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My dear professor `Abd al-Ghaffar': the letters of Sayyid `Uthman to C. Snouck Hurgronje as a reflection of their relationship

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“My Dear Professor ‘Abd al-Ghaffar”: The Letters of Sayyid ‘Uthman to C. Snouck Hurgronje as a Reflection of Their Relationship

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1 Introduction: C. Snouck Hurgronje and his Dutch East Indian Collaborators

Throughout his entire career, from the very beginning when he still was a young man until the end of his life, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje had the ability to gain the trust of a wide variety of people and to involve them in his activities, both in his academic endeavours as well as in his more practical efforts. This was the case during his famous stay in Mecca, where he had spent the first half of 1885,² as well as during his work in the Netherlands East Indies from 1889-1906. He made extensive use of indigenous informants in his capacity as advisor to the Netherlands Indies colonial administration for native affairs. A number of examples might serve as an illustration of this.

When Snouck travelled in Java between 1889 and 1891 as part of a government mission to study Islam in the archipelago, he did so in the company of the Sundanese scholar Haji Hasan Moestapa (1852-1930). In accompanying Snouck, Haji Hasan Moestapa was of vital importance to his fellow traveller, not only in explaining local customs to Snouck and initially as an interpreter, but also in introducing him to all kinds of local persons. These Javanese peregrinations did not lead to a large monograph, but the field notes were used extensively in Snouck’s column “Brieven van een wedono pensioen” in the Dutch East Indian newspaper *De Locomotief* in 1891 and 1892.³ Later his rela-

1 I thank professor Jan Just Witkam who generously sent me his notes on most of the letters dealt with here in April 1996. After I finished the research for this paper, Leiden University Libraries made most of the letters used here available online.

2 Jan Just Witkam, Introduction to *Mekka in de tweede helft van de negentiende eeuw: schetsen uit het dagelijks leven*, by C. Snouck Hurgronje, translated [from German] and introduced by Jan Just Witkam (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Atlas, 2007), 66-128.

3 P.S. van Ronkel, “Aanteekeningen over Islam en folklore in West- en Midden-Java uit het reisverhaal van Dr. C. Snouck Hurgronje,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 101 (1942): 312.

tionship with Haji Hasan Moestapa would also prove to be important when the government asked Snouck to give advice about the Aceh War and Haji Hasan Moestapa had become *hoofdpanghoeloe* in Kota Raja. As a matter of course, this relationship greatly facilitated Snouck's access to Acehese society.⁴

In Aceh, Snouck also used a number of other informants, whom he sometimes mentions explicitly, while in other cases their involvement becomes clear from other sources.⁵ A lot of the information gained from these individuals was of an academic nature and was eventually placed in Snouck's famous monograph on Aceh, but there are also instances of information which was of direct use in the warfare against the Acehese. The best known example of this type relates to the military expedition to Pidie in 1898, in which Snouck participated personally. During this expedition a number of prominent members of the Acehese resistance were captured on the basis of information which Snouck received from his clerk Muhammad Noerdin⁶ and a local informant.⁷

In his 1903 work on the Gayo highlands of Aceh and its inhabitants in North Sumatra, Snouck also made use of two indigenous informants, Nyaq Putih, whom he characterised as "an intelligent young man," and Aman Ratus. After Snouck moved back from the field to Batavia in 1903 and had completed his monograph on Gayo, he continued to work on the Gayo, taking his two informants with him.⁸

These are a few examples of the central role of indigenous collaborators in

4 P.S. van Koningsveld, "De geschiedschrijving van een koloniale expansie-oorlog. Vijftig jaar na de dood van Snouck Hurgronje," in *Snouck Hurgronje en de islam. Acht artikelen over het leven en werk van een oriëntalist uit het koloniale tijdperk* (Leiden: Documentatiebureau Islam-Christendom, Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, 1987), 203-214 (first published in *De Volkskrant*, 21 June 1986). See also Mufti Ali, "It is Incumbent upon Indonesian Muslims to be Loyal to the Dutch East Indies Government': A Study of a Fatwa by Hasan Mustapa," in *Hasan Mustapa: Ethnicity and Islam in Indonesia*, ed. Julian Millie (Monash University Press, 2017), 141-160. The Indonesian scholar Jajang A. Rohmana has published a number of letters of Hasan Moestapa in Arabic to Snouck, see his *Informan Sunda Masa Kolonial: Surat-surat Haji Hasan Mustapa untuk C. Snouck Hurgronje dalam kurun 1894-1923*, Yogyakarta: Octopus, 2018. See also his article "Colonial Informants and the Acehese-Dutch War," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 49, no.143 (2021): 63-81, which is based on the letters which Moestapa wrote to Snouck, when Moestapa was based in Kota Raja. Jajang Rohmana is preparing an edition of these letters.

