

# Culture and Environment of the End 19<sup>th</sup> Century Jepara Society Religious Character formers R.A. Kartini

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**Abstract.** RA Kartini has always been associated with issues of education and emancipation of women. However, R.A. Kartini's letters to her friends apparently also discussed the cultural conditions and religious environment of the Javanese people at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. How did the culture and religious environment of the end 19<sup>th</sup> century Javanese society cause Kartini to be critical of Islam? What is the contribution of R.A. Kartini against the development of Islam in Java? This research data uses the letters R.A. Kartini to her friends who have been summarized in books that have been published. Secondary data used are books and articles with similar themes. Various information relating to the topic of the problem is then analyzed to draw conclusions in accordance with the problems that have been raised. The results showed that R.A. Kartini had several times wanted to convert to a religion because of a foreign language that she could not understand in worship. Kartini wanted an effort to translate the Qur'an, so that she and the Javanese community could understand the teachings of her religion well.

**Keywords:** R.A. Kartini, end 19<sup>th</sup> century, Islam, Javanese society.

## 1 Introduction

Javanese people are people who live on the island of Java. Specifically, in Java there are two large ethnic groups that are distinguished by the use of language as a means of communication, namely the Sundanese in the West Java area, and the Javanese in the Central and East Java regions. In this study, the Javanese people told are represented by the Jepara people, part of the Javanese ethnic group. However, this society can represent all Javanese people in general. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Javanese society was a colony of the Dutch Colonial Government, which had ruled Java since the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century [1,2]. At that time most Javanese people had converted to Islam [3,4]. However, in practicing their religion they still often mix with the teachings of their ancestors relating to

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animism and dynamism [5,6]. That information can be obtained from letter R.A. Kartini to one of her questioning friends [7].

During this time the information relating to R.A. Kartini always boils down to issues of women's education and emancipation [8,9,10]. However, if we look closely, several letters of R.A. Kartini to her friends turned out to also discuss about the cultural conditions and religious environment of the people of Jepara at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the religion they professed, namely Islam. The Jepara community here represents the Javanese community, because the Jepara community is part of the Javanese ethnic group. What was the culture and religious environment of the end 19<sup>th</sup> century Javanese society that caused R.A. Kartini to be critical of Islam? What was R.A. Kartini's contribution to the development of Islam in Java?

## **2 Research Methods**

The main data used in this study are the letters R.A. Kartini to her best friend who has been collected in a book that has been published, namely *Kartini, Surat-surat Kepada Ny. R.M. Abendanon-Mandri dan suaminya*, compiled by Jaquet [7] and translated into Indonesian by Sulastin Sutrisno. Secondary data used are books and articles with similar themes [1, 11, 12, 13]. Various information relating to the topic of the problem is then analyzed to draw conclusions in accordance with the problems that have been raised.

## **3 Results and Discussion**

The environment is apparently not always related to the exact sciences, because the environment is a unit that includes a variety of living things and all the surrounding components. This environmental component includes physical, chemical, social cultural, and other components. In the social cultural element, this element is in the form of a social and cultural environment that is found around humans. The things that are targeted are the system of values, ideas, and beliefs in determining human behavior as social beings [14]. Therefore the discussion in this article is more aimed at matters relating to the cultural environment that can shape the character of R.A. Kartini as a Muslim.

### **3.1 Culture and Environment of the End 19<sup>th</sup> Century Jepara Society**

Various books used to trace the cultural environment of the Jepara community at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century [7, 1, 11, 12, 13] show that the cultural environmental conditions of Javanese people are as told by RA Kartini. In the letters sent to the questioner's best friend, R.A. Kartini often tells the cultural and environmental conditions of the Jepara people. As one part of Javanese ethnicity, Jepara could represent the condition of Javanese society at that time, namely at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Through testimony and the story of R.A. Kartini in her correspondence with her friend, this study was written.

