CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Practice and Perfection

The study of the Arabic Qur’ān is the foundation of religious learning throughout the Islamic world, including Southeast Asia. The Muslim population of Indonesia alone is almost the same size as that of the Arabic-speaking Muslim world, and Indonesian Muslims comprise about a quarter of the 80 percent of Muslims worldwide who are not native Arabic speakers. In Indonesia in the mid-1990s, programs and projects of Islamic revitalization focused intensively on the recited Qur’ān, emphasizing participation in perfecting various modes of its reading. Overall, Indonesian Muslims are known worldwide for the depth of their piety in general and for heightened skill in reading the Qur’ān in particular. Evidence of this includes the international profile in the late 1990s of the woman reciter from Jakarta Dra. Hj. Maria Ulfah.' In Indonesia in the mid-1990s, a broad segment of the Muslim population enthusiastically pursued the improvement of vocal reading of the Qur’ān, representing a distinctive and energetic expression of a transnational phenomenon of “Islamic awakening.” The trend enrolled active and enthusiastic participation from persons who were opting to become not only committed practitioners of reading and reciting the Qur’ān, but also its teachers and students. This book explains the ongoing and escalating aspects of Indonesian Qur’ānic piety in this period in terms of developmental religious processes and projects of learning and feeling among Muslim groups and individuals.

The widespread phenomenon of Qur’ānic learning and engagement was not limited to young people in Indonesia in the 1990s; it also included mature Muslims who labeled themselves as “learners.” As part of a resurgent movement in the “fundamentals” of religious practice in Indonesia during the last months of Indonesia’s “New Order” under former president Suharto, religiously
oriented individuals actively adopted and promoted projects such as local and national Qur’ān recitation competitions, a widespread movement in “Qur’ān kindergartens,” revitalized efforts to memorize the Qur’ān, and a lively women’s mosque movement trained on the development of reading skills. Qur’ān reading and the “Islamic arts” were a key focus of Islamist, nationalist, and developmentalist programs, blending with compatible goals such as mainstream Islamic “da’wah,” or Muslim outreach. These projects of performance and education met with public and official support, although it would be a mistake to identify the movement as a top-down imposition of ideological interest. The affective and educative aspects of the system were subject to continuous feedback among individual projects of self-cultivation and the collective interests of community-building.

The emphasis of the Qur’ānic movement in Indonesia in the mid-1990s was on processes of enhanced learning, participation, and engagement. Even performances by experts in Indonesia primarily served as pedagogy, potentially for all. As a result, many Muslims were coming to pursue the standard of a world-class virtuoso as a model of ordinary piety. The phenomenon of performances doubling as pedagogy was especially apparent, for example, in broadcast media, which pervasively cast the recited Qur’ān as participatory and educational. Although there were recitation segments by trained performers aired on television and radio at designated times of the day, especially in locally taped spots broadcast during the month of Ramadan, recitation on the air was most often structured as a form of educational programming. The format of a wide variety of shows was a virtual learning space, and the representation of the very activity of learning itself was a critical aspect of teaching. The depiction of learning through voices and presences of virtual students on broadcast and cassette allowed real students at home to follow along with studio performers, teachers as well as their mock students.

For example, a call-in radio show for Qur’ān recitation in the city of research, Makassar, South Sulawesi, was not primarily construed as an opportunity to recite on the air. It was instead understood to be a forum for the presentation of Qur’ānic learning. The show “Bimbingan Tadarusan al-Qur’ān” was broadcast by Radio Al-Ikhwan (with the station identification “Voice of Moslem,” after “Voice of America”), and a local Qur’ān kindergarten instructor was the host. When I first heard about the show, and even when I first listened to broadcasts, I assumed that the show was, for callers, chiefly an opportunity to be heard performing on the air (like a sort of ritual “open mike”). I was missing the expressed purpose of the activity for participants. As the show’s title “Bimbingan” (Guidance) implies, this was not just an opportunity to be heard reciting on the radio, but, more important to those involved, the show
was intended to provide listeners with the guidance of a teacher who would correct callers’ recitational mistakes. On-air broadcast was explained by station directors to be incidental, practically expedient, to the actual purpose of the program. Callers gained access, producers explained, to a qualified teacher who assisted the entire listening audience through his corrections and comments. The call-in radio show was one of countless examples in Indonesia in the mid-1990s in which pedagogy was not for the sake of a final performance as much as performances were used as a form of pedagogy.

A widespread assumption in this period was that a desire to practice and to learn was a primary reason for Muslims to want to listen to performances of the recited Qur’ān. The dominant model of pedagogy and performance conveyed that not only were all kinds of voices supposed to participate in reading the Qur’ān aloud, but one ought to select the voice closest to one’s own from among a group of surrogate participants in order to personalize and maximize efforts to improve. For example, when I first asked for cassettes of “recitation” (pengajian) at a local shop, the owner asked whether I wanted recitation by a woman or a man. As he did this, he was already reaching for Dra. Hj. Maria Ulfah’s cassette recording of performed recitation, effectively answering his own question. He seemed to approach our exchange with the idea that I would be listening to the recited Qur’ān expressly in order to learn how to recite better myself and that, as a woman, I naturally would want to listen to and learn from another woman’s voice. Cassette tapes that were explicitly geared toward learning, such as those distributed by a popular program for the memorization of the final juz’, or thirtieth, of the Qur’ān, as well as other “hafalan” (memorizational) material for children suggested a similar logic. One will learn best by listening to a member of one’s own group (golongan), in terms of gender as well as age; a child’s voice would be heard on instructional materials for children, for example.

