

Speaking American in Indonesian Islamic Boarding Schools

TIM S. PAPPA

Ohio University

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Tim S. Pappa lived in and toured clusters of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) across Java, Indonesia, from September 2005 to May 2006. In West Java Pappa 'shadowed' a *kyai* (*pesantren* director), and studied regional networking; in East Java he examined internal communicative processes within a large *pesantren* complex. Pappa will graduate with an MA in Southeast Asian Studies from Ohio University in June 2007.

I lived in and toured various *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) across Java, Indonesia, from September 2005 to May 2006. In West Java I 'shadowed' a *kyai* (*pesantren* director), and studied regional networking; in East Java I examined internal communicative processes within a large *pesantren* complex.

For 37 days, for example, I accompanied a particular West Java *kyai* (with whom I lived at Pondok Pesantren Al-Mizan, in Jatiwangi, Majalengka, West Java) to more than 25 regional and local *pengajian* (Qur'anic-based sermons held in mosques and *pesantren* and neighborhoods) and related events. In Cirebon, West Java, about an hour from PP Al-Mizan, I observed processes of a *pesantren*-affiliated Muslim non-governmental organization (Fahmina Institute), staffed by *kyai* and former *pesantren* students.

In Tambakberas, Jombang, East Java, I lived in Pondok Pesantren As-Sa'idiyyah I within Pondok Pesantren Bahrul Ulum, a large complex composed of 27 *pesantren* 'dorms' and 15 state or private *madrasah* 'modern day schools', and a nursing academy and two second-tier universities; near PP Bahrul Ulum were

several other substantive clusters of *pesantren* and *madrasah* in Jombang (e.g. Pondok Pesantren Tebuireng, Pondok Pesantren Dahrul Ulum).

In each research locale I regularly spoke to various audiences of *pesantren* and *madrasah* students and Javanese Muslims, about Americans and myself (e.g. pluralistic communities, freedoms, choice). In subsequent text I include vignettes of my initial (unintended) enculturation with a particular West Java *kyai*, who urged me to speak with him at underground punk rock concerts and radio talk-shows and seminars; and without him, speaking to thousands in various East Java *pesantren*.

On 10 February 2006 I accompanied Kyai Haji (KH) Maman Imanulhaq Faqieh to Pondok Pesantren Al-Munawar Al-Zarnujyah in Tasikmalaya, West Java, a city of about 700 *pesantren*. He spoke, and I sat, crowded by about 300 students. I was asked about research funds, and the CIA; girls quickly snapped cell photographs, ran off. Most students stared, and whispered. KH Maman mentioned the United States, and the crowd howled. Many students laughed and grum-

bled; other attendees shouted in the local dialect (Sundanese), and looked at me.

KH Maman (with whom I lived at PP Al-Mizan, about four hours away) recited Qur'anic *sura* (verses); a majority of students bellowed "Allah!" in response. Midnight neared. In previous days KH Maman and I had attended multiple late-night *pengajian* (Qur'anic-based sermons), sometimes back-to-back, far from PP Al-Mizan; I was tired, of travel, and celebrity. I was agitated by students' overt suspicion (relatively rare in *pesantren*), and upset by a large poster of Osama bin Laden, unruly shouts upon reference of New York City or the United States; I did not understand Sundanese. In my field notes I wrote and imagined negative things about fundamentalists.

KH Maman, meanwhile, discussed pluralism, inclusiveness. "*Kita berbeda*" ("We are different"), he said, smiling. In jest he mocked students' laughs, outfits, and himself. KH Maman talked about *ikhlas* (sincerity), in school, and homework assignments; he urged friendship and peace. They were just kids.

KH Maman and I had spoken weeks earlier at a seminar titled *Terorisme dan Budaya* ("Terrorism and Culture"), hosted by second-tier Muslim university Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Shalahuddin Al-Ayyubi (STAISA), at Pondok Pesantren Ulumuddin in Babakan, Cirebon, West Java, about 20 minutes from PP Al-Mizan. A majority of the 120 attendees read distributed copies of my paper ("*Saya 'Hanya' Orang Amerika, Tidak Lebih*", or "I'm 'Only' an American, Nothing More") during pre-seminar formalities; I spoke briefly, about American religiosity, pluralisms.

