

David Kloos. *Becoming Better Muslims: Religious Authority and Ethical Improvement in Aceh, Indonesia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 240 pp.

Kristina Großmann

David Kloos's book *Becoming Better Muslims* offers a refreshing new perspective to a topic and region that has already received a great deal of scholarly attention: Islam, politics, and agency in Aceh, the western-most province of Indonesia. Whereas most authors in recent years have tended to focus on classical topics of political Islam, such as Islam and nation building or Islamic law,¹ Kloos instead chooses to stress "religious agency," which includes religious practices as well as ethical improvement and its entanglement with Islamic authorities and the state. He therefore aims to shed light on the intertwinement between the personal space for action—thereby referring to an individual's pious practices and agency—and norms established by state and religious institutions. Specifically, Kloos asks how "ordinary" Acehnese Muslims experience their daily lives and what religious routines they practice in their attempt to become good or better Muslims. The theoretical approaches that inform Kloos's study are concepts of agency and practice in combination with ethics and morality.

Aceh is a region of multidimensional transformation. Massive reconstruction has been ongoing since the catastrophic tsunami on December 26, 2004. In August 2005, Indonesian government officials and representatives of the Free Aceh Movement signed a Memorandum of Understanding that ended twenty-nine years of armed conflict. Thus, reconstructing the province both physically and ideologically since 2005 has been the overall paradigm. The slogan "Build Aceh Back Better," used by former US President Bill Clinton after he made his first speech as the United Nations Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, was not just a reference for physical post-tsunami, post-conflict reconstruction. It also encompasses the ideological reconstruction taking place as the provincial government, religious authorities, and ordinary Muslims explore and negotiate new possibilities and incorporate Islam as a political tool as well as a personal belief.

Aceh, known as the Veranda of Mecca, is described as the abode of Islam in Indonesia because the first Islamic kingdom in the archipelago was founded in this region. Additionally, Aceh experienced an Islamization of its legal, political, and social spheres after the 2004 Tsunami when Islamic criminal law was rigidly enforced—and thus leading to violence and discrimination against minorities by state officials and individuals. However, Kloos doesn't want to perpetuate the stereotype of Acehnese

Kristina Großmann is an assistant professor in Comparative Development and Cultural Studies with a focus on Southeast Asia at the University of Passau, Germany. Her research interests include environmental transformations, Islam, dimensions of differentiation in ethnicity and gender, and Southeast Asian civil-society organizations.

¹ About Islam and nation building, see Edward Aspinall, *Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); about Islamic law, see R. Michael Feener, *Shari'a and Social Engineering: The Implementation of Islamic Law in Contemporary Aceh, Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

being exceptionally pious and fanatic and aims to deconstruct the picture that Islam in Aceh is predominantly linked to violence. He rather wants to show how people negotiate and react to the increasing range of moral admonitions and pressure instigated by religious authorities legitimized by the state and other public actors. Kloos is looking at how Muslims play out their individual agency in response to normative forces that formulate what is good and bad. He describes religious agency not as a coherent and straightforward process, but rather as an ambivalent and unpredictable path. He thereby reveals that a revitalized Islamic identity and increased attention to religious practices are not the only ways that Muslims respond, since people's perceptions and reactions are contradictory and guided by feelings of weakness and uncertainty. Thus, as Kloos argues, for many people in Aceh, notions of moral failure are inherently intertwined with ethical improvement and the process of becoming a better Muslim. He illustrates this argument best in the fifth chapter, where he points out the complexity and ambivalence in people's dedication to Islam.

Kloos combines historical analyses with rich ethnographic data. In his book, he first introduces the main political, economic, and religious aspects that have shaped Acehnese history. In chapter two, he describes how, especially during the New Order era, religious and political authority more and more became intertwined. This chapter is based on archival sources as well as on the articles and field notes of Chandra Jayawardena, who lived in the district of Aceh Besar from the 1960s to the 1980s. In chapters three, four, and five, Kloos comes to the present situation in Aceh, referring to two field sites where he conducted most of his research: the rural village Jurong and the peri-urban settlement Blang Daruet. He describes increasing tensions in Jurong between the spiritual leader (*ulama*) of a religious school (*dayah*) and the rural community there, thereby giving a more nuanced picture of the often ambivalent relationship between the state, villagers, and religious authorities. Kloos reveals that members of the school's and the village's elite are involved in various kinds of corruption and nepotism and use the Islamic institution for increasing their political and economic power. The oldest villagers especially see little possibility of challenging such authority and domination that leads to a "crisis of solidarity." In contrast, young people see increasing opportunities to pursue their interests via state structures. Thus, Kloos's descriptions not only show the close ties between state and religious institutions but also document changes in post-war Aceh with regard to the relationship between the state and civil society.

