

Review Article

# **Alternative Education or Teaching Radicalism?**

New Literature on Islamic Education in Southeast Asia

Holger Warnk

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**Hefner, Robert W. (ed.) (2009)**, Making Modern Muslims. The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, ISBN 978-0-8248-3316-9, 246 pages

**Liow, Joseph Chinyong (2009)**, Islam, Education and Reform in Southern Thailand. Tradition and Transformation, Singapore: ISEAS, ISBN 978-981-230-954-9, 218 pages

**Berlie, Jean A. (2008)**, The Burmanization of Myanmar's Muslims, Bangkok: White Lotus Press, ISBN 978-974-480-126-5, 155 pages

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### **Abstract:**

*This review article focuses on three recent publications on Islamic education in Southeast Asia. While two are monographs on South Thailand and Myanmar/ Burma, one is a collection of essays on Indonesia, Malaysia, South Thailand, Cambodia, and the Southern Philippines. All works highlight local, regional and international educational networks, as well as their connections to the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East. Based chiefly on first-hand fieldwork, the works deliver an up-to-date and detailed picture of current discussions and developments regarding Islamic education in Southeast Asia.*

**Keywords:** *Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Islam, religion, education*

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### [Main Article]

In recent years Islamic education and its growing social and political potential for Southeast Asia has been attracting more and more attention, in the academic world and elsewhere. This is reflected by the growing literature on the role of Islamic education and schools in Southeast Asian states, societies and politics, including the three new books which are under review here. While two of them (Liow, Berlie) are monographs, the volume edited by Robert Hefner is a collection of essays by six authors.

After 9/11 and the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, the importance of Islamic education was increasingly considered in political and sociological studies. Given the geo-strategic role of Pakistan and India, many publications particularly focused on Islamic schools in these countries and their ambivalent relationship to the government have appeared. Candland (2008), Reetz (2008), and Sikand (2005), to cite only a few, have delivered highly relevant studies on recent developments in madrasah education. Most striking is the growing number of such schools, especially in Pakistan, along with the significantly increasing number of students enrolling. Candland, Reetz, and Sikand also analyse in detail the differing religious Islamic directions present in these madrasah. In particular, the supporters and former disciples of the orthodox seminary of Dar ul-‘Ulum in Deoband in northern India deserve special mention here as they operate approximately 70 per cent of the madrasah in Pakistan (Candland 2008: 105) and have been criticized by both liberal and conservative modernists for their curriculum, which devotes much attention to secular and modern subjects (Sikand 2005:105). Reetz’s article focuses on the Tablighi Jama’at, a movement of Muslim laymen founded in colonial India whose membership not only on the Indian subcontinent but also in Southeast Asia is continuously growing. In the last two decades this organization has been able to attract increasingly more preachers from Southeast Asia, especially from Malaysia and Indonesia (Reetz 2008: 120). Currently, many Tablighi Jama’at preachers are active in the southern Philippines and South Thailand, but this movement is also becoming stronger in Malaysia and Cambodia.

The boom in Pakistan’s madrasah sector, with the mushrooming of hundreds of new schools at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border since the 1980s, has also led to a greater exchange with students from countries outside South Asia. Often with financial backing from the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, etc.), these madrasah have been able to attract students from Malaysia in particular, probably due to these students’ better command of the English language. The Syed Maudoodi International Islamic Educational Institute in Pakistan was founded in 1982 with substantial funds from Saudi Arabia and almost immediately tried to establish connections to Islamic parties and other Islamist movements in Asia and the Arab world. As their main partner in Southeast Asia since the late 1980s has been the Islamist Malaysian opposition party Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), it is not surprising that many Malaysian students study at this rather elitist madrasah. Many of these Malaysian students are graduates of the madrasah at Kampung Rusila in the Malaysian state Terengganu which is run by PAS party president Abdul Hadi Awang (Noor



2008: 156f.). Most of them come from families with a PAS background and receive stipends for their education abroad. Furthermore, many PAS leaders, including Abdul Hadi Awang himself, have close ideological connections to the former Indian-Pakistani politician Syed Abul A'la Mawdudi (Warnk 2008),<sup>1</sup> so it is no wonder that this school in particular is among the primary choices of PAS sympathizers for studying abroad. However, not only Malaysians but also students from Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, China (mainly Uighurs), and Central Asia can be found at this madrasah. In contrast to the Malaysian students, the Indonesians and Thai Muslims come from different political and social backgrounds. One of the most well-known former students is Ja'far Umar Thalib, who studied at the madrasah in 1987 and went on to Afghanistan to fight in the jihad against the Soviets. He later returned to Indonesia, where he founded the militant Muslim Laskar Jihad movement, which became infamous for its role in the Moluccan conflict after 1999 (Noorhaidi 2008: 253f.).

Students from Southeast Asia are found more or less everywhere at madrasah in India and Pakistan. Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, the spiritual leader of PAS, graduated from Dar ul-'Ulum in Deoband in the early 1950s, before going for further studies to Al-Azhar University in Egypt (Warnk 2008). His son Nik Adli Nik Mat studied at madrasah in Karachi and Peshawar and travelled onwards to Afghanistan. After coming back to Malaysia the latter was arrested as the alleged leader of the militant Kumpulan Mujahedin Malaysia group. It is no wonder that returning students from Pakistan madrasah are often stigmatized in Malaysia and Indonesia after their return. Nevertheless, the South Asian madrasah should not be stereotyped as purely institutions for training Islamist cadres or militant radicals (Malik 2008; Noor 2008).<sup>2</sup> Often these madrasah offer the only chance for children to receive at least a basic education in their regions.

