

Becoming better Muslims: Religious authority & ethical improvement in Aceh, Indonesia

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BOOK REVIEW



Becoming better Muslims: Religious authority & ethical improvement in Aceh, Indonesia, by David Kloos, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2017, 212 pp., £22.00, ISBN-13: 978-0691176659

Indonesian provinces, districts and municipalities have adopted over 700 *shari'a* laws since 1998. In his most recent monograph, David Kloos asks if, and if so, how, the religious practice of Indonesian Muslim is affected by this increasing formalization of religious norms and practices. Based on in-depth field research in Aceh, Indonesia's westernmost province, Kloos explores 'the complex processes through which Islamic norms were being created, contested, and transformed' (xiii). Concretely, Chapter 1 examines the political and religious circumstances since the late colonial era that have contributed to Aceh's reputation as a province where conservative public mores reign supreme and whose inhabitants adhere to a strict legal code based on *shari'a* law. However, Kloos shows in Chapter 2 how Islamic scripturalism has had less of an impact on the daily religious practice of ordinary Acehnese than stereotypical accounts of Aceh claimed. He does so through a detailed account of religious practice in Indrapuri subdistrict, a jurisdiction in Aceh Besar district that has a reputation for being a 'militant hotbed.' Yet, residents of Indrapuri practice religion in diverse ways. In a similar vein, Chapter 3 shows how perceptions of what constitutes 'moral leadership' differ greatly among residents of Indrapuri subdistrict. Chapter 4 explores how an Acehnese family reacted to the growing religiosity of one of their members. Kloos shows that a diverse set of financial, social and class conditions shaped the family's reactions to their son's growing outward display of 'piety.' In Chapter 5, drawing on the findings from previous chapters, Kloos concludes that 'the basic concern of dealing with bad behavior is marked by considerable measures of flexibility and creativity.' Ordinary Acehnese, in other words, have a lot more autonomy in reacting to the spread of *shari'a* laws than existing works on the 'Islamization' of Indonesian society and are willing to admit. Finally, Kloos discusses how studying Aceh can inform research on religious practice in Muslim societies more broadly. Avenues for future research include the opportunities and limits of individual agency in religious matters in light of a homogenization of Islamic norms through the spread of *shari'a* laws; how ordinary Muslim understand and deal with moral failure; and how age, life stages, and generational interaction shape people's reflections on what constitutes morally sound behavior.

The book makes several important contributions to studies of religious practice in Indonesia and other countries with sizeable Muslim communities. One, despite Aceh's reputation as the home of the most devout inhabitants of the Indonesian archipelago, there are surprisingly few ethnographic studies of religious practice in the province. Therefore, Kloos' study makes an important contribution to our understanding of religious life in Aceh. Two, there is a dearth of research on how the adoption of *shari'a* laws is shaping religious practice. There are a number of reports, recently published by donor agencies or advocacy groups, which have documented how sexual- and religious minorities such as Indonesia's LGBT, Ahmadi or Shi'a community have been affected by *shari'a* laws. However, Kloos' book is one of the first studies that provides an in-depth account of how Muslim who are considered to be

practicing their religious beliefs within the ‘mainstream’ react to the formalization and bureaucratization of moral norms. Three, Kloos’ account of how people in Aceh understand ‘moral failure’ in the context of a growing homogenization and standardization of such norms contributes to scholarship on ‘morality’ in Muslim-majority societies more broadly. Existing accounts often look solely at class or gender as potential factors shaping Muslims’ understanding of what it means to act morally. Kloos shows that age, life cycles and generational interaction are at least as important in shaping people’s understandings of what it means to behave ‘morally.’



Arguably the most interesting, and contrarian, finding of Kloos’ study is that, despite the growing number of jurisdictions that have adopted *shari’a* laws in Indonesia,¹ ordinary Indonesians continue to enjoy considerable autonomy when it comes to practicing their religious beliefs and identifying the moral values on which to base their lives.

Kloos shows that ordinary Acehnese managed to retain much religious autonomy since the colonial era despite several attempts by local and national authorities to impose official norms and values on the province. However, it is perhaps too early to tell what impact the current wave of *shari’a* laws will have on the daily religious practices of ordinary people and the moral universe they inhabit. Most *shari’a* laws have been adopted only after 2005. It may take a generation or two for the ‘new normal’ these *shari’a* laws seek to establish to seep into Indonesian society. Furthermore, the set-up of the book, a study of religious practices among ordinary Muslim in a province with allegedly conservative public mores, which then reveals that, in fact, religious practices and discourses about ‘morality’ are more complex and nuanced, may indeed show that the impact of *shari’a* laws in Indonesia may be less pronounced than alarmist accounts of the ‘Islamization’ of Indonesia suggest. However, it is communities at the fringes of the mainstream that arguably feel the impact of the bureaucratization of ‘morality’ and standardization of ‘norms’ first. It would therefore have been illuminating to examine whether Ahmadi or Shia also feel that they continue to enjoy considerable religious autonomy in today’s Indonesia.

Overall, *Becoming better Muslims* is an important contribution to the study of state-Islam relations in Indonesia and beyond. It is beautifully written and therefore provides easy access to a complex topic. Scholars in anthropology, political science and sociology will find it useful and inspiring as will practitioners working for donor agencies and advocacy groups.

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¹The *homogenization* of official norms and values that result from this development has been examined in Buehler, Michael, and Dani Muhtada. ‘Democratization and the Diffusion of Shari’a Law: Comparative Insights from Indonesia’, *South East Asia Research*, 24:2 (2016), pp. 261–282.