5 A.A. Trouwborst, *De Atjehers van Snouck Hurgronje* (Arnhem: Stichting Vrienden van Bronbeek, 1993), 14.

6 Van Koningsveld, "De geschiedschrijving van een koloniale expansie-oorlog," 210.

7 Trouwborst, *De Atjehers van Snouck Hurgronje*, 17.

8 J. Bowen, *Sumatran Politics and Poetics: Gayo History, 1900-1989* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 32-33.

the activities of Snouck in the Netherlands East Indies, and they show how well he was able to involve native people in his work, not only as informants for academic purposes, but also for purposes of a more administrative or even political nature.

In this contribution I will discuss the relationship between Snouck and one of his best known partners, Sayyid ‘Uthman, as this evolves from the latter’s letters to Snouck which have been preserved. Although these letters are rich in content, in this essay the primary focus will be on what they reveal about the nature of their connection. Consequently I will not go into the entire content of the letters. Before I start to deal with the letters, I will give some biographical information about Sayyid ‘Uthman.

2 Some Biographical Notes on Sayyid ‘Uthman⁹

Sayyid ‘Uthman b. ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Aqil b. Yahya al-‘Alawi (1822-1914) was born in Batavia in 1822 as a member of the Arab minority of the city. Within this group he belonged to the religious nobility, the so-called *sāda* (pl. of *sayyid*), who traced their genealogy back to the Prophet Muhammad. The Arabs in Batavia formed part of the large Arab diaspora which originated from Hadramaut in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, and which had taken shape in all regions around the Indian Ocean. Between the Hadramaut and the diaspora there was an intensive traffic of persons, for instance by sending sons who had been born in the diaspora back to the homeland for education, including thorough training in the Arabic language. Likewise, Sayyid ‘Uthman left his native Batavia for educational purposes, initially going to Mecca in 1841, when he was nineteen years old. He stayed for seven years in the Holy City in order to study Islamic sciences with, among others, the famous Sayyid Ahmad b. Zayni Dahlan. In 1847 Sayyid ‘Uthman moved on to Hadramaut, where he met members of his family, continued his studies, married, and fathered at least one son, as will become clear below. In 1855, after a period of eight years in Hadramaut, he

9 See for detailed references to the information given in this section, Nico J.G. Kaptein, “Sayyid ‘Uthman: de adviseur,” in *Tropenlevens: de (post)koloniale biografie*, ed. Rosemarijn Hoefte, Peter Meel and Hans Renders (Amsterdam and Leiden: Boom and KITLV, 2008), 195-215; and Nico J.G. Kaptein, “Arabophobia and the Aversion Against the Tarekat: How Sayyid ‘Uthman Became Advisor to the Netherlands Colonial Administration,” in the *Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia. Identity Maintenance or Assimilation?*, ed. Ahmed Ibrahim Abu Shouk and Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2009), 33-44. Most information in these articles has been integrated in my monograph, *Islam, Colonialism and the Modern Age in the Netherlands East Indies. A Biography of Sayyid ‘Uthman* (Leiden: E.J. Brill 2014).

toured various cities in the Middle East. After this trip Sayyid ‘Uthman resettled in Hadramaut, where he stayed for a period of seven years.

In 1862, around the age of forty, Sayyid ‘Uthman returned to his birthplace, where he would spend the rest of his long life which would end in 1914. In Batavia he became active in teaching and preaching Islam, and within a few years he developed into a well-established authority in religious matters. Around 1870 Sayyid ‘Uthman seems to have started experimenting with a lithograph press to publish his own writings which he eventually offered for sale. After a hesitant start with a publication in 1875 and one in 1877, from 1880 until shortly before his death in 1914 he regularly wrote and published books and brochures, of which more than 150 different items have been preserved. These writings deal with most branches of Islamic scholarship, such as theology, *fiqh*, mysticism, Islamic law, hadith, Qur’an recitation, ethics, Arabic language, and astronomy, and show that Sayyid ‘Uthman was one of the most important and productive ‘ulama’ in the Netherlands East Indies of his time. In this capacity he was consulted many times on all kinds of issues by various Muslims from the entire archipelago, who often regarded him as the most important mufti of the Indies.

In addition to these activities as a prominent Muslim scholar, Sayyid ‘Uthman is also known for his involvement in the Dutch colonial administration from 1889 onwards, from 1891 bearing the official title of “Honorary Advisor for Arab Affairs.” In this capacity Sayyid ‘Uthman worked closely together with Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje. In the legacy of the latter a number of letters from Sayyid ‘Uthman have been preserved, to which I will now turn.

3 The Letters

3.1. *Introduction*

The Leiden University Library houses the largest collection of material from Sayyid ‘Uthman’s lithograph press in the world. In addition to these printed works, the Oriental Department of the Leiden University Library has preserved twelve letters from Sayyid ‘Uthman to Snouck Hurgronje in the latter’s archive (Or. 8952). Besides these twelve letters, on a few occasions other letters have popped up which Snouck had put in a book or a manuscript of his personal library. When his personal library was included in the Leiden University Library after his death in 1936, these items came along too. In all I now have sixteen letters of Sayyid ‘Uthman to Snouck at my disposal, and hopefully still unknown ones will be found in the future. From these remaining sixteen letters it is obvious that the correspondence must have been much more inten-

sive from both sides, so that what we have is just the tip of the iceberg. Apart from one isolated example, Snouck’s letters to Sayyid ‘Uthman are not known.

