

Features: Potpourri

People in Kudus live in religious harmony

KUDUS, Central Java (JP). After a bit of bargaining, a pedicab driver finally agreed to take me to Kudus Tower from the town square for Rp 4,000. *Becak* (pedicab) is the main mode of transport in this small town, 55 kilometers east of the Central Java capital Semarang.

Despite the heat, the town was lively. Though Kudus was once at the forefront of the spread of Islam, now the town is home to people of all religions.

During the fasting month of Ramadhan, not all of the residents fast. Some small restaurants remain open during the day and people can be seen eating and drinking. However, approaching Kudus Tower — the town's mascot — the nuances of Islamic life are apparent. Some sarong-clad students of an Islamic boarding school walk past carrying the Koran, while kiosks selling cloth, perfumes, books and dates stand along the road leading to the gate of a mosque.

Kudus Tower and Al Aqsa Mosque, or Kudus Mosque, attract many visitors because of their historical values; they are symbols of the past Islamic glory and harmony in Java. Of all the city names in Indonesia, perhaps only Kudus is Arabic in origin. It stems from *al quds*, which means holy. According to legend, Kudus was named after Al Quds (the ancient name for what is now Jerusalem).

By Wahyuni Kamah

While Jafar Shodiq, later called Sunan Kudus, one of the Wali Songo — the nine Islamic saints that disseminated Islam — was studying in Mecca, an epidemic broke out there. He successfully freed the people and the area from the disease. Jafar was offered a reward by the emir (head of the government) for his deed, but he modestly refused it. Instead, he asked for a piece of rock from Baital Maqdis (Jerusalem). When he returned to Java, he took the rock with him. In 1549, Jafar founded Kudus Mosque and fastened the rock in its *mihrab*, a niche in the mosque wall facing Mecca.

The mosque was named Al Aqsa after Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. In 1919 the mosque was repaired and expanded. The present veranda was added during the expansion. Its domed roof resembles the Dome of Rock, one of the Muslims' holy shrines in Jerusalem. Moreover, whether it is a coincidence or not, 18 kilometers to the north of Al Aqsa Mosque in Kudus stands Mt. Muria, while to the north of Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem stands a mountain with a similar name, Mt. Moriah.

Sunan Kudus was a well-known thinker and tolerant scholar. In spreading Islam in the once Hindu dominated area of North Java, Sunan Kudus did not want to alienate the locals and this was expressed in his tower's architecture.

At first glance, the extraordinary Kudus Tower does not appear to be the tower of a mosque because of its Hindu architecture. The *bedug* (big drum) was placed on the top level of this earthen concrete brick tower, where it was beaten to call the people to prayer.

This elegant old tower, according to Dutch historian Krom, was built in the beginning of 16th century at the latest. The peak of the tower is not the original, which was destroyed in 1947. The distinction is in the decorations on the walls of the tower, where ceramic plates are inserted. These decorations are characteristic of the early mosque in Java.

In his lifetime, Sunan Kudus, who also founded Kudus, banned his Muslim followers from slaughtering cows and eating their flesh out of respect for the Hindus, who believe the cow is a holy animal. This tradition continues today. It is extremely difficult to find beef in the city, and restaurants and food vendors mainly serve buffalo or chicken.

The indigenous and Chinese-Indonesian residents seem to live harmoniously in this town, as witnessed by the several small churches found about town.

During Ramadhan Al Aqsa Mosque is crowded. People young and old come to pray and recite the Koran. The mosque compound also includes the graves of Sunan Kudus and many of his followers.

"Except during the fasting month, hundreds of Muslim pilgrims from all over Java crowd around the tomb every day. You cannot even approach his tomb in the peak season," the tomb's caretaker, said. The pilgrims come to pray to this saint and scholar or to seek his blessings.

Cigarette

When people mention Kudus now, it usually brings to mind cigarettes. The town has also produced many leading businesspeople, including Noto Semito, a Javanese businessman who invented *kretek* (clove flavored cigarette) and pioneered the cigarette industry in Kudus in the early 1900s. He is known as the Father of Kretek.

The history of the cigarette industry in Kudus is documented at the Museum Kretek in dioramas and various objects, such as old packs of Kudus-made cigarettes and the instruments used to produce the cigarettes.

Four large cigarette companies are currently located in the town, putting money into the Kudus economy.

"Kudus is the biggest tobacco tax payer in Indonesia," the museum's guide, Abu, said. "As a result of its ever-growing industry, most of its residents are employed."



The unique Kudus Tower and Al Aqsa mosque, or Kudus mosque, show the influence of Hindu architecture. The tower and mosque located in the small town of Kudus, Central Java attract visitors because of their historical value.

