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An Arabic manuscript on the life and career of Ahmad Muhammad Sûrkatî and his Irshâdî disciples in Java

Shortly before the death of Ahmad Muhammad Sûrkatî (or al-Sûrkatî; al-Sûrkatî) in 1943, his Irshâdî students had formed a committee to write the history of the Irshâd Islamic Movement and the contribution of al-Sûrkatî to the Islamic reforms that took place in twentieth-century Indonesia. The efforts of this committee resulted in the drafting of a 260-page manuscript, entitled: 'A History of the Irshâdîs and their shaykh, Ahmad Muhammad al-Sûrkatî.' The original copy of this manuscript was compiled and written by Muhammad Abû al-Anwâr in 1943, and kept unpublished in the possession of 'Abd al-Qâdir 'Abd al-Karîm al-Tâmîmî in Surabaya, Indonesia. In February 1998 the present writer obtained a Xerox copy of the manuscript from the private collection of Prof. R.S. O'Fahey, who had in turn received it from Dr U. Freitag.

The manuscript is a collection of various articles and fatwas that deal with: a. the life and career of Ahmad Muhammad Sûrkatî and his attitude towards the reform of the Arab-Muslim community in the Netherlands East Indies; b. the intellectual, religious, and political disputes that emerged between al-Sûrkatî as a preacher of a modernist movement and the 'Alawî sayyîds as the traditional elite of Hadrami society in Java as in Hadramaut; and c. the establishment and growth of the Irshâd Islamic Movement in Batavia (Jakarta) and other Indonesian cities.

The purpose of the present article is to provide an analytical survey of the

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1 I thank Prof. R.S. O'Fahey, Dr U. Freitag and K. Vikas for their valuable comments that have helped me to improve this article.

2 The title of the manuscript, as well as other biographical details, are written in the right margin of the first page as follows: Ta'rîkh al-Irshâd wa-shaykh al-Irshâdîyyîn al-'Âlimu al-shaykh Ahmad Muhammad al-Sûrkatî al-Ansâri. Katabahu wa-dawwâna wâsala al-asârî wa-sharh abîhî la'yhis bi-wâdis al-qubara, al-shaykh Muhammad Abû al-Anwâr al-Sayyid al-Hasanî al-Jâ'far al-Ansâri. Katabahu bi-hadrat al-shaykh wa-sin min tâlîfî fi iswâlî 'âhî al-Yâhîn 1943. In the present article I refer to this manuscript as Ta'rîkh al-Irshâd.
contents of the manuscript, and investigate how the Irihâdî's view their own socio-political history and present it to the outside world. This approach allows the manuscript to be placed in the wider scope of the existing literature written about the modernist Muslim movement in Indonesia (1900-1943).

The early life and career of al-Sûrkanî

The early life and career of Ahmad Muhammad Sûrkanî has been studied and documented by a number of scholars like Salâh al-Bakrî and Delair Noer, who based their accounts on personal observations, and interviews with Sûrkanî's family and his collaborators in Indonesia. Al-Bakrî claims that Sûrkanî was born at Edfu in Upper Egypt in 1292/1875-6, (al-Bakrî 1956:255) while Noer says in 'Dunggula (Sudan)' in 1872' (Noer 1973:63). This uncertainty about al-Sûrkanî's date and place of birth has been settled by Sâtti Muhammad al-Sûrkanî, who wrote a chapter in 'A history of the Irihâdîs' and their shaykhî on the early life and career of his brother in the Sudan and the Hejaz (Ta'rikh al-Irihâd: 9-13). He states that his brother Ahmad was born on the Island of Arqû near Dongola in 1292/1875-6, of two parents who traced their origins back to Jâbir ibn 'Abd Allâh ibn 'Amr al-Ansârî (Ta'rikh al-Irihâd: 9-10). His closest forefather was Shaykh Sâtti Hamad, whose tomb lies in the middle of Arqû Island, where Sâtti's descendants drew their fame from the role which they played as agents for the transmission and propagation of the Islamic faith, the sharia, and Muslim culture.3

Sâtti asserts that the first bearer of the nickname, Sûrkanî, was his great-great-great grandfather, Muhammad Sûrkanî, who was given this nickname because after he completed his study in Egypt (Cairo) he returned home with many books. In the Dongolawi-Nubian language, the nickname Sûrkanî means 'many books' (sîrîr, book; kîtrî, many). It was later also conferred upon the father of Ahmad Sûrkanî, after he completed his study at al-Azhar University in Cairo, and returned to his home country to teach Islamic Law and the Qur'an (Ta'rikh al-Irihâd: 10).

As Sâtti mentions, the first teacher of the child Ahmad was his father, with whom he began the memorization of the Qur'an. He then joined several Qur'anic schools in the district and graduated as a professional reciter of the Qur'ân. After his father's death, the plan of the family was that Ahmad should go to al-Azhar University to complete his studies, and return home to continue the message of his father and maintain the religious heritage of the family. But the closing of the northern Sudanese borders with Egypt by the Mahdîs regime (1885-1898) made such a proposed trip to Cairo very difficult (Ta'rikh al-Irihâd: 12).

