

**Anna M. Gade. *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur'an in Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004. 348 pages.**

Thomas Gibson

This book is a sustained attempt to understand the “moods and motivations” that impel growing numbers of Indonesians to devote long hours to learning how to recite and memorize the Qur’an. Fluent in Arabic and Bahasa Indonesia, Professor Gade spent ten months in 1996 observing Qur’anic recitation instruction and performance at the main mosque in Makassar, South Sulawesi, and in 1997 she interviewed experts with national and international reputations. She combines these firsthand materials with extensive discussions of classical Islamic texts on recitation and memorization. She puts her aim in doing so this way: “Rather than emphasizing the political conditions of the ‘New Order’ as an overarching interpretive frame, this work applies instead a method and approach that could explain Arabic-language practices in Indonesia by locating them within the larger continuities of the Islamic religious tradition.” The decision to stress trans-historical and global religious continuities rather than the local social or political ramifications of the recent upsurge in Indonesian Islamic piety constitutes both the strength and the weakness of this volume.

Gade is quite good at conveying to a non-initiate how and why what might seem to be the tedious process of memorizing a long prose work, written in an archaic form of a difficult foreign language, actually comes to be quite absorbing for the pious student. She shows how modern pedagogical techniques have been used to attract and retain the interest of learners, young and old. The first chapter contains a long historical and theoretical introduction to the topic of recitation. This is followed by four substantive chapters on the skills of memorization, literacy, performance, and competition.

Chapter 2 begins with a theoretical discussion of the place of emotion in religious ritual. This is followed by a review of classical Islamic thought about the way the acquisition of religious knowledge is meant to transform the moral comportment (*adab*) of the student. The final third of the chapter brings us at last to her field materials.

Chapter 3 compares the “traditional” Baghdadi with the “modern” Iqra method for teaching Arabic letters and the rules for vocalizing the Qur’anic text (*tajwid*). Here the ethnographic material is richer than in chapter 2 since Gade provides a detailed account of the emotional associations each of the two methods produces. Although the Baghdadi method is treated as “traditional,” it too has undergone modification in recent years. It was once taught in a one-on-one fashion by a *shaikh* using the local vernacular of Bugis or Makassar. It is now taught in Bahasa Indonesia to large groups of children who often sit behind rows of wooden bookstands in the mosque. The Iqra method was invented near Yogyakarta in the 1970s, and the first instruction manuals were produced in 1988. Teaching materials were distributed nationally only in 1992, just five years before Gade began her fieldwork in Makassar. By 1997, the Iqra method was sweeping all other systems away. Teams of devout college students descended on

villages all over South Sulawesi to complete their applied community service requirement (*Kulia Kerja Nyata*, KKN). They used the *Iqra* method to teach recitation to village students in a way that clearly undermined the authority of local religious experts. In line with her decision to avoid the political context of the Qur'anic movement, Gade does not pursue the implications of this fact.

Chapter 4 begins with another long theoretical discussion of the nature of expertise in ritual performance. She rejects the metaphor of a "frame" for ritual experiences and settles on the phenomenological concept of the "horizon" to describe the way those who have achieved even an advanced degree of mastery are drawn onward toward an ever-receding goal of perfection. The horizon of perfection provides Qur'anic reciters with a lifelong motivation to sustain a particular religious mood. Qur'anic recitation in Indonesia is increasingly governed by the explicit norms established for judging national and international competitions. In accordance with Qur'anic injunctions, the Qur'anic text must be enunciated according to precise rules, but always in such a way that a measure of individual creativity is involved. In practice, this means that the reciter can choose from a certain number of musical modes that he or she feels is appropriate to the text at hand. In Indonesia, they select one of the seven modes used by master reciters in Egypt. They master these modes by listening to cassette-tape recordings of the masters, and it would be close to impossible to compete successfully without access to these recordings. Deference to Egyptian expertise has allowed Muslims from the "outer islands" of Indonesia to bypass the Javanese domination of national, political, and religious institutions. Somewhat paradoxically, this attachment to Egyptian models appears to have fostered the creation of a national religious culture as Indonesian interpretations of these models have become standardized in all-Indonesia competitions.

Chapter 5 begins with an example of the way ancient traditions of Qur'anic recitation in South Sulawesi have become an object of ridicule for university-educated Muslims. She gives, as an example, the village of Cikoang in South Sulawesi, a place famous for both its Sufi learning and an elaborate annual feast in honor of the Prophet Muhammad. The musical mode used for recitation in this village is now viewed with derision. Here Gade touches on a matter I know something about from my own fieldwork in South Sulawesi during the 1980s. Many of my older informants in the boat-building villages of the Bira peninsula had studied Islam and mysticism in Cikoang during their youth. They had incorporated the Neo-Platonic interpretations of Sufi doctrine they had learned there into their own interpretations of local history. Gade's report that this whole tradition had become an object of contempt in the 1990s conforms to my own findings, made during a return visit to Bira in 2000. Textbook-based, official Islam, as taught in both state and private schools, had spawned a whole generation that regarded the Islamic knowledge of their elders with doubt and even derision. And indeed, by the end of this chapter, we learn that mothers and grandmothers all over South Sulawesi have been persuaded that what they learned in childhood is worthless and that they must go back to the beginning and learn Qur'anic recitation all over again. Once more, Gade does not pause to reflect on the upheaval in traditional kinship and political relations this portends. She also takes the role played by the competitive form of learning in Islamic revitalization for granted. But it is a natural form only to a generation that has spent years undergoing the competitive testing mandated by modern schooling and that has become accustomed to the

standardization of language and music by mass media like cassette recordings and radio and television broadcasts.

In her conclusion, Gade returns to the theory of the emotional transformation of those individuals who devote themselves to long-term ritual projects like Qur'anic memorization. She sees socially constructed emotions as playing an equal role with both cognitive and social systems in creating and sustaining the Islamic revival. Her argument here is persuasive. After reading through the book, I felt I understood more deeply how and why champion reciters can come to serve as internationally emulated models for pious Muslims and how the *hafiz* (one who has committed the Qur'an to memory and is thus considered the living embodiment of the Qur'an) continues to play a central role in the modern world.

What I would like to know more about, given my own interest in the interaction between political and religious models, are the political and social implications of this Islamic revitalization, along the lines of Gregory Starrett's discussion of the feedback between Egyptian religious education in the schools and Egyptian Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>1</sup> Egypt is, after all, clearly a model for Indonesia. Gade seems surprised that the economic and political crisis that followed her fieldwork in 1997 and 1998 expressed itself in communal religious violence, particularly in eastern Indonesia, an area once noted for its "tolerance and pluralism but that was tragically scarred by conflict soon after the end of my stay." It would be interesting to know whether she views the creation of the homogenized, national Islamic culture she describes so well as contributing to, or working against, the maintenance of tolerance and pluralism in the long run.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).