Other centres of crucial importance are the educational institutions in the Middle East and Egypt. Here the universities of Medina and Mecca in Saudi Arabia and Al-Azhar University in Cairo have to be mentioned first, but Southeast Asian students are also found at institutions of higher education in Kuwait, Jordan, and Qatar. Equipped with stipends funded by petro dollars from Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, thousands of students from Indonesia and Malaysia have flocked to Middle Eastern universities, where they have become acquainted with the writings of the medieval theorist Ibn Taymiyya and modern ideologues such as Syed Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Taymiyya, Mawdudi, and Qutb are regarded as particularly essential references by many fundamentalists, as these texts seem to offer a good legitimating argument for the use of violence against the ruling classes (Zeghal 1996: 129; Roy 2004: 170). Returning students have propagated these authors in Malaysia and Indonesia, and today their books are found in every Islamic bookshop in Southeast Asia. Al-Azhar has been a centre of Islamic education ever since its founding, and the first students in Cairo from the Malay world can be traced back to the last decades of the eighteenth century (Warnk 2006). While in the 1920s more than three hundred Indonesians and Malays were already present in Cairo, Al-Azhar

attracted increasingly more students from Africa and Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, with Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Turkey being the most important source countries. Prominent political figures such as the former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid and the previously mentioned PAS leaders Abdul Hadi Awang and Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, as well as former PAS party presidents Yusof Rawa and Fadzil Mohd Noor were graduates of Al-Azhar. The number of Indonesian students in Cairo remains considerable today, demonstrating that Al-Azhar is still a highly attractive place of study for Indonesian students, despite attempts by the Egyptian state to control its students and teaching staff (Abaza 2003).

Petro dollars have also funded many other Islamic organizations and institutions in Southeast Asia. When the Indonesian Islamic Mission Council (Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia) was founded in 1967, it received substantial financial backing from Saudi Arabia to build mosques and establish madrasah together with free copies of the Qur'an and Wahhbi text books for educational institutions or to train Indonesian preachers (Noorhaidi 2008: 251; Dhume 2008: 144). The International Islamic University of Malaysia (established in 1983) was largely financed with money, alongside Malaysian governmental funds, from the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and from Saudi Arabian and Kuwaiti sources (Roald 1993: 232). Especially in the field of madrasah schools, the impact of Middle Eastern connections has been felt more strongly since the 1980s.

Modern madrasah networks have begun to take the place of traditional Islamic schools elsewhere in the Islamic world.<sup>3</sup> Olivier Roy (2004: 160ff.) gives a useful description of how modern madrasah networks function and how their members try to operate. Modern madrasah usually have a shorter curriculum than universities, and as a result their graduates have far poorer chances of obtaining qualified positions, especially in the state's bureaucracies.

Therefore, they work either at poorly paid jobs or become autodidactic self-made clerics – like Mawdudi or the Egyptian Muslim Brother Sayyid Qutb decades earlier. The only reasonable chance for madrasah graduates is to also serve in a madrasah; thus, the system is reproducing itself. No wonder, then, that former madrasah students attack secular Muslim intellectuals as well as traditionalists cooperating with the existing systems. From their call for the Islamization of bureaucracy, justice, and society they draw the conclusion that any other Muslim competitor can only be an infidel (kafir), a heretic (munafik), or at the least a bad Muslim.<sup>4</sup>

From this viewpoint it is only a short step towards militancy and terrorism.

Noorhaidi's study on the Salafi madrasah in Indonesia shows in detail how teachers, students, and graduates, many of them well educated with madrasah or even university backgrounds, have served as activists for militant movements. Former graduates of institutions such as the Indonesian Islamic Mission Council or the Institute for Islamic Knowledge and Arab Language (Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Bahasa Arab, founded by the Saudi government in Jakarta in 1980) received stipends for further higher education in the Middle East; many of them went on to Afghanistan

after their studies, thus using the Afghan battlefields as an arena for their enthusiasm to defend Islam, side by side with many other voluntary soldiers from the Muslim world (Noorhaidi 2008: 252). After their return home they formed the core of a new generation of Muslim reformists in Indonesia, who, since the early 1990s, have propagated jihad, militancy and terrorist activities.<sup>5</sup>

The three books under review here are part of the ongoing discussion in academic circles on the role of Islamic education in Southeast Asia. Two of them are case studies based on extensive fieldwork, while Hefner's *Making Modern Muslims* is an essay collection which came about as a result of a larger research project which had already produced another volume of essays on Islamic education in the broader Muslim world (Hefner and Zaman 2007). To give a judgement right now before going into detail, all three books are important contributions to our understanding of Islamic education. They deserve to be read widely, and not just by regional specialists, as they deliver a considerable amount of hitherto unknown information on a so far still highly understudied topic. This should be kept in mind as a few critical points are also raised here by the reviewer.

