TRADERS TEACHING ISLAM: COMMENTS ON THE ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS LITERATURE USED IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract:
Southeast Asian Islam in widely known for its syncretism. If we examine it more closely, however, we find that it is based on writings very rarely considered to be unorthodox. The Southeast Asian tradition of examining books on Islamic law and Sufism to establish which among them are considered to be important works in the Middle East too is deeply rooted on the islands. On the other hand, if we take another look on the corpus of such books, we will find that many important works are missing. The reason for this is to be found in the type of people who spread Islam in the archipelago centuries ago. Most of them were traders and not Islamic scholars, and they used the advantage of their prestigious Middle Eastern origins to grab important positions at local courts, spreading their teachings during the process. These, however, were not the teachings of learned religious experts, but mainly the practical knowledge of religion of the average Muslim trader. This also shaped the corpus of the so-called *kitab kuning* – normative books about Islam – that would be taught and studied in religious schools and at courts. The present essay surveys Muslim traders' activity in the Southeast Asian archipelago and examines how their involvement shaped the corpus of Islamic books used there.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, Islam, *kitab kuning*, trade, *pesantren*

There is no shortage of academic publications on the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia. Virtually every work mentions that the first people to spread the religion were traders who, arriving in the context of the maritime trade, introduced Islam to the coastal areas of the islands (Robson 1981:271, Prange 2009:29–31, Taib Osman 1980:2). Another important subject, namely the corpus of the so-called *kitab kuning* ('yellow books' in Malay, the usual designation of the widely consulted books on Islamic doctrine and law) has been also discussed extensively. These academic works identify the particular books that were consulted and taught, the territories and the historical periods in which they were used by local populations interested in

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learning about Islam.[1] However, few authors have been concerned with the connections between the two aforementioned topics: the question of, the way the personal identities and professions of the first Muslim arrivals influenced the corpus of books that has come to be used.[2] In what follows we will examine the typical types of Muslim newcomers spreading Islam in the region, the kinds of Islamic books – mostly written in Arabic – that they would carry with themselves. Based on this survey, we hope to be able to draw some conclusions about the connections between these two aspects.

1 A Religion of Traders

It has been observed that the first step in the spread of Islam is usually trading (Robson 1981:271), an interesting link that was even religiously sanctioned in the form of a tradition of the prophet Muhammad, which states: ‘Convey something from me, even if it were a single sentence’ “*balliġū ‘annī wa-law āya*” (al-Buḫārī *Ṣaḥīḥ* 493, *Kitāb Aḥādīṯ al-Anbiyā’* 3461). This means that a Muslim should always try to teach the people around him about the tenets of Islam. The main motivation behind this was encouraging conversion. Long-distance traders were very important in this process, because during their long journeys they had access to those regions of the world which could not be reached by other Muslims, making the mercantile community one of the most significant factors in conversion. This is even truer around the Indian Ocean, where because of the monsoon season, some merchants would be stranded for months in a city or village, waiting for the favourable winds before they could set sail again for home or for an ever farther destination. During this time there were many opportunities for converting people. We have ample evidence of this process in Southeast Asia. Written sources and archaeological evidence too attest to the presence of Arab traders in the region, who were interested and involved in the spice trade, certainly by the beginning of the 3rd/9th century (Prange 2009:29–31). From this time on, the connection between the two worlds is constant, with the Southeast Asian Archipelago in particular attracting traders from elsewhere. Among these people we find not only Arabs (as a matter of course) but also Muslims of other ethnicities, including Indians (mainly from Gujarat and Bengal), Persians and Chinese (Azmi 1980:137–139, 143, Hirth-Rockhill 1911:18–19, Taib Osman 1980:5, Hakim 2018:41–42, Robson 1981:272–274). By the

[1] In this topic the best-known author is Martin van Bruinessen (Bruinessen 1990:226–269, Bruinessen 1994:121–146), but other researchers have also published valuable works, such as Nor bin Ngah 1980:10, and Feener 1998:580–581.

