Malay Sufism
As illustrated in an anonymous collection
of seventeenth-century tracts
by
A. H. Johns, Ph.D.
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A. H. Johns
Introduction

It was Muslim learning that provided raw material which contributed towards the development of Christian scholasticism in the West. Islam also spread eastwards, extending north-east through central Asia as far as China, south-west to India, and from India to the Malayan Archipelago. The philosophy and mystical theology which developed during the first five centuries of Islam and which played a part in the growth of similar studies in western Christendom were thus carried to the furthest limits of the Muslim world.

The subject of this thesis is an anonymous collection of Süfi tracts composed at Aceh in north Sumatra which was one of these limits. Detailed study of the doctrinal development of Islam in Indonesia has been almost exclusively a Dutch preserve, so that as far as I know, this is the first thesis on the subject written for an English University. Dutch work in this field has generally taken the form of theses to satisfy University of Leiden requirements for the degree of Doctor of Letters, and the most important works in chronological order are: Rinkes, Abdoerraoef van Singkel (1909); Schriekte, Het Boek van Bonang (1916); Kraemer, Een Javaansche Primbon uit de zestiende eeuw; Drewes, Drie Javaansche Goeroes (1925); Doorenbos, De Geschriften van Hamzah Pansoeri (1933); Zoetmulder, Pantheisme en Monisme in de Javaansche soeloek literatuur (1935); C. A. O. van Nieuwenhuijze, Shamsu'l-Din van Pasai (1945). Of these only three are directly concerned with Malay authors — although Kraemer gives an excellent general account of the mysticism of north Sumatra during the first half of the seventeenth century1 — and of these Rinkes, in spite of the fact that he is writing on a Sumatran author, is interested mainly in the spread of the Shattariya order in Java, and in any case has not made any text available. Van Nieuwenhuijze has produced an encyclopaedic work on Shamsu’l-Din, giving a full account of his teaching and synopses of the majority of the manuscripts attributed to him, but has edited only two Arabic texts. Doorenbos, it is true, has edited the works of Hamzah, but apart from this, little of Malay mystical writing is accessible to scholars.

The presentation of indigenous Islamic writings is useful for several reasons. Such documents throw light on Malay civilization at its greatest (in Malacca and Aceh). Now there may be a tendency to think that Malacca (and afterwards Aceh) were comparatively minor outposts on the fringe of the Muslim world, but in the later Middle Ages this was far from the case, for first one and then the other were key points in a great Muslim trading system which it was the purpose of the Portuguese to capture or destroy. The availability of religious documents in particular, by throwing light on cultural contacts will throw new light on the day to day relations between the states of the archipelago with each other and with India and the Near East. The sea bears no tracks; only fragmentary evidence of material goods remains; linguistics is a highly specialized science, but the traffic in ideas crystallized in contemporary writings is evidence for all to see.

1 H. Kraemer: Een Javaansche Primbon uit de Zestiende Eeuw, pp. 21 et seq.

Another interesting point is that we find preserved, as if in a museum, the effect upon a language of a sudden influx of new ideas and vocabulary, and the manner in which the language reflects the effort to express something new. This is doubly interesting, for the same phenomenon is taking place today, even more rapidly.

Then there is the self-evident point that a full assessment of the nature and quality of Indonesian Islam is not possible until a far wider range of primary sources is available than at present. Finally there is the religious content of such writings, and the light they throw on the Indonesian mentality in its approach to religious questions. It is true that the conceptual groundwork of the tracts may seem unfamiliar to modern eyes. But similar metaphysical concepts played a decisive role in the development of Greek, Alexandrine and afterwards Christian religious thought. In any case the religious mind cannot work without concepts to build on, even if eventually it is able to pass beyond all concepts. So that even if the scale of the seven grades of being which is the basis of the teaching of these tracts is pure metaphor, it is metaphor well fitted for its intended function. And in the last resort the mystics we treat of here would freely admit that any attempt to define Absolute Being can result only in metaphor.

The tracts which are the subject of this thesis are bound in a single volume forming No. 11648 of the Marsden Collection in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies. It is described by William Marsden as ‘An exposition of the mystical doctrine of the Sufis in the Malayan language. Written at Pasae near Achin in a character remarkably well formed.’ Some extracts were translated by Marsden and published in his dictionary, and these versions are included in the appendix. There is also a copy of the same MS. in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris catalogued as Malayo Polynésien, 31. This is a verbatim copy of the Marsden text made for Dulaquier, and thus offers no help towards the solution of any difficulties.

