A. T. Gallop

FROM CAUCASIA TO SOUTHEAST ASIA: DĀĞIJISTĀNī QUR’ĀNS AND THE ISLAMIC MANUSCRIPT TRADITION IN BRUNEI AND THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES.

Introduction

Over the past few years a study of the art of the Islamic book in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on Qur’ān manuscripts, has revealed a number of distinctive artistic schools. The common denominator of each school is a strong sense of regional identity, with particular styles of manuscript illumination associated with, for example, Aceh at the northern tip of Sumatra, and the states of Terengganu, Kelantan and Patani on the East Coast of the Malay peninsula. While in the case of both these schools the main arena of artistic activity was quite naturally on their home territories, by itself location appears not to have been a critical factor, for manuscripts illuminated in the Achenese and East Coast styles are known to have been produced in the late 19th century in Makka, home to large communities of scholars from Southeast Asia [1].

The identification of these regionally-defined artistic schools is based primarily on an artistic analysis of the decorated double frames which are the obvious focus of any study of Qur’ānic illumination, but it also depends on a host of other features of the manuscript. These might be decorative or at least essentially graphic, such as the composition of ruled text borders, the shape and colour of āyāt markers and decorated šurūt headings, and the ornamental marginal text markers. But the regional identity of a Qur’ān manuscript also appears to influence codicological features such as size, paper, format, bindings, layout of text and script, as well as theological preferences for the inclusion in the margin of variant readings (qira‘āt), and the choice and placement of textual division markers. All these features can assist in determining the origin of a Qur’ān manuscript when identification cannot easily be made solely on artistic grounds.

Despite the plethora of regional artistic schools in Southeast Asia, there is nonetheless an overarching sense of “Malayness” about all these Qur’āns, whether from Sumatra, Java or Sulawesi, which serves to distinguish them immediately from illuminated Qur’ān manuscripts from other Islamic regions such as Turkey, India and Iran, on alone the Maghrib or China. Prominent differences range from a Malay preference for pinched arches on the three outer sides of decorated frames compared to the essentially rectangular outlines of illuminated frames found elsewhere, to a palette dominated by red and yellow rather than blue and gold. “Internal” differences include the ubiquitous use of round āyāt markers in the Malay world rather than the rosettes and wheels typical of Mamlūk, Ottoman, Indo-Persian and even Chinese Qur’āns.

An Unusual Group of Qur’āns from Southeast Asia [2]

The picture painted above of a recognizable “Malay” style of Qur’ānic art is complicated by a small number of Qur’ān manuscripts which have come to light over the past decade and which can be associated with Brunei and the southern islands of the Philippines. Brunei was once one of the greatest Malay sultanesates in the archipelago, and at its zenith in the early 16th century its hegemony extended over most of the northern half of Borneo and part of the Philippines, reaching the islands of Sulu and Mindanao. While this region thus has a definite cultural and historical coherency, it is equally firmly networked into the wider Malay world, and it therefore comes as some surprise to find that Qur’ān manuscripts from this region are in many aspects at variance with almost all other Southeast Asian Qur’āns.

The group in question consists of 14 Qur’ān manuscripts, most of which first appeared in the sale rooms of London auction houses, while one is held in the Muzium Negara (National Museum) of Malaysia. Six have colophon or ownership statements in Arabic which loca-
the manuscripts in Southeast Asia (labelled here A1—6), and the other eight manuscripts can be linked with these six on codicological, philological and art-historical grounds (labelled B1—8). All the manuscripts are fully described in the Appendix.

The “ambor” manuscript of this group is a large and impressive Qur’an (A1) dated 1573–4, with a clearly written colophon which gives the name of the scribe as Muhi al-Uthbi (7) and the place of copying as “in the Abode of Peace Kotu [sic] Bata, in the kingdoms of Brunei the Protected” (fi dīr al-salātī Kotū Bātu min mantalik Būrīna al-mahriṣ). At the end of the manuscript is a schematic diagram of Makka inscribed “Abd Allāh b. Aḥkām (8) Muḥammad, the artist from Brunei” (al-rasām al-Būrīnāvi). Another Qur’an (A5), dated 1545–6, gives the name of the scribe (or owner) as Muḥammad al-Utqī (7) al-Būrīnāvi, and the place as “the kingdom of Kota Batau” (manālik fi Kūt Bātu), while in a third (A2) the scribe is named as “Zayn al-Dīn al-Ahzān (7) in a town in Sabah, one of the kingdoms of Brunei” (fi Ḥāfīm fi madinat fi Sabāh min al-mantalik al-Būrīnāviyya). Two manuscripts have colophons with the toponym Fūlibin, “Philippines”: A3, dated 1821, mentions the masjid al-Jahl al-Balāqī bi-Fūlibīn, while A4, dated 1834, was copied by ‘Abd al-Ghafr b. Aḥmad, in Ahia in the Philippines (fi ṣayyut Abī al-šīr bi-baṣir fī Fūlibīn). The sixth manuscript (A6) was copied in Singapore (bi-Singdúfu) in 1870.

