



SEATIDE Online Paper 9

## **Muslim Education in Southeast Asia in Historical Perspective**

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Followed by a response to 'Muslim Education in Southeast  
Asia in Historical Perspective'

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## **Muslim Education in Southeast Asia in Historical Perspective**

Sumit Mandal (independent scholar) and Tim Harper (University of Cambridge)

### **Abstract**

This essay offers some thoughts on the history and continuity of Muslim education rather than a discussion of new research as there is already substantial work on the topic. The scholarship on the subject has tended to view it through the lens of the nation-state. This essay takes an exploratory approach that recognises Muslim education as a site of multiple scales of transnational interaction in order to identify the underlying dynamics of education in the transition from the colonial to the independence eras. The early twentieth century saw the efflorescence of a variety of unprecedented Muslim schools that addressed the inequality and injustice of colonialism through innovative curricula and by drawing teachers from far and wide. It was a time of pioneering organisational activity that drew on transnational sources, before the rise of outright nationalist movements. The essay draws from this historical moment in its reflection on Muslim education as the aspirations to a Muslim modernity left a lasting mark on the region. It has been noted that transnational interaction has typically been underplayed or even viewed with suspicion by colonial empires and nation-states. Yet transnational routes have been an active resource for local transformation well before the globalising currents of today. Then and now Muslims have sought education and intellectual inspiration from regional and transregional sources. Then as now these efforts have been frequently viewed as a potential threat to national and international security. The degree to which nation-states have marginalised or even excluded Muslim education is illuminated when we put it into historical perspective. There is some underlying similarity between Southeast Asian and European nation-states in this regard. Far from a security threat, many contemporary Muslim schools have continued to be important sites of educational innovation and serve significant social needs.

### **Introduction**

This essay offers some thoughts on the history and continuity of Muslim education rather than a discussion of new research as there is already substantial work on the topic. The scholarship on the subject has tended to view it through the lens of the nation-state if not nation-building itself. Deliar Noer's classic study of modernist Muslim politics and organisations sheds light on the associated schools as well. He sees these developments as the precursor to the Indonesian nationalist movement:

The greater stress will be on the Muslim movement itself, since any important movement in Indonesia was originally that of Muslims. Those operating under a

banner other than Islam were mostly those who had left the cradle in which they had been nursed earlier. It can be said that nationalism in Indonesia started with Muslim nationalism (Noer 1973: 73).

This essay takes a more exploratory approach that recognises Muslim education as a site of multiple scales of transnational interaction in order to identify the underlying dynamics of education in the transition from the colonial to the independence eras. It draws its methodology and analytical focus from an overview of education in Southeast Asia by Tim Harper (2011) and expands on the question of Muslim education.

The early twentieth century saw the efflorescence of a variety of unprecedented Muslim schools that addressed the inequality and injustice of colonialism through innovative curricula and by drawing teachers from far and wide. It was a time of pioneering organisational activity that drew on transnational sources, before the rise of outright nationalist movements. This essay draws from this historical moment in its reflection on Muslim education as the aspirations to a Muslim modernity left a lasting mark on the region.

## **Muslim Education**

Muslim education has been the site of considerable transnational interaction of people, ideas, and knowledge for centuries. This interaction has taken place across vastly different scales. Students have undertaken the journey across the Indian Ocean to learn from reputable scholars in Mecca. Students have also travelled the relatively short distance from Terengganu (in Malaysia today) to study in Patani (in present-day Thailand). The experience of these different scales has come to bear on Muslim schools that have been established across Southeast Asia.

Muslim education refers to a broad range of centres of learning with a longstanding history in the region. The *pondok* in the Malay Peninsula and the *pesantren* in Java are two well-established schooling traditions that frequently centre on the figure of a well-known scholar. The *madrasah* introduced in the early twentieth century in major cities of the Netherlands Indies and British Malaya taught a hybrid curriculum that included both European languages and school subjects as well as Islamic subjects. Colleges and universities in Malaysia and Indonesia have for several decades now offered an education in Islamic traditions and law. Today Muslim education is available from the primary to the tertiary level in both countries and is international in the composition of its students and teachers. As it was historically, Muslim schooling today is part of a transnational field of interaction.

