IIAS Reports

Female Islamic authority in comparative perspective: exemplars, institutions, practices

International workshop, Leiden, 8-9 January 2015

David Kloos and Mirjam Künkler

Funded by the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), the Asian Modernities and Traditions Research Program (AMT), 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).

Above: *Otuns* (spiritual leaders) gathering for *hudoi*, a thanksgiving ritual, at a *mazar* (shrine) near Khujand, Tajikistan.

All photos by Anna Cieślewska.

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 the Islamic scholarly tradition), nuances emerge that call the exclusively male character of religious authority in Islam into question.

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.[2] 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.[3] Thus, papers explored how female Islamic authorities are embedded in local contexts, shedding light on community-based processes of certification.

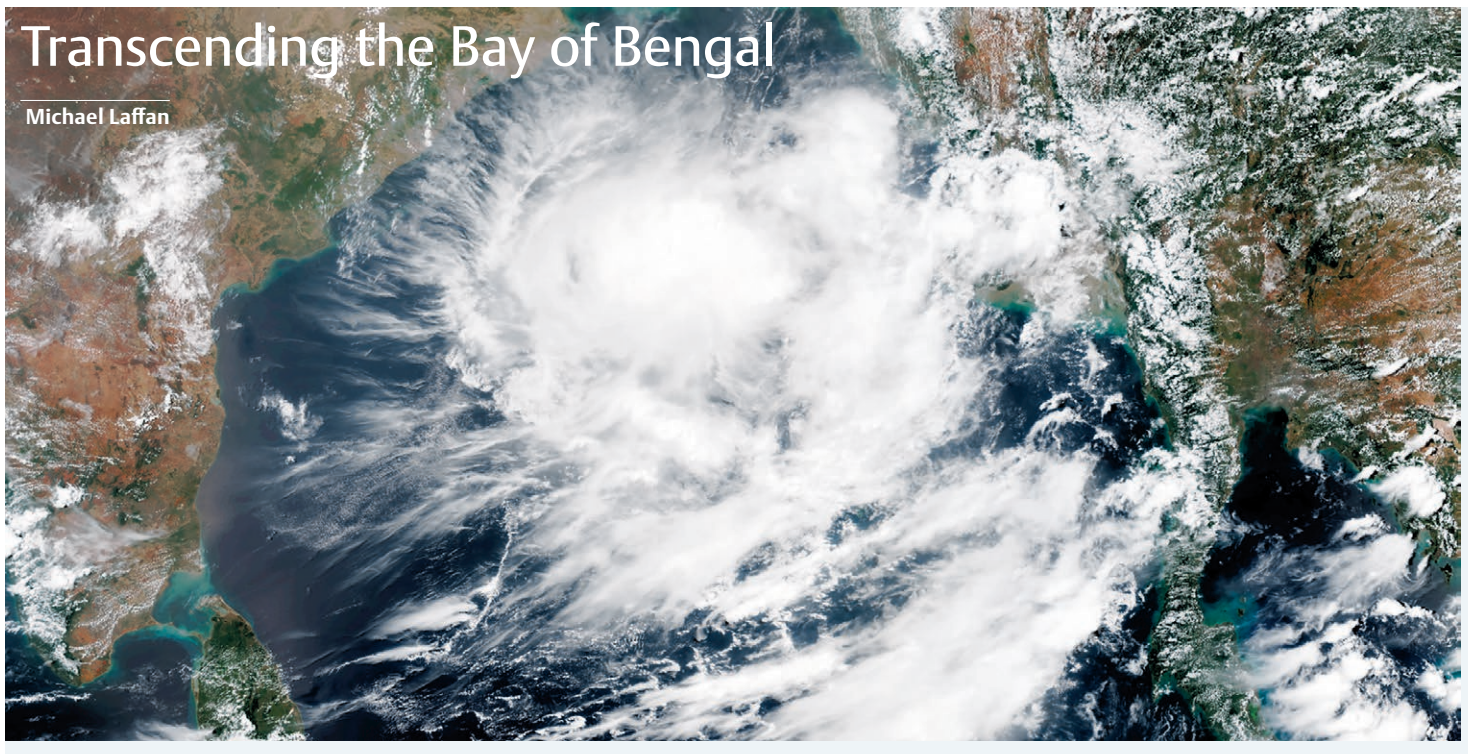
Providing a reference point for the workshop as a whole, Mirjam Künkler gave an overview of recent state- and society-driven initiatives for the promotion of female Islamic authority. Recent years have seen a surge in programs aimed at training and certifying women as legal scholars, preachers and counsellors. 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 advise *(iftā)* 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 by building up a community. Rahima, a women's rights organization in Jakarta, and the focus of a paper presented by Nor Ismah, is responsible for one of the first female *ulamā* (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.[4] Ismah'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, 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 *ulamā* mentioned by Nor Ismah, these scholars have a background in the *tarbiyah* movement – an (originally campus-based) revivalist 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 through religious knowledge and to develop forms of authority that are grounded in strong ties between female Islamic leaders and local communities.

