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RADICAL MUSLIMS IN INDONESIA:
THE CASE OF JA'FAR UMAR THALIB AND THE LASKAR JIHAD

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I. Introduction

On April 6, 2000, thousands of people gathered in Senayan stadium, Jakarta. All of them wore white garb, and many brought swords. They were attending a mass religious rally (*tabligh akbar*) held in response to a religious conflict that had been taking place in the province of Maluku. The rally was also meant to declare the year 1412 Hijriah (Islamic year) as the year of *jihad*. After the rally, they marched to the Presidential Palace to meet President Abdurrahman Wahid in order to push the government to take necessary actions to curb the conflict and protect Muslims.[1]

The appearance of thousands of people, many of them carrying swords, but behaving in a highly disciplined manner like military people was shocking to those present. It implied that they were ready to wage a war and that this was their show of force. This phenomenon, covered by national and international mass media, then became a focus of discussion not only in Jakarta but among Indonesians in general. The group of people were members of the Laskar Jihad a paramilitary wing of the Forum Komunikasi Ahlussunah wal Jama'ah (FKAWJ), the Sunni communication forum, operating under the command of Ja'far Umar Thalib.

This event caught the attention of the international media, and in an article of the New York Times Magazine, Marshall described the Laskar Jihad as a "sleeper cell" of al Qaeda which was said to be aiding "the logistical relocation of al Qaeda forces, post-Taliban."[2] Ja'far is portrayed as "the most feared Islamic militant," who "would soon be mentioned in the same breath as Osama bin Laden."[3] According to Marshall's article, Ja'far's goal is "the establishment of an Islamic government in Indonesia."[4] In Indonesia, too, some people were concerned that this signified the increase of radical Islam in the country and

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[1] For a report of the event, see "Enam Wakil Laskar Jihad Bertemu Presiden," in *Kompas*, Apr. 7, 2000, p1

[2] Andrew Marshall, "The Threat of Jaffar," *The New York Times Magazine*, March 10, 2002, p. 45

[3] Andrew Marshall, *ibid*.

[4] Andrew Marshall, *ibid*., p. 47

represented a threat to religious harmony. Moreover, people feared it would worsen religious conflicts that had been taking place in several parts of the country. However, some Muslims, especially in the areas of conflict, welcomed and supported the group. They not only provided the group with funds, donations and various kinds of materials, such as clothes, food, and medicine, but they also joined the Laskar Jihad and were ready to be martyrs on the battle field. For about two years, before it was dissolved in October 2002 by the commander himself, Ja'far Umar Thalib, the group was very active in recruiting members, training them, and sending them to conflict areas in order to help their fellow Muslims.

In this paper, I will examine the issue of radical Islam in contemporary Indonesia, by examining the case of Ja'far Umar Thalib and the Laskar Jihad, in religious, historical and political context. First, I will elaborate on Islamic teachings that contain seeds of radicalism, as some verses in the Qur'an do lead some Muslims to be radical. Second, I will discuss historical cases of radical Muslims in Indonesia in order to show that radicalism among Muslims is not something novel. Next, I will elucidate socio-political conditions in Indonesia during the Suharto era, in order to give a background into why such movements emerged again at the end of the 20th and the early 21st centuries. The fourth part will sketch several similar Muslim radical organizations, which appeared during these decades. Then, in the most important part of the paper, I will discuss in detail the biography and ideology of Ja'far Umar Thalib, and the practices of the Laskar Jihad. As the central figure and leader of the Laskar Jihad, Ja'far's personal views are difficult to separate from the organization's views. The final section of the paper will discuss the ideological and practical factors which led to the dissolution of the Laskar Jihad and FKAWJ.

Before discussing radicalism in Islam it is worth defining radicalism. Literally, "radical" means "tending or disposed to make extreme changes in existing views, habits, conditions, or institutions." If it applies to a person, it means one that "advocates a decided and often extreme change from existing, usual, or traditional views, habits, conditions, or methods."[5] By this definition, the important characteristic of being radical is the "will" or the "effort" to uproot and reform established conditions. Being radical does not only mean "believing" in certain teachings but, more importantly, "advocating" the necessity of using extreme, even violent actions if necessary, although it should be noted that violence is not a universal characteristic of radicalism.

II. Radicalism in Islam

For Muslims, the Qur'an is the highest source of laws governing their lives. This is because it is believed to be revealed by God. There is no question about this belief among Muslims. However, the way they understand and interpret verses of the Qur'an can differ from one person to the other. Some are more rational while

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[5] *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. Springfield: Merriam, 1971, p. 1872.

others are more scriptural. I will elaborate some verses that are always used by radical Muslims as the basis of their thought and action. I will also discuss Wahhabism that arose in Saudi Arabia and which has had a fundamental influence on the ideas of the Laskar Jihad. The following verses from the Qur'an are frequently referred to by radical Muslims:

> *Those who do not judge by God's revelations are infidels indeed.* And there (in the Torah) We had ordained for them a life for a life, and an eye for an eye, and a nose for a nose, and an ear for an ear, and a tooth for a tooth, and for wounds retribution, though he who forgoes it out of charity, atones for his sins. *And those who do not judge by God's revelation are unjust...* Let the people of the Gospel judge by what has been revealed in it by God. *And those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are transgressors.* And to you We have revealed the Book containing the truth, confirming the earlier revelations, and preserving them (from change and corruption). *So judge between them by what has been revealed by God*, and do not follow their whims, side-stepping the truth that has reached you. To each of you We have given a law and a way and a pattern of life... *Judge between them in the light of what has been revealed by God* (5:44-49).[6]

By these verses, radical Muslims argue that all Muslims have to follow exactly what God has ordained (*shari'ah*). Muslims should not use secular laws which are produced by human beings because they will inevitably contradict the *shari'ah*. All sentences mentioned in the verses and others found in the Qur'an, such as stoning for adulterers, cutting off the hands of thieves, and flogging for drinkers, have to be implemented by Muslims. They understand the verses literally and scripturally and insist on implementing them as such. Those who reject this prescription, in their views, are not really Muslims.[7]

Radical Muslims also invoke verses about *jihad,* as follows:

> Those who barter the life of this world for the next should fight in the way of God. And we shall bestow on him who fights in the way of God, whether he is killed or is victorious, a glorious reward. ...Those who believe fight in the way of God; and those who do not, only fight for the powers of evil; so you should fight the allies of Satan. Surely the stratagem of Satan is ineffective. (4:74-76)[8]

> You tell the unbelievers in case they desist whatever has happened will be forgiven them. If they persist, they should remember the fate of those

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[6] Ahmed Ali, *Al-Qur'an: a contemporary translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 103-104. The emphasis is added

[7] See Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, translated by Badrul Hasan (Karachi: International Islamic Publishers, 1981)

[8] Ali, *Al-Qur'an*, p. 83

who have gone before them. So, fight them till all opposition ends, and
obedience is wholly God's. If they desist then verily God sees all they
do. But if they are obstinate, know that God is your helper and protector:
How excellent a helper, and how excellent a protector is He. (8:39-40)[9]

By these verses, radical Muslims argue that the *jihad* is obligatory for all Muslims,
not only in the defensive meaning but also an aggressive one, in order to realize
the glory of Islam.[10] The *jihad* is waged against those who do not accept the call
(*da'wah*) of Islam and against unbelievers. However, sometimes *jihad* is also
waged against those who declare themselves to be Muslims, because they are
regarded as not truly Muslim by the radicals.[11] For this purpose, radicals refer to
other verses, as follows:

Have you never seen those who aver they believe in what has been revealed
to you, and had been revealed (to others) before you, yet desire to turn for
judgment to evil powers (*taghoot*), even though they have been commanded
to disbelieve in them... Indeed, by your Lord, they will not believe till they
make you adjudge in their disputes and find no constraint in their minds
about your decisions and accept them with full acquiescence. (4:60, 65)[12]

One of the most radical Muslim sects is the Wahhabists. Wahhabism is a
sect in Islam founded for the first time by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in
Saudi Arabia in the mid eighteenth century. This sect became very influential
after the Sa'ud family, the ally and supporter of the sect, succeeded in establishing
the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia after World War I.[13] In recent times, however, the
followers of this sect have been reluctant to use the term *Wahhabi* as it refers to
the founder only. Instead, they prefer the term *Salafi* because according to them
this sect basically refers to the practices of the *Salafi* (the first generation of
Muslims) rather than just to the views of ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Some scholars use
the term *Salafi-Wahhabi* to designate those who follow this school of thought.

The most important and defining belief for Muslims, according to
Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, is adherence to the principle of *tawhid* (absolute
monotheism) and avoidance of *shirk* (attributing associates to God). Ibn Abd al-
Wahhab argues that strict and absolute monotheism is the basis upon which
Muslims practice their daily lives. With the true *tawhid*, Muslims should be able
to avoid any kinds of *shirk*, greater or lesser, which could endanger their status as
Muslims. He also advocates the importance of independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) in
the defining an Islamic law by referring directly to the Qur'an, *Hadith* (sayings

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[9] Ali, *Al-Qur'an*, p. 157.
[10] Qutb, *Milestones.*
[11] See Johannes Jansen, *The Neglected Duty: the Creed of Sadat's Assassins and Islamic
Resurgence in the Middle East* (New York: McMillan, 1986)
[12] Ali, *Al-Qur'an*, p. 82
[13] For a criticism of Wahhabism, see Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: a Critical Essay* (Oneonta, NY:
Islamic Publication International, 2002).

and deeds of Prophet Muhammad), and practices of the *Salafi* people. Consequently, he denounces *taqlid* (blindly following the opinion of former Muslim scholars).[14] Based on stressing *ijtihad* and rejecting *taqlid*, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab instructs his followers to oppose all kinds of innovation (*bid'ah*) and superstition (*khurafat*) whether manifested in buildings or daily practices. Opposition to any innovation or superstitions is one of the most important signifiers of this sect.

It is believed that all these principles mentioned above should also be spread, especially to Muslims through *da'wah*. Therefore, *da'wah* is the most important activity for *Salafis*. *Da'wah* might be done through several ways, one of which is through education. The targeted priority of the *da'wah* among *Salafis* is Muslims, so that this sect is more inward looking than outward. For the purpose of *da'wah*, *jihad* (war) becomes lawful, though Ibn Abd al-Wahhab stresses the defensive aspect rather an active or aggressive one.[15]

III. Historical Cases of Radical Muslims in Indonesia

The history of radical Muslims in Indonesia goes back to at least the early 19th century, when the Padri movement rose in West Sumatera.[16] Initially, this was a revivalist movement led by three young Muslims who had just performed the Hajj pilgrimage in 1803, after the Wahhabi had captured Mecca and Medina. They tried to imitate Wahhabi ways in order to revive religious practices in West Sumatera.[17] Conflicts between the Padri and local leaders arose, and when the latter were almost completely defeated they invited the Dutch government to help them regain sovereignty over the area. The Padri movement was finally crushed by the Dutch military campaign and by 1938 it was totally finished.

In the early decades of the 20th century, there were two Muslim organizations that, to some extent, were radical: the Al-Irshad and the Persis. The Al-Irshad, or *Jam'iyyat al-Islah wa al-Irshad* (Union for Reformation and Guidance), was set up by a Sudanese-born preacher, Ahmad Surkati, in 1915.[18] The main purpose of al-Irshad is to reform religious practices, especially among Arab communities in Indonesia by referring directly to the Qur'an and the Hadith. In addition, al-Irshad also advocates equal treatment among Arab people. This is a response to the *Jami'at al-Khair*, another organization of Arabs living in

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[14] For further discussion of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab's thought, see Natana J. Delong-Bas, *Wahhabis Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[15] Delong-Bas, *Ibid*. p 193-225.

[16] For further discussion of the Padri movement, see Christine Dobbin, *Islamic Revivalism in a Changing Peasant Economy* (London:Curzon Press, 1983).

[17] Dobbin, *ibid*, p. 128-141.

[18] For further discussion of Ahmad Surkati and his role in Al-Irshad, see Bisri Affandi, *Syaikh Ahmad Syurkati: Pembaharu dan Pemurni Islam di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Pustaka Al-Kautsar, 1999).

Indonesia, which discriminates between people based on whether or not they are descendants of the Prophet. To spread these ideas, al-Irshad set up schools in some cities in Java, such as Jakarta, Tegal and Surakarta (Central Java), as well as Surabaya and Malang (East Java).

Persatuan Islam (Persis) was established in 1923 by a group of merchants in Bandung. A year later, a Singapore-born Tamil, A. Hassan, joined this group and he made Persis the most extreme Muslim organization at the time.[19] A. Hassan is known as a harsh critic of traditional religious practices that he claimed were innovations (*bid'ah*) and superstitions (*khurafat*). In addition, he also opposed the idea of nationalism because Muslims should not be separated by nations. He argued that Muslims should be united under one *dawlah* (state). Similar to Al-Irshad, Persis under the leadership of A. Hassan is more concerned with education as a means of disseminating these ideas. A. Hassan himself then established an Islamic educational institution, *Pesantren Persis*, in Bangil, East Java, where Ja'far Umar Thalib was to study for two years.

After independence, Indonesia was shaken by a rebellion that erected the banner of Islam. Disappointed with an agreement between the Indonesian government and the Dutch, known as the *Renville* agreement, in 1948, a Javanese mystic, S.M. Kartosuwiryo (1905-62) seceded from the state of Indonesia and declared the *Negara Islam Indonesia* (NII, Indonesian Islamic State) covering most of West Java.[20] In the 1950s, this rebellion which is also popularly known as the *Darul Islam* (DI, the Islamic State) movement, spread to South Sulawesi and Aceh under the leadership of Kahar Muzakkar and Daud Beureu'eh, respectively.[21] This movement was basically more political than religious. The leaders were dissatisfied with the policies of the central government under President Sukarno. However, they used Islam to legitimize their existence and at the same time to denounce the nation-state of Indonesia.