Sustained or escalating Qur’ānic piety within diverse Muslim religious domains in Indonesia in the 1990s used affect, or feeling, as both a strategy and a recognition of piety within projects of Muslim learning and community-building. Pious Muslims eagerly sought the sense of being “able to” engage the voiced Qur’ān correctly, beautifully, and better through the development of abilities such as reading from memory, vocalizing the text correctly according to normative rules and culture-bound assessments, reciting with standardized melody types based on the performances of nationally or world-renowned experts, and competing in all of these practices in events that were widely understood to be a program for further religious inspiration. Practitioners self-consciously aligned religious ideals with the particularities of practice within their projects of learning and feeling, and this occurred on both personal and
social levels. When Indonesian Muslims studied forms of reciting the Qur’ān according to shared norms, they enhanced self-consciously a widespread affective dynamic of escalating engagement. These processes changed not only how Indonesian Muslims recited the Qur’ān, but also who they understood themselves to be. The result for many Muslims was an ongoing transformation of religious subjectivities into being and becoming ongoing Qur’ānic practitioners.

Piety is progressive, and repeated religious activity is necessarily a learning process over time, whether understood self-consciously as such or not. In Indonesia, individual and collective projects of acquiring, perfecting, and sustaining abilities related to reading the Qur’ān formed a widespread system of continuous motivated involvement. In different kinds of Qur’ānic projects, learners and practitioners initially took on the development of an objectified aptitude or named process, such as becoming or remaining “holders” of the Qur’ān in memory, applying a curriculum for learning how to vocalize the Qur’ān, or analyzing their own feelings during or about the performance of Qur’ān recitation itself. They subsequently applied strategies of affect that interacted with specifics of Qur’ānic practice as well as the shared norms of social systems. The ongoing nature of these projects was usually a given for practitioners who undertook or sustained them; the religious subjectivities that emerged as a result of these processes, however, were not always what had been envisioned at the outset. Often the involvement comprised a compelling pull that practitioners themselves may not have anticipated. Combining with social frameworks and technical and theological aspects of the recited Qur’ān, the process of the acquisition of enhanced Qur’ānic practical abilities within projects of self-cultivation led to an ongoing and sometimes even unexpected transformation of Qur’ānic practitioners.

Pious Muslims in Indonesia greatly valued the opportunities for self-improvement and contribution to community offered by the practice of the recited Qur’ān in the 1990s. Institutions and public programs (such as Qur’ān recitation contests) energetically promoted these goals, while individuals simultaneously applied personal projects to pursue enhanced Qur’ānic ability. Desired abilities took the form of the comprehension of the meanings of the Arabic text, the maintenance of parts of the Qur’ān that had already been memorized, the ability to make the ever-present choices in phrasing that are stipulated within the orthoprax rules of recitation (tajwīd), as well as mastery of the improvisatory system of melodic modes for recitation. Each of these practices engendered a motivation (Ind. motivasi) to enhance ability that the educationally oriented curricula, media, and practices of the recited Qur’ān in Indonesia in the 1990s shaped and amplified. During fieldwork, there were
many instances in which a person attempted self-consciously to acquire a particular skill or ability, and found that the open-endedness of Qur’anic practice offered new compelling horizons for potential competence and mastery.

For example, at an intensive training session for a corporate competition, I met an executive who said that he first undertook recitation study for competition in a markedly disinterested way. He said that he began to study recitation only in order to improve his employee profile for promotion (he had also taken up folk dance). He himself was amused at the irony, however, that after he began to study Qur’ān recitation, he became deeply involved with it (and he subsequently quit folk dancing). He found himself unable even to take a break from his recitation practice. He would hum the melodic modes he was studying when he was on his motorcycle to and from work, he said, and then also at work as well as at home, and he also found himself seeking out more places in which to study and practice. A horizon of possibility had opened up for him through discovery of the improvisatory and aesthetic dimensions of normative practice. The compelling project of acquiring competence in a ritual practice had become, as he said, “ibadah,” a practice of religious piety. As predicted by the Qur’ān itself, such developmental “moods and motivations” of the recited Qur’ān cycled with sustained or intensifying force among individuals and within Qur’ānic communities in Indonesia in the 1990s; these affective dynamics of learning and practice generated escalating dynamics of ongoing religious engagement. A widespread movement of religious change in the world’s most populous Muslim-majority nation was the result.

Energetic systems of Qur’ānic engagement in Indonesia in the 1990s were based on norms of person, practice, and piety. These determined the goals, structures, and methods of practice and performance, and also fueled their escalation. The overall phenomenon suggested that a large-scale movement of “Islamic revitalization” could be interpreted as the collective face of individuals pursuing such goals, their agency shaping social structure just as social systems reciprocally informed the context for practice. In addition, social and religious structures conveyed salient norms. Because authoritative religious structures and ideals could not possibly explicitly encompass everything one would want or need to know to practice piety in every situation or to improve technical expertise, however, such norms were also sought actively and developed directly within projects of learning and practice. In some cases the authority of such modes or models was understood to extend directly from the Qur’ān, sharing in an ontology of revelation; in other cases this legitimacy was seen to emerge from historically contingent and socially specific systems. Most norms were multiply determined: they were understood to be universal as well as emergent
for practitioners within their specific trajectories of learning and repetition. As such, they were pragmatically approached and piously deployed.

