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**Remembering Java's Islamization:
A View from Sri Lanka**

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Remembering Java's Islamization: A View from Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION*

Let us imagine a group of people sitting together and listening to a narrative recited aloud. They are assembled in a Sri Lankan home, perhaps in Colombo's Slave Island or Kandy's Kampong Pensen, around the turn of the twentieth century. The reciter is reading from a Malay manuscript written in Arabic script, and the story he is telling his audience - titled *Hikayat Tuan Gusti* - recounts the early Islamization of Java. In the following pages I explore the significance of this seemingly unlikely scene and consider, especially, how and why memories of a Javanese conversion to Islam were sustained in Sri Lanka through an on-going engagement with such narratives. I suggest that this engagement represented a reaching back towards an earlier era of globalization during which Islamic civilization was spreading to places ever farther from its site of emergence, including Southeast Asia. And that although that earlier period predated the telegraph, nationalism, and other emblems of modernity now associated with globalization, it too was marked by diverse interactions among peoples, places and texts, by a contraction of space, and by multiple forms of mobility. Reading the *Hikayat Tuan Gusti* in the early twentieth century was, in part, about imagining an earlier global age while living through another in the present.¹

The theme of mobility - of individuals, beliefs, symbols and practices - is central to the *Hikayat's* account. This focus on movement, coupled with the emphasis on religious conversion, highlights relationships and contacts that go beyond Sri Lanka's shores and link its small Malay community to distant places, times past, and a global community of Muslims. Thinking about these connections - and in particular their spatial and temporal dimensions as represented both within the story and at the scene of its retelling - is important for what it reveals about networks, community, and memory. Particularly significant are the memories of Islam's earlier expansion which, in the colonial world of the late nineteenth century, may well have been tinged with nostalgia. The *Hikayat's* emphasis on mobility and travel echoes with the Malay community's ties to this global past and evokes the far reaching networks - of literature, trade, and proselytization - that shaped the community's own distant history.

Several elements of this particular history will be discussed below. More broadly, the Sri Lankan Malays were part of the complex picture of Islam's long standing presence in the Indian Ocean region where trade, travel and sufi brotherhoods have been viewed as central to Islam's dissemination and expansion and where prominent Muslim communities lay claim to

* I wish to thank B.A Hussainmiya and B.D.K. Saldin for generously sharing their knowledge of the Sri Lankan Malay community with me; John Rogers for inviting me to present a paper on the subject in Colombo; and Jim Gelvin, Nile Green, Charley Hallisey, Ian Proudfoot, Bhavani Raman and Jonathan Spencer for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.

¹ Hikayat refers narrowly to a story or tale, but as a Malay genre has come to encompass a broad range of topics and writing styles, from romance to adventure and from history to autobiography. Tuan and gusti are both honorific titles, the former Malay and the latter Javanese, that could be loosely translated as 'mister,' 'master,' 'lord,' or 'prince.' The title of the manuscript could be rendered as The tale of Tuan Gusti, or The life of Tuan Gusti.

Arab descent.² In the Indonesian-Malay lands from whence came the Sri Lankan community's ancestors, historical evidence points to a slow and gradual process of Islamization by which Islam was established in northern Sumatra by the late thirteenth century, in Northeast Malaya, Brunei and parts of Java in the fourteenth century, in Malacca and additional areas of the Malay Peninsula in the fifteenth century, and in most of the coastal areas of East and Central Java but not yet its western region and interior by the sixteenth century.³ Turning to Southeast India, archaeological evidence suggests an Islamic presence rooted in Arab trade in that region since the eighth century AD, whereas the Malabar coast of Southwest India lay along Arab trade routes since pre-Islamic times.⁴ Sri Lanka itself, also known to the Arabs prior to the advent of Islam, has long been associated with the important pilgrimage site of Adam's Peak where, according to early Arab traditions, Adam was believed to have fallen from Paradise to earth. The Sumatran, Javanese, Coromandel, Malabar and Sri Lankan coasts, among others, were part of the Indian Ocean's commercial networks where coastal towns that functioned as important trade hubs and ports developed into major centers of Islamic learning and culture.

