

A REVERBERATING ECHO FROM THE FAR PAST THE ROLE OF THE *ASMARAKANDHI* IN JAVA'S ISLAMIZATION PROCESS

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Abstract: *The Asmarakandhi, which is a Javanese translation of an Arabic book entitled Bayān 'Aqīdat al-Uṣūl by Abū al-Layth Naṣr b. Muḥammad al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983), is to be discussed in this study. Abū al-Layth's text belongs to the earliest theological primers in Java, possibly first introduced on Java's North Coast by Chinese merchants from the Ḥanafī legal school. For many centuries, Asmarakandhi was an authoritative source for new students of Islam before it fell into general disuse during the course of the twentieth century. Contrary to common belief, Abū al-Layth's text is not as simple as it seems, containing several controversial issues.*

Keywords: *Interlinear translation; Javanese; Arabic; Ḥanafī; al-Mātūrīdī*

Abstrak: *Artikel ini membicarakan Asmarakandhi, yakni terjemahan Jawa dari kitab Arab yang berjudul Bayān 'Aqīdat al-Uṣūl karya Abū al-Layth Naṣr b. Muḥammad al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983). Karya Abū al-Layth tsb. tergolong sumber pembelajaran pendidikan Islam tingkat dasar yang mungkin pertama-tama dibawa ke daerah pesisir Jawa oleh pedagang Tionghoa yang bermazhab Ḥanafī. Asmarakandhi selama berabad-abad merupakan sumber yang berwibawa untuk orang yang baru belajar mengenai agama Islam, namun sejak abad ke-20 karya itu hampir tidak dipakai lagi. Berbeda dengan pendapat umum, karya Abū al-Layth ini yang kelihatan sederhana ternyata berisi beberapa isu kontroversial.*

Kata Kunci: *Terjemahan antarbaris; bahasa Jawa; bahasa Arab; Ḥanafī; al-Mātūrīdī*

Introduction

My article in *Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin*, Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta (UIN), has its grounds in an invitation from its editor-in-chief, Professor Media Zainul Bahri, and is based on a lecture delivered during my stint as a visiting professor in September 2022 in the *Fakultas Ushuluddin* of the same university. Dealing with *uṣūl al-dīn* (spelled as *ushuluddin* in Indonesian) or the bases (or principles) of the (Muslim) religion, I aim to discuss the *Asmarakandhi*. Although students of Javanese literature would probably think of the title *Asmarakandhi* as an alternative name for the so-called *Jatikusuma* (also spelled as *Jati Kusuma*) romance, whose eponymous hero is a Samarkand prince,¹ in Islamic educational circles, *Asmarakandhi* or *Sēmarakandhi* (also known as *al-Samarqandīya*), serves as a shorthand designation for *Bayān ‘Aqīdat al-Uṣūl* (Exposition of the Principles of Theology) by the medieval scholar Abū al-Layth Naṣr b. Muḥammad al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983).² It is also known as *Sail*, which is the Javanese name for *Masā’il* (Problems; Questions).³

As Abū al-Layth’s *nisba* (al-Samarqandī) reveals, he came from the city of Samarkand (also spelled as Samarqand) in Central Asia, namely present-day south-eastern Uzbekistan. Building on existing research and insight, I wish to explore some new ideas and develop further thoughts on the *Asmarakandhi*, which is commonly described as a succinct and rather uncomplicated catechism, but which, on closer inspection, is not as unproblematic as it may seem. Furthermore, the historical trajectory of this seemingly unassuming text is most remarkable: the *Asmarakandhi* was probably influential during Java’s initial Islamization process and it remained an authoritative source for Islamic education for many centuries before it fell into general disuse during the course of the twentieth century.

This article proceeds as follows: firstly, I will briefly address extant scholarship. Next is a short discussion of the long-standing authoritative status of the *Asmarakandhi*, which may have to do with its early introduction into Java, possibly first brought to Java’s North Coast by Chinese Muslim merchants. I will then turn to the manuscript record of the *Bayān ‘Aqīdat al-Uṣūl* in Indonesia, drawing attention to digitization technology, which not only greatly facilitates access to textual material, but also in many ways broadens our horizons. Finally, I will briefly dip into the contents of Abū al-Layth’s catechism, which contains only seventeen questions and answers. Although most of the subject matter can be characterized as ‘standard’ and uncomplicated material, the author’s affiliation with the Mātūrīdī school of Islamic theology, founded by the Ḥanafī scholar Abū Manṣūr al-Mātūrīdī al-Samarqandī (d. 944), becomes noticeable in

the rather intricate questions concerning concepts of faith. As Indonesia's Islamic world became dominated by the Shāfi'ī law school and Ash'arī doctrine, the centuries-long persistence of Abū al-Layth's Ḥanafī creed, containing some Māturīdī influences, makes it appear a 'fossilized' form of Islam from another era.⁴

Filling a Gap

Academic research thrives on the idea that some gap needs to be filled as a result of insufficient scholarly attention. Bearing in mind that the field of Indonesian Islamic Studies is enormously broad, whereas, by comparison, the number of scholars doing research in this area is not quite so impressive, especially when one only considers non-Indonesian researchers, gap-filling is the default rule of thumb. Tackling such an Arabic treatise as the *Bayān 'Aqīdat al-Uṣūl* in its Indonesian context would seem to be no exception. According to Andrew Peacock, "Arabic textual production in Southeast Asia has generally received little scholarly attention," while "scholarship has generally favored the study of texts in local languages such as Malay and Javanese."⁵ However, what about 'faithful' translations of Arabic texts in Indonesian languages, which are so literal and so close to the source language that one can even speak of such special linguistic varieties as 'Kitab Malay'? The term *Kitab*, derived from the Arabic *kitāb*, refers to Islamic religious books, hence Kitab Malay is a strongly Arabicized, bookish variant of Malay. As could be expected, the extreme closeness of these translations to their Arabic originals has not been conducive to further research.