In the fourth chapter, Kloos shifts his attention to the other research site, Blang Daruet. By putting the relations among members of a neighboring family on center stage, Kloos describes the revitalized Muslim identity of Eri (about age 20) and negotiations with his parents, Ikhsan and Meli, about piety and the definition of correct religious behavior. Significantly, Eri quarrels only with his mother about her reluctance to raise her children according to Islamic principles. In contrast, his father, who is several years older than Eri's mother, is less subject to the son's instructions. Apparently Eri thinks it is enough that the father works hard to sustain the family's livelihood and strives to be a good Muslim by discharging faithfully his family obligations. Referring to these descriptions, Kloos argues that piety and people's endeavors for ethical improvement

are mostly dependent on their specific life stage, whereas other categories of differentiation, such as gender or class, play a minor role. I agree that one's life phase certainly plays an important role in people's engagement with their personal religious inner workings concerning ethical betterment. But in the outlined case, gender seems also to be a decisive factor in the formation and enforcement of Islamic ethics. It is the wife who is held responsible (by her oldest son, at least) for imparting and maintaining Islamic principles with regard to raising her children and, consequently, she is the one being admonished by her son to adhere to and to exhibit Islamic ethics and morality, rather than her husband. Thus women are perceived and used as custodians of Islamic morality, thereby linking Islam to a specific gendered role model essentializing women and men. In my opinion, Kloos's analysis of his valuable experiences with and the episodes about the relationship between Eri and his mother—referring to their Muslim identity formation and personal ideals intertwined with mutual expectations and consequent struggles—would have been enriched by a more detailed gender-specific analysis of religious morality and ethics intertwined with normative orders.

Coming back to the main question of the book, the fifth chapter provides the essential basis for Kloos's objective, namely, to elaborate on the complex relationship between people's ambivalence and doubt in striving to become a better Muslim interlinked with Islamic authorities and the state. With three very nuanced and grounded vignettes, he shows how individuals in their daily life navigate between personal accounts of piety, religious practice, and sinning vis-à-vis the enforcement of a totalizing Islamic law in today's Aceh. Kloos demonstrates how people circumvent and appropriate dominant Islamic discourses and find ways to adopt their decisions to their perception of Islamic morality and life as a good Muslim.

Kloos's combination of historical accounts and ethnographically grounded analyses is a promising path, especially when examining the links between civil society and Islamic and state authorities. However, the historical aspects don't inform the ethnographic data in a manner I expected, especially in chapters four and five. This leads to a tension in the structure of the book and, consequently, the reading flow, as the first three chapters seem little connected to the last two chapters. Also, the theoretical framework and its connection to the presented data lack clarity in some parts. Kloos aims to focus on the links between two immense relevant aspects—agency and the norm—to understand societal transformations in the context of Islamic revitalization. This is an intriguing yet challenging endeavor. It is highly relevant because it focuses on the interaction of two influential dimensions, agency and structure, and it is challenging because not many scholars work empirically on this rather complex topic but instead shed light on either the side of individual religious practices or on normative Islam. To develop his analytical frame of religious agency, Kloos refers to theories of agency and (ethical) practice, as well as dimensions of personal piety, religious experiences, and bodily expressions. This broad theoretical approach is outlined only briefly in the introduction, which leaves a reader puzzled as to which aspects of which concepts Kloos was actually referring throughout the text. He makes his conceptual approach clearer in the well-written conclusion, where theories are linked with the presented ethnographic data, but, as mentioned, the reader has to wait until the last chapter.

Additionally, arguing from the structural side, theories of social practices that explicitly work on the merger of agency and structure could have provided a clearer framework in the development of Kloos's concept.² Integrating ideas from the field of the Anthropology of Emotions, which apprehends emotions, affects, and decision-making as related elements of an individual's practice and social-relational process, could also be useful in developing his concept of religious agency.³

Overall, Kloos presents interesting new material that is the result of long and intensive field work. His analysis is based on a deep understanding of the Acehnese people's struggle to become good Muslims while negotiating hegemonic discourses of Islam. The strength of the book is in the rich empirical material presented, which favorably complements existing studies in the field of political Islam. Therefore, his book is a fascinating exploration at the intersection of political Islam, the anthropology of ethics, and the agency-structure debate, while also serving to elaborate on individual discipline, integrity, and compromise. It provides a nuanced picture that is empirically well grounded of today's life worlds, and gives valuable insights into Muslims' daily practices, struggles, and negotiations in post-tsunami, post-war Aceh.

² See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory—Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (London: Macmillan, 1979); and Sherry Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

³ See, for example, Birgitt Röttger-Rössler and Thomas Stodulka, *Feelings at the Margins—Dealing with Violence, Stigma and Isolation in Indonesia* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2014).