There are a number of unusual points about these colophons. Kota Batau [2], sited on the banks of the Brunei river two miles downstream from the present capital, is one of the most ancient settlements in Borneo and was probably once a royal capital [4], but Kota Batau is now identified as the site of writing in chancery documents or royal letters in Malay or in the colophons of Malay manuscripts from Brunei, which are invariably located simply in Brunei or negeri Brunei, “the state of Brunei”, sometimes accompanied by an honorific epithet [5]. The use of the toponym Fūlibīn also invites comment. The early Spanish explorers named the islands Las Islas Filipinas in honour of the crown prince, later Philip II of Spain (r. 1556–1598), but as recently as the 1970s, Cesar Adib Majul wrote that

“some Muslims at present do not appear too happy in being called ‘Filipinos’… simply in recognition of the fact that their ancestors were never subjects of Felipe, the Spanish Prince who later became King of Spain” [6].

Although very few Philippine Muslim manuscript texts are available for comparison, royal Malay letters and seals from the sultāns of Mindanao in the 17th and 18th centuries only use the toponyms ‘alaw Magindanao, “the land of the Magindanao” [7] or the Arabised ‘alaw Minandāvi, “the land of Minandāvi”, while in a collection of late-19th century letters in Magindanao the location of the writer is always specified in very localised terms, such as Baysan, Rotan (Lanao), Sibugay, Kawanawa (Cotabato) or Magindanao, the term Filipinas only being used in a colonial Spanish context, for example in referring to the Governor in Manila [8]. One possible explanation for these discrepancies is that a different set of geopolitical parameters may have been brought about in play when writing in Arabic compared to writing in Malay or Magindanao and other indigenous languages, and that therefore a meaningful comparison can only be made with toponymic practice in other Arabic texts from this region [9].

The Artistic and Codicological Profile of the Qur’āns

The Qur’āns in this group share a number of highly distinctive features, some of which can be expressed in contrast to the

Binding, Paper and Layout

- Bindings are plain and rustic: dark brown leather, with simple stamped corner and centre medallions often involving small circular punches, and often with ruled lines along the horizontal, vertical and diagonal axes.
- Folio sizes are generally larger than usual for Southeast Asian Qur’āns, with several manuscripts measuring around 42×32 cm.

Script

- The Qur’ānic text is generally written in a large, bold, confident and widely-spaced hand, tending towards the monumental, and completely unlike the small naskh favoured in most Southeast Asian Qur’āns.
- Catchwords are written in a very distinctive small cursive hand with overlining.
- Marginal, preliminary and end notes are written in the same distinctive small cursive script with a pronounced slope to the right.
Illumination

- The rectangular double decorated frames at the start of the Qur'ān often have horizontal extrusions into the vertical margin (figs. 7, 9, plate 2). This is very unusual for the Malay world where illuminated frames are usually adorned with arches on the three outer sides of the text block, and almost never only on the outer vertical sides.

- Characteristic ornamental motifs include double/triple scrolls (fig. 8) and concave diamond-shaped lozenges, and the presence of "eyelets" within these motifs.

- Şūra headings may be set in decorative cartouches which are extended horizontally into the outer margin with a palmette (figs. 3, 4, 6, 10—15). Although this form of decoration is found in illuminated Qur'ān manuscripts from the earliest times, it is never found in Southeast Asian Qur'āns.

- One of the most distinctive features of this group is the use of a mechanical stamping device for āyāt and even marginal text markers. In four of the Qur'āns the āyāt markers are six-petalled flowers which have been stamped in black ink and the petals then coloured in by hand (fig. 10), while in two Qur'āns, the ājūz markers are also stamped and then coloured.

