

## **Shi‘ism in South East Asia: ‘Alid Piety and Sectarian Constructions**

*Chiara Formichi and Michael Feener, eds.  
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Although Southeast Asian Muslims are overwhelmingly Sunni, alleged historical Shi‘i influences have been a recurring feature in academic debates on the region’s Islamization, the content of local traditional literatures, and certain contemporary manifestations of religiosity. Moreover, the emergence of local Shi‘i communities from the 1950s onward has been frequently noted but rarely studied. This collection of path-breaking research seeks to help fill this gap in the literature.

Unfortunately, the book’s catchy title may initially obscure its outstanding theoretical and thematic depth, for most of the chapters are about Alid piety and devotion to the Prophet’s household as found in different Sunni traditions. By highlighting the pervasiveness of the latter in other regions of the Muslim world, the editors’ introduction represents a major reconsideration of such commonly found earlier notions as “Shi‘itic elements,” “crypto-Shi‘ism,” and “de-Shi‘itization.” Many of the papers show that it would be misleading to equate local literary and other traditions of Alid piety with Shi‘i influence. Those that deal with actual contemporary Shi‘i sectarian constructions in the region are highly suggestive of the different mechanisms behind Shi‘ism’s global expansion in the modern era, thereby contributing to a growing body of research on present-day Shi‘ism beyond the Arab-Iranian world.

The volume comprises four parts. Part 1 scrutinizes Shi‘ism’s historical foundations in Southeast Asia. Bianca Scarcia Amoretti’s article on Shi‘a devotion to the Ahl al-Bayt *inter alia* shows how the religious policies of the Ilkhanids and the Safavids facilitated Sufism’s appropriation of Shi‘i elements and the internationalization of a brand of Shi‘ism intertwined with Iranian imperial claims, respectively. Christoph Marcinkowski overviews Shi‘ism in Thailand from the Ayutthaya period (1351–1767) to the present. Besides the comparably well-known late seventeenth-century links between Siam and Safavid Iran, as detailed in the Persian travel account *Safinah-yi sulaymānī*, the author specifically highlights the strong trading, cultural, and personal connections sustained between Siamese ports and the Persianate Shi‘i sultanates of the Indian Deccan.

Part 2 is concerned with literary legacies. Ronit Ricci discusses Ali’s representations in various genres of Javanese literature: as a scribe and converter of Jewish tribes in the didactic texts of the Javanese corpus of texts built around the Arabic *Book of One Thousand Questions*; as a model warrior in epic literature and, less frequently, in manuals on warfare; and as Muhammad’s disciple and son-in-law par excellence in advice and ethical literature. In the latter role, he has an obvious counterpart in Southeast Asian literatures in the figure of Fatima, who features prominently in advice texts to women, usually framed in the form of the Prophet’s admonitions to her or in exemplary tales from her life. Wendy Mukherjee and Mulaika Hijjas scrutinize different aspects of this phenomenon. Moreover, the couple’s function as role models for all aspects of married life has, at times, extended to sexual ethics and practice. This becomes evident in Faried F. Saenong’s analysis of texts on proper sexual arts among the Bugis of Sulawesi (Indonesia). Finally, Teren Sevea introduces readers to the peculiar teachings of a *pawang* (spiritual master) based in late nineteenth-century Perak (Malaysia), as contained in an erotic and physiological manual that combines esoteric interpretations of “tantric” sexual arts with claims to Alid descent for an envisaged spiritual elite.

Part 3 is devoted to the modalities of Alid piety and their modern cultural expressions. Ismail Fajrie Alatas traces the discourses on the Ahl al-Bayt and religious authority among Indonesia’s Hadrami-descended Ba ‘Alawi *sayyids*. He shows how Islamic reformism has precipitated a discursive shift in these shaykhs’ self-representation from a more esoteric one, as heirs to a “hidden viceregency” (*al-khilāfah al-bātinah*), toward a more scripturalist one as privileged carriers of the prophetic hadith. Moreover, he discusses the local influence of Habib Umar b. Hafiz (b. 1963), the major reviver of the ‘Alawiyah in Hadramawt after Yemen’s reunification, and the challenge to the *tariqah* in In-

donesia posed by the spread of Shi‘ism within the Ba ‘Alawi community. Daniel Andrew Birchok introduces the intriguing case of another group of Southeast Asian *sayyids*, namely, the Habib Seunagan in Indonesia’s Aceh province. While laying far less emphasis on meticulously recorded genealogies, the Habib are closely linked to an extensive spiritual geography of grave sites in the Seunagan area, representing yet another form of regional Alid piety. Interestingly, they have aligned themselves with the Republic, as opposed to the province’s long-term separatist movements, in genealogical terms by claiming descent from the legendary nine saints (*wali songo*) of Java, the island commonly presented as the irreconcilable “other” in separatist discourse.

