Sultans, Shamans & Saints: Islam and Muslims in Southeast Asia

Howard Federspiel
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007. 297 pages.

Few people in North American academia are more knowledgeable about Islam in Southeast Asia, and especially in Indonesia, than Howard Federspiel. The forte of his own research contributions lays not so much in innovative analyses as in presenting comprehensive and useful overviews for specialists and novice students alike. As a political scientist, he made his name with his study of Indonesia's Persatuan Islam (PERSIS), a modernist Islamic organization active from the 1920s until the 1950s – the critical time frame during which the Dutch colony gained its independence. This was followed by further contributions to the country's contemporary intellectual history. With *Sultans, Shamans & Saints*, Federspiel has now tried his hand at producing a general overview of Islam in Southeast Asia.

Although not conceived as a history, "for purposes of presentation" (p. 5) the study has nevertheless been arranged chronologically. And while not guided by a single methodology, it "comes closest perhaps to the 'historical-periods' comparison of G. Bergsträsser in his 1930 study of Islamic jurisprudence" (p. 4). Federspiel has organized this study of Islam and Muslims in a "non-Arabic setting" (p. 2) around the postulate of an "Islamic zone" transcending political as well as geographical boundaries and has framed his narrative in four periods: a brief chapter on Islam's slow penetration of maritime Southeast Asia (600-1300), a more expanded account of the "emergence of a hybrid Muslim culture (1330-1800)," and then two long chapters in which he discusses the "emergence of new Muslim institutions (1800-1945)" and the history of the nation-states founded in the wake of the Second World War.

In each of these chapters the author works his way inwards: starting from the region's place within the greater Asia setting, he pays attention to Southeast Asia's ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity – Islam coexists here alongside other "world religions," such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, the Chinese religiocultural value systems of Confucianism and Taoism, and localized animist and shamanic practices. The discussion then moves on to the "people and their activities": the political developments, relevant communal mores and customs, as well as the intellectual and artistic aspects of the various Southeast Asian Muslim societies.

In the first half millennium of its existence, Islam was carried to Southeast Asia via the trade routes traversing the Indian Ocean and, to some extent, an overland route further north. During these early centuries it was only known through contacts with itinerant traders from West and South Asia and the limited presence of expatriate merchant communities in emporia scattered along the region's long coastlines. There is no evidence of any substantial conversions among the indigenous populations during these years. The first indications of some form of local adherence to Islamic teachings and practices do not emerge until the very end of the thirteenth century, hailing the beginning of a lengthy and pluriform conversion process that was soon complicated by the arrival of other foreigners from even further West, halfway through this time frame.

One of the earliest centers of an emerging Southeast Asian Muslim society was the port of Melaka (Malacca), located on the eponymous sea straits between the Malay Peninsula and the island of Sumatra. Federspiel sketches a three-stage scenario replicated at various places in insular Southeast Asia.

After exercising limited influence on the inhabitants of ports such as Melaka, Aceh, and a string of settlements along the north coast of Java, the process only gains momentum after local rulers and courts begin to adopt elements of Islam's tenets, gradually followed by the general population.

Once Islam has gained a firmer local foothold, a hybrid Malay-Muslim culture begins to evolve, one that draws on the input from the Islamized parts of India as well as Persia and the Arabic-speaking world through a continuing reliance on the Indian Ocean trade routes, now doubling as conduits for Islamic learning. Federspiel also traces three types of Islamic states he has identified during this period, exponents of which he sees recurring throughout the region in the centuries to come: a community model that remains very local due to tight familial and clan connections; a looser vassal model that often involves less cohesive migrant populations with no close kinship ties to the area; and a hierarchy model controlled by a higher authority capable of exercising effective political control for extended periods of time.

Miniature "empires" (e.g., early Melaka, the northern Sumatran sultanate of Aceh, and the kingdom of Mataram on Java) also function as centers of education and intellectual life. Relying heavily on Islamic learning from the Arabic- and Persian-speaking parts of the Muslim world, local linguistic and literary styles undergo a drastic transformation. This body of knowledge is transmitted and further developed at so-called "Islamic boarding schools." A defining feature of Malay-Muslim culture, Federspiel gives only the local Sumatran name, *surau*, and not the more widespread Malay (*pondok*) and Javanese (*pesantren*) equivalents. In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, what Federspiel refers to as the "Islamic specialists" (e.g., scholars, Sufis, and state functionaries) who participate in the networks spanning the Muslim world become instrumental to integrating Southeast Asia into the *Dar al-Islam*. Parallel to this "elite" Muslim culture of courts and centers of learning, there also developed a more populist strand in which – aside from lesser clerics – shamans or spirit doctors (*bomoh* and *dukun*) played a pivotal role.

The book's remaining two-thirds are dedicated to the developments of the last two centuries. As the Industrial Revolution got underway in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, Southeast Asia's political-religious landscape changed dramatically. By the end of the nineteenth century the whole region, except for Thailand, was controlled by western powers. Much of the third chapter is thus concerned with juxtaposing the interfaces between the region's Muslim populations and their colonial overlords, with particular attention for the impact of the administrative and educational policies of the

Dutch (in Indonesia), British (Malay Peninsula and Borneo), French (Cambodia and Vietnam), Spanish and American (southern Philippines), and Thai (northern Malay Peninsula) colonial authorities. Although Federspiel correctly underscores the central importance of the Islamic education system in sustaining and asserting Muslim identity in the face of western political hegemony, the chapter's thirty-odd final pages provide a rather fragmented account of the synergies between Islamic education and developments in Islamic thought and ideology, nationalist ideas, adherence to Islamic practices, and developments in literature and other forms of artistic expression.

This flaw extends to the fourth chapter as well, as it tries to provide a bird's eye view of the region's post-war history in both its Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority states. To his credit, Federspiel draws on his expertise in contemporary Indonesian intellectual history with, albeit, brief references to such progressive Muslim intellectuals as Nurcholish Madjid, Dawam Rahardjo, and Kuntowijoyo. While this first generation of postcolonial thinkers-activists has been instrumental in creating a relatively open intellectual milieu, it is rather unfortunate that he pays no attention to the younger generations who are presently exploring exciting new ways of engaging with Islam. Indicative of this, to my mind, too early cut-off date is his over-reliance on dated source material and ignoring of recent contributions by both younger Asian and western scholars. Despite such shortcomings, however, *Sultans, Shamans & Saints* provides a useful introduction for those who want to become acquainted with one of the Muslim world's most fascinating parts.

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