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The Performance of the Ritual of Slawatan and the Influence of a Charismatic Leader

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the the performance of Slawatan and the charismatic leadership of Habib Sheikh as a source of motivation for diverse communities in Central Java. The paper uses ritual and performance theories as the guiding framework. The data-gathering method was derived from participant observation, interviews and discussions. The study argues that the ritual performance of Slawatan follows a systematic process and the charismatic leadership of Habib Sheikh serves as a motivation for different groups. The findings show that the performance of Slawatan is a process that includes the preliminaries, dress code, verses and songs, and the 'cool-down' part. They reveal how people from diverse communities see Habib Sheikh as very charismatic. They believe that his leadership qualities and innovations motivate them to attend this form of Islamic ritual performance. This study is part of a growing body of research on the understanding of Islamic ritual as a peaceful event which people from different backgrounds can attend and enjoy religious songs and music, without fear of encountering aggressive teachings and practices. It also contributes to future research on comparable issues.

Keywords: *Habib Sheikh, Slawatan ritual, performance, charismatic leadership and Indonesian Islam.*

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INTRODUCTION

This study highlights the performance of *Slawatan*, which is an Islamic ritual performance to celebrate the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). The study also shows how the charismatic leadership of Habib Sheikh has attracted people from diverse

communities in Central Java to attend this ritual performance. It is important to note that the phenomenon of *Slawatan* is an important practice in both Sufism and Neo-Sufism. Various Sufi scholars such as: Ibn Arabi, Ahmed Sirhindi, Nicholson, R. A., and spiritual leaders, for example, the *Wali Songo* of Java, and ritual theorist like Clifford Geertz, Catherine Bell, Victor Turner Van Bruinessen, Mark Woodward, were key contributors to the literature relating to the phenomenon of the ritual performance of *Slawatan* as detailed in this paper.

The ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan* is conducted in a regular monthly schedule at and around Central-Java provincial cities such as: Purwodadi, Kudus, Jepara, Sragen, Yogyakarta and Solo. Aside from Habib Sheikh and members of the *Majelis Ahbabul Musthofa* organization, the event is frequented by thousands of people. These people usually come from the host city, while others travel from surrounding towns and villages, using buses, cars and motorbikes, and by foot. However, not every member of the public is able to access the event under the prepared, giant tents. The performance of *Slawatan* follows a systematic pattern. This process is discussed in more detail throughout this study. It includes activities such as: the preliminaries, dress code, verses and songs, and the ‘cool down’ part.

DISCUSSION

The Preliminaries and Training

The data from the field observation indicate that the performance of the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan* starts with the preliminaries and elaborate training (Schechner, 2010: 17-18). The training and actual performance reveal the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan* as a symbolic action, explained by the various scholars of ritual theory, as referenced in a literature review and theoretical framework. Training takes place in Habib Sheikh’s compound in Solo every Wednesday. Training is also conducted in other *Pesantren*. Reciters, singers and drummers are all involved in training. Most of the drummers (*rabana*) are from other *Pesantren* and do their rehearsal separately, according to the songs written in the form of *Dhikir* (veneration of the name of Allah) and the religious music of the *Slawatan*. These songs are derived from a book called “*Simtu al-duror*” written by Habib Ali bin Muhammad bin Husainal-Habsyi. The book has fourteen chapters; each chapter has a

different song which is read at a specified time during the ritual performance. Most of the rehearsal and actual events are based on this book. However, there are also other written materials by Habib Sheikh. During the training session conducted by Habib Sheikh, the actors create choruses of the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan* and practice them accordingly. These preliminaries and training are very important to the participants, and in some cases, visitors can attend the training.

On the day of the event, there are on-stage practices before the arrival of Habib Sheikh and the *Kyai*. The onstage preliminaries include recitation of the Qur'an and the *Dhizir*. This is done possibly to alert the audience and direct them to the venue. Such onstage preliminaries, or practices, take several hours before the actual event starts. It is important to note that the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan* has a formality that includes the setting, dress code, place, time, actors, main activities and the 'cool-down' part. Turner's (1987: 11) ideas can be used to understand this process. Turner suggests that performance is a diachronic structure like in the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan*, which has a beginning, a sequence of overlapping but isolable phases, and an end. Their structure is generated out of the dialectical oppositions of processes and levels of process.

