

SPECIAL SECTION INTRODUCTION

Introduction: Religion in Transregional Connections: Indonesia and Malaysia

Claudia Derichs¹ and Amanda tho Seeth^{2*}

¹Humboldt-University Berlin (Transregional Southeast Asian Studies), Berlin, Germany and ²School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS)/Centre for Southeast Asian Studies (CASE), Paris, France

*Corresponding author. Email: amanda.tho.seeth@gmx.de

What connects the latest fashion item from Dubai with religious tourists travelling through Israel and Indonesia's ambitions to export Islamic education abroad? This special section of TRaNS draws these themes together and proposes that a central common denominator of all three is their reflection of intensified transregional dynamics and mobilities. The articles feature a number of innovative perspectives on the cross-regional religious connectivities of Indonesia and Malaysia.¹ They mirror the increasing scholarly attention paid to the international entanglements of these two countries' religious ecospheres and, more broadly, the transregional dynamics of Southeast Asia. Moreover, they attend to the growing turn toward conceiving of social, political, economic, and religious phenomena as able to transgress geographical boundaries, thereby forming new 'regional' or spatial entities that are not necessarily defined by territorial or maritime space. These entities may consist of and/or become shaped by emotions, spiritual beliefs, and other forms and notions of belonging and connectivity (cf. Derichs 2017). They function at various scales, meaning the articles attend to local, translocal, national, transnational, regional, and transregional arenas. We subsume the scales addressed here in a rather pragmatic manner under the term transregional—bearing in mind that a region may, in the described sense, be conceptualised in diverse and encompassing ways.

Viola Thimm traces the evolution of a transregional Muslim fashion market that unfolds between Dubai and Kuala Lumpur. The Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur emerges as a fertile producer of a female dress that is tailored to suit Malaysian Muslimahs' and Muslims' tastes. By transforming the original *shari'a*-compliant Arab *abaya* into a colorful and decorated Islamic dress that caters to Malaysian consumers' fashion preferences, Malaysia not only de-centres the Arab religious hegemony over fashion. On a broader level, Thimm argues, it also changes perceptions of sacred landscaping, thus weakening the institutionalised 'sacredness' of the Arab region.

Mirjam Lücking observes an intensifying diversification of Indonesia's domestic and outbound religious travel industry. Focusing, amongst others, on guided Christian religious package tours from Indonesia to Israel and Palestine, Lücking shows how this kind of transregional tourism forces its participants to confront unsettled questions that revolve around (religious) identity, distinction, and solidarity. The ambivalent relationship Indonesia has to the Middle East accompanies the participants throughout their travels as do certain symbolic, social, and spatial boundaries, the intersections, manifestations, and renegotiations of which Lücking analyses.

Delphine Allès and Amanda tho Seeth address a relatively new phenomenon that unfolds in the Indonesian Islamic educational ecosphere. They note a shift from a formerly inward-looking to an outward-looking orientation which they call "extroversion". Against the backdrop of a historical narrative that demarcates the domestic political function of the Indonesian state Islamic higher education sector, they demonstrate how in recent years, political authorities have started to strategically export this sector beyond the nation-state. This export serves to promote Indonesia to the world as an attractive Islamic 'alternative'. In the process of developing a new public diplomacy and Islamic soft power approach,

¹The papers were first presented to the 2019 conference of the European Association for Southeast Asian Studies (EuroSEAS) held at Humboldt-University Berlin.

also private Islamic educational institutes, like *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), have become increasingly involved in public and foreign policy projects.

While examining different countries, religions, actors, objects, and transregional flows, all three papers in this special section address a subset of common issues. Most explicitly, they showcase how Indonesian and Malaysian actors challenge existing asymmetric power relationships within an established centre-periphery distinction of the religious sphere. While the Arab world/Middle East conventionally constitutes the centre and Indonesia and Malaysia the periphery of the ‘Islamic world,’ Southeast Asian Muslims beg to differ and claim a centre-stage position instead. As these actors self-consciously and creatively talk back to the alleged centre, they aim at re-shifting institutionalised flows and patterns of religious authority, import, and export, and ‘advertise’ domestically inspired ideas, perspectives, products, and places as attractive alternatives not only to the home audience but to one that is located beyond the domestic realm. ‘The domestic,’ however, remains a central reference point in transregional constellations, and it is mostly domestic concerns and traditions that nurture transregional engagement. Thimm, for instance, points out how the transregional *abaya* business is embedded in Malaysia’s ambition to fortify itself as an epicentre of a marketed and modern Islam. As Lücking observes, Indonesian transregional religious tourism is inspired by domestic pilgrimage traditions. And Allès and tho Seeth discuss how, for the purpose of political and religious legitimation and national stability, the internationalisation and extroversion of the Indonesian Islamic educational landscape also aims at targeting a domestic audience.

