

Nancy J. Smith Hefner, *Islamizing Intimacies: Youth, Sexuality, and Gender in Contemporary Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019, xii + 248 pp., ISBN: 9780824878030, price: USD 80.00 (hardback); 9780824884253, USD 20.00 (paperback).

This important book synthesizes fifteen years of ethnographic research, carried out between 1999–2015, among young educated Muslims in the Indonesian city of Yogyakarta. Responding to the transformative forces of mass education, democratization, and religious revitalization, it asks “what it means to be both ‘modern’ and Muslim” in Indonesia today. The answer, Smith-Hefner argues on the basis of an examination of the “everyday life experiences of young people with regard to intimacy and education, family and relationships, and career and religion” (p. 19), lies in an ongoing and highly personalized search for mutuality and balance between Islamic piety and “a greater desire for personal expression and self-actualization in a variety of less religiously marked social fields” (p. 70). While Smith-Hefner draws extensively from her interviews with men, the primary focus of the book is on women, whose “roles have been more vividly and profoundly reshaped” (p. 18).

The book focuses on the lives and ideas of religiously committed students from two of the city’s main campuses, Gadjah Madah University and the State Islamic University Sunan Kalijaga. Among many other things, her research shows the benefits of a longitudinal approach. Not only has Smith-Hefner been able to document the effects of the changes that have transformed Indonesia in this period—most prominently increased personal freedoms due to the ending of dictatorship 1998 and an increasing salience of the Islamic scriptural norms in both public and private life—she has also been able to follow some of her interlocutors over time, combining interviews carried out in their student days with follow-up research and observations of how they have fared and made their decisions since. It gives the book great depth, enabling an analysis of changes that range well beyond the snapshots that ethnographies often necessarily are.

The two campuses reflect two different subject-positions and corresponding outward styles. One, found primarily at the (secular) Gadjah Mada, is a disposition Smith-Hefner defines as “neo-reformist.” This style is found mostly among students from urban, middle class families, who tend to describe their parents as “ordinary,” “lay,” or “Javanese” (i.e. syncretic) Muslims, whose religious commitment is “not so strong”. The “neo” in “neo-reformist” distinguishes it from earlier movements of reform, particularly the Islamic modernism of the twentieth century. Today’s “neo-reformist” youth are not content with bringing Islamic interpretations in line with secular modernity. They engage in highly

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE

© DAVID KLOOS, 2021 | DOI:10.1163/22134379-17702009

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [CC BY 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Downloaded from Brill.com11/30/2021 07:11:40AM
via free access

individualized pursuits of pious perfection: a pledge to apply Islamic norms “fully” or “comprehensively” (*secara kaffah*).

The other style, found among students at Sunan Kalijaga, is “neo-traditionalist.” In contrast to their “neo-reformist” counterparts, these students hail from families in which religion already played a very important role. They are mostly from rural, “NU” (Nahdlatul Ulama, the main traditionalist Islamic mass organization) families. Many of them studied at traditional Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) before going to college. The “neo” in “neo-traditionalist” reflects the fact that, “despite their devout religious backgrounds,” these students “had also experienced the effects of the Islamic resurgence and expressed a renewed interest in religious normativity” (p. 65).

Building on interventions in the literature on gender in Southeast Asia (e.g. Ong and Peletz 1995) and an emerging critical view within the anthropology of Islam with regard to the assumed coherence of pious pursuits (e.g. Schielke 2015), Smith-Hefner argues that the ways in which youth adjust to changing norms are often full of tensions and ambivalences. Perhaps the most evocative example of this is the emergence around the turn of the twenty-first century of a “hip, new youth style called *gaul* (‘sociable, hip’),” and the ways in which this open, confident, and cosmopolitan style is currently being reconciled with Islamic norms, including, for some, the strict, “Shari’a-minded” Islamic norms of the neo-reformists. A discourse of a checked, “principled sociability” (p. 139) has emerged that is distinguished from the “self-expressive individuality celebrated in certain accounts of Western modernity.” I found this a great section, even if I was slightly surprised by the lack of engagement with Su’ad Khabeer’s work on “Muslim cool” (2016), or with the rich anthropological literature on style more generally.