This book analyzes how Indonesian Muslims exerted efforts self-consciously to develop and to enhance normative Qur’anic abilities in dynamics of increasing or escalating engagement. Building on the recognition that learning is an aspect of all human activity and that religious practice in particular lends itself to long-term projects of self-cultivation, each of the book’s chapters demonstrates affective patterns and proclivities that sustained or intensified long-term practices of piety, especially through modes of feeling. Qur’anic performative and pedagogical pursuits and their affective dynamics generated all of the following in Indonesia in the 1990s: selves recognized for a practice explicitly characterized as being ongoing (chapter 2), Qur’anic “learners” engaged with continuous study (chapter 3), discoverers of unrealized potential within open-ended projects of learning (chapter 4), and “motivated” subjects who self-consciously developed their own and others’ motivations for Islamic practice (chapter 5).

The argument of each chapter is based on the study of one of four Qur’anic practical abilities, with particular emphasis on how affect was deployed in direct engagement with the Qur’ān and in understandings of self with respect to processes of Qur’ānic learning, rehearsal, and repetition. Rather than attempting to unravel the tightly woven reciprocity of individual and social structure, each chapter considers the modes that sustain and compel such projects on individual and collective levels. Chapter 2 highlights social, cognitive, and especially affective aspects of Qur’ān memorization in terms of formal properties of the recited Qur’ān as well as strategies of feeling applied in social interaction in order to “manage” the moral demands of maintaining memory. Chapter 3 demonstrates how learning to read correctly generated new subjectivities for ongoing learners in reference to affective aspects of teaching curricula. The main argument of chapter 4 is that the attempt to recite the Qur’ān according to expansive norms for technical artistry, grounded in systems of feeling, made individual potential and increased competence self-conscious objects of cultivation. Finally, chapter 5, which presents influential tournaments in Qur’ānic practices, shows that in Indonesia in this period competing was a form of religious and educative practice, undertaken in the service of collective as well as individual interests; among the norms and standards that the competition system conveyed to Indonesian Muslims were affective strategies oriented toward enhancing “motivasi” for Qur’ānic practices in the self and among others. In each of these chapters, subjectivities of ongoing practice (which, naturally, reflect and refract social schemas) are shown to emerge through the affective dynamics of learning and repeated activity.
Qur’ānic Reading in Context

The ethnographic data for this book come primarily from the province of South Sulawesi (Ind. Sulawesi Selatan) and especially its capital city, Ujung Pandang (formerly known as Makassar and since the end of the New Order called Makassar once more). The size of the city (approximately one million inhabitants at the time of fieldwork) offered an opportunity to observe engagement with the Qur’ān on multiple educative levels and in a representative variety of institutional contexts. For example, regular visits over a period of ten months to the newly dedicated main mosque known as Masjid “Al-Markaz Al-Islami” (or Yayasan Islamic Center), which opened as a showcase to all of Indonesia in 1996, allowed me to observe Qur’ān recitation instruction and performance on a number of levels, from beginner to advanced. The observations of teaching and learning there, and elsewhere, point to social networks and interconnections among institutions, groups, and individuals that supported an energetic upsurge in Qur’ānic practice and education in the mid-1990s in South Sulawesi and also throughout Indonesia more generally.

The data represent linkages that connect Qur’ānic practices in Makassar to influences that originate elsewhere. With the exception of some modes of non-Qur’ānic Arabic recitation (described below), Islamic revitalization movements of Qur’ān reading in South Sulawesi were continuous with national and transnational networks, in contrast to and often disjunct from the distinctive local traditions of Bugis and Makassarese South Sulawesi. In portraying salient textual and social systems that cut across time and space in Muslim experience, I use the local context of South Sulawesi as the center to which other threads relate. I do not attempt to describe or compare the structure of Qur’ānic practices in other Islamicized areas of Southeast Asia such as Malaysia. Beginning in South Sulawesi, analysis considers networks that radiate out from this center: in space, to sites as near as Jakarta and as far as Mecca and Cairo; and, in time, spanning the recent past as well as the more distant past, including the thought and practice of the early Muslim Community, which Muslims of all historical periods have rendered a part of lived experience. Because the connections drawn sometimes mirror my own contacts and friendships, the picture naturally evidences chance, personal networks, and a Sulawesi-centric view. Ethnographic data from field research in Indonesia are supplemented by textual sources, including “classical” Arabic writings. Some of these materials are known in South Sulawesi (such as the writings of al-Ghazzālī, for example) and thus can be said to form a part of “Indonesian” or even “South Sulawesi” tradition. Rather than emphasizing the political conditions of the “New Order” as an overarching interpretive frame, this work
applies instead a method and approach that could explain Arabic-language practices in Indonesia by locating them within the larger continuities of the Islamic religious tradition.4

The primary linguistic and ethnic groups of South Sulawesi represented in the urban area of Makassar are Bugis and Makassarese, with a sizable Mandarin and Torajan influence originating from northern areas. As it has been for centuries, Makassar is still said to be the “gateway” to the eastern archipelago. This is the case not only with respect to the movement of goods (such as spices from the eastern islands of Moluku moving west and south), but also for the dissemination of ideas. For example, during the time of the field research, the State Islamic University (Institut Agama Islam Negeri, or IAIN, on one of whose campuses I lived) was responsible for overseeing all of the smaller satellite campuses throughout the eastern archipelago. Many individuals who were influential in the systems of formal and informal Qur’ānic education in Makassar were not originally from Sulawesi but from elsewhere in the eastern archipelago (such as Bima, Ambon) or from Java, evidencing the translocal character of Islamic networks in the region in the present as well as the past.

