



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**CENTRAL JAVANESE ADAPTATION TO THE ISLAMIC CONCEPT OF
AESTHETICS**

SULAIMAN DUFFORD

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**CENTRAL JAVANESE ADAPTATION TO
THE ISLAMIC CONCEPT OF AESTHETICS**

By

SULAIMAN DUFFORD

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies,
Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the
Requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

August 2006



DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all those who have helped me "come across", from the secular worldview and all its attendant behaviors, to the world of Islamic thought and aspiration. For many years, I have lived and taught in Muslim-majority countries, primarily Malaysia and Indonesia. In my "Acknowledgements", I will mention many from both countries who were among my "Ansarun", helpers-in-migration. Here, in this dedication, I wish to acknowledge the incredibly comprehensive assistance of Professor Syed Hussein Alatas, who identified my topic as potentially fruitful because as yet hardly explored by my fellow scholars. I can only hope that the unbelievable breadth of Professor's own knowledge may be minutely expanded by reading what he inspired here. May Allah grant him a longer life still, and preserve his knowledge through those whom he has so skillfully mentored, AMIN.



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti
Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**CENTRAL JAVANESE ADAPTATION TO
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August 2006

Chairman: Professor Zahid Emby, PhD

Faculty: Human Ecology

In addition to politics, economics, sociology, and theology, aesthetics as the study of beauty is proposed as a legitimate approach to Islamic cultures. A qualitative research style is developed to investigate various phenomena of beauty as observed in Central Javanese culture. An analysis is attempted to discriminate aspects of Javanese life and thought that are Islamically acceptable from those that may not be.



Several visits were made to Solo and Yogyakarta in Central Java, both the cities and surrounding villages. Four categories of investigation were attempted - Religion and the Unseen, The Aesthetics of Femininity, Entertainment and the Arts, and Architecture and the Environment. A questionnaire was developed and distributed to one hundred thirty informants, following the four-part categorization mentioned above. Many interviews with focused groups were conducted comprising individuals willing to discuss "halal" and "haram" aspects of the beauty of various activities of their daily lives.

Javanese palace ceremonies, village cultural activities, public concerts, radio and television shows, magazines, and other media were scrutinized for both "halal" and "haram" expressions of artistic, photogenic, or musical beauty. It became evident that informants described as "beautiful" those of their religious and social experiences toward which they were subsequently most highly drawn and motivated. The approach to Javanese Islamic culture as an aesthetic entity yielded a collation of various categories of Islamic life that could not be subsumed under any other category.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti
Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah
Doktor Falsafah

**ADAPTASI KONSEP ESTETIKA ISLAM KE DALAM
BUDAYA JAWA TENGAH**

Oleh

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Sebagai tambahan kepada bidang politik, ekonomi, sosiologi dan teologi, estetika sebagai kajian keindahan dicadangkan sebagai satu pendekatan yang wajar kepada budaya Islam. Satu cara penyelidikan yang kualitatif digunakan untuk menyiasat pelbagai fenomena keindahan yang diperhatikan dalam budaya Jawa Tengah. Satu analisis dibuat bagi melihat sama ada aspek-aspek kehidupan Jawa dan pemikiran mereka diterima oleh Islam atau tidak.

Beberapa lawatan dibuat ke Solo dan Yogyakarta di Jawa Tengah termasuk kawasan bandar dan perkampungan sekitar. Empat kategori penyiasatan dibuat - agama dan alam ghaib, estetika kewanitaan, hiburan dan seni serta seni bina dan alam sekitar. Satu senarai soalan dibuat dan diedarkan

kapada 130 orang, mengikut empat kategori yang disebut di atas. Beberapa temubual dan tumpuan perkumpulan dibuat untuk berbincang mengenai halal dan haram aspek-aspek keindahan dalam pelbagai aktiviti harian mereka.

Istiadat istana Jawa, aktiviti kebudayaan kampung, konsert awam, persembahan radio dan televisyen, majalah dan lain-lain media dikaji dari sudut halal dan haram pernyataan artistik, fotogenik dan keindahan muzik. Adalah jelas dari jawapan yang diberikan bahawa apa yang mereka anggap indah itu adalah bertolak dari pengaruh agama dan sosial yang mereka alami. Pendekatan kepada budaya Islam Jawa sebagai satu entiti estetika menghasilkan pelbagai kategori kehidupan Islam yang tidak dapat dikategorikan.

