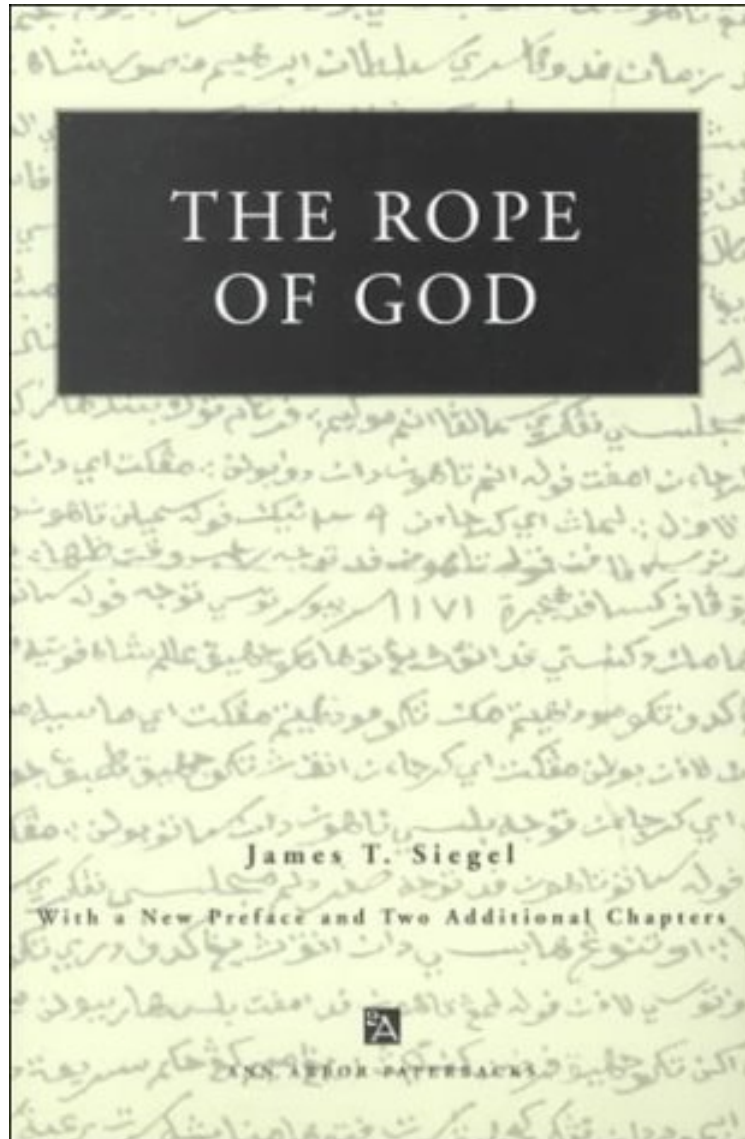


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James T. Siegel

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James T. Siegel : The Rope of God (Ann Arbor Paperbacks) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Rope of God (Ann Arbor Paperbacks):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. tied together by IslamBy Bob Newman I started hearing about Jim Siegel from my fellow graduate students in the late 60s. They were quite excited about this new, young professor in anthropology. Most of them were studying Southeast Asia while I concentrated on South Asia. THE ROPE OF GOD was much bruted about and I assumed it would be a cerebral, highly difficult book. When I bought a copy in

Australia, a few years later, I always put off reading it, thinking it would require a long time to absorb. Well, 41 years does a lot to you and now I see that my fears were unjustified. It is a competent ethnography with a different angle from most, but not terribly taxing. Siegel describes Acehnese society of the 1960s through examination of family, economic patterns, and religion. While in his description of 19th century Aceh, four groups existed, groups not arranged in a clear hierarchy, by the 1960s, society was more atomized. The Sultan no longer existed. The chiefs had lost power, the peasants were still close to the land, but most men had to seek extra earnings away from their villages, and the ulama or educated men of religion were trying to wean Acehnese away from local customary practice (adat) to more orthodox lives. The ulama preached self-denial and rationality over social ties and gratification of desires. While modern economic life had torn social groups apart, the power of prayer, the living of life with akal (rationality and a very Hindu idea of "renunciation"), the elimination of differences through coming together in prayer would bind men together again. This would be the rope of God. Siegel explains the evolution of how Acehnese men came to understand their roles in a changing society or, at least, how cultural leaders tried to explain it. Aceh, a former Sultanate at the northern tip of Sumatra, had its glory days in the 17th century. The first part of the Indonesian archipelago to be Islamized, it has always been the home of the most orthodox Muslims in Southeast Asia. After a long war with the Dutch in the 19th century, the Acehnese again revolted against independent Indonesia in the 1950s. The period when the research for this book was done was one of the quietest (1963-64). Soon afterwards, the Acehnese rose up again, leading to a long guerrilla struggle; oil and gas were discovered, changing the economic and political stakes, Saudi money penetrated much of Islamic Asia, and finally the tsunami of 2004 caused tremendous destruction and loss of life. How far the conclusions of *THE ROPE OF GOD* still hold up is not clear. However, as all anthropology turns into social history, it is still well worth reading.

The Acehnese, a Muslim people of Sumatra, fought Dutch attempts to colonize them for forty years. After its "pacification," Acehnese society evolved peacefully, yet nonetheless the Acehnese participated fully in the Indonesian revolution and in a rebellion against the Indonesian central government not long after. Based on field work done in the early 1960s, James Siegel's *The Rope of God*, traces the evolution in Islam, in the economy, and in the structure of the family to show how it was that Aceh mobilized itself as a society from the time of the colonial war to the emergence of the republic. At a time when this Indonesian society is once again in movement, this influential study has gained a certain new relevance.