With al-Azhar out of the question, the Hejaz beckoned to Ahmad Sûrkanî as another alternative, where he could continue his education. He found his way there via Sawâkîn on the Red Sea to the Holy Cities in the Arabian Peninsula (Medina and Mecca), where he spent about fifteen years (1896-1911) as a student and teacher. After four and a half years in Medina, he went to Mecca, where he completed his studies and obtained the international certificate that used to be given to outstanding religious teachers by the scholars of Mecca. Around the same period (1908), the same degree was awarded to his Sudanese fellow countryman, 'Abd Allâh Hamdu (Ta'rikh al-Irihâd: 12). In 1911 Sâtti paid a two-month visit to his brother, Ahmad, in Mecca. He found him already established as the first Sudanese teacher in the Holy City, and chairman of al-Falâh Commercial and Co-operative Company. Less than two months after his return to the Sudan, Sâtti heard that al-Sûrkanî and two of his Meccan companions, Muhammad 'Abd al-Hamîd and Muhammad al-Taayîbî, had been offered teaching positions at the schools of the Jâmi 'iyyat Khayrî in Java (Ta'rikh al-Irihâd: 13).

In his biographical chapter, Sâtti also gives a list of ten teachers with whom his brother Ahmad studied in Medina and Mecca (Ta'rikh al-Irihâd: 12-3). One of them was Ahmad al-Jâbi 'Ali al-Majdîh religious family in the Sudan. After the capture of Tokar in the eastern Sudan by the Anglo-Egyptian colonial forces in 1891, al-Majdîh seems to have made his way to the Hejaz, where he studied and taught in Medina between 1891-99. From Medina he moved to Cairo and finally returned to the Sudan, where he established himself as a teacher and well-respected scholar until his death in 1943.4

His second teacher in Medina was Falîh ibn Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allâh al-Zâhîrî, who studied with a number of the leading scholars of the Hejaz and Egypt, and taught in the Holy City (Mecca), Istanbul, and Cairo. Towards the end of his life he was nominated mufti of the Shâfi 'i school in Medina. Besides his various works on Islamic jurisprudence, al-Zâhîrî was known as a leading scholar on Hadîth. He died in Medina in October 1910 ('Abd al-Jâbîr 1385/1965-6:130-4).

The third teacher was 'Umar ibn Hamdân al-Maghribî (1875-1949) of Tunisia, who studied with scholars in the Haramayn, Tunis, Fez, Damascus

3 'Abd al-Rahîm (1371/1952:286-6, 305:12) gives the same account on the date and place of birth of Ahmad Muhammad Sûrkanî, and to a great extent agrees with Sâtti's account about his early life and career in the Sudan and the Hejaz. O'Fahey and Abu Salim (1993) has been founded on 'Abd al-Rahîm's account. In this publication they tried to locate al-Sûrkanî 'within specific Sudanese and Hejazi contexts'.


His last two teachers in Medina were al-Shaykh al-Khayārī of Morocco and Ahmad al-Baznājī. We know little about the former, except that he was a North African scholar and a professional reciter of the Qur’an in Medina (O’Fahey and Abu Salim 1997:69). The latter was Ahmad ibn Isam ‘l ibn Zayn al-‘Abidin al-Baznājī, who was born in Medina and studied there with distinguished scholars. After he finished his education, he was appointed first as a teacher and then a mufti of the Shafi’i school in Medina. Before the outbreak of the First World War he was elected a member of the Ottoman Council of Representatives in Istanbul. During the war he moved to Damascus, where he spent the rest of his life until his death in 1919 (al-Zirikli 1952: 99).

In Mecca, Sattī mentions that his brother Ahmad had many teachers. The four of them singled out were As’ad Ahmad al-Dahrānī and his brother ‘Abd al-Rahmān, Muhammad Yūsuf al-Khayā’ī and Shu ‘ayb ibn Mūsā of Morocco. The present writer has failed to gather further information on their careers in the standard Middle East biographical dictionaries. But from what has been written by Deliar Noer (1973:63 note 90), one can say that al-Khayā’ī was a Meccan scholar, disfavored by the ruling authority in Istanbul. To avoid difficulties with the Istanbul regime, he went to Bukhara, where he obtained a Russian passport in order to gain protection from the Ottoman authorities. In 1914 he went to Malaya and became a mufti in Kedah. From there he established regular contacts with East Sumatra and remained active in transmitting his religious message to the public until his death in Penang (Malaysia) in 1915.

From this educational background Ahmad al-Sūrkhī can be classified as a well-established scholar in Islamic jurisprudence, the Qur’an and its sciences, and a competent authority on Hadith and the Arabic language. The actual foundations of his Islamic knowledge seems to have come primarily from the school of Ibn Taymiyya (1269-1328) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292-1350), who favoured reform along conservative lines. This attitude can be observed in his major writings that deal with ijtihād, taqīd, and visiting of the graves of saints for meditation and intercession (Tarih al-Irshād: 46-66). In dealing with such issues, al-Sūrkhī criticized many Sufi practices arguing that they had falsified the Muslim religion and made it out of keeping with the time. He also denounced ‘the blind imitation’ of the four orthodox schools of law and called for the restoration of ijtihād with a particular emphasis upon the public interest (maslahat mursala) as a compatible legal source of legislation (Tarih al-Irshād: 33-6). In his call for the restoration of ijtihād he agreed with Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905) and Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935), who recognized the Qur’an and Sunna as the basic sources of their ideas and thoughts, and rejected the idea of taqīd. In their eyes, as in those of al-Sūrkhī, the validity of any fatwa, idea, or practice issued by any religious authority after the Prophet’s death should in principle be judged on the basis of the Qur’an and Sunna (Kerr 1966:103-52, 187-208; Hourani 1970:130-60, 222-44).