The Dress Code

The dress code is how people dress for religious events. Men wear a Muslim shirt, a *Sarung* (a cloth wrapped around the body from the waist to the ankles), or long pants, and a hat or turban. The Muslim women cover their heads and wear suitable clothes (Raimy, 2000: 173-213). Newland, for example, claims that the dress code symbolizes the notion of modesty. Both men and women cover their torsos and their upper legs while attending the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan*. However, the women's dress code is much stricter, as they are expected to cover their shoulders and upper arms. While women should cover their hair, it is not a requirement that every woman should use the *jilbab* (veil). Instead, some women choose scarves in which to wrap their hair (Newland, 2000: 199-222 dan Izharuddin, 2015: 397-412). And there is a general understanding that every participant must dress appropriately, in accordance with Islamic and Javanese norms. This includes non-Muslims who are there to observe.

For instance, on two separate occasions, in 2013 and 2014 respectively, the researcher invited two female friends who were interested in participating in the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan*. The first one was from the USA and the second from Australia. They were both academics. They asked if they could attend and if he could take them. He confirmed that they could attend. However, he advised them that the most important thing to secure their attendance was to dress the same way as all the Muslim women attending. Although they were Western academics who had a different way of dressing, it was important to emphasize the importance of respecting the values of the ritual for which the dress code is crucial. The same happened with a male friend from Slovakia. On one occasion he and the researcher were invited to observe a ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan* together. They obtained Muslim dress, including a hat and a shirt, and the researcher's friend used his long pants. Although most men attending the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan* use *Sarung*, others use long pants. Throughout the fieldwork, the dominant color of the clothes was white, worn by both men and women. The color white signifies a symbol of peace in this context. Also, Habib Sheikh and other *Kyai* from Ahbabul Musthofa, *Majelis Dhikir Al Khidmah*, *Pondok Pesantren Nurul Haromain* and *Majelis Al Ukhuwwah* wear white robes and turbans in line with this tradition (Woodward, 2012: 121).



Figure 1. This photo is an example of how women dress during a *Slawatan* performance. Although a white covering and veil are preferred, other colours and covering hair with a scarf are also accepted. Photo taken by researcher in Yogyakarta, July 2015.



Figure 2. Photo shows the men's dress code during the ritual. Photo taken by a participant and shared with the researcher during an interview and discussion session. The event was in Gresik, East Java, in 2014.

The Religious Songs

It is important to highlight that the Qur'an is the primary source of the first part of the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan*. However, other books written by *Ulama* (Muslim scholars) are used. According to Ilham (2011: 67), the main book used by Habib Sheikh and Ahbabul al Mustafa is the "*Simtu al-duror*". Moreover, there are other book sources as well, including the "Al- Barzanji" written by Sheik Ja'far bin Hasan bin Abdul Karim Bin Muhammad Al- Barzanji Al-Kurdi, a mufti scholar from Medina, Saudi Arabia; "*Burdal*" by Imam Busyairi and the "Diba" by Sheikh Abdurrohman Ibn Al-Daiba'i Al-Zabidi. Before the reading of the "*Simtu al duror*", "*Fatihah*" (the first verse in the first chapter of the Qur'an) is recited as a blessing to the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon Him), His companions, and followers. Then the following verses are read:

فيا ايها الراجون منه شفاعة صلوا عليه وسلموا تسليما
ويا ايها المشتاقون الى رؤيا جماله صلوا عليه وسلموا تسليما
ويا من يخطب وصاله يقظة ومناما صلوا عليه وسلموا تسليما
اللهم صل وسلم وبارك عليه

O you who hope for his (the Prophet's) intercession, ask Allah to grant blessing upon him (Prophet Muhammad), and pray for the Prophet and greet him with "peace be with you".

The reading of the verse above signals the official start of the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan*. After this, Habib Sheikh reads the following, singing:

“Ya Rabbi Solli ‘ala Muhammad waktakh Min al-Khoir Kulla Muglaq”.

When the Habib reads, the congregation follow him while the *rabana* plays the music. The reading and music go on for a few minutes. Then Habib Sheikh changes to another chapter that is called:

“Ya Rabbi Ballighu al-wasilah Ya Rabbi Khussob bi al-Fadilah”.

This goes on for a few minutes and then he changes to the next chapter:

“Assalamu’alaik Zain al-Anbiya’ Assalamu alaik Ayyo al- Atqiya”.

Then he changes to:

“Ya Rasulallah Ya Nabi laka Syafa’ah Ya Nabi”.

This is followed by:

“Ahmad ya habibi..., Ya habibi... Allahumma Salli ala Muhammad...”

