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Islam, Education and Reform in Southern Thailand

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Islam, Education and Reform in Southern Thailand

TRADITION & TRANSFORMATION

Joseph Chinyong Liow



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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(1964–2005)

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FOREWORD

In the 1960s and 1970s, Islamic education in Southeast Asia was not a topic of great scholarly or policy urgency. Although a few anthropologists recognized that Islamic boarding schools in Java, Malaysia, and southern Thailand played an important role in religious learning and the sustenance of local religious identities, the general assumption was that Islamic schooling was so incapable of keeping up with the demands of the modern age that it was just a matter of time before it was pushed from the national scene. In an otherwise thoughtful essay, one of today's most perceptive observers of Islamic affairs in Southeast Asia reached just such a pessimistic conclusion about the future of the Javanese variant of the Islamic boarding school known as the *pesantren*, writing, "The *pesantren* has enjoyed an unusually long life for a traditional school, but it may finally be threatened with disappearance."¹

As it turns out, like its southern Thai counterpart, the Javanese *pesantren* did not disappear. Rather, like Islamic education across most of Muslim Southeast Asia, it has flourished and diversified since the great resurgence in Islamic piety of the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, however, Muslim educational institutions are no longer seen as quaintly irrelevant institutions. Since the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. and the October 2002 Bali bombings in Indonesia in particular, the sense of wistful obsolescence that used to characterize discussions of Southeast Asia's Islamic schools has been replaced by an anxious and often unhelpful media frenzy.

The reasons for the change of perception are understandable enough. The teachers of the young men responsible for the October 2002 attack in Bali had educational ties to the al-Mukmin boarding school in Central Java, an institution alleged to have links to the terrorist Jemaah Islamiyah. The link

led to widespread fears that some of Indonesia's 47,000 Islamic schools were being used to open a "second front" in the al-Qa`ida conflict with the West. In the Philippines, the Intelligence Chief of the Philippine Armed Forces blamed an upsurge in terror bombings in that country in the early 2000s on the southern Philippines' network of *madrasas*. "[T]hey are teaching the children, while still young, to wage a *jihad*. They will become the future suicide bombers."² In Cambodia, government officials discovered that between 2002 and 2004 the JI military chief, Riduan Isamuddin, alias Hambali, had visited several Islamic schools, allegedly attempting to recruit militants for armed attacks on Westerners.

Nowhere have the allegations surrounding Islamic schooling been more heated, however, than with regard to the Malay-Muslim schools in southern Thailand. As Joseph Chinyong Liow shows in this timely and important study, since January 2004 Thailand has been rocked by a renewed cycle of violence between state authorities and the Malay-Muslim population concentrated in the country's south. Government officials have accused particular Islamic schools of laying the groundwork for attacks on Thai government officials. Liow did not shy from the policy implications of these allegations in the course of his research on southern Thailand's *pondoks*. He wisely reminds us, however, that Islamic education in this region can only be understood by situating it in relation to three broader facts.

The first is that, contrary to many media commentaries, the *pondoks* are not at all backward-looking or unchanging "medieval" institutions. The question of reform now being debated with regard to the *pondoks* is not new either. Rather, the question of how to accommodate Islamic education to modern markets, politics, and forms of knowledge has raged for more than a century here in Thailand and for the better part of two centuries in some parts of Southeast Asia and the Middle East to which Muslims in southern Thailand have long travelled.

A second point among the many fine insights offered in this study is equally relevant for scholarship and policy discussion. It is that, rather than being uniform, Islamic schooling in southern Thailand shows a competitive diversity of institutions and cultures. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the classical Malay *pondok* was challenged by new Islamic institutions proposing to integrate some subjects of general ("secular") learning into their curriculum. The challenges to the more or less classical *pondok* have continued to this day. Indeed, Liow shows, they have intensified in recent years, with the appearance of Saudi-funded Salafi schools that challenge not only the traditional *pondok* curriculum but the traditionalist Shafi'i Sunnism long dominant in southern Thailand and most of Muslim Southeast Asia. The

outcome of this competition among rival variants of Islamic schooling and rival visions of Islam, Liow shows, will be a major influence on the future of Islam in southern Thailand.