Dynamics of competition, distinction, and a re-focusing on indigenous religious resources and cultural identity feature strongly in all contributions. By carving out religion-connected contentions, the authors highlight the religious sphere’s emergence as the central locus where the strategic upgrading of Indonesia’s and Malaysia’s status on the global stage takes place. However, practices of competition and demarcation do not only play out on the level of inter-state or inter-region rivalry but also within Indonesian and Malaysian society itself. In both countries, it is the growing pious middle class and its economic resources that significantly facilitate the unfolding of increased transregional mobility and connectivity. In the empirical examples discussed, transregional mobility is clearly an (upper) middle-class phenomenon and one marked by self-enacted practices that serve the continuity and solidification of domestic social stratification and class distinction. Fashion items, consumer products, souvenirs, and social media entries proving one’s having been abroad (to Mecca, Dubai or elsewhere, e.g. Israel) all serve as visible markers of social distinction and benefit from a value-added from people’s attempts to demarcate their ‘place’ in society. Borrowing from Birgit Meyer’s (1997) “material religion” approach, we note that religious identities are increasingly exposed through material manifestations of piety. In this sense, there is certainly a “new materialism” at stake in Southeast Asia’s highly stratified and religiously conscious societies, a materialism that others have associated with the notions of “prosperity religion” (Hefner 2010) and “new Muslim middle classes” (Nasr 2009).

Connected to materiality, the articles also highlight that physical places and spaces are still important for capturing ‘the religious’ and its transregional diffusion. In their reflections on transregional connectivities, the authors repeatedly refer to particular sites of sacred importance, may these be ‘the Arab world’ at large (Thimm), local pilgrimage sites (Lücking), or ‘concrete’ buildings of Islamic knowledge production and authority (Allès and tho Seeth). It is, to our minds, the conflation of geographical, territorial, physical, non-physical, spiritual, and emotional features of place, space, and region that renders the narratives presented in the articles as telling examples of religion’s role in today’s landscape of pious actors’ mobilities and motilities.

Having said that, all three articles tend to merely postulate the transregional dimension and refrain from thoroughly conceptualising it. In doing so, the meaning of transregional remains blurry. Thus, for the sake of clarity, but without any claim to offer an exhaustive definition, we suggest conceiving of the transregional as a perspective: a vantage point from which to direct one’s gaze at the very near or far environment and its happenings. Transregional approaches require a context-sensitive (re-)scaling of research entities that acknowledges diverse (cross-) linkages and entanglements from local and regional to national and/or global levels. Container-based notions of place and space are, as mentioned before, addressed in a critical manner, i.e. space, place, and region are understood as notions beyond established systems of ordering and meta-geographies. However, this does not contradict or discard the concept of regions in a traditional sense. Rather, it amounts to a complementary approach that engages with issues

of scale as well as the temporal and spatial axes through which we intend to scrutinise our research phenomena and comprehension of the world.

Last but not least, we thank Azyumardi Azra for his willingness to contribute an epilogue to our special section. His historical perspective on the manifold transregional Islamic entanglements of the Indonesian-Malay archipelago reminds us of the deep continuity of transregional religious exchange—the cradle, so to speak, of new transregional phenomena—with all their ruptures, shifts, and re-directions. This historical contextualisation illustrates that transregional connectivities have always been of central relevance to the Indonesian and Malaysian religious experience. Finally, we thank Mirjam Künkler for numerous insightful comments when the paper drafts were first presented at the conference of the European Association for Southeast Asian Studies.

References

- Derichs, Claudia.** 2017. *Knowledge Production, Area Studies and Global Cooperation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hefner, Robert W.** 2010. "Religious resurgence in contemporary Asia: Southeast Asian perspectives on capitalism, the state, and the new piety." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69(4): 1031–1047.
- Meyer, Birgit.** 1997. "Christian mind and worldly matters: Religion and materiality in nineteenth-century Gold Coast." *Journal of Material Culture* 2(3): 311–337.
- Nasr, S. V. R.** 2009. *Forces of Fortune. The Rise of the New Muslim Middle Class and What It Will Mean for Our World*. New York: Simon and Schuster.