Some early Islamic posters from the Netherlands East Indies

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1. Introduction

Recently, important progress has been made in the documenting of *kitab kuning* in Southeast Asia with the publication of the catalogue of the Sophia University collection (Kawahina 2010). Based on solid fieldwork, this catalogue gives an overview of which *kitab kuning* are still in circulation in this part of the world and it enables us to compare this with the earlier overviews made by Van den Berg (1886), van Bruinissen (no date; 1990) and Matheson and Hooker (1988) which provide insight into the distribution of these works and the fluctuations therein. An additional and unique feature of this catalogue is that it also includes works from the southern Philippines, which are not included in the other works mentioned.

The concept of *kitab kuning* is used in various ways, but here I will use it in its widest sense, that is to denote printed works on traditional Islamic learning in Arabic or a language in use in Southeast Asia, which are or have been in circulation among the various Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. The size and shape of the *kitab kuning* might differ, even the colour of the paper might be other than yellow. However, in my view, one characteristic must be present in order to correctly identify a *kitab kuning* and this is the use of the script of the Islamic language par excellence, Arabic.² Of course, this description is of a prototypical nature and exceptions can be found. For instance, a recent development seems to be that some publishers of the traditional *kitab kuning* also include the modern Indonesian translation in a separate column, alongside the original Arabic text. As an example, I mention here a book from 2006, written by the well-known 19th century author Nawawi al-Bantani, entitled *Al-fudhat al-madaniyya fi al-sha'b al-imaniyya*. It is likely that, in this case, the Indonesian translation has been added because the knowledge of Arabic in Indonesia is, on the whole, declining. Another explanation might be that the publisher wants the book to reach a wider audience, beyond the circles of the *pesantren* where knowledge of Arabic remains common.

From my studies, I have distinguished three types of *kitab kuning*. The

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¹ The illustrations accompanying this article have been published here with kind permission of Leiden University Library (= UBL), and the Royal Netherlands Institute for Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (= KITLV), both located in Leiden, the Netherlands.

² The use of Arabic script emphasizes that the content of the books is Islamic.
first consists of common Arabic works, which are also readily available in the Middle East. This type demonstrates the level and kind of Islamic scholarship in Arabic that was in circulation in Southeast Asia. The second type of *kitab kuning* is composed of renderings of these or other original Arabic works in a local language, e.g. Malay, Javanese, Sundanese, Madurese, Acehnese and others, or it provides the Arabic original text with an interlinear translation. These works are not very original, because they do not provide insight into local interpretations of Islam; however, they do matter because, like the first type, they show what is or has been in circulation. This important insight has often been overlooked as can be seen, for instance, in the work of the British scholar R.O. Winstedt, entitled *A History of Classical Malay Literature* from 1939. Winstedt regarded many Malay Islamic writings as mere derivatives of Middle Eastern originals and viewed them as linguistically inferior, compared to ‘classical’ Malay texts, such as the *Sejarah Melayu*. As a result, many Malay religious writings were not considered worthy of serious study and, consequently, they did not figure in ‘comprehensive’ overviews of Malay literature. Fortunately, in more modern overviews this blind spot for Islamic literature has been overcome, as can be seen in the work of Vladimir Braginsky, *The heritage of traditional Malay literature* (Leiden 2004). In my opinion, the most interesting type of *kitab kuning* is the third, which consists of works written by Southeast Asian authors. This type provides us with the most direct information on local interpretations of Islamic learning. Of course, these authors lean very heavily on Middle Eastern examples and work within the established intellectual tradition of Shafi’ite *fiqh* and Ash’arite theology, but this is also the case with Middle Eastern Muslim authors working in the same period and within the tradition of the conventional schools of Law and theology. Because these authors are based in Southeast Asia, they are aware of local customs and the tensions between these customs and Islamic teachings. For this reason, their books are the best sources for the history of Islam in this region.

All in all, we can conclude that in order to obtain a good understanding of Islam in Southeast Asia, the study of *kitab kuning* is indispensable.

