
The edited volume Mosques and Imams: Everyday Islam in Eastern Indonesia emerges from a multi-year collaborative project that, bringing together excellent scholars based in Indonesia and Australia, had the stated aim ‘of understanding Islamic traditions and the many ways of “being Muslim” in diverse communities’ (p. 20). The result is refreshing in many ways. First of all, placing Eastern Indonesia at center stage, the volume is an important contribution in countering the trend that for over a century has connected the study of Muslims in the archipelago to the islands of Java and Sumatra. Second, the framework of ‘everyday religion’ allows for a constructive approach to the lived experiences of Muslims without putting any unduly excessive attention on either ‘syncretism’ or ‘purification.’ The Introduction, authored by Kathryn Robinson, offers a concise but satisfying historical overview of the various historical trajectories of Islamization across Eastern Indonesia. It also reflects in depth on the importance of thinking about Islamization as an ongoing process, and of ‘interaction and change’ as constitutive elements of religious practices (p. 4). Under this lens, mosques and imams are identified as places and agents (respectively) of mediation between, and preservation of both, ‘adat and Islam since the seventeenth century, despite various disruptive waves—including the Darul Islam rebellion in the 1950s and the recent implementation of regional Islamic laws (Perda shari’a). All the subsequent 9 chapters interweave the historical narrative with an anthropological line of inquiry deeply rooted in the study of religion as a lived experience.

In Chapter 1 (‘Lebe and Sultan: Serving the Mosque and Sustaining Royal Authority’), Muhammad Adlin Sila explores the contemporary legacy of the seventeenth century connection between the Sultan (as representative of political authority) and the lebe in Bima (Sumbawa). Still today the lebe ‘create[s] the identity of local Muslims through ritual performance and ... sustain[s] the legacy of the royal authority’ of the Raja bicara (p. 25). Pursuing an analysis of ritual prayer, and its different performance between ‘traditional’ and ‘modernist’ congregants, and taking the mosque as field of study but also looking beyond it, Sila shows how religious leaders prefer accommodation and tolerance, ‘solv[ing] conflict over ritual practice’ (p. 40). Imams as mediators, and the legacy of early Islamization, are also core concerns of Faried Saenong’s Chapter 2 (‘Mediating Religious and Cultural Disputes: Imam Desa and Conflict Resolution in Rural Indonesia’). Saenong investigates how still today imams—even
when they have credentials as being trained in Arabic language and Islamic legal scriptures—are considered the go-to persons for eloping couples seeking both physical safety from, and resolution of the conflict with, angered family members. In this circumstance, imams uphold traditional ʿadat over concepts of (and punishment for) zina. Moh Yasir Alimi’s chapter (3, ‘Shariaisation, Wedding Rituals, and the Role of Imams in South Sulawesi’) takes imams’ sustained performance of traditional wedding ceremonies (which include pre-Islamic practices as well as dancing, music and alcohol consumption, alongside canonical Islamic rituals) as an example of the ‘seamless’ integration of Islam and ʿadat (p. 66), and of how ‘ordinary Muslims challenged the formalization initiative’ of Islamic law (p. 65).

In Chapter 4 (‘A Bugis Imam Desa: An Authoritative Voice in a Changing World’), Kathryn Robinson takes us to her early fieldwork site near Lake Matano to see how the region’s Islamization resulted (unintentionally) from early twentieth century colonial policies and (with much intent) from the work of a lineage of imams. Focusing on economic, political and social shifts throughout the century, Robinson highlights the role of modernity in affecting everyday (religious) life. Economics is also an element of analysis for Wahyuddin Halim; in Chapter 5, titled ‘The Reproduction of Imams and Their Changing Roles within the Contemporary Muslim Community in Wajo, South Sulawesi, Indonesia,’ Halim investigates the impact of and motivations behind attending the century-old As’adiyah school, and specifically its Qur’an memorization training program. Established in the late 1920s by a Mecca-born reformist Bugis, the school (now a network) is a sought-after educational institution as graduates are then able to be employed as permanent (rawatib) or temporary (tarawih) imams. The imams then become vectors for reformist ideas and practices.

In her ‘Negotiating a Space in the Mosque: Women Claiming Religious Authority’ (Chapter 6), Eva Nisa continues to attend to the themes of education and community-guidance, but also adds a focus on the physical space of the mosque, and how women occupy it. Zooming in on the activities of female university students who join Islamist and Salafi groups in Makassar, Nisa reaffirms Sila and Saenong’s suggestion that religious authority in Eastern Indonesia tends to work towards mediation, harmony, and inclusivity within the umma, but she further proposes that the inclusion of women in multiple dakwa groups and these women’s presence (if not ‘monopolization’) in the physical prayer space of the mosque ‘is the result of a progressive effort by women to have a public abode there’ (p. 145). Philip Winn (in Chapter 7, ‘Mosques and their Communities in Northern Ambon, Maluku: Exploring Local Traditions as Islamic Practice in Indonesia’) focuses on the peculiarly Ambonese mosque-roof feature of the tiang alif as ‘Islamic’; looking at how mosque spaces are structured,
inhabited, and managed (both administratively and ritually) he then returns to the ‘mutual implication’ (p. 81) of ‘adat and Islam discussed at the beginning of the volume.

The last two chapters investigate Muslim minorities in Kupang, in West Timor. Stella Aleida Hutagalung (Chapter 8, ‘Haji Badar Daeng Pawero: A Bugis Imam and His Roles in Maintaining Islamic Law and Bugis Adat in Kupang’) interweaves the life story of Kupang’s imam with regional economic dynamics and migration trends, to illustrate how religious leaders in this Muslim minority community are both concerned with reproducing a migrant Bugis community committed to Islam—an effort which includes making local convert wives into ‘pious Bugis women’—and also with accommodation and harmony with non-Muslims. Andrew McWilliams’s chapter (9, ‘Being Muslim in Eastern Indonesia: Contemporary Patterns of Islamic Practice’) takes Kupang as a case study to explore the themes of trade and migration; conflict and co-existence; conversion; and intra-Muslim tensions between traditionalism and reformism. McWilliams acknowledges the realities of globalization, social media, mass travel and exchanges of new ideas, but circling back to some of Robinson’s introductory reflections, he also concludes that while reformism takes hold, local values and practices endure through the charge of local imams who perform life cycles ritual services, provide religious guidance, and care for the community, inspired by the intermesh of ‘adat and Islam.

The book as a whole offers a rich perspective on the varied realities of ‘being Muslim’ in South Sulawesi, Ambon, Sumbawa, and Kupang (West Timor), but it is also suited for reading in excerpts. Besides the stated focus on mosques and imams, a few other thematic threads might spark a reader’s interest. These include: migration, socio-economic dynamics, religious diversity, and interfaith relations. The one that caught my attention the most was marriage, as in multiple chapters it emerges as a crucial element in individuals and communities’ lives; analytically, it opens up conversations about ‘adat/scriptures relations, conversion, integration and state authority. Each theme could be extracted and used as a thread across the book, thus testifying to the richness of the material presented therein.

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