Peter Riddell explains Kitab Malay as "the Malay used in religious writings, which are translations or renderings of, or closely based on, original works written in Arabic."⁶ While Riddell notes that a few (Western) scholars have occasionally discussed particularities of this variety of Malay, I am not aware of any comparable studies on Kitab Javanese, Kitab Sundanese, Kitab Madurese, or any other such variety. If Google (accessed on 8 August 2022) can be relied upon, the term 'Kitab Javanese' does not even exist, apart from its use for the name of a rock band called "Kitab Javanese Black Metal Temanggung."

However, an important caveat is in order: the lament (by Western scholars) about the lack of scholarly attention seems to target Western academics, but what about the situation in Indonesian academia? Looking at the shelves of my study, I noticed Saiful Umam's Ph.D. on what he calls *Kitab Pegon*, or books on Islam in the Javanese language using Arabic script, but the works he discusses were written by the Islamic scholar

Muhammad Salih Darat (1802-1903) from Semarang, and belong to the categories of commentaries, abridgments, and new compositions; hence no translations.⁷ The same goes for such studies as M. Adib Misbachul Islam's work on the 'Kitab Pegon' treatises composed in verse by the nineteenth-century Islamic scholar Ahmad ar-Rifai Kalisalak.⁸

Obviously, the quest for scholarly literature from Indonesia is not finished here. While it used to be difficult for foreign Indonesianists to keep track of research undertaken by Indonesian colleagues, which generally was not easily accessible from abroad, times have changed for the better. Two important factors, namely the increased use of digital open-access media and the rather recent governmental publish-or-perish coercion, are the main forces driving the astounding growth of research findings. However, the enormous mass of article(s) (or rather online publications) in recent years poses a new difficulty in surveying the landscape. Not all that is published is high-quality research. In all fairness, it has to be said that the staggering global growth in research production has, to no less extent, also led to a lowering of the bar when it comes to quality standards.

The internet search engine Google Scholar is a great help when conducting a broad search for scholarly literature, and hence it came to my notice that Sri Wahyuni and Rustam Ibrahim from the Universitas Nahdhlatul Ulama Surakarta have published an article on the use of Javanese in Islamic religious books written in *Pegon*, which is used in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*).⁹ Their article was published in 2017 in *Jurnal Ilmiah Studi Islam*, which hitherto had remained under my radar. This is just one of many examples, and there is much more to discover on the world wide web. For example, in 2018, Jamaluddin, a historian affiliated with the Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta, published an article on what he called Javanese *kitab*s "as a Javanese language presever [*sic*]" (*sebagai pelestari bahasa Jawa*).¹⁰ The journal of his choosing was *Pangadereng: Jurnal hasil penelitian ilmu sosial dan humaniora*, which is another outlet that I had never heard of previously.

Thus, imagine my 'shock' when Google Scholar directed me to a recent article by Muhammad Nabil Fahmi and Muqowim, both from the UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, about the *Asmarakandhi* as "a learning resource of early Islamic education in Nusantara".¹¹ Moreover, they referred to other recent relevant Indonesian studies, which were also unknown to me. For example, I was unaware that A. Amalia had done a philological study of the *Asmarakandhi*, conducted in 2020 at the IAIN Purwokerto, based on a manuscript dated 1650 CE from a private collection in the village of Dawuhan in the regency of Banyumas.¹² Apparently, the gap I had

ignorantly assumed existed had already been filled. Even so, I think that I may still provide a few additional apposite remarks and also point to some international English-language publications which (in turn) seem to have escaped Indonesian colleagues.

A Premodern Authoritative Work

Commenting on the so-called *kitab kuning* or books in Arabic script used in contemporary Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), Martin van Bruinessen states that theology and doctrine (*‘aqīda, uṣūl al-dīn*) no longer have a prominent place in the curriculum, marking a considerable difference with the past: “whereas earlier generations of Indonesian Muslims showed great interest in cosmology, eschatology, and metaphysical speculation – as witness the writings of Rānirī, ‘Abd ar-Ra’ūf of Singkel and ‘Abd al-Ṣamad of Palembang –, these subjects are now largely kept out of the *pesantren* curriculum. Could this perhaps be because of the old adage that too great an interest in matters of doctrine can only lead to unbelief?”¹³ As this question would clearly go beyond the scope of his article, Van Bruinessen does not touch further upon this remarkable phenomenon. However, his comment opens up a new field of inquiry that should prompt future scholars to think about the ‘when and why’ of this apparent break with age-old practice, looking into continuity and change in a supposedly conservative tradition of religious learning.¹⁴

