

Southeast Asia and the Middle East: Islam, Movement, and the Longue Duree.
Edited by Eric Tagliacozzo. Singapore: NUS Press, 2009. 360 pp.

Elizabeth Fuller Collins

This book is the product of a 2004 workshop held at the Asia Research Institute in Singapore, when mass-media reports generally treated Islamic terrorism in Southeast Asia as directed by radical Middle Eastern Islamic organizations. The essays collected here are meant to contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of the dynamic history of relations among Muslim societies and Islamic organizations in Southeast Asia and Muslim thinkers and educational networks in Saudi Arabia, Cairo, Iran, and Yemen. The relationship between Southeast Asian Muslims and Muslim leaders and organizations in the Middle East is only now beginning to receive the attention that it deserves, largely because until recently few scholars had the language skills necessary to describe those dynamics. Indonesianists should welcome the historical essays in this volume as a valuable addition to the work of Azra, Laffan, Mobini-Kesheh, and earlier scholars. I will first review the essays on the role of Arabs in the Islamization of Southeast Asia, then the essays on the Hadrami,¹ followed by the three essays in the concluding section of the book on Islamist politics in Southeast Asia as of 2004.

Part I, on "The Early Dimensions of Contact," begins with Michael Laffan's essay, "Finding Java: Muslim Nomenclature of Insular Southeast Asia from Srivijaya to Snouck Hurgronje," a discussion of the referent for the Arab toponym Jawa, which later came to designate the Jawi, pilgrims or resident scholars from Southeast Asia in Mecca. Laffan suggests that "Jawa," which was later to become an Islamizing "Zabaj" in Arab sources, referred to an ill-defined region claimed by Sriwijaya and Java in different periods. Laffan argues in this essay that the vague delineation of the Jawi in terms of geography and ethnicity was to have consequences in the twentieth century.² Because Islamic nationalists failed to name and designate the boundaries of their imagined nation, the outline of the Dutch colonial empire was to determine the shape of the nation that emerged as Indonesia.

Timothy Barnard's essay, "The Hajj, Islam, and Power among the Bugis," describes an account of the hajj performed in 1828 by the Bugis noble Raja Ahmad and his son Raja Ali Haji when the Wahabis had taken over Mecca. This essay would be appropriate as an addendum to Azyumardi Azra's *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia*.³ Azra concludes his study of Islamic authority as transmitted orally

¹ Five of the eleven essays in the sections on the history of relations between Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian Muslims are devoted to the Hadrami, Muslim traders from the Hadramaut region of Yemen who are recognized as having played an important role in Islamic and nationalist movements in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia in the modern period.

² See also Michael Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma below the Winds* (London and New York, NY: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

³ Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern "Ulama" in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

from teacher to student through *isnad* and *silsilah*⁴ with the observation that, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, new channels for the transmission of Islamic authority appeared, including print media and Islamic movements like the Wahabi reforms and the modernism of Abduh and Rida. In Barnard's story, the Bugis aristocrat Raja Ahmad was able to parlay his experience in Mecca into a claim to be a pious orthodox Muslim leader, legitimating his rule over the Riau-Lingga archipelago.

In the section on the colonial period, Merle Ricklefs draws on material he treated in *Polarizing Javanese Society* to describe how reform movements in the Middle East were brought back to Indonesia by an ever-increasing flow of Hajjis throughout the 1800s and into the twentieth century.⁵ Wahabi teachings stressing the observance of *shari'a* characterized even the Sufi brotherhoods (*tarekat*) that had been introduced into Java. Eric Tagliacozzo explores inconsistencies and contradictions in Snouck Hurgronje's view of Indonesian Islam rooted in tensions between Hurgronje's personal sympathy for pious Muslims and colonial anxieties about Islam. In "Southeast Asian Debates and Middle Eastern Inspiration: European Dress in Minangkabau at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century," Nico Kaptein surveys the debate that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century between a younger generation (*kaum muda*) of reformers and traditional Muslims (*kaum tua*) over whether Muslim men were allowed to wear Western dress. This essay provides a vivid example of how Southeast Asian Muslims exploited tensions between conservative Islamic authorities in Mecca and leaders of the reform movement in Cairo inspired by Muhammad Abduh and promulgated by Muhammad Rashid Rida, a subject also explored by Laffan in his aforementioned *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia*. Kaptein's essay takes the story a step further into the 1930s, when Salafi influence had eradicated more moderate traditionalism in Mecca.