Virginity tests torment women in Rajasthan's rural areas

By Anil Sharma

JAIPUR, India (Reuters). Mevar was a typical Indian bride when she got married four years ago — a bit apprehensive, but extremely excited about the life ahead of her.

It didn't take long for the 19-year-old's dreams to be shattered. On her wedding night, her husband, Rakesh, approached her with a skein of thread to determine whether she was a virgin.

Minutes later, he emerged from the room and announced loudly to waiting relatives and friends: "She's impure."

Ignoring Mevar's pleas of innocence, the young bride was beaten and dragged to a village council for a public hearing.

"When the torture became unbearable, I took the names of youths who came to my mind — dozens of them," she told Reuters. "But they wanted me to name my sister's husband, a police officer, as my lover and I refused."

Mevar is among a number of women belonging to the nomadic Sansi community in India's desert state of Rajasthan who are subjected to such crude virginity tests which assume that an unbroken hymen is proof of virginity.

The centuries-old custom of *Kukari ki Rasam* (thread ritual)

isn't just used to torture women. It is also a money-making tool. "Impure" brides are beaten to reveal the names of their "lovers" who are then forced to pay big sums to their husbands' families. Sansi women often name any man to end their ordeal.

"It's irrelevant that she privately says she was forced to name these men," says Ramavtar, a school teacher. "Here the brides are beaten to make them admit to affairs."

Virginity tests are common among the Sansis, said Zakiya Inam, state minister for women's development. But police say their hands are tied.

"It's more of an immoral thing than an illegal one," says S.N. Jain, deputy inspector general of police in the state capital, Jaipur.

"Virginity tests are not covered under the Indian Penal Code and as such cannot be considered a crime. So how can a case be filed?" he asks.

Although Indian women have made enormous inroads in a range of fields from corporate finance and politics to diploma-

cy and the arts, violence against them is not uncommon.

According to a recent government survey, 20 percent of women have either been beaten or physically abused since the age of 15, most commonly by their husbands.

But the tourist state of Rajasthan, better known for its palaces and forts, has a particularly horrifying track record.

In the late 1980s, a young widow jumped on to her husband's funeral pyre following the banned ritual of sati, triggering a furious debate over whether she had been drugged and pushed.

Under the centuries-old ritual, a widow is supposed to immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. It was a tradition started in medieval times to prevent wives of slain warriors falling into enemy hands.

There are also continued reports of infant girls being smothered to death by traditional families who consider

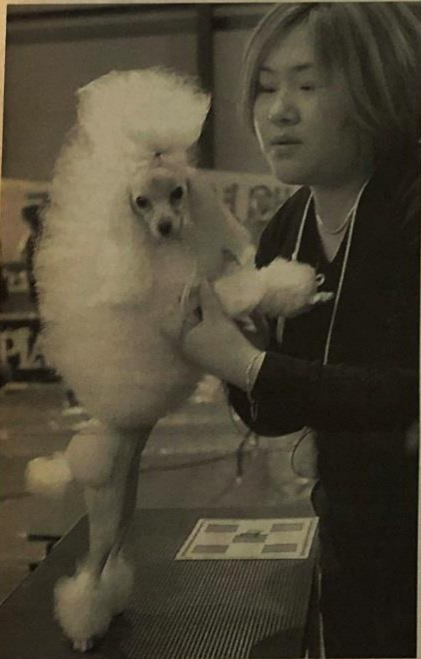
girls a burden because of the huge dowries they must pay for them.

Government officials say the main reason for such crimes in the state is low literacy. According to the last 1991 census, literacy was 38.55 percent. Literacy among women was particularly poor, at 20.44 percent it was the lowest in India and half the national rate of 39.29 percent.

Virginity tests can only be abolished through education, women activists say.

"There are conspicuous disparities in the literacy rates in urban and rural areas and among males and females," said Nirupama Banerjee, a women's activist. "Illiteracy is a major cause of ills against women in Rajasthan."

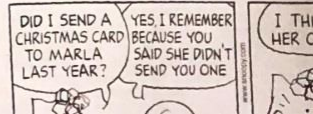
Other tests are the *Paani ki Dheej* (purity by water) or a modern day version of the *Agnipariksha* (trial by fire) which Lord Rama's wife, Sita, faced in the Hindu epic, *Ramayana*.



Reuters

A dog beauty coordinator welcomes her poodle, *Best*. The poodle won the top slot for the beauty category at the annual World Dog Show Championship on Saturday.

Peanuts



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