As the ‘Irshādī’s argue, the call by al-Sūrkhī for the restoration of ijtihād and the condemnation of Sufi practices like the visiting of the graves of saints’ tombs for meditation and intercession was criticized by conservative Muslims in Java, who showed their criticism on two major points. The first point was adopted by Muslim scholars who denounced the validity of ijtihād on the grounds that there was no qualified mujtahid who could practice ijtihād. Accordingly, they defended the authority of the four orthodox schools of law and confirmed their obligation to taqīd which had already been denounced by al-Sūrkhī. In response, al-Sūrkhī denounced their argument on the grounds that the founders of the four orthodox schools of law themselves had rejected the validity of taqīd and favoured the maintenance of ijtihād that would be based on the Qur’an and Sunna. He then branded the supporters of this counter-opinion ‘blind imitators’, who led ordinary Muslims astray from the path of the orthodox schools of law and made Islam a religion which was incompatible with the task of fulfilling the changing demands of the Muslim community (Tarih al-Irshād: 46-55).

The second point was supported by the ‘Alawī sayyids who attacked al-Sūrkhī and demeaned him as a mere imitator of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (1703-1787) of the Arabian Peninsula (Tarih al-Irshād: 21, 146-7). They did so, because in many of his works he criticized the cult of their saints and denounced the visitation of tombs for meditation and intercession as a non-Islamic practice or an innovation (bi‘a) that would water down the Oneness of God. In his writings al-Sūrkhī only acknowledged the visitation of Muslim graves in general for the remembrance of the Hereafter and emphasized that such a visit should not be accompanied by any kind of blameworthy practices like loud weeping or believing that the saint thus visited could mediate or intercede between his visitor and God (Tarih al-Irshād: 58-66). In the end this anti-Sufi attitude brought him in direct confrontation with his ‘Alawī employers, who finally forced him to resign from the administration of the Khayr schools in 1914. The development and consequences of this conflict will be discussed in detail in the subsequent sections.

Al-Sūrkhī and Jam ‘Iyyāt Khayr (welfare organization)

There is a general consensus among contemporary scholars that the first signs of the Hadram awakening in the Netherlands East Indies appeared in
1901, when a group of wealthy ‘Alawī traders and property owners formed the Jam’iyat Khayr in Batavia (Noer 1973:38; Mobini-Kesheh 1997:232-3; Haikal 1986:6). But for the Irshādīs, the foundation of the Jam’iyat Khayr was the second phase in the process of the development of the Hadrami awakening in the Dutch colony. They trace the roots of this awakening to Singapore, where a group of progressive ‘Alawī sayyids launched a campaign against their traditionalist peers, who used to present themselves as the only possessors of supernatural power on the earth. In accordance with this status, ordinary Muslims should kiss their hands in greeting, make pilgrimages to their graves for baraka, and their daughters should not be married to non-‘Alawīs. As the Irshādīs’ mention, the figureheads of this progressive group were Hasan ibn Shihāb, Abū Bakr ibn Shihāb, and Muḥammad ibn ‘Aqīl ibn Yahyā who succeeded in recruiting a large number of supporters among the Hadramis in Java as well as in Singapore (Ta’rīkh al-Irshād, 1943, 7). In Java a sub-group, headed by ‘Abd Allāh ibn Abī Bakr al-Habshī, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Shihāb, and Ahmad ibn ‘Abdallāh al-SAqqāf also established contact with Middle Eastern scholars like Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Muḥammad Rashīd Ridā and presented itself as a modernist movement for the reform of the Hadrami community according to the fundamental principles of the Qur’ān and Sunna. To translate this attitude into practice, in 1901 this group founded the Khayr Organization in Batavia for the support of poor people and the provision of a modern-style education for the Arab youth in Java (Ta’rīkh al-Irshād: 8). In 1905 the organization was recognized by the government as a legal body with a formal constitution, a governing executive committee, and registered members. Around the same time Muḥammad ibn ‘All ibn Shihāb was elected its first chairman and a few years later the Khayr organization opened its first modern-style primary school in Pekojan in Batavia (Ta’rīkh al-Irshād: 8).

The Irshādīs’ mention that in 1911 the Khayr administration sent ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Ma‘bud to the Hejaz to select newly qualified teachers for its elementary school in Java. In the Hejaz, ‘Abd al-Ma‘bud met the two Meccan scholars Muḥammad Yūsuf al-Khayyāt and Hasan ibn Muḥammad al-Habshī, who recommended the appointment of Ahmad Muḥammad Sūrkatī, Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Hamīd, and Muḥammad al-Tayyīb of Morocco as qualified teachers to work in the Khayr schools. After their arrival in Java, al-Sūrkatī was appointed headmaster of the original Khayr school in Pekojan, and his two companions Muḥammad al-Tayyīb and Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Hamīd, were detailed for the administration of schools in Krukut and Bogor respectively (Ta’rīkh al-Irshād: 96-7, 104).