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The moral support of the Muslim community for this research, and for my personal life throughout, has been exemplary. I must express my gratitude to Sheikh Imran Hosein, Trinidad Indian scholar who served as a model of what a writer can do, how he must stand for his principles, and even how he can sell his books. At his request, I also received unqualified backing from various of his most generous and trusting friends.

Sheikh Al Waleed Al Thani of Qatar, another man of principle, taught me the sacred status of knowledge, and how to navigate some of the minefields that guard its borders. Datuk Ishak Ismail underwrote a book-writing project that helped me survive my final years of student status. During a conversation about my thesis research, he thought a moment and then asked, "Yes, but what can you DO?" So I wrote a book in the middle of my research and learned something of the packaging and propagating of one's knowledge.



Datuk Jamaluddin Mansur helped siphon off my irrepressible "journalistic English" into his magazine, "Milenia Muslim". If my thesis attained any degree of academic purity, I must thank Datuk Jamal for providing an outlet for some of those other writing tendencies. Raja Kamaruddin of the Selangor Royal Family provided his first class motivational support, especially the "never give up" incentive that was needed more often than I would like to admit.

I can never forget some of the deep friendships forged among the post-graduate student community at UPM, in which the Malay "gotong royang" (mutual assistance) took place so often as we individually struggled to complete our various tasks and move to other countries, or even to remain in Malaysia, as seems to be my lot. Mohammad Hamoud, his wife and many children from Sudan were especially inspiring. I was amazed that he had brought his entire family with him and even had another child while here. We had already met while both in Riyadh in 1982, without having any idea then that UPM would be in our future. It's a small world after all.

Bapak Achid Masduki, who had attended my English classes in Yogyakarta in 1988, was a wonderful host and friend while carrying out the Yogya phase of my data collection.



May Allah reward him in his present Heavenly Abode. Professor Dhamardjati, Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Yogya's Universitas Gajah Mada, arranged for me to give a few guest lectures while there, which he attended in all humility as any other student. This was a wonderful compliment.

Paul Read, then Academic Director of English First in Solo, arranged support for my fieldwork in that Javanese town by hiring me to teach in his school for six months. This was one of those surprises mentioned above, which enriched my research immeasurably.

A lovely sister, Kun Atiqah, great grand-daughter of Muhammadiyah founder Ahmad Dahlan, was a most perceptive commentator on local life and custom in both Yogya and Solo. She paid me the honor of accompanying me to the graveside of her father, grandfather, and great-grandfather to pray in their humble Yogya cemetery. It was after this experience that I began stopping in graveyards to practice and extend my plodding memorization of Surah Ya Sin from the Holy Qur'an, one of the great aesthetic monuments of human spiritual history. And there were many others, too numerous to mention, who made my visits to Yogyakarta among the most memorable social experiences of my life.



Bapak Jack and his wife Sari provided a welcome "family atmosphere" at their Losmen Lotus in Yogya's Sosrowijayan district. Mahdi Husin kept an amazing collection of books at his small Rama Bookshop there, where one could always find intellectual companionship and stimulation. The French Cultural Center behind Yogya's "Mall" shopping center also provided an eager and welcome intellectual community, for whom I was able to perform several classical piano recitals. Even the Melia Purwosani Hotel welcomed me to practice on their lobby's Yamaha grand piano, where Julien Purwanto, retired Steinway technician, came to listen and later even tune the piano!

At UPM, the then Vice Chancellor Tan Sri Syed Jalaludin offered me the facilities of his graduate school to complete this research, and my thesis advisory committee became some of my best friends. Dr. Zahid Emby nursed me through the entire project, even protecting me from disturbance when I was trying to remember how to live on a student budget, Dr. Al Sagoff was always ready with the proper focus and title, Dr. Raja Ahmad Tajuddin taught me the new-fangled ways of qualitative analysis, and Professor Syed Hussein Alatas provided many memorable Socratic evenings at his home and among his friends. It was Professor Alatas, my dedicatee, who first suggested Islamic aesthetics as an original field of investigation.



