

## THE HISTORY OF HINDUISM AND ISLAM IN INDONESIA: A REVIEW ON WESTERN PERSPECTIVE

Mohd. Zariat Abdul Rani

Department of Malay Studies, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia,  
43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

E-mail: zariat@fbmk.upm.edu.my, mozariat@yahoo.com

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### Abstract

This article takes as its starting point the early observation that describes the vastness of the research corpus on the cultural history of Indonesia. The vastness of this corpus is, among other things, contributed to by the writings of Western scholars. Among those that are considered classics and frequently used as important references are *De Hindoe-Javaansche Tijd* by N.J. Krom (1950), *Nusantara: A History of Indonesia* by Bernard H.M. Vlekke (1959), and *Indonesia: Trade and Society* by J.C. Van Leur (1955). Initial readings find that these Western scholars' writings often raise the question of the role and contribution of Hinduism and Islam in Indonesia. This draws attention to their views and standpoint as Westerners on the history of Indonesian culture, especially in the context of comparison between Hinduism and Islam. This article is written with the purpose of discussing the role and contribution of Islam and Hinduism in the history of Indonesia according to the perspective of three Western scholars, namely N.J. Krom, Bernard H.M. Vlekke and J.C. Van Leur in the writings mentioned above. This discussion finds that these writings studied are more inclined to acknowledge the significance of the role and contribution of Hinduism in the history of Indonesian culture, with the presence of Islam said to have not reduced the influence of Hinduism.

*Keywords: cultural history, Hinduism, Indonesia, Islam*

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### 1. Introduction

Historically, the Indonesian civilization developed concurrently with its exposure to and acceptance of foreign cultures. Initially steeped in animistic beliefs, the Indonesians then consented to accept the cultural and religious tenets of Hinduism and Islam, before being exposed to Western cultural influences through the process of colonisation. While it is irrefutable that the chain of cultural influences above have had their respective parts to play in the development of the Indonesian civilisation, my early observation reveals that the distinct roles and contributions of Islam and Hinduism on the Indonesians has frequently courted debate, more so than any other cultural force. This topic has also attracted the attention of most Western scholars, who have been inclined to compare the influential potency of both cultures.

Thus, this article aims to observe the views put forth by select Western scholars, about the significance that both Islamic and Hinduistic cultural influences have had on the Indonesians. This observation will allow for a better understanding of Indonesia through the Western

perspective, so as to determine their inclinations as to the more influential of the two.

### 2. Methods

To that end, this article will examine three works of Western scholars: N.J. Krom's (1950) *De Hindoe-Javaansche Tijd* (translated from the Dutch into Indonesian as *Zaman Hindu* by Arif Effendi), Bernard H.M. Vlekke's (1959) *Nusantara: A History of Indonesia*, and J.C. Van Leur's (1955) *Indonesia: Trade and Society*. These works were chosen based on their relevance to the discussion. Given that the general scope of the three works above vary, this article will only incorporate the views that are deemed most pertinent to the discussion. Overlapping views of the three scholars will not be repeated, unless reiteration is vital for the purpose of comparison. Another important matter that needs to be clarified is the variance of the terminology used by the three researchers to depict the region in question: N.J. Krom uses the term "nusantara", while both Bernard H.M. Vlekke and J.C. Van Leur use the generic "Indonesia". Since the terms refer to the same region, this region will henceforth be consistently

referred to as “Indonesia” in this article to avoid confusion.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### *De Hindoe-Javaansche Tijd* by N.J. Krom.

This discussion will first look at N.J. Krom’s (henceforth Krom) *De Hindoe-Javaansche Tijd* (1950). His work generally revolves around the history of Hinduism in Java, as well as the positioning of Islam in, and its contribution to the Indonesians. Krom explains that Hinduism reached Indonesia as early as the first century, based on a Tionghua travelogue dated 132 AD, which recounts the history of Tiao-Pien, the emperor of Ye-Tiao, who is said to have received a gift from a king in Yawadwipa named Dewawarman (Krom, 1950). Based on the same source, Krom also clarifies that the usage of ‘Yawadwipa’ for Java is from the Sanskrit, the holy language of the Hindus. This is also true with Javanese monarchical titles, ‘Dewawarman’, which end with the same *varman/warman* suffix of Indian Hindu kings (Krom, 1950). Krom states that this usage of Sanskrit terminology points to the fixedness of Hinduism in Indonesia.

