

Anne K. Rasmussen. *Women, the Recited Qur'an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia*. London, Berkeley, CA, and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2010. 336 pp.

Christina Sunardi

Delving into the rich and thriving worlds of qur'anic recitation and Islamic music, the ethnomusicologist Anne Rasmussen offers a fascinating study of gender, religion, and expressive culture in *Women, the Recited Qur'an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia*. She uses music, musical performance, and qur'anic recitation to understand and analyze the Islamization of Indonesia and the localization of Islam, situating her "documentary ethnography" as an answer to Robert Hefner's call to explore the diversity of the Muslim world through the study of Islam in Southeast Asia (p. 15).¹ Taking the reader across regional and national boundaries, she draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Jakarta and multiple other sites in Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi during a period spanning the mid-1990s through the first decade of the 2000s. She further draws on her personal observations and conversations in Malaysia and in the Philippines, as well as her expertise in Arab traditions of performance gained through prior work.

Women, the Recited Qur'an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia is organized into a preface and six chapters. In the preface and chapter one, "Setting the Scene," Rasmussen introduces the book's main points, issues, and aims. She establishes the cultural dominance of the Eastern Arab world on the recited Qur'an and Islamic music in Indonesia since independence in 1945 (p. xvi). She sets out to demonstrate that Indonesians, however, actively select and refashion particular aspects of Arab music, musical aesthetics, and culture to create localized expressions of Islam, a distinctive feature of which is women's visible and audible participation (p. 5). Examining gender roles and relationships in the expression of Islam in Indonesia, and recognizing that women are part of larger, complex, cultural and political structures that include males, throughout the book she analyzes men's activity as well as women's, and the interactions between males and females. Furthermore, she investigates the roles that institutions, such as the national government and institutions of Islamic learning, play in supporting and controlling the articulation of the religion. Ways in which Indonesians negotiate tradition and modernity through Islam, and expressions of piety, are also of central interest to Rasmussen. Building on the work of Suzanne Brenner,² Pieternella van Doorn-Harder,³ and others, Rasmussen presents a seeming paradox—that while "women's Islamic moves are 'modern' ... the presence of active Muslim women is part and parcel of local, 'traditionalist' practice" (p. 24).

The second chapter, "Hearing Islam in the Atmosphere," analyzes the sonic presence of Islam that permeates public and domestic spaces. The author highlights how sounds such as the call to prayer, qur'anic recitation, Islamic musical arts, and

¹ Robert W. Hefner, "Introduction: Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia," in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia*, ed. Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvatich (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p. 4.

² Suzanne Brenner, "Reconstructing Self and Society: Javanese Muslim Women and 'The Veil,'" *American Ethnologist* 23,4 (1996): 673–97.

³ Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, *Women Shaping Islam: Reading the Qur'an in Indonesia* (Chicago and Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

Arabic words and phrases used in spoken language emanate from multiple sources, including mosques, televisions, radios, homes, cars, stores, institutions of Islamic learning, and individuals. All those, she observes, contribute to an Islamic soundscape—one that is often amplified through sound technology (pp. 38–39; 45–49). Rasmussen argues that, although this soundscape may be perceived by some outsiders and even by some Indonesians as loud, disruptive, distorted, and chaotic, it contributes to an overall preferred aesthetic of “busy noisiness” that is characteristic of Indonesian cultures (pp. 44–45). While she is careful to recognize that “busy noisiness” is not unique to Indonesia, she highlights that “Many contexts in the Islamicate world ... do not welcome public broadcast of the call” (p. 47). The “noisiness” of Islam in the soundscape in Indonesia, she shows, is thus one way the religion is expressed, produced, and experienced in an Indonesian manner, and contributes to an alternative modernity (p. 68). Reinforcing the point that women are key agents in the localization of Islam, she shows that the “noisy” Indonesian Islamic soundscape includes female voices and “invites communal spirituality and participation in a system even for those who might not be able to attend events in person (the sick, the elderly, and many women)” (p. 51). In other words, the presence of Islam in the Indonesian soundscape allows more people—including women—to engage with the religion in different ways (p. 51).

In the third and fourth chapters, Rasmussen turns to the cultural implications of transmission. Chapter three, “Learning Recitation: The Institutionalization of the Recited Qur’an” examines transmission through events in which the Qur’an is recited and through institutions of Islamic learning. Chapter four, “Celebrating Religion and Nation: The Festivalization of the Qur’an,” focuses on qur’anic recitation in national and international festivals and competitions. Rasmussen analyses and explains the melodic aspects of the recited Qur’an, the musical and linguistic knowledge reciters must possess, the space for individual creativity, the criteria by which recitation is evaluated, and the roles played by institutions (such as the Indonesian government and institutions of Islamic learning). In so doing, she further demonstrates ways in which Indonesians make sense of Arab and Arab-derived aesthetics as Indonesians express, experience, and embody Islam. In highlighting women’s roles in the transmission of knowledge about qur’anic recitation, Rasmussen further supports and develops her point that women play critical roles in the Islamization of Indonesia and the localization of Islam.

In chapter five, “Performing Piety through Islamic Musical Arts,” Rasmussen explores the performance of Islamic music in a variety of contexts; consumption of Islamic music through live performance, videos, and recordings; the careers and images of selected female and male star performers; and the selective use of the Arabic language, Arab visual aesthetics, and Arab aural aesthetics. Effectively drawing attention to the diversity of genres in Indonesia that incorporate Islamic music, Rasmussen identifies Arab, indigenous, and Western influences. She submits that women’s participation in many kinds of Islamic musical arts is rooted in local tradition and is thus a localized manifestation of modernity through Islam (pp. 169–70).

In chapter six, “Rethinking Women, Music, and Islam,” Rasmussen revisits the path she has taken to illustrate the localization of Islam, the Islamization of Indonesia, and the critical roles that women play in these processes through their voices, their

bodies, and their intellects. Focusing on Muslim feminists and their use of Islam to resist patriarchal pressures, she ends optimistically, reiterating that “the culture of Islamic musical arts and the central art of qur’anic recitation as created and activated by women and men flourishes” (p. 243). She predicts that “tradition and tolerance” will “continue to prevail” in Indonesia (p. 243).

Women, the Recited Qur'an, and Islamic Music in Indonesia contributes a wealth of perspectives and material to the study of gender, Islamic performance, and cultural politics from late New Order times into the era of *reformasi*. In addition to chapters rich with ethnographic detail and analysis that convincingly support her main points—along with a glossary, index, maps, notated musical examples, and photographs—Rasmussen also provides on the Internet numerous audio examples and information about each example (available through the University of California Press website). The recorded examples allow readers—music specialists as well as those specializing in other fields—to experience and appreciate the presence of both female and male voices in Indonesia’s Islamic soundscape, as well as the diversity of Islamic performance genres that Rasmussen identifies in her book. Individual chapters or the entire book with the audio examples would make for very useful and interesting class materials, particularly in college-level seminars, as Rasmussen provides much to contemplate and discuss. Writing sensitively and sincerely about her position as a researcher, and exuding a contagious enthusiasm for her subject matter and for the people with whom she worked, she is certain to inspire other scholars and students—as she has inspired me—to think about Indonesia, Islam, and performance in new ways.