Encountering Buddhism: An Interreligious Experience from a Muslim Woman Scholar

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Recently, I joined the International Conference on Buddhist Women in Jogjakarta, Indonesia, from 23-30 June 2015. About 1000 Buddhist women participated in this conference. At the end of the conference, participants were able to tour the amazing Buddhist Temple, Borobudur. They also visited additional temples such as Mendut, Prambanan, Pawon and other temples in Central Java. It was interesting to see them, the Buddhist women, with their colorful robes, coming from various countries. They came from Asia, America, Australia and Europe; however, I did not see any Buddhist participant from African countries in this event. The conference schedule was so tight. It started at 6.30am by doing meditation and finished at 8.30pm by listening dharma talk or some dance-performance. Each meditation was led by a different Bhiksuni from different countries. This is not the first time for me, to join in a meditation session, as a highly-educated Muslim woman.

When I was an undergraduate-student at Thammasat University, in Bangkok: I often prayed in the traditional Theravada Buddhist style, together with other students in the dormitory. Sometimes, a monk might come to dorm, and students would pray together with the monk or monks. I felt weird, because I wore the hijab, sitting with students and praying with them. Some monks gazed at me, but they didn’t say anything. I hope they didn’t mind that I joined in with them. I hope they didn’t think that I wanted to harass their religion. I was in another similar situation when I was in Southern Thailand: one student took me to the temple, and a monk asked me a question. Since he could not speak English, my friend translated for me. The monk said he felt weird to see a Muslim inside the temple because even though there are many Muslims surrounding the temple in the local community, none came to Buddhist celebrations, but I did. I just smiled and did not answer his question. This is the reality that I met everywhere. Many Muslim people do not want to come into other areas where other religions are practiced; but what I feel is, when you are outside of your usual surrounding, why not have another experience? You cannot build trust with other culture and religion if you just living in the same atmosphere. By knowing other people culture, you will know each other and it can build trust to make the world better to live. This is what I gained during the Sakyadhita International Conference.

I have known of Thailand since I became a foreign exchange student in 1996. At that time I stayed with a local family for 4 days – and visited several temples around Bangkok. That was the first time that I gained knowledge about Buddhism. I encountered Buddhism for a second time in Thailand when I was a participant in a traveling classroom to Thailand and Malaysia. Over two weeks, I hardly got to know about the life of Thai people because I spent my time in the classroom, receiving only lectures by several lecturers - and just stayed inside the hotel. Then, the most impressive thing I would come to learn about Buddhism was when I lived there for almost one year in 2002, when I took two semesters of classes at Thammasat University in Bangkok – for the Thai Studies Certificate program. I stayed in student-dormitory so that I could learn Thai language and practice speaking in Thai with them. Some of them wanted to practice their English and I wanted to practice my Thai language. It was a good opportunity as well because I was
invited to visit some villages when university students engaged in some activities, such as: doing voluntary work in the Isaan area, or an opportunity to visit some villages in southern Thailand (Satun, Pattani and Narathiwat). There, I experienced the local life style of Muslim people, which is not so different from my lifestyle in Banda Aceh.

During the very first week that I was staying in Bangkok, in 2002, I became very shocked. I mean: I saw many transvestites in and around the university - I would never met these people in my university in Banda Aceh or in Jogjakarta. As Muslims, we never allow any man to become a woman, in contrast to what I see in Bangkok. Another example: I saw many women wearing short pants or short sleeve shirts when they prayed in front of the Buddha statue. As a Muslim woman, we have to cover all of our body, humbly, when we pray in the mosque. After staying almost a year, I realized that Buddhism is very loose to humanity, and found this interesting. Then I realized: in (real) Buddhism – as it is practiced in daily life - what people are really wanting is peace, without doing any harm to the universe. This is something that differs from my daily life as a Muslim: seeing transvestites everywhere, and women wearing very revealing clothes.

