

Learning English in the Perspectives of Indonesian Traditional Moslem People A Case Study at North-Sumatra, Indonesia

Anwarsyah Nur¹

¹Head of Islamic Thought Department of Graduate Program of State Islamic University of North-Sumatra Medan.

Date of Submission: 05-10-2017

Date of acceptance: 27-10-2017

Abstract: Geertz divides Muslims in Java into three strata namely *Abangan*, *Santri* and *Priyayi* (civil servants) which are also present in Sumatra island, especially in North Sumatra Province. The *Abangan* Muslim community is identical as a Muslim because the descendants are caused by both parents who gave birth to their Islam and automatically the children of their descendants are Muslims as well, but lack of understanding of the true teachings of Islam. The purpose of this study is to find out why they consider foreign languages especially English is "haram" or forbidden. This research is field research with qualitative and descriptive approach. The theoretical basis used in this study is Clifford Geertz's theory. The results show that due to the weak knowledge of these traditional Muslim societies, both religious knowledge and general knowledge, they consider learning English as a forbidden thing. This traditional Muslim perspective is not as a representative of Muslims in North Sumatra and it is contrary to the true teachings of Islam. Whereas *Qur'an* clearly commands Muslims to learn foreign languages (See, *Alquran* Surah *Al Hujarat* 13 and *Surah Ar Rum*).

Keywords: learning English; perspectives; traditional Muslim people

I. INTRODUCTION

If Clifford Geertz writes the legendary book "The Religion of Java",¹ which is both popular and important to discuss about the diversity in Indonesia, especially in Java, then Geertz's view which reveals about the existence of trichotomy, *abangan santri* and *priyayi* in Javanese society has influenced many people in analyzing either the relationship between the religion and culture, or the relationship between the religion and politics. In the discourse of interaction between religion, especially Islam and culture in Java, Geertz's view has inspired many people to look more deeply about the interrelation between the two. The influence can be seen from some views that try to apply the thinking framework of Geertz or those want to criticize the Geertz's discourse.²

What Geertz mentions above that the Moslem society in Java is divided into three layers namely *Abangan*, *Santri* and *Priyayi* (the civil servant) are also found on the island of Sumatra, especially in the province of North Sumatra, but the most dominant is *abangan* Moslem society. The *abangan* Moslem society is identical with Muslim society because of the descendants whose parents gave births them as Moslem, so their children automatically are Moslem as well, but they less understand of the true Islamic teachings. Even they do not practice the Islamic teachings as practiced by other Moslems generally. This Moslem society is often called 'Islam KTP' or Moslem of Identity card which means the Moslems whose Islam is only written on the identity card. This society is also called as traditional Moslem society where their understanding of Islamic teachings is very shallow. Because of the understanding of their Islamic teachings is very shallow, so they are often *taqlid* that is following the Islamic teachings from the people whose teachings are inconsistent with the teachings of Islam contained in Al-Quran and Hadith. The nature of this *taqlid* is sometimes continued to some generations.

North Sumatera Province is used as the research location which is the fourth largest population in Indonesian provinces after West Java, East Java, and Central Java. Based on the results of the complete enumeration of Population Census in 1990, North Sumatera has 10.81 million people, and in 2010 the population of North Sumatera has increased to 12.98 million people. Population density of North Sumatera in 1990 is 143 people per km² and in 2010 it increases to 178 people per km². With the Population Growth from

¹ See, Geertz, Clifford, *The Religion of Java*, (Berkeley: The Free Press, 1960).

² Geertz, Clifford, *Abangan, Santri, Priyayi dalam Masyarakat Jawa*, terj. Aswab Mahasin, Bandung: Dunia Pustaka Jaya, 1981

2000-2010 amounts to 1.10 percent, the population census in 2015, the population of North Sumatera increases to 13,937,797 people, with a density of 191 people/km². Based on the Census in 2015, the majority of the population of North Sumatera who are Islam is 63.91%, then Protestant Christian is 27.86%, Catholic is 5.41%, Buddhist is 2.43%, Hindu is 0.35%, Confucian is 0.02%, and *Parmalim* is 0.01%.

