



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

NO ONE IS AN ISLAND – RELIGIOUS INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE MIDDLE EAST AND INDONESIA

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One of the most important aspects of the *pesantren*¹ system of school is the emphasis on the journey of students... traditionally they wandered from one *pesantren* to another...²

The time of the roaming *santri* (students of Islamic boarding schools and followers of Islamic religious leaders) across the Indonesian archipelago maybe more limited today than when compared to the historical situation that the quote above describes. The importance, however, of learning as a spiritual and physical journey remains. Becoming an Islamic scholar (*alim*) requires an educational journey.³

Just as young scholars from across the world head to Harvard or Oxford, Islamic scholars flock from Indonesia to great teachers and educational institutions across the Middle East and North Africa. Unfortunately, in recent times this understandable movement has often been seen, at least in popular culture, as something dangerous – intricately connected to the radicalization of youth (and commonly, almost without thought, linked to terrorism).⁴ Too commonly talk of Islamic education, and particularly

¹ A pondok pesantren is an Islamic boarding school in Indonesia, akin to institutions such as *madrasah* elsewhere in the Muslim world.

² Zamachsary Dhofier, “The Pesantren Tradition: The Study of the Role of the Kiyai in the Maintenance of the Traditional Ideology in Java” (PhD diss., Australian National University, 1980), 15.

³ Islamic boarding schools have a lengthy history as an important element of religious and communal socialization in Southeast Asia. See William Roff, *Studies on Islam and Society in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 117-130.

⁴ It is not difficult to find contemporary media coverage that portrays Islamic boarding schools as hot beds of radicalism. See, for instance, Ulf Laessing, ‘Religious Schools Under Scrutiny in Yemen’, *Reuters*, 3 March 2010, accessed September 22, 2015. <<http://www.reuters.com>>; ‘Religious Schools Under Scrutiny in Yemen’, *Reuters*, 3 March 2010, accessed September 22, 2015. <<http://www.reuters.com>>; Rebecca Conway, ‘Pakistan’s Female Madrassas Breed Radicalism’, *Reuters*, 15 June 2010, accessed September 22, 2015. <<http://www.reuters.com>>; ‘Is Indonesia Ngruki Islamic School Teaching Terrorism’, *BBC*, 4 November 2012, accessed September 22, 2015. <<http://www.bbc.com>>; Malyar Sadeq Azad, ‘The Afghan Madrassa Accused of Radicalising Women,’ *BBC*, 16 March 2014. , accessed September 22, 2015. <<http://www.bbc.com>>.

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Islamic boarding schools, is “laced with suspicion if not outright contempt.”⁵ This closes one’s minds to fully interrogating these kinds of educational institutions and their outcomes.

Terrorism studies, or scholars of ‘radicalization’, although sometimes making legitimate claims, can make us tone deaf to seeing only the problems and nothing else. Without question we are confronted with the violence of terrorism and its serious consequences witnessed from New York to Bali. Rather than ignore these issues it is my contention that one needs to be careful that a major concern does not paper over real social and religious intricacies. The educational journeys of these young Indonesians are part of a rich intellectual and religious connectivity that has enriched Indonesian Muslim scholars for generations and vice versa their Arab brethren. For instance, the traditional curriculum of Indonesia’s Islamic boarding schools was developed, to large degree, as a result of Indonesian scholars learning in the Middle East and North Africa.⁶

One simply cannot understand or study Islam and Muslim communities across Indonesia without zooming into the local. The local in this circumstance, however, is intricately connected to the global. Local Muslim communities are commonly linked through religious scholars to greater networks of knowledge and places of learning across and beyond the Indonesian archipelago. I saw this first hand while undertaking research on the eastern Indonesian island of Lombok.⁷ It is a recognized strong hold of traditionalist Muslim mass movements, such as Nahdlatul Wathan (NW) and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). These groups are not to be trifled with – NU has over 50 million members across Indonesia with 1.5 million of these people living in Lombok, which has a population of just over three million. While the two NW groups centred on Lombok have approximately 1.5 million members between them. There is essentially no jurisprudential or theological difference between NW and NU. The differences are much more about the organizational structure, leadership styles and political affiliations.