The Irshādīs’ claim that as a result of the success of these schools the Khayr administration authorized al-Sūrkatī to nominate more qualified teachers from abroad for its newly established schools. This time the Hejaz was not the place where they were sought, but the Sudan. The group of Sudanese who joined al-Sūrkatī in 1913 at his invitation included a. Ahmad al-Qālib; b. Muḥammad Nār ibn Muḥammad Khayr al-Anṣārī (or Abū al-Anṣārī); c. Sāḥi Muḥammad Sūrkatī (or Abū al-Fadl; al-Sūrkatī’s brother); and d. Ḥasan ʿAbīd al-Anṣārī (Ta’rīkh al-Irshād: 99). All of them, as Noer (1973:60) argues, were well acquainted with the works of Muḥammad ‘Abduh and regarded themselves as his followers. After the arrival of these teachers, al-Sūrkatī introduced a more comprehensive curriculum at the Khayr schools including exegesis of the Qur’ān, Arabic language and linguistics, the science of Hadith, and principles of jurisprudence. These were taught alongside secular subjects like history, geography, arithmetic, and bookkeeping (Ta’rīkh al-Irshād: 112, 141).

He also attempted to champion the idea of equality among the Arab Muslims in Java. As part of his programme, he introduced a poem called ‘The Mothers of Morality’ (Ummahāt al-Akhīlāt) into the school curriculum and asked the students to recite it together when entering or leaving the school. Some of its verses read:

No pride in descent or dress
Nor in the accumulation of silver or gold
But pride should be in knowledge and ethics
And religion is the light of men of understanding (Ta’rīkh al-Irshād: 98-9)

These reforms had consequences for the Irshādīs’ as the introduction of this poem into the school curriculum had aroused the suspicion of the traditionalist ‘Alawī sayyids about al-Sūrkatī’s attitude and led them to realize that if this Sudanese ‘intruder’ remained in office he would create a serious challenge to their favoured position among Muslims in Java. Therefore they used the issue of kafila’s (eligibility in marriage) in order to mobilize the support of the progressive ‘Alawī sayyids who were much impressed by the educational performance of al-Sūrkatī. Thus, on one of his visits to Solo, al-Sūrkatī was asked about the legality of a marriage that would take place between a shari‘i woman and a non-sayyid Muslim. Basing his argument on the Qur’ān and Sunna, he recognized the legality of such a marriage (Ta’rīkh al-Irshād: 98-9). His fatwa was collectively denounced by the ‘Alawī sayyids who favored the counter-fatwa of ʿUmar ʿAlī al-ʿAttās which nullified any form of marriage between a daughter of a sayyid and a non-sayyid husband, and strongly advocated the superiority of the sayyids over the rest of Muslims (Ta’rīkh al-Irshād: 196-8). The outcome of this campaign was that the traditionalist ‘Alawī sayyids succeeded in undermining the support Sūrkatī enjoyed among the progressive sayyids and finally forced him to quit his job at the Khayr school on 6 September 1914 (Ta’rīkh al-Irshād: 99).

According to the Irshādīs’ account, the ‘Alawī sayyids had denied that the
issue of kaf‘a was the main factor behind the resignation of al-Sārkatī. They contended that his resignation was arranged by ‘Umar ibn Yūsuf Manṣūqh and Doctor D.A. Rinkes, a Dutch official of the Office for Native and Arab Affairs. Their main concern in this triple alliance was to create a politico-religious entity in the Hadrami community that would support its own political and personal aspirations. The ‘Alawī sayyids went on to say that they had advised al-Sārkatī several times via the administration of the Khayr Organization to disassociate himself from these two persons (Rinkes and Manṣūqh) but he arrogantly declined their request. Therefore they appointed an educational inspector to supervise his work and report them regularly on his performance. When al-Sārkatī found himself in such a critical position he resigned from office on 6 September 1914. A week later he held a meeting at the house of ‘Umar Manṣūqh, where al-Sārkatī’s supporters among the Hadramis drafted and approved the constitution of the Jam‘ īyyat al-Īslām wa l-İrshād al- ‘Arabiyya (Arab Association for Reform and Guidance). Three months later the İrshād was recognized by the government a legal organization and given government premises where to resume its activities (Tü rkīh al-İrşād: 103-4). From that date al-Irşād arose as a counter-power to the Jami‘īyyat Khayr and became mouth-piece of al-Sārkatī and his İrşādī followers.

