

Becoming Better Muslims: Religious Authority and Ethical Improvement in Aceh, Indonesia. By DAVID KLOOS. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017. xvii, 212 pp. ISBN: 9780691176642 (cloth, also available in paper and as e-book).

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In this remarkable book, David Kloos draws from extensive archival research and ethnographic fieldwork to offer important insights about religious authority and personal piety in Aceh, Indonesia. In the historical sources and academic literature, Aceh is often portrayed as a region and people who have drawn on primordial ethnic ties and a conservative brand of Islam to fend off intrusions from both the Dutch colonial state and the contemporary Indonesian state. With multiple academic audiences in mind, Kloos argues against the notion of “Acehnese exceptionalism” in terms of a supposedly fanatic and violent Islam. Instead, Kloos traces genealogies of the historical formation of such an idea (one that implicates both Dutch colonial ethnography and Indonesian national politics) and provides fine-grained ethnographic analysis that delineates the frictions, anxieties, ambivalences, and even senses of moral failure that animate personal piety and public politics. As such, *Becoming Better Muslims* will be of great interest—and arguably become required reading—for students and scholars of Indonesia, Islamic studies, and the anthropology of Islam, as well as the broader study of ethics and morality.

The book includes a clear and well-written introduction (readily accessible by upper-level undergraduates and graduate students), followed by two historical chapters and three ethnographic chapters. In the introduction, Kloos sketches out the book’s major historical and theoretical interventions. Building on recent historical scholarship by Michael Laffan,¹ Kloos rejects the notion of Acehnese exceptionalism, arguing instead for an appreciation of the “dynamic and shifting interactions among state actors, religious authorities, and ordinary Muslims” (p. 1). In this reckoning, traditional religious authorities have not simply sought to counter an encroaching Indonesian state, rather they have drawn from state resources in an effort—often contested by local villagers—to increase their own religious authority and to manage the resources (financial and otherwise) made possible by the embeddedness of the state in Aceh.

With respect to the anthropology of Islamic ethics, Kloos engages recent critiques of the Asadian emphasis on power and discipline in order to emphasize the importance of “doubt, ambivalence, indifference, and self-perceived religious negligence” in the processes of ethical formation. Building on analyses along these lines by Samuli Schielke and others,² Kloos points out that, contrary to such characterizations of religious subjects as “locked in or struck by a condition of insoluble moral tensions and unattainable futures,” his Acehnese interlocutors “framed their religious lives in terms of a progressive effort, rocky and unpredictable, but seldom in a deadlock” (p. 12). As Kloos’s careful ethnography in the latter chapters ably demonstrates, moral failure is actually productive of particular social, religious, and kin relations and reveals the religious agency of ordinary Muslims contending with demands from (and also seeking the resources of) family,

¹Michael F. Laffan, *The Makings of Indonesian Islam: Orientalism and the Narration of a Sufi Past* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

²Samuli Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence before and after 2011* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

religious leaders, and the state. At least for this particular reader, these latter interventions in the anthropology of Islamic ethics will be especially important in shaping the current debates and future scholarly conversations well beyond the study of Indonesian Islam.

Chapter 1 traces the aforementioned idea of “Acehnese exceptionalism,” arguing instead for a historical understanding of this idea as the product of colonial encounter and advocating for the need for an ethnographic understanding of the mutual embeddedness of religious actors and the Indonesian state. In chapter 2 (“The Limits of Normative Islam”), Kloos sheds light on the religious repertoire of Acehnese Muslims during the New Order (1965–98) and argues that “the impact of reformist Islam, championed by PUSA [The All Aceh Association of Ulama] and Darul Islam, was more limited than commonly assumed, and that the attempt by the government to adapt and incorporate reformist Islamic norms and interpretations created opportunities as much as constraints” (pp. 55–56).

In chapters 3, 4, and 5, Kloos draws on careful and incisive ethnography to examine, respectively, the transformation of religious authority, the relative flexibility of normative Islam in everyday life, and the importance of moral failure as productive of both ethical improvement and Islamic sociality. Building on the analyses of contemporary Aceh by scholars such as Michael Feener,³ Kloos offers an understanding of Islamic subjectivity in Aceh that goes “beyond the politics of violence and grief” (p. 78). As Kloos demonstrates, movements of normative Islam were also accompanied by new forms of the religious authority of rural religious elite who were respected, but also held in suspicion as their own authority became increasingly entangled in the machinations of the Indonesian state.

Chapter 4 offers a nuanced portrait of a family at odds. When a son returns from Islamic school in Jakarta influenced by the aspirations and anxieties of reformist Islam (especially of the Justice and Prosperous Party, or PKS), his parents struggle to deal with his newfound sense of “proper” Islamic ethics, alternating between accommodation and protest. Through several interesting vignettes, which also convey the intricacies and possibilities of ethnographic encounters, Kloos emphasizes the interpenetration, ambivalences, and even resonances that structure, and at times call into question, easy dichotomies between so-called traditionalist and reformist Islam.

In chapter 5, Kloos expands on the model of religious agency developed in the first several chapters. Rather than understanding ethical formation in terms of a linear path towards moral perfection, Kloos cogently argues that scholars must also pay attention to how perceived moral failure and generational differences also structure the moral aspirations and anxieties of contemporary Acehnese. The former emphasis on moral failure is an especially important contribution to research in the anthropology of Islam and religious studies more broadly. As such, *Becoming Better Muslims* offers important correctives to scholarly understandings of ordinary Muslims, everyday politics, and ethical formations.

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³R. Michael Feener, *Shari'a and Social Engineering: The Implementation of Islamic Law in Contemporary Aceh, Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).