
This volume represents the third substantial published monograph by the author based on his frequent research visits to the Gayo highlands of Aceh, Indonesia since the late 1970s. This extensive engagement with the world’s most populous Muslim country provides Bowen with a deserved authority as an anthropologist of Indonesia, which is confirmed by the quality of this present volume.

Bowen sets out to provide an ethnographic account of Indonesian Muslim responses to a context which is highly pluralistic at various levels. He observes that “Indonesian society…is criss-crossed by competing claims about how people ought to live and about what Indonesian society ought to become. These claims draw on highly local ideas, on national values, and on universal rights and laws. To make matters still more complicated, ideas of what is at stake change from one level of society to another” (5).

The competing claims which Indonesians must address in negotiating their way through their own contexts are thus those derived from adat, a term with “multiple uses, multiple ideas about how it comes to be found and applied” (14), but which most commonly refers to local customary law; those received in a top-down sense from national structures, institutions and values; and those deriving from an increasingly globalizing Islamic faith; to which can be added pressures from kinship structures.

Bowen divides his work into three parts. The first, entitled “Village Repertoires,” is essentially adat focused, basing its discussion on the village community of Isak in the Gayo highlands. Matters of property inheritance fall under the spotlight and Bowen considers cross-generational issues of equality within the framework of established adat procedures in terms of “repertoires of justification…how actors justify what they do in specific, generally conflict-ridden, social settings” (7). In the process he takes account of the legacy of Dutch colonial rule which privileged adat structures and traditions over Islam as a basis for social life, and also considers the place attributed to adat in the Indonesian legal system which developed after independence.

The second part of the book is entitled “Reasoning Legally Through Scripture,” and moves the focus to the role of a universalizing Islam in shaping the way Indonesian Muslims live their lives in the communities under investigation. The four chapters in this section offer a range of invaluable insights into the operation of Islamic courts in local communities, in the light of norms derived from the broader nation and the Islamic world beyond. Bowen presents fascinating data drawn from court cases considering matters such as marriage, divorce and property division in the Gayo village of Takengen. The clash between Islam and adat in certain areas is starkly identified by Bowen: “Islamic norms regarding inheritance stand in striking contrast to all adat-based systems” (70). In identifying how such differences are resolved, the author grounds his theoretical discussion in living case studies which provide an immediacy and credibility to the conclusions being drawn by the author. Of particular interest is the consideration of gender issues, where women are pitted against men in the courts, and the specific context of Minangkabau society, where matrilineal traditions run...
parallel to Islamic legal norms. In Chapter 7, “Historicizing Scripture, Justifying Equality,” Bowen conducts a fascinating exploration of debates relating to gender and inheritance as discussed at the national level by prominent Islamic scholars such as the late Nurcholish Madjid, in the light of classical provisions of Islamic jurisprudence [fiqh].

The third section of the book considers family and kinship matters as they relate to guidelines for Muslim living. Again gender issues are to the fore. Chapter 8 considers marriage, orphans and female inheritance rights. Chapter 9 discusses equal agency in divorce, drawing on specific cases from the Takengen religious court, and also addresses the much discussed issue of polygamy. Chapter 10 moves into the thorny area of inter-religious relations, considering conversions and inter-religious marriages.

Text-based Islamicists sometimes approach detailed ethnographic studies such as this work by Bowen with either a hermeneutic of suspicion or a sense of curiosity. Neither would do justice to this excellent work. This is not simply an anthropological study of a small community that leaps to drawing dubious broad conclusions on higher levels. This work carefully interweaves a detailed, rigorous consideration of local village features of legal pluralism with a skilful study of pronouncements by national and international legal and religious figures. In doing so, Bowen demonstrates a solid knowledge of the main areas of classical Islamic jurisprudence.

As such, Bowen has produced a work which is of great value to those interested in the minutiae of Indonesian village life. But he has done much more than that. His discussion bears directly on other Muslim communities around the world where individual Muslims are pulled in multiple directions by legal systems: customary law, national priorities and international Islamic trends. Bowen has thus reinforced a view of local Indonesian communities as being an integral part of the worldwide mosaic that is Islam.

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