

# The Collapse of Muslim Bourgeois in Java

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## Abstract

This study was inspired by Clifford Geertz's success in reviving discussions about the role and presence of middle class Muslim bourgeois traders in Java, especially in Kudus. The indigenous bourgeois had existed before Indonesian independence. This class was expected to be the core of the middle class to carry out social, economic, and cultural developments and reforms. Bourgeois representation indigenous traders in the western area, known as Kudus *kulon*. Its community was expected to be an agent of change and a source of entrepreneurship for the modern community. However, this prediction was not proven. Especially after Indonesia's independence, the role of the middle-class bourgeois of Javanese Muslim traders was getting declined. Therefore, this study conducted using a historical approach through archival studies and interviews to prove the truth of these predictions. Based on the results of field study, it is known that the Islamic student class living in Kudus *kulon* were considered as the most potential and had certain values to develop themselves into a strong and independent entrepreneurs class. However, the strength of the Muslim traders' network diminished due to unfavorable economic conditions for the traditional business of *santri* (Islamic students) during the New Order.

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## Introduction

By the middle of 19th century, the indigenous bourgeois continued to thrive, even though the colonial economy grew in passionately. Chinese entrepreneurs were increasingly stronger. Meanwhile, the indigenous middle class only relied on the bureaucrat ruling class, ranging from the orderlies, assistant of *wedana* (equal to sub-district head at that time), to the governor and the regent. In Java, outside *Vorstenlanden* (the main area of Mataram kingdom), all regents were controlled by the Dutch practically. Some of them, especially the regents and sub-district heads (*Wedana*), were paid and only owned a small amount of "*Tanah Lungguh*" (land of which the right to work on it was possessed by village administrator, as compensation for the salary they did not receive;), land as well as farmers who had an obligation to serve the employer (officials in question). The policy of Governor-General Raffles (1812-1818) which gave land prizes to indigenous rulers was finished up until almost nothing left.

Unfortunately, as written by Robison (1993), indigenous rulers were not so worried about *Tanah Lungguh*. They were crazy of receiving salaries, plus tax tips and commissions on cash crops. They thought that administering people was honorable more than conducting business. Therefore, many *priyayi* (a class comprised the elite in contrast to the masses, or “little people”) had accumulated capital to increase their assets. Their children and grandchildren also did not want to trade. They preferred to be such as doctors, engineers, lawyers or a career in the Dutch East Indies government (Niel, 1960).

Geertz's prediction (1956) that a small number of Muslim middle class entrepreneurs would survive as well as become a source of entrepreneurship and a modern economy were not proven at all. If we look at the history, the development of middle class in post-independence of Indonesia came from the *abangans* and *priyayi* who were co-opted by the state bureaucracy. The economic conditions during the New Order era were apparently not favorable for the development of traditional *Santri* businesses into large, capital-intensive, and technologically advanced industries. This was caused by the economic rent, collusion, and nepotism which began to spread. For example, a traditional batik company that could not survive faced a new coloring process competition. Thus, it can be said that the obstacles to the growth and development of Muslim middle class businesses were not just patrimonial cultural values and an irrational Bazaar system, but also structural factors which made it impossible for the *Santri* to compete against the strength of multinational companies, the strength of state sector, and the private sector which received monopoly rights during New Order era. Coalition between the New Order bureaucracy and the middle class of trade industry including the Chinese continued to color the Indonesian economic competition during New Order era. This condition also applied in Kudus represented by community groups in Kudus *kulon*.

This study emphasizes the existence of indigenous bourgeois in the midst of Javanese society. There have been several studies on the existence of middle class people in Java, Hoogervost and Nordholt (2017, p. 442) investigated how the middle class in urban Java could be formed and their role in shaping 'modern' lifestyles in Indonesia. This formation was seen through language and appearance of the middle class. They are considered as the backbone of various state projects, both in the colonial period to independence (Nordholt, 2017, p. 439). By applying historical method, this article proves the existence of middle class in Java, especially in Kudus. Through the use of secondary sources, this study critically examines the process of formation, the role, to the collapse of middle class in Java caused by economic crisis.

