
In this well written and well researched ethnographic study, Mirjam Lücking explores how Indonesians imagine the Arab world. She does this by investigating two specific groups who both have their own experience of their encounter with the Arab world, namely (mostly female) labor migrants to the Arab Middle East and pilgrims to Mecca. These groups are subject to what the author calls ‘guided mobility’, which means that their perceptions of the Arab world depend largely on the home context, in the form of stereotypical images and narratives, as well as through all kinds of personal, institutional, and governmental intermediaries. For both groups she looks into the question of whether these experiences cause social change and cultural and ideological reorientations after they return home. In the book she looks at communities in Madura and Central Java, both with their specific features.

Chapter I goes into the history of the relationship between Indonesia and the Arab world and shows that this relationship has always been ambiguous. On the one hand, the Middle East was seen as the birthplace of Islam, the Arabic language was revered as the language of the revelation, and the Arab customs of the Prophet Muhammad as exemplary for a proper Islamic lifestyle; on the other hand Arabness was seen as rude and violent, in particular after the Wahhabi conquest of Mecca in 1926 and the 9/11 attacks in 2001. This ambiguous perception is still at the heart of the debate on whether more local forms of Islam can be regarded as authentic and correct or not, in comparison with Middle Eastern Arab Islam. Within this debate, the Nahdlatul Ulama and the government propagate the concept of Islam Nusantara, the indigenous variety of Islam which is supposedly tolerant, pluralist, and peaceful, in order to counterbalance the incursion of intolerant, radical, and violent Islam from the Arab world into Indonesia, which is called Arabization.

Chapter II goes more deeply into the actual travel experience of pilgrims and labor migrants and illustrates through fascinating fieldwork that for both groups this experience is determined by guided mobility (spurred by many things, including the “jungle of bureaucracy”) and concludes that a returnee might adopt an Arab lifestyle, but that on a normative level they stick to Indonesian, Javanese, and Madurese values, like “reciprocity, humbleness, collectivism and local religious rituals that would conflict in fact with Wahhabi norms” (p. 105).

Chapter III deals with the ambiguous ways that labor migrants and pilgrims imagine the Arab other (in contrast to the self), based on travel experience, as
well as on the encounter with Arabs and Arabness at home, particularly how this is represented in contemporary Indonesian novels and cinema. Here again it is repeated that the Indonesian following of an Arab lifestyle generally does not mean that this is at the same time an expression of adherence to the Wahhabi or Salafi ideology or, in other words, that the Indonesians studied make a distinction between culture and religion.

Chapter IV presents two interesting case studies and delves into the different ways female labor migrants engage with Arabness upon their return to Central Java and Madura, respectively. Both informants use their travel experience to promote their social position in their home communities. In Madura, the returnee retained her Middle Eastern experience and linked it with the dominant Arab-Islamic culture there, while in Central Java, with its greater cultural and religious heterogeneity, the informant abandoned her Arab experience altogether, adapting more Korean and Mandarin lifestyles.

In the conclusion, Dr. Lücking stresses that the Indonesian perception of the Arab world is to a large extent a continuation of diverse ideas which were already in existence in Indonesia before they ever travelled to the Middle East, and that possible adoptions of Arab lifestyle features do not form evidence of an ideological reorientation. Moreover, the author connects her findings to current manifestations of Indonesian Islam and concludes that the rise of religious conservatism in Indonesia is not monolithic and results more from internal competition than Wahhabi and Salafi influence from the Middle East.

The book presents an interesting account of how Indonesian labor migrants and pilgrims construct their Arab world, and although one should perhaps not judge a book for what it does not address, I think that in making the Indonesian perception and imagination of the Arab world various other factors are also at work. I will mention several. Firstly, I would like to include the Indonesian students in the Middle East. The author is aware of them (see, e.g. pp. 5–6), but did not study this group separately. Indonesian students have been around for ages in the Middle East and until today there are large groups of Indonesians in the Middle East (mostly in Saudi Arabia and Egypt), mainly studying religious sciences but more recently other disciplines, as well. Another group which is addressed, but not studied systematically, is that of the local Arabs of Hadrami descent who have been living in Indonesia for ages and whose presence has given rise to all kinds of Arab stereotypes. Finally, I would like to highlight the role of the Institute for Islamic and Arab Studies (Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab, LIPIA) in Jakarta, which also has campuses in other parts of Indonesia. LIPIA is a branch of the Muhammad ibn Sa’ud University in Riyadh, is financed and managed by the Saudi government, and has been active in Indonesia since 1981. This institution does not only require a particular Arab
lifestyle from its students (such as gender segregation, women seclusion, dress codes etc.), but also plays an active role in the spread of the Saudi Wahhabi state interpretation of Islam among its students, alumni, and beyond. I think that when these other factors are added to the current analysis of the book, a more complete and nuanced picture emerges of how the Indonesians imagine their Arab world and in particular, how besides internal dynamics, outside influence has a far larger influence in promoting the rise of current conservative ideas than the current book demonstrates.

That being said, I can wholeheartedly recommend the book, because it is a stimulating contribution to the discussion on the Arabization of Indonesian Muslim culture and the question of how this is influenced by travel to the Middle East. I think that the author has written a very interesting book which convincingly shows that the ways Indonesian labor migrants and pilgrims to the Middle East imagine the Arab world are to a large extent predetermined by their local and socio-economic backgrounds.

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