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Going Far or Staying Close? Transnational Mobility among Southeast Asian Students in Islamic Studies

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Abstract

This article discusses eleven Southeast Asian students' transnational mobility in order to obtain higher education at an Islamic university in Jakarta. A life story approach has been used and semi-structured and interviewee-oriented interviews have been carried out in the field, as well as on the internet. The focus is not only on the students' individual experiences, such as educational background, strategies in mobility, prevailing life conditions, educational objectives, and future plans, but also on why they chose international Islamic studies in Jakarta and how they evaluate the education offered there. Gender constitutes an overall empirical and analytical aspect of this article, taking into account the prevailing gender order, or norm, in the students' homelands and families, as well as gender regimes, or relations, in the educational and social environment in Jakarta. These students have mixed backgrounds regarding nationality, class, parents' education, gendered and religious norms, and previous contacts outside of their homelands. All, however, accumulate social capital in the transnational social fields or networks – physical and digital – that they take part in during their time in Jakarta and after they finalised their studies. All the students plan for further studies or a working career, and a majority of the students intend to return – or have already returned – to their home country, while a few prefer a third country. They can be defined as so-called temporarily uprooted locals, with an even spread on a scale from localism to cosmopolitanism in their individual identity formation.

KEYWORDS: Transnational mobility, Islamic education, Jakarta, gender, identity formation

Introduction

Indonesia and Malaysia are both Muslim majority countries providing an abundant supply of institutions for Islamic education at all levels. This is in stark contrast to the situation in other Southeast Asian countries with Muslim minorities where no, or only very limited, higher Islamic education is available (Hefner 2009). Anthony Welch has carried out one of the few studies on student mobility in higher Islamic education in Southeast Asia, focusing on Malaysia and Indonesia and their respective qualities that attract international

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students. Welch comes to the conclusion that Malaysia is far ahead of Indonesia in this ability due to a much higher level of development, including the educational sector, and a capacity to deliver education in international languages, in this case English and Arabic. Malaysia also has a strong ambition to become an 'education hub' solidly situated in the country's Islamic culture, especially attracting Muslim students (see Graf, this issue). In this endeavour, the International Islamic University of Malaysia, established in 1983, plays a crucial role. Indonesia has no general explicit ambition to attract international students to its institutions of higher Islamic learning combined with a much lower level of development, including education, due to a lack of funding. Additionally, they suffer from an inability to provide education in international languages. Nevertheless, there are a limited number of international students enrolled in Indonesia's vast and diverse system of higher Islamic education (Welch 2012: 73–76).[1] According to Terra Gargano, most transnational migration studies neglect individual voices in general and experiences of educational border crossing in particular. Instead, like Welch above, the focus is on country comparisons and statistics (Gargano 2011: 335).

In this present study, a life story approach will be used based upon semi-structured and interviewee-oriented interviews with Muslim Southeast Asian students enrolled at an Islamic university in Jakarta. This article discusses the students' transnational mobility in order to obtain higher Islamic education, and the overall purpose is to analyse how this experience affects their social networks and identity formation as individuals. One additional aim is to present these students' evaluation of the education offered in Jakarta and to consider Jakarta's future possibility to compete with other Islamic education offered internationally. The intention, however, is not to discuss these students as representatives of Southeast Asian Muslim minority groups in the Muslim majority country of Indonesia. Instead, the more specific aim is to analyse their individual strategies in mobility, educational objectives and future plans, as well as the impact of religion, class, and family background. It is also important to find out why they chose international Islamic studies in Jakarta and how they evaluate the education there. Repeated interviews were carried out with eleven students from five Southeast Asian countries. Empirical material from the students' narratives constitutes the major contribution of this study, while transnational social fields, or networks, in addition to transnational identity formation, provide the main analytical framework. Gender constitutes an overall empirical and analytical aspect throughout the paper. The prevailing gender order, or norm, in students'

[1]For a larger discussion of the development of higher education in Southeast Asia see, Anthony (2011) Higher education in South-East Asia: achievement and aspiration. In Colin Brock and Lorraine Pe Symaco (eds.), *Education in South-East Asia*, pp. 265–282. Oxford: Symposium Books.

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homelands and families as well as gender regimes, or relations, in the educational and social environment in Jakarta (Connell 2002) will be taken into account.[2]

I argue that all students have extended their transnational social networks and benefitted from their educational mobility in various ways, but there are significant individual variations. Concerning the process of transnational identity formation, most are to be regarded as temporary transnationals. However, a more detailed individual analysis is also carried out with the help of a transnational continuum with cosmopolitanism at one end and localism at the other (Roudometof 2005: 71–72). A general finding is that gendered norms seem to have no impact on the majority of the female students' possibilities for transnational educational mobility, while it had some impact on the conditions during and after their educational sojourn in Jakarta. Contrary to this, gendered and religious norms had severe implications for one male student's entire life situation, and to some extent affected another male and one female student.

