

RE-EXAMINING DUTCH ORIENTALISM IN CONSTRUCTING INDONESIAN ISLAM

Ahmad Nur Fuad
IAIN Sunan Ampel, Surabaya – Indonesia

Book Review



Book title : *The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the Narration of a Sufi Past*
Author : Michael Laffan
No. of Pages : xx + 301
Year : 2011
Publisher : Princeton University Press

As indicated by its title, this book is concerned primarily with the historical processes of the making of Indonesian Islam. It is devoted largely to examining the role of Dutch scholarly traditions and indigenous ‘*ulama*’ in the construction of Muslim identity in Indonesia. It is also aimed at exhibiting the role played by diverse actors in interpreting and fashioning Islam in the region, including Dutch scholars. The book likely tries to elaborate the “disputes about the place of *ṭarīqah* praxis which represents but one aspect of Sufism as a field of Islamic knowledge” (xii). However, what constitutes the core discussion of this book seems to be the career and role of Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936) - often labeled as a Dutch Orientalist, outward Muslim, colonizer - and his allies in defining and directing the course of Islam’s development in modern Indonesia. The whole argument presented in this book, in my view, is established to support the conviction that the formation of Indonesia Islam involves continuous

processes, and is constantly redefined by its citizens throughout history, while at the same time demonstrating the crucial role of the Dutch actors.

This book is divided into four parts, while each part consists of three chapters. Having been organized as such, this book presents an historical account in light of diachronic and synchronic approaches altogether. In the first part, this book describes the major trends in the formation of Islamic discourse in Southeast Asia from about 1200 to 1880s when the Dutch would make an explicit intervention in Muslim affairs. It has been suggested that the process of Islamization owed a great deal to mystical traditions. In addition, the establishment of more formalized structures of learning as the result of intellectual networks between the 'ulamā' in the archipelago and the Middle East brought about a stronger tendency to Islamic law rather than to speculative sufism.

At this point, this book examines how the process of Islamization took place from about 1300s to 1750, and shows numerous difficulties arising in the course of history of conversion and Islamization up to the middle of the eighteenth century. However, it is apparent that this book tries to elaborate the role of Sufism in the making of Muslim identity in the region. It can be argued that the role of figures collectively known as Nine Saints (Walisongo) and other mystical figures in other places of the archipelago has been very significant. This can be related to A.H. John's theory of the *ṭarīqah* shaykh's role in spreading Islam in the archipelago, in addition to trade activities (5). The process of conversion of some royal figures, such as Mirah Silu who later became Malik al-Salih (d.1297), is often narrated in traditional historiography in the perspective of mystical experiences. In effect, the processes of Islamization brought the power of international connections that linked the Indian Ocean and China Sea ever more closely together.

In the first part of the book we can find complex encounters between speculative Sufism and orthodoxy. This has been represented by the debate between the idea of wujudism propagated by such figures as Hamzah Fansuri and Shams al-Din Sumatrani and orthodox sufism advocated by the 'ulamā' such as by al-Raniri and al-Sinkili. The latter figures are reported to have established intellectual connections and networks with the 'ulamā' of Middle East such as al-Qushahi and al-Kurani during the seventeenth century.

It is admitted that the development of mystical traditions has also contributed to the spread of Islam and its acceptance by large number of population in different parts of the archipelago, from Sumatra in the west, Java, even to Celebes in the east. These developments involved the role of various mystical fraternities such as the Qadiriyyah, Naqshabandiyyah, Khalwatiyyah and Sammaniyah. What is interesting in this connection is this book's elaboration of numerous Sufi manuscripts produced by different Sufi shaykhs in Sumatra and Java. This fact indicated the richness of Sufi traditions that influence the model of Indonesian Islam.

However, as this book suggested, during the nineteenth century there has been a significant shift in the history of Indonesian Islam due to the increasing economic penetration of the English and Dutch successor states in the archipelago. Supported in some cases by a growing native economy, Indonesian Islam was seen as moving away from "court-mandated orthodoxy towards a closer connection with Mecca and the Middle East," mediated by independent teachers or 'ulamā'. In some cases, these independent religious masters were able to prosper, particularly in the places that were closely linked to global trade. They were also able to adapt to new modes of Sufi organization and praxis. By the end of the century, the Naqshabandi Sufi order in particular was exploring new ways of expanding and broadening their followers.