The third and final point I would highlight from Liow's rich account concerns the relationship of Muslim society and education to the Thai state. As Liow demonstrates, the Malay Muslims in Thailand's southern provinces have an identity distinct from that of dispersed Muslim minorities found in some societies. The Malays are overwhelmingly concentrated in a border region where they comprise the demographic majority and where they identify themselves as the original inhabitants of the land. In the face of the Thai government's assertive programs of cultural assimilation (conducted at varying fever pitches over the course of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries), these facts have guaranteed that Islamic schooling has come to be seen by the Malays as key symbols of their identity. This perception, and the often tense relationship between Malay Muslims and the Thai authorities, has in turn meant that government efforts to impose reforms on the Malay population's Islamic schools have often met with opposition. However, it is telling that the resistance has been selective in its focus. Elements of general education have, in fact, been welcomed into some schools. Indeed, for a while in the 1970s, it looked as if the south's Islamic schools might become a bridge between Muslims and the state rather than the front line in a culture war. Education in some Islamic schools was being brought into alignment with the national curricula; Malay enrolments in national colleges soared. The establishment of two state-assisted Islamic colleges in the south, with plans for a third, was also well received in the Muslim community. The colleges were designed to provide higher education in Islam as well as courses on Islam for non-Muslims, including government officials posted to the south.

Other educational trends, however, showed that education and politics in the Muslim south were being buffeted by less favourable winds. Beginning in the 1980s, growing numbers of students opted to complete their religious education in the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia. According to reports Islamic leaders provided Liow, today, several dozen schools promulgate conservative Salafi teachings. However, Liow shows, the life history of the Saudi-trained reformist, Ismail Lutfi, demonstrates that not all of the Saudi-style *Salafis* are anti-integrationist. Lutfi is a gifted and warm speaker, and advocates a gradualist and contextualist approach to the understanding of Islamic law. But recent developments in the southern provinces also indicate that, hardened by the heavy-handed tactics of the Thai authorities, a small minority within the Islamic school system has concluded that compromise with the state is no longer an option.

No one can say for certain where political events in southern Thailand are likely to lead in years to come. What is certain, however, is that the cultures and organizations Liow has highlighted in this far-ranging study will be key determinants of whatever finally takes place. Having begun by introducing us to a small, educational tradition that policy makers a few years ago thought obsolescent, Liow ends by providing us with critical insights for understanding the issues at stake in southern Thailand. The readability, high scholarship, and policy relevance that characterize this book are a rare achievement in the academy, and its insights are of relevance well beyond the beautiful but troubled landscapes of southern Thailand.

Notes

- ¹ See Sidney R. Jones, “The Javanese *Pesantren*: Between Elite and Peasantry,” in Charles F. Keyes, ed., *Reshaping Local Worlds: Formal Education and Cultural Change in Rural Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale Southeast Asian Studies, 1991), p. 36.
- ² See “Defense, Deped to look into *madrasah*’s alleged role in breeding terrorists,” *MindaNews* II, no. 40, June 16, 2003.

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PREFACE

Islamic education in southern Thailand has not been the subject of much scholarly attention and analysis as few have gone to print on it — whether in the English, Malay, or Thai languages. Currently, Hasan Madmarn's work on Islamic schools in Pattani, *The Pondok and Madrasah in Pattani*, stands out as the only book-length investigation of this phenomenon published in the English language. For that reason alone it remains a path-breaking study and a valuable contribution to our understanding of a very dynamic, yet reclusive, social-religious institution. The value of Madmarn's contribution is undoubtedly augmented by the fact that he himself was a product of the traditional *pondok* (Islamic school), an institution that remains the heartbeat of Thai Malay-Muslim culture and identity, even in this age of globalization. Madmarn's book provides important historical information about the development of the *pondok* in southern Thailand, as well as its gradual ascent to a position of eminence as a bastion of Islamic scholarship in Muslim Southeast Asia.

While it provides insight into the traditional curriculum in Islamic schools, Madmarn's laudable effort is by and large descriptive in nature. Little attempt is made to analyse and interrogate the much-vaunted legacy of traditional Islamic education in southern Thailand against the political context in which it is located, or to uncover the tensions and antinomies inherent in southern Thailand's dynamic Muslim society, which I suggest have both framed and been framed by Islamic education. By skirting these more complex issues, Muslim society is inadvertently portrayed as a somewhat monolithic entity when in fact it is deeply divided between forces of tradition, reform, and modernity. To be fair, Madmarn does hint at these cleavages when he

introduces the *madrasah* as an alternative to the traditional *pondok*, but ultimately, the implications of its emergence on the overall landscape of Islamic education in the South is skirted.

Aside from Madmarn's work, broader studies on Muslim society, particularly of the Malay-Muslim southern provinces have touched on various aspects of Islamic education. The work of Michel Gilquin, Wan Kadir Che Man, Surin Pitsuwan, Uthai Dulyakasem, and Raymond Scupin come immediately to mind, as does a Ph.D. dissertation written in English by Ibrahim Narongraksakhet, available in the libraries of Universiti Malaya and Prince of Songkhla University, Pattani Campus. With the exception of Scupin and Narongraksakhet, who provide a great deal of detail about Islamic education institutions themselves, the attention given to education issues in these studies are usually addressed along any of the following three themes: (1) the revered status of Islamic education institutions, in particular the *pondok*, in Malay-Muslim society, (2) the role of Islamic education institutions in the broader ethno-nationalist and separatist struggle, and (3) state policies towards Islamic education. Thus far, no article or book-length study has attempted to explore the structure of Islamic education in terms of the types of schools, enrolment or funding trends, or issues of translocality. Nor has any effort been made to pry open the "black box" of Islamic education by dissecting the curriculum in Islamic schools, either through interviewing teachers and students or by interrogating key texts and ideas that circulate in these schools. This book hopes to fill this lacuna.