Be that as it may, Van Bruinessen could only muster fourteen titles in the field of theology and doctrine,¹⁵ which are all, “without exception, straightforward expositions of Ash‘arī doctrine on the attributes (*ṣifāt*) of God and the prophets”.¹⁶ Some classics, along with their many commentaries, continue to be widely used for instruction in Java, such as *Umm al-Barāhīn* (The Mother of Proofs), also known as *Al-Durra* (The Pearl) and *‘Aqā’id al-Sanūsī* (al-Sanūsī’s Theology), which is a handbook on Islamic theology authored by Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanūsī (d. 895/1490), also *Jawharat al-Tawḥīd* (Jewel of Divine Oneness), written by Ibrāhīm al-Laḳānī (d. 1041/1631).¹⁷ Against this backdrop, the omission of *Asmarakandhi* from the list of canonical works on theology is most remarkable. The *Asmarakandhi* still featured most prominently in L.W.C. van den Berg’s 1886 survey of books commonly used in nineteenth-century Javanese *pesantren*.¹⁸ It is also among the authoritative books cited by the fictional protagonist Shaikh Among Raga in the frequently cited 1815 major version of the *Cēnthini*, serving to emphasize his learning in a discussion of religious matters.¹⁹

The general description of the *Asmarakandhi* as a catechism for

beginners may explain its neglect by (Western) researchers conducting Islamic Studies. However, as Tijana Krstić points out, the *Bayān ‘Aqīdat al-Uṣūl* is a specimen of early Islamic creedal literature, which is “very important and yet unstudied”.²⁰ In her recent study “From shahāda to ‘aqīda: Conversion to Islam, catechization and Sunnitisation in sixteenth-century Ottoman Rumeli,” Krstić argues that its importance lies in its contribution to spreading the Islamic faith, as it “appears to have been a much more significant tool of Islamisation than previously recognized”.²¹

Although Krstić is a historian of the early modern Ottoman empire, discussing developments taking place in another period and a region other than Java during the early phase of Islamization, I nonetheless think that her findings can be fruitfully applied to rethinking the role of the *Bayān ‘Aqīdat al-Uṣūl* during the transformation of Java from being predominantly Hindu-Buddhist to Muslim. This religious transition was a long process rather than one single decisive moment in history. However, this religious paradigm shift is still shrouded in obscurity, with more speculations than evidence. Our earliest ‘hard’ evidence of local communities in insular Southeast Asia beginning to identify as Muslims dates from the thirteenth century, but the formation of Islamic states in Java took place much later, roughly between 1500-1700.²²

I would like to posit that the *Asmarakandhi* possibly played an important role in educating newly converted Muslims during the earliest waves of Java’s Islamization. My hypothesis is based upon the notion that Islam is a “text-centered community”,²³ which needs the propagation of ‘true belief’ and ‘correct faith’ that defines the community of believers.²⁴ Firstly, from a practical perspective, the *Asmarakandhi* is a relatively short catechism, that deals with the basic questions of Muslim belief, hence well-suited for those who are new to Islam. Apart from Krstić’s case study (cited above), the question-and-answer genre (*masā’il wa-ajwiba*) is known to have “played a key role in the history of Islam and religious conversion more broadly”.²⁵ Elizabeth Lhost points to a number of examples, in which “works of this nature fulfilled the need of new Muslims to understand the practices and beliefs of their adopted faith through dialogues with individuals who had more direct access to the teachings of Islam”.²⁶ For Southeast Asia, Lhost cites Ronit Ricci’s study of the *Book of One Thousand Questions* as having been “central to the growth and dissemination of Islam”.²⁷

Secondly, an indication of its early use in Java could be what the German Islamicist Josef van Ess (1934-2021) has termed its “Hanafite simplicity,” as the catechism was compiled by a scholar best known as a Ḥanafī jurist.²⁸ In view of the ultimate dominance of the Shāfi’ī school of

law in Indonesia, the use of a text with a Ḥanafī background is remarkable, to say the least, since it could point to an early period in which clear-cut inner-Islamic demarcations had not yet crystallized.

Western scholars have hypothesized that Abū al-Layth's catechism was first brought to Java by Chinese merchants, based on the fact that Chinese Muslims are Sunnī Muslims following the Ḥanafī legal school.²⁹ This hypothesis would fit with the idea of the possibility of Chinese Muslim involvement in Java's earliest Islamization, which (for political and ideological reasons) is generally not enthusiastically embraced in Indonesian academia. However, the Indonesian scholars Fahmi and Muqowim (in their above-mentioned 2021 article on the *Asmarakandhi* as a "learning resource of early Islamic education" in Java) are fair and balanced, and leave this possibility open, at first stating that the *Asmarakandhi* perhaps was brought to insular Southeast Asia in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by gurus or Sufis from Central Asia, including Samarkand; but further on, concerning the Ḥanafī background, they also point out that the text consequently may have been introduced by Chinese Muslim communities in the harbors of Java's northern coast.³⁰

A possible Chinese involvement is, in my view, more than a mere antiquarian detail: since the late twentieth century, a re-evaluation of Java's Islamic conversion history has been taking place in international scholarship, questioning the grand narrative which only looks in a Western direction, attributing the initial Islamization process to Muslim traders and mystics from India, Persia, and the Arabic world. However, as Alexander Wain forcefully argues, there is sufficient reason to re-examine the Islamic influence of Chinese Muslim traders from Southern China.³¹

It is no less noteworthy that, although hitherto no very early surviving manuscripts of the *Asmarakandhi* have been found, its popular use in nineteenth-century Java suggests that its original Ḥanafī authorship did not pose any theological problems. We may elucidate this by looking more closely at the manuscript record.