Developments within Indonesian Islamic Education

Indonesian Islamic education has gone through more than a century-long process of reform and modernisation, which has been orchestrated by the state but also further facilitated by a number of individual scholars and thinkers. Furthermore, the political and societal climate in Indonesia during the reign of President Suharto (1967–1998) generally restrained political Islam but at the same time gave free rein to the development of Islamic thought along progressive and even liberal lines. More recently, during the democratisation process in the post-Suharto era, this development has included a gender sensitive approach to the interpretation of Islam (Azra *et al.* 2007: 173–175; Hefner 2009: 25–27; Kull 2013: 163–165).[3] The Islamic university in Jakarta, which is the focus of this study, has been continuously reformed in terms of curriculum, methodology, and course literature over the last 40 years. Overall, the university has a progressive and open-minded attitude to Islam and Islamic studies. Since the early 2000s, it has had a pioneering approach to gender issues, with mixed-gender classes and a determination to raise gender awareness among teachers and students alike. This is seen, for example, in the production of text books with a consistent gender perspective in all major subjects of Islamic studies (Kull 2012: 409–412).

As a result of this national development, the Indonesian Islamic educational system in general, and this Islamic university in Jakarta in particular, are

[2]For a further discussion of gender and education in Southeast Asia see, Brock and Pei-Tseng Hsieh (2011) Aspects of gender and education in South-East Asia. In Colin Brock and Lorraine Pe Symaco (eds), *Education in South-East Asia*, pp. 245–263. Oxford: Symposium Books.

[3]For a discussion of general educational reform in Indonesia, see Assad (2011) Education reforms in Indonesia. In Colin Brock and Lorraine Pe Symaco (eds), *Education in South-East Asia*, pp. 265–282. Oxford: Symposium Books.

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accordingly "among the most open and innovative in the world" (Azra *et al.* 2007: 174). This is not to say that Indonesian Islamic higher education is mostly of a high quality. However, Hill and Wie (2013: 167) state that the Islamic university discussed in this article is one of a few strong institutions in the country. As reported by administrative staff at this Islamic university, an additional part of its continued reform and development is the ambition to increase international exchange and co-operation in research as well as education, which includes the enrolment of international students. The number of students enrolled has grown rapidly over the last ten years and recently also includes international students. To facilitate this development, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) provides Bachelor, MA, and Ph.D. level scholarships for international students.[4] However, staff at the International Student Office (ISO) say that this process is in its initial phase and international students constitute less than 0.5 per cent of the total number of students. Students from Southeast Asia comprise the majority in this group, but we also find students from, for example, Somalia, Russia, and Turkey.[5]

Despite this generosity in providing scholarships, Indonesia is not to be regarded as a wealthy state, although it is slightly wealthier than some of the home countries of the international students in this study. Kell and Vogel assert that there is often inequity in power between wealthy host countries and less wealthy countries that send students, which leads to an increasing propensity to remain, or at least the hope to remain, in the host country (Kell and Vogel 2007: 19). However, due to the larger economic circumstances in the country, Kell and Vogel's scenario is not applicable to the Indonesian case. And, as discussed above, Welch (2012) points out that while the internationalisation of higher Islamic education in Malaysia includes aspects of commodification (see also Graf, this issue), the situation in Indonesia, which itself is financing international students, is rather to be seen as commodification in reverse. Therefore, hypothetically, the generous grants of scholarships could be a strong enough incentive for students to extend the length of their studies in Jakarta. In addition, there are other circumstances that can further attract international students, for example, the progressive academic environment including the gender sensitive approach, and the educational quality.

Method and Material

This study uses a 'life story method' (Behar 1990) where the reflective and creative elements of the narrative process are encouraged through the mix of repeated live interviews and conversations on the internet. Two periods of fieldwork were carried out at an Islamic university in Jakarta and continuous contact and

[4]Interview with staff at the Rector's Office, Jakarta, October 2010.
[5]Interview with staff at the International Student Office, Jakarta, November 2012.

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follow-up inquiries have been maintained with most students by means of Facebook. A mix of English and Indonesian was used during the semi-structured interviews and informal conversations, and occasionally a fellow student was used as interpreter – which in some cases may have slightly affected the interviewees' comments. In addition, interviews have been carried out with administrative staff at the university.

A manual for interview questions was prepared beforehand, focusing on experiences, strategies, and plans in the past, present, and future of these Southeast Asian students' lives. For example, the notion of 'homeland' and 'host country' respectively; aspects of class, gender, religion, and economy and their implication for choices made; and personal experiences of an academic, social, and religious kind. Moreover, there were inquiries about their personal future plans and the expectations from their family. One key question asked of the students was why they had chosen to study in Jakarta. Some questions related to gender had to be approached from different angles in order to reach as comprehensive an understanding as possible (Morrisey 1998: 110–111) – a method that proved very fruitful.

In the field, however, the interview manual was used as a rough guide while also taking the individual interviewee and the larger context into account; and using a friendly conversational style of interviewing, which is "interviewee-oriented" rather than "instrument-oriented" (Reinharz cited in Fraser 2004: 185). This style includes a provision of the time the interviewee needs to tell her/his story without being rushed, and willingness from the researcher to also answer questions from the interviewed person. Altogether, the ambition is to facilitate a climate of trust (Fraser 2004: 184). This is in line with a long development within the method of life history and life story research where the importance of interaction between 'researcher' and the 'subject'" has been emphasised (Frank 1979: 83–88); and the "interactive process of interviewer and narrator, of interviewer and content" has been stressed (Yow 2006: 67). The major themes analysed in this article are therefore mainly the result of my inquiry, but partly also the result of a subjective selection or emphasis by the interviewees.