More importantly, Krom finds that Hinduistic cultural influences in Indonesia, which took root circa 1 AD, permeated local culture by way of the active acquiescence of the locals. The issue of cultural acceptance is indeed unique, because Indonesia had already been exposed to *Tionghok* (Chinese) culture and rituals through commerce; nevertheless, the locals were unbending to these cultural influences, and thus did not allow any marked changes in their worldview. Krom finds that Hinduism, on the other hand, was allowed to permeate into local culture easily, and was subsequently allowed to influence virtually every aspect of local communal life.

As to the locals’ collective sanction of Hinduism, Krom observes that Hinduism did not spread in Indonesia through forces of subjugation. He finds no evidence of the region ever having received an Indian king, or being conquered by an Indian kingdom. This is evident in the use of the *varman* suffix in the names of the Hinduistic-Javanese kings, which is not so much a hereditary title as it is a holy one (Krom, 1950). In other words, Krom believes that the Hinduistic-Javanese kings are not of direct Indian descent, but rather local kings who used the *varman* suffix as a tacit acknowledgement of their practice of Hinduism.

Krom also finds that the exclusive strand of Hinduism that was received by the Indonesians was brought over by the Brahmins, who sit atop the uppermost tier of the Hindu caste system. Evidence of this can be found in ancient inscriptions that describe Hindu religious rites practiced in the region, involving the worship of the

cow, as well as the holy status of King Purnawarman, who is said to be the reincarnation of the Lord Vishnu. However, Krom does not reject the possibility that other variants of Hinduism took root in Indonesia, such as Hinduism-Buddhism. This is due to reliefs on the walls of *stupa* in Buddhist *candi* (monuments) written in the Pallava alphabet, which Krom believes to be sacred Hindu-Buddhist inscriptions. Furthermore, the travelogue of I-Tsing reports the presence of more than a thousand Buddhist monks in the region, who studied and meditated in Srivijaya, and who practiced religious rituals similar to those in India (Krom, 1950).

The presence of Hinduism in Indonesia also wrought significant changes upon local art forms. This is evident in the erection of *candi* and other monuments, as well as the creation of reliefs and arches inscribed with Hindu inscriptions and motifs. Krom believes that these art forms are local, since they indicate a clear link between the two disparate cultural strands, the local and the Hinduistic (Krom, 1950). Cultural influences are also evident in the infusion of the Malay-Indonesian and Javanese languages with elements from the Sanskrit lexicon. Krom views this as an act of “honour”, due to Sanskrit’s status as a sacred Hindu language spoken exclusively by the Brahmins, thus effectively bringing “higher civilisation” into Indonesian culture. As Krom (1950) states: “...[Hinduism] enriched Nusantara [Indonesia] culture as it was a valuable Hindu cultural heritage, or shall we say *raised it into real culture.*” [“...[Hinduisme] memperkaya kebudayaan Nusantara sebagai warisan berharga dari milik kebudayaan Hindu, atau yang barangkali boleh kita katakan telah menaikannya ke dalam kebudayaan yang sebenarnya.”] [Emphasis added & my translation].

Krom (1950) subsequently shifts his focus onto Islam; he finds that the Islamic strand that reached Indonesia was introduced via trade routes by Indian and Gujarati traders who wished to engage in trade with the locals. The process of Islamisation in Indonesia, he theorises, initially only developed in areas that had not directly received or practiced Hinduism (Krom, 1950). Krom (1950) believes that Islam took a long time to be received by the locals; its “charm[s]” were more effective on foreigners such as Indian Muslims. Krom (1950) adds that the accelerated development of Islam in Indonesia approaching the 15th century was driven more by political insecurity after the decline of the Hindu kingdoms than it was by the strength of the Islamic missionary (*da’wah*) movement. The inherent weaknesses of the Islamisation process, according to Krom, are apparent in the primacy of Hinduistic cultural influence – already rooted in the local mindset – even after most Hinduistic-Javanese kingdoms had accepted the Islamic faith. Evidence of this can be found in art forms still in practice after the arrival of Islam, such as in the *wayang* theatre, which utilise Hinduistic-Javanese

engravings and stories, and are narrated in the ancient Javanese poetic form of *kakawin*.<sup>1</sup> Krom (1950) also finds substantiation of his theory in the Hinduistic-Javanese aesthetic discernable in the architecture of mosques built after the fall of the Hindu empire in the region. Based on these observations, he concludes that on the whole, Islam could not fully oust the pre-eminent influence of Hinduism in Indonesia, as Krom (1950) states:

“Hinduism did not just disappear...it still holds strong after all this time in Western Java, and stronger still in the East Corner, where Pasaruan Baru fell in the sixteenth century. Panarukan until the end of the century was still polytheistic. Balambangan Baru in the seventeenth century fell completely, while Bali, seemingly recipients of the cultural current from Java, is still Hindu today”.