## **The Early Twentieth Century**

Efforts to transform education in Southeast Asia were catalysed by the challenges posed by colonialism at the turn of the twentieth century. The wealthier Asian landowning and trading classes were almost wholly excluded from the educational institutions introduced by colonial rulers. They encouraged and provided financing for the establishment of schools of their own. Muslim educators were hired whose task it was to start schools that would provide an education in the subjects taught in colonial as well as Islamic schools, thus developing unprecedented hybrid curricula.

To reflect on this time in Muslim education is to draw on a world of multiple diasporic connections in the colonial cities of Singapore, Penang, and Batavia (Jakarta today) (Harper 1997; Kahn 2006, Roff 2009). Here Muslims from near and far mingled. Javanese, Buginese, Malay, intermarried, socialised, and traded with Indians, Arabs and others. They did so within a wider world of Chinese, Europeans, and diverse faiths. They were driven by the quest for equality of status with Dutch and British colonial rulers and imbued their schools with this ideal.

It is also important to note that cities were not the only places to have transnational connections. Areas such as the Minangkabau heartland of West Sumatra, on the eastern flank of the Indian Ocean, had wide international linkages from trade and the hajj that functioned at a small town and village level. Patani, in what is today southern Thailand, was long known as the 'veranda of Mecca'. Both these regions drew in scholars from afar, and exported religious teachers and ideas across the Malay world.

But it was in the port cities in this period that there was the most intense competition with western education. This was also a process of interaction: the 'western' or 'colonial' sector and local initiatives were never wholly distinct from each other. Missionary inspired schools – such as the Keasberry School in Singapore in the 1840s and 1850s – were instrumental in creating a new generation of reforming Malay administrators who reinvigorated the traditional Malay polity and themselves played a role in Muslim religious reform. These men saw themselves as living between two worlds (Milner 1994). Similarly, these schools were important sites for translation, not only of Christian texts into Malay, but in helping the circulation of reformist Malay texts within the Muslim ecumene, in advancing the business of translation itself, and the use of Romanized script (Proudfoot 1993). The current controversy in Malaysia over the rendering of Christian texts into Malay largely ignores this mutually creative tradition of translation and transmission.

## **Schools for Muslim Moderns**

The new Islamic schools of the early twentieth century saw themselves as agents of modernity that served to educate the young to work and excel in the colony, and to be

on a par with Europeans. They were important early efforts for the struggle for equality that catalysed anti-colonialism in the decades that followed. One of the characteristics of the many new hybrid Islamic schools that emerged in Batavia, Singapore, Penang, and other cities is that they drew their inspiration and teachers from regional and transregional routes of educational flows. They did not necessarily draw inspiration from exemplary Muslims alone. It is worth recalling that Egyptians looked to Japan following the latter's defeat of the Russian Navy in 1905. Religious scholars from Central and South Asia were drawn to Japan and publications and missions from Japan reached out to Muslims across Asia (Esenbel 2004).

The Jam'iat al-Khayr school established in 1903 in Batavia is a pioneer institution in the region and drew from the transnational connections of its time. Its local-born Hadrami founders sought the best teachers from Mecca and other centres of learning to lead the transformative pedagogy of their schools. This school prompted the establishment of others in Batavia and the region. The teachers went on to establish their own schools in some instances, and some became important figures in the anti-colonial years and following independence. Education was part of a larger ideological and political mobilisation. There were hierarchies and inequalities in the formation of the madrasahs, and contestation over their orientations (Mandal 2009). These contending movements drew from transregional and regional sources as they fed into the broad nationalist movement.

Sayyid Shaykh al-Hadi (1867-1934) is an exemplary figure of this time. The writer, teacher, and reformist was born in Melaka and raised in Riau, Sumatra across the Straits of Melaka. He travelled in the Arabic-speaking world and studied at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, then notable for its modernist Muslim thinkers and educators. He was part of a wave of scholars who introduced the emergent ideas of Cairo to Southeast Asian Muslims. He established three schools, Madrasah al-Iqbal al-Islamiyyah in Singapore, Madrasah al-Hadi in Malacca, and Madrasah al-Mashoor al-Islamiyyah in Penang (Noer, Sikand, and Bruinessen 2008: 194-95). The trajectories of his work and life constitute the historical legacy of three nation-states today: Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia.