The volume in the Marsden Collection, as numbered, has 325 pages and contains eighteen tracts, the first of which lacks a beginning and the last an end; all are written in the same hand. Before the fly-leaf are inserted three tattered leaves in the same handwriting as the rest and dealing with the same subjects, but which do not belong to any of the subsequent tracts; neither are they themselves consecutive. Blank spaces on some leaves have been written on by a different and later hand, and on one is written 'this book belongs to Muhammad 'Abd al-Latif'. The paper is probably local, for it has neither water-mark nor lines, and seems to be made from bark.

The spelling is archaic; in many cases a final vowel which would be written in modern Malay is omitted, e.g. kamu, olēh-mu, bagi, terbuni, lagid and lagid. Exceptions are certain Sanskrit words such as maha and bijaksana. 

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The medial vowel in a closed syllable is omitted, e.g. betul, sunggoth, terdinding. It is usually written in an open penultimate, e.g. kasēh, berolēh, but even then is omitted occasionally, e.g. segala and bagi.

In derivatives the vowel is often shifted to the penultimate of the derived form, and words which are ordinarily written without a final vowel have the vowel inserted before a suffix, e.g. memasok, peraturan, kembali-lah, daripada-nya, guru-mu, bagi-mu, terdinding. That the vowel should so regularly be shifted to the open penultimate may be an indication of the accent in Malay at that time. But there are a few exceptions, e.g. memohonkan, memohonkan, but this may be a slip. Words where confusion is possible are vocalized as in Arabic, e.g. tanggal, peraturan, kami, kamuk, kamuk.

There are several examples of old morphological forms, e.g. memachak is written regularly for membacha; and similarly memichara for memicha. Dualapan is written for delapan, and there are such old forms as ngantar, karunia and anugerahat; other examples are akshara, manushia, neshchaya, perseksa.

Likewise there are old words not known in modern Malay, e.g. maya meaning what or how, is used in the same way as in the Sējarah Melayu and the Hikayat Raja, Pasai (e.g. dengan maya kau-kenal Allah?). Then there is belum-pai and tiada-pai in the meaning of belum lagi. There is also a tendency to use a Sanskrit term where later texts use Arabic ones, e.g. Hurūf 'Aliyāt is rendered akshara yang maha tinggi.

In addition the latest quotations are from Shamsu’l-Din’s (d. 1630) Jauhar al-Ḥakā‘ik and an unnamed work by Sharif ‘Aidarūs, an Indian author (d. 1628). It seems probable then that even if this copy does not date back to the first half of the seventeenth century, it is taken from an original that did.

The MS. states that it is written in the language of the people of Pasai and an occasional Achenese word strengthens the possibility that it comes from northern Sumatra, e.g. urēh, line is used several times. In one place the word mukammal is clearly vocalized mukammil, this might very well be a slip, but it is also an Achenese form. Further laku is used with the meaning 'the manner of doing something'.

The general outlines of the story of the arrival of Islam in north Sumatra and its spread through the Malay Archipelago are well known. The first states to embrace Islam were those of Pasai (later a port of Aceh) and

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5 E.g. in Al-Ra‘ī’s Jawāhir al-‘ulām fī kash al-ma‘lūm. Marsden collection, S.O.A.S., MS. 12151, p. 89, and ‘Abd al Ra‘ūf’s Dā‘a’ik al-Hurūf. Leiden Cod. Or. 7643, p. 132, both seventeenth-century texts where the Arabic word ḥurūf is used in the Malay version.

6 Tract 8, § 6.


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Samudra on the north coast of Sumatra, and the first Muslim ruler of Pasai died in 1297. In 1416 the Chinese found the Sumatran peoples of Aru, Samudra, Pedir and Labri all Muslims and record that the ruler of Malacca had embraced Islam by 1404 through marriage with a Pasai princess. This opinion is strengthened by the fact that in its early days, Malacca was dependent on Pasai for its rice supply. It was from Aceh, too, in the first place, that Islam spread along the trade routes to Palembang and Tanjung Pura, and thence to the ports of the north coast of Java; by the middle of the sixteenth century Islam had reached the Moluccas and Banda, and by the early seventeenth century the Bugis and other coastal peoples of southern Celebes were Muslim.