### **The Existence of Indigenous Bourgeois in Indonesia**

Indigenous Muslim "Bourgeois" traders were persistent in trading in Indonesia. Then, they established Islamic Trade Union (*Sarekat Dagang Islam; SDI*) in 1912, and built cooperatives as well as called for a boycott of Chinese products. This union was led by figures such as Haji Samanhudi, H.O.S Cokroaminoto, and other figures who were generally from the textile and batik entrepreneurs. However, until the Dutch left, the

indigenous entrepreneurs had no time to strengthen themselves with modern machinery. Their businesses were classified as traditional (Kuntowijoyo, 1980).

There was a figure who came out of the press of white rulers and Chinese rulers, named Nitisemito. He was a trader from Kudus City, precisely from Kudus *kulon*. Nitisemito managed to develop a cigarette business with modern machines. In 1920s, he employed 10,000 workers. Nitisemito was the first indigenous entrepreneur promoting his cigarette branded "Bal Tiga" with a banner pulled by an airplane in Semarang at the time (Nitisemito, 1980). This man with high work ethic was originally from Kudus *kulon*. Kudus *kulon* community activities had always been engaged in trade.

Until independence era, Indonesia did not have a firm indigenous bourgeois. So, economic experiments by the political regime went freely. The economic agenda had changed without continuity. There was no indigenous middle class as a counterweight. Meanwhile, traders only took part in business. Furthermore, more than five decades ago when observing the phenomenon of *Santri* business group in Modjokuto (one of small towns in Berantas river valley), Geertz (1956) had brought to life a discussion about the role and existence of Muslim middle group in Indonesia (indigenous bourgeois). According to Geertz (1981), this Islamic students' (*Santri*) group had the most potential and had the values to develop themselves into a group of tenacious and independent entrepreneurs. This group was expected to be the core of middle class that was indispensable for development, social, economic, political, and cultural reform. It did not only happen in Modjokuto, actually. In every city in Central and East Java, there were indigenous artisans centered on Kauman. They were more diligent and tenacious compared to the population at large. In addition, they also had religious wisdom and obedience that was greatly different from society in general. This exclusive society was engaged in the industries of batik, clove, and silver handicrafts.

The role of Muslim middle class was very prominent. They formed local socio-cultural configurations that deviated slightly from the dominance of civil servants or *priyayi* in general. According to Geertz (1966), there was a relationship between religious experiences of the *Santri* and economic behavior. Increasingly, their effect economically could spread from an exclusive society towards society at large, as happened in Kudus City.

According to Mahasin (1995), the bazaar economy projected by Geertz (1956) did not develop or transform into a model of firm economy or *Commanditaire Vennootschap* (CV). On the other hand, the entrepreneurial *Santri* community (such as in Kudus *kulon*) sent their sons and daughters to modern schools to encourage them into the middle class government bureaucracy. Thus, according to Mahasin (1995), it was not a transformation from the Bazaar economy to a modern economy but rather the "bourgeois" of the *Santri* or making the *Santri* to be "*priyayi*".

The transformation of *Santri* middle class into a modern bureaucratic middle class during New Order was a relatively a new phenomenon. Although not transformed into a group having political power with a strong economic basis, but the entry of *Santri* into the modern sectors was so surprising (Mahasin, 1995). This

phenomenon obscured the old stereotype of *Santri* subculture. They were described as children of farmers or petty traders who emerged from traditional Bazaar socioeconomic system. Some of the striking characteristics of this class were being resilient, frugal, and persistent in competing in the free market and not familiar with bureaucracy. They were actually a class that inherited the ideals of indigenous bourgeois formation. This social group was frequently described that it would be the basis for industrialized societies formation and even democracy in Indonesia. However, the prediction of Geertz (1956) was never proven and realized.

