

BETWEEN THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE: THE DYNAMICS OF THE MEMORIZATION OF THE QUR'AN IN EAST KALIMANTAN

ANTARA YANG SUCI DAN PROFAN: DINAMIKA MENGHAFAAL AL-QUR'AN DI KALIMANTAN TIMUR

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Abstract

Memorizing texts of the Qur'an is one of the highest rewarding deeds, and it has long been perceived as a manifestation of the idea of guarding the religion. The rewarding job of memorizing the Qur'an is sustained by material benefits provided by the Muslim society thus creating a dynamic interaction between profane and sacred motives for the haafizhs (memorizer of the Qur'an). This paper aims at exploring the dynamic inter-relationship between sacred and profane motives in the process of memorization of the Qur'an in East Kalimantan by answering twofold questions; (1) What are the main determinant factors affecting the decision to memorize the Qur'an? (2) how full-fledged haafizhs see their efforts in doing such tasks? In-depth interviews were undertaken to get information related to the research questions, while qualitative technique is applied to analyse the data. Findings reveal that the main determinant factor for the Qur'anic memorization is a combination of perceived high social stratum the haafizh would enjoy should they manage to complete the task, and the society's recognition for such stratum in the form of government supports for them. Full-fledge haafizhs of the Qur'an perceive their effort to memorize the whole chapter of the Qur'an as a sacred duty ordained by God thus material gains and social recognitions they get while doing the task are the manifestation of God's blessings. The sacred and the profane in this context is fluid that in most of the times the demarcation lines of the sacred and the profane transcend each other's.

Keywords: *Memorization of the Qur'an, haafizh, and Muslim society.*

Abstrak

Menghafal teks-teks Al-Qur'an adalah salah satu perbuatan paling berharga, dan telah lama dianggap sebagai perwujudan dari gagasan menjaga agama. Pekerjaan menghafal Al Qur'an yang menguntungkan ditopang oleh manfaat material yang disediakan oleh masyarakat Muslim sehingga menciptakan interaksi yang dinamis antara motif profan dan sakral untuk *haafizh* (penghafal Al-Qur'an). Makalah ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi hubungan dinamis antara motif sakral dan profan dalam proses menghafal Al Qur'an di Kalimantan Timur dengan menjawab dua pertanyaan; (1) Apa faktor penentu utama yang mempengaruhi keputusan seseorang untuk menghafal Al Qur'an? (2) bagaimana *haafiz* penuh melihat upaya mereka dalam melakukan tugas-tugas seperti itu? Wawancara mendalam dilakukan untuk mendapatkan informasi terkait pertanyaan penelitian, sedangkan teknik kualitatif diterapkan untuk menganalisis data. Temuan riset menunjukkan bahwa faktor penentu utama untuk menghafal Al-Qur'an adalah kombinasi dari strata sosial yang tinggi yang dirasakan akan dinikmati oleh seorang *haafizh* jika mereka berhasil menyelesaikan tugasnya, dan adanya pengakuan masyarakat untuk strata tersebut dalam bentuk dukungan pemerintah bagi mereka. Para *haafiz* yang secara penuh menghafal Al-Quran memandang upaya mereka untuk menghafal seluruh pasal Al-Quran sebagai tugas suci yang ditakdirkan oleh Tuhan sehingga perolehan materi dan pengakuan sosial yang mereka dapatkan saat melakukan tugas adalah perwujudan dari berkah Tuhan. Yang suci dan yang profan dalam konteks ini sedemikian cair, di mana seringkali garis demarkasi antara keduanya saling melampaui satu sama lain.

Kata kunci: Menghafal al-Qur'an, haafiz, masyarakat Muslim.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of memorizing texts of the Qur'an was central to the development of Islam in its formative period. The Arab society at the time of Prophet Muhammad placed oratorical skill at the top of their must-have skills. It had social function as it facilitated upward mobility among those who were lack of privileged family lines and sufficient inherited wealth. Therefore, once a person mastered oratorical skills, he could, then, climb the social strata in his society through mastering the art of reciting poem. (M. V. McDonald, 1978, hlm. 15–17)

The Qur'an itself, in many occasions, has been referred to as a divine literary work by Muslims and the Arab society has admitted its sublime power, especially in terms of its linguistic styles and wordings. Several verses in the Qur'an even pose a challenge to those who deny its divine characters by asking the early Arab society to compose something like the Qur'an. The significance of memorization of the Islamic texts in Muslim society has many to do with the central position of oral culture in pre-Islamic and Islamic Arab society. It is not an exaggeration to say that the early generation of Muslims in the Arabian Peninsula were not very familiar with written texts. Instead, they were famous for their skills to memorize, one which help them preserve their oral culture. (Cook, 2001) Prophet Muhammad, in addition to this, was also perceived as someone who was not very familiar with written texts as mentioned in the Qur'an itself.

Lay and scholar Muslims alike believe that at times when verses of the Qur'an were revealed to Prophet Muhammad, his companions would

gather around him and the prophet would then recite those verses to them in the exact wordings of Archangel Gabriel. Such verses, then, would be memorized. The companions of the prophet would do their best to preserve the memorized verses by reciting them in any given opportunity such as during their prayers. This practice had led to the emergence of early generations of Muslim who spent most of their times for memorizing the Qur'an, known as guardians (*haafizh*) of the Qur'an.