[2] I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Tamás Iványi for initially identifying the problem. His original inquiry into why these books were specifically employed in Southeast Asia, and the potential deviation from their original purpose and genre, served as the inspiration for writing this article. The ensuing discussion will delve into the conclusions drawn from this investigation.

4th/10th century some Muslims even lived in Southeast Asia for longer periods, as evidenced by the first Muslim gravestones which are without doubt the last resting places of merchants and their family members arriving from lands to the west. In Kedah in the Malay Peninsula a Muslim gravestone was found with the date 291/903 (Azmi 1980:143). Northwards from there, in Pattani, there are two other tombstones from the 4th to 5th/10th to 11th centuries (Hassan H. 1980:49). In today's Indonesia the oldest known Muslim gravestone can be found in a village called Leran in Java, dated to 474/1082, which belongs to a woman called Fāṭima bt. Maymūn (Sunyoto 2018:56–61). According to historical research, this woman came from Lūristān, a region situated in present-day Western Iran, and she was possibly a member of a trader's family originating in that province. Another person from today's Iran, Šayḫ Šams ad-Dīn al-Wāṣil was also buried in Java near Kediri in the 6th/12th century (Sunyoto 2018:62–67). According to the inscription on his grave, this man was a *qāḍī*, a quite surprising fact if we consider that there were not too many Muslims yet in this place. It is possible of course that he was the most learned person among the traders staying here concerning religious matters. It is interesting to know that the *Serat Jangka Jayabaya*, a Javanese literary work written some 500 years after this, mentions a sage coming from the west, from the country of Ngerum (Rūm in Arabic), who was teaching divination and astrology to the Hindu king of Kediri.

In this early period the Muslim population was comprised of foreigners only, while the conversion of the local populace took place a few centuries later. The latter process was still managed by merchants, not infrequently by means of intermarriage (Hakim 2018:18). Because long-distance trade is dependent on considerable wealth, the riches of the traders were certainly attractive to the locals. We should also bear in mind that a foreigner from a faraway land also brings news, making him a crucial agent in keeping contact with the outside world (Harnish-Rasmussen 2011:20–22). Merchants have tended to be men, and children born from marriages with local women have always inherited the religion of their fathers. Probably these children were the first Muslims born in Southeast Asia. This was usually followed by the conversion of a local ruler, who without doubt acknowledged the great socioeconomic advantages of links to the ever-growing community of Muslim traders in the Indian Ocean. This way the king, as a member of the Indian Ocean Islamic trade network, also had his share of its wealth-generating potential, not to mention the new political legitimacy that he acquired. The earliest testimony of this phenomenon comes from Marco Polo, who in 690/1291 visited the city of Perlak, situated on the northern tip of Sumatra Island. He states (Coedès 1975:202) that while its citizens used to adhere to idol worship, by his time most of them followed Islam because of the influence of Arab traders. Not much later, in 696/1297 the ruler of neighbouring Samudera-Pasai died, whose gravestone leaves no doubt that at least in the years preceding his death he was already a Muslim (Prange 2009:35). Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, who visited Samudera-Pasai about 50 years later, informs us about a Muslim state whose ruler employed advisors mainly from Iran (Hassan H. 1980:53). From

