Robert W. Hefner, ed. *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia.* Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009. 246 pp.

Andrée Feillard

Islamic education has emerged as an essential yet so far understudied prism through which to understand the less visible face of Southeast Asian Islam. This is a point demonstrated in Robert W. Hefner's new study of Islamic education in Southeast Asia. This book takes up the challenge of examining an educational system comprising some fifty thousand Islamic schools in a region reputed for its religious moderation, yet, since 2000, plagued by unprecedented violence. The result is a path-breaking work, impressive for the amount of literature studied and new data very well synthesized.

Hefner has succeeded in giving probably more clues on the region's future than does any contemporary report of political turmoil. Given the public's suspicions that Islamic boarding schools were nurturing terrorism after the wave of Jemaah Islamiyah's (JI, an underground organization engaged in a campaign of bombings since 2000) violence and arrests of 2001 and 2002, which Hefner recalls in his introduction, Islamic education was a likely focus of research in confusing transitional times. But it also can be an uneasy and potentially dry subject. As an American anthropologist specializing in Indonesian Islam, which has the largest national Muslim community in the world, and as a researcher increasingly interested in a comparative perspective, Hefner was arguably the person most suited for this two-year research project (2005–06) that involved some twenty-five researchers in five countries.[1] The resulting study demonstrates that there is an amazing variety of Islamic schooling systems in one single zone, highlighting the vivid contest between Islamic interpretations of Holy scripture and the often successfully innovative efforts to fill the gap between secular and religious education.

Hefner's introductory chapter ("The Politics and Cultures of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia") presents a rich and unique synthesis of an impressive array of scholarship on the subject, relative to both the Middle East and Southeast Asia. In this essay, Hefner stands back and reflects on Islam in Southeast Asia using a truly comparative perspective, something rarely done. His optic is to look at how the spread of intermediate-to-advanced training in the Islamic sciences to Southeast Asia has influenced the local balance of authority among different varieties of Islams. Hefner observes that the process of standardization and canonization occurring in Islamic education during the Muslim Middle Period (1000–1500 CE) took place in Southeast Asia only centuries later. Contrary to Geertz's characterization of Islamic boarding schools as an institution influenced by Hindu-Buddhist learning, Hefner shows that the spread of schools for advanced learning was a modern development, extending from the late eighteenth century in West-Sumatra and Patani, till the late nineteenth

[1] See Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) and Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, ed., *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

century for South Sulawesi and Kalimantan. This spread, ironically, was hastened by the advance of Western colonialism, which brought the ease of travel to the Middle East and a crisis of authority to native rulers. A third factor that facilitated the establishment of these boarding schools was the reform movements arising in Arabia and other parts of the Middle East since the eighteenth century. The result is an undermining of "syncretic," or non-Sunni Islams, which had once been so widespread across the region, but the collapse of which now stands as one of Southeast Asian Islam's most striking traits. Finally, Hefner also argues that in all five countries studied (with a qualified exception for Malaysia), "the postcolonial storm" has been weathered, with Islamic education opening to "a critical engagement with the plural and instable intellectual horizons of the modern world" (p. 44). For Hefner, the dynamism of Islamic education in Southeast Asia is so marked that it is most aptly compared not with "medieval scholasticism," but "Roman Catholic educators' efforts in the 20th century United States to respond to a world not entirely of their choosing but in which they were determined to prevail" (p. 45). One difference, though, is an involvement in politics and public affairs encouraged in Islamic schools, something that would not matter so much if it were not "for the tendency of a small fringe to interpret Muslim ethics and knowledge in an exclusive and absolutist way" (p. 46). Hefner makes here available an impressive amount of information to support a very sophisticated picture of Islamic schooling in Southeast Asia in a wider worldwide context. It is arguably the most enlightening chapter of his book.

In chapter two ("Islamic Schools, Movements, and Democracy in Indonesia"), Hefner describes with finesse the nuances of the new currents (*aliran*) religion and politics, never indulging in caricature but keen to give the right measure of how much conservatism/moderation and exclusivism/inclusivism each of them carries. His choice of qualifying Abu Bakar Baasyir's Islamic boarding school as "modernist" rather than "reformist" attests to his constant effort to avoid derogative clichés. Most importantly, Hefner makes an interesting argument, bringing forth a new theoretical optic to try and understand the fastest-growing trends in Islamic education, i.e., the "Integrated Islamic schools" mostly linked to PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, Prosperous Justice Party) and Hidayatullah. For Hefner, "the most striking parallel between Islamic schooling and social movements [...] has to do with the 'framing processes' in which both engage. Cultural frames must (1) diagnose some chronic problem in society in a manner that resonates with the needs of people; (2) recommend a strategy for the problem's remedy; and then (3) provide a rationale that motivates actors to support the proposed course of remedial action" (p. 72). Since the 1990s, he writes, some new Islamic schools bear "an at least partial resemblance to the recent social movements theory," inasmuch as they demand a more far-reaching transformation of politics and society than did, so far, the "Islamic-but-pluralist nationalist mainstream groups" (p. 73). And this is true notwithstanding the fact that the rejectionist minority is "tiny" (p. 97), not state-centric, but aiming at changing citizens and society. Hefner's argument is well presented, with potential objections considered and well circumscribed. His perspective and approach merit reflection as an innovative but central theoretical optic in reconsidering new education trends not only in Indonesia but maybe also elsewhere in the Muslim world.