The second part of the book focuses on different stories, and is largely concerned with the *longue durée* of Dutch experiences with Islam in Southeast Asia. Here, this book emphasizes the discussion on the formation of Islamic discourse in the course of the first voyages of the 1590s. The place of Protestantism in the understanding of Islam and its relationship with the East India Company is very much emphasized. In this part the book reviews the impact of new cultures and sciences and new concept of empire, fostered by the colonial government of The Hague and Batavia, on societal and cultural changes in the eighteenth century. The Westerners (Dutch) has attempted more actively to understand how Islam was organized and to educate their officials in Islamic law before their deployment in the field.

This part, particularly chapter four suggests the necessity to consider the long history of competition between Protestant Christianity and Islam in the archipelago. It seems to have been that Islam was regarded as an important and familiar enemy encountered by

the Christians in a new part of the world. It has been said that the presence and expansion of Islam did not necessarily generate much printed material. Nevertheless, some Dutch scholars, many of them churchmen, gained new ideas about Islam in the process of acquiring Malay texts.

This book elaborates the history of rivalry between the former power and the emergent one throughout the first half of the nineteenth century across Southeast Asia in the wake of VOC's collapse. There have been significant shifts of hegemony and influences that were not simple in this phase. Many local sultans also tried to take advantage from these changes to extricate themselves from old agreement and treaties. In due course, wars that took place in effect urged the Dutch to establish officials to administer Muslims who then became formally under their imperial grasp. For this purpose, the Dutch turned to consider the importance of different texts previously ignored. These texts became the basis for the training manuals used by teachers who had often never been to the Indies. In addition, it is intended to contrast the text with the materials that were already available from the Middle East. This phase was considered as the establishment of "new regimes of knowledge," during 1800-1865.

The book then continues to focus on the activities of Christian missionaries in the region and on the backing which they received from prominent scholar-polemicists, such as P.J. Veth. In many cases, the missionaries saw a chance for Christianizing the natives as they saw and understood the natives' weak understanding and practice of Islam. These missionaries seemed to argue that the Javanese could not be considered as Muslims because their "Islam" fell far short of the Islam which they knew and studied from the texts edited by their teachers in Delft, the Netherland. More crucially, however, we can see in their writings "tangential and certainly unintended evidence of an active engagement" with new modes of thinking, with printing, and with Sufi practices imported from the Middle East. The Christian missionaries and some local officials tended to underplay the sincerity of the Muslims, and especially of the undifferentiated Arabs and hajjis behind them. However, the missionaries were in full earnest when faced with the potential threat of the Sufi fraternities that emerged into the scene with the Cilegon massacre (1888). In this case it can be stated that Dutch knowledge about Islam was outdated. It is also highly oriented

to texts above context. Whereas, it is fairly said, “Islam had to be understood, Mecca had to be known.”

Having discussed at length about the missionary efforts by a number of theologians and churchmen, this book therefore can be regarded as successful in providing a general overview of the early encounter between “Dutch interlopers” in the archipelago and their Muslim rivals. More specifically, it can be seen that during the nineteenth century and in the wake of two intense wars in Sumatra and Java, scholars who have been hired to train future administrators would have different perspectives from their missionary fellow in seeing Javanese and Malays as being not proper Muslims. Some scholars like Keijzer, on the one hand, saw the difference as a matter of degrees, “that Javanese and Malays deviated to a greater or lesser extent from the proper juridical understanding of normative Islam.” Whereas, some Indies-based missionaries, on the other hand, could declare that the Javanese in particular failed to meet and fulfill even the most elementary tests of Islamic belief.

What appears in the following part is the implication of the “entwining of indigenous and Dutch scholarship on the question of religion.” In this part, this book focuses largely on the crucial role of Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936) and his network of allies and informant. It examines in much detail various developments and trends during a rather brief period of years, rather than decades or centuries. Snouck Hurgronje’s intervention in the field of religion in Holland and his criticism of the juridical and missiological attacks on the orthopraxy of Islam in the Indies is discussed in great detail, and this becomes—in my view—the scholarly strength and advantage of this book. What is most interesting seems to be that this book considers the dislike or aversion of Snouck Hurgronje and his allies for varieties of populist mysticism. The book then explores the development of Islamic society after the arrival of Snouck in Batavia in 1889 and his fieldwork activities in Java and Aceh. In due course, Snouck was seen by Muslims as a mediator and authority for their interest and by his superiors as an informant on Muslims. On the contrary, however, those who opposed Snouck’s authority would regard his “ethical policies” as a part of a longer-term project of Christianization.