However, the wars during the first caliphate of Abu Bakr had killed a big number of *haafizh* (guardian of the Qur'an of the Qur'an). This in turn led to a growing concern among Muslims over the need to create a new strategy to protect the authenticity of the Qur'anic texts. It was during this specific period that the early Muslim society of Medina came up with the idea of writing the Qur'an. Later, the writing process resulted in a more rigid codification. The written form of the Qur'an as it is known today, then, emerged as a final product (Friedmann, 2003).

For Muslims, the Qur'an is not only a Holy Scripture containing guidelines about how to live the everyday lives but is also believed to be a miraculous scripture that can heal the sick, light the darkness, and bring good news to everyone. Understanding the Qur'an is the duty of every Muslim because it can provide meanings of life for Muslims. (Mursalim, 2017) Thus, Muslims around the world have always tried their best to interact with the Qur'a through various forms of oral and written expressions, rational thoughts, and spiritual and emotional experiences. (Kurakin, 2015) Muslims

believe that good interaction with the Qur'an would guarantee a successful life in this world and in the hereafter.

In Indonesia, efforts to bring forward the Qur'anic texts into practices are actualized in a variety of ways, example of which ranges from reading, memorizing, interpreting, and practicing it in daily life. Since these practices are considered part of *ibadat* (rewarding deeds) every Muslim should do, they transform into a tradition, which in turn has become part of the cultural lives of Indonesian Muslims, especially among religious students living in *pesantren*, popularly called *santri*. Yet, even among Indonesian Muslims in a larger society the Qur'an has become part of everyday practices among Muslims. The reason behind this successful enculturation lies on the fact that for Indonesian Muslims the Qur'an is more than a holy scripture. In this case, Muslims in Indonesia believe that reading the Qur'an, let alone memorizing it, will bring mercy and blessings from Allah, the almighty God.

Even though manifestation of the Qur'anic norms and values into the social and cultural fabric of Indonesian Muslims in the modern period has been going on for many years, it was the state-backed program of a Qur'anic competition, or *Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an* (MTQ)-begin at 1968, which is run annually across the district levels through to the national level. Indonesian Muslims who are already familiar with Qur'anic recitation and memorization eventually have extra incentives to continue doing the tasks. Anna M. Gade noted that during the 1990s, Qur'anic recitation and memorization related events in Indonesia had become the main medium of Da'wa for Islamic revivalism.(Anna M. Gade, 2017) Thus,

the MTQ has become a place in which *haafizh* of the Qur'an could exercise their privilege of being *haafizh* in a relatively formalized way.

A government's support of 'a *haafizh* scholarship program' for university students is also responsible for the growing interest in memorizing the Qur'an among young Muslims. The ministry of religious affairs of Indonesia (MORA) has been creating a variety of grants for those who remember by hearts parts and, or, full chapters of the Qur'an. ("Kemenag Berikan Beasiswa Tahfiz Alquran," 2016) Similar programs were soon followed by many institutions around the country. In some provincial regions, such as in West and East Java, local governments even went further to accept the Qur'anic *haafizhs* who apply for a job in the police service without a formal test. (*Penghafal 30 juz Alquran akan lolos seleksi penerimaan anggota Polri*, 2018)

The economic gain given by the government to the *haafizh* of the Qur'an has become a new way for social mobilization among many young Muslims who came from traditional backgrounds, mainly from traditional Islamic boarding schools known as *Pondok Pesantren*. Indeed, this privilege from the government has diversified the motives of these young Muslim student to memorizing the Qur'an. Even though divine reward is still, in theory, an important motive to memorize the Qur'an among many young Muslims, such a worldly motive as an economic reward may also contribute to their decision for memorizing the Qur'an. Rohman, establishing his argument on Gade's notion of moods and motivations of Qur'anic recitation in Indonesia, stated that such mechanism is self-sufficient, in that it creates continuous chains of

demand and supply for *haafizhs*. (Rohman, 2016, hlm. 120–124)

In recent years, the significance of memorizing the Qur'an as part of the students' daily chores at schools are widely supported among parents, who want their children to excel both in science and religion (spirituality). Partly in reaction to such demand, many public and Islamic schools have increasingly tried to offer a more Islamic educational system, and they do so by creating a new method of memorizing the Qur'an, and promoting it as part of the school's distinctive programs. At the same time, a competition of a Qur'anic memorization broadcasted by many Indonesian television reality shows has helped advertise the popularity of the schools' program of Qur'anic memorization.

The trend of memorizing the Qur'an among the school children is also obvious in the province of East Kalimantan. This trend is accepted as an effective way to instil the children's interests in doing the tasks and is considered to be a crucial factor in determining the success of undertaking the memorization process. Many scholars suggest that allowing children to start memorizing the Qur'an as early as possible is crucial in determining their success later on. (Azhar Jaafar, Munawir Kamaluddin, & Mohd. Isa Hamzah, 2017) The widespread emergence of private schools with Islamic attributes (Integrated Islamic Elementary School; SDIT, Integrated Islamic Junior High School; SMPIT, Senior High School Plus; SMA Plus), has attracted many parents to send their children to these schools, despite their relatively high tuition fees.

