

The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the Narration of a Sufi Past

Michael Laffan

*Princeton and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press,
2011. 320 pages.*

This rich, nuanced historical study effectively encourages (demands, perhaps) a rereading of much of what has been written about Islam in Indonesia by western observers. Focusing on a period during which the Indonesian nation itself was being made – Dutch colonial times (c. 1800-1942) – Michael Laffan sets out to investigate what makes Indonesian Islam and who has participated in the processes by and through which it has been made (p. xi). Dipping also into earlier times, he argues that the makings of Indonesian Islam lie in interactions spanning centuries involving Southeast Asian Muslims, Muslims from other places, and the Dutch (p. xi). He draws on a wealth of archival and scholarly sources (especially Dutch material) to explore the role that Dutch Orientalist advisors played in the history of Indonesian Islam and in its (mis)representation in western writings (pp. xi-xii). Complicating understandings of Sufism in the region, he also focuses on “disputes about the place of *tariqa* praxis – the rituals of mystical reflection organized under the guidance of a preceptor known as a *shaykh* – which represents but one aspect of Sufism as a field of Islamic knowledge” (p. xii). With its exploration of the makings of Indonesian Islam on multiple levels, this book would be of particular interest to specialists (especially historians) of Indonesia, Southeast Asia more broadly, Islam, and colonialism.

Laffan methodically, convincingly, and clearly develops his argument through a preface, four parts – each of which has three chapters – and a brief conclusion. After providing an outline of his argument and the structure of

the book in the preface, he delves into the arrival and spread of Islam in the Indonesian islands in part 1, "Inspiration, Remembrance, Reform." The first three chapters, "Remembering Islamization, 1300-1750," "Embracing a New Curriculum, 1750-1800," and "Reform and the Widening Muslim Sphere, 1800-1890," establish Islamization in the region as a complex, global process involving the interactions of Southeast Asians, Indians, Persians, Arabs, and Chinese along trade routes (pp. 4, 6, 7). He highlights strong influences from the Middle East through people from the Middle East who traveled to Southeast Asia, Southeast Asian scholars who went to the Middle East and either returned to Southeast Asia or wrote for audiences in Southeast Asia, and Middle Eastern (including Egyptian) written works (pp. 17, 18, 24). Through networks that made Southeast Asia part of a larger Muslim world, diverse and sometimes conflicting ideas about Islam circulated in the islands, including different ideas about Sufism, mystical fraternities (*tariqa*), and their places in the societies of the archipelago.

Part 2, "Power in Quest of Knowledge," turns to the coming of the Dutch and the expansion of Dutch power in the islands, demonstrating that Dutch missionaries who resided in the region as well as Dutch scholars in Europe misunderstood and thus misrepresented Islam as lived and practiced in the archipelago (p. 123). Through the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters, "Foundational Visions of Indies Islam, 1600-1800," "New Regimes of Knowledge, 1800-1865," and "Seeking the Counterweight Church, 1837-1889," Laffan attributes such misunderstandings in part to the Dutchmen's own Protestant religion. For example, the emphasis on understanding religion through texts in Protestantism was a factor leading the Dutch to conclude that the discrepancies between Islamic texts and the practice of Islam in the islands meant that "Javanese and Malays were not proper Muslims" (p. 123). As Laffan shows, Dutch writings nonetheless do provide information about Islam in the region – "tangential and certainly unintended evidence of an active engagement with new modes of thinking, with printing, and with Sufi practices imported from the Middle East" that contributed to ongoing tensions among Indonesians about diverse approaches to Islam (p. 121).

Further investigating the representation of Indonesian Islam in part 3, "Orientalism Engaged," Laffan focuses on the work of the influential Dutch Orientalist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936). Laffan documents his career in Holland, Arabia, and the Indies as a scholar and colonial advisor in chapter 7, "Distant Musings on a Crucial Colony, 1882-1888," chapter 8, "Collaborative Encounters, 1889-1892," and chapter 9, "Shadow Muftis, Christian Modern, 1892-1906," showing that Snouck sought to understand

Islam as lived and experienced by its adherents through fieldwork, rather than relying exclusively on texts (p. 137).

Snouck, however, although working to better understand the religion in the region so that the colonial state could better control its subjects (pp. 146, 148), also contributed to the misrepresentation of Indonesian Islam. Arguably influenced by his elite Muslim allies in the Indies who shared a concern about the threat that populist mystical orders posed to their own power and influence (p. 235), Snouck argued that “Islam . . . needed to be modernized” (p. 161). He agreed with his Muslim allies that “the tariqas were the leftovers of a by-gone age of Indic-inspired ignorance” (p. 235) and portrayed the *tariqas* as such. To modernize Islam, in Snouck’s view, “Muslims had to be weened from their faith in jihad and from the mystical teachers” (p. 161). As Laffan has led us to understand, portraying the tariqas as remnants of an Indic past erases the complex place that Sufism and mystical fraternities have occupied in the history of Indonesian Islam as well as Sufi influences that came to Indonesia from the Middle East. Moves to disempower mystical teachers, however, served the security interests of the colonial state as well as those of the Muslim elite.

The fourth and final part of the book, “Sufi Pasts, Modern Futures” – consisting of chapter 10, “From Sufism to Salafism, 1905-1911,” chapter 11, “Advisors to Indonesië, 1906-1919,” and chapter 12, “Hardenings and Partings, 1919-1942” – take the reader through the last decades of colonial rule. As Laffan traces in this part and reiterates in the conclusion, Snouck’s ideas about Islam’s history in the islands were passed on to his Dutch and Indonesian followers (p. 235). Both Dutch scholars and Muslim reformers believed “that a new Islam was coming into being in the Indies, and that this new form would supplant the region’s assumedly ancient tradition of ‘Indic’ mysticism” (p. xiv). The historical conclusions of Snouck and his followers were little questioned as Indonesia moved into nationhood and have persisted into the present (p. 235).

The Makings of Indonesian Islam is an impressive and important scholarly contribution that provides a wealth of information and critical perspectives to scholars and students alike. A glossary, index, and eleven figures (including maps and photographs) enrich the text and are helpful resources for the reader. As an ethnomusicologist with research interests in Javanese arts and culture, I very much look forward to using this book in my own research projects and rereading this book with students in advanced seminars to further explore the diverse ways Muslims approach and experience Islam in Java as well as to further explore issues surrounding the representation

of Islam in Java (particularly as these issues relate to my own interests in music, dance, and theater). To these ends, it would be productive to read *The Makings of Indonesian Islam* together with Clifford Geertz's *The Religion of Java* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1960), Mark R. Woodward's *Islam in Java: Normative Piety and Mysticism in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1989), Judith Becker's *Gamelan Stories: Tantrism, Islam, and Aesthetics in Central Java* (Program for Southeast Asian Studies, Arizona State University, 1993), Laurie J. Sears' *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), and Timothy Daniels' *Islamic Spectrum in Java* (Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), among other studies. Laffan's book also provides an instructive framework for the investigation of the "makings" of Islam in other places, and through its attention to the career, work, and positionality of Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, encourages critical self-reflection on our own positionality, and the ways we as students, scholars, editors, administrators, etc. working within particular structures of power and knowledge represent Islam in our own work.

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