

**Michael Laffan. *The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the Narration of a Sufi Past*. Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics. Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2011. 301 pp.**

Robert W. Hefner

The past six years or so have seen a welcome surge in publications on the Islamization of the Indonesian archipelago. Ronit Ricci's study of the dissemination and translation of the *Book of One Thousand Questions* (which was originally composed in Arabic in the tenth century) has provided us with a richly detailed portrait of an Islamic literary cosmopolis spanning South and Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Thomas Gibson's research on regional integration and identity transformation among the Makassar of South Sulawesi has enhanced our understanding of the cultures, politics, and subjectivities of Islamization in a once understudied area of the archipelago.<sup>2</sup> M. C. Ricklefs's two books on Islamization in Java from the fourteenth to twentieth centuries have allowed us to rethink basic assumptions about the place of Islam in Javanese culture, and have offered general insights into the ways in which ethnic and religious identities interweave in the process of conversion.<sup>3</sup> These and other recent studies have taken us well beyond earlier portraits of the Islamization of Indonesia as superficial, a cultural sleight of hand wrought by cloaking animist and "Hindu-Buddhist" practices in the casual garb of "Sufism."

Michael Laffan's new book on the makings of Indonesian Islam fits squarely within this welcome revisionist historiography. A professor of history at Princeton University, Laffan is the author of the earlier *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Winds*.<sup>4</sup> That book was applauded for the way in which it demonstrated that Islamic political ideals played a greater role than often assumed in the formation of early twentieth-century Indonesian nationalism. The new book has a reflexive ambition similar to that of the earlier book. The book's "major theme" centers on the question, "What are the supposed ingredients of Indonesian Islam?" (p. xi). The book's first sections are dedicated to combing through primary texts and historical archives to identify the ingredients through which *Jawi* (the Arabic term for Muslims from Southeast Asia) imagined and reimagined their faith as a result of their involvement with study circles in Mecca and Cairo. Laffan does not limit his account of Islam and Islamization, however, to the native point of view. He also explores "how Islam was interpreted and fashioned by the region's diverse actors; Dutch Christians included" (p. xii). In addition to the *Jawi* writings and networks, then, Laffan explores the archives and activities of the Europeans who sailed to the archipelago, and highlights their often self-serving efforts to make sense of the region's "Mohammedans." In the

---

<sup>1</sup> Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), reviewed in this issue of *Indonesia*.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Gibson, *Islamic Narrative and Authority in Southeast Asia: From the 16th to the 21st Century* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> M. C. Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java: A History of Islamization from the Fourteenth to the early Nineteenth Centuries* (Norwalk, CT: East Bridge, 2006); and M. C. Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions (c. 1830–1930)* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Laffan, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Winds* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2003).

nineteenth century, a handful of colonial scholars went on to pioneer the field of Dutch Orientalism. Foremost among the latter was Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje. Snouck is the subject of three of the book's chapters, and, in the author's words, "the pivot on which this book turns" (p. 123). Laffan adds: "far beyond a mere fact of background hegemony, the direct engagement of Orientalist advisors like Snouck ... is a major strand complicating this story" (p. xi). It is a complication that the author develops through a narratively sprawling, occasionally dizzying, but ultimately fascinating book.

Laffan divides his book into four sections of three chapters each. The first section is the most straightforwardly historical, and readers interested in a state-of-the-field overview of the early phases of the archipelago's Islamization will find this section deeply rewarding. Chapter 1 examines the ways in which, early on, a handful of royal courts in the western archipelago became promoters of the new religion. Laffan also reviews the role played by other key actors in the early phases of Islamization, including mystical fraternities (*tariqas*), Chinese traders, and Java's "Nine Saints" (*Wali Sanga*). The author takes exception to several long-established views of the role played by these actors in Islam's dissemination. Although the Nine Saints and other heroes of early Islam in Java are typically regarded as having been flexibly accommodating in matters of Javanese culture, Laffan demonstrates that some, like the famous Seh Bari, were not disposed to syncretism but sought to "sternly inculcate Islamic norms" (p. 9). Whereas earlier accounts of Islam's early arrival emphasized the role of mystical Sufism in easing the transition from Hindu-Buddhism, Laffan cites primary sources to conclude that Sufism's role in the first phases of conversion has been exaggerated. In the early years of Islamization, he argues, Sufism was "formally restricted to the regal elite," while "shari'a was commended to their subjects" (p. 24).