I put ‘real’ in parenthesis because Buddhism is different now through the eyes and perspectives of Muslims, especially for us Acehnese. This is because what the Buddhist monk, Ashin Wiratu does and endorses towards Muslims in Myanmar. The chaos in Myanmar forced many Rohingya to be stranded in Aceh, and this made many Acehnese feel angry towards Buddhist people. In 2012, if you recall, many Rohingya became refugees in Aceh. Acehnese people learned through the stories of those refugees that Rohingya were forcibly removed from out of Myanmar because of their religion. This statement upset many Acehnese, who later became angry and threw stones at a Chinese Buddhist temple in Banda Aceh. This is not the first time that people have thrown stones at the temple. This is because Acehnese believe that Buddhist people pushed Muslims out from Myanmar. The Chinese Buddhists in Banda Aceh had to face the wrath of the overreacting Acehnese - because Myanmar is too far away. The fact that some people are pushing against the Buddhist community to shutdown their temple is a counteraction to force Myanmar people and their government to stop persecuting Rohingya.

This reaction happened, again, because of the bloody demonstration inspired from Ashin Wiratu. Ashin Wiratu claimed Rohingya persecution is revenge for what the Taliban did when they bombed the Buddha statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. Hatred has spread into Buddhist Myanmar. Because Wiratu cannot avenge against the Taliban in Afghanistan, he and his organization did it to helpless-Rohingya people, because these Muslim people are easier targets to reach rather than those in Afghanistan. Again, this angered the Muslim world, including those in Aceh, and this spread of hatred resurrected towards Buddhist people in Aceh as a result of the impact of what Wiratu did against Rohingya Muslims. This cycle will spread again if we do not stop it – through spreading harmony among the religions. One action, was from this Muslim woman, who became a volunteer during the Sakyadhita conference, is a good example of fostering and sharing harmony, understanding and love among other religions.

Moving beyond the 2012 case of the Rohingya people now stranded in East Aceh; currently there are around 900 Rohingya live in shelters in Aceh now. However, the reaction of most people is different from 2012. If in 2012, there was a Muslim throwing a stone at a temple, this year there is no reaction. Together with the hardliner organization, FPI (Islamic Defender Front) and Buddhist organizations in Aceh collect donations for the

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1 http://aceh.tribunnews.com/2012/07/30/tpm-aceh-minta-pemerintah-tutup-vihara-budha
2 http://edition.cnn.com/2015/05/11/asia/rohingya-muslims-aceh-indonesia/ The refugees actually not only Rohinya but also Bangladeshi. They live in separate camp. Rohingya comes with their family while Bangladeshi are male who tried to find job either in Malaysia and Indonesia.
Rohingya Muslims.³ Later, the FPI reacted against information suggesting that they worked together with Buddhists and their donations, saying that they refuse to collect from Buddhists in Aceh.⁴

Apart from what is happening in Aceh, the Sakyadhita Buddhist Conference in Jogjakarta aspired to bring peace, compassion and social justice to the world. The aim of this conference was to introduce social justice and social activism in Indonesia and other outlying Asian countries, together with the rest of the curious international world. Additionally, since the Sakyadhita conference was being held in Indonesia, this introduces the Sakyadhita organization to national and local NGOs, which also work to being about social justice⁵. I met many women from different countries, most of course were Buddhist. Through this conference, I learned many things about Buddhism, which is similar to many ideas in Islam. I saw many colorful robes that I assume were from those representing different sects, as we also have this idea in Islam. By seeing this fact, I became aware that Buddhism is not only Theravada or Mahāyāna; but internally, Buddhism also has many divisions.

During this conference, I found other Muslims, students who become volunteers. This is a good sign that there are many Muslims who are not as strict as what other religions portray and think. Muslims can be a ‘Peace Bridge’ for the future if they join interfaith activities. There is no doubt about it, since Yogyakarta is a multi-cultural city, where many tradition, religions, cultures and ethnicities mix. One of factors why this can happen is because there are many universities in Yogyakarta, where many students from Indonesia and abroad, come to study. This is a good opportunity for students and local people to know and understand other religions and traditions. By doing this, students can share the harmony from their religion to other people. Yet, more is to be done, far way in my home province of Aceh.

