

Islamic Education System and Muslim Identity in Southeast Asia

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Abstract: *The increasing public attention towards Islam in Southeast Asia shows a positive trend for the development of Islamic studies. However, it is necessary to provide an adequate understanding of Islamic traditions in Southeast Asia so that the research conducted does not escape the actual context. This article tries to describe the tradition of Islamic education in the Southeast Asian region. The results show that Islamic education in Southeast Asia has developed rapidly from elementary to tertiary levels. The process of Islamic education in turn gave birth to the Jawi tradition. The Jawi tradition symbolically and functionally develops its own original identity without damaging its Islamic character and cognitive characteristics.*

Keywords: *Islamic Education, Muslim Identity, Jawi, SouthEast Asia.*

Abstrak: *Meningkatnya perhatian masyarakat terhadap Islam di Asia Tenggara menunjukkan trend positif bagi pengembangan studi Islam. Namun demikian, perlu diberikan pemahaman gambaran yang memadai tentang tradisi Islam di Asia Tenggara sehingga kajian yang dilakukan tidak luput dari konteks yang sebenarnya. Artikel ini berusaha mendeskripsikan tradisi pendidikan Islam di wilayah Asia Tenggara. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa pendidikan Islam di Asia Tenggara telah berkembang pesat dari tingkat dasar hingga perguruan tinggi. Proses pendidikan Islam tersebut pada gilirannya melahirkan tradisi Jawi. Secara simbolik dan fungsional tradisi Jawi tersebut mengembangkan identitasnya sendiri yang asli tanpa merusak karakter Islam dan karakteristik kognitifnya.*

Kata Kunci: *Pendidikan Islam, Identitas Muslim, Jawi, Asia Tenggara*

A. Introduction

In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in the study of Islam worldwide, both within the Muslim community and outside it. Such interest is contributing to significant changes in the way that the study of Islam is both conceptualized and taught in the region. Once dominated by scriptural interpretation and exegesis, for some years there has been a growing trend towards the use of new disciplinary approaches in the understanding of various religion-influenced phenomena in Muslim societies. The field of Islamic Studies now encompasses a wide variety of disciplines, including those of anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, and the more interdisciplinary fields of gender studies and area studies. Outside of Islamic Studies scholars in these disciplines are also turning their attention to the study of issues pertaining to Muslims and Islam. The topics which such scholarship seeks to understand in Muslim societies are also increasingly diverse, and include democracy and political pluralism, secularism, gender, law, human rights, ethics, economic development, the environment, popular culture, consumerism, Islamic finance, even management and organizational theory.

Recently, the Islamic education in Southeast Asia has become an object of international attention. However, the development of Islamic education should primarily be seen as having been determined by the unique historical circumstances of each country. The Studies in the various countries represented in this volume is the outcome of long struggles with governments, religious authorities, and different religious schools of thought, protecting varying interests—political and economic, as well as scholarly.

This paper will highlight the tradition of religious education in Southeast Asia which includes Islamic education, the structure of religious education, and the development of higher education institutions in Southeast Asia. Based on the education system, this article then sees that the "Jawi" tradition is the identity of the Muslim community in Southeast Asia.

B. Islamic Education in Southeast Asia

The study of Islam in Southeast Asia has a long history of being "globalized", it is clear that the educational networks and scholarly

pilgrimages in Islamic Studies are also changing significantly. For some years the universities of McGill, Temple, Leiden, Chicago, and the Australian National University (for Islam in Southeast Asia) have been competing with the traditional centres of Islamic Studies, such as Al Azhar or the Islamic University of Medina, for influence over a much broader field of Islamic Studies. Globalization has given unprecedented opportunities to greater numbers of young Southeast Asian Muslims to study overseas than ever before, whether it is in the Middle East, Iran, South Asia, Europe, the UK, North America, or Australia. Student mobility, scholarly exchange, international conferences, joint research projects, the setting-up of Islamic Studies centers in Western universities, international benchmarking and quality assurance among universities in Muslim countries, the increasing use of English as a medium of academic discourse, and not least of all the communicative revolution made possible by the Internet and email, are all impacting upon the nature of the study of Islam in Southeast Asia. They are increasingly drawing it into a single, globalized academic landscape.

The expansion of material resources available for the study of Islam in Southeast Asia is a further crucial factor in the development of the field. The unprecedented interest in Islam has also attracted the attention of scholarly foundations and funding agencies globally both in the Islamic world and the West. While the flow of Middle Eastern oil wealth into Islamic schools and education institutions worldwide is well-known, less attention has been given to how no Muslim funding agencies are also impacting upon studies of and Islam. Some of these funding bodies may reflect the political agenda of the governments with whom they are affiliated (e.g. combating terrorism or promoting democracy), or at least concerns that are more prominent in the West: e.g. in the case of Europe, the integration of Muslim minorities into European mainstream society, or the promotion of a democratic, 'liberal' Islam. In the case of Southeast Asia, international funding agencies have long been active in funding local scholars and projects in the field of Southeast Asian Studies within the context of promoting economic and social development. Local funding sources should also not be overlooked. The relatively successful path to economic development of Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia and Brunei, and to a lesser extent Indonesia, has enabled the governments of these countries to provide greater resources for the study of Islam in their schools, colleges and universities.

