

Religious Networks Between the Middle East and Southeast Asia

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the study of diasporas, overseas communities, and transnational networks among scholars working in a number of fields. Connections and relationships between the Middle East and Southeast Asia have existed for many centuries. Studying the historical and contemporary relationships between these two important areas of the Muslim world calls for contributions from a wide variety of perspectives, ranging from the historical and anthropological to the political and philosophical.

Report >

General

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International Institute for Asian Studies

By Michael Feener

Transregional Islamic networks and issues related to them were discussed at the IIAS workshop 'Religious Networks between the Middle East and Southeast Asia', precisely with such multidisciplinary in mind. The topics addressed included the migration and diaspora of Arabs from Hadhramawt and translation studies, as well as Arabic and Malay publishing in both the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

A number of presentations contributed insights gained from a strong focus on textual sources for the modern history of religious networks between the two regions. Ahmed Ibrahim Abu Shouk discussed some of the complex dynamics among different groups of Arabs in the Dutch East Indies as elaborated in an Arabic manuscript from Java, while Jajat Burhanuddin's presentation outlined some of the major developments of Indonesian publishing that

were influenced by increased travel and communications between Egypt and Indonesia during the early twentieth century. Textual approaches also characterized the papers presented by Nico Kaptein on fatwa literature and Michael Feener on Hadith studies, both of which explored issues relating to evolving understandings of religious authority among Muslims in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, connected by rapidly changing and expanding networks in the modern period. The relation of such intellectual exchanges to the institutional history of organizations like the Muhammadiyah and the Nahdlatul Ulama were also discussed by Hassan Hanafi in his presentation. Throughout the workshop, textual and historical studies of this type were complemented by others that dealt with contemporary aspects of transregional Muslim religious networks. Based on rich ethnographic and life-history research, Mona Abaza explored new styles of religious

authority being cultivated in the burgeoning Muslim culture of upper-class Indonesians of Hadhrami descent. Haji Maaruf Saleh focused on the contemporary Muslim communities of Singapore, which have long been an important node in the networks connecting Southeast Asia and the Middle East. In recent years, globalization of Muslim women's networks in cyberspace has extended the networks to far beyond these two regions alone. Discussing this expansion of Muslim women's networks into cyberspace, Hoda Rouhana significantly broadened the frame of discussion. Most remarkably, this workshop went beyond simply discussing Islamic networks, contributing itself to the construction of expanded global networks of scholars from various disciplines studying the complex and continually changing relationships between Southeast Asia and the Middle East. <

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An Indonesian student studying in Saudi Arabia, visiting the tomb of Shayk Ahmad al-Badawi, in Tanta, Egypt in 2002.



Michael Laffan

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