The elite commentaries Laffan cites do indeed support this let-the-masses-have-shari'a interpretation. But some readers will wonder whether scholarly sources are sufficient to determine what was going on more generally with Sufism and popular society in the early period. Studies of scholarly and popular religion in the medieval Middle East (where a richer assortment of historical commentaries is available than in the archipelago) show that, although religious scholars there made similar appeals for ordinary Muslims to leave mysticism to the lettered elite, popular society had had its own understanding of the proper balance of religious ecstasy and normativity.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, across much of the early and medieval Muslim world, the larger noetic economy involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of religious knowledge was typically deeply pluralized because it was not yet effectively tethered to the core institutions of madrasas and jurisprudential study. In this still-unsettled setting, the ability of scholars to define and enforce a systematic orthodoxy in popular society was limited at best.<sup>6</sup> Although his observations on Sufism must be regarded as tentative, then, Laffan's core claim as regards Indonesian Islam in the early period is

<sup>5</sup> On the less-than-integrated coexistence of normative legal scholarship and antinomian mysticism in medieval Cairo, see Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 244–45. For a vivid discussion of a similarly agonistic pluralism in modern Pakistan, see Katherine Pratt Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1997), esp. pp. 201–52.

<sup>6</sup> A point brilliantly illustrated in Louis Brenner's *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power, and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

convincing: that the debates raging in the early seventeenth century between the proponents of different varieties of Islamic piety were not evidence of “a showdown between an irenic and mystical Malayo-Indonesian Islam and a scripturalist Indo-Arab intolerance,” but were consistent with debates raging “in all parts of the Muslim world” (p. 16).

Chapters 2 and 3 concern the critical decades of the late eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, when both scholarly and popular varieties of Islam underwent far-reaching transformations. Building on earlier studies by Martin van Bruinessen and Merle Ricklefs, Laffan shows that the drivers for this change included the colonial state’s marginalization of the royal courts (which had heretofore played a central role in the sponsorship of religious scholarship) and the widespread establishment of more formalized institutions of Islamic learning.<sup>7</sup> Chapter 2 describes the curriculum and spread of Java’s Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*); it is arguably the finest such overview currently available in any single book. In these same chapters, Laffan draws on historical archives and the writings of Islamic scholars to demonstrate how *Jawi* scholars became more active in Middle Eastern scholarly networks. He also explores how the combination of *pesantren* growth and the lithographic press allowed for mystical fraternities with ties to Meccan-based circles to expand the scope of Islamic activity beyond the reach of the once hegemonic royal courts, especially in the aftermath of West Sumatra’s Padri Wars (pp. 41–44) and the Java War (pp. 44–46). Laffan offers vivid and original insights into the religious motivations of the Islamic leaders central to both conflicts.

The consequence of these nineteenth-century changes was that new Islamic publics came into existence, and the “scholarly diet” consumed in religious schools became “ever more stable and bound to standards set in Mecca and perhaps ... Cairo’s al-Azhar mosque” (p. 27). *Pesantren* growth and the removal of royal elites from the commanding heights of the religious economy also resulted in the spread of new varieties of mystical fraternities (*tariqas*). Some of these, not least the Naqshbandis, used print technologies and new forms of association to challenge the orthodoxy of their mystical rivals. In Java at this time, some in the *pesantren* and *tariqa* wings of the Muslim community also began to express their contempt for less observant Muslims by referring to them abusively as “the red ones” (*abangan*), as opposed to the pious “white ones” (*putihan*). Assuming readers’ familiarity with the topic, Laffan says little about who the *abangan* were and what their presence might say about the very meaning of “Islam” in Java. However, as Merle Ricklefs (whom Laffan carefully cites) has explored in richer detail, this divide was to fuel growing tensions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and, among some Javanese, caused a crisis as to what it meant to be Muslim.<sup>8</sup>