2. *Kitab and jadwal*

One prolific author who was active in Southeast Asia is the well-known Muslim scholar from Batavia Sayyid ‘Uthman (1822-1914), whose biography I am currently writing. He was a productive writer and some of his works are still in use, as is evident from the just mentioned catalogue of the *Sophia* collection, which contains a number of his works (0459; 490-6; 0545-7; 992-4; 0744-5; 0983-4; 1188-94; 1747; 1787-9; 1885). In addition, Sayyid ‘Uthman wrote numerous other pieces. The best available source for his writings is a catalogue published by his son Yahya on 1 November 1915, in an effort to continue the printing enterprise of his deceased father in the newly established ‘N.V. Handel-Mij. Said Oesman, Potamboeran – Weltevreden’ (Said Oesman, Trading Company Ltd., Potamboeran - Weltevreden). This catalogue was drafted with a view to promoting business and attracting buyers for Sayyid ‘Uthman’s books. This catalogue contains no fewer than 122 different titles. These works deal with all branches of Islamic scholarship, discussing dogmatics, *fiqh*, mysticism, the Prophetic tradition, Qur’ān recitation, ethics, brotherhoods, heresies, inheritance law, religious administration, Arabic grammar, lexicology and astronomy. Apart from the titles of the works, the price is also given along with a very brief indication of the contents of the work. In many cases the language of the work involved is mentioned: Arabic, Malay, Javanese, or Sundanese (Yahya ibn ‘Uthman 1915).

The full title of this directory reads: *Daftar dari nama-nama dan harga-harga kitab-kitab dan jadwal jadwal karangannya al-marhum Sayyid ‘Uthman [...*, which brings me to the actual topic of this paper. As we see from this title, in addition to the books proper (*kitab-kitab*), a number of *jadwal* are also mentioned and it is this that is the subject of my paper. A number of *jadwal* feature in the sales catalogue of Sayyid ‘Uthman’s works. Out of the 122 titles, I counted 32 *jadwal* and this shows that, alongside the *kitab*, they also were important in the printing business. *Jadwal* is an Arabic word and means, amongst other things, chart, table or schedule. A number of the *jadwal* mentioned in the sales catalogue is preserved in Leiden University Library and, as a result of what I have seen, I prefer to translate the term *jadwal* as ‘poster’. Before I discuss a number of these posters I will first examine, briefly, the concept of poster.

A poster is a piece of printed paper designed to be attached to a wall in order to convey information. In Western art history posters are studied as a form of applied graphic art and have received ample scholarly attention. In 1998, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, which houses a large collection of posters, organised an international exhibition on posters, entitled ‘The Power of the Poster’. In the accompanying exhibition catalogue, edited by M. Timmers, a number of important observations on the poster are made. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a poster as ‘a placard posted or displayed in a public place as an announcement or advertisement’. The poster might be a combination of text and images, but can also consist of just images or just text. Other characteristics of the poster mentioned are its relatively large size, the use of everyday language and its striking appearance with direct imagery. In terms of manufacturing, posters can be made individually, or they can be multiplied in a simple way. Most important are the observations on the function of the poster insofar as the poster is regarded as a
tool for communication between someone who has a message to sell and a targeted audience, which has to be convinced to accept this message. This exchange takes place in the public sphere. Consequently, the catalogue distinguishes three domains of posters: I. Pleasure and Leisure – posters to announce performances and cultural events; II. Protest and Propaganda – to promote issues and ideas; and, III. Commerce and Communication – to advertise products and services (Timmers 1998: 7-12).

These observations are useful because they sharpen our thinking about posters and they can be used as a starting point for our subsequent discussions.

3. The posters of Sayyid 'Uthman

(1) Introduction

In some of his books Sayyid 'Uthman gave graphic presentations of difficult arguments. One example is his treatment of the legal sources that are available to the judge and the mufti, and the hierarchy of these sources in his Manual for the Islamic Courts of 1894, the Kitab al-qawamin al-shar'iyya li-abil al-majalis al-hukmiyya wa-l-if'alyya ("The book of the Islamic legal rules for the staff of the judicial and advisory councils"). In this book he supports his treatment of the sources with a diagram in order to clarify his argument (p. 6). This shows that Sayyid 'Uthman was aware of the usefulness of these diagrams for educational purposes. He employed the same procedure for single charts, independent of a book and in larger sizes, thus producing a jadwal or poster. As seen above, these posters were also offered for sale and one might expect that, next to the books, they formed another important commodity. As mentioned, a number of the posters listed in the sales catalogue of Sayyid 'Uthman's works has been preserved and I will deal with a few here. For the sake of convenience, I have distinguished various kinds of posters.

(2) Overviews

The first type I distinguish links up with the example just given regarding the Manual for the Islamic Courts. These posters provide a graphic representation of a particular narrative text or give, at a glance, an overview of a particular subject. An interesting example of this is the poster showing the seven different foster relationships, 'table of all unmarriageable family members' as the result of

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\[\text{Photo 1: Poster showing foster relationships. (UBL Plano 53 F 1: 26; 23 x 36 cm.)}\]

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\[3\] The Malay reads mahrum, which means unmarriageable according to Islamic Law. In
Another example which falls within this category is the *Jadwal ilmu usul* (UBL Plano 53 F 1: 61; 21 x 35 cm.), dating from 1309/1891. This Malay poster provides, at a glance, the twenty attributes of God, the proofs for the existence of God, and the qualities a Prophet should have.

