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# The traditional image of Indonesian Islam in German newspapers\*

Arndt Graf\*\*

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 2001 in New York and Washington, both in Western and in Islamic countries, the perception of each other is increasingly thematized. How is the West perceived in Islamic countries? And what do Western societies know and think about Islamic cultures? In this article, I investigate a small part of that larger picture. My question is how Indonesian Islam is traditionally perceived in German dailies published during the 1980s. This short paper is restricted to a more or less descriptive approach, trying to establish a basis for a broader discussion involving approaches from various other disciplines (like Islamic studies or anthropology).

The decade of the 1980s is of special significance, because it comprises the first decade of an explicitly Islamic government in the modern era, namely that of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In these years, topics related with the Iranian version of Islam are to be found in almost every media in Germany. The question is whether the image of Indonesian Islam is somehow influenced by the developments in the Middle East.

In this paper, I refer to extended background articles (history), features, and in-depth reports in what are considered to be the more high-quality German newspapers with nation-wide reader bases. My sample in-

cludes those articles written by correspondents in the field, and associated journalists.

In order to carry out a qualitative analysis, my samples are limited to articles consisting of a minimum of at least 100 lines in length. This qualification eliminates redundancy, as many news agency reports are reprinted ad infinitum. The reasoning for this choice is that the opinion of an article is the better to observe the more complex and long the argumentation is.

Since the titles and ideological positions of these German newspapers are probably not commonly known in Indonesia, provided below is an overview first of the political/ideological landscape in (West) Germany of the 1980s, then of the corresponding newspapers.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of analyzing the media landscape of the 1980s, it is helpful to take into account that until 1982, the government body consisted of a coalition of SPD and FDP, thereafter of CDU/CSU and FDP. Hans-Dietrich Genscher held the position of Foreign Minister for the most of the duration of both coalitions. His party, the fairly small, moderate-liberal FDP occupied central positions in the Department of Foreign Affairs between 1969 and 1998.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Germany's foreign policy concerning Indonesia maintained a relative continuity during the period under examination.

Table 1: Political landscape in Germany in the 1980s

Political orientation	Conservative, Conservative-liberal	Moderate/Liberal	Social Democratic, Left-liberal	Ecologist
Name(s) of the main parties	Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU)*	Free Democratic Party (FDP)	Social Democratic Party (SPD)	Green Party
Approx. size of the party (in % of the national electorate)	35-42	5-10	35-42	5-10

\* The CSU only exists in the state of Bavaria, emphasizing often on special Bavarian topics.

<sup>1</sup>The image of Indonesian Islam in East German newspapers until the reunification of 1990 is not covered in this short paper, although a comparative analysis would be quite interesting.

<sup>2</sup>One of the most problematic attributions in this table is "liberal", since not only the Liberal Party FDP, but also almost all other parties claim to be "liberal". In the 1980s, this label is often used equivalent to "moderate" or "centrist", as opposed to "right-wing" or "left-wing". It bears connotations like "pragmatic", "tolerant", or "unideological".

**Table 2: Quality newspapers in Germany, and their broad political orientation**

Paper	Abbreviation	Political orientation	Mainly read by supporters of:
<i>Die Welt</i>	Welt	Conservative, nationalist	CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union)
<i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i>	FAZ	Conservative-liberal	CDU, right wing of liberal party FDP
<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i>	SZ	Liberal, centrist	Center-left wing of the conservative parties CDU/CSU, liberal party FDP, center-right wing of Social Democrats
<i>Frankfurter Rundschau</i>	FR	Left-liberal, social democratic	Mainstream and left of mainstream of social democratic party SPD, right wing of the Green Party
<i>Tageszeitung</i>	taz	Green, alternative	Green/ecologist party

