Julian Millie, *Hearing Allah's Call: Preaching and Performance in Indonesian Islam*.

Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2017, xiv + 258 pp. ISBN 9781501713118, price: USD 29.95 (paperback).

In the almost entirely Muslim province of West Java, Islamic preaching is part and parcel of many people's religious lives. Popular preachers travel around and perform at religious festivals (such as the birthday of the Prophet) and life cycle events (such as weddings or circumcision rituals). Julian Millie's rich and compelling ethnography of their oratory styles—based on fourteen months of frequent participation in preaching events (mostly in and around the city of Bandung) and enabled by the author's fluency in both Indonesian and Sundanese—does two things. It is a study of preaching as an embedded practice. How do preachers preach? What oratory techniques and strategies to they employ? How do audiences listen? How and to what extent does local context influence or determine the communications between preachers and listeners? It is also a study of the conflicting ideas at both the local and the national level *about* preaching as a religious communication. What forms and choices—bearing on the use of language, humor, and bodily comportment, to mention a few issues—are considered appropriate and why? What ideas circulate about the value of Islamic oratory compared to other forms of communication, particularly written text?

The main argument is difficult to summarize because Millie does not really present it as such. The book is, rather, a string of interrelated arguments about the place of oratory in ordinary Muslims' life worlds, the nature of Muslim publics and the Islamic public sphere, and listening as an embodied and localized practice. Two major points stand out, however. The first is a call, resounding clearly throughout the book, to take seriously the practice of listening, not just as a technique for cultivating piety—an approach pioneered by Charles Hirschkind (2006) in his work on Egypt—but also, importantly, as a practice that ties together religious (and classed and gendered) communities and allows people of different backgrounds, persuasions, and lifestyles to overcome or mitigate religious and ideological differences. The second contention, dependent on the acceptance of the first, is that preaching in West Java must be seen as a “successful” Islamic project. By this, Millie means that Islamic oratory, despite authoritative arguments brought up against the spoken word in general and the more entertaining forms of preaching in particular, persists and is not just accepted but also actively supported by a very wide range of social, political, and religious actors, including ordinary villagers, politicians, activists, state administrators, and business people.

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE

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Popular preachers in West Java, Millie shows, are able to draw huge audiences because they master a wide range of enthralling and entertaining styles by which they lead their audiences in affective engagement. Their sermons and public religious lessons, carried out in mosques, villages, companies, and government offices, are funny, theatrical, and interactive. These orators also owe their success to a careful avoidance of taking stances on contentious religious debates. Such positioning, they reason, would aggravate discord within heterogeneous audiences and diminish their chances of repeat invitations. These factors distinguish them from more activist preachers, who conceive of their speech as an instrument of religious propagation (*dakwah*) and normative reform, and make them an object of criticism voiced by academically trained intellectuals—particularly Islamists and feminists—who disagree on many issues but converge in the opinion that the listener is primarily a passive subject who “laughs and cries” but “does not think”. The latter view is authoritative, Millie argues, because it resonates with both nationalist and Islamic revivalist narratives of progressive transformation. A good subject is one who engages in personal and societal transformation according to specific, future-oriented moral ideals. In this view, a constrained, clinical style of public speaking, combined with the use of the Indonesian language, stands for progress, while an exuberant, theatrical style, combined with the use of the Sundanese language, stands for retardation.

Such views, Millie argues, preclude a different subjectivity, grounded not in ideals of personal or collective (ethical) transformation, but in affective relations and motivations emanating from the broader circumstances and situations that many ordinary Muslims, and particularly women, find themselves in. Portrayals of audiences as slavish followers of patriarchal norms (the feminists) or a dressed up, commercially driven and religiously bland rhetoric (the Islamists) ignore the broader complex of motivations that people have as they come to listen to their favorite preachers. Millie’s writing about the roles and perspectives of women is a particularly strong part of this argument. Like elsewhere in Muslim Southeast Asia, preaching in West Java is a feminized domain. Audiences typically consist largely of women, who attend preaching and Islamic pedagogical events to acquire religious knowledge and for the “pleasure and satisfaction that comes with submission through pious action”, but also because of the “affective communication that creates surprise, laughter, sympathy, and feelings of comfort and belonging” (p. 135). These motivations must be understood in terms of embodied participation and in a context in which women, in contrast to men, do not have many opportunities to move, independently from their husbands or families, beyond their immediate living environments, to spend time together, to forget (albeit temporarily)

about their daily concerns and obligations, and to reflect on their often difficult existences in a somewhat autonomous manner while still in moral (because religious) terms. With their skillful repertoire of jokes, songs, local proverbs, and theatrical performances, preachers stoke and respond to women's condition as much they "mediate" audiences' social and ideological differences and entanglements. Millie makes the case that, although preachers do not "reinterpret" patriarchal norms as feminists might see it, the narrative structures and performative styles on which their sermons are based, combined with the need to please female audiences, do allow for certain "inversions" of otherwise mainstream or dominant patriarchal norms, thus creating a message that is more kindly disposed towards women.

Millie ends his book with an intriguing note on an "ambivalence" intrinsic to popular preaching in West Java. The latter is a "successful" Islamic project because it contributes to the making of meaningful Islamic subjectivities beyond either liberal or Islamic puritanical reform. But this success, Millie argues, is at the same time dependent on the views and critiques of the reformists, because of the way in which the latter, through their own public communications, safeguard the sincerity, dignity, and "otherworldliness" of Islam. Preachers feel free to put on a show, interweaving their religious messages with jokes and songs while eschewing religious stances that may deter parts of their audiences, exactly because of the existence of this "necessary counterpoint" (p. 172).

This brief summary does not do justice to the wide array of questions addressed in this book or to its valuable contributions to theoretical debates about affect, embodiment, practices of listening, language, and the making of (counter-)publics (all prominent themes in the anthropology of Islam). While there is much to admire in the book, some criticism seems in order. Although he sets out early defending the position, I was not entirely convinced by Millie's choice to "focus on the styles and routines of Islamic communication instead of analyzing the content of these communications" (p. 4). Common assumptions that content is more important than form, he argues, are deficient because they ignore that form is also content: debates about proper communication "are windows into processes by which Islamic forms and practices are organized into ones that are acceptable publicly and others that are not". Privileging substance would, moreover, "involve an assumption that all media forms—print media, radio, oratory, theater genres, and so on—perform an essentially similar function of conveying messages about things outside the context of the communication itself" (p. 5). Indeed, Millie convincingly shows that oratory styles are reflective of religious debates (a comparable argument has been made with regard to visual styles; see Moll 2018). However, the critique that Millie anticipates might have been formulated in less austere and binary ways. After

reaching the end of the book, I believe more attention to the ways in which substantive norms are shaped through the encounters between preachers and audiences might have led to an even more incisive and convincing argument. This reservation aside, *Hearing Allah's Call* is certainly an original, inspiring, and thought-provoking book and an important contribution to the study of Indonesia and the anthropology of Islam. It deserves a wide readership.

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