Let us start with *Making Modern Muslims*: Hefner's book combines an introduction to the topic with five articles on Islamic education in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines. The developments in Islamic education in Myanmar and Brunei Darussalam are left out due to the lack of reasonable data and scholarship, but the omission of Singapore and its Islamic educational institutions does not seem to be justified. A chapter on the city state is painfully missing here, particularly as relevant and current material is easily available, for example, through Laurent Metzger's (2003) study or the fascinating essay collection edited by Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Lai Ah Eng (2006). Generally speaking, however, this book is well edited and the contributions are of high quality.

In his well-written introductory essay, Hefner highlights the importance of Islamic education for political developments in Southeast Asia. Some of the Bali bombers of October 2002 were former students at an Islamic school in East Java. Hambali, the military chief of the Indonesian terrorist group *Jema'ah Islamiyah*, was in Cambodia between 2002 and 2004 and visited several Muslim schools there. *Al-Qa'ida* documents were found in an Islamic school in South Thailand in May 2005. These and other incidents have led to the growing attention given to Muslim education in Southeast Asia. Despite all the predictions of political and social analysts in the 1950s and 1960s that Islamic education in Indonesia and Malaysia would face decline and final collapse, such education has seen a revival throughout the region since the 1970s and 1980s (p. 43). Hefner furthermore delivers an exhaustive overview of the history of Islamic education in Southeast Asia, criticizing the statement in a famous article by social anthropologist Clifford Geertz that Southeast Asian Islamic Muslim education is a mere continuation of similar institutions existing since Hindu-Buddhist times (Geertz 1960:231). Instead, Hefner proposes taking a closer look at contemporary developments in education in the Middle East, and the parallels seem stronger than originally thought by Geertz. The transmission

of Islamic texts and values played an important role in the first madrasah, which were established in the Middle East as early as the tenth century. This “Arab model”, to use a phrase of Jacqueline Sublet (1997), indeed shows great similarities to the Islamic education systems of Southeast Asia. Furthermore, Geertz’s statement is based on rather weak sources as it lacks data on education in Hindu-Buddhist times as well as on the first centuries of Islamic education in Southeast Asia. Hefner rightly judges Geertz’s approach as rather static, while at least since the mid-eighteenth century, if not earlier, Islamic education in the Malay world has been in constant flux and open to impulses from within the region as well as from the outside world (p. 6).

One can thus draw the conclusion that many features of Islamic education are not the result of traditions dating back to times immemorial, but rather must be regarded as expressions of and reactions to modernity. This becomes even more obvious if one takes into consideration the fact that Islamic educational institutions only became widespread in Southeast Asia at the end of the nineteenth century. In several diasporic regions, such as Cambodia, the southern Philippines or Sulawesi, specialized schools in the Islamic sciences only appeared between 1900 and 1950 (p. 17). Generally speaking, the institutionalization of Islamic education in Southeast Asia is a fairly recent phenomenon, occurring over the last 200 years.

Another point raised by Hefner is the importance of the teaching materials. Sacred texts in Arabic, Malay or Javanese – chiefly Qur’anic commentaries, interpretations of Hadith or other theological works – do have a central place in the curriculum of Islamic educational institutions (p. 22f.). These texts have been printed in cheap editions, usually with poor paper and binding quality, so that they can also be made available for students throughout Muslim Southeast Asia – a point that will be raised again later in this review article.

The second chapter of this essay collection, also authored by Robert Hefner and again clearly presented and well written, is about Islamic schools and their relationship to social movements and democracy in Indonesia. Hefner first works out the differences between more traditional pesantren or pondok schools and the more modernist madrasah type of Islamic school (p. 60ff.). While he regards the pesantren/ pondok as a Malayo-Indonesian variant of the classical Middle Eastern madrasah, this does not mean that they follow uniform streams of ideology or teaching. Hefner successfully shows the heterogeneity within these various Islamic educational institutions. While some are still rather loosely structured, others have followed the Indonesian reform of 1975 which aimed to enhance the status of pesantren and bring pesantren and madrasah up to the same standard as non-religious education (p. 65). However, some pesantren did not join in this reform, preferring to establish their own curriculum; these include such well-known institutions as Gontor in East Java.<sup>6</sup>

In general, enrolment at Islamic religious schools did increase in the late 1980s and the 1990s. For Hefner (p. 69) this is not a marker for growing fundamentalism within Indonesian Muslim societies, but rather reflects an increase in piety in the Indonesian Muslim public in general; one need only

refer here to the boom of the Indonesian Islamic book market since the 1990s (Watson 2005). This development has also created new job possibilities for graduates of these educational institutions – within Islamic publishing, as journalists, as teachers, or as translators.<sup>7</sup> To cite Hefner, “Indonesia’s Islamic schools have shown a remarkable aptitude for competing in a fast-changing educational marketplace” (p. 70). Given their efforts to face these challenges, these schools surely cannot be regarded as symbols of older times but must be taken as signs of modernity, all the more as they employ modern mass media in order to attract students.

While Islamist groups and individuals have already identified education as an important tool for achieving social change for quite some time, this does not mean that all Indonesian Islamic schools are now breeding grounds for potential suicide bombers. Several pesantren are in fact seen more as an alternative or addition to Indonesian state education, which has shown weaknesses for quite some time. A proper knowledge of Arabic and Islamic law interpretation (fiqh) or preaching abilities may mean better job opportunities for many students. However, it can also not be denied that Laskar Jihad fighters in the Moluccas from 1999 to 2003, the Bali bombers of 2002 and 2005, and many members of the fundamentalist Parti Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) have closest connections to Islamic schools in Java and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> This ambivalence is carefully considered and is presented in a well-balanced manner in this important essay.

