

Howard Federspiel, *Sultans, Shamans & Saints: Islam and Muslims in Southeast Asia*. Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 2008. 297 pp. ISBN 978-974-9511-41-1

When, ultimately, you gaze through
the veils to how things really are,
With great wonder you will say,
again and again,
'This is truly not what we thought
it was!'

Rumi, *Mathnawi*

If it can be said that there have been any positive effects resulting from the terrible 11 September 2001 attacks on the US, and the death and destruction resulting from the 'War on Terror' which was declared following the attacks, one might point to the surge in interest in Islam and Muslim societies on the part of the general public, the media, as well as scholars outside the 'Muslim world'. While much of this interest inevitably has tended to focus on security issues and particularly the relationship between Islam and radicalism, nevertheless it is undeniable that there has also been a desire among non-Muslims to come to a better understanding of Islam and Muslim society. This demand has stimulated a growing supply of scholarship. In Southeast Asia, where Muslims make up almost half the region's population, and which includes the country with the world's largest population of Muslims (Indonesia), there has similarly been rapidly increasing attention given to the study of Islam.

Thailand is not an exception to this general trend. Scholarly interest since the 1990s in the ethnic and religious 'diversity' of Thailand's population, and the shock of the extreme violence in the southern border provinces since 2004, where separatist militants have resorted to a revolutionary 'Islamist' discourse, have combined to stimulate unprecedented interest in Islam. It is thus a welcome contribution to Southeast Asian Studies in Thailand that Silkworm Books has chosen to republish Howard Federspiel's *Sultans, Shamans & Saints: Islam and Muslims in Southeast Asia* in Thailand – the book was first published by University of Hawai'i Press in 2007. The book is part of this Thai publisher's growing list of publications on Southeast Asian Islam.

In Thailand it has to be admitted that until quite recently there has generally been far greater scholarly interest in Southeast Asia's Hindu-Buddhist tradition than in its equally significant Islamic heritage – for the obvious reason that superficially Hinduism / 'Brahmanism' and Buddhism appear to have a more organic relationship to Thailand's conception of its religious and cultural self. Yet at a time when Thailand's trade and economic interactions with neighbouring Muslim-majority countries is increasing, and its knowledge of its own Muslim minorities is rather minimal, it has to count as a 'good thing' that Thai scholars, students, and the general public are now beginning to gain a better understanding of the religion of almost half the population of the Southeast Asian region.

The author, Howard Federspiel, professor of political science at Ohio State University, is a well-known figure in the study of Islam in Southeast Asia. Like a not inconsiderable number of Western scholars in Southeast Asian Studies, Federspiel formerly worked in the US State Department. He received his PhD in Islamic Studies from Canada's McGill University, one of the Western world's foremost centres for the study of Islam – not just for Western researchers but also for a large number of influential Southeast Asian Muslim scholars. While Islam tends to be thought of as being exclusively oriented towards the Middle East, today there are multiple centres of Islamic scholarship contributing to the global discourse on Islam – the Middle East, South Asia, Europe and North America, and of course, Southeast Asia itself.

Federspiel's book is essentially a social and cultural history of the development of Islam in Southeast Asia. The book's emphasis is on the forms that Islam has taken as a lived religion in the unique environment of Southeast Asia – a multi-ethnic, multi-religious region, which had already been influenced by the great Indic religions outside the Abrahamic tradition prior to the coming of Islam. To this extent, Southeast Asian Islam has taken on distinctive forms when compared to Islam in the Middle East, particularly in the Arab lands, the place of Islam's origin. In setting out the principles that guided the writing of the book, Federspiel states that, 'This study operated on the basis of two premises:

(1) Islam is a dynamic religion that has been adapted to time and place by its followers and (2) Islam in any region can be measured for orthodoxy, not simply against the Middle East, but against the general norms of Islam throughout the world' (p. 3).

The book is divided into four chapters which correspond to successive historical periods, and a concluding thematic chapter that deals with historical institutions in Southeast Asian Islam. The four periods are: (i) The coming of Islam to Southeast Asia – from the earliest influences up to 1300 AD; (ii) the expansion of Islam in Southeast Asia and the 'emergence of a hybrid culture', which deals with the development of states under local Muslim rulers, and Islam's influence on and accommodation with existing traditions (1300–1800); (iii) the modernization of Muslim societies in Southeast Asia as a result of the challenges posed by colonialism and Western civilization, and the development of Islamic 'modernism' (1800–1945); and (iv) Islam in the era of nation-states, which covers the period in which Southeast Asian Muslim societies adjusted to a new political order dominated by indigenous elites who in general eschewed Islamic models, and the on-going accommodation of these societies with, and sometimes resistance to, a world dominated by Western political and intellectual paradigms (1945–2000).

As its title suggests, *Sultans, Shamans and Saints* is generally anthropological in tone, which will appeal to a reader-

ship that may be less interested in the specifics of Islamic law and theology – whose apparently stark and austere rulings seem out of keeping with the liberal, individualist inclination of today's scholarly tastes. The book gives particular attention to custom and ritual, ceremony, religious practice, literature, art, and other cultural forms influenced by Islam, always emphasizing the practice of accommodation and negotiation with Southeast Asia's reality of diversity. The presence of Islam and *Jawi* culture – the use of Malay written in Arabic script as a vernacular for the teaching and dissemination of Islam – is one of the things that gives a substantial part of the diverse Southeast Asia region some semblance of unity – what Feder-spiel refers to as the 'Muslim Zone'.

Sultans, Shamans and Saints: Islam and Muslims in Southeast Asia is a welcome general introduction to the field of Islam in Southeast Asia. The book does not claim to offer a great number of new insights for specialists in Islamic Studies, for whom there is an existing literature. It covers the field of Muslim society in Southeast Asia with broad brush strokes rather than specific detail. However, it does map out the field in an accessible way for those who may be newcomers to the field of Islam in Southeast Asia, while providing a useful reference work for others.

The quote which began this review, from the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic poet Rumi, is taken from the beginning of this new book on Islam and Muslims in Southeast Asia. It is possible that

scholars and students new to the study of Islam in Southeast Asia who read the book, too, will discover that, 'This is truly not what we thought it was!'

Patrick Jory