The letters are written in Arabic, which was also the language in which Snouck and Sayyid ‘Uthman were accustomed to converse.¹⁰ Occasionally Malay words and passages pop up in these Arabic letters. Most letters are dated according to the Christian era, which was not uncommon among the Arabs in the Netherlands East Indies who often used the Western calendar and numerals.¹¹ Some letters have been dated according to the Muslim calendar and some according to both the Christian and the Muslim calendars.

The letters can be classified according to the period in which they were written: a) letters from the period before Snouck’s arrival in the Netherlands East Indies in 1889 (three letters); b) letters written during Snouck’s stay in the Indies from 1889-1906 (three letters); and c) letters written after Snouck’s departure from the Indies in 1906 (ten letters).¹²

3.2 *The letters before 1889*¹³

The three letters from this period were written before Snouck and Sayyid ‘Uthman had ever met, and Sayyid ‘Uthman addresses Snouck in these letters as “Mister or Dr. Snouck Hurgronje” (*al-khawāja/al-duktur* Snouck Hurgronje), while in the later letters, after they had met, Snouck is addressed as “*al-perufīsūr* ‘Abd al-Ghaffar,” thus using the Muslim name which Snouck had adopted in Mecca. Sayyid ‘Uthman had heard about Snouck from K.F. Holle (1829-1896), the well-known tea planter and honorary advisor for native affairs, and the latter’s close friend J.A. van der Chijs.¹⁴ (I) On the other hand, Snouck Hurgronje had heard about Sayyid ‘Uthman during his stay in Mecca.¹⁵ Furthermore, Snouck would have been reminded of Sayyid ‘Uthman when the well-known Leiden professor of Arabic M.J. de Goeje (1836-1909) wrote a review in the *Revue Coloniale Internationale* of 1886 on the atlas of Hadramaut which

10 A. Djajadiningrat, *Herinneringen* (Batavia: Kolff, 1936), 77.

11 L.W.C. van den Berg, *Le Hadramout et les colonies arabes dans l’Archipel Indien* (Batavia: Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1886), 236-237.

12 See for an overview of the letters the appendix at the end of this chapter. I refer to a particular letter by using the Roman number given in the appendix.

13 I have dealt with these letters more extensively in Nico J.G. Kaptein, “Arabophobia and the Aversion Against the Tarekat,” and Kaptein, “Sayyid ‘Uthman: de adviseur.”

14 This person should not be confused with P.N. van der Chijs (d. 1889) who resided in Jeddah, initially as a shipping agent and later also as a staff member of the Dutch consulate (Witkam, “Inleiding,” 33-34).

15 C. Snouck Hurgronje, “Een Arabische bondgenoot der Nederlandsch-Indische regeering,” in *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 14 and 16 October 1886 [reprinted in his *Verspreide Geschriften* IV:1 (Bonn und Leipzig: Kurt Schroeder, 1924), 79].

had been compiled and published by Sayyid ‘Uthman. In this journal, De Goeje evaluated the atlas positively and also suggested that Sayyid ‘Uthman could perhaps be of service in the study of the inscriptions from Hadramaut.¹⁶

It is not clear who took the initiative in the correspondence. The earliest letter (I) contains two notes in the margin. One note refers to the epigraphy in Hadramaut, in connection with which Sayyid ‘Uthman mentions that he had sent his son in Hadramaut a letter to request relevant information; the other note says that Sayyid ‘Uthman has enclosed some linguistic data. I think these two notes suggest that this is not the first letter from Sayyid ‘Uthman to Snouck Hurgronje, because it seems plausible that they refer to a previous request made by Snouck Hurgronje.

The most important information contained in these early letters deals with Sayyid ‘Uthman’s ambition to become involved in the Dutch colonial state apparatus as advisor, or, as he prefers to denote this position himself, as mufti (III).¹⁷ To accomplish this, Sayyid ‘Uthman tries to convince Snouck of his loyalty towards, and his possible value for, the Dutch government, and for this purpose he added to the letters some of the booklets which he wrote to condemn the activities of the Naqshabandiyya brotherhood in West Java, which at the time was highly suspected and feared in government circles.