The community of traders, artisans, and indigenous entrepreneurs in the early twentieth century who were part of the Islamic Trade Union were frequently referred to as the middle class in Java. Their role was not only to trade, but also to control the colonial government (Knight, 2007, p. 34). This community was an embodiment of the values of entrepreneurship in the true sense. However, the heyday of middle class ended with the fall of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. War, revolution, and political and economic latitudes had eliminated the opportunity for entrepreneurs to reclaim the level of middle class economic power in the past.

Perhaps, that was the cause of middle class discourse that was so widespread during the first half of 1980s that had more political connotations. Talks about the middle class are always emphasized on the aspect of its role, rather than the criteria of the middle class itself. The role raised is always centered on the political aspect. Therefore, this article intends to roll back the spirit of discourse about the Muslim middle class in Java in the perspective of social science theories.

### **The roots of Middle Class “*Bourgeois*”**

Middle class discourse as well as the class concept developed by Karl Marx cannot be separated from the Industrial Revolution occurring in Europe in the 17th century. The Industrial Revolution had been the beginning of capitalism development. At that time, the social system was feudal with stratification; the king and the aristocratic family were at the top of the social pyramid, the landlords and merchants were below, and the commoners were at the lowest strata. When the Industrial Revolution began to shake Europe, it was the second class that played a major role in the process of change. The social layer was later referred to as the old middle class or bourgeois.

Class conflicts (unequal relations) between the owners of capital (capitalists) and workers caused Karl Marx's hatred to capitalism, as he hated feudalism. Nevertheless, Karl Marx did not deny his admiration for parallel capitalism. Feudal values that were praised by the king and aristocracy were seen as nothing more than an ideological veil of reality, that feudal society was a society based on human exploitation of other human beings.

When the Industrial Revolution which continued with the expansion of capitalism developed more rapidly and complexly, plus the service industry which was no longer in operation, it made Karl Marx's theory of social class problematic. Day by day, the management of the political, economic, and ideological superstructure was increasingly being taken over by the emergence of a paid expert's class, managers, officials, technicians, and other professionals. That social class was then called as the

new middle class. It was different from the capitalist class living from the accumulation of profits (capital), the new middle-class lived from the salary gained from the expertise they had, both expertise based on certain education and long experience in a job (Boley, Belford, Heijne, 2011, p. 23).

From that fact, the concept of middle class is actually closer to the Weberian tradition than the Marxians who define class as a social group in society. Social groups are determined by certain positions in the production process. Meanwhile, Weber's analysis of class emphasizes more on the market position relating to ownership rights, welfare, and opportunities for life than a form of relationship to the means of production. Therefore, welfare and income are important factors in class structure. Weber do not pay much attention to the problem of class conflict. His attention is focused on the transformation of society and political authority from traditional and patrimonial systems to modern, rational, and legally organized systems (Adair-Toteff, 2014, p. 245).

Van der Kroef (1954) states that middle class is not always uniform. Because they sometimes appear as opportunists, human rights fighters, or even as radical activists. The middle class in Europe have a significant role in the process of social and economic change and reform. Meanwhile, many people in Indonesia have the illusion that middle class in this country should emulate those in Western.

One question is: can middle class in Indonesia be expected to be an agent of change? Maybe it is too early to call it so, moreover, forcing equalization with what happened in the West. Middle class in Indonesia is frequently labeled skeptical of change, less involved in political issues, and lacks a clear political orientation, because they have never taken root in the history of politics in Indonesia. In fact, their existence was always supported by bureaucrats and also by businessmen who were very pro-government during the New Order era.

### **The Failure of Indigenous Bourgeois Formation in the Colonial Period**

The existence of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia was based on the raw material sector or primary goods. The colonial government controlled all existing land. Finally, a law was issued allowing plantation land to be leased to private parties in 1870. Then, there had been a kind of dualism in the agricultural sector: on one hand there was a plantation sector for exported crops. On the other hand, there was a traditional agricultural sector whose the crops were consumed by the community itself. Therefore, the plantation sector providing high profits was dominated more by Europeans. Meanwhile, the traditional agricultural sector with slow development was dominated by indigenous farmers. Such an economic system, eventually did not give birth to an indigenous class of landlords. Plantation land was controlled by Dutch and other Europeans businesspersons. Of course, the system was a very simple description of the groups existing in the current society (Budiman, 1991).