- The palette includes several colours rarely encountered elsewhere: a vivid green ink, sometimes used for textual annotations; purple ink; and a metallic cobalt red which degrades to brown, often used for simple round non-stamped āyāt markers.

Layout and Divisions of the Qur'ānic Text

- The sūra "al-Fātīha" usually occupies the whole of the first two facing pages, and is enclosed in decorative frames (figs. 7, 17—20, plate 2). This is very unusual in Southeast Asia, where almost invariably the sūra "al-Fātīha" is positioned on the right-hand side of the opening pages, with the first āyāt of the sūra "al-Baqara" on the left (11).

- The sūra "al-Fātīha" usually ends with a few added words of prayer, such as ādīn Rabbi al-‘ilāmin (figns. 7, 9, 19, 20).

- At the end of the Qur'ānic text, after the sūra "al-Nāba‘", there are usually added a few words of praise which always include Allāh akbar (figns. 11, 14, 21—24).

- The beginning of sūra "al-Baqara" may be annotated in the margin al-ţuj al-anwāl (figns. 13, 15).

- Any major decorative features in the middle of the text invariably mark the start of sūra "Maryam" (12) (figns. 1, 25, 26).

- In addition to common marginal annotations such as ājūz, niṣf and sajda is also found the term wād (figns. 4, 12, 15), marking specific portions of the Qur'ān for devotional recitation associated with Sūfism; this term has never been encountered in the margins of Southeast Asian Qur'āns.

In general in Southeast Asia the finest Qur'āns are distinguished by the quality of their illumination, but in this group of Qur'āns there is a striking disjunction apparent between calligraphy and illumination. A similar comment has been made about Qur'ān manuscripts from Banten, where it was concluded that "Banten was truly a state where calligraphy was favoured over illumination" [13]. And yet in Banten, the few known examples of illumination were technically impressive, albeit mismatched proportionally with the Qur'ān manuscripts in which they were found. In our present group of Qur'āns, it is the difference in calibre that is the issue. Although some of the Qur'āns (notably A 1, B 2 (plates 1, 3) and A 2) have quite attractive and impressive decorated frames and sūra headings, in many more calligraphy of the highest order is married with crude and slapdash illumination. The most glaring example is Qur'ān A 4, written in perfectly controlled and neatly-spaced muhaqqaq but with garish initial frames in bright purple, green and orange (fig. 17).

In this group of Qur'āns, the index of artistry is clearly the calibre of the calligraphy rather than the decoration, but perhaps the most unusual characteristic is a sense of calligraphic quickness or even brusqueness. Elements of the text of a Qur'ān traditionally highlighted calligraphically, such as the marginal inscriptions, or the first few words of a ājūz or beginning of a sūra, are often approached with gusto, as in Qur'ān B 7 (fig. 6). The exemplar of this tendency is Qur'ān A 3, dated 1821, where the basmalah at the start of sūra "Yā Sin" (fig. 2) and the marginal marker for ājūz "9" are positively modish. The calligraphic treatment applied to certain words, such as the exuberant āmīn at the start of the final ājūz of the Qur'ān (fig. 4), or the clan of the presentation of "mysterious letters" like the bi‘rīn at the start of the sūra "al-Zukhruf" (fig. 3), bespeak an individualism not normally associated with Qur'ān manuscript art. The start of sūra "Maryam" (fig. 1) is heralded with calligraphic panache and graphic design of a boldness not encountered in any other Qur'ān manuscript known.

The Islamic Manuscript Culture of Brunei and the Southern Philippines

As mentioned above, all but one of the 14 Qur'āns in this group emerged in the sale rooms of the major London auction houses between 1994 and 2005. What is sorely needed, as a "control" in statistical terms, is examples of illuminated Qur'āns or other Islamic manuscripts from the Brunei-southern Philippines zone either held in the region itself, or with secure provenances from the area.

