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**Smith, B.J. and Woodward, M. (Eds.) *Gender and Power in Indonesian Islam: Leaders, Feminists, Sufis and Pesantren Selves*. New York and London: Routledge, 2013.**

*Gender and Power in Indonesian Islam* contributes to a burgeoning body of literature on the subject formation of women leaders in Islam—a line of inquiry that has been fruitfully opened up by postcolonial scholarship in reaction to Orientalist thinking that has long denied agency to Muslim women. The essays contained in this edited volume demonstrate that in Indonesia, female leadership has, in fact, placed important limits on the patriarchal structures of Islamic institutions. The essays, moreover, show that the Salafi movement—a fundamentalist movement associated with literal, puritanical interpretations of Islam—that emerged in Indonesia in recent decades has had to accommodate locally specific patterns of gender relations and cultural meanings. Rapid economic development, democratization, foreign aid intervention, political conflict, and other social changes have nonetheless affected female autonomy in contradictory ways: while gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment have become the buzzwords of the post-Suharto era, fundamentalist Islamist forces have gained some traction in civil society and have even risen to power in local governments. The deepening conservatism associated with this rise of Islamist forces is encapsulated in control over women’s sexuality, ideologies in favor of polygamy and child marriage, and restrictions on women’s leadership in institutions of religious learning (*pesantren*). Yet, as Smith and Woodward point out, the rise of Salafism has also reinvigorated societal debates about gender equity and the position of women in Islam, introducing spiritual pluralism to a region that had been the hotbed of Sufism—Islamic mysticism—for centuries. At the forefront of the struggle to promote gender equity are Muslim women and their male allies in the *pesantren*—actors who accommodate religious norms legitimating male tutelage, even as they strive to enhance authority for women in the public sphere.

To address the paradox of women’s simultaneous empowerment and complicity in their own subordination, the book takes as its point of departure a critique of dominant representations of Islam that have overlooked Islam’s transformations in Southeast Asia. The aim of the volume, the editors proclaim, is to “decolonize the anthropology of Islam and Muslim feminism” and to problematize the conflation of Middle Eastern gender tropes with Islam writ large (p. 1). Smith and Woodward argue, in particular, that Indonesian variants of Islam must be understood as a product of the archipelago’s distinct cultural and historical traditions. The bilateral kinship systems prevalent in Java, Lombok, and other parts of Indonesia have enabled the transfer of spiritual authority from male Islamic leaders (*kyai*) to their daughters, granting the latter the leverage to head political and religious organizations once perceived as male domains. Moreover, the fact that some Indonesian Sufi orders have retained lineages of pre-Islamic customary practices suggests that Indonesian Muslim women may enjoy privileges in social life that are probably unavailable to their counterparts in parts of the Middle East.

Conceptually, the editors examine the subject-making of Muslim women leaders by referencing what they call gendered *pesantren* selves. For Smith and Woodward, the notion of *pesantren* selves encompasses both private and public aspects, emerging “from social interaction [with broader segments of society] as well as from the study of Islamic texts and communal religious practice” centered in Islamic boarding schools (p. 5). Viewing Muslim women leaders’ involvement in public affairs this way gives analytical purchase to deciphering the myriad forms in which women’s authority is enacted in everyday praxis, from fundamentalist reinterpretations of religious scriptures to the promotion of Muslim feminist agendas. Such a view of human

agency, the editors imply, has the potential to unsettle the dichotomy between domination and subordination, and between power and resistance, encouraging social scientists to attend to the diverse registers of Muslim women's negotiations with piety and gender equality.

The edited volume is divided into four parts composed of the following themes: female leadership, female spiritual authority, Muslim feminisms, and sexuality. Probably the most theoretically robust in the volume, the first essay, by Smith and Hamdi, examines the contestations that unfolded over the leadership succession of Lombok's largest Islamic body, Nahdlatul Wathan, when Siti Raehanun, the daughter of a late *kyai* was appointed to succeed her father. Raehanun's succession generated widespread conflict between the Sufi and Salafi sects due to their contrasting understandings about the place of women in Islam. Whereas Sufi customary practices permit the bilateral descent of spiritual authority to women, the Salafis believe that women have little right to become authority figures and "[associate] women with emotion, weakness and child-rearing" (p. 36). For Smith and Hamdi, the heated dispute over Raehanun's rise to power is symptomatic of Sufism's declining hegemony in the face of a Salafi reformist movement that seeks to "deculturalize Islam" in favor of a "literalist [interpretation] of the Qur'an" (p. 25).

