ASPIRING FOR ISLAMIC REFORM: SOUTHEAST ASIAN REQUESTS FOR FATWĀS IN AL-MANĀR*

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Abstract

Against the general background of the transmission of Muḥammad ʿAbduh’s ideas about reform to Southeast Asia, as reflected in al-Manār, I examine requests for fatwās relating to affairs in the archipelago. These requests emanated from three groups: Southeast Asian students in the Middle East, Arabs living in Southeast Asia, and indigenous Southeast Asian readers of al-Manār. The fatwās examined here relate to three themes: Islam and modernity, religious practices, and aspirations for religious reform. I conclude that al-Manār created a new mode of discourse for Southeast Asian Islam in which the mustaftī and the muftī were not pupils and teachers but fellow discussants of reform in societies undergoing similar challenges.

With the exception of articles by Bluhm (1983: 34-42; 1997: 295-308) and Abaza (1998: 93-111), most studies of Islam in Southeast Asia have paid scant attention to the correspondence sent by Muslims in the region to al-Manār, the seminal reformist journal edited in Cairo by Rashīd Riḍā (1865-1935), the heir to Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849-1905). Instead of merely asserting that Islamic reform was transmitted as a complete package from the Middle East (cf. Noer 1980), Bluhm and Abaza focus on the internal views of Southeast Asian Muslims as revealed in this correspondence, of which requests for fatwās (Ar. sg. istifā) formed a part. In this regard Bluhm (1983: 35) mentions that during the

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lifetime of al-Manār (1898-1936) there were 134 requests for fatwās from Southeast Asian Muslims, and twenty-six articles in the form of announcements and letters commenting on Southeast Asian affairs or on previous articles published in the journal. As for the istīfā’s, she states that these “reflect the concomitant internal religious and social tensions arising from the changing religious, political, and ‘national consciousness’ of the Muslims in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago” (Bluhm 1983: 37).

Following Bluhm and Abaza, and taking istīfā as the main subject of discussion, I will describe the substance of the requests, identifying where possible the petitioners (mustaftīs), and showing how istīfā—rather than the fatwās themselves—reflects the changing social and intellectual circumstances of Southeast Asian Muslims at the beginning of the twentieth century. By so doing, I shall provide a historical background for the articles in this theme issue, drawing attention to the continuities and changes in the relationship between Southeast Asian Muslims and their co-religionists in the Middle East as they faced similar challenges in relation to “the modern” and claims of traditional authority.

Islamic Reformism: an Outline

The expression “Islamic reform” as used here refers specifically to the new approaches to Islam made in the early years of the twentieth century in response to the contemporary demands of (often colonial) modernity. As such, Islamic reform is not merely an intellectual continuation of the older tradition of periodic renewal (Ar. tajdīd) and reform (Ar. iṣlāḥ) that have occurred in Muslim societies or, as Voll terms it, the “continuing tradition of revitalization of Islamic faith and practices” (Voll 1983: 32). Rather Islamic reform incorporated a new dimension, formulated “to integrate modern thought and institutions with Islam” (Rahman 1969: 222).

For some Southeast Asian Muslims, the ideas of ‘Abduh and Rīḍā, as propagated in Cairo, were central to their engagement with this new current of reformism. More especially, the program of ‘Abduh as articulated in al-Manār served as a guide for their new understanding.

Inspired by his mentor, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1839-97)—
who Fazlur Rahman (1966: 216) has described as “the first genuine Muslim modernist”—‘Abduh urged Muslims to reformulate the heritage of Islam through independent rational investigation of its divine sources (through the process known as *ijtihād*) in order to meet the new demands of modernity. According to Rahman, ‘Abduh urged the urgency for Muslims to “restate the basic ideas of Islam in such a way as to open the door for the influence of new ideas and for the acquisition of modern knowledge” (Rahman 1966: 217). He therefore was concerned with presenting “the basic tenets of Islam in terms that would be acceptable to a modern mind and allow further reformation of it ... and allow the pursuit of modern knowledge” (Rahman 1966: 217).

‘Abduh’s ideas were largely communicated to Southeast Asia indirectly through Rida, who reformulated his master’s ideas in terms of a puritanical approach that emphasized a return to the Qur’ān and Sunna and to the tradition of the pious forefathers (Ar. *al-salaf*) (Hourani 1983: 231; Eliraz 2002: 52). Indeed it should be noted that ‘Abduh did not create a single school of Islamic thought; rather, his ideas were diffuse and, according to Kerr, “rested on intellectual foundations that were, on the whole, vague and unsystematic” (Kerr 1966: 15). Followers of ‘Abduh therefore found themselves divided between “almost purely Westernist intellectual development” on the one hand, and the Salafiyya movement of Rida on the other (Rahman 1966: 223). Certainly the ideology and practice of later Southeast Asian Islamic reformers—such as those of the Muhammadiyah movement, founded in Java by Ahmad Dahlan (1868-1923) in 1912—exhibit clearer links with Rida’s Salafiyya movement than with the less systematic ideas of ‘Abduh (Eliraz 2002: 71).

