



[Link to Publisher's Website](#)

Islam and Colonialism

Becoming Modern in Indonesia and Malaya



Muhamad Ali

Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, December 2015. 360 pages. £75.00. E-Book.
ISBN 9781474409209. *For other formats: [Link to Publisher's Website](#).*

Review

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Muslims reformed their practices and institutions, both as a response to the domination of their societies by non-Muslim imperial powers and as a way of becoming “modern.” In *Islam and Colonialism*, Muhamad Ali compares these reforms in colonial Indonesia and Malaya. Cultural similarities and historical linkages, and the different impact made by British and Dutch colonialism, warrant such a comparative approach. The book is a response to the commonly held idea that western colonialists and colonized Muslims were generally or per definition opposed to each other (1).

In reality, Ali argues, they often collaborated or worked “in tandem” with one another. What they shared, most of all, was a drive toward modernization. What this meant in practice was different for different actors, but in a general sense it meant reshaping Islamic thought and practices in line with a sharp awareness of the changes taking place within society and around the world, in terms of technology, connectedness, and social mobility, as well as an openness to, and active engagement with, nonreligious knowledge and forms of organization. Closely tied to this shared project of modernization was a process of secularization, understood by the author not as a decrease of religiosity but as a mode of distinguishing between and actively separating “religious” and “worldly” domains of life.

The book is organized along four main themes: organizations, politics, law, and education. In each part, a chapter on Muslim ideas and initiatives is followed by a chapter on the discourses and policies of colonial scholars and administrators. This outline serves Ali’s key objective of highlighting the agency of Muslim thinkers and associations. Indeed, it is refreshing to read an account in which colonial policies respond to innovations in Muslim thought and action rather than the other way around. For the most part, I found it persuasive, with the exception of the fourth part on education (chapters 7 and 8). Here, the author might have chosen to change the order, for in this case Islamic reforms seem to be responses to colonial ideas and policies and not vice versa. The book is based on a variety of sources, including newspapers, colonial reports and laws, school curricula, religious texts, and scholarly works, written in Dutch, English, Malay/Indonesian, Arabic, Bugis and Makassarese (the main languages of South Sulawesi).

Both in British Malaya and the Netherlands Indies, Islamic scholars and activists were driven by a global impetus to reform. But their initiatives were also contingent on local circumstances and therefore varied in substance and shape. As Ali shows in chapter 1, Indonesia in the early 20th century saw the rise of several Islamic mass organizations of different ideological orientation, branching out across the Netherlands Indies. In Malaya, the emergence of such organizations was precluded by the successful claim to authority—backed by British power—of the Malay sultans and the religious scholars who acted as their advisers.

Instead, calls for reform were concentrated in Islamic bureaucratic institutions, such as courts and councils, local “clubs” formed after British example, and print culture (59-60, 123-27, 156-57). The Dutch, who administered a much larger and more diverse territory, trusted less their alliances with indigenous rulers and developed an obsession—conspicuously absent in the case of Malaya—with expressions of “political Islam” (chapter 4). Another, related difference concerned the fact that notions of Islamic reform in Malaya were inextricably connected to the racialized discourses in which studies of Malay culture and religion were framed (chapter 2), and to ideas about the supposed backwardness of the Malays vis-à-vis other ethnic groups (239-41). Ali makes the important point that the divide between so-called “modernists” and “traditionalists”—labels that dominate the literature on the history of Islam in Southeast Asia—was less sharp than commonly assumed (9-10). Traditionalists sought to protect certain practices, rituals, and modes of authority against the reformist or puritan zeal of modernists.

What is often missed, but which Ali brings to light particularly in chapters 1, 5, and 7, is that many traditionalists also modernized their institutions and were thus not principally opposed to “Western” knowledge or modes of organization. A modern idea shared by modernists and traditionalist was that Islamic educational institutions should be accessible to both women and men. Moreover, at the level of local contexts or individual lives, the cleavage between modernists and traditionalists tended to be complicated, if not dissolved. This point is demonstrated in rich discussions of local dynamics in South Sulawesi and Kelantan. While Ali does not explain why he chose these cases over others, I found them a welcome addition to a book that, generally, is engaged more with textual discourses than with actual practices.

While Ali’s argument about the resonance between Islamic and colonial ideas is well taken, it remains unclear whom, exactly, he is debating. The claim that “Islam and European colonialism have been less confrontational in recent history than is generally assumed” (30) is not backed up by a careful review of the literature. A line of debate that comes out more clearly bears on secularization. Here, the book engages primarily with the work of Talal Asad, who, according to Ali (15-16, 159, 216-17), ascribes too much weight to Western and Christian conceptualizations of the religious and the secular, and not enough to the agency of Islamic actors engaging creatively and selectively with these notions. This made me wonder why Ali did not choose to situate his argument more squarely in recent debates about secularism and secularization, in which Asad is one of the main voices but certainly not the only one. This might have allowed for a deeper exploration of the religious subjectivities that were either enabled or precluded by the interaction between Islam and colonialism.

Islam and Colonialism offers a new comparative look to the discussion of Islamic institutions in early-20th-century Southeast Asia, as Ali approaches the topic thematically, admirably balancing and linking the perspectives of European imperialists and their Muslim subjects. Whereas it ultimately treads ground that is rather well covered, and I remain unconvinced of the originality of its main thesis, I do believe that there is a strong demand for this book in a field that is dominated by country-specific studies and more narrowly defined aspects of religious change.

About the Reviewer(s):

David Kloos is a Researcher at the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) in Leiden.

Date of Review:

June 29, 2020

About the Author(s)/Editor(s)/Translator(s):

Muhamad Ali is an Associate Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of California, Riverside. He has published articles in several refereed journals including the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* and *Indonesia and the Malay World*.

Categories: [politics](#) [20th century](#) [Southeast Asia](#) [Islam](#) [colonialism](#)

Keywords: [Indonesia](#), [Malaysia](#), [modernization](#)

Comments

Reading Religion welcomes comments from AAR members, and you may leave a comment below by logging in with your AAR Member ID and password. Please [read our policy](#) on commenting.

[Log in](#)