The three remaining chapters deal with regional ritual, carnivalesque, and theatrical expressions. R. Michael Feener analyzes the transformation of *tabot* ‘Ashura observances in Bengkulu (Sumatra) from a tradition brought by colonial Britain’s South Asian Sepoy soldiers, to one propagated by the Indonesian state as part of its support for local cultures under the national unity-in-diversity policy. Even though the latter necessarily treats *tabot*, as well as other practices nowadays perceived as having a rather dubious relationship to official Islam, as “just culture” (as opposed to religion), Feener argues that rituals may be invested with different meanings for their practitioners. Jan van der Putten illustrates how loss of memory and intentional forgetting has helped transform Muharram processions, introduced to Penang (Malaysia) by South Asian Muslims, into a carnivalesque *boria*, championed in the mid-nineteenth-century by troupes linked to Malay and Chinese secret societies. As a consequence of recurring violence, this event became heavily debated and condemned by various Islamic groups, and eventually tamed in the early twentieth century by being moved onstage. Edwin Wieringa analyzes the Malaysian passion play *Karbala* and its controversial author Faisal Tehrani (b. 1974). While always evasive on questions concerning his personal involvement with Shi‘ism, Tehrani’s explicit aim of bringing a neglected topic to wider attention is intriguing, for Malaysia occasionally makes headlines for discriminating against local Shi‘is. His play, a straightforward account of oppressors and oppressed, reflects Islam’s inherent spiritual quest for justice.

Part 4 is devoted to the recent emergence of Shi‘i groups in Indonesia. Umar Faruk Assegaf reveals that such communities initially adopted the labels *madhhab ahl-bayt* or *pecinta ahlul bayt* (Lovers of the Prophet’s Household), in the different milieus of Hadrami-descended Indonesians on one hand and campus circles on the other. As Shi‘ism spread, most notably in the form of religious boarding schools, universities, and socio-religious organizations with multi-million memberships, the diverse background of its leaders (i.e., tradi-

tional religious teachers or those within student circles) has caused serious internal friction. Chiara Formichi, who focuses on this friction, shows how Shi‘ism’s spread in Java has gone hand in hand with the attempt to recast aspects of Alid devotion in its heritage to forge a narrative of a locally embedded “cultural Shi‘i Islam.”

In sum, this volume represents major advances in the field and should be of vital interest to both scholars of Southeast Asian Islam as well as of Shi‘ism in general. Formichi’s and Feener’s introduction provides readers with a useful overview and critical discussion of the major debates surrounding Shi‘i influence and Alid piety in Southeast Asia. Scarcia Amoretti’s broad comparative approach across the Muslim world is well suited to readers not yet well versed in the study of Shi‘ism and Alid devotion. Ricci’s contribution highlights how Ali’s introduction into Javanese culture did not replace traditional Javanese topoi, but rather how he was incorporated into classical discursive frameworks. Saenong and Sevea’s focus on sexual arts and the erotic are shedding light on important aspects of local culture so far unduly neglected by scholarship. Both are also engaging with rare sources. Sevea likewise thankfully brings back into focus the Malay *bomor* or *pawang* (spiritual master), who were still fulfilling important social functions in the nineteenth century but historically had been relegated to the side-lines by the ulama.

Feener’s account of the comparatively recent establishment of *tabot* traditions in Bengkulu, and their even more recent transformations, suggests that in earlier times religious influence may have worked in far less simple and stringent ways than is commonly implied in scholarly discussions of, say, “Shi‘i” traces. As far as more recent developments are concerned, the book clarifies how different actors in Java and even Sumatra still use Java’s cultural heritage and Islamization myths to construct an identity and that Shi‘ism’s spread in Indonesia cannot be monocausally attributed to Iran’s Islamic revolution. Indeed, it also shows Shi‘ism – and not just Alid piety – to be a highly complex regional phenomenon.

Finally, a few minor shortcomings should be mentioned. Marcinkowski’s description of Islam at the court of Ayutthaya, even though understandably centered on Shi‘i communities, is overly one-sided. Given that King Narai (d. 1688) had to face a rebellion of resident Malay, Makassar, and Cham Muslims who were vying for influence with their Persian and South Asian Shi‘i contenders, it appears quite reductive to present Islam in Ayutthaya as an exclusively Shi‘i story. As for the two contributions on Fatima, is the over 25-year-old entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2d ed.) still relevant, given the major recent advances in the field?

The idea that the “light of Muhammad” is specifically Shi‘i or Alid, stated or at least implied several times, is likewise questionable. Indeed, besides its importance in Sufi thought, this doctrine is found in the works of such household names of Arabic Shafi‘i scholarship in Southeast Asia as Ibn Hajar al-Haythami (d. 1567), and is commonly supported by material from the Hadith collections of al-Bayhaqi (d. 944), al-Hakim al-Naysaburi (d. 1014), and other earlier Shafi‘i luminaries. Sevea, in turn, fails to notice that his source, the late-nineteenth-century *pawang Pa’ Sulong*, is mistaken in his assumption that forty-four adult males are required for a “conventional Malay [Friday prayer] congregation.” The correct number is forty. Pa’ Sulong’s apparent lack of canonical knowledge in this regard could help researchers assess his own background as well as his subsequent esoteric injunctions concerning a “superior” Islamic congregation (pp. 126-27).

Assegaf’s assertion that the “campus-based Islamic revival in the 1980s and 1990s” was characterized by “the principle of non-sectarianism” is only partly correct. There was a remarkable tendency to discuss the works and subscribe to the ideas of both contemporary Sunni (including Islamist) and Shi‘i authors in many university-based Islamic study groups and related publishing houses. However, this applies far less to certain parts of the *tarbiyah* (education) movement, a major force within the “campus Islam” of the period that was strongly oriented toward the Muslim Brotherhood.

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