The İrşād organization and al-Sārkatī

As the İrşādī’s argue, after al-Sārkatī submitted his resignation to the Khayr administration he moved from Pekojan quarter to Jati, where he established a private school named Madrasat al-İrşād al-İslāmîyya (the Islamic School of Guidance) (Tü rkīh al-İrşād: 105-6). In the establishment of this school he was supported by ‘Umar ibn Yūsuf Manṣūqh, Sālih ‘Ubayd ‘Abdāt and Sa‘īd ibn Sālim Mash‘ābī. As their second step forward al-Sārkatī and his supporters established a socio-political organization that would sponsor the activities of the İrşād school and through which the İrşādī’s could air their views and ideals. The İrşād organization was recognized by the government as a legal body, and the fifth clause of its constitution banned the ‘Alawī sayyids from participating in administration (Tü rkīh al-İrşād: 109-10). The first executive committee of the İrşād was composed of Sālim ibn ‘Awad Bal‘al (chairman), Muhammad ibn ‘Abūd ‘Ubayd (secretary), Sa‘īd ibn Sālim al-Mas‘ābī (treasurer), and Sālih ibn ‘Abdāt (adviser) (Tü rkīh al-İrşād: 111). The result of this step was that the rift between the sayyids and non-sayyids had become very pronounced and its rectification remained a vital problem for the Hadramis at home and in the diaspora.

In a short time the İrşād Organization extended its branches and schools from Batavia to the other principal towns of Java such as Tegal, Pekalongan, Surabaya and Cirebon. The administration of the İrşād schools was placed in the hands of al-Sārkatī and his Sudanese collaborators and students, who followed the same modernist educational curriculum which he adopted at the Khayr schools. The administration of the İrşād in Batavia and its regional branches was founded on a decentralized basis. Each branch was authorized to conduct its own activities with less interference from the centre, but at the same time they were obliged to follow the steps of the centre in matters of general policy that would lead to the betterment of the whole community (Tü rkīh al-İrşād: 119-20).

The İrşādī’s point out that when the ‘Alawī sayyids realized that the existence of the İrşād Organization would undermine their religious and political ambitions, they again raised the issue of kaf‘a so as to corner the İrşādī’s and strengthen their internal front. In October 1915 they raised the question of kaf‘a in the ‘Malay newspaper’ Sulhī Hindī, where they asked al-Sārkatī about his legal opinion on a putative marriage between a sayyid’s daughter and a non-sayyid Muslim. Al-Sārkatī issued a long fatwa founded on the Qur’an and Sunna, given the name of Şerāt al-Jawābī (The Form of the Answer) (Tü rkīh al-İrşād: 116-22). In this fatwa he advocated the equality of Muslims regardless of their descent, race, and language, and denounced the ‘Alawī claim that the eligibility of marriage should be based on an ideology of descent. He anchored his argument on the issue of equality and marriage eligibility on the following Qur’ānic verses:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily, the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (Qur’an 49: 13)

As a first counter-response, the ‘Alawī sayyids contacted and asked the government to ban the circulation of al-Sārkatī’s fatwa on the grounds that it was in contradiction to the Shayī’s school of law which the majority of the Indonesian Muslims followed. When they realized that the government was not interested in being involved in such a religio-political issue the sayyids themselves entered into a public debate with their İrşādī rivals. A series of fatwas was issued and published, defending the noble descent of the sayyids and denouncing the validity of the Sudanese intruder’s fatwa (Tü rkīh al-İrşād: 116). Here the famous fatwa of ‘Abd Allāh ibn Sadaqa al-Dahlān entitled: İrsāl al-Shihāb ‘alā Şerāt al-Jawābī (the Sending of the Flame for Burning the Form of the Answer) should be singled out. In this fatwa al-Dahlān attacked al-Sārkatī personally and branded him a ‘Sudanese liar, ignorant and backward’, and as a ‘resentful intruder’, who would like to raise his fame and prestige in Java at the expense of the noble status of the ‘Alawī sayyids.
As the Irshādī’s argue, al-Sūrkhī himself did not respond to al-Dahlān, but his Sudanese collaborator, Ahmad al-‘Āqīb, wrote a book entitled: Kābinations Fī Ta’īlī Rāsut al-Jawālīr (The Authoritative Argument in Support of the Form of the Answer). In this book he favoured al-Sūrkhī’s fatwa, and refused that of al-Dahlān, whom he branded as a non-qualified and unfair scholar unfit to deal with such a delicate issue.

The issue of kāfī’s does not seem to have been the only trap that the ‘Alawi sayyids had set up for the Irshādī’s. The number of the cases listed in ‘A History of the Irshādī’s and their shaykh’s shows how the conflict between the two parties was bitter and full of intrigues. For example, in 1920 some ‘Alawi sayyids, the Irshādī’s argued, requested the Kathīrī chairman of the Irshād Organization, Sālim ‘Awād Bahw al (1914-20), to change the name of the Irshād to ‘A Kathīrī Organization’. They based their request on the argument that the name of the Irshād had divided the sons of the Hadramaut into two groups, and the British were reluctant to deal with any organization that bore the name. In order to put the ‘Alawi’s ‘proposal’ into effect, Shaykh Sālim invited the members of the Irshād to attend a general meeting that would be held at the headquarters of the Irshād in Batavia on 15 February 1920. The Irshādī’s claim that some leading figures of the Irshād in Batavia discovered the ‘conspiracy’ of the ‘Alawi sayyids and contacted the members of the regional organizations advising them to fight for the existence of the Irshād. On 14 February 1920 the regional delegations arrived in Batavia where they were well received by ‘Umar Ibn Manqīsh and his colleagues. On the same day when Shaykh Sālim realized that he was in no position to carry out his proposal, he issued a newspaper statement postponing the meeting for an indefinite period. But the meeting was held, and Shaykh Sālim was dismissed from the chairmanship of the executive committee and his membership of the organization was terminated. A new executive committee consisting of Ghālib Sa’Id ibn Tuba’ (chairman), Muhammad ‘Ubayd ‘Abdūd (secretary), ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Qadir Harara (treasurer), and Sālim ‘Umar Balfās (adviser) was formed. On 26 May 1920, the fired chairman Shaykh Sālim held a counter-meeting at his house, where he declared the dissolution of the Irshād Organization. But his resolution seems to have been stillborn and the Irshād Organization continued under its new leadership (Ta’īlī Rāsut al-Irsād: 123-4). According to the Irshādī’s account, this situation also generated tension between al-Sūrkhī and some leading figures of the Irshād, who later suspended (if not rejected) his educational reform programme for the Irshād schools (Ta’īlī Rāsut al-Irsād: 141). As a result al-Sūrkhī resigned from the administration of the Irshād schools and froze his activities at the Irshād Organization for more than three years (1920-1924).