The history of radicalism in Indonesia shows that there are at least two types of radicals: those who involve violence in their efforts to achieve their goals, such as the Padri and the NII, and those who mainly used educational institutions in order to change current conditions, such as Al-Irshad and Persis.

IV. Socio-Political Condition of Indonesia

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[19] For further discussion on the Persis, see Howard Federspiel, *Persatuan Islam: Islamic Reform in Twentieth Century Indonesia* (Ithaca: Modern Indonesia Project, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1970). For the discussion of A. Hassan's thought, see Akh. Minhaji, *Ahmad Hassan and Islamic Legal Reform in Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Kurnia Kalam Semesta Press, 2001).

[20] For further discussion of the NII, known also as Darul Islam, see Karl D. Jackson, *Traditional Authority, Islam and Rebellion: a Study of Indonesian Political Behavior* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). See also Cornelis van Dijk, *Rebellion under the Banner of Islam: the Darul Islam in Indonesia* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981)

[21] Hendra Gunawan, *M. Natsir dan Darul Islam: Studi Kasus Aceh dan Sulawesi Selatan Tahun 1953-1958* (Jakarta: Media Dak'wah, 2000)

When Suharto assumed the presidency following the abortive coup by the Communist Party in 1965, he was fully supported by Muslim groups, especially those in the parliament. However when his position was secure, in the early 1970s, he started to "depoliticize" Islam. Suharto, for example, did not approve of Muslim aspirations to revive the Masyumi Party, which had been banned by Sukarno in the 1950s. He then reduced political parties into three, pushing all the Muslim parties to unite in the *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* (United Development Party) while all Christian and Nationalist parties were combined in the *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia* (Indonesian Democracy Party). Suharto also introduced laws on marriage and on *aliran kebatinan* (local belief) which disappointed Muslim people. The law on marriage would compel Muslims to register their marriage at the government office and restrict some accepted practices, such as polygamy, which was allowed according to Islamic law. The law on *aliran kebatinan* made Muslims worried that local beliefs would be acknowledged as one of the formal religions, equal to those of Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism.

In pursuit of stability and development, Suharto made security the first priority of his policies so that he tightly controlled those who could potentially oppose him. Religious groups were among those his regime targeted. Muslim preachers were under surveillance and they had to have permission before they delivered sermons. Those who criticized the government were easily detained and jailed, some without trial. The peak of the policy took place in the mid 1980s, when Suharto required all societal, political and religious organizations to accept *Pancasila*, the state ideology, as their sole basis.[22]

Most Indonesian Muslims had no choice but to accept these policies, in order to avoid being repressed by the government. Some of them chose to leave the country, such as Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir, as will be discussed later. Some of them, however, continued to oppose and criticize Suharto era policies, not in public but in limited underground meetings. Small underground religious groups, called *usrah*, then appeared throughout the country, especially surrounding university campuses in big cities. These groups organized their activities clandestinely and always moved from one place to another. Most were preoccupied with disseminating puritanical teachings of Islam in response to disappointing contemporary political conditions.[23]

In the late 1980s, the government eased its tight policy over Muslims. This was marked by several political gestures. For example, in December 1990, *Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia* (ICMI, the Indonesian Union of Muslim Intellectuals) was established and headed by B.J. Habibie, at the time the Minister of Research and Technology. Suharto, his family and several cabinet members performed pilgrimages to Mecca in 1991 and thus adopted the title of Haji. In the

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[22] For further discussion on relation between Islam and the state, see Bahtiar Effendy, *Islam and the State in Indonesia* (Athens and Singapore: Ohio University Press and ISEAS, 2003)
[23] Jamhari and Jajang Jahroni, *Gerakan Salafi Radikal di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Raja Grafindo Persada, 2004), p. 57-60

same year, the *Bank Mu'amalat Indonesia* (the Islamic Bank of Indonesia) was established.[24] However, these gestures did not reduce the spread of the *usrah*. The *usrah* movement kept flourishing until Suharto stepped down in 1998. B.J. Habibie, who was the vice president at the time, assumed the presidency and he declared his era to be the era of *Reformasi* (reform).

President Habibie enacted drastic policies by loosening control over political and religious groups. In the first weeks of his presidency, Habibie released many political prisoners, mostly Muslim activists, who had been jailed during Suharto's time. He also agreed to change the law relating to public elections. With the new law, there was no restriction on the number of political parties. More than a hundred new political parties were established during this time, although only 48 of them were eligible for the 1999 elections. The policy of releasing control was continued by the next elected president, Abdurrahman Wahid. It was during this period, in which freedom of speech was granted and there were no more political restrictions that radical Muslim organizations appeared in public. Some of them were newly established but some others had been in existence for a long time and only recently emerged into public view.

The appearance of radical Muslim groups was welcomed by some Indonesians who were experiencing economic hardships as a result of the 1997 economic crisis that affected many countries in Asia, especially Indonesia[25] Hundreds of thousands if not millions of people lost their jobs due to the crisis. The rhetoric offered by the radicals, "back to *shari'ah* as the only solution for the crisis," seemed to have attracted some of those affected by the crisis. Although this is a utopian and millenary promise, some of them joined the radical organizations for that reason.

V. The Rise of Contemporary Radical Muslim Organizations

Several Muslim organizations appeared in the 1990s and in early 2000. They are, among others, *Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia* (the Council of Indonesian Jihad Fighters), *Front Pembela Islam* (the Front of Defenders of Islam), *Hizbut Tahrir* (the Liberation Party), and *Forum Komunikasi Ahlussunnah wal-Jama'ah* (the Communication Forum of Sunni). They share similar concerns in some aspects, such as implementation of the *shari'ah*, but they have different ways of advocating their concerns. They also have similar agendas of challenging domination and the influence of Western countries, especially the US. They might maintain connecting networks, but each is certainly a separate organization. The interesting thing is that almost all of them are led by Arab descendants, which has

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[24] M.C. Rickelfs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since 1200*, Third Edition (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 391-395

[25] Kees van Dijk, *A Country in Despair: Indonesia between 1997and 2000* (Leiden: KITLV, 2001), p. 71-111

been interpreted by some scholars as indicating a trend towards "Arabicization" of Islamic movements in Indonesia.[26]

The Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI) was established on August 7, 2000 as the result of the congress of the Counsel of Indonesian Mujahidin, held in Yogyakarta. The congress itself was attended by about 1800 people from 24 provinces in Indonesia. Some of them were veterans of the Afghanistan war, others were religious leaders who hoped for the implementation of *shari'ah* in Indonesia, and some were former members of the Darul Islam (DI) movement. The latter causes some scholars to argue that MMI is a continuation of the DI.[27] This is supported by the fact that the main purpose of the MMI is similar to that of the DI: to establish an Islamic state as a condition for the implementation of the *shari'ah*. The members of this group also praised Kartosuwiryo, who had declared the NII over forty years before, as a *mujahid* and not as a rebel.[28]

When it was established, the MMI was meant as a federation or an alliance of existing Muslim organizations, and also included individuals who were concerned with the implementation of the *shari'ah*. However, the mechanism of the alliance was not clearly defined; the roles between the unifying and unified organizations were not obvious; there were also no criteria as to the kind of organizations that could join the alliance. MMI soon developed as an independent organization like similar groups. The MMI no longer included organizations such as FPI and FKAWJ, but drew on individuals recruited through the network of the *Pesantren* (Islamic education institution) in Ngruki, Solo, Central Java.[29] This *pesantren* itself was built by Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir in 1974.

The leader of the MMI is Abu Bakar Ba'asyir. He has been known for a long time as a strong advocate of an Islamic state, together with Abdullah Sungkar. During Suharto's time, in 1978, both Sungkar and Ba'asyir were jailed for four years because they were accused of being rebels against the government for their *da'wah* in establishing an Islamic state as well as their harsh criticism of Suharto's policies. After being released from jail in 1982, they did not stop opposing the government. When the government introduced the policy of *Pancasila* as the sole basis for all organizations in the mid 1980s, both rejected the policy. They were aware that they could be jailed for the second time by the government; therefore, before this could happen, both escaped and went to live in Malaysia. After Suharto stepped down in 1998, both returned home in October 1999. However, Sungkar passed away not long afterwards.

Some commentators have seen a connection between the MMI and the *Jama'at Islamiyah* (JI), a suspected al-Qaeda cell operating in the Southeast Asia, but this is debatable. Abu Bakar Ba'syir is believed to be the *amir* (the top leader)

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[26] Azyumardi Azra, "Recent Development of Indonesian Islam", *The Indonesian Quarterly*, 32, 1 (2004), p. 16

[27] Jamhari and Jajang Jahroni, *Gerakan Salafi*, p. 49.

[28] Irfan S. Awwas, the chief executive of the MMI, clearly states that view in his book. See, Irfan S. Awwas *Menelusuri Perjalanan Jihad SM Kartosuwiryo: Proklamator Negara Islam Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Wihdah Press, 1999).

[29] Jamhari and Jajang Jahroni, *Geraka Salafi,* p. 60-61

of the JI,[30] but he always insists that this is not so and he even argues that the JI is basically a West-made term used for discrediting Muslims. Currently he is jailed on two different charges. The first is for falsifying immigration documents when he left for Malaysia and the second is for his involvement in the Bali bombings. For the latter, the court issued the verdict in January 2005, finding him guilty and jailing him for two years and six months.[31]

The Front Pembela Islam (FPI) was established in August 1998 by some Arab-descendant *ulama* in Jakarta. The founders were motivated by their conviction that Muslims in Indonesia were suppressed by the government. Muslims in Indonesia experienced many abuses of human rights and there had been no fair and just investigation of these cases. In addition, FPI leaders also believed that Islam and Muslim people had been humiliated and that Muslims did not respond sufficiently.[32] Therefore, the main objectives of the group are to help Muslims who experience suppression from either the government or non-Muslims, to defend the greatness and holiness of Islam, and to revive the spirit (*ruh*) of *jihad*. The implementation of *shari'ah* is also another objective of the FPI, through what is called *amar ma'ruf nahy munkar* (to command righteousness and to prevent evilness), but the agenda of this group does not include establishing an Islamic state.[33]

The FPI leader is Habib Muhammad Rizieq who was born in Jakarta in 1965. He graduated from the King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in 1990, majoring in Islamic law. According to Rizieq, all the socio-economic problems of Indonesians are because Muslims do not follow the rules that God has ordained and instead use secular ways. Therefore, he calls for Muslims to return to the *shari'ah.* Rizieq argues that since people are creatures of God, to follow the *shari'ah* is an absolute requirement. The government's current policy of decentralization is perceived by Rizieq as a good opportunity to insert Islamic laws into secular laws. Rizieq has therefore encouraged local branches of this group to work closely with local parliamentary councils in order to participate actively in drafting local laws.

It is unknown how far Rizieq and his group have inserted Islamic laws, but many people recognize the FPI as a group which has tried to close entertainment centers, such as discotheques and night clubs. This happens especially during the fasting month, *Ramadhan*, in Jakarta and Solo, Central Java. Every *Ramadhan* there have been instances in which members of the group come to night clubs, instructing them to close and, in some cases, destroying and looting them.

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[30] See the reports of ICG, *Indonesia Backgrounder: How the Jemaah Islamiyah Terrorist Network Operates*, December 2002, and *Jama'ah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia: Damaged but Still Dangerous*, August 2003.
[31] *Kompas*, March 3, 2005.
[32] Jamhari and Jajang Jahroni, *Geraka Salafi*, 131-132
[33] Jajang Jahroni, "Defending the Majesty of Islam: Indonesia's Font Pembela Islam (FPI) 1998-2003," *Studia Islamika*, 11(2), 2004, p. 197-253

According to them, they take such actions because the government does not take any concrete action to stop those "immoralities."[34]

A third group, the Hizbut Tahrir (HT) is a political organization which was founded in 1952 in Lebanon by Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, a Palestinian-born man who left his country after the Israeli invasion in 1948. It is unclear when HT came to Indonesia, but some scholars argue this happened around the 1970s.[35] During Suharto's time this group remained underground, moving from one mosque to another and avoided any documentation that might uncover its presence. Therefore, its existence was not known until Suharto stepped down. During the era of *Reformasi* this group made its appearance through public several rallies. However, HT has never revealed the leader of its Indonesian branch. So far, people only know that Ismail Yusanto normally represents the group, but he claims that he is just the spokesperson. It might be that the bitter experiences of HT leaders in Arab countries, where they have been repressed, tortured, and jailed, has influenced this group not to disclose its leadership.

Like other groups, HT also advocates the implementation of the *shari'ah* in daily life. According to this group, Islam is not just a religion but also a political system (*al-din wa al-dawlah*). Therefore, the most important objective of the group is to establish an Islamic *khilafah* (caliphate). It idealizes one government for all Muslims in the world as occurred during the era of the Prophet and the Companions (*sahabat*). This means that Muslims should not be divided into many states but should be under one *khilafah.* It is not surprising that this group rejects the idea of nationalism or a nation-state.

The objective of reviving the Islamic caliphate is a response to the domination of the Western powers. According to this group, the influence and control by the West, especially the US, in Muslim countries is unacceptable. This influence is not only limited to the economy, but also applies to political and military affairs. When the US unilaterally invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, no single Muslim country, in the view of this group, opposed or challenged it in a significant manner. This confirms the weak position of Muslim countries vis-à-vis the West. The only way to respond to the domination of the Western powers, according to HT, is to establish an Islamic *khilafah*.

