

Syamsul Rijal, *Defending Traditional Islam in Indonesia: The Resurgence of Hadhrami Preachers*. New York: Routledge [Routledge Series on Islam and Muslim Societies in Indonesia], 2023, xviii + 192 ISBN: 9781032415352, price: GBP 130.00 (hardback); 9781003358558, GBP 35.09 (ebook).

In *Defending Traditional Islam in Indonesia*, Syamsul Rijal explores the dynamics of the Hadhrami Arabs and their growing popularity among young urban Muslims in contemporary Indonesia. His fieldwork was located in six cities in Indonesia, five of which are in Java, and mainly focused on Jakarta (p. 14). The book consists of seven chapters that emphasize the internal dynamics within the diasporic community, their ideological fragmentation, and their contestation with other religious individuals and groups.

Chapter 1 starts with a claim about the prevalence and influence of traditional Islam in relation to the intensifying popularity of *ḥabāʾib* (descendants of the Prophet) in major cities in Indonesia. Even though the book focuses on young *ḥabāʾib* who emerged after 1998 (p. 15), the introduction illustrates the historical backdrop of traditional Muslim societies in Indonesia and the shifting trends promoted by the Hadhrami preachers. It also identifies research questions, key terms, scholarly views, methodological notes, and a book structure. Chapter 2 observes the contestations within the Hadhrami community, aiming to illustrate internal breakages that affect the cohesion and differentiation of the group. It discusses debates and conflicts affected by several factors such as the traditional social stratification of *sayyids*, the transnational movement of young *sayyids* to Shīʿī and Salafi education institutions, and theological contestation between the competing Hadhrami institutions in Indonesia.

Chapter 3, arguably the core of the book, discusses various Hadhrami preaching companies and analyses forms of *daʿwā* movements against Salafism and in favor of strengthening the orthodoxy of Sunni theology. Overall, the chapter deals with this new identity by taking the intertwining reaction of three traditional Sunni groups of traditionalists, popular preachers, and digital activists. Transnational movements that went underground in the New Order era proliferated significantly after the 1998 Reformation, challenging the authority of Sunni traditionalists that are linked to NU (*Nahdlatul Ulama*), the largest Islamic mass organization in Indonesia. Both NU traditionalists and post-traditionalists are against Salafis over being the “true” Sunni community or referred to as *aswaja* (*ahl as-sunna wal-jamāʿa*). A media preaching initiative called *Aswaja dakwah* was founded independently by NU traditionalists to countermeasure the increasing Salafi preachers in Indonesia (p. 47). Some *ḥabāʾib* preachers also advocate the notion of *aswaja* to eradicate what they consider

“deviant sects,” resist extremist Muslim movements, and reject “iniquity,” while making Hadhrami preachers into the “moderate-most” figures (p. 53).

Chapter 4 discusses celebrity Arab-*sayyid* preachers and the rising commodification of religion. Taking account of Habib Ahmad and Habib Munzir with their sermon groups (*majelis*) in Jakarta, it confirms that the performative aspect of sainthood and the marketing of *ḥabīb-ness* using media, symbols, personal relations, infrastructure, music, and merchandise play key roles in gaining legitimate religious authority and expanding popularity. In Chapter 5, the author pays attention to the intensifying traditional Sunni-Hadhramaut influence in Indonesia within the last three decades. It argues that the re-establishment of Indonesia-Yemen relations since the 1990s has facilitated the mobility of young Indonesians to Hadhramaut to study in traditional Islamic seminaries and increase the networks of new Hadhrami intellectuals, resulting in the growing authority of *ḥabāʾib* and Yemeni traditionalists.

Chapter 6 focuses on the young followers of a late charismatic preacher in Jakarta, exploring their enthusiasm in expressing—simultaneously—their spiritual piety and youth culture during leisure time. Focusing on a number of passionate attendants of various *majelis* who identify themselves as *muḥibbīn* (devotees), it elaborates on the structural and cultural composition of *muḥibbīn* while examining their motivations of acquiring tranquility, success, and instant miracles after attending the *majelis* of Arab saints (p. 110) or performing pilgrimage to the local tombs of deceased saints (p. 111). In Chapter 7, the author sums up his findings, notably by highlighting the rising popularity of *ḥabāʾib* and the strengthening network of Sunni traditionalist and Hadhrami scholars in Indonesia as a direct counter-measurement to the new conservatism of the Salafi-Wahhabi movement, while also showing the entanglement of popular *ḥabāʾib* with new media, popular culture, aesthetic elements, and young Muslims.