In addition to heeding ‘Abduh’s call to build modern educational institutions and reopen the gates of *ijtihād*, the Islamic reformers of Southeast Asia sought to purify religious practices of what they regarded as heretical and improper innovations (Ar. sg., *bid’ā*) (Peacock 1978). Driven by the desire to render the Islamic teachings “adaptable to the complex demands of modern life” (Adams 1933: 1), the reformers were particularly interested in cleansing Islam of practices that they felt were contaminated by pre-Islamic tradition and culture, and that therefore were the cause of Muslim backwardness, e.g. blind obedience to the shaykh (Ar. *taqlīd*), the loud pronunciation of the formulation of intention
(Ar. *niyya*) at the beginning of prayer, and whispering instructions to a corpse prior to burial (see Noer 1978: 86-7, 220-1; Federspiel 2001: 158-70).

The justification for reformist attacks on these practices was frequently sourced to *al-Manār*. And, as mentioned above, requests for fatwās to that journal played an important role in the formulation of reformist ideas. In addition, they reveal much about the experience of Muslims of the archipelago under Dutch rule. Before describing these requests, I shall outline the nature of the connection with Cairo.

**Southeast Asia – Mecca – Cairo**

The transmission of Islam from the Middle East to the Malay-Indonesian world is once more attracting scholarly attention. It is important to emphasise, however, that much of the transmitting was done by Southeast Asians themselves.

Azyumardi Azra (2004) has shown how, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, all of the leading Malay-Indonesian ‘ulama’ had studied in the Middle East, especially in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. This connection became even more important in the nineteenth century when, due to improvements in sea transportation that culminated in the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, increasing numbers of Southeast Asians performed the *hajj* or travelled to the Hijaz for study (Vredenbregt 1962: 91-154; McDonnell 1986). As a result, a distinct community of Southeast Asian students emerged in Arabia, known locally as the Jawa. These were the people who Snouck Hurgronje (1931: 291) famously declared to be “the heart of the religious life of the East-Indian Archipelago.” This community—composed of many different ethnic groups—participated in lively discussions of issues concerning Southeast Asian affairs in general, and, notably, the often hostile engagement between their countrymen and European colonialism (Snouck Hurgronje 1931: 260; Kaptein 1997: 5).

By the turn of the twentieth century, a new print-minded orientation to knowledge within the Jawa community at large contributed to the rise of a new mode of transmitting Islam to the Malay-Indonesian archipelago from Cairo—the source of
new editions of classical works and newspapers—rather than from Mecca. This process was instigated by the Muslim encounter with European-style modernity. In Southeast Asia, urbanization and the increasing availability of Western-style education led to the emergence of distinct intellectual hubs, such as Singapore on the Malay Peninsula, Yogyakarta and Batavia in Java, and Padang and Palembang in Sumatra.¹ In these cities Muslims came face-to-face with a new form of urban living that stimulated the desire for material change and religious reform.

Meanwhile, thanks largely to the efforts of its rulers, Cairo had become one of the modern cities in the Middle East, and a new social and intellectual landscape was taking shape (Adams 1933; Hourani 1983; Vatikiotis 1976: 74-89). As mentioned, one of the most important aspects of this urban transformation was the emergence of printing and the press, which engaged a new Muslim readership. In this respect, al-Manār played an important role. First published in 1898, it was intended by Rida to perpetuate the ideas propagated by al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh in Paris in the 1880s in the journal al-'Uruwa al-wuthqā: a call for the revival of an “authentic” Islam based on the Qur’ān and Sunna, and the acquisition of all modern forms of technology by Muslims in order to compete with the West on the world stage.