Among these groups the *Forum Komunikasi Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* (FKAWJ)[36] has emerged as the most controversial. It was established by Ja'far Umar Thalib during a mass religious rally (*tabligh akbar*) at Manahan Stadium in Solo, Central Java, on February 14, 1999. The establishment of this forum was

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[34] However, FPI does not take this action against all night clubs, but only selected numbers. Therefore, this results in a rumor that those which FPI targets are those which do not respond to FPI's demands. It is said that FPI requests funds to night clubs as a concession to be left undisturbed.

[35] Jamhari and Jajang Jahroni, *Geraka Salafi*, p. 169. Azra argues that it came to Indonesia in 1972. See, Azyumardi Azra, "Recent Development," p. 15.

[36] This should not be confused with *ahlussunnah wal-jama'ah* among the *Nahdlatul Ulama*, a social organization of traditional Muslims in Indonesia. This group has claimed as the follower of Sunni far before FKAWJ exists.

initially to respond to social-political changes resulting from the fall of President Suharto. As the elections approached, two candidates appeared the most likely to be elected president: BJ Habibie, the former vice president during Suharto and the incumbent President; and Megawati Sukarnoputri, the leader of the Reformed Indonesian Democracy Party (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan*, PDIP) and a daughter of the first President, Sukarno. Influenced by *Salafi-Wahhabi* teachings, Ja'far and his network were opposed to female leadership, so the rally was meant, partly, to denounce Megawati's candidacy.

After the establishment of FKAWJ, Ja'far declared his outrage over the continuing religious conflicts in Ambon, Maluku, where he believed Muslims had become innocent victims of their Christian fellows.[37] He was convinced that the government had not taken decisive actions in order to stop the conflict and violence. Therefore, Ja'far took up their cause. During the mass rally at Kridosono Stadium, Yogyakarta, on January 30, 2000 he announced his commitment to assist his Muslim fellows by establishing the Laskar Jihad, a paramilitary wing of FKAWJ. The main purpose of the Laskar Jihad was to recruit people, train them and deploy them in Ambon in order to help and protect their Muslim brothers from the Christian attacks.

The Laskar Jihad is the vanguard of FKAWJ. Although formally, FKAWJ is an umbrella organization for Laskar Jihad, the latter is more popular for Indonesians because involvement in the religious conflict in Ambon was the most visible activity of the FKAWJ while the banner raised during the time was that of the Laskar Jihad. The two then became identical since both were under the control of Ja'far Umar Thalib. The fact that Ja'far is very influential in this group is unquestionable. It is even impossible to distinguish Ja'far's action personally from that institutionally. The discussion of Ja'far and the Laskar Jihad, therefore, is interchangeable and will overlap.

VI. Biographical Sketch of Ja'far Umar Thalib

Ja'far was born in Malang, East Java in December 1961, and a descendant of a religious Yemeni-Madurese family. His father, Umar Thalib, is an activist of al-

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[37] It was reported that on December 27 and 31, 1998, Muslims in Air Bak village, Ambon, were attacked by some Christians. Then, on January 15, 1999 Muslims in Dobo, Southeast Maluku, were also victimized by Christians. After that, on January 19, 1999, or a day after 'Id al-Fitr, clash between Muslims and Christians broke in Ambon. According to the official Police report released on Jan 21, 1999, 22 people were dead while 102 were severely wounded, and 42 others were slightly injured. In addition, 107 houses were burned, 7 buildings for worship were looted, and several other buildings, such as markets, shops, banks as well as cars were smashed. See, Jajang Jahroni et. al., *Hubungan Agama dan Negara di Indonesia: Studi tentang Pandangan Politik Laskar Jihad, Front Pembela Islam, Ikhwanul Muslimin dan Laskar Mujahidin*. Jakarta: INSEP, 2004. A year later, Brigadier General Max Tamaela, the Commander of Regional XVI/Pattimura, reported that between December, 26, 1999 and January 16, 2000, 771 people were killed, 559 seriously injured and 305 lightly wounded. See *Kompas*, January 17, 2000. Both reports do not really mention how many of the victims are Muslims and how many are Christians.

Irshad (the modernist Muslim organization of Arab descendants discussed earlier), and a veteran of the famous November 10, 1945 "war of Surabaya."[38] The mass media describe Ja'far in various ways: as "a hardliner *'alim*,"[39] "a colorful religious leader,"[40] as well as "a convincing leader."[41] An Australian Indonesianist, Greg Fealy, notes that Ja'far was both a revered and a feared leader.[42] The quality of Ja'far's leadership, according to an education expert, Muhammad Sirozi, was the result of three related lines of education: informal education he received from his father, formal school education, and non-formal education such as his involvement in the *Salafi-Wahhabi* movement in Pakistan and his experience as a holy war fighter in Afghanistan.[43]

Ja'far received his early education in Islam and Arabic from his father who educated him in a "military style of education."[44] His father's previous involvement in warfare seems to have influenced his methods of instruction. However, the young Ja'far was also "rebellious" in character. He was "critical," "always dissatisfied," and "applying different lifestyles."[45] Therefore, Ja'far was used to being punished and beaten with rattan by his father when he made mistakes. "Studying Arabic from my father was like being in a boxing ring,"[46] said Ja'far about his father's teaching style.

Ja'far began his formal education at the *Pesantren al-Irshad* (a boarding school) run by his father in Malang. He continued his studies at the Religious Teacher Education (*Pendidikan Guru Agama,* PGA) run by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, also in Malang. After graduating from PGA in 1981, Ja'far went to *Pesantren Persis* in Bangil, East Java, to continue his study of Islamic knowledge. He spent only two years in Bangil because he was dissatisfied with the teaching-learning process. He moved to Jakarta and studied at *Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab* (LIPIA), or the Institute for Islamic Knowledge and Arabic, an educational institution funded by the Saudi Arabian government. He studied there for three years but left the institute without completing his study

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[38] Muhammad Sirozi, "The Intellectual Roots of Islamic Radicalism in Indonesia," *the Muslim World*, 95, January 2005, page 84-85. The war of Surabaya broke out when the Allied forces, specifically the British, tried to disarm the Japanese forces following the surrender of Japan in the World War II. Indonesians who had declared the independence on August 17, 1945, tried to resist the British and Dutch's plan to re-colonize Indonesia. The local British commander, Brigadier-General Mallaby was killed in the battle so the British troops bombarded the city. The day is now commemorated as the Hero's Day (*Hari Pahlawan*). See Ricklefs, *A History*, p. 266-267. For further discussion, see Nugroho Notosusanto, *The Battle of Surabaja* (Djakarta: Dept. of Defense and Security, Centre for Armed Forces History, 1970)

[39] *Suara Merdeka*, October 20, 2002

[40] "Sang Ustad yang Penuh Warna," *Tempo Interaktif* available at http://www.tempointeraktif.com/harian/profil/prof-jafar.html

[41] *Tempo Interaktif*, ibid

[42] Greg Fealy, "Inside the Laskar Jihad: An Interview with the Leaser of a New, Radical and Militant Sect," *Inside Indonesia 65*, available at http://www.insideindonesia.org/edit65/fealy/htm

[43] Muhammad Sirozi, "The Intellectual Roots," p. 93

[44] *Tempo Interaktif*

[45] *Tempo Interaktif*. It was not mentioned, what kind of "different lifestyles" mentioned here.

[46] *Tempo Interaktif*.

after he was involved in disputes with one of his lecturers. With the help of the LIPIA Director, in 1986 Ja'far received a scholarship from the Saudi government to continue his studies at the Maududi Institute in Lahore, Pakistan. After one year at the institute, Ja'far again quarreled with one of his lecturers and in 1987 he decided to leave the institute without finishing his education. In terms of his educational story, a news magazine labeled him an "adventurer."[47]

Ja'far's educational history shows his "rebellious" character. He had strong convictions and dared to challenge those who differed from his convictions. When he felt that he faced a "wall" he preferred to step aside. It is unclear, however, what issues made Ja'far oppose his lecturers, both in the LIPIA and the Maududi Institute. He mentions that he disagreed with his lecturer in Pakistan regarding a *Hadith*.[48] But he does not explain further as to why these differences led him to leave the institution. Ja'far also mentions that he was shocked when he found that *Ikhwanul Muslimin* thinkers, especially Sayyid Qutb, whom he previously admired, were harshly criticized by *Salafi* people. However, after having discussion with *Salafi* activists when he visited Peshawar, he started familiarizing himself with *Salafi-Wahhabi* thoughts. It was in Peshawar, Ja'far says, that for the first time he began to admire the *Salafis*. In Peshawar, too, he began to empathize with the Afghanistan *mujahidin* movement against the Soviet invasion. This brought him to join the movement after he decided to leave the institute in Lahore.

Ja'far was in Afghanistan for about two years, 1987-1989. He says that he joined the *mujahidin* purely because of a feeling of Islamic brotherhood (*ukhuwah Islamiyah*). During his time in Afghanistan, Ja'far acknowledges that he met Osama bin Laden, but denies any connection with him. He even criticizes Osama as lacking Islamic knowledge. "He was spiritually an empty man. His had no religious knowledge at all," said Ja'far.[49] He also argues that Osama is an arrogant man who poured scorn on Saudi Arabia. Therefore, he did not join Osama's group while he was in Afghanistan but instead joined a faction connected with a *Salafi* organization in Saudi Arabia, the *Jama'at al-Da'wa ila al-Qur'an wa Ahl al-Hadith*, led by Jamil al-Rahman.[50] Later on, Ja'far quoted a *fatwa* issued by the late grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, that Osama "is an erring sectarian and rebel whom pious Muslims should never follow."[51]

In Afghanistan, Ja'far not only learned how to use arms and to battle against enemies, but also was exposed to *Salafi-Wahhabi* teachings delivered by Jamil al-Rahman. When the war was over and he came back to Indonesia in 1989, he spent less than two years in Salatiga, Central Java, as the director of the Al-

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[47] *Forum Keadilan*, May 20, 2001

[48] *Tempo Interaktif.*

[49] Andree Marshal, "The Threat of Jafar," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2002.

[50] Muhammad Sirozi, "The Intellectual Roots," p. 90. See also Nurhaidi Hasan, "Faith and Politics: The Rise of the Laskar Jihad in the Era of Transition in Indonesia," *Indonesia*, 73 (April 2002), p. 152; and *Forum Keadilan*

[51] Muhammad Sirozi, "The Intellectual Roots," p. 91

Irshad Islamic School, before again leaving for North Yemen in 1991. In Yemen, Ja'far widened his knowledge on *Salafi* teachings by studying with Sheikh Muqbil ibn Hadi al-Wadi'i. Sheikh Muqbil is known as the leading figure of *Salafi* Islam in Yemen. Supported by the conservative Islamist *Islah* party, he is active in implementing *Salafi* teachings. In addition to Sheikh Muqbil, Ja'far also learned *Salafi* teachings from prominent Saudi scholars, such as Muhammad Nasr al-Din al-Albani and Abd al-Aziz Abd Allah bin Baz, when he performed the *hajj* pilgrimage.[52] This shows that it was after his involvement as a *mujahidin* guerilla that Ja'far became so fascinated with *Salafi-Wahhabi* teachings.

Ja'far came back to Indonesia in 1993. Having widened and deepened his knowledge of *Salafi-Wahhabi*, Ja'far is committed to spreading *Salafi* thoughts in Indonesia through *da'wah* and education. Therefore, he did not return to the al-Irshad school, which he previously managed, but built a new *pesantren* which he called *Ihya al-Sunnah* ("Preserving the Prophet's tradition"), in Degolan, about 15 kilometers north of Yogyakarta. Ja'far wants to disseminate *Salafi-Wahhabi* thoughts among young Indonesians in this educational institution. It is not surprising that the books he uses are by *Salafi* scholars, such as *al-Usul al-Thalathah* (Three Basic Principles), *Sharh Kitab al-Tawhid* (Explanation on Islamic Theology), both written by Muhhamad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and *al-Aqidah al-Wasitiyyah* (the Middle Path Ideology), by Ibn Taimiyah.[53] These three books are intended to strengthen students' knowledge about basic Islamic ideology and theology, as interpreted by *Salafi* scholars.

Ja'far is also involved in the *Salafi* network in Indonesia, which is connected with both the Yemen and Saudi Arabian *Salafi* network. Among the most important members of the network is Umar as-Sewed. This *Salafi* network is different from other *Salafi* groups, such as Al-Irshad whose school in Salatiga was managed by Ja'far in 1989-1991. While Ja'far and his network refer primarily to Yemeni and Saudi *ulama*, the *Al-Irshad* network, led by Yusuf Baisa, refers to Kuwait scholars, such as Sheikh Abdurrahman Abd al-Khaliq. The two factions compete with each other in claiming to be the most authoritative *Salafi* group in Indonesia. Ja'far and his group seem to have overshadowed Yusuf. In fact, the mass rally in February 1999 was partly to show Ja'far's greater influence in contrast to al-Irshad's network.[54]

For a few years Ja'far was preoccupied with teaching and disseminating *Salafi-Wahhabi* thoughts to his students in the *pesantren* as well as being involved in the *Salafi* network *da'wah*. For the *da'wah* outside the *pesantren*, Ja'far often gave religious lectures and sermons at discussion groups known as *halaqah* (study circle) which had sprung up since the 1980s among university students in Yogyakarta. As this city has many universities, there is a very large number of young people living there. Some are eager to learn and deepen their Islamic

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[52] Muhammad Sirozi, "The Intellectual Roots," p. 97

[53] *Tempo Interaktif*

[54] International Crisis Group (ICG), *Indonesia Backgrounder: Why Salafism and Terrorism Mostly Don't Mix*, September 2004, p. 12-15

knowledge while studying sciences at the universities. Due to his mastery in religious knowledge, Ja'far was quickly popular and influential among the university students. The network of university students that Ja'far built up while undertaking his *da'wah* activities subsequently became an important source for recruiting members of the Laskar Jihad.