The sayyid-shaykh discord and its international dimension

The Irshādī’s mention that when the ‘Alawi sayyids failed to defeat them in Java they turned to the British colonial power in Hadramaut and Sharīf Husayn in the Hejaz. They reported to the British ambassador in Batavia about the activities of the Irshādī’s, insinuating that they were directed against the colonial power of the British and their allies in the Middle East. In their appeal they argued that the founder of the Irshād, Ahmad Muhammad Sūrkhī, was a ‘maternal nephew of the Sudanese Mahdi’ who mobilized the Sudanese against the British and their Egyptian allies there. They went on to say that in Java al-Sūrkhī was playing the same role of his uncle and trying to unite and mobilize the non-sayyid-Hadramis for his own political ends (Ta’īlī Rāsut al-Irsād: 106).

In response, the British colonial administration instructed Kathīrī and Qū ‘aytī sultans in the Hadramaut to order their subjects at home and in the diaspora to dissociate themselves from the Irshād. On 16 June 1919, the Sultan Ghālib ibn ‘Awād al-Qū ‘aytī and his counterpart, ‘Ali ibn Mansūr al-Kathīrī, issued a joint circular instructing the Hadramis to dissociate themselves from ‘the intruders and cultivators of dissension’. By intruders and cultivators of dissension they meant al-Sūrkhī and his Sudanese collaborators. In the circular quoted by the Irshādī’s, they called for the unity of their subjects for the betterment of the Hadrami community at large and that of the ‘Alawi sayyids in particular. They seized the opportunity to warn those who were not inclined to follow their order with punishment like that of ‘those who wage war against God and His Apostle, and strive with might and main for mischief through the land’. In the circular they did not complete the second part of the Qur’ānic verse which states the punishment as ‘execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile from the land. That is their disgrace in this world, and a heavy punishment is theirs in the Hereafter’ (Qur’an 5:36).

As the Irshādī’s mention, shortly after the circular was put into effect, they wrote two appeals: one to the Sultan Ghālib al-Qū ‘aytī and the other to the British ambassador in Batavia (Ta’īlī Rāsut al-Irsād: 130-32). In both they denied the ‘Alawi’s accusation and emphasized their organization had no interest in politics and its main role was charitable and educational. By stating ‘this fact’ they gradually succeeded in normalizing their relations and contacts with the British administration and their Yemeni sultans.

On 19 August 1920, a letter signed by twenty-one ‘Alawi sayyids was sent to Sharīf Husayn in the Hejaz. In this letter the signatories informed him that in Java they had a group of dissenters (khawārij), who directed their activities towards stirring up ‘the hatred of the Prophet’s descendants, spreading intrigues, and awakening dissension’. To suppress the spread of their ‘cor-
rupt beliefs and ideas’, they requested him to ban them from entering the Hejaz and the Holy Cities, and that he appointed an agent from among their own group who would defend the Muslim Faith in Java and be responsible for issuing travel documents to the holy places in Arabian Peninsula. As the Irshādī’s argue, the Sharīf of Mecca seems to have showed little respect to the ‘Alawī’s appeal, particularly not when he published their letter in the newspaper al-Qibla, in the issue of Dhū al-hijja 1338/August 1920. The disclosure of the contents of the letter came as a great shock to the ‘Alawī sayyids and at the same time relieved the Irshādī’s, who were realizing that the Sharīf of Mecca was not interested in being involved in their conflict with the sayyids (Ṭźiṣṣat al-Irshād: 125-7).

The Sharīf may have been uninterested, but the appeal of the ‘Alawī’s opened an avenue for the Irshādī’s by which they could consolidate their future contacts with King ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Sa‘ūd (1876-1953) of Arabia, after the overthrow of the Sharīf of Mecca in 1924. For example, in 1926, as the Irshādī’s mention, a delegate of them was invited by King ‘Abd al-‘Azīz to attend an international conference of Muslims held in Mecca, and three years later al-Sūrkatī himself paid a visit to the Holy Land, where he was officially received by the Sa‘ūdī ruling family and its Wahhābī advisers (Ṭźiṣṣat al-Irshād: 16-9). In this sense the ‘Alawī sayyids lost their support in the Hejaz and the Irshādī’s gained new grounds for support and inspiration in the future.