The essay by Richard Kraince on Malaysia’s reform efforts in Islamic education takes the ongoing debates between government and Islamic opposition on the role of Malaysian citizens, among them the son of Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, in militant terrorist Southeast Asian groups as a starting point. Kraince then provides an interesting overview of the various types of Islamic education in Malaysia. The People’s Religious Schools (Sekolah Agama Rakyat) have become a particular target of the government as they have been seen as centres of opposition activity and have been labelled as bases for Islamic violence. Since the last two decades the Malaysian government has tried to gain more control over these schools. The decision to withdraw government funds in late 2002 based on the argument of lack of quality faced sharp criticism from PAS and other groups (p. 126f.). Kraince also shows that despite expectations to the contrary, the majority of Muslim pupils are not educated at religious schools but rather at state schools as their chances of getting attractive jobs are thus far better. Yet the author does overlook an important point here: the motivation of the parents and pupils. Although only 2.2 per cent (in total 113,221) of all Malaysian students were enrolled at Islamic schools in 2004 (p. 124), this is still a considerable number, particularly if non-Muslim students are excluded from the statistics. If it is generally known that the chances for the children are better at national schools, why are so many children still sent to Islamic schools then?

The reviewer also notes the absence of some discussion on the actual role of institutions of Islamic higher learning in Malaysia. Both Abdul Hadi Awang and Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat run madrasah in Kelantan and Terengganu. While the international connections of Abdul Hadi Awang’s

madrasah in Kampung Rusila have recently been pointed out (Noor 2008: 156), Nik Abdul Aziz's college, consisting of huge buildings located in Kampung Pulau Melaka close to Kota Bharu, has still not received attention. These madrasah, or better, their teaching staff, play an important role as agents of Muslim modernity and often stand for Islamic reformism (Abdullah 1979).

Their role needs to be examined, particularly as Nik Abdul Aziz is the first chief minister (Menteri Besar) of a Malaysian state whose education is based solely on madrasah and traditional pondok schools (Noor 2004: 475). The importance of the religious teachers with their networks of pondok schools as a vehicle for propaganda and the mobilization of the PAS electorate since the earliest times of this party had recently been emphasized by Liow (2009: 26).

Kraince's essay is the only in this collection which pays significant attention to gender issues in Islamic education (p. 129ff.). Kraince rightly states that "Islamic education materials used in national schooling continue to promote parochial views that undermine women's public statuses" (p. 130). Women's rights efforts undertaken by Malaysian NGOs such as Sisters in Islam or academics and activists such as Maznah Mohamad or Norani Othman have attracted more attention in recent years. Devaraj (2005), for example, unmasks the highly conservative, if not reactionary, view of gender roles in society presented in Malaysian elementary schoolbooks.

Joseph Liow's essay on South Thailand will only be discussed briefly here, as the second book under review is his more comprehensive monograph on Islamic education in the region. Here it should only be mentioned that given the continuation of violence in the three southern provinces Patani, Yala, and Narathiwat, Islamic education has increasingly become an issue for the Thai authorities. Documents found suggest links to Al-Qa'ida, Jema'ah Islamiyah and other terrorist movements which might have been established even before the 1990s. Liow presents a well-written overview which might also serve as an introduction to his longer and therefore more detailed monograph.

Bjørn Atle Blengli's essay on the role of Islamic education in the Muslim diaspora of Cambodia is a highly fascinating piece of scholarship. Blengli has meticulously outlined the international relations of Islamic schools and organizations in Cambodia. Subsequent to the genocide of the Muslim Cham during the Khmer Rouge terror, the free exercise of religion was possible again. Former relations with South Thailand and Malaysian east coast states were revived, and the Malay-language religious texts of Nawawi al-Banteni or Muhammad Ismail al-Patani were reinstalled in the curriculum (p. 176ff.). The Tablighi Jama'at was introduced in Cambodia in 1989, and their first school opened in 1992. They organized mass assemblies with more than 20,000 participants, among them more than 200 foreign preachers from Thailand, Malaysia, India, Jordan, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, and even New Zealand (p. 185). The Cambodian followers of this movement, which is also very active in South Thailand, Malaysia, and the southern Philippines, come from foreign educational

backgrounds. They are graduates of Deobandi schools in Islamabad, Karachi or India; from universities in Saudi Arabia, Libya or Egypt; or from Islamic colleges and schools in Malaysia and South Thailand (p. 187).<sup>9</sup>

In the mid-1990s Middle Eastern organizations became more and more active in Cambodia. The largest Salafi organization operating in Cambodia is currently the Revival of Islamic Heritage Foundation from Kuwait, which has sponsored eight Muslim schools and a teacher-training centre (p. 172).

Saudi foundations and Islamic charity societies such as the Umm al-Qura are also active and finance Islamic schools. Both Kuwaiti and Saudi organizations are heavily critical of Islam in Cambodia, taking their interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah as the sole basis of all religious activities (p. 188).<sup>10</sup> However, Blengli states that these movements are still in the minority in Cambodia.