As we know that Netherlands is a small country. To hold the vast Dutch East Indies, the Dutch would need local people to help them in ruling. Javanese aristocrats were used for this purpose. However, the Dutch colonial government had to be careful and make the position of Javanese aristocrats not to be too strong. For this reason, the

Dutch Colonial government used the politics of *divide et impera*, that was pitting and controlling. The Dutch Colonial Government pitted fellow aristocrats in the Javanese kingdoms. The Netherlands was very active in helping one nobleman against another. If the nobles who were helped won, then they governed the people in Java together. The Dutch recognized the traditional power of Javanese aristocrats, even protecting them. In return, the Dutch controlled the land and its farmers as a form of tax payment. The Dutch gained income from the land. Other groups pitted were traders and noblemen. The noblemen had traditional political power but no economic power. If the noblemen gained economic power, then they would be a threat to the power of colonial government. Therefore, the Dutch attempted to prevent the emergence of traders among indigenous people.

On the other hand, the economic power emerged from the coastal regents in Java who traded with foreign traders. This certainly made the Javanese aristocrats in hinterland worried. Therefore, the coastal regents were attacked and destroyed by the Dutch military. As a result of the attack, a strong bourgeois class was not formed during the colonial period. The Javanese, especially those who were affected by the colonial government, preferred to be bureaucrats rather than traders. Sometimes, trading activities were still seen as less honorable occupation, even though that view has now begun to change (Budiman, 2001).

### **Bourgeois Middle Class Muslim Traders in Java**

The bourgeois in Indonesia whose characteristics was similar to pre-revolutionary in Europe, were found in the early 20th century. Like in other developing countries, the development of the bourgeois in Indonesia was affected by the development of colonialism. The Dutch colonialism always stopped the emergence of middle class or indigenous bourgeois embryos which began to appear in society. They were ocean traders and craftsmen of small industries. From a theoretical perspective, there were no bourgeois in its truest sense in Indonesia; a group of Indonesians who were genuinely independent in political views and had independent and absolute economic power. From this point of view, the bourgeois who were born during the Dutch colonialism in Indonesia were just pseudo-capitalist bourgeois, the impure middle class.

In the early 20th century, there were middle class types in Indonesia which consisted of indigenous traders and craftsmen who later joined the Islamic Trade Union. This group was mentioned by Muhaimin (1984) as the milestone of the bourgeois as in the West. Their economic and political activities were the controlling power of the colonial government and were an embodiment of the *entrepreneurship* values in its true sense. However, Muslim bourgeois could not last long. It only lasted until the independence, although the traces are still visible until today. Their existence was replaced by the Chinese groups.

An example of a community belonging to the bourgeois representation of indigenous traders was Kudus *kulon*. Kudus is a city in northern Central Java, well known as the growth place for cigarette factories. The name of Kudus is derived from Al-Quds which means "holy" (it is most likely because this city has long been the center

of several religions later changed by the saint to show that Islam has dominated the region). Kudus society, like other cities in Java, practices diverse religious life. This fact is seen by the existence of several groups dominating certain areas. Kudus *kulon*, famous with the name of Kudus *kulon*, is where the graves of the saints and ulemas are located. The majority of the people are the *santri* or community practicing the orthodox version of Islam. The majority of people in Kudus *kulon* worked as successful traders before independence, and from this area it was born the famous Kretek king named Nitisemito. was the old city of Kudus formed by Sunan Kudus after he withdrew from Demak due to his feud with Sunan Kalijaga. Eastern Kudus was a heterogeneous area. Chinese and Christians lived there. This place was dominated by *Abangan* class. While Kudus *kulon* was the strong base of Islam Masyumi party supporter, on the other hand, eastern Kudus was the base of two non-Islamic parties - Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) and Indonesian National Party (PNI).

The successful indigenous entrepreneurs were often associated with *santri* from Kudus *kulon*. They were known as the humble, hard worker, and deft entrepreneurs, but most importantly, they were godly *santri*. Although most of them were taught in traditional Islamic schools, they tend to bloom into humble bourgeois entrepreneurs, different from the employees and other elite groups of Islam in Kudus.