Islam had come to Pasai from India, but with the growth of Malacca the importance of Pasai declined, and the trade which had brought Islam to Pasai was diverted to the new port. D’albuquerque describes the situation and development of Malacca thus:

... There are no storms to injure it and never was a ship lost there. It forms a point where some monsoons commence and others end, so that the inhabitants of Malacca call those of India people of the West, and the Javanese, Chinese and Gores and all others of those Islanders, people of the East; and Malacca is the middle of all this ... and those which come from the East to the West find here western merchandize, and carry it away with them, leaving that which they bring of theirs instead and in like manner do they who come from the West. By these means Malacca gradually increased to so great an extent that whereas the place used once to be a village of Pacé (Pasai), Pacé became at length a village of Malaka.

Thus Malacca received Islam first from Pasai and subsequently through direct trade contacts with India and the Middle East. Contacts with India and Persia left their mark on other branches of Malay literature: the romances of Amir Hamzah and Muhammad Hanafiyyah were translated from the Persian; the Sêjarah Melayu contains Persian verses and words rare in Malay. In the same work the title Makhdum, as in India, is applied to religious teachers, a use which is unknown in the Middle East.

By virtue of the development of Malacca as a Muslim port the Malay world was drawn into the trade-stream across southern Asia, from Egypt, Arabia, the Persian Gulf, west India, east India, the islands of the Eastern Archipelago and China. Moreover, Malacca at its peak was not only an essential link in a vast trading system, and thus an international city: it was also the pivot of political power in the area, and, as the religious heart of an expanding Islamic community, a centre of Muslim learning.

The Sêjarah Melayu throws some interesting sidelights on this. For example we read of a certain Maulana Abu Bakar arriving at Malacca bearing a book entitled Durr Manzum. Sultan Mansur Shah received him with honour and sent the work to Pasai to be explained. The same sultan also sent Tun Bija Wangsa to Pasai to ask whether those in Heaven and Hell remained there for all eternity. At first his messenger received the orthodox answer — that this was the case. On his complaining, however,

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11 Di-ertikan is a little puzzling. Two other suggestions are: to have its orthodoxy checked; or, giving di-ertikan the sense of di-pahami: to be studied.
that the people of Malacca already knew this, he was given the esoteric answer, namely that the sufferings of the damned would be turned to pleasure.\textsuperscript{13} Later we read of Sultan Mahmud referring a theological problem to Pasai.\textsuperscript{13} It is also related that he mocked at his father’s intended pilgrimage to Mecca, saying that Malacca was the real Mecca,\textsuperscript{14} and in the \textit{Babah Tanah Djawi} we read of Santri Bonang, a famous Javanese saint, and Santri Giri going to Malacca for a year to study under Wali Lanang.\textsuperscript{15}

It is difficult to realize fully the importance of Malacca to the Muslim world of that time; but some idea may be formed of it from the fact that the Indonesian Islamic community is now the second largest in the world. That this community has not the importance proportionate to its numbers may be due to the long domination of India and the Indonesian countries by European powers, and the trading system which had been so strong a bond between them likewise falling into European hands. Lack of political unity and the fact that the Indonesians do not appear to have been original Islamic thinkers, however, may have been equally important causes.

After the capture of Malacca by the Portuguese in 1511 a new centre of Muslim trade developed in Aceh, a state which did not begin to emerge until the beginning of the sixteenth century when Pasai was the dominant power in north Sumatra. Its first recorded ruler was ‘Ali Mughāyat Shāh who had been ruler of Pedir, a vassal state of Pasai. In 1521 the Portuguese intervened in Pasai to set up a new ruler. A year later ‘Ali rebelled and overthrew the suzerainty of Pasai. In 1524 he captured Pasai, destroyed a fort the Portuguese had founded there and massacred the inhabitants. He died in 1528 leaving Aceh an independent state. He was succeeded by a series of strong rulers, and under ‘Alā’-l-Din al-Kahhār (1537-68) Aceh became sufficiently powerful to fight the Portuguese and the kingdom of Johore on equal terms.\textsuperscript{16} To reinforce his armies he hired mercenaries from the Gujrat, Malabar, Abyssinia and Turkey.\textsuperscript{17} Achenese power continued to expand during the remainder of the century; the Batak were conquered, giving Aceh control of the rice-lands, political control was established over the southern pepper areas and about 1579 Perak succumbed. Between this date and 1641 Aceh was at its greatest; as an international port, a political fulcrum of opposition to the Portuguese and a religious centre it had established itself as successor to Malacca.

