

James Bourk Hoesterey. *Rebranding Islam: Piety, Prosperity, and a Self-help Guru*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press (Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center Series), 2015. 296 pp.

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The dramatic rise and fall of television-celebrity preacher, self-help “guru,” and management trainer Aa (“older brother”) Gym is documented by James Hoesterey in this compelling ethnographic study. His account challenges simplistic understandings of the new Muslim piety among Indonesia’s middle classes. He demonstrates that the globalization of Islam, often analyzed simplistically as the spread of illiberal or conservative forms of belief and practice originating in the Middle East, cannot be separated or quarantined from other global effects, such as mass media. In this vein, he documents the attraction of pop psychology and self-help literature (mainly from the United States) that is enthusiastically embraced by Indonesia’s aspirational middle classes. Aa Gym and his followers readily incorporate this enthusiasm for self-improvement with Sufi ideas of the ethical heart into their embrace of piety and prosperity.

Contemporary forms of religious authority are at the center of this story. Aa Gym emerged as a popular TV evangelist and self-help guru in the late 1990s, during the heady period when restraints on free speech and media were relaxed, following the end of the Suharto regime in 1997. His preferred title, Aa, encodes the fact that he does not have the kind of formal religious education and command of Arabic that normally bestows religious authority on preachers who go by the term *ustadz*. And unlike the teachings of traditional religious authorities, such as *ustadz* and *kiyai* (religious scholars), his advice was not based on interpretations of the law (*fiqh*), but rather on the rather looser idea of *adab*, or conduct. A central tenet of his teachings is the emotional concept of “heart” (*qolbu*), a translation of the Arabic term *qalb* (in effect, a neologism in Indonesia), reflecting the trend to Arabization of speech that Joel Kuipers has described as an aspect of the piety movement.¹ His advice is given with a tone of intimacy as befitting his appellation as older brother, frequently drawing on homilies from his own biography, that he likes to term his *qolbugrafi*. Marketing and branding are central to this form of mediated religious authority.

While Aa Gym grounds his advice and teachings in Islamic conduct, the content owes much to the pop-psychology and personal-improvement literature that is abundant on the shelves of Indonesia’s urban bookstores, in both English and in translation. Hoesterey describes an encounter with Aa Gym while he is preparing his sermon, for which he was drawing on the popular self-help book *Chicken Soup for the Soul* alongside Islamic texts.

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¹ Joel C. Kuipers, “Language, Identity, and Changing Structures of Islamic Authority in Contemporary Indonesia,” paper presented at the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, May 17, 2016.

The rapid rise of Aa Gym as a preacher, reaching a mass audience through television (after 2000), from his origins as a modest entrepreneur, is soon accompanied by the rise of his business empire (MQ, *Manajemen Qolbu*, managing by heart [*qolbu*], or emotion), which encompasses management training for Indonesian companies, his TV shows, a publishing arm, and merchandizing. No religious asceticism here! He preaches that making money is a positive thing for Muslims, as it enables one to better fulfill religious obligations, such as giving alms.

Another important thread in the book concerns Aa Gym's self-promotion as a "new age" modern Muslim man, who loves and cares for his (one) wife and children. This presentation of self and his practice of self-cultivation were diametrically opposed to the violent Muslim masculinity represented by other movements that emerged at the same time, such as Front Pembela Islam (FPI; Islamic Defenders Front). This group is known for putting its aggressive masculinity on display in street demonstrations, such as in 2012, when the group opposed Lady Gaga's scheduled concert performances (which were then cancelled out of fear of violence against the fans); or to show its support for sharia-based regulations and legislation, such as the so-called anti-pornography law passed in 2008. Nonetheless, Aa Gym was an effective political operator, and Hoesterey describes the ways in which he was able to obtain public endorsements from a variety of Islamic actors—from hard-line groups to liberal Islam proponents. In turn, he was sought after by politicians of all persuasions (including the president at the time, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, or SBY) seeking to bask in his charisma.

The research for the book was a long period of fieldwork during which Hoesterey participated in a wide range of the religious and commercial activities of the Aa Gym empire, met many supporters and participants through MQ training modules, and had access to Aa Gym and the everyday intimacies of his inner circle (including Aa Gym's public performance of word play on Hoesterey's name, "Jim," as his younger brother).

