

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

Iris Busschers, Kirsten Kamphuis
and David Kloos

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.



Wanita Rukun Santoso: picture probably taken at an annual conference of WRS at Swaru. NL-UThUA 1567 file 320 photo album De Vries and De Vries-Krugt (ca. 1934).

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 (1900-1969) 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 to some extent property, passes through female family members. In line with this strong position of Minangkabau women, West Sumatra has a longstanding tradition of girls' education in Quranic schools.² Rahmah el Yunusiyah played a crucial part in expanding girls' education in her region into the realm of secular knowledge. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, more and more parents sent their daughters to European-style secular schools established by the colonial government.

Rahmah believed that a different kind of education was needed for local girls. Her passion for religious knowledge and education was sparked early in life. She came from

a family of *ulama*, scholars of Islam, and received practical and religious education from the women in her family. Her older brother, Zainuddin Labay el Yunusy, founded a coeducational primary school for Islamic education.³ Rahmah, however, argued that girls should have the opportunity to follow a designated educational programme in an all-female environment. This, she believed, was required in Islam. In Rahmah's eyes, women's religious education ran the risk of being neglected in favour of men's, and she was determined to change this. After divorcing her husband, to whom she had been married off at age fourteen, she remained unmarried and dedicated her life to the cause of women's education.⁴

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 Aishah Ghani, a future minister of independent Malaysia.⁵

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.⁶ 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 anticolonial 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 anticolonial activities.⁷ 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.⁸

That said, *Diniyyah Puteri* did have an undeniably nationalist outlook. In the school newsletters *Soeara Moerid* [The Voice of the Students] and *Kodrat Moeda* [Force of the Youth] students wrote about the important role of Muslim women in the struggle against colonialism. *Soeara Moerid* stopped appearing in 1926 after its editor-in-chief was arrested and sent to the Boven-Digoel prison camp by the colonial authorities.⁹

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 Muslimas, the daughters of Indonesia”, using the nationalist term for the territory.¹⁰ *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 continued their religious education in Egypt, a global centre for modernist Islamic learning.¹¹ In the 1950s, Rahmah herself became the first woman to receive the honorary title *syekhah* 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 from 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 part of the so-called British Straits 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.¹²

It is in this atmosphere of possibilities that Khaironnisah binti Mohd Ali (1933-2017) was born.¹³ 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-Mashoor school in Georgetown. Founded in 1916, *Sekolah al-Mashoor* was one of the most important institutions of modernist Islamic education in Southeast Asia.¹⁴ In contrast to traditional

Islamic schools, the curriculum included religious and secular subjects. It had a modern administration, a classroom system, and was open to both male and female students. Al-Mashoor was thus comparable to Rahmah el Yunusiyah's school in Padang Panjang and, due to its location in Penang, a focal point of the growing urban Islamic middle class.

Khaironnisah's mother took her daughter and her friends to school every morning, until one of the teachers could no longer bear the sight of the old woman plodding 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 1949. Five female teachers got married, more or less simultaneously, and left Penang. The best students, including Khaironnisah, sixteen years old at the time, were pitchforked into a new job as teacher. The girls agreed but, ambitious and assertive as they were, only on the express condition that their own education would not suffer from it and that they would be taught by the senior teachers two days per week. Four years later, Khaironnisah became the head of the girls' section, as the first woman in the history of al-Mashoor. She was an active and enterprising leader. The girls of al-Mashoor, she believed, should be knowledgeable but also prepared for responsible roles in society. She therefore regularly organized extra-curricular trainings in skills such as public speaking.

Khaironnisah's ambition to prepare her students for a visible role was modelled, at least partly, on her own experiences. In 1946, she represented al-Mashoor at an assembly of the Malay Union (the first experiment with self-determination, orchestrated by the British and the Malay aristocratic elite). Her speech did not remain unnoticed. New political parties were conscious of the importance of youthful commitment, and Khaironnisah was scouted by the local branch of the United Malays National Party, the organization that would dominate the national political landscape for more than sixty years to come.