It was during this period that the two most famous heterodox mystics lived: Hamzah Pansuri and Shamsu’l-Din. The exact dates of Hamzah are unknown, but it seems certain that he preceded Shamsu’l-Din,\textsuperscript{18} and it is known that Shamsu’l-Din died in 1630.\textsuperscript{19} It is possible, moreover,

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\textsuperscript{15} R. O. Winstedt: \textit{History of Malaya}, p. 52.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Babah Tanah Djawi}, ed. Meinsma, p. 21.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Encyclopedia of Islam}, art. Atjeh.

\textsuperscript{18} Winstedt: \textit{A History of Malaya}, p. 80.

\textsuperscript{19} Van Nieuwenhuijze: Shamsu’l-Din van Pasai, diss. Leiden, 1945.

\textsuperscript{15} Op. cit., p. 15.

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that Shamsu‘l-Din was the ‘Archbishop’ who received the English captain, James Lancaster, at the court of ‘Ala al-Din Ri‘āyat Shāh in 1602.20

There are two other important names in the Achenese religious history of this century: Shaikh Nūr al-Dīn ibn‘Alī al-Rānīrī and ‘Abd al-Ra‘ūf of Singkel. The former was a Gujarati who arrived in Aceh about 1637, and wrote strenuously against the heterodox pantheism of Hamzah and Shamsu‘l-Din; ‘Abd al-Ra‘ūf on the other hand was a native Sumatran who studied under ‘Alīshad Quashāshi,21 and Mulla Ibrāhim22 in Mecca for many years before returning to Aceh in 1661 to propagate the Shatṭāriya order there. His intellectual outlook was virtually the same as that of al-Rānīrī, but he had none of the former’s fierce intolerance.

Thus the stage is set for these tracts at the period when the power of Aceh was at its greatest, and it is in the light of the teachings of these four outstanding protagonists that they will be examined.

In general the tracts are of the heretical pantheistic type. Two themes are central: the unity of God and the universe (hence these Sūfis are referred to as the Wujādiyya), and the unique position of man who is a perfect reflection of the Essence and Attributes of God. Each tract opens with the same kind of formula as a khūṭbah, so that they seem to be a series of lectures giving a general outline of Sūfī teaching as it was then known and popular, delivered by a guru at a mosque or surau. The author is a man of considerable erudition for he draws not only on local authorities, but also upon several from India and the Middle East. The isolated way in which some topics are dealt with, e.g. Fayṣ and Azal and abad23 make it clear that the author presupposes a certain amount of knowledge on his students’ part; otherwise much of what he says would be unintelligible. It follows then that the main outlines of the system were familiar. On the whole they are scholarly and lucid, and that is no mean achievement in a language so lacking in abstract terms as Malay. Lucidity, however, is a relative matter. The style is enough to baffle anyone accustomed to the balance and polish of traditional classical Malay. The reason for this lies in the fact that all these religious authors thought in Arabic; and when they translated their versions were slavishly literal. What, for example, is to be made of the sentence: Kamu kerjakan-lah barang kehendak kamu, maka tiap yang di-mudahkan itu bagi yang di-jadikan bagi-nya.

It is only when considered in relation to the Arabic sentence of which it is a ‘translation’ (i.e. ‘If alā mā shī’tum, kullun muṭsayarin li mā kuṭiṣa lahu), that the meaning becomes clear.24 Similarly, the sentence: Maka upama mertabat la ta‘ayyun dan ahadiyat sirfah itu dengan mertabat ta‘ayyun awwal dan wahdat itu (maka bagi Allah ta‘ala jua upama yang maha tinggi) saperit upama suatu chaṭhaya dengan terang-nyaa.25 is unintelligible unless one realizes that the words in parentheses are a literal translation

23 Tracts 14 and 17 respectively.
24 Tract 1, § 8.
25 Tract 7, § 8.