Outside Yogyakarta, however, Ja'far was relatively little known until he organized mass rallies in 1999 and 2000, in which he announced the establishment of the FKAWJ and the Laskar Jihad respectively. Following the rallies, especially that in Jakarta, Ja'far and the Laskar Jihad were prominently featured in news headlines in the mass media and became even more widely known. Ja'far's face frequently appeared on television, and he was interviewed by journalists. Although other members of the *Salafi* network criticized his popularity, this did not lessen his preparations for *jihad*. He remained firm in his decision to take up arms in defense of his fellow Muslims.

VII. The Laskar Jihad: Its Principles and Activities

As indicated by its name, physical *jihad* is one of the most important principles of this group. After Ja'far declared the establishment of the Laskar Jihad on January 30, 2000, it began to recruit members who were ready to wage war in Ambon. Many *posko* (center of command or communication) were set up in numerous urban centers, located in strategic places and indicated with a large banner, "Invitation to Jihad in Maluku," that could easily be seen by people who passed by. The *posko* was where people registered for membership, and thus became candidates for the status of *mujahidin* (warriors), or gave donations to support the goals of the *jihad*. Since the *jihad* was the main reason for becoming a member of the group, we can assume that those who registered were ready to go to the battle field. To the surprise of most commentators, there were substantial numbers of men who were sufficiently enthusiastic to respond to the "invitation." Fajar, a university student in Surabaya, East Java, for example, said that the reason he joined the Laskar Jihad was that he could not accept the humiliation of Islam in Ambon.[55] Arif Yani, a teacher at a junior secondary school in Kuningan, West Java, preferred to leave his job and join the Laskar Jihad for similar reasons.[56] In the mass rally on April 6, 2000, in Jakarta, Ja'far claimed that 3000 men had joined the Laskar Jihad, had received military training and were ready to go to Ambon.

As a *Salafi* follower, Ja'far did not forget to seek endorsement from both Yemeni and Saudi *Salafi* scholars. Seven *Salafi* scholars issued *fatwas* that, according to Ja'far, approved the plan of *jihad* in helping Muslim fellows in Ambon.[57] They were Sheikh Abd al-Muhsin al-Abbad, a Medina mufti; Sheikh

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[55] *Gatra*, March 25, 2000, p. 68

[56] *Gatra*, April 22, 2000, p. 39

[57] ICG, September 2004, p. 16-17

Ahmad al-Najm, a member of the Saudi senior *ulama* committee; Sheikh Muqbil ibn Hadi al-Wadi'i, Salafi mufti in Yemen and Ja'far's teacher; Sheikh Rabi' bin Hadi al-Madkhali of Medina; Sheikh Salih al-Suhaimi, a *Salafi* mufti in Medina; Sheikh Wahid al-Jabiri, a *Salafi* mufti in Medina; and Sheikh Muhammad ibn Hadi al-Madkhali, a *Salafi* mufti in Medina.[58] The most important aspect of the *ulama*'s response, however, is the fact that their approval was conditional on a defensive *jihad*, intended to protect Muslims from the Christian attacks. None of the *Salafi ulama* approved an attack where the Laskar Jihad was the initiator. Moreover, some of them even laid down certain stipulations without which the *jihad* would not be lawful. Abd al-Muhsin al-Abbad, for example, said that the *jihad* should not endanger or hurt other Muslims, while Ahmad al-Najm and Salih al-Suhaimi required the availability of power and strength before waging the *jihad*.

By providing the *fatwa*, Ja'far argues that the *jihad* was religiously justified. However, it is clear the *fatwa* was not a starting point for Ja'far to declare the *jihad*. In other words, he did not seek the *fatwa* before he decided to declare the *jihad*, but in fact reversed the order. The *fatwas* themselves appeared after the mass rally in April 2000, because Sheikh Muhammad ibn Hadi al-Madkhali, for example, mentioned in his *fatwa* that Ja'far's group had taken the proper steps, including *tabligh akbar* and meeting with President Abdulrahman Wahid, before waging the jihad.[59]

The appearance of the *fatwa* after the establishment of the Laskar Jihad provides grounds for arguing that Ja'far's insistence on waging jihad in Maluku was motivated more by his experience in Afghanistan than his status as a *Salafi* follower. He was as deeply distressed and angered by what had happened to Muslims in Maluku as he had been about the situation in Afghanistan. He had already made his decision before the *fatwa* was issued. However, since he is a member of the *Salafi* network, he needed endorsement from the highest rank of *Salafi* scholars and his past history suggests that he would not have crossed the "border" without this endorsement. Had the *Salafi ulama* not issued the *fatwa* supporting the *jihad*, Ja'far would have abrogated it.

Although *jihad* was one of the most important principles of the Laskar Jihad, it was never meant as an aggressive war. The Laskar limited *jihad* to defensive action to protect Muslims from Christian attacks. In addition, *jihad* does not mean instigating rebellion against the legitimate government, and Ja'far accepted this. Furthermore, he claimed that the *jihad* was waged against those who wanted to establish a separate government, i.e. the Republic of South Maluku (RMS).[60] He also argued that the decision to publicly recruit the members was meant to "straighten" the negative perception of *jihad*. *Jihad*, according to Ja'far,

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[58] Noorhaidi Hasan, "Faith and Politics," p. 166

[59] Noorhaidi Hasan, "Faith and Politics," p. 166.

[60] Ja'far Umar Thalib, *Laskar Jihad Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* (n.p.: DPP FKAWJ, 2001), p. 17. The Republic of South Maluku was declared on April 25, 1950, by Dr. Soumokil. Although by November this movement was fully crushed by the Indonesian troops, sympathizers of this movement still exist, either in Maluku or in the Netherlands. See Ricklefs, *A History*, p. 285.

was previously perceived negatively as a rebellion or a movement against the government.[61] At this time he wanted to show that *jihad* also has a positive meaning.

The Laskar Jihad did implement the principle of *jihad*. After recruiting members, the Laskar Jihad conducted military training in several cities. *Gatra* magazine, for example, reported in March 2000 that the training was taking place in Surabaya, Malang, Madiun, Jombang, Gresik (all in East Java), as well as in Solo, Central Java.[62] Then, after the April mass rally in Jakarta, the Laskar Jihad conducted what it called the Consolidated National Training (*Latihan Gabungan Nasional*), in Bogor, the southern part of Jakarta, on 7-17 of April 2000. This was followed by the deployment of as many as 3000 people in Maluku by the end of April and mid May 2000.

The government opposed the Laskar Jihad's activities. After meeting with the representatives of the Laskar Jihad, President Abdurrahman Wahid ordered the police and the military to prevent its members from going to Maluku. However, due to internal friction within the government, President Wahid's instructions were ineffective.[63] Laskar Jihad units freely went to Maluku and faced no restrictions on their way. This resulted in an assumption that the Laskar Jihad was supported by or received assistance from the military or police institutions.[64] Had the military or police chiefs supported the President, they would have had easily stopped the Laskar Jihad from leaving for Maluku.

The implementation of *jihad* shows one aspect of the radicalism of the Laskar Jihad. Members of the Laskar believe that *jihad* is a religiously ordained action. They implemented this principle with full consciousness of the effects and risks of *jihad*, including the possibility of being wounded or dying in the battle field. *Jihad* for them is a physical war and not just a spiritual exercise, as it is perceived by most Indonesian Muslims. Members of the Laskar Jihad tried to change this view by involving themselves in the conflict in Maluku. Ja'far argues that physical *jihad* is a part of the *da'wah*.

The next principle in Laskar Jihad beliefs is the implementation of *shari'ah* (Islamic laws) in daily life. However, following *Salafi* views, this principle does not mean that they intend to establish an Islamic state. According to Ja'far, Indonesia is already an Islamic state because Muslims are free to practice Islamic teachings and the government also regulates Islamic affairs. This view is consistent with Ja'far's idea that there are only two types of state: Islamic (*dar al-Islam*) or infidel (*dar al-harb*) states. If Muslims live in an infidel state,

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[61] Ja'far Umar Thalib, p. 17

[62] *Gatra*, March 25, 2002, p. 66-68

[63] President Wahid was supported by an alliance of several parties when he was elected as the President. However, after becoming president, he initiated several policies without consulting with the parties, and, moreover, disappointed them. One of the most disappointing policies was the replacement of members of the cabinet.

[64] Ja'far rejected this rumors saying that Laskar Jihad did not get support from either military of police institutions. However, he acknowledged that some military men, as personals, assisted the Laskar as the military trainers. See *Gatra*, March 25, 2000, p. 69.

according to Ja'far, they have to move (*hijrah*) to an Islamic one. The opinion of this group is similar to that of the FPI but different from that of MMI and HT. The latter two made the establishment of an Islamic state, upon which the *Shari'ah* can be implemented, their ultimate objective.

The implementation of the *shari'ah*, for the Laskar Jihad, is to "Islamize" government policies or to insert Islamic values into Indonesian rules and laws which are currently being drafted. There are no reports, however, as to what extent the Laskar Jihad has endeavored to actually set this program in action, nor the degree to which their efforts have been successful. One case that scared many people was Ja'afar's implementation of the *shari'ah* in the conflict area. A member of the Laskar Jihad who had pleaded guilty to raping a woman was stoned to death. Ja'far argues that the implementation of the *shari'ah* was caused by the absence of governing law during the conflict. There were "no prosecutors and no judges… The court was totally ineffective," Ja'far says.[65] That is why he took the decision to implement *shari'ah* in order to sentence the guilty man. However, this is the only case when the Laskar Jihad pushed implementation of the *shari'ah* during its time in Ambon.

The absence of the goal of establishing an Islamic state on the Laskar Jihad's agenda is based on *Salafi-Wahhabi* teachings. According to these teachings, a revolt against a Muslim government, though authoritarian, tyrannical or despotic, is unlawful. Ja'far once said to the mass media that his target was to topple Abdurrahman Wahid as the president,[66] but he never took any action to achieve this. Therefore, this statement probably reflects his disappointment after he met the President, and is not representative of his *Salafi* views. It might sound inconsistent that the group advocates the implementation of the *shari'ah*, on the one hand, but does not condone rebellion against a Muslim government, on the other. How can they implement *shari'ah* when they are not allowed to challenge the existing government? This is one major inconsistency in *Salafi* teachings.

Another inconsistency relates to the view of female leadership. According to the Laksar Jihad's views, Muslims are not allowed to elect a woman as the leader. But when President Abdurrahman Wahid was impeached by the parliament and Megawati replaced him as President, Ja'afar and his followers did not take any action to oppose her. Moreover, the dissolution of the Laskar Jihad happened during her presidency.

VIII. The Dissolution of Laskar Jihad

The Laskar Jihad and the FKAWJ were dissolved, formally, on October 7, 2002. But this was not known by the public until October 16, 2002, a few days after the Bali bombings. According to Ja'far, the dissolution of the Laskar Jihad was the

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[65] *Forum Keadilan*, p. 37
[66] *Panji Masyarakat*, April 26, 2000

decision of the legislative board of FKAWJ, which held a meeting in Yogyakarta October 3-7, 2002. The main reason for the dissolution, according to Ja'far, was a growing trend of involvement in political maneuverings among the members. A second reason was a *fatwa* from Sheikh Rabi'i ibn Hadi al-Madkhali, one of the seven *ulama*s who had previously endorsed the *jihad* in Maluku.[67] The dissolution was very abrupt and many people were taken by surprise, because when it happened, thousands of the *mujahidin* were still in Ambon. This resulted in an assumption that Ja'far's decision was due to the government's persuasion or suppression.

After the 9/11 attacks and the US government's launch of its war against terrorism, the Indonesian government was under pressure to join the anti-terrorism campaign as well as to take firm actions in cracking down on suspected Muslim fundamentalist groups. Ja'far himself was reported by several mass media as having connections with Osama bin Laden; and the Laskar Jihad was suspected of providing a niche for al-Qaeda in Indonesia.[68] Although the government insisted that there was no proof of al-Qaeda's operation in Indonesia, Ja'far was detained on May 4, 2002. He was charged with having insulted the president and with provoking a religious conflict. But after several days in jail, Ja'far was released and on January 30, 2003, the court decided that he was not guilty. In analyzing possible connections between the detainment, the release, the dissolution of the Laskar Jihad and FKAWJ, and the court's verdict that Ja'far was not guilty, some argue that there was a deal between the government and Ja'far. In other words, Ja'far would be released if he dissolved the Laskar Jihad.[69]

Although this may have been the case, the evidence suggests that the dissolution of the group was based more on *Salafi* principles, as Ja'far argued, than on pressure from the government. After Ja'far became popular as the commander of the Laskar Jihad, he was invited to several religious gatherings where he met and socialized with non-*Salafi* Muslims. In addition, he was also often interviewed by mass media, so that his face frequently appeared on television as well as in printed newspapers and magazines. Ja'far's growing personal popularity was not acceptable to *Salafi* members. Umar Sewed, Ja'far's close ally in the early 1990s, for example, criticized all Ja'far's activities. Qumar Suaidi, another member of the *Salafi* network, wrote that "Ja'far Umar Thalib Has Left Us," meaning that he had deviated from *Salafi* principles. Disappointed with an apparent change in Ja'far's actions, the *Salafi* people relayed their views to Sheikh Rabi' ibn Hadi al-Madkhali. Al-Madkhali responded to the report in a long statement recorded on cassette, expressing regret for Ja'far's behavior and for recent developments in relation to the *jihad*. "If you continue, it means you

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[67] *Kompas*, October 17, 2002.