The material consists of repeated interviews and follow-up contact over a period of three years, 2011–2013[6], with eleven students, eight women and three men in their twenties, from Singapore, Malaysia, East Timor, the Philippines, and Thailand. One student was attending a Master's programme, but the majority of students were undergraduates. All interviewees were studying Islamic studies, but with a variety of specialisations. During the course of the fieldwork, five students graduated, of whom two pursued further studies in a third country (both have now graduated and are back in their home country); several students have started to work in positions related to their field of studies, and one student has married and had a baby. Interviews have resulted

[6]In some cases (Azhar, Aisyah, and Winy) contact has continued until 2015.

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in empirical material that by its nature includes information of the past, present, and future, and where a factual and narrative development can be observed over time. Students will be presented when mentioned for the first time and fictitious names are used. However, anonymity is crucial and information will be used with caution. Full life stories are not presented due to the limitation of space; instead major themes have been chosen in addition to two longer stories.

Implications of Transnationalism

Transnational social fields, or networks, provide a fundamental heuristic tool in the analysis of these life stories, where a 'social field' is defined as "a set of multiple inter-locking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed" (Lewitt and Schiller 2004: 1009). This definition can also include transnational interactions through digital networks (Roudometof 2005: 68). In line with the life story approach, the focus here is on the students' individual social networks that not only concurs with Gargano's emphasis on the importance of not amalgamating international students into a homogenous group, but also deepens the understanding of their individual experiences, as well as their negotiations of ideas and relationships (Gargano 2011: 332). In addition, transnational social fields provide the conceptual space to study intersectional power hierarchies based on, for example, gender and class (Gargano 2011: 337), themes that in addition to religion and language are prevalent in this study. Related to the idea of a transnational social field is also the concept of social capital, defined by Robert Putnam as "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 1995: 2). The students in Jakarta have more or less social capital from the home country depending on a number of variables elaborated on in this study, and all accumulate more capital through their transnational experience.

Roudometof states that the transnational experience consists of several layers including the construction of more vague transnational social spaces as well as the creation of clearly defined transnational communities. He also discusses the somewhat complicated relationship between transnationalism and cosmopolitanism and states that "the creation of transnational social spaces leads to a bifurcation in attitudes. This bifurcation is expressed in terms of a continuum with cosmopolitanism at the one end and localism on the other end" (Roudometof 2005: 65). Roudometof's idea of a bifurcation, or a split, is developed further by Tarrow through the concept of "rooted cosmopolitans", defined as "individuals whose primary ties are domestic but who are part of the complex international society" (Tarrow 2005: 42). Complementary to this is Weiss and Ford's study of Southeast Asian students in Australia, which introduces the concept of "temporarily uprooted locals". This study implies that students who do develop a

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global consciousness and are able to take an outsider's perspective of their home country do not necessarily develop any strong sense of cosmopolitan agency and identity (Weiss and Ford 2011: 243). The students do, as Aihwa Ong puts in (1999: 6) "accumulate capital and social prestige in the global arena", but many regard their stay abroad as limited in time and often their patriotic attachment is strengthened and refined rather than weakened and attenuated (Weiss and Ford 2011: 243). All of the Southeast Asian students in Jakarta can be defined as 'temporary transnationals' – but their respective identity formation covers the whole scale from localism to cosmopolitanism.

Thematised Findings from the Life Stories

Class, Parents' Education, Religion, and Gender

This group of eleven students is diverse on the basis of class and the educational background of their parents. Six students come from lower to upper middle-class families where their parents work as civil servants, teachers, etc. Four students originate from a lower-class family of farmers or manual workers. One student, Dini, comes from an East Timorese elite family. Only one of the three Philippine students comes from a family where both parents are highly educated, while an additional two East Timorese fathers and one Philippine mother have a university education. Three mothers have no or only very limited education, while the rest have secondary school or lower. In addition, two fathers from the Philippines and Thailand as well as a Philippine grandfather are Islamic scholars and practising teachers or imam. Sharifah, a 23-year-old Thai student, said that her family has founded a *pesantren* or Islamic boarding school. In all, less than 50 per cent of the parents can be described as strictly practising Muslims. However, all students, despite various class affiliations, differing educational backgrounds of their parents, and religious practices in the family, expressed full support from their families in their ambition to move abroad to pursue a university education in Islamic Studies.

Since aspects of class, parents' educational backgrounds, and religion did not negatively affect these students and their ability to study abroad, gender could at least be expected to be a differentiating factor among female and male students' educational abilities. Joseph, a 26-year-old student from East Timor, with strictly practising religious parents, revealed that "I and my brothers had the full support to go abroad to study, but our sister had to enrol in a domestic university".[7] Azhar, 23, as the eldest son in a Singaporean family, was sent abroad for an Islamic education as early as the age of nine. In all the other families, sisters and brothers were equally encouraged to engage in studies at home and internationally. For example, Deny has seven sisters but no brothers and all the children are

[7]Interview Jakarta, November 2012.