The Islamic manuscript tradition of the southern Philippines remains shrouded in mist, although enough scattered evidence survives over the centuries to attest to an established writing culture using Arabic script to
write in Arabic or Malay, or in the principal Philippine Muslim languages associated with writing. Tausug from Sulu, Maranao from northern Mindanao, and Magindanao from western Mindanao. These include royal letters and documents in Malay, Magindanao and Tausug, dating from the 17th to the early 20th century, some written in very accomplished hands [14]. A recent study of Islamic seals from Southeast Asia yielded 31 seals from Sulu, dating from 1728 to the late 19th century, usually inscribed wholly in Arabic with pan-Islamic sovereign titles and epithets such as *almir al-amir*, "Prince of Princes", and *zill Allah R* al-* Islam*, "the shadow of God on earth" [15]. In one particular respect, royal Sulu seals partake of a sigilographic fashion especially associated with Ottoman and Persian seals but not otherwise common in the Malay world: the use of rhyming couplets for the seal inscription, where the standard expression of trust in God is expressed in terms of a Divine Name chosen to rhyme with the name of the sovereign [16]. Another feature of Sulu diplomates — the use of two royal seals, a large one at the beginning and a smaller one at the end of the letter — has been linked to Indian traditions [17]. However, this relative abundance of documents reflecting a critical awareness of chancery practice in the broader Islamic world is not matched by a similar number of literary texts, and so far little can be said about literary, historical and theological writings from this region [18].

Even less is known of Islamic illumination from the Philippines. Only two illuminated Philippine Islamic manuscripts have ever been published, both sermons (*bhuja*) from Sulu composed in Arabic: one a Friday sermon and the other a Ramadhan oration dated 25 July 1906. The black-and-white photographs of the double decorated frames published by Salehah in 1905 [19] give no hint of their palette, but in structure both are typically "Malay" with foliate meander vines enclosed in arched frames that prong on the three outer sides of each page. Their present whereabouts is unknown, and only two other illuminated Philippine Islamic manuscripts can currently be located. One is a book of devotions in Arabic in praise of the Prophet Muhammad from Mindanao with marginal verses in Maranao, held in the library of the University of Michigan [20]. It has a pair of double decorated frames with sharply triangular arches on the three outer sides of the text block (fig. 27), and many pages are inset with small square boxes containing a foliate front — a pan-Malay motif widely known as *sulir*. The other is a Qur’an from the Philippines held in Bristol University Library [21]. The text pages are typically Malay in their appearance, with ruled frames enclosing 15 lines written in small neat handwriting red roundels for dividers. There is only one surviving illuminated folio, containing the *sura* “Al-Falaq” set within a rectangular border with triangular arches on all four sides, colored in red, black and reserved white [22]. An incomplete Qur’an from the Philippines is held in New York Public Library, but has no significant illumination [23].

Despite various enquiries, no Qur’an manuscripts currently held in Philippine collections have been identified, although the presence of Qur’an manuscripts throughout the centuries in this region is undoubted — witness a finely-carved wooden Qur’an stand from the Pulangi Valley in Mindanao now held in the Smithsonian Institution [24]. Writing about the Pulangi Valley in 1874, Sebastian Vital y Soler described how each settlement in the valley had a Muslim priest or *padīdāl*.

> "who generally had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. One of his tasks from the Koran, copies of which were guarded with great care since they dated from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and were heavily written in with commentaries" [25].

In another report on Mindanao published in 1893, Ferdinand Blumentritt complimented the *padīdāl* of the Pulangi for being "the most learned calligraphers" [26].

More recently, a Maranao scholar, Dr. Nagasara Madulay, recalled that in his youth he had come across a Qur’an manuscript which was called "Manbeleq" [27]. Intriguingly, Dr. Nagasara added that the Qur’an was very large compared to usual Qur’ans, as was the script — prominent features of the group of Qur’ans currently under investigation. There is a number of detailed studies of the art of the Muslim south of the Philippines, but none makes any mention of manuscript illumination among the considerable list of major and minor art forms [28].

Turning now to Brunei, there is much more extant evidence of the indigenous manuscript culture. Letters in Malay have survived in small numbers from the earliest times, and indeed a royal Brunei letter of 1599 is the earliest known Malay letter to display all the standard features of the Malay epistolary more usually encountered in 16th and 19th century epistles [29]. The Brunei court chronicle, the *Silatul raja-ruja Beruwat*, dates in part from at least the early 18th century, and the Brunei Museum and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei (Brunei Language and Literature Bureau) each hold several hundred manuscripts in Malay, mostly on literary and historical subjects, and dating from the 19th and early 20th century [30].