What is challenging when researching Indonesia, compared to all other Southeast Asian countries, is the large size of the archipelago and the huge numbers with which

one has to deal. To cope with this problem, Hefner chose to conduct an opinion poll among 900 scholars and educators on questions of sharia and democracy. The survey allowed him to expose the current paradox of Indonesians being in favor of both sharia and democracy while still not voting for political parties advocating sharia implementation. Hefner's interpretation of this paradox is that "most Muslims are uncertain as to the law's practical entailments, and thus prefer an empirical approach to social problems" (p. 95). In the minds of most voters, excepting radical Islamists, sharia is "not an entity akin to Western positive law" (p. 95). The poll results, in my view, also expose quite well the gap between values present in the more secular Muslim milieux and those present in more Islamized circles (p. 93): for example, whereas only 33 percent of the general public (2004) was in favor of polygyny, some 75 percent of Islamic educators are (2006). Also interesting is the fact that Islamic educators are at times more open to democracy than is the general public: 94.2 percent of educators say that every citizen should be allowed to join any political organization, while only 82.8 percent of the general public holds this same viewpoint (p. 92).

To Hefner's sophisticated interpretation of the poll results, which show a high degree of support for democracy among Islamic educators, I would add that post-Soeharto democracy has given total freedom to all sorts of Islamic groups (including radical Islamists). All in all, Hefner's relative optimism for the future rests on several objective reasons: Indonesia's Islamic state universities are unique in Southeast Asia for their attempt to expand the intellectual horizons of Islamic boarding-school students and madrasa graduates. Hefner also justly notes that Indonesia benefited from the presence of "some of the New Order's most gifted cabinet officers" (p. 101, n. 29), e.g., Munawir Sdjazali, during the authoritarian regime of Soeharto, a remark only a long-time observer of Indonesian politics would dare. Hefner's other argument is that, contrary to the situation in Egypt, where Islamists have moved into the vacuum provided by the state's inability to provide basic services for the poor, PKS, which is moderately Islamist, cannot find such space, because that space has been taken by other mass organizations defined as "moderate or moderately conservative" (p. 98). The question remains, in my view, whether this space is filled as much as it used to be after the breakdown of Soeharto's more protective policies in education and health, and after the abundant natural disasters affecting Indonesia since the 1990s. This said, Hefner's analysis remains outstanding for the complete picture it gives of the singularity of this largest Muslim country in the world, which has shown a unique confidence in its efforts to blend Islam and modernity.

Nowhere in Southeast Asia has a country reacted as vigorously as has Malaysia to Islamic radicalism with reforms of its education system, in particular the changes affecting the Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR, People's Religious Schools). This point is made by Richard G. Kraince in the book's third chapter ("Reforming Islamic Education in Malaysia, Doctrine or Dialogue?"). Kraince's description of the history of Islamic education up to the present reforms is well presented, with a special emphasis on gender issues, explainable by the widespread influence of the Sisters in Islam (Muslim professional women promoting rights of women in Islam). Nevertheless, Malaysian reforms have their limits, writes the author, who points to the paradox of Malaysian Islamic education, "a culture of scholasticism that places greater emphasis on promoting a unitary interpretation of Islam than it does on nurturing critical thought" (p. 136). Gender-biased textbooks are cited at length, which highlight the dilemma

faced by Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's Civilizational Islam (Islam Hadhari) campaign: the Malaysian government may have succeeded in taking control of the SAR—for political reasons, as SAR was mostly deemed as being too close to the opposition party, PAS (Partai Islam se-Malaysia, Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party)—but, in general, the content of Islamic education has escaped the government's efforts to reform it. Kraince describes as "one of the anachronisms" (p. 135) the rigidity of the Islamic education curriculum, this all the more striking since Malaysia has experienced an "unsung revolution," (p. 129) to borrow the words of Cecilia Ng, Maznah Mohamad, and Tan Beng Hui,[2] that is, the high levels of women's achievement in academia and the workplace.

One country of Southeast Asia—Thailand—probably raises more interrogations on the state of Islamic education than any other because of the uncertain nature of its recent violent upsurge. In this book's chapter four, Thailand receives a very thorough treatment by Joseph Chinyong Liow ("Islamic Education in Southern Thailand, Negotiating Islam, Identity and Modernity"). The gap between the past and present is striking: Liow demonstrates that this former reputed center of Islamic learning in the region (Patani) has been left, paradoxically, relatively untouched by reformism compared to Indonesia and Malaysia. It is the place *par excellence* where traditional Islamic boarding schools (*pondok*) have survived into the twentieth century almost unchallenged by modernism. Thai government policy (from 1961 into the 1970s) has finally opened up the *pondoks*, integrating these centers of Malay Islamic identity into the nation state better than ever before. Despite this opening, due to continued poverty and sporadic repression, Saudi and Tablighi influences have made their way in the traditionalist landscape. It is quite interesting to see that, even in a place where Malay identity is so much linked to religion, Arabic has still been able to progress. In terms of gender, the region's conservatism is noteworthy, except regarding the right to work, which women do have.