**Table 3: Articles on Indonesian Islam in German-language dailies in the 1980s**

Year	Date	Newspaper	Lines (plus picture(s))	Translated header (with original)
1983	Feb, 26	Welt	216 + picture	At the end of the night came the dead uncle. The role of spiritism in the social life of Indonesia (Gegen Morgen kam der tote Onkel. Die Rolle der Geisterbeschwörung im sozialen Leben Indonesiens)
1983	Dec, 2	Welt	201 + picture	Suharto is building dams against the danger of a revolution (Suharto baut Dämme gegen die Revolution)
1985	Jan, 23	Welt	96 + picture	Borobudur – the fresh force of Indonesia (Borobudur – die frische Kraft Indonesiens)
1985	Apr, 16	Welt	307	Pancasila, the principles against the centrifuge (Pancasila, die Prinzipien gegen die Zentrifuge)
1987	Sept, 9	FR	276 + picture	Searching Javanese identity (Auf der Suche nach javanischer Identität)
1989	Aug, 14	FR	128	Revalorizing Islamic law (Aufwertung des javanischen Rechts)
1990	Jan, 12	FR	151	Indonesia: Islam between tradition and modernity (Indonesien: Islam zwischen Tradition und Moderne)
1991	Jan, 29	taz	352 + 2 pictures	The Prophet only at place eleven (Der Prophet nur auf Platz elf)
1991	July, 27	taz	268 + 2 pictures	Dangerous opinion poll (Gefährliche Meinungsumfrage)

The degree of political affiliation of the print media in Germany in the 1980s can be compared to that of Indonesian print media during the era of *reformasi*. Although newspapers do not strictly follow particular party lines, they do target specific segments of the public identified by certain sets of attitudes, assumptions, expectations, as well as (party) political orientations (see table 2).

I am quite aware of the fact that these short ascriptions of political orientations can be dealt with in much greater detail. However, for our purposes here these labels might be sufficient for interpreting the data above (see table 3).

Table 3 demonstrates that reports on Indonesian Islam in the German press vary widely from year to year. In some years (like in 1982, 1984, and 1988), this topic is not even covered at all in any lengthy background reports, features or similar in-depth articles. It can then be concluded that the general interest for Indonesian Islam is traditionally very low in German media. One possible reason for this is that historically contact between

Germany and Indonesia, or more specifically, Indonesian Islamic affairs, has never been especially intensive.

However, this conclusion is forcibly modified when scrutinized more closely. This is especially the case when considering the frequency of reportage within individual newspapers. An aggregated reportage frequency (or ARF) consists of the total number of lines and photos contained in all articles (for each newspaper) concerning Indonesian Islam.

**Table 4: Aggregated reporting frequency (ARF) of the individual newspapers**

Newspaper	Welt	FAZ	SZ	FR	taz
Number of articles	4	-	-	3	2
Number of lines	820	-	-	555	620
Number of pictures	3	-	-	1	4

Table 5: Thematic aspects/Header analysis

Year	Date	News- paper	Translated header (with original)	Java/Mys- ticism	Every- day life	Reli- gious rules	Political aspects	Inter- religious relations
1983	Feb, 26	Welt	At the end of the night came the dead uncle. The role of spiritism in the social life of Indonesia (Gegen Morgen kam der tote Onkel. Die Rolle der Geisterbeschwörung im sozialen Leben Indonesiens)	x	x			
1983	Dec, 2	Welt	Suharto is building dams against the danger of a revolution (Suharto baut Dämme gegen die Revolution)				x	
1985	Jan, 23	Welt	Borobudur – the fresh force of Indonesia (Borobudur – die frische Kraft Indonesiens)					x
1985	Apr, 16	Welt	Pancasila, the principles against the centrifuge (Pancasila, die Prinzipien gegen die Zentrifuge)				x	
1987	Sept, 9	FR	Searching Islamic identity (Auf der Suche nach islamischer Identität)				x	
1989	Aug, 14	FR	Revalorizing Islamic law (Aufwertung des islamischen Rechts)			x		
1990	Jan, 12	FR	Indonesia: Islam between tradition and modernity (Indonesien: Islam zwischen Tradition und Moderne)		x			
1991	Jan, 29	taz	The Prophet only at place eleven (Der Prophet nur auf Platz elf)				x	
1991	July, 27	taz	Dangerous opinion poll (Gefährliche Meinungsumfrage)				x	
				2	2	1	5	1

Table 4 shows that not all German newspapers offer their readers long in-depth articles on Indonesian Islam in the 1980s. In fact, only *Die Welt*, *Tageszeitung* (taz), and *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR) provide such background information. These newspapers also feature the highest numbers of lines and pictures on this topic.