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equally encouraged to study despite, or maybe because of, the parents being poor farmers with low levels of education. He said: "I feel no special pressure being the only son in my family."[8] Winy, 28, comes from a middle-class Philippine family with nine siblings, four girls and five boys, and she is child number four and the eldest sister. Her three elder brothers have no university education and work in low-skilled occupations. Both her parents are university graduates, in addition to three maternal aunts. Her mother, but not her father, is working in the occupation of her university degree. The parents are divorced and Winy stated that "both my mother and father encourage, or force, me to pursue my studies in order to support my large family economically"[9] which is in accordance with the Philippine custom. Malaysian Amina, 24, has nine siblings, seven brothers and two sisters, and eight of them already have or aim at obtaining a higher Islamic education, while one brother has a secular education. Fatima, 25, is one of five siblings, three boys and two girls, in a Singaporean lower-middle-class family where the parents have no higher education. She is the only sibling with a university education and the only one with any Islamic education. Fatima said: "It is my own choice but my parents support me strongly."[10] To sum up, gender had almost no impact on the possibility for transnational educational mobility among the students in my material, apart from Winy and Azhar as the oldest daughter and son respectively, who were more or less forced to undertake international education by their parents.

Many students have siblings or other relatives of both genders that are presently or have been studying abroad, mainly in the Middle East and Indonesia (Jakarta and Malang), but also in the United Kingdom and Cuba. Dini has half of her extended family in Jakarta and said "I see Jakarta as my second home"[11], thereby blurring the line between homeland and host country. Several students benefited from these transnational social networks, and the adherent social capital, before and during their educational sojourn in Jakarta, especially Dini from a highly mobile family, who has a widespread transnational social network as well as strong social capital.

Future Plans: Studies, Working Career and Marriage

All the students aim for further studies and/or a working career. They also expressed a wish to marry but most prioritised studies and an initial career before marriage, women and men alike. However, over time their narratives on this topic changed, which is not surprising since they are all young and living under changing circumstances in their respective transnational social fields. Marriage is also a sensitive issue, not least due to Islamic modesty

[8]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.
[9]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.
[10]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.
[11]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.

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among the women but also the men, and it has taken time to gain enough confidence to discuss this topic together.

The eight women in this study all declared an ambition to continue working after marriage and childbirth – they clearly took it for granted – but at the same time revealed a hesitation about the possibility to combine full-time work with the raising of children. Fatima, her Singaporean friend Aisyah, 27, and Malaysian Mona, 24, presented part-time work as a solution to this situation while the children are still small. Although 50 per cent of the students' mothers are employed in various occupations and 50 per cent are housewives, it is not a future goal for any of the young women in the study to become a full-time housewife. Therefore, they do not intend to get a good education in order to become an attractive marriage partner and housewife, which according to Bano is otherwise still common in, for example, Pakistan and other Asian countries (Bano 2010: 14, 19). However, none of the women demanded or expected their husbands to take an equal or larger responsibility for childcare, at least not for young children.

Two students, Winy and Joseph, were already married or in a long-term relationship. After some time in Jakarta, Winy became acquainted with an Indonesian Muslim man through the internet. Initially her father refused to approve of their marriage due to her fiancé being a foreigner. However, she said with a smile, "finally I convinced him with Islamic arguments".[12] Winy soon got pregnant and gave birth to a daughter. She would have preferred to finish her studies before becoming pregnant but her relatives, and especially her mother, demanded grandchildren. Her studies were delayed because of pregnancy and raising her child, but are now completed. Her marriage to an Indonesian man has also raised complications concerning future residency, something that worries her because of economic expectations from her parents after graduation. Winy stated: "Neither Indonesia, nor my home country, but a third country would be the best option."[13] Her marriage is a result of her transnational mobility in education, which is an experience that has enriched but also complicated her life. Winy has throughout her stay in Indonesia felt very homesick and she is in daily contact with her family in the home country through digital networks. Her personal social field is therefore highly transnational and not confined to homeland or host country, which becomes increasingly clear through her choice of a third country for her future residency. She could therefore be defined as a 'rooted cosmopolitan', although with a very strong emotional connection to her home country. As mentioned before, gendered and religious norms did affect Winy's possibility, or rather necessity, to study abroad and have also increasingly affected her life before and after marriage.

Joseph has a long-term girlfriend back in his home country. He said that: "After graduation I plan to go back home, work one year, marry, and apply for another

[12]Interview Jakarta, November 2012.
[13]Interview Jakarta, November 2012.

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scholarship".[14] It is, however, obvious that his transnational experience has complicated his life as well, but in a different way from Winy. Joseph has gained not only educational experience but also a general life experience of an international character – something that might affect his relationship with his girlfriend since their respective future dreams may be very different. Yet, he assumed that "if we get married she will accept my wishes and follow me".[15] He himself has until now followed, or rather obeyed, his strongly religious father's advice of going to Indonesia as a Muslim majority country in the close vicinity and not to a preferred, more distant, non-Muslim country. In this family both Islamic values and patriarchal structures are central to the parental generation. Gendered norms are also strong in the younger generation, while the impact of religious values are less strong, this is despite Joseph's present educational experience at an Islamic university.

Why Study Abroad?