When looking at the Javanese way of life at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century around her, to her friend who came from the Netherlands, R.A. Kartini always stated that the Javanese were shackled by customs and superstitions which made their minds dull and stupid. Javanese customs have many restrictions on someone to interact or do something, there must be strict rules that make it difficult for someone to interact with each other. With her own birth mother, R.A. Kartini could not easily get along and communicate. In the Jepara Regency household, Kartini's biological mother is no different than a servant because of her low social status. As for who cared for Kartini, her siblings and sisters were the queen's mother. Therefore, R.A. Kartini's mother must *laku dodok* (to walk by crouching), speak

*kromo Inggil* (Javanese language is subtle) and worship R.A. Kartini when she will talk to her biological child. The atmosphere is very difficult by R.A. Kartini said to be like hell.

Javanese tradition also makes it difficult for a person to express his true feelings. It is very difficult for Javanese people to say the word "no" to others, especially those whose social position is higher than him. The Dutch always made fun of this, and they said that the Javanese could only say *inggih* (means yes) and *sendiko* (means yes or willing). Therefore, R.A. Kartini's attitude against Javanese customs was very surprising, especially since R.A. Kartini was a Javanese aristocrat, who was usually very comfortable with her special rights.

The superstitious issue also shackles the minds of Javanese people. Many irrational things prevented Javanese people from progressing. The belief in shamanism, witchcraft, and the like is very gripping the minds of Javanese people in R.A. Kartini's time. This makes it difficult to "move" forward. Moreover the girls and women, they are more fettered by the customs and superstitions, which makes them very weak creatures.

The condition of Javanese women is made even worse by the wrong way of practicing Islam. The teachings of Islam which should offer the doctrine of salvation, which can glorify the people, which aligns the position of men and women based on their practices, were apparently mistakenly understood by men in R.A. Kartini's time. Many regents and aristocrats converted to Islam because Islam allowed divorce. This is partly what makes R.A. Kartini's concern. Islam is not understood as a whole, but only in bits and pieces, and very detrimental to women. In this day, many regents were very fond of marrying village flower girls, however, once they gave birth to a child, they would soon be divorced and driven out of the district palace without bringing the child they had just born.

### **3.2 R.A. Kartini's Restlessness on the Practice of Islam in Java**

Practicing Islamic teachings in R.A. Kartini is very limited. Its movements were limited by the Dutch, because this could endanger Dutch power. Therefore, it is a natural thing that R.A. Kartini does not understand about Islam as a whole. R.A. Kartini and the Javanese community only knew their skin without understanding the purpose of prayer that was stamped in Arabic or working on other practices in Islam [10]. The teachings of Islam in Java are implemented according to what is taught by the *kyai*, namely the term for the leaders of Islam in Java. In accordance with the rules for praying and praying, Islam uses Arabic. However, this language is rarely known by the general public. This is what causes anxiety R.A. Kartini in practicing her religion is seen in her two letters to Stella Zihandelaar and Mrs. Abendanon. In his letter to Stella Zihandelaar dated November 6, 1899, R.A. Kartini wrote;

*"... Regarding my religion, Islam, what should I tell? Islam forbids Muslims from discussing their religious teachings with other people. Besides, I am Muslim because my ancestors are Muslim. How can I love my religion, if I don't understand and can't understand it? The Qur'an is too holy; it must not be translated into any language, so that every Muslim can understand it. There is no one here who understands Arabic. Here, people learn the Qur'an but don't understand what is read. I think it's crazy that people are taught to read but not to be taught the meaning of what is read. It's the same way you told me to memorize English, but it didn't mean anything. I think, not being a pious person is okay as long as being a good person. Isn't that right Stella? ... "*

RA Kartini continued her outpouring of Mrs. Abendanon in a letter dated August 15, 1902:

*"... And at that time I didn't want to do things that didn't know what was necessary or useful. I no longer want to read the Qur'an, learn to memorize parables in a foreign language that I do not understand. Don't tell me, my teacher doesn't*

*understand the meaning either. Tell me what it means, I'll learn anything later. I sinned. This book is too holy, so we cannot understand what it means ... "*