In 1957, the year in which Malaya became an independent nation, Khaironnisah tried to resign from al-Mashoor. Her husband had found a job in Singapore and she had decided to follow him. The school board, however, did not accept her resignation and instead offered her husband a job as a teacher. They stayed. A few years later she did step down as a school director so she could dedicate herself more fully to her growing family. It was the end of a short and turbulent career, but not of her visible role in local politics and civil society. Khaironnisah remained active on the forefront, as a political activist, as a member of several associations, and as a religious teacher of both children and adults in her neighbourhood. She continued to fulfil some of these roles up until her death in 2017.

Christian women's leadership: Wanita Rukun Santoso

Christian women, too, were able to achieve religious authority. In the context of Christian missionary work and Christian churches in East Java, women played important roles in local religious and social life. In 1935, the Women's Mission League and the Dutch Missionary Society appointed Christine Slotemaker de Bruïne as the first woman missionary in East Java.¹⁵ Her appointment meant a more sustained commitment by the mission to dedicate itself to work "by women, for women". Slotemaker de Bruïne's tasks included coordinating women's associations and training Javanese women in evangelising labour.

The East Java mission conference created Slotemaker de Bruïne's position in response to the "age in motion" in Java. Her appointment was part of a series of changes in missionary policy, the most evident of which was perhaps the establishment of the *Gereja Kristen Jawi*

Wetan (GKJW) [East Java Christian Church] in 1931. Under pressure of Javanese Christians and the international missionary community, the East Javanese church became (partially) independent from the mission. Javanese men occupied most of the leadership positions in the church but chairmanship remained in the hands of a Dutch missionary. Dutch missionaries thus handed some of their authority back to Javanese Christians after having taken over leadership in Javanese congregations during the nineteenth century.¹⁶

The organization of women's work among and with Javanese Christian women was an important element in the reconfiguration of the Christian mission and church in East Java. Dutch missionaries and Javanese church leaders feared that Javanese Protestants would lag behind the organizational vigour of other Javanese groups, including nationalist and religious (Muslim and Catholic) organizations. The establishment of schools and associations

received particular attention. Slotemaker de Bruïne's coordinated women's associations and women's evangelising work as part of a broader transition that included moving Christian life beyond villages and into the cities of Malang and Surabaya (which attracted increasing numbers of Christians), and the founding of new Christian schools and (youth) associations.¹⁷

In her first years in East Java, Slotemaker de Bruïne set out to

coordinate activities that, to a large extent, were already taking place, albeit not under Dutch coordination.¹⁸ In her effort to coordinate women's associations, she depended on gaining access to existing local Christian women's associations and the overarching federation called *Wanita Rukun Santoso* (WRS) [Women Harmonious and Steadfast]. Javanese women founded WRS in 1929 as a follow-up to the annual women's conferences organized by missionary wives since 1926. WRS's slogan read "spiritual and material progress". In 1936, the organization added the aim of "bringing others to Christianity". Motherhood and the guarding of morality, especially of Christian daughters, were central concerns, similar to some Muslim women's associations.¹⁹ WRS united approximately thirty local associations, which all put the federation's slogan into practice in their own manner. However, all local associations organized bible circles, offered sewing or weaving circles, and provided financial aid to those in need. WRS thus combined social, economic and religious initiatives.

The work performed by Javanese women was indispensable to fostering Christian belonging and building up active Christian women's associations in East Java. For Slotemaker de Bruïne, these women could act as intermediaries. One of the women she worked with was S. Mestoko, who was married to the first minister of the GKJW. She was chair of WRS and together with missionary wife Hester Schuurman-Nijhoff taught the wives of future ministers at the training college for Javanese ministers in Malang. In her capacity as chair of WRS, Mestoko helped Slotemaker de Bruïne gain access to the meetings of local associations. At the same time, this position also allowed her to curtail Slotemaker de Bruïne's access. For example, by forbidding her from speaking at the annual congress of WRS, instead relegating her to the youth department, which she considered more suitable for a Dutch unmarried woman. Mestoko also joined Slotemaker de Bruïne in some of her journeys. Together with two other Christian women they visited the public meeting of *Aisjah*, the women's section of the Islamic modernist organization *Muhammadiyah*, in 1938 in Surabaya. In response to that visit and the broader debate about the proposed marriage law in 1937, Mestoko spoke about marriage at various WRS meetings.²⁰