Yet the Islamic manuscript art of Brunei is no better documented than that of the southern Philippines. A few late literary manuscripts have simple decorated frames that bear no resemblance to the illumination of our group of Qur’ans. Very few manuscripts in Arabic from Brunei are known, and no Qur’ans from Brunei — or even from its former tributary territories of Sabah or Sarawak — have ever been published. The sizable collections of Qur’an manuscripts belonging to His Majesty Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei currently on display in the Brunei Museum [31] and in the State Mufti’s Department [32] consist entirely of foreign recent acquisitions, including a number of manuscripts from Java. A visit to Brunei in December 2007 succeeded in ascertaining that not a single locally-written Qur’an manuscript is known to be held in a Brunei institution, including the Brunei Museum, National Archives or the Brunei History Centre.

As the Director of the Brunei History Centre, one only Qur’an manuscript from the northern part of Borneo has been traced: said to have been copied by a Brunei nobleman (*jangiran*), the manuscript is in
The Russian Connection and the Path to Dāghistān

The failure of this survey of Islamic manuscripts in or from Brunei and the southern Philippines to reveal any artistic common ground with our Qur’āns leads us to question how securely we can accept the Southeast Asian provenance of this group of Qur’āns, their colophons notwithstanding. As emphasized above the manuscripts exhibit many features at variance with the Malay Qur’ānic tradition, and the one feature most incontrovertibly hard to reconcile with a Southeast Asian provenance is a pervasive Russian connection.

At least three of the manuscripts (A 2, A 3, B 5) — including two with Southeast Asian colophons — are written on Russian paper, and between the pages of A 3 and B 5 are small piece of newsprint in Cyrillic script, while B 2 has fragments of Cyrillic script evident in the binding papers. Russian paper is not known ever to have been used in manuscripts from maritime Southeast Asia [35], and for one of the manuscripts in this group with a Şabah colophon, the identification of the Russian origin of the paper appears to have diminished its market value as a “Southeast Asian” Qur’ān [36]. Russian paper was certainly used in some Islamic manuscripts, notably in Iran in the early 19th century [37], but by this late date there were few points of contact between the Malay and Indo-Persian manuscript traditions, which are in fact differentiated by numerous factors such as the Persian use of nasta’liq script, the relatively slim proportions of Persian manuscript books and the use of Indian paper.

In view of the long links between the sultanes of Brunei and the southern Philippines and China, the most logical scenario within which the use of Russian paper could be reconciled with the manuscript tradition of this part of the Malay world is through possible Central Asian influence. But investigations into the manuscript culture of, for example, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan during the 18th and 19th centuries show manuscripts firmly in the Indo-Persian style as described above, completely dissimilar to the Qur’āns under consideration [38].

The key to the mystery was finally revealed with the publication in Manuscripta Orientia in 2007 of Prof. A. T. Gallop’s article on “Muslim Treasures of Russia. II: Manuscript Collections of Dāghistān”, leading to the astonishing realisation that many of the unusual features of the “Brunei Philogipines” Qur’āns were in fact typical of the Dāghistān manuscript tradition. The distinctive small backward-sloping cursive script, with the frequent use of overlining, turned out to be a standard Dāghistān hand, which is often accompanied by flamboyant and exuberant calligraphic headings sometimes filled with floral scrolls and dashes of colour, just as found in our Qur’āns. Most decisive of all were the opening pages of an 18th-century Qur’ān from the mosque in Qūrūdū, reproduced in colour on the back cover of the journal [39], with double decorated frames extended horizontally, which mirrored exactly the initial illuminated pages in two of the most important manuscripts in this group (A 1 and A 2), including the great Qur’ān from Brunei of 1754.