this point conversion progressed rapidly, and the ruler of the city of Malacca, situated in the Malay Peninsula, converted to Islam in 817/1414, after which Malacca became the hub for Islamic missionary work (Azmi 1980:146). We should keep in mind, however, that because of its strategic position on the trade routes, Malacca is one of the most important commercial cities in the region, and the spread of the new religion almost certainly went hand in hand with trade. The next place to adopt Islam was the central island of Java. The Portuguese sailor Tomé Pires wrote in his memoirs at the beginning of the 10th/16th century, that about 70 years earlier (i.e. around the middle of the 9th/15th century) the Muslims here were all Arab, Persian or Indian merchants, who could easily marry Javanese women because of their immense wealth. Because Javanese trade completely depended on them, they could easily replace the Hindu kings even in politics. The crucial role of traders in Javanese Islam can be traced through the stories of the so-called 'nine saints' (*wali sanga* in Javanese). Although the legends rarely state it explicitly, it is quite certain that they were traders, which we can see in stories of their long journeys. Malik Ibrahim came from somewhere in the Middle East, lived for a long time in Gujarat and finally he settled down in Java (Rahimsyah 2011:5–11). Sunan Ampel came from Champa (in today's Central Vietnam), from where he moved to Sumatra and then to Java (Sunyoto 2018:191–203). Sunan Giri was Javanese, but at one point he was sent to Malacca and to Sumatra as well, after which he became a merchant and travelled all across the archipelago (Rahimsyah 2011:25–39, Sunyoto 2018:214–227). Sunan Gunung Jati came from Egypt, then he moved to Gujarat, from where he moved on to Sumatra and it is only after this that he settled in Java (Rahimsyah 2011:81–91). Later on, he even spent a considerable time in China before he returned to Java. Summarizing these data, in the case of Sunan Giri even the legends specify that he was a trader, but all the other *wali*s too must have moved all the time from one place to another because of the same reason.

Moving eastwards from Java, we again have strong evidence that Islam was introduced to Sulawesi by traders. The first mosque was built in the southern part of the island in the middle of the 10th/16th century by the king of Gowa (Pabbajah 2012: 407). He was not a Muslim himself and probably neither was the majority of the population in his kingdom. The construction of the mosque was requested by the Malay merchants living there, and the king, who saw the growing importance of Islam, granted this to them. The first Muslim ruler in the island was the king of Tallo, who converted in 1014/1605 and by the laws of the local centralised religious traditions he was followed in this *en masse* by all of his subjects (Pabbajah 2012: 407). The important role of traders, however, is also attested outside of the coastal areas. Later on during the colonial era beginning in the 11th to 12th/17th to 18th centuries trade slowly came under the control of the European nations. This meant that the merchants living on the coastline were forced to do business with the regions far away from the sea in their own islands, thus introducing Islam to the inner areas

too (Geertz 1971:13, 41–42). We can say that even there, Islam advanced by way of commerce.

The role of Arabs in this process increases dramatically in the 11th/17th century because of a great wave of immigrants coming from the Arab world (Taib Osman 1980:5–6). Among them we find professional traders as well as adventurers who wanted to try their luck in this rapidly Islamising word. Among Muslims, Arabs tend to have a certain prestige, which in this case was also strengthened by the fact that most of the time the locals considered them to be descendants of the prophet Muhammad. This esteem provided by *sayyid* status was certainly very much sought after by many Arabs who could in this way easily secure high governmental or religious positions in different local kingdoms. Their real expertise in Islamic sciences was less important because they were highly respected by default just because of their descent. By this means some of them could also end up occupying the throne. A second wave of Arab immigrants originating from the Ḥaḍramawt region in Yemen hit the archipelago in the 13th/19th century (Berg 2011:217–218, Geertz 1976:125). Just as before, they were mostly traders who married local women. In this new, fully Islamised, society not only their wealth but their descent too helped them to get high positions and favourable marriages. Although many people disliked them because of their greediness, they were still treated with high respect. Even Ahmad Dahlan (d. 1341/1923), the founder of Muhammadiyah (which is one of the biggest and most successful Islamic organisations today in Southeast Asia) was sometimes working as a merchant (Koentjaraningrat 1990:79).