On top of a careful scrutiny of existing literature, the methods of inquiry adopted in this study revolve around in-depth interviews, ethnographic observation, and textual analysis. Fieldwork for this book was conducted on numerous occasions beginning in April 2004. This included visits to Islamic schools and religious institutions in Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Bangkok, and Chiang Mai. Over the course of these visits, extensive interviews were conducted by the author and his research assistants with religious teachers, *alim*, academics, students, and community leaders. Where possible, interviews were also conducted with Thai government and security officials in order to ascertain how the state views Islamic education and its overall place in Thai society against the backdrop of conflict in southern Thailand. Field researchers also provided further assistance in the form of critical follow-up interviews. During these field visits, I also had the opportunity to spend some time at various Islamic schools observing religious and vocational classes. This allowed me the opportunity not only to witness firsthand the conduct of lessons, but also to observe the relationship between religious teachers and their students.

Beyond interviews and ethnographic observation, this project also undertakes analysis of some popular texts used in Islamic education institutions. Specifically, I have examined and interrogated the ideas behind some religious texts in order to tease out the trends and tensions that have come to define Islamic education in Thailand, particularly the differences between so-called reformist and traditionalist Islam in southern Thailand. In order to facilitate a comparative analysis of these two streams in the context of religious education in southern Thailand, I have chosen to focus on texts associated with reformist-Salafi scholars and their ideas, given that these have received almost no scholarly treatment in the extant literature, rather than on the core texts of traditionalist Islam, several of which have already received fairly detailed treatment in major studies of traditional religion in Southeast Asia.

Unsurprisingly, research for this book proved immensely challenging. Not least of the obstacles was the security situation in southern Thailand, where violence continues to rage as a consequence of a potent concoction of competing interests, thereby making access exceptionally difficult. Conditions were further aggravated by a mood of suspicion and apprehension, and oftentimes locals were reluctant to talk, especially when approached by unfamiliar faces. Because my research began at about the same time that several local Malay-Muslims were apprehended on allegations of being Thai members of the terrorist organization Jemaah Islamiyah, this made it even more difficult to win the trust of local religious leaders and teachers. It is because of these constraints that I am especially grateful to a number of locals who trusted me enough to make introductions, open doors, and on many occasions, accompany me for meetings and interviews. Needless to say, without their help I would not have been able to uncover as much as I eventually did.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In writing this book I have accumulated a great many debts of gratitude.

It is with deep appreciation that I acknowledge the support of Barry Desker, Dean of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, who granted me time away from heavy administrative responsibilities so that I could conduct field research and later write up my research findings.

Research for this book first began as part of a larger project on Islamic education in Southeast Asia. Concomitantly, a word of thanks is due to my fellow project members Bob Hefner, Rick Kraince, Tom McKenna, and Bjorn Blengli, who laboured with me to better understand the complicated dynamics and nuances of Islamic education in the region. It was during our many meetings discussing this project that my interest in the Islamic schools of southern Thailand was nursed, and it was they who first forced me to think through this topic carefully in order to define and refine research questions and methodologies. Thanks also to the National Bureau of Asian Research for funding this Islamic education project, and to Michael Wills, Aishah Pang, and Mercy Kuo for supporting it.

The person who learns most from any book is its author. In the course of writing this particular one, I have learnt and profited a great deal from my interactions with friends and colleagues from the Thai studies, Islamic studies, Southeast Asian studies, and security studies communities who helped me think through the issues it raises. I am particularly indebted to Saroja Dorairajoo, Raymond Scupin, Duncan McCargo, Michael Montesano, Chaiwat Satha-Anand, Ibrahim Narongraksakhet, Nilor Wae-u-Seng, Hasan Madmarn, Sukri Langputeh, Imtiyaz Yusuf, May Mullins, Muhammad Arafat, Suleemarn Wongsuphap, Worawit Baru, Ahmad Somboon Bualuang, Michael

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In Bangkok, Jim Klein patiently took me through the Asia Foundation's projects in Thailand's religious schools, while Alayas Haji Salah kindly accompanied me on visits to *pondoks* and Islamic schools in the city and its vicinity. Similarly, research for the brief discussion on Chiang Mai benefited from the kind assistance of Suchart Sethamalinee and Kannaporn "Pam" Akarapisan. Francesca Lawe-Davies shared her data on religious education, reproduced in Chapter Two, based on her own research on the National Reconciliation Committee. In Pattani, Kariya (Zakaria) Langputeh kindly hosted me at the Yala Islamic College, while prominent local Islamic scholars such as Ismail Lutfi Japakiya, Nidae Waba, and Abdurrahman Khahama patiently and candidly answered my many questions.

