

The Muhammadiyah as a Reformist Islamic Organization and Its Role in the Social Development of Indonesia¹

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1. Introduction

First of all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude for the invitation to attend this international seminar held in advance of the 44th National Congress of Muhammadiyah. Further, it is an extraordinary honor for me to be allowed to sit side by side on this podium with such prominent scholars as Prof. Dr. A. Syafi 'i Ma' arif and Prof. Dr. Nurcholish Madjid. In fact, I have been acquainted with these two great gentlemen as personal friends for many years ; but I am also deeply aware that my scholarship is far below comparison with theirs. Therefore, I thought for a moment that the organizing committee of this seminar must have invited my husband, NAKAMURA Mitsuo, not me. However, Mitsuo pointed out that the invitation letter was addressed to me, and was signed by Prof. Dr. A. Syafi 'i Ma' arif, as General Chairman of Muhammadiyah, and co-signed by Dr. Watik Pratiknya, Secretary, another gentleman with whom my husband and I have been acquainted for a long time, therefore the invitation was for me to make a presentation. Further, Drs. Habib Chirzin, one of the seminar moderators, hails from Kotagede, Yogyakarta, where we did our fieldwork in the early seventies when he was still a young boy—we have known him since then.

Slightly bewildered, I still wondered if the invitation was not a mistake. Eventually I had to admit that it was I who was indeed invited to participate in this seminar. Then, I pondered how I could meet the expectations of our friends in Muhammadiyah. What specific contribution could I make that would differ from a presentation by Mitsuo? As anthropologists, my husband and I have worked closely together in our research and traveled together to many places for fieldwork. We have also participated in the national congresses of Muhammadiyah as well as Nahdlatul Ulama's many times ; this, in fact, is our fifth national congress of the Muhammadiyah. Given this, I felt that what I could give, and that which Mitsuo couldn't, was my observations as a woman—the female perspective. I would like to then address the topic given to me from the viewpoint of a female anthropologist. I would like to make some observations, as a female, on the activities of 'Aisyiyah, the women's wing of Muhammadiyah, and as an anthropologist, focus on the grassroot activities of Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah people, and comment on them.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented in an international seminar on the Muhammadiyah held in Jakarta, July 5, 2000.

2. Two Field Experiences : The Activities of BP4 in a Local Community and Participation in its National Training Course

It was almost 30 years ago in 1971 when I first became acquainted with the 'Aisyiyah. In 1970, my husband and I first arrived in Indonesia and started to engage in anthropological fieldwork in the town of Kotagede, Special Region of Yogyakarta.² I was attracted to the problem of divorce among Javanese Muslims in the community.³ The reason for this was that the social phenomenon of marital dissolution occurring around Kotagede was contrary to the established sociological theory that I had been familiar with. Namely, modern sociological theory told us that divorce rate increased in accordance with urbanization. Around Kotagede, however, an analysis of government statistics revealed that the situation was the reverse --- the urban sector had a lower rate of divorce compared to that of the rural sector. And in the urban sector of Kotagede, I found a large number of Muhammadiyah activists whose families maintained an extremely low rate of divorce. What factors were causing this phenomenon --- sociological, economic or religious? I wanted to find an answer to this question. This was the beginning of my approach to the Muhammadiyah and 'Aisyiyah.

During my research in 1970-2, it appeared that Muslims in Yogyakarta who wished to dissolve their marriage, first had to seek advice from the counselors of BP4. BP4 (Badan Penasehat Perkawinan dan Penyelesaian Perceraian, or the Body of Marriage Counseling and Divorce Settlements) was a semi-governmental organization attached to the KUA (Kantor Urusan Agama, or Office of Religious Affairs, the lowest level of the Department of Religion), but not directly associated with the Muhammadiyah or 'Aisyiyah. It became increasingly clear as my research on BP4 progressed, however, that the 'Aisyiyah played an important role in its activities in Kotagede.

