
In *Becoming Better Muslims: Religious Authority and Ethical Improvement in Aceh, Indonesia*, David Kloos offers an account of Islamic ethical life drawn from the life histories of several Acehnese interlocutors. These are people we might consider ordinary Acehnese, and Kloos focuses his attention movingly on how, in the years following the December 2004 tsunami, they narrated the joys, struggles, concerns, and failures of their lives. He frames these stories with a historical account of Islamic authority and the state in Aceh, but without making the book about this topic. As a result, readers catch insightful glimpses of aspects of Acehnese ethical life that are often missed in scholarship more squarely focused on Aceh's political-religious history.

Foremost among these is a particular style of narrative that underpins important versions of Acehnese models of ethical improvement. Kloos argues convincingly, especially in Chapters 4 and 5, that there exists in Aceh a “shared reflexive ethical mode […] that enabled my interlocutors to see their moral shortcomings […] as conducive rather than detrimental to their personal religious development” (p. 13). Kloos is correct, both in arguing that such a mode exists and that this has been an underdeveloped theme in anthropological literature on Islamic ethics. Some have come close to making this point (Agrama 2010), but it has not yet been developed to the extent that Kloos develops it here, and in subsequent essays (Kloos 2018; Kloos and Beekers in 2018). This is an important contribution, and is the book’s most significant theoretical insight.

Drawing attention to this contribution allows me to pivot to more critical questions regarding the book’s central argument, focused on what Kloos terms “religious agency”. He defines this term as a “capacity of individual Muslims to engage in religiously defined moral actions” (p. 160). These actions are not determined by “normative Islam”, although they are always in dialogue with it, as Acehnese Muslims interact “with the universalizing norms and structural constraints posited by the state and organized religion” (p. 1).

Here Kloos is trying to recast a conceptual problematic at the intersection of the anthropologies of Islam and ethics, one pitting Islam against the “ambivalences, contradictions, and inconsistencies” of everyday life (p. 12). I wonder, however, if Kloos’ configuration of normative Islam and religious agency does not reify the very terms of this problematic. In the historical sections of the
book, Kloos tells a well-known story of the “objectification” of Islam (Eickelman and Piscator 1996), one that occurred in Aceh in tandem with Islam’s entanglement with the state (Chapters 1 and 2). He does so to illustrate how Acehnese have creatively taken up Islamic discourses generated by the state and religious authorities. This is an important ethnographic point. Nonetheless, taking it as the basis for a model of religious agency places normativity squarely within the realm of a particular kind of Islam. It leaves most Muslims outside the normative except in moments of highly self-aware reflection, and leaves outside the domain of the state and religious authority forms of Islam that are less normative, differently normative, or not normative.

As a result, the form of religious agency that Kloos theorizes continues to bear the mark of an everyday outside of Islam. What makes this agency religious, aside from the fact that, in taking it up, Acehnese Muslims creatively respond to normative Islam? This suggests that the agency found in Kloos’ religious agency originates not in Islam itself, but in responses to it. Here it might have been helpful to turn to different modes of Islam and Islamic authority, in particular those that are not framed primarily in terms of constricting structure and individual agency (Ahmed 2016; Mittermaier 2012). Would the practices of Sufi groups taken as heterodox by state-recognized religious authorities, for example, fall under the category of normative Islam, or would these be an example of religious agency? Such a question forces one to consider how both normativity and other modes of religious authority and practice crosscut divisions between state, religious authorities, and ordinary practitioners.

This is not to say that Kloos’ notion of religious agency is not a useful way of thinking about ethical life in Aceh, but simply that its use is limited. It may not quite reformulate the anthropology of Islamic ethics in the ways that Kloos suggests. Nonetheless, it allows him to make the aforementioned, and theoretically invaluable, contribution regarding ethical failure. This is because it accurately describes one form of religious agency in Aceh, and one that, in light of the region’s long history of entanglement between particular kinds of Islamic normativity and the state, is especially prominent. Further, the historical and ethnographic narratives Kloos weaves synthesize important themes in Acehnese Islamic history and practice, and they are a pleasure to read. Becoming Better Muslims therefore represents an insightful and enjoyable ethnography of an important strand of ethical life in contemporary Aceh.

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References