This new journal, with its message of renewal and reform, caught the attention of the Jawi community in Mecca (cf. Yatim 1999: 257). And while its reformist message was not always well received, it stimulated an interest in Cairo as a scholarly destination. Such ambiguous interest is reflected in the person of Ahmad Khatib (1860-1916), a Sumatran scholar who lived in Mecca for most of his life. Khatib, who stressed the need for the purification of Muslim religious practices, is regarded by Steenbrink (1984: 145-6) as “the master of the first generation of the reformist ‘ulama‘ in Malay-Indonesia.” Although Khatib taught the classical texts to his students in the traditional manner (the master-student relationship), he was also open to ideas from beyond the world of these texts, and is said to have encouraged his students to

¹ For a description of those cities at the time, see Roff (1994: 32-8) on Singapore; Darban (1980) on Yogyakarta and Van Mook (1958) on Batavia. For Padang and Palembang, see Abdullah (1971) and Peeters (1997), respectively.
read *al-Manār* in order to refute some of its ideas (Noer 1980: 39). Although many did, others became interested in its message. Among those attracted to the new Cairene mode were Khātīb’s maternal relative, Shaykh Tahir Jalal al-Dīn (1869-1956), a future editor of Singapore’s *al-Imam* (1906-08), and Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of the Muhammadiyah movement on Java.

By facilitating individual reading and critical interpretation, *al-Manār* made it possible for the Jawi community to gain access to Islamic ideas beyond the realm of the traditional master-student transmission process. Southeast Asian Muslims had long known of al-Azhar as a center of Islamic learning, in particular for their Shāfī’ī madhhab (Snouck Hurgronje 1931: 185; Veth 1868); but now reform-minded individuals like Shaykh Tahir started looking to Cairo more seriously as a destination for their religious studies. They also saw *al-Manār* as a new source of religious authority, as reflected in the rise in the number of requests for *fatwās* addressed to Rashīd Riḍā, and the corresponding decline in requests to Meccan ‘ulamā’ (cf. Kaptein 1995: 141-60; and 1997). These requests for *fatwās* not only shed light on the transformation of religious life, but also signaled the establishment of an intensive dialogue between the Malayo-Indonesian world and al-Azhar, a dialogue that paved the way for the subsequent development of the Islamic reform movement in Southeast Asia.

In addition to providing a scholarly home for increasing numbers of Southeast Asians, Cairo also gave them the experience of living in “modern” conditions (Laffan 2003: 127-31). In Egypt at this time “Islam” began to be voiced not only by the ‘ulamā’ in traditional Islamic institutions, but also by intellectuals and activists using the modern media. This resulted in the fragmentation of religious authority (Eickelman and Anderson 1999: 1-18). As we shall see, religious authority would similarly fragment in Southeast Asia, and that process was often driven by Cairo-oriented reformists.

**Al-Manār’s Southeast Asian Mustafīṭīs**

It is possible to identify three categories of Southeast Asian mustafīṭīs in *al-Manār*: (1) those Jāwa with an experience of study in the Middle East; (2) Arabs resident in Southeast Asia; and (3) Southeast
Asians connected to reformist discourse by *al-Manār* and its allied papers in Southeast Asia, such as the aforementioned *al-Imam* and later *al-Munir* in Padang, West Sumatra.

Having lived and studied in Arabia, a key group of Jawa had access to *al-Manār*. Some, like Shaykh Tahir, visited al-Azhar, where they had the opportunity to make contact with ‘Abdūh and, more especially, Rida. Of these expatriate *mustaftīs*, Basyuni Imran is perhaps the best—if not the most prolific—example, showing how Southeast Asian students living in the Middle East first engaged with, and then contributed to, the transmission of Islamic reformism to their homeland. Like other Southeast Asians, such as Shaykh Tahir or Abdullah Ahmad of Padang (1878-1933; see below), Basyuni Imran began to study reformist ideas after living for some time in Mecca. Born in Sambas, West Kalimantan, on 16 October 1885, Basyuni came from a family of leading *ʿulamāʾ*. His father, Muhammad Imran, was the highest ranking religious official in the sultanate of Sambas (Pijper 1984: 142). After finishing his basic schooling and religious education (which included Qurʾān recitation and elementary Arabic), he went to Mecca ca. 1901 to perform the pilgrimage and to pursue further studies. Like most Jawi students in the Hijaz, he went on to study various branches of Islamic knowledge and spent almost five years studying under his fellow Southeast Asians, Umar al-Sumbawi, Uthman al-Sarawaki, and Ahmad Khatib. In 1906, at the request of his father, he returned to Sambas (Pijper 1984: 142-3).

During his first five years abroad, Basyuni Imran became acquainted with *al-Manār*. After returning to Sambas, he subscribed to the journal and began to correspond with Rida, asking for fatwās on various issues. In a later autobiographical account, Basyuni says that he found in *al-Manār* “pure knowledge of religion based on the book of God and the Sunnah of the Prophet” (Pijper 1984: 143). This connection was deepened in 1910 when he traveled to Cairo with his brother, Ahmad Fawzi, and their friend Ahmad Saʿud. All three enrolled at a new school established by Rida on Roda island, and Basyuni appears to have remained there until his father died in 1913, whereupon he returned to Sambas to take over as imam (Laffan 2003: 138, 255 n.18).