Religions in North Sumatera	
Religions	Percentage
Islam	63.91%
Protestant Christian	27.86%
Catholic	5.41%
Buddhist	2.43%
Hindu	0.35%
Confucian	0.02%
Parmalim	0.01%

With the number of the adherent is 63.91% from North Sumatera people which amounts almost 14 million people, so Islamic adherents is the majority.³

From the majority of the Moslems, some are under Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah, NU, Al Jamiatul Washliyah, Al Ittihadiyah, PERSIS, and others. This society generally gets better Islamic learning than the traditional Moslem society as mentioned above. The traditional Moslem societies are still practicing some of the Hindu teachings that had reigned in Indonesia centuries ago. Even as a result of the weak knowledge either Islam or general knowledge, they consider that anything that relates to Arab such as the Arabic alphabet, Arabic characters and Arabians are definitely identical with Islam. In fact not all Arabians are Moslems, even some are Christians and some are others. So that in the view of the traditional Moslem society who generally live in the villages and some live in the towns that have not got the enlightenment about the true teachings of Islam, they consider that learning a foreign language especially English is prohibited or more extremely it is mentioned as "*haram* (forbidden)" because the language is the *kafeer* language.

Two academicians in the religion social field, Dr. Irwansyah, M.A., and Dr. Aisyah, M.A.⁴, who have the same view and often visit the remote areas to conduct comparative studies about variety of Moslem society in North Sumatera said to the researcher that there are still some traditional Moslem society, especially those who live in villages think that learning foreign languages, especially English is "*haram* (forbidden)" because it is a non-Arabic language and not identical with Islam.⁵ Furthermore, according to them, that such assumption does not only exist in the traditional Moslem society in the village, but also in urban areas. This is caused by the lack of information on Islamic teachings they actually obtain or because they do not care about the teachings of Islam which are sourced from Alqur'an and Hadith. This society is then called as KTP Moslems.

Two other Moslem leaders from Centre Tapanuli/Sibolga and the regencies of Karo Dairi Deli Serdang, Serdang Bedagai, namely Dr. Mardinal Tarigan, M.A., agrees with Dr. Dur Brutu, M.A., a society leader who was the Head of the Ministry of Religion Affairs in the three regencies mentioned above reveals to the researcher that there is still a traditional Moslem society that is still very shallow and assume as stated by previous leaders. But because the Ministry of Religion Affairs of the second level has always held counseling and guidance in their respective areas and religion teachings which are organized by Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah, Al Washliyah and others, the traditional community is reduced. The traditional Moslem society usually comes from the weak economic class and migrants from Java Island as contracted laborers who were recruited by Dutch colonists to work in plantations that are common found in the area of North Sumatera as Geertz mentioned above as an *abangan* group.⁶

The view of why this traditional Moslem society considers that learning a foreign language especially English is "*haram*" is as a worthy matter to be studied and researched.

³"Provinsi Sumatera Utara dalam Angka 2016 (*"North-Sumatra Province in Figure 2016"*).

⁴ Interview with Dr. Aisyah, M.A., an academician and lecturer of Philosophy of Islam who studies the activities of social community especially the society organizations such as Muhammadiyah, NU dsb. Wawancara dilakukan on 17 September 2017.

⁵ Interview with Dr. Irwansyah, M.A., an academician and lecturer of Religion Comparison Study in post graduate UIN SU Medan, on 18 September 2017.

⁶ Interview with Dr. Mardinal Tarigan, M.A., dan Dr. Dur Brutu, M.A. di Karo and Central Tapanuli on 20 September 2017 at the Kemenag of Karo Regency.