These early letters convinced Snouck of the trustworthiness of Sayyid ‘Uthman and caused him to write two articles in the Dutch newspaper the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* of 14 and 16 October 1886 about this “ally of the Netherlands Indies government,” the last one ending with the statement that “one Arab like ‘Uthman b. Yahya is more valuable to us than many ‘liberal,’ wine-drinking regents.”¹⁸ After Snouck had arrived in the Dutch East Indies in 1889, he negotiated with the authorities about a possible involvement of Sayyid ‘Uthman as his informant on Muslim affairs, and this indeed materialised, at first on a loose basis, while two years later Sayyid ‘Uthman was appointed to the official position of Honorary Advisor for Arab Affairs.¹⁹

3.3 *The letters from the period 1889-1906*

As a young student, Ahmad Djajadiningrat used to frequent the house of Snouck Hurgronje in Batavia. These visits were part of his education, because he was one of the young and able natives who had been selected by Snouck to

16 M.J. de Goeje, “Hadramaut,” *Revue Coloniale Internationale* 2 (1886): 101-124.

17 In Kaptein, “Sayyid ‘Uthman: de adviseur,” 208 there is a facsimile of this letter.

18 Snouck Hurgronje, “Een Arabische bondgenoot der Nederlandsch-Indische regeering,” 85.

19 E. Gobée en C. Adriaanse, *Ambtelijke adviezen van C. Snouck Hurgronje 1889-1936*, 3 vols. Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatiën (’s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1957-1965), 1510-1513.

be trained as the future native leader of the country. The idea was that, amongst other educational activities, his exposure to Snouck involved a training along the lines of a Western system of education. As such he would be the living proof of the correctness of Snouck’s *association* policy.²⁰ In his memoirs, written in Dutch and entitled *Herinneringen*, Djajadiningrat also mentions Sayyid ‘Uthman among the many individuals who frequently came to visit Snouck in his house.²¹ This is just one indication that Snouck and Sayyid ‘Uthman often met personally and explains why there was no need for written communication between them. On the other hand, Snouck Hurgronje was often travelling within the Netherlands East Indies for longer periods of time, for example to Aceh, and we might expect that, during these field trips, Sayyid ‘Uthman kept Snouck informed about current affairs in Batavia. Perhaps due to the often difficult circumstances in which Snouck had to work during these trips these letters have not been preserved. Another reason for this absence might be that the relationship between Snouck and Sayyid ‘Uthman seems to have cooled around 1898 when Snouck obstructed efforts to award Sayyid ‘Uthman a royal decoration, because he thought that such a reward would expose him too much as an ally of the Dutch government and would consequently isolate him from the Muslim population in the country.²² Whatever the reason might be, for the entire period of Snouck’s stay in the Netherlands East Indies only three letters are available.²³

These three letters originate from the period in which Snouck, in his capacity as director of the Office of Native Affairs, was the actual supervisor of Sayyid ‘Uthman within the colonial bureaucracy and was also personally responsible for paying him his monthly salary of one hundred Dutch guilders.²⁴ The first two letters (IV and V) start with only a short introductory salutation without mentioning a name. This underlines the professional character of the letters. Interestingly enough, in the letter of 1 February 1906 (VI), Snouck is addressed for the first time as “*al-perufīsūr* ‘Abd al-Ghaffar.” In contrast to the letters from the first period, which were written before they had actually met, these few

20 See the contribution of Otterspeer in this volume.

21 Djajadiningrat, *Herinneringen*, 77.

22 See letter of F.W.M. Hoogenstraaten to M.J. de Goeje, 8 February 1899 (Leiden University Library, BPL 2389). Sayyid ‘Uthman eventually received the decoration in 1899. See Nico J.G. Kaptein, “The Sayyid and the Queen: Sayyid ‘Uthman on Queen Wilhelmina’s Inauguration on the Throne of the Netherlands in 1898,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 9, no. 2 (1998): 158-177.

23 I thank professor Jan Just Witkam for drawing my attention to letters IV and VI; I found letter V among Snouck’s Aceh papers in March 2009. Letter VII also dates from 1906, but at the end of that year Snouck had already returned to the Netherlands.

24 Gobée en Adriaanse, *Ambtelijke adviezen van C. Snouck Hurgronje 1889-1936*, 45, 1510-1511.

letters show that both men know each other very well. For instance, Sayyid ‘Uthman complains about constipation²⁵ which prevents him from writing and from being able to stand up properly, as a result of which he had to perform the salat seated (iv); in the other two letters he also refers to his bad health. These complaints about his health are a recurrent theme in almost all of his letters until the end of his life. It seems to have been a favourite habit of Sayyid ‘Uthman to go on about this. However, since Snouck was Sayyid ‘Uthman’s boss in this period, we might also wonder whether, by insisting on his bad health, Sayyid ‘Uthman meant to say that Snouck should not expect too much from him. One letter comments on a request by Snouck on various *fiqh* matters (v) and another on Hadrami poetry (vi). In the most extensive letter from this period (iv), Sayyid ‘Uthman mentions some things which do not seem to be of direct relevance to the work, but are of a more general interest. We read, for instance, as Snouck would have known from the newspapers, that there had been a fight in Surabaya between Arabs, who had been cheerfully celebrating the marriage of the Queen, and Eurasians (*mawāladat al-Ifranji*).

As far as we can judge on the basis of the few letters from this period, the tone is more business-like than it is in the letters from the next period when Snouck had settled in the Netherlands.