## **From the Colonial to the National Sphere**

The break between the national and colonial eras was significant as many of the modern madrasah either diminished in importance or became incorporated into national education systems over time. Both colonial and national policy was hostile to the local initiative of the *pondok* and *pesantren* models. As Ruth McVey has put it in the case of post-colonial Indonesia, the dilemma was:

whether instruction was to be in familiar surroundings and with a minimum of formality, or whether it should be in a place kept apart, which embodied the new order to which the pupil was to be acculturated and which aroused awe and obedience. Governments and established faiths have preferred the latter; new

beliefs have often opted for the former, both because it emphasized accessibility and because it required fewer resources (McVey,1990: 8).

To this might be added that, historically, the more informal sector has also been more acclimatised to transnational influences. These too were often as not viewed with suspicion. Yet despite these pressures, the historical impetus for innovative and hybrid solutions to the problems of Muslim education in the face of global challenges however appears to have lasted. In this, knowledge entrepreneurs and charismatic teachers have found space to reassert their influence.

The context for this is the rapid changing map of education in the region, particularly the massive expansion of private tertiary education. In Malaysia alone, the number of foreign students in higher education rose from 18,240 in 2001 to 86,923 in 2010: around three-quarters in private higher education institutions. The Malaysian government's stated goal is 200,000 by 2020. In 2010, the largest contingents were from Iran (13.6%), China (11.8%), Indonesia (11.4%), Yemen (6.7%) and Nigeria (6.7%) (Institute of International Education 2014). These were both a resumption of old historic and a reflection of new global connections.

Where does Islamic education stand in this? Large numbers of Muslims from Southeast Asia continue to undertake religious study abroad: in the Middle East and South Asia. But in recent decades education in the Muslim world has been decentred to some extent from the old sites of Islamic authority. Southeast Asia is now an important destination for Muslim education in its own right. An early example of this was the International Islamic University, founded in 1983 under the auspices of member states of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in Malaysia. Around 20 percent of its graduates have been from overseas and the University was unusual at the time of its foundation for its use of not only of Arabic, but of English as a medium of instruction. It has also attracted non-Muslim students. This was a state initiative. But this revived transnational sphere has extended to the private sphere.

## **Private Capital**

Looking at longterm and transnational trends as well as beyond the norms of the nation-state, we find a variety of ways in which Muslims are coping with education in innovative ways today. These innovations can be found at every level, and have become big business. Ambitious enterprises extend their schools across the regions, as can be seen from the Singapore-based Al-Irsyad School or the Global Islamic School based in Jakarta, Indonesia. In Malaysia, the profitable pre-school education sector has fostered initiatives that mix Montessori and Islamic methods, such as the 'Little Caliph' chain of 'Islamic-English-Creative' pre-schools which franchises to over a hundred branches across Malaysia (Little Caliphs Program). It is worth noting that in Java, as early as the 1920s and 1930s, the Taman Siswa movement mixed the Kindergarten method with Javanese tradition and the Santiniketan model of Rabindranath Tagore. In a different

sphere, Malaysia has emerged as a centre of education in Islamic Finance. In 2014, over 2,000 people had enrolled in courses at Malaysia's International Centre for Education in Islamic Finance: some 14 percent from countries where Muslims are a small minority and also including non-Muslims (Ho and Liau 2014). But here again, this has a longer history: madrasahs in colonial Malaya had introduced classes in modern accounting by the 1930s and 1940s, and a radical movement of educational and economic uplift was led by Maahad El Ehya' Al Shariff, at Gunung Semanggol, Perak, which was only arrested by an alliance of the colonial state and elite Malay interests on the outbreak of the Malayan Emergency in 1948 (Nabir 1976).

## Contemporary Trends

Muslim education and its transnational connections have been viewed with suspicion by security authorities in the United States with the initiation of the 'War on Terror' after 2001, much as it was the case in the colonial era. Networks of Muslim teachers and schools have been said to encourage political violence in the name of Islam. John Sidel's analysis suggests that this would have less to do with the character of Muslim education than the efforts by particular groups to advance their cause in the face of declining Muslim political influence in different national contexts (he compares the Philippines and Indonesia). Additionally, Farish Noor, Yoginder Sikand, and Martin van Bruinessen provide substantial evidence and compelling arguments of Muslim education as largely serving an important need in large segments of the poor across the world. Their work also points to efforts whose innovative and transnational constitution and reach recall the impetus for schools in the early twentieth century.