2 The Written Tradition

As we could see, Islam in Southeast Asia was mainly “the religion of traders”. They were the people who introduced it to the region, and even later, when most of the people had converted, it was still them who had the strongest connections to it. Besides this there was, and still is of course, a school system, whose purpose is to teach the religion. This system has various names; in Java it is called *pesantren*, while in the Malay Peninsula it is mainly referred to as *pondok* (Taib Osman 1980:7).[3] We do not know exactly when this school system appeared, but without doubt it has ancient roots. Although the first school bearing the designation *pesantren* was only built in 1155/1742 in Tegalsari in Java (Bruinessen 1994:129), popular memory knows of much older institutes as well, which might have had different names but certainly served the same purpose, namely to teach Islam (Rahimsyah 2011:13–21).[4] In these schools the students learn from one or more

[3] The combined name *pondok pesantren* also exists.

[4] It is also worth mentioning that the *pesantren* system has most probably even older roots than the arrival of Islam, and it goes back to the old *āśrama* system, which had the purpose

lecturers about Islam and the Islamic sciences using books that arrived from the Middle East (books called *kitab kuning* in Indonesia and *kitab Jawi* in Malaysia). The majority of these books are written in Arabic, and most of the time are also taught in Arabic. As for the few books in another language, they are usually just translations of an Arabic original (Nor bin Ngah 1980:10).[5]

It is worth to know exactly which books are traditionally considered to be the most important texts in these schools.[6] The earliest known titles come from around the year 1600 (Bruinessen 1994:132–133). Even in these early times we can see that *Iḥyā' ʿulūm ad-dīn*, written by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī (d. 505/1111), was already the most important textbook. Besides this, Southeast Asian students knew and studied a book of Abū Šakūr as-Sālimī (late 5th/11th century) titled *at-Tamhīd fī bayān at-tawḥīd* which is mainly concerned with doctrine, and the Islamic law book of Abū Šuǧāʿ al-Iṣfahānī (d. 500/1107) called *at-Taqrīb fī l-fiqh*. There were other works used too in addition to these, but they are mostly unidentified. Their titles strongly suggest that they were works on Sufism. Later on, during the 11th/17th century the corpus widened and the *at-Tuḥfa al-mursala ilā rūḥ an-nabī*, which is a book about Islamic mysticism written by Muḥammad b. Faḍlallāh al-Burhānpūrī (d. 1029/1620) became very popular (Bruinessen 1994:133). In the 12th/18th century the brief *uṣūl ad-dīn* work of Abū Layṯ as-Samarqandī (d. 373/983) appears too. In Southeast Asia it is referred to under two different names, to wit *Asmarakandi* (coming from the name of the author) and *Usul 6 bis* (because it has six chapters and all of them starts with the *bismillāh*) (Bruinessen 1994:133). The list of books taught starts to broaden considerably in the 13th/19th century. From this century the most important Islamic law books are the *al-Muḥarrar fī fiqh al-imām aš-Šāfiʿī* by Abū-l-Qāsim ar-Rāfiʿī al-Qazwīnī (d. 623/1226), the *al-Muqaddima al-ḥaḍramiyya fi fiqh as-sāda aš-šāfiʿiyya* by ʿAbd Allāh Bā-Faḍl al-Ḥaḍramī (10th/16th century), the *Fatḥ al-muʿīn* by Zayn ad-Dīn al-Malībārī (d. 975/1567) and the *Minhāǧ aṭ-ṭālibīn wa ʿumdat al-muftīn* by Abū Zakariyyā Yaḥyā b. Šaraf an-Nawawī (d. 676/1277). This book is still the most important one in the topic of Islamic law. A work of Abū-l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad al-Miṣrī (d. 818/1415) called *Sittīn* and written about fundamental doctrinal questions, was also quite popular in the *pesantren* (Bruinessen 1990:247–248, Bruinessen 1994:134).

Among the *kitab kuning* we find books of local origin as well. The earliest known works are from Aceh, which is situated on the northern tip of Sumatra Island, and most of these works are about Sufism. The first known author is Hamzah Fansuri (d.

