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ARABIC AS A LANGUAGE OF ISLAM NUSANTARA: THE NEED FOR AN *ARABIC LITERATURE OF INDONESIA*

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Abstract

The term Islam Nusantara has been in circulation for a long time, but recently its use has gained a new significance after the 2015 Nahdlatul Ulama Congress in Jombang. Understanding of the term Islam Nusantara differs, but a common feature in all interpretations is the opinion that it is a blend of universal Islamic notions and specific regional cultural elements with specific Indonesian characteristics, like tolerance, peacefulness and moderation. In the history of Islam in Indonesia different appreciations of Arabic as a language of Islam Nusantara exist. In this paper, I want to go into the role of Arabic in Islam in Indonesia and I will argue that for a proper assessment of position of Arabic within the concept of Islam Nusantara an Arabic Literature of Indonesia should be produced.

Keywords: *Islam Nusantara, Nahdlatul Ulama, Universal Islamic Notions, Arabic language, Arabic literature of Indonesia.*

Abstrak

Istilah Islam Nusantara telah beredar dalam waktu lama, namun baru-baru ini penggunaannya telah mendapatkan signifikansi baru setelah Kongres Nahdlatul Ulama 2015 di Jombang. Pemahaman tentang istilah Islam Nusantara berbeda, namun merupakan ciri umum dalam segala bentuk toleransi, kedamaian dan moderasi. Dalam sejarah Islam di Indonesia terdapat perbedaan apresiasi terhadap bahasa Arab sebagai bahasa Islam Nusantara. Dalam tulisan ini saya ingin masuk kedalam peran bahasa Arab dalam Islam dan saya berpendapat bahwa bahasa Arab dalam konsep Islam Nusantara merupakan sebuah Sastra Arab Indonesia yang harus diproduksi.

Kata Kunci: *Islam Nusantara, Nahdlatul Ulama, Pengertian Islam Universal, Bahasa Arab, Sastra Arab Indonesia.*

Introduction

The term Islam Nusantara has been in circulation for a long time and different understandings of the term have been used. When we engage in the discussion on Islam Nusantara a lot of terminological issues pop up. First there is the idea of Nusantara. This topographical term is usually translated as Malay-Indonesian Archipelago or maritime Southeast Asia, and evidently does not only include the present republic of Indonesia, but also comprises Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and the southern parts of both Thailand and the Philippines. However, in most writings on Islam Nusantara, the term Nusantara is used to denote or, at least, is focussing on present day Indonesia. Next, there is the issue of the concept of Islam itself. Academically spoken, there is no one single understanding of 'Islam', so as an academic descriptive category, the word Islam also adds to the complexity of the issue. In using the term Islam Nusantara, often authentic or true Islam as present in Indonesia is meant, and as such the term is less descriptive and more of a normative and ideological nature.

This terminological vagueness is present in almost all publications dealing with Islam Nusantara, but in all interpretations the opinion is voiced that Islam Nusantara is a blend of universal Islamic notions on the one hand and, on the other hand, specific regional cultural elements with specific Indonesian characteristics, like tolerance, peacefulness and moderation.

The issue of a specific type or manifestation of Islam in a particular region is, of course, not restricted to this part of the world, and the debate of how the universal message and claims of Islam translates into and manifests itself in local cultures, and what the relationship between Islam and local culture is, has led to many sophisticated discussions.

As an example of how this relationship has been conceptualized, I would like to refer to an interesting study by the the German scholar of African Islam Rüdiger Seesemann. In an article, entitled “African Islam or Islam in Africa? Evidence from Kenya” he gives a table in which he lists a number of opposing categories to characterize the local “African Islam” and the global “Islam in Africa”, which is sometimes also called “Arab Islam”. This scheme looks as follows:

African Islam	Islam in Africa or Arab Islam
tolerant	militant
emotional	puritanical
syncretistic	fundamentalist
oral	literal
local	trans local or global
contextualized	non-contextualized
traditional	modern
“popular” Islam	“orthodox” Islam

By taking Kenya as an illustration Seesemann shows that this dichotomy does not do justice to empirical data, and he concludes that this dichotomy is too schematic and therefore not tenable as a proper academic model for understanding and analyzing the various manifestations of Islam in Africa.