The early Islamicized states of Gowa (ethnically Makassarese) and its Bugis rival across the peninsula in the region of Bone were important historical influences in the development of structures of power in the eastern archipelago.5 Dutch policies in the later seventeenth century irrevocably changed their relations as well as their influence among their neighbors. A turning point was the treaty of 1669, in which the Bugis leader Arung Palakka, in alliance with the Dutch, overtook the Makassarese kingdom of Gowa, which was centered near present-day Makassar. The Bugis ethnic group is especially well known throughout the Indonesian archipelago as a maritime diaspora.6 At times the outward-reaching aspects of South Sulawesi’s historical tradition refracted back into the area; figures in the anti-Dutch resistance who were sent to South Sulawesi included the Javanese Prince Diponogoro, famous for his leadership in the Java War of the nineteenth century, as well as the celebrated figure from Makassar Sheikh Yusuf, to whom is credited, among other things, the Islamization of South Africa during his period of exile there.7

In the twentieth century, a pattern of resistance to centralized control from outside the island continued to be associated with the area, particularly in the case of a rebellion against postcolonial federal governance. Under the insurrection led by Kahar Muzakkar starting in the 1950s, South Sulawesi came under an Islamist government that, like counterparts in West Java and Aceh (north Sumatra), claimed to be an “Islamic state” under the Darul Islam movement. This period lasted from 1950 to 1965, with parts of South Sulawesi coming under the political control of the movement from the mid-1950s to the
mid-1960s. Eventually, the central administration in Jakarta brought South Sulawesi back under its political and military jurisdiction. South Sulawesi is famous throughout Indonesia for its traditions of committed Islamic piety (along with, the visitor is often told, its hot weather, shipbuilding, and tasty fish). As is announced at every national Qur’ān recitation competition, the first Qur’ān recitation competition called “national” was held in 1968 in Makassar.

Qur’ān recitation always occurs within a context, and to describe the recited Qur’ān in modern Indonesia in terms of overly idealized performances dislocates it from realities of lived, historical systems and may distort the experience and everyday activities of lived practice. As is the case throughout the Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority worlds, the most common context for Qur’ān recitation in Indonesian Muslims’ lifeworlds is not the appreciation of heightened performance styles such as those heard on recordings of highly trained qāri’ (reciters) but the daily situated recitation performed multiple times within each canonical act of worship (ṣalāt). Although ṣalāt is often performed alone, when following the recommendation to pray with others, an imām (prayer leader) may recite for the entire group. This requirement guarantees that all practicing Muslims will have memorized at least some of the Qur’ān.

During Ramadan, standard daily worship is enhanced and amplified, as more people attend mosques (hundreds, for example, come for morning and evening prayers at Masjid “Al-Markaz”), and supererogatory worship often follows canonical prayers. During Ramadan, an evening prayer cycle called “tarāwīḥ” (Ind. tarwih) is observed in which the entire Qur’ān is read through over the course of the month. Tarwih imams must have memorized the Qur’ān in order to lead the prayers, in which a juz’ (one-thirtieth of the Qur’ān) is read each night. Tarwih prayers are held at mosques in Indonesia as well as in homes. There was, for example, a “tarwih keliling,” or “traveling tarwih,” that moved from house to house among a circle of associates of the family with whom I lived; the night it was at my house, a preacher (penceramah) also came to speak to the crowd assembled in the living room. Every night during Ramadan, the tarwih prayers from Mecca were also broadcast live on television. Especially in the last days of Ramadan, some observed the Islamic tradition of staying in the mosque all night. The city’s main mosque, Al-Markaz, was busy with Ramadan celebrants who rested on blankets, rugs, and mats in the cool, quiet building. Men and women read the Qur’ān and other religious texts all night long; they snacked, chatted, and napped but were mostly quiet with their own thoughts until crowds began to gather in and around the mosque for the busy dawn prayer.

Non-Qur’ānic Islamic performances were another context for perfor-
mances of Arabic-language piety in South Sulawesi. In Indonesia in the mid-1990s, systems of religious performance in the Arabic language, not just the recitation of the Qur’ān itself, were shifting and evolving along with Muslim recitation traditions in Indonesian languages. This was especially the case with devotional readings dedicated to the Prophet Muḥammad (which have been heatedly controversial at times, including in Indonesia). These non-Qur’ānic Arabic-language texts were often read communally, highlighting the participatory and social aspects of Arabic-language piety. Such texts have been commonly recited in “dhikr” observances and on life-cycle celebrations such as circumcisions, occasions that mark that a young person has “tammat” (completed a first reading of all or part of the Qur’ān), weddings, departures for Hajj, as well as holidays such as the Birthday of the Prophet (Mawlid al-Nabī) and the commemoration of the Isrā’ and the Mi’rāj (the Prophet’s “Night Journey” and “Ascent”). In addition, these texts may be recited in the home, especially on a Thursday night at any time of the year.

Many of these devotional texts comprised praise of the Prophet, often based on sīrah (hagiographical) literature, and, dating back to the early period of Islam, they have variants throughout the Islamic world. One of the best known, and earliest to appear in the Malay-speaking world, is the “Burdah” or “Mantle Ode” of the Egyptian al-Busīrī (thirteenth century). In the early nineteenth century, a cycle composed in the previous century known popularly as the “Barzanji” (which includes texts in the “Mawlid al-Nabī,” or “Birth of the Prophet,” cycle) came to Southeast Asia and became one of the most popular texts for recitations after that time. Both archival and ethnographic evidence point to the fact that the Barzanji tradition has been especially popular in the Muslim religious history of eastern Indonesia, including South Sulawesi. Like other “Mawlid” texts, it narrates events in the Prophet’s life (especially his birth), and it also includes sections of praise. In contemporary Indonesia, several readings are often found bound together as a single “Barzanji” text: “Mawlid Diba’i,” the Barzanji (of several variants), “Sharif al-‘Anām,” and the “Burdah.” The texts are sometimes rendered into local languages (such as Makassarese or Buginese), and Arabic-language variants are identified in terms of the influence of regional and vernacular versions.

