Teachers, missionaries, and activists. Female religious leadership and social mobility in Southeast Asia, 1920s-1960s

What roles did Malay and Indonesian women play in early twentieth century religious reform? Both Muslims and Christians felt confronted in this period by a need to adapt their practices and institutions to modern times. Increasing women’s participation in religious education, ritual, and proselytization was a key aspect of this urge for renewal. Yet, very little has been written about women in positions of religious authority and historical research about women and women’s movements has a decidedly secular imprint. At the same time, the study of religion is deeply biased toward men. In both perspectives, female religious authority is a neglected theme. How did women, whose experiences were shaped largely by and through religious engagement, navigate a changing world and their own place therein? Three brief portraits provide a glimpse. They suggest that the agency of these women was more significant than commonly assumed, and also, albeit often confined to local spheres, both reflective of and conducive to new paths for social mobility.

Spearheading Islamic education for girls: Rahmah el Yunusiyah

The 1920s have been characterized as “an age in motion”, a period of new ideologies, new technologies, new media, new forms of education, and new visions of the future.1 It is in this period that Rahmah el Yunusiyah (1902-1949) came of age. Rahmah was one of the most prominent figures in Islamic education for girls in the Netherlands Indies, and continued to play an important role in education and religious politics after Indonesian independence. Her life story poignantly illustrates how some Indonesian women were able to gain significant religious authority, in spite of their doubly marginalized position as colonized women in a racially structured society that valued men over women.

Rahmah was born in West Sumatra, a region known throughout the Netherlands Indies for the prominent place of Islam in local culture, and for the particularities of Minangkabau society. The Minangkabau are well-known for their matrilineal traditions. The family line, and for the particularities of Minangkabau, remained unmarried and dedicated her life to the cause of women’s education."

In 1923, at the age of 23, Rahmah opened a new school called Diniyyah Puteri (Religious Education for Girls) in a mosque in Padang Panjang. To raise the necessary funds, she had travelled extensively through West Sumatra and Aceh. The school was a novelty in the Netherlands Indies, offering a combination of religious and secular education in a girls-only boarding school environment. The curriculum was not restricted to religious education and Arabic, as was common in traditional Quranic schools. Instead, the programme included a range of secular school subjects such as history, Dutch and English, geography, and economics. Diniyyah Puteri quickly gained popularity. In West Sumatra and beyond, and five years after its opening the school moved to a large two-storey building that served as a pondok (dormitory). By the end of the 1930s, hundreds of girls were registered, hailing from as far as modern-day Malaysia, Singapore, and Ambon. One of them was Anishah Ghani, a future minister of independent Malaysia.

Ideologically, Diniyyah Puteri was part of the kaum muda (young generation). This was a political and educational movement that aimed to strengthen Islam by integrating Western science into the religion. By combining Islamic with secular, ‘modern’ knowledge, kaum muda schools, including girls’ schools, sought to educate a new generation of Muslim intellectuals capable of freeing Islam from colonialism. They were regularly raided by the colonial police and many were closed down by the government. This never happened to Diniyyah Puteri, however, possibly because Rahmah refused to align her school with overtly anticlonial organizations such as PERMI (Persatuan Muslimin Indonesia, the Indonesian Muslim Union). The government considered PERMI a grave threat and did everything it could to frustrate the organization. Its schools were frequently raided and in 1932, PERMI leader Rasuna Said (1910-1965) became the first Indonesian woman to be imprisoned for anticlonial activities. Interestingly, Rasuna was a former teacher at Diniyyah Puteri who had left the school after a conflict with Rahmah about the content of its education. Rasuna wanted her classes to have an anticolonial character, while Rahmah insisted that the school should be politically neutral.2

That said, Diniyyah Puteri did have an undeniable nationalist outlook. In the school newsletters Sosara Meora (The Voice of the Students) and Kadrat Meoda (Force of the Youth) students wrote about the important role of Muslim women in the struggle against colonialism. Soera Meoda stopped appearing in 1922 after its editor-in-chief was arrested and sent to the Boven-Digoel prison camp by the colonial authorities.3

As convinced of the importance of Indonesian independence as her students, Rahmah herself refused to accept subsidies from the colonial government, and stated that she aimed to teach “young Muslims, the daughters of Indonesia”, using the nationalist term for the territory.4 Diniyyah Puteri was a prestigious school in the colonial era, and remained so after Indonesian independence. As early as the 1930s, some of its graduates studied religious education in Egypt, a global centre for modernist Islamic learning.5 In the 1950s, Rahmah herself became the first woman to receive the prestigious Sulaykhah from the famous Al-Azhar University in Cairo, an acknowledgement of her prominent role as a scholar of Islam. Nowadays, Diniyyah Puteri is still a flourishing institution that offers Islamic education for primary school up to secondary school level. The school will soon celebrate its one-hundredth anniversary.

At the forefront of public life: Khaironnisah Mohd Ali

As in West Sumatra, the 1920s and 1930s in Penang could rightly be called “an age in motion”. Like other port cities in the region, such as Bangkok, Rangoon, and Batavia, this island just off the coast of the Malay peninsula became a centre of social and political change. Alongside Singapore and Malacca, Penang was one of the first to see so-called Settlements. The expansion of trade and commerce, the development of the local press, a thriving cultural scene, and a wide range of new religious and political movements created unprecedented opportunities for social mobility and emancipation. Women across social classes benefited from this atmosphere of change as they joined local and international organizations, secured access to education, and found employment in local schools, hospitals, offices, and banks.6

It is in this atmosphere of possibilities that Khaironnisah binti Mohd Ali (1913-2017) was born.7 Her father was a clerk at the Hollandsche Bank (Dutch Bank), while her mother took care of six children. The family lived in Jelutong, a peri-urban area outside the island’s main city, Georgetown. From the age of seven onwards, Khaironnisah attended a local Malay-medium primary school. During the Japanese occupation, this school remained open, teaching children Japanese in the morning and religion in the afternoon. Khaironnisah was a good student and at twelve years old she already taught the Quran to younger children. But she entered the most formative years of her education only after the war. Together with a few friends, she was enrolled by her religious teacher in the famous Al-Masihoor school in Georgetown. Founded in 1916, Sekolah al-Masihoor was one of the most important institutions of modernist Islamic education in Southeast Asia.8 In contrast to traditional
Islamic schools, the curriculum included religious and secular subjects. It had a modern academic focus, with a classical education open to both male and female students. Al-Mashoor was thus comparable to Rahmah School in Padang Panjang, and due to its location in Penang, a focal point of the growing urban Indonesian middle class. The school was attended by her daughter and her friends to school every morning, until one of the teachers could no longer bear the sight of the children playing through the streets. It was decided that the girls would have to board. A girls’ section was thus established parallel to the boys. Another big change occurred in 1946. Five female teachers got married and were transferred to the island of Java, and the school was left with few teachers. Khaironnisah, sixteen years old at the time, was appointed as one of the class teachers. She was an active and enterprising leader. The school was almost out of control, but she should be knowledgeable but also prepared for various roles in society. She therefore required a rigorous training in extra-curricular trainings in skills such as public speaking. In 1949, Al-Mashoor’s board campaigned for more seats for girls, or to expand the school, and in 1953, she was appointed as the secretary of the school board. A girls’ section was established.

In the early to mid-twentieth century Malay-Indonesian church, the mechanisms of agency and social mobility were at work in Muslim and Christian communities.

Wanita Rukun Santoso

Christian women’s leadership

Women in Indonesia in the 1930s

Notes


1971. Women in the Church, and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) in Leiden. The Newsletter No. 85 Spring 2020

The Study