However, as this book demonstrates, Snouck Hurgronje has successfully changed the perceptions of indigenous people, especially Muslims, towards the colonial engagement in the region. This book

brilliantly highlights the scholarly career and journey of Snouck, starting from Europe, Arabia to the Indies. Although Snouck was trained in the field of religious studies, he criticized legalistic scholarship that highly prioritized text over context. Rather, he seemed to propose what he regarded as a more professionally developed Orientalism, that is a scholarship supported by fieldworks and observations to understand the Muslims' lives and cultures. In so doing, such an Orientalism "would more effectively service an empire contending with Islam as its primary threat."

In this part, the book describes how Snouck Hurgronje had been actively engaged in Muslim affairs in the archipelago. Even though Snouck gave emphasis on the importance of fieldwork, his engagement with various manuscripts and printed text as well as with Sufi masters and 'ulamā' is worth noted. As has been widely known, he is often regarded as "Mr. Dr. C. Snouck Hurgronje or Moefiti Hadji Abdoel Gafar, a man very learned in Arab language and religion." He was also "Advisor for Native and Arab Affairs" (162). During his career, Snouck has successfully experienced what is termed as "collaborative encounters" (1889-1892).

As a colonial advisor for natives and Arab affairs, Snouck took advantages from connections he built during his "field-defining venture in Mecca," and the political events of Cilegon (1888). He believed that he could play an important part in elevating the well being of the indigenous people, despite his deep consciousness in serving the colonial enterprise. As suggested by this book, Snouck seemed to change colonial policies to a much greater respect for Muslim faith and people as well. In the course of his various journeys to many places including Aceh he thought that he should have put off "the mantle of doomsayer" and began to give "greater patience with, attention to, and even respect for Islam as the faith of a distressed people." This book also shows that for Snouck it was important to modernize Muslims' life, and minimize or even eliminate the influence of jihad notion as well as the role of Sufi teachers. The 'ulamā' and their manuscripts (especially on Java) were considered more as a "source of antiquarian interest than of counterinsurgency intelligence" (161).

Still concerning the role of Snouck, this part, especially Chapter Nine, demonstrates how Snouck established an alliance with local 'ulamā' such as Sayyid 'Uthman in the last decade of the nineteenth

century. Snouck and Sayyid 'Uthman became two "faces of one coin," and could not be separated. The writer of Sayyid 'Uthman's biography has observed that this Arab scholar considered his new position as "Batavia's quasi official mufti." This position is assumed as analogous to the position of a Western "Advisor" (162).

Also of interest in this part is the historical account, although short, of various developments in Indonesian Islam, such as the story of Kartawidjaja and the controversy of his conversion to Christianity. There is also the story of Hasan Mustafa who rejected Ghazalian orthodoxy in favor of wujud philosophy of Sufism that denied God's attributes. He is therefore considered as "the turbaned devil of Bandung," who advocated naturist materialism. The Gedangan affair of Sidoarjo East Java which involved Hasan Mu'min was also regarded as important to the role of Snouck, even though his advices on this latter event was rejected by colonial officials who disliked Snouck's "liberal" viewpoints (165-172). This event in fact influenced Snouck's tendency to critically review and make efforts to change the institutional culture operating in the field. However, in his role as unofficial mufti of the Muslim Netherlands Indies, Snouck was –it seems- perceived as servant to state and Islam alike. As such, two viewpoints of Snouck's role eventually emerged. On the hand, Snouck was regarded by missionaries as trying to "Islamize" Java. On the other, however, some Arabs saw that Snouck's enterprise would facilitate the project of Christianization.

It can be commented here that this part of the book has brilliantly observed how Snouck worked in the Netherlands, in Arabia, and in the Indies and made alliance with his networks. This part also provides an overview of Snouck's critiques and interventions to colonial policies. Snouck began to question the value of texts produced by his juridically oriented rivals on the basis of his reading of missionary reports. He therefore then determined to lead by example a fieldwork effort to reorient what is called "Islamology" so that it might become of direct benefit to the colonial state.