Students from most countries in Southeast Asia have to go abroad for higher Islamic studies, while Malaysians and Indonesians have educational opportunities at home. Nevertheless, most interviewees spoke of a curiosity to experience other cultures in the host country and among fellow students as the foremost inspiration for undertaking studies abroad, namely, the aim of a transnational experience. This is of course a common dream among many young persons all over the world; and education, including Islamic education, is an increasingly feasible way to realise that dream. At the same time, Malaysian Amina mentioned the close geographic proximity, and similarity of language and culture as a reason to go to Jakarta – going abroad but still experiencing a familiar environment. Deny, Dini, Joseph, and Winy had been recommended to enrol at the Islamic university in Jakarta by friends, siblings, or other relatives with on-going or previous studies at this university. Due to the influence of these social networks, many students had Indonesia/Jakarta as their first choice, while some had preferred another country (Egypt, Syria, Malaysia, the United Kingdom, and Brazil) but chose Jakarta for various reasons. The importance of Arabic in Islamic studies made, for example, Mona and Aisyah prefer studies in the Middle East. To go abroad for Islamic studies in the Middle East, and not least Yemen, has a long tradition among Muslims in Southeast Asia (Abaza 2007: 424–425).

Seven out of the eleven interviewed students received scholarships from the Indonesian MORA – three Singaporeans, and two from East Timor and the Philippines respectively. This was therefore a crucial reason for their choice to study in Jakarta. It could have been expected that holders of scholarships should have special conditions to fulfil towards the Indonesian state after graduation. This is however not the case and according to the students the only condition is to finish their studies within the appointed time.

[14]Interview Jakarta, November 2012.
[15]Interview Jakarta, November 2012.

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Social Networking

During their stay in Jakarta most international students are building, or extending, their transnational social networks for the future. In Jakarta they mainly do this by means of direct contacts and all students, to a greater or lesser extent, have large and highly international (not only Southeast Asian) social networks where they arrange study groups, practise sports, cook, or just socialise. These networks, which fluctuate over time, are gender mixed; and here international students make contacts outside of faculty, language, and class borders. Pahl argues for the importance of new networks of friendship that often need to extend over barriers of class and that can temporarily replace the close circle of family and kin (Pahl 1998: 113). These groups that form and reform among international students and local Indonesian students in Jakarta constitute a looser form of friendship, phrased by Pahl as "a particular style of relationship based on the recognition of and respect for differences and heterogeneity among friends" (Pahl 1998: 113). The university's International Student Office also provides social activities in Jakarta as well as journeys to other cities on Java, initiatives that are highly appreciated by the students who thereby come together in even larger and more diverse groups than during their own arrangements. Together these various forms of activities can, in line with Putnam's reasoning, create "dense networks of interaction … developing the 'I' into the 'we'" (Putnam 1995: 2) and according to the students they are creating a stronger feeling of being a part of an international, or transnational, community. Deny said: "I love to have friends from many countries, to exchange stories and experiences, one of the best things here in Jakarta."[16] Lewitt and Glick Schiller (2012) implicate an unavoidably unequal set of power hierarchies in transnational social networks. In the case of international students in Jakarta, I would rather argue in line with Pahl (1995) that these networks often extend not only over barriers of class, nationality, and language, but also modify religiously and socially stipulated gender roles. I therefore concur with Gargano who also states that studying these transnational fields can enhance our understanding of identity negotiations among international students (Gargano 2011: 337). Moreover, students build and maintain old and new networks through the help of text messages and social media. Several of them are very active internet users and all are diligent users of mobile phones. The rapid development of digital networks has increasingly blurred the line between physical spaces within short and long distances alike.

Students' Evaluation of the Education and their Social Field in Jakarta

Most of the students highly appreciated the quality of their studies in Jakarta, although some reported discontent, mainly related to Bahasa Indonesia (BI), or Indonesian, as the main language of instruction. The university does not offer special classes for international students, instead they take part in the regular

[16]Interview Jakarta, November 2012.

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courses and no initial language training is provided. Jennah, a 22-year-old student from the Philippines, revealed that she had serious problems with the language of instruction and course books, especially during her first semester. Winy and Deny agreed with Jennah, but Deny also said that he found it problematic to deal with administrative issues in BI, while Fatima and Aisyah stated that they had expected much more teaching in Arabic and not mainly in BI. This limitation of using BI as the main language is a weakness in this university's ability to attract international students, especially compared to education offered in Malaysia and the Middle East.

The responses to the mixed-gender classes were divided. Winy, Jennah, Dini, Amina, and Joseph prefer mixed-gender teaching because they are used to that from their previous educational experiences. Sharifah, Mona, Fatima, Aisyah, Azhar, and Deny prefer gender-segregated classes. The men stated they have better concentration if they study in same-sex classes, and the women mentioned shyness and religious modesty. However, three of the women who preferred gender-segregated teaching revealed that the new experience of gender mixing, in class as well as during spare time, has encouraged and strengthened them personally. Sharifah, who was still very hesitant, said: "It has at least given me an experience that I have never had before"[17], while Mona stated: "I don't like it but I think it has been important practice for my future graduate studies and working career."[18] Therefore, the mixed-gender education can be seen as providing important social capital for some of the students, as well as influencing their individual identity negotiations, something that had not been possible without their transnational educational experience and the subsequent increased social network. This said though, none of the students regarded as something positive the university's ambition to pursue a thorough gender perspective in all aspects of the education offered.