Hopes of reconciliation and the disappointments of failure

In January 1919, the Irshādī’s argue, Ismā‘il ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Attās, representative of the Arabs in the Indonesian People’s Council (Volksraad), took the initiative and formed a steering committee of twenty members in Batavia, with the purpose of inviting the Arab emigrants in Java to attend a conference that would be held in Batavia on 9 February 1919. The agenda of the conference was spelt out as:

a. to discuss the unification of the Arab emigrants in a political form that would safeguard their rights and defend their interests at the Indonesian People’s Council;

b. to discuss their response to the military law that made their recruitment in the Indonesian military forces obligatory as it was for other citizens;

c. to solve the practical problems that lowered their participation in the development process of Indonesian society;

d. to establish a Malay newspaper that would function as a mouthpiece of the Arab emigrants and at the same time enable them to communicate with other ethnic communities in the country (Ṭźiṣṣat al-Irshād: 119-20).

This conference agenda reflects the political and personal aspirations of al-‘Attās and his supporters among the Hadramis who had been born in the Netherlands East Indies. It also shows how this group was motivated by the idea of establishing an ethno-political party that would secure their representation in the Indonesian People’s Council and other state governing institutions. As the Irshādī’s argue, when the ‘Alawī sayyids realized that al-‘Attās’s proposal did not tie in with their own aspirations, they made their participation in the conference conditional on the dismissal of the foreign intruder’, Ahmad al-Sūrkatī, as a member of the steering committee. But on the other hand, the Irshādī’s advocated his membership of the steering committee. The outcome of this conflict over the membership of al-Sūrkatī was that the proposed conference was cancelled and the whole proposal of al-‘Attās ‘died before being able to stand on its own feet’.

The failure of al-‘Attās’s initiative does not seem to have driven the neutral mediators to despair. From 1921 to 1933, according to Irshādī’s accounts, more than four major reconciliation proposals were presented respectively by Husayn ʿAbdīn of Singapore in 1921, ʿAbd al-Rahmān ibn ʿUbayd al-Saqqāf in 1928, Muhammad ʿAbd Allāh al-Ammūlī in 1929, and King ʿAbd al-‘Azīz ibn Sa‘ūd via Ibrāhīm al-Saqqāf in 1933, but all of them ended in total failure (Ṭźiṣṣat al-Irshād: 120-3).

Conclusion

In this survey I have tried to emphasise that ‘A history of the Irshādī’s and their Shaykh Ahmad Muhammad al-Sūrkatī’ is one of the most significant primary sources on the history of the Irshād Islamic Movement in Indonesia (1914-1943). The manuscript obtains its significance from the point that it gives an authoritative account on the early life and career of Ahmad Muhammad Sūrkatī in the Sudan, the Hejaz, and then in Java, where he established his career as the founder of the Irshād Islamic movement. The authority of this account stems from the point that it was written by Sāltī Muhammad Sūrkatī who shared his childhood with his brother, Ahmad, in the Sudan, visited him in the Hejaz, and finally shared the rest of his life with him in Java. Moreover, the account was written in the presence of and approved by Ahmad Muhammad Sūrkatī himself.

Secondly, a large part of the manuscript is devoted to the major fatwas issued by Ahmad Muhammad al-Sūrkatī in Java. Through a close reading of
these factors one can understand from where al-Sūrkatī drew the source of his knowledge, to what school of thought he belonged, and what kind of contribution he made to the Muslim modernist movements in the Netherlands East Indies at large and the Irshād Islamic Movement in Java in particular.

Thirdly, the manuscript includes a number of documents that deal with the origins of the shaykh-sayyid discord and trace its development and consequences in a systematic way prior to 1943. They show how the Irshād's present the role which they played in the Hadrami awakening and how they tried to defend their position against intriguers of their 'Alawī sayyid rivals. The documents also examine the role of the international forces (Britain, Holland, the Hejaz, and the Hadramaut) that were involved in the settlement of the shaykh-sayyid discord. They also investigate to what extent these forces stimulated the conflict between the two sides by favouring one group at the expense of the other.6


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TRANSCENDING BORDERS
Arabs, politics, trade and Islam in Southeast Asia

Edited by
HUUB DE JONGE and NICO KAPTEIN

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In Berlage’s words: ‘The main street leads at one end to a mosque, whose minaret has a most charming silhouette. A walk through the labyrinth of streets, as in any ancient quarter, offers picturesque views at every turn, and a stroll along the river, lined with colourful and quaintly shaped praus, is a delight.’
Inhoud

Preface vii

Huib de Jonge and Nico Kaptein 1
The Arab presence in Southeast Asia
Some introductory remarks

Enseng Ho
Before parochialization
Diasporic Arabs cast in creole waters

Mohammad Redzuan Othman
Conflicting political loyalties of the Arabs in Malaya before World War II 37

C. van Dijk
Colonial fears, 1890-1918
Pan-Islamism and the Germano-Indian plot

William R. Roff
Murder as an aid to social history
The Arabs in Singapore in the early twentieth century

