

***What is Religious Authority?: Cultivating Islamic Communities in Indonesia.* By Ismail Fajrie Alatas. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. Softcover: 268pp.**

Throughout history, Islamic communities grew and developed along diverse trajectories. While some prospered, others withered. Some theorists hold that religious authority plays an important role in the sustenance of Islamic societies. However, within these societies there are varying levels of acceptance towards religious authorities, and this can determine whether Islamic communities expand or diminish. Ismail Fajrie Alatas' book, *What is Religious Authority?: Cultivating Islamic Communities in Indonesia*, provides a fresh perspective on how religious authority is created and maintained in Islamic societies.

The book is based on the author's research into the historical and cultural practices of Islamic community leaders in Java, who sought to align community interests with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad so that the former could serve as sites for the transmission and social realization of the latter (p. 210). The main focus is on a Sufi leader of Arab descent from Hadramawt (Yemen), Habib Luthfi (b. 1947), who is still influential in Muslim communities in Indonesia today. Following Hannah Arendt's political philosophy, Alatas explains that a hierarchical master-disciple relationship in the Muslim community works to stabilize, centralize and expand religious communities (p. 136).

The author believes that contemporary Islamic societies across the world have experienced alienation from the prophet's life (*sunna*) in terms of role models as devout Muslims. Therefore, religious community leaders had to work hard to connect, reconstruct, select and represent the prophetic past as a model of action for their communities. The work carried out by religious community leaders has produced authoritative teachings and practices adapted to the context of specific communities—translating *sunna* practices into local practices. According to Alatas, lasting Islamic communities are built on efforts to construct cultural and political institutions that establish religious authority, or what he calls “articulatory labour”: the labour of articulating the *sunna* and the community (p. 18). Alatas emphasizes that articulatory labour must adapt to the culture in which the community is located. To support this argument, the book is divided into two parts: “authority in motion”, which consists of three chapters, and “assembling authority” in the next

four chapters. In these two parts, Alatas lays out chronologically how religious authority emerged, spread, changed, competed, dwindled and finally re-emerged under the process of articulatory labour in Indonesian Muslim communities.

In “authority in motion”, the author outlines the history of articulatory labour in Java and Hadramawt. Chapter One recounts the Javanese kingdom era, and the historical accounts of how figures of saints (*Walisongo*) and local leaders (*Pangeran Diponegoro*) transmitted *sunna* to build Muslim communities in the *perdikan* (free villages) and *keraton* (royal court). Elsewhere in Hadramawt, Sufi scholars built Muslim communities through *tariqa* (path of spiritual wayfaring) and *hawṭa* (sacred sanctuary). In both Java and Hadramawt, religious authority had to be built in conjunction with local culture and interests while establishing themselves as links to the Prophet’s past. In Chapter Two, Alatas explains how articulating texts originating from the Prophet, such as the creedal texts—abridged legal manuals and litanies—served as a form of authority infrastructure in these communities. Alatas’ focus on text articulation explains the Haddānian mode of articulatory labour, which is based on a Sufism paradigm pioneered by Abdallāh b. Alawī al-Ḥaddād (d. 1720) from Hadramawt, and how it spread to Indonesia. The first part of the book then closes with a discussion of the transformation of Muslim communities in Java as a result of new modes of articulation such as reformist and modernist ideas regarding Islam.

The second part of the book explains how Habib Luthfi cultivated religious authority in Java. Chapter Four begins by recounting the biography of Habib Luthfi and explains how an aspiring scholar assumed a position of authority by tapping into different genealogies and networks of Islamic transmission (p. 110). Chapter Five deals with the social institutions that Habib Luthfi built to establish authority and develop a durable community. Specifically, the hierarchical master-disciple relationship in the *tariqa* community, where Habib Luthfi served as a *murshid* (a spiritual mentor or Sufi master), made religious authority easy to cultivate. The subsequent discussion in Chapter Six describes Habib Luthfi’s relationship with various state actors and institutions in Indonesia. Having close relationships with various political actors, such as presidents, military generals and district heads, Habib Luthfi enjoyed state protection, which helped him fend off challenges to his authority and expand the community. The central concept, articulatory labour, is again used in this chapter to explain how the state can be used as a framework for religious

authority (p. 164). The final chapter describes Habib Luthfi's efforts to strengthen his authority through the hagiographic composition of saintly talk (like sermons), texts (like litanies) and tombs (as sacred sanctuaries). Through this hagiographic composition, Habib Luthfi was able to project himself as a new saint and local leader.

Overall, Alatas' work provides rich insights for readers who wish to gain a better understanding of comparative Islamic authority. The author's success in blending historical, anthropological and political analyses together makes this book a worthwhile read and a useful source of reference for scholars interested in Islam in Indonesia. Through this book, we discover that there is not one global Islamic community but that there have always been many communities, each revolving around different articulations in various places and at various times.

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