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Two recent volumes on Islam and politics in Southeast Asia

Kloos, D.

published in

Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde
2013

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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citation for published version (APA)

Kloos, D. (2013). Two recent volumes on Islam and politics in Southeast Asia. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 169(4), 518-524.

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Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 169 (2013) 518-524



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Two Recent Volumes on Islam and Politics in Southeast Asia

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Hui Yew-Foong (ed), *Encountering Islam: The Politics of religious Identities in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: ISEAS, 2013, x + 401 pp. ISBN 9789814379922. Price: 32.90 (paperback).

Joseph Camilleri and Sven Schottmann (eds), *Culture, Religion and Conflict in Muslim Southeast Asia: Negotiating tense Pluralisms*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013, xvi + 196 pp. ISBN: 9780415625265. Price: GBP 85.00 (hardback).

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In recent years, cracks have appeared in the image of Southeast Asia as a haven of 'moderate' Islam. The expansion of Islamic law, vociferous Islamist movements, vigilante violence against churches, religious minorities, bars and nightclubs, and acts of terrorism have shifted the view of observers and governments worldwide. This is connected, obviously, to the more general process of alienation between Muslims and non-Muslims in the post 9/11 era. These two volumes both refer to this changing sentiment as a motivation for bringing together a collection of articles on religion and politics in Muslim Southeast Asia. According to Hui Yew-Foong, 'recent work engaging with the political dimension of Islam tends to be cast under the neo-orientalist shadow of 11 September as an event' (p. 6). According to Joseph Camilleri and Sven Schottman, '[i]t has become a cliché to say that many things changed on 11 September 2001, but what transpired that autumn day

served to accelerate a reassessment of the role of religion and culture that was already under way' (p. 2). This is all quite valid, and indeed, the field has seen a burgeoning of scholarly interest. So what new questions, analyses, or insights do these two volumes offer?

Encountering Islam follows from a 2008 conference, entitled 'Religion in Southeast Asian politics'. Some of the papers were published in a special issue of *Sojourn* (April 2010). The volume under review comprises 13 chapters, written mostly by historians and anthropologists. Reading the introduction, I was taken aback by Hui Yew-Foong's statement that religion has an 'uncanny tendency to intervene in the political life of nation-states', while, 'as a phenomenon, [it] haunts our everyday lives' (pp. 1-4; emphasis added). It was unclear to me what these pejorative terms ('uncanny', 'haunts') are supposed to convey. Is religion something to be beware of, then? Apparently, this is not the message intended, for Hui goes on to explain that the book 'goes beyond narrow concerns with what is recognized as militant Islam and its attendant security issues' to reflect on 'the multiple impressions, suppressions and repressions, whether coherent or incoherent, associated with Islam as a socio-political force in public life' (p. 6). I also had some doubts about the representation of existing knowledge. According to Hui, 'Islam has been represented as a vestige of the feudal past embedded in an irrational exceptionalism that lacks compatibility with the secular modern nation-state' (p. 5). While this might be true for the general public opinion in many non-Muslim countries, it certainly does not hold for the body of recent scholarship in the field, which is marked by a growing recognition of Islamic networks and concepts as central factors in the making of the nation.

The volume is divided in four parts, starting with 'Islam across borders'. Merle Ricklefs avoids the problematic dichotomy between the 'religious' and the 'secular' by denoting a fundamental difference, valid 'across times and culture', between 'religious elites' and 'state elites' (p. 18). Comparing Indonesia—his main area of expertise—to other Muslim contexts, he argues that, most often in history, state authorities have turned out as the primary political force because the knowledge on which their authority rests can be observed and 'tested'. Religious leaders, in contrast, rely on divine knowledge, and therefore are less equipped to solve (political) conflicts or challenges in 'epistemological robust ways' (p. 42). This is followed by an interesting, albeit somewhat impressionistic, piece by Eric Tagliacozzo on

Southeast Asian Hajj memoirs. Read as 'acts of intent' (pp. 47-8), these texts offer a window for viewing the representation of the Muslim 'self' in different periods of time. In the next chapter, Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid investigates the spread of the Sufi congregation Jemaah Aurad Muhammadiyah, the intellectual root of Darul Arqam. The section about Singapore, which stresses congregation leaders' stances on life in the 'modern world' and support for *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), is quite informative, as it complicates the frequently overstated split between 'reformist' and 'traditionalist' styles of Islam in Southeast Asia.