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of teaching Hinduism, meaning that the *pesantren* is just an alteration of the *āśrama*, with only the religion to be taught being changed (Sunyoto 2018:424–427).

[5] According to the fieldwork of Martin van Bruinessen in the 1980s, among all of the books found by him in various *pesantren* and *pondok* 55 percent were in Arabic (Bruinessen 1990:229). Unfortunately, he does not specify if the remaining ones were translations or original works.

[6] In the following only the most important ones will be mentioned.

998/1590), whose thought is clearly influenced by Ibn ‘Arabī (Bowen 1993:111–113). The next author worth mentioning is Syamsuddin Pasai (d. 1040/1630), who was followed by Abdurrauf Singkil (d. 1104/1693) (Bowen 1993:111–113). Both of them were members of the Šaṭṭāriyya Sufi order and in their books, they further elaborated the work started by Hamzah Fansuri. Thus, we can see that, as with the books arriving from the Middle East, so too with those written in Southeast Asia, one of the most popular topics was Sufism. The other most prominent subject was Islamic law. Already during the time of the Acehnese mystics we find at the sultanate court the Gujarati scholar Nūr ad-Dīn ar-Rānīrī (d. 1068/1658), who was an ardent enemy of mysticism, sometimes even ordering the burning of books on Sufism.[7] The real development of Islamic law in Southeast Asia started a century later, among the Malays. The first famous scholar in the field was Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari (d. 1227/1812) who, having lived through almost the entire 18th century died in the 102nd year of his life.[8] He was the official Islamic law expert at the court of the Banjar Sultanate in the southern part of Kalimantan Island. The other two people important in the field were Abdus Samad al-Palembangi (d. 1203/1789) who was from South Sumatra (Nor bin Ngah 1980:12) and Daud b. Abdullah al-Pattani (d. 1296/1879) from the Malay Peninsula (Hassan H. 1980:55–56). These authors wrote mainly about Islamic law, but even they have a few works on Sufism too.

The works taught in the religious schools are mainly about Sufism, Islamic law and doctrine, be they books from the Middle East or written by local scholars. It is far more interesting however to examine the range of topics that were absent from the curriculum for a long time. One of the most striking hiatus is the almost total dearth of Quranic commentaries. The only *tafsīr* used was the universally known *Ǧalālayn*, beside which we can sometimes find the commentary of al-Bayḍāwī (d. 719/1319) too (Bruinessen 1994:134–135). Towards the end of the 13th/19th century, with the development of long-distance transportation between Southeast Asia and the Middle East, Indonesians and Malays became aware of the importance of *tafsīr*. In spite of this fact not much has changed. Although during the 14th/20th century some schools adapted the works of aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) and Ibn Kaṯīr (d. 774/1373) to their curriculum (Bruinessen 1990:253–254), these books are read and understood by just a few people even today.[9] Another, even more noteworthy, phenomenon is the absence of *hadīṯ* literature. Until the end of the 13th/19th century

[7] This behaviour was not tolerated for long by the sultan, who became angry and banished him in 1054/1644 (Bowen 1993:111).

[8] His life and efforts are discussed in detail by Halidi 2016:20–45.

[9] During a personal discussion in July 2023, I asked a man who graduated from a *pesantren* in Singkawang in Kalimantan about the kind of books that he had been taught. He could not remember any titles except one, which was the *tafsīr* of Ibn Kaṯīr. Even about this one he only remembered the name of the author but not the contents of the book. It is worth mentioning that despite of this fact my interviewee considered himself to be very religious and played recordings of Islamic prayers in Arabic on his computer loudly every day.