This long period of research enabled Hoesterey to witness and document not just Aa Gym's extraordinary rise in popularity but also his dramatic fall from grace. While many of the public figures who lined up with him on stage were powerful men, the bulk of his public—who queued to meet him, purchased his merchandise, and provided the audience for his TV shows—were women. They admired Aa Gym for his representation of an ideal Islamic masculinity: a gentle, monogamous, self-made family man for whom his wife figured strongly as the foil to his modern manhood. Yet in an interesting challenge to the common assumption that women who choose to wear the *jilbab* (tight veil)—the contemporary clothing of choice by Indonesia's pious middle-class women—have abandoned their agency, Aa Gym's *jilbab*-wearing public deserted him overnight when it was revealed that he had secretly undertaken a polygynous second marriage. His followers were outraged and heartbroken, publicly shredding his photos and boycotting his sermons and merchandise. His business empire collapsed.

He had broken faith with these women, both because of his lack of candor and for entering a second marriage. "*Poligami*" (the Indonesian term used to refer to polygyny) has long figured as a point of contention for Indonesian Muslim women, and they experienced some success in limiting the established male prerogative in this regard through the 1974 marriage law. In the space of post-1998 political freedom (the

context of Aa Gym's rise as a celebrity preacher), women's groups demanded a review of the law, with the objective of totally outlawing *poligami*. By contrast, some men tried to restore their pre-1974 "right" to polygyny unfettered by anything but religion.

The final chapter of the book documents the fall of Aa Gym and that of his religious and business empire. Hoesterey provides an intimate view of Aa Gym's struggle with his own heart to understand the dramatic consequences of his actions. He comes to see his fall as a punishment or test by God because of a kind of hubris, of being too concerned with his worldly success and the adoration of his public. He begins to turn more to the *fiqh* and rationalizes that, after all, *poligami* is not forbidden by God and thus his fall from favor shows a lack of religious understanding by his erstwhile followers. Interestingly, while his followers and secular politicians desert him, many "hard" Islamic leaders, from groups like Hizbut Tahrir (HT, Global Islamic Political Party) and the Islamist political party Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS, Prosperous Justice Party), which also arose in the post-Suharto period, pursue him with the idea that he might bring a new credibility to their politics. But Aa Gym's association with PKS further compromises his personal integrity and conduct as those groups, in turn, come under public scrutiny and attract criticism for insincerity.

While Hoesterey's study revolves around his discussion of the self-fashioning of Aa Gym within a particular moment of both Indonesia politics and globalization, his ethnographic strategy takes him to the everyday events of the movement and to direct interactions with Aa Gym's followers. Perhaps this is especially appropriate because his study also intervenes in another contemporary debate within the field of anthropology: the understanding of emotions, not so much as inner states (as many of the pop-psychology texts that Aa Gym references emphasize) but as socially constituted in interpersonal connections.

This is a gripping story, well told by Hoesterey, that touches on many important issues in contemporary Indonesia: the diversifying nature of religious authority and its relation to political power; the character of the middle class's embrace of piety; gender relations and power; and the increasing significance of mass media in the piety movement. It is an exemplary ethnography of complex social and cultural phenomena in a globalizing world. Anthropologists are required to develop new strategies in deploying the ethnographic methods that were developed in studies of relatively homogeneous community settings to bring their distinctive insights to contemporary phenomena. Hoesterey provides an exemplary strategy for achieving this by engaging in a wide range of "encounters and interactions" over a broad spectrum of geographic and organizational settings, which Anna Tsing has termed "zones of awkward engagement, where words mean something different across a divide even as people agree to speak."²

Much like Aa Gym's religious marketing empire, the book has as its core Hoesterey's engagement with Aa Gym and his inner circle (indeed, with his *qalbugrafi*). From this base, Hoesterey provides a fascinating perspective on contemporary Indonesian society and politics. It will be of interest to and enjoyed by anyone with an interest in contemporary Indonesia, Islam, political and religious

² Anna Tsing, *An Ethnographic Study of Global Change* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), xi.

authority, gender relations, and the growing middle class. Students will find it a gripping read as they follow the rise and fall of a celebrity preacher and his marketing empire.