Although I completely agree with the conclusion of Seesemann, I think that for heuristic reasons this scheme is useful, and for studying the concept Islam Nusantara it might also be helpful. Each of the different

pairs of characteristics can also be used to have a closer look to Islam Nusantara, if only to establish where these different characterizations came from and who used them for the first time and with what agenda in mind.

In this paper it will be impossible to go into all of these pairs, but I will look more closely at the language issue, which is also identified by Seesemann in Africa, namely the opposition between oral and literal. It is evident that in Africa Arabic is linked to pure Islam, which is also called Arab Islam, while African Islam is making use of local languages (in the scheme of Seeseman in oral form). The issue of Arabic also plays a role within Islam Nusantara and it is this issue which is the focus of my paper.

The Academic Study of the Role of Arabic in Nusantara

It is evident that Arabic as the Islamic language *par excellence* has played and still plays a very central role in Indonesia. The introduction and spread of Arabic in Indonesia has however not yet been dealt with comprehensively nor in detail. In a book on the various writing traditions of Indonesia, published in 1996, like others before him, the Australian scholar Anthony Johns (1996:33) noticed a lack of academic studies on the Arabic writing tradition in Indonesia. According to him this was due to the circumstance that generally spoken Arabists do not consider the Arabic works produced in Nusantara interesting enough as compared to those produced in other parts of the Muslim world and therefore not worthy of attention, while on the other hand Southeast Asianists do not have the proper sensibility to recognize the underlying Islamic norms and ideas of Muslim communities in Indonesia.

Since the publication of Johns's article, there seems to be more openness towards the Arabic writing tradition in Indonesia, as is shown, for instance, by an entry on Indonesia in the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, written by Karel Steenbrink, published online in 2011, but written earlier. The article of Steenbrink

is useful and can be regarded as a state of the art of the academic study of the role of Arabic in Indonesia. The author has divided his article in the following paragraphs: 1) the arrival of Islam in Indonesia; 2) Arabic in literary texts; 3) the study of Arabic; 4) Arabs in the archipelago; and finally 5) The study of Arabic today. In the present audience, anyone can think for himself or herself of several issues which are dealt with under these headings and here I restrict myself in mentioning that plenty of historical persons figure in this overview, like the 17th century scholars Syamsuddin al-Samatrani and Yusuf al-Makassari, the two of whom published both in Malay and in Arabic.

Based on the articles of Johns and Steenbrink it appears that at least two conditions contributed to the – indeed – prominent role of Arabic in Indonesia, that is the close links with Mecca, Medina and Cairo as educational centres for Indonesian Muslims and, secondly, the presence of an Arabic Hadrami minority in the archipelago, who kept on using Arabic until far in the 20th century. Both articles also show that the Arabic writing tradition is important in the transmission of Muslim scholarship and forms a vital component of the Muslim intellectual tradition in Indonesia.

However, in spite of these and other commendable efforts, there is still a gap in our academic knowledge on the topic. Earlier this month, the famous German language history of Arabic literature by Carl Brockelmann became available online in English through the efforts of Brill Publishers in Leiden, entitled *Brockelmann in English: The History of the Arabic Written Tradition Online*. The work is preceded by an introduction of the Dutch scholar Jan Just Witkam, the retired keeper of the Oriental Department of Leiden University Library. In this introduction Witkam (2017: ix) refers to the small amount of bio-biographical tools which Brockelmann had at his disposal when he was preparing his work in the first half of the 20th century, in particular pertaining to Arabic literature outside the classical Muslim heartlands. Today this is still the case and in relation to this Witkam writes:

“The extent of Arabic literature in Sub-Saharan Africa, East Turkestan,

the rest of China, South-East Asia's mainland and Indonesia is, even today, almost a closed book".