Many contemporary Muslim schools are important sites of innovation and serve significant social needs. To cite but a few examples, the Malaysian filmmaker Yati Kaprawi has documented *ulama perempuan* (women Islamic scholars) in Java who have actively encouraged women to participate in what is a male-dominated profession. Husein Muhammad, who is a teacher at the pesantren Dar al-Tauhid in Cirebon, Java has been championing the rights of women through his writing and by establishing non-governmental organisations. Monika Arnez has explored how some pesantren have been integral in the production of Indonesian Muslim responses to the growing transnational Islamic discourse on environmentalism.<sup>1</sup>

To draw attention to these trends is not to minimise the conflicts over the substance and the symbols of Islamic education that continue to occur between state and religious authorities and the private sector, and within the complex day-to-day negotiations between different participants in these initiatives. However it does point to a range of sites of educational interaction, over a long duration, which are imperfectly understood and obscured by an over-reliance on the lens of the nation-state.

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<sup>1</sup> Arnez is a fellow researcher in the collaborative research project 'Integration in Southeast Asia: Trajectories of Inclusion, Dynamics of Exclusion (SEATIDE)'.

## Concluding discussion

The essay locates Muslim education in Southeast Asia in a broad historical and transnational field and brings to light continuities in educational innovations that are obscured through the focus on the national. It has been noted that transnational interaction has typically been underplayed or even viewed with suspicion by colonial empires and nation-states. Yet transnational routes have been an active resource for local transformation well before the globalising currents of today. Then and now Muslims have sought education and intellectual inspiration from regional and transregional sources. Then as now these efforts are frequently viewed as a potential threat to national and international security. The degree to which independent Southeast Asian states have marginalised or even excluded Muslim education is illuminated when we put it into historical perspective. These nation-states have integrated Islamic symbols and have bureaucratized independent religious authority at the cost of the traditions of innovative education with a transnational reach.

It could be argued that Muslim-majority, as well as European states, have diminished the role of Muslim education. Independent Southeast Asian states' acceptance of the symbols of Islam, whether in dress, architecture and language, has albeit been reluctant. Meanwhile, European states have in notable instances such as France rejected the very same symbols. Significantly, however, a powerful historical impetus to face oncoming changes and absorb and redeploy external influences is suppressed in both instances. Although the comparison is helpful in bringing to the fore what appears to be a seemingly unlikely similarity between Europe and Southeast Asia in underlying processes of marginalisation, it should be taken further only cautiously. The experience of Muslims differs vastly in the two regions. It could be said with some confidence, however, that the need to pay attention to religiously-oriented schooling may be necessary not only in Asia but Europe. Increasing capacity in research and cooperation in this area would be widely beneficial.

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## **A response to 'Muslim Education in Southeast Asia in Historical Perspective'**

Iza Hussin (University of Cambridge)

### **Introduction**

Sumit Mandal and Tim Harper locate their exploration of Muslim education in Southeast Asia in a "broad historical and transnational field," focussing on the early twentieth century as a period of significant dynamism and change that had durable effects for Muslims in the region today. This response draws from three of their observations in particular: that Muslim education is itself has long been a site of transnational interaction, that Muslim schools have seen their role as providing resources for balancing Islam and countervailing forces such as modernity or the nation state, and that private capital plays an increasingly important role in the direction and shape of Muslim education today. It suggests possible questions for further exploration along these lines: how do the networks and institutions central to Southeast Asian transnationalism condition the range of strategies for negotiating tensions between the nation state and Islamic institutions? How do these tensions then become part of the experience and the daily life of Muslims in Southeast Asia? And how has the rise of global Islamic business affected Muslim educational repertoires?

### **Muslim Education**

In their edited volume on Islamic education around the world, *Schooling Islam* (2007), Robert Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman provide diverse cases of Muslim educational reform as responses to colonial and post-colonial interventions. Each case seems to occupy a point along a continuum between outright adoption of European state institutions and models, and outright rejection in favour of a self-consciously Islamic model: in the Ottoman Empire, educational institutions were re-organised to consolidate the empire and counter the rise of Western powers; in Morocco, the politico-religious elite left Islamic schools in favour of European-style educations; in India, Islamic educational institutions reached out to a mass Muslim public, offering Islamic education as an antidote to the colonial state. (Hefner and Zaman 2007, 15-19) All modern responses, all transnational in their scope and their terms of reference as well as their reliance on networks beyond the territorial state; and all represent a major tension running throughout debates on Muslim education, often expressed as a choice to be made between Islamic and state institutions.