Blengli also keeps an eye on the motivation behind Islamic schools. In a country like Cambodia, not only Islamic schools but also more or less the whole educational system has had to start all over again from zero. Islamic schools are all too often the only choice for the education of Muslim children, especially girls (p. 197). Therefore, it is not surprising that the Muslim school system in Cambodia is very much in flux, open to changes from the outside world.

The last chapter of this book covers Islamic schools in the southern Philippines and is authored by Thomas McKenna and Esmael A. Abdula. Islamic schools have in fact been quite well established in the Mindanao-Sulu region for some centuries. When the Americans took over the colonial Philippines in 1898, they found a local Islamic school, which they called "pandita schools", in more or less every village. These traditional pandita schools were run by a local ulama, imam or Islamic teacher. Their curriculum consisted of the reading of the Qur'an, Arabic and a little arithmetic (p. 208).

One of the consequences of these widespread schools was a relatively high literacy rate among women, who in some societies, such as the Tausug, were also active in Islamic rituals. American colonialists, however, were not able to see any use in this traditional school system – an opinion which was also held as late as 1987, when Lacar (1987: 12) labelled Islamic schools generally as an "educational dead end for Muslims".

Modern, reformist madrasah education came to Mindanao only after the Second World War in the 1950s. These madrasah taught Qur'anic Arabic, Islamic history, Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir), and Hadith (p. 209). As the economic boom of the late 1940s and 1950s created a new Muslim elite in the southern Philippines, there was money for the building of new mosques and madrasah. Relations with the Middle East also became stronger at this time as more people were able to perform the pilgrimage and spend time studying in Saudi Arabia or Egypt.

These relations became even closer when, also in the early 1950s, the Egyptian government of President Nasser started to send Al-Azhar-trained missionaries to the southern Philippines. These missionaries entered the new madrasah schools and expanded Arabic language training. As of 1955 the Egyptian government also created stipends for further studies at Al-Azhar

for students from Mindanao and Sulu. More than two hundred students were sent to Egypt with these funds between the 1950s and 1978 (p. 210). The outbreak of the violent conflict in the southern Philippines brought an end to this relationship. After 1977 new sources of money flowed into Muslim education, this time from Saudi Arabia and Libya. This led to the growth of Muslim education, both quantitatively and qualitatively. In 2004 approximately 21 per cent of the children in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao were registered at madrasah schools (p. 213). But despite the efforts of Middle Eastern forces, only a small number of teachers are graduates from the Middle East (p. 225). Here the authors could have referred also to the role of Islamic institutions of higher learning such as the Mindanao State University, where a Saudi-sponsored King Faisal Institute of Asian and Islamic Studies was established in the 1970s.

Public schools in the Muslim south have demonstrated considerable shortcomings in quality, staff, and equipment. Thus, the situation in the Philippines parallels developments in Cambodia and Burma: children are sent to Islamic schools in order to get at least a basic school education instead of having an insufficient education (p. 206, 223). The majority of the parents seem to have the same preferences as the Christian Filipinos: a solid grounding in ethics and moral values and the acquisition of skills which will enable their children to have a future in the contemporary state.

Joseph Liow's study on South Thailand presents an example of the religious education of a minority in the nation state. He does limit himself to the three provinces of Patani, Yala, and Narathiwat, which are predominantly Malay-speaking, but also includes Satun and Songkhla, which also have a Muslim but Thai-speaking majority. Liow and a team of local researchers collected the data over three years. Liow's book has four aims (p. 3ff.): (1) It is the first monograph on Islamic education in South Thailand. (2) It tries to provide an updated description of the relations between the central state and the Malay-Muslim periphery in the South. (3) It elaborates on the dynamics within the Muslim community in South Thailand, which has all too often been analysed as a monolithic block. (4) Finally, it shows the transnational links and networks that exist. Another point which Liow could have included in his list is that this study serves as a link between security/conflict studies and area studies. He fulfils all of the above aims quite successfully.

One of the strongest points of Liow's study is the extensive use of fieldwork data and case studies, which are the spices that give this book a delicious taste. The author describes a typical day at Islamic schools (p. 37);

presents in detail the role of the local scholar Ismail Lutfi Japakiya al-Fatani as rector of the Yala Islamic University (p. 88ff.); and, with the Thamma Witthaya Islamic Private School in Yala, provides an example of the history and organization of the curriculum of a modern Islamic educational institution (p. 38). Liow shows some weaknesses when it comes to historical arguments. He uncritically states that the ethnic identity which stresses Malay- or "Patani"-ness "is also transferred from generation to generation via oral history as well as the local school curriculum" (p. 17). But this assumption is somewhat unsatisfactory as ethnic identity as well as



oral history and, even more so, the local school curriculum have their starting points in history. Anthony Milner has recently shown that Malay ethnic identity indeed largely developed out of the colonial discourses of the nineteenth century (Milner 2008: 119ff.) and that Patani traditional chronicles explicitly do not refer to the state as “Malay” (ibid.: 75).