Different Appreciations of Local Culture and Arabic in Indonesia

As mentioned, the position of Arabic in Indonesia has always been strong. When we confine ourselves to the 20th century, a number of relevant data can be related to substantiate this. In the pre-independence period of the 20th century, we see that the well-known modernist leader of PERSIS Ahmad Hassan (1887-1958) considers knowledge of Arabic a duty for scholars who study the constituent textual sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the Hadis. In the same vein, Hassan declared the use of Arabic in reciting the Fatiha, and in the ritual prayer an obligation for every single Muslim. However, in issues which he did not regard as part of the *'ibadah*, Hassan had a great concern that the common believers would be enabled to understand the religious reasoning and arguments and, therefore held a favourable position to the use of Malay to convey religious ideas. For instance, he took the position that the Friday sermon could be given in a local language, because the sermon was delivered by the Prophet to convey a particular message, while it was nowhere mentioned in the Qur'an nor in the Hadis that the sermon should be given in Arabic (Federspiel 2001: 56; 163-5).

Also in circles of the traditionalists in Indonesia, Arabic was rated as very important. Perhaps this is related to the dominant school of law in Indonesia which the traditionalists adhered to, namely the Syafi'ite *mazhab*. For, in this *mazhab* the reverence for Arabic is very high, as expressed, for instance, by the founder of the *mazhab* al-Syafi'i (767-820), who wrote in his famous book *Al-Risala* that "every Muslim must learn Arabic to the utmost of his capacity ..." (Tibawi 1962:14). A prominent representative of the traditionalists in pre-independence Indonesia Hasyim Asy'ari (1871-1947), one of the founders of the Nahdlatul Ulama, wrote in Arabic. Recently, I got a copy of his collected works, entitled *Irsyad al-Sari fi Jam' Musannafat al-Syaikh Hasyim Asy'ari*, "The right guidance of the night traveller containing the collected writings of Syaikh Hasyim Asy'ari". This

undated compilation contains not less than 17 of his writings, and all of those are in Arabic. As an example I mention here his essay *Risala Tusamma bi al-Jalus fi Bayan Ahkam al-Naqus*, “An essay bearing the title The spy who clarifies the legal judgments on the drum”,² which deals with a custom which can be regarded as characteristic for Islam in Indonesia, namely the beating of the drum in order to let the believers know that the time for prayer has come, instead of the common Islamic way to do this by way of the *azan*, the “call for prayer”, which is done with the human voice, today most of the times with the help of sound equipment. In this work, dated 7 Rabi` al-awwal 1335/ 31 December 1916, Hasyim approves of this use of the drum as a *bid`a mahmuda*, a “praiseworthy innovation”.

In itself this essay is very interesting, because it was obviously written in the context of a protracted discussion about this particular use of the drum. Also the just mentioned PERSIS leader Ahmad Hassan participated in this debate and severely condemned this use of the drum, because in the Hadis there was no precedent for this custom and the Prophet had clearly advocated calling the people for prayer by means of the human voice, and had declined all other forms, like the *naqus*, or drum (Kaptein 2014: 118-9). When we compare the opinion of Hasyim Asy`ari with that of Ahmad Hassan we thus see that a prominent traditionalist spokesman defended the local custom of using the drum *in Arabic*, while an important modernist leader rejected this local custom *in Malay*. This is just one example to show that the abovementioned dichotomy of Seesemann, which associates Arabic with puritan and modernist Islam is not tenable.