However, some argues that there has no significant relation between the act of memorizing the Qur'an and the commitment of practicing it in daily lives. Huda's observation of *haafizhs* in an Islamic boarding school in Purworejo reveals that religious commitment of those who are in the process of memorizing the Qur'an is not very different from those who are not. Huda argues religious commitment plays a major role in undertaking the hurdle of memorization, but it is not the only determinant factor. A combination of the perceived higher social status of the *haafizhs* combined with limited social capitals of young traditional Muslim has encouraged many young Muslims in many rural areas to memorize the Qur'an, as it may allow them to climb the social ladders in society. (Huda, 2018)

Despite the enormous development of writing and printing technologies, the notion of guarding Islam through memorizing its fundamental texts remains strong among Muslims. It is widely accepted that in order to be able to prove the miracle of the Qur'an as the true words of God, one must grasp the Qur'an physically. It means that those who want to possess the sacredness of the Qur'an, they must remember by heart the texts of the Qur'an before being granted an ability to allow the Qur'an to reveal the true words of God through divine ways. (Boyle, 2006)

Today, the practice of memorizing the Qur'an as a strategy of survival, as it was once employed by the early Muslim society of Medina, has lost its social function. This has in turn left theological justification as a sole basis for the proliferation of the idea of memorization of the Qur'an. (Moore, 2008)

METHOD

This article aims at revealing various motives of memorizing the Qur'an among *haafizhs* in East Kalimantan. It does so by exploring early experiments of the *haafizhs* that led them to decide to invest their times in memorizing the Qur'an. In-depth interviews with *haafizhs* in East Kalimantan were undertaken in a span of four months. Participants were selected purposively by relying heavily on personal connections and contacts with *haafizhs* who frequently attend MTQ's events in the last four years in East Kalimantan. Once the participants told stories about their motivations for memorizing the Qur'an, they were asked to reflect on those experiences as they are now full-fledged *haafizh*.

DISCUSSION

The Sacred and the Profane

The term "sacred" and "profane" was first coined by French sociologist Emile Durkheim who thought it to be the central characteristic of religion. Durkheim's definition of sacred and profane emerged from his effort to define the term religion by providing evidences that could prove the omnipresence of religious phenomenon in society. He believed that even the most primitive society has complex understanding of religious phenomenon thus proves that the idea of religion is a natural phenomenon that exist in every society. Durkheim insisted that religious phenomenon should be treated as a natural phenomenon in society that emerge as a result of people's interaction with their immediate environment. (Emile Durkheim, 1995)

According to Durkheim, all religious phenomena fall into two categories; beliefs and rites. Beliefs refer to people's understanding about the relation between them and the higher beings and rites contain specific ways about what to do and how to deal with such higher beings. Since rites refer to mode of actions, to distinguish them from mundane human activities one need to understand the characteristics of the objects of the rites, thus one must understand the beliefs regarding such objects. In this regard, almost all religious beliefs, according to Durkheim, have one thing in common: they share the presupposition of a classification of "[T]he real and ideal things... that man conceive of into two classes... which the words profane and sacred translate fairly well". (Emile Durkheim, 1995, hlm. 34)

Durkheim's bipartite classification of profane and sacred plays pivotal role in his definition of religion. It is the sacred that define religion since religion is "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred... beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church" (Emile Durkheim, 1995, hlm. 44) This definition situates the idea of the sacred and profane beliefs and practices within the functional frameworks of society. Thus, the sacred eventually refers to all practices that live in society which main function is to bolster group solidarity. It is the main ingredient of social cohesion that bound people together to live as a group. The idea of the sacred, thus, revolves around the discussions concerning the production and maintenance of order within a society through social interaction involving sets of symbolic items.

The term profane, however, is bounded to the term sacred since the two terms refer to the same phenomenon; the making and maintaining of order in society. In many literatures, both the sacred and the profane are seen as a dichotomy. However, the term sacred itself is problematic because it can also refer to bad things such as the cause of disorder. Sacred, therefore, must be examined in both of its pure and impure aspects. The pure aspect of the sacred refers to positive powers that help society to stay in-order while the impure aspect of the sacred refers to the opposite direction; disorder. (Kurakin, 2015, hlm. 3–5)

The impure aspect of the sacred, most of the times, is treated as if it was part of the profane. This is misleading since both the sacred and the profane have both positive and negative functions to society. The separation of the sacred from the profane depends solely on the social construction on the ideal type of society agreed by all involved in social interaction. Since society is dynamic, what considered to be sacred in one time could later be considered as profane. This also works the other way around.

However, how the sacred became known to human is always problematic because the term sacred itself refers to different reality. Scholarly discussion regarding the sacred and the profane since 1917 until today, according to Stausberg, have undergone several theoretical evolutions. (Michael Stausberg, 2017a, hlm. 549) In this regard, a literature review of the term sacred by Engler and Gardiner suggests that there are at least four point of views used by scholars to approach the notion of the sacred; the ineffable sacred, the experienced sacred, the

polarized sacred and the contextualized sacred. Each of these approaches refers to different roles of language in talking about thus giving meaning to the sacred. (Steven Engler & Mark Q. Gardiner, 2017, hlm. 616) The ineffable sacred and the experienced sacred hold the assumption that the term sacred is out of human understandings and language we use to talk about it lacks the capability of revealing its' true meaning. The first approach simply suggests that the sacred cannot be spoken while the second approach towards the sacred holds the assumption that while we cannot talk about the sacred, we can still experience it. This implies that the sacred could only be understood by locating the position of the sacred within the complex definition of religion thus placing religion in the domain of objective social reality that can be described collectively and locating the sacred in the category of subjective personal experience. (Steven Engler & Mark Q. Gardiner, 2017, hlm. 619–620)

