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*Gender and Islam in Southeast Asia: Women's Rights Movements, Religious Resurgence and Local Traditions*. Edited by Susanne Schröter. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013. 335 pp.

"It is no secret that religion and state 'conspire' against women." These words open Siti Musdah Mulia's chapter (p. 111) in *Gender and Islam in Southeast Asia*. However, to what extent does Mulia's view describe the fate of Muslim women in Southeast Asia today? Historically, Muslim men in Southeast Asia have been seen as treating their women more respectfully than men in other Islamic societies. In sixteenth-century Aceh, for instance, women served as heads of state (*Sultanah*). In 2001, a Muslim woman, Megawati Sukarnoputri, was elected president of Indonesia, the largest Islamic country in the world. On the other hand, the global Islamic revivalism that affected Southeast Asia throughout the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the strengthening of patriarchal discourses. State-sponsored campaigns promoting the "ideal" family from the "Islamic" perspective entrenched essentialist arguments that men are the protectors of

women in all domains. In 2011, the argument forwarded by the Obedient Wives Club — a group of women promoting subservience to men as a panacea to social problems and first established in Malaysia — seemed to suggest patriarchy as the ideal in Islam.

*Gender and Islam in Southeast Asia* is indeed a timely contribution to the growing debate on feminism, gender rights, and Islam. The fact that the contributors to the book are from various disciplinary backgrounds — ethnology, theology, history and literature — enriches its relevance to the debate on the role and future of Islamic feminism. The book mainly captures the tension between two camps, which Susanne Schröter accurately describes as “the moderate and liberal female activists and intellectuals campaigning for the implementation of the CEDAW (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women) and gender egalitarian Islam” and “the orthodox conservatives and Islamists fighting for an order of difference that is based on supposedly God-given inequality between the genders” (p. 52). In pointing out this tension, the contributors to the volume critically examine the ways in which dominant perceptions of women impede the various agenda for reforms, both at the state and societal levels.

The two chapters that focus on Indonesia accurately depict this tension. Nelly van Doorn-Harder’s chapter examines the way in which the progressive harmonious family programme developed by *Aisyiyah* (the women’s wing of Muhammadiyah), is continuously challenged by the state and Islamist groups that insist on the importance of the nuclear family. In the same vein, Siti Musdah’s chapter spells out the agenda for reforms on existing marital law. The Counter Legal Draft of the Islamic Code of Law — which sought to rectify the notion of witness in wedding ceremonies, the age of requirement for marriage, dowry and also the concept of *nusyuz* (disobedience of wife to the husband) — addresses the discrimination that women face under existing laws.

The main strength of the book lies in the examination of gender discourses in countries and organizations that have been under-researched. Alexander Horstmann’s examination of women’s

participation in Tablighi Jamaat in South Thailand portrays the way in which the very conservative image of female gender roles promoted there has the reverse effect of encouraging the female members to participate actively in the public sphere, including travelling with their husbands to India. This argument is sustained in Farish Noor's chapter which examines the transnational dimension of Tablighi Jamaat. Farish reflects on the movement's internal contestations and contradictory perceptions of women. Furthermore, the book features contributions from such authorities in the field as Maila Stevens and Amina Rasul-Bernardo, who offer very succinct, in-depth case studies on Malaysia and the Philippines, respectively.

However, the volume could have set a clearer objective than "for readers to gain a comprehensive insight into the diversity of Islamic cultures in Southeast Asia" (p. 1). While this objective is met, where the book positions itself within the vast literature on Islam and gender in Southeast Asia remains unclear. There are many books on the same theme focussing on social change, problematizing patriarchal discourses, rethinking religious doctrines in the light of modern realities and advocating for equal rights to be given to women. Lately, such approaches are regarded as unfashionable. Instead, underscoring women's agency and coping mechanisms in engaging and challenging the dominant patriarchal discourses has become a trend in gender studies. Works of this latter sort, largely anthropological with postmodern and subaltern perspectives, invite readers to rethink the portrayal of women as merely victims of patriarchy. Undeniably, some of the chapters in this volume have applied postmodern and subaltern perspectives. Nonetheless, establishing at the outset the volume's place in the broad literature on gender and Islam in Southeast Asia would have linked the chapters more coherently. Moreover, the scholarly conversation needs to move away from the archipelagic states to include Muslim minorities in Singapore, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar.

Despite these shortcomings, this book is an important contribution to gender studies and Islam. Future works on the same theme should provide new angles on the existing paradigms, if not focus

on a particular aspect of gender and Islam, such as Southeast Asian women's political leadership, women's roles in social movements or gender and popular culture.

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*Rice Talks: Food and Community in a Vietnamese Town.* By Nir Avieli. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. 323 pp.

*Rice Talks* explores the culinary sphere of Hội An in central Vietnam. It is both an ethnography and a theoretical project, as it aims to show that the culinary sphere can be an important arena for gaining insight into what it means to be Vietnamese. How different such facets of identity as gender, class, ethnicity and religious affiliation are constructed, maintained, negotiated, challenged and changed within this sphere is discussed in the book.

In addition to writing about the history of Hội An in the introduction, Avieli offers a brief discussion of theoretical perspectives used by anthropologists in the study of food. In analysing the culinary sphere of Hội An, he found Handelman's scheme of mirrors, models and re-presentation useful for its attention to cultural production and reproduction. Avieli focuses on two research questions: (1) how do food and foodways reflect the social order and cultural arrangements of the Hoianese? and (2) how do the Hoianese reproduce, help negotiate or alter food and foodways?

The detailed ethnography captures the particular texture of everyday home meals as well as different types of festive meals. Its style of introducing a food event begins with a social interaction with an informant who invites or tells the author about a particular meal. The conversation between him and the informant is presented in the form of a narrative. The reader feels as if she or he is present at the field site.