The point I want to make here, however, is that Hasyim Asy`ari, writing in 20th century Indonesia used the Arabic language to convey his ideas. This is not an exception, because also from more recent times Arabic writings produced in Indonesia are known. As an example I mention here a *fiqh* treatise on smoking, by Ihsan Jampes Kediri (1901-1952), entitled *Irsyad al-Ikhwan li-Bayan Syarab al-Qahwa wa al-Dukhan*, “The right guidance of the brothers clarifying the consuming

of coffee and tobacco”, which forms just one title of his oeuvre in Arabic (Barizi 2004).

After independence we see that an entire new element is brought into the discussion on the relationship between universal Islamic notions and local customs, that is -unsurprisingly- the idea of nationalism. Important contributions to this debate were made by the Hasbi Ash Shiddieqy (1904-1975). Hasbi approached the issue through a thorough investigation of the history of Islamic *fiqh*. He was convinced that many parts of what was considered divine classical Islamic Law were actually reflections of specific conditions in Arab culture and society of the past, which therefore did not have validity for Muslims in other circumstances. This insight opened up the possibility for him to develop a school of law which took into account the specific Indonesian living conditions and in this way he conceptualized an “Indonesian *mazhab*” (Feener 2007: 54-80).

Another person who made important theoretical contributions to the relationship between Islam and custom was Hazairin (d. 1975). He was trained as an *adat* law scholar and held the opinion that Indonesian society should be understood in its own local terms and not according to foreign concepts. For instance, Hazairin declined certain patrilineal elements in Islamic inheritance law, because he regarded these as being suitable to the Arab society from which it originated, but not to Indonesian society. In the same vein, he also criticized the popular idea that adhering to the Shari`a automatically implied the following of Arab custom. In his work he, thus, also helped to develop a national Indonesian *mazhab* and, like Hasbi Ash Shiddieqy, distanced himself from Arab culture (Feener 2007: 54-80).

More recently, also important ideas have been developed in relation to the idea of a specific Indonesian Islam, and similar to the previous ones these were strongly imbued with ideas of nationalism. The first person I would like to deal with here is Nurkholish Madjid (1939-2005). Madjid’s work can be characterized briefly as an effort to integrate Islam and Indonesian identity (*keindonesiaan*). In a recent

paper the Indonesian researcher Ahmad Najib Burhani identified at least four components of this integration, to wit: 1) the acceptance of modern nationalism; 2) the redefinition of the concept of *umma*; 3) the acceptance of the Pancasila; and 4) the rejection of the perception of Islam as a political ideology (Burhani 2013: 35-40). By means of theorizing on these four points Madjid depoliticized Islam and brought it into perfect harmony with the Indonesian nation state of the New Order. For this paper, it is also interesting to go into the question of how Madjid saw the relation between Indonesian Islam and Islam elsewhere. According to Madjid, compared to other countries Islam in Indonesia is the least influenced by Arabization and in this context he uses the term *Islam pinggiran*. He uses this term to indicate that Islam as compared to other countries is still very young and very “marginal” in a negative sense: Islam in Indonesia has not yet advanced enough and in this sense is thus unique. However, as such, this is not something which according to Madjid should be protected and preserved (Burhani 2013: 40-1).

As a public Muslim intellectual Madjid has been for a long time at the heart of political, cultural and religious debates and in his numerous writings he has dealt with many issues. One of the issues which is relevant to this paper is Madjid’s article, entitled *Islamic universalism and the position of the Arabic language*, (“Universalisme Islam dan kedudukan Bahasa Arab”). In this article Madjid (1995: 358- 372) mentions that Arabic is of course the language of the revelation, but in the course history in addition to Arabic also other languages became important bearers of Islamic culture, like Persian, and Malay in Southeast Asia. Basing himself on some Qur’anic verses and the Prophetic tradition which says that an Arab is not better than a non-Arabs, unless if he is more pious, Madjid concludes that for God all languages are equal. The Qur’an was revealed in Arabic, because the Prophet was an Arab, and therefore it could not have been sent down in another language.