A final example of an overview is a conversion table for the *hijri* calendar to the Gregorian calendar for the year 1302/1885. Interestingly, at the top of the chart is a warning in Arabic and in Malay that one may only establish the new moon by actually seeing (*ru'ya*), and not by calculation (*hisab*) (Photo 2).

![Conversion table for the year 1302/1885. (UBL Plano 53 F 1: 62; 35 x 42.5 cm.)](image)

Other examples of these overviews are astronomical tables, table to establish the right time for the ritual prayer, grammatical tools[^4] and others.

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(3) Genealogical trees

A second type of poster has to do with physical and spiritual pedigrees. A very interesting example can be found in the sales catalogue under nr. 19 (p. 7), where it is mentioned: ‘Tree of the Prophets, giving a continuous line from all Prophets who have been sent – Peace be upon them’ (*Shajarat al-anbiya* terasa segala anbiya’ nusralin ‘alayhim al-sala’), immediately followed by: ‘as an example of blessing inside the house’ (*dhibat tombil* berkah didalam rumah). This tree is preserved in the Leiden University Library (UBL Plano 53 F 1: 9; 45 x 58 cm.) and contains a tree from Adam to Muhammad. Interestingly, preceding the prophet Adam we find the pre-existing Light of the Prophet Muhammad (*Nur al-nabi Muhammad*) being mentioned.

It is no surprise that also posters of the Sayyids – the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad – were produced in order to stress the elevated position of this group of people. Here, I show a genealogical tree, ending in the Prophet (‘the Best of Mankind’) and his forefathers (Photo 3). This poster mentions that it was designed and composed by Sayyid Uthman and that it was printed in Sha’ban 1337/May 1919, so slightly over five years after his death.

Incidentally, a comparable practice is still upheld in contemporary Indonesia, where in various places posters with photographs of the Sayyids are offered for sale.

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[^4]: In the Tokyo collection also a number of items on grammar is included (nr. 1426-31). Interestingly, these works also bear the word *jadwal* in their titles. On 24 October 2011 I was able to inspect these works in the Sophia University Library. The works contain charts and tables of inflection (*arif*) and syntax (*nahwe*), in some cases making use of different colours, and have a common book size.

[^3]: This word is not clear to me. The reading of the word is obvious (ta’, waaw, mim, ba’, lam), because it also occurs in other places in the same catalogue (e.g. no. 43 p. 6). I have read it as a rendering of the Dutch word *doornboeit*, which means an example to be followed. In an e-mail of 30 August 2011, Prof. Edwin Wieringa (University of Cologne, Germany) suggests reading *tunub* which is a loanword from the Javanese and denotes a means to avert evil. However, this does not fit Sayyid Uthman’s puritanical understanding of Islam.
teachers and intellectual ancestors of Sayyid 'Uthman. Similar to these genealogical diagrams, these intellectual pedigrees also go back, ultimately, to the Prophet Muhammad being the ultimate source of Muslim scholarship. In the most simple of these diagrams (UBL Plano 53 F 1: 14; 23 x 36 cm.) Sayyid 'Uthman refers to himself as ‘the dust of their [sc. his teachers'] feet’ (tara‘ saydanihim 'Uthman ibn 'Abd Allah). This links him directly to four persons (who are indeed known to have been his main teachers), namely, Ahmad al-Dinawati, Ahmad ibn Zayn al-Dahlan, both referred to as ‘mufti Makka’, and al-Habib 'Abd Allah ibn Husayn ibn 'Umar Tahir and al-Habib 'Abd Allah ibn 'Umar ibn Yahya, who both belonged to his teachers in Hadramout. These documents were printed by Sayyid 'Uthman himself and undoubtedly were also used to boost his intellectual credentials among his colleagues and in a confrontation with opponents.

With the passing of time, we see that in other charts the number of teachers of Sayyid 'Uthman grows, apparently with the aim of further enhancing his authority. In the only one of the three which is dated, in 1327/1909, it is briefly explained that this diagram contains Shafi‘ite scholars who form the intellectual pedigree of Sayyid 'Uthman. This chart directly links Sayyid 'Uthman with ten teachers (UBL Plano 53 F 1: 43; 38 x 51 cm.), while in the third one he (‘the dust of their feet’) is linked to not less than 25 scholars (Photo 4).