The BP4 in MPP Kotagede (the township of Kotagede) was officially formed on the 17th July 1964. At the time of its establishment, it consisted of seven board members, all of whom were graduates from the Mu'allimat, a religious school of the Muhammadiyah for girls at the level of secondary education. They all came from economically well-established and religiously-oriented families. For example, the general chairwoman of BP4 Kotagede was Ibu Hadi Nur, whose father was a naib (religious official) of Kotagede. Her husband was the head of KUA of MPP Kotagede at the time of my research and also a member of the Muhammadiyah. Ibu Chirzin, mother of Drs. Habib Chirzin, was the secretary. Her husband, Bapak Chirzin was the general chairman of

² Yogyakarta had been a Javanese sultanate since its birth in 1755 until 1945 when it became a special region of the Republic of Indonesia. Kotagede in the early 1970's was a local community in the Region with a population of about 15,000 individuals, almost all Muslims.

³ The result of my research was submitted to the National Australian University as an M.A. thesis with the title, *The Dissolution of Marriage among Javanese Muslims*, 1981, and later published by the Gadjah Mada University Press as *Divorce in Java*, 1983.

the Kotagede Branch of the Muhammadiyah. Ibu Djahid, the treasurer, came from a wealthy old family in Kotagede, known as Bani Mu'min. After marriage, these ladies established good family reputations in the religious circles as well as in their neighborhoods. Thus, they were not only well educated but also had been raised in a religious atmosphere, married and raised their own children in a similar way, and practiced their religion seriously.

The Head of KUA Kotagede, the late Bapak Hadi Nur, clarified how the board members of BP4 were selected as follows :

[The Regional Office of] the Department of Religion in the City of Yogyakarta organized an up-grading course for the ladies who were ready to become board members of BP4. KUA Kecamatan [County] Kotagede was also asked to send representatives. At the time there was no women's [religious] organization in Kotagede except 'Aisyiyah. Thus, several people were chosen from 'Aisyiyah: those who were capable and had spare time.⁴

Thus, in the case of BP4 in Kotagede, all board members were selected from among the 'Aisyiyah. The 'Aisyiyah is a women's division of the Muhammadiyah, an Islamic social organization founded by Kyai Haji Ahmad Dahlan in Yogyakarta in 1912. Kyai Dahlan's wife, Nyai Dahlan was instrumental in the establishment of 'Aisyiyah shortly thereafter. The name of the organization, 'Aisyiyah, means 'followers of 'Aisyiyah', the favorite wife of the prophet Muhammad, an ideal for Muslim womanhood.

The Muhammadiyah movement as a whole aims at "establishing firmly and revering the Faith of Islam so as to create a Muslim society in the true sense of its meaning."⁵ According to the Muhammadiyah, the ideal Muslim society is a society in which people believe in, worship and obey Allah.

That men live in this world in societies is God's will. A society which aspires for welfare, tranquility, peace, prosperity and happiness can only achieve its goal by basing its principles on justice, righteousness, fraternity and mutual assistance within the Laws of God, excluding the devil's influence and greed.⁶

Based on these tenets, the Muhammadiyah members endeavor to pursue the following goals :

1. Promotion of moral enhancement on the basis of Islamic Teachings :

⁴ Nakamura Hisako, *Divorce in Java*, Gadjah Mada University Press, Yogyakarta 1983 : 47.