[“...agama Hindu tidak hilang begitu saja...ia masih dapat bertahan beberapa lamanya di Djawa Barat, lebih lama lagi di Sudut Timur dimana Pasuruan baru dijatuhkan kira-kira pada pertengahan abad keenambelas, Panarukan sampai akhir abad itu masih musyrik, Balambangan baru dalam abad ketujuh belas dapat dijatuhkan seluruhnya, sementara akhirnya Bali, yang agaknya telah mendapat arus baru lagi dari Djawa, sampai pada waktu ini masih tetap Hindu”.]  
[My translation]

***Nusantara: A History of Indonesia* by Bernard H.M. Vlekke.**

This discussion will now move on to Bernard H.M. Vlekke's (henceforth Vlekke) *Nusantara: A History of Indonesia* (1959). Vlekke discusses the history of Indonesia in detail, and includes his views on the contributions of Hinduism and Islam in the cultural development of Indonesia. With reference to Hinduism, Vlekke rejects the theory that assumes Hinduism was spread in Indonesia by means of territorial expansion, or more specifically, through the conquest of Indonesian kingdoms by Hindu kingdoms, due to a lack of evidence (Vlekke, 1959). He holds that a more distinct possibility to explain the spread of Hinduism is that it was allowed to saturate over an extensive period of time. Vlekke (1959) also believes that the Indian traders involved in the Indonesian spice trade were the ones responsible for bringing in Brahmanic religious authorities, the latter of whom then settled into the local community.<sup>2</sup> His views do not discount the locals' active participation, even allowing for the possibility that said Hindu religious

authorities were invited by the local community itself via Indian spice traders. In short, he shares with Krom the belief that Hinduism was not spread by force, but rather by acquiescence.

Partly influenced by the appreciation of Hinduistic aesthetic, Vlekke believes that the locals' acceptance of Hinduism has developed Indonesian culture, evident in the monuments, temples, and engraved reliefs found scattered around Indonesia. Moreover, Vlekke (1959) also finds that Brahmanic influence can be deduced from the Sanskrit inscriptions on these monuments, temples and reliefs. This view echoes that of Krom's, who also acknowledges the significance of the role played by Hinduism, specifically that of Brahmanic Hindus, in advancing artistry in Indonesia.

With reference to Islam, Vlekke is of the opinion that the arrival of the faith in Indonesia can be attributed to Gujarati and Indian spice traders. This is substantiated by the discovery of tombstones with Jawi inscriptions with the names of sultans who ruled the Malay-Islamic kingdoms, as well as Quranic engravings that have been identified as being of Indian and Gujarati origin. The import of these tombstones, which are inspired by Hindu temple engravings, by these Indian and Gujarati traders, and the discovery of the tombstone of Malik Ibrahim, a spice trader, reinforce Vlekke's assumptions that Hinduistic aesthetic was continually influential upon Indonesian art forms after the arrival and acceptance of Islam (Vlekke, 1959). Again, like Krom, Vlekke highlights the significance of Indian and Gujarati spice traders in the Islamisation of Indonesia.

Vlekke also finds that Islamisation in Indonesia was somewhat unsystematic because it was in demand of an organisation or body to specifically coordinate missionary work. Since Islam was spread by Indian and Gujarati traders who, as Vlekke assumes, were less intent on spreading the faith than they were on becoming involved in the Indonesian spice trade (Vlekke, 1959), there was no initial collective or centralised effort to construct mosques or religious centres that would have acted as centres for Islamic missionary work. In short, he surmises that the spread of Islam in Indonesia happened by chance, and was therefore incomprehensively spread, because it only involved a small group who had economic interests primarily at heart. This can be seen in the initial burgeoning of Islam, which was almost exclusively limited to spice trade centres, such as Cirebon, Demak, Jepara, Gresik, and Surabaya.

Vlekke also sees political manoeuvring as a factor that aided Islamisation in Indonesia. He ventures the case of the Tuban kingdom, an Islamic kingdom in the 17th century, whose king accepted Islam but largely practiced Hindu culture and rituals. Vlekke also claims

<sup>1</sup> For further understanding of the *kakawin* genre, see Harun Mat Piah, *Puisi Melayu Tradisional: Satu Pembicaraan Genre dan Fungsi* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1989), 22-23.