Another influential board member of WRS was R. Arsiyah, who worked as a teacher at the Christian domestic science school in Malang. In 1936, Arsiyah participated in the

Asian YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka as the only Javanese attendant. Like the other WRS women highlighted here, Arsiyah acted both within missionary circles through her work at the school, and in the context of the GKJW in her role as WRS board member. Moreover, she combined these activities with a third function for the transnational Christian organization YWCA, implementing YWCA work in Malang.

WRS board member Soewati was also instrumental to the work of Slotemaker de Bruïne. Like the other women discussed here, she received Christian education beyond the village school level and she was part of important Christian family networks. Her brother, for instance, was the secretary of GKJW. Like many members of WRS board, she lived in Malang and adhered to the idea that village women needed further Christianisation and education. Soewati accompanied Slotemaker de Bruïne on multiple tours of local women's associations, providing the necessary contacts for the Dutch missionary. Through this labour, Soewati hoped to be appointed as inspector for WRS, a position that entailed making working visits to local associations. When WRS appointed an older and married woman instead, Soewati moved into a position of surveyor for the mission's district nursing organization in Malang. For Soewati, then, a position in the Christian women's federation was also a means of making a career.

For Slotemaker de Bruïne, these three women were key intermediaries, advancing her missionary labour. However, their activities as Christian social reformers and sometimes proselytizing women were by no means confined to being a go-between for Dutch missions. They were evidence of the manoeuvring space and potential for social mobility implicated in Javanese women's roles in the context of, and particularly in moving between, mission, church, and Christian associations.

Religious activism as a pathway towards social mobility

In the early to mid-twentieth century Malay-Indonesian archipelago, similar mechanisms of agency and social mobility were at work in Muslim and Christian communities. The most significant difference between Christian and Muslim female activists was, of course, their relationship to the British and Dutch colonial regimes. While the Dutch colonial government often actively supported Christian missions, for example, it repressed certain Muslim organizations which it considered a threat to its authority. At the same time, Christian women used their skills to create a more prominent place for local people in previously European-dominated religious spaces, suggesting that they did not always accept the colonial status-quo.

The individual women portrayed here also differed significantly, and not just in terms of their religious backgrounds. Some of them were educated at official schools, while others received education at home, and the social position of their families of origin varied. What they had in common, however, was a strong dedication to their religious and social aspirations in a time of great change. An interesting insight, in this respect, bears on the apparently relatively strong stance of several of these women toward marriage and divorce. This brief inquiry into the lives of Rahmah el Yunusiyah, Khaironnisah Mohd Ali and the women of *Wanita Rukun Santoso* demonstrates that a focus on Southeast Asian women's religious agency in the colonial era can wield fascinating results. Their stories have the potential to transform the ways in which scholars interpret the religious history of the region, connecting women's religious commitment to new pathways towards mobility and the forging of public roles.

Iris Busschers, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Groningen

Kirsten Kamphuis, junior researcher at the Cluster of Excellence Religion and Politics at Münster University

David Kloos, senior researcher at the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) in Leiden