The publication was highly anticipated for two reasons. First, it offers a novel interdisciplinary study of religion, media, popular culture, and transnational movements, mostly within the urban areas of contemporary Indonesia. Research on the ongoing influence of traditional Muslim scholars in the globalized and mediatized Muslim world somehow remains infrequent, especially in the case of Hadhrami societies in the global south that are still considered diasporic and isolated from local-cultural particularities. The book’s rich ethnographic evidence shows that diaspora theory cannot truly comprehend the rising popularity and authority of Hadhrami preachers in Indonesia. Second, most of the data was acquired through ethnographic fieldwork between 2012 to 2013 with additional data updates in 2023. Therefore the book provides important findings from authoritative and esteemed religious figures and charismatic

ḥabāʾib preachers, as well as representatives of various Hadhrami institutions, numerous youth attendants of popular *majelis*, and online messaging groups supporting their causes.

As regards its shortcomings, the book pays little attention to defenses of Islamic traditionalism, limiting itself to the reactive attitudes of the Sunni traditionalists against Salafi doctrines and other forbidden sectarian teachings in Indonesia and simply listing the external dynamics of Hadhramis outside their own group. Thus, several massive *ḥabāʾib*-led actions in Indonesia within the last decade are absent from the discussion. Examples include the three waves of national-scaled protests called *Aksi 411*, *Aksi 212*, and *Aksi 112* in Jakarta at the end of 2016 and early-2017, which demanded legal punishment of Jakarta's non-Muslim governor for the accusation of blasphemy. Another under-examined topic is gender. The book briefly mentions the increasing amount of *majelis taklim* attendants among women, especially middle-aged and married women (pp. 69–70, 112). This phenomenon could be connected, on one side, to the improving economic participation of Indonesian women (World Economic Forum 2023), the rising popularity of Hadhrami preacher women in urban areas and in digital media (Husein 2021b, 2021a), and the emergence of young female students graduated from Yemen (Bubalo et al. 2011).

Without downplaying the popularity and religious authority of Hadhrami preachers from several cities as observed in this book, the *ḥabāʾib* preaching movement could be expanded not only to the *majelis taklim* in Jakarta and other metropolitan cities of Java, but also to other regions where Hadhrami communities play important roles, such as Aceh, Siak, Jambi, Perlis, and Pontianak in western Indonesia (Kathirithamby-Wells 2009; Koh 2017) or Makassar, Sorong, Fakfak, and Ambon in the east (for instance Istiqomah 2020; Sila 2015). In addition to what the author offered for conducting fieldwork in Jakarta (pp. 14–15), two other reasons could be adduced for investigating *ḥabāʾib* communities outside Jakarta. Firstly, the number of visitors to a *majelis* is not in itself a measurement of its popularity, especially when people can also attend the sermon group through live-streaming or digital recordings. Secondly, the centrality of Jakarta as the home of many Hadhrami centers is being challenged with the moving of Indonesia's capital city to the eastern side of Borneo in 2024, which will encourage a great migration of people and institutions from Jakarta, intensify the *ʿulamā*-state relationship in Borneo, and make local Hadhrami preachers more popular and authoritative.

Nevertheless, the book provides great insight into the Hadhrami community in the non-Arabic-speaking world. It is safe to say that the ethnographic findings compiled in this book will continue to inspire future research, especially on topics such as Hadhrami internal dynamics and their relations to tradition-

alism, new media, popular-urban culture, young Muslims, transnational movements, local pilgrimages, and the religious marketplace. Indeed, since this book treats the sale of merchandise as a form of *da'wā*, Rijal has laid the groundwork for studying post-Islamism in relation with the religious marketplace in Indonesia's Hadhrami community.

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