In underscoring his authority in this way, it seems likely that Sayyid 'Uthman— and after his death his descendants— also aimed to stimulate the sale of his books. Indeed, in the preface to the sales catalogue his international scholarly networks are highly acclaimed.

Photo 3: Genealogy of the Sayyids. (UBL Plano 53 F 1: 54; 36 x 53 cm.)

(4) Posters underlining the authority of Sayyid 'Uthman

In addition to these posters on the genealogy of the Sayyids in general, three charts are known to me which present the intellectual genealogy of Sayyid 'Uthman himself. These posters do not show the physical ancestors, but the
4. Occasional posters

(1) Introduction

Until now, the posters shown were largely of an educational nature, meant to educate the audience and to provide information. All of these posters were mentioned in the sales catalogue as *jadwal* and, clearly, in addition to the educational or edifying purpose had a commercial goal. Next to this type of posters, Sayyid 'Uthman also produced another type, which, in contrast with those dealt with so far, are not mentioned in the sales catalogue and were not for sale. This type was linked to a particular historical occasion and is even rarer. However, in the course of my research I have been able to retrieve a number of these, which I shall turn to now.

(2) Sarekat Islam

An extremely interesting example of this is a poster that relates to the Sarekat Islam, the first indigenous nationalist mass movement in the Netherlands East Indies. In an earlier publication,\(^6\) I have shown that the document dates from the end of 1913 (when Sayyid 'Uthman was already more than 90 years of age!), when the movement was still in its initial stage and the exact character of the movement was still unclear to most people (including the colonial authorities). For this reason, Sayyid 'Uthman's support for the Sarekat Islam as expressed in this document forms an interesting piece of historical information.

The poster is printed in big letters and consists of an ‘Advice’ (*nasihat*) in Malay given by Sayyid 'Uthman. The copy which I have seen is kept in the KITLV library in Leiden, the Netherlands and bears a handwritten note in Arabic which reads: ‘This is what the government (al-dawla) had printed and ordered to be hung on the doors of the mosques’ (Photo 5).\(^7\)

\(^6\) For more details see Kaptein 2007.

\(^7\) This document was discovered in a file with other documents in the KITLV archives in Leiden in the autumn of 2004. This file originates from the personal archive of C. Snouck Hurgronje, which at the beginning of the 1980s was moved from the Snouck Hurgronje Mansion (Rapenburg 61, Leiden), partly to the Leiden University Library and partly to the KITLV, e-mail dated 15 February 2008 from Prof. Jan Jast Wilkam.
I translate this text as follows:

[quote] Advice of Sayyid 'Uthman in line with religion and with a pure heart towards the state (nego). 

This advice is an explanation and clarification for those people who do not yet know what the Sarekat Islam is and who do not yet understand what its aims are.

To start with, you should be aware that the rise of the Sarekat Islam and its aims consist of the two matters which are mentioned below.

Firstly, its goal is to advise to the Muslim population to assist each other (bentolong-tolongan) in carrying out the obligations of religion in performing the salat and in giving instruction on the rules of the religious obligations, neither of which do any harm to the government (nego) or anything else. The sole aim is to obtain the complacency of Almighty God and to safeguard against His Punishment.

Secondly, the aim of the Sarekat Islam is to advise to the indigenous population (bumi putra) to assist each other in carrying out the obligations of religion in order to strive to for a pious life (kehidupan halal), so that protection against the spread of poverty will be obtained, as well as freedom from inferiority. Because of these two matters, we trust that the Sarekat Islam will remain loyal (kehajikan) towards the government, while it will display its benefit to the government even more than it has done already.

Moreover, you must know that it is not the aim of the Sarekat Islam that its members become aggressive or arrogant or do anything harmful. Any suspicion of this kind is absolutely out of order! And likewise this conduct is abhorrent to the Sarekat Islam. On the contrary, it brings the name of the Sarekat Islam into discredit. People who behave like this should be stopped from doing so'.

[signed] Sayyid 'Uthman [unquote]

Interestingly, we see that in this period the colonial government was apparently prepared to finance the dissemination of this pro-SI poster.