The second part, which focuses on Malaysia, begins with an article by Maznah Mohamad that treads well covered terrain about Islamic state institutions (including courts) and their role in what she calls the 'homogenizing and ring-fencing of the Muslim subject'. In my opinion, this article gives too much weight to top-down processes, as it claims that state Islam controls most facets of Muslim life in Malaysia. As such, it stands at odds with more nuanced works on cultural politics (such as Liow 2009 and Peletz 2002), which discuss the potential as well as the limitations in the Malaysian state's efforts to force particular religious norms upon its Muslim population. Andrew Willford introduces a fascinating topic, namely the sudden, forceful gathering in 2008 of a group of ethnic Indian, working class dissidents in the so-called Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindraf). Drawing from personal interviews with Hindraf leaders, Willford argues that the movement rose as a response to the marginalization of the Indian community generally, and the ongoing encroachment by the state on its claims to land more specifically. Finally, Regina Lim discusses the various ways in which local leaders in Sabah have dealt with state Islamization, which she sees as a strategy by ruling party UMNO to expand its power in Eastern Malaysia.

The third part deals with Indonesia. Audrey Kahin analyses the initially close, but increasingly fraught relationship between Soekarno and Masyumi leader Mohammad Natsir, whose role in the early history of the Indonesian Republic is often underestimated. Bernhard Plattdasch discusses the contemporary persecution of the Ahmadiyah minority sect. He argues that the root of the violence should be sought not just in the weakness of the state to protect its own citizens, but also, more fundamentally, in the law itself, which is vague and ambiguous, and therefore unable to safeguard the principle of freedom of religion. The next chapter by Rachel Rinaldo

adds a gender component, discussing contestations surrounding the controversial 2008 pornography bill. Rinaldo makes the important observation that, although the bill appears to be an open attack on Indonesian women's agencies, it also propelled female Islamic activists to the forefront of political debate.

The fourth and final part addresses Muslim minorities. Ernesto Braam draws attention to the various ways in which Malay Muslims in Thailand view their relationship with the Thai-Buddhist state. Based on extensive fieldwork, his discussion oscillates between instances of extreme violence, political accommodation, and the (ostentatiously apolitical) forays into village life of the transnational missionary movement Tablighi Jama'at. Apparently, this movement has become quite strong in this part of Southeast Asia, as it provides an ideological alternative to young men living in a region 'where day-to-day life is marked by the constant threat of violence' (p. 297). The situation in South Thailand is comparable, to some extent, to the conflict in Mindanao, the home of most Muslims in the Philippines. Like Braam, Coeli Barry refuses to view the region solely through the lens of violent conflict, as she introduces the reader to Filipino Muslims' contributions to short story writing, the most popular literary genre in the Philippines. In the final chapter of the volume, Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman criticizes the Singaporean government's 'culturalist' view of its Muslim citizens.

The second volume under review, *Culture, religion and conflict*, grew out of a workshop in Melbourne in 2011, which was attended mostly by Australian scholars. It builds on the premise that 'religion and culture matter in politics everywhere', but especially in Southeast Asia, because of its great ethnic and religious diversity. Compared to *Encountering Islam*, this volume is less historical, and focused more strongly on the dynamics of conflict. In their introductory chapter, Joseph Camilleri and Sven Schottmann argue that it is important to view culture and religion not just as a 'part of the problem', but also as 'potentially at least part of the solution'. Thus, the volume makes an effort to investigate the roots of conflict, and to locate possibilities of cultural and interfaith dialogue, as well as forms of solidarity and cooperation that transcend communal boundaries. While recognizing the fact that 'official support' for dialogue is often merely rhetorical, the editors claim that 'a substantial and influential body of opinion has concluded that problem-solving in the present international context

must somehow draw upon the collective wisdom, skills and know-how of the world's diverse cultural and religious traditions' (p. 23). Unfortunately, it remains unclear where this 'body of opinion' comes from concretely, and what, exactly, is meant by 'cultural conflicts'.