The fourth part of the book examines the relationship between Dutch scholars and Muslim reformers in the first half of the twentieth century. The part traces the ongoing debates about Sufism in relation to orthodoxy. Here, the book examines how Snouck's successors who were well trained in the field of Islamic history through the use of Islamic manuscripts supported Muslim activism in Indonesia. The

book also shows the marginalization of the advisors and their reformist fellow by colonial state before the Japanese occupation in Indonesia.

Early twentieth century, as addressed by this book, witnessed the transmission of Islamic reformism into the archipelago, marking a transformation from Sufism to salafism from 1905-1911 (177). This transformation was shaped by Malay religio-intellectual traditions but linked to the Middle East, especially Cairo. There, printing and public activism became a hall mark of what is labeled as ‘new Salafi movement,’ led by such influential figures as Muhammad ‘Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida. This movement was oriented to reorient Muslim society and call upon Muslim to move away from the patronage of Sufi masters of the *ṭarīqah* and the sayyid.

In this phase of the region’s history, the influence of Snouck and his legacy –despite his absence– was still significant through advisors he had already trained. As Snouck’s successors, these advisors had to continue their patron’s mission in observing and even directing the transition of Indonesia into the modern world. These colonial advisors thought that they would guide a movement of Indonesia into the orthodox public sphere and away from the otherworldly personal control of mystical teachers. They also established connection with elite scholars of Indonesia. However, they had been very pleased by the independent and collaborative attitude of the Sarekat Islam as well as the egalitarianism of the al-Irshad movement.

It can be fairly asserted that this book in the first instance has successfully highlighted certain elements of Islamization in the archipelago. A variety of historiographical traditions also suggested that genealogical claims about Sufi learning have frequently narrated various stories and memories of conversion to Islam. However, this book seems to urge us to re-think the notion that Sufism provided “the accommodator mechanism for Southeast Asia conversion or that it explains Indonesia’s tradition of ecumenical tolerance.” To the contrary, this book argues that the “introduction of formalized techniques of Sufi learning was often tied to scholarly intolerance of popular variance that perhaps began as emulation of regal prerogatives.” (233).

As expected by the author, this book has provided a meaningful contribution to the study of Islam in Southeast Asia and to broader scholarship on the Muslim world. This book also has brilliantly

responded to questions regarding “the current consensus on the essence of Indonesia’s religious formation by highlighting assumptions formed during the colonial era.” More importantly, this book invites us to reflect on how “colonial scholarship interpreted the pre-colonial, and then inflected particular strand of reformist Sufi self-critique into modernist discourse.”

This book has provided a relatively balanced account on the history of Indonesian Islam from the perspective of “Indonesian/Islamic historiography” and the colonial historiography. However, as the central theme of this book is the career and role of Snouck Hurgronje and his successors in implementing somewhat liberal policies towards Indonesians, the heavy colonial tone of this historiography cannot be totally avoided. Although this historical account demonstrates the role of diverse actors, including indigenous ‘ulamā’ or scholars, the influences of Dutch advisors still dominated the makings of Indonesian Islam. This was due to the fact that from the era of Snouck to the time of his successors, most Indonesian ‘ulamā’, scholars and activists were relatively under the “hegemony” of their Dutch fellows. This fact represents, in my view, the dominant role of what is supposed by Snouck as “developed Orientalism” over the Islamic discourses evolving within Muslim scholars and community.

As has been addressed by the author in the preface, the book is aimed at examining “how Islam was interpreted and fashioned by the region’s diverse actors: Dutch Christians included” (xii). In the final instance, however, this book seems to have been quite successful in exhibiting how the Dutch scholars and advisors (i.e. Orientalism) played more important role than other actors (i.e. indigenous actors) did in shaping or constructing Indonesian Islam in the modern time. Nevertheless, it should be asserted that along with Laffan’s previous work, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Winds*, which demonstrates the Islamic contribution to the creation of Indonesia, this book -*The Makings of Indonesian Islam*- constitutes yet another important contribution to scholarship on Indonesian Islam in general, and to its historiography in particular.[]