[68] See for example the report of Raymond Bonner and Jane Perlez, "Qaeda Mobbing into Indonesia, Official Fear," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2002 and Andrew Marshall, "The Threat of Jaffar," *The New York Times Magazine*, March 10, 2002.

[69] See *Gatra*, October 26, 2002, p. 74-76, *Tempo*, October 27, 2002, and *Kompas*, October 17, 2002.

have joined the Brotherhood… and the real *Salafis* will shun you," said Al-Madkhali.[70]

After receiving this cassette, Ja'far and the committee members of the FKAWJ and Laskar Jihad met in early October 2002 and discussed the future of the group. Ja'far insisted on dissolving the Laskar Jihad as well as FKAWJ. If there had been no *fatwa* from Al-Madkhali, it is very likely that Ja'far would have continued his *jihad*, though there might have been repression from the government. As noted earlier, when he started the *jihad*, he continued deploying members of the Laskar Jihad, even though the President prohibited it.

IX. Conclusion

Radical Muslims clearly do exist in Indonesia. As discussed earlier, this radicalism is partly due to the availability of references in the Qur'an. Historical, social and political conditions in Indonesia also have contributed to the emergence of radical movements. Although they share some ideals, such as implementation of the *shari'ah*, each of them operates independently because each has its own characteristics. They even criticize each other. It seems, therefore, almost impossible that all radical groups in Indonesia will unite under one leadership. In other words, without strong leadership, Muslim radicals will always be "splinter groups" and will be unlikely to receive major support from majority of Indonesian Muslims.

As far as Ja'far Umar Thalib and his Laskar Jihad are concerned, the cumulative evidence shows that they are not as dangerous as portrayed by Marshall in the *New York Times*. Although Ja'far successfully recruited thousands of Muslims to be *mujahid* in Maluku, he maintained his view that the *jihad* is for defensive purposes. He also had no agenda to establish an Islamic state. His views in this regard are totally different from those of Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and also opposed to the views of the Hizbut Tahrir. Ja'far easily dissolved the Laskar Jihad under the "guidance" of the *Salafi-Wahhabi* scholars in Saudi Arabia while the *Salafi-Wahhabi ulama* in Mecca and Medina themselves are part of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This means that as long as the government of Saudi Arabia keeps the *ulama* in control, *Salafi* Muslims in Indonesia, such as Ja'far Umar Thalib, are unlikely to impose a real threat toward the nation-state of Indonesia.

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[70] Quoted from ICG, September 2004, p. 18. The Brotherhood here means the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan al-Muslimin*), an organization based in Egypt and founded for the firs time by Hasan al-Banna. Sayyid Qutb was the ideologue of the group. See, Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

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Glossary

*alim,*pl. *ulama*	Muslim scholar, scholars
aliran kebatinan	local beliefs
amar ma'ruf nahy munkar	to command righteousness and to prevent evilness
amir	leader
Bank Mu'amalat Indonesia	Indonesian Islamic Bank
bid'ah	innovation
dar al-harb	infidel state
Darul Islam	(DI) Islamic State
da'wah	call, proselytizing
dawlah	state
al-din wa al-dawlah	religion and state
Forum Komunikasi Ahlussunah wal Jama'ah	(FKAWJ) Communication Forum of Sunni
Front Pembela Islam	Front of Defenders of Islam
Hadith	sayings and deeds of Prophet Muhammad
Hizbut Tahrir	Liberation Party
ijtihad	independent reasoning
Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia	(ICMI) Indonesian Union of Muslim Intellectuals
Jami'at al-Khair	Association of Goodness
Jam'iyyat al-Islah wa al-Irshad	Union for Reformation and Guidance
jihad	religious war
Khalifah	Caliph
khilafah	caliphate
khurafat	superstition

Laskar Jihad	paramilitary fighters
Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab	(LIPIA) Institute for Islamic Knowledge and Arabic
Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia	Council of Indonesian Jihad Fighters
mujahid, pl. *mujahidin*	warrior, warriors
Negara Islam Indonesia	(NII) Indonesian Islamic State
Pancasila	national ideology of Indonesia
Partai Demokrasi Indonesia	Indonesian Democracy Party
Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan	Reformed Indonesian Democracy Party
Partai Persatuan Pembangunan	United Development Party
Persatuan Islam	Union of Islam
Pesantren	Islamic boarding school
posko	center of command or communication
Ramadhan	Islamic fasting month
Reformasi	reform
Ruh	spirit
Sahabat	companions of the Prophet
Salaf	first generation of Muslims
Shari'ah	Islamic laws
shirk	associationism
tabligh akbar	religious mass rally
taqlid	blindly following the opinion of former scholars
tawhid	absolute monotheism
ukhuwah Islamiyah	Islamic brotherhood
usrah	small group

Wahhabi	Islamic sect following Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab

WORSHIPPING THE MOTHER GODDESS:
THE ĐẠO MẪU MOVEMENT IN NORTHERN VIETNAM

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Introduction

There have long been two belief systems in Vietnam: the official ideology, and the folk ideology or folk beliefs (*tín ngưỡng dân gian*). Today, the official ideology exists in government proclamations and plans for development and preservation and it is used by government leaders, academics and by formal organizations and government agencies and schools as a basis for taking action and making political decisions. The folk ideology exists in oral traditions—in myths, legends, folk stories and songs. It is used by the common people to make decisions affecting their personal lives and to serve as a guide for daily living. The folk ideology of Vietnam is generally viewed as a "resistance identity" (Castells 1996: 8). It is a resistance or response to Chinese influences; one which serves to preserve Vietnamese national identity. The co-existence of these ideologies, often contradictory and conflicting, reflects a basic characteristic of Vietnam in accepting the influences of a foreign country or ideology and at the same time resisting that influence by preserving its folk identity.

Đạo Mẫu, the worship of *Mẫu* the Mother Goddesses (also called Holy Mothers), constitutes an important component of folk ideology and identity in Vietnam. Although the historical origins of *Đạo Mẫu* are not clearly documented, it is believed to have its roots in prehistory when the Vietnamese worshipped the spirits of nature. It is possible that the concept of the Mother Goddess came to encompass the many different spirits of nature becoming one spirit manifesting itself in many different forms or deities. In time, the concept of the Mother Goddess was expanded to incorporate folk heroines—real women who emerged in history as protectors or healers. In time, these historical figures were respected and venerated and eventually deified to become other manifestations of the Mother Goddess.

The *Đạo Mẫu* religious movement is centered on the worship of the Mother Goddess in its many manifestations in a *đền*— a temple (or a *phủ* -- a palace[1])—and the observance of a body of rituals. As in many other religions, the

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[1] Palace means *phủ* refers to a temple complex of various buildings, while one single temple is *đền*

act of worship is purposeful and intended to gain a benefit—good fortune, good health, and for the temple (or the palace) to become an important gathering place of worshippers. But unlike many other religions, the leaders of the movement— the clergy and lay leaders—are mostly women. The clergy are shamanistic in the sense that they are said to have the power to move from the real world to the spirit world and back to the real world bringing messages to the worshipper from the spirit world. The key figure is the *Mẫu* (Mother Goddess) whose origins were tied to nature and humans, as well as other personages who were worshipped as supernatural figures or historic characters, or were simply diverse cultural symbols and manifestations of the indigenous native cultures.

This paper provides an ethnographic description of the beliefs, practices and contemporary status of *Đạo Mẫu* in Northern Vietnam. It is based upon participant observation and interviews with leaders and the followers of *Đạo Mẫu*, and with Vietnamese scholars in Thai Nguyen, Thai Binh provinces and Hanoi conducted in 2004 and 2005. The paper also draws on accounts by Vietnamese and foreign researchers.

Studies of Đạo Mẫu

The practices and beliefs of *Đạo Mẫu* have been of interest to many researchers. The earliest studies were undertaken by French scholars or Vietnamese scholars trained in France. Nguyễn Văn Huyên (1944), Durand (1959) and Simon and Simon- Barouh (1973) were among the first scholars to write about *Đạo Mẫu*. Durand compared the practices of Vietnamese *lên đồng* (mediumship or spirit possession associated with *Đạo Mẫu)* with that of Australoid peoples. Simons studied *lên đồng* among Vietnamese expatriates and immigrants living in France. Nguyễn Văn Huyên described Mother Goddess *Liễu Hanh*, a well known historical figure who later became an incarnation of the Mother Goddess. She became the most important of the incarnations and was the only woman to be venerated as one of the pantheon of the four immortals[2] of Vietnamese tradition (Vũ Ngọc Khánh and Ngô Đức Thịnh, 1990). Later, Dror (2002) continues to study Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh* in the connection with an elite Vietnamese woman, Doan Thi Diem.

Interest in *Đạo Mẫu* and other elements of folk belief has increased substantially since the *Đổi Mới* reforms[3] in 1986, which brought about changes in the role of the government in reexamining and promoting the study of traditional

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[2] The four immortals are *Saint Tản Viên, Saint Gióng, Chử Đồng Tử* and Princess *Liễu Hạnh.*
[3] *Đổi Mới* – meaning renewal or revitalization refers to the economic reforms which were adopted in 1986 during the Sixth National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party. The reforms came about as the result of a reexamination of some of the basic ideas of Marxism-Leninism and following Ho Chi Minh's ideology which provided a theoretical foundation for actions taken by the Vietnam government. In one sense these changes were triggered by the growing impact of globalization and also by the fact that the adoption of the classical principles of development were not working.

cultural and ritual activities (Malarney, 2002). Consequently, the practices of *Đạo Mẫu* have been studied by European, American, Australian and Vietnamese researchers. Most studies have been have focused especially on the shamanism of *Đạo Mẫu* and the rites of *lên đồng* (mediumship) which involves spiritual possession with sacred dances and the typical music, such as the works of Norton (2000, 2004), Proschan (2001), Tô Ngọc Thanh (2004), Vargyas (2004), Lê Hồng Lý (2004). Some researchers focused on the medically and spiritually therapeutic aspects of the shamanism of *Đạo Mẫu* such as Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2002, 2004), Chinkarev (2004), and Nguyễn Kim Hiền (2004). Vietnamese researchers have also contributed descriptions of *Đạo Mẫu* and worship of various types of Mother Goddesses in different areas of Vietnam by different ethnic groups---the Việt people (or Kinh, the ethnic majority in Vietnam) and minority groups such as Tày, Chăm, Bru, H'mông and M ường such as the works by Đặng Văn Lung (1991), Nguyễn Thị Yên (2003, 2004), Phạm Quỳnh Phương (2001), Nguyễn Chí Bền, Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn and Nguyễn Duy Hinh (2001) Nguyễn Hữu Thông (2001), and the Friends of Vietnam Heritage (2004). Some of the researchers contributed an analysis of *Đạo Mẫu* within the context of the Vietnamese folklore tradition and Vietnamese culture such as Vũ Ngọc Khánh (1990, 1991), and Nguyễn Minh San (1992), Trần Quốc Vượng (2004). Some other researchers start to do comparative research related to *Đạo Mẫu* such as Kendall (2004). Taylor described the practices of the worship of Mother Goddess as the metaphor of the "feminine spirit" in the pilgrimage with worshippers in southern Vietnam (Taylor, 2001, 2004). Fjelstad (1995) studied the practice of this belief within the Vietnamese community in the San Francisco Bay Area, United States. Among these scholars, Ngô Đức Thịnh (1992, 1996, 2001, 2004), has been one of the most prominent in his studies of *Đạo Mẫu* from both practical and theoretic perspectives.

Đạo Mẫu Beliefs and Practices

Vietnam is a country of many religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Christianity, as well as folk beliefs (*tín ngưỡng dân gian*) as mentioned earlier. These folk beliefs include ancestor worship (*tín ngưỡng thờ tổ tiên*), worship of the village tutelary god (*tín ngưỡng thờ Thành Hoàng*), and *Đạo Mẫu*, or the worship of the maternal divinity (*tín ngưỡng thờ Mẫu*) (Nguyễn Duy Quý, 2004:17)[4]. Vietnamese scholars hold that *Đạo Mẫu* is different from other folk beliefs because it was a universally held belief of all Vietnamese and not a belief held only by people in one province or only by one ethnic group in Vietnam. The spirits of *Đạo Mẫu* were viewed as existing everywhere, from the lowlands to the highland regions, from the country to urban areas, and among every ethnic group from majority to minorities. This came about because of its roots in the worship

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[4] Author's translation from the Vietnamese

of nature and the spirits and forces of nature. *Đạo Mẫu* took on variations in different parts of the country and thus reflected the importance of differing forces and aspects of nature in the different regions. *Đạo Mẫu* was thus the cultural product of the Vietnamese people in relating to themselves and to the forces of nature within geographical regions. The *Mẫu* took the forms of the Mountain, the Ocean, the Valleys, the bogs and wetlands, and the tropical forests.