II. THE PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this study is to find out why some of these traditional Moslem societies still assume that learning a foreign language especially English is not allowed or "*haram*" and the advantage of this research is to provide the enlightenment of Islamic teachings based on the AlQur'an to the traditional Moslem society, especially the law in learning a foreign language.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research is a field research with qualitative and descriptive approach. The theoretical framework used in this research is the theory of Clifford Geertz that divides the diversity layers of Moslems in Java namely: *abangan*, *santri* and *priyayi*. The *abangan* layer also exists throughout Indonesia, especially in North Sumatra which is famous for plantation, where the workers were imported from Java Island by Dutch Colonial Government. The qualitative approach in this research is expected to produce information in the field based on facts that exist then studied comprehensively.⁷ Furthermore, it is concluded by inductive method that is the process of having conclusions from special to public. The research location is North Sumatera Province. Meanwhile the secondary sources are taken from books, magazines, articles and others.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results of interview with the Head of Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) of Pematangsiantar Drs. M. Ali Lubis by informing the researchers that there are still some Moslems especially those who do not care to follow Islamic religious discussions in mosques or to hear the Friday sermons and do praying every Friday and even stay away from the discussions or socializing with other educated Moslems. Because of the lack of them (traditional Moslem/Islam KTP) associate and participate in religion activities, they finally do not understand the true teachings of Islam. In fact most of them do not implement the Pillars of Islam that are obliged to them such as praying five times in a day, fasting, *zakat*, going to Hajj and so forth.⁸ Because of their low religious knowledge, so they think that learning a foreign language is wrong and even "*haram*", because it is not the language of the AlQur'an that is Arabic. M. Ali Lubis further says that in this era, the people like this are not many anymore, but still exist, especially the people who do not care to understand the teachings of Islam that they believe in.

Subagio, S. Sos, a teacher, preacher and community leader in Pematangsiantar and has lived in a tea plantation in Sidamanik, Bah Butong of Simalungun Regency where many of the contract laborers from Java as laborers there also reveals the same thing that early the independence of the Republic of Indonesia was still a lot of *abangan* Moslem societies who assumed that way. "As a preacher I always convey the importance of learning English as a world language to remote villages and it seems that most of them have understood the importance of mastering foreign languages in this present era, but some of them still do not care to the teachings of Islam which are sourced from the holy Qur'an and more believe in *taqlid*, following the teachings of their false predecessors and hereditary."⁹

Prof. Dr. H. A. Jacob Matondang, M.A.¹⁰ is an academician, ulema, and community leader of North Sumatra as well as a former Rector of State Islamic University of North Sumatera, and Rector of Medan Area University reveals the same thing to the researcher that in general the traditional Moslem community is not representative of Moslems. According to him, this *abangan* society still exist because they do not care to follow the teachings of Islam delivered by the scholars and teachers of religion. This kind of people need to be enlightened by good Islamic teachings with a special preaching method that can be accepted by *abangan* society.

Based on various leaders' opinion above and the researcher's direct observation in the field, there are still many traditional Moslems who view that learning foreign language especially English is forbidden.

Whereas in the context of learning the culture or foreign language, Allah SWT states in The Holy AlQur'an in Surah Al Hujarat verse 13 as follows:

⁷ Nurhayati Reni dan P. Suryanto, *Penelitian: Sebuah Pengantar*, (Yogyakarta: UKM Penelitian UNY, 2006), p. 6

⁸ Drs. Mumammad Ali Lubis, tokoh ulama/masyarakat Kota Pematangsiantar dan Kabupaten Simalungun. The interview was conducted on 4 September 2017 at his house in Jalan Bolakaki Kelurahan Banjar Pematangsiantar.

⁹ The interview with Subagio, S. Sos, at Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara Pematangsiantar on 5 June 2017.

¹⁰ The interview with Prof. Dr. H. A. Yakub Matondang, M.A. at the office of Psot graduate study program of Islamci Thinking on 22 September 2017.

يَتَأَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۗ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَنُكُمْ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

Meaning: 13. “(Mankind! Verily We! We have created you of a male and a female, and We have made you nations and tribes that you might know one another. Verily the noblest of you with Allah is the most pious of you. Verily Allah is Knowing and Wise.) “

From the verse above, it is clear that Allah commands Moslems to know each other among nations, tribes. Moslems will not be well acquainted and communicative with different languages or tribes unless they first learn the language and culture of other nations/tribes. The purpose of Allah in creating humanity having nations is so that Moslems can *lita'arafu* that is to know each other. From the interpretation of this verse, it is clear that Allah commands and even obligate Moslems to learn foreign languages even though the level of obligation does not reach *farḍu ain*, but at the *farḍu kifayah* level. Therefore, learning foreign languages especially English as one of the international languages which is recognized by the United Nations is required by Moslems, not forbidden or "haram". It is conceivable that Moslems should not learn foreign languages in today's global era, so they will be left in various things and excommunicated by other advanced nations. In this case P.H. Matthews (1997) says that international language is International languages: one used internationally, specially, one recognized officially as a language of international meetings, diplomacy etc.¹¹

The other verse also which stated in the Holy AlQur'an explicitly suggest to the Moslems to learn foreign language in Surah Ar Rum, verse 22 as follow:

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَأَخْتِلَفُ الْأَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَاللُّوْنِكُمْ ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

Meaning: (And of His signs are creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variation of your languages and complexions; verily in this are signs for men of knowledge.)

From this verse, it is clear that Allah commands and gives the understanding that Moslems pay attention to one of Allah's power by creating the sky and the earth, as well as different languages and diversity of human skin. People who master various languages whatever the color of his skin or whatever his nationality, are the people who have *alimin* or knowledge.

Foreign language mastery is certainly not only recommended to learn English but also all other important languages in the world because language is a tool of science in deepening the culture of a nation. Incidentally, English is one of the most popular international languages than any other international language.

According to the United Nations Organization which centered in New York USA there are six recognized international languages namely English, French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic and Chinese. The connection in learning these foreign languages, the history records actually Moslems play an important role in the development of foreign languages such as English and other foreign languages.¹²

Even when Moslems are at peak where the Moslems become super power countries in the VII-XIII century (Dynasty of Umayyah and Dynasty of Abbasid) and after the end of the XIII century of Moslem fall and retreat until the XV century. Then in the XVI-XVIII century there were three super power countries reappeared namely Savavit Kingdom in Iran, Osmani Kingdom in Turkey, and Mughal Kingdom in Indian subcontinent. When Islam was controllong the world, the progress of science is so rapid, so English people absorbed/borrowed Arabic words into English. Here are some examples of English words derived from Arabic words that at that time the world of science held by Islam:

Alchemy (alkimya), alcohol (al-kuḥul), alcove (al-qubbah), alembic (al-anbiq), algebra (al-jabr), algorism (al-khawarizmi), alkali (al-qali), hidroksida sodium, potassium, etc), azimuth, summit (al-sumut atau al-samt), calibre (qalib.), carat (qirath.), caraway (karawya), cipher (shifr), elixir (al-iksir), monsoon (mawsim), nadir (nadhīr al- samt), saffron (za'faron), sirocco (sharuq), zenith (samt), zero (shifr). The term of English from Arabic or Persia Language, such as: *admiral (al-amir), alfalfa (al-fashfashah), azure (al-lazaward), carafe (gharaffah), coffee (qahwah), cotton (quthm), hashis (al-hasyisy), jar (al-jarrah), lute (al-ud), macrame (miqramah), magazine (makhazin), mohair (mukhayyar), sofa (shuffah), tariff (ta'rifah)* and many others.¹³

From the explanation above, historically it appears that when a country plays a role or control of a global thing (e.g., economy, science, communication, etc), so the country will greatly affect the environment.

¹¹International languages: one used internationally, specially, one recognized officially as a language of international meetings, diplomacy etc. and according to United Nations Organization, there are six recognized international languages in the world namely: English, French, Russian, Spanish, Arabic and Chinese (Mandarin), See, P.H. Matthews, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Linguistics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 183.