At the same time, the language of the Qur’an is linguistically unique (he refers here to the classical doctrine of the *i’jaz al-Qur’an*)

and therefor the Qur'an cannot be translated because many linguistic subtleties and the emotions evoked by the sounds of the Arabic language would get lost in the translation. Consequently, in another language the meaning of the Qur'an can only be rendered as an interpretation, and this rendering can never replace the Qur'an. We thus see that on the one hand Nurkholish underlines that the universal message of Islam is not dependent upon Arabic, while on the other hand he subscribes to the doctrine of the *i`jaz al-Qur'an* and stresses that Arabic, especially when used in ritual, promotes the unity of Islam in the entire world.

A final person I would like to deal with is Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009), who has voiced perhaps the most outspoken opinions on the relationship of Islam and local Indonesian culture and the role of Arabic in Indonesia. In 1983 Wahid had introduced the idea of *Indigenization of Islam* ("Pribumisasi Islam") and in 1989 he published an essay with the same title. A central idea within this notion is that Islam as it manifests itself in Indonesia is an authentic expression of Islam, which is not inferior to other forms of Islam which are practised in the Middle East, or which are propagated for instance by the modernists. In order to counterbalance the feeling of inferiority among Indonesian Muslims, he also proposed not to use Arabic words when an good Indonesian word was available. For instance, instead of the Arabic word *salat* one should use *sembahyang*, and likewise the words *langgar* and *Kiyai* or *tuan guru* should be used instead of the Arabic words *musalla* and *ustadh*. Like Madjid, Wahid also stressed the universal character of Islam, which implied that persons were not obliged to follow Arab culture. In fact he regarded the process of what he called Arabization a threat to other cultures, and as cases in point he mentioned religious terminology and mosque architecture. A second point in his notion of *pribumisasi* was the idea of nationalism. Since the Pancasila was a reflection of both Islamic universal values and Indonesian culture, Wahid convincingly subscribed to the Pancasila. Finally, by stressing *`urf*, or custom, as a source of Islamic Law, Wahid further substantiated the notion of *pribumisasi* (Burhani 2013: 27-34).

This essay by Wahid can still be regarded as one of the most intriguing contributions to the debate on the specificity of Indonesian Islam and it does not come as a surprise that it was recently reprinted in a collection of essays on Islam Nusantara, where it is called a “manifesto” (Wahid 2015). This collection was published in the wake of the 2015 Nahdlatul Ulama Congress in Jombang and contains various interesting issues by prominent scholars. It starts with a brief introduction by KH. A. Mustofa Bisri, one of the top leaders of the NU. In this introduction Mostofa Bisri advocates the moderate and tolerant Islam Nusantara against foreign understandings of Islam and expresses his hope that this Islam, “which is troubled by particular influences from outside”, will be strengthened (Bisri 2015). Although not explicitly mentioned, it is clear that Mostafa Bisri is aiming at Salafi-Wahhabi ideas from the Middle East.

In addition to this very sketchy overview of the views of a number of scholars on Indonesian Islam and Arabic, we should also mention that in educational institutions belonging to both modernist and traditionalist organisations within Islam in Indonesia, Arabic was and still is important, be it in different degrees, varying from a complete curriculum in Arabic, as was and still is the case in particular *pesantren*, to the requirement of at least being able to read Arabic religious textbooks. There is much more to say about this, but this suffices to underline my point of the prominence of Arabic in Indonesian Islam.

Finally, I like to mention here that Arabic is not only important within the intellectual and scholarly tradition in Indonesia, but also among the common people. Recent research has shown that there is a positive appreciation for Arabic as is demonstrated in a recent article which deals with Arabic names in Java. In this research, done in three regencies in Java, the number of Arabic names given to new born children is growing, as well as hybrid names in which one Arabic name forms one component (Kuipers and Asturi 2017).

Concluding Discussion: Towards an Arabic Literature of Indonesia?