Liow also does not mention when Islamic pondok schools emerged in the Malay Peninsula (p. 19).<sup>11</sup> This is an important point as enrolment at Islamic schools in South Thailand today can be clearly interpreted as a marker of ethnic identity. Let us look at the following tables, which use data from Liow’s study:

**Table 1: Number of Pupils in the Lower Secondary Level in the Five Southern Provinces in Thailand, 2006**

Lower Secondary Level	<i>madrasah</i>	Public Schools
Yala / Patani / Narathiwat	17,116	6,924
Songkhla / Satun	3,622	12,652

Source: Liow 2009: 51.

**Table 2: Number of Pupils in the Upper Secondary Level in the Five Southern Provinces in Thailand, 2006**

Upper Secondary Level	<i>madrasah</i>	Public Schools
Yala / Patani / Narathiwat	10,095	4,643
Songkhla / Satun	1,329	8,489

Source: Liow 2009: 51.

It becomes obvious from tables 1 and 2 that enrolment in a madrasah in southern Thailand is a feature of pupils’ ethnic background. While the Malay-dominated provinces show a very high level of enrolment in Islamic madrasah compared to public schools, the numbers from Songkhla and Satun show a different picture. Here the majority is also Muslim but mainly of non-Malay ethnic background, and the students prefer to be registered in Thai-language public schools.

Liow pays great attention to the international backgrounds of individuals involved in Islamic education in South Thailand. Yala Islamic University has received substantial financial backing from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar, and its rector Ismail Lutfi holds a Ph.D. in shari'a law from Saudi Arabia (p. 88ff.). Many teachers who are close to his reform agenda and now work in Islamic schools were also trained in Saudi Arabia and are closer to conservative Wahhbi thought than to the Shafi'i school traditionally dominant in Southeast Asia. The chapter on Thai students in the Middle East deserves particular mention here as it provides data on numbers and the preferred places of study. In the last 15 years more than 2,500 students from Thailand have graduated in Saudi Arabia, and each year approximately 20 students received a Saudi stipend (p. 152). The preferred universities are Al-Riyadh University, Medina University, and Umm al-Qura University in Mecca. Approximately 3,000 Thai-Muslim students were present in Egypt in 2006, chiefly at Al-Azhar University, Al-Qahirah University, the American University of Cairo, and Zamalik University (p. 154). Approximately 400 Thai-Muslim students were also found in the Sudan, where they studied not only Islamic sciences but also medicine, engineering, pedagogy, communication, and economics. All of them had financial support from either the local university, Islamic charities or private donations (p. 156). Some dozen students were also found in Jordan, approximately 70 per cent of them at Yarmuk University for shari'a studies (p. 158). Liow also includes information on Islamic education in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, providing the first accounts of these institutions to date (p. 163ff.).

The author discusses in great detail the school curriculum and the teaching materials in use. The writings of al-Ghazali and Nawawi al-Banteni are all present in southern Thai Islamic schools, as well as the nineteenth and twentieth-century writings of local ulama. In the 1980s Matheson and Hooker (1988) undertook a survey of Islamic writings circulating in Patani. Liow thus enables a comparative study of the changes in local curriculum and texts in South Thailand over the last three decades.

A final critical point on this monograph – Liow's presentation of the materials is sometimes marked by a certain sloppiness. He mentions the grandfather of Haji Sulong, the important nineteenth-century ulama Sheikh Zainal Abidin al-Fatani with different spellings (p. 81, 100). Elsewhere he mixes up the dates of the lifespans of al-Ghazali and Nawawi al-Banteni in the same sentence: the first is presented according to the Christian calendar, while the second follows the Muslim calendar (p. 100).

Jean Berlie's study is somewhat different as it aims to provide a general overview of the situation of the Muslim communities in Burma/ Myanmar in relation to the central state. However, it is based on elementary fieldwork and provides many hitherto unknown and fascinating details on Islamic education in Burma. It thus seems justified for the reviewer to include this book in this article as well.

After the initial reading, Berlie's book gives a somehow sketchy impression of the topic as it often lacks a stringent analysis. Berlie delivers a patchwork of field description and interviews which – not to be

misunderstood here – also serve as the salt in the soup. But this makes it difficult to follow his argument at times and also leads to the repetition of data. Berlie further states that since Moshe Yegar’s now nearly classic study *The Muslims of Burma* (1972) no more recent book has been published on the Muslim minority in Burma, but he fails to mention Klaus Fleischmann’s important study on the refugee drama in Arakan in the late 1970s (Fleischmann 1981). Despite this minor flaw, Berlie takes the relevant secondary literature completely into account.

Berlie successfully shows that there is no Muslim “minority” in Burma, but in fact several minorities (p. 7). These minorities have different status in the provinces (“states”) where they are living, and in Arakan they actually represent the majority. Therefore, the Islamic education situation differs from state to state according to the specific circumstances.

As Arab, Urdu, and Parsi have been superseded as languages of Islamic education in Burma, such education is now carried out chiefly in Burmese (p. 79). The decade from 1950 to 1960 is labelled by Berlie as the “golden period” of Islamic education, when a governmental Muslim Central Fund sent students with stipends to the colleges of Deoband and Saharanpur in India, and occasionally also to Al-Azhar University in Cairo (p. 81). When the military took over power in 1962, this exchange of ideas and thoughts came to an abrupt end, leading to a general decline in Islamic educational institutions. However, Berlie also mentions other examples: Ashambori Mosque in Rangoon serves, like many other mosques in Burma, as a centre of Muslim education. It has highly qualified teachers and attracts approximately two hundred new pupils each year, of whom more than 50 per cent graduate (p. 44). Berlie states that the best quality Islamic education is found in urban centres such as Rangoon or Mandalay (p. 93).

