

## Southeast Asia

*Piety, politics and everyday ethics in Southeast Asian Islam: Beautiful behavior*

Edited by ROBERT ROZEHNAL

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In this edited volume of eight chapters the authors attempt to use *adab* as a guiding concept and framework to understand (perhaps appreciate) Islam differently. In editor Robert Rozehnal's introductory essay, the etymology of *adab* is dissected as a concept which embraces ideas of behavior and morality, but ultimately, to be construed as 'beautiful behavior'. Rozenhal provides an analysis of the role of *adab* in Islam by way of its history and social practice, defining *adab* as values and behavior which are woven between and within foundational Islamic networks to provide its 'civilizational glue' for Muslim communities spread throughout time and space (p. 3). He also provides the practical meaning of *adab* as, 'a comprehensive code of Islamic moral behavior and ethical practice', and 'best understood as the public display of an individual's internal moral character' (p. 3). The book's intention is to follow-up from Barbara Daly Metcalf and Katherine P. Ewing's *Moral conduct and authority: The place of adab in South Asian Islam* (1984), by shifting the same 'frame' and 'spotlight' to the more pluralistic Muslim Southeast Asia (p. 4).

Despite the above tenets, the question lingers as to how this focus on *adab* reframes and shifts erstwhile peripheral Muslim Southeast Asia into the centre of contemporary media narratives on Islam. While the intention of the book is to throw light on 'beautiful behavior' as part of the essence of Southeast Asian Islam, some of the articles end up critiquing the meanings and uses of *adab* as a 'front' often manifested instrumentally, in Indonesia and Malaysia. This puts doubt as to the capability of *adab*, in mediating or tempering the harsher complications of Islamic politicisation and law-making.

Within the eight chapters, *adab* is applied as a running signpost to revisit previous studies by a group of multidisciplinary experts on Islam in Southeast Asia. Case studies of electoral politics, Syariah law-making, Islamic feminism, popular religious and political icons, Islamic music and performance, and environmental crisis are made to converse with 'beautiful behavior' as a way of differently comprehending the everyday realms of being Muslim in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Aside from Rozehnal's Introduction, and chapters on 'The interplay between *adab* and local ethics ...', by Muhamad Ali, and '*Adab* and embodiment in the process of performance...', by Anne K. Rasmussen I actually find it difficult to see the conceptual value of *adab* in all of the other studies. To begin with, the original studies were not intended to interrogate *adab*, but in this volume, the import of *adab* is expected to impute some fresh angles into these studies. In most of the chapters, *adab* as a concept or practice does not appear to have provided much gravitas towards an innovative, alternative, or an Other reading of Islam.

Muhamad Ali's chapter is the most richly informative of all the other chapters as it provides much clarity on the purpose of *adab* in the Islamic Malay-Indonesian world. As he correctly points out, '*adab* does not exist in the primary scripture of Islam, the Qur'an', but is shaped by both scriptural and cultural factors. *Adab*, the word, though of Arabic origin, 'intersects with a wide variety of localized terminology' (p. 19), whether they be Sanskrit, Javanese, Malay, Dutch and even English. Ali's exploration of various pre-twentieth century and contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian texts provides the key to the prevalence and hence, the significance of *adab* in fashioning identity within an Islamic realm of high culture. According to Ali, good behaviour and manners are the sum of inner ethics, which includes both 'universalized values and everyday acts of politeness' (p. 37). This intimates that *adab* is not solely a monopoly of an Islamic tradition.

I enjoyed the chapter by Anne K. Rasmussen in trying to position both *adab* and *adat* in understanding the roots of hybridity in Islamic music and dance performances in Indonesia. A distinction is made by her interlocutors, between *adab* and *adat*, with the former more grounded in religion, and the latter in culture. How all of these had fashioned performers' bodily postures, bearing, form, deportment and movements, perhaps best encapsulate the idea of 'beautiful behavior' in Islamic expression — when *adab* is performed 'with their bodies' (p. 166).

Daniel Andrew Birchok's critique of how 'bottom-up' experiences of Muslims in Aceh challenge 'top-down' Islamic prescriptions have little connection to the unpacking of *adab* in local community life. Thomas Pepinsky's use of *adab* to distinguish Malaysian and Indonesian political culture is also somewhat unclear as to how *adab* can be effectively observed in both cases. Timothy P. Daniel's attempt at looking at the operation of *adab* in Syariah law-making in Malaysia is comprehensive, but does not really provide any new angle to the study. And the women in *pesantren* who empower themselves through a more feminist reading of their educational texts, in Nelly van Doorn-Harder's study, do not necessarily depend on *adab* in their project. James B. Hoesterey's study shows how *adab* can be flexibly employed as a contrivance for shoring up the charisma of popular Islamic personalities, but equally used to also challenge their hypocrisy (by those 'below'). Anna M. Gade's chapter on how *adab* is used communally by Muslims to provide a 'situation-responsive' action (p. 187) to environmental crisis is interesting, though not necessarily unexpected.

What this volume shows is that *adab* is a rather enigmatic concept that may defy too much scrutiny, being difficult to reify for the purpose of assessment or methodological consideration. But this does not mean that the book does not make an important contribution to studies of Islam in the Malay-Indonesian world. Indeed it suggests that a wide array of possible study areas on Islam, from ethics and philosophy to textual and performative culture to interpersonal relationships and public diplomacy, would do well to enmesh *adab* within their scope of examination.

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