From the above discussion, it can be seen that the perception of the Arabic language also plays a role in assessing what Islam Nusantara is. Issues which are not a matter of debate are the general conviction that the Qur'an cannot be translated, as well as the use of Arabic in ritual, like in the *salat*. Moreover, this paper has shown that within Indonesia different appreciations of Arabic are in existence and that the identification of Arabic with puritan and modernist Islam, as done in the above mentioned dichotomy of Seesemann, is not tenable. It seems that among traditionalists Arabic is more important than among modernists and in the light of the different appreciation of the scholarly Arabic tradition, this does not come to a surprise, since the traditionalist aim and claim to continue this tradition, while the modernists consider this scholarly tradition less important and orient themselves much more to the Qur'an and the Hadis.

When we try to correlate the different appreciations of Arabic with the idea of Islam Nusantara, a serious problem pops up, namely that - to me at least - it is not always clear who can be regarded as a spokesman or representative of Islam Nusantara. Evidently the concept has gained prominence in circles of the Nahdlatul Ulama after its 2015 congress in Jombang, but the term has been in circulation much longer and the question arises whether also persons who are not attached to NU can be regarded as spokesmen of Islam Nusantara. In any case we might say that persons like Hasbi As Shiddiqui and Hazairin, as well as Nurkholish Madjid were convinced of a particular type of Islam in Nusantara, which formed an unbreakable unity with the Indonesian identity.

All in all, I think that if we want to get a better insight in the ambiguous appreciation of Arabic in Indonesia an *Arabic Literature of Indonesia* is a serious desideratum. Such a work can serve as an instrument, both to fill the above mentioned gap in our academic knowledge on the Arabic writing tradition in Indonesia, as well as to facilitate a balanced judgement of the role of Arabic literature in Islam Nusantara. Once the

role of Arabic by means of the proposed instrument is available, the next step should be to combine and integrate the Arabic strand of Indonesian Islamic learning with products of Indonesian Islamic scholarship in other languages. Eventually, this huge intellectual effort will lead to a better understanding of what Islam Nusantara is.

Of course, it is rather audacious to propose such a huge project here in this learned audience and I would be interested to learn your reactions. As an example we could think of the prestigious work *Arabic Literature of Africa* (ALA), which can be regarded as a supplement to the abovementioned work by Carl Brockelmann. The first volume of ALA was published in 1993 and recently volume 6 has appeared with Brill Publishers. The work has been compiled by a large team of corroborators and is a bio-bibliography on the Arabic literature of Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa from its beginnings to well into the 20th century. The work offers information about African authors, the texts they wrote in Arabic, and bibliographical references to these texts.

Obviously, when we want to produce a work comparable with ALA, this requires a lot of thinking, e.g. what period of time should be covered? How should the contents be structured in terms of geography? How should this be done thematically? Do we include scholars, like Nawawi al-Bantani, Ahmad Khatib and 'Abd al-Hamid Kudus, who were scholars from Nusantara and wrote in Arabic, but produced their works in Mecca? Should we restrict ourselves to manuscripts, or should we also include printed work? These and other questions should be seriously addressed before a start with an *Arabic Literature of Indonesia* (ALI) can be made.

It goes without saying that the production of ALI could never be the work of one single scholar. For this enormous task, which might take decades, a specialized office with highly trained staff and long-term funds will be needed. To conclude this paper, I would like to say that for this enormous task I cannot think of a better institution than our host of the present conference.

EndNotes

- 1 Paper presented at the 2nd International Symposium on Religious Literature and Heritage (ISLAGE), Bogor, 18-21 July 2017.
- 2 The word naqus actually means church bell, but in these discussions it is the equivalent of the Malay word toktok, tong-tong or bedug.

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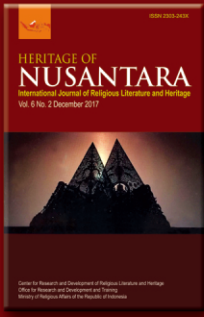
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