

The Roots and Societal Impact of Islam in Southeast Asia

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR MARK MANCALL

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WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF ISLAM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA? HOW IS IT SEPARATE FROM OTHER FORMS OF ISLAM?

The first thing to understand is Islam in Southeast Asia did not come directly from the Middle East; it came from India. The consequence is that the Islam that came into Southeast Asia had already been modified by the experience of Islam in India and had some very strong elements of Sufism in it. Remember that Islam first came to India via the Arabs; that occurred around the 10th century. Then the Turks in Central Asia, along with the Mongols and all the earlier dynasties in India that came from Central Asia modified Islam considerably. It became a “softer” Islam; it was very mystical. So the Islam of India became very different from the Islam of the Middle East. Meanwhile, throughout Southeast Asia, certainly in Indonesia and Malaysia, Thailand, etc., when Islam settles eventually, there was a Hindu Buddhist civilization, which was rooted in the Indian tradition of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the great Hindu epics.

So Islam entered this Hindu Buddhist culture. The result was a Sufi-influenced Islam in India coming into an area where there was already an Indian culture – it was an Indianized Islam coming in on top of an Indianized local culture. The individuals that are historically said to have brought Islam into Indonesia are the *Walis*, who were all Sufi mystic types. So there was a hybrid culture evolving,

particularly in Java, for example, and in other parts of Indonesia, and it created an Islam that was very mystical, very fluid, very soft, which developed a kind of spiritualism that was very peculiar in the region. In the time we are talking about – the 14th and 15th centuries – one really could not distinguish between modern-day Malaysia and Indonesia; they were the same cultural area. But Indonesia was overwhelmingly the cultural center; Malaysia was really a kind of commercial entrepôt and the Malays in the Malaysian peninsula at this time had not advanced as far as Indonesia in terms of literacy and so on. There was Muslim settlement in the part of the Malay Peninsula below the modern-day Malaysia-Thailand border.

HAS THERE BEEN AN EXCHANGE BETWEEN MIDDLE EASTERN AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN ISLAM, THEN?

Yes. Beginning in the 19th century, but becoming much more common at the turn of the century, was a phenomenon of which we still know relatively little. This was the development of trade relations and other relations between Arab migrants, particularly from Yemen, to Malaysia and Indonesia. They are a very significant component of the Muslim population, particularly in trading communities along the coasts of Malaysia, Java, and Sumatra. They maintain, right down to the present day, rather close ties with Yemen. It has been found that, even today, people in Yemen continue to wear Malay-influenced

clothing – a lot of young people went back to Yemen for education. So there's an Arab element in Malaysia and Indonesia about which we know relatively little. It is much closer to the puritanical Saudi type of Islam.

Q DOES THIS MEAN THAT VARIOUS FORMS OF ISLAM SEE EACH OTHER AS DISTINCT, SIMILAR TO VARIOUS DENOMINATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY?

Absolutely not. Although Islam in Southeast Asia has these very particular characteristics, there is a concept throughout Islam of the *ummah*. We don't really have a word for it in English, but it's the sense that all Muslims, everywhere in the world, belong to the same community. And Muslims are taught that. Once a year, Mecca is the center of pilgrimages. All Muslims are required to go to Mecca at least once in a lifetime on a pilgrimage if they can afford it. So what you find throughout the Muslim world, including of course Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, is that when it comes time for the *Hajj*, governments hire planes and thousands upon thousands of people go on the *Hajj* from all over Southeast Asia. In Mecca, they mix with other Muslims coming from all over the Muslim world, so that idea that Muslims from all over the world are members of the same community is a very real thing, not a fanciful abstract idea. The annual gathering of Muslims in Mecca, regardless of what part of the world they come from, the color of their skin, their ancestry, or their history, means they all become part of this community. With faster communication, and with the ability, for example, to fly fifty flights every week to Mecca with pilgrims from Indonesia and then bring them home, the sense of being part of the community has grown. Modern technology has resulted in a reinforcement of traditional values by virtue of the fact that it makes communication of traditional values easier. This constant travel is one of the elements that contribute to the evolution of Islam in the modern period of Southeast Asia – there is increasing sense of being part of a

Muslim community that modern technology makes possible. Radio and television can contribute to a reinforcement of traditional values, which is a lesson that Westerners ought to learn.