I wish also to acknowledge the valuable contribution to this work made by a number of people who assisted in research and translation. Ustaz Muhammad Haniff Hassan was kind enough to share with me parts of his own analysis of Ismail Lutfi Japakiya's doctoral dissertation, while Abdul Rahim Zakaria allowed me to use segments of his Master's dissertation on Haji Sulong. Shahirah Mahmood, Mohamed Nawab, and Afif Pasuni helped in the translation of some Arabic and Jawi material; Shahirah patiently assisted me by ploughing through the entire manuscript as I prepared it for publication. Don Pathan was characteristically generous with his own time, contacts, and insights. As administrative responsibilities made it difficult for me to visit the southern provinces as often as I would have liked, I had to rely on local help to sustain the research on the ground. Owing to the precarious security situation in southern Thailand, however, I am unable to acknowledge by name those who were instrumental in arranging interviews for me, and at times conducting them as well. They know who they are, and they know how important their contribution has been to this book. There are many others — religious teachers and local Malay-Muslim community leaders as well as government officials — whose names cannot be revealed here for personal and security reasons. To them I owe a heartfelt gratitude and appreciation for their candour and honesty in sharing with me their views on the topic. Preliminary findings of this research were presented at a research seminar at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (2006), a panel at the Association of Asian Studies Annual Conference (2006), and the Thailand Update at the Australian National University (2007). I would like to express my gratitude to those who attended these sessions and for contributing

suggestions and criticisms. A special word of gratitude is also due John Funston for his kind invitation to speak at the ANU Thailand Update.

Back at my RSIS home base, the pressures of balancing academic writing with other professional responsibilities were made much more bearable thanks to my colleagues. I thank in particular Tan See Seng, Kumar Ramakrishna, Ralf Emmers, Bernard Loo, Norman Vasu, Joey Long, Adrian Kuah, Ang Cheng Guan, and Khong Yuen Foong. A special word of thanks, too, to Adeline Lim, who assisted me with many of my administrative burdens when I took time off to write up the manuscript. I am grateful to the staff at ISEAS Publications Unit, especially Triena Ong, who provided much needed support and editorial assistance as the publishers of this volume.

To my dear wife, Ai Vee, thank you for all your patience, love, and understanding, which have helped me keep things in perspective. This work is as much the fruit of your labour as it is mine. To my two children, Euan and Megan, thank you for allowing Daddy to spend more time than he should have in the study. Finally, none of this would have been possible without the grace of my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. My debt to him is truly beyond measure: to him be the glory.

INTRODUCTION

In his best-selling narrative history on the rise of Wahhabism, Charles Allen made the following observation of the pertinence of the *madrasah* to social and religious life in South Asia:

the Taliban were youngsters orphaned by war, who had been brought up and educated in the hundreds of religious schools set up in Pakistan with funds from Saudi Arabia. For many thousands of young Pathan boys the *madrasah* had been their home and its male teachers ... their surrogate parents. Here the bonds and shared purpose had been forged which had given these 'searchers after truth' their extraordinary aura of invincibility, for the *madrasah* was not so much a school as a seminary, with curriculum made up entirely of religious instruction and the study of the Qur'an. Here they had spent their adolescence rocking to and fro as they learned to recite by heart an Arabic text whose meaning they did not understand but which they knew conferred on them absolute authority in all matters governing social behaviour.¹

This excerpt echoes both the centrality of religious education in Muslim life as well as a common tendency among Western scholars towards orientalist narrations that perpetuate a stereotypical view of Islamic education as a stoic and static pursuit. Such a view on Islamic education has been advanced further with former U.S. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld's now infamous October 2003 memo that queried if the U.S. was "capturing, killing, or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the *madrasahs* and the radical clerics are recruiting, training, and deploying against us?"² It is clear from the frenzy that Rumsfeld's controversial question stirred up in

the international media, policy circles, and the terrorism analysis communities, not to mention the caustic reactions across the Muslim world, that Islamic education is a highly controversial and contested issue, and that the institution of the Islamic school is subject to intense scrutiny.