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8 This translation is also included in Kaptein 2007: 109-110.
(3) Warning against the drinking of dirty water

This is an undated poster which, mindful of the axiom of the 'ulama' ‘avoidance is the best medicine’ (Arabic al-khimya ra's al-tibb), warns people to stay away from everything which might make a person ill, specifically in times of cholera. In particular, one is prescribed not to drink water from the river, but from drilled wells. In case this is not available, one should boil the water before use. Moreover, one should cover food and not consume food which has been in touch with dirty water. Based on the religious prescription ‘cleanliness is part of the faith’ (Arabic al-mazafa min al-iman), one is also obliged to clean one’s body, clothes, and dwelling place. The text ends as follows:

‘All religious obligations to avoid what has just been mentioned and to clean what has just been mentioned are completed in line with that which the state government has ordered. For both rules have the aim to protect the native population and therefore have become an obligation to be followed’ (Photo 6). 9

(4) Animal protection

I found this Malay poster in a small booklet, entitled Nasihat daiang buat menegah atas menyakit binatang, which Sayyid 'Uthman published in 1899. As is indicated by its title ('Welcome advice to prohibit the harming of animals'), this brochure is a plea to treat animals well, based on arguments from the Islamic scholarly tradition, a.o. from the work of al-Ghazali and Ibn Hajar, which argue that it is a great sin to harm animals. The poster, which apparently accompanied this booklet, also appeals not to harm animals unnecessarily. In addition to religious arguments not to do so, it tries to persuade the audience with practical arguments. If one overloads his animals of burden, they decrease in value; and, if one shoots birds that eat worms and lice, these pests will eat the crops. 10

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9 This poster is kept in the KITLV Archive H 1083 nr. 83; size 28 x 39.
10 In my forthcoming biography of Sayyid 'Uthman I will go more deeply into the arguments in favour of animal protection and the background of this work. The poster is included in UBL 8190 F 12.
5. Conclusions

Having shown some of the posters of Sayyid 'Uthman, one can wonder how they have to be classified according to the classification of Timmers, mentioned above. Given the fact that Sayyid 'Uthman was an orthodox and puritan scholar, it is no surprise that he did not produce posters in the Pleasure and Leisure domain. Likewise the category of Commerce and Communication is not represented. In fact, all of his posters fall within the category of Protest and Propaganda, since all of them aimed to promote certain issues and ideas.

In promoting these ideas, we can see that Sayyid 'Uthman mainly produced posters of an educational nature, which were designed to transfer basic religious knowledge to the people and to explain religious rules and regulations. In doing so, Sayyid 'Uthman remained faithful to his orthodox understanding of Islam. He did not produce posters to support more popular religious manifestations of Islam, as is often the case. For instance, some posters depict the sandal print of the Prophet, which is used as a kind of amulet. Other posters, or rather the people or objects depicted in them, form an object of devotion, something that appears to occur in South Asia quite often as a result of the Hindu influence (Jamal J. Elias 2009).

What comes closest to this idea in the posters of Sayyid 'Uthman is the remark in the sales catalogue referred to above that the genealogical tree of the Prophets renders a blessing (baraka) upon the house where it is hung, but this is apparently not considered to be unorthodox.

Another characteristic of the posters of Sayyid 'Uthman is that they contain more text than images. Images can convey very powerful messages, as we have seen, for instance, in the Danish cartoon crisis. In his writings, Sayyid 'Uthman often makes use of powerful language, but the graphic images he employs are mainly used to support or better structure and explain the contents of the text. Perhaps this has to do with the rather primitive technology Sayyid 'Uthman had at his disposal.

As a final, more general, conclusion, I would like to mention here that I have shown that in studying the history and present condition of Islam in Southeast Asia the study of Islamic posters is important as an addition to the study of kitab. Similar to the kitab, they transfer religious knowledge and provide certain information and ideas to the Muslim population. Given the importance of this type of material, we are fortunate that a number of these rare posters from the Dutch East Indies have been preserved in the Leiden University Library. We are even more fortunate in this case, because these posters originate from a rather early period, the oldest being lithographed in the 1870s.\[11\]

Having established this, at the same time this should stimulate us to preserve those posters that are published today; just as we now profit from historical posters, future generations might benefit from what is currently being produced and collected. From a broader perspective, we might also think of studying Islamic posters from different parts of the world, as well as from different periods of time. In doing so, we might gain a unique insight into the similarities and dissimilarities between various Muslim peoples, and gain more insight into the unity and diversity within Islam.

References


Bruineness, M. van, no year. Kitab Kunir. Islamic books in Arabic script published in Southeast Asia, collected in Indonesia, Malaysia and Patani by... in 1887-1983, 6 volumes, Jakarta.


\[11\] This is indeed early given the fact that printing among the indigenous population in the Dutch East Indies (independent from government-related printing activities) began from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, see Kaptein 1993 and Peeters 1996.
Photos of the workshop

Photo 1: The Audience is absorbed in Dr. Nico Kaptein’s paper.

Photo 2: Dr. Oman Fatuhrahman is reading his paper.
Photo 3: Prof. Kawashima is introducing speakers to the audience.

Photo 4: Showing the lively debate after the presentation of a paper.