Literature was an important component of Islamic cultural production. The discussion in the following pages stems from, and expands on, my work on such literature produced by Muslim communities in South India and the Indonesian-Malay world. In particular, I've considered how circulating stories, literary genres, idioms and ideas connected Muslims from diverse regions of South and Southeast Asia, producing and sustaining a sense of shared narratives, shared knowledge and a common past. Thinking about the broad contours of the Sri Lankan Malays' literary culture, and about the *Hikayat Tuan Gusti* in particular, can contribute to our understanding of the inter-connectedness of Asian Muslim societies. It also allows us to see the ways one such society reflected on its past and its present during the final years of what has been coined "the first age of globalization," with such reflections themselves - focusing as they did on a prior globalized epoch - complicating the notion of originality central to this temporal categorization.

I begin by introducing the idea of "literary networks." These have served, along with the oft-discussed networks of trade, travel and sufi brotherhoods, to connect Muslims from diverse regions and cultures. I then briefly discuss the history of the Malays of Sri Lanka, a community that was deeply invested in literary production and networks. The next section explores the way conversion to Islam was represented and remembered within this community through a reading of the *Hikayat Tuan Gusti*. Finally, I consider what it meant to

² These communities include, among others, the Moors of Sri Lanka and the Maraikkāyars of Tamil Nadu. On the Moors see M.A.M Shukri, "Introduction," in M.A.M Shukri (ed.) *Muslims of Sri Lanka: Avenues to Antiquity* (Beruwala: Jamiah Naleemia Institute, 1986) 21, and Asiff Hussain, *Sarandib. An Ethnological Study of the Muslims of Sri Lanka* (Dehiwala: A.J Prints) 2-21.

The appellation Moor is a contested one. On the controversy see Dennis B. McGilvray, "Arabs, Moors and Muslims: Sri Lankan Muslim ethnicity in regional perspective," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 32, 433-483.

³ Merle Calvin Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since C. 1200*, 4th ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008). 3-10.

⁴ On the Islamization of the Tamil region see Susan Elizabeth Schomburg, "'Reviving Religion': The Qadiri Sufi Order, Popular Devotion to Sufi Saint Muhyiuddin 'Abdul Qadir Al-Gilani, and Processes Of 'Islamization' In Tamil," Ph.D Dissertation, Harvard, 2003. 19-20; On Malabar see Sebastian R. Prange, "Like Banners on the Sea: Muslim Trade Networks and Islamization in Malabar and Maritime Southeast Asia," in R. Michael Feener and Terenjit Sevea (eds.) *Islamic Connections: Muslim Societies in South and Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2009) 28-29.

imagine a pre-telegraph, pre-steamship globalized past that continued to exert its influence on those engaged in a globalized present, one marked by reading newspapers, serving in the British police, and educating children in modern schools.

LITERARY NETWORKS

When considering Islamic civilization and the histories of its circuits and networks, South and Southeast Asia have been, and remain, crucially important regions in terms of linguistic and cultural diversity as well as intellectual and literary output. They are also home to the world's majority of Muslims. A better understanding of the nature of contacts, exchange and transmission between and within these regions offers insight on the broad contours of Islamic history as well as its very local manifestations.

Different kinds of networks, often intertwined, traversed these regions, forging connections between and among individuals and communities. To the networks of travel, trade, and sufi brotherhoods, mentioned above and often presented in the scholarship as the paths by which Islam spread and flourished in these regions, I propose adding the literary networks: these connected Muslims across boundaries of space and culture, and helped introduce and sustain a complex web of prior texts and new interpretations, crucial to the establishment of both local and global Islamic identities.⁵

The literary networks I consider were comprised of many shared works, including stories, poems, genealogies, histories, and treatises on a broad range of topics; they also included the readers, listeners, authors, translators and scribes who created the texts, translated and transmitted them, and engaged with them in various ways, thus facilitating the networks, enhancing their reach and significance. Beyond particular texts and individuals, thinking about literary networks also means exploring the multi-layered histories of contacts, selection, interpretation and serendipity that shaped the networks as we have come to know them.