While studying at the boarding school, Pondok Pesantren Darul Falah, with TGH⁸ Mustiadi Abhar I met his nephew, Fauzan Thabrani, who had recently returned from over a decade in Java and then Yemen, studying at several prominent Islamic boarding schools. He told me that his educational journey was aimed at developing his Islamic knowledge. While in Yemen, Fauzan Thabrani studied under Shaykh Habib Umar bin Hafiz at his school, Dar al-Mustafa, in Tarim, Hadramawt. This institution is a renowned place of Sufi learning and its leadership is affiliated with Ba 'Alawiyya Sufi order. It has hundreds of Indonesian,

⁵ Farish A. Noor, Yoginder Sikand and Martin van Bruinessen, “Introduction – Behind the Walls: Re-Appraising the Role and Importance of Madrasas in the World Today,” in: Farish A. Noor, Yoginder Sikand and Martin van Bruinessen (eds.), *The Madrasa in Asia: Political Activism and Transnational Linkages* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008): p.11.

⁶ Michael Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p.38-39. See also, Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren dan Tarekat* (Yogyakarta: Gading Publishing, 2012); R. Michael Feener, ‘Abd al-Samad in Arabia: The Yemeni Years of a Shaykh from Sumatra’ (2015) *Southeast Asian Studies* 4,2: pp.259-277.

⁷ Lombok is the island immediately to the east of Java and Bali. It is known as the gateway to eastern Indonesia.

⁸ TGH means “*Tuan Guru Hajji*”. These are local Muslim religious leaders with significant socio-political standing in Lombok. I have written about these religious leaders, see for instance: Jeremy Kingsley, “Tuan Guru, Community and Conflict in Lombok, Indonesia” (PhD diss., The University of Melbourne, 2010); Jeremy Kingsley, “Redrawing Lines of Religious Authority in Lombok, Indonesia,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 42, 5 (2014): 657-677.

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Malaysian, and Singaporean students and alumni. Fauzan talks of Habib Umar as his spiritual teacher.⁹

It was not uncommon for me while undertaking fieldwork to visit local Muslim religious leaders, *Tuan Guru*, whom had returned from studying in the Middle East. These educational experiences have made a significant imprint on Sufi practices on Lombok.¹⁰ For instance, TGH Ahmad Madani received his religious education at Pondok Pesantren Darul Falah in Pagutan, which I researched, and then went on to study for four years in Saudi Arabia furthering his religious education.¹¹ He was a key leader within the community surrounding Darul Falah and involved with the Qodiriyah-Naqsyibandiyah Tarekat (this is the Sufi brotherhood active within the Darul Falah community). While TGH Subkhi Sasaki lived for eight years at an Islamic boarding school in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Sasaki, a prominent progressive religious leader and advocate of women's rights, painted a surprising picture of his experiences in Saudi Arabia at a private institution where scholars had come from all corners of the Muslim world with backgrounds from most of the schools of Islamic jurisprudence. For Sasaki it was an enriching experience and he contrasted it with 'puritanical'/extreme Islamic education taught in Saudi state universities.¹² Finally TGH Bajang, the provincial governor,¹³ received his tertiary education from Cairo's prestigious Al-Azhar University.¹⁴ Each one of these scholars and leaders, is connected to traditionalist (Sufi-inclined) religious groups. It was not simply that they learnt in Yemen, Saudi Arabia or Egypt but their social and religious networks gained from these experiences has fostered their high social standing and enhanced their religious legitimacy in local communities.