Once the Caucasian connection had been established, many puzzles — such as the use of Russian paper and traces of Cyrillic script — were no longer problematic, and further confirmatory evidence could be sourced for a range of other features of the Qur’āns discussed above. Indeed, the language of one of the fragments of newsprint in Cyrillic script found between the pages of Qur’ān A 3 was identified as Awər, one of the languages of Dāghistān [40]. Two earlier articles on Dāghistāni manuscripts in Manuscripta Orientia provided examples of key ornamental details: a decorated colophon in a manuscript of al-Ghazālī’s Ittihād al-asrār al-din [41] exhibited the concave diamond shape so characteristic of illumination in our Qur’ān manuscripts; while a Qur’ān with interlinear Persian translation [42] bore a triple scroll similar to those found in a large number of the Qur’āns (fig. 8). By fortunate coincidence, just around this time a Dāghistān Qur’ān was offered for sale at Christie’s in London [43]. Signed by the scribe Sha‘ibīn al-Qurbakī al-Dāghistānī and dated 1225/1810–11, it confirmed the Caucasian origin of one of the most notable features of our Qur’āns: the stamped petalled ḏaḥīr markers (fig. 16c). Investigations of the only known manuscript of Dāghistāni manuscripts in the British Library [44] revealed annotations in the by now familiar bright green ink, and in a catalogue entry for two manuscripts from Dāghistān in Leiden University Library, Jan Just Witzkam [45] described their “bold script of wiliness and beauty” [46], an evocative description equally applicable to some of the calligraphic elements of our Qur’āns. Finally, Prof. Shikhisaidov commented that many of the features of our Qur’āns — such as the handwriting, design of colophons, decorative ṣūrā headings, enhancement of ṣūrā “Maryam”, and the petalled rosette ḏaḥīr markers — were typical of Dāghistānī manuscripts, and kindly sent further images of Dāghistān Qur’āns which confirmed the correspondences [47].

From Caucasus to Southeast Asia: How, When, Who, Why?

It now seems clear that all 14 Qur’āns discussed above were created within the Dāghistānī manuscript tradition, by Dāghistānī scribes, and using Dāghistānī materials and implements. In view of their emergence on the London art market, some of the manuscripts in group B without Southeast Asian colophons are probably...
simply Daghstani Qur’ans, without necessarily any Malay-world connections at all. The only manuscript found in the Malay world—the Museum Negara Qur’an, possibly acquired from Patani in southern Thailand—could be regarded as a critical piece of evidence linking this group to Southeast Asia, but its very recent date of acquisition (2002) limits its value in this context.

The key question is the status of the Qur’ans in group A, which, on the basis of their colophons, were produced in Brunei, Sabah, Singapore, and the Philippines. On artistic and codicological grounds, it is clear that these manuscripts should be regarded as “Daghstani” Qur’ans and not “Borneo” or “Philippine” Qur’ans. This statement is not at all incompatible with colophons written in Southeast Asia, for if an Acehnese resident in Makka could produce a Qur’an illuminated in the Acehnese style, there is no logical reason why a Daghstani Qur’an could not be produced by a Daghstani scribe in Brunei, or even perhaps by a Brunei writer fully under the influence of a Daghstani master. But just how likely is it that such a cultural exchange did in fact take place? The presence of Daghstani scholars and scribes in Southeast Asia, though entirely plausible, has hardly been documented. Yet this lack of documentation probably simply serves to underline how little is known about the movement of Islamic scholars and the transfer of religious knowledge between the central Islamic lands and Southeast Asia outside the main “highways”—the jaringan adat or scholarly networks—documented by Azra and others [48].

In fact, bits of information can be gleaned, sometimes in eye-witness accounts by foreign visitors, which show that Brunei, Sulai, and Mindanao were well plugged-in to international Islamic networks centered on the Hijaz. The Siisiwa riya-riya Bernand records that in 1837 a Brunei hostelry (rumah wakaf) was founded in Makka on the orders of Sultan Muhammad Taj al-Din [50]. Valuable information on religious life in Brunei in the early 19th century can be found in the little-known reports of two American missionaries who in May 1837 spent a month in Brunei living in the palace of Sultan ‘Umar ‘Ali Sayf al-Din II (r. 1828–1852), investigating the prospects for mission work. They record that the Sultan’s “chief imam,” a native of Brunei who was aged about sixty, had lived in Makka for 25 years and wore Arab dress, and there were about two or three hundred hajjis in Brunei at that time, although no Arabs [51], and on 18th May, they observed what appears to have been a three-hour long vigorous communal performance of dhikr which took place in the Sultan’s palace on a Thursday evening [52]. In another detailed account of Brunei published in 1862, the British Consul describes how Hajji Muhammad, a Brunei scholar who had returned from Makka, was responsible for an ongoing theological schism which had divided Brunei society for nearly twenty years, each side with their own mosque, imam, and congregations, observing the last month of fasting for a different number of days, and sending deputations and counter-deputations to Makka to obtain the requisite fatwas [53].