After the above chapters, one important section follows which is termed the core of the *Maulid Nabi* (rites marking the birth of the Prophet). This part is considered the peak of the ritual process. When the event reaches this stage, it requires everyone attending to stand up and the whole gathering sing together, starting with the following:

“Tala Al Badru Allainah, Minn Sari Yaa Til wah da I”.

This is a welcoming song that was sung by the people of Medina in Saudi Arabia, during the time the Prophet migrated from Mecca. Also, during the process, a volunteer will use perfumes, rubbing them onto the hands of the leaders. Another one will sprinkle flowers onto the stage as a sign of giving blessing.

Habib Sheikh continues the event by reading other chapters, including the one that starts with:

“Allahumma Salli ala Muhammad...”

This part of the event is interesting because the first part of the song is in Arabic and the second, in Javanese. The congregation like it, especially when Habib Sheikh arrives at the Javanese part. However, he uses high-level Javanese that is hard to understand. After this song, Habib Sheikh shifts to another, starting with the following:

“Maulaya Salli wasallim daiman adada”.

The singing of the religious songs by Habib Sheikh. This part is one of the most interesting, and key to the ritual. First, Habib Sheikh will signal to the vocalists and

drummers who are on the stage opposite him. Immediately after the signal, he leads the singing followed by the vocalist and the whole gathering. The drummers play their instruments to echo the singing in the background. The songs are in the form of *Dhiker* (veneration of the name of Allah) in a very deep and spiritual mode. This is one of the closing songs that the Habib sings before moving on to the next level, which is the *Dakwah* (preaching).

The “Cool-down” effect

After every ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan* performance, there is what Schechner (2010: 18) called the ‘cool-down’ effect. This process of ‘cooling-down’ involves both the performers and the audience. The Habib and the *Kyai*, who are leading performers, are taken to a special room that has been prepared for them. Here, they sit in circles and chat. Meanwhile various kinds of food, both Javanese and Arabic, are served. Different kinds of fruit, tea and water are also available. While eating, they discuss how the event went and about future ones. They also receive visitors in the room, who come for prayers and blessings from the Habib and *Kyai*.

On the other hand, the audience also have their ‘cooling-down’. Immediately after the event, food is served by members of the organizing committee. The audience members gather in different groups, according to when they arrived. Some rush to greet the Habib and *Kyai* while they are leaving the stage. Others take photographs and selfies. While eating in groups, they talk about the event and how they feel about it. Some will rush to the parking area to find their vehicles and motorbikes, to avoid being caught up in the traffic jam that usually happens after every event. Others will hang around near the temporary merchandise stalls and tables (*Kaki Lima*) erected around the surrounding place, to buy souvenirs of *Slawatan*.

The cleaning of the places and dismantling of the stages and tents also starts after the main event. Committee members come in with plastics bags to collect the piles of rubbish left behind. Others fold up the mats and carpets where people were sitting. The sound system and televisions are also collected by the technicians who erected them pre-event. Some of the audience stand along the roadside to wait for the *Habib* and *Kyai*. They wave and try to shake hands with them while they walk to their vehicles to go home. This

brings the event to an end and everyone goes home. The next section will explain the finding related to the figure of Habib Sheikh, as a motivation for some followers from different communities.

The Figure of Habib Sheikh and Charismatic Leadership as a Motivation Factor.



Figure 3. Photo of Habib Sheikh in his traditional dress. The photo was taken by a participant and shared with the researcher.

The data findings in this section examine the image of Habib Sheikh and his charisma as part of the complex set of factors and multiple interests that motivate people in the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan*. Habib Sheikh is a composed, charismatic individual. In Brouilly's descriptions (Bruilly, 2011: 482), a widely shared set of beliefs embodied in popular rituals, such as *Slawatan*, are crucial in the emergence of charismatic leaders such as Habib Sheikh in traditional societies like Java. During the fieldwork, people said that Habib Sheikh has extraordinary qualities that provide him with a charismatic authority which enables people to submit to him, because of these qualities (Anderson, 1990: 80). Examples of the qualities observed include: he is a *Hafiz*es *Qur'an*, linguist, writer, composer, singer, conductor of music and is sociable and generous, with many other qualities that are key to his success. He is well-built, tall, handsome, and well dressed. *Hafiz*es *Qur'an* means he is

master of the Qur'an and can read or cite from any verse or chapter of the Qur'an. He is, therefore, an important symbol of the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan*. This is consistent with Geertz's symbolic understanding of ritual. He believes that ritual symbols shape the social order in society. In this sense Habib Sheikh's image is linked to shaping the social order, by transforming the ritual of phenomenon of *Slawatan* with new innovations, into a form of Muslim popular piety, displaying social passion as explained by Geertz (1973: 112). It also validates participants' responses, in that Habib Sheikh himself is a key factor as to why they attend the ritual. Catherine Bell (1992) differs from Geertz by using the term ritualization. In this way Habib Sheikh serves as the superior authority necessary in ritualization (Munn 1973; Davis- Floyd, 2004; Schirch, 2005; Firth, 2011).

