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Michael Francis Laffan, Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The *umma* below the winds

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Michael Laffan's Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia, based on his doctoral thesis, analyzes the place of Islam in the growth of early Indonesian nationalism. Laffan argues that the evolution of Islamic identities played a seminal but previously unacknowledged role in the rise of nationalism and nationalist identities. In other words, Laffan demonstrates the role of religion in the growth of nationalism, which has been consistently underestimated.

This work is framed and best understood in terms of Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities. Anderson, an Indonesia specialist whose knowledge of the archipelago was instrumental in his thinking, sought to explain the advent of nationalism in the non-western world. Anderson defined the nation as an imagined political community, a sodality in which people feel a deep sense of fraternity and comradeship despite the fact that members will never know most of their fellow-members. Vernacular print-capitalism made it possible to "think" the nation, and the communications and transportation infrastructure within colonies facilitated the creation of emotionally plausible and politically viable unities such as Indonesia. Educational instutitions and colonial technologies such as the census, map, and museum made these unities realities. Anderson's thinking has been of great influence, but he has been criticized for making it seem as if the idea of a nation was a European concept cut from whole cloth which others simply borrowed. Laffan's important book joins the chorus of voices revising and extending our understanding of imagined communities.

Laffan demonstrates that an important site for the growth of nationalism and the development of the concept of Indonesia was in the Islamic heartlands. Students from the Dutch East Indies, those studying in Cairo in particular, and pilgrims from the archipelago making the Hajj to Mekka experienced a transformative change in their identity. They simultaneously gained a heightened sense of their identity as Muslims in a world-wide Islamic community and confirmation that they shared a local identity with others from the Indonesian-Malay world that distinguished them from other Muslims. Laffan summarizes his work as follows:

> "...the foundation of the Jawi [Indonesian] ecumene rested in part on the experience of alterity grounded against both foreign Muslims and European colonizers. This alterity was cre-

ated by the scholarly networks of the ulama and reinforced on the Hajj, where pilgrims would experience the multivalent claims of local, Jawi, and wider Islamic identity. It was these claims that were later to occupy Muslim reformists as they campaigned for a homeland that was both indigenous and genuinely Islamic."

Laffan spends considerable time and effort tracing the history of this evolution in identity. He focuses quite naturally on those individuals whose writings, government service, and role in Islamic organizations has resulted in an important body of source material. Where possible he traces connections between individuals, organizations, and publications in an effort to map the growth of a national identity influenced by their religious experiences.

Laffan's argument relies on the progressive accumulation of information over over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rather than on a close reading of a short period or single individual. The result is a substantial revision to the dominant existing account of Indonesian nationalism, in which secular, western educated leaders arising out of the native middle class in the Dutch East Indies are given almost exclusive attention. With the publication of this book such a narrative is no longer tenable.

Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia also marks an important contribution to the growing literature on Islamic networks linking the Malay-Indonesian world to the Middle East. Understanding the nature of these networks is an important antidote to the all-too-common perception that Indonesian Muslims were somehow peripheral to the Islamic heartland or, even more erroneously, not really Muslims at all. We should thank Laffan for his initial efforts and look forward to his further contributions to the fields of Islamic and Southeast Asian studies.