R.A. Kartini's anxiety religion caused her and her younger siblings to feel attracted to go to Mojowarno. In her letter to Mrs. Abendanon she told that Dr. Bervoets from Zending Mojowarno want to educate them to be midwives at no cost. In another letter, R.A. Kartini stated that Mojowarno was one place that could calm his soul [7]. In this case Mojowarno relates to the place of zending, namely the place to spread Christianity. Thus subtly R.A. Kartini felt attracted to this Christian religion which she said was a reassurance of the soul. However, Javanese customs kept him from going to Mojowarno, whose place was different from the regency occupied by R.A. Kartini. Mojowarno is located in Mojokerto [15], therefore her father forbade his daughter to go there.

At another time, R.A. Kartini was tempted to always go to Welahan, one of the places in Jepara, where there was an old *klenteng*, a place to pray for Chinese people. At that place, R.A. Kartini also said that it was a peaceful place. Especially in the *klenteng* there is an old well that is believed by the people of Jepara to have good luck that can cure all diseases for those who drink the water. Thus, R.A. Kartini was restless in her religion, as an adherent of Islam but did not know the meaning of the prayers she always prayed, so it felt empty.

Nevertheless, the Islamic R.A. Kartini remains visible in her letters. Several times R.A. Kartini mentioned *alhamdulillah*, *Allah*, angels, and showed her strong belief in the God she worshiped. R.A. Kartini Muslim blood flowed from her grandfather, Kiai Modiromo, a Qur'an teacher in Teluk Awur District, Jepara [11]. Thus it is not surprising that R.A. Kartini's religious side is very thick, because she has been accustomed to studying religion since childhood. Even when she was an adult she was happy to join the recitation with her father. One letter to her friend revealed that:

*"... I also faithfully visited the mosque, but without understanding the contents of the Arabic sermon ... I also have the Holy Qur'an, I faithfully read it, but I do not understand its meaning ..., this book is a solace and approach to the soul of God".*

One of the important events that aroused her religiosity was when she attended a special recitation for regents throughout the northern part of Java in Demak Regency. The material about the interpretation of *Al Fatikhah* by a teacher of Kiai Sholeh bin Umar As Samarani or today is more commonly referred to as Kiai Sholeh Darat. It was then that R.A. Kartini had a long dialogue with the teacher, who in principle proposed that the Qur'an be translated into Javanese. About a year later the Qur'an of Javanese Tafsir published volume I by Kiai Sholeh, leader of the Islamic Boarding School in Darat Village, Semarang City.

Thus, R.A. Kartini's strong personality was also based on her strong faith. As her approached his wedding, which was said to be doomsday, she gave herself a motivation that could be an example for today's women. The following is an expression of sadness as poured in one of his letters dated July 4, 1903, *"Do not despair, do not regret the unfortunate fate ... Misery brings pleasure. Curse today turns out tomorrow is a blessing. Temptation is God's education."*

R.A. Kartini is also very concerned about the role of women in shaping children's morality. In the school he founded, R.A. Kartini designed to make a difference with the school which was generally founded by the Dutch people. In her letter addressed to Abendanon as Minister of Education and Teaching dated December 9, 1903, she revealed as follows, *"... If we can be good teachers, it is he who takes care of children's brain intelligence, and I in the formation of their morality"*. The formation of morality has been a concern for R.A. Kartini since the beginning of school, as she wrote as follows: *"I am convinced that the girls' school held in our house led by European female teachers, and I as the "supreme" leader, will certainly progress!"*

## 4 Conclusions

The results showed that the cultural and environmental background of the Javanese community led to R.A. Kartini had experienced the shock of faith, so that several times she wanted to convert. Her religious criticism caused R.A. Kartini fought for ways to practice true Islam so that misunderstandings and misappraisals of Islamic teachings would not occur. One of his appeals to a great *kiai* in Semarang was the translation of the Qur'an. In addition, in education, in order to be different from European schools, her inserts religious lessons to shape the morals of students. That's the big contribution R.A. Kartini in Islamization on Java

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