The Manuscript Record of the *Bayān 'Aqīdat al-Uṣūl*

Although Petrus Voorhoeve, the Dutch cataloguer and one-time keeper of Oriental printed books and manuscripts at Leiden University Library, reiterates the frequently made claim that the *Bayān 'Aqīdat al-Uṣūl* was "one of the most popular religious textbooks in Indonesia", his handlist of Arabic manuscripts in the Leiden library and other Dutch collections mentions merely thirteen copies of the Arabic text with interlinear Javanese translation.³² Being little more than a simple list, Voorhoeve only provides

titles and call numbers, and we have to consult Theodoor Pigeaud's multivolume catalog of Javanese manuscripts in Leiden University Library and other collections in the Netherlands, for more detailed information on each individual manuscript.³³

However, the overall number of extant Indonesian manuscripts kept in collections outside Indonesia is not an accurate yardstick with which to measure the popularity of texts in Indonesia. Contrary to a popularly held belief in Indonesia that most of the written heritage was taken away to the Netherlands during the colonial era, the Leiden and other Dutch collections are in no way 'complete' and have many shortcomings.³⁴ It should be borne in mind that the Dutch collections from the colonial period are mainly based on what a rather limited number of civil servants and scholars happened to collect, reflecting their interests, to which common Islamic textbooks used in *pesantren* mostly did not belong. For the same reason, the fact that Leiden University Library only has one copy with an interlinear translation in the Makasar language says much more about Dutch (colonial) scholarship than about the circulation of the *Bayān 'Aqīdat al-Uṣūl* in South Sulawesi.³⁵

Even the manuscript collections of the National Library of Indonesia in Jakarta do not represent an accurate picture of Indonesia's intellectual history, because this institution, which was founded in 1980, goes back to the colonial library of the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences with its Dutch interests. Quite recently the Indonesian National Library in Jakarta came into the possession of a copy from 1335/1916 with interlinear Javanese translation, namely AW 84, (*Kitāb 'Aqīdah al-Uṣūl*), which once belonged to Indonesia's fourth president, Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009).³⁶ *Mutatis mutandis*, the same problems apply to all non-Indonesian collections of Indonesian manuscripts: although there are quite important collections in (Western) Europe, especially preserved in British, German, and French public institutions, all of these collections were built for European purposes, not necessarily congruous with living Javanese/Indonesian practices.

The few authentic vernacularizations of the *Bayān 'Aqīdat al-Uṣūl*, which are now stored in the vaults of European libraries, can only give us tantalizingly brief glimpses of their former use. For example, the archive of the India Office Library, which is held by the British Library in London and is publicly accessible, has one copy in Arabic with interlinear Malay translation (in *Jawi* script), which was owned by someone with the title of *Tuan Alperes* of Kampung Salemba in Batavia (Jakarta), who must have been the Head of the Arabs in this suburb, as such Arab officers were

normally awarded military titles as *Luitenant or Kapitein*.³⁷ The term *alperes* comes from Portuguese *alferes* or lieutenant. The scribe identifies himself as Duljabar, who had come to Batavia from Cirebon. He apologizes for his appalling handwriting “like hens’ scratchings” (*suratannya bagai cakar ayam*).³⁸ All these paratextual details provide intriguing snapshots of the social life of a manuscript, and thanks to modern technology this text has been digitized and is accessible on the British Library website, with the URL http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=MSS_Malay_C_7.

It is only in recent years that modern technology has greatly increased the accessibility of Indonesian manuscripts, while digitization programs increasingly reveal the unexpected existence of textual material. Perhaps activities at the British Library are best known to Indonesian philologists, as Annabel Teh Gallop, the indefatigable curator for Maritime Southeast Asia, intensively uses such modern social media as Twitter and Facebook to let the whole world know about activities at her institution, while her blog (<https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/>) is itself a great resource containing many thoughtful vignettes about Indonesian manuscripts.

My armchair surfing activities took me to places I had never imagined. For example, the Southeast Asia Digital Library of Northern Illinois University, USA, has images of a copy of ‘our’ text with interlinear Javanese translation. According to the description on the website, the manuscript was copied on a Friday, 21 Dhū al-ḥijjah 1282 AH, belonging to the collection of the Pesantren Sabilil Muttaqin in Takeran, while the contributor was the UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta.³⁹ In other words, the world is now at the fingertips of any internet user.

Surfing the internet, I also came across a multi-text manuscript in Arabic with Javanese translations kept in another place, which does not belong to the ‘usual suspects of Indonesian collections, namely the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library of Yale University with call number Arabic MSS suppl. 603 (partially digitized). Among others, it contains an extensive commentary of the *Bayān ‘Aqīdat al-Uṣūl* and although neither the name of the copyist nor the place and the date of copying are mentioned, the cataloguer assumes that it is probably from the eighteenth century. The Yale University Library’s website for this manuscript, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/10842854>, contains an extensive description, to which I refer for further details.

As is only logical, the majority of Indonesian localizations of the *Bayān ‘Aqīdat al-Uṣūl* are to be found in Indonesia, and thanks to modern technology an increasing number of manuscripts in hitherto unknown collections is brought into the public domain. A few examples may

suffice. Among the many digitization projects of the Endangered Archives Programme (website: <https://eap.bl.uk/>), a funding program and digital archive run by the British Library in London, there is a text which is cataloged under call number EAP061/1/59 as “*Bahjat al-‘Ulūm fī Sarkh fī Bayān Aqīdat al-Uṣūl*”, being part of EAP061/1 “Islamic Manuscripts held at the Pondok Pesantren Langitan, Widang, Tuban, Indonesia”, with manuscripts from the eighteenth-twentieth century.⁴⁰ The digital version of this particular manuscript can be viewed at <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP061-1-59> (accessed August 20, 2022).