Ulrike Freitag
Arab merchants in Singapore
Attempt of a collective biography

William Gervase Clarence-Smith
Horse trading
The economic role of Arabs in the Lesser Sunda Islands, c. 1800 to c. 1940

Sumit K. Mandal
Forging a modern Arab identity in Java in the early twentieth century 163

Nico Kaptein
The conflicts about the income of an Arab shrine
The Perkara Luar Batang in Batavia

Ahmed Ibrahim Abu Shouk
An Arabic manuscript on the life and career of Ahmad Muhammad Sūrkatī and his Iṣhāḍī disciples in Java 203
Preface

The present book originates from the twelfth International Workshop on South-East Asian Studies which was organized by the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV) in Leiden, in conjunction with the International Institute of Asian Studies (IIAS) in the same city. The theme of this workshop was 'The Arabs in Southeast Asia (1870-1990)' and was held in Leiden from 8-12 December 1997. During the course of this workshop fourteen papers were presented, of which nine have been brushed up and are published here. In addition to these nine, in our capacity as editors we invited Ahmed Ibrahim Abu Shouk to contribute, which he kindly did. Therefore, all in all this book contains ten contributions.

It is our pleasure to thank here our friend and colleague Kees van Dijk who took the initiative in holding the conference and who took care of the major part of the organization. Furthermore, we would like to express our gratitude to the Leiden University Fund (LUF), the International Institute of Asian Studies (IIAS), and the KITLV for financial support in organizing the workshop, as well as the Institute for Cultural and Social Anthropology (ICSA) of Nijmegen University for a grant which enabled us to have the English of the manuscript improved where this appeared necessary. Moreover, we would like to thank the KITLV for having opened its doors to us in December in 1997 to hold the workshop, and for having included the present book on its publisher’s list. Finally, we would like to express our thanks to Henk Maier for commenting upon one of the papers in the book, René van der Haar and Jantien Delwel for their technical assistance during the finalization of the typescript, and Rosemary Robson McKillop for the accurate way in which she polished the English of some parts of the typescript.

Anyone who has ever written on Arabs in a non-Arab environment knows how difficult it is to spell and transliterate Arabic names and Arabic terminology: should the original Arabic spelling be followed?; and, if the answer is in the affirmative, what system of transliteration should be used? Or should the native spelling of these Arabic terms and names be employed instead?; and what should we do if the native spelling is not consistent?; and,
Preface

if the native language uses the Arabic script, as for instance does Malay, once again what system of transliteration should be utilized? If we take, for instance, a frequently occurring family name, we might come across `al-Saqqaf', 'Alisagoff', 'Assegof', and even other forms, for one and the same name.

In the present book we have chosen to use a simplified transliteration system of Arabic, which does show the long vowels (ā, ī, ū), but which does not indicate emphatic letters. For Arabists this system will speak for itself, while we will not annoy non-Arabists with all details on this point. Like any system followed, this has an arbitrary element in it, and to some readers the method we have used might look hypercorrect or awkward at times. However, by utilizing this system we were able to reach the greatest degree of consistency throughout the entire book. As a matter of course, in quotations we have retained the original spelling used in the sources.

HUUB DE JONGE AND NICO KAPTEIN

The Arab presence in Southeast Asia
Some introductory remarks

This study deals with Arab immigrants to Southeast Asia and their descendants. In comparison with immigrants from other parts of the world, such as the Chinese, Indians, and Europeans, they have not received much attention. Numerically the Arabs, as they are called up till now, have always paled into insignificance besides other foreign minorities, in particular in the colonial period. Even today their presence is hardly noticed. Yet, they have exercised a great influence on economic, political, social, and religious developments in the region for centuries.

Even before the advent of Islam there were sporadic contacts between the Arab world and Southeast Asia (Morley 1949:143; Tibbetts 1979). With the spread of Islam these trade contacts increased in magnitude and frequency. In the eleventh century traders of Arab origin called at several islands in the Indonesian Archipelago (Van Leur 1967:111). Marco Polo mentions Islamic converts among the local population on the northern tip of Sumatra, ascribing this to the regular visits by Saracens (Latham 1958:251-2). In 1347 the well-known Moroccan traveller Ibn Batutta met 'a number of compatriots and co-religionists' during a visit to the same island (Morley 1949:154). In the centuries which followed the number of Arabs must have gradually increased both in Sumatra, in other islands, and along the coasts of mainland Southeast Asia. In the fifteenth century small groups of Arabs were settled in most of the important coastal places of the area (Van der Kroef 1955:16). Just as other foreign minorities, they were primarily engaged in trade and alongside their commercial activities they played an important role in the spreading of Islam. Due to their economic success and religious knowledge, various Arabs even succeeded in marrying scions of local dynasties. Both in Java in the fifteenth century and Riau in the eighteenth century immigrants of Arab descent were able to reach leading positions through matrimonial strategies (De Graaf and Pigaud 1974; Engseng Ho in this volume). In other areas, such as Pontianak, they achieved such powerful positions almost entirely by virtue of their own endeavours. Trade and Islam constituted important sources of power, while political influence, in its turn, exercised positive