

***Questioning Modernity in Indonesia and Malaysia***, edited by Wendy Mee and Joel S. Kahn (Kyoto CSEAS Series on Asian Studies, 5) (Singapore: NUS [National University of Singapore] Press, 2012), vi + 257 pp., ISBN: 978-9971-69-563-7, US\$30.00 / S\$38.00 (pb)

The creeping expansion of a Western-normative modernity has posed a challenge both for non-Western societies and for scholars of those regions. For the societies, the struggle is to adapt to the disruptive trends of individualization, commoditization, technological transformation, and others while still maintaining the characteristics that mark their cultural difference. For scholars, the task is not just to document the struggle of non-Western societies, but more to understand the essential characteristics of the “modern age” and “modernity” without essentializing these two down to contemporary Western practice or denying their existence. This book, edited by the anthropologists Wendy Mee and Joel S. Kahn, attempts to use observations from Muslim societies in Southeast Asia (in the states of Malaysia and Indonesia, but certainly not focused on those state identities) to probe current definitions of modernity.

In the introduction, Mee and Kahn examine academic debates about modernity, demonstrating the basis of their dissatisfaction in purely historical or economic examinations based in the West. As an alternative, they put forward the cultural approaches of this book, organized under three themes: “Transnational and Border-Zone Modernities,” “Nation-States and Citizenships,” and “Cultural and Moral Orientations.”

Leading off the discussion of border-zones, Kahn has a chapter that grows out of his 2006 book, *Other Malays*. The central question here is whether Weber’s ideas about modernity (and its Western, Protestant origins) apply to Southeast Asia. To find the answer, Kahn looks at the geographic regions on the margins of long-standing states, concluding that despite being politically marginal they are in fact the most rapid in economic modernization. Kenneth Young then provides the most Islamically-oriented chapter of the book, using Charles Taylor’s idea of a “social imaginary” to propose alternatives to the modern nation-state in Islamic regions of Southeast Asia. Young supports the idea that “Other Malays” (again pulling from Kahn’s

work) share norms and cultural concepts to constitute a cohesive group even if they do not share the historical experiences that render a nation-state. To close out the section, Yekti Maunati describes three recent efforts to connect and promote modernity among the Dayak, the interior peoples of Indonesian Borneo.

The best chapter in the book is Goh Beng Lan's study of the tension between Islamic values and human rights in Malaysia, entitled "Dilemma of Progressive Politics in Malaysia." Meticulously documenting her many cases through Malaysia's alternative press, Goh points to instances where Malaysians hoping to change religion, limit religion's public role, or exercise a particular type of religious freedom have found their discourses of human rights (inherently Western-oriented and thus alienated from the aspiring Islamic modernity of Malaysia) opposed by Islamic interests. The dilemmas documented here in Malaysia are equally applicable in other Islamic societies. This chapter also complements nicely the next one, a discussion by Thung Ju-lan about the place of ethnic Chinese in Indonesian political and social contexts. Deftly using a comparison with Rwanda and Mamdani's distinction between ethnic and civic citizenship, Thung teases out the cultural structures rendering Chinese-Indonesians second-class citizens in their country of birth.

In the section on "Cultural and Moral Orientations," Maila Stevens describes various points of social anxiety relating to urban youth and morality in Malaysia. This chapter is the clearest in the book pointing out the conflict between Malaysia's national rhetoric of "development" juxtaposed with a national rejection of "westernization," leading to a heavily-contested search for modernity. On the opposite end of society, villagers engaging in land transfer demonstrate how both traditional patterns of gift exchange and "modern" patterns of commodity exchange are important in contemporary Malaysian society, as Oh Myung-Seok details. The conclusion of Oh's article is that Malaysian villagers, far from being traditional "peasants" – as the national narrative and some academic studies would have them – are also not entirely commoditized in their economic relations; indeed, no one anywhere is. To close the book, Wendy Mee ends with a look at popular attitudes towards technology in Malaysia. Using the results of a small, intensive study at a transnational company in the 1990s, Mee finds that technology is uniformly seen as positive and necessary by

Malaysians, showing how the public has absorbed and contributed to the local idea of modernity through scientific trappings.

Although the book identifies “modernity” as the unifying theme, it could have just as easily been pitched as a volume to honor the work of Joel S. Kahn. His ideas about cultural construction, “Other Malays,” economic and technical transformation, and modernity generally color the book. Additionally, many of the contributors are connected through the person of Kahn, either from his time at LaTrobe University (where he is now an emeritus professor) or the Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia.

This edited volume is most useful for scholars of Southeast Asia, but holds appeal for Islamic studies generally in two ways. First, as the editors suggest, it charts a methodology for approaching the concept of “modernity” through anthropological fieldwork. Especially if scholars of the Muslim world want to contribute to the international definition of this critical concept, their contributions should be similarly based in the lived experiences of Muslims in the modern world. Second, because Malaysia especially is a paragon for a state project promoting “Islamic modernity,” this volume shows the cracks in that project and some points of conflict on the path to such a future. In further studies of Malaysia’s push for Islamic finance, science and technology, and state-controlled development – or studies of other Muslim countries with similar agendas, of which there are now quite a few – scholars should remember this cautionary tale of the limits of modernity, or the particular characteristics of local modernity, or the questioning of modernity altogether.

**Kevin W. Fogg**

*Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies & University of Oxford, Oxford-UK*