<sup>2</sup> Vlekke's assumptions are based on inscriptions in the Pallava alphabet, lending credence to the possibility that the group responsible for bringing in 'higher civilisation' to the Indonesian were Brahmans who came from the Coromandel Coast.

that there was a prince in Tuban who embraced Islam, but maintained his close relationship with various Hindu kingdoms. Vlekke (1959) finds that this prince did not consent to accept the Islamic faith per se, but only did so superficially to obtain political protection after the decline of the Hinduistic-Javanese kingdoms. The general trend of decline amongst these kingdoms, especially following the death of King Hayam Wuruk, led many Hinduistic-Javanese rulers to accept Islam – neither out of alacrity nor attraction to the tenets of the faith – but for the retention of their kingdoms and preservation of political interests (Vlekke, 1959).

Clearly, Vlekke's premises point to the inherent limitations of the Islamisation of Indonesians, which impeded the possibility of Islam supplanting Hinduism as its cultural basis. His inclination towards Hinduism, rather than Islam, is evident in his supposition that Islamic culture could not supersede Hinduistic culture which had taken root in Java – substantiated by the discovery of tombstones in an Javanese-Islamic cemetery, which were inscribed in Arabic, but maintained Shaivite (of the Hindu god Shiva) motifs. Vlekke also shares with Krom the view that the predominance of the Hinduistic cultural base in Java, even after the widespread acceptance of Islam, is manifest in the *wayang* art form, and the continual influence of the Hindu epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, amongst both the Javanese aristocracy and gentry. Vlekke (1959) states that: "...Islam definitely did not cause a clear break with the past in Java...The culture of the Javanese princely courts remained essentially Hinduistic-Javanese up to very recent times".

***Indonesia: Trade and Society* by J.C. Van Leur.**

This discussion will now focus on J.C. Van Leur's (henceforth Van Leur) *Indonesia: Trade and Society* (1955) in which he expounds his own views on the respective contributions of Hinduistic and Islamic culture in Indonesia, but more pertinently to this discussion, also refutes the theory that trade activity was the single most important factor in the transmission of Hinduism in this region (Van Leur, 1955). Van Leur's refutations stem from the fact that when viewed against the corpus of Indonesian trade history, the social status of traders would render them unlikely vehicles of the religion. The Indian tradesmen who were engaged in the spice trade in Indonesia were members of lower castes, whilst the brand of Hinduism that was spread throughout this region was distinctively Brahmanic. It would have been near impossible for the lower-caste tradesmen to be involved in the religious rituals practiced in royal courts, given that these rites were caste-specific. Van Leur also points to the absence of any mention of a direct relationship in historical accounts between the aristocracy of Srivijaya and Bantam and Indian tradesmen, as evidence of these trader's non-participation in the dissemination of

Hinduism. He adds that during the reign of either of the Hinduistic-Javanese kingdoms, the community of Indian tradesmen were in fact disconnected from mainstream society, and settled into minority communities called "*perkampungan keling*" (Indian villages). Van Leur's refutations would imply that the arrival of the Brahmanic strand of Hinduism – undiluted, as it were, by the involvement of the lower caste tradesmen – signified the onset of "higher civilisation" in Indonesia.

Where Islam is concerned, Van Leur believes that 16th and 17th century trade activities, which were monopolised by Islamic traders, did not significantly affect Indonesian cultural development since "higher civilisation" had already been achieved during the height of the Hinduistic-Javanese reign (Van Leur, 1955). He shares with Vlekke the assumption that the emergence of Islamic kingdoms in Indonesia, twinned with the aforementioned Islamic trade monopoly, were influenced by the political interests of the aristocracy. The proliferation of Islamic kingdoms in the region, according to Van Leur, is attributable to the decline of Hinduism following the rise of the Islamic Mogul dynasty in India in 1526, and the fall of the Hindu Vijayanagar kingdom in 1556. Necessarily, Van Leur holds, that this evolving political landscape in India, and the simultaneous ascension of Islamic kingdoms in Indonesia, resulted in the decline of Hinduistic-Javanese kingdoms. Thus, Malay-Islamic kingdoms came to monopolise trade routes in the Straits of Malacca, since the political and economic protection of less powerful forces, especially that of distressed Hinduistic-Javanese kingdoms, could somewhat be guaranteed by Islamic affiliations. Evidence of this, according to Van Leur, can be seen in the embracement of Islam by North East Javanese rulers of noble descent, who subsequently received backing from Islamic kingdoms in their attempts at the conquest of Majapahit (Van Leur, 1955). In short, Van Leur finds that the spread of Islam in Indonesia was governed more by political factors than any inherent qualities of the faith itself. Van Leur (1955) writes: "The acceptance of Islam...had nothing to do with the transmission of a 'higher civilization'. Javanese political motives and tactical considerations of the aristocracy brought about Islamization."

