

**Indonesian Islam in a New Era:
How Women Negotiate Their Muslim Identities**

*Susan Blackburn, Bianca J. Smith, and Siti Syamsiyatun, eds.
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This work examines the negotiations that Indonesian Muslim women have made in certain areas of life in the post-Suharto era, an era of socio-political reform in which “it is possible to question accepted attitudes and break new ground” (p. 16), and their religious practices and identities. The editors claim that their work breaks new ground in that (a) it informs readers of “how the women themselves experience their religion and actively engage with it in their lives” (p. 1); (b) it focuses on women and Islam in the post-Suharto period, in which Islam is more prominent and it is more acceptable to put forward feminist views in Indonesia and within Islam; and (c) it is the effort of insiders – Indonesian women with western and Islamic training – who can bridge the gap between western and Indonesian scholarship on Islam and women. The editors state up front that the book does not deliberately engage in a critical feminist theory and that they are not feminist writers; rather, they are influenced by feminism and desire to show that women are active participants and not mere “passive victims of male oppression” (p. 2).

This edited work consists of seven chapters organized under three sections, namely, representation and identity, regional variations, and organizational negotiation. In the first section, Nina Nurmila (chapter 1) provides an interesting analysis of her fieldwork involving polygamous marriage vis-à-vis three different cases as regards the 1974 Marriage Law, which discourages and restricts its practice. She concludes that how the women respond to this practice is influenced by their beliefs about polygamy and the attitudes

of the people who live around them. Those who believe that it is a form of test of their belief in Islam tend to stay in the marriage as a sign of religious devotion and for the children's sake. Those who live in society that does not have negative attitudes about polygamy will find less social pressure to reject it.

Rachmah Ida (chapter 2) examines the practice of veiling (*berkerudung*) among urban middle-class Muslim women as represented in the Ramadan *sinetron* (television dramas). She argues that veiling in these dramas reveals a dilemma and that what seems to be highlighted is the difference between the "devout" and "ordinary" Muslimah. Her research, which was conducted in one village (*kampong*) within an urban neighborhood, reveals that the women feel that this practice is not expected to be part of a costume contest or a social trend; rather, they strongly feel that it carries a consequence for those women who adopt it. They were able to understand that these dramas were economically, as opposed to religiously, motivated and that the producers were using them to present fashionable Muslim dress (*busana*) to whet the appetite of trendy Muslimahs.

Lugina Setyawati's research (chapter 3) took place in Riau (Indonesia), where, unlike other regions, religion has become fused with Malay ethnic identity. She shows how the Islamic characteristics of Malay identity have been strengthened by the current resurgence of regionalism and notes the important role of women in constructing these local identities. Bianca Smith's ethnological study of women's religiosity in a Javanese village (chapter 4) demonstrates that "the women in the Javanese village practiced a variant of Islam, not a Javanese form of religion alien to Islam" (p. 18). She asserts that Indonesian Islam is tolerant and inclusive by arguing that Islam necessarily varies with time and place and that these Muslims still consider themselves to be good Muslims. These two chapters reinforce the view that the combination of Islam and older traditions often makes the rural practice of religion different from that in the urban areas.

In the section on organization negotiation, Eka Srimulyani (chapter 5) focuses on women's leadership roles in the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), which traditionally have been male-dominated. Basing her conclusions upon biographical data for three generations of female religious leaders (*nyais*), she shows that women did play a significant leadership role in these schools. She argues that exceptional women could have influence and that this resembles the legitimacy of female political leaders in Muslim countries today. However, such women have to be "careful to abide by gen-

dered Islamic rules such as in their dress, their relations with men, and their reputation as household managers” (p. 19).

Chapter 6, by Siti Syamsiyatun, studies how Muslim women negotiated religious space in the case of the *Nasyiatul Aisyiyah*, the young women’s organization in the Muhammadiyah, whose leaders championed new ideas about women and Islam. This chapter is important for its analysis of how Muslim women from secular feminism and Arabic-influenced Islamism struggle to strike a middle path. Finally, Amelia Fauzia examines women and Islamic philanthropy in Indonesia (chapter 7). Based on a number of empirical surveys and interviews, she reveals that Islamic charitable institutions are gendered in how they spend their money and in how they employ women. In fact, women are taking a more individual role in giving and playing a more prominent role in such institutions.

I found this work excellent in terms of providing an understanding of how Indonesian women negotiate their spaces in various aspects of life. The language is clear, the work is well organized, and the introduction provides an excellent overview of the work and how its different chapters fall in place. The contributors have actually succeeded in voicing the views of Muslim women elsewhere, because the issues they discuss are common to other women in the Muslim world. Although the work is based on a feminist framework, it is not really clear to which definition of feminism the contributors subscribe. Nowhere do we find them demanding absolute equality between men and women; instead, the framework presented rings true to the Islamic worldview.

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