3.4 *The letters after 1906*

The remaining ten letters available to me date from the period after Snouck had left for the Netherlands. Although this return was initially intended to last for a short period, it turned out to be for good. The tone of the letters is more intimate than in the period when Snouck was still living in the Netherlands East Indies, and a number of times Sayyid ‘Uthman complains that he misses Snouck, which shows that they had had a very good personal relationship during Snouck’s stay in the Indies. For example Sayyid ‘Uthman ends a letter from 1909 (x) as follows:

O, my dear, all the white paper which is in the bookshop (in Malay *toko buku*) of ‘Ali²⁶ could not hold what I feel in the way of the French eloquence. My longing for you occurs frequently and when I remember the days of discussion and expounding with you, there is a gentleness in my heart which no one knows but God.

25 In Arabic *yabūsa*, literary “dryness.”

26 Although the letter reads ‘Ali, perhaps Sayyid ‘Uthman’s son ‘Alwi is meant, who was in charge of the family bookshop.

The content of the letters is mixed and consists of all kind of scattered information, sometimes of a more trivial nature, such as health matters (VIII, x, XIII, XIV) and a car accident in Batavia which he discussed with his old friend Dr Hoogenstraaten (x). More often, however, these letters contain useful information on various matters, such as scholarly information requested by Snouck; news from Batavia and the Netherlands East Indies, like the rise of the first indigenous nationalist movement the *Sarekat Islam* (xv); and developments within Islam in the Indies, like the coming of modernist ideas from Egypt (xvi).²⁷ While I have already dealt with some of these issues in more detail in other publications,²⁸ I will here go into one particular matter, because it sheds a unique light on the relationship between Sayyid ‘Uthman and Snouck.

The issue is the translation of the Qur’an. In a letter dated 25 July 1909/8 Rajab 1327 Sayyid ‘Uthman reports to Snouck that in Solo a Javanese by the name of Agus Arpah (sic) had made a translation of the Qur’an in the *Jāwī* language,²⁹ containing the Arabic original (“the Qur’an”) on the right side of the page and the translation on the left side of the page, i.e. in two parallel columns. Moreover, this translation was printed and distributed.

This person, to be identified as Bagus Ngarpah,³⁰ was the head-teacher of the Madrasa Mambā’ al-‘ulūm in Solo. He had started to make a Javanese translation of the Qur’an from about the end of 1907, which appeared in parts, printed by the publisher H.A. Benjamins in Semarang.³¹ This translation was published under the sponsorship of the literary circle *Waradarma* in Solo which had received a subsidy from the prime minister of the Sunan, as a result of which the translation had an official ring. At the end of 1908, this translation, or at least the parts which had already been published, had led to protests among a number of very orthodox scholars of religion and some Arabs. Against these protests Bagus Ngarpah had replied that the translation was in fact a

27 I have dealt with these issues extensively in my abovementioned biography of Sayyid ‘Uthman.

28 See Nico J.G. Kaptein, “The Lament of an Old Man: Sayyid ‘Uthman of Batavia (1822-1914) on Cars,” in *Lost Times and Untold Tales from the Malay World*, eds. Jan van der Putten and Mary Kilcline Cody (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 283-289 on this car accident; and Nico J.G. Kaptein, “Grateful to the Dutch Government: Sayyid ‘Uthman and the Sarekat Islam in 1913,” in *Islamic Legitimacy in a Plural Asia*, ed. Anthony Reid and Michael Gilsenan (London: Routledge, 2007), 98-116 on the *Sarekat Islam*.

29 The word *Jāwī* in Arabic means “Southeast Asian,” in a general sense. Often it means “Malay,” but sometimes it can also mean “Javanese.”

30 I owe this identification to Dr. Moch. Nur Ichwan, Yogyakarta.

31 There is a copy of a part of this translation in Leiden University (851 F 20), namely sura 1 - sura 7:85.

tafsīr, or an explanation (Or. 6495).³² This reply of Bagus Ngarpah shows that he defended his translation with the argument that what he had produced was not a literary rendering of the Qur'an, and therefore had not affected the divine character of the text. He had merely explained the Qur'an's meaning in another language, which was permissible according to the shari'a. This idea constitutes the classical justification for the translation of the Qur'an: as a kind of compromise, a "translation" becomes possible under the guise of an explanation.³³

In his letter to Snouck Sayyid 'Uthman does not mention these events, but relates the following incident. According to him, a man from China had bought a copy of the translation and while reading it, reached the verse "Fight the polytheists all together..." (in Arabic *qātilū al-mushrikīna kāfatan*) (Q. 9:36) and its translation *mesti bunuh orang yang semah tepekong sama sekali*,³⁴ which can be translated as "Kill the people who sacrifice in the [Chinese] temples all together." When he read this he became very angry and threw the book into the street. When a man from Java saw this, they started a quarrel and decided to ask Sayyid 'Uthman to give a legal opinion on the issue. Sayyid 'Uthman wrote a brochure in reaction to the incident, which he handed over together with the letter to Tuan Hazeu who was to see to the dispatch of the items to Snouck in Leiden (x).