Aceh Province has twenty-three districts. I live in Banda Aceh, the capital city of Aceh. We have four Buddhist temples, one Hindu temple, three Christian churches and one Catholic church in Banda Aceh.⁶ All of the Buddhists in Banda Aceh are Chinese, and they live in the middle of the city. As a result, all of the Buddhist temples are in the middle of the town. In Indonesia, we call it ‘Pecinan’ (Chinatown). I’ll describe it as being similar to the Muslim community near Ramkhamheng University in Bangkok.

This separation was implemented by the Dutch government when they occupied Indonesia. In 1740, there was a huge anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesia. It was known as Chineseenmoord (Chinese massacre) in Batavia.⁷ More than 10,000 Chinese were killed in this instance of ethnic-cleansing. Historians believe that the Dutch East India Company was the architect and intellectual actors behind that action, because the Chinese were business competitors towards the Dutch East India Company in Indonesia.⁸ The Dutch also created a letter to force them living in one area so that it was easier for the Dutch government to observe and control their activities. This racist situation continued into when Suharto governed Indonesia. The separation created an area called ‘Pecinan’, as previously mentioned, and is the reason why Buddhist temples are inside the town. It does though, give Buddhists easier access to their temples.

³ http://beritahati.com/berita/140/Demi%2BToleransi%2BUmat%2BBuddha%2BAceh%2BBantu%2BPengungsi%2BMuslim%2BROhingya
⁴ http://www.acehterkini.com/2015/05/fpi-aceh-tolak-bantuan-kemanusiaan-dari.html
⁵ Sakyadhita Handout, 2015, p ix
⁶ According to my observation, I found 4 Buddhist temples in Banda Aceh. However, according to statistics made by Banda Aceh government website, there is only one Buddhist temple in Banda Aceh. It can be seen in http://www.bandaacehkota.go.id/1/10Agama.html#.VbBub1-qqko
⁷ Batavia was the capital city of Indonesia under Dutch imperialism. Now we know it as Jakarta
⁸ Qurtuby; Mengikis Rasialisme Anti-Tionghoa http://www.suarakerdeka.com/harian/0405/11/opi04.htm, seen at 23/7/2015
Due to this dark-period of anti-Chinese and by extension, anti-Buddhist activities in Indonesia, it is understandable why they do not want to be more open to non-Chinese people in Indonesia, especially in Aceh. Aceh has a very dark history as well, certainly in the case of our very long conflict with the Indonesian government over the implementation of Islamic Shariah Law – which has made Aceh into a better place but still has a long way to go. Therefore, Chinese in Aceh still cannot be open about their traditions, habits, lifestyle, and religion. During the International Conference, I spoke with several Buddhists from Jakarta. They said that they came many times to Aceh, for an often-held ten-day meditation-retreat, somewhere in central Aceh, and that it has been held for several years. I was very surprised to learn of this because this good news never appears in any local or national media. When I tried to know more about that retreat, no Chinese participants from Aceh wanted to share their stories about that retreat. I can understand that – they still possess the feeling of fear, deep within themselves. It is still there within them.

Officially, the Indonesian government recognizes six religions in Indonesia: Islam, Christianity (Protestant), Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism. The Buddhanet.net website shows that there are only 1.8 million people (1%) who practice Buddhism in Indonesia. During the Suharto era (1965-2008) Confucianism was not recognized as a religion. Many Confucian believers listed themselves as Buddhist practitioners because Confucianism is relatively close in terms of religious activities. Taoists did the same thing. Many Tao believers list themselves as Buddhist on their ID card. This situation raises doubt over the exact number of Buddhists in Indonesia, and when KH Abdurrahman Wahid was president and recognized Confucianism as a religion, the numbers of Buddhist believers decreased.

The International Conference on Buddhist Women gave me insight though, into Buddhism. Buddhism in Indonesia is not only Mahāyāna, but also Theravada. Indonesian Buddhists exist not only in Jakarta or other regions in Java, but also in other regions in Sumatera and in places out in eastern Indonesia. Many representatives of Buddhism from other regions in of Indonesia also attended the conference – I could not meet them all. I wish for this to be a good start for promoting a mutual understanding between many religions in Indonesia and also in the world.

9 http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/indo-txt.htm