Another major digitization project, namely DREAMSEA (website: <https://dreamsea.co/>), which stands for Digitising Manuscripts Safeguarding Cultural Diversity, has (among others) digitized the private collection of Nang Sadewo from Indramayu (West Java), and a multi-text manuscript (under the project number DS 0017 00001) that contains a commentary of the *Bayān ‘Aqīdat al-Uṣūl* (accessible at <https://www.hmmlcloud.org/dreamsea/detail.php?msid=1627>). More recently, on 19 August 2021, the DREAMSEA team announced on Twitter that a manuscript from the private collection of Iim Abdurrohim in Kuningan, West Java, had been discovered and among the identified titles was the *Bahjat al-‘ulūm* or commentary of ‘our’ text.⁴¹

I could go on and on, eventually turning this article into some sort of Voorhoevian handlist, which would not even be complete and final, but I trust that the thrust of the argument has become clear. As Annabel Teh Gallop rightly points out, studies of the languages and literatures of insular Southeast Asia have long “been fundamentally shaped by the collections of manuscripts held in western institutions, as well as those in the region founded during the colonial era.”⁴² Gallop rightly concludes, “A very different picture of maritime Southeast Asia writing traditions emerges from a survey of manuscripts still held in local communities digitized through the Endangered Archives Programme and DREAMSEA.”⁴³ The new wave of digitization projects of previously unknown collections in Indonesia itself underscores the importance of Islamic religious literature within Indonesia’s written heritage, but research on the newly available material is still in its initial phase.

A Catechism for Beginners, but not Devoid of Difficulties

There are two text editions of Abū al-Layth’s catechism, generally referred to by Indonesian scholars who have written about it. Firstly, the Dutch Islamicist A.T.W. Juynboll had already published the text in 1881, both in Arabic and its interlinear Javanese translation, to which he added

his own Dutch translation and comments, while secondly, Mifedwil Jandra in 1985-1986, in the framework of a government-sponsored project on Javanology in Yogyakarta, made a text edition of the *Asmarakandhi*, based upon on a manuscript kept at the Museum Sonobudoyo in Yogyakarta (call number PB C.61), which contains the Arabic text with interlinear Javanese translation in adapted Arabic script (*pegon*).⁴⁴

However, it was also translated into Arabic-Afrikaans by Shaikh Taha Gamielien (d. 1946) in 1909. The South African Islamicist Muhammad Haron has discussed and translated this text, which was circulating in Cape Town.⁴⁵ As Haron's 1999 article appeared in a specialized journal for Arabicists published in Hungary, it is rather well hidden from the world of Islamic Studies at large, but in this case, too, the internet nowadays provides easy access to it.

As to the question of why the Shaikh Taha Gamielien chose Abū al-Layth's text as a reading matter for the Cape Muslim community, Haron speculates that it may have had to do with particular theological debates at the time and that perhaps "the Ash'arī theological texts which were available did not provide satisfactory responses to the theological questions raised."⁴⁶ What was Abū al-Layth's position on theological matters? Although he was not a student of his predecessor al-Mātūrīdī, Haron states that Abū al-Layth "grew up and imbibed" many of the Mātūrīdīan ideas and was "very much affected and influenced by him."⁴⁷ Nevertheless, according to van Ess, Abū al-Layth "did not entirely share" the outlook of al-Mātūrīdī, and most importantly perhaps, Abū al-Layth "seems to have avoided complicated *kalām* problems."⁴⁸ Dealing only with the most basic questions of Muslim belief, Abū al-Layth's text would seem to be an ideal introduction, without controversy, for beginners. Haron speaks of "middle-of-the-road theological ideas" which made the treatise attractive to believers along a broad Sunnī spectrum.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the 'Q and A' model of catechisms is ideal for religious instruction, summarizing the principles of belief in a series of questions followed by answers to be memorized.

Abū al-Layth's catechism is short, consisting of seventeen questions and answers, but (Javanese) copies of the text usually have additional chapters appended to them, all beginning with the *basmala* and ending with *wa'llāhu a'lam*. Scholars refer to this expanded work as *Usul 6 Bis* (The Six Pillars with Basmala), but as the additional chapters deal with Shāfi'ī *fiqh* issues, this extra material cannot be ascribed to Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī, who was a Ḥanafī jurist.⁵⁰ First things first, the catechism starts with a most basic question about faith, or as it is phrased in the Javanese rendition:

“This is the question: When they ask you: ‘What is faith?’” (*Ikilah masalah: tatkala tinakokakēn ing sira apa imam?*).⁵¹ As the text continues:

“The answer of the questioned person is: I believe in Allah, and His angels, and His books, and His messengers, and the Last Day, and the determination of good and evil by Allah, the Highest” (*Maka jawabe wong kang den-takoni: angimanakēn ingsun Allah, lan malaikat Allah, lan kitabe Allah, lan utusane Allah, lan dina kang akhir, lan pēsthen bēcike lan pēsthen ala saking Allah Taala*).⁵²

In other words, this answer briefly enumerates, in a most matter-of-fact manner, the so-called ‘six pillars of faith in Islam, which belong to the basics of Sunnī Muslim doctrine.