Many literary works circulating among Muslims were told and re-told in local languages which were profoundly influenced and shaped by the influx of Arabic, defined broadly as the bearer of new stories, ideas, beliefs, scripts, and linguistic and literary forms. Such inscribed texts, as well as oral sources, poetics and genres, were to a large extent shared by Muslims across these linguistically and culturally diverse regions. They contributed to the rise of a common repository of images, memories and meaning fostering a consciousness of belonging to a trans-local community. The two way connections many literary works had— both to a larger Islamic world and to very local communities - made them dynamic sites of interaction, contestation, and negotiations of boundaries. Competing agendas (as, for example, between creative and standardizing impulses), often played out between their pages.

That many literary works were shared among Muslim communities across South and Southeast Asia was a product of the mobility and travels of traders, teachers and explorers who facilitated the transmission and circulation of written texts, oral knowledge and performative traditions through which stories were enacted and guidance conveyed. However, as Pollock has written “literary representations can conceptually organize space, and the

⁵ For an expanded discussion of the idea of literary networks see Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 1-11, 260-267.

dissemination of literary texts can turn that space into a lived reality, as much as space and lived realities condition conceptual organization and dissemination.”⁶

Islamic literature, in its various forms, thus also produced a shared space through its circulation, and with that space was created a socio-textual or, more pertinently here, a religio-textual community - the community for which literature is produced, in which it circulates, and which derives a portion of its self understanding as a community from the acts of hearing, reading, performing, reproducing and circulating particular literary texts. Because of Islam’s universal message and the presence of Muslims in many world regions, the Islamic space and communities produced by circulating texts in South and Southeast Asia were by definition both local and global in nature: written in languages like Tamil or Javanese they certainly addressed local and circumscribed audiences, yet their content, reliance on Arabic terminology and genres, and perspectives on topics from cosmology to mysticism that were common across languages meant that they also inspired much wider, cross-cultural and global affiliations. And in addition to producing literature in local languages, diverse communities in South and Southeast Asia had long standing traditions of writing in Arabic, a vehicle of expression commanding the status of a cosmopolitan language. The study of Islamic literary cultures thus casts light on how literary dissemination, translation, and adaptation gave rise to a form of religious globalization.

There is perhaps no better case to explore than that of the Sri Lankan Malays - a community of Southeast Asian descent living in South Asia - when striving to understand the inter-connectedness of Asian Muslim societies as reflected in circulating stories, literary genres, idioms and ideas that produced and nurtured a sense of shared narratives and history, and in considering how literary networks continued to sustain trans-regional memories and identities into the twentieth century.⁷ The Sri Lankan Malays’ history, and notably their rich literary output, offer insights on the questions of literary transmission and circulation, networks, and Islamization as remembered and imagined in South and Southeast Asia.

THE SRI LANKAN MALAYS – A BRIEF HISTORY

The history of the present 'Malay' community in Sri Lanka goes back to the middle of the seventeenth century, following the foundation of Dutch rule in the island in 1658.⁸ The ancestors of today’s community came from diverse backgrounds. Many were of Javanese or east Indonesian ancestry, exiled to Sri Lanka by the Dutch as political exiles and convicts,

⁶ Sheldon Pollock, “Introduction,” in Sheldon Pollock (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 27.

⁷ These post cold war regional designations (as well as the names of nation-states) are clearly anachronistic, but they serves to highlight how our current divisions of the world tend to obscure very different earlier mappings. From the mid-seventeenth century until the end of the eighteenth both present day Sri Lanka and Indonesia were part of “Dutch Asia.”

