

Sylva Frisk, *Submitting to God:
Women and Islam in Urban Malaysia*
Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009. pbk. 216 pages

Sylva Frisk's *Submitting to God: Women and Islam in Urban Malaysia* is an interesting and informative study of urban Malay women who have turned to Islam to regulate their daily lives. While the book focuses on Muslim women, it is written for a broader audience not necessarily familiar with Islam—namely, anthropologists and feminists. Following Saba Mahmood¹ and other recent scholarship on pious Muslim women, Frisk argues for the necessity of acknowledging agency not only when it resists or reinforces patriarchy. Much of feminist writing has recognized women's agency only when women have actively resisted patriarchy. Otherwise, women are seen as passive victims. Frisk critiques this dichotomous understanding of agency.

The aim of *Submitting to God* is thus to treat pious women as agents and to understand the meaning of what they do as defined by the women themselves (5). Instead of focusing on the effects of Islamization on women's lives, the book's goal is to account for women's Islamization—that is, their religiosity and their spiritual development (15). Frisk conducted her fieldwork from 1995 to the present in mosques in Kuala Lumpur's affluent

and middle-class neighborhoods. There she studied middle-class women (35) who go to mosques and attend Islamic classes (68). Since her knowledge of Malay was fairly rudimentary (21), Frisk mainly communicated with her informants in English. Consequently, Frisk was restricted to attending only those classes conducted in English.

The book gives a gripping narrative of the lives of the women who go to these religious classes. The first three chapters provide the reader with some background information on Islamization in Malaysia and an account of how the women themselves came to study religion at the mosques. In Chapter 4, Frisk examines the way her informants understand and practice the basic Islamic practices that are shared by all Muslims. Frisk shows what prayer, fasting, and giving alms mean to the women you had observed. In addition, she addresses how the women work to cultivate piety. In the fifth chapter, Frisk argues against information that regards Islamization as a way in which women are increasingly sidelined. Through the example of *majlis doa* (a women-only religious gathering), Frisk argues that Malay women are creating more clear-cut religious identities and authority for themselves (141).

Chapter 6 discusses the process through which women hope to become devout, true believers (*mukmin*). The Islamic knowledge gained in the process of “becoming” *mukmin*, enables many women to renegotiate oppressive social practices that they regard as un-Islamic. For example, one respondent discovered that her husband is obliged to pay *nafaqa* (maintenance). Before that she had paid for all the household expenses herself. Her newly learned Islamic knowledge allowed her to convince her husband that it is his religious duty to pay household expenses. “By bringing God into an argument, the injustice [of not paying *nafaqa*—in this case] was done towards [God], and only indirectly towards the wife” (179). Finally, Frisk shows that far from being passive targets, women were central in the organizing and participation of religious activities. Even though the motivation of these women was not resistance to patriarchy, but a desire to submit to God, Frisk maintains that these are clear examples of agency.

Frisk’s conceptualization of agency is part of an important theoretical contribution to feminist scholarship. She argues for a more anthropological approach which is able to understand rather than to judge the other and to establish a relationship with her or him. Thus Frisk enables us to divorce our understanding of agency from a value judgment (good vs. bad agency), a trap into which much feminist analysis often falls.

My main critique of *Submitting to God* relates to the goal of the book. Frisk writes that her study “has asked what effects women’s striving towards piety has on the religious practice of Islam in the Malaysian context” (186). Despite the interesting example of *majlis doa*; however, the book fails to address this question. This is due to three reasons. First, Frisk’s sample is comprised of women who are students of Islam and not teachers. We often read about what they are told is Islamic and what is not. Hence, it is mostly not the women themselves, but their teachers who tell them how to practice their rituals. “Many women followed the advice given by the *ustaz* or *ustazah* [male and female for teacher] that they considered ‘theirs’” (119). In order to study how pious women impact Islamic discourse and practice, it would be more helpful to examine the producers, and not the consumers, of Islamic knowledge.

Moreover, the sample size is quite small and is restricted to those studying religion in English and in affluent areas of Kuala Lumpur. We should, therefore, be careful not to overestimate the impact of this limited group or to generalize their experiences by arguing that they are influencing Islam in the whole of Malaysia. Given its scope and the type of women examined, Frisk’s work is more a study of the impact of Islamic knowledge on her informants’ lives, rather than vice versa. Third, while it is extremely important to understand the “other” on her own terms, this should not prevent us from seeing how this other relates to others in her society, and how different interpretations of Islam are related to. In order to examine how the complex phenomenon that is Islam in Malaysia is changing, we need to be aware of what types of Islam are being practiced. We read that one informant considers listening to music to be un-Islamic. By not taking into account alternative Islamic discourses, which refute such claims, Frisk unwittingly universalizes the discourse of her informants.

While *Submitting to God* might not address how the pious women in question affect Islam in Malaysia in general, it gives valuable insight into how Malay women in an urban middle-class study and negotiate Islam in their daily lives. Anthropologists will appreciate the attention to detail in the description of Frisk’s fieldwork. In addition, Frisk’s discussion on the relationship between Islam and tradition is important, not only for academics interested in the topic, but also for Muslim activists who are addressing these issues in their struggle for women’s empowerment.

Endnote

1. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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