

**Michael Laffan. *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia*. London: Routledge, Curzon, 2003. 294 pp.**

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Michael Laffan's aim is "to evaluate the place of Islam in early Indonesian nationalism." (p. 2) His target is Ben Anderson, whom he considers did not take into account "the faith of the majority of the inhabitants of the archipelago." (p. 2) Islam, he hopes to show, has been central to the formation of nationalism. "I hope to demonstrate how Muslim reformists, whose activities were focused on the peoples and concerns of the Netherlands Indies, expressed their sense of imagined community above all else as a function of Islam." (p. 2) The Islam he speaks of is that which Indonesians found not in Indonesia, but outside it, in the *hajj* pilgrimage and in Egypt. The force of the book, indeed, is to show the liveliness of ideas about the Islamic community which Indonesians encountered abroad. This has the advantage, he points out, of avoiding a study of nationalism that focuses on the middle class. Other peoples become prominent.

The book is organized chronologically, but the descriptions center on a couple of ideas. The first is that in the course of travels abroad, "Indonesians" (we necessarily use the word anachronistically; the point is that what we call "Indonesia" today might have had another name and another form altogether) discovered that they had local identities given to them within both the Islamic contexts of *watan* and *ummat*, in particular, and that their identities were further confirmed, or complicated, when they had to identify themselves in some way, given particularities that set them apart from the Muslims they encountered abroad and given that they were set apart by those whom they met. These descriptions are valuable because they show how fluid notions of identity were.

Laffan's point is that Indonesian nationalism developed when, as Muslims, Indonesians discovered their foreignness—foreignness from their own tradition, thus from themselves. It is not a question of surpassing local ties by finding a transcendent identification. It is a matter of having a transcendent identification already, but one which, when rediscovered in the face of others with the same identity, made them also into Jawi, for instance. So regardless of whatever Islamic terms were used—"watan," "ummat"—"Islam" was the starting point of differentiation within the Islamic world, just as it also furnished an identity counter to that of the West, and the Dutch in particular.

The question is the motor of this process. Print is central, Laffan claims, referring not to the circulation of material printed in Roman, but in Arabic, script. ". . . There was an alternative religious print network in Southeast Asia which, from c. 1900, was bound to a religious centre." As a result, "political and religious ideas continued to be exchanged and refined by Southeast Asian Muslims, in the Hijaz and Egypt" and in Indonesia. (p. 10) Yet this formulation evades the idea of the imagined community as defined by Anderson, for that entity depends on print not so much for its content as for

the process of reading, in which notions of simultaneity of events in the newspapers and the lives of readers, for instance, stimulate a sense of community which otherwise would have remained merely local. Encounters between “Indonesians” and other Muslims abroad are, analytically speaking, the opposite of this process. Laffan would have benefited from a closer look at reading and at the differences between reading religious *kitab* and newspapers. The exchange of ideas that he analyzes and that passes through print is obviously important, but it is a process almost not comparable with the work he sets himself against. Laffan might or might not be correct about the importance of Islam in the formation of nationalism, but his case would have been stronger if he had taken in more of Anderson’s argument.

In the end, of course, secular nationalism prevailed. Along the way, Islamic ideas of community—*ummat* and *watan*—were important for those who traveled abroad. It is not that these ideas had to be modified to reach a notion of nationalism that, in Laffan’s view, caused them to lose out. Rather,

the ultimate failure of the Kaum Muda to achieve an Islamic state in Indonesia was prefigured [*sic*] by their choice of script. In the race to the press and a modern education, they had lost a calligraphic hegemony to a Western-dominated modernity, and one in which their own schools had participated. Roman-script Malay had become accepted as the language of communication between all the various groups in the Indies. And, as many natives were seeking recognition from both their fellow natives and the Dutch rulers, roman-script was the logical vehicle for expression. As time went on, fewer Indonesians were able to read *jawī* and may well have found the ideas expressed in the *kitab kuning* dour by comparison to the offerings of the Dutch-educated Communists and nationalists. (p. 237)

In these sentences, another universe opens. What is the relation between “seeking recognition” (as opposed to opposition) from Dutch, from “fellow natives,” and Islamic ideas? Would such recognition have been an issue if there were no differences of script? And why are the ideas of the *kitab kuning* suddenly “dour”? Is there something inherently more stirring about the ideas of “educated Communists and nationalists”? What happened to make them so, and why the search for recognition from Westerners? The answers to these questions can be given only through study of the local as it is combined with the sort of inquiry Laffan has made.

*Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia* is a valuable book. To my regret, I have not been able to touch on its richness. Laffan gives a picture of events occurring beyond the conception of the people concerned. We see a certain history take shape. It strikes me as the history of something that reached no culmination, to be likened to a strand of evolution no longer represented in the present. At the same time, history does not necessarily stay in the past. In his first sentence, Laffan evokes the difficulties of present-day Indonesia. His book is best read with the current Islamization of that country in mind.