Circulations', convened at Princeton University, 31 October 2014

Report of the workshop ‘Belonging Across the Bay of Bengal: Migrations, Networks, Circulations’, convened at Princeton University, 31 October 2014

The workshop ‘Belonging Across the Bay of Bengal’, held under the rubric of the Asian Spatialities forum of the IIAS/Mellon-sponsored program ‘Rethinking Asian Studies’, under the rubric of the Asian Spatialities forum of the IIAS/Mellon-sponsored program ‘Rethinking Asian Studies’, provided a reference point for the workshop as a whole. Mirjam Künkler gave an overview of recent state-driven initiatives for the promotion of female religious authority. Recent years have seen a surge in programs aimed at training and certifying women as legal scholars, preachers and counsellors. In most cases, however, this authority is fundamentally limited, in the sense that it depends on, or is placed below male authority, or because it is confined to ‘women’s issues’. Interestingly, the latter limitation runs counter to all major schools of law (madhāhib) that allow women to provide advice (fatwa) on any issue, not only issues of particular relevance to women. In light of the limits of top-down programs in training women as religious authority, Künkler called for a research agenda that turns the attention towards the way women are perceived as religious authorities by local communities.

The other papers complemented this analysis by exploring how female Islamic leaders and authorities have been gathering a following. Rahima, a women’s rights organization in Jakarta, and the focus of a paper presented by Nor Isumah, is responsible for one of the first female ulama (religious scholars) training programs in Indonesia. To increase its reach among the grassroots, this organization has worked together with traditional Islamic boarding schools, most of which are located in rural areas. A framework that is often invoked in the relevant literature is one that distinguishes between female agency, male support, and state initiative in the promotion of female religious authority. Yahom’s paper confirmed the usefulness of this framework when it emphasized how the support of male religious leaders has been an important contribution to the success of Rahima’s programs. Amporn Marddent’s in turn, discussed the views and activities of a group of (female) Malay Muslim scholars in the southern provinces of Thailand. In contrast to the female scholars in Jakarta, these scholars have a background in the tareekh movement – an (originally campus-based) revisual current focused on religious instruction and modelled after the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. They also focus more explicitly on women’s issues. What unites both case studies, however, is a conviction to empower women and to develop forms of authority that are grounded in strong ties between female Islamic leaders and local communities.

Faiy Sadonnong in his inquiry into the vast (and for a large part female) universe of informal Islamic study groups in Jakarta, elucidated how female religious teachers have come to serve as crucial links between seemingly divergent spaces, including the upper hierarchies of traditional Islamic scholarship, electoral politics, and the mundane realities of the domestic sphere. Saenong usefully demonstrated how one particular social institution may encompass a spectrum of modes of certification, including genealogical authority, the granting of an ijāzah (permission to transmit religious knowledge) between actors throughout and even beyond it. The primary themes that emerged concerned freedom of migration and mobility, and the place of India in historical imagination.

As Ludden noted, much of the grand historical interaction in the eastern Indian Ocean has been across its southern latitudes. One need only think of the 11th century Chola or the 15th century Ming incursions prior to the penetration of European power that saw the very naming and claiming of that space through Bengal. Anne Blackburn then demonstrated how Buddhists around that Bay have long regarded themselves as a ‘Southern’ (rather than Theravādā) community, offering a longue durée history of monks in motion and rituals of ordination being deployed by states in contact with both sides of the Bay. Even so, a primary shift is signaled in the 19th century with the rise of non-regal sites of exchange and interaction; especially in Lanka, where the discourse of global Buddhism transformed into the language of ‘reform’. Such transitions are to be found in the history of Islam too, and there is a burgeoning literature on that subject that takes some of its cues from work on South Asia and the colonizing West. In this sense Anne Hansen’s paper on khmer conceptions of religion was salutary, given that ‘indianised’ Cambodia was never really the site of a Christian encounter. Rather some of its elite monks engaged with Orientalist thinking about the history of Buddhism, causing them to reimagine India as a historical rather than mythological place whose bequeathing of a world religion would play into their own nationalist thinking of Khmer superiority.

One of the reasons for Cambodia’s lack of engagement with a Christian challenge reflects its modern isolation from the web of coastal capitals that served the European empire by the late 19th century. And it was to these capitals that many sojourners and settlers came from the near west, though not always

The significance of women participating in, and shaping, Islamic scholarly traditions through the centuries is male. The possibility that women might exercise various aspects of religious authority is usually not discussed. Yet, when we dissect religious authority into its various manifestations (leading prayer, preaching, providing religious counselling, issuing fatwas, transmitting hadith, shaping, Islamic scholarly traditions through the centuries), nuances emerge that call the exclusively male character of religious authority in Islam proceed from the assumption that this authority is male. Thus, papers explored the possibility that women might exercise various aspects of religious authority.3 Thus, papers explored the alternative lens and instead focused on bottom-up initiatives of establishing female Islamic authority.4 Particular attention has been paid to the role of the state and higher educational institutions in training women as female religious authorities. These analyses tend to highlight top-down processes of recognition and certification, that is, how universities and training programs, grand muftis and bureaucrats in state ministries of religion develop curricula to train women in various roles of Islamic authority and certify those who have successfully graduated from these programs. In the workshop convened at KITLV in early January 2015, we sought to apply an alternative lens and instead focused on bottom-up initiatives of establishing female Islamic authority.4 Thus, papers explored how female Islamic authorities are embedded in local contexts, shedding light on community-based processes of certification.