In the context of frequency, it is interesting to note that the centrist-liberal newspapers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* pay no special attention to the phenomenon of Indonesian Islam. Although, in daily reports, they do provide a large amount of news from Indonesia, including on Indonesian Islam. Such dailies do not, however, include lengthy articles regarding Indonesian Islam. It can, then, be asked whether these newspapers are mainly targeting a more or less secular (meaning non-religious) audience. This would at least explain the relative lack of interest on the part of some newspapers. This is in contrast to the attention given by more conservative German newspapers which have traditionally been interested in Islamic affairs in Indonesia. This is probably due to the fact that in politically conservative circles in Germany, religious orientations remain comparatively high. Thus, the in-

terest in Indonesian Islam is perhaps an expression of a general interest in religious topics.

A bit more difficult to explain is the almost equally frequent coverage of Indonesian Islam in FR and taz, newspapers affiliated with social democratic and green/ecologist orientations. In this arena of the overall political spectrum, secular world views are quite frequent. If seen from the headings and the content of the articles published in these newspapers, it appears that here a positive image emerges quite often. Before we attempt a qualitative interpretation of these tendencies, let us first turn to a qualitative-quantitative analysis of the headers of these articles. In this method, the headers are analyzed word by word. The reasoning behind this approach is that journalists usually place great effort on putting the main message(s) of an article into the header. The header thus gives a good impression of the issues constructed in the article concerned. The quantitative aspect of this method lays in the combined analysis of a greater sample of article headlines. Thus, like in the present case, we can see whether there are ever-recurring aspects evoked when talking about a certain topic.

**Table 6: Articles on Indonesian Islam in Welt**

1983	Feb, 26	Welt	216 + picture	At the end of the night came the dead uncle. The role of spiritism in the social life of Indonesia (Gegen Morgen kam der tote Onkel. Die Rolle der Geisterbeschwörung im sozialen Leben Indonesiens)
1983	Dec, 2	Welt	201 + picture	Suharto is building dams against the danger of a revolution (Suharto baut Dämme gegen die Gefahr der Revolution)
1985	Jan, 23	Welt	96 + picture	Borobudur – the fresh force of Indonesia (Borobudur – die frische Kraft Indonesiens)
1985	Apr, 16	Welt	307	Pancasila, the principles against the centrifuge (Pancasila, die Prinzipien gegen die Zentrifuge)

This analysis of the headlines of German newspapers during the 1980s reveals a certain emphasis on political aspects of Indonesian Islam. In this, the more conservative papers are generally underlining the positive aspects of *Pancasila* and President Suharto’s political position regarding Islam. This image of Indonesian Islam should also be seen in context with the German/Indonesian foreign relations at that time. As mentioned earlier, during the 1980s, Germany was governed by a conservative government that fostered strong relations with Suharto and Habibie.

A similarly positive image is constructed in articles that connect Islam in Indonesia with “astonishing” (as it is presented) aspects of beliefs in spirits. Headlines like “At the end of the night came the dead uncle” (Welt) not only serve very well the purpose of attracting the reader’s interest. They also underscore just another aspect to the stereotype of an Indonesia that is inhabited by many gods, ghosts, and demons. This is an image of a supernatural and exotic world widely circulated in touristic advertisements. In an indirect way, the alleged exoticism of “Friendly Indonesia” is thus connected with the image of Indonesian Islam.

