

Features: Potpourri

Demak: A Javanese town of Islamic saints

DEMAK, Central Java (JP): Traveling by public bus to Demak from Semarang, the capital of Central Java, you will pass along the only highway along the coast of north Java — popularly known as Jalur Pantura Utara Jawa, or Pantura.

For the 22 kilometers from Semarang to Demak, the highway is busy with trucks carrying cargo, intercity buses and cars. The typical view as you drive along Pantura highway is of houses and vendors' stands on each side of the road. You can either take an air-conditioned bus plying the Semarang-Surabaya route, or an economy-class bus for Rp 1,400 one way. The bus drivers generally exceed the speed limit, but most of the passengers do not seem to mind.

A sign proclaiming *Demak Kota Wali*, which means Demak City of Saints, greets you at the entrance of this small town. Demak is noted for the Wali Songo — the nine Islamic saints who together were largely responsible for spreading Islam throughout Java.

After arriving at the small and uncrowded bus terminal, I decided to visit the famous Great Demak Mosque — believed to be the first mosque in Java — which is near the town square and only a few meters from the bus terminal. Although only a short walk from the terminal, the hot midday sun convinced me it was better to take a *becak* (pedicab), the town's main mode of transportation.

The front of the mosque is very simple looking. The *serambi* (roofed porch) reminded me of Javanese architecture, with its unique three-tiered roof. There is a tower by the gate, the appearance of which indicates it was built after the mosque was constructed. Most of the ground of the courtyard is covered by concrete blocks, with a few trees in between.

The porch of the mosque is the ideal place to relax on a hot day, and there are always lots of people taking advantage of this cool spot. The *serambi*, which was constructed during the period of the second sultanate of Demak, is supported by eight meticulously carved wooden pillars. It is said that the pillars were a gift from the last king of Majapahit, Brawijaya V, to his son, the sultan of Demak. Two large drums and two *kentongan* (gong) are situated on the porch. A number of ceramic plates have been placed in the wall.

Founded by Babad Demak in 1477, the main feature of the mosque is the 31-meter-long by 31-meter-wide main room, which has wooden doors that have been painted green.

You are not allowed to take photographs inside the mosque and, like in other mosques, women must dress properly and cover their heads. Inside the mosque men and women use separate areas to pray, and the areas are divided by a curtain. While some men were praying

By Wahyuni Kamah

and reciting the Koran, I spoke with a woman who had traveled a long way to pray here. She said she wanted to seek blessings by praying in the Great Demak Mosque.

The historical and legendary part of the mosque are the four wooden pillars, called the *soko guru*, that support the wooden roof of the mosque. These pillars are named after the Walis who participated in the construction of the mosque: Sunan Ampel, Sunan Bonang, Sunan Gunungjati and Sunan Kalijaga.

It is said that one of the pillars was made of *tatal*, or pieces of wood held together by metal bands. This would have been the work of Sunan Kalijaga, who was known as *soko guru tatal*. It was believed he used his metaphysical powers to make *tatal*.

The original four *soko guru* were replaced with replicas in 1983 and now reside in a museum in the mosque compound. One of the Walis, Sunan Kalijaga, was also famous for correcting the direction of the *qiblat* (the direction of Mecca) of the mosque, which is usually marked by a *mihrab* (niche in a mosque wall facing Mecca).

The mosque was the symbol of Islamic power and a place where the Walis discussed many subjects.

Indonesia's most distinguished ulama, Prof. Hamka, once said that Wali Songo's legacy was the philosophical and symbolic way in which the mosque was created. This was first revealed when the mosque was renovated in 1507.

"The five doors of the mosque symbolize the five pillars of Islam, the six windows symbolize the six pillars of Iman (faith) and the three-tiered roof symbolizes Islam (the lower), Iman (the middle) and Ihsan (good deeds, at the top)," said the museum guide, Solihin.