Polarized sacred, as an approach towards understanding the notion of the sacred, is a strategy of revealing the sacred by contrasting it to other less mysterious terms, especially the profane. Understanding the sacred, thus, means that one must understand the profane. This strategy has been criticized for being able to explain the mechanism by which something becomes sacral and vice versa. However, the strongest advantage of using this strategy is its' tendency to focus on describing the profane rather than experiencing the sacred. (Steven Engler & Mark Q. Gardiner, 2017, hlm. 627–628)

Contextualized sacred, perhaps, is the most realistic and promising approach towards understanding the

sacred. This approach does not try to explain properties or qualifiers of the so called sacred. Instead, this approach suggests that "...the meaning of 'sacred' is determined only through its' relation to its' context; it's meaning is not some property inherent in the concept itself". (Steven Engler & Mark Q. Gardiner, 2017, hlm. 630) The sacred, therefore, is in a state of constant constructions and reconstructions.

Of abovementioned approaches, none aims at proposing a line that could separate the sacred from the profane. Instead, the sacred is kept hiding in mysterious realm inaccessible to the eyes of those who live in profane life. However, it is obvious that such profane world has the potential to provide good arguments on the nature of the sacred by either locating the sacred in opposite position relative to the profane, such as in the work of Durkheim, or locating it within the profane itself, such as in the work of Eliade.

Eliade's account on the notion of the sacred and the profane, however, is unique because not only does it acknowledge the role of mysterious power, thus subjective personal experience, in making the sacred visible but also the mechanism by which the sacred manifests itself and becomes less mysterious. Mircea Eliade, a French philosopher, build his argument on Rudolf Otto's thesis about the sacred as an immediate experience that cannot be described to those who don't have first-hand experience regarding the phenomenon. However, many believe that Eliade was heavily influenced by the Work of Durkheim on the elementary forms of religious life. Eliade's position on the sacred, therefore, is similar to that of Durkheim's. (Douglas Allen, 2008)

Despite being open about his admiration towards Otto's analysis of the sacred, Eliade's position on the issue of sacred and profane goes beyond the belief of the sacred as an immediate experience *per se*. Moreover, many believes that Eliade's concept of *hierophany* and his view on the two modes of being lend heavily on Durkheim's diametral positioning of the sacred and the profane. The rather ambiguous position of Eliade, therefore, is promising because it serves as a hub to bridge the sociological work of Durkheim to the phenomenological work of Rudolf Otto thus open the possibility of creating more fruitful scholarly discussions on the issue of the sacred and the profane. (Michael Stausberg, 2017b, hlm. 575–580)

Eliade proposed the term *hierophany* to explain the emergence of the sacred from the profane. The sacred, according to Eliade, shows itself as something wholly different from the profane. Men, therefore, cannot reveal the sacred by themselves but must wait for the sacred to manifest itself. In a glance, such presupposition is loaded with paradoxes. However, Eliade argued that almost all religion is based on *hierophanies*, from the most primitive form of religion to the relatively more sophisticated one like Christianity. (Mircea Eliade, 1987, hlm. 11)

For Eliade, anything can be *hierophany* since the sacred can choose to manifest itself in almost any form. Once the sacred reveals itself, the manifestation of the sacred is no longer be perceived as profane because it, now, belongs to another reality. A stone, for example, is profane thus people would treat it as merely a stone. But once a stone is revealed as a medium of sacred manifestation, it is no longer just a stone, it is now a *hierophany* and people who are aware of this would

start to treat to stone as a sacred object. (Mircea Eliade, 1987, hlm. 12)

The concept of *hierophany* implies that everything could be *hierophany*, thus sacred. In fact, everything that men can relate to has the possibility of becoming *hierophany*. When there is no sign manifest itself, it will be provoked. Men need *hierophany* in order to end disorientation caused by what Eliade called homogenous space, a profane space in which there is no known different inner quality between one space to others. (Mircea Eliade, 1987, hlm. 27)

Once a practice is perceived as a sacred, it would become a religious symbol, or at least, a sacralised symbol that refers to religion. This process of transgressing boundaries between the sacred and the profane has long been noted by several authors who studied cultural sociology. For example, the work of O'Brien on the sacralization of Hip-Hops Music among African-American Muslims in the US. (O'Brien, 2013) It is suggested that individuals will always create innovation in order to maintain their identity according to demands of the society they live in. This reciprocal and interactive process of socialization is continuous, and it would not end at any point in time as long as the society exists.

Memorizing the Qur'an can be seen as a sacred practice not only because it has religious significance but also because it has social functions, such as to establish an ordered society. Changes brought forward by modernization indeed have affected pattern of social interactions in the society, thus blurring the boundary between the sacred and the profane. With secularization as the main force behind the modernization process,

the symbolic significance of Qur'anic memorization must find other references to become ever-relevant to the modern secular society. One way to do this is by incorporating moral values of Qur'anic memorization into the wider continuum of public morality.

In the early period of Islam, memorizing all texts of the Qur'an was served to protect the newly born religion -Islam- from disappearing, due to the fear of losing the Qur'an as the religion's prime source of teachings. The invention of printing and digital technology in later centuries has enabled Muslims to store Qur'anic texts in huge numbers, bringing about changes in the ways today's Muslims perceived the sacredness of Qur'anic memorization. From being a method of preserving the authenticity of the revelation, now the practice of memorizing the Qur'an is evolving into a sort of social festive.