However, Juynboll thought that “it is certainly not coincidental” that the catechism mentioned the *ṭahāra* (ritual purification) in question 16, the *ṣalāt* (ritual prayer), the *zakāt* (alms-giving), and the *ṣaum* (fasting) in question 15, but not the *ḥaj* (pilgrimage to Mecca).⁵³ Juynboll seems to suggest that the *ḥaj* was left out on purpose, but this may be attributed to the somewhat corrupted copy of the text which happened to be at his disposal. More relevant for us, Juynboll also drew attention to some particularities, which in his view did not entirely conform with ‘orthodox’ opinions.⁵⁴ Van Ess is more concrete and detects some Mātūrīdīan influence in Abū al-Layth’s treatment of faith: “Faith is indivisible because of its character as a light in the heart and the intellect, in the spirit and body of man. As divine guidance it is uncreated; as an act of assent (*taṣḍīq*) and as an oral confession (*eqrār*), it is created.”⁵⁵

Haron’s English translation of the Samarqandī creedal text on this point is as follows: “The answer is: Faith cannot be divided because it is a light in the heart, the intellect, the spirit, and body of the children of Adam; if it is a guide to a man from Allah, the Highest, to man; then whosoever denies (any) of its aspects that person is an unbeliever.” The Javanese rendition of this question and answer is no less difficult to understand for the non-specialist, and I refrain from translating it into English:

*Iki ana pitakonan sawiji tatkala den-takoni ing sira, utawi iman ing dalēm bangsa lughah juz-juzi utawa ora? Maka jawabe wong kang den-takoni, utawi iman iku ora juz-juzi, karana satuhune iman ana ing dalēm ati lan akal lan ruh lan ana ing jasad saking anak-putune Nabi Adam, karana satuhune iman iku pitudube Allah Taala ing atase makhluk kabeh, lan sapa wonge mungkiri sētengah kitab maka tēmēnan kufur.*⁵⁶

The catechism’s final question addresses the no less problematic issue of whether faith is created or uncreated. Haron’s English translation is as follows: “The answer is: Faith is guidance from Allah, the Highest, and assent in the heart, and verbal confession with the tongue. As for guidance

it is not created because it is the deed of the Lord, and He is eternal; and beliefs and testification are the doings of the servant, for he is the one who is the originator. What is coming from the eternal is eternal and what is coming from the originator is originated.”⁵⁷

The Javanese rendition of the question and answer reads as follows, and once again I will refrain from attempting a translation:

Iki ana pitakonan sawiji tatkala den-takoni – sapa – sira, utawi iman iku makhluk utawa dudu makhluk? Maka jawabe wong kang den-takoni, utawi iman iku pituduhe – saking – Allah Taala, utawi ikrar kélawan lisan, lan angestokakĕn kélawan ati, lan anglakoni kélawan rukun. Maka utawi hidayah iku panggawene Pangeran, lan iya-iku dudu makhluk kĕrana satuhune iku Qadim, utawi sabĕn-sabĕn kang tĕka saking qadim – iki ana – iku qadim. Lan ikrar lan agestokakĕn iku saking panggawe kawula, utawi panggawe iku anyar. Maka utawi sabĕn-sabĕn kang tĕka kang anyar – iku ana – iku anyar. Kaya pangandikane Allah Taala: “Utawi Allah iku andadekakĕn ing sira kabeh lan barang kang sira lakoni.” Lan (pangandikane Nabi saw): “Wus den-dadekakĕn iman lan angĕdarakĕn kélawan loman, lan wus den-(dadekakĕn) kufur lan angĕdarakĕn kélawan kumed.”⁵⁸

This Javanese translation, which adds a quotation from the Qur’ān (namely Q 37:96) and a hadith, is immediately followed by the statement “This is the book from Samarqand. Perfect. And Allah knows best” (*Ikilah kitab kang bangsa Samarqa(n)di. Sampurna. Utawi Allah angawĕruhi*).⁵⁹

Here we may observe that the treatment of faith (*iman*), which was still easy for beginners to follow in the first basic question of “what is faith”, with the standard answer about the six pillars of faith, turns into a far more complicated subject when follow-up questions are asked about the exact nature of faith. Whatever Abū al-Lait’s reason for the inclusion of these theological niceties may have been, the rather specialized questions and subsequent answers belie the general idea that his catechism is very simple and basic. We touch here upon a remarkable paradox, which in my view has not yet been addressed in scholarship. On the one hand, for many centuries in Java, new students of Islamic theology memorized Abū al-Layth’s questions and answers, which partly consist of such ‘basic’ doctrines as the number of prophets (answer: one hundred and twenty-four thousand prophets). However, on the other hand, this ‘primer’ is not without difficulties and even has its share of controversies.

Was the very early introduction of Java in the initial phase of the Islamization process perhaps a major reason for securing its long-lasting authoritative status? Can we perhaps speak of a ‘fossilized’ form of Islam from Java’s earliest Islamization era, before the time when ‘orthodoxy’

was defined in Java as following the Shāfi‘ī school of jurisprudence and adherence to Ash‘arī doctrines in the field of theology? In turn, did Abū al-Lait’s basic text perhaps begin to lose its luster around the late nineteenth and early twentieth century because at that juncture Islamic ‘modernism’ increasingly called for ‘reform’ and hence forced all believers to position themselves vis-à-vis formerly unquestioned beliefs and practices? Believed to be a relatively simple text, and hence apparently with little appeal for further inquiry, Abū al-Layth’s booklet raises many questions for further research. []

