

**Transcending Borders: Arabs, Politics, Trade,  
and Islam in Southeast Asia**

*Huub de Jonge and Nico Kaptein, eds.  
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This collection of essays is a spin-off of a workshop held in December 1997, which was jointly organized by the venerable Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology) and the more recently established International Institute of Asian Studies in Leiden, the Netherlands. Both are important resource centers for the study of Islam in Southeast Asia and are closely connected with Leiden University, which has a formidable reputation as a centuries-old center of learning in Islamic and Asian studies. Publications like the present one show that academic institutions with roots in the colonial past and which were once part of the now much-criticized scholarly tradition of “Orientalism” can reinvent themselves and continue to make valuable contributions to the study of non-western cultures.

*Transcending Borders* focuses on the phenomenon of Arab settlement in Southeast Asia. Although the role of these migrants in the Islamization of the Malay–Indonesian archipelago has long been acknowledged, questions pertaining to their integration into Southeast Asian society and the resulting impact on their ethnic identity have received far less attention. In fact, the upsurge in research into these aspects is barely a decade old. However, the most recent developments in Muslim Southeast Asia will certainly keep that interest alive, because some of the more militant key players in Southeast Asian Islamic revivalism are themselves of Hadrami or southern Arabian descent.

The book’s 10 articles approach the study of Arab migration and settlement from historical, sociological, anthropological, and Islamological perspectives. However, the editors have taken care to ensure that these different approaches provide intersecting images of the Arab presence in

Southeast Asia. In their introductory survey, de Jonge and Kaptein draw attention to a few key aspects, such as the significance of the migrants' economic success and knowledge of Islam for establishing close (marital) relations with local dynasties, the marked drop in migration following Europe's expansion in Southeast Asia, and a shift from onward migration via earlier settlement in the Indian subcontinent to a direct movement (almost exclusively of men) from contemporary Yemen's Hadramaut region to maritime Southeast Asia after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.

Some of the contributing scholars have themselves produced important publications in the same field. William Clarence-Smith and Ulrike Freitag's *Hadrami Traders, Scholars, and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s-1960s* (1997) and Sumit Kumar Mandal's 1994 dissertation, *Finding Their Place: A History of Arabs in Java and under Dutch Rule, 1800-1924* are landmark contributions to the study of Arabs in Southeast Asia. These recent publications come out after a century-long lull since L.W.C. van den Berg's *Le Hadramout et les colonies arabes dans l'archipel indien* (1886) and Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje's reports and studies during his stint as the senior government adviser on Islamic affairs in the Dutch East Indies (1889-1906) and his tenure as a professor of Arabic and Islam at Leiden University (1906-36).

Hurgronje's significance for shaping Dutch perceptions of Islam is illustrated by de Jonge's own essay, which focuses on the scholar's writings about the Hadrami communities and their connections with pan-Islamism. De Jonge draws attention to a strange ambiguity in Snouck's writings: His objective and empathetic reports on the resident Hadrami communities, as well as his criticism of their repression by the Dutch authorities, contrast strangely with his virulent advisories to stamp out any sign of pan-Islamist activism.

Several articles address the connection between the Hadramis and the introduction of pan-Islamism into Southeast Asia. Although Engseng Ho's essay "Before Parochialization: Diasporic Arabs Cast in Creole Waters" is primarily concerned with the impact of the diaspora experience on ethnicity, it provides the necessary historical backdrop for other essays on political Islam, such as Mohammad Redzuan Othman's case study of the political loyalties of Arabs in pre-World War I Malaya and C. van Dijk's important article, "Colonial Fears, 1890-1918: Pan-Islamism and the Germano-Indian Plot." The main foci of Othman's article are the complex interrelations between loyalty toward the British, a vivid interest in the caliphate question, and internal rivalries between Arabs of *sayyid* and *non-*

*sayyid* descent. But it is van Dijk who best articulates the colonial administration's often alarmist views of politicized Islam.

Van Dijk pays ample attention to Ottoman propaganda and interventions by Turkish diplomats in response to the restrictive measures taken against Arabs by the European authorities in the Dutch East Indies, such as limiting the freedom of movement and their objections to seeking an (Islamic) education abroad. During World War I, things became further complicated by fears of a Germano-Turkish infiltration of the British and Dutch colonies in the Far East. This relationship between Constantinople (Istanbul) and Arab Muslims is also explored in Ulrike Freitag's collective biography of Singapore's Arab merchants. Although they had penetrated into the top echelons of British colonial society, the merchants' role as honorary consuls for the Ottoman Empire was regarded with a fair dose of suspicion.

Freitag has also studied the contacts and interests that these migrants maintained in the affairs of their homeland. There was a continuous traffic between the Hadramaut and Southeast Asia as people moved back and forth to seek a traditional Islamic education in the Middle East and help run the family's Asian business, only to return again to play a role in the domestic politics of the Hadramaut. Proper education for the future generations was a matter of constant concern, and this theme, along with the closely connected phenomenon of Arabic printing and publishing in Asia, is closely examined in Sumit Mandal's contribution.

Although *Transcending Borders* may not be qualified as being in the realm of Islamic studies *per se*, many of the themes have an "Islamic" angle to them. Thus, the book is a valuable resource for scholars of Islam with interests in Islamic history during the colonial era, the critique of Orientalism, subaltern studies, or the comparative study of expatriate Muslim communities.

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