STAISA students (some PP Ulumuddin 'boarders') in particular asked about Muslims in the United States; I mentioned millions, inclusiveness. A STAISA student stood, and said in English, "Mister, I wish you were the president of America." Many chuckled; I smiled. Then for about 10 minutes he chided U.S. foreign policies, President Bush. A nearby STAISA student questioned Muslims' acceptance of aid from non-Muslim nations, tsunami relief. A *kyai* was asked about hegemonic news media association of Islam and violence; "it is clear" from Qur'anic content that Muslims oppose conflict, the student said. I added, "It's not clear. Most [non-Muslim] Americans have jobs and families and errands. They are busy. 'Islam' is just a brief news article, a TV news blurb, usually about violence. Ameri-

cans don't *know* any Muslims. They don't care. They don't want violence or war; but they don't care." Attendees were quiet, as if hurt. Later, I asked attendees about Indonesian Muslims' "obsession" with other Muslims, in Iraq and Afghanistan and Bosnia; I pointed outside PP Ulumuddin, and mentioned unemployment, poverty. Attendees muttered, smoked.

Later I was crowded, praised. I was ushered to prepared food. I posed for photographs, exchanged cell numbers. A STAISA student gave me a 'thumbs up', and said, "*Amerika bagus, bagus*" ("America is great, great").

First days

About a hundred *santri* (male *pesantren* students) eyed me from several tiered balconies at Pondok Pesantren As-Sa'idiyyah I in Jombang, East Java. Groups of *santri* bunched. A few giggled, and hid or scurried away; some waved, and yelled, "Mister, mister!" Others peeked from window slits, from behind pillars.

In my room I stared at the walls, at photographs of past weddings and aged portraits, of the families that have managed Pondok Pesantren Bahrul Ulum, a large complex inclusive of 27 *pesantren* 'dorms' (including PP As-Sa'idiyyah I) and 15 *madrrasah* 'modern day schools' and thousands of students. I intended to examine internal communicative processes, interaction; but after six months of living in and touring various clusters of *pesantren* across Java I still hesitated to again abide celebrity, publicity. I thought about home, and of leaving. For two days I traveled to Jombang, on trains and mini-vans. I stunk of sweat and body odor, I had slept little; already I had met various *pesantren* officials at nearby complexes, and shared tea and silence, sparse conversation. I was agitated by passersby, staring; I was angered by smiles, even smirks. I was in a bad mood.

I sighed. I washed, and changed clothes. I entered the *pesantren* courtyard, smiling; I walked up nearby stairs, and extended my hand. I said my name. A few *santri* woke, bewildered. Some stared at me, and each other. Others rushed me. They asked my age, where I was from. "How many girls you have, mister?" I was asked, in English. We posed for photographs, in groups and one-by-one. I autographed their forearms; I even signed a few Qur'an. I tried on a white *topi haji* (a type of skullcap usually worn by Indonesian Muslim

males who have completed the Hajj to Mecca). “Handsome, handsome, mister” a student said. I was given a tour of the *pesantren*; we shuffled, together. An older *santri* and I entered the *santriwati* (female *pesantren* students) dorm of PP As-Sa’idiyyah One, gated off from *santri*. Girls screamed; younger *santriwati* ran off, hurriedly put on *jilbabs* (Indonesian Muslim female ‘veil’, a *pesantren* requirement). Several *santriwati* squirmed, giggled. “*Siapa nama kamu?*” (“What’s your name?”), I asked a girl, maybe eleven. She stared back, quiet. Girls shouted from a balcony, and waved.

The following morning I interviewed teachers at Madrasah Aliyah Al-F’adiah Bahrul Ulum (MAI-BU) a private *madrasah* high school across the street from PP As-Sa’idiyyah I; about 90 percent of MAI-BU curriculum includes Islamic studies, Arabic. I spoke to about 20 *santri*, too. For about two hours I talked about ice hockey parties at Ohio University (I am a former OU player), Christian friends, losing my virginity in high school, U.S. educational standards, and *Wu-Tang Clan* rap lyrics; I was sweating, and pacing. They asked about homosexuals, Vietnam War protesters, and former U.S. president John F. Kennedy. *Santriwati* in the street waved, and yelled, “I miss you, Tim!” and “I’m always with you, Tim;” I had visited PP As-Sa’idiyyah II the previous night, to speak. *Santri* brought me fruit. I showed photographs of friends and family; a *santri* asked for my sister’s e-mail address.

In the afternoon about a hundred *santri* from various *pesantren* dorms gathered at a nearby soccer field to drill, without coaches. I tended goal, playfully taunting shooters. Later I sat in the shade with other *santri*; in silence our eyes trailed the ball, and our smiles saluted skillful moves, and scores. Nearby mosque loudspeakers guzzled the call to prayer. Some of us talked about girls, and love.