The second group of Southeast Asian *mustaftīs*—who can be identified either by their use of the title *sayyid* or by their clan
names—were either immigrants from the Middle East or their locally-born sons. Most of these “Arabs,” as they were called in accordance with the colonial system of racial classification, originated from the region of Hadramaut or had family connections there. Hadramis had long been engaged with the scholarly networks linking Jawi ‘ulamā’ to centres of study in the Middle East, whether as teachers in Zabid or itinerant visitors at Muslim courts in Southeast Asia. But as the colonial urban centers prospered in Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century, and as sea travel became safer and cheaper, the number of Hadrami immigrants to the region increased. By the end of the nineteenth century, Singapore had the largest Arab colony on the Malay Peninsula, with many of its richest members having made their mark in the pilgrimage industry (Van den Berg 1989: 71). Likewise, there was a noticeable increase in the number of Arabs in the cities of the Netherlands Indies (Van den Berg 1989: 67-9).

Although a desire for economic advancement was perhaps the most important reason for the migration of Arabs to Southeast Asia, many immigrants were prominent contributors to the transmission of Islamic reformism. This was in part brought about by the discriminatory policies of the Dutch government towards Arabs. The Netherlands Indies was a deeply compartmentalized state with a hierarchical legal system that placed Europeans at the top of the social ladder and natives at the bottom, with “Foreign Orientals” such as Chinese, Japanese and Arabs in the middle. To draw attention to their plight as ambiguous “foreigners,” in the 1890s the Arabs began to write letters to Ottoman and Egyptian newspapers.

In this period the Arabs were keenly aware of modern developments in Egypt, and Cairo was one of the main educational destinations for the children of high-class sayyids (Mandal 1994: 146). This shift in religious orientation among the Arabs was one of the most important factors that resulted in the extension of the existing Southeast Asia-Middle East network of scholarly interaction to Egypt. As for reformist sections of the Jawi community in Mecca, so too for Southeast Asian Arabs, al-Manār came to be regarded as a source of authority to which requests for fatwās were addressed (Mandal 1994: 143).

Among this second group of mustaftīs, Muhammad bin Hashim bin Tahir (1882-1960) is noteworthy. Although not much is known
about his life, Bin Tahir was one of the Arabs most intensely engaged in sending requests for fatwās to al-Manār. He was the editor of the first Arabic periodical in Indonesia, al-Bashūr, initially published in Palembang in 1914. In 1915 he and his press moved to Batavia where he took charge of the Jam‘iyyat Khayr school. He later became a teacher at the Shamā‘il al-Hudā school in Pekalongan and the Ḥaḍramawt school in Surabaya (Mobini-Kesheh 1996: 239). By the 1920s he had become the patron of a lodge for Southeast Asian students in Cairo, where he once delivered a speech in which he encouraged Indonesians to embrace the positive benefits of modern education in Cairo, as well as the new schools run by the Dutch colonial government (Schmidt 1992: 82; Van der Meulen 1981: 79-80).

The third, and murkiest, category of mustāfīs includes Muslims who gained access to Islamic reform ideas from al-Manār, which circulated in the archipelago, despite allegedly having been banned by the Dutch (cf. Azra 1999: 80-1). The influence of al-Manār in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago was not limited to the spread of reformist ideas. It also contributed to the rise of a new socio-religious sphere in which reformist ideas constituted the main element of the emerging public discourse (Azra 1999: 81).

Requests for Fatwās in al-Manār

Southeast Asian Muslims asked for fatwās on a wide range of issues, from matters of doctrine to practical life and the experiences of rapid social change. Their istifṭās fall into three categories: (1) the encounter with modernity; (2) the questioning of long-established religious practices; and 3) the physical condition of Southeast Asian Muslims and the authority of their leaders. Of these, the encounter with modernity was primary.

1. The Challenge of Modernity: Interaction, Dress and Language

The rise of modern urban life caused Muslims in the Malay-Indonesian world to seek ways of coping with new problems and the uncertainty of the emerging social order. Thus, the desire to provide an Islamic explanation for new phenomena became a major part of the social and intellectual discourses of Southeast
Asian Islam. This is reflected in questions to al-Manār regarding the permissibility of the dress adopted by the new, often western-educated, intellectual elite, and regarding new inventions such as the gramophone. In all cases, we can discern a desire to keep the lifestyle of Southeast Asian Muslims definably Islamic and modern. That is, modernity might be rendered acceptable only if it could be shown to be in accordance with the values of Islam.