The texts are almost always recited by a group in monophonic unison, often under the direction of a leader, with reading alternating between soloist and group. Leaders may choose selectively which sections to read and may also extend the reading of some sections, such as praise of God, into a dhikr-like performance. Instrumentation, when used, consists of membranophones such as tambourines and drums. There are regional variants to Barzanji practices, in terms of the melodies used and the relative participation of men and women.
In Ambon (Moluku), for example, there was said to have been special instruction in the Barzanji (for men and women), and persons of both genders would recite together at observances; elsewhere in Indonesia this has not been the case. The melodic structures for Barzanji reading are also sometimes taught in semiformal instruction, and in areas such as central Java there were known to be several named melodic variants. Readings in Sumatra, Java, and Sulawesi were different in their musical and performative qualities. Even readings in the city of Makassar showed great variation; a performance by a semiprofessional troupe from Banjarmasin at a housewarming contrasted significantly with a reading in the home of a kiai (religious teacher) whose relative was away on Hajj, for example.

When recited in Arabic, there is a strong vernacular flavor to the style of reading these texts, unlike the recited Qur’ān, and within South Sulawesi during my fieldwork the differences between the recitations of Bugis and Makassarese readers were apparent. This is an expected aspect of the style of these non-Qur’ānic Arabic performances. A self-conscious deployment of regional style and language was especially clear, for example, at a special observance at the old royal palace of the Makassarese kings of Gowa (Ballalampoa) dedicated to reading a text in the cycle.12 Before the performance, the sister of the last king of Gowa lit incense and invited ancestral spirits to bless bananas that were distributed to the group after the occasion; when reciting, the soloist read from one text mounted on a pillow, while others joined in ensemble portions of the reading, holding saucers over their mouths during the two-hour event. The Makassar-language influence on the Arabic text and a stylized form of reading were so elaborated that the recitation was virtually unrecognizable as Arabic. Remarkably, the performers at Ballalampoa erased such vernacular influences when reciting the Qur’an at the end of the performance, indicating a self-consciousness about registers of vernacularization of the articulation of Arabic sound depending on what text was being recited.

On a performative as well as an ontological level, there are clear distinctions between Arabic-language texts that Indonesians recited and the recited Qur’ān, as well as particular ways that Indonesians construed these continuities and contrasts.13 When discussing the difference in situated terms (rather than theologically), Indonesians usually compared the modes of learning the devotional readings with the normative pedagogy for learning to read the Qur’an. While they are often exposed to both kinds of Arabic-language readings from an early age, the method of acquisition of competence in devotional readings resembles what Jean Lave has termed “legitimate peripheral participation” (rather than formal schooling).14 A statement made by a respected educator summarizes perceptions of difference based on learning and expectations of
established orthopraxy; when clarifying the distinction of Qur’anic and non-Qur’anic recitation, he began by explaining that, in reading the Barzanji (unlike reciting the Qur’an), one does not have to apply the Qur’anic rules of *tajwīd* for vocalization, and when people make mistakes, they are not corrected (as they must be in the Qur’anic case).

Both Qur’anic and non-Qur’anic Arabic religious performance were promoted as part of the revitalization in Islamic piety in Indonesia the 1980s and 1990s. Performances of Arabic-language devotional texts were undergoing an upsurge in interest, evidenced in new media for their performance (such as competitions and television broadcast). The passing away of the first lady, Madame Ibu Thien, in 1996 added to what was already an energetic movement in reading Arabic-language texts. Her “*tahlil*” funerary observances were the focus of national attention for a full year. Copies of Sūrat 36 Yā Sīn along with standard prayers for the dead were in great supply in book shops. The religious observance on the anniversary of her death was broadcast nationally on every television station, showing the president with his family members and cabinet wearing simple clothes as they recited on television under the direction of a *shaikh*. The standard texts for this sort of recitation provide each line of Arabic text with interlinear romanized transliteration and Indonesian translation, greatly assisting those whose confidence or competence is not yet complete. Not surprisingly, the sudden requirement placed on government officials to recite Arabic publicly was noted with some sympathetic irony by Muslim intellectuals and educators.

Diverse religious influences in this period rendered the recited Qur’an increasingly developed and standardized in terms of its pedagogy and popularity, leading to the disappearance of some local styles of recitation. At the same time, however, there was also a reappearance of other “traditional” Muslim practices, such as the recitation of devotional readings in Arabic that valorized localness and regionalism. Until the early 1990s, for example, it seemed to many that Barzanji recitation was dying out across the archipelago. However, by the mid-1990s, a Barzanji revival was actually under way (surprising even many Barzanji readers themselves). A prominent *kiai* (religious scholar and teacher) in Makassar who ran a special *pesantren* (Islamic school) for Qur’anic memorization and study still led a Barzanji group, as he had for decades, while at the same time a new phenomenon began in which champion Qur’an reciters from the region increasingly rehearsed and performed Barzanji at public events. Cassettes were beginning to appear, to the expressed amazement of some who had never associated the “traditional” context of Barzanji reading with a commodity like a cassette. Barzanji reading had come to be included among the required activities at one of the Qur’anic institutes in Jakarta, and
it was not unusual for Qur’ān recitation teachers working with beginning and intermediate-level readers in popular new study circles to teach “Salawat Nabi” (“Prayers on the Prophet,” including also devotional songs such as the famous “Tolal Al-Badru”) and the Barzanji, along with Egyptian-inspired religious songs, or “qasida,” to their classes. When I was in Makassar, a local businessman paid for soccer tickets for such a group of older women who attended Qur’ān reading groups so that they could go to the game and recite prayers on the Prophet in the stands (in order to support the home team, it was explained) — and the only controversy I heard was that the husbands complained they didn’t get tickets to see the game too. In general, in the Muslim public culture of the late New Order years, such devotional reading was becoming increasingly accepted and, in many contexts of “Islamic” performance, expected.