⁸ For evidence of an earlier, pre-colonial Malay presence in Sri Lanka see Hussein 2007: 408, and B.D.K. Saldin, *The Sri Lankan Malays and Their Language. Orang Melayu Sri Lanka dan Bahasanya* (Kurunegala: 2001) 1-4.

sent there in various capacities to serve the Dutch, or recruited as soldiers to colonial armies, both Dutch and, at a later stage, British.⁹

A portion of the political exiles were members of ruling families in their home country. For example, the Javanese prince Amangkurat III (also known as Susunan Mas) of Surakarta was exiled along with his retinue in 1708 while the king of Gowa was exiled in 1767. Also exiled during the eighteenth century were, among others, the prince of Bantam, crown prince of Tideore and the king of Kupang.¹⁰ Another important figure exiled by the Dutch even earlier (1684) was Sheikh Yusuf of Makassar, a leader, religious scholar and ‘saint’ from Sulawesi.¹¹ Such prominent figures had followers who joined them in exile and often also a local following in Sri Lanka.

Some members of the community eventually returned to their places of origin, as was the case when Natakusuma and several members of the Yogyakarta *kraton* were sent back to Java in 1758 following a request by Mangkubumi (later Sultan Hamengkubuwana I).¹² Many, however, stayed, married in Sri Lanka and lived out their lives there, whether out of choice or being deprived of any alternative: among the former were Malay soldiers who refused a 1799 call from the Dutch authorities in Java to “repatriate” after the colony was transferred to British hands;¹³ among the latter, those who had no choice but to remain in Sri Lanka, was Siti Hapipa, widow of the exiled Sultan of Gowa (r. 1753-1767) whose 1807 letter to the Governor General of the Dutch East Indies in Batavia testifies to great hardship. In it Siti

⁹ The appellations used to identify the community have shifted over time. The designation ‘Malay’ was commonly used by the British, since their arrival in 1796, to refer to members of the community and was based first and foremost on their collective language. The name received added currency when new arrivals came from the British settlements of Malaya and Singapore during the nineteenth century. Previously the Dutch referred to the group as “the Easterners” (*Oosterlingen*), another blanket term that did not hint at the diversity of their home regions. According to Hussainmiya this tendency reflected the fact that many of the “Easterners” had been living in Batavia before coming to Sri Lanka and so may have developed a sense of community and shared identity that reflected that experience rather than their individual, geographically diverse backgrounds. However, the designation “Javanese” (*Javaans*) is also used in some Dutch sources, especially after the mid-eighteenth century, and could suggest that Javanese people formed a majority within the community in its formative stages or, again, that with many coming from Batavia (situated on Java), it indicated their site of departure to Sri Lanka, see B.A. Hussainmiya, *Lost Cousins: The Malays of Sri Lanka* (Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1987) 55-57. At present the ‘Malays’ are known as *Ja minnu* in Sinhala and *Jāva maṇusar* in Tamil (people from Java); as *Malai karar* (Malay people) by the Moors; and refer to themselves as both *orang Jawa* and *orang Melayu* (Javanese and Malay people, respectively). This shifting nomenclature, its imposition from without and adoption from within during different periods, and its relationship to the ways in which the past was understood and narrated are beyond the scope of this chapter but deserve further attention. The term *Jawa*, or more often *Jawi*, was used widely to refer to all Southeast Asian Muslims, see Michael F. Laffan, “Finding Java: Muslim Nomenclature of Insular Southeast Asia from Srivijaya to Snouck Hurgronje,” *Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Islam, Movement and the Long Durée*, ed. Eric Tagliacozzo (Singapore: NUS, 2009) 17-64. In the case of Sri Lanka, however, the use of *orang Jawa* seems to indicate a particular connection to Java.

¹⁰ B.A. Hussainmiya, *Orang Rejimen. The Malays of the Ceylon Rifle Regiment* (Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1990) 39.

¹¹ Sheikh Yusuf spent several years in Sri Lanka and was exiled yet further to South Africa, where he died, and where his tomb still attracts large numbers of pilgrims.

¹² Merle Calvin Ricklefs, *Jogjakarta under Sultan Mangkubumi 1749-1792. A History of the Division of Java* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974) 102.

¹³ Saldin 2001: 8.

