The Reinterpretation of Culture: The Tension of Religious Islamism in the Reformation Order

The Reformation Order in arriving its presidential election in the year 2019, has been followed with a stronger tension, or perhaps, a tug-of-war of Islamism in the public and political sphere. This article discusses the relevance of Geertz’s Interpretation of Culture in the current Indonesian socio-political context. While Geertz’s have been infamous of categorizing Indonesian Islam into three major typological branches: Nominal Islamism (Abangan), Religious Islamism (Santri), and Elite Islamism (Kiai), his categorization does not halt in a triadic relation. Currently, the socio-political context has shown that religious Islamism, in the form of moderate Islamism affiliated to the indigenous “Nusantara Islamism” is now challenged by a more popular and puritan “Wahabism”. By focusing on the relation of nominal and religious Islamism, this article would like to describe that the former had its roots in accommodating both the locality of nominal dan religious notion of Indonesian Islam, the latter draws its movements in purifying nominal Islam into its more radical template. By borrowing various findings on the process of Islamisation in the socio-political spheres, this article would like to further advance Geertz’s argument that culture, is not a-thing-in-itself, that is benign, passive, and located in external to the individuals’ interaction. However, culture acts as a social landscape which consists of a dormant social force to which socio-political interests draws its energy. By doing so, the interpretation of culture, which Geertz’s proposed, does not serve only as a sketch to describe the interactive landscape of social meanings, the “Web of Meanings” as he coined the term. In contrasts, Geertz’s portrayal of culture initially serves to reveal the system of meanings, and later having various interpretation of religious Islamism as its “social motors” to arrange the institutional facet of the Indonesian Islam, whether it took the construction of moderate “Nusantara Islamism” or perhaps even extending and taking a sterner form of puritan Wahabism. Social actions are motivated by social meanings as argued by Weber. Likewise, religion and its socio-
political manoeuvres drew its collective motivation from the cultural web of meanings, its landscape and dormant social forces within it.

**A REVIEW OF GEERTZ’S INTERPRETATION OF CULTURE**

Geertz admitted that culture, although is “strange” or appeared relatively unknown to the observer, it can continually be observed, guessed, and accumulated to draft the “web of meanings” (Geertz, 1973: 20). Since culture is external (a-thing-in-itself), it is not possible to understand the substance (*noumena*) in a single leap but can be comprehended by continuously observing its surfaces comprised of symbolic features (*phenomenon*). The methodological process which allows this to operate is ethnography, and thick description is the core criterion for ethnographical work. Various views on Geertz’s writing tend to emphasise the “Thick Description”. However, he coined this term to stress on how culture is supposed to be approached: not as a product, but a social fact which encompasses the society. And features of social fact demands a detailed description of the “adjective of culture” in the manifestation of everyday meaning and experience, not only “in the noun” where culture is functional. The thick description implies that the interpretation of symbols is embedded within the process of description. Beyond the basic social phenomenon, thick description narrates the “rawnness” and complexity of symbols within a social setting (going native), observing actions, differing aspects and layers of social life, which point towards the “web of meaning” or culture. After the process of interpretative description, Geertz added another step of analysis that is, the researcher would relate the pieces of signified events/symbolic actions to map out the anatomy of culture. Although Geertz sometimes provide a “heuristic” or parallel phenomenon to provide a preliminary structural framework of understanding culture (*Geertz compared Wajang*, a Javanese drama, to Shakespeare’s play), he also encouraged that researcher should dive into the details where the “logico-meaningful” connection lies; social researcher misinterpret culture if they have their observation paused on the basic “causal-functional” level of knowledge (the “nouns” of culture), without entering into the domain of meaning (the “adjectives” of culture). The domain of “causal-functional” institution is described
in similarity where different societies relatively share a familiar character in their diverse social apparatus. The domain of culture is oriented in the differences and details where it is “strange” to the observer but is rooted meanings as its underlying principle. Some examples presented in this review will point to two accounts of thick description that employs detailed analysis of symbols: through language and rituals (funeral rite). In the use of language, Geertz argued that local Javanese use the word “feel” (rasa) to signify both “feeling” and “meaning”. Instead of using the English word “feel” which consists of human five senses and emotional faculty, Geertz stick to the original indigenous word of rasa to explain the multiple layers of significance on how local Javanese perceive their subjective experience (feeling) from the ultimate objective cosmos to derive metaphysical and ethical evaluation (meaning). The loss of translation in language implies the loss of cultural meaning. Secondly, on rituals, Geertz noted how different cultural procedure of handling funeral may lead to social disintegration, where elements of culture tend to compete and overwrite another: whether an Islamic prayer in Arabic or Animistic-Hindhu mantra should be changed. In this case, Geertz encouraged the researcher’s sensitivity to recognise the importance of symbols. Language and rituals are not just “functional” for communication and ceremonial purposes as they represent cultural significance for meaningful integration. The insensitivity to recognise this would lead to misinterpretation.