Consequently, evidence in this study reveals that the figure of Habib Sheikh as an individual is very important in motivating people. The observations and discussions with various participants inform us that these devotees come to the *Slawatan* mainly to see him performing. The people consider him to be an extraordinary individual and believe that he has exceptional qualities when it comes to celebrating the life history of the Prophet. In Weberian terms (Weber, 1968: 48-54), such kinds of qualities are regarded as of divine origin, which are not accessible to the ordinary person.

Other evidence for linking the role of Habib Sheikh and participant motivation in the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan* relates to the Indonesian political situation in 1997-1999. According to Hefner (2000: 6-7), once the events of Indonesian Independence passed the country began to have, and now enjoys, a relatively pluralistic society, the same way as medieval Muslim society showcases religious pluralism. However, during Indonesia's political and economic crises, from 1997-1999, an upsurge of religious violence was witnessed, mostly by angry Muslim protesters against the Chinese-minority Christians. Such religious conflicts are backward steps for the diversity of Indonesia, as stated in Pancasila (Indonesian national ideology) and undermine the pluralistic state, as described by its founding fathers (Ricklefs, 2001: 247-260; Vickers, 2005: 113-141). The complex events of this period were an opportunity for Habib Sheikh to play a significant role in substantiating the leadership vacuum created by the political insecurity. His background, of middle-class *Hadhrami* descent, and experience as a successful businessman, gave him legitimate authority (Bruilly, 2011: 479).

As Farid notes (Esack, 2002: 236), the loss of charismatic leadership figures can lead to the diminishing presence of progressive Islam. This is because the Muslim community seem to display a penchant for such figures. Therefore, the rise of Habib Sheikh in this period was a requirement for the existence of ordered spiritual life. This is because, as the events of 1997-1999 unfolded, Gibson (2008: 309-321) observes that there was need for an institution that could rise above the conflicts and factionalism generated by the political situation. Habib Sheikh was able to calm down the discontent provoked by the circumstances of the time (King: 1978: 23). His image and performance provided a retreat for people who were looking for an alternative, charismatic leader who could salvage them from the stressful political and economic situation. In doing so, his image served as being of exemplary character, inspiring large crowds of people to gather for every performance (Willner, 1985: 4). This provides another piece of evidence of the complex set of factors and multiple interests that motivate people in the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan* by Habib Sheikh.

Linguistically, Fogg (2015: 86-110) argues that during the standardization of the Indonesian language from the 1940s to the 1950s, authorities pushed the language towards European normativity. This has had a significant influence on how the Muslims, who were less impressed with European languages, could use the national language for religious purposes. However, Habib Sheikh has succeeded in remixing Arabic, Javanese and Bahasa Indonesian, which was more appealing to the Islamic leaders and their followers. The assimilation of Arabic and Javanese knowledge by Habib Sheikh contributes to the domestication and transformation of the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan*, as a powerful polity of motivation in urban areas (Kraus, 1995: 21-31). His linguistic skills make it possible for him to write, compose and sing in all three languages. He has written many songs in all three languages, which are usually read and sung during his *Slawatan*. Some of his songs are also sung at other social and public gatherings, and on radio stations around Java. His presence in this new form of *Slawatan* provided a general efficacy of the ritual (Prager, 2010: 9-25).

Furthermore, his language skills are a powerful tool, appealing to the Javanese community. Nourse (2013: 400-422) notes that in contemporary Indonesia, both Arabic and Javanese are supra-languages that attract citizens with cross-cutting appeal. The use of

the Javanese language also creates a form of identity for them. This serves as a catalyst, enticing people in the thousands to his performances. It also offers a conceptualisation that becomes an aspect of a wider cultural heritage to be enjoyed, performed and consumed (Mee, 2010: 321-339). In addition, Taylor clarifies that language is used during the process of orientation of the self, where norms, morals and virtues are inculcated by the agencies in the fundamental orientation. In this case, the self-start identifies itself in association with the agencies. Likewise, the self, most of the time, sees it as a moral obligation to stick to the identity in which the self was framed during the fundamental orientation. To the self this identity is good (Taylor, 1989: 25-52 dan Taylor, 2007: 359).