C. The Structure of Religious Education in Southeast Asia

The public education systems in the Muslim majority countries of Southeast Asia include religious education. In Indonesia, religious education in state-run schools is multi-religious. Every student who belongs to any of the five recognized religions (Islam, Catholic Christianity, Protestant Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism) is entitled to religious instruction in his or her religion (although a minimum number of students is required before instruction in a particular religion is provided). If no religious instruction is available in accordance with the student's faith, the student has the right to be excused from religious instruction. Instruction in Confucianism can also be offered as an option in state schools, although Confucianism is not a recognized religion. The religious curriculum is set by the Ministry of Education, in consultation with representatives of the different religious communities. Textbooks are produced by autonomous publishers, but screened by the Ministry. In order to enhance the teachers' knowledge of other religions, the general competence aims for the other religions are cited in the introduction to the curricula for every religion.

Aside from religious instruction in state schools, Islamic education is also provided throughout Southeast Asia at the primary and secondary levels through boarding schools. In Malaysia and southern Thailand these schools are known as "pondok"; in Indonesia, such boarding schools are known as "pesantren." Indonesia also has Islamic day schools known as "madrasas" (confusingly for Westerners, who associate the term madrasa with the boarding schools of the Middle East and South Asian).

The majority of the Indonesia's pesantren are affiliated with the traditionalist NU organization. A smaller number adhere to the modernist doctrines of the Muhammadiyah and Persis organizations, and only a very small minority teaches extremist interpretations of Islam.

In Indonesia, most pesantren and madrasas include instruction in secular subjects in their curricula. Nevertheless, these institutions have a religious purpose to teach Islam through the reading and recitation of the Quran. Successful students are those who are assessed from the Quran in Arabic without mistakes, even though many of these students do not fully understand in Arabic.

Senior students at these institutions are taught more complicated Islamic doctrines—for example, Islamic theology, law, and ethics. Since textbooks are largely only available in Arabic, learning the Arabic language and how to translate those textbooks into the local dialect constitutes a major part of the teaching process and is carried out by the teacher with every student individually. In the Indonesian pesantren, students do not have a time limit for completing their education, and they can leave a school when they feel their knowledge of Islam is sufficient.

Indonesia's pesantren are run and often owned by an individual religious teacher. The students are bound in a personal relationship with their headmaster or teacher, who may promote a particular ideology or interpretation of Islam. Many contemporary pesantren are now providing both traditional Islamic education and modern national education. In addition to the general curriculum, many kiai have found it useful to offer extra courses—(English and computer science are the most popular)—as well as vocational training in skills such as driving, automobile repair, sewing, small business management, and welding. In part, this is in response to government programs designed to encourage the improvement of human resources. In part, it is a reflection of the fact that skills-training is a time-honored part of pesantren education. Traditionally, students did not pay for their education or lodging but worked for the kiai in exchange for their expenses.

Even with the addition of secular and technical subjects, the main purpose of the pesantren education, as noted above, is to spread Islam. Pesantren values define a modernity quite different from that practiced in the West. The values of Islamic brotherhood and selflessness are seen as safeguards against heartless Western capitalism, and "self-sufficiency" is taught as the ground of individual and the nation continued independence. For individuals, this means that a person should exercise the entrepreneurship that development requires, but controlled by Islamic values. These values are by no means inconsistent with democracy. Over the past decade, more than one thousand pesantren have participated in programs aimed at promoting the values of pluralism and tolerance, and at bolstering civil society. In one such program, the pesantren students are taught to run issue-based political campaigns, to conduct elections for student leadership, and to represent their constituency both with pesantren leaders and the local community.

D. Islamic Universities in South-east Asia

The most extensive and sophisticated system of university-level Islamic education in Southeast Asia and perhaps in the entire world-is in Indonesia. The Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic University, formerly the Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) or State Institute for Islamic Studies, is comprised of 52 colleges and universities with over 100,000 students. The PTAIN system draws many of its students from the pesantren since, until recently, a pesantren education did not provide access to other universities.