The three chapters in the second part of the book shift away from the culture of *Jawi* Islam toward Dutch (and to a lesser extent, English) efforts to understand Muslim populations of the Malayo-Indonesian archipelago. Although Laffan hints that he seeks

<sup>7</sup> See Martin van Bruinessen, “Kitab Kuning: Books in Arabic Script Used in the Pesantren Milieu,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde* 146,2-3 (1989): 225–69; Martin van Bruinessen, “Sharia Court, Tarekat and Pesantren: Religious Institutions in the Banten Sultanate,” *Archipel* 50 (1995): 165–200; and Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java and Polarising Javanese Society*.

<sup>8</sup> Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society*, passim.

to position this portion of his book within the burgeoning field of post-colonial scholarship on religion (a desire signaled in the title of the book's part two, "Power in Quest of Knowledge"), in these chapters and the book as a whole Laffan steers clear of extended theoretical exegeses, not least those that might reflect more systematically on the relationship of knowledge, society, and power. The lack of theoretical flourish may surprise readers from fields like anthropology, political science, and even religious studies—disciplines that today prefer that authors gird their analytic narratives in key theoretical debates. But Laffan's lighthanded theorizing allows him to husband his narrative resources for the task that he most obviously cherishes—finding unexpected gems in the historical detritus of Islamic texts, travelers' reports, and colonial archives.

Chapter 4 highlights the ways in which the first European travellers to the archipelago perceived Islam through the optic of Protestant notions of religion and congregation. Chapter 5 jumps forward to the imperialist surge of the nineteenth century, showing how the needs of empire and the pretense to science brought further changes in European efforts to understand and control Islam. Notable among these was the effort begun in 1818 by Governor General G. A. G. P. van der Capellen and his representatives to gather information on native education, "with an eye to substituting something of their [the Dutch rulers'] own devising" (p. 87). The reports prepared showed that the Dutch as yet had no fear "of Mecca as a scholarly destination" (p. 88); that, of course, would change with the growing number of *hajj* pilgrims later in the century. The early decades of the nineteenth century also saw a shift in the training programs of officials destined for service in the Indies. Whereas the Dutch East Indies Company had simply sent out officers and families and assumed they would learn what linguistic skills they could on their own, the new colonial administration would "dispatch a generation of young, single, men, who were expected to speak at least the major languages of the archipelago before commencing their official labors" (p. 94). The training was not to make a European consensus on Islam any easier.

Chapter 6 examines the ways in which nineteenth-century missionaries, more determined than ever to project their programs into native societies, understood Islam in a manner often at odds with the colony's rulers. Among other things, Laffan carefully chronicles the debates among missionaries and government officials as to just how "Mohammedan" Java and Sumatra's Muslims were, and how serious was the learning taking place in the fast-growing network of Islamic *pesantrens*. Many officials agreed with the director of the Indies Bible society, W. R. van Hoeffel (1812–79), that Sumatrans were more deeply Muslim while "Javanese barely knew their Prophet" (p. 106). Voicing a sentiment widespread in Western circles still today, most, too, were convinced that the study of scripture and commentaries in the *pesantrens* was mindlessly mechanical. No doubt reinforcing this conviction was the fact that Dutch officials sought to come to terms with Islam "through limited textual offerings" (p. 107) rather than sustained field studies. This would change in the aftermath of the Aceh War and the Cilegon massacre (in Banten in 1888). The two events catapulted a new figure into the Indies Islam limelight, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje.