An example of the upsurge in new interest in reading Arabic-language religious texts and hearing them read was a Barzanji-reading contest sponsored by a South Sulawesi corporation in 1996. In contrast to the national Qur’ān-reciting tournament, which tended to have a minimizing effect on the diversity of regional expression, the revival of the reading of Arabic-language Barzanji was being explicitly promoted at the contest as an appreciation of the range of regional variation (all within one province). For example, the organizers of this competition stated that they intended to add to the Barzanji event the following year a required translation of the reading into any one of the four principal regional languages (i.e., Bahasa Bugis, Bahasa Makassar, Bahasa Mandar, and Bahasa “Tator” [Tana Toraja]). Whether the end result was the promotion or the diminishment of local variations in practice (or both), competition practices were having powerful effects on Qur’ānic and non-Qur’ānic Arabic-language recitation in South Sulawesi.

Another popularizing mode of the resurgence of Arabic-language devotional reading, song, and piety was performances broadcast during Ramadan. These were usually some form of a group reading of religious songs, with characteristic lighting and staging effects. An example was a “TV Takbir” broadcast from the capital on the eve of “Idul Fitri” (Hari Raya) at the end of Ramadan in 1997, which was attended by the president and his family as spectator-stars of the show. It featured performances by the great dangdut (Muslim pop music) and movie star Rhoma Irama as well as the well-known and respected poet and performer Emha Ainun Najib, whose not-for-profit album Kado Muhammad was being circulated widely among Muslim youth at the time. This program’s dramatic structure highlighted emotional modulation in its musicality and “stadium rock” smoke and lighting effects in its staging. The material drew on revitalized aspects of Indonesian performance traditions, such as excerpts from the Barzanji and “Salawat Nabi” genre known across the Muslim world,
chanting and singing by students from the flagship Qur’ān institute in Jakarta (Institut Pengembangan Tilawah dan Ilmu Al-Quran, or PTIQ), the drumming characteristic of ‘Idul Fitri celebrations across Indonesia, plaintive wept speech by a female vocalist imploring God’s mercy, and accompaniment by a Javanese gamelan ensemble. Viewers in Makassar (those who stayed home rather than attending the great float parade in the main square or joining in the drumming and chanting of “Takbir” celebrations at mosques) enjoyed identifying the excerpts of devotional chants in the broadcast, such as the ever-recapitulating “Salawat Nabi”; everybody in my house that night was singing along. Other performances broadcast nationally in Ramadan 1997 included Barzanji groups from Jakarta, although nothing matched the spectacular production effects of “TV Takbir.”

On the campus of the Islamic university where I lived, the tambourines and drums from the Fakultas Dakwah departmental building reverberated through quiet afternoons, and I would occasionally come across groups of students sitting informally in classrooms, practicing songs for performance rehearsal or just for fun. At the city’s Qur’ān college, the advanced Qur’ān readers who competed at national competitions would spend hours practicing programs in devotional readings, Barzanji as well as arrangements of the recited Qur’ān that were to be performed at public and private occasions in mosques, homes, the residence of the provincial governor, and elsewhere. At rehearsals, key criteria for composition and arrangement included aesthetic balances of “high and low” and male and female voices as well as the expressive dynamics of soloist-group modulation. An example of this kind of performance was the great celebration at the Department of Motor Vehicles in Makassar on the occasion of the bureau having achieved its annual revenue goals. There, the performing group from the local Qur’ān college (some of the best regional talent at the national level and one international champion reciter) wore special yellow attire (signifying the Golkar party of former president Suharto) and sat in a special room that was designated for “Islamic” performance (in distinction to other parts of the complex, which featured marching bands and local “traditional” dance). They had rehearsed the program of “Salawat Nabi” in advance, and discussions in these rehearsals included the question of timing the musical climax with the official entrance of the provincial governor into the space.

The recited Qur’ān was embedded within such contexts of revitalized Islamic piety, which included the reading of many Arabic-language texts. The Qur’ān was, however, always recognized to be a religiously and ontologically unique performance. The recited Qur’ān and other Arabic-language religious performances were readily combined in new modes of performance in Muslim
Indonesia in this period. Muslims elaborated programs in these kinds of performances not primarily because of their shared linguistic and cultural basis as “Arabic” or “Arab,” although they were certainly valorized on these grounds, but more significantly because of an embracing recognition of the accessibility and effectiveness of such modes of participatory piety for individual and collective projects of da‘wah.

Global Qur’ānic Revitalization and
Mainstream Qur’ānic Da‘wah in Indonesia

“Da‘wah” is a Qur’ānic term interpreted and applied in different ways in different global contexts and even in Indonesia itself. Most basically, the term means a “call” to deepen one’s own or encourage others’ Islamic piety; it has been a crucial concept in the historical propagation of the Islamic religious tradition and especially for certain historical traditions. It is also one of the more misunderstood categories in the contemporary academic study of Islam because of its wide range of connotations as well as its differing theory and practice in diverse parts of the Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority worlds. In Indonesia during the New Order, mainstream da‘wah was understood to be an “invitation” to voluntary Islamic piety issued only to Muslims and not to other faith communities.  