The emergence of Kudus *kulon* community could be explained as the attitude of Sunan Kudus related to the defeat of the Demak Kingdom. Sunan Kudus wanted to preserve the coastal as the hegemony of power by moving it inland. This thing encouraged Sunan Kudus to leave Demak and formed a community of his own. The community was then known as Kudus *kulon*. Such an event could be considered as an alternative lifestyle from Sunan Kudus due to political defeat. Even so, Sunan Kudus could not create a new form of consolidation, i.e., between trade, religion, and power all at once as a force. Because the coastal trade had disappeared, political consolidation was clearly defeated by the power of Pajang. Creating a religion and mainland commercial communities were the last alternative.

According to de Graaf (1986), the ruler of Demak (Sunan Kudus) withdrew to the places of small communities inhabiting the villages on the old path to the east (now known as Kudus *kulon*). They could survive because they earned income from the surrounding fields and started pioneering trade managed by loyal followers of Sunan Kudus. There might be a group that followed the departure of Sunan Kudus to Kudus *kulon*. De Graaf (1986) added that perhaps some *santri* who fought under Sunan Kudus against Wirasaba joined Sunan Kudus in forming a new community.

The area formed by Sunan Kudus had become an old town called Kudus *kulon* by the Kudus society. The life of Kudus *kulon* community is quite exclusive and different from other Kudus society until today. Kudus *kulon* has a good trading will and a strong work ethic. They consider working as a form of worship. In the past, Kudus *kulon* community was the haves when compared to the public. This could be identified through the pattern of the settlements and houses that looked more luxurious than the general public.

Kudus *kulon* community was economically independent. They worked as craftsmen of weaving, batik, jewelry, antiques, embroidery, tobacco, tiles, shops, and

kretek cigarette factories. In the early 20th century, Kudus began to be famous of its cigarette industry. The emergence of cigarette factories could be associated with the Javanese bourgeois *santri* with big capital to trade household crafts. The high trading will was often due to challenges, hope, and possibilities. It encouraged the society to work diligently, meticulously, with a sense of dedication and responsibility. This situation has been formed since Sunan Kudus formed the area. It can be said that Kudus *kulon* society had had sufficient mentality as the basis from the very beginning. The long movement and journey of the history were in the form of political upheavals during the Demak empire, the sociocultural that provided enough space for them as an opposition society. Kudus *kulon* community was not formed by a status Quo or routine in socio-political life that was steady and likely conservative.

Kudus *kulon* society always formed *counter concept* toward the domination of inland empire during the colonial period. They created such model as the opponent of the Dutch Government. The emergence of trading ethos within Kudus *kulon* society was a character that became the character of the people. Sunan Kudus was an architect who was born as an innovative figure, future-oriented, and sometimes wandered from the prevailing standards. As a strong-willed and denied figure, Sunan Kudus felt he had been successful in becoming a leader of a social group with goals and values of life, though sometimes, those values were not fairly recognized by other groups.

In each of his book, Geertz always stated the strong association between worldliness and spiritual elements. In this relation, Geertz interpreted the balance between pursuing worldly interests and the virtues of Islam. This interpretation was widely performed by Muslim reformers among Muslim traders, especially in northern coast of Java. Therefore, the conception of Clifford Geertz justifies the historical and functional relationship between Islam and trade.

In Mojokuto appeared a growth process from new values such as *economic ethics* as once stated by Weber. The new value allowed the more rational economic to play role in people's lives. Meanwhile, Nakamura (1983) who focused on his study in Kotagede stated that the society down there owned specific characteristics. The emergence of Islamic reformism which was born from the community at first contained a very syncretic religious tradition. The entrepreneurs there were non-*santri* traders before the arrival of Muhammadiyah. However, it could not be denied that there was once a symmetrical and mutually supportive process between the growth of indigenous entrepreneurship on one side and Islam on the other, before the war in Kotagede. However, this process fell along with the fall of Dutch colonialism in 1942.