The university's overarching aim is to produce tolerant graduates with a modern, "rational Islam" outlook. The university has nine faculties, including a Faculty of Theology (Fakultas Ushuluddin), which includes a Department of Comparative Religion, a Faculty of Sharia (Fakultas Syari'ah) and a Center for Women's Studies. Perspectives of comparative religion have been included in Islamic studies at IAIN, together with interfaith, human rights and gender issues. The IAIN also publishes two noteworthy academic journals, *Studia Islamika* and *Kultur*, which publish articles by Indonesian and Western Islamic scholars. According to Amin Abdullah, the rector of UIN in Yogyakarta, PTAIN has long been at the forefront of issues such as interfaith dialogue and at improving overall relations between Islam and the West (we must explain to the Saudis that they misunderstand the West).

Another major system of Islamic university education associated with the Muhammadiyah. The Muhammadiyah university education is based on the Dutch system, and includes teaching of religious subjects that reflect, naturally, Muhammadiyah modernist beliefs and principles. A third Islamic university is Islamic University of Indonesia. Both the IAIN and Muhammadiyah universities subscribe to democratic and pluralistic values. After downfall of President Suharto's government in 1998, IAIN developed a civic education course to replace the previously mandatory state ideology courses with a new curriculum designed to teach democracy in an Islamic context. This course has been made mandatory for all students in the IAIN system and has proven so successful that the Muhammadiyah network also developed its own mandatory democratic civic education course.

In Malaysia, the system of Islamic university education has gone a different route. As part of its Islamization program, the Mahathir government established the International Islamic University (IIU) near

Kuala Lumpur. As the university's name indicates, its approach to Islamic studies reflects a universalistic interpretation of Islam that is closer to that of religious institutions in the Arab world.

In the Philippines, there are some Islamic colleges, but no Islamic university. The Mindanao State University, a secular institution with nine campuses, has a majority Muslim student body. The main campus of the university and its three branches are within the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) at Marawi City, Datu Odin Sinsuat, Tawi Tawi and Sulu, respectively. There is an Institute of Islamic Studies at the University of the Philippines that conducts research, but in order to receive the required education in Islamic studies required, a Filipino student must go abroad.

Thailand plans to establish its first Islamic university in 2005. The university will be a branch of Egypt's al-Azhar University. The Thai government will provide most of the funding for the project, but the university will seek financial assistance from outside sources, including from Muslim countries. This development should be watched, as it is likely to impact the overall political and intellectual dynamic of Islam in Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

In conclusion, Southeast Asia has an extraordinarily large well-developed structure of Islamic education that can be a respite of critical importance in the ongoing war of ideas within Islamic institutions can be expected to keep the Muslim communities in Southeast Asia rooted in their moderate and tolerant values, despite the apparent onslaught of extremist ideology from the Middle East. At a global level, they could serve as the building blocks of a moderate or liberal Muslim international movement to counter the influence of radical Salafi networks.

E. The Jawi as a Common Identity

The Muslims of mainland Southeast Asia are an integral part of the Jawi tradition that has emerged to give Islam in Southeast Asia its distinctive feature. Symbolically and functionally the Jawi tradition developed its own identity which was distinctively indigenous without undermining its Islamic character and cognitive characteristics. Although the Jawi tradition is often associated mainly with Malay culture, it actually goes beyond this to also include other vernacular cultures like the Cham. Historically, the Jawi network developed in many regional

centers, but for centuries the Patani region on the Malay peninsula was one of its principal centers. It is partly the attempt to try to sustain the relevance of the Jawi tradition in its new form that appears to have aggravated the political difficulties for Muslims in that part of Thailand today. For the Muslims of southern Thailand today, not to try to keep that tradition alive would be tantamount to rejecting their past existence and cultural heritage. Their problems have been compounded by the fact that recent political developments have made it extremely unlikely that they would be able to set the agenda for educational change independently without the political sanction of the state and its agenda. The nature of the new nation-states that have emerged in mainland Southeast Asia as well as their political systems, regimes and policies have become critical factors in determining the options that are available to the Muslim minorities in their attempts to preserve their religion and their socio-religious identity.

So, historically, culturally, socially, and politically, the Jawi tradition has always been intrinsically connected to Islam. It is principally Islam that is Jawi's *raison d'être* in Southeast Asia. The traditional links between the various Muslim groups in the Muslim world of Southeast Asia constituted a region-wide Jawi network which has been principally inspired and facilitated by Islam. The transnational ties that continue to exist between Muslim minorities and the Malay world have essentially been supported by regional Jawi networks that have been in place since the early days of Islam in the region.

F. Conclusion

Based on the description above, this paper concludes that the Islamic tradition in the region of Southeast Asia has a distinctive tradition and is different from Islam in other regions. Islam brought from Haramain has been developed in such a way that gave birth to a moderate Islamic tradition, a tradition unique to the Muslim community of Southeast Asia called *Ashhab al-Jawi*. Therefore, efforts should be made to intensify Islamic studies in this region with various approaches and modern perspectives. [.]

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