The chapters—ten in total—offer some clarification. They deal mostly with religious and ethnic identities and relations, and the ways in which these are intertwined, and connected, in the context of conflict, to a range of different factors, including economic marginalization, electoral processes, international relations, human rights, and state ideology. The chapters are arranged in two parts, starting with 'States, discourses and *grandes idées*'. Joseph Camilleri locates the possibilities of dialogue in regional relations and transnational institutions, giving primary attention to the 'Alliance of Civilizations' announced under the aegis of the UN in 2004. He concludes that the realization of most 'consultative processes', 'national strategies', 'action plans', and a connected 'construction of a Southeast Asian regional identity' still lie ahead of us in the future (pp. 35-6). Gerhard Hoffstaedter focuses on multi-ethnic Malaysia, arguing that '[m]eaningful dialogue (...) is possible only if people are allowed to practice free speech for what they believe in and against others' beliefs' (p. 41). 'Official' concepts and initiatives proposed by the government to facilitate the transcendence of communal boundaries (Bangsa Malaysia, Islam Hadhari, 1Malaysia), have failed this standard, sparking little enthusiasm among the population. Sven Schottmann elaborates on this topic, as he analyses the Islamic discourse of former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed (1981-2003). Schottmann is remarkably positive about Mahathir's role in advancing an understanding of Islam, and the hope it holds for 'a decidedly non-secular and yet democratic Malaysia' (p. 52). Yet his choice of words ('paving the ground', 'steps in the direction', 'setting the scene', 'may end up') reveals that such a future vision is by no means a certainty.

The second part of the volume offers more solid empirical grounding. Michael Barr's chapter on the Singaporean government's management of Islam, adapted in part from an earlier book written together with Zlatko Skrbiš (2008), is excellent. It shows convincingly how, after 9/11 and in the face of an emerging 'extremist threat', Singaporean administrators empowered conservative religious leaders—rather than more progressive representatives of a so-called 'modern', or 'liberal' Islam (who used to be their main ally)—in their attempt to keep the Muslim minority under control.

Alberto Gomes' chapter returns to Malaysia. He argues that, although state strategies of managing pluralism perpetuate rather than diminish communal boundaries in public discourse, the government has been successful in preventing large scale communal violence. Virginie André stresses the religious component in the motivations of Muslim insurgents in South Thailand, calling this conflict a 'cosmic war'. Methodologically, I found this chapter problematic, firstly because it largely disregards a range of other relevant factors (mentioned for example by Ernesto Braam in his contribution to *Encountering Islam*), but also because it (intentionally) conflates the views and experiences of quite different (groups of) actors.

Jemma Purdey's chapter about Prabowo Subianto—an ex-general and a rising star in Indonesian politics—I found the most remarkable of the volume. Prabowo is seen by many as a key figure in the outbreak of anti-Chinese violence during the final days of Soeharto's reign in May 1998. However, in the long run-up to the presidential elections of 2014, he has initiated a campaign of reconciliation (referred to by the originally Chinese term *kongkow*, 'talk or chat'), which at least some Chinese Indonesians seem to accept and even appreciate. This is possible, Purdey argues, because in the Indonesian cultural and political context, the telling of the truth—central to western ('Christian-based') approaches to reconciliation—is relative to the 'primary concern' of coexistence. Of course, this is debatable (some might call it a typical argument of perpetrators) but Purdey's gripping account is certainly worthy of attention. Peter Sales' piece on the civil war in the Philippines I found hard to follow, due to its narrow focus on human rights and the role of the US military (which tends to obfuscate the analysis of local dynamics) as well as its impenetrable style. Damien Kingsbury turns to Aceh, Indonesia, and the provincial parliament's passing of the controversial *qanun jinayat*, an Islamic criminal code which included, among other measures, the punishment of stoning. This heavily contested law was never signed by the Governor, a choice which prevented it from coming into effect. Unfortunately, little insight is given into the drafting process, as the whole episode is reduced to a mere democratic deficit. Syed Muhammad Khairudin Aljunied concludes on the volume, usefully drawing together some of the major themes.

These volumes address urgent questions about the impact of public, political or 'state' Islam, about the roots of communal conflict, and about the difficulty of distinguishing between claims of identity and the more

cynical use of religion or 'culture' for maintaining or expanding power and advancing particular interests. Given these concerns, in my view too much weight is given to elites, state structures, and formal institutions. This comment may be elaborated both on methodological and theoretical grounds. To start with the first, many of the chapters here are based on existing literature, (written) reports and media sources. Some include interviews, but these concern mostly people in privileged positions. This would not be a problem, if it were not for the fact that the themes addressed, and the broad approach to 'politics' taken, appears to warrant a more 'grounded' perspective. On a theoretical note, it struck me that there is little reflection in either one of these volumes on the changing nature of the state, even though in some respects (Islamic law, religious and political elites, 'managing pluralism') state institutions appear omnipresent. More specifically, I missed a relational approach to the state, which I believe is necessary to assess how people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds deal with and adapt to the process dubbed conveniently (and imprecisely) 'Islamization', and with the gradual intrusion of state structures in religious and (for lack of a better term) 'cultural' spheres. Nevertheless, a number of the contributions collected in these volumes are very valuable, and will be eagerly consulted by those who take a special interest in their respective topics.

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