In the southern Philippines, foreign Muslims often held high office in the sultansates. In Sulu, the office of chief qadi was held by an Arab during the reign of Sultan ‘Azim al-Din I (r. 1735–1748, 1764–1774), by a Turk from Istanbul during the reign of Muhammad Israil (r. 1774–1778), by an Afghan during the reign of Jami‘ al-Azm (r. 1806–1881), and by an Arab in the reign of Hurai al-Raghid (r. 1888–1894) [54]. In Mindanao, the chief padi and advisor to Datu Piang of Buayan in the 1890s was a certain Sheikh Abdul from Bukhara [55]. Foreign eye-witness reports also attest to large numbers of hajjis in 1866 in Cotabato [56] and in 1903 in the Pulangi Valley, which had a considerable contingent of hajjis “who have drifted here from Arabistan, Bukhara and Afghanistan” [57]. Following the fall of Jolo, capital of Sulu, to the Spanish in 1876, there was a noticeable Islamic revival which spread outwards from Sulu to Mindanao, with an attendant marked increase in pilgrim traffic via Singapore [58].

Reconciling this picture of a vigorous and dynamic religious scene with the almost total absence of locally-produced Qur’ans in Brunei and the southern Philippines today is not as problematic as might be supposed. Not to be overlooked is the obvious fact that many precious Qur’an manuscripts would have been destroyed in the armed conflicts that have beset this region to the present day. One important finding that has emerged from the current study of Qur’anic art in Southeast Asia is that centres of Islamic manuscript art were not uniformly spread through the Malay world [59]; nor were they necessarily identical with centres of Islamic scholarship. For example, in the 18th century the sultnate of Palembang on the east coast of Sumatra became one of the leading centres of Islamic learning in the Malay world, with a number of foreign Arab scholars invited to reside at the court, and it was in Palembang in 1854 that the Qur’an was first printed in Southeast Asia [60], but no illuminated Qur’an manuscripts copied in Palembang have yet been identified [61].

What all the evidence above does suggest is a very “thin” Islamic manuscript tradition in Brunei and the southern Philippines, in which circumstances a proficient foreign scribe could have made quite a considerable impact in the 18th and early 19th centuries. One plausible scenario, suggested by the recent appearance of three finely illuminated Qur’an manuscripts, evidently of Chinese manufacture, said to have been commissioned by sultans of Brunei in the 15th and 16th centuries [62], is the theory that in Brunei at least there may have been a deep-seated preference for “deluxe” foreign productions of the Qur’an rather than locally-produced ones. In Mindanao, too, it has been suggested that it was precisely the steady flow of foreign Muslim scholars which may in fact have negated the imperative for home-grown institutions:

“No evidence has been found of the existence of Muslim religious schools or monasteries in Mindanao; the influx of religious figures from abroad to ensure the continuance of Islam must have had a long historical precedent” [63].
These disparate reports suggest that it would not be that unusual for an 'ālim or scribe from Dīghistānī to have found his way to Brunei or the southern Philippines in the 18th or 19th centuries. They also highlight the fact that a key arena for initial contact may have been Makka, where large communities of both peoples gathered, and where no doubt fine copies of the Holy Qur’ān were avidly sought out as prized souvenirs of the hajj [64]. Certainly by the second half of the 19th century there are documented links between Dīghistānī and Malay scholars in Makka: Snouck Hurgronje [65] mentions that shaykh ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Dīghistānī was the teacher of shaykh Muhammad Nawawi, to whom he gave his contract, and probably of other Malay jawi students as well. According to Wain Mohd. Shaghir Abdullah [66], shaykh ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Dīghistānī’s son, shaykh Mahamid al-Sharwan, moved to Pontianak on the west coast of Borneo and died there in 1896, and his daughter married into the Pontianak royal family of Hadrami descent, the al-Qadrīs.