Southeast Asian Islamic scholars never read any *hadīṯ* compilations, their only knowledge about this topic coming from the quotations appearing in the *fiqh* books (Bruinessen 1990:229). By the end of the 13th/19th century however, because of the aforementioned development of international relations, the importance of *hadīṯ* also became better understood, urging some scholars to start reading *hadīṯ* compilations. In spite of this, these works still did not enter the *pesantren* curricula for a considerable time (Bruinessen 1994:134–135). The first school to introduce them in its curriculum only became known at the beginning of the 14th/20th century.[10] Since then the most widespread such works are the two classical collections of Muslim b. al-Ḥağğāğ (d. 261/875) and Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Buḫārī (d. 256/870), but the *Riyāḍ aṣ-ṣāliḥīn* by an-Nawawī and the *Bulūġ al-marām* by Ibn Ḥağar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449) are also popular (Bruinessen 1990:254–256).[11]

3 Shortcomings of the System and Reasons Thereof

Before we draw conclusions from the facts outlined above, we should assess the degree of success of the Islamic education discussed here. In many places in which there were no religious schools, the teacher would usually be only a merchant passing by (Bruinessen 1994:129–130). Because such men are usually not religious scholars, the quality of this kind of education is dubious at best. Villages from which at least one person could complete the pilgrimage to Mecca and could for a while study there from a master were in a better position. After their return, these people usually started teaching in their homes and if they became successful, they even set up a new school (Bruinessen 1994:129–130, Mansurnoor 1990:42–43). The existence of these schools, however, did not automatically mean (and to a certain degree still does not mean) that the education was of a good quality. While the majority of the books taught were written in Arabic, most of the time even the teacher could not speak or even read Arabic well. The famous Medinan Sufi mystic Ibrāhīm al-Kūrānī (d. 1101/1690) wrote a commentary to his book *at-Tuḥfa al-mursala ilā rūḥ an-nabī* specially addressed to his Southeast Asian students, because he noticed that many of them misunderstood the teachings in it (Bruinessen 1994:133). In the Javanese schools during the colonial period the teacher usually had no better knowledge of the Arabic language than did his own students, so it was common practice that they used only a summary of the work written in Javanese (Geertz 1971:70). In Kelantan in the Malay Peninsula, it was only by the end of the 13th/19th century that the religious teachers learnt Arabic properly and started to teach from the original books instead of from Malay summaries (Hassan A. 1980:191–192). In Northern Sumatra some of

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[10] This school was founded in the Javanese village of Tebuireng (Bruinessen 1994:144).

[11] According to data from the previously mentioned fieldwork of Bruinessen, only 8 percent of the books taught in the 1980s were *hadīṯ* compilations (Bruinessen 1990:229).

the schools began to have teachers with a better understanding of the Arabic language only as late as the 1350s/1930s (Bowen 1993:52).

We can understand now that the existence of Islamic books in Arabic does not necessarily mean that the people also understand the knowledge contained in them. It must be because of this reason that the aforementioned Acehnese mystics and Malay religious scholars wrote their books mainly in Malay and not in Arabic. We know that all of them lived in Mecca or in Medina for a long time and studied from the best masters (Bowen 1993:111–113, Feener 2009: xxiii, Halidi 2016:26–42, Hassan H. 1980:55–56) so their Arabic must have been perfect. In spite of this fact, they all decided to write in Malay, obviously for the sake of their intended readers who could not read Arabic. On the island of Lombok, it became obvious to everyone that the language of Islam *par excellence* is not Malay but Arabic only during the 1390s/1970s (Harnish 2011:86). Those rare local scholars who decided to write in Arabic could not remain popular for long. The best example is Nawawi Banten (d. 1314/1897), whose Arabic works were widely known and taught in most of the religious schools during the 14th/20th century (Bruinessen 1990: 248–250), but nowadays he is barely known even among the *pesatren* students. Recently however, Arabic language proficiency became much better, and teachers have started to teach from the original works (Bruinessen 1990: 238–239). The most important books taught in the *pesantren* today are the *Iḥyā' ʿulūm ad-dīn* by al-Ġazālī, the *Minhāǧ aṭ-ṭālibīn* by an-Nawawī, the *at-Taqrīb fī l-fiqh* by al-Iṣfahānī, the *Fatḥ al-muʿīn* and the *Hidāyat al-aḏkiyā'* by al-Malībārī (d. 975/1567), the *Safīnat an-naǧā* by Sālim b. Samīr al-Ḥaḍramī (d. 1270/1854) and *al-Ḥikam al-ʿAṭāʿiyya* by Ibn ʿAṭā' Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 709/1310) (Feener 1998:580–581, Bruinessen 1990:245–260).[12] While these are taught in Arabic nowadays the quality of this education is still doubtful.[13]