All students expressed a strong satisfaction with the reformed, problem-based pedagogy and the many discussions in class. Teachers were overall regarded as highly qualified, friendly, and engaged. For example, Fatima and her best friend Aisyah, who were both top students in their class, revealed that they have been continuously encouraged. They said: "The teachers even presented us as good examples or role models for our classmates."[19] The library also received a very positive evaluation, while several students with experience from Malaysia regarded the technical equipment as less satisfactory. However, contrary to my own expectation, and as a response to my explicit question, only a few students expressed appreciation towards the prevailing progressive and open-minded approach to Islamic studies at the university in Jakarta, in fact most expressed hesitation. This reaction is also contradictory to their enthusiastic account of

[17]Interview Jakarta, November 2012.
[18]Interview Jakarta, November 2012.
[19]Informal discussion Jakarta, November 2011.

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their educational experience in Jakarta and seems to relate to the use of words such as 'progressive' and 'liberal' in my direct question. One interpretation could be that the students regard it as possible to be positive in practice but not in theory since these words are sensitive in many Muslim environments, including most Southeast Asian countries. It is therefore a matter of wording rather than content. The Malaysian students also mentioned Indonesia's bad reputation as an 'Islam liberal' country in their homeland – a reputation that had been at least slightly modified during their stay in Jakarta. Malaysians and Singaporeans also expressed an ambiguous feeling of appreciation and uneasiness towards the freedom of thought and expression that prevails in Indonesia concerning Islamic issues as well as politics, and especially the regular demonstrations staged in Jakarta. Deny said: "If demonstrations are proper they are OK, but if violent not OK."[20] In addition, the female students from Singapore and Malaysia expressed hesitation towards the less restricted social intercourse between men and women in Indonesia. However, Fatima revealed: "In class our friends know how we feel and respect it."[21] Ideas and practices that are taken for granted, or officially communicated, in the home country are exchanged, questioned and to some extent transformed in the social field that the students encountered in Jakarta and Indonesia.

Transnational Identity Formation

Despite the mainly positive evaluation of their educational experiences in Jakarta and the generous provision of scholarships provided by the Indonesian state, only one student, Aisyah, expressed an interest in continuing to postgraduate studies in Jakarta. None of the students was interested in pursuing a career in Indonesia after graduation. Quite contrary to this, most students declared their decision, or desire, to return home for further studies or a working career. Fatima said that "of course" she plans to return to Singapore after finalising her studies in Jakarta; a plan that has been realised. Amina stated that: "I want to return home and work or study in Malaysia, but preferably not in my hometown."[22] Her shy and cautious friend Mona agreed. Amina even revealed that she chose studies in Jakarta "because of the many similarities between Malaysia and Indonesia".[23] Their transnational experience has provided Amina and Mona with the courage to explore new areas within their country of origin, but it has not spurred ambitions of further transnational experiences. Sharifah also wants to return home for final studies and work, but for different reasons. She stated that: "After graduation in Jakarta I and my older sister who studies in Egypt are expected to return home to teach and take a part in the further development of our

[20]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.
[21]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.
[22]Interview Jakarta, November 2012.
[23]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.

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family's *pesantren*"[24], which is something Sharifah is enthusiastically looking forward to. Deny also wants to return home for further studies – an MA and maybe a Ph.D. He stated: "After finishing my studies my biggest dream is to found an Islamic school in my home village."[25] This young man is highly devoted to his village and its future development, and he emphasised that he "has been increasingly encouraged by the example of Sharifah and her family".[26] These students regard their stay abroad as limited in time and can be defined as 'temporarily uprooted locals'.

Yet, students like Dini and Joseph planned for, or dreamed of, future studies in a third country, mainly outside Southeast Asia, before finally returning home. These two East Timorese students were also open to studies outside of the Islamic sciences. Dini, a very young woman, noted: "I want to continue studying in Portugal before returning home to support the development of my country"[27], while Joseph said: "Next time I want to go to a more international and distant country, hopefully Brazil."[28] Among these students the transnational identity is, or has become, stronger, and here it seems appropriate to use the concept of 'rooted cosmopolitans'. These individuals' primary bond is still local but they have increasingly become a part of the international community.

Two in-Depth Life Stories

Finally, I want to present extended life stories of two students, one female and one male, Aisyah and Azhar, both from Singapore, to provide increased depth to this study. These narratives contain each of the aspects or themes pertinent to this study. However, Azhar is also especially interesting because he has a long educational transnational experience, for more than half of his life, while Aisyah is educationally the most highly motivated of all interviewed students, because she hails, to use her own words, from a "failed family".

Aisyah's family consists of six children, three of each sex, and Aisyah is child number three and the eldest daughter. Her parents have a low level of education and have always worked very hard to provide economically for the children. They are divorced and have, according to Aisyah, "not been able to provide much emotional support or encouragement to study".[29] Instead, she said: "Two of my mother's sisters are my main supporters, in studies and life in general." Aisyah has the highest education in her nuclear and extended family and is the only one who has studied Islamic education. She stressed: "I want to show that I

[24]Interview Jakarta, November 2012.
[25]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.
[26]Interview Jakarta, November 2012.
[27]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.
[28]Interview Jakarta, November 2012.
[29]All quotations from Aisyah in this section come from interviews in Jakarta, November 2011.

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can succeed, despite being from a divorced family." In addition, she has a passionate engagement in moral issues based on Islamic values regarding the family as well as society. She also emphasised the importance of "not becoming rebellious" but continuing to respect one's parents and other older family members. She said: "Many young people in Singapore today use drugs, practise free sex and so on, because of media, internet, and parents' lack of support and love." This is a "terrible development", Aisyah exclaimed, and therefore she struggles to prove that she can "succeed in education, career, and future family life, and even contribute to society at large".