The brochure mentioned has been preserved and is entitled *Hukm al-Rahman bi-l-Nahy 'an Tarjamat al-Qur'an* ("The judgement of the Merciful on the prohibition to translate the Qur'an"). The booklet is bilingual (Arabic and Malay) and was published at the end of Rabi' al-Thani 1327 which corresponds to the end of May 1909, i.e. two months before the writing of the aforesaid letter. In the introduction to this work Sayyid 'Uthman says that he wrote the work

32 I have derived the information on this case from an exchange of letters about the Qur'an translation between the advisor for Native Affairs G.A.J. Hazeu (1870-1929) who held this post after Snouck, and the assistant resident of Solo Ch.P.J. Blok, d.d. 30 December 1908 and 23 January 1909 respectively, which are kept in the Leiden University Library, Or. 6495 no. 235.

33 A.L. Tibawi, "Is the Qur'an translatable?," *The Muslim World* 52 (1962): 4-16.

34 It is noteworthy that Sayyid 'Uthman here translates the verse into Malay, and does not give the Javanese rendering of Bagus Ngarpah. My former student Dr. Munirul Ikhwan has checked the Javanese translation of all twelve occurrences of the Arabic word *mushrikūn* in the parts of the printed translation of Ngarpah which are available in the Leiden University Library, namely chapters 1- 7, verse 85. Notably, he did not find any rendering which deviates from the usual rendering (polytheists and the like). The word *tepekong* means "Chinese temple" and has been derived from the name Tua Pek Kong, the Buddhist deity of money, who has been venerated in Buddhist temples in Southeast Asia until today. In Malay this name has become a *pars pro toto* for the entire temple.

after someone had brought him a copy of a *Jāwī* translation of the Qur’an and had requested him to give his judgement about it. In the same letter we have seen in more lively terms what the background of this request was, as well as who the translator was and what the book looked like. In the booklet Sayyid ‘Uthman advocates the prohibition of the translation of the Qur’an, based on the traditional arguments. In short, he argues that the Arabic language cannot be rendered adequately into another language because this leads to corruption (*tahrīf*) and transformation (*tabdīl*)³⁵ of the Holy Book. Moreover, the style of the Qur’an (*balāgha*) cannot be imitated by a translation into a non-Arabic language. In conclusion Sayyid ‘Uthman states that:

it is absolutely not permitted to translate the Qur’an, for what has been translated is not the Qur’an, but it is a corruption and transformation of the Qur’an, as well as an insult. A translation should not be considered to be an Islamic book, but as something which causes Muslims to fall into religious sins.

We should note that Sayyid ‘Uthman also briefly goes into the concept of *tafsīr*, which, as we saw, was adduced to justify the Javanese translation. According to him *tafsīr* means “the explanation of words at their face value,” and this is only permissible for a person who masters fifteen branches of the Arabic sciences. If this applies to *tafsīr*, it applies even more to *tarjama*, which is basically the transformation (*tabdīl*) and alteration (*taghyīr*) of words. In a final remark he calls the translator of the Qur’an which had been brought to him a rebellious sinner who should repent by destroying his translation.³⁶ We thus see that Sayyid ‘Uthman here categorically forbids the translation of the Qur’an. Moreover, he seems to be aware of the concept of *tafsīr* in the discussion about the translation of the Qur’an, but he makes it virtually impossible to use the concept as a compromise to allow a “translation” of the Qur’an.

It is interesting to learn about Snouck’s reaction to these observations. As we saw, the letters of Snouck to Sayyid ‘Uthman are lost, but his reaction becomes clear from a letter of 2 October 1909, sent by Sayyid ‘Uthman to Snouck (XI). In this letter Sayyid ‘Uthman refers to a (now lost) letter on the issue of Qur’an translation from 27 August 1909 which he received from Snouck. In this

35 The Malay rendering gives here for both terms *merusakkan*, “to destroy” the Qur’an. These two terms are theological concepts in polemical and apologetic writings in which Jews and Christians are accused of having falsified the Holy Scriptures, which prevents them from a proper appreciation of Islam.

36 Sayyid ‘Uthman, *Hukm al-Rahman bi-l-Nahy ‘an Tarjamat al-Qur’an* (Batavia: the author, 1909), 5-8.

letter Snouck had affirmed that there are many translations of the Qur'an in non-Arabic languages (*'ajamiyya*) which have not provoked any rejection by anyone.³⁷ Sayyid 'Uthman's reply to this reads as follows:

You have to realise, my dear, that this prohibition is pertinent to the translation of the Qur'an itself for the reasons we have mentioned in our brochure *Hukm al-Rahman*. But a translation of the interpretation of the Qur'an (*tarjamat al-tafsīr al-Qur'ān*) is, as we have said, permissible, and there is no one who rejects that. May the difference between these two not be hidden to you.

