Chapter 1

Negotiating Tradition, Modernity, and Identity

One evening in mid-August 1995, I was working in my rented room when my landlord told me I had visitors: four college students from some of the many colleges in Malang, East Java. One was studying business, another law, the third economics, and the last agribusiness. All four were supplementing their university studies by studying religion at an Islamic boarding school. Although they wanted to participate in the globalization of Indonesia, they wanted their lives to be grounded in a religious lifestyle.

The Islamic boarding school (pesantren) at which they studied was Al-Hikam, which in 1994–1995 housed its 60 students in a complex consisting of two two-story buildings and a mosque. Students at Al-Hikam are enrolled in any one of the several colleges and universities in Malang. They can major in any nonreligious field, which, by definition, excludes studying at the Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN; State Islamic Institute)—an institute that offers only religiously oriented majors. Demographically and sociologically the students do not significantly differ from other Indonesian college students. Their majors include English, law, economics, business, accounting, political science, and agronomy. On top of their university studies, which the pesantren staff monitors, the students have a regular routine of standard pesantren education. Some have specific hopes and dreams, but most are eager to find any gainful employment or to successfully launch their own businesses. The only real common denominator is that they do not have any pesantren training before entering—and because of the goals of the institution, this is an entry requirement. Students have a number of reasons for attending and living at Al-Hikam while attending college. The most common include wanting to absorb the barakah (blessing, but with an existential quality) of the headmaster.
and to learn more about their religion and the right ways to practice it. In this regard, they differ little from students at other pesantren. Al-Hikam students also mention the relatively low housing cost and the access to additional educational opportunities, specifically learning Arabic and English, as additional reasons for enrolling there.

The lifestyle at Al-Hikam differs from more traditional pesantren: the students are allowed to watch television and go to the movies in their free time; they sleep on beds, and even eat meat with their meals. In more traditional pesantren, as part of ascetic training, sleeping on beds and eating meat are avoided. The watching of television and movies is proscribed because of the morals they portray. At Al-Hikam, the allowance of meat with meals (several times a week, but not nightly) is meant to create a feeling of indebtedness (hutang budi) to the headmaster, as to a father; students are said to be more easily taught when they feel indebted. Although beds are used, the mattresses are the thinnest available, and so the living conditions are more ascetic than those in a college dorm, even if they are less ascetic than those in a traditional pesantren.

My visitors had sought me out that evening because an exciting event was about to take place at Al-Hikam. Syehk Abdurrahman, a seventh-generation descendant of Sunan Kalijaga, the most famous of the saints who brought Islam to Java and the syehk (master, head) of the Qadiri-Naksibandia Sufi brotherhood, was going to visit Al-Hikam early the next morning. This was an important event because it was the meeting of tradition—in the person of Syehk Abdurrahman, who was playing the archetypal role of a Sufi saint—and modernity—in the persons of the college students who wanted to become lawyers, economists, government workers, and businessmen.

Because I was trying to type up field notes, we decided that one of them would pick me up just before the event was to start. At 7 A.M., my ride told me that I should bring my video camera. However, he warned me to ask permission before taping, because Syehk Abdurrahman had such strong spiritual power, coming from his barakah, that if I did not ask permission, his image would not show on the videotape. My escort was making a claim that his traditions were more powerful than my modern technology.

When we arrived at Al-Hikam, the gateway to the pesantren campus had a bamboo archway built over it. Signs on this structure proclaimed 50 years of Indonesian independence. While awaiting the public appearance of the syehk, I sat on the steps of the pesantren’s mosque and conducted interviews as I sipped strong coffee while recorded Egyptian music played in the background. These markers place this event into three wider social arenas: Indonesia, by means of the signs on the