

## BOOK REVIEW

William R. Roff. *Studies on Islam and Society in Southeast Asia*. National University of Singapore Press, 2009.

This work provides a valuable window into the prolific scholarly output by William Roff during his long (and continuing) academic career. Readers are urged to take the time to read the Introduction, which provides the author's overview of his own career and his evolving scholarly context. It reveals how he was almost lost to Malay Studies because of his early interest in Burma and Buddhism. Roff unpacks for the reader the changing preoccupations and trends in the study of Islam in Southeast Asia and, as such, this short introduction is itself a valuable resource for young students of Southeast Asian studies. Roff's career has been characterised by both longevity and breadth. He has spent over forty years of his life researching the modern history of Islam and Muslims, with particular reference to Southeast Asia and its social and intellectual history. The fifteen essays contained in this present volume were originally published between 1964 and 2009. They cover wide-ranging themes, though the connections across the themes are clear and provide a powerful coherence to the volume.

### THE CONTENT OF THE VOLUME

The book is divided into five parts, with each part presenting three essays. Part I offers essays written in 1985, 1987 and 2007, addressing interpretative issues in historiography and methodology. They span a significant part of Roff's career, indicating his concern with core methodological issues down the years. They also take account of both Southeast Asian and broader Muslim world contexts, demonstrating Roff's wide-ranging knowledge base.

The first essay considers diverse methodological themes, including the transition from an earlier scholarly view of Southeast Asian Islam as syncretic and full of accretions to a view that allowed for it to be an equally valid expression of Islam, if distinctive in its own myriad ways. So important is this to Roff that he opens Chapter 1 with the statement: "There

seems to have been an extraordinary desire on the part of Western social science observers to diminish, conceptually, the place and role of the religion and culture of Islam...in Southeast Asian societies." (p. 3) He goes on to scrutinise the scholarship of diverse Western scholarly predecessors, including Snouck Hurgronje, J. C. van Leur, Clifford Geertz, P. E. de Josselin de Jong and so forth. We will return to this issue later.

Chapter 3 ("Islamic Movements: One or Many?") is a fascinating chapter, engaging with the dilemma of how to reconcile vast Muslim diversity with unities that hold that diversity together. Roff does this by studying various Islamic militant movements across the Muslim world, the removed Paderis in Sumatra, the Fara'idi movement in East Bengal and a Fulani jihad movement in Africa, in order to see to what extent they can be characterised as broadly "Wahhabi." This essay reflects the breadth of Roff's knowledge, both synchronic and diachronic, about the Islamic world.

Part II focuses in on Malaya and Singapore, with essays originally written in 1964, 1988 and 2004. One of the many aspects of the Roff legacy is the awareness of the key role of Singapore in Islamic developments in the Malay-Indonesian world. Chapter 4 provides a window into his contribution in this regard, with a superlative study of Malay-Muslim activities on the island at the close of the 19th century. This is followed in Chapter 5 by a study of a century of Islamisation in neighbouring Malaya, identifying the patterns of this Islamising process and the function of key elements such as the *ulama* and the *shariah* courts.

Ever present in Roff's writing, and indeed in the processes he describes, is the lateral influences coming from other parts of the Muslim world. Chapter 6 takes account of this theme in its examination of changing institutional structures that produced the *ulama* in Malaysia, from the 19th century down to the present.

In Part III, the three essays (written in 1970, 2002 and 2009) consider Arab world connections. Chapter 7 provides a fascinating account of the dynamics of the community of Malay and Indonesian students in Cairo in the 1920s, painting a portrait of their activities with particular reference to the periodical they produced, *Seruan Azhar*. Chapter 9 presents the volume's most recent essay, deriving from a paper delivered at the International Conference on Yemeni-Hadhramis in Southeast Asia held at the International Islamic University in Malaysia in 2005. This complements Chapter 8, both of which provide ample testimony to Roff's invaluable research into Hadhrami contributions to Southeast Asian Islam down the years.

In Part IV, attention moves to Kelantan, with essays written in 1973, 1974 and 1983. A more narrow band of time (in terms of Roff's research

career) is reflected in these essays, which follow three years when he lectured at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur in the late 1960s. That post enabled him to pursue a rapidly developing interest in Kelantan's role in the emerging Malay Islamic identity.

Chapter 10 presents a valuable study of the early 20th century history of the Majlis Agama Kelantan, which provided a model for development of Majlis Agama bodies in other parts of Malaya. Chapter 12 is much more focused, dealing with debates in Kelantan about the status of the saliva of dogs. Roff describes this chapter as "a case study of conflict over authority, tribunal, and decision in Malay Islam" (p. 250). The photo on the front cover of this book features the very Dalmatian dog that was the trigger to the dispute, which divided Kelantanese society for a time in the 1930s and which also involved Malaya's transnational Islamic connections when the dispute was referred for adjudication to the Shaykh al-Islam at Al-Azhar in Cairo.