Endnotes

1. See T.E. Behrend and Titik Pudjiastuti, *Katalog induk naskah-naskah Nusantara jilid 3-A: Fakultas Sastra Universitas Indonesia* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia and École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1997), 144-146 with further references.
2. GAL I:196. However, as duly noted by P. Voorhoeve, *Handlist of Arabic manuscripts in the Library of the University of Leiden and other collections in the Netherlands* (The Hague, Boston, London: Leiden University Press, 1980), 44, it is mentioned twice by Brockelmann under different titles (numbers 6 and 7).
3. Soebardi, “Santri-religious elements as reflected in the Book of Tjĕntĕni”. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 127 (1971), 338.
4. Wilferd Madelung, *Studies in medieval Muslim thought and history* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 321.
5. A.C.S. Peacock, “Arabic manuscripts from Buton, Southeast Sulawesi, and the literary activities of Sultan Muḥammad ‘Aydārūs (1824-1851),” *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 10 (2019), 45.
6. Peter G. Riddell, “Literal translation, sacred scripture and Kitab Malay,” *Studia Islamika* 9 (2002), 5.
7. Saiful Umam, *Localizing Islamic orthodoxy in Northern Coastal Java in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries: A study of Pegon Islamic texts*. PhD thesis, University of Hawai‘i, 2011.
8. M. Adib Misbachul Islam, *Puisi perlawanan dar pesantren: Nazam tarekat karya KH. Ahmad Ar-Rifai Kalisalak*. Tangerang: Transpustaka, 2016.
9. Sri Wahyuni and Rustam Ibrahim, “Pemaknaan Jawa Pegon dalam memahami kitab kuning di pesantren,” *Jurnal Ilmiah Studi Islam* 17 (2017), 4-21.
10. Jamaluddin, “Kitab Jawan sebagai pelestari bahasa Jawa: Studi kasus kitab terbitan Menara Kudus, 1952-1990-an”, *Pangadereng* 4 (2018), 399-413. The English translation is from Jamaluddin himself.
11. Muḥammad Nabil Fahmi and Muqowim, “Kitab Asmarakandi sebagai sumber belajar pendidikan Islam awal di Nusantara,” *Jurnal SMArT Studi Masyarakat, Religi dan Tradisi* 7 (2021), 242-252.
12. A. Amalia, *Nilai-nilai akidah dalam manuskrip Asmarakandi karya Abu Al-Laits Al-Samarqandi tahun 1071 H (kajian filologis)*. Purwokerto: IAIN Purwokerto, 2020.
13. Martin van Bruinessen, “Kitab kuning: Books in Arabic script used in the pesantren milieu”. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 146 (1990), 251.
14. See also Winastwan Gora, “Bahjat al Ulum kitab akidah populer di era pra kemerdekaan yang kini tidak diajarkan lagi di pesantren”, 2021. <https://naskahnusantara.com/bahjat-al-ulum-kitab-akidah-populer-di-era-pra-kemerdekaan-yang-tidak-diajarkan/> (accessed

- August 20, 2022).
15. Van Bruinessen, "Kitab kuning", 265.
 16. Van Bruinessen, "Kitab kuning", 251.
 17. Edwin P. Wieringa, "The heron and the snail: A visual pun in a Javanese manuscript of the *Jawharat al-Tawhīd*". Laila Prager, Michael Prager, Guido Sprenger (eds), *Parts and wholes. Essays on social morphology, cosmology and exchange in honour of J.D.M. Platenkamp* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2016) 475-484.
 18. L.W.C. van den Berg, "Het Mohammedaansche godsdienstonderwijs op Java en Madoera en de daarbij gebruikte Arabische boeken", *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 31 (1887), 518-555.
 19. Soebardi, "Santri-religious elements," 337.
 20. Tijana Krstić, "From shahāda to 'aqīda: Conversion to Islam, catechization and Sunnification in sixteenth-century Ottoman Rumeli", in A.C.S. Peacock (ed.), *Islamisation: Comparative perspectives from history* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 302.
 21. Krstić, "From shahāda to 'aqīda", 303.
 22. For a brief and excellent overview of research on the Islamization in Southeast Asia, see R. Michael Feener, "Islam in Southeast Asia to c. 1800", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*. Retrieved 2 Mar. 2022.
 23. Jonathan P. Berkey, "Textual aspects of religious authority in premodern Islam", Léon Buskens and Annemarie van Sandwijk (eds), *Islamic studies in the twenty-first century: Transformations and continuities* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 54.
 24. Edwin P. Wieringa, "The story of Yusuf and Indonesia's Islamisation: A work of literature plus", A.C.S. Peacock (ed.), *Islamisation: Comparative perspectives from history* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 444-471.
 25. Elizabeth Lhost, "To flower and fructify: Rational religion and the seeds of Islam in Nazir Ahmad's (1830-1912) late-career non-fiction", *Journal of Islamic Studies* 31 (2020), 51.
 26. Elizabeth Lhost, "To flower", 51.
 27. Elizabeth Lhost, "To flower", 51. The reference is to Ronit Ricci, *Islam translated: Literature, conversion, and the Arabic cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
 28. Josef van Ess uses the term "Hanafite simplicity" in J. van Ess, "ABU'L-LAYT SAMARQANDĪ," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, I/3, pp. 332-333; an updated version is available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/abul-lay-nasr-b> (accessed on 17 August 2022).
 29. Joseph Schacht, "New sources for the history of Muhammadan theology," *Studia Islamica* 1 (1953), 25 cited in Van Ess "ABU'L-LAYT SAMARQANDĪ."
 30. Fahmi and Muqowim, "Kitab Asmarakandi," 245.
 31. First developed in his PhD, namely Alexander David Robert Wain, *Chinese Muslims and the conversion of the Nusantara to Islam*. Oxford: University of Oxford, 2015.
 32. Voorhoeve, *Handlist*, 45. Leiden University Library has digitized this resource, which can be found at URL <http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:110696>.
 33. See Th. Pigeaud, *Literature of Java*; 3 volumes (1967-1970) with supplement (1980), which was also digitized by Leiden University Library and can be found at URL <http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:114875>.
 34. I refer to Timothy E. Behrend, "Small collections of Javanese manuscripts in Indonesia," *Archipel* 35 (1988), 23-42 for a more detailed discussion of the many lacunae in overseas collections of Javanese manuscripts.
 35. Listed in Voorhoeve, *Handlist*, 45.
 36. Described in T.E. Behrend (ed.), *Katalog induk naskah-naskah Nusantara. Jilid 4: Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia and École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1998), 40-41. It is also called "Aqidatu l-Ushul" in Behrend,