The very top of the mosque is called the *mastaka*. It symbolizes the *makrifat*, or esoteric knowledge of God. The year the mosque was constructed is revealed in a picture on its *mihrab*. The picture was made according to the Javanese calendar, and it shows the year of construction as 1479.

People come to the mosque compound not only to pray, but also to visit the graves of the first king of the Islamic kingdom in Java, Raden Patah, and his followers. The graves are situated at the rear of the mosque. Raden Patah, the son of Brawijaya V, king of the Buddhist Majapahit kingdom, together with a princess from Campa, a kingdom in Southeast Asia, founded Demak as the center of the Islamic kingdom in Java. This was in the beginning of the 16th century, at the same time Raden Patah became the first sultan of Demak.



The simple but famous Mesjid Agung Demak (Demak Great Mosque) with its unique three tiered roof is dubbed as the first mosque in Java. The mosque is located in Demak, Central Java.

Bach's celebrated choral works to be performed in Jakarta

By Y. Bintang Prakarsa

In its golden period, the sphere of influence of the sultanate of Demak reached as far as Banjar, Kalimantan. The sultanate also ceaselessly fought against the colonial Portuguese.

The collection in the small museum also includes photos and objects passed down from Sunan Kalijaga, the mosque's cofounder. The most memorable object in the collection is a drum, known as *bedug* Sunan Kalijaga. Kalijaga introduced the *bedug* as a way to summon people to pray, who would come to the mosque when they heard the sound of the drum.

Solihin said the mosque compound is visited by about 2,000 people every day, except for during the fasting month of Ramadhan.

Most people making the journey to Demak come on tour packages. Besides visiting the mosque, they also visit the grave of Sunan Kalijaga in Kadilangu. Demak residents have named the grave *Makam Kadilangu*, and it is located about two kilometers from the mosque.

After the Ashar prayer, throngs of local women come to the mosque. In a few minutes, the empty *serambi* is again filled with women who have come to recite the Koran together or just to listen. The mosque is never empty.

JAKARTA (JP): Closing the year of Bach's anniversary, the Jakarta Oratorio Society (Stephen Tong, conductor) and Eliatha Choir (Billy Kristanto, conductor) accompanied by the augmented Capella Amadeus string orchestra (Grace Sudargo, director), will join the celebration on Dec. 19 at Graha Gepembri in Kelapa Gading Permai, North Jakarta.

The combined forces will perform selections from the composer's celebrated choral works, a very welcome gesture that will enhance on previous anniversary concerts dealing only with his instrumental works.

The pieces to be heard are mainly first choruses of the cantata *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, *Magnificat*, *Christmas Oratorio*, and *St. Matthew's Passion*. All of them are later works, composed for use at St. Thomas's and St. Nicholas's, as he was then the music director of these two Leipzig churches. Thus, they were intimately connected with the liturgical life of the Lutheran church. In each composition, the music enhances the chosen text for the assigned Sunday or festivity, giving the Biblical text and its liturgical context a musical realization.

Most of the choruses, except the opening chorus of the

ing Vespers or evening prayers. Earlier Bach's *Magnificat* was thought of as a special composition for Christmas Vespers, but now it is proposed that he might have just composed and used it for any (presumably festive) Vespers.

Whatever the case, the lyrics speak of the wonder of God's regard for His lowly servant and God's justice toward humanity. The work is a miniature whose full duration does not exceed half an hour, but Bach gave the lyrics an appropriate grandeur by writing them for five voices (two sopranos, alto, tenor, and bass) and a full orchestra. The resplendent choruses and meditative solos vividly paint Mary's vision of the coming rule of God's justice brought by Christ whom she bears in her womb. Accompanied by full orchestra with trumpets and timpani and packed with running melismas, the first chorus recalls the confident opening phrase of the hymn, "My soul praises the Lord."

Magnificat is now Bach's most famous Latin work after the Mass in B minor. Indeed, the composer himself might have thought of it as one of his best, because he revised it later as a part of his effort to establish definitive versions of his finest compositions.

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