The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern `Ulama' in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Ayzumardi Azra
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004. 254 pages.

This book, an extension of Azra's doctoral dissertation, explores the transmission of Islamic knowledge from the Middle East to the Malay-Indonesian (*Jawi*) world. Making use of Arabic biographical dictionaries and scholarly texts, he produces a historical account arguing that the region's Islamic renewal and reformism originated in crisscrossing networks of Islamic scholars based in the Haramayn (Makkah and Madinah) during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Azra's detailed historical research substantiates an earlier intellectual transmission than previously thought. He contends that the main ideas transmitted comprised a "neo-Sufism" characterized by harmonizing the Shari`ah and *tasawwuf* (Sufism) and promoting a return to orthodoxy, purification, and activism. He makes these arguments in an introduction, seven chapters, and a brief epilogue.

The author introduces his study and discusses scholarly figures, social institutions, networks, and reformist discourses in the seventeenth-century Haramayn, pointing out that the flowering of Malay-Indonesian Muslim states in the late sixteenth century and their relations with Middle Eastern states contributed to a rise of Southeast Asian pilgrims and students seeking knowledge from the highly esteemed scholars of Makkah and Madinah. Traditional Islamic learning, as he describes it, was based in mosques, madrassahs, *ribats*, teacher's homes, and the two Haram mosques. Officially, it was administered through the religious bureaucracy of the chief *qadi* (judge) and the directors of Islamic scholars, as well as of each Haram mosque. Scholars were linked through vertical and horizontal ties into complicated networks of hadith chains of authority and *tariqah* (Sufi order) genealogies.

In chapter 2, he describes the "rapprochement between the shari'ah-oriented 'ulama' … and the sufis," which reached its climax during this period (p. 33). He shows that the neo-Sufis sought to incorporate Sufism, which had captured the Muslim world's imagination, within a Shari`ah-oriented perspective by combining it with hadith studies. Nevertheless, the neo-Sufis looked at hadith studies in an untraditional light, as a way of achieving such spiritual goals as higher levels of the mystical journey. Azra provides examples from the scholarly works of Ahmad al-Qushashi and Ibrahim al-Kurani, both of whom emphasized the importance of harmonizing Islam's exoteric and esoteric aspects. Moreover, the significant presence of *Jawi* students in these networks is reflected by three major works of Haramayn scholars during this period, all of which sought the intellectual reform of "excessive Sufism" in the *Jawi* world (p. 43). In addition, the networks' reformism also emphasized "the exercise of individual judgment (*ijtihad*) in religious matters" and activism in which Muslims cooperate "with other Muslims for the betterment of society" (p. 44).

In chapter 3, Azra considers al-Raniri of Aceh, who studied with Ba Shayban in India and was appointed *khalifah* (spiritual leader) of both the `Aydarusiyyah and Rifa`iyyah orders (p. 57). This scholar rose rapidly to the position of the Sultanate of Aceh's *shaykh al-Islam* and launched his campaign for Islamic renewal to correct what he considered to be misunderstandings of Sufi doctrines, such as notions of *wujudiyah* as propagated by some local scholars. A prolific writer, he issued a fatwa that led to the persecution of *wujudiyah* followers and the burning of their books. Al-Sinkili, also from Aceh, took a more evolutionary and tolerant posture to local interpretations of Sufi doctrines and reassessed the prevailing conceptions of *muslim*, *kafir* (unbeliever), and *tasamuh* (tolerance), matters still of significance in many contemporary Muslim societies.

In chapter 4, Azra notes that al-Sinkili studied with a number of scholars in Qatar, Yemen, Jeddah, Makkah, and Madinah. He learned *tasawwuf* and related sciences from Ahmad al-Qushashi, who appointed him his Shattariyyah and Qadirriyyah *khalifah*, but reflected Ibrahim al-Kurani's tolerant intellectual demeanor and understanding of Islam (p. 75). Al-Sinkili spent nineteen years in Arabia before returning to Aceh, where the sultanah appointed him *Qadi Malik al-`Adil* (chief religious administrator). He wrote twenty-two works on Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Qur'anic commentary (*tafsir*), theology (*kalam*), and *tasawwuf*, and prepared the first Malay *tafsir* of the entire Qur'an.

Chapter 5 considers al-Maqassari, al-Raniri's student and al-Sinkili's contemporary. Born in South Sulawesi, he studied with al-Raniri and his teacher Ba Shayban before continuing his studies in the Middle East. Azra reports that he joined the Naqshabandiyyah and Ba `Alwiyyah *tariqahs* while apparently studying hadith, *tafsir*, *fiqh*, and other Islamic sciences. Al-Maqassari traveled to Banten and began rising among the court elite. When civil war broke out, he supported the sultan and, after being captured, was exiled to Sri Lanka and later to South Africa. Similar to al-Sinkili, he distanced himself from pantheism by making a clear distinction between Allah and His creation. He also stressed that students should practice all of the Shari`ah's precepts before entering *tasawwuf* (p. 107).

Chapter 6 focuses upon al-Palimbani, al-Banjari, and al-Fatani, three scholars from different parts of the Malay-Indonesian world who were also cohorts with the same teachers in the Middle East during the eighteenth century. Al-Palimbani and al-Fatani never returned, but appealed to fellow *Jawi* Muslims to launch a jihad against the Europeans colonizers. Al-Banjari returned to Southeast Asia, along with several other *Jawi* cohorts, where he launched a reform of the *qiblah* and the system of administering justice.

Chapter 7 elaborates on neo-Sufi calls for jihad and the Sufi and *tariqah*-based Padri Movement of West Sumatra, which led to long wars against the Dutch colonizers. He argues that such neo-Sufi activism refutes the "modernist Muslim" notion that Sufism was passive, escapist, and responsible for the Muslim world's regression (p. 139). However, he needs to make a distinction here between the neo-Sufis and the "excessive and extravagant" Sufis to which he refers in several parts of this book as the primary targets of neo-Sufi renewal and reformism.

In the epilogue, Azra discusses the issue of secular and religious time and leaps over the independence struggle to two post-independence intellectuals striving to reconcile Islam with modernity and development. It would have been more consonant with the final chapter to discuss the role of Islamic

renewal and reformism in the struggle for political independence. Nevertheless, this book is a major contribution to the study of Islam in Southeast Asia and provides important insights into neo-Sufism's significance to scholarly networks and the transmission of Islamic knowledge from the Middle East to Southeast Asia.

Timothy P. Daniels
Assistant Professor of Anthropology
Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York