Secondly, a very important element of education in Indonesia and Malaysia is the system of Muslim schools called the *pesantren* – local Muslim schools, as I think of them. In an environment where modern technology has increasingly reinforced the sense of being part of an Islamic community, the role of Muslim schools in Southeast Asia has also increased precisely because they feed into the idea a Muslim community which itself is an idea reborn every year in Mecca. So it becomes a very complex situation.

Take, for example, the sense that people in the Middle East and Iran have of being the victims of Western colonialism and imperialism. Whether it's a valid sense or not is irrelevant; they feel it, and therefore it's a political reality. It communicates itself – one of the consequences of the *Hajj* and modern communication. It becomes revived through the schools, with even the liberal Muslim schools reinforcing this sense. Consequently, it's not at all surprising that we would find a generalized negative reaction in the *ummah* to the latest Afghan war. It is that reality that makes leaders like, for example, Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia and Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in Malaysia extraordinarily careful in their reaction to the American antiterrorism campaign.

Q THE POLITICAL ROLE OF ISLAM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN GLOSSED OVER IN THE LAST FEW MONTHS. WHAT SORT OF EFFECTS DOES ISLAM HAVE ON THE STATES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA?

A There are four countries in Southeast Asia where Islam is politically significant. In Thailand, there has been the constant dilemma of integrating about a million Muslims into the larger Thai population. They have been included in the bureaucracy; the foreign minister of Thailand has been a Muslim. But

they are very distinctively Muslim – making integration more challenging – and influential enough to keep the Thai government from being overwhelmingly for the war in Afghanistan. What gives Thai Muslims their influence is the fact that they border Malaysia.

In Malaysia, Islam presents, perhaps outside of the Indonesian territory of Aceh, the strongest presence in Southeast Asia. Malaysia has a population that is divided between the Malays and Chinese immigrants. Chinese began immigrating into Malaysia in the first part of the 19th century when the British began to colonize the area. Singapore was a small village, but then the Chinese started coming in and the British decided to establish the city as a major British entrepôt,

along with Malacca and Penang. Penang is almost completely a Chinese city. Until the expulsion of Singapore from Malaysia in the 1960s, the Chinese actually had a numerical majority in Malaysia. With the expulsion of Singapore, the Chinese today number maybe 40 percent of the population, so the Malays have a slight edge. But economically, socially, and educationally, the Malays always were at a disadvantage in comparison to the Chinese. They (the Malays) lived in the *kampung*; they were peasants. During the colonial era, British brought in another element of the population, which is not numerically important but is still very present, to work in the tin mines and the rubber plantations; they brought in Indians. So the result is a three-part population, but the primary part is still the Malays.

Since Malaysia received its independence, there has been a policy of favoring Malay development and finding a way to coexist with the Chinese by incorporating them into society, but nonetheless there is a sharp distinction.

Malay identity has, to a large extent, depended on Islam. One of the problems that Mahathir, the prime minister of Malaysia, has been having is how to allow Islamic institutions to develop within the

government and yet at the same time not have Malaysia become an Islamic state in such a way that the Chinese, who are a crucial and economically important element, will be frightened away. He has had to walk a very, very thin line.

In Indonesia, in spite of the mellifluous quality of Islam that I spoke about before, there are also more puritanical elements. The government has tried to keep these elements under control (Suharto, the recently deposed president of Indonesia, himself practiced a mystical form of Islam). Nevertheless, these puritanical elements have

grown, and there has been a growth of Islamic movements. B.J. Habibie, Suharto's successor, headed one of these movements.