¹²See, P.H. Matthews, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Linguistics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 183. See also, Nur, Anwarsyah, *A History of English: Historical Approach* (Medan: CV. Jabal Rahmat, 2003), p. 1)

¹³ Nurcholis Madjid, *Kaki Langit Peradaban Islam*, (Jakarta: Paramadian, 1997), p. 17-18

We see that the British become great sailors and even get the epithet "the king of the sea", and colonized other countries indirectly their culture especially their language spread almost all corners of world. Likewise, when Islam becomes the super power country and master the various scientific disciplines as previously described, many of the Islamic studies were taken by other nations. After the World War II, Japan emerged as the most industrialized country in Asia also greatly affects the world economy. The words "Honda", "Suzuki", "Yamaha", "Kamikaze", "Ninja", "Aji No Moto", "Mitsubishi", and so on are already very familiar in the ears of people around the world and absorbed into various other languages in the world.¹⁴

From various research and the researcher's direct observation in the field as well as the document study, it can be found as follows:

1. Geertz theory divides the three layers of Moslem society, namely; *abangan*, *santri* and *priyayi* who exist outside of Java. Especially in North Sumatera province, *abangan* layer (traditional Moslem) still exist where they are more as Moslems who are consider as Islam KTP and do not do the obligations of Islamic teachings such as praying, fasting, paying *zakat*, going to Hajj and so on.
2. Some Traditional Moslem society who believe that learning English is prohibited not represent the Moslems in North Sumatra.
3. Because of having low religion knowledge and general knowledge of traditional Moslem, some of them consider that studying foreign languages especially English is "*haram* (forbidden)" because English is the *kafeer* language. The Arabic is considered "sacred and Islamic" and identical with Islam, but it is not because many Arabs have different religions besides Islam.
4. Learning a foreign language besides Arabic is highly recommended and not contrary to the Islamic teachings. This is in accordance with the word of Allah SWT in Surah 49:13 and Surah 30:20.
5. History proves that when Islam as superpower state at that time, it is very advanced in the field of science, so that many English words are absorbed from Arabic words.

V. CONCLUSION

Because of having the weak knowledge, both religion knowledge and general knowledge, the traditional Moslem societies especially those who live in the villages and away from getting information, consider that learning English as a forbidden thing. The Perspective of This Traditional Moslem is not as a representer of Moslem in North Sumatra and is contrary to the true teachings of Islam. Whereas AlQur'an clearly commands Moslems to learn the importance of foreign languages (See, Alquran Surah Al Hujarat 13 and Surah Ar Rum 22).

REFERENCES

- [1] Buku Sumut, *Provinsi Sumatera Utara dalam Angka 2016* ("North-Sumatra Province in Figure 2016)
- [2] Daniel L. Pals. *Seven Theories of Religion*, Yogyakarta: Penerbit Qalam, 2001.
- [3] David Sills, (Ed). *International of Social Sciences*. New York: The Macmillan and the Free Press, 1972.
- [4] Geertz, Clifford, *The Religion of Java*, Berkeley: The Free Press, 1960.
- [5] Geertz, Clifford, *Abangan, Santri, Priyayi dalam Masyarakat Jawa*, terj. Aswab Mahasin, Bandung: Dunia Pustaka Jaya, 1981
- [6] Noeng Muhadjir, *Metodologi Penelitian Kuantitatif*, Yogyakarta: Rake Sarasin, 1986.
- [7] Nur, Anwarsyah, *A History of English: Historical Approach*, Medan: CV. Jabal Rahmat, 2003.
- [8] Nurcholis Madjid, *Kaki Langit Peradaban Islam*, Jakarta: Paramadina, 1997.
- [9] Nurhayati Reni dan P. Suryanto, *Penelitian: Sebuah Pengantar*, Yogyakarta: UKM Penelitian UNY, 2006.
- [10] P.H. Matthews, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Linguistics*, London: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- [11] Peter Trudgill & Jean Hanna, *International English Third Edition*, London: Arnold, 1982

¹⁴ See also, Nur, Anwarsyah, *A History of English: Historical Approach....*p. 33.