The discovery that Hambali, the alleged hand of al Qaeda in Southeast Asia, had chosen to reside in Cambodia (Phnom Penh) may seem not so astonishing, after all, when one reads chapter five ("Muslim Metamorphosis, Islamic Education, and Politics in Contemporary Cambodia), by Bjorn Atle Blengsli. The case of Cambodia offers rare transparency, with detailed data made available on this diverse Muslim minority scattered over several areas of the Cambodian territory. Indeed, the state of Islamic education here is unique, given that it had to start from scratch after Pol Pot's suppression of religion. Consequently, Cambodia has the fastest changing system in the region. The ease with which the India-born Tabligh missionary organization has been able to take root in Cambodia is a fascinating phenomenon. Also noteworthy is the weight of foreign influences from ages back: Malaysia and Southern Thailand and more recently Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait (through new schools). Compared to the Southern Thailand case, no secessionist threat is influencing the way the government deals with the Muslim minority, yet sharp political rivalries have

[2] Cecilia Ng, Maznah Mohamad, and Tan Beng Hui, *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung (R)Evolution* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

[4] W. F. Wertheim, "Indonesian Moslems under Sukarno and Suharto: Majority with a Minority Mentality," in *Indonesian Politics: A Reader*, ed. Christine Doran (Townsville: Centre for South East Asian Politics, James Cook University of North Queensland, 1987), pp. 111–32.

politicized the way to deal with Muslim minorities, with various parties giving their protection to one or the other current of Islam, in exchange for their support.

Some of the most unexpected findings come in chapter six ("Islamic Education in the Philippines, Political Separatism, and Religious Pragmatism"), by Thomas McKenna and Esmael Abdula, who demonstrate the pragmatism of parents concerning Islamic education in one of the most conflict-ridden areas of Southeast Asia. Forcefully—at times with emotional accents—the authors try to dispel misunderstandings that exist with regard to this region, rejecting the prevailing view in the Philippines that Islamic schools are breeding future suicide bombers. A telling point of information that illustrates their argument is the fact that Janjalani, chief of the Philippines' "only identified homegrown Islamist extremist group," (p. 234) was a product of a Jesuit high school, not a madrasa. And he would have conducted his early recruiting for Abu Sayyaf at a public university, the Western Mindanao State University. This is evidence of how, for the Philippines at least, the roots of terrorism in the name of Islam should not be searched so much in Islamic schooling, but maybe more so in geopolitical perspectives available outside the Islamic system. It could probably be a future theme of research in itself, at least as relevant as that of Islamic schools proper.

In reading Hefner's book, one is struck by the fact that Indonesia, the only country under consideration here with a large Muslim majority, is also the country that has done a relatively good job, over a lengthy period of time, of integrating both Islamic and general education. Would that be because of the confidence stemming from a (new?) "majority mentality"—as opposed to the "minority mentality" described by W. F. Wertheim?[4] Minority mentalities, as shown in Malaysia, and, to a lesser degree, the Philippines, Thailand, and Cambodia, seem, then, a constraint for the integration of religious and general subjects, and for Malaysia may be painful remnants of a colonial past.

Hefner's *Making Modern Muslims* will remain a timely reference book on the subject, with far-reaching significance for understanding the diversity of Islamic education and modernity in Southeast Asia. His exhaustive readings of the available literature on Islamic education in the Muslim world give the book a wide and unique perspective, which makes his work all the more readable for non-Southeast Asianists. Not only should scholars working on Islam in other parts of the world be moved to consider this region with greater attention, but also—why not?—prompted to make useful similar comparative studies for their own region. Southeast Asianists will appreciate Hefner's treatment of rich historical, statistical, and other data, combined with the nuanced interpretations of seasoned social scientists, an approach badly needed in times of intense interrogations about the recent upsurge of Islamic radicalism. Hefner's work on Indonesia proper will also be of prime interest to Indonesianists for the array of material that he has synthesized. Praise is also due for the attention this collection gives to gender issues, despite the fact that all the authors are male (two female scholars who were invited were unable to join the project). Hefner's conclusions on the great decline of syncretic or non-Sunni Islams may sound gloomy, but they reflect compelling realism. Nevertheless, Hefner remains confident that "al-Qa'ida terrorism is bound to fail" because it is "so out of step with mainstream Muslim society" (p. 5). The question remains open on how Islamic reform will further

proceed, that is, "to determine just what is timeless and required in their tradition, and what must be reformed in a world where much that is solid melts into the air" (p. 5).