Bianca J. Smith and Mark Woodward (eds.)

This edited book is a very welcome addition to the growing corpus of work on gender in Islamic contemporary Indonesia. It is one of the first books on gender relations in pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) and many of the papers focus on the much neglected topic of women in pesantren. Another novelty is the number of Indonesian scholars represented among the authors: after the Introduction there are nine chapters, all bar one by Indonesian scholars or by Indonesian scholars co-authoring with one of the editors. This representation is particularly important as the work grows out of post-colonial debates about the anthropology of Islam and the hot topic of feminism and Islam.

The enjoyable Introduction by the editors does an excellent, pithy job of situating the book within the historiographical context of post-Orientalism and attempts to decolonise the representation of Islam in Indonesia. It gives some idea of the excitement and controversy surrounding the Muslim women's movement in Indonesia and globally, as well as the history and nature of pesantren and the position of pesantren in Indonesia politically and socially. If you can only read one paper in the book, read this.

Scholarship on pesantren in Indonesia has been dominated by the study of pesantren in East Java, so it was refreshing to read about equivalent institutions in Aceh, the dayah (chapters by Asna Husin and Eka Srimulyani), and Lombok (Smith and Saipul Hamdi, and Smith). These latter two chapters essentially addressed the same individuals and institutions, a fascinating mix of Sasak Islam, Sufism and post-Soeharto politics in Lombok. Although the editors divided the book into sections on Female Leadership and Muslim Agency, Female Spiritual Authority in Sufi Orders and Mystical Groups, Muslim Feminisms: Islamic and Islamist Orientations, and Sexuality, Shariah and Power, the papers stood alone and I reproduce the section titles here only to give the readers a better idea of the content, since I cannot deal with all the papers.

I wished for more detail on how the authors came to know what they presented. Most papers did not even mention the methodologies that were used, or when or for how long fieldwork was conducted. There were often many pages of text with no details of interviews, field notes, or primary sources. The editors did say that the authors were “practitioners and advocates of the Malinowskian position that ethnographic research [...] requires immersion in communities we hope to understand” (p. 18), perhaps hoping to cover this shortfall in advance. Many will no doubt be interested in the chapter by Inayah
Rohmaniyah on the position of women in the radically fundamentalist group MMII (Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia). She was honest in describing how difficult of access MMII is, and how she had to rely mainly on texts written by MMII male authors, whilst arguing the need not to assume that Islamist women are merely submissive “non-thinkers” (p. 136). Nevertheless, it is clearly difficult to present the perspectives and agency of MMII women if one cannot access them or their writings.

The Introduction says that the book will shed light on “gendered pesantren selves”, where the self can be “collective” or private (p. 4). A quibble is that the dominant impression after reading the whole book is that we have a very good sense of public or collective pesantren selves, as they emerge from years of pesantren discipline and study, and finally through modes of interaction with the broader society, but we do not have much sense of the private pesantren self, nor of non-adult selves. How does it feel to live in a pesantren, whether as a young child, separated from home and family, or as a teenager, sequestered away from mobile phones and pop music?

The most effective papers were those that introduced some sort of argument, theory or conceptual framework that gathered the detail and the data under its umbrella. Thus, the paper by Srimulyani drew upon the simple framework of ascribed versus achieved status to discuss female leadership in an Acehnese dayah. Perhaps most memorable were the two papers on sexuality. Mustaghfirah Rahayu used Foucault’s image of the pan-opticon to analyse the pervasive control of sexuality in a pesantren that was presumed by parents to be a morally safe environment for their university student daughters. The chapter by Woodward and Inayah Rohmaniyah on the notorious case of ‘Syech’ Puji Widayanto and his child-bride Luftiana was the only paper to analyse male sexuality. This paper showed how the “tawdry tale” of very public polygamy and child marriage (Puji was jailed for four years for child sexual abuse) was entangled in broad controversies about civil versus religious law, local Muslim practices versus rigid fundamentalism, public flaunting of matters often kept private, etc. I enjoyed the writing style in this paper. Despite lacking religious learning and authority, the dubious protagonist established a pesantren. Buried in the middle of the paragraph about the “more than presumptuous[ly]” named “Pujiono’s Key to Heaven Islamic School” is the scathing sentence, “The school is unusual in that there is no tuition” (p. 160).

To be hyper-critical, the paragraph on page 9 about pesantren as historically male institutions should perhaps have mentioned that the gender balance is now almost equal. Errors in the English were rare (mainly in the paper by Asna Husin on women leading dayah in Aceh), as were inaccurate translations (e.g., “hak dan kewajiban” should have been translated “rights and responsibilities”,