⁵ *The Statutes of the Djamiat Muhammadiyah*, English original 1958 : 5

⁶ *ibid.* : 3

2. Promotion of training and education ;
3. Promotion of mutual social assistance ;
4. Building and fostering of places of worship and religious foundations (waqafs) ;
5. Training and guidance to raise women's religious consciousness and organizational skills ;
6. Training and education of the younger generation as worthy Muslims ;
7. Betterment in the standard of living in accordance with Islamic teachings ; and
8. Enactment of Islamic Laws in society.⁷

The objectives of the 'Aisyiyah are more specifically to enhance Islamic consciousness among Muslim women by promoting the following activities :

1. Building musholla (prayer houses) and mosques especially for women's use :
2. Spreading instructions on proper Muslim women's attire, social relations and etiquette ;
3. Giving guidance on how to establish a happy family in accordance with Islamic teachings ;
4. Publishing women's magazine, "Suara Aisyiyah" ; and
5. Establishing a special educational system for women, including schools for midwives, nurses, and nursery school and kindergarten teachers.⁸

Thus the activities of 'Aisyiyah are broad, and aimed at assisting women to live in accordance with Islamic teachings. Among the most essential activities of the 'Aisyiyah is the education of women in the widest sense of the term. The 'Aisyiyah is engaged in (1) formal education through schools ; (2) semi-formal education through courses, public lectures and meetings ; and (3) informal education through counseling.⁹

Counseling given through BP4 is a genuinely important part of the educational activities of the 'Aisyiyah. That is, even though organizationally BP4 is not a part of the 'Aisyiyah, participation in the activities of BP4 is compatible with the 'Aisyiyah movement. As this is the case, counselors from the 'Aisyiyah work energetically for BP4 even though they are unpaid. The head of KUA does not force this counseling work upon them, but it is viewed as a work, which Allah enjoins them to do. As 'establishing a happy family' is essential for all Muslims, so to give guidance for this purpose is a sacred mission for the members of 'Aisyiyah. The establishment of BP4 by the Ministry of Religion, thus, has given an institutional opportunity to the 'Aisyiyah to realize one of the most essential objectives of the organization.

⁷ *ibid.* : 5

⁸ Musthafa & Chusnan, *Muhammaidyah Sebagai Gerakan Islam*, Yogyakarta, Pimpinan Pusat Muhammaidyah Majalis Pustaka. 1977 : 25-26. My translation.

⁹ Nakamura Hisako, *op.cit.* : 51.

At the time of my fieldwork, it seemed that activities of BP4 in Yogyakarta were directly related to the vigor of the 'Aisyiyah movement. This correspondence was well observed in Kotagede. The Muhammadiyah in Kotagede (including the 'Aisyiyah) was one of the most active of the 14 branches of Muhammadiyah in the City of Yogyakarta. BP4 in Kotagede was equally active and was therefore highly regarded by the BP4 counselors of other areas and by the officials of the Department of Religion, Yogyakarta.

BP4 National Training Course (Penataran)

Already since around the year of 1964, when the BP4 was first established in Yogyakarta, the Ministry of Religion has been sponsoring a number of training courses (penataran) for counselors, locally as well as nationally. I was not able to attend any of these while I was first in Yogyakarta in 1970-72, but was fortunate to be allowed to participate in a national training course held in Jakarta in December 1982.

I spent several days and nights in the building of Asrama Haji, in Jakarta, together with a number of lady counselors of BP4. There were about sixty participants altogether, coming from various parts of the country. We listened to a variety of distinguished scholars lecturing on the topics of religion, sociology, economics, psychology, medical science and so forth. Besides attending these lectures, with the permission of Department officials, I conducted a survey towards the end of the training course on the participants using a questionnaire.

The survey was aimed at learning the opinion of the participants on the effects of the training course and also to obtain information on their personal backgrounds. One item of the questionnaire asked for the organizational affiliation of the participants. As mentioned earlier, I became aware of the important role the 'Aisyiyah was playing for the local BP4 in Kotagede during my field research there in the 1970-72 period, and was curious to know what organization was playing a similar role in other parts of the country.

I expected that the answers to this question would yield the names of a limited number of national women's organizations like Dharma Wanita (organization of the wives of government officials), 'Aisyiyah, and Muslimat NU (women's wing of Nahdlatul Ulama). I was then surprised to be asked by one of the participants : "How many organizations should I write in?" I was unable to understand the meaning of the question then and just answered, "As many as you can, so long as you actually belong to them."

