have to adapt themselves. The book *True to this Earth* challenges Muslims to respond to the global crisis and turn Islam to a critical inquiry, which I definitely think is one of the original roles of any religion.

Soumaya Pernilla Ouis


Research results spanning the globe from Indonesia to Egypt report of Islamisation processes within Islamic societies that are expressed in more intensified personal, political, and legal applications of Islam. These processes are marked by recurring questions about the role the Islamic religion should play in the manifold areas of the lives of believers in the twenty-first century. Through the prism of individual dramas that are played out in front of the Islamic courts, the book *Islamic Modern Religious Courts and Cultural Politics in Malaysia* brilliantly sets out to address some aspects of this process within the Malaysian context.

Michael Peletz places vivid ethnographic descriptions of actual court cases in the larger context of the Malaysian politics, culture and religion. The reader sees, hears and smells the chambers of the judge and his assistants, including noisy fans, regular tea breaks and playing children. Analyses about the workings of the court serve as guideposts to understand what the Malaysian context considers to be Islamic law, how the courts protect the rights of women, what their role is in modeling a Malay, modern interpretation of Islam, and how the courts can be both instrumental in and used for overarching state projects such as nation building, the consolidation of power and teaching its citizens the right form of Islam. The latter issues, naturally, involve a contest of authorities between the State, local forms of Islam that are influenced by the *Adat* or indigenous law systems, and Middle East-inspired Islamist interpretations of groups such as the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PAS). Woven through all these issues is the ethnic theme that inextricably binds being a Muslim to being Malay (just over half of the country’s population) that is not of Chinese, Indian, or other descent.
The book is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the courts, their history, and several carefully analysed cases. The second part focuses on modernity and the role of the government in Islamic courts.

It is noteworthy that before the British authorities implemented legal Islamic institutions during the 1880s, the degree of application of Islamic law in Southeast Asia varied greatly from one area to the other; with the harshest codes applied in Aceh (p. 37). In general, the office of qadi was more connected with a casual knowledge of Islamic law. Conflict resolution took place through the informal, culturally accepted methods of negotiation, mediation and arbitration (p. 62). Punishment did not necessarily follow Islamic rule but could be instilled through social mechanisms such as shaming, shunning and ostracizing (p. 29).

The book argues that due to the narrow range of jurisdiction of the Islamic courts, in fact their most important role remains that of arbitrator, mostly in matters of family law concerning marriage, divorce, custody over children, and inheritance. As in other Islamic countries, most criminal cases, and cases with a high political profile such as the one concerning former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (charged with sodomy, corruption and bribery), are dealt with in national courts that are built on the British judicial system. The Islamic Courts are allowed to rule in cases concerning sexual offences such as illicit proximity, rape and adultery. This has made them a useful tool to serve the Malaysian government’s policies that aim at reducing the country’s traditionally high rate of divorce. The Malaysian government views stable nuclear families as one of the building stones for a prosperous, modern, Islamic society. This means that it has a high stake in the rulings of the courts concerning marital problems. In fact, the courts are a useful tool in the service of the governmental goal to domesticate the private lives of its citizens for the higher goal of Malaysia’s development and growth.

The majority of the plaintiffs are women which adds a strong gender dimension to the role of the courts. A female counselor who tries to mediate between husbands and wives is the most central counterpart to the qadi (p. 71). If she succeeds, the case does not even make it to his chamber. The counselor plays the role of a mediator who has to rely on her powers of persuasion rather than on any form of officially assigned authority. The final word about cases is with the male qadi. Advocates for women’s rights have picked up on the potential injustices this system can harbour and in neighbouring Indonesia the Islamic courts are trying to solve this dichotomy by appointing mainly female qadis for marital cases. For this author, I found it is interesting that in spite of its prosperity and highly developed educational level, Malaysia has not paved roads for females to be qadis.
Peletz concludes that the system is double edged for women. On the one hand, the qadi’s office allows for culturally counter hegemonic discourses that brand men as creatures who lie and lack a sense of responsibility as they are the ones who create the bulk of marital problems. This transforms the qadi’s office into an outlet where topics can be discussed that otherwise are taboo in the Malay society, for example, men’s failure as husbands and fathers. On the other hand, the court’s informal dealing with cases, customarily allowed men more leeway in cases of divorce, polygamy, etc. The latter gave rise to severe protest, both from advocates for women’s rights such as the Sisters in Islam (SIS) and from members of the so-called dakwah movement that seek to formalise cultural expressions of Islam. Thus the office of the qadi faces demands from Islamic formalism, local expressions of Islam, and from advocates for stronger institutions of civil society.