Bringing the Southeast Asian experience into this range of responses, Hefner points out that the Indonesian experience of educational reform was unusual in "the ease with which it assimilated cultural forms of diverse provenance," (20) paving the way for "some of the Muslim world's most ambitious reforms of religious education." (21)

Hefner and Zaman's volume makes clear the diversity of Muslim responses; Mandal and Harper's contribution to this area of exploration is, among others, to broaden the scope of inquiry to "multiple scales of transnational interaction," while at the same time paying attention to the specificities of Southeast Asian interactions, networks and pathways. One question that extends from cases in Southeast Asia such as Mandal and Harper have raised, then, is what factors have conditioned or constrained the range of responses to the state-Islam tension in Southeast Asia? And, given the interest in possible policy and comparative implications, especially with Europe, are there substantively different tensions for Muslims living in the United Kingdom, France or Germany (to name only a few states with highly visible Muslim populations) or are these a matter of degree?

### **Schools for Muslim Moderns**

These tensions, at the quotidian level, warrant further research as well. Mandal and Harper point to the role of schools as "agents of modernity," places that hybridised and localised regional and transnational flows of ideas, institutions and people. Islamic schools throughout Southeast Asia carry these legacies and have built upon them, but increasingly are having to contend with national and international metrics, to economic pressures, to linguistic pressures, to problems of teacher qualifications and supply as well as to parental anxieties about economic and social success. Transnationalism cuts in several directions; the manner in which children, parents and institutions manage and make meaning of these sometimes conflicting pressures is a subject for further exploration.

Here, gender politics may also be important to continue to keep in view: from the visible and coercive, for example in the ways that states and institutions govern proper dress for female students and teachers (the requirement or banning of hijab in public schools and universities); to the systemic and symbolic (the ways that gender is performed and taught in schools across the religious-secular spectrum); and also in terms of the selection effects of demography and class on which types of schools parents choose to send their male and female children. The *ulama perempuan* of Java and those of Egypt and China; women graduates and faculty of Islamic universities; the utility of hijab for women's mobility; the appeal of Muslim preachers and evangelists to women – all these may yield important comparative and policy lessons.

### **Private Capital**

Taking on Mandal and Harper's assessment of the importance of Islamic business to questions of Muslim education and innovation, another transnational flow might also be added – that of models of religiosity significantly inspired (perhaps) by prosperity gospel and evangelical Christianity, in which economic and worldly success is both a sign of, and a conduit to, salvation. Here, in addition to the examples Mandal and Harper put

forward, might also be added the massive popularity of Muslim preachers and televangelists; the combination of popular music and Islamic modes of behaviour and expression; ideas of success, progress and civilisation (*Islam hadhari*) that combine capitalism, usually represented as value-free and not historically laden, with Islamic ideals and Muslim culture. What dynamics do these promote, what tensions do they conceal? While we may tend to think of Muslim education in institutional terms, as taking place in schools and requiring long-term enrolment and affiliation, it is possible that the rise of private business in education means that weekend seminars, online learning, occasional lectures and short camps now constitute a significant component of how Muslims in Southeast Asia now learn about being Muslim, and where ideas about Muslim life, family, society and politics might be developing in particular segments of the Muslim middle class. Immigration and educational travel, to Southeast Asia from Central Asia, Turkey, Iran and Syria, and from Southeast Asia to North Africa, China, and the Middle East, may also play an influential role in these developments and exchanges.

## **Conclusion**

Mandal and Harper point out that it is difficult to avoid questions of political violence and security when discussing Muslim institutions, but that this unfortunate fact may also be a symptom of the uneasy relations between transnational institutions and the national order. Perhaps, then, the conflict and tensions that arise between Muslim educational institutions and the nation state may reveal continuing fault lines between the transnational and the national; the cosmopolitan and the global; the regional and the local. Mandal and Harper have raised important and exciting new areas for discussion and exploration, one of which is the overlap, co-constitution and competition amongst multiple scales of the non-national: where the nation state has diminished Islamic education, private businesses have filled a growing desire for Islamic goods and cultural products; where regional networks of Islamic institutions and learning have had to contend with national metrics and global competition, transnational Muslim networks have provided new languages of Muslim modernity and success; where local Muslim schools have been downgraded to informal and occasional spaces of learning, international Muslim education has supplied other pathways for the achievement of Muslim aspirations.