Michael G. Peletz, *Sharia Transformations: Cultural Politics and the Rebranding of an Islamic Judiciary*. California: University of California Press, 2020, i + 283 pp. ISBN: 9780520339910, price: USD 85.00 (hardcover); 9780520339927, USD 34.00 (paperback), 9780520974470, USD 34.00 (ebook).

Across the Muslim world, the Islamic judiciary has transformed into a modern legal system featuring legal codification and substantial procedural reforms and institutional developments. Malaysia and Indonesia are examples of Asian countries exhibiting the global phenomenon of Sharia modernization and transformation. The book under review offers an important contribution to the Sharia judiciary in Malaysia, its structures, its practices, the ways they have changed in recent decades, and the ways they have been rebranded to accommodate the requirements of global and modern legal systems. This historical and ethnographic account examines how Malays and other Muslim societies perceive and incorporate Islamic norms and grapple with issues of family law in a globalized and changing world.

Excluding its introduction and conclusion, the book consists of five chapters. The first chapter outlines the Sharia judiciary of Malaysia, stressing the endeavors of many relevant parties to rebrand it and the ways Islamic courts have adapted to social change in a rapidly globalizing world. Chapter Two discusses the courts, selecting two specific courts as representatives of Malaysia's broader Sharia judiciary, its development, the education of its judges, their appearance, and their legal references and practices. The following chapters are primarily dedicated to practical judiciary issues of mediation (*sulh*) and gender questions in relation to Islamic law. The book concludes with significant observations and reflections culminating in the insight that the Sharia judiciary in Malaysia constitutes a global assemblage of bureaucratization, rationalization, globalization, and corporation, with Islamization being the main characteristic. The book should interest readers from various backgrounds, including researchers, practitioners, academics, and politicians. Its arguments and analysis are supported by thorough and rich data gathered during extensive fieldwork, including through interviews and the observation of court sessions.

However, with two chapters already published as journal articles and three newly written ones, the book does not make for an easy read. The first two chapters, on the historical dimensions and ongoing developments of Malaysia's judiciary, take a broad perspective on legal systems, legal reform, and the historiography of Islamic law. The author's advanced-level prose, conceptual frameworks, and theoretical arguments force those new to the study of law and judiciary—as well as those unfamiliar with the abundance of social and historical concepts and theories invoked—to read some of the sentences repeatedly.

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE

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While the chapters complement each other in terms of illustrating the processes of rebranding the Islamic judiciary in Malaysia and the transformation of Sharia in general, the chapter organization makes for a rather uneasy flow of the argument. Chapter four, for instance, is quite large compared to the other two chapters on *sulh* and women's access to justice. It discusses in detail the physical institutions of Islamic judiciary, including their architecture, structures, and court environments. It furthermore discusses the actors of the courts, including lawyers and—again—judges, and their practices of resolving family cases, in particular divorce. While this chapter is important and convincing in demonstrating how recent transformations touch upon all aspects of Islamic judiciary, it seems somewhat overwhelming and opaque compared to the lucid discussion on mediation in Chapter Three, and the detailed treatment of courts and judicial practices of judges in Chapter Two. Nevertheless, all chapters eventually converge into a useful discussion on institutional developments.

The book's discussion on *sulh* and the legal fate of women in court settings, by contrast, is tremendous. Chapter Three on *sulh* delves into the dynamics of mediation and the efforts of mediators and mediation officers to influence the relevant parties, mostly women, to rethink their petitions of divorce. It also examines mediation in relation to several other practices: *ijtihad* (independent legal interpretation or reasoning), the adoption of the Western concept of alternative dispute resolution in formal litigation, and the revival and integration of Islamic modes of mediation into the modern legal system. Through several intriguing cases, the author examines whether *ijtihad* is exercised in these sessions, given that mediations are less formal than court hearings. After problematizing the definition of *ijtihad*, he asserts that the mediators, who supposedly have greater space to exert and interpret laws, are in fact not exercising it in a strict sense. If, however, one adopts a broader definition of the term, an argument could be made that *ijtihad* is practiced on some level. Such a statement would still be problematic, as "*sulh* officers cannot render binding decision and this capacity is prerequisite for the exercise of *ijtihad*" (p. 104).

Chapter Five on women's access to justice shows how the Islamic judiciary has recently transformed into an institution sensitive toward gender justice and the legal fate of women in Malaysia's Islamic courts. This is particularly relevant to the common interpretation that law based on Islam is unfriendly and discriminatory toward women. Here, the author demonstrates convincingly that the state has generally endeavored to engage with Muslim women and plays a role in the cultural politics of marriage and gender pluralism, granting women better access to justice in the domain of family issues. The author argues that the judges have grown more gender-sensitive and that women are more positive about these courts and optimistic about their legal status compared to the

late 1980s. He stresses that the courts have become more relevant, consistent, and substantive. They show themselves punitive toward errant husbands, while wives are better informed about their legal rights through various media and support networks for legal justice and equality. These changing structures and values have transformed the actual legal practices within the Islamic judiciary across the Muslim world. This is demonstrated prodigiously through comparative observations of other Muslim-majority countries, including Egypt and Indonesia. On the reformed practices of divorce in these countries, the author observes: “these are but three examples from across the Muslim world of different ways in which Sharia judges and the political and religious elites overseeing their practices have engaged increasingly global trends associated with the rise of new forms of kinship and marriage and the attendant idea that women are rights-bearing citizen-subjects” (p. 229).

The author’s outstanding expertise and acquaintance with relevant publications has made the book extraordinary and exceptional. However, his abundant citations and complex discussions come with a downside: the broader argument is not easily grasped by all readers. It is certainly significant to bring locally specific discussions into global contexts, in the framework of this book and elsewhere. Yet the multitude of works cited and statements proffered—sometimes repeatedly—occasionally defy the purposes of the book and the patience of its readers. Besides that, a few technical matters need to be addressed. There are some typos, such as *suhl* instead of *sulh* at the beginning of Chapter 3. Some names of authors and places are also misspelled, including in the bibliography. These shortcomings have in no way diminished the importance and quality of the book, which will prove difficult to ignore for anyone interested in Islamic judiciary, its ongoing developments, transformation, and the evolution of its institutions, jurisdiction, and the attitudes of its judges.

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