Aisyah does not experience pressure from her parents to support the family economically, but said that: "I want to provide for my younger siblings in the future." She herself financed her initial studies in Singapore through part-time work. After some time Aisyah received scholarships from the Indonesian MORA and went to Jakarta. However, she stated that: "I would have preferred Egypt since I want to be able to speak Arabic fluently." Still, she was very successful in Jakarta and has been strongly encouraged by teachers throughout her three years of study there. After graduation Aisyah pursued one year of Arabic studies in Yemen, which thereby fulfilled another of her goals. She is now back in her home country and is working as a teacher in an Islamic school during weekdays, in addition to teaching in a mosque during weekends. Her next educational goal is "to take a Masters programme in psychology and thereafter combine working as a religious teacher with family counselling". She will apply for a course in Indonesia again "since it is easier to get scholarships there". If she is granted another scholarship I am convinced that she can achieve her larger goals expressed above.

There is a clear narrative development in Aisyah's life story and she herself is driving this change, although she has been supported economically, academically, and personally throughout the process. Aisyah is a typical representative of a so-called survivor child and a pioneer among her relatives, and being a woman has not hindered her in this development. She has through her educational mobility found role models among teachers and others. She explicitly said that she wanted to be "a highly educated Islamic teacher and researcher who works part time, and at the same time is strongly involved with husband and children", which is everything that her parents are not. Aisyah also wants to build her own family "the Islamic way" since it is "more stable".

Through her transnational experiences Aisyah has not only gained academic skills and considerable social capital as a result of her increased social network in Jakarta and Yemen respectively, she has also become a role model among her classmates in Jakarta and, we can at least expect, among her family members at home. She was very active in social networks while in Jakarta, but according to my observations not very active in digital media, probably because of her negative view of the internet in general. Aisyah has to be defined as a 'rooted cosmopolitan' since she is fully convinced that she wants to live and work permanently in

her home country. Yet, she would without hesitation go abroad again to study if it promotes her final goals. Her gender neither exerts an influence on the development of her life in general nor on her transnational educational experiences, whereas her 'failed family' background does. Religious norms, especially Islam, have acted as a guideline for her personal life, and have influenced her past, present and future decisions. Aisyah's view of Islamic values seems not to have been negotiated by her experiences in Jakarta, which is an exception compared to most other students.

Azhar is the eldest of five siblings, four boys and one girl. He described his family as "working class but not poor".[30] His father has been very clear that he expects Azhar to support the family economically in the future, and he accordingly said: "You are my eldest son, I count on you."[31] Azhar, who is highly devoted to his studies, regards this as positive pressure. He is an experienced international student and has been studying abroad since he was nine. He told me that he spent seven years at an Indonesian Islamic boarding school ("part of this time together with my younger brother"[32]), two years in Yemen ("my best educational experience ever"[33]), two years in Malaysia, and a further one-and-a-half years in Indonesia. Thereafter his father decided that the whole family should migrate to Yemen. They leased out their house, left the home country and all family members enrolled in Arabic and Islamic studies in Yemen, planning to stay for a period of five years. Azhar, who had to suspend his Bachelor studies, was not happy about this and said: "I had to sacrifice my own future for supporting the rest of the family in their new living environment."[34] He enrolled in a one-year-long course, enjoyed the studies and then planned to go back home to work.

Azhar finished the course, went back to Singapore and got a job as a religious teacher – just as he planned. However, since he is the oldest sibling and therefore the one who, in accordance with religious tradition, should marry first. His parents also demanded that he marry as soon as possible. Azhar, who had "no girlfriend and no personal interest in getting married"[35], was concerned and confused and tried to convince his parents that "he should still be able to concentrate on studying and working for some more years".[36] Nevertheless, the latest news from Azhar is that he is now married and wants "to start a new life, all new and fresh after marriage".[37]

This young man's extensive transnational experiences seem to be foremost for the benefit of the family, and not for his own sake. Although Azhar himself

[30]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.
[31]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.
[32]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.
[33]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.
[34]Conversation on Facebook, 20 June 2013.
[35]Conversation on Facebook, 2 July 2014.
[36]Conversation on Facebook, 2 July 2014.
[37]Conversation on Facebook, 25 June 2015.

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gains a solid transnational experience he also somewhat loses his roots. This is visible in the fact that Azhar, similar to his very good friend Deny, also nurtures a personal dream of establishing an Islamic school. However, Azhar's dream is different in that he has no ideal fixed place for the foundation of his school, nor a specific target group: "It can be anywhere"[38], he said, and he "wants to teach everyone and people of all ages".[39] What is important though is the content, which, according to Azhar, would be "a mix of the best from all my different educational experiences" – thus a very concrete outcome stemming from his transnational mobility as a student.

As in the case of Aisyah, there is a clear narrative development in Azhar's life story, but what is completely different though is that it is the father who drives or even forces this change, and not Azhar. Religious values, as well as patriarchal structures, are strong in this case and gender norms certainly play a vital role in the on-going development. He is also a 'rooted cosmopolitan' but the one with most emphasis on the cosmopolitan identity among the students in this group. Azhar was very active in the students' social networks in Jakarta and he is extremely active in digital networks wherever he is located in the physical sense. Apart from the common benefits gained from these networks, they also offer Azhar stability and provide a substitute for the family in his individual and ever-changing transnational field.