Socially, the phenomenon of the *Slawatan* ritual involves a group of drummers of different instruments, hence Habib Sheikh conducts the drummers and sounds in line with what is being sung. This gives atmosphere to the event (Reid, 2008: 253–267). In all observations, he could be seen swinging his hands to the music and musicians in an artistic way.

One of the signs of his generosity is that he comes to the performance with packets of money, either in two thousand, or five thousand, Rupiah notes, and distributes them to the children at the gathering. Sometimes adults also gather around him, hoping to be given some. On the other hand, he throws fruit to those sitting in front of him. People are always eager to get the fruit he throws, as they believe it is a ‘*Barakah*’ (blessing) to eat something directly given by Habib Sheikh. He socializes with everyone who comes to him during, and after, the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan*. This is evident when he arrives at the event, even though there are always high-protocol persons and security present, he attempts to shake hands with those wanting to reach him. The same process goes on after the ritual is finished. People struggle in lines from the stage to where he is hosting, to be able to shake hands, or take a photo of him.

Therefore, the combination of these qualities makes it easy for people to like him. They serve as a magnet to motivate followers towards him and his *Slawatan*. These manners also correspond to several ideal qualities expected of leaders in a traditional society like Java; they are interpreted as signs of his charisma, spiritual power, and legitimacy (Amirell, 2011: 303-323). The same applies when he is on stage during the ritual phenomenon of

Slawatan; no matter at which part of the event you are located, you can see him from that distance. As such, a finding in this research reveals that Habib Sheikh himself is a figure of major desirability for different people, including men and women, young and old. And his high degree of commitment to the cause of *Slawatan* accords him the ability to build a symbolic relationship with his followers of different ages (Aljunied, 2011: 281-302).

People come from all backgrounds, rich and poor, from cities, towns and villages. They include: aristocrats, royalty and ordinary people. For instance, he has a regular schedule of *Slawatan* with the Sultanate of Yogyakarta. This is one of the biggest *Slawatan* held every year in the province and draws one of the biggest crowds among the events held in the city.

In one of the interviews, with one interviewee, when asked, “Why are you interested in this ritual?” The person answered, “Because I like him”. In another interview, another interviewee was asked the same question and his response was, “I go to the ritual because of the music”. Looking at these two respondents, each said something different based on what motivated him. The different answers to the same question are an indication that Habib Sheikh’s charisma, together with complex sets of factors and multiple interests, are issues that motivate people to attend the ritual.

Furthermore, the rise of Habib Sheikh is inspiring people to link what Schulz (2006: 210) sees as the prominence of new types of religious leaders who promote Islam, to a mission geared towards social and individual reform. These leaders have mesmerizing voices that pervade streets, domestic settings and public spaces, and are welcomed by urban and rural listeners as spiritual guidance. Moreover, Habib Sheikh’s performance has taken the shape of modernized ritual with a deep appreciation of local roots and the innovative annexation of local tradition. He consequently plays a leading role in the significant change in Islamic expression and practices manifested in public life through the ritual phenomenon of *Slawatan*, since after the collapse of the New Order regime. And indeed, public piety surged after the end of the New Order in 1998 (Bodden, 2013: 24-48). Indonesian society turned to more moderate religious leaders, like Habib Sheikh after witnessing the advent of democratization (Makin, 2017: 1-22). Thus, Habib Sheikh’s

charisma and modernization of *Slawatan* has had a positive influence on the growth of democracy in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study has discussed the performance of *Slawatan* and how the charismatic leadership of Habib Sheikh serves as a source of motivation for diverse communities in Central Java. The study has argued that the ritual performance of *Slawatan* follows an organized process which is consistent with religious rituals and performance. The findings show that the performance of *Slawatan* is a procedure that includes: the preliminaries, dress code, verses and songs, and the ‘cool down’ part. It reveals how people from diverse communities see Habib Sheikh as being very charismatic. They believe that his leadership qualities and innovations motivate them to attend this form of Islamic ritual performance. Therefore, the ritual of *Slawatan* and Habib Sheikh contribute to the understanding of Islamic ritual, as an event that promotes peace, the social solidarity of people from different communities.

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