The situation is entirely different in Arakan. As the Arakan Muslims/Rohingyas are not regarded as citizens of Burma – and therefore considered to be stateless and illegal Bangladeshis according to the Burmese military government – they face heavy pressure from state authorities. Of 2,500 registered mosques in the whole of Burma, more than 1,200 are found in Arakan (p. 60). There are also far more madrasah schools in Arakan than in any other Burmese state. Government efforts seek to reduce the number of mosques and madrasah in Arakan and to take greater control of Islamic education there than elsewhere in Burma (p. 84). Restrictions on free travel hinder any exchange with other Islamic institutions within or outside of Burma.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the Islamic schools continue to attract many pupils. As the government does not accept the Rohingya as Burmese citizens, it does not run many schools in Arakan and does not send a sufficient number of qualified teachers to the remaining schools. As a consequence, Muslim children in Arakan either do not go to school at all or are sent to Muslim madrasahs, as this is the only chance of accessing an education for these children (p. 89). Given this situation, it is surely not surprising that the general standard of education is far lower in Arakan than in other Burmese states (p. 93).

Berlie's book has further merits: It is the only book known to the reviewer which pays considerable attention to the Islamic education curriculum in Burma and to the text books used at Burmese institutions (p. 81f.). Appendices 2 and 3 provide summaries of the contents of two of such text books, something which is highly useful for comparative studies on Islamic education in South and Southeast Asia (p. 119ff.). Furthermore, Berlie does not have a static perspective on his topic: he highlights ongoing developments and continuous changes, especially when presenting his materials on Islamic education. Therefore, despite some flaws in the presentation of data, Berlie's study is a highly important book on a very neglected topic in Southeast Asian studies, especially considering the circumstances of conducting research and fieldwork in a state ruled by a dictatorial regime.

To summarize I would like to draw attention to some points which I consider to be of special importance for Southeast Asia. All three books mention the importance of transnational networks of Islamic education in the relevant states. The role of international connections within Southeast Asia is carefully outlined (Liow, Blengli, Hefner's introduction) as well as relations with organizations beyond Southeast Asian borders. The networks to Saudi Arabia and Egypt have been the subject of scholarly attention for quite some time, but the links to Pakistan, India, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan or the Sudan have so far not been described in such great detail as in these studies. Muslim educational networks have a tremendous impact on the ideological and intellectual climate. Their role should therefore not be underestimated. The works of Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, were already being read in the 1950s in the Penang madrasah of former Malaysian prime minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's father (Warnk 2008: 142).

The works of Mawdudi and Qutb became widespread in Malaysia through the channel of the youth organization ABIM and its student members in the 1970s and entered the political arena via this path (Kamal Hassan 2003). The impact of Mawdudi's writings was not so great in Indonesia as his works often circulated only as English or Arabic translations and grew due to exchanges with Malaysian students and their knowledge. Since the 1990s his thoughts have become more popular in certain circles, especially among those with a Pakistan educational background (e.g. Noorhaidi 2008: 253). In the Philippines one of the main propagators of Mawdudi's ideas was Abdulrafih Sayedy, a former professor at Mindanao State University with a BA degree in shari'a law from Al-Azhar University in Cairo (Sayedy 1988). Students in the Middle East in the 1960s and 1970s with stipends from PAS were responsible for the introduction of the writings of Sayyid Qutb in Malaysia (Fauzi 2007: 127f.). Qutb was popularized in Indonesia by Indonesian students returning from Saudi Arabia, where his brother Muhammad Qutb<sup>13</sup> became professor after his flight from Egypt in the mid- 1960s (Dhume 2008: 229).

All of the contributions show a great awareness of the central role of sacred and educational texts. Liow, Berlie and most of the contributors to Hefner's essay collection focus at least partially on this matter. The

booming market for Islamic books in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam is only one marker of the extremely high relevance of texts for Muslim education. The materials presented here will enable further studies in the coming decades on the traditions, changes and innovations in the curriculum. So far this has only been carried out by Martin van Bruinessen, who compared the texts of Javanese pesantren collected by van den Berg in the 1880s with his own findings in the late 1980s (Bruinessen 1995). However, considering that the writing of religious Islamic works is one of the elementary tasks of an Islamic scholar (Muhamad 2006), the role of the teaching staff could have been more clearly elaborated by some authors. The greatest detail here comes from Liow's monograph, which meticulously analyses the ways in which ideas, ideologies, and thoughts have been transferred from one generation to another.

Although some authors have tried to incorporate a gender perspective in their accounts (especially Kraince, McKenna, and Abdula), the information on female students in the studies under review is rather limited. This is not surprising as all contributors are male and could not access first-hand fieldwork data on the varying approaches of Islamic institutions to female education and how these affect and influence girls and women. We still urgently lack detailed studies on Islamic female education for nearly all regions of Southeast Asia.

