

First Cosmopolis Conference: The Making of Religious Traditions in the Indonesian Archipelago: History and Heritage in Global Perspective (1600-1940), 20-22 June 2014, Yogyakarta (Indonesia)

Occasion

This first COSMOPOLIS-conference will mark the official launch of the Leiden-Yogyakarta PhD-programme “The Making of Religious Traditions in Indonesia: History and Heritage in Global Perspective (1600-1940)” as sponsored by the Leiden University Fund for the years 2014-2018.

Convenors

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Abstract

One of today’s most fascinating phenomena is the global revival of religious traditions. Almost everywhere, the challenges of an ever more globalizing world inspire calls for religious reform, be it for adaptation to new circumstances or for a return to fundamental values. The public rhetoric that stresses essential differences with “other” religions often masks considerable social and cultural commonalities as well as differences and discord within groups. Present-day debates on reform tend to generate an anachronistic understanding of the various ways religious identities have been built in the past. At the same time, scholars should be sensitive to the various continuities across time and space and explore more thoroughly the historical and entangled roots of processes of religious identity-formation.

Indian Ocean comparisons and connections

First of all, this conference will situate the on-going religious interaction of the Indonesian Archipelago within its wider regional context. One of the main challenges of the conference will be to compare and connect Indonesian cases with other areas in the Indian Ocean world. It would be fascinating to detect parallels between some of the major religious developments, whether or not they are the result of comparable challenges or existing contacts. Obvious areas to look for such linkages are those broad cultural cosmopoles – Indic, Arabic, Theravada-Buddhist and Sinic – that overlap in the Indonesian archipelago. In understanding religious identity-formation, contributing transnational connections are often ignored. Far from being autonomous, religious (re)construction was the result of an unprecedented growth of human interaction across the entire Indian Ocean region, mainly through trade, (slave/indentured) labour, and pilgrimage. These factors can offer historical and more global depth to what has so far been treated mainly as a contemporary, regional experience. This can deepen our understanding of the wider mechanisms and agencies that have made and unmade religious identities in the Indonesian archipelago.

Colonial impact

In addition to these intra-Asian connections, European expansion intensified the interaction between European and Asian societies with considerable impact on the way these societies perceived both each other and themselves. The Dutch presence in the Indonesian Archipelago offers an important case in point. From the earliest stages of exploration onwards, the Dutch confrontation with a myriad of different cultures and religions triggered an increasing demand for interpretation and reflection, producing a huge amount of published and unpublished texts

from travellers, merchants, administrators and missionaries to home-chair intellectuals and scholars. In the Indonesian Archipelago itself, increasing intra-Asian interaction as well as European aggression led people to rethink their religious and cultural identities. For scholars, this raises new questions about the way colonial authorities, politicians, religious elites and scholars, both at home and abroad, created their own particular version of religious cultures and claimed it as “heritage”; the “discovery” of an Indianized past and that of Adat Law are perhaps the most famous examples of this colonial heritage crusade, but other examples abound.

Global + Colonial = Local

In what can be perceived as an early phase of globalization, early modern Dutch interaction with Southeast Asia offers one of the earliest and best-documented cases of modern intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Unfortunately, so far most research has been focused on the political and economic relations between the Netherlands and Southeast Asia. Hence this conference calls for a cultural and global perspective on the local. Three and a half centuries of Dutch interaction with Southeast Asia have not only produced a tremendous amount of political reports and economic statistics, but also voluminous collections of missionary and scientific accounts which remain neglected. This conference therefore starts from the awareness that the period of ca. 1600 to 1940 was crucial in the making of religious traditions in the Indonesian Archipelago. The convenors welcome proposals which supplement administrative collections with non-official accounts of missionaries, scientists and scholars, as well as with Southeast Asian sources. For instance, the reinvention of religious traditions at the various Indonesian courts can only be investigated by taking into account the rich textual and oral traditions in vernacular languages. Apart from textual sources, we also welcome studies which include art and material culture as tools for understanding the process of constant religious reconstruction. The stories told by texts and objects have been and still are the basic ingredients of religious cultures that we should reinvestigate as both tangible (e.g. buildings, landscapes) and intangible (e.g. beliefs, performing arts) forms of cultural heritage. Exploring these strongly politicized, commoditized and popularized versions of the past will be one of the main objectives of the conference. The convenors hope that the study of religious traditions as heritage will demonstrate how history and heritage interact with each other, both in the past and in the present. Thus will enhance the interdisciplinary approach of the project and build a bridge to the present-day debate on cultural interaction and globalization.