Faried Saenong, 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)

Transcending the Bay of Bengal

Michael Laffan



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', followed an earlier meeting at Princeton in 2011 that had used a discussion of traditional texts and modern textbooks to bridge the gap between specialists of South and Southeast Asia. Now, armed with a sense of what the three historical moments were to be for our project – the long 19th century, the economic crisis of the 1930s, and the difficult period of emancipation after WWII – we were better able to come to grips with our subject in what was an incredibly fruitful discussion.

After an opening paper from David Ludden (New York University) on the Bay of Bengal as historical space, a further eleven offerings explored vectors of connection and imagination crisscrossing that arena; thinking about relationships 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. Indeed it became apparent that there are now some strikingly polarized northern and southern narratives that distinguish contemporary sojourners from ancestral gifters of world religion.

Satellite image of the Bay of Bengal. Image reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of NASA Goddard Space Flight Center at Flickr.com.

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 Cholas 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 Theravadan) 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 the encounter with a Christian and 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

by *ulamā*, and diplomas obtained from state institutes of higher Islamic learning. David Kloos, in his paper on female *ulamā* 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) female Malay Muslim audiences, constitute a significant growth market. Nurhaizatul Jamil analysed the complex relationship between modern technology (particularly social media), Muslim minority anxieties, and the specific constraints placed by the Singaporean state on pedagogical spaces and the innovative roles played by young female religious teacher-cum-entrepreneurs. A very different – and rather paradoxical – effect of the upward mobility of (middle class) Muslim women was observed by Claire-Marie Hefner in her research on a cadre school of Muhammadiyah, the second largest Islamic organization in Indonesia. While Muhammadiyah has invested in the training of female preachers and leaders for several decades, Hefner pointed out a major drawback to the success of the movement, as students increasingly seem to aspire (more prestigious) secular careers.

From these papers it may appear that the emergence of female Islamic authority is exclusively or primarily tied to initiatives of religious, political and economic reform. In reality, the situation is more complex. In Tajikistan, Anna Cieślewska showed how traditional female leaders (*otun*) continue to provide important religious services to local communities, even though reform-minded state and religious institutions have been hostile to their religious interpretations and activities. Daniel Birchok, in his paper on (deceased) female saints in Seunagan, Indonesia, drew attention to the importance of ascribed (rather than achieved) authority. Belonging to a local lineage of *sayyids* (descendants of the Prophet), these women continue to bestow blessings on those Muslims who 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 (trans)national communities, 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 enable and constrain various forms of female Islamic authority. As such, they open up space for new questions, analytical frameworks and comparisons that will further develop the study of Islamic authority in general, and female Islamic authority in particular.

Above: *Otuns* (spiritual leaders) participating in the ritual of *bibi mushkul-kushod* ('women solving problems') at the Kalandarkhona shrine, Khujand, Tajikistan.

Left: *Otuns* (spiritual leaders) reading the Quran during the one-year commemoration of a death.

David Kloos, postdoctoral researcher at KITLV (kloos@kitlv.nl)
Mirjam Künkler, assistent professor in the Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University; senior research fellow at KITLV, winter 2014/2015 (kuenkler@princeton.edu)

References

1 See, for example, Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke (eds.) 2006. *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies,* Brill Academic Publishing; Nikki R. Keddie (ed.) 1972. *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis. Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500,* Berkeley [with the exception of the chapter by Fernea & Fernea]; Dabashi, H. 1989. Authority in Islam. *From the Rise of Muhammad to the Establishment of the Umayyads,* New Brunswick/London; Humphreys, S. 1991. 'A Cultural Elite. The Role and Status of the Ulama in Islamic Society', *Islamic History. A Framework for Inquiry,* [rev. ed.] Princeton, pp.187-208; Zaman, M.Q. 2002. *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam. Custodians of Change,* Princeton; Hallaq, W.B. 2001. *Authority, Continuity, and Change in Islamic Law,* Cambridge/New York.

2 For example, Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach (eds.) 2012. *Women, leadership and mosques: Changes in contemporary Islamic authority,* Leiden: Brill; See also Juliane Hammer and Riem Spielhaus (eds.) 2013. 'Muslim women and the challenge of authority', *The Muslim World* 103(3):287-431.

3 Our workshop followed four other events with related interest, bringing together different constituencies: a conference of graduate students and junior scholars held at the University of Oxford in 2011, on female religious leadership more generally (including leaders of religious movements, thus not only theological and jurisprudential authorities); a conference comparing advocacy for female religious authority in Islam and Catholicism held at the University of Roehampton, 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 Shi'ism held at Princeton University in March 2014.

4 See Kalmbach, 'Introduction: Islamic Authority and the Study of Female Religious Leaders', in Bano and Kalmbach (eds.) 2012. *Women, leadership and mosques: Changes in contemporary Islamic authority,* Leiden: Brill, pp.1-27.