SPEAKING OF INDONESIA, HOW HAVE THE VARIOUS RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES WITHIN THE NATION COEXISTED?

Beginning already in 1945 was a concept known as the *panca sila*, the five principles of the country, an ancient Sanskrit term which shows the hybrid quality of that society. One of these principles is belief in one god. Indonesians have been very careful not to say what the name of that god is. So, the Muslims believe in Allah, and in Bali, which is a Hindu Buddhist society, a supreme god has emerged over time for various reasons (ultimately, Hindus argue it is all one reality, all one being called god), so they can claim belief in one god. There is also a Christian element, which is particularly strong in eastern Indonesia.

Recently, there has been conflict between Christian and Muslim elements in parts of the country. Under the Dutch there was a policy called *transmigrasi*, meaning transmigration, where Javanese were relocated to other islands, including the eastern islands, in order to relieve population pressure on Java. This became standard policy during the Suharto regime. Needless to say, however, the government often did not provide supplies to these new farming communities of Javanese migrants. So, in the eastern islands, where there was a Christian population stemming all the way from the Spaniards, Dutch, and so on, the Muslim migrants from Java competed for very scarce resources and conflict resulted, especially because the Javanese Muslims felt the government had dumped them in outlying regions without resources. In recent years, this has developed into a very serious conflict, particularly in the Moluku, or the Spice Islands. Nowadays in Java, they recruit people to go on *jihads* in the eastern islands to fight the Christians.

EARLIER, YOU MENTIONED THAT THERE WAS AN ARAB INFLUENCED ELEMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. HAS THIS ELEMENT BEEN POLITICALLY IMPORTANT?

The only place where the Arab *Wahhabi* kind of Islam has any political importance in Southeast Asia is in the northern tip of Sumatra, in the city and region called Aceh. The Dutch never succeeded in quelling this area. The Dutch fought a series of wars, the Aceh Wars at the end of the 19th century, and the Indonesians in a way have continued that war down to the present time. We don't know much about Aceh; it is hard to say why they have had a century of Islamic militancy, but it's simply a fact that the Indonesian government has to contend with.

FINALLY, LET US DISCUSS SOMETHING LESS SPECIFIC TO SOUTHEAST ASIA AND MORE ASSOCIATED WITH ISLAM IN GENERAL. THE WORD "JIHAD" HAS BEEN USED EXTENSIVELY TO DESCRIBE THE ACTIONS LEADING UP TO SEPTEMBER 11TH. THE POINT HAS BEEN RAISED THAT THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF *JIHAD*: ORIGINALLY, IT WAS MEANT TO BE AN INTERNAL SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE, BUT RECENTLY THE TERM HAS BEEN INVOKED TO DESCRIBE SO-CALLED "HOLY WARS." IS IT TRUE THAT THERE IS SUCH A DISTINCTION?

No. In my opinion, it is not a valid opinion. Let me explain why I believe it's wrong. We in the West have a culture in which religion is set off to one side. Many other religious traditions – ways of life – don't make the distinction between the spiritual and the social. They are indeed one. In Buddhism and in Islam, for example, there isn't a distinction between what we in the West call the secular as opposed to the religious. We're talking about a way of life. In that way of life, the *jihad* that is about spiritual values – the struggle with one's self, to live the right kind of life internally – must also be a struggle in society as a whole. The individual is an instant of society. So, if I don't live my life the way I'm supposed to, as a good Buddhist, a good Muslim, or as a good Jew – then how can society be good? And equally, if society isn't organized in that way, how can I lead a good life? What we call fundamentalism is a Western concept. It's a concept that is made possible by this very sharp division we make between the spiritual and the secular, between the inner spiritual life and the external social life. We like to make the distinction in Islam between the internal *jihad* and the external *jihad*. And Muslims who are speaking to Westerners make that distinction as well, because it makes us feel better. But frankly, I would be inclined to find certain respects in the idea of the consonance between the social and individual to be rather interesting in creative and productive life.

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