As noted above, Laffan refers to the three chapters in part 3 as the "the pivot on which this book turns" (p. 123). But one suspects that many readers will experience these chapters not as the book's topical hinge, but (to switch metaphors) as another thickly furnished room in a sprawling mansion of a book. Chapter 7 examines Snouck

Hurgronje's early career in the Netherlands. Laffan reveals how dissatisfied Snouck was with missiological characterizations of Indies Muslims as "half-Hinduized Polynesian" (p. 128). The chapter reports on Snouck's distaste for the excessively juridical approach to Islam favored by government educators back in Holland. Most intriguing of all, Laffan provides a vivid account of Snouck's travel to Mecca in January of 1885, where he recited the Islamic profession of the faith and purchased and married an Abyssinian slave. "It seems that he was immediately accepted for the believer he claimed, at least outwardly, to be" (p. 133). Back in the Netherlands, Snouck drew on his experiences to call for a shift in the universities "away from the study of juridical theory" (p. 133) toward ethnography and philology. He had also concluded that the greatest threat to Dutch rule in the Indies was not Islam in general, but the unruly *tariqas* of popular Sufism. After presenting these observations, Snouck made common cause with several of the Dutch Indies' most celebrated Islamic reformists, including the Arab Indonesian official and public-intellectual-activist Sayyid 'Uthman. Marked by the heavy involvement of *tariqa* leaders, the Cilegon massacre guaranteed that Snouck's message would receive an eager administrative hearing.

Chapter 8 continues this survey of Snouck's career, from his arrival in Batavia in 1889 to his fieldwork in Java and Aceh shortly thereafter. Although the government regarded him as something of a spy in their service, Snouck was welcomed in Muslim circles "by virtue of his connections to the Meccan community and the belief that he still manifested" (p. 149). Eventually, Snouck moderated his views on *tariqas*, concluding that "in all cases" the political disposition of the fraternities "depends on the *goeroe*" (*guru*, mystical teacher, p. 156). The chapter also expands on one of the book's most important themes, exploring the ways in which the Meccan pilgrimage continued to strengthen Islamic networks and schooling back in the Dutch Indies. Chapter 9 discusses Snouck's later years, as well as (in lesser detail) the growing suspicion in some Muslim circles that Snouck's "ethical" policies were really part of a long-term plan to Christianize the Muslim Indies.

The fourth and last section of the book shifts focus back to the Indies Muslim community. At the turn of the century, the Dutch East Indies were witnessing the ascendance of a reformist Islam confident that it was to supplant what the community of Muslim reformists, with the help of Dutch Orientalists, had come to regard as an "ancient tradition of 'Indic' mysticism" (p. xiv). Chapter 10 follows Muslim debates about Sufism and orthodoxy, showing how these were part of the gradual emergence of a Muslim public sphere more attentive than ever to reformist currents in Mecca and, especially, Cairo, "where printing and public activism were becoming a hallmark of the new Salafi movement" (p. 189). Chapter 11 focuses briefly on Snouck's administrative successors, showing how an unsteady alliance emerged between Muslim reformists and Snouck-inspired scholars. The latter were confident that the colony's future lay in effecting collaboration between enlightened reformist Muslims and their "Ethical Policy" advisors. Chapter 12 reveals that, with the rise of a more assertive nationalist movement, the Muslim reformists and their administrative overseers were challenged by sugar plantation owners and reactionary officials convinced that any such partnership only put the Dutch empire in peril. Their suspicions seemed confirmed with the communist rebellions in West Sumatra and Banten in 1926–27. The Japanese march across the Indies in early 1942 swept the Dutch

authorities away, obliterating what little remained of the earlier collaboration between Dutch officials and reformists.

Laffan has written one of the most engaging and important books in several years on Muslims, Europeans, and Islamization in the Indonesian archipelago. The array of archival and Islamic textual sources on which Laffan draws is far-ranging and impressive. The early chapters on the first centuries of Islam offer a state-of-the-field summary of what can be known. The author's insights into the changing role of Sufi *tariqas*, the spread of new institutions of Islamic learning, the growing influence of a "Meccan standard" of normative Islam, and the dialogical engagements of Dutch colonial officials with Indies Muslims all represent important and original contributions to the study of Islam in Indonesia.

