

Feener, R. Michael, David Kloos, and Annemarie Samuels (eds.)

Islam and the Limits of the State. Reconfigurations of Practice, Community, and Authority in Contemporary Aceh. Leiden: Brill, 2016, xx + 249 pp. ISBN 9789004304857. Price USD 71.00 (hardback).

Among the effects of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, together with the subsequent 2005 Memorandum of Understanding ending the conflict between the Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian military, was that a cohort of ethnographically-oriented scholars was able to carry out research in Aceh for the first time in decades. *Islam and the Limits of the State* represents an impressive fruit of this work, and it should be counted among the best scholarship of a burgeoning literature about Acehese politics, society, and religion.¹ With its ethnographic focus, the volume serves as a much needed complement to literature from previous decades, which tended to be carried out from afar.² The editors and contributors focus diligently on the work's central theme, offering the reader a critical coherence through the multiple ethnographic lenses with which each views transformations in post-tsunami Aceh.

As suggested by its title, each essay meditates on the limits of the state as these intersect with Islam in post-tsunami Aceh. After an insightful and informative introduction by R. Michael Feener, Annemarie Samuels describes how everyday experiences of time in the post-tsunami period have been transformed by an array of state and non-state actors, drawing from both Islamic and non-Islamic traditions, structuring people's understandings of progress. This is followed by David Kloos's analysis of Acehese engaged in projects of ethical improvement. These pursuits are often rooted in local Islamic practices and models of aging that, if not exactly challenging the state-sponsored Shari'a project, can seem out of synch with it.

The next three essays look at women negotiating Shari'a and Islamic authority. Kristina Großmann considers how female civil society activists learn to participate in the drafting of Shari'a legislation, as well as discover the limits of their participation. Dina Afrianty looks at Mitra Sejati Perempuan (MISPI), which, like most women's groups in Aceh, counts itself a supporter of the Shari'a project. It nonetheless operates outside the state, and encourages women to recognize the limitations of Shari'a legislation, most strikingly by emphasizing that Shari'a laws are, in fact, legislated. Eka Srimulyani historicizes

1 This scholarship includes at least two previously published edited volumes. See Feener, Daly and Reid 2011 and Graf, Schröter and Wieringa 2010.

2 For an exception, see Siapno 2002.

the kinds of authority held by female religious scholars in Aceh, and illustrates how such women today bring their authority to bear on Shari'a-related issues without participating in formal legal or bureaucratic processes.

In his contribution, Reza Idria writes of Banda Aceh's punks, who are targeted by state actors for living in a manner allegedly incompatible with Islamic norms; however, he draws attention to the ways in which many punks understand themselves to be devout Muslims. Benjamin Otto and Jan Michiel Otto argue that the infamous Shari'a police (Wilayahul Hisbah), underfunded and with no authority to arrest or detain, actually operate at the margins of the state, functioning more like an *adat*-based mediator than a law enforcement agency. Finally, Antje Missbach describes how, for former pro-Acehnese independence activists living outside Indonesia, the state Shari'a project can still be characterized as a Jakarta-based scheme to oppress Acehnese.

As an Aceh specialist who carried out ethnographic research in the same period under discussion in the volume, I found myself nodding in recognition repeatedly while reading the book. In short, the ethnography checks out. One need not be an Aceh specialist, however, to appreciate or engage with this work. The book shows its readers what those of us who teach about Islam, whether in Indonesia or elsewhere, regularly remind our students, namely, that Islam is a historical phenomenon that is produced and reproduced in specific social and political circumstances. No one can read this work seriously without this point being driven home with each turn of the page.

Given the great strengths of the book, most of the critiques that I might raise seem relatively insignificant. Thus, I want to instead close this review by posing a question. One that might be thought of not so much as a critique, but as opening up possibilities for future inquiries at which this work hints, but leaves under-explored. How might this volume have been different had it reversed the terms of its title? What if instead of 'the limits of the state', the authors had turned to 'the limits of Islam'? This possibility was suggested by several of the essays; for instance, Samuels' discussion of the entwining of Islamic and NGO-based temporalities, and the evocative suggestion of one of Idria's punk interlocutors that the punk lifestyle is akin to Sufism. What would these essays have looked like if the limits of Islam had been their major theme? Would the authors, for example, have been so easily able to take Islam in contemporary Aceh to be inextricably tied to the state Shari'a project, as they were prone to do? Given the historical moment, this slippage between Islam and Shari'a might be understandable; but it is hard to deny that a focus on 'the limits of the state' may have overdetermined it.

Islam and the Limits of the State is a must-read for anyone with an interest in contemporary Aceh, Islam and the state, Islamic legal systems in prac-

tice, and Islam and gender. In 2007 I was contacted by a young soon-to-be-graduated undergraduate student who was about to embark on a two-year teaching appointment in Banda Aceh and wanted to know what she should read to prepare herself. If I ever receive such a request again, this volume will be near the top of the list.

Daniel Andrew Birchok

University of Michigan-Flint

dbirchok@umflint.edu

References

- Feener, R. Michael, Patrick Daly, and Anthony Reid (eds) (2011). *Mapping the Acehnese Past*. Leiden: KITLV Press.
- Graf, Arndt, Susanne Schröter, and Edwin Wieringa (2010). *Aceh. History, Politics and Culture*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Siapno, Jacqueline Aquino (2002). *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State in Aceh. The Paradox of Power, Co-optation and Resistance*. New York: RoutledgeCurzon.