The three books clearly demonstrate that Islamic educational institutions in Southeast Asia are neither unprogressive nor stagnant – neither are their counterparts in the Middle East or on the Indian subcontinent! The use of modern information technology and national and international networks shows that Southeast Asian Islamic educationalists are not backwards-looking medievalists, but rather cultural brokers of unique educational hybrids. They offer not only an intellectual breeding ground for radical elements, but also an alternative form of education when public education does meet the needs of local population (in Burma, the Philippines, Cambodia, and parts of Indonesia). The connections to and implications for politics, terrorism and militancy on a national, regional and international level are not forgotten by any of the authors, but these are only one part of the story. Finally, the works of Berlie, Blengsli, Liow, McKenna, and Abdula on Muslim communities with minority status in modern Southeast Asian nation states deliver an excellent picture of the heterogeneity of the region. Thus, instead of referring in future to a Muslim “minority”, it would be better to speak of Muslim “minorities” in South Thailand, Burma, the southern Philippines, and Cambodia.

In conclusion, despite some critiques on the part of the reviewer, all three books must be praised here. They not only deliver a lot of answers, but also raise additional questions of far-reaching relevance which will enable future research on a highly important topic.

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## **Alternative Bildungschance oder Radikalenbildung? Neue Literatur zu islamischer Bildung in Südostasien**

### **Zusammenfassung:**

Dieser Buchbesprechungsaufsatz behandelt drei neue Publikationen zur islamischen Bildung in Südostasien. Zwei der besprochenen Werke sind Monografien über Südthailand bzw. Myanmar/ Burma, bei einem Buch handelt es sich um einen Sammelband mit Aufsätzen zu Indonesien, Malaysia, Südthailand, Kambodscha und die Südphilippinen. Alle Werke betonen sowohl lokale und regionale südostasiatische als auch internationale Bildungsnetzwerke (Pakistan, Indien, Mittlerer Osten). Vielfach auf Feldforschungsmaterial basierend geben die Werke ein aktuelles und detailreiches Bild über die aktuellen Debatten und Entwicklungen in islamischer Bildung in Südostasien.

**Schlagwörter:** Südostasien, Indonesien, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Islam, Religion, Bildung

## Notes

1 In particular, the PAS concept for an Islamic state in Malaysia closely resembles Mawdudi's ideas (Warnk (forthcoming)).

2 The Dar ul-'Ulum Seminary in Deoband and its adherents at other schools are today often accused of maintaining connections to the Taliban (Sikand 2005: 231).

3 Networks of Islamic thought and different schools of reasoning were in fact existing in Southeast Asia, emerging in the late sixteenth century, if not earlier (Azra 1992). With the growing number of steamships in the Indian Ocean in the nineteenth century, the transfer of students, teachers and also ideas between the Middle East, Egypt, and Southeast Asia became much easier (Warnk 2006; Mas'ud 2006: 110ff.). However, traditional Islamic schools in Indonesia continue to be of importance for the local population (see e.g. Jones 1983).

4 Not surprisingly, Southeast Asian extremists search for their shining examples outside the region. As the Taliban state became obsolete as an ideal model following the attacks of 9/11, the Malaysian opposition party PAS now openly favours the states of Sudan and Saudi Arabia and the Hisbollah movement as its ideal models for an Islamic state order in Malaysia (Warnk 2008: 154).

5 For an overview on the Salafi movement in Indonesia see Noorhaidi 2007; for a general definition of Salafism see Roy 2004: 42ff

6 The pesantren of Gontor was labelled by Dhume (2008: 126) as a kind of "Eton" of modernist Islamist education; former students are well-known Indonesian public figures with heterogeneous political and religious views such as Din Syamsuddin, Nurcholish Madjid, Abu Bakar Bashir, Hidayat Nur Wahid, and Hasyim Muzadi. Founded in 1926, it had more than 12,000 students at seven campuses in 2002. The curriculum is run in Arabic and English, but not in Indonesian. Many of Gontor's graduates continue their studies in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan or Malaysia (ibid: 127).

7 Roy (2004: 169) has already highlighted the significant role of translators in the transmission of Islamist thought via book publications and the Internet. In consequence, it is also they who choose what is translated, which means that certain authors, texts and languages (Arab and English originals) are preferred.

8 Hefner is fully aware of the paradox that the popularity of PKS slogans is not reflected in the party's results in Indonesian general elections (p. 95).

9 Such exchanges and discourses still seem to be non-existent in the Cham community in Vietnam (Taylor 2007: 239).

10 The same pattern applies for Wahhbi preachers in Indonesia and Malaysia. If any person from Western countries were to show a similar attitude in these countries, he would immediately find himself faced with the accusation of cultural imperialism or even racism, as is rightly stated by Bassam Tibi (2007: 31).

11 Traditional Malay pondok schools centred around an Islamic teacher emerged on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula (Kelantan, Patani, and Terengganu) in the early nineteenth century (Muhamad 2006).

12 The Burmese Ministry of Religious Affairs allows only two hundred pilgrims per year to make the pilgrimage to Mecca (p. 88). Berlie does not have material on Muslim students who visit institutions of higher Islamic learning on the Indian subcontinent, in the Middle East or in Southeast Asia. Noor (2008: 143) mentions some dozens of students from Burma at madrasah in Pakistan. From his own field experiences the reviewer is aware of the presence of many students from Burma at both universities and madrasah in Malaysia.

13 Muhammad Qutb was one of Osama bin Laden's teachers.

[www.alhassanain.org/english](http://www.alhassanain.org/english)