THE REINTERPRETATION OF CULTURE:
WHICH RELIGIOUS ISLAMISM?

Geertz’s anthropological endeavour is based on the context of the Indonesian society, focusing in particular on the local culture of Java. By taking Geertz’s Interpretation of Culture into the current social context, one should be able to observe that the tension between the Arabic and Animistic-Hindhu culture remains stern. The chanting of mantras on funeral ceremony extends even more widely to the public sphere as the process of Islamisation attempts to influence the Indonesian culture. While it may begin from the enclosed circle of the educational institution, the Islamisation of Culture may even spread into the social and political institution (Hidayat 2014, Raihani, 2011, Kurniawan 2018). The use of Arabic language within the Indonesian
society becomes more and more discursive as the religion of Islam appears to dominate religion of Java within the cultural landscape. Geertz has had been famous for distinguishing the three groups of Indonesian Islam: Abangan, Santri, and Priyayi. He maintained that nominal Islam (Abangan) which consist of mixing local animistic religion with Islam had been the major cultural outlook within the Indonesian culture. However, it is noticed that the landscape of Indonesian culture does not remain dormant to be just “interpreted neutrally” as one sketches and further uncovers the “Web of Meanings”. Culture does not remain as a benign landscape; it is a social fact “waiting out there” to be orbited, planned, developed and even modified by interpreters who occupy around the parameter of the social landscape. Culture is not independent of any social force, but it is directable by various forms of social force and political interest. The resources of meanings stored within the Indonesian culture is dormant to any form of interpretation. There is a logico-meaningful connection between the Javanese and Arabic dimension of Islamism. The connection, however, does not necessarily erase the existence of nominal Islamism in Java. On the contrary, taking the similar notion of Western Occidentalism which maintains its particular existence by opposing the Orients, Wahabism (Santri) is supported and appears to be made possible by positing itself against nominal Islamism (Abangan). The process of Islamisation does not necessarily misinterpret the culture or failed to regard it as an independent force. It is precise “the reinterpretation of culture” and had made culture the bedrock for socio-political utopianism. The idea of such Utopia is, therefore, a modern Islamic template to deconstruct both local-traditional nominal and religious Islamism and to transport and construct Wahabism as its rationale for the Indonesian society. While adherents of moderate “Nusanteria Islamism” view the other party as their radical counterparts for having misinterpreted the Indonesian religion, the consistency of such socio-political movement is not without a cause: having found its potential ecosystem, all it requires is to implant its socio-political agenda and reprogram the landscape of Indonesian culture accordingly to its religious interpretation. Thus, “The Re-interpretation of Culture” is a continual tension within the Indonesian society. While nominal Islamism (Abangan) may appear more passive to the reception of religious Islamism,
various Islamic traditions compete to provide a certain interpretation of Islam in the Indonesian society, thus making nominalism vulnerable for socio-political manoeuvre. Knowing clearly that the Indonesian culture remains as a benign landscape, various Santri and religious Islamism negotiate, compete, and to some extent, may even syncretize its social and political motives with the cultural autonomy of Javanese social fact. While the local Nadhlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah maintained that democratic and multicultural Indonesia is certainly compatible with Islam, arguing no need to further “purify” the non-Arabic Indonesian culture, Wahabism and more radical forms of Islamism attempts to reinterpret and regards the local Indonesian culture as “Oriental” landscape waiting to be converted, arranged and remodified-overwriting its current nominal character through social and “democratic” means. The tension between Santris, one arguing for an Indonesian and another for a Wahabism, continues in the public sphere. This is mostly observed through various social institutions: the Islamisation of public schools and the Islamisation of the political sphere-mediated through tertiary or higher education in the university. Thus, the Indonesian culture is no longer just an independent form of social fact. The social fact while stands ontologically independent as a normative concept, it is susceptible to the social forces of interpretation. Culture is no longer a “conserved reservation” for observation but has become the landscape for socio-political negotiation, competition and reinterpretation to recreate and stimulate new forms of the social ecosystem. The clash of interpretation, therefore, is very much a plausible idea to be explored, especially in the current Indonesian context, whereby the Santris, representatives and “reinterpretation” of religious Islamism are now posited in the contentious “cultural tug of war”.

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