Political developments in the latter part of the 19th century would certainly have encouraged an outflow of scholars and scribes from the Caucasus. Following the capture of imām Shāmil by the Russians in 1859 many Dīghistānī moved to neighbouring Muslim lands such as Turkey, Jordan and Syria, and the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–78 saw thousands more Dīghistānī families relocated to the territory of the Ottoman empire, and hence into closer contact with the wider Islamic world [67]. An important network connecting Dīghistānī and Malay scholars during this period may have been the Naqibbandiya-Khaliṣiya yaft order, which was widespread in both Southeast Asia and Dīghistānī [68], and it may therefore not be coincidental that a seal used by shaykh Zakaria Bashir — son of shaykh ‘Umar Bashir (d. 1883), imām of the Acheen Street mosque in Penang (Pulau Pinang) and a shaykh of the Naqibbandiya Khaliṣiya order — is almost identical in design with that of imām Shāmil [69] (figs. 28, 30). Penang was also the site of one of the most idiosyncratic instances of a Dīghistānī-Malay cultural nexus: the composition, probably in 1879, of a Malay narrative of the Russo-Turkish war which propelled into the position of hero Shāmil’s son Ghaffar Muhammad [70].

Presented above is a sketch of a historical, theological and cultural context within which the prospect of a Dīghistānī scribe producing a Qur’ān in the Brunei-southern Philippines zone in the 18th or early 19th centuries is logically plausible, without, it must be admitted, a single piece of firm supporting evidence from Southeast Asia itself, other than the colophons of the six Qur’ān manuscripts in group A. Nor are the colophons unproblematic. The context of the use of “Kota Batu” and “Filibbin” has already been discussed at the start of this article; a further complication is that most of the other toponyms mentioned — ‘Alamūnī (7) in Sabah (A2), the nābi al-Jakāl al-Hakārī (A3), Ahl in the Philippines (A4), and the madrasa Juma’ ‘Adl in the “kingdom” of Kota Batu (A5) — cannot be identified.

Due to their relative rarity, Southeast Asian Islamic manuscripts tend to command higher prices on the inter-
national art market than those from more prolific manus-
script cultures, and there is undoubtedly an inherent commercial advantage in identifying a manuscript as Southeast Asian, or, indeed, creating a Southeast Asian pedigree for a manuscript. It would therefore be remiss of this article if it did not squarely consider the question of forgery. The authenticity of the six manuscripts as genuine 18th- or 19th-century Dīghistānī Qur’āns is not in doubt; what needs to be examined critically is whether their colophons may have been tampered with or added at some subsequent date [71].

All the manuscripts have been inspected personally by the present writer, but photographs of the colophons are only available of A1, A2, A3 and A4. In the cases of A5 and A6, the colophons are found after the end of the Qur’ānic text (as is indeed very common for colophons!), and although there is no inherent reason to doubt their authenticity, without scientific analysis of the ink it would be difficult to prove categorically whether or not the colophon was added considerably later. In A4 (fig. 21), the colophon also follows the end of the Qur’ānic text, but is written in the same bright green ink that is used for the sūra headings and the marginal qāṣida inscriptions, and can therefore be judged to be contemporaneous with the production of the manuscript. In A3 (fig. 31), the colophon is on a new but equally and consistantly stained folio following the end of the Qur’ānic text, and is itself followed by a prayer, which is written in the same hand and with the same red qiyār markers as found in the body of the Qur’ān proper; here too it can be concluded that the colophon is contemporaneous with the writing of the Qur’ān. In A3 (fig. 32), although the design of the colophon appears rather spatially constricted in proportion to the page size, the cartouche is undoubtedly decorated with the same motifs and pig-
ments as used in the rest of the manuscript, and the thin yellow wash of the ground and the double green outlines of the inscription reserved in white mirror the design of the inscribed panels in the illuminated initial frames of the manuscript, suggesting that the colophon is contemporaneous with the illumination of the manuscript, and was not added later [72].

As for A1 (figs. 11, 29), there are no questions about the integral nature of this colophon, which is set in an illuminated roundel of exactly the same design and colours as the other decorated elements in the manuscript.

Thus on codicological grounds, at least, there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the colophons of these Qur’ān manuscripts and their Southeast Asian links, which brings us back to the ‘why’ of the Caucasian connection — why Dīghistānī? History is full of enough coincidences, accidents and chance encounters to warn us against using hindsight to rationalise why influence from one cultural quarter should have taken root rather than another. But given the unlikely cultural encounter between Dīghistānī and northern Borneo, it is possible to highlight factors that might have eased and nurtured any nascent relationship, such as the renown of Dīghistānī Islamic scholars [73] and a shared adherence to the Shāfi‘ī school of law [74]. Especially significant may be the evident resonance between Dīghistānī and Malay