Al-Manār received a number of requests from the archipelago that dealt with issues relating to the experience of living in an urban area and interacting with both European and non-European Christians. Two of the earliest requests came from Hadramis, Sayyid Aqil bin Uthman bin Yahya and Hasan bin Alwi bin Shihab. Sayyid Aqil, then living in Kupang, West Timor, a stronghold of Christianity, submitted a question about the legal status of drinking beer and wine. He asked if Muslims are allowed to drink these beverages, from what substances they are made, whether they may be categorized as medicines, and if there are any ingredients in the drinks that it is permissible for Muslims to consume (al-Manār 10, 1907: 46-7). Hasan bin Alwi asked about the use of the gramophone for broadcasting a recitation of the Qur’ān. He asked if the record on which a recitation is recorded should be regarded like the holy text, the mushaf, in which case Muslims must be in a state of ritual purity when handling it. However the underlying problem here related to the medium itself: the gramophone was widely-used, mainly by Westerners, for entertainment purposes in cafes, where people listened to music while they drank (al-Manār 10, 1907: 439).

Also interesting is the experience of Muhammad bin Hashim bin Tahir, then a teacher at a school in Malang, Java. Living in a heterogeneous society, he asked about the legal status of a marriage between a Muslim man and a Chinese woman, concluded on the condition that the woman would convert to Islam after the man married her. He posed the following questions: Is it permissible to marry a woman who is still a non-Muslim, with the expectation that she will subsequently convert to Islam? Is a Chinese woman considered to be one of “the people of the book” (Ar. ahl al-kitāb)? Who may be categorized as a member of the ahl al-kitāb? And, bearing in mind their current theological beliefs, does the Qur’ānic definition of ahl al-kitāb properly apply to European Christians? (al-Manār 12, 1909: 261).
Questions also were posed about the representation of the body. For example, in 1908 Basyuni Imran asked about the legal status of painting and photography (al-Manār 11, 1908: 772), while Muhammad bin Hashim posed a question about the legal status of watching movies in a theatre, as increasing numbers of Muslims were doing (al-Manār 12, 1909: 270). Arguably, the issue that aroused the most passion in the Malay world concerned the donning of western dress, whether by students or by the reformists themselves. In 1911, the West Sumatran editor of al-Munir, Abdullah Ahmad of Padang, submitted a request for a fatwā in which he sought clarification of the statements on dress made by traditionalist ‘ulama’ in Sumatra (al-Manār, 14, 1911: 669-70). Apparently some of these ‘ulamā’ averred that people who wore western clothes should be regarded as sinful, although they did not specify what kind of dress Muslims were allowed to wear. Abdullah Ahmad therefore asked about the legality of donning the brimmed hats and neckties worn by Europeans and Turks, as significant numbers of Muslims were beginning to do.

Abdullah Ahmad’s request for a fatwā points to intensive contact with modernity in his hometown, Padang, where he not only had close contact with the elite graduates of modern schools, but also witnessed the increasing influence of Europeans upon Muslim social life (see Abdullah 1972: 181; 1971: 10-11). It was in this context that Abdullah Ahmad encountered Muslims imitating Europeans, whose lifestyle had long been associated with “the other” by the Muslim community. Abdullah Ahmad’s requests for fatwās point to other issues as well. In the same issue of al-Manār (vol. 14, 1911: 670), he asked for an opinion on hanging paintings or pictures of animals on the wall of a house, and on the legal status of making paintings. He also asked about listening to music, citing the opinion of ‘ulamā’ who argued that singing leads to the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

Such questions about relationships between Muslims and Europeans and approaches to dealing with modernity remained important for many years. For example, in 1919, Muhammad Ramzi from Sambas sent two such questions to al-Manār. The first was about the legal status of a Muslim who gives a drink to one of the ahl al-kitāb, and vice versa. The second question was about Muslims who wear western clothes, like a belt, or a brimmed “British” hat that protects them from the sun. This time, however,
the mustaftī noted that local ‘ulamā’ had different opinions: some held that the above-mentioned practices were religiously forbidden (Ar. harām), while others (the reformists) found them permissible (Ar. halāl) on the grounds that there are no direct references to such practices in either the Qurʾān or the traditions of the Prophet (al-Manār 14, 1919: 669-70).

While urbanized Southeast Asian Muslims like Bin Hashim or Abdullah Ahmad were trying to deal with the mixed blessings of western education, dress and the potential taint of association with “infidels,” they also were keenly aware of developments in other Muslim countries such as Turkey and India. For example, an anonymous mustaftī from Lokseumawe in Aceh said that he had observed that elite Muslims in Southeast Asia were sending their children to modern schools to study European languages. In so doing, he continued, they were following the example set by Turkey, where the study of Arabic was being neglected in favour of the national language. He therefore asked for information about the experiences of Turkey and about Muslims who prefer to study European languages over Arabic (al-Manār 12, 1909: 904).

