IMPORT AND ABSORPTION

Some aspects of the Arabic manuscript literature in South-East Asia

presented by Prof. Jan Just Witkam
(University of Leiden, The Netherlands)

4th International Conference ‘Translated Manuscripts’, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria, 29 May – 1 June 2007
The spread of Islam and the spread of Arabic

The spread of Islam went far beyond what would become the linguistic boundaries of Arabic.

This means that in course of time many new muslims had, and still have, a problem in understanding Islamic texts. Translation was one of the solutions. Another obvious solution was to learn Arabic as a second, scholarly language.

This first happened in the Persian realm. As a result of the conquests, the national language had in its written form become obsolete, but it survived in spoken form.

When in the 4/10th century nationalist tendencies became apparent, the Persian language regained its position as a literary language.
Colophon in a MS of the *Kitab al-Hasha’ish*, the work on *Materia medica* by Dioscurdides. This MS dated Samarqand, Ramadan 475 (1082).

Under the colophon is a note by the Persian translator, Muhammad b. ‘Alî al-Râmî, telling that he had used this MS for his Persian translation, ‘because in Arabic it is not so popular anymore, but in Persian it is’. Dated 18 Safar 510 (1116).

Source: MS Leiden, Or. 289, f. 228a
Surat al-Fatiha in an illuminated Qur’an with Turkish interlinear translation.

It is a word by word translation, with occasional commentary, all in old Anatolian Turkish.

In this way the reciter of the Arabic text would know the precise meaning, even if his knowledge of Arabic was imperfect.

Manuscript dated Gallipoli, 5 Ragab 926 (1520), copied by Mehmed b. Sarukhân.

Source: MS Leiden, Or. 504, f. 1b

Arabic poetry, with anonymous commentary in Persian.

Manuscript copied in the first half of the 17th century.

Source: MS Leiden, Or. 525, f. 288b, detail

For this text, which played a role of importance in a Shi’ite environment, a commentary was written in Persian, a language which in Shi’ite circles was better known than Arabic.
Islam was a relative latecomer in South-East Asia. Only slightly before the advent of the Portuguese (after 1498) it had spread and become a widely accepted religion.

Before that time Islam had entered the archipelago from several directions, from the West through Gujerat and South India, and possibly also from the North, from China. Small Islamic states could at first only exist in the margin of larger, regional non-Muslim. Only much later the Hadramaut became the main source of Arab immigration to South-East Asia.

Ibn Battûta (14th century) mentioned already Islamic rulers in the North of Sumatra.

Islam’s spread in the regio was a mostly peaceful one, by trade channels and by the work of the nine legendary saints.

Islam was a relatively simple religion, which left room for the survival of mystical and magical customs of earlier date.
Islam in action in a multicultural South-East Asian environment: An offering to appease the demons is carried out by a Muslim for two Chinese. A Muslim pangulu (teacher/cleric) recites the Koran for a group of followers. Bali, c. 1890. Source: MS Leiden, Or. 3390-256 A.
Islam brought with it its impressive manuscript literature to South-East Asia. The introduction of paper into the region took place through Islamic scholarship.

In the pre-modern Islamic literatures of Indonesia paper has become the common writing material, although other writing materials are still well-known (animal skin, treebark, palmleaf) and occasionally used.

Islam brought with it an elaborate literature, mostly in the Arabic language, in which many subjects were treated.

Basic texts in Arabic on Islamic law (ibâdât) and the instrumental sciences (âlât), such as grammar and phonology of the Qur’ân, were among the early imports of the new religion. Texts on mysticism came slightly later.
Islam in South-East Asia 3

In course of time Arabic Islamic sciences were absorbed and expanded.

The Arabic texts were often cast in a bi-lingual shape, with interlinear explanations and translations into the vernacular languages of the region. This was usually done in an educational context.

The proliferation of translations and of independently created texts shows the interest of South-East Asian muslims in making a religious literature of their own, both in Arabic and in regional languages.

As in other Islamic regions printing replaced writing in the course of the 19th century, but traditional Islamic education till today has retained characteristics of the manuscript era.
al-Gawâhir al-Khamsa
a mystical text on gestures and sounds during dhikr by Muhammad b. Khatir al-Din al-Ghawth al-Hindi (d. 970/1562).

Arabic text with Javanese interlinear translation. Part of a collective volume. Javanese in specific Islamic text is often written with the Arabic script.

Written on treebark paper, heavily affected by insects. Dated: first half 19th cent.

Source: MS Leiden Or. 5665, f. 111b
‘Aqidat al-‘Awâmm, a very popular elementary religious text by Ahmad al-Marzûqî (c. 1281/1864). Manuscript late 19th-century.

With interlinear translation in Buginese, a language from South Celebes, written in the Buginese script, with the exception of a few words in Arabic script.

The copyist has solved the problem of the conflicting writing directions in the translation by writing the Arabic upside-down in relation to the Buginese script.

Source: MS Leiden NBG Boeg 145, p. 56.
The beginning only of an anonymous Urgûza on al-Asmâ’ al-Husnâ.

Arabic text with Malay interlinear translation. Part of a collective volume. Malay in specific Islamic text was usually written in Arabic script. Nowadays Latin script is almost exclusively in use.

Made for better understanding the Arabic text, in an educational environment

Written on European paper, mid-19th cent.

Source: MS Leiden Or. 5741, f. 247b
Details (lines 3 and 5) from the same page of the *Urgûza* on *al-Asmâ’ al-Husnâ*.

The Arabic words *tanazzahu* and *quddûsu* are both translated with the Malay word *suci*, holy.

The subtleties of meaning are lost in such a translation, which serves only to give an approximate idea of the semantic range of the Arabic text. The interlinear translation is not a composition of its own, like *matn* and *sharh*.

Source: MS Leiden Or. 5741, f. 247b, details
Examples of book art: the basmala

1. In an Arabic manuscript from Sumatra, *Anis al-Muttaqin*, ascribed to the 18th century Sumatran author Abdussamad al-Palimbani.
   Source: MS Leiden Or. 7030, pp. 218, 243, details

2. In *Asrâr as-salât*, and other fragments in Arabic, with interlinear Malay translation. Arabic orthography is often faulty.
   Source: MS Leiden Or. 7355, p. 59, detail
Islam in South-East Asia 4

Further remarks:

- Best known names of ‘foreign’, imported, authors: Ibn al-Arabi, al-Qushashi, al-Kurani, al-Gazuli

- Transfer points of knowledge: Mecca, Cairo

- Use of the Arabic alphabet, often orthographically incorrect

- Identification of indigenous authors often problematic. Many texts are anonymous.

- Bilingual texts usually stem from the school environment (mosques, pesantren), 19th century

- Main repositories of these materials are in: Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Leiden, London, Berlin, Paris
Concluding remarks:

- There exists an autonomous Arabic literature in South-East Asia which is virtually unknown outside the region, and of which there is hardly any bibliographical control.

- Seamless continuation into the printed literature of the late-19th and early 20th-century literature, where developments can be seen to secular subjects: novels, newspapers, mainly for the Hadhrami diaspora.

- This has now come to an end since many 3rd or 4th generation Hadârim have now lost their ability to speak and write Arabic.

- The Islamic revival in Indonesia in the past twenty years has resulted in a massive increase of the knowledge of Arabic among Indonesians (through Islamic boarding schools). The books which they read all come from the Middle East.