

The “Shaykh al-Islam of the Philippines” and Coercive Cosmopolitanism in an Age of Global Empire

ABSTRACT

In 1913 an American colonial governor in the Southern Philippines, John Finley, travelled to distant Istanbul to recruit a “modern Mohammedan” who could “be brought to...aid the government in successfully combating the vicious habits” of the local Muslims known as the “Moros.” Armed with a petition from the local Filipino Muslim community, Finley arranged to bring back a bureaucrat from the Ottoman office of the *Shaykh al-Islam*, a Palestinian named Shaykh Wajih Zayd al-Kilani. Shaykh Wajih’s odyssey from the Ottoman capital to the Philippines produced a transnational sensation, reverberating across colonial and Muslim networks from Mecca to Singapore, from the remote islands of Sumatra and Mindanao to the capitals of Manila and Jakarta, Washington and The Hague. In turn, the dissemination of this story came to embody the tangled realities of global empire. News of Shaykh Wajih’s voyage on American gunboats spread from diplomatic communiques and Filipino Muslim petitions to religious reformist newspapers across the Indo-Malay world. Muslim reporting even attracted the notice of Dutch officials and the infamous colonial scholar, C. Snouck Hurgronje.

This paper will examine the entanglements and contestations that marked Shaykh Wajih’s sojourn as an example of “coercive cosmopolitanism.” I will argue that the “Shaykh al-Islam of the Philippines” episode generated optimism among both the colonizers and colonized that a globalizing world could promote not only the “true path of Islam,” but also nurture affinities between Muslims and non-Muslims. Indeed, such enthusiasm inspired American governors, Ottoman officials and Muslim reformers alike, thereby appearing to augur a new cosmopolitan moment in imperial-Islamic relations. This paper will also contend that decades of pacification freighted such encounters with a heavy weight of mistrust and mistranslation, engendering accusations of treachery, nefarious plotting, and naiveté that ultimately drove Shaykh Wajih from the Philippines after a mere two months. He would die a few years later in the United States while seeking re-entry to Manila. In sum, Shaykh Wajih’s travel through the knotted pathways of transnational empire encapsulated the possibility and peril of an age of coercive cosmopolitanism.

BIO

Dr. Gedacht received his M.A. and Ph.D. in History from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in December 2013, and is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. Dr. Gedacht’s research examines the relationship between colonial era war-making, Islamic networks, and the reconfiguration of religious connections in Indonesia and the Philippines. His dissertation, *Islamic-Imperial Encounters: Colonial Enclosure and Muslim Cosmopolitans in Island Southeast Asia, 1800-1940*, considers the ways in which colonial wars of conquest in Sumatra and Mindanao engendered paradoxical dynamics of exclusion and inclusion, disconnection and reconnection, that contributed to the remaking of Southeast Asian Islamic networks. In addition to convening an international conference on “Wild Spaces and Islamic Cosmopolitanism in Asia,” Dr. Gedacht has written a book chapter on colonial massacres and Muslims in the Southern Philippines, is co-editing a special issue on Muslim Modernities in the *Muslim World* journal, and plans to publish articles on discourses of *perang sabil* (holy war), the role of nodal port cities in colonial war-making, and the value of comparison to understanding Islamic-imperial encounters.