The result of the questionnaire 'betrayed' my expectations. That item was filled with the names of so many organizations. Each of the participants wrote at least three organizations, the most being up to eight. Also contrary to my expectations, there was no particular Islamic organization dominating the activities of BP4 since the counselors belonged to a multiplicity of

organizations. The fact that a lady counselor was affiliated with a number of organizations simultaneously made me realize the following point : what should be studied in detail was not her membership in an organization alone but her activities and the mode of her involvement in organizations.

Organizational Participation and the Modes of Activities

The above mentioned two research experiences on BP4 suggested that there are at least five angles of observation through which we can make meaningful approaches to the organizational participation and the modes of social activities of Muslim women activists :

- (1) Organization centered view;
- (2) Activity centered view;
- (3) Society/locality centered view;
- (4) Individual centered view; and
- (5) History or process centered view.

Organizationally, BP4 was no more than a product of a government project under the guidance of the KUA. Actual activities of BP4 are conducted by local women counselors selected by the KUA. They are local religious and social leaders who are decisively imbued with local modes of social relationship. In fact, as I pointed out in my book, quite contrasting modes of counseling were employed in two different localities in the vicinity of Kotagede. In a locality where traditional ties of social relationship were still strong, the mode of counseling at BP4 was quite informal. The BP4 counselors did not use their office but instead conducted the counseling in a publicly unnoticed manner in their own homes or even in a corner of a market where both the client and the counselor worked. In contrast, in a community adjunct to Kotagede where rapid urbanization in terms of the influx of outsiders had begun, the counseling was conducted at a fixed time at a fixed place, i.e. during office hours in a BP4 office.¹⁰

In either case, however, the counselors did not appear to be engaged in the BP4 activities because they were assigned by the government to do so, or because they were pressured by the organization of their affiliation to do so. Through close personal observation of those ladies over a long time, I learned that they were happily, positively, and voluntarily engaged in the activities of BP4 as Muslim women.

Time is limited here to mention the historical process of the growth of BP4. But, one thing which should be emphasized is the fact that continuous and pervasive activities by a number of 'Kyai' and 'Nyai', i.e. respected male and female Islamic religious leaders, have been taking place in the

¹⁰ Nakamura, *op.cit.* : 51-52.

field of marriage and divorce counseling all over the country for many generations. The government project was established on this historical basis. These activities had been embedded in the context of mutual social assistance in a closely-knit local society for a long time and did not require the formation of formal organization like BP4 until recently.

3. Reformism – Organization vs. Individual

My experience with the BP4 in Kotagede has made me aware of the danger of looking at the 'Aisyiyah only from its organizational aspects. The activities of the 'Aisyiyah as an organization in a local society and the roles it is playing in it, constitute nothing but a fraction of the total activities and roles played by the individuals belonging to the 'Aisyiyah. People cannot and should not be reduced to an organization.

My husband and I have been engaged in the research of Islam in Indonesia, and have made a number of Muslim and Muslima friends over the years. We have learned so many things about Islam through them personally as human beings, and that fact has helped us to deepen our understanding of Islam academically. Both my husband and I have also received numerous advice and much encouragement from our Muslim friends. It will not be out of order to mention the name of one of them here. That is Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, the fourth president of the Republic of Indonesia, or whom we call affectionately Gus Dur, as many other Indonesians do. He was one of those friends who has watched over our intellectual growth as students of Indonesian Islam since the 1970's, when we first got to know each other. He was in fact one of the external examiners of my MA thesis submitted to the Australian National University. He later gave a substantial foreword to the final version of my thesis, published as a book by the Gadjah Mada University Press in 1983. In the foreword, Gus Dur praised the activities of Ibu-Ibu 'Aisyiyah, i.e. 'Aisyiyah ladies, in Kotagede in the following words :