This was consistent with the policy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in much of the 1980s and 1990s, which was to promote ideals of religious pluralism among faith communities as a part of mainstream Islamic da‘wah. This approach emphasized the Qur’ānic value of “li‘ta‘ārifū,” derived from 49 al-Ḥujurāt 13, which expresses the idea that differing groups have been placed on earth in order to “get to know one another” and, by extension, to vie in their good works, in a context of human and religious pluralism.

The work of K. H. Zainuddin M.Z., an orator of undisputed star status in Indonesia, could be seen to be paradigmatic of the popular attitudes and popularizing aspects of mainstream Indonesian Islamic da‘wah in this period. His book (the title of which translates as “Secrets to the Success of K. H. Zainuddin M.Z.’s Dakwah”) surveys uses of the term “da‘wah” (Ind. dakwah) in Qur’ān and hadith material before it offers no less than six distinctively Indonesian definitions of “dakwah.” Each of these conforms to the mainstream, nationalist, and pluralist Pancasila ideology of the time. Deploying categories of “general” and “specific” application, common to the logic of the Qur’ānic sciences, these definitions divide the concept “dakwah” into its “restricted” form (for within Islam) and its “open” form (for all of humanity). Da‘wah, according to this framework, carries the basic meaning of persuading people to commit to Islamic values and, by extension, to the improvement of the human condition.
The latter reflects developmentalist and nationalist goals that both Muslim and non-Muslim Indonesians were expected to share in this period.\textsuperscript{17}

Another kind of conceptualization of the goals of \textit{dakwah}, such as that emphasized in the curriculum of \textit{dakwah} programs in state-run Islamic universities (IAINs), is more instrumental than ideational in its focus. The programmatic statement that follows, typical of this curriculum, is characteristically straightforward; also characteristic is that \textit{dakwah} is conceptualized as a means to a goal, constituted in terms of its final ends:

1. Overall Objective (Major Goal). The first objective of \textit{dakwah} is the final value/result that is intended or applied by each [successive] step of \textit{dakwah}. In order to reach this goal, every arrangement and action must be aimed and directed toward it. The first goal of \textit{dakwah} is to realize well-being and prosperity for human existence in this world and the next, as bestowed by God.

2. Administrative Objective (Minor Goal). The administrative [departmental] objective of \textit{dakwah} is to give shape to the goals of the agent [\textit{perantara}, lit. “intermediary”]. For the agent, the goal at its very basis is none other than the [moral] values that can bring about well-being and prosperity that are bestowed by God, each [value] in accordance with the area or part (\textit{segi atau bidang}) of life being developed. For example, well-being and prosperity in the field of education is marked by the readiness of adequate resources (\textit{sarana}) and administration of the educational system in order to shape a pious people (\textit{manusia bertakwa}). In the area of religious social organizations, it is marked by the existence of religious activities, such as religious lectures and instruction [\textit{pengajian}, a term also denoting "Qur’ān recitation"], based on piety (\textit{taqwa}) toward God.\textsuperscript{18}

The circularity of the statement (the overall goal of \textit{dakwah} is defined as that which each particular strategy of \textit{dakwah} attempts to achieve) casts \textit{dakwah} activities as absolutely instrumental: means are dominated (and certainly justified) by their ends. This logic supported an enormous creativity in mainstream Indonesian \textit{dakwah} in the New Order years as well as an Indonesian emphasis on the appreciation of beauty and enjoyable activities as the most effective means to “motivate” (\textit{memotivasikan}) people to deepen mainstream Muslim piety.

Aesthetics and performance have been primary modes by which Indonesian Muslims have approached the project of contemporary mainstream \textit{dakwah}. An example of a \textit{dakwah} performance that was presented explicitly as such is the play staged by the group El Bitrul at the 1997 National Qur’ān Recitation Contest (Musabaqah Tilawatil Quran or MTQ). The group was a part of
the national oil company’s Badan Dakwah Islam Unit Korpri Pertamina. The performance was titled “Taubah”; possible English translations could be “Repentance” or “Change of Heart,” but neither captures the profound Qur’anic, Islamic revivalist, and Sufi overtones of the term. It was a morality play about a pious blind singer and the drunken sinner she reformed, and it included production numbers in the tarian massal choerographical genre as well as dazzling stage effects. A glossy printed program introduces the performance in terms of its \textit{da’wah}:

This stage presentation is always [intended to be] related to the cultivation and development of the people of Indonesia as a unity. The development that is occurring at this time does not only take the form of media and projects in the physical sense but is also the development of humanity itself, that is, spiritual development. With this artistic performance, we may carry out \textit{da’wah} and introduce elements of spiritual (spiritual dan rohani) life into the forms of drama, song, and dance. This presentation is centered not only on the arts (seni) that appear but even more intensely on the content conveyed within it. Because most of the performers are (male and female) employees of Pertamina [the national oil company], we are aware that the work and its performance are still in progress at this time, and for this we “\textit{mohon maaf}” [ask for your forgiveness].

This statement suggests that, within the outer form of the presentation, there is held (terkandung) a hidden, pure essence. As long as this essence remains pure and protected, it is implied, the material form (rupa) of the effort (upaya) applied is actually immaterial. Aesthetic means, including Qur’anic frameworks like competitions, could be seen to collapse into ends in the mainstream Indonesian logic of \textit{da’wah} in the mid-1990s. Among other effects, one result of this logic was the erasure of possible objections to some media of \textit{da’wah} (such as musical theater) just as long as the ultimate ends were deemed appropriate and desirable.