Education has always been a key feature of Muslim life and society. In Islamic culture, however, knowledge has never been an end unto itself. Nor has the role of educational institutions been envisaged as a production line churning out individuals equipped to contribute to the bureaucracies and economies of the modern nation-state and global capitalist enterprise. Instead, Islamic education has had two overarching objectives at its core: the transmission of Islamic heritage and values on the one hand, and the spiritual, moral, and ethical transformation and advancement of Muslim societies on the other. This long-cherished traditional role of Islamic education has, however, come under immense pressure and scrutiny in this modern age of development, globalization, and the nation-state. Notwithstanding the fact that the lines between secular and religious education are often far more complex and fluid than have been popularly portrayed, secular governments, for whom education is an efficacious tool of modernity, increasingly demand that these religious institutions produce students who can contribute to the instrumental ends of economic prosperity and national development in the name of the “greater good”. Since September 11, 2001, another factor has come to the fore, and Islamic schools throughout the Muslim world find themselves under the microscope of state surveillance for the declared purpose of “uprooting” the Islamic radicalism that fans the embers of terrorism. The subtext is of course clear — terrorism is rooted in the extremist religious ideology that some Islamic schools perpetuate.

These pressures on Muslim societies are, at least in part, symptomatic of the “crisis of modernity” that many pundits suggest confronts Islam today, and that continues to be the subject of great scholarly interest. This “crisis” itself has been dealt with substantively elsewhere and is not a matter of concern for us here. How the tensions that define this crisis have been mirrored in Islamic education, however, is. That the perceptions of Islamic education described above have been gaining currency should not detract from the fact that Islam remains fraught with tensions. Despite romanticized notions of it being a unified religion, the realm of Islamic education has long been an arena for the interplay of various, and often contending, social forces.³ This book is an attempt to document and unpack this interplay in the context of Islamic education in Muslim-dominated southern Thailand. It will focus primarily on the Malay-Muslim provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, but will also allude to trends beyond these provinces.

Islamic schools in southern Thailand have a long, chequered history. Members of the Malay-Muslim intelligentsia, as well as of the political and religious elite in Thailand, have often impressed upon us how the *pondok* or traditional Islamic school has been, and continues to be, amongst the most revered religious institutions in Muslim Southeast Asia.⁴ On the other hand, Islamic schools are viewed in many quarters of the Thai state as parochial institutions that not only contribute little to modern Thai society, but, more disturbing, nurse an exclusivist vision of the world and of the place of Malay-Muslims in the imagined Thai nation. At least to some extent, it can be said that Islamic schools lend themselves to the perpetuation of this view by virtue of the fact that they have intermittently been accused of, and at times found to be, complicit in the long-drawn Malay-Muslim separatist insurgency in the southern provinces.⁵ That said, the unfortunate reality is that, in truth, very little is known about the nature of religious knowledge and education in the region. Unpacking this evident disjuncture in what Islamic schools represent through the prisms of the state and of the Malay-Muslim community, one is likely to find that the reality straddles the two extremes. In other words, this disjuncture captures the challenges confronting the community — questions of tradition, identity, religiosity, historical legacy, relations with the state, and responses to encroaching secularism and modernity. It is my contention that these dynamics and tensions at once both frame and are framed by what is happening to, and in, the Islamic school system in southern Thailand in particular and, to a lesser degree, in Islamic schools across the country in general. The purpose of this book is to describe and reflect on trends and tensions in Islamic education in Thailand which will allow us to further illustrate and critically evaluate the dynamics and tensions that have emerged in the Muslim community there.

OBJECTIVES OF THE BOOK

By way of the above as a point of entry, this book has four primary objectives. First, this book aims to be a first-of-its-kind resource book for Thai specialists and those working more broadly in the field of Islamic education. In particular, it accumulates and provides hitherto unpublished information on various aspects of Islamic education in southern Thailand, but also with an eye to comparison with other Muslim communities strewn throughout the country. The data amassed in this book, collected over a period of three years by the author and a team of local researchers, will be of significant use not only to scholars working on Muslim politics and community in Thailand, but for comparativists as well.

There are further localized reasons why mapping out the profile of Islamic schools in southern Thailand is an urgent and necessary exercise. The extant literature centres our understanding of Islamic education in southern Thailand on the *pondok* and its role and stature in the Malay-Muslim community. There are no doubt important reasons why this is so. The southern Thai kingdom of Patani Darussalam was historically significant as a centre of Islamic learning across the Malay-Muslim world from the sixteenth century onward, and the *pondok* has come to exemplify this tradition. Hence, any attempt to study Islamic education must necessarily begin with the institution of the *pondok* as a point of entry. Additionally, such is the centrality of the *pondok* in popular imagination that it has become the prevailing practice to label just about every institution of Islamic learning in southern Thailand a “*pondok*”. This discursive practice obfuscates what has over the years developed into a highly complex and pluralistic system of religious education. Indeed, there has been a proliferation of Islamic schools in southern Thailand, both in number and kind, such that, at least in theory, students would be able to go from pre-school through to tertiary education along an exclusively “Islamic” track (even if they were pursuing an academic discipline, as opposed to Islamic studies). These schools can be differentiated not just in terms of standards, but also the nature and source of funding, qualifications of teaching staff, the focus of their respective curricula, and, most provocatively, ideological proclivities as well. There is an urgent need to sufficiently appreciate this plurality in order to better understand Islamic education in southern Thailand.