This sympathetic and “exotic” version of Islam is primarily perceived as a tolerant and friendly religion. In the context of the time, this positive stereotype has to be juxtaposed with the negative media image of Islam in the Middle East, especially in Iran after the take-over of Ayatollah Khomeiny. It might be argued that stereotypical perceptions generally work in exactly this way. The negative primary stereotype (here: the bad image of Iranian Islam) is even affirmed by referring to the positive “exception” (the exotic and tolerant Indonesian Islam). Seen from this perspective, the image of Indonesian Islam benefits in a way from the negative Western headlines created around Ayatollah Khomeiny.

Going a bit further, one could link this evidence to the fact that Indonesia historically very often has been seen as a syncretistic, “traditional” culture. One could critically say that it has never been allowed to transform into a modern nation state in the eyes of some Western media. The further anthropological debate could ask why some newspapers (like the German ones in this case study) still tend to convey this kind of image. In the following, I would like to contribute some more data for this discussion, by a short qualitative analysis of every single article in the sample.

## Qualitative analysis by newspaper

### *Die Welt*

The conservative newspaper *Die Welt* is represented in the sample with four long background articles, published in 1983 and 1985. The first three of them are all written by Christel Pilz, while O.G. Roeder is the author of the article on “Pancasila...”.

The first article by Christel Pilz, “At the end of the night came the dead uncle...”, focuses on beliefs in spirits in Indonesia, especially in Java. Indonesian (Javanese) Islam is represented as syncretistic, tolerant, and peaceful. This image of Javanese-Indonesian Islam is also used in her next article, “Suharto is building dams...”. Here, Suharto is described as a “typical central Javanese”, searching for harmony and avoiding conflicts. He is said to fight against religious fanaticism and fundamentalism, for example by renovating the temple of Borobudur. At the same time he is reported trying to curb Islamic fundamentalists, by cutting down the support of PPP.

The bomb assault on Borobudur is the subject of the next article of Christel Pilz, “Borobudur...”. In addition to the bomb incident, Pilz also mentions the Tanjung Priok riots as a possible motivating factor behind the assault. In fact, statements protesting the *Pancasila* campaign of the early 1980’s are taken from both Muslims and Christians. Via such quotes, Pilz asks whether the “Javanese”, “mystic” line of Suharto’s politics provoked the violent protests. Thus, in a way, this article documents quite a change in perception – if compared to the first one that still centered entirely on “the dead uncle” as a symbol of Javanese mysticism and that did not take into account any other manifestation of Islam in Indonesia.

The remaining article, written by O.G. Roeder (reporting from Indonesia since the initial rise of the New Order), gives a general introduction to the heterogeneous geographical, cultural, and political composition within Indonesia. From there he attempts to explain the elements of *Pancasila* which he apparently values as a viable solution to Indonesia’s problems of nation-building and national unification. He also warns that too strict an interpretation of *Pancasila* could lead to conflict within the various factions of Indonesian Islam. However, the basic concern of the article, as regarding

religion, concentrates on the *wayang* and mystical aspects found in and presumably still influencing Indonesian Islamic thinking and culture. Roeder portrays this as a mainstream version of Indonesian Islam, other interpretations are mentioned in passing, as dangers from the periphery.

### Frankfurter Rundschau

*Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR) published three long articles on Indonesian Islam in the 1980s. All three of them are written by Jürgen Dauth, the journal's correspondent in Singapore. His overall perspective is quite different from that found in *Die Welt*.