Evolution of *Đạo Mẫu*

The origins of *Đạo Mẫu* are not clear. Accoding to Ngô Đức Thịnh (2004) *Đạo Mẫu* does not have a consistent form of religious belief. This author theorizes that it involves a system of religious beliefs that has evolved over three phases: 1) the worship of individual goddesses (spirits) of nature; then 2) the worship of Mother Goddesses; and finally, 3) the worship of the Mother Goddess of the three-four palaces (or three-four palaces religion) where the Mother Goddess is viewed as having power over the elements of nature and the heavens, and human beings. Thus, initially, there was the phase of worshipping Goddesses such as the Sun-Goddess and the Rice-Goddess. These goddesses had no maternal virtue or human characteristics. The second stage was the worship of Mother Goddesses such as Mother Âu Cơ, the mother of the Việt nation, the Royal Mothers, the Mother Goddesses of Heaven, of Forest, and of Water. This stage was based on the worship of the Goddesses of nature but the difference is that these Goddesses acquired maternal attributes and became Mothers. I believe that at this stage the more important goddesses or spirits were viewed as divinities with some anthropomorphic and maternal qualities, though they were limited to one domain or another. The third stage saw the worship of the Mother Goddess of the three-four palaces. "Three--four palaces" --*Tam Phủ - Tứ Phủ* does not refer literally to the number of palaces or temples (as in Day Palace, or *Phủ Dầy*[5]) but rather, refers to the three or four elements of the Universe: Heaven (*Thiên Phủ*), Earth (*Địa Phủ*), Water (*Thoải Phủ*) and Mountains and Forest (*Nhạc Phủ*). Thus, at this stage the concept of a Mother Goddess emerges, with influence over all of nature, meaning the physical environment in its totality not just single elements such as water or earth, and over human life. The first and second stages of the evolution of *Đạo Mẫu* worship are common to any agricultural society. These stages bear an indigenous and endogenous character while the stage of the three-four palace religion came about as a result of Chinese Daoist influences. However, eventually, the three-four palace religion began to incorporate features of the ceremonial worshipping of the Goddesses of Nature. With the appearance of

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[5] The word *phủ* in "*phủ Dầy*" means "palace," refers to a temple complex of various buildings. The word *phủ* means "palace" in the phrase "*Tam Phủ - Tứ Phủ*" refers to specific spiritual domains for specific Mother Goddess.

Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*, a real life Vietnamese princess, the three-four palace religion became a truly Vietnamese belief.

In *Đạo Mẫu*, as in all religions, there is a view of how the world came to be. The central idea of *Đạo Mẫu* is that nature is nurturing and beneficent. Not unlike the concept of a "Mother Earth," this entity is seen as the life force which supports and sustains life in nature. *Mẫu* (Mother Goddess) plays this same role in creating and maintaining a human family, and by extension, a nation and human society. *Mẫu* is viewed and worshiped as "the Creator and maintainer of the Universe and Human Beings" (Ngô Đức Thịnh, 2004: 789).

Contemporary Belief and Practices of Đạo Mẫu

Today, believers see an explanation in *Đạo Mẫu* for how life came to be and how life is to be lived. *Đạo Mẫu* developed a conception of human life based on the worship of real-life "mothers" of the living people and for the benefit of living people. Thus, every deity in *Đạo Mẫu* reflects the qualities of a kind-hearted Vietnamese Mother who is both a divinity and a normal woman at the same time. *Đạo Mẫu* does not focus on the afterlife, or death. It cares about the present life and the question how people can gain a happy and fulfilling life during their time on Earth. This focus on life is manifested in their chants and prayers. These chants sing of the many things people wish for in their daily life-- good weather for good harvests, good health for everyone, happy life for a prosperous country, and the like. The content of the chants are very clear and simple. This is different from the content of Buddhist chants which sing the praises of abstract concepts, ambiguous ideas and distant things.

Đạo Mẫu has standardized rituals with a formal calendar of ceremonies and a large body of regular worshippers[6] who attend the ceremonies. There is no formal training for performance of the ritual and people learned from each other in oral forms. The sacred dances with the music and songs (*Chầu văn*) in the ritual of *Đạo Mẫu* have been studied by a lot of scholars such as Nortan 2000, Tô Ngọc Thanh 2004. The music and dances were immensely popular, and during the Nguyen dynasty there were regular performance competitions within the country.

The pantheistic system includes a hierarchy of divinities. There is one Supreme Deity which is the Jade Emperor (*Ngọc Hoàng*) in the formal ideology of *Đạo Mẫu* and which is the Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh* in the ideology of *Đạo Mẫu* which is practiced. Because the central figure of worship can manifest itself in many forms, the pantheon of deities has evolved. These represent not only the spirits of nature but also historic personages who have contributed to the country

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[6] I use two terms: "worshippers" refers to the active believers who come to the temples to worship and attend the ritual regularly, while "believers" refers to the passive believers who believe in Mother Goddess, who agree with The Maternal Principle in Vietnamese culture (Trần Quốc Vượng) but who do not go to temples or attend rituals.

and the culture or who have possessed a substantive spiritual power. Most of these deities are women and embody feminine qualities.

Thánh Mẫu Liễu Hạnh: The Supreme Mother Goddess

Besides the abstracted or anthropomorphic Goddesses in the Vietnamese folk consciousness, there are "heroic" divinities who actual human beings and historical personages. Among them, Princess *Liễu Hạnh* or Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh* or *Vân Cát Thần Nữ* (the supreme deity in the pantheon of *Đạo Mẫu*) is one of the four immortals of Vietnamese mythology (Vũ Ngọc Khánh and Ngô Đức Thịnh 1990).

Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh* was said to have been the daughter of the Jade Emperor (*Ngọc Hoàng*). Because she broke a treasured cup belonging to her father she was reborn as a mortal, a daughter in the Lê family (in present day Nam Định province) in 1557. She had a short life, marrying and having a child at 18, then dying at age 21. Because of her love for life as a mortal, the Emperor allowed her to be reincarnated one more time. During this life she wandered through the country, enjoying the beauties of nature, and meeting many people. She created many miracles and helped her people drive away the Chinese invaders. She became a champion of the people, even fighting with the King in a dispute she could not win. Because of her virtuous behavior the Kinh people rallied to her support and made a place for her in the *Đền Sòng* in Thanh Hóa province. In time she was deified and became the most important of the Mother Goddesses and she became a role model for all Vietnamese women.

No matter how her life may be interpreted, *Liễu Hạnh* became a symbol of feminine power. She broke from the Confucianism that underscored female subjugation to male authority. She emphasized happiness, freedom of movement and independent of thought. Feared and loved at the same time, her principles of punishing the bad and rewarding the good also sent a message of protection and hope for social justice to the population then troubled by the upheavals of the 17th-19th centuries. A divine figure (immortal, fairy) as well as a historical person (daughter, spouse, mother), *Liễu Hạnh*, though she lived in the 16th century in Vietnam, is still revered by all of the Vietnamese people. Having shared the same joys and pains as mortal beings, she is perceived as the most understanding and benevolent goddess (Friends of Vietnam Heritage: 37).

For many, *Liễu Hạnh* thus became the symbol of the ideal Vietnamese woman, compassionate, and an independent and free spirited woman. *Liễu Hạnh* symbolized the beauty of the Vietnamese spirit and its ability to overcome outside influences which Confucianism, Taoism or Buddhism represented. She became a popular figure in Vietnamese culture and would become an important figure in *Đạo Mẫu*. She became part of the pantheon of goddesses in *Đạo Mẫu*, becoming Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh* - the Holy Mother of Heaven and was quickly elevated to the position of being the most popular and most important within the pantheon of *Đạo Mẫu.* The fact that Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh* is both "divine"

and human adds tremendously to her popularity, and makes her an achievable model of behavior. She ultimately becomes the Supreme Divinity, ruling over all of the other lesser divinities and over human beings as well.

The Divinities of Đạo Mẫu

Because of the way *Đạo Mẫu* evolved and the inclusiveness of the religious movement, a confusing array of divine spirits and goddesses and deified women make up the *Đạo Mẫu* pantheon. These heroic figures are the personification of the virtues of women and actual women-- leaders in wars against the many foreign invaders Vietnam has experienced, or leaders in life-- especially virtuous women venerated for their ability to handle difficult situations, as well as from myths and legends from the different ethnic groups of Vietnam. Thus, the Mường people have *Bà Si, Bà Sổ* (Lady Si, Lady So); the Thái people have *Mẹ Bầu* (Mother Bau); the Tày people have *Mẹ Hoa* (Mother Hoa); the Kinh people have *Mười Hai Bà Mụ* (Twelve Lady Mu). In their folk legends, the Kinh people have *Mẹ Âu Cơ* (Mother Au Co), *Mẹ Nàng* (Mothers Nang- daughters of King Hùng), *Mẹ Thánh Gióng* (Mother Giong Saint), the Tày people have *Mẹ Già Cải* (Mother Gia Cai), the Thái people have *Mẹ Yke* (Mother Yke), the Chăm people have *Mẹ Thiên Ya Na* (Mother Thien Ya Na), the Mường people have *Mẹ Giạ Dìn* (Mother Gia Din).

Within the folkloric traditions of Vietnam there are seventy-five Goddesses (Đỗ Thị Hảo and Mai Thị Ngọc Chúc 1984). The evolution of these goddesses and the veneration of women and the feminine qualities and virtues over time was not the product of an attempt to promote gender equity or "woman power." It was an acknowledgement of the real life role played by women and the valuing of this role elevated to supernatural or transcendental levels. Thus the concept of a goddess of agriculture or rice came about "because the notion of fertility, held dear by a wet rice agricultural population, was unconsciously connected with that of human procreation by women" (Friends of Vietnam Heritage 2004: 29). This notion of fecundity also probably gave rise to the conception of a Mother Earth or Mother Nature in the Vietnamese folkloric tradition, and in the myths of many other countries as well.

Within the temples of *Đạo Mẫu* there is a multitude of deities arranged in a ranked order. First among these is the Jade Emperor (*Ngọc Hoàng*). He is the supreme deity and is provided a place of honor but viewed as a figurehead not much worshipped. He is viewed as being insignificant perhaps because of his masculinity, but more importantly because of his Chinese heritage. The only Supreme Deity of *Đạo Mẫu* is the Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*. Other divinities taking their place in the pantheon- three palace or four palaces *(Tam Phủ -- Tứ Phủ)* of three or four Mother Goddesses in the Mother Goddess altar - the main altar in the temples, *Ngũ Vị Vương Quan* (Five Great Mandarins), *Tứ Vị Chầu Bà* (Four Ladies of Honor), *Ngũ Vị Hoàng Tử* (Five Princes), *Thập Nhị Cô Nương*

(Twelve Royal Damsels), *Thập Vị Vương Cậu* (Ten Boy Attendants (Pages)), *Quan Ngũ Hổ* (Five Tigers), and *Ông Lốt Rắn* (Monsignor Snake).

       In the pantheon of *Đạo Mẫu*, there are male deities and female deities. Early Vietnamese society was matrilineal, as scholars such as Đào Duy Anh (1939), Huỳnh Sanh Thông (1986), Whitmore (1984), Vũ Ngọc Khánh (1990), Trần Quốc Vượng (1996) and Đặng Văn Lung (1991) have shown. Yet, women could only become leaders with power when they get married (Ngô Đức Thịnh[7]). Thus, as men are acknowledged as having an important role in life they could also be worshipped. This is the explanation of having both male and female divinities in the pantheon of *Đạo Mẫu*, under the direction of the Supreme Deity, who was a female deity, Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*.

The Temples of Đạo Mẫu

As the belief systems of the *Đạo Mẫu* were formalized, temples and places of worship were built where practitioners could come together to participate in ceremonial activities and to pray for good fortune and recovery from illness. Some of these temples were private, built by individuals, or families or communities usually in gratitude for some good fortune granted. Other temples were built for community members to gather. Some of these were built by individuals who were thought to possess certain shamanistic powers. The earliest temple is *Đền Quốc Mẫu – Âu Cơ* (for the worship of the National Mother) in Hiền Lương commune (Sông Thao district, Phú Thọ province) in northern Vietnam. This is in an area thought to be the ancient capital- Phong Châu of Văn Lang state which is believed to be the oldest kingdom in Vietnam (more than 4000 years ago according to myths). Other temples are the *Đền Đổng xung Thiên thần Vương Mẫu* (temple for the worship of the Mother of Saint *Gióng*, a national hero), and the *Đền Tây Thiên* (temple for the worship of the Royal Mother). Both temples are on Mount Tam Đảo, located in Phúc Yên, Vĩnh Phúc, Sơn Tây provinces, Northern Vietnam. Tam Đảo is the sacred mountain of one of the four immortals, Saint *Tản Viên* ((Vũ Ngọc Khánh and Ngô Đức Thịnh 1990).

       There are hundreds of other private and community temples and palaces throughout Vietnam. In North Vietnam, far toward the northeast, there are seventeen temples in Lạng Sơn province including the *Đền Mẫu Đồng Đăng*, *Đền Mẫu Tây Hồ*, *Đền Bắc Lệ Linh Từ* (for the worship of *Mẫu Thượng Ngàn*-- the Mother Goddess of the Forest). In the Red River Delta region there are the biggest temples and palaces: *Đền Bà Chúa Kho* (for the worship of the Queen of Treasure) in Bắc Ninh province, *Phủ Dầy* (for the worship of Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*) in Nam Định province. Phủ Dầy is the biggest central palace of *Đạo Mẫu* and the "holy land" of the religious believer. In Vụ Bản district in Bắc Ninh province there is a complex of two palaces -- *Vân Cát*, and *Tiên Hương* and nine temples (for the worship of Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*) as well as the Imperial

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[7] A personal interview, November 11, 2005 in Hanoi, Vietnam

tomb of Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*. In Hanoi, the most typical palace is *Phủ Tây Hồ* - West Lake Palace (for the worship Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*). In Thanh Hóa province there is *Đền Sòng (*or *Đền Sòng Sơn)*, *Đền Phố Cát* (for the worship of Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh*). Besides the temples and palaces dedicated to the worship of *Mẫu,* many other temples and pagodas in Vietnam have an altar for the worship of *Mẫu*. These altars are usually positioned beside or behind the image of the primary spirit being worshipped in the temple, according to the common saying: "*Tiền Thần hậu Mẫu*" (Spirit in front, Mother Goddess behind) or "*Tiền Phật hậu Mẫu*" (Buddha image in front, Mother Goddess behind).