Srimulyani's chapter highlights the contradictory developments in gender relations in Indonesia's Aceh region in recent years. The 2004 tsunami was a key juncture, allowing for the confluence of political Islam and gender mainstreaming. The merging of the two themes became a dominant discourse in a region ravaged by civil war. Although the notion of women's empowerment was initially introduced by foreign donors and international NGOs, Muslim women seized the opportunities afforded by gender workshops to become leaders in Islamic communities. Yet, as Srimulyani reveals, the adoption of a gender discourse into the indigenous lexicon has been met with resistance from religious elites who perceive gender equity as a Western concept with no relevance for Muslims. A key task for female Muslim leaders has thus involved reframing gender ideas as being in line with a more liberal interpretation of Islam. For Srimulyani, female autonomy has thus been both enabled and disabled by Aceh's contradictory sociopolitical transformations.

The next pair of essays examines women's authority in mystical and orthodox Sufi organizations. In her essay, Smith foregrounds pre-Islamic beliefs and bilateral kinship ties as factors permitting the acquisition and succession of spiritual influence by women in both the Subud and Sapta Darma groups. Indeed, the succession of power through women is possible because Sasak and Javanese mystics "value mystical instruction over patriarchal assumptions about proper gender roles based on normative interpretations of gender in *pesantren* and Sufi orders" (p. 99). Despite this authority to acquire spiritual power, Smith also finds that women's assumption of spiritual power through divine revelation (*wahyu*) has led to changes in gender roles without necessarily challenging hegemonic gender constructs in Islam. Such contradictions in the interpretation of women's role in Islam are becoming more pronounced due to the growing surveillance of Sufi mysticism—regarded as a nonnormative expression of Islam—in post-Suharto Indonesia. In the second essay of this section, Widiyanto contends that while a high degree of flexibility in gender roles is permitted in Sufi mystical groups, patrilineal conventions prevail in orthodox Sufi orders (*tarekat*), with significant restrictions on female leadership.

Arguably the most fascinating for feminist scholars of Islam is the thematic section on women's movements in Indonesia. Hamdi examines a network of *pesantrens* based in the city of Solo—often considered the epicenter of Javanese high culture—that promote interfaith dialogue and a progressive gender-equity agenda, even though the activists do not refer to themselves as

feminists. Hamdi provides a genealogy of Indonesian feminism, demonstrating that while the women's movement began in the late colonial era, it was not until Suharto's reign (1967-1998) that feminist ideas rapidly disseminated from Western-trained scholars and NGOs to secular universities and *pesantrens*. In this context, female students in the *Al-Muayyad Windan pesantren* took the lead in reforming gender bias by reinterpreting classical Koranic texts that discuss women, criticizing the discriminatory treatment of female students, and intervening in rural communities to address gender inequality. Hamdi is careful, however, to note that *Al-Muayyad Windan* is unusual in its liberal stance on gender norms. In fact, its minimal surveillance of women students is almost unheard of in other *pesantrens*, and may explain, in part, the greater capacity of female students there to transform unequal gender relations in this institution of learning. Hamdi's study can therefore be seen as a comparison case to the more conservative institutions that Rahayu has labeled as "panopticon *pesantren*" in the final essay of this book.