Van Leur also highlights the significant role played by Portuguese Christian missionaries, who operated after the Portuguese conquest of the Malay Sultanate of Malacca in 1511, in the spread of Islam in Indonesia. He opines that Christian missionaries, by way of direct competition with their Islamic counterparts, indirectly sped up the Islamization. Van Leur (1955) states: "The expansion of Islam later gained strength through the eruption of the struggle with the Portuguese in Asia, after which the Moslems consciously counteracted every Christian influence". Again, it is worth reiterating that Van Leur stresses factors such as the Islamic

monopoly of the spice trade, political clout, and the rapid spread of Christianity, are directly responsible for the swift Islamisation of Indonesians, as opposed to virtues intrinsic in the teachings the Islamic faith. This, he finds, is indicated by the very nature of the introduction of Islam in Indonesia: the religion was not first brought to the region by institutional Muslim missionaries well-versed in Islamic teachings, but rather by Persian and Gujarati traders, who were largely intent on procuring trade opportunities and economic advantages. This supposition contrasts with his conception of Hinduism's Brahmanic outreach in this region: Brahmins are considered to be knowledgeable holy men, but more importantly he finds, they were not motivated by factors external to the Hindu faith. Based on these observations, it is clear that Van Leur believes that Islam did not bring about significant cultural changes to the Indonesians, as "higher civilisation" had already been attained when the locals were practicing Hinduism.

#### 4. Conclusion

The works of Krom, Vlekke and Van Leur discussed above converge on a few key points on the individual roles and contributions of Hinduism and Islam in Indonesia. All three researchers deny that Hinduism was introduced to the region by means of territorial conquest, implying that Hinduistic culture was not diffused by force, but rather by the acquiescence of the locals themselves. Krom, Vlekke, and Van Leur also limit Indian tradesmen to the role of indirect agents in the transmission of Hinduism in the region; these traders did not spread the religion themselves, but rather functioned only to ship Brahmins – the direct agents who subsequently led religious rituals in royal palaces – from the Indian subcontinent to Indonesia. It is important to note that this rejection of the direct involvement of Indian tradesmen on the one hand, and the acknowledgement of the Brahmins' significance on the other, point to the cultural weighting associated with the Brahmanic strand of Hinduism that was received by the Indonesians. Given that Brahmins habituate the uppermost rung of the Hindu caste system, the three researchers concur in their view that it was through Hinduism that "higher civilisation" was introduced to the region. It is important to note that the views of Van Leur, Vlekke and Krom have elicited reaction from Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, who put forth his own view of the roles of Hinduism and Islam in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. See Al-Attas, *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu*.

With reference to Islam, however, Krom, Vlekke and Van Leur indicate that trade activities were vital in the spread of the faith amongst the Indonesian populace. Indian and Gujarati traders are earmarked as direct vehicles in both the introduction of Islam, and the acceleration of the Islamisation process. The concurrence of opinions suggest that the strain of Islam that was transmitted upon the locals was secondary, given that it was not directly spread by missionaries from the Arabian peninsula, the location in which the religion was revealed. The three researchers also find in this indications of the inherent weaknesses of the Islamisation process – such as its success being limited to smaller Indonesian provinces, its relatively long incubation period, and its lack of a specific organisation to carry out missionary duties. Economic and political factors, as well as competition from the Christian missionary movement, also played a part in propelling the Islamisation process forward. What can be inferred from the views of Krom, Vlekke, and Van Leur is that the Indonesian's embracement of Islam stemmed from disparate factors external to the intrinsic qualities of the religion itself. Where cultural infusion is concerned, all three researchers also agree that Islam could not entirely supplant Hinduism, which had long saturated in the region, evident in the Indonesian art forms. In other words, Islam, in the eyes of the Western researchers such as Krom, Vlekke and Van Leur, could not match the significant cultural roles and contributions of Hinduism in Indonesia.

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