The Design of the Temples and Altars

In its own special places of worship, the *Đạo Mẫu* temple or palace, the holy altar is set at the center of the facility for worshippers. The temple can stand alone, be set within a complex of temples, called a palace, such as in the temples of *Phủ Dầy* (Nam Định) or *Phủ Tây Hồ* (Hanoi) or *Đền Sòng* (Thanh Hóa). Sometimes the place of worship is in more humble surroundings, such as in a building attached to a pagoda or within a Buddhist sanctuary, albeit at the back. The design of the holy altar is uniform in most temples, with images of *Tam Phủ - Tứ Phủ* (three or four symbolic palaces of three or four Mother Goddesses on the holy alter) to *Ngũ Vị Vương Quan* (Five Great Mandarins), *Tứ Vị Chầu Bà* (Four Ladies of Honor), *Ngũ Vị Hoàng Tử* (Five Princes), *Thập Nhị Cô Nương* (Twelve Royal Damsels), *Thập Vị Vương Cậu* (Ten Boy Attendants [Pages]), *Quan Ngũ Hổ* (Five Tigers), *Ông Lốt Rắn* (Monsignor Snake). Decorative elements include the *nón quai thao* (traditional hats of Vietnamese women), *hài* (ancient shoes) and *đèn lồng* (decorative multi-colored lanterns), and *lọng* (parasols or umbrellas) and *thuyền* (boats) made of paper.

The templates generally have an elaborate "three palaces" (or four palaces sometimes) design with the *cung đệ nhất* (the first palace) on the right side dedicated to Mother Goddess *Thoải* – the Mother Goddess of Water, clothed in white; the *cung đệ nhị* (the second palace) is usually on the left side and it is dedicated to Mother Goddess *Thượng Ngàn* – the Mother Goddess of the Forest, clothed in green; and the *cung đệ tam* (the third palace) is in the center and dedicated to Mother Goddess *Liễu Hạnh* - the Mother Goddess of Heaven (also considered Mother Goddess of Earth and of Human Beings), the Supreme leader of all the Mother Goddesses, clothed in red. The display is further divided into three levels: *tầng trên không* (the highest level) has images of *Ông Lốt Rắn* (Two Monsignor Snakes); *tầng ngang* (the middle level) has images of the many other manifestations of the Mother Goddesses and other spirits; *tầng hạ ban* (the low level) has images of *Quan Ngũ Hổ* (Five Tigers). In front of the door of the holy altar there is usually an elaborate arrangement of water sources, stones, flowers, trees, and grasses.

The design of holy altar is a symbol of femininity for the Vietnamese. In front of the highest level dedicated to "Mothers", the worshipper can look up to see scenes of rivers and lakes represented by the snake (water being symbolic of woman) and look down at the low level to see the earth, symbolized by an image of the tiger (the earth being another symbol of woman). Looking ahead, the worshipper can see the Mother Goddess of Forest on the left side, the Mother Goddess of Water on the right side, and at the center - a representation of the Mother Goddess of Heaven, of the Earth and of Human Beings. The decorations are ornate, complex and symbolic with historic meaning, pageantry and a feeling of grandness and are designed to impress and awe the worshipper and inspire a feeling of reverence and awareness.

The Rituals and Ceremonies of Đạo Mẫu

The ideology of *Đạo Mẫu* does not exist in written form. There is no "bible" or "holy book" since *Đạo Mẫu* was formed in the oral tradition. Its power to evoke and communicate lies in the power of the ritual and the ceremonies. A thousand chants and hundreds of dances can be remembered, and hundreds of musical compositions can be played from generation to generation by maintenance of this oral tradition. The rite most performed is *lên đồng– hầu bóng*, which is a possession ceremony or mediumship ritual. The rite is the multiple integration of the soul of the divinities of *Đạo Mẫu* to ông đồng (male mediums[8]) and bà đồng (female mediums) invoked to pray for good fortune and protection from misfortune by the provision of nurturing assistance. The mediums are *cốt* – the empty physical body that the divinities borrow to appear.

The *các giá đồng* (the sacred dances) were an important part of the rite. There are seventy-two sacred dances and these include *giá các quan lớn* – the sacred dances of the Great Mandarins, *giá các cậu*– the sacred dance of the Boy Attendants (Pages), *giá chầu bà* – the sacred dance of the Ladies of Honor, *giá các cô*– the sacred dance of the Royal Damsels and so on. During the rite, the sacred dances were performed with *hát văn (*or *hát chầu văn*) (the Vietnamese traditional type of singing). *Hát văn* can also be call *hát nói,* meaning "singing while speaking". The song had to be performed with a specific rhythm and and included 11 sentences with 2-4 verses having 5-7 words each. The last sentence was called the summary sentence with 6 words in six-eight styles. *Hát văn* was performed during the rituals by *đồng* – the medium – and by *cung văn* – a musical ensemble – which played *nhạc văn*- music accompaniment to *hát văn* and create *nhạc cảnh*-- "songscapes" (Nortan 2004). As Norton states: "*chầu văn* constructs a spiritual presence and music enables mediums to assume new identities and to engage with the people and places beyond their local world" (Nortan 2004: 341).

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[8] Although *ông đồng* (male mediums) sometimes perform the rite, they are usually dressed in female attire.

Đạo Mẫu celebrates two main festivals: *"Tháng Tám giỗ Cha, Tháng Ba giỗ Mẹ"* (The month-long death anniversary of the Father [General *Trần Hưng Đạo*] in August[9] and the death anniversary of the Mother [Princess *Liễu Hạnh*] in March[10]). The worshippers usually come to the temple on the first and fifteenth of the lunar calendar month to offer their thanks or to make requests. The *lên đồng- hầu bóng* (mediumship) rites are performed on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month or on special festival days. In all of these elaborate ceremonies and performances, women played the dominant role.

The Organization of Đạo Mẫu

The leaders of most *Đạo Mẫu* temples are females although there is no rule that they must be women. Most of them are said to have a "special ability" to communicate with the divinity and spirits. Some are people who can be possessed by the spirits, called *nhập vai* (take the part of spirits) in a special rite called *lên đồng* (mediumship). These people "are not considered to be powerful by essence, but solely empowered by spirits. They are referred to as 'a mount for spirits' like horses are mounts for people, and used by spirits of the cult (*Đạo Mẫu*) merely to heal souls and treat ailments" (Friends of Vietnam Heritage 2004: 38). Thus, these female leaders or priestesses are considered shamans who can bring themselves into the possession and receive supernatural power to help heal souls or bodies, cure ailments, bestow wealth and prosperity, or see future events.

These female leaders of *Đạo Mẫu* are also folk virtuosos (masters of the folk stage) and the virtuosos or masters of the ordinary life of women in *"sân khấu tâm linh,"* meaning the spiritual stage or realm (Ngô Đức Thịnh, 1996). Thus, they create their own world by performing ritual dances, songs and music which bring the women more opportunities to show and share their beauty and desires. As a result through the design of the holy altar, these women leaders create an atmosphere, an environment of women and for women. Describing the practices of four palace religions among Vietnamese communities in San Francisco, Fjelstad also points out that "the social nature of spirit possession

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[9]This festival is held in the 8th month of the lunar calendar mainly in Thái Bình (his native place) and Kiếp Bạc (Hải Dương). The Father, a subsequent branch of the cult, is believed to have been re-incarnated in General *Trần Hưng Đạo* (13th century), one of the great national heroes who defeated Mongol invaders and is now worshipped on an almost equal footing with Mother *Liễu Hạnh*. The festival is characterized by a boat procession and race, a commemorative rite re-enacting the glorious past (the victorious battles of *Trần Hưng Đạo*, and the legend of the holy snake, *Bát Hải đại vương*- a descendant from the Dragon Lord – who helped Kinh *Hùng* fight his enemies at sea (Friends of Vietnam Heritage 2004: 45)

[10] This festival is held in the 3rd month of the lunar calendar and celebrated most spectacularly in *Phủ Dầy* (Nam Định) where *Liễu Hạnh* was born. The focus of the event is a procession from Mother Goddess' temple to the pagoda to honor the intervention of Buddha when Princess *Liễu Hạnh* was at the lowest point in her life (Friends of Vietnam Heritage 2004: 45).

ceremonies helps foster the formation of social support groups that have far reaching consequences" (Fjelstad, 1995: 141).

The leaders are not mere caretakers of their temples-- *thủ đền* – a person who looked after the temple or *thủ nhang* – a person looked after the worshipping or *viết sớ* - a person or scribe who writes the petition to the spirits, which usually are men. They are the chief of groups of mediums or shamans selected by Mother Goddesses to be *con cái nhà Mẫu* – the Mother Goddess's offspring. If the design of the holy altar is as an imperial "palace" or a home, these female mediums play the role of the leader of a family. Thus, *nhà Mẫu* (the group of people in the temple) is like a family. The female leader also keeps the money and the goods of *nhà Mẫu* to bestow good fortune for the worshippers. The leader of temple has both the visible and manifest power to rule over affairs in *nhà Mẫu* and she has the invisible, spiritual power to help society. Many believers feel that the possession of these dual powers shows that Vietnamese women, although seemingly compliant and sometimes apparently victimized, have never given up their power.

In *nhà Mẫu*, the worshippers divided themselves into two groups – those who assist the priestesses in carrying out the rituals and ceremonies, much like the lay leaders of a congregation in a Western church, and those who come to the temple simply to wish for guidance or good fortune. The first group is called *con công, đệ tử* – the group of persons selected by Mother Goddesses to be Mother Goddesses' offspring and help with the performance of the shamanistic rites *lên đồng* – mediumship. In addition, this group consists of the people such as *cung văn* – who play music and sing during the ceremonies, *thủ đền* – caretakers of the temple, *thủ nhang* – those who oversee the services and *viết sớ* – the scribe who writes out the petition of believers. Most of the members of this important group are women, except for the scribe. The second group is larger and is given the name *con nhang* (people who come to the temple through an initial ritual *lễ đội bát nhang*[11]). These people go to the temple to pray for good fortune and advice. They also want to be the Mother Goddesses' offspring as the first group but they don't perform the *lên đồng* (mediumship) rites, they are just observers and beneficiaries.

The believers of *Đạo Mẫu* are expressive and exuberant as they get caught up in the spirit of the ceremony and the ceremonies are festive and very crowded and not somber. There are no strict rules of membership, no limitations or requirements, nor elaborate rites of passage such as a baptism to become a worshipper of *Đạo Mẫu,* so anyone and everyone is invited to participate in these ceremonies.

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[11] *Lễ đội bát nhang*, the ritual of "carrying incense on the head," is for initiates who want to go to the temple with the belief and desire of changing their fate. They also want to be the Mother Goddesses' offspring, but they don't practice the rite *lên đồng(* mediumship). They are attendants.

Conclusion

Đạo Mẫu plays an important role in the lives of followers and other Vietnamese. It is a source of solace when an individual or family suffers illness or tragedy. It is also a potential source of good fortune in its priestesses' ability to help individuals see what lies ahead. The belief system is familiar and simple to understand because of its roots in tradition. It is a source of social interaction with its ceremonies and festivals. It is a gathering place of like minded individuals and it offers each person the comfort and support of each other. Most important, *Đạo Mẫu* is the collective deification of each worshipper's own mother, and plays the many roles of a mother on a personal and societal level.

　　Đạo Mẫu is primarily a woman's religion. The object of worship and the source of religious succor is woman, or rather the power of women – to give life and sustain life. *Đạo Mẫu* is a celebration of womanhood and motherhood and women play an important role within the movement. The clergy and leaders are mostly women; the shamanistic priestesses who bring the past and the future and the present together are women; the worshippers and practitioners are mostly women. *Đạo Mẫu* is an important social force in present day Vietnam. It has created a "sisterhood" – one of the few places in a male dominant society where women can exercise leadership, demonstrate ability, gain respect and find fulfillment as a person and a member of society. One of the female leaders of *Đạo Mẫu* temples in Thái Nguyên province – *Đồng Vọng* – stated in an interview to me that since she became the leader of the temple, her husband and her children behave more respectfully to her. Also, she had chances to help her people who were worshipers in her temple by knowing them, sharing with them and giving advice to them on how to solve the problems of daily life. She thought the temple is the place the worshippers have a chance to get together for special rituals, participate in social activities which make their life more fun and meaningful. She thought being a woman helps her to do a better job in her leading role of the temple because naturally people feel more free and comfortable to talk with a woman about their problems. Thus, I believe, most important, *Đạo Mẫu* represents the institutionalization of the Vietnamese ideal of womanhood, epitomized by her role as a mother. In a way, *Đạo Mẫu* starts with recognition of the importance of woman as mother, universalizes and deifies her qualities as a mother then offers this vision as an ideal for real life women and mothers to follow as a guide for living in today's society.

　　Đạo Mẫu is important as a religious movement for the solace it provides worshippers and practitioners and the ability to deal with the stresses of everyday living. But, I believe it is also important as a vehicle for recognizing and promoting the abilities and powers of women, first within a small social group, and then perhaps within a traditional society which Vietnam is. This then is the gift that *Đạo Mẫu* brings to Vietnamese society, its recognition of the power of woman as mother and the potential for using this power to transform the broader society. The relationship between the role of women in *Đạo Mẫu* and in

Vietnamese society has not been well studied. Ngô Đức Thịnh (2002: 14; 2004: 26, 27), Trần Quốc Vượng (2004: 144), and Vũ Ngọc Khánh (2004: 687) make reference to the potential importance of this aspect of *Đạo Mẫu*, but none of them has made it the subject of a major study. I agree with these scholars and hope that future research will explore how *Đạo Mẫu* has influenced the role of women in Vietnamese society. I do believe this will be a fruitful area of study.