Interestingly enough, we see that, in response to Snouck's view, Sayyid 'Uthman writes in a different way about the issue of the interpretation (*tafsīr*) of the Qur'an translation. In his letter he takes a much less rigid view on the issue than in his booklet *Hukm al-Rahman*, and instead of mentioning it reluctantly, he seems, in his letter, to allow it generously as a means of circumventing the difficulties surrounding the translation of the Qur'an.

This raises an interesting question related to the relationship between the two men. Had Snouck actually mitigated the views of the mufti of Batavia here? and was Sayyid 'Uthman prepared to give up his more rigid ideas after having heard Snouck's more liberal opinion? In any case this example of the translation of the Qur'an shows that, at least in his letters to Snouck, Sayyid 'Uthman was ready to accept Snouck's more liberal opinion on a sensitive religious issue. For a proper understanding of this observation we should keep in mind that Sayyid 'Uthman was a highly respected religious scholar who was regarded by many as the most important spokesman on Muslim affairs in the Netherlands East Indies, while Snouck, in his capacity as advisor for native affairs, had been (and at the time still was) deeply involved in, and to a certain extent responsible for, the religious policy of the country. Moreover, during Snouck's stay in the archipelago both men had been working closely together in answering all kinds of religious questions which Snouck received from the archipelago in his capacity as "mufti of Batavia," but which were usually answered by Sayyid 'Uthman.³⁸

37 Snouck retained his interest in the issue of Qur'an translation, since he published an article on it in the Dutch daily the *Telegraaf* on 19 April 1932, entitled "Mag de Quraan vertaald worden?"

38 Michael Laffan, "What Can Collaborators Tell Us about the Idea of an Islamic Indies?," in *Proceedings of the Symposium on Bangsa and Umma: A Comparative Study of People-Grouping Concepts in the Islamic Areas of Southeast Asia*, eds. M. Kawashima, K. Arai and H. Yamamoto (Tokyo: Sophia University, 2007), 116. There is more to be said about this

الحمد لله وحده
 الى جناب المفاضل الاكرم العلامة السيد عثمان بن عبد الله
 بن يحيى زيد قدسه امين .
 تحب اهداء جزيل السلام عليكم ورحمة الاكرام ففي ابرك
 وقت قد وصل كتابكم المؤرخ عم التوبر مع رسالتكم المخصوصة
 بامر شركة الاسلام وقد صار ذلك لنا من اعز اسباب الفرح لان
 كتابكم فيد دليل كافي شافي على دوام المحبة وعدم السيان وكذلك
 حجة عليكم في ادعاءكم زيادة الضعن فان جوابكم لاجل نامنه
 نور بصركم وبصيرتكم وتبيلين لنا من دوام صحتكم البدنية
 والروحانية لانزلتم في احسن حال في المحال وفي المال وقد طالعتنا
 مؤلفاتكم في الشركة وتشكرنا منها والمرجو اذا كان في المستقبل صغتم
 شيئاً صغيراً او كبيراً في اي موضوع كان لاقتنوا المعاهدة القيمة
 الكاشنة بيتنا وترسلوا لنا نسخة بعد الطبع هذا ولا يخفاكم انه في
 الايام القريبة قصدنا سفرنا الى بلاد امريكا فيكون حدة السفر
 ذهاباً واياباً ثلاثة اشهر وستغير من هذه السياحة زيادة معرفة
 بعجائب المخلوقات ان شاء الله وتحصل لنا اضافات من بعض المدارس
 العلمية الموجودة في تلك الافاق . ونرجوكم من حين الى حين
 تسروننا بعلامة الذكر لنا لاسيما بشئ من الاخبار الحاصلة في قريكم
 هذا ما لزم ودمتم نافعين لنا ذاكرين

طالب الدعاء منكم
 عبد الغفار
 لم

ليدن ٨ نوفمبر سنة ١٩١٣

FIGURE 11.1 Letter of Snouck Hurgronje, 8 November 1913, Leiden University Library, Or. 8543. This letter is published with kind permission of Leiden University Libraries.

4 A Letter of Snouck

Snouck used to reply to all letters from Sayyid ‘Uthman which reached him. This is not only apparent from references and reactions to Snouck’s letters made by Sayyid ‘Uthman, an example of which we have just seen, but also from the notes which Snouck made on the original envelopes to indicate when he had answered a particular letter (“*beantw. ...*” = answered, followed by the date).

As we saw, Snouck’s part of the correspondence has not been preserved, apart from a single letter. This was written in Leiden on 8 November 1913 and is preserved in Or. 8543. The reason why it has been preserved may be because it was never sent, but this is mere speculation. In it Snouck thanks Sayyid ‘Uthman for his letter of 4 October (xvi) and the publications on the *Sarekat Islam* which were enclosed. Snouck regards this gift as clear proof of their continuing friendship and asks Sayyid ‘Uthman to send him any writing he might produce in the future, be it great or small. Furthermore, Snouck mentions his imminent travels. I translate this passage here, because it is an interesting example of the religiously coloured style in which Snouck apparently communicated with Sayyid ‘Uthman. It reads as follows:

It may not be concealed to you that we have the plan to travel soon to America for a period of three months, back and forth. May we profit from this trip by increasing our knowledge about the marvels of creation – God willing – and may we benefit from some of the scholarly institutions which exist in these distant regions.