Both my sons kept their doubts to themselves, as they watched their aging father return to his studies, and although my father-in-law Professor Winfield Salisbury passed away during these studies, his amazing and seemingly ageless mind was a constant challenge to my own further inquiries. My own father, J. S. Dufford, a pioneer member of Texas Instruments in Dallas, Texas, first proposed by long-distance telephone that I might like to further my studies even in my fifties, since knowledge everywhere was progressing and changing so rapidly. He was absolutely correct. May Allah reward him for setting this standard for me, for his initial financial support, and most of all for opening up a whole new life to keep my brain alive, as well as TV- and retirement-free.

There have been so many to enrich my life, and I apologize for those I may have overlooked here. The research has spanned more years than expected, not to mention serving to integrate an entire lifetime of artistic and scholarly interests and activities. And so finally I pray that all who came into contact with me during these years may have benefited in some way as much as I did by their presence in my life, AMIN!



I certify that an Examination Committee has met on 9 August, 2006, to conduct the final examination of **Sulaiman Dufford** on his **Doctor of Philosophy** thesis entitled, **Central Javanese Adaptation to the Islamic Concept of Aesthetics** in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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This thesis submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee are as follows:

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

SULAIMAN DUFFORD

Date:

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Most graduate research and writing occurs consecutively in one's younger years. Sometimes one's choice of studies is fortuitous, sometimes not. How can one know oneself sufficiently well to proceed wisely at this stage of life? In the case of the present study, a certain claim may be made to a more comprehensive approach. At age sixty-three, my concerns are highly personal and integrative, as well as academic. One feels there is no more time for digression.

My early-life training was as a classical musician. My instrument was the piano, but my favorite music was that of the symphony orchestra. Piano studies seemed very lonely (except, of course, at events of public presentation and triumph), whereas orchestras were my ultimate model of group cooperation for civilized ends, uplifting human culture everywhere they existed. So I took up symphonic tympani in order to participate in orchestra life.



Whatever else I may have been doing professionally or personally, in or out of the classroom, my practice of these skills has proceeded uninterrupted until today. My appreciation for earlier musical training knows no bounds as I approach retirement years, able now to call on an exquisite repository of accumulated artistic experience. Wherever there is a good piano my angels will be happy, and wherever there is good symphonic music, my soul may weep in gratitude. The piano keeps my hands young and healthy, the orchestra keeps my eyes, ears, and seemingly my soul happy as well. This is the template on which the present studies have proceeded.

Early on, it came to pass that my music and other interests involved a great deal of world travel. By my present age, having collected glimpses of some fifty-plus foreign countries, it seemed reasonable to synthesize this experience into a knowledgeable presentation in Cultural Anthropology that would be related to my primary skill, that is, my artistic training. Hence the choice of a traditional culture with sophisticated aesthetic elements.

Javanese culture had occupied my attention during my MA years (age thirty-six until forty-one), and personally



thereafter for some years. So I have returned to the Javanese, with the appreciation I had already gained of their accumulated cultural and spiritual wisdom, not to mention the benefits accruing to me personally from extensive participation in Javanese social and community life. If a refined aesthetic sensibility were to be found anywhere, it would be among the Javanese.

There is one further influence in my personal bias, and that is from the religion of Islam. My attraction to Islam was more comprehensive than my artistic leanings. It supported them and protected them from certain excesses I saw permeating the world of professional musicians in the West. But not all Islamic cultures could have done this, by any means. Aesthetics has a variable position in Islamic, as well as other cultures, and could satisfy my needs only in carefully selected areas. Certain communities in the area of Central Java seemed to possess cultures of religious sensitivity combined with aesthetic sensibility.

Some professional friends had mentioned earlier in my life that the only "protection" a musician needs is talent, and that my talent was sufficient. So why turn to religion or alien cultures? Only Allah knows what is "sufficient" with



regard to any skill, but since I felt an acute need for spiritual regulation as well as substantial immersion in cultures other than my own, no one could really dispute the topic of my Ph.D. research. It is, as I say, a simple report of a felt need. This thesis may be one possible response to my friends' sincere puzzlement.

But the spotlight here is really not on me. It must be on those good people in Central Java who are trying to make sense out of what "modernization" is doing to their society, and how turning to the aesthetic elements of their environment may help them cope. I am interested to see if the Javanese response to various forms of beauty is really of survival value, and if so, how and what the rest of us may learn from them.