The first article, "Searching for Islamic identity", begins with a graphic description of the massacre of Tanjung Priok of Dec. 1986, in which, according to the article, hundreds of Muslims were ambushed and killed by the military. According to the author, those killed were protesting against social injustice, and against a trend of an enforced secularization of Indonesian culture and politics. In the following, Dauth explains terms like *Pancasila* and *Dwifungsi* before he quotes Muslim leader Abdurrahman Wahid and Muslim social scientist Sutjipto Wirosardjono for an analysis of the situation. Based on their statements, the author concludes that there is a long-lasting, fundamental trend towards an intellectual emancipation of Indonesia's Muslims. In fact, in some sense one could even call it a growing intellectualization and self-awareness at the same time. Moderate parts of the government acknowledge such a trend, however, hardliners still cannot accept the 'realities' of the situation. The latter therefore, attempts to implement a repressive political line against all kinds of Islamic revivalism. A hope for the future, according to the article, is the *pesantren* (Islamic schools) because the leaders of which (*kyai*) are in the process of modernizing their curricula. This will in the long run contribute to an intellectual empowerment within Indonesia's Islam.

The next article by Jürgen Dauth, "Revalorizing Islamic law", focuses on the introduction of religious courts in Indonesia for marital affairs. Here, a broad variety of voices are quoted: The Minister of Religious Affairs, H. Munawir Syadzali, the German-born Jesuit Franz Magnis-Suseno, the former Governor of Jakarta, Lieutenant General Suprpto, the former speaker of the Indonesian parliament, General Amir Machmud, Pres-

ident Suharto himself, and Abdurrahman Wahid. The basic line of the article is that the new law can be seen as a success for Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and their tactics of joining Golkar temporarily. Finally, the Supreme Judge Ali Said is quoted as saying that Muslims still can marry at the state office (Catatan Sipil) if they want to do so, for instance in cases of inter-faith marriages.

Jürgen Dauth's third article, "Indonesia: Islam between tradition and modernity", focuses also on the NU version of Indonesian Islam. His analysis takes as a starting point Abdurrahman Wahid's and Achmad Sidiq's re-election during the convention in Yogyakarta. Modernizing efforts within the party are attributed primarily to the influence of A. Wahid and reformers such as himself. The author also states that Benny Murdani assisted in paving the way for this new ideological line. The greatest problem for the reformers at that time were, according to the article, various rural *pesantren* still dominated by conservative *kyai*.

In general, Dauth's three articles published in *Frankfurter Rundschau* on Indonesian Islam focus on similar features:

- Indonesian Islam is almost exclusively described as the NU version of Islam. Muhammadiyah and other movements are mentioned only through a passing glance.
- There is a strong emphasis on an analysis of the power groups in Jakarta. The advancement of religious issues is often interpreted as a result of tactical maneuvers of politicians.
- The underlying, positive image of Indonesian Islam seems to consist of several persistent elements: Islam in Java (stereotypically syncretistic and mystical), Islam outside of Java (more reformist), rural and conservative Islam, intellectual and reformist Islam.

For newspaper readers in distant Germany, this image of Indonesian Islam appears to be quite differentiated. Since the overall tone in these articles is usually full of sympathy for Indonesian Islamic issues, it might be that such images have a correlation (on the left-liberal and social democratic sides of the political spectrum) to the similarly positive image of Indonesian Islam promoted by other newspapers, such as rendered in conservative *Die Welt*.

**Table 7: Articles on Indonesian Islam in *Frankfurter Rundschau***

1987	Sept, 9	FR	276 + picture	Searching for Islamic identity (Auf der Suche nach islamischer Identität)
1989	Aug, 14	FR	128	Revalorizing Islamic law (Aufwertung des javanischen Rechts)
1990	Jan, 12	FR	151	Indonesia: Islam between tradition and modernity (Indonesien: Islam zwischen Tradition und Moderne)

**Table 8: Articles on Indonesian Islam in *Tageszeitung***

1991	Jan, 29	taz	352 + 2 pictures	The Prophet only at place eleven (Der Prophet nur auf Platz elf)
1991	July, 27	taz	268 + 2 pictures	Dangerous opinion poll (Gefährliche Meinungsumfrage)

**Tageszeitung**

The remaining two articles in the sample were published in the ecologist-alternative newspaper *Tageszeitung* (taz). Readers of this journal can generally be said to orient themselves politically with the Green Party, represented by, among others, Joschka Fischer, the Foreign Minister of Germany since 1998.

