

Book Reviews

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Piety, Politics, and Everyday Ethics in Southeast Asian Islam: Beautiful Behavior. Edited by Robert Rozehnal. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. xiii+237 pp.

This new volume presents a diverse and fascinating set of explorations of *adab* in contemporary Muslim Southeast Asia. This concept from classical Islamic tradition is glossed by the editor as “beautiful behavior” in the book’s subtitle, and further defined by Rozehnal in the introduction as both “the public display of an individual’s internal moral character” (p. 3) on the micro-level and “a sort of civilisational glue” (ibid.) on the macro-level. Over the chapters that follow, the concept is traced across both registers with reference to a broad range of manifestations. Muhamad Ali’s contribution, for example, surveys conceptualizations of *adab* across a broad set of discourses in Malay, Javanese and Arabic texts circulating through the region since the eighteenth century, while Daniel Birchok presents a rich ethnography of “life course-contingent *adab*” (p. 54) across diverse social strata.

The chapters in this volume thus range impressively across multiple disciplinary perspectives, from anthropology and religious studies to ethnomusicology and political science. There is, however, something of an imbalance in terms of country coverage, with only one chapter dedicated to Malaysia (by Timothy Daniels) alongside seven on Indonesia. Thomas Pepinsky’s contribution, however, takes a comparative approach to *adab* as a key term in diverse discourses of political critique in Indonesia and Malaysia—arguing that more confessionalized Islamic valences characterize dominant conceptions of *adab* in contemporary Malaysia (pp. 67–68), as opposed to what

he characterizes as a more ‘secular’ vision informed by “Javanese traditions” in neighbouring Indonesia.

Pepinsky’s argument about Malaysia resonates with Daniels’s account of the ways in which *adab* was transformed through the Malaysian experience of religious revival since the 1970s, as it was increasingly “shaped by *sharia* models”, as well as by custom in the intensification of the country’s identity politics (p. 79). Pepinsky’s argument about the “simply civilizational” (p. 66)—rather than “religious” Islamic valences—of *adab* in Indonesia, however, stands in contrast to that presented in other contributions to this volume. James Hoestery, for example, argues persuasively that it is not the case that “*adab* has somehow become secularised. Instead the study of *adab* in Indonesia provides an opportunity to better understand how Islamic ideas of public ethics unfold in the wider religio-political context of national politics” (p. 124).

The self-consciously religious dimensions of *adab* in Indonesia are also prominent in the volume’s other chapters on Indonesia. Nelly van Doorn-Harder highlights changes in traditional ideals of female comportment with the expansion of education allowing women “to become religious leaders in their own right” (p. 104). Her focus here is on the “Character Project” led by Lies Marcoes-Natsir with an agenda to “scrutinize *adab* rules aimed at restricting women’s rights and freedoms” (p. 105) by way of the critical readings of classical Islamic texts. Anne Rasmussen explores the aesthetics of *adab* in the performative contexts of competitions in the recitation of the Qur’an and Islamic musical arts. She perceptively highlights here that as judges evaluate the performance of *hajir marawis*, the category of *adab* provides the space for appreciating aspects of “intent, feeling, sincerity, authenticity, or spirituality” (p. 150) that shape the “acceptable demonstration” of *beradab* bodies (p. 166) in public performance. Here, *adab* provides a space for the negotiation of expressions of communal identities as well as the construction of models of individual subjectivity. Anna Gade’s chapter then further expands the range of contexts in which conceptions of *adab* are operationalized in contemporary Indonesian Muslim movements for

religiously inflected responses to environmental degradation—which provides an “alternative to ‘environmentalism’ that foregrounds a moral critique of human responsibility for the corruption (*fasād*) of the earth” (pp. 185–86).

Across these chapters we can trace a stimulating extension of conversations on *adab* building upon and directly engaging with the earlier work of Ewing and Metcalf on the subject (p. 4) to provide thought-provoking explorations of the concept in Muslim Southeast Asia. Moreover, the detailed case studies of that region presented here benefit substantially from being framed in conversation with an editorial voice whose primary geographic focus is outside the region. Rozehnal has thus helped to shape a collection of strong and stimulating essays that helps bring the specific case studies presented by the contributors into broader conversations of interest well beyond area specialists of Southeast Asian Studies. This serves to open up the particular developments treated here to something of a larger framework.

There are, however, also what I would consider some missed opportunities here. Firstly, there is not much engagement between and across the individual chapters in ways that might have helped to sharpen and challenge particular lines of interpretation. Beyond that, the volume might have made a more substantial contribution to broader contemporary conversations had it engaged with current anthropological work on ethics—some important examples of which have emerged from scholars with extensive fieldwork and experience in the region. The volume is at some points also marred by problems with presentation of words in Arabic script, such as with the disconnected letters set in reverse (left to right) as in the case of ب د ن for *badan* (p. 194n2). These unfortunate issues with the typesetting are, however, mere technical quibbles. Looking beyond this, what we are presented with in this volume is an excellent example of productive engagement between specialist work conducted in Southeast Asia and broader frameworks for discussion with the field of Islamic Studies beyond the region. This accomplishment is a credit to both the editor and the contributors,

who have together produced a model for future work transcending the divisions traditionally separating Islamic from Southeast Asian Area Studies.

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Familial Properties: Gender, State, and Society in Early Modern Vietnam, 1463–1778. By Nhung Tuyet Tran. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2018. xii+257 pp.

Even though women’s history has been an important component and a defining marker of Vietnamese history, a monograph dedicated to studying early modern Vietnamese women in depth has been missing. For this reason, Tran’s *Familial Properties* is long overdue. It fills a huge gap in the historiography of Vietnamese and Southeast Asian women, and hence is especially welcome.

Employing her hard-gleaned sources in multiple languages (classical Chinese, Vietnamese demotic script or chữ Nôm, French, etc.), Tran has painted a detailed picture of Vietnamese women’s lives during the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. Setting her research against the war-torn period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in Vietnamese history, one can discern two main threads in Tran’s book. One is that the Vietnamese states (the Lê, Mạc, Trịnh and Nguyễn regimes), in varying degrees, regulated the gender regime by employing neo-Confucian ideology imported from China. Female behaviour from birth to death became a paramount concern of these states, which employed their apparatus (mainly law codes) to implement externally derived ideals from the top down, to the village level. Women’s bodies and their sexuality were the primary concerns of the states. The second thread demonstrates how the implementation of state ideals of women fell short of