After an introductory chapter, six substantive chapters each discuss a crucial aspect of the book’s main argument, respectively: the social and religious transformations that have set the stage for Yogyakarta’s “Islamized intimacies” (Chapter 2); the differences between and confluences of “neo-reformist” and “neo-traditionalist” styles (Chapter 3); the conceptualizations of gender—both conflicting and overlapping—in which Muslim Javanese youth are educated and socialized (Smith-Hefner called these “gender currents,” which is nicely chosen, denoting their ideological underpinnings as well as their fluidity) (Chapter 4); shifting conceptions of gender in the wake of religious resurgence and increased educational opportunities for men and women (Chapter 5); the relationship between sexuality and sociability (Chapter 6); and the emergence of “the new Muslim romance,” a commitment to, and confidence about, autonomous choice in building relationships in line with the importance attached to both education and career and to the new Islamic norms that

emphasize the “marital imperative” (p. 145) and strict boundaries with regard to the interaction between opposite sexes (including, most prominently, “dating”) (Chapter 7). Smith-Hefner concludes by reiterating her argument about the “plurality, fluidity, and ambivalence” found in young people’s accounts and negotiations of both religious and social concerns; and the fact that these negotiations have a significant effect, particularly on educated women, who at the same time enjoy more autonomy than previous generations and struggle to combine work and career with the equally important aspiration of companionate and Sharia-compliant relationships.

In this struggle, the focus on the notion of “romance” raised some questions for me. For some, romantic love is clearly important. Since dating is viewed as sinful or immoral, romantic relationships are said to evolve after rather than before marriage. A female interlocutor cites “her friends” who say that it is “more beautiful, more romantic” to get to know one’s life partner after marriage (p. 158). A male interlocutor, by contrast, dismisses romantic relationships as being “time-consuming and distracting” (p. 173). Since these are among the few instances in which Smith-Hefner’s interlocutors explain what the idea of romance means to them, I was left to guess about its true import. Do these conflicting statements reveal a gendered divide? Should we see romantic love as a normative framework more or less separate from religion, as Samuli Schielke (2015) does? Or do the views of the young women friends suggest a new, religiously inflected concept of romance significantly different from that in Western popular culture, from which it is arguably derived? And if this is the case, how do these attachments to Muslim romance pan out after marriage? These are questions to which Smith-Hefner could have given more attention in this otherwise impressive work.

Another question bears on the choice of interlocutors. While Smith-Hefner focused on sites—the university campuses—not on (members of) religious organizations, the combination of research topic (the “resurgence of interest among young Javanese in a more authoritative and normative Islam,” p. 3) and the use of a “modified snowball technique” to arrange interviews, leading from research assistants to their class- and housemates, then on to their class- and housemates, seems to have led to a selection of interlocutors that is biased toward those with a distinctly “revivalist” outlook; those who, even if they do not consider themselves to be Islamic activists, are still relatively certain about the need to cultivate Islamic norms and practices along the lines of the resurgence. While these are all valid and understandable choices, it did make me wonder, at some point, about the aspirations of youth—male and female—who are not as “serious” and confident about, or convinced of, their own or others’ pious pursuits.

These critical comments aside, the bottom line for me is that *Islamizing Intimacies* is the first book of its kind: the first monograph that investigates, in rich ethnographic detail, the ideas and desires of young educated Muslims who seek to give both religious norms and professional ambitions a central place in their life path. Among these youth, the trajectories of women—and their ability to make choices and shape both their careers and their spiritual lives—are particularly remarkable. The book is a document of an era of great transformation and should become a standard reference for all those working on Islam, gender, and ethics as a lived reality in Indonesia and well beyond.

David Kloos

KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian
and Caribbean Studies, Leiden, the Netherlands
kloos@kitlv.nl

References

- Khabeer, Su'ad Abdul. 2016. *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*. New York: New York University Press.
- Ong, Aihwa, and Michael G. Peletz, eds. 1995. *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schielke, Samuli. 2015. *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence Before and After 2011*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.