The first long article, “The prophet only at place eleven“, written by Dorothee Wenner, begins with a quotation of Turkish demonstrators in Berlin at the tenth day of the Gulf War: “Vultures! Why don’t you let us in the Islamic world determine our future ourselves?“ The idea that the West often does not understand the Islamic world, and that the Islamic world all too often falls prey to imperialistic and exploitative powers in the West, is a recurrent theme throughout the entire article. Indonesian Islam is portrayed as an extremely peaceful and tolerant religion that can serve as a shining example for the West, including Christian churches.

Mosques in Indonesia are portrayed as a meeting point for whole villages, where also foreign guests are treated with respect. The emancipation of women, an important topic for readers of *Tageszeitung*, is said to be best advanced by moderate religious groups like Nahdlatul Ulama. This is perhaps the reason why the article is illustrated by a photograph of two smiling female *pesantren* students.

Abdurrahman Wahid plays an exemplary role in the article as a wise religious leader. He is portrayed as tolerant, modern, liberal, and integrative. Supposedly, it was largely due to his influence as to why the Arswendo affair did not escalate any further. The article concludes with a lengthy quotation by A. Wahid arguing in favor of a rediscovery of the true values of Islam. These true values, according to the quotation, have been altered by the colonial rule of the Europeans.

The second article in *Tageszeitung*, “Dangerous opinion poll“, features Asia Watch as the author. Here, the Arswendo affair is seen in a different light. According to anonymous sources quoted in the article, the affair was used by political power groups in Jakarta in order to attract support among the vast Muslim majority of Indonesia. Then, a connection is drawn to the Indonesian support for the US in the Gulf War. This war led supposedly to a decreasing support of Indonesian Muslims for their own government because it did not distance itself clearly from the US policy. It is insinuated in the article that the militant Muslim groups demonstrating against Arswendo were orchestrated by factions of the power groups of the government in order to distract and divert Muslim anger. This interpretation of actual events is accompanied by a glance

at some underlying currents of Indonesian Islam. Supposedly, fundamentalism is growing in Indonesia. The article’s conclusion expresses concern over the growth of “conservative“ Muslim organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama. In this perspective, Suharto’s politics regarding Islam are positively viewed as attempts to control the organized, political forces of Islam. Thus, the primary concern of this article written by Asia Watch is quite similar to that found in some articles in *Die Welt* regarding the political role of Islam.

**Conclusion**

Summing up the findings of this paper, it can be said that in German quality newspapers of the 1980s, Indonesian Islam is generally perceived with great sympathy. Newspapers on both sides of the political spectrum tend to associate Indonesian Islam with attributes like “peaceful“, “tolerant“, and also “exotic“. It seems that in some articles of the conservative newspaper *Die Welt*, the Suharto line of dealing with Islamic issues is viewed positively. On the other hand, in articles of *Frankfurter Rundschau*, mainly read by supporters of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Islamic revivalism is in general seen as a long-lasting, inevitable trend. This is perhaps why articles in this newspaper focus on the Indonesian Islamic modernizers’ perspective such as that of Abdurrahman Wahid. The latter enjoys in all analyzed German newspapers of the 1980s great attention and sympathy. This is also true for Nahdlatul Ulama in general, which is presented as a positive version of Islam – even to the green and feminist readers of *Tageszeitung*.

Generally, however, the coverage on Indonesian Islam in my sample is lacking depth. Some newspapers, like the centrist-liberal journals *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, do not even publish long background articles on the topic. In addition, the reporting in the other newspapers reveals particular and serious shortcomings. Glaringly absent, for example are discussions concerning important movements such as *Muhammadiyah* which consists of millions of followers. Another persistent misperception is the repetitive and stereotypical image of Javanese, “mystical“ Islam as being typical for the whole of Indonesia. A regional and historical differentiation of Islam in Indonesia is generally not considered.

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