Why are these books in particular used for educational purposes? For example the *Minhāǧ aṭ-ṭālibīn* is a very useful manual on Islamic law indeed, but it is just one volume long, and in reality is only an extract of the multivolume *Rawḍat aṭ-ṭālibīn* by the same author. While the latter was really written for the experts of Islamic law, the *Minhāǧ aṭ-ṭālibīn* is much easier to understand, treats everything in a short and totally clear manner, making it more useful not for experts but for other people

[12] Besides these there are many commentaries of the above works within the curriculum, but here I did not mention them, and neither did I mention the *hadīṯ* compilations used.

[13] During January 2019 I met in Yogyakarta (Central Java) a director of a *pesantren* who based an argument on the analysis of a grammatically incorrect Arabic word. The books taught are also not always complete. In July 2023 I met a person in a village not far from Sukabumi (West Java) whom I asked which books he had learnt from in the *pesantren*. He was very happy to bring me his "books" whose titles were existing works on Islamic law indeed (for example *Fatḥ al-muʿīn* or *Safīnat an-naǧā*) and were really in Arabic, but they were only extracts from the original books. All of them were brochures in style and none of them were longer than 30 pages. Their contents were only quotations from the original works.

interested in the topic. While we can find books on religious law and Sufism too in the schools, most of the other existing works only contain short introductions and basic prayers for the common people (Bruinessen 1994:147–148). How is it possible that, while the *Iḥyā' ʿulūm ad-dīn* is, strictly speaking, not a work of *fiqh* and al-Ġazālī wrote more elaborate works about Sufism too, it is still this book that is the base for understanding Sufism in Southeast Asia and many decisions concerning religious law are also based on it? Why could the local Islamic scholars not learn proper Arabic for many centuries, while in theory they were teaching and working from books written in Arabic?

In my opinion the answer lies in the type of the people who spread Islam in the region. As discussed earlier, the religion was introduced by traders whose main purpose was not religious proselytization but simply to get rich. Because of the aforementioned tradition of the prophet Muhammad, they also did some missionary work of course, but as they were not religious experts, their knowledge was inadequate. Most of them had no real expertise in Islamic law or science. The case of Šams ad-Dīn al-Wāṣil, who is designated as a *qāḍī* on his gravestone, is particularly interesting. He might be an exception, but it is also possible that because during his lifetime there were not many Muslims in Java yet, the word *qāḍī* only means 'wise man' and is used to refer to the advisor of the king who came from a faraway country. These people, if they were shrewd enough, could easily get into the inner circles of royal courts and get high positions as well. Because they advertised themselves as sages of foreign knowledge, they needed some genuine intellectual material too, which was however not the elaborate knowledge of a religious scholar but the practical needs of a trader which they found useful in everyday life. For instance, basic, easy-to-understand doctrinal questions and extracts from books on religious law, and those works that a merchant could understand too and if needed explain to the locals. The importance of Sufi books might seem strange at first, but in reality, it fits the picture perfectly. First of all, it is worth mentioning that traders as such are usually interested in mysticism (Prange 2009:37). Secondly, mysticism and the different mystical systems and explanations were always very popular in Southeast Asia, so it is quite evident that some traders wanted to impress the locals by teaching derived from books on Sufism.