It is not an exaggeration to say that in the secular modern world, the area of practices considered sacred is shrinking because the role of religion as a moral basis for social cohesion is losing its power. (Thompson, 1991, hlm. 279–280) Thus, to maintain the sacred aspect of social practices considered sacred by the society, all parties involved in maintaining those social practices should agree to reinterpret the line separating the sacred from the mundane and ordinary aspects of human activities. Competition on Qur'anic memorization then becomes sacred in itself.

One can argue that even though *haafizh* of the Qur'an would compete to win mundane benefits in the form of material gains, the practice of Qur'anic memorization itself would still be sacred

because those material benefits are not the only reason to join the competition. The dialectics of this sacred and profane motives behind the practice of Qur'anic memorization lead to a tendency to justify the mundane aspects of those benefits as part of religious deeds. It is done mainly by converting materials rewards for the *haafizhs* into a more religious one such as exchanging certain amount of money into free visits to holly Mecca for Umrah.

Haafizhs of the Qur'an in East Kalimantan

Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an (The Competition of Qur'anic Recitation -MTQ) plays a pivotal role in attracting *haafizhs* from all around Indonesia. In East Kalimantan, MTQ is a prestigious event held annually by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Indonesia. The event attracts *haafizh* (the guardian of the Qur'an), *Qari* (Qur'an reciter) and other Qur'an related religious professionals from all over the region to flock and compete for relatively large sum of rewards from the ministry. This competition consists of some branch of competitions such as *Tahfidz Qur'an*, *Tilawah Qur'an*, *Tartil Qur'an*, *Tafsir Qur'an*, *Khat Qur'an*, *Syarihil Qur'an* and *Fahmil Qur'an* competition. *Haafizh* of the Qur'an can choose to compete in almost all branches since most of them require a sufficient ability of Qur'anic memorization.

The magnitude of the event can be seen through its scope and duration. It takes at least a week long, and holds various kinds of competition. Like any other national-level events, the MTQ is organized in all levels of government, ranging from village to national level. Hence, the preparation of this event takes a lot of resources.

At the sub-district level (*Kecamatan*), members of the Institute for the development of the Qur'anic Recitation (*Lembaga Pengembangan Tilawah al-Qur'an -LPTQ*) are responsible for the organization of the MTQ. However, on the district or Municipal level (*Kota/Kabupaten*) level), preparation for MTQ is the responsibility of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the municipal level (*Kabupaten/Kota*).

As one of the most anticipated events in the East Kalimantan, MTQ costs a huge share of fund from East Kalimantan Government Budget (*Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Daerah - APBD*). This is evidenced by the ways the event is prepared, and by the number of its participants. Board committee of the MTQ is structured on a hierarchical chart that ranges vertically from the regional (*Provinsi*), regency (*Kota/Kabupaten*), and to sub-district levels (*Kelurahan*), known as *kafilah* (members of the committee and participants of the event). During the event, committee of the provincial level will pay for all expenditures needed by the *kafilahs* of the regional and municipal levels, whose main task is to take care of all participants of their respective regions. It is well known (among many) that expenses for accommodation, transport, and consumption of the participants and committees of the MTQ during the event were lavish especially in comparison to the average standards of other government-funded events in the province. One informant in this paper depicted it as "... Every time I attended the MTQ, [I saw] that the participants would always get the best"¹

¹ Interview with MJ (MTQ's participant) on 18 Juni 2017 in Samarinda.

Besides the facilities from the committee of the provincial level, participants also received an amount of incentives from their respective *kafilah*, or regional or municipal committees. This is because several days before attending the actual competition at the provincial level, the participants will go for a short training, popularly known as "*masa karantina*" (a training camp). During this time, participants will receive intensive trainings from a number of coaches appointed by the regional board of the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

After the training camp is over, participants will be officially released by their respective regional-government leaders to embark upon joining the competition. Besides fully facilitated during the camp, participants also get a relatively large sum of money as incentives from their respective regents or mayors. Several informants said, that the incentive money they got from both the camp and the competition is, if accumulated around three to six million rupiah.² This is not to mention that the local governments will give them a bonus money if they won a trophy from the competition.

Prize money for winners of an MTQ event at the provincial level of East Kalimantan is somewhat fantastic. One regency in East Kalimantan gave a full-package trip to Mecca for an *Umrah* (little pilgrimage to Mecca), as well as large sum of money. Several other regencies promised tens of million rupiah for winners. One informant told that prize money for the first winner in an MTQ event can reach an amount of twenty five million rupiahs, while there

is no significant difference from that of the second winner of the competition.³ For the participants, the prize money is quite big because it could cover their living cost for (a number of) months, as one responded stated, "... when I was an active participant of MTQ, I always had so much money that I no longer needed a financial support from my parents."⁴

However, it must be noted that most of the funds spent for the MTQ come from the state, although a number of private parties also contribute to the success of the event. Regarding this, as one could easily predict, companies from mining sectors are among the most generous private contributors to MTQ.