This is not the only contradictory mode of being the courts face. On the one hand, they play a central role in the Malay state project that aims at building a non-rural, modern, middle class, Muslim Malay society. Yet they are bypassed when the government has a personal stake in a certain case. Peletz illustrates this with a detailed description of the baffling charges of corruption and sodomy brought against Anwar Ibrahim and the unfolding of that case on the world’s stage in 1998. An eminent scholar of Islam, Shaykh Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, brought to attention that this case rightfully belonged in the Islamic courts where the requirement of four witnesses to prove the charge would have rendered it void (p. 263).

In the state building project, Peletz illustrates how the local and central government can pick and choose what is Islamic and what is not. It can ban traditional shadow-puppet theatres and hurl accusations of sodomy and bribery at those who seem unpalatable to those at the helm of affairs. At the same time, the average Malaysian citizen does not protest against these developments that take place in the name of modernisation and Islamisation. Peletz tries to explain why rural Malaysians seldom openly revolt against the destructions of their long cherished cultural expressions (p. 232). This is a combination of political risk, village conventions, inequities of power and domination, and for ordinary Malays, “profoundly disconcerting moral existential dilemmas if they register any form of dissent with the movement insofar as it claims as its primary objective the spiritual and material betterment of all Malays (Muslims)” (p. 232). One of the greatest obstacles for any sincere Muslim to take action is questioning those who claim to be invested with religious authority is that it might expose him/her to personal risks and get him in political troubles. Part of the problem in Malaysia seems to be that it is unclear who defines that authority: the state, a qadi, or other
religious leaders who studied for a while in the Middle East and made the pilgrimage to Makkah.

_Islamic Modern Religious Courts_ illustrates the complicated role of gender issues in this landscape of competing forces: The _qadi_ chastises a woman who demands a divorce because her husband wants to marry his mistress as a second wife (p. 150). The _qadi_’s goal is to keep the family together because both he and the husband fear that the wife will not be taken care of and that the children will suffer in the long run. The desire of the government here is to preserve the family for the sake of economic prosperity. No serious objection is raised against the husband on account of his committing adultery (zinā); on the other hand, the wife is required to give her consent to her husband to have the second spouse as well. The woman is trapped between three competing powers: the indigenous Malay culture where husbands easily leave home and settle with a mistress in another town; the Islamic law that does not allow her to demand a divorce; and the _qadi_ who applies the law in combination with the government policy that discourages divorce.

Peletz has managed to provide the reader with great insights in what exactly is meant by grand-scale projects such as “Asian values”, “Islamization”, and “Modernization”. He pays attention to the complex layers of political conditions, personal predicaments and the forces in society that all compound the question what exactly it means to be a Muslim in modern Malaysia where “society, state, and family are more important than the individual” (p. 245). The wife whose husband had a mistress told the court she wanted “justice” (p. 149). She could have referred to the spirit of the Islamic Law with that remark. Yet, as Peletz’s book shows, the justice she will find depends on whose agenda needs to be satisfied first.

_Nelly van Doorn-Harder_

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The thirteen essays in this new collection have two goals: to represent women of the Arab-Islamic region as social actors in their own right and to identify the value of disparate genres of Arabic letters to the writing of “gendered”