Mohammad Redzuan Othman's essay on "The Origins and Contributions of Early Arabs" is a broad overview showing how commercial trading contacts between Arabia and Southeast Asia led to Islamization in the region. Othman points out that most of the Arabs settled in Southeast Asia today can trace their roots to the Hadramaut. He suggests that the sharp increase in the number of Hadrami migrants in the second half of the nineteenth century can be traced to the impact of Wahabi reforms in their homeland and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Sumit Mandal's essay describes how the respected modernist teacher Soerkati and prominent Hadrami merchant leaders in Java mounted a challenge to the status and prestige of the *ashraf*, a Hadrami elite bearing the title Sayyid who claim descent from the Prophet. The debate over *kafa'ah* (social equality) in Islam led to the establishment in 1915 of Al Irshad, founded by Hadrami reformers to raise funds to support Islamic schools that would end *sayyid* domination of education and produce progressive Muslims. This story has been told by Mobini-Kesheh; in his conclusion, Mandal emphasizes that the attack on hierarchy and *sayyid* privilege was also an attack on the colonial system that upheld social distinctions based on race. Michael Gilsenan's essay is distinctive in focusing not on the politics of the Hadrami, but on how the Hadrami were forced into a kind of

⁴ *Isnad* means "chains of transmission" and *silsilah* is Arabic for "chain," used by Sufis to refer to a chain of authorities or master teachers, a spiritual genealogy.

⁵ Merle Ricklefs, *Polarizing Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions c. 1830–1930* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007).

cosmopolitanism by the need to deal with different legal systems—Islamic, local custom (*adat*), and colonial law—in order to establish property rights and pass on wealth through inheritance. The case studies he presents make the point that choices about using or appealing to one set of legal institutions rather than another were strategic. Gilsean emphasizes that, over time, colonial law established property rights as central to the relationship between people and the state, reshaping Islamic charity and providing new channels for people to contest inheritance. Ulrike Freitag tells the story of the rise of a Hadrami family in Singapore and evokes the Hadrami ethos through translation of a *tawsiyya*, or letter of advice, to two young men about to depart to Southeast Asia as family agents. Mona Abaza presents the life story of Sayyid Mohammad Asad Shahab (1910–2001), a man from a prominent Hadrami family active in the debates and movements of the era. Her subject was a writer and publisher, an anti-communist critic of Sukarno, and an early supporter of the Palestinian people and of the Moros in the Philippines. In Saudi Arabia, where Shahab moved after 1965, he worked with the Muslim World League. All of these essays expand on *The Hadrami Awakening*, Natalie Mobini-Kesheh's important study of the evolving identity and political activism of the Hadrami community in Southeast Asia, emphasizing again the complexity of the Hadrami story and suggesting new directions for research.⁶

