Maria Platt

Marriage, Gender and Islam in Indonesia: Women Negotiating Informal Marriage, Divorce, and Desire. New York: Routledge [Asian Studies Association of Australia Women in Asia Series 51], 2017, xii + 158 pp. ISBN 9780415662611, price: GBP 84.00 (hardcover), 9781315178943, GBP 35.99 (paperback), 9780415662611, GBP 35.99 (e-book).

This book challenges the modern conceptualization of marriage as an individual or state-based institution. By providing rich and thoughtful data from her fieldwork in Lombok, the author successfully describes more dynamic forms of marriage and marital practices than what is typically imagined in modern conceptualizations of this institution. She argues that marriage in Indonesia is moral and social in nature, and that marriage in Lombok 'largely remains a community-based affair' (p. 5) and is 'truly a communal institution' (p. 78).

Chapter 1 outlines the position of Indonesia's state-based Marriage Law and community-based law, with particular attention to marriage registration. Chapter 2 deals with the practice of spontaneous elopement (*kawin-lari*), chapter 3 highlights extramarital relationships (*pacaran lagi*) and polygyny, and Chapter 4 discusses divorce and reconciliation; all explore women's agency and gendered sexual ideologies. In my view, the author makes two main contributions: one about women's agency within the dynamism of marriages, and another about the implementation of the state-based Marriage Law 1974 in what she calls 'projects of modernity'.

Regarding women's agency, the author studied the dynamic nature of marriage in the Sasak community and describes it as taking place in a 'marital continuum', the 'conceptualization of marital practices as they occur across the span of women's lives' (p. 5). She also claims to apply a 'marital continuum approach', which 'views marriage as a fluid, open-ended endeavor which can be circuitous, rather than a fixed state' (p. 6). This approach allows us to conceive of the diverse ways women exercise their agency. The author aims to 'convey the multiplicity of women's agency in the context of the marital continuum' (p. 59), and by demonstrating these case studies, she shows that 'women's agency can transform throughout the course of their lives. [...] women's ability to shape their marital destiny is not confined to this first stage of the marital continuum.' (p. 77). She furthermore argues that the marital continuum is not static and consequently women's agency across the spectrum cannot be rendered in one specific form as a passive wife (p. 111). Essentially based on Mahmood's (2005) 'non-liberatory agency', the author's observation on marriage practices in the Sasak community expands an interpretation which prefaces women as victims and 'freeing' themselves in marital events.

As for the second point about the Marriage Law as 'projects of modernity', the author argues that it has failed, and discusses the consequences of its failure. For instance, in chapter 3 she indicates that extramarital relationships and polygamy are consequences of the failure of the implementation of the Marriage Law as 'projects of modernity' (p. 110). In chapter 4 she points out the divergence between the state-based Marriage Law and community-based marriage laws, which creates ambiguity in women's legal rights, and concludes that community-based law undermines the smooth implementation of the Marriage Law as a project of modernity (p. 141).

This book should interest ethnographers, especially those who research customary marriage practice in Indonesia and/or legal pluralism, in regard to customary law and state law. The author's careful and critical use of statistics throughout the book is of value to anyone who endeavors to study marital issues in Indonesia, and perhaps in other countries.

This book also provides useful insights for practitioners in development projects, and projects on rule of law or access to justice. The author's account on the marriage registration, as a system promoted by the state-based Marriage Law, must be refreshing for those practitioners: 'The very design of the marriage registration process, I argue, is built upon normative ideas of individual autonomy and free will, thus dispensing with, or at [least] minimizing rituals that promote a more dynamic form of marriage' (p. 46); 'state marriage processes simply lack relevance in the lives of many Sasak' (p. 149).

Some points could have improved the book to be even more interesting and useful. For instance, the author could have elaborated more on the term 'modernity' that is highly diverse in its use and definitions. To be fair, she does refer to Habermas (1981) when she introduces the term 'a project of modernity' (p. 9), and suggests that in the Indonesian context 'modernity' has something to do with women being autonomous legal subjects. However, her exploration of this term is not comprehensive, and I reckon that strengthening the theoretical foundation on this point would have enabled deeper insights on her main points.

I would also have been very interested in learning more about her methodology and research ethics. This book is such a great piece of ethnography and is so rich in fieldwork, that anybody who aspires to take on ethnographic methods would greatly benefit from her experiences from the field.

Also, throughout the book, more of the local religious perspectives could have been explained. The author indicates the 'Sasak community's strong adherence to local Islamic interpretations and religious fatalism' (p. 121) and occasionally mentions religious implications of the local marriage practices (for instance, in her discussion of *zina* [illicit sexual relations] and the Qur'an

[p. 100]) However, since the book's title refers to 'Islam' as well as marriage and gender, readers might expect more on this.

Criticisms notwithstanding, there is no doubt that this book is very valuable. I hope it inspires future research with careful and flexible interpretations of local marriage practices and customary law, using Maria Platt's insightful and handy 'marital continuum approach'.

Hoko Horiï

Van Vollenhoven Institute, Leiden University/

KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies

h.horii@law.leidenuniv.nl

References

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