Another facet of the importance of Hisako Nakamura's book lies in its description of how Kotagede women fit their morality, their worldview and their organized life to the religious mould of Islamic teachings. These three aspects merge into a single aspiration : to foster social welfare in the more concrete form, i.e. the establishment and maintenance of strong family ties and a well-adjusted family life. This endeavor, showing itself clearly throughout the many pages of description on the workings of BP4, KUA and PA [Pengadilan Agama, Islamic Religious Court] and local 'Aisyiyah chapters, proves to be the single most important ingredient for preserving the social fabric of the whole community through the turbulent and rapidly changing time. It operates as the guiding hand in the collective spelling out of priority for the community's life, the shared sense of self-discipline among community members, and the formulation of common purpose for the whole community.

The reader's attention is directed towards the importance of this type of social bond, which grows stronger with the passing time, operating internally to bind the devout followers among Muslims in an exclusive sense of duty to implement Islamic teachings fully in the community's life, but at the same time integrating externally different sectors of the society, at least among those needing 'help' in marital arrangements, into a truly 'local entity', i.e. the Kotagede community at large. This type of social bond, internally binding and externally integrating proves to be the Muslim's answer to the challenges of modernization.¹¹

To the best of my knowledge, Gus Dur has been extremely consistent since the 1970's in viewing and evaluating the social contribution of Muslim men and women regardless of their organizational affiliation. He was not concerned with their organizational difference, for example between the Muhammadiyah or Nahdlatul Ulama, but with their actual contribution to the enhancement of the well being of the community. Obviously, he was appreciating some of the findings in my thesis from this viewpoint. I myself, however, had been unaware of the significance of his comment for a long time until I began to deepen my understanding of the significance of Muslim activities at the grassroots level. The strength of an Islamic social movement does not seem to stem from the enormity or solidity of the organization alone. It largely depends on how extensive and numerous those individual activists are and how intensively they are engaged in their activities on the basis of their religious convictions in the context of a given space and time beyond their organizational affiliation.

The movement of 'Taman Kanak-Kanak Al-Qur'an', or the Qur'an Kindergarten is another illustrative example indicating how important individual devotion and dedication is. It is another socio-religious venture initiated in the early 1980's by a group of student activists with the assistance of a well learned Qur'anic teacher and his family members in Kotagede. The teacher devised a particular learning method in reciting the Qur'an, *iqra'*, for pre-school children. As is well known, national achievements of this Qur'an Kindergarten movement since then are enormous. A generation of young boys and girls well versed in reciting the Qur'an has grown up through this program all over the country. They are then expected to make a significant contribution to the understanding and application of the substance of the Qur'anic teachings in the real life context.

Finally, let me make a remark on the topic I was given for this seminar : "Muhammadiyah as a reformist organization and its role in the social movement of Indonesia." To be honest, I am not quite sure whether Muhammadiyah should be labeled as a reformist organization. According to my understanding, all those Muslims who want to be faithful to the teachings of Islam today are in essence all reformists. For they need to continuously reinterpret the injunctions of Islamic

¹¹ Foreward to Nakamura, *op.cit.*

teachings in accordance with the changes in the external world. Those reform movements are inevitable by nature and there seems to be no Muslim who is not reformist in this sense. Reformism is not a monopoly of the Muhammadiyah.

For example, who could be the most reformist among the three individuals of Gus Dur, Pak Syafi 'i Ma' arif, and Cak Nur [Nurcholish Madjid] would depend on the constantly changing situation. The NU may become more progressive than Muhammadiyah on certain issues or vice versa. It is indeed a researcher's job to put a label on the object of their study on the basis of their findings. They choose a label, which seems most appropriate to describe their findings in the time of investigation or publication of their research result. The label thus given seems to be of restricted usefulness since it may represent features limited by particular time and space. I believe, however, whether one is reformist or not is not a matter of label, but of substance. I have come here to attend the 44th national congress of the Muhammadiyah. At the end of my observation of the congress, I hope I will become able to say to what extent and in what manner the Muhammadiyah today is reformist in substance.