In a sense, there are two books here: Parts I–III, addressed to scholars of Southeast Asia, and Part IV, strangely titled “Into Modernity,” which pursues a discussion of radical Islamic groups and Islamic violence in Southeast Asia today (i.e., at least through 2004) and appears to be addressed to a general audience. In “Jihad and the Specter of Transnational Islam in Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Comparative Historical Perspective,” the longest essay in the book, John Sidel shows that Islamic violence in the Philippines and Indonesia has deep historical roots that go back to Spanish, American, and Dutch policies in the colonial period, and that Islamic violence was compounded by policies adopted by the authoritarian regimes of Marcos and Suharto that marginalized Muslims. Sidel points out that what are viewed from the West as “triumphs for global liberalism in economic, political, and cultural terms” were not experienced as an extension of inclusive, universalistic freedoms to Muslims in Southeast Asia, “but rather as the intrusions of colonizing, particularistic interests at the expense of Islam” (p. 312). In Sidel’s view, “jihad in Southeast Asia is ... overwhelmingly reactive and defensive in nature,” responding to national policies that have denied Muslims a strong voice in their own society, and “the internationalization of jihad most apparent in the Bali and Jakarta bombings” is the consequence of Muslim activists taking advantage of a new mode of mobilizing support for their Islamist agenda utilizing external resources (p. 312).

In the essay following Sidel’s, Moshe Yegar of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem makes an argument directly opposed to the one advanced by Sidel. Yegar maintains that “any attempt to understand Muslim rebellions in Southeast Asia must take into account more than an analysis of the local factors in each country or ... of relations between the Muslim minority and the majority government against which it struggled” (p. 324). After a review of similarities and differences in the Muslim separatist movements in Burma, Thailand, and the Philippines, and the response of the

⁶ See Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies, 1900–1942* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1999).

respective governments, he concludes that “the history of Muslim rebellions in Southeast Asia indicates that attempts to seek a solution to the problems of the Muslim minorities through economic or social instrumentalities did not succeed” (p. 343). The reason for the intransigence of these conflicts, in his view, is that religious identity “is the primary element in the lives and ... consciousness” (p. 344) of Muslims, and those who live in societies under the rule of non-Muslims will never accept rule by a non-Muslim government. Yegar recognizes that the Muslim minority communities in Burma, Thailand, and the Philippines endure higher rates of poverty than do the majority communities, and that poor communities are not represented in positions of political power. But he discounts the significance of these factors in the political mobilization of Muslim separatists, citing a survey he conducted that found Muslim minorities “saw the conflict in more than socioeconomic terms” (p. 343). The survey is not further described; one should presumably turn to Yegar’s book *Between Integration and Secession* for more information.⁷ Yegar’s dismissal of socioeconomic grievances as important is strange, as he acknowledges that prosperous Muslim merchants in Bangkok and Rangoon do not reject rule by a non-Muslim government. He simply maintains that minority Muslim communities subscribe to a religious ideology according to which “the rule of non-Muslims over Muslims is considered an affront to Islam and to the proper order of the world” (p. 325). Consequently, “there is no chance that various development programs in the areas of education, or in economic and social spheres, will be crowned with the results” (p. 343). One has to wonder whether Yegar is seeking to justify Israeli attitudes and the policies of Israel’s government toward Palestinians.

The concluding essay is by M. Syafi’i Anwar, executive director of the International Center for Islam and Pluralism in Jakarta. He describes the vibrant debate in post-Suharto Indonesia between proponents of what he calls “radical-conservative” Islam (those taking a “legal-exclusive” approach) and “progressive-liberal” Islam (those taking a “substantive-inclusive” approach), identifying the leaders and organizations on both sides of the debate and the issues being contested. Syafi’i Anwar concludes that the future orientation of Islam in Southeast Asia will depend on the success of democratically elected leaders in dealing with poverty, growing inequality, corruption, and lawlessness. If progress is not made on those issues, people will be inclined to accept the view that an “Islamic solution” is required to deal with the problems they face.

Taken together (with the notable exception of Yegar’s contribution), these essays demonstrate the agency of Southeast Asian Muslims in appropriating Islamic ideas and values with the goal of improving their own societies. They hold out the promise that the scholars who contributed to this volume will continue to expand our understanding of Islam in Southeast Asia as a local project. In particular, the essays by Sidel and Syafi’i Anwar deserve a broader audience. The public would be better served if they were required reading for all journalists who write on Islam in Southeast Asia today.

⁷ Moshe Yegar, *Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myama* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002).