As an ethnographer of Muslim communities trying to understand their feelings towards, and perceptions of Islam, it is not enough to examine local practices, interpretations and modes of affiliations within the particular community that one studies. It is necessary to be cognisant of the movement of knowledge and people, tangible interconnections, between Southeast Asia and the Middle East. More importantly, we need to see these interconnections as points of fruitful intellectual and social interaction rather than bowing simply to fears of radicalization. Attention to detail, not generalizations, is necessary. It is easy, and many consultants and academics make a career of it, to be concerned or sow fear into the minds of the public about Islamic education. To a degree they are correct – there is a problem in some segments of Islamic education.¹⁵ This begs

⁹ Shaykh Habib Umar bin Hafiz has a significant reputation in Indonesia and has visited several times – see Novel Muhammad Alaydrus, *Ulama Hadhramaut* (Solo: Putera Riyadi, 1999). During his 2014 visit to Singapore, Habib Umar described the long-standing relationships with the Malay-Indonesian archipelago – see Shaykh Habib Umar bin Hafiz, “Muwasala: Dar Al-Mustafa and The Revitalizing Of Historical Links Between Arabia And Southeast Asia” (presentation, Middle East Institute Seminar, Singapore, November 13, 2014). For a discussion of the important role of Tarim, Yemen, as a place of learning and intellectual interconnection within the Indian Ocean maritime world, see Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim – Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* (California: University of California Press, 2006).

¹⁰ It is important to recognize that semantically I read Sufi Islamic practices and Indonesian traditionalism as the same thing. Although this assessment is a little simplistic it is a generally accurate assessment.

¹¹ TGH Ahmad Madani, interview by Jeremy Kingsley, Mataram, August 21, 2008.

¹² TGH Subkhi Sasaki, interview by Jeremy Kingsley, Kediri, West Lombok, August 23, 2008.

¹³ The Governor of Nusa Tenggara Barat, TGH Muhammad Zainul Majdi (known locally as TGH Bajang), oversees a province that includes Lombok and the neighbouring island of Sumbawa.

¹⁴ “Akhirnya, HM Zainul Majdi Pimpin NW,” *Lombok Post*, September 20, 1999.

¹⁵ The aim of this article is not to obscure or minimize political violence as a serious issue. Rather it aims to examine the nuanced and often positive nature of the interaction between Indonesia and the Middle East. With this said there

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however an important question: would we have stopped young scholars from studying at Cambridge University in the late 1950-60s even though it produced one of the most influential, and damaging, cold war spy rings? Answering this question affirmatively would, to most people, be an absurd proposition. One would suggest that careful attention should be placed on the specifics of the problem. Sowing fear over a whole community of learning simply papers over the real problems.

When seeking to understand Islamic education a nuanced picture needs to be painted, and it should be recognized that for many young Muslim scholars their travels to the Middle East are for legitimate educational and spiritual reasons. They are undergoing an important religious process that often sees their traditionalist beliefs enhanced and helps them maintain strong and authentic chains of religious lineage and teaching.¹⁶ If we stigmatize or inhibit these rich learning practices it is only the radicals who benefit.

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is genuine concern within Indonesian law enforcement and security agencies about Indonesians travelling to the Middle East in order to further their radical agenda or becoming radicalized. This is exemplified in the world’s largest Muslim-majority nation, according to recent reports, having approximately 500 Indonesians join ISIS in Syria and Iraq - Andi Hajramurni, "IS supporters intercepted from going to Syria," *Jakarta Post*, November 3, 2015. For further discussion of the issues facing Indonesia, see Institute for Policy Analysis, *The Evolution of ISIS in Indonesia*, Jakarta, IPAC Report No. 13, September 24, 2014; Institute for Policy Analysis, *Indonesia’s Lamongan Network: How East Java, Poso and Syria are Linked*, Jakarta, IPAC Report No. 18, April 15, 2015. This Indonesian problem must be put into context with several thousand Europeans having joined ISIS and other extreme Islamic groups in Syria and Iraq – see Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, Foreign Affairs at Brookings – Policy Paper 34, November, 2015.

¹⁶ Jeremy Kingsley, "Redrawing Lines of Religious Authority in Lombok, Indonesia," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 42, 5 (2014): 657-677.