

INTERWEAVING CULTURES

Islam in Southeast Asia

A Guide for Teachers and Students

BY ELIZABETH A. COLE AND MARLEEN KASSEL

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HTTP://ASIASOCIETY.ORG/EDUCATION/ISLAM_IN_SEASIA/

Reviewed by Nelly van Doorn-Harder

The outcome of a collaborative project by the Asia Society, the goal of this book is to present the complex and diverse religious landscape of Southeast Asia. Through a thematic approach, the guide introduces the Muslim population of the area that is among the largest in the world. The result is an enlightening balance between information about normative Islam—the five pillars—and local specific expressions and interpretations of normative Islamic teachings.

The guide is written for upper level high school and introductory college classes. The format is user-friendly, which allows teachers with little or no knowledge of the area to devote an entire class or part of a class to this topic. Eighteen maps and numerous pictures offer the visual tools to understand the region. All the material is available on the CD in the back of the book.

Four short introductory essays, written by outstanding experts in the field, provide students with the required background of history, geography, visual, cultural, and social practices. Each of these introductions is further developed in ten separate chapters that address specific topics, such as the Hajj, the study of the Quran, education, women, mourning traditions, and artistic expressions of Islam.

The units start with questions, suggestions of how to teach the topic, and activities that can help students process the information. The guided reading questions help both teachers and students remain attentive to the main issues highlighted in the texts. This user-friendly approach does not lessen the considerable depth that is needed to explore these themes. The editors have not tried to avoid, for example, using the names and terms needed to explain the various forms of *wayang* plays (traditional form of theater in the region), but help students navigate the text with lists of names and glossaries at the end of each unit.

The thematic approach not only helps students understand the rich cultural diversity of Southeast Asian countries—it also provides them with insights about how a major world religion absorbs and is absorbed by local cultures, without diminishing principles of faith. It shows how unity in diversity can be a reality for Muslims, while holding on to the main tenets of Islam. Thus, on the one hand, the guide is a healthy antidote against learning about Islam as one big monolithic Arab block, and on the other hand, it corrects the impression of an Asian nebulous, watered-down version of the original belief.

For example, the reading in chapter two about the arrival of Islam in the region tells about the conversion of the king of Melaka (Malacca, a present day Malaysian state) and consequently all his subjects. The story illustrates what a “king centered” conversion of the population meant, and how the miraculous went hand in hand with the transmission of knowledge about normative Islam. According to local lore, the King of Melaka accepted Islam after a dream vision of the Prophet Muhammad. Waking up circumcised and being able to pronounce the *Shahada* (the confession of faith and first pillar of faith) in Arabic were the tangible proofs of his spiritual experience. The vision was to be followed by the arrival of an Islamic teacher from Jeddah who could instruct the king, and those around him, about the new faith.

Chapters five and six detail the obstacles and difficulties of being far away from the heartland of Islam and the effort it takes to learn Arabic, the vehicle for the transmittance and performance of the sacred text and rituals. Distance to the holy places of Mecca and Medina heightens the importance of local alternatives for pilgrimage, such as the graves of Muslim saints. Pilgrimages bring people together and create liminal communities who unite in time, space, words, and minds. These venues are important for the majority of Southeast Asian Muslims who will never be able to afford the Hajj. Those who can afford it not only will need to learn about the rituals, including the required phrases in Arabic, but they also will visit a culture that is deeply alien to their own. Thus, manuals for both in the form of cartoons, such as the one on page eighty-five, are no luxury or playful banter.

Casual remarks that pepper general introductions to Islam about the sacred character of the Quran and its language come to life with the story about learning the Quran (97–99). “We had to be careful and cautious,” remembers a former student who finished memorizing the text at the age of twelve: “For the teacher said, if we read and recited it wrong [for instance, if *Islaam* was read *Islam*], we would have com-

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mitted a great sin and would be tormented in hell, whose fires were a thousand times as hot as those on earth.” (97) The description of the joyful celebration that marks the memorization of the entire Quran conveys the weight and importance of this central act of fusing one’s mind and body with the holy text. While celebrating the universal text, however, the event remains fully local and the boys become annoyed with the Arab outfits their parents make them wear. (99)

Finally, the guide does great justice to the abundance of artistic expressions Southeast Asian Muslims have produced to praise, pray, transmit, and articulate their faith through music, the shadow puppet plays, painting, and calligraphy. Students growing up in the US are used to creative mixes of forms of popular culture, but few will understand how, for example, Indonesian artists do the same with religious music. By reinterpreting traditional Arabic forms of song and poetry, fusing them with Malay and Indian popular music, they have created the immensely popular music genre of *dangdut*.¹ Few students will realize that this music is used to guide the believers in how to behave and to be a good Muslim. One of the *dangdut* icons, Rhoma Irama, even considers himself an actor in a “holy war” of playing music. (104)

Another reading, about the works of the famous artist Pirous, explains the role of the Quranic calligraphy in his paintings: “Calligraphic paintings are a form of visual *djikir* (or *dhikr*—remembrance of God), in that they help Muslim viewers become mindful of God and God’s oneness (*tawhid*).” (122)

By presenting the information about Islam in Southeast Asia in a many-layered approach, mixing academic information with stories, pictures, and other illustrations, the editors of this guide have created a useful tool for all whose classes involve teaching about Islam. The quote about Pirous is useful to any teacher trying to explain the status and impact of the holy text of the Quran. While the initial goal of the editors is to address the paucity of regional introductory material, it provides a wealth of useful texts, illustrations, and tips that can be used in any introductory class on Islam. This unexpected added value underscores the reality that the contributions of Southeast Asian Muslims to the interpretation, practice, and application of their faith is as strong and vital as those of Muslims living closer to the heartlands of Islam. ■

NOTE

1. *Dangdut* is a popular form of Indonesian music that is partly derived from Arabic, Indian, and Malay folk music. It developed in the 1970s, and reached a broader following in Indonesia in the late 1990s.

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