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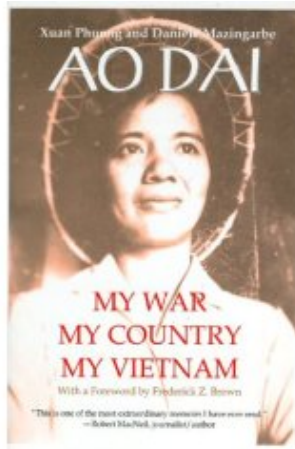
Ao Dai: My War, My Country, My Vietnam
by Xuan Phuong, and Daniele Mazingarbe.
2004.
Translated from French by Lynn M. Bensimon and edited by Jonathan E. Myers. New York: Emquad International.

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  Ao Dai: My War, My Country, My Vietnam is a thoroughly engaging first-hand account of one woman's experiences of revolution, war, social upheaval, deprivation and peace during the last half of Vietnam's 20th century. *Ao Dai* provides insight into the experiences of women during the anti-colonial resistance movements against the French and briefly, the Japanese, and the subsequent struggle and war with the United States. This is a perspective that is lacking in the literature on the Indochina Wars, and *Ao Dai* fills a gap in the growing body of memoir literature on the multivariate Vietnamese experiences of these wars. In particular, the book fills a gap in the English-language literature on such topics. In this respect, it is comparable to several other key writings of women's experiences of the Vietnamese Revolution and it is useful to use these as comparisons in this review of Xuan Phuong's *Ao Dai.* These examples include Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989),[1] Duong Thi Thoa's memoir essay translated in the Women's Studies journal *Signs* (1998),[2] Nguyen Thi Dinh's memoir *No Other Road to Take* (1976),[3] and Duong Van Mai Elliott's *The Sacred Willow* (1999).[4] Among these, Xuan Phuong's memoir is unique and significant in several ways.

  First, Phuong candidly recounts growing up as part of a colonial-era élite family in Dalat and Hue. She candidly discusses the hardships and advantages this offered her, and reflects upon how this affected the course of her life. Phuong generally depicts herself as a naive and inexperienced young girl who was swept

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[1] Hayslip, Le Ly, and with Jay Wurts. 1989 When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace. New York: Plume.

[2] Duong Thi Thoa (Le Thi), translated by Mark Sidel. 1998 Changing My Life: How I Came to the Vietnamese Revolution. Signs 23(1):1017-1030.

[3] Nguyen Thi Dinh, and translated by Mai V. Elliott. 1976 No Other Road to Take: The Memoir of Mrs. Nguyen Thi Dinh. M.V. Elliott, transl. Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program.

[4] Elliott, Duong Van Mai.1999 The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family. New York: Oxford University Press. Interestingly, two decades before publishing her own memoir, Elliott was one of the principal translators of Nguyen Thi Dinh's memoir.

up in the tide of revolutionary activity. In her prologue, Phuong details the very moment when she leaves her parents' home to join the Resistance on March 19, 1946. She was just 16 and was dressed in her school uniform, a purple *áo dài* or tunic dress when she literally and figuratively crossed the river from life as a member of the bourgeois class to join the revolution. In the first part of her book, which chronicles her family history and her formative years in Hue and Dalat, Phuong conveys a growing awareness of her family's relative luxury and her sensitivity of the disparity between rich and poor in the early part of the 20th century Vietnam, still under French rule. Phuong explains how this influenced her choices as a teenager and motivated her dedication to the revolutionary cause. This element of Phuong's narrative in particular, contrasts to Elliott's *The Sacred Willow* in which she seems to avoid coming to terms with her family's upper-middle class status.

Second, like Duong Thi Thoa's memoir essay translated in *Signs*, Phuong remained in Hanoi throughout the war years *and* the impoverished postwar years (which provides a dramatic contrast with the relatively dynamic picture of Vietnam these days). In spite of the relative military and political success of the Vietnamese Revolution with the final withdrawal of American forces and reunification of the country in 1975, the late 1970s and 1980s saw economic deterioration and political isolation, which brought continued suffering to the people. Phuong details how she and others suffered during the 1970s and 1980s and she gives us a brutally honest picture of those stark years in Hanoi. She eventually finds success in working as a documentary filmmaker but ultimately seeks solace by moving back to the south and going into business in the art world.

Third, another unique quality of Phuong's memoir is that she seems to straddle a "middle-ground" politically, as she alternately rejects and embraces the political (communist) message throughout her life as a revolutionary. Where other authors espouse a particular political perspective, Phuong seems somewhat ambivalent about politics. Where other memoir writers display a political outlook characteristic of many who left Vietnam for political or economic reasons (Hayslip and Elliott), or having determined the course of their lives according to political motives (Nguyen Thi Dinh and Duong Thi Thoa), Phuong alternately embraces and rejects political ideals (in particular, communism). And yet one of her primary reasons to write the book is to show the youth of today what their forebears have suffered. This makes her account seem more realistic and interesting, to see that her beliefs and actions are a more complex reality and not necessarily a "black and white" issue as with many memoirs.

The main text of *Ao Dai* is laid out in sections of varying length which follow a linear, chronological path in a highly episodic mode. I suspect that this somewhat erratic format resulted because the book was actually narrated to Ms. Mazingarbe, in French, and subsequently typed up and translated into English. Nevertheless, the narrative largely flows from one story to the next. Phuong avoids dwelling on her many traumatic experiences and we do not get a sense of that elusive "deep memory" that other memoirs of painful times have exhibited

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(such as Spiegelman's exploration of his father's Holocaust experience[5]). This silence in Phuong's narrative gave me pause, as it seems like there are large omissions. Yet, in essence, this is further evidence that personal memory and its recounting are subjective activities which depend on the writer's goals and other factors.

A foreword by Frederick Z. Brown situates *Ao Dai* in its larger historical and political context and ends with the statement that "Phuong represents a bridge between the Vietnam of the war years and the Vietnam we see today" and as such, Phuong, the person, becomes Phuong, the symbol of a "new" Vietnam. Indeed the full title of her memoir, *Ao Dai: My War, My Country, My Vietnam* is telling in this respect. We infer that this memoir is a personal account, not only of her life, but of her country's history. In her prologue, Phuong declares one motivation for writing the memoir: "It occurred to me that telling my story would allow me to render homage to the companions of my youth, those whose examples I followed…I also wanted today's youth, especially the Vietnamese for whom uncle Ho is only a historical figure, to understand the suffering that our generation endured. Finally, I wanted to explain to my newly reunited family why I had made choices that separated us from each other for so long" (xvi). Here Phuong expresses the desire to bridge not only her country's past and present, but also the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese living outside of Vietnam.

An excellent research project would be to perform a thorough analysis of Vietnamese women's narratives such as those mentioned here; and *Ao Dai* would be an interesting component of such a study. In the meantime, *Ao Dai* is recommended for undergraduate courses or graduate seminars on Vietnamese history or the Vietnam War and could also be useful in Women's Studies or Anthropology courses. One minor technical aspect will be of some irritation to specialists on Vietnam, and that is the lack of diacritics for Vietnamese words and a few typographical errors of Vietnamese words. However, this issue is minor in consideration of the larger appeal and viability of the book as a whole.

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[5] Spiegelman, Art. 1986-1991 Maus: A Survivor's Tale. New York: Pantheon Books.
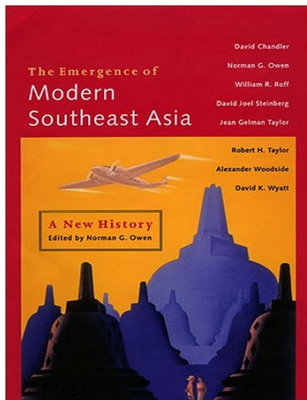
The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia: A New History
Norman Owen, ed. 2005. Honolulu:
University of Hawaii Press.

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The word "emergence" is a fraught term, appearing in scholarly discourse on Southeast Asia on a seemingly regular basis, and showing up in contemporary articles about the region from a wide variety of sources as well. For example, read an article about the avian flu epidemic or developing economies in Asia, and one is likely to encounter the word "emergence", as in "emerging diseases" or "emerging markets." The word has implicit dramatic value, suggesting that an abstraction is being defined in an active way by being held up to the light and away from the shadows of the past. More often than not, the word is used with regard to developing regions or countries, although it has lost some of its literal punch and it is easy to gloss over it without absorbing its implications. The title of the text, therefore, envisions an historical juncture that demarcates the pre-modern from the modern, while spanning three hundred years of Southeast Asian history.

The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia, edited by Norman Owen, intends to serve as a kind of companion to another general historical reference of Southeast Asian studies, *In Search of Southeast Asia*, edited by David Steinberg (2nd edition 1997, University of Hawaii Press), which is comprised of a more detailed historical survey of the region in the modern period. One of the measurements of this text, therefore, will be its utility for the student of the region and its ability to synthesize a wide field of scholarship into a distilled essence by its essential authorial personalities – in this case eight names that have come to be relatively synonymous with the national histories of the countries they study, such as David Chandler (Cambodia), Norman Owen (the Philippines), William R. Roff (Malaysia), David Joel Steinberg (the Philippines), Jean Gelman Taylor (Indonesia), Robert Taylor (Burma), Alexander Woodside (Vietnam) and David K. Wyatt (Thailand) . The objective of the project, according to the preface, was to try to "break the original book (*In Search of Southeast Asia*) completely open, take a fresh look at modern Southeast Asian history, and draft a shorter, more accessible text for the twenty-first century." (p. xiv).

The authors make clear, then, that we are no longer "in search of Southeast Asia" because as a discrete unit, it has emerged, blinking in the dazzling light of the twenty-first century, a century in which "secular nationalism" has triumphed across much of Southeast Asia and, perhaps, the entire globe. Two photographs included in the text make this startling transformation clearer: one of Kuala Lumpur circa 1880 (p.

2) and the other of the same city today (p. 3). The comparison of the two photographs is an impressive illustration of the inexorable growth and advancement of economics, population, and the human imagination.

The book is smartly designed, its cover graced with an image culled from an old travel poster depicting Java for an airline company. The text is divided into five sections. "Modernity" (Part 1) begins in the eighteenth century and colonialism's effects are related in parts 2, 3 and 4, while the final part, called "Coping with Independence and Interdependence" details the outcome of the colonial projects in the region and the strategies used to adapt to independence. The book contains six maps and two demographic tables. It is prefaced with information on the changing place-names of the region and an advisory section on how to use the book. Illustrations are peppered liberally throughout the text, which contribute effectively to an understanding of the key points of each chapter. Following each section and subsection is an abbreviated bibliography of "further readings" to guide the reader who would like more information about the material covered in the section.

While the overall aim of this text is ambitious, it runs the risk of remaining a "coffee-table" reference for those who are more familiar with the histories of the countries that comprise Southeast Asia. However, while students of the region have their own foci and their own references, for the layperson this volume would provide undoubtedly smooth entry into the field in a way that does not tax the attention span, but without some of the deeper issues from the historiography of the region. The style, therefore, is fluid and readable and surprisingly consistent, given the range of authorial voices and styles, and the textbook qualities, for example, photographs and clear subject headings, make this book a valuable and coherent addition to a Southeast Asian history library.

Its drawbacks are generally in keeping with what one might expect from a book that deals with a broadly defined region, a multiplicity of individual national histories and a complexity of historical issues. In keeping with its objective, it is certainly an "accessible" text, with fairly straightforward historical divisions with highly synthesized segments. However, brevity is not always a virtue in historical accounts. For example, chapter six, "Siam: From Ayutthaya to Bangkok" covers a period of dramatic and generally complicated historical events in a mere twelve pages and two photographs.

Generally, the picture of modern Southeast Asia that emerges in the text is a politically balanced one, with a few notable exceptions. For example, in "The Dark Side of Development" (p. 402), the less-than-subtle heading aside, the reader is treated to the standard and simplified litany of complaints that tend to deprive the countries of Southeast Asia of their often staggering modern achievements, or of their ability to "cope" with such problems: i.e., unimaginable poverty, crime, drugs, urban squalor, corruption, prostitution. While these are all obviously present in modern Southeast Asia, they are also found throughout the developed world as well. The implication is that these aspects of life in Southeast Asia are the consequences of development and are, hence, a relatively new phenomenon. In this section, then, is it really necessary to refer to Prime Minister Tanom (Thailand), Presidents Marcos and Estrada (the Philippines), and President Suharto (Indonesia) as "the biggest rogues" [who were] "eventually overthrown"? (p. 403-404) Or, in the same way, is it finally

satisfying for the reader to find in a single paragraph dedicated to the topic that the rise of the notorious commercial sex industry in Thailand is simply attributable to American G.I.'s on R&R during the Vietnam War? (p. 405).

In short, the oversimplifications in this section in particular detract from an otherwise readable book, rather than clarify or correct firmly entrenched preconceptions (and misperceptions) about the region today. These are also illustrative of the problems that a succinct summary of historical trends and developments presents along with the complex picture of modern Southeast Asia. In its mix of conversational and academic styles, the book's overall intent remains clear, but in the provocative rhetorical leaps described above, it highlights the problem of a synthesis of academic thought on an enormous topic with clear political undertones. These final, political intrusions in the text, therefore, were hopefully intended to stimulate debate on the regions current political features. For the student of Southeast Asia, though, it is likely that the editorial position that has been taken with regard to the oversimplified problems that beset modernizing Southeast Asia (and, indeed, the entire world), is merely "preaching to the choir."

Nonetheless, the overall impression of *The Emergence of Modern Southeast Asia* is a positive one. It serves as an excellent reference and introductory text to the modern period in the region, and it nicely, if at times imperfectly, consolidates critical historical and political developments that characterize the region today.