The second aim of this book is to provide an update on the nature of relations between the central Thai state and its Malay-Muslim periphery through the optic of Islamic education. While this is a topic that has garnered widespread interest over the years, the book looks to go beyond general impressions of this relationship to explore its dynamics in the specific case of education. Here, it is important also to register that the employment of education policies as the yardstick takes on greater salience since many of the problems associated with the conflict in southern Thailand today are a result of contested, polarized interpretations of history and identity, and it is the education system that often perpetuates both national dogma and local perspectives on these issues, rendering them progressively intractable.

Because an exclusive focus on relations between Bangkok and southern Thailand through the optic of state-society relations tends invariably to treat the Malay-Muslims as a monolithic group comprising empty, unreflective subjects somehow devoid of the ability to reflect on and analyse the existential conditions of their social, political, and economic predicaments, there is an

equally urgent need to investigate dynamics within the Malay-Muslim community itself, as they pertain to the nature and authenticity of knowledge, and the legitimacy and authority of those empowered to transmit it. Bearing this in mind, the third objective of the book will be to investigate a dimension of Islamic education unexplored in recent times in studies on southern Thailand — the nature of relationships within the Malay-Muslim community.

Here, interest is given particularly to the effect that Muslim reformists have had on the traditional landscape. This arises out of observations that traditionalism and orthodoxy in the Malay-Muslim community of southern Thailand have in recent years come under pressure for change and transformation from a brand of Islamic reformism that is, paradoxically enough, rooted in puritanical and fundamentalist Salafi ideology. The tension and contestations arising from this “clash” is, this book argues, clearly evident in the education system, where the reformist attempt to transform the nature and transmission of Islamic knowledge has been interpreted by traditionalists as a challenge to age-old beliefs and practices, as well as to their authority and legitimacy as custodians of the faith. In order to trace the contours of this tension, the book will rely on extensive interviews with educators from both camps as well as the analysis of popular Islamic texts employed in the religious studies curriculum. Particular attention will be given here to texts identified with reformist thinking among the *ulama* community in southern Thailand. There are two issues at stake here. First, unlike the works of traditionalist scholars, which have been treated at some length by Hasan Madmarn, Azyumardi Azra, and Peter Riddell amongst others, the work of a current generation of reformist scholars such as Ismail Lutfi Japakiya has yet to come under similar scholarly scrutiny.⁶ Second, while a bastion of traditional Shafi’i and Sufi Islam, the discursive landscape in southern Thailand has of late experienced considerable growth in Salafi-reformist scholarship that is gradually reconfiguring (not without resistance) the existing constellation of Islamic thought and praxis and threatening to eclipse the stature of traditionalist scholars.

Fourth, the book also charts out the transnational links and networks, both formal and informal, between Islamic education institutions and scholars in southern Thailand and the wider community of believers. Given the universal nature of Islam as faith, creed, and knowledge (in theory, at least), it follows that Islamic education would logically possess a transnational dimension in the way that local knowledge is to some extent or other plugged into the wider *ummah*. Furthermore, it is common knowledge that, insofar as mainstream thinking on questions of authenticity are concerned, the “universal” character of Islamic knowledge is also paradoxically predicated on the existence

of a temporal “core” — the Middle East and Arab Peninsula, from which Islamic knowledge flows to all quarters of the Muslim world. The charting of these transnational links and networks entail, to the extent such information is obtainable, careful examination into the flow of Malay-Muslim students from Thailand to various centres of Islamic learning both regionally and globally, the nature of relationships between institutions in these centres with counterparts in southern Thailand, and the existence of alumni networks.

Finally, the book aims to bridge the gulf that exists between the fields of security and conflict studies on the one hand and area studies on the other. This objective arises from the observation that this gulf has grown wider today, in the age of the post-September 11 fascination with global *jihadi* terrorism, despite the fact that both fields have much to contribute to our understanding of violence and conflict — sanctioned with religious referents by its perpetrators — and of the nature and configuration of the societal structures that spawn them. While the study of Islamic education has in general gained greater currency these days, owing to concerns about a possible nexus between Islamic schools and Muslim militancy, the resultant cottage industry has produced few works that have attempted to open this “black box” (of Islamic education) by systematically and critically examining its content, nor has much been done to study the policies and procedural norms that inform it. This is certainly so in the case of southern Thailand, where persistent accusations made by the Thai government and by numerous security analysts and pundits — that Islamic schools are somehow spawning militants and perpetuating endemic violence — have not been followed by careful study of the ideas and ideologies these schools are supposedly propounding and instilling. While the immediate purpose here is not so much to test the validity of such claims, through careful interrogation of the religious texts employed in the curriculum as well as through interviews with the educators in these schools, this book hopes to provide a nuanced perspective of how Islamic schools may or may not be involved in the conflict in southern Thailand.