The letter ends with the request to remain in touch and is signed in the conventional way “*ṭālib al-du‘ā’ minkum* (“requesting your prayer”), ‘Abd al-Ghafar,” Snouck’s Muslim name.

Although this is the only example of a letter from Snouck to Sayyid ‘Uthman it constitutes a significant complement to the correspondence since it fits very well into the intimate and cordial tone of Sayyid ‘Uthman’s letters and thus shows that both men were communicating on the same wavelength.

As Snouck had announced, he would indeed go to the United States, and when he was staying with professor Richard Gottheil at Columbia University he received a letter from ‘Alwi, the son of Sayyid ‘Uthman, dated 5 February

matter in Solo, but here I have limited myself to what the issue reveals about the relationship between Sayyid ‘Uthman and Snouck. More details can be found in my biography of Sayyid ‘Uthman.

1914, in which ‘Alwi reported to Snouck (“Our brother in God, ‘Abd al-Ghaffar”) that his father had died in the night of Monday 21 Safar, corresponding to 19 January 1914, after an illness of two months (Or. 8952 A 62).³⁹

5 Conclusion

Throughout his entire career Snouck Hurgronje appears to have been a great networker. In the present chapter I have analysed his relationship with Sayyid ‘Uthman from Batavia as reflected in his letters to Snouck, sixteen of which have been preserved.

Snouck Hurgronje and Sayyid ‘Uthman were already in touch through correspondence before they met. While Snouck initially seems to have been interested in the *sayyid* for the help he might give him in his research into Hadrami linguistics and epigraphy, Sayyid ‘Uthman approached Snouck in order to obtain an advisory position within the colonial administration. These initial written contacts generated mutual trust, and through the intervention of Snouck, they eventually led to the appointment of Sayyid ‘Uthman as Honorary Advisor for Arab Affairs.

From the period in which Snouck, in his capacity as director of the Office of Native Affairs, was acting as Sayyid ‘Uthman’s supervisor, the number of letters is unfortunately limited to three. From this scarce evidence, it appears that the relationship between Snouck and Sayyid ‘Uthman was mainly of a professional nature, but that it was very good. The most striking feature of the correspondence in this period is that Snouck was addressed with his Muslim name ‘Abd al-Ghaffar.

There are ten letters available from the period after Snouck had returned to the Netherlands permanently, which indicates that their relationship during Snouck’s stay in the Indies must have been very good. In these letters both men not only exchange useful information, but also discussed more personal matters. The exchange about the translation of the Qur’an shows that Sayyid ‘Uthman was ready to take a less rigid stance in religious matters on Snouck’s advice. In view of the role both men played in the religious policy in the Netherlands East Indies, this is an interesting observation and makes one wonder how their working relationship had been during Snouck’s tenure of the directorate of the Office of Native Affairs.

39 The postal stamp shows that the letter was forwarded from Leiden to professor Gottheil at Columbia University on 1 March 1914. On the envelope Snouck indicated in his handwriting that he answered the letter on 16 March 1913.

In the introduction to this essay I said that Snouck Hurgronje was able to engage with indigenous informants in a very effective manner. Judging from the letters of Sayyid ‘Uthman dealt with here, this ability was based on a number of features which were important in conjunction with the financial reward which the informants received. First of all, Snouck was seen as a Muslim; secondly, people were aware of his reputation and he was highly respected for his knowledge of Islam and, I imagine, of other fields, and for his language skills; and finally, he was careful to develop a good personal relationship with his informants. As a result of these features, Snouck was able to gain the complete confidence of his informants which enabled him to obtain the information he was looking for.

Appendix

Overview of the letters of Sayyid ‘Uthman to C. Snouck Hurgronje in Leiden University Library (if not otherwise indicated they are kept under numbers Or. 8952 A 1023 and Or. 8952 A 1024).

Letters before they met

- I. 30 August 1886
- II. 4 January 1887 (Or. 18.097 S 32)
- III. 8 July 1888

Letters during Snouck’s stay in the Indies

- IV. 22 March 1901
- V. 14 May 1903 (Or. 18.097 S 16)
- VI. 1 February 1906 (in Or. 7098, Collection of Qaṣa’id by poets of the Hadramaut, and several other texts)

Letters to Snouck in the Netherlands

- VII. 1 December 1906
- VIII. 6 March 1908
- IX. 31 December 1908
- X. 25 July 1909
- XI. 2 October 1909
- XII. 4 May 1910
- XIII. 8 November 1910
- XIV. 5 November 1911
- XV. 4 October 1912
- XVI. 4 October 1913 (wrongly dated as 1912)

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