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 some cases Tamil or even Gujarati convicts (known locally as 'Klings') banished to the colonial periphery where they served mixed constituencies of Malays, Indians and even Chinese. Equally engaging in the narratives of their service and sanctity are the tales of their subverting the political order and even being the true authorities of, and guarantors of safety in, the colonial matrix.

Then again, as Pritipuspa Mishra (University of Southampton) argues, we should also remember the some such 'Kling' travelers wanted to replace local memories of bonded labor with the ancestral pride of having been bringers of civilization to such far-flung (and seemingly abstract) places as Bali. Was Kalinga 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 in the 1930s as historical masters of the sea, for it should not be forgotten that India's nationalists were not yet settled on the colonial idea of Mother India as a network of village societies.

Contextualized against the backdrop of Sunil Amrith's (University of London) mapping of the vicissitudes of Tamil migrants in the 1920s and 1930s (when movement became foreclosed and ideas of diaspora were firmly planted) a strikingly similar narrative emerges in Nira Wickramasinghe's (Leiden University) paper on citizenship in colonial Lanka. For it was at this time that British authorities set the parameters for the ways in which Lankan nationalists would conceive of a place for acceptable Indians, not in the electoral process, but rather in an idealized and decidedly northern past that had brought 'true' religion to the resplendent isle where it could later be reformed and perfected.

Nor were such ideas and ideals to be confined to Lanka. Spurred by the attentions of the Theosophical movement, Lanka's renaissance man, Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), would play a key role in shaping global appreciations of Buddhism as a 'world religion' whose classical traces were to be found as far away as distant Java. And if Java lacked a Dharmapala, Marieke Bloembergen (KITLV) showed how its monuments, crowned by the Borobudur, could be made to bear witness to a greater Indian past in the minds of Orientalists, their elite informants, or yet rising nationalists.

Naturally there was a lingering tension about just what constituted local genius versus 'foreign' grace, a tension made all the starker in very late colonial contexts like neighboring Malaysia, which was the site of the contributions of David Henley (Leiden University) and Bhavani Raman (Princeton University). Examining the exclusionary discourse of Mahathir Mohamad, Henley was able to point to the enduring legacy of eugenic notions that seem entirely contradictory at first blush. How was it that the Malays were to be celebrated as true sons of the soil to be kept separate from 'industrious' Chinese and pliant Indians even as theories regarding origins and endurance were framed in terms of ancient moments of cultural invasion and admixture? In a way, the answer is to be found in Britain's own myths of origin, invasion and counter-invasion, though as Henley noted, the history of eugenic thinking in Malaysia is yet to be told fully.

Similarly deserving of recounting is the momentous first International Tamil Studies Conference of 1966. This was held not in Southern India, but rather in Malaysia and imprinted by thinkers and activists moving across the Bay both under and then beyond the auspices of British Imperialism. Indeed a key player in Raman's story, the Catholic priest Xavier Thaninayagam (1913-1980), is someone whose trajectory embodies the intertwined strands of southern Asian history linking notions of globalizing religion, historical imagination of culture and prowess, and yet a desire for recognition that need not necessarily be framed as nationalism or yet cultural imperialism.

Much of Raman's paper and the ensuing discussions brought us back to very slippery notions of belonging and the claiming of social rights, though we were also forced to remember that there were many moments of excitement and hope in the 1960s that were not all predicated on nationalism and in which countries like India, Ceylon and Malaysia were viewed as future partners.

Of course, the story that did unfold thereafter was not one of harmonious collaboration, but rather of exclusivist claiming of places for imagined nations. In this sense, Clare Anderson's (University of Leicester) revisiting of the Andaman Islands highlighted many of the tensions found around the Bay of Bengal by pointing to their seeming absence at the former convict colony where boundaries of caste and even faith have been effaced or surmounted. That said, one might point to the writings of key prisoners like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), who popularized exclusivist notions of Hindutva even as he wrote in Urdu, and Anderson has much to say too of the Muslim graves being studiously rediscovered and reinterpreted on the islands today. This very facet of remem-oration was also central to Laffan'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 Indonesian presidents alike.

In short the intertwined papers on mobility, the place of India, and the overlapping domains of Buddhism and Islam gave us pause for thought about a region not so much to be made the discrete object of scholarly colonization, but rather of a space whose interwoven histories offer an excellent critique of current Area Studies divides and real teaching potential if published in the future. Beyond this, too, we feel that we have made a real inroad into Indian Ocean history without romanticizing the space as a Muslim lake prior to colonialism. With such enthusiasm in mind, we are now approaching academic presses and considering ways to bring the papers into yet closer alignment and awaiting further findings from our subsequent workshop in Leiden this coming Summer.

Michael Laffan, Department of History, Princeton University (mlaffan@princeton.edu)