In East Kalimantan, there is a very strict regulation regarding who could participate in the event. Age limits and valid identity cards are among the most regulated aspects. However, it is difficult for the committee of the MTQ in regional level (*provinsi*) to verify the validity of age and identity cards of all participants due to the lack of reliable database available for the committee. Moreover, participants of the competition come from several regency (*Kota/Kabupaten*) within the provincial government and the provincial government cannot do much to verify the participant's basic identity such as age and physical address. The verification task becomes even more difficult because governments on the regency level (*Kota/Kabupaten*) will do anything to guarantee their representatives' chance of winning as many trophies as possible, considering the fact that winning trophies of the MTQ is considered as a symbolic success of the regency.

² The amount of incentives varies among participants, depending on the generosity of each sub-district/city.

³ Interview with MJ (MTQ's participant) on 18 Juni 2017 in Samarinda.

⁴ *Ibid*

During the MTQ, it is widely known that many participants manipulated their identities in order to become eligible for the competition.⁵ The organizing committee however is also in favour of such practice because it helped them to win a success in the competition, and many participants of MTQ did it. Thus, before MTQ events, members of regional committees of MTQ would wander around the country to persuade prospective participants from other provinces to represent their *kafilah*. Most of the time, success of the dealing between the committee and the prospective participants depends upon the amount of money offered by the former to the latter.

One informant said a story of how she had faked her identity in order to be eligible for joining the competition. Living in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, she stated that since 2011 she had been contacted by a person from an LPTQ via mobile phone, asking her to compete in an MTQ event at regional level as a participant from East Kalimantan, with a promise that all costs for her travel and accommodation related to it would be reimbursed by the LPTQ.⁶ Moreover, winners of the MTQ will get a priority card when applying for jobs as civil servant, usually assigned at an office relates to scouting a new generation of the MTQ participants.

For many people in East Kalimantan, becoming a civil servant is a popular choice of job because it comes with a promise for better economic securities. In the early 2000, job vacancies for civil

servants in East Kalimantan was quite high. This situation was responded by the local LPTQ by creating a short cut way for *haafizh* to fill up the vacancies. In the eyes of many *haafizhs*, such offer by the LPTQ is often seen as a profane side of the sacred duty, i.e. memorizing the Qur'an.

"Alhamdulillah, the Qur'an gives me a lot of favours. The job I have now comes from my efforts of memorizing the Qur'an. When I was young, I used to join MTQ until at an international level. In 2004, I got an opportunity to have an internship as a civil servant. It didn't take long for me to officially become a civil servant, and I did it without having to follow the long and complicated procedures as did everybody else. This means I was appointed as a civil servant via a special route, without a test."⁷

The story above is not exceptional among the *haafizhs* in East Kalimantan. Instead, it is so typical among them that it serves as a carrier template for most *haafizhs*. The story is telling us that the *haafizh* believe that material benefits would accompany when one does sacred duties. Many *haafizhs* believe that this material rewards are blessings from God for their efforts of memorizing the Qur'an.

The idea of blessing, for the *Haafizhs* of the Qur'an, revolves around what one can possibly have in this world. *Haafizhs* of the Qur'an in East Kalimantan firmly believe that their efforts of memorizing the holy book will be rewarded by the God in the hereafter. However, beside that, they are also certain that rewards of their work will be paid off in this world too, in a way that is unpredictable to human.

⁵ Based on the author's experience as an MTQ participant over the past few years, age manipulation among MTQ participants on the Identity Card is considered as normal.

⁶ Interview with HS, MTQ's Participant who come from outside East Kalimantan on 28 June 2017 in Kutai Kartanegara.

⁷ Interview with AF, MTQ's Coach in Samarinda on August 11th, 2017.

The Sacredness and Profaneness of Memorizing the Qur'an: A Blurring Boundary

Writing about memorization of the Qur'anic texts in a Moroccan context more than a quarter century ago, Eickelman considered the notion of Qur'anic memorization as a form of socialization. According to him, Qur'anic memorization is a foundation of Islamic education. (Eickelman, 1992, hlm. 57–59)

When writing about Qur'anic memorization in an Indonesian context, one cannot undermine the role played by *Pondok Pesantren*, or an Islamic boarding school. In East Kalimantan, there are a number of *Pondok Pesantren* designed especially for memorizing the Qur'an.⁸ The establishment of the *Pesantren Tahfidz* (*Pesantren for Haafizhs of Qur'an*) in East Kalimantan, however, is modeled after the similar *Pondok Pesantren* which had been long popular in Java, where majority of Indonesian Muslims live.

The existence of *Pondok Pesantren* in East Kalimantan, as it is in other place can be seen as an indication of pious society. Many parents in East Kalimantan hope that their children could become a pious person who pray for them when they are dead. So, numbers of parents sending their children to *Pondok Pesantren* hope for their children to get Islamic education, and think that *Pondok Pesantren* is a manifestation of piety. This idea of filial piety is constantly communicated by the parents to their children, so that the children will eventually choose to study and stay in *Pondok Pesantren*.⁹

⁸ There is no data available about the exact number of such pesantren.

⁹ Interview with FU, aluminous of Pesantren Tahfiz on 27 Mei 2017 in Samarinda.

A former student of a *Pesantren Tahfidz* in East Kalimantan depicted this matter as follows:

Once upon a time my mom was ill. Afterward, one ustadz gave her some advices. One of that advice was to put me in a *Pesantren Tahfidz* (*Pesantren for Haafizhs of Qur'an*). First, I refused my mom's wish because I wanted to enter a junior high school, just like my friends. But my mom never gave up on motivating me, then I changed my mind and followed my mom's order to memorize the Qur'an.