So although my specialization is not aesthetics, I may state the matter thus. Within the field of Aesthetics, I have sought to give further meaning to my artistic training. Within the field of Cultural Anthropology, I am trying to relate the benefits of the arts to all of mankind by generalizing from their representation in Javanese culture. It is a synthesizing effort of an entire lifetime.



1.2 Statement of the Problem

For religious artists and aestheticians, "aesthetics" can seem totally amoral in the secular context, where academicians insist that objective research must remain "value-free". Contrary to the secular approach, I have attempted a discussion of specifically Islamic aesthetics, especially from the pacifistic Javanese perspective, thereby suggesting a clearly non-secular linkage of ethical or moral elements with artistic or aesthetic issues.

My chief research problem is, therefore, this linkage. On this matter, Psycholinguistics Professor Naom Chomsky at MIT in the USA advised me to remain in SE Asia to conduct such research, since protocols for research into "value-laden" issues had yet to be agreed upon in the West.¹

Professor Syed Hussain Alatas, noted Malaysian sociologist, advised me toward a specifically value-laden approach to aesthetics issues, observing that it had not yet been done. Professor Alatas' works have long insisted on the importance of value-laden research, Asian life being totally permeated with such value issues.²

We must therefore introduce the concept of an Islamic *ethics of aesthetics*, by analyzing components of various forms of beauty from both *halal* and *haram* points of view. Let us take this line of thinking through the various human sense modes, to suggest an approach for later, in our Data Analysis section. We will discuss visual, aural, and olfactory aesthetics, as well as social and intellectual aesthetic values.

As an example of *halal* visual aesthetics, the space surrounding the Petronas Towers in downtown Kuala Lumpur is of interest. These towers, among the very tallest manmade structures in the world, are not precisely the same height. Similarly, the walls of the seemingly rectangular Parthenon on its hill overlooking Athens are actually slightly curved. Making the walls of the Parthenon perfectly straight, or making the Petronas Towers exactly symmetrical, would have diminished the aesthetics of the space around them (which architects refer to as "negative space"). Indeed, one publication recounting the history of the Petronas Towers is entitled, "Sculpting the Sky".

Aside from their questionable ecological impact (increasing the density of human workspace in a downtown location),



these towers are quite interesting aesthetically. The Malaysians seem to have forged ahead with their excellent sense of design, into evolving various visual forms that are very modern while still consonant with Muslim feeling.

However, we are not yet dealing here with issues of *haram* or *halal*. There would not be anything *haram* about a more boring negative space around the towers. So far, we are dealing only with a matter of aesthetic sophistication, a greater degree of which would render any edifice designed to express wonder and grandeur as more Islamic, and any plain, rectangular structure (such as dominate the skylines of Singapore or Jakarta) as less so.

This issue of "negative space" was first explained to me in Katmandu, Nepal, in 1961. There, I met an American architect and city planner who was traveling the world in order to study the organization of space in native town design. He pointed out that the individual structures we were examining may not have been considered beautiful in themselves, one by one, but that the intuitive juxtaposition of buildings and especially the spaces they carved out of their street fronts were a beautiful form or shape of empty space. The trick was to draw outlines with



your imagination, using the building fronts as the side borders, with the street at the bottom, and whatever you liked connecting the tops of the buildings across the street. Voila! You had a negative space. And these spaces, once he pointed them out to me, did indeed often have a really interesting beauty. This reversal of foreground with background provided a surprising aesthetic pleasure.

The Taj Mahal, famous "Wonder of the World", is not a mosque. It is the Mogul Emperor Shah Jahan's loving memorial to his deceased wife, Mumtaz Mahal. It is built on a cliff overlooking the banks of the Jumma River, so that it appears to float when first viewed from afar. This produces an effect of an apparent absence of space itself behind the building, illogical as this may sound. The Taj seems to float mid-air, especially on the fabled nights of the full moon.

The visual purity of the Taj also elevates most viewers into a timeless realm. A visit to the Taj by moonlight would bring almost anyone into a greater understanding of the sense of timelessness in aesthetics, as in religion. The Taj Mahal is undeniably Islamic in its subjective effect, as well as in its objective design. As a young man,