Rohmaniyah examines the paradoxical role of female leaders in a fundamentalist group called the *Majelis Mujahidin*. Like Hamdi, Rohmaniyah maintains that feminist theory has circulated widely since 1985 due to the efforts of scholars, activists, and NGOs. However, says Rohmaniyah, the expansion of political opportunities presented by Suharto's downfall has in fact led to the emergence of two opposing trends in Indonesia and that "Islamic fundamentalism and Western feminism have become important discursive sites" of struggle (139). Rohmaniyah argues that the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is better seen not as an expression of cultural "backwardness," but as an artifact of modernity—a collective response to the existential threats posed by rapid social change. From this perspective, conventional understandings of fundamentalist women leaders as powerless victims at best, and promoters of Islamic patriarchy at worst, obscure the ways in which women are agents for gender equality. Indeed, while conservative activists uphold Islamic ideologies that valorize an unequal, gendered division of labor, they have also selectively borrowed Western liberal discourses to emphasize female autonomy in their "fundamentalist transformative agenda" (p. 140). In short, the attitudes toward gender equality as examined in the case studies presented in the text reflect Indonesian Muslims' cautious accommodation of the discourses of modernity and feminism emanating from the West. That even *Majelis Mujahidin* has to grapple with the gender tropes of Western liberal feminism suggests that it is misleading to view Islamic fundamentalism as a sociopolitical movement for the restoration of Islam's presumably "purist" patriarchal ideologies.

The final thematic section of the text examines the discourse of sexuality in contemporary Islamic movements. The essay by Woodward and Rohmaniyah studies a recent controversy surrounding polygamy and child marriage, showing how disputes have emerged over the legitimacy of these practices despite their deep historical roots in Javanese society. The authors suggest that the contemporary rise of Islamic fundamentalism has politicized this debate in a highly visible manner, revealing the deep-seated tensions between a secularizing state and an increasingly powerful Salafi movement. The authors, nonetheless, conclude that demographic changes will gradually make such practices obsolete, paving the way for a more progressive interpretation of Islam.

Taken together, this series of essays provides a fascinating account of the contested relationship between liberal feminism and political Islam in contemporary Indonesia on the one hand, and the pioneering role played by religious leaders in advancing gender equity, on the other. Nevertheless, the empirical and theoretical robustness of the essays is of uneven quality, with most of the essays being of a descriptive nature. Also lacking is a systematic analysis of

changes in the relationship between female and male leaders in the *pesantren* over the *longue durée*. In some chapters, we are made to believe that the social status of women has traditionally been high in Indonesia, yet in other places, the evidence presented points to a far more tenuous position for women involved in *pesantrens* and political movements, especially when it comes to women's sexuality. While bilateral kinship ties are argued to be important in accounting for female leadership (p. 31), such ties are not adequately theorized in the essays on female authority in Aceh and Java. As social anthropologists have long established, Acehnese and Javanese kinship systems are both bilateral and matrifocal (mother-focused), a phenomenon that may account for a degree of flexibility in gender roles in Indonesia's experiments with Islam. Given that spiritual bilateralism is a factor invoked for explaining the distinctiveness of Indonesian Islam, it seems pertinent to develop this argument further to illustrate how Indonesia's Sufi traditions differ from their progenitors in the Middle East.

The editors' characterization of the Middle East as beset by "[honor] killings, dowry murder, female genital mutilation, and public stoning," also risks Orientalizing the Middle East and producing a static representation of Arab, Iranian, and other Middle Eastern women's struggles with political Islam (p. 3). As Saba Mahmood has argued in *Politics of Piety*, the growing conservatism of Islam is a relatively recent phenomenon in a longstanding Muslim country like Egypt. Still, even Egyptian women have been able to take advantage of the new opportunities for leadership roles in religious organizations afforded by a rapidly modernizing society. That the structural conditions for Salafism's rise seem, on the surface, similar in both Indonesia and Egypt call for a need to better contextualize the historical, geopolitical, and cultural conditions (including kinship systems) that account for Indonesia's religious transformations. Finally, there is considerable slippage in relation to the essays' treatment of Foucault's views on power and agency. Srimulyani's study, for instance, conceptualizes "active agency" as being exemplified by women leading political movements and participating in electoral politics, and "submissive agency" as exemplified by those who do not take part in them. Yet, both Foucault and Mahmood clearly warn us against a narrow view of agency that centers on individuals' relations with sovereign power and resistance to structures of domination. The inconsistent application of Smith and Woodward's Foucauldian conception of gendered *pesantren* selves detracts from the overall coherence of the book. Despite these shortcomings, however, *Gender and Power in Indonesian Islam* provides many fascinating insights about the paradoxes of contemporary Indonesia. Given Indonesia's position as the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, its experiences of Islam are both substantively and theoretically important in their own right. Scholars interested in religion, gender, and cultural change will find this book helpful.

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