The popularity of *Pondok Pesantren* in East Kalimantan lends its credence to a significant role played by the *Da'i* (preachers), who keep preaching their audiences about the advantages parents and children would get from pondok pesantren. Many *Da'is* in East Kalimantan, like everywhere else, keep on saying that religious education is not a supplementary to the general subjects. Instead, general education is the one that should be put as supplementary for religious education. In this regard, the emergence some *Pondok Pesantren* gives a kind of warranty to parent that they now don't have to worry about the future of their children since *Pondok Pesantren* provide both religious and vocational education.

There are at least two types of *Pondok Pesantren* in Indonesia according to Pieterella Van Doorn. First, *Pondok Pesantren* that only focus on learning classical Islamic Text. This type of *Pondok Pesantren* only use Islamic Curriculum for the student. Second, *Pondok Pesantren* that provide mixed curriculum of religious and secular subject for students. (Doorn-Harder, 2010, hlm. 117) However, there is

another kind of pesantren which is quite different from both types mentioned above, *Pesantren Tahfidz*, *Pondok Pesantren* that focuses on memorizing the Quran.

However, the growing number of *Pondok Pesantren* which provide mixed curriculum of religious and secular subject for students does not hold parents from sending their children to other kind of *Pondok Pesantren* which focuses on learning classical Islamic Text. This kind of *Pondok Pesantren* is popular among Muslims in East Kalimantan. To compensate the lack of general curriculum, the *Pondok Pesantren* usually facilitate their students to get a state-sanctioned school diploma, by taking a sort of home-schooling program known as "*Paket C*". This is usually done if the student wanted to pursue a university education.

Different from both types of *Pondok Pesantren*, pesantren that is designed specifically for the purpose of memorizing the Qur'an has different characteristics. If the two types of other *Pondok Pesantren* are mostly attended by students of teenage old, the *Tahfidz Pesantren* (*Pesantren for Haafizhs of Qur'an*) usually don't set any age limits. It means that *Tahfidz Pesantren* will always accept students at whatever age as long as the students are willing to memorize the Qur'an. In reality, however, age of the students in *Tahfidz Pesantren* range from 7 to 12 year old, and only a small minority of them who are older than that age range.

Most of the *tahfidz pesantren* in East Kalimantan do not provide a general education for their pupils. They do not also facilitate their pupils to take *Paket C* from the ministry of Education. However, the *pesantren* generally allow their pupils

to go to formal schools outside the *pesantren* area, as long as it will not give negative influences to their memorizing activities in the *Tahfidz Pesantren*.

Even though the *Tahfidz Pesantren* allows its pupils to take formal schooling outside the pesantren, many parents who send their children to the *Tahfidz Pesantren* usually do not think that sending children to formal schooling is an important issue. For these parents, the fact that their children have memorized the Qur'an is enough. The thoughts of these parents were based on Islamic tradition that Allah will guarantee for *haafizh* on the day of judgement. (Doorn-Harder, 2010, hlm. 179) Moreover, it is a well accepted story that a *haafizh* of the Qur'an can help his/her family members to enter the paradise.

¹⁰

Parents of the *haafizh* children clearly understand that memorizing the Qur'an is a daunting task, so that they send their children when they are as young as possible. Not many *santri* (student in *Pondok Pesantren*) want and able to memorize the Quran even though they live for many years in *Pondok Pesantren*. (Doorn-Harder, 2010, hlm. 178) One main motivation for that is related to parents' expectations for a better life in the hereafter. An informant once said "... I want my child to start memorizing the Qur'an as early as possible. Thanks God that he said yes when I asked him to do so. He does it for our life in the hereafter" Acknowledging their children might feel abandoned, most parents usually visit their children once a week or two as they want to show their responsibility

¹⁰ This is one of the famous stories among *haafizhs*. One of them explained that sometimes they spend their time to motivate each other in memorizing Quran. One of the motivations is that they can increase their parent's status.

and compassion to their children.¹¹ The purpose of the *haafizh* and parents which refer to the obedience in religion by memorizing the Qur'an and the hope of the guarantee to enter heaven is an indication of the sacred in memorizing the Qur'an.

According to instructors in several *Tahfidz Pesantren*, it is clear that they believe that pupils who stay in *Tahfidz Pesantren* to memorize the Qur'an will not only benefit the spiritual atmosphere of the *pesantren*, but also will learn from social and cultural diversity among the *Pondok Pesantren* pupils, since most of them come from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. One instructor explained that "... Pupils here are coming from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, such as Sebulu, Sangatta, Sangkulirang. Some even come from Banjar (South Kalimantan) to study Qur'anic memorization here"¹² Although lacking in formal education, pupils of *Tahfidz Pesantren* in East Kalimantan mostly able to financially sustain their selves thanks to their frequent participation in the MTQ events.

The magnitude of religious events such as MTQ is felt even stronger in *Tahfidz Pesantren*. Several pupils at a *Tahfidz Pesantren* in East Kalimantan stated that during the MTQ they would practice more often and more intense because of the immediate effect of such events to their life. Winning or not winning a trophy in the MTQ makes a huge difference in pupils' life. They acknowledged that the MTQ event has been a source of motivation for them to memorize the Qur'an.

¹¹ Interview with MS, Father of one student in *pesantren tahfiz* on 4 Juli 2017 in Loa Janan.