To summarize the issue, Islam was first introduced by traders coming from different parts of the Islamic world (Arabia, Iran, India and China) who started their "missionary work" according to their personal needs. Later on, when Islam had spread widely, Arabs, belonging as they did to the most prestigious ethnicity among Muslims, became more influential in the region. It must be for this reason that the first wave of Arab immigrants arrived in Southeast Asia during the 11th/17th century. By this time most of the archipelago was already Muslim, if not yet in common practice, at least nominally. In my opinion, this period must have seen many Arab newcomers who were less successful at home yet could see a good opportunity

in the east, and tried their luck in the archipelago.[14] In the Malay-Indonesian world they were held in a much higher esteem just because of their descent.[15] These adventurers then established themselves at one of the royal courts, and following the already existing tradition, started to teach the books already known by the locals, and also brought new books with themselves which fit into the tradition, thus enriching the corpus. They of course married local women, and their children would be regarded Arabs because of their fathers. It the beginning of the 13th/19th century Raffles mentions that all the "Arabs" in Java have a religious occupation (Raffles 1830a:83). He adds however that most of them are not real Arabs but people of mixed descent between Arabs and Javanese. These people were very keen to look like Arabs and always wore Arabic clothes and tried to grow long beards (Raffles 1830b:3–4). This fact can also provide us with an answer for why the teachers of Islam did not know Arabic. They had a high and prestigious position, they were believed to be Arabs, but in reality, they were locals. Although there were genuine Arabs among their ancestors, by this time they had been living in Southeast Asia for many generations, and most of their ancestors were locals too.[16] The old knowledge (which had already been fragmented) was lost. It was only the advent of the modern era and the rapid development of transportation and communication which came with it that opened up new opportunities. In the 13th/19th century a new wave of Arabian immigrants tried to take advantage of the situation, but this was a different age in which, because of the influence of modernist thinking, the need for a more precise study of the religion already arose (Taib Osman 1980:6). This facilitated a better education in the Arabic language, and served to enrich the corpus of religious books by introducing new works to the schools. The number of people who could travel to the Ḥiǧāz or to Egypt also grew rapidly. These people could learn in Arabic universities from Arab teachers, and after returning home they started to teach what they had learnt abroad (Koentjaraningrat 1990:379, Budiwanti 2000:10–11, Mansurnoor 1990:230–231). This started a new process, which is still going on today. The

[14] A good example is the reason for the failure of the rebellion in Banten in West Java during the 11th/17th century. The Dutch sent a fake "Arab" (who was in reality from Europe but could talk Arabic fluently) to negotiate with Abidin, the leader of the rebels. While Abidin had previously been a very ardent enemy of the colonialists, he immediately gave himself up following the advice of this "Arab" (Raffles 1830b:190–191). It is easy to see that among these circumstances a real Arab could rightly expect a much better quality of life here than in his homeland.

[15] This sentiment can be felt even today. Many of my Arabic friends living in Indonesia told me that a lot of Indonesians ask their advice concerning questions about religious law, in spite of the fact that they themselves have no knowledge whatsoever about the topic. Most of the time they are only traders, English teachers or even just university students, but the locals see them as religious experts (*'ālim*).

[16] The Arab Indonesians of today have completely Indonesian somatic features, and their facial features usually do not resemble the stereotyped 'Arabian looks'. Despite of this, they are all very proud of their descent and usually fond of talking about it.

circle of those who know the Islamic sciences deeply and have access to a great variety of sources is constantly widening. But this is still a relatively new phenomenon and can only be felt in the cities. Besides this the old tradition, which still uses the books brought by the first traders and adventurers and tries to subordinate all new material to the first few works, is still strong today, and this is the way in which most of the traditional religious schools operate even nowadays. We cannot say for certain where this new process will lead in the future, but it is certain that a centuries-old tradition cannot easily fade away among a people who regard the values and lifestyle of their elders as a model worthy of following.

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