In recent years, case studies of women exercising any of these roles have been published by scholars working in different fields, including history, sociology, anthropology, politics, and law. Publications have focused on such topics as female teachers, scholars, preachers and judges, women’s mosque and study groups, ritual leadership, the role of the state in shaping female religious authority, and Islamic feminism.5 Particular attention has been paid to the role of the state and higher educational institutions in training women as female religious authorities. These analyses tend to highlight top-down processes of recognition and certification, that is, how universities and training programs, grand muftis and bureaucrats in state ministries of religion develop curricula to train women in various roles of Islamic authority and certify those who have successfully graduated from these programs. In the workshop convened at KITLV in early January 2015, we sought to apply an alternative lens and instead focused on bottom-up initiatives of establishing female Islamic authority. Thus, papers explored how female Islamic authorities are embedded in local contexts, shedding light on community-based processes of certification.

Funded by the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), the Asian Modernities and Traditions Research Program (AMTR), the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), the Leiden University Centre for the Study of Islam and Society (LUCIS), and the Leiden University Fund (LUF).

The significant role of women participating in and shaping, Islamic scholarly traditions through the centuries is still hardly reflected in either Western scholarly or public perceptions. Nearly all classic accounts of religious authority in Islam proceed from the assumption that this authority is male.1 The possibility that women might exercise various aspects of religious authority is usually not discussed. Yet, when we dissect religious authority into its various manifestations (leading prayer, preaching, providing religious counselling, issuing fatwas, transmitting hadith, judging in court, shaping, Islamic scholarly traditions), nuances emerge that call the exclusively male character of religious authority in Islam proceed from the assumption that this authority is male.1
by ulama, and diplomas obtained from state institutes of higher Islamic learning. David Kloos, in his paper on female ulama in the Indonesian province of Aceh, further strengthened the image of female religious leaders navigating a multitude of social and political contexts, while underlining the importance of female agency as a determinant of their success (or failure) in achieving their goals.

A conspicuous new dynamic concerns the rising middle class and its impact on the creation of and experimentation with new forms of female Islamic authority. In Singapore, religious courses inspired by American self-help rhetoric and Sufi theology, directed especially at (relatively wealthy) higher Islamic learning. David Kloos, in his paper on female religious teacher-cum-entrepreneurs. A very different - social media), Muslim minority anxieties, and the specific female Malay Muslim audiences, constitute a significant and Sufi theology, directed especially at (relatively wealthy)

Of course, the story that did unfold thereafter was not one of harmonious collaboration, but rather of exclusivist claiming as future partners. Of the two key prisoners like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), who popularized exclusivist notions of Hindutva even as he was written in Urdu, and Anderson has much to say too of the Muslim graves being studiously rediscovered and reinterpreted on the islands today. This very feat of remem-oration was also central to Laffar's (Princeton University) concerns in questioning the creation and recasting of the 'Malay' community of Cape Town whose saints have become the poles of attraction for local 'Indian' Muslims and Indonesians alike.

willingly. As Teren Sevea showed, a stage by stage examination of genealogies of Muslim saints in Singapore, Batavia and Perak shows how men remembered today as pious Arabs were in the 3rd century BCE? Certainly many Oriya literati cast themselves not the name of the great kingdom of Orissa whose conquest had caused the great Ashoka to convert to Buddhism in the 3rd century BCE? Certainly many Oriya literati cast themselves ascribed (rather than achieved) authority. Belonging to a local lineage of sayyids (descendants of the Prophet), these women continue to hold on to rituals and practices that women visit their gravesites and perform prayers and Sufi rituals. Both papers show that there are important continuities at work in the ways in which local communities recognize and incorporate forms of female Islamic authority in their everyday lives.

In general, the workshop demonstrated the strength of ethnographic approaches, as these brought to the fore how female Islamic leaders negotiate the spheres of organized religion, the state, local and personal domains, and the family. In contrast to much of the recent literature, the papers in this workshop explored how local initiatives reinforce, clash with, or otherwise relate to the ways in which state (and religious) institutions institutionalize forms of female Islamic authority. As such, they open up space for new questions, analytical frameworks and comparisons that will further develop the stories begun in this workshop in general, and female Islamic authority in particular.

References


3 Our workshop followed four other events with related interest, bringing together different constituencies of graduate students and junior scholars held at the University of Oxford in 2011, on female religious leadership more generally (including theological and jurisprudential authorities), a conference comparing advocacy for female religious authority in Islam and Catholicism held at the University of Buehamp, London, in September 2012, bringing together scholars and activists; a graduate student conference on female religious leadership in Islam held at UCSB in March 2013, and a workshop on female religious authority in Sin hui held at Princeton University in March 2014.