¹² Interview with MJ, Manager of *Rumah Tahfiz* on 19 Juni 2017 in Samarinda.

Regarding this, a graduate of a *Tahfidz Pesantren* in Samarinda depicts this phenomenon as follows: "kalau dulu pang di pondok tuh rancak bujur menambah hapalan. Suka ada *sima'an* jua tiap minggu. Tapi meulang hapalan tuh paling ramai mun handak MTQ. Gasan persiapan lomba jua pang. Supan ae mun dilihat urang kadak lancar."¹³

Besides reciting the memorized verses of the Qur'an to their instructors, many pupils during the MTQ would also ask their competitor *haafizhs* to listen to their recitation, even though rivalries between them is real and obvious. The *haafizhs* acknowledge that fair play in a competition of Qur'anic memorization is one of the most important things. However, this idea of fair play is limited to, mainly, not to cheat during memorization tests. In this regard, violating administrative aspects of the competition, such as making up identity, will not be counted as cheating, and the *haafizhs* seem to accept it. An informant stated that "... Back then, a lot of my fellow *haafizhs* manipulated their age on their identity card, so they can compete in a lower level. They [my fellow *haafizhs*] joined the 5-10 juz category, which is designed for younger *haafizhs*, even though their ages were older than the age qualification".

Age and residential region are two information in an identity card that are most likely to be manipulated by the *haafizhs* during the MTQ. At a first glance,

¹³ Interview with FU, alumnus of *Pesantren Tahfiz* on 27 Mei 2017 in Samarinda. (Interview conducted in Banjar Language. Transcript of English translation is as follows: "in *pesantren*, I always spend my time for memorizing the verses of Quran. Sometimes we held *sima'an*. The busiest time to repeat our memorizing is around MTQ. We will be shy if we forgot the verses in front of audiences)

it seems contradictory to their vision of fair play during competition. However, if we took a closer look at the prescribed requirement by the committee, we would realize that the committees of MTQ usually set a very high age standard.

There are five categories of Tahfiz competition in MTQ. The first category, covering only 1 chapter of the Qur'an (the first juz or the last juz of the Qur'an), is qualified only to those under the age of twelve. The second category, covering 1-5 chapters of the Qur'an, is designed to those under the age of fifteen. The third category, covering 1-10 chapters of the Qur'an, is designed to those under the age of sixteen. The fourth category, covering 1-20 chapters of the Qur'an, is designed for those under nineteen years old. The last category, covering 30 chapters of the Qur'an is limited to those under twenty years old.

Another aspect that is often manipulated among the *haafizhs* is related to their residential places. Since many of them come from outside the province of West Kalimantan, they registered a fake identity card to the MTQ committee. This practice is made feasible because of the 'don't ask don't tell' rule that shared among the negotiating actors. They consist of not only the participants and the local recruiters, but also the local town halls, negotiation of which is smoothed by a practice of 'bribery'.

The purpose of the *haafizh* in East Kalimantan to memorize the Quran for the purpose of the hereafter is something sacred. This is in line with the purpose of the implementation of the Musabaqoh Tilawatil Quran (MTQ), which is to transfer the spirit of religious practices such as memorizing the Quran. Most Muslim

communities in East Kalimantan consider that more Muslim are able to memorize the Qur'an so that community will be more pious than other Muslim. This is a form of a sacred in memorizing the Quran.

On the other hand, there is a blurring boundary between the side of sacred and profane in memorizing the Qur'an. According to some respondents in this study, they appear to have worldly benefits in memorizing the Qur'an. Although they believe their initial purpose of memorizing the Quran for the purpose of the Hereafter, the fact that many of these *haafizhs* are willing to make up their identity and commit frauds to be able to join the MTQ forum, is a proof of profanity within the sacred duty of memorizing the Qur'an. Even so, the *haafizh* agreed that the material benefits they obtained from MTQ were one of the bonuses of their efforts in memorizing the Quran.

CONCLUSION

Local governments in Indonesia want their regions to be perceived as Islamic since the term Islamic would bring positive images to them. The easiest ways to do so is by performing Islam in its superficial form such as through a Qur'anic competition, or the MTQ. As a response to this demand, several *pesantren* specializing in memorizing of the Qur'an emerged across many regions. People demand more *haafizh*.

As a rich province, East Kalimantan becomes a magnet for those who seek a good balance between material benefits and religious rewards. For the provincial government of East Kalimantan, facilitating the *haafizhs* to win trophies in MTQ is beneficial in ways that it would

uplift the status of the government as a more religious province in Indonesia. However, it is well-known that the government is not hesitant to provide the *haafizhs* with “fake” identity in order for him or her to meet the administrative procedures of the competition. Thus, when a potential participant of the MTQ accepts that kind of bribery practice, sacred element of memorizing the Qur'an is washed away by a profane motive. The decision to memorize the Qur'an and the practice of joining the MTQ among the *haafizhs* in East Kalimantan prove that the boundary separating the sacred from the profane is blurring as societal functions that it serves change.

This article concludes that motives behind undertaking the task of memorizing the Qur'an is fluid and dynamic. They range from sacred ones such as preserving the religion of Islam by

possessing the sacred text of the Qur'an, to profane ones such as exercising agencies for the purpose of social mobilizations. Instead of being a binary, these motives resemble a continuum of the sacred and the profane, whose line often blurs each other's boundaries.

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