According to Geertz (1960), *santri* groups were the most potential and possessed specific values to develop themselves into independent and influential entrepreneurs. These groups were expected to be the core of the Javanese bourgeois needed the most in the social, economic, political, and cultural development and renewal. In fact, according to the history of bourgeois development in Indonesia after the independence, the ones who developed into indigenous Javanese bourgeois came from bureaucrats. In Weber's conception, they did not have the cultural values needed as entrepreneurs.



## The New Order

It is convincing that since before independence until the end of the 1940s, the middle-class Muslim traders or also *santri* entrepreneurs relatively dominated the world of trading in this country. It was so dominant that many researchers associated trade activities with *santri* groups all the time. One of the researches was Geertz. Thus, it could be said that the upper classes always dominated the state employment sector, *abangan* dominated the agricultural sector, and the *santri* group dominated the business world group.

Nakamura (2003), who is also an anthropologist stated that the center of trades and industries in cities in Java were often called Kauman. *Santri* who lived in Kudus, Pekajangan, Laweyan, Kajen, Kotagede and so on were known to have a militant trading will, with a high work ethic, and were always involved in the fields of trade and commerce. There were several parts of the entrepreneur-based region in Java where economic activities were very dynamic; it was the regions with the *santri* as the members. Those regions were Pekajangan, Kotagede, and Karang Kajen.

However, a different situation occurred during the New Order. Almost all traders and entrepreneurs came from the groups of *abangan* and upper-classes. They grew and moved in "greasy", uncompetitive, and non-risky sectors because they were protected by the government. Besides, they generally developed because they were supported with political facilities or *entrepreneurship* skills of other groups. The middle-class bourgeois was identical to Javanese Muslim traders and once triumphed in the early 20th century. Only a small amount remained in the New Order era. Only a few of them could survive and take part at the national level with their own strength. Up to this point, it could be concluded that Geertz's assumptions in many of his books in the field had met a different reality. That was because the groups that drove the social-economic growth and change, at least in the short term, were no longer from the indigenous Muslim bourgeois as what Geertz stated, but the indigenous Muslim bourgeois whose independence was very weak.

During the New Order, obstacles to growth and development of middle class businesses came not only from the patrimonial cultural values of the *santri*, but also the "bazaar" system which was irrational and left no space for the *santri* to compete both against multinational foreign forces and the strength of the state and private sectors who got monopoly rights.

Such a middle-class bourgeois portrait began to change slightly when a wave of reform shook the New Order regime in early 1998. The professional class and the pro-status quo did not seem to miss the action in the final seconds of the New Order era. When the reform era began, the climate of freedom and openness was relatively better. The theses of change about the middle-class bourgeois certainly surfaced. The changing climate was believed to bring Indonesia to growth and change in a strong and independent middle class because the cooptation of the New Order regime has disappeared. As it was known that the middle-class infertility today was not merely due to the co-optation of power but also the patrimonial cultural factors that were still going strong. Bureaucratic officials were like *Patron* and the public are *clients*. The relationship of them was not based on modern bureaucracy rationality, but more on

personal relation with the related officials. Therefore, the existence of the middle class was not solely determined by itself but also by the political culture surrounding it.

## Conclusion

Up to this moment, the existence of the middle-class or bourgeois as in Western is like empty space with no definite format answer to Indonesia. Various approaches and the following scenarios have been put forward to try to solve the riddle about the middle class. However, the middle class remains an absurdity and still appears disguised.

The development of the Javanese bourgeois middle class was not normal, because during the Dutch colonialism period in Indonesia, the natives were only given a secondary role and even eliminated. While in the economic field, the main role was passed to the Chinese. Only a few space was surfaced as if in Kudus *kulon*, Pekajangan, and Kotagede. During the post-independence era, the indigenous bourgeois middle class of Muslim traders did not produce a strong entrepreneurial class. The strong networks tied between the entrepreneurs and New Order authorities. The indigenous bourgeois children of Muslim traders became bureaucrats or professionals after receiving higher education.

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