Two features are likely to constrain the larger impact of this otherwise remarkable book. The first is that the book relegates the broader structure of archipelagic politics and political culture, even that intimately related to Muslim historical agency, to a distant or assumed narrative background. While M. C. Rickle's *Polarising Javanese Society* provides a masterfully engaging account of the broader changes in modern Javanese society that propelled competition between "the red ones" and the "white ones," Laffan largely leaves readers to their own devices on background historical currents like these. Thus, for example, although in the book's final pages the author comments that the Indies political field was "increasingly dominated by nationalist and communist agitators" (p. 232), he provides but a few sentences that hint at how such an unexpected development was possible in a society marked by the ascendance of Islamic reform. This is to say, too, that the unstable plurality of traditions of knowledge and power that competed to shape Jawi subjectivities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are for the most part put aside in Laffan's narrative, in favor of an anachronistically secure "Muslim" identity.

Similarly, although the varieties of mystical fraternities operative in the Dutch Indies loom large in the central chapters of the book, Laffan provides but bare comment on their doctrinal, cosmological, and ritual genealogy. Absent this framework, undergraduate readers will find this book taxing; even graduate students in Indonesian studies are advised to throw themselves into core curriculum readings on Indonesian Islam and politics before beginning their reading, so that they can better appreciate the wealth of insights this book has to offer.

The second quality that may limit the impact of this book concerns the interpretive criteria by which the author identifies what figures as an "ingredient" in Indonesian Islam—and his criteria for identifying Islam itself. On the second page of his Preface, Laffan cites with justified disapproval Clifford Geertz's characterization of Islam in Indonesia as "until recently, remarkably malleable, tentative, syncretistic, and most significantly of all, multivoiced."<sup>9</sup> We realize today that some of Geertz's observations were based on obsolescent historical materials and theoretical framings. From this perspective, Laffan's book can be understood as an extended criticism of Geertzian portrayals of Indonesian Islam. The book boldly affirms that from the seventeenth century in Sumatra and the eighteenth century in Java, *Jawi* Muslims developed a

<sup>9</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Developments in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 12, cited in the book under review, p. xii.

heightened awareness of and commitment to normative principles at the center of study and debate in Mecca and Cairo.

In terms of the breadth of historical evidence it accumulates to support its thesis, Laffan's book is a remarkable achievement, indeed. But it is a work that on certain important points looks away from rather than toward what remains worthwhile in the efforts, not just of Clifford Geertz, but of a host of contemporary scholars of Islam and Indonesia. Although, as Merle Ricklefs has correctly observed,<sup>10</sup> Geertz erred in projecting the division between abanganism and normative Islam back to the first years of Indonesia's Islamization, his basic insight that Islam in Java (and many other parts of the world) was multi-streamed and that each stream represented a practice and tradition of knowledge grounded on its own political and subjective economy of knowledge was sound. It is a like-minded premise that informs the above studies by Thomas Gibson and, not least of all, Merle Ricklefs. No less significant, the approach also underlies efforts underway to "rethink Islamic studies" in a post-Orientalist and noetically pluralist direction, one attentive to the varied and sometimes opposed ways of identifying, inhabiting, and enacting a "religion."<sup>11</sup> A similar paradigmatic shift can be seen in the recent efforts of anthropologists of Islam to highlight the diverse subjectivities and practices at the heart of "living Islam," as opposed to the two-dimensional Islam of textual representation and normative interpretation alone.<sup>12</sup>

To argue that it raises important questions like these is to bear witness to the importance of Laffan's book. This is not a book specialists of Indonesia will be able to hand to undergraduates as a guide to the history of Islam in Indonesia. The work assumes an advanced familiarity with prior texts and disciplinary arguments. With its meticulous scholarship and its wealth of insights into European and Indonesian Muslim understandings of Islam, however, there can be no doubt that this is a path-breaking study. It is a book that should be welcomed and read by all scholars of Islam and all specialists of Indonesia.

<sup>10</sup> Ricklefs, *Mystic Synthesis in Java*, p. 233.

<sup>11</sup> See Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin, *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2010). For a similarly post-Orientalist approach in the field of Theravada studies, see Rachelle M. Scott, *Nirvana for Sale: Buddhism, Wealth, and the Dhammakaya Temple in Contemporary Thailand* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> See Magnus Marsden, *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Samuli Schielke, "Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and the Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians," in *Islam, Politics, Anthropology*, ed. Filippo Osella and Benjamin Soares (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 23–38.