Part V concludes the volume with essays written in 2002, 1982 and 1975 (in order of volume presentation). The three essays all consider issues connected with the Muslim pilgrimage, the *Hajj*, such as the methodology of studying the pilgrimage ritual, as well as practical matters to do with sanitation and security and specific issues connected with Malays on pilgrimage.

## A MAN OF HIS POSTMODERN TIMES

Roff is clearly uncomfortable with the methodology of many earlier scholars from the colonial and immediate post-colonial periods. He subtly yet clearly criticises their "uncontrolled passion for taxonomy, an operation which, like taxidermy, is seldom best performed upon the living." (p. 4) This is a great line, one worth remembering for dinner-party conversations. He seriously challenges Snouck Hurgronje's Islam/*adat* dichotomy; Geertz' taxonomy of *priyayi-santri-abangan* in the study of Javanese Muslims; the undefined use of terms such as "mystical", "orthodoxy", "orthoproxy" and so forth. Roff concludes his first chapter with a telling statement: "One cannot, in the interests of however desirable a patterned understanding, avoid the burden of complexity." (p. 21)

Of course, colonial scholars lived in a different age: one where traditional metanarratives reigned supreme; where colonial personnel, including scholars, often came to their tasks with a clear sense of centre and periphery, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, or simply right and wrong—an angle

of approach that lent itself to taxonomies. This produced a scholarly attitude that saw certain aspects of the expressions of Islam in Southeast Asia as quaint, and interesting, but ultimately as syncretic, compared with a normative, essentialist (text-based) centre.

Such colonial scholars were men of their times. Yet Roff is equally a man of his postmodern times. Scholarship is no less subject to trend and fashion than other domain of human activity. Scholarly methods dominate for a period until they are amended, or replaced, at key hinge-points of scholarly history, when a new generation of scholars—or in some cases an outstanding individual—breaks previous moulds and sets scholarly method off in new directions.

In terms of the study of Southeast Asian Islam, Bill Roff is one of a small number of scholars who brought about such a historical hinge point of scholarly history (another is Anthony Johns, mentioned several times in this volume). They wrote in a post-World War Two context where Europeans were shedding their old metanarratives, abandoning the colonialism project (often with a sense of shame and guilt), and coming to regard the former colonial "other" as not only equally valid, but more so in many respects.

Eurocentrism came to be seen as not merely passé; it became the cause of a significant cringe factor. Postmodern Western scholarly methods did an about-face in diverse ways—one of which was to shun taxonomies, and labels and the like—because they risked creating false boundaries according to unfashionable Western perspectives of the world.

Of course, the long-held view of Southeast Asian Islam as an inferior variety to that in the Arab world was not simply imposed by Western colonial scholars. Southeast Asian Muslims themselves had long looked to the Arab world for advice, judicial opinion and conflict resolution. As Roff's essays demonstrate, Southeast Asian Muslims had long travelled to the Arab world to "top up" their expertise in the Islamic sciences, with a liberal dose added of political activism if Cairo was their destination. And in return, as Roff also demonstrates, Arab Muslims travelled to Southeast Asia, especially from the Hadhramaut, with many assuming positions of religious authority, a process no doubt helped by local perceptions of Arabs as having a special link with the context which produced the Prophet of Islam.

Even today, a creeping Arabisation of Southeast Asian Islam, as a manifestation of worldwide Islamic resurgence, reflects a long-felt sense of inferiority on the part of many Southeast Asian rank-and-file Muslims, one which rightly rankles many Southeast Asian Islamic specialists.

While it is important to note Roff's caution about being too bound to taxonomies—a concern driven to no small degree by his postmodern context—we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Taxonomies

are blunt instruments, but nevertheless they can be useful in helping us negotiate our way through a complex world—providing that they are seen as dynamic and flexible. They can, and should, be "performed upon the living."

## **LEGACY**

Bill Roff has had a profound influence on two generations of scholars of Southeast Asian Islam, both in terms of the detailed portraits he has painted of Southeast Asian Islamic societies and also in terms of advances in scholarly methodology. In time, his method will be subjected to the same kind of critique as occurred (under his searching gaze) with the method of the scholarly generations which preceded him. However, whatever the outcome of that process, Roff will undoubtedly be deservedly remembered as one of the greatest scholars of Southeast Asian Islamic history and society who bridged the 20th and 21st centuries.

Reviewed by  
Peter Riddell  
Centre for the Study of Islam and Other Faiths  
Melbourne School of Theology