DEFINITIONS AND ARGUMENTS

Given that a key objective of this book is to investigate the tensions that have arisen between “traditionalist” and “reformist” Islam, some comments on the definition of these terms are perhaps appropriate here. For our purposes, traditionalist Islam in southern Thailand refers to the syncretic belief system that marries the Islamic creed with indigenous cultural beliefs and practices that were carried over from the pre-Islamic era of Southeast Asian history.

This syncretism underscores the brand of Sufi Islam commonly found across Islamic Southeast Asia including southern Thailand, even today. Additionally, it should further be noted that this brand of traditional Islam sits comfortably with the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence popularly practised across the region. As alluded to earlier, in the realm of education traditional Islam is expressed in the institution of the *pondok*, where the instruction provided is, save for some very elementary lessons in mathematics, exclusively focused on religion. Reformist Islam, on the other hand, can be conceptualized on (at least) two levels. In terms of pedagogy, it refers simply to moves to "reform" and change prevailing means of knowledge transmission. Hence, as we shall see in the following chapters, one of the imperatives behind the creation of the Islamic private school, for example, stems from the observed need to reform the traditional *pondok* by introducing academic and general subjects, improving pedagogical tools, and streamlining methods of assessment. At a deeper level, however, the concept of reformist Islam, as least as it is applied here, relates also to the very nature of knowledge itself. Following the tradition of the Islamic reform movement that gained prominence a century earlier and whose influence continues to linger, reformist Islam speaks among other things of the need to refocus knowledge away from the fixation on *fiqh* or jurisprudence back to the Qur'an and *sunnah*, the actions and teachings of the Prophet that are often recorded in the *hadith* (a series of authenticated sayings and declarations recorded by Muslim scholars from sources who heard the Prophet speak and watched him live). Furthermore, rather than a rejection of modernity, reformist Islam seeks to understand and embrace modernity by arguing the premise that modern knowledge is not unexplainable in Islamic terms. It should be noted here that to some, this model of reform is explicitly Salafi in nature in that the return to the Qur'an and *sunnah* accords in some respects with the Salafi practice of avoiding scientific rationalism and adopting faith and religion as the point of entry to the pursuit of understanding. In this regard, the interest in the intellectual and theological dimensions of the reform movement here is specifically with relation to the ideas and writings of Salafi-reformists, as identified in this book.

Bearing these objectives in mind, this study argues that, far from being a merely passive recipient of Western secular education paradigms or of foreign Islamic ideational and ideological influences, the Malay-Muslim community of the southern provinces has increasingly exercised agency in its attempt to navigate between pressures generated by the need to preserve culture, knowledge, and identity at one end, and the demands of modernization, nationalism, and reform at the other. Consequently, Islamic education in

southern Thailand has been defined as much by the adaptation, synthesis, and appropriation of external models of education (by which I mean both “Western” and secular as well as reformist and Salafi) as it has by tradition, orthodoxy, and resistance to change. Beyond the simplistic caricature of Islamic schools as a breeding ground of Islamic militancy and terrorism — a view that has unfortunately gained much currency in the post-September 11 “age of terror” — this book contends that Islamic education in southern Thailand is a highly dynamic terrain which captures a variety of contestations emanating from within the structural, historical, and cultural parameters of the southern Thai Malay-Muslim community.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book is divided into five chapters. Chapter One briefly describes the advent and configuration of Islam in southern Thailand, as well as the role that Islamic schools have played in the narratives of ethno-nationalism and separatism in the Malay-Muslim provinces. The chapter further discusses the major policies that the modern Thai state has formulated and instituted with regards to Islamic schools in the south, and the ramifications of these policies on state-society relations as well as on the Muslim community’s own sense of identity and belonging. Chapter Two maps out the plural landscape of Islamic education in southern Thailand. It does so by identifying the structures and institutions of Islamic learning, in the process distinguishing their key traits. Chapter Three investigates the emergence and trends of Islamic reform in Thailand in general, and in the south in particular. Here, three major stages are identified: the advent of reformist ideas in Thailand, the emergence of a reformist movement in the southern provinces, and the resurgence of this reformist movement in recent times. It is suggested that the latter two stages are personified, first in the nationalist-reformist scholar Haji Sulong Abdul Kadir in the years immediately preceding World War Two, and later in the person of Dr. Ismail Lutfi Japakiya, the Saudi-trained cleric and current rector of Yala Islamic University. The chapter further focuses discussion on Lutfi’s practice of Islam and considers it against the backdrop of allegations of his allegedly unstinting allegiance to Wahhabism, a distinct and highly puritanical stream of Salafism. Chapter Four charts the parameters of Islamic thought and practice in southern Thailand’s Islamic schools on a range of issues, focusing on the contestations between Salafi-reformist and traditionalist approaches to the teaching and content of Islamic education in the southern provinces. The chapter explores these tensions through the optic of pedagogical and curricular emphasis. Particular focus is given to the key texts used by