In a later request, Basyuni Imran asked whether Muslims would be allowed to use a projected Malay translation of the Qurʾān based on an English edition made by the Indian scholar, Muham-mad Ali al-Hindi (see Ichwan 2001). At the time, the Malay version was being prepared by H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto, leader of the Sarekat Islam movement. According to Basyuni, most ‘ulamā’ in the Netherlands Indies (like those in Egypt) rejected the translation, notwithstanding the translator’s assertion that not a single mistake had been found in his text (al-Manār 28, 1927: 268-9). This īstifā’ indicates that developments beyond Arabia and Egypt were influencing Islam in the archipelago (Ichwan 2001: 143-61).

Related to the question of Arabic literacy, Basyuni observed that growing numbers of Muslims were graduating from modern European schools in which they received no training in Arabic. The question therefore arose as to whether it was permissible for Muslims to study Islam and the Qurʾān without having mastered Arabic. Basyuni Imran sent two questions to al-Manār. In the first he noted that non-Arab Muslims (Ar. ʿajam) do not understand Arabic, the language of their religion and of the Qurʾān, and
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that some are therefore unable to understand the meaning of the Islamic faith. This is especially true, he claimed, of Southeast Asian Muslims, who often read the Qur’ān and perform various rituals without understanding their meaning. The second question dealt with the translation of the Qur’ān. Referring to a fatwā published previously in al-Manār (28, 1927: 268-9), according to which Muslims are not allowed to translate the Qur’ān, he asked if it is permissible to translate only certain parts of the Qur’ān into Malay; this, in turn, led him to ask how the teachings of the Qur’ān are to be transmitted to Muslims who do not understand Arabic (al-Manār, 29, 1928: 661-4).

2. Religious Practices

The impact of modernity in the archipelago in the early twentieth century, as revealed in the istiftdā’s summarized above, created a growing awareness of the need to deal with unprecedented problems. This process required not only a continuous adjustment to new circumstances but also the reformulation, indeed the “reinvention” of the Islamic tradition. In the early twentieth century, new attitudes towards the nature of tradition were a major feature of Islamic intellectual discourse, and vigorous debates were conducted over the validity of long-established religious practices.

The fatwā requests in al-Manār indicate that tradition was of great concern to Malay-Indonesian Muslims. One request sent by Salim bin Ahmad Abd al-Fattah of Singapore asked about the practices of some Malays who place a stone on the grave while praying. He also mentioned the belief that praying at a gravestone wards off danger and misfortune (al-Manār 5, 1905: 665). Two years later, another istiftdā asked about miracles and the supernatural power of the Qur’ān. In this request, Sayyid Muhammad bin Hisham al-Alawi claimed that many local (and thus non-Arab) Muslims believe that the miraculous powers (Ar. karāmāt) ascribed to local saints are equivalent to the miracles (Ar. mu’jizāt) performed by the Prophet (al-Manār 10, 1907: 42-3). Another question asked about the practice of reading verses from the Qur’ān with the intention of gaining supernatural power. Apparently some Muslims were in the habit of reading Qur’ānic
Suras in front of a child with the aim of making something or someone visible on his palm or the sole of his foot; the child was then supposed to be able to communicate with the being who appeared on his hand or foot and to ask him to fulfil his desire. In the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, this practice was usually performed to determine whether or not someone had been correctly accused of wrongdoing. The *istiftā'* also mentioned the belief of many Muslims that the identity of an individual may be revealed by writing Sura 67 on an eggshell and by reading Sura 36 in front of a child. Here, the child supposedly could see the face of a thief (*al-Manār* 14, 1911: 738-9).

There had long been attacks on localized deviations from Islam in Southeast Asia, but now the authenticity of the greater tradition was also called into question. In a request submitted from Central Java, Ramzi of Surakarta asked about the authenticity of the doctrines contained in books written by the founders of the four schools of law. Are these doctrines based on the Qur'ān and the tradition of the Prophet? Or do they reflect the personal views of the founders? What about those who follow the four schools and take them as the basis of their religious practices and the sources of legal decision-making in the courts? The *mustafīf* asked for clarification of the contents of the books: What in them is based on the Qur'ān and the tradition of the Prophet and what is not? (*al-Manār* 13, 1910: 104-8).