Notes

- 1 Shiraishi, T. 1990. *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java, 1912-1926*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- 2 Hadler, J. 2008. *Muslims and Matriarchs: Cultural Resilience in Indonesia through Jihad and Colonialism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp.107-108.
- 3 Rasyad, A. 1991. 'Rahmah El Yunusiyah, Educational Pioneer for Girls', in Rasyad, A., Salim, L. & Saleh, H. (eds) *Rahmah El Yunusiyah dan Zainuddin Labay El Yunusy. Dua Bersaudara Tokoh Pembaharu Sistem Pendidikan di Indonesia. Riyawat Hidup, Cita-Cita, dan Perjuangan*. Jakarta: Pengurus Perguruan Diniyyah Puteri Padang Panjang, pp.245-260.
- 4 1938. *Boekoe Peringatan 15 Tahun 'Dinijjah School Poeteri' Padang Pandjaj*. Padang Panjang.
- 5 Ghani, A. 1992. *Memoir Seorang Pejuang*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, pp.6-10.
- 6 Abdullah, T. 1971. *Schools and Politics: the Kaum Muda Movement in West Sumatra (1927-1933)*. PhD thesis Cornell University; Noer, D. 1973. *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia, 1900-1942*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- 7 White, S. 2013. 'Rasuna Said: Lioness of the Indonesian Independence Movement', in Blackburn, S. & Ting, H. (eds) *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- 8 *Boekoe Peringatan 15 Tahun*.
- 9 Witrianto. 2013. 'Dampak Pendidikan terhadap munculnya Pergerakan Nasional di Padangpanjang', *Analisis Sejarah* 3:29-30.
- 10 *Boekoe Peringatan 15 Tahun*.
- 11 1932. 'Doea Orang Gadis Bp. Berangkat ke Mesir', *Pandji Poestaka* 23(10):365.
- 12 Lewis, S.L. 2016. *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920-1940*. Cambridge University Press, pp.12-13.
- 13 The following paragraphs are largely based on the (transcriptions of) interviews with Khaironnisah Mohd Ali, carried out by Mahani Musa (Universiti Sains Malaysia) and her students, between 2008-2014, in the framework of the project (also led by Mahani Musa) "Oral History Documentation, Al-Mashoor School Pulau Pinang, 1940s-1980s" (History Section, School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia in partnership with Malaysiana and Archives, Hamzah Sendut Library, USM, Penang State Museum, and Yayasan Islam Pulau Pinang). Additional interviews were carried out by David Kloos and Mahani Musa in 2014 and 2016. For a longer biography, see: Mahani Musa. 2016. 'Dato' Hajjah Khaironnisa' bt Mohd Ali: Bekas Pelajar, Guru, dan Guru Besar Sekolah perempuan Al Mashoor,' in Mahani Musa. (ed.) *Memori 100 Tahun Sekolah Al Mashoor*. Georgetown: Jam'iyah Al-Ikha' Al-Khairiyah, pp.104-113.
- 14 Mahani Musa. 2016. *Memori 100 Tahun Sekolah Al Mashoor*, pp.17-31; *ibid.* note 12, pp.191-92.
- 15 Slotemaker de Bruïne was not the first woman to work for the mission, but rather the first woman to carry the title 'missionary'. Dutch women had been part of mission work in different capacities (as missionary wives, teachers, nurses and doctors) and Javanese women too participated in missionary and church life as *njoras*, nurses, teachers, and as members of local church councils.
- 16 Aritonang, J.S. & Steenbrink, K. (eds) 2008. *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*. Leiden, Brill, pp.639-719
- 17 Nortier, C.W. 1939. *Van Zendingarbeid tot Zelfstandige Kerk in Oost-Java*. Hoenderloo: Zendingstudieaad, pp.243-248.
- 18 The following paragraphs are based on the three-monthly reports by Slotemaker de Bruïne published in the Women's Mission League's journal *Vrouwen Zendingblad* (1935-1940) and the archival files containing letters and reports about her work in the mission archives located in Utrecht: NL-UtHUA 1102-1 files 3478 and 3526. While these files report on Slotemaker de Bruïne's work, they also provide a record of the activities of multiple Javanese Christian women.
- 19 Locher-Scholten, E. 2003. 'Morals, Harmony, and National Identity: "Companionate Feminism" in Colonial Indonesia in the 1930s', *Journal of Women's History* 14(4):38-58.
- 20 Locher-Scholten, E. 2000. 'Marriage, Morality, and Modernity: The 1937 Debate on Monogamy', in *Women and the Colonial State*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp.187-218.