

# Photos show many facets of Muslim life

A woman dressed in black Muslim clothing wearing a *cadar*, a veil covering everything but her eyes, pushes a scooter.

A young student wearing a Muslim headscarf or *jilbab*, her chin pierced with a silver stud, stands alone by a Coca-Cola sign. A young Muslim woman walking in the street wears a pair of jeans and a jumper and her head is uncovered.

What do they have in common? They are all featured as part of an ongoing photo exhibition, *Common Ground: Aspects of Contemporary Muslim Experience in Britain and Indonesia*, at Taman Budaya, Yogyakarta.

"It's about starting to discuss what it means to be Muslim," said Yudhi Soerjoatmodjo, former *Tempo* magazine photographer and curator of the exhibition.

"We usually tend to look at the general outline of what Muslim experience is and not the detail ... at the forest rather than the trees. This exhibition is an attempt to look at the trees."

The exhibition, sponsored by the British Council, the UK organization for cultural relations overseas, includes almost 200 large-scale photos, making it the largest event of its kind in Yogyakarta in recent years.

The project began in the UK when eight photographers were commissioned to explore the theme of Muslim identity. Britain is home to almost two million Muslims, and as many as 60 percent of asylum seekers arriving in Britain come from Muslim countries.

As a result, many of the

photos depict poor and run-down areas, and show a side of Britain that many Indonesians may not have seen before.

However, many Muslims settled in Britain generations ago and the pictures also show Muslims with successful businesses, enjoying the same daily activities as non-Muslims.

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This mosaic of Muslims' experiences in Britain is diverse and complex, embracing many nationalities and social groups across the country.

"We want to challenge the stereotypes about different minority groups in the UK," explained Mark Stephens, who heads the project at the British Council in Jakarta.

"Photos are a good way of crossing boundaries as there are no language or communication difficulties," he said, adding that the exhibition is part of a campaign to raise peoples' awareness of other cultures in Britain and abroad.

To create a platform or "common ground" for discussion, the British Council enlisted the help of Yudhi Soerjoatmodjo, curator of the Goethe Institute and co-founder of the "i see" Gallery in Jakarta.

Yudhi commissioned six Indonesian photographic artists to illustrate Muslim



JP/Anghi Purbandono

Women give very different reasons as to why they wear *jilbab*, or Muslim headscarf. Riska (*photo above*), a 21-year-old student, feels more comfortable wearing it when she goes out, but said it does not mean she cannot also wear a stud in her chin and go on dates. A photograph of a Muslim woman wearing a *cadar*, a veil covering everything but her eyes, and pushing a scooter (*right photo*), is directly transferred to a computer screen in the gallery using a digital camera, allowing the exhibition participant to see themselves with different bodies and clothes.

experiences in Indonesia.

"The theme was complex: Just defining what 'Muslim' means is quite difficult; people have different interpretations," said Yudhi.

"The British exhibition was more straightforward. In Indonesia there are Muslim images everywhere. This was a challenge for the Indonesian artists."

However, Yudhi is acutely aware of the limitations of photography in dealing with a theme as vast as human

experience and believes that this challenges the audience to be proactive.

"The audience has to rise to the occasion and try to see more and ask more. If they don't like it and have something to criticize, they can. That's why we are holding discussions and workshops," he said. He uses the analogy of reading a good book where you have to put some effort in to get something back.

Many of the pictures have a context to them which is not



JP/Angki Purbandono

immediately apparent.

This is particularly the case with Anthony Lam's work, a series of pictures with superimposed slogans such as "further representations" or "integration."

At first glance they look like Orwellian-style propaganda posters. The slogans are taken from a UK government White Paper on asylum and nationality. The scenes of ports, railways and buildings under cold, gray skies are what immigrants are likely to see upon arrival in England.

"I wanted to use photography to challenge the whole idea of photography," said Lam enigmatically.

He said people expected photos to show everything while what was missing from the photo was often the most important thing.

Lam sees photography as just a starting point for debate.

"Allowing people to enter into the debate around the

pictures and the issues makes the photography come alive. Otherwise, it can be very dead, especially if it's just exported from abroad," he said.

Some photographers have added interactive features to their work, which reveals more about the subject and allows the audience to manipulate the image themselves.

Yogyakarta-based artist Angki Purbandono photographed and recorded local women talking about why they wear Muslim dress and placed recordings of their voices on portable stereos in front of their portraits.

Life-sized photos of the women wearing veils, with holes where their faces or eyes should be, were placed around the gallery and viewers are encouraged to insert their own face.

The artist then takes their picture and transfers the image to a computer screen

which shows the audience how they appear in the different outfits.

When he snaps the photo, Angki asks, "How do you feel in those clothes?" The answer does not always come easily, but it gets people thinking.

"I often saw friends suddenly starting to wear *jilbab* and I never had the courage to ask them, 'why?' They might have construed the question as being critical, so I preferred not to ask anything," says Yudhi, adding this exhibition lets people air their views and is a good way of bringing things out in the open.

An exhibition of this kind can only hope to explore a tiny fraction of the totality of Muslim experience. However, it throws up some surprises such as a prostitution complex in Bandung where a government-funded Islamic school was built to teach the children of the sex workers.

A series of scenes taken from the lives of Chinese-Indonesian Muslims seems commonplace, but explores complex issues regarding religion, ethnicity and identity.

Yudhi believes collaboration with foreign artists provides a valuable experience for Indonesian photographic artists, often too focused on commercial work that employs very clear and straightforward messages.

"This is not just about pretty images; you really have to think and reflect," he said.

*Common Ground: Aspects of Contemporary Muslim Experience in Britain and Indonesia runs until Sept. 2 at Taman Budaya, Jl. Sriwedani No.1, Yogyakarta.*

*The exhibition continues at Mandala Monument, Jl. Sudirman No.2, Makassar, South Sulawesi from Sept. 19 to 30 and at the National Museum, Jl. Merdeka Barat 12, Central Jakarta from Oct. 22 to Nov. 12, Tel. 2524115, website: [www.britishcouncil.or.id](http://www.britishcouncil.or.id)*