Instrumentality was at the core of discussions over other modes of Islamic piety, embracing not just new forms of for \textit{da’wah} but also “traditional” practices that had first propagated Islam in the archipelago. Performances such as the public reading of Barzanji texts or “Mawlid al-Nabi” had been controversial earlier in the century, along with gravesite commemoration (tahlil) and other observances, coming under attack by Muslim modernists in Indonesia as well as reformers elsewhere in the Muslim world. An idea underlying these social and legal disputes was criticism of the potentially confused instrumental goals that might be motivating activity (in Islamic terminology, the “\textit{niyya}” or intent by which actions are assessed) as well as questionable implied notions of
spiritual agency.20 With the ends recast, however, the means were resurfacing in Indonesia in the 1990s, as in the case of the Barzanji revival. When discussing the occasions of reading the Barzanji, one modernist, prominent educator and university administrator, and member of the “modernist” Muhammadiyya organization made an offhand comment that perhaps he himself should hold a Barzanji reading in his home. He explained that where he came from in the eastern archipelago, such a reading that was not associated with a specific life-passage event would be said to be for the sake of “venerating the ancestors’ spirits, or suchlike”; this one, he went on, would be said just to be “for the benefit of Muslims everywhere.” Implied was that there was no problem with a Barzanji reading in itself, only a potential problem in intention and potential ends—who or what it was said to be for. The means-ends logic of mainstream Indonesian da’wah in the mid-1990s was critical for the acceptance of practices, such as competitions, that might otherwise have been controversial.21

At the forefront of reinvigorated Indonesian da’wah projects was often the appreciation of aesthetic features of religious practice, referred to as “arts with an Islamic flavor” (kesenian yang bernafaskan Islam). While a range of practices and performances had come potentially to be understood as da’wah, occurring in similar settings and with the same performers or agents, the routes by which non-Qur’ānic practices and Qur’ān recitation activities (such as competitions) had become a part of mainstream Islam in Indonesia had differed. Similarly, the imagined reach and scope of Qur’ānic and non-Qur’ānic da’wah efforts differed, from local to national spheres and beyond. The logic underlying the acceptance of Qur’ān recitation competitions, for example—while sharing in the “aesthetic” framework—went beyond appreciation or expression of regional identity as emblematically Muslim or as a part of Indonesian collective nationhood. Contests resonated more deeply with a framework of piety located within what was imagined to be a “globalized” (a key term in New Order rhetoric in the late 1990s was “globilisasi”) and universal Islamic Message.

The mainstream conceptualization of promoting Islamic da’wah in Indonesia was increasingly expanding toward ideals of internationalization in 1996–1997 (on the eve of the sweeping social change Indonesia was to experience within a year). A pivotal event in the development of mainstream Qur’ānic revitalization in the later New Order years was the “Festival Istiqlal,” held for one month in Jakarta in 1991; it was aimed at representing and celebrating the “Islamic culture” of Indonesia. As one English-language source published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs explains, “Different from the World of Islam Festival in London April–October 1976, which showed Islamic culture in Middle East region and exhibition moving artefact from museum,
Istiqlal Festival pointed out daily activity and art performa which have Islamic value from entire Indonesia region” [sic]. This statement puts the festival in the context of an international event, while also demonstrating the value of representing “unity and diversity” in Indonesian (Muslim) “culture.” One of the main attractions of the festival activities was the project of the great muṣḥaf (written text) of the Qur’ān, purportedly the largest in the world (it was completed in 1995, with “Festival Istiqlal II”), in addition to a magnificent illuminated muṣḥaf known as the “Mushaf Istiqlal.” There were also exhibitions of Islamic calligraphy, decorative arts (especially textiles), and mosque architecture, Qur’āns from all over the world, as well as performances (representing “regional culture” with “Islamic value”) that included a competition in ḥān (call to prayer) for children and youth and a calligraphy contest open to all ages. Another highlight was an “Intellectual Forum” the official theme of which was “Islam and Indonesian Culture: The Past, the Present, and the Future,” with topics subdivided according to the headings “Aesthetic Expression in Islam in Indonesia,” “Islamic Tradition and Innovation in Indonesian Culture,” and “Islam and the Future of World Civilization.” The festival promoted the idea of Indonesian Islam as a showcase to the world, especially in terms of its Qur’ānic visual arts.

The Indonesian movement to represent Islamic practice on a massive scale in this period featured especially the Qur’ān and its recitation. In early 1997, for example, the latest exhibit was inaugurated at Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, the amusement park outside Jakarta that is known for its Disney-like “fantasi” castle and the scale model of the Borobudur Buddhist monument. Another of Madame Ibu Thien’s projects, the last before she passed away, the Baitul Quran (House of the Qur’ān) shows an overwhelming maximalization of scale, reversing the “miniaturization” of “beautiful Indonesia” that John Pemberton describes in his article on Taman Mini. If the immensity of Indonesia’s culture-scape is shrunk to an individual scale in the park’s other exhibits, the Baitul Quran blows up representation of text and individual practice to epic dimensions.

As one enters the Baitul Quran, whose roof is a gigantic model of a Qur’ān recitation stand (so that, it was said, Hajjis traveling to and from the Middle East via Jakarta’s international airport would see it as they passed overhead), one is immediately confronted with what is reputedly the biggest muṣḥaf, or Qur’ān text, in the world and the one featured at Festival Istiqlal II (made at a pesantren in Wonosobo, Central Java). There is also a giant video screen showing a Qur’ān recitation class in progress, the booming sounds of more children reciting on the sound system, and, further inside, halls full of huge reproductions of Qur’ān pages. The illuminated pages are from the “Mushaf Sundawi”