reformists which, as suggested earlier, have been insufficiently studied in the literature. These texts are introduced, analysed, and interrogated in terms of their transmission of ideas that in some instances challenge conventional and traditionalist thinking on a range of issues. Chapter Five maps out the transnational networks, both formal and informal, of Islamic education locally and internationally. It focuses on identifying the nature of these networks, as well as its features in terms of student associations and alumni groupings. The chapter also explores the cross-currents generated by alternative Islamic ideas and movements, primarily the *Jemaat Tabligh* and Shi'a groups, which have taken shape on the educational landscape in Muslim Thailand. In addition, the chapter undertakes a number of comparative investigations in order to consider trends in the southern provinces against those in other major concentrations of Muslims in Thailand, chiefly, Chiang Mai in the north and Bangkok in the central plains. The book concludes by drawing out key observations on the trends and tensions within Islamic education in southern Thailand. The Conclusion will attempt to illustrate that popular assumptions about how Islamic schools in southern Thailand are generating radicals and terrorists have been grossly exaggerated and misplaced. Such generalizations, the book argues, are fundamentally counter-productive, as they might engender policies that would do little other than deepen misunderstanding and resentment between the state and the Muslim communities of the southern provinces. Rather, the book concludes that there is a need to foster greater understanding of the challenges and constraints faced by southern Thailand's Islamic schools, not only in relation to the state and to history, but also in the context of developments and tensions within Muslim society itself.

Prior to the study proper, a few caveats on spelling, terminology, and research methods are in order. In this book, both the terms "Patani" and "Pattani" are used. "Patani" is used when there is a need to refer to the historical Muslim kingdom of Patani Darussalam that continues to resonate in the minds of Thailand's Malay-Muslims. "Pattani", on the other hand, is employed to describe the administrative unit of Pattani, which constitutes one of four or five (depending on how one chooses to define the area) provinces in the south. Because the subject of inquiry is Islamic education in the Malay-Muslim community, when exploring local concepts and ideas this study alludes to mostly Malay and, where appropriate Arabic, terminology as opposed to Thai. By the same token, while cognizant of the fact that as a religio-ethnic marker the notion of "Malay-Muslim" is by no means exclusive to southern Thailand, the phrase Malay-Muslim is used here specifically to refer to the Muslims in the three southern Thai provinces who are also almost

entirely ethnic Malay. Likewise, the provinces covered under the rubric of “southern Thailand” here are primarily Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, where Malay-Muslims form the majority of the population.

Finally, given the dearth of extant published literature on the topic in either English, Malay, or Thai, this study draws upon extensive field research conducted by the author as well as by a team of field researchers who conducted interviews and collected information over three years. Because of the sensitivity both of the information collected and of the situation in southern Thailand more broadly, it is difficult to divulge specific details of interviews and meetings without potentially compromising the security of interviewees. In particular, I have been careful not to divulge the names of those interviewed (except where I was explicitly permitted to do so), or of the schools in which they teach, and for that matter, of my field researchers. For purposes of methodological rigour and source verification, I have identified most of the schools in which interviews were conducted. For obvious reasons I have not been able to name the schools that either my field researchers or I identified that teach local Patani history in a way that is antagonistic towards the Thai state, at times to the extent of endorsing separatism.

Notes

- ¹ Charles Allen, *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad* (London: Abacus, 2007), p. 5.
- ² Fred Kaplan, “Rumsfeld’s Pentagon Papers”, in *Slate*, October 2003 <<http://slate.msn.com/id/2090250>> (accessed 23 October 2003).
- ³ See, for example, Yadullah Kazmi, “Islamic Education: Traditional Education or Education in Tradition?”, *Islamic Studies* 42, (2003): 259–88; Sherin Saadallah, “Islam, Religious Orientations, and Education”, in *Educational Strategies Among Muslims in the Context of Globalisation*, edited by Holger Daun and Geoffrey Walford (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 37–61.
- ⁴ Raymond Scupin, ed., *Aspects of Development: Islamic Education in Thailand and Malaysia* (Bangi: Institut Bahasa Kesusasteraan dan Kebudayaan Melayu, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1989); Hasan Madmarn, *The Pondok and Madrasah of Pattani* (Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1990).
- ⁵ Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand* (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, 1985); Wan Kadir Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990).
- ⁶ See Hasan Madmarn, *The Pondok and Madrasah in Pattani* (Bangi, Selangor:

Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1999); Peter Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses* (Singapore: Horizon Books, 2001), pp. 184–204; Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia* (New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2004), pp. 122–26.