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Mosques and Imams. Everyday Islam in Eastern Indonesia

KATHRYN M. ROBINSON (Ed)

Singapore, NUS Press, 2021

“Mosques and Imams” is a valuable contribution to the expanding ethnographic study of the devotional practices, social institutions, and spiritual and political movements shaping the presence of Islam in today’s Indonesia. It is a collection of nine articles that reflect long-term research collaboration between the Australian National University and numerous Indonesian scholars whose research is informed by international scholarship, expert knowledge of Islamic doctrine, and an understanding Islam as a constituting element of contemporary Indonesian society. By grounding its ethnographic studies in these forms of scholarship, the book succeeds in highlighting the situational diversity of Islam without slipping back to the Orientalist distinction between Islam’s normative, scripturalist interpretation and its local (“syncretic” or “traditional”) expressions.

The figure of the imam, a mosque official who leads congregational prayers, defines the book’s comparative focus on the construction of Islamic authority and its incorporation in various secular and cultural contexts. The role of the imam is not limited to Islam alone. The chapters by Yasir Alimi, Eva Nisa, Adlin Sila, and Phillip Winn demonstrate that the imam’s role extends to managing local religious and ritual practices, and Kathryn Robinson, Adlin Sila, and Andrew McWilliam describe the imam’s position as an integral part of the cosmological principles and political structures that articulate local social orders. This does not mean that imams are merely defined as part of local institutions. The book as a whole highlights their role as cultural, religious, and political mediators who embody, and interact with, several figures of

external political and spiritual power: the *dato* 'noblemen; scholars known as *ulama* and *kiai*, Islamic teachers called *ustadz*, and various representatives of state power. Such titles indicate that the office of imam is reproduced and shaped by educational, spiritual and political networks of national and global scale. As one instance of such networks, Wahyuddin Halim's chapter describes the As'adiyah Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) of South Sulawesi. This *pesantren* was founded in 1930 by a Bugis scholar born in Mecca and has generated its own, local *pesantren* network, famous for training Quran memorizers (*hafiz*) that mosques seek to contract as resident imams. Stella Hutagalung's contribution shows that the social and political role of imams can also be shaped interlocal ethnic networks, as in the case of Bugis migrants to Timor. In the comparative perspective of this book, the imam emerges as far more than a local religious authority: a key player in the dynamic interactions between the networks, institutions, movements, and populations that constitute today's Indonesian society.

With its focus on Eastern Indonesia (Sulawesi, the Lesser Sunda Islands, and Maluku), this collection complements the picture of Indonesian Islam that emerges from recent studies of contemporary Islam in Java. In her chapter, Eva Nisa argues that although the same movements of reformist and fundamentalist Islam are active nationally, female students in Makassar stand out in their ability to deploy self-fashioned Islamic virtue to claim visibility and agency as they participate in these movements. The Islamic leaders described in Faried Saenong's and Stella Hutagalung's chapters seem to exemplify the mutually reinforcing dynamic of geographic and social mobility that is one of the hallmarks of social structure in South Sulawesi. Wahyuddin Halim's article, on the other hand, indicates that Islamic education and the demand for Islamic knowledge

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