- Perpustakaan Nasional*, 506. Behrend, *Perpustakaan Nasional*, 8 also lists A 208, *Aqīdah al-Uṣūl*, in the Arabic collection, but without any details.
37. Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami awakening. Community and identity in the Netherlands East Indies, 1900-1942* (Ithaca: New York: Cornell University, 1999), 26.
 38. This text has been digitized and is accessible at the website of the British Library, with the URL http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=MSS_Malay_C_7. It was detached from IO Islamic 2906 (Loth 381) (old number IO 2906a) and has the call number MSS Malay C 7. M.C. Ricklefs, P. Voorhoeve and Annabel Teh Gallop, *Indonesian manuscripts in Great Britain. A catalogue of manuscripts in Indonesian languages in Indonesian languages in British public collections. New edition with addenda et corrigenda* (Jakarta: École française d'Extrême-Orient, Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2014), 121; 125. In 2016, Annabel Teh Gallop wrote an interesting vignette, see "From Samarkand to Batavia: a popular Islamic catechism in Malay", <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2016/01/from-samarkand-to-batavia-a-popular-islamic-catechism-in-malay.html> (accessed 17 March 2022). An Indonesian student has written a short note on this manuscript, see <https://kumparan.com/15september99/sembahyang-dalam-manuskrip-malay-texts-on-prayer-and-marriage-1umUX9k65rm/full> (accessed 17 March 2022).
 39. For further information, see <https://sea.lib.niu.edu/islandora/object/SEAIImages%3ANIU-TAKERAN-32a-collection#page/1/mode/1up>.
 40. This collection forms the subject of Amiq's 2015 Leiden PhD thesis entitled "Islamic manuscript culture in the pondok pesantren of East Java in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries". Leiden: PhD thesis, University of Leiden. Accessible at <https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2889689/view>.
 41. See https://twitter.com/dreamsea_mss/status/1428205085830656001.
 42. Annabel Teh Gallop, "Shifting landscapes: Remapping the writing traditions of Islamic Southeast Asia through digitisation," *Humaniora* 32 (2020), 97.
 43. Gallop, "Shifting landscapes," 98.
 44. A.W.T. Juynboll, "Een Moslimsche catechismus in het Arabisch met eene Javaansche interlineaire vertaling in pegonschrift uitgegeven en in het Nederlandsch vertaald". *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 29 (1881): 215-227; 229-231; 279-284. The Javanese manuscript is described under I2 in T.E. Behrend, *Katalog induk naskah-naskah Nusantara. Jilid 1: Museum Sonobudoyo* (Jakarta: Penerbit Djambatan, 1990), 545. The text edition is Mifedwil Jandra, *Asmarakandi (Sebuah tinjauan dari aspek tasawuf)*. [Yogyakarta:] Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan; Direktorat Jendral Kebudayaan; Proyek Penelitian dan Pengkajian Kebudayaan Nusantara (Javanologi), 1985-1986, 29. Jandra's unpublished edition entered the manuscript collection of the Museum Sonobudoyo under call number PB C.61a, described under I3 in Behrend, *Museum Sonobudoyo*, 545.
 45. Muhammad Haron, "The Samarqand-Cape Town connection: Revisiting a 10th century theological text", A. Fodor (ed.), *Proceedings of the Arabic and Islamic sections of the 35th international Congress of Asian and North African Studies (ICANAS)*. Part two (Budapest 1999), in *The Arabist; Budapest Studies in Arabic* 21-22 (1999), 73-88. The entire volume is accessible at http://real-j.mtak.hu/15749/1/The_Arabist_Budapest_Studies_in_Arabic_1999_21-22.pdf.
 46. Haron, "The Samarqand-Cape Town connection," 77.
 47. Haron, "The Samarqand-Cape Town connection," 74.
 48. Van Ess "ABU'L-LAYT SAMARQANDĪ." For more information on the Mātūrīdīan school of thought, see Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Mātūrīdī and the development of Sunnī theology in Samarqand*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2015.
 49. Haron, "The Samarqand-Cape Town connection," 74-75.
 50. Jandra, *Asmarakandi*, 74.

51. Jandra, *Asmarakandi*, 65.
52. Jandra, *Asmarakandi*, 65.
53. Juynboll, "Moslimsche catechismus," 284.
54. Juynboll, "Moslimsche catechismus," 284.
55. Van Ess "ABU'L-LAYT SAMARQANDĪ."
56. Jandra, *Asmarakandi*, 71-72.
57. Haron, "The Samarqand-Cape Town connection," 81-82.
58. Jandra, *Asmarakandi*, 72-73.
59. Jandra, *Asmarakandi*, 73.

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