These *istiftā*s indicate that long-established religious practices, including affiliation to a *madhhab*, were being called into question (cf. Federspiel 2001: 142-6). The formulation of the requests points to a desire to introduce a rational approach to the understanding of religious practices or rituals regarded as being out of line with the demands of the modern world. This new attitude caused people to call into question the received Islamic teachings. Indeed, Southeast Asian Muslims now began to criticize not only ritual practices, but also the Islamic arguments on the basis of which those practices were regarded as legitimate.

In 1914 Musa Abd al-Samad asked about the widespread practice of *talqīn*, a ritual in which one whispers into the ear of a corpse, immediately prior to burial, advice for use when being questioned by the angels Nakūr and Munkar. Here too Musa asked about the religious justification of the practice put forward by the 'ulamā'. The *mustafīf* asked about al-Barmawī’s commentary on the work
of Ibn al-Qāsim in which an argument is made for such a religious practice. According to the mustaftī, this argument cannot be based on a tradition of the Prophet (al-Manār 17, 1914: 514).

Questions about the authenticity of religious teachings also appear in an istifṭā’ about reciting mawlid poems in praise of the Prophet Muhammad. The mustaftī Sayyid Aqil bin Abd Allah bin Aqil al-Habshi of Palembang asked about such a practice: Is it religiously meritorious (sunna) or an innovation (bid‘a)? Who were the first people to celebrate the mawlid? And whose story should Muslims read? According to al-Habshi, the majority of ‘ulama’ hold that the tales of the Prophet compiled by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Daybā’ī is the most appropriate for recitation because the spirit of the Prophet is present at each rendition (al-Manār 17, 1914: 111; see also Kaptein 1993: 132-3). This istifṭā’ is in fact a continuation of an earlier question discussed in al-Manār, posed by a mustaftī from Johor in the Malay Peninsula who stated that a student, apparently a foreigner, had refused to follow al-Daybā’ī’s account on the grounds that it contains false stories and that its reading therefore constitutes bid‘a (al-Manār 8, 1905: 901-11).

3. On Southeast Asian Islam and its Leaders

Such attempts to reevaluate established religious practices and to criticize accepted teachings naturally constituted an attack on the authority of the established ‘ulama’.

On one level these disputes intersected with internal differences among expatriate Hadramis between noble-born sayyids and their lowly-born fellow Arabs who often had risen to prominent positions in Southeast Asian societies. Promoting the egalitarian spirit of Islam, many reformist modernizers called into question the privileges enjoyed by the sayyids (Bluhm 1997: 298-9). Three main points were the focus of the dispute: the kissing of a sayyid’s hand (Ar. taqbil), the ban on marriage between a sayyid’s daughter (Ar. sharifā) and a non-sayyid, based on the principle of parity (Ar. kafā‘ā), and the use of title sayyid itself (Mobini-Kesheh 1999: 91-2; Kaptein 2002: 194-7). In an early request sent to al-Manār (vol. 8, 1905: 580), a mustaftī mentioned a recent marriage between a sayyid’s daughter and a non-sayyid to illustrate the traditionalist sayyid monopoly on the transmission of religious beliefs.
Criticism of Southeast Asian ‘ulamâ’ is also expressed in an istifâ from a Muslim from Singapore who asked about statements made by ‘ulamâ’ that are not supported by strong religious arguments, and, consequently, about the status of Muslims who refute such statements (al-Manâr 9, 1906: 130-1; see also Noer 1980: 235-54; Roff 1994: 56-90). Such tension is clearly reflected in another letter that al-Manâr received from Singapore (al-Manâr 12, 1909: 416-7). Here the mustaftâ asked about the new way in which some preachers (Ar. sg., khaṭīb) were delivering Friday sermons, referring specifically to changes in the substantive content of sermons in his mosque following the arrival of a new young preacher. Whereas the old preacher delivered sermons on religious doctrines, the afterlife, or the need of Muslims to avoid worldly affairs, the new preacher paid far more attention to the material backwardness of Muslims vis-à-vis the West.

The mustaftâ was concerned because some worshipers who listened to the new sermons, especially members of the older generation, disagreed with their substance, and told their fellow Muslims not to attend the Friday prayer if the new preacher was going to preach. For them, the Friday sermon was an occasion for religious instruction, not a forum in which to discuss worldly affairs and politics. Meanwhile, the younger Muslims assumed that the old preacher was too deferential to Westerners because of his avoidance of contemporary or controversial topics. When criticism by the older generation grew in intensity, the mustaftâ sent a copy of one of the younger khaṭīb’s sermons to al-Manâr, together with his request, in which he wrote, dismally:

What afflicts us now are the conditions of helplessness, humiliation, and disadvantage. These are due to poor basic education, which in turn creates those [Muslims] responsible for bringing about [our] destruction. We no longer pay attention to the prayers, we commit sins deliberately, and we are negligent of what the Qur’ân commands and prohibits. … The majority of Muslims are now much closer to the condition of unbelievers, and far away from the Islamic faith. This disaster occurs in every ritual activity of religion, both in its spiritual and material aspects. In fact, although we have already realized the truth, we still ignore our religious duties. We are in crisis in almost all aspects of life. The foreigners look down on us in a cynical way. We have long lived without religious injunctions. We no longer hold firmly to the law. All these things have made us negligent, deficient, and hopeless…. If we look at the lifestyle of the Western people, we find “Islamic” values prevailing. They cooperate, unite
and support each other so that they can handle even the most difficult problems, something which cannot possibly happen in our own lives. They establish organizations primarily to build the new generation. To the contrary, we build organizations to support sin, which make us religiously weak. For western people, moral values function as a means to achieve steady advancement, while for us [our ignorance] forms a bridge to backwardness (al-Manâr 12, 1909: 416-7).

As tensions rose in Southeast Asia, printed debates between the (often anonymous) reformists and traditionalists became increasingly acrimonious. In one istîfâ' the mustaftî states that opponents of the reformists have established organizations in an attempt to repudiate their adversaries. The mustaftî describes the leaders of these organizations as defenders of bid'a and taqlîd. He claims that they engage in religious practices merely because their predecessors had done so and that, as a consequence, they are more faithful to the old 'ulamā' than they are to Qur'ān and Sunna, the Companions and the Successors. He claims that they follow their 'ulamā' uncritically and blindly attack the reformists as heretical innovators, even when the ideas of the latter are supported by strong and rational arguments (al-Manâr 12, 1909: 614-5). In a similar manner, a Southeast Asian student in Mecca, Abd al-Hafiz al-Jawi, asks al-Manâr to become more involved in fostering progress and unity for Malay-Indonesian Muslims by helping to combat submissiveness to the Dutch, superstition, and rigid conservatism (al-Manâr 12, 1912: 929-37; Bluhm 1983: 39). He also accuses the old 'ulamā' of alienating Southeast Asian people from true Islam.

Such statements not only point to a questioning of the authority that had served to legitimize Islamic teaching and practices, but also served as a vehicle for mustaftîs, and Southeast Asian Muslims in general, to reflect on their perceived backwardness vis-à-vis the West. It was this larger issue that inspired Basyuni Imran to once more request a general answer to the issue in 1930 (vol. 31, 1930: 347-9; Bluhm 1983: 40-1). In this istîfâ' he posed questions about the state of Southeast Asian Islam and of Muslims in the world in general. He wanted to know the factors that cause Muslims, especially in Southeast Asia, to remain in a condition of relative decadence and backwardness. For him, this condition contradicts the very belief that Islam as a religion is superior to other faiths, given that Qur'ān 63: 8 states: “But honour belongs to Allah and His Messenger, and to the Believers” (‘Ali 1991:
Basyuni Imran also wanted to know why the Europeans, Americans and Japanese had achieved their position of dominance over Muslims. Basyuni Imran’s questions are at the core of the Islamic intellectual discourse in the early twentieth century. They even inspired Riḍǎ’s ally, Amīr Shākiǔ Arslān (1869-1946), to write a book on the subject, appropriately entitled: “Why have Muslims fallen behind while others have progressed?” (Hourani 1983: 223-4).

Concluding Remarks

Al-Manār played a crucial role in the development of Islamic reform in the Malay-Indonesian world. The journal served as a vehicle for the transmission of Islamic reform ideas, which became the main component of the Islamic intellectual discourses in Southeast Asia in the early twentieth century. It also caused Muslims in Egypt and the Malay-Indonesian archipelago to become actively involved in an intense dialogue. This dialogue, articulated in all of the istifṭā’s examined in this essay, created conditions favorable to the growth and acceleration of the reform movement in Southeast Asia. By publishing the istifṭā’s, al-Manār created a new mode of discourse in which the mustafī and muftī—although unequal—were not necessarily pupils and teachers but fellow discussants of reform. Al-Manār introduced reform ideas in “a synthesized and easily digestible form” (Bluhm 1997: 298), and created a space that made it possible for more Malay-Indonesian Muslims to participate in the reform project. Consequently, the Islamic reform ideas promoted by al-Manār had a strong impact on Southeast Asian Muslims. Supported by the social and cultural changes described above, certain urban areas of the archipelago emerged as important bastions of the Islamic reform movement in the early twentieth century although, as the following essays will show, the parameters of reform and tradition would be contested and would create new institutional forms for the dissemination of Islamic authority.