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### **Book review: Becoming better Muslims: Religious authority and ethical improvement in Aceh, Indonesia (by David Kloos) & Chinese ways of being Muslim: Negotiating ethnicity and religiosity in Indonesia (by Hew Wai Weng)**

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Book review: *Becoming better Muslims: Religious authority and ethical improvement in Aceh, Indonesia* (by David Kloos) & *Chinese ways of being Muslim: Negotiating ethnicity and religiosity in Indonesia* (by Hew Wai Weng)

Charlotte Setijadi

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Indonesian Islam has earned something of a bad reputation in recent times. Amid reports of rising intolerance against religious minorities, terror attacks, high-profile blasphemy cases and the growing political influence of hardline Muslim groups, it is easy to take an alarmist stance and assume that Indonesia's approximately 225 million Muslims are heading down the path of puritanism. Indeed, even seasoned analysts of Indonesia often forget that Indonesian Islam is heterogeneous, and that the everyday experiences of Muslims from different socio-cultural backgrounds are extremely diverse. This is why Hew Wai Weng's and David Kloos' respective books are much-needed additions to contemporary scholarship on Islam in Indonesia.

In *Chinese Ways of Being Muslim: Negotiating Ethnicity and Religiosity in Indonesia*, Hew sheds light on the little-known community of Chinese Muslims in Indonesia. Drawing on ethnographic accounts accumulated over years of field research across Indonesia, Hew examines the formation and negotiation of Chinese Muslim cultural identities in everyday settings. In *Becoming Better Muslims: Religious Authority and Ethical Improvement in Aceh, Indonesia*, Kloos offers a detailed analysis of religious life in Aceh, the only province in Indonesia to apply Sharia laws in full. Focusing particularly on the processes of individual ethical formation, Kloos examines how ordinary Acehnese Muslims negotiate increasingly pervasive Islamic norms set by the institutions of the state and religion.

The two books are vastly different in their focus, scope and theoretical underpinnings. For one, Hew is predominantly interested in public manifestations of ethnic and religious identity politics at the national level. Kloos, on the other hand, frames his study around themes of personal piety and religious experiences at the local level. However, both authors are clearly intent on breaking existing stereotypes about the respective Muslim communities they studied.

In Kloos' case, Aceh (nicknamed the "veranda of Mecca") has a longstanding reputation of being home to the most devout and puritanical Muslims in Indonesia. Furthermore, one of Kloos' primary field sites, the Aceh Besar regency, is known for being a "hotbed" for radical militants. Here, conservative public mores reign supreme, the inhabitants adhere to a strict interpretation of Sharia, and a new generation of young people are displaying heightened religiosity. Yet, through detailed ethnographic descriptions, Kloos shows how Islamic scripturalism is much less pervasive in the daily religious practice of ordinary Acehnese than stereotypically assumed.

Examining Aceh within the context of post-disaster (the 2004 earthquake and tsunami) and post-conflict (the Aceh separatist insurgency) rebuilding efforts, Kloos also shows that the growing religiosity of individuals is shaped by a complex web of economic, social and political circumstances. In a similar vein, Kloos argues that the relationship between religious leaders (the ulama) and ordinary villagers are much more complicated than commonly thought. For instance, in chapter three, Kloos discusses how the interference of ulamas in the daily affairs of villagers are perceived in different ways. Here, Kloos argues that age, life phase and past experiences of local political upheavals constitute major and underestimated aspects that underpin ordinary Acehnese's approach to state and religious authority.

Like Kloos, Hew also faced an uphill task of demonstrating the internal diversities of his subjects of study. Representing a mere 3.6 per cent of all Chinese Indonesians (who themselves only comprise 3–4 per cent of the country's total population), Chinese Muslims occupy the peculiar space of being an in-group religious minority when they are in fact part of the majority at the national level. For much of Indonesia's modern history, the assumption was that Muslim and Chinese modes of identification were seen as incompatible. Particularly during Suharto's New Order, conversion to Islam was considered to be an "effective" way for the ethnic Chinese to assimilate themselves into Indonesian society. Hence to convert to Islam was to lose one's

Chineseness. However, Hew's fieldwork covered a unique time period (roughly a decade after the fall of Suharto) when Chinese identity politics blossomed and different ethnic Chinese communities began to publicly celebrate their versions of Chineseness.

Hew shows how, through Chinese-infused architectural designs of mosques, fashion styles, preaching activities, cultural celebrations and political engagements, Chinese Muslims negotiate two sets of competing religious and ethnic identities. Hew also discusses how, in the post-Suharto era, many Chinese Muslim public figures and wealthy patrons use essentialized interpretations of Chinese Muslim identity to demonstrate the compatibility of Chineseness and Indonesianness (as characterized by Muslim-ness). Aptly pointing out the inherent problems of this rhetoric, Hew argues that, not only are Chinese Muslims extremely diverse culturally, they also vary greatly in terms of their degrees of religiosity, and in how they negotiate aspects of Chinese and Muslim identities in everyday life. Examples such as a part-time preacher who wears a jilbab when giving religious talks, but takes off her headscarf when gambling at a casino in Malaysia, or an activist who encourages inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony but condemns Ahmadis as "deviant", show that Chinese Muslim identities are complex and deeply entangled in discourses about ethnicity, gender, nationhood and Islam at the global level.

While focusing on two very different communities of Muslims, both Kloos and Hew challenge the simplified dichotomies of Muslim religiosity and practice in contemporary Indonesia. The most striking similarity between the two studies is the level of agency and creativity exercised by ordinary Muslims who navigate their lives amid pervasive norms about piety and culture. In the case of the Acehnese, Kloos' most illuminating finding is that, despite the full adoption of Sharia laws, ordinary Acehnese continue to enjoy considerable autonomy when it comes to the religious practices and moral values they employ in their lives. This gives hope that, as more Indonesian jurisdictions adopt Sharia, perhaps the impacts of these laws on local communities may be less pronounced than what concerned analysts predict. In Hew's case, his study dispels the simplistic assumption of the stability of post-conversion Chinese Muslim identity. Hew shows that the New Order-era argument that conversion is a sure path towards acceptance into pribumi (indigenous) Muslim Indonesian society is deeply problematic and flawed. However, the Chinese Muslims in Hew's study make the most out of their unique identity, and carve out spaces for themselves within contemporary Indonesia's ethno-religious landscape.

The two books are of course not without their flaws. One criticism of both books is the lack of critical discussions about how the research subjects perceive minority groups such as Ahmadis, Shia Muslims and the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender community, and indeed how their experiences of negotiating identity and religious agency compare to these other marginalized groups. However, overall, the two books make important contributions to the academic study of Indonesian Islam, particularly in terms of the cultural politics of being Muslim in Indonesia today.

Amid concerns about growing Islamic conservatism and puritanism in the country, Kloos' and Hew's beautifully written ethnographies present different faces of Indonesian Islam that are equally complex, contrasting and plural in their own ways. Their respective books provide refreshing insights into contemporary Muslims' lives in Indonesia that would benefit anthropologists, political scientists and sociologists, as well as Indonesia observers more generally.

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