Summary

Through a life story approach this article discusses eleven Southeast Asian students' experiences of transnational mobility, identity negotiation, and educational quality while enrolled at an Islamic university in Jakarta. Repeated semi-structured and interviewee-oriented interviews were carried out in Jakarta, as well as follow-up sessions on the internet. An apparent narrative development has been observed in several stories – especially Aisyah's, Azhar's and Winy's.

The transnational educational experience has been positive on the level of personal life experience for a majority of the students, but two students' life situations have become more complicated because of changed circumstances within the family – Winy's marriage to an Indonesian man and Joseph's absence from his long-term girlfriend back home. Through their educational mobility the students have also established or extended individual transnational social fields or networks, including digital networks, which provide possibilities for future exchange and co-operation. These 'dense networks of interaction' have bridged intersectional power hierarchies based on class, gender, language, and nationality, often leading to modification of stipulated religious, social and gendered norms, thereby stimulating individual identity formation and the

[38]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.
[39]Interview Jakarta, November 2011.

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accumulation of social capital among the students. The students had more or less social capital from the home country depending on class, educational background, personal contacts, economic circumstances, familiar norms or absence of norms, and role models or absence of the same. During their transnational educational sojourns in Jakarta and subsequent places of study they accumulated new and modified old capital – mainly ideas, norms, role models, and not least social fields or networks. For example, Mona and Sharifah acquired new experiences and strengths through mixed-gender education and social intercourse. Malaysian and Singaporean students encountered liberal Islamic ideas and freedom of speech, which led to a questioning and modification of norms and stereotypes from their home countries. Several students found role models, while Aisyah and Fatima also became role models themselves. Joseph and Azhar were very active in social and digital networks, and their respective transnational spaces increased rapidly, while Deny, who explicitly appreciated the exchange of stories and experiences with other students, received further inspiration to carry out his future dream to start an Islamic school in his home village.

After graduation in Jakarta, most students want to return home for continued studies or a working career; although some plan for further studies in a third country outside of Southeast Asia, and two have already continued and completed their studies in Yemen. The physical experience of transnational identity among the majority of students is temporary, although the established transnational social fields and networks can be expected to last, and the digital networks can continue to thrive and even grow independent of physical location. If we, however, define the identity of these students in more detail, using Roudometof's transnational continuum with cosmopolitanism at the one end and localism at the other end (2009), we find most students in the middle of the continuum and can, in line with Weiss and Ford (2012), define them as 'temporarily uprooted locals'. Yet, Amina, Mona, and Fatima should be placed very close to the local side of the continuum. They are individuals who have experienced and gained capital from the 'global' but still strongly prefer the 'local', and their respective transnational social spaces are very vague. Azhar, Dini, Aisyah, and Joseph respectively should be placed relatively close to the opposite cosmopolitan side. They could therefore be defined as 'rooted cosmopolitans', "as individuals whose primary ties are domestic but who are part of the complex international society" (Tarrow 2005: 42). Dini originates from a cosmopolitan family and Azhar, due to his constantly changing transnational field, is already part of a more clearly defined transnational community. Winy's identity is the most complicated to define since she is strongly drawn towards both ends of Roudometof's transnational continuum.

Most of the students interviewed expressed a great interest in going abroad to explore other cultures, preferably outside of Southeast Asia; and education is one possible way, or even the only way, of doing that. Still, a majority of the students chose to study in Indonesia, primarily due to the generous provision of

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scholarships from the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, and partly also because of this Islamic university's reputation as a good educational institution, although not because of its pioneering approach to gender issues. Yet, after experiencing education at the university, all students highly appreciated the modern methodology in teaching and learning, as well as the engagement and quality of the teachers. Despite this lack of interest in gender issues, most students expressed a reasonably developed idea and experience of gender equality with regards to the possibility to study abroad, as well as to a future career in combination with marriage and having a family. This attitude has grown from long-term support from their families and is not influenced by class belonging, educational background, or the religious practices of their parents' generation. However, two male students are clearly affected by gendered and religious norms, although this has not hindered their educational mobility. Rather, Joseph has been limited in his choice of destination, while Azhar has been forced not only to undertake transnational religious education for a major part of his life, but also to provide economically for the family and to obey his parents' demands to marry because he is their eldest son. Winy, as the eldest daughter in a Philippine family, has also been forced to study abroad and is expected to economically support her extended family after graduation.

Finally, Bahasa Indonesia (BI) as the major language of instruction was problematic for several students (Deny, Winy and Jennah), and only Amina regarded it as explicitly positive due to the similarity to her own language – other students would have preferred Arabic instead of BI. In addition, only a minority of the students favoured the mixed-gender classes, and none brought up gender sensitive teaching of Islamic subjects as a positive experience. The students' relatively scarce knowledge of the university's educational qualities before coming to Jakarta and their lack of interest in its gender pioneering approach are contrary to my expectation. In addition, due to the centrality of BI in international education we cannot foresee a large-scale recruitment of international students to this Islamic university in Jakarta. One indication for this is that, despite the generous provision of scholarships from the Indonesian government, only Aisyah expressed an interest in pursuing postgraduate studies in Jakarta, thus strengthening the conclusion of Welch (2012) in his comparison of international Islamic education provided in Malaysia and Indonesia.

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