Hapipa begs the Dutch ruler to free her from the burden of her deceased husband's debt and in exchange offers to return to Batavia and be at his service.¹⁴

The largest sub-group within the early Malay population were the soldiers who served in the Dutch army, taking part in attacks on Portuguese fortifications in Sri Lanka and the Malabar coast, and in the expeditions against the king of Kandy.¹⁵ After the British took control of Sri Lanka in 1796, and throughout the nineteenth century, many of the Malays joined the military regiments established by the British, serving the new colonial power. This incorporation into the British army was due in no small measure to the bravery the Malays had exhibited in opposing the British, and subsequent British admiration for their military abilities, as well as a constant need on the part of the British to police the island. In 1873 the Ceylon Rifle Regiment, where several generations of Malay men had served, was disbanded. The history of the Regiment has been explored in depth elsewhere and is beyond the scope of this chapter.¹⁶ What is pertinent to my own inquiry, however, is the quite remarkable relationship between life in the Regiment and Malay literary culture: members of the Regiment copied classical Malay works and also wrote their own stories and poems, especially in the form of *syair*; the literature's principal promoters and audiences were related, in one way or another, to the Regiment; members of the Regiment conducted compulsory lessons for Malay children, instructing them in Malay written in jawi script, ensuring that the literature remained intelligible to the next generation; soldiers who travelled to Malaya on assignment served as a bridge between the community in Sri Lanka and the large Malay centers to the east by guaranteeing a two way movement of ideas, religious texts, and people between them. Evidence of this multi-faceted investment in Malay literary culture is found in the fact that most manuscripts collected to date were in the possession of the soldiers' descendants.¹⁷ Some texts, including the *Hikayat Tuan Gusti* (see below), explicitly acknowledge their scribes' status as Regiment retirees

Sri Lankan Malay manuscripts, written and copied through the early twentieth century, have survived in archives and private collections. These include many poetic works, early histories of Islam depicting episodes from the Prophet Muhammad's life, literary narratives written in the *hikayat* genre and theological treatises. The majority of these works are known from across the Malay world but certain poems and stories appear to be the products of local creativity.¹⁸ If we are to consider representations of religious experiences and events, the rootedness of their memory in an earlier globalized era, and the narration of such memories within the Sri Lankan Malay community at the turn of the twentieth century, it is to this

¹⁴ Suryadi, "Sepucuk Surat Dari Seorang Bangsawan Gowa di Tanah Pembuangan (Ceylon)," *Wacana: Jurnal Ilmu Pengetahuan Budaya* 10.2 (2008) 222-226.

¹⁵ Hussainmiya 1990: 44.

¹⁶ Hussainmiya 1990.

¹⁷ Saldin 2001: 11-12.

¹⁸ Examples of trans-Malay works include *Hikayat Sri Rama*, *Hikayat Ahmad Muhammad*, *Hikayat Amir Hamzah*, *Sirat al-Mustaqim*. Examples of local Malay works include *Hikayat Indera Kuraisy*, *Syair Syaikh Fadlun* and a host of additional *syairs* and *pantuns*. Hussainmiya 1990: 140-142.

literature that we must turn. Among such remembered experiences the embracing of Islam is perhaps most momentous.¹⁹

REMEMBERING CONVERSION TO ISLAM

Conversion to Islam is narrated in countless texts (as well as oral forms and performative traditions) in many South and Southeast Asian languages. Such accounts, despite their diversity, often share a great deal. For example, many emphasize the powers and charisma of individuals who carried the new religion from afar, thus highlighting the tropes of travel and mobility; miracles such as feeding the hungry and curing the sick feature prominently; dreams, too, are often evoked, with rulers waking to find themselves circumcised, conversing in Arabic or still in awe having experienced a personal encounter with the Prophet.²⁰

The 1897 *Hikayat Tuan Gusti* from Sri Lanka testifies to the persistence of such circulating conversion narratives across South and Southeast Asia. Narrated in Malay written in Arabic script (jawi) on South Asian soil, not far from the site where according to Arab traditions Adam is said to have fallen from the heavens to earth, the *Hikayat* recounts the biography of one of the nine Javanese ‘saints’ (J. *wali sanga*), Sunan Giri, employing it to retell the story of Java’s Islamization.²¹ In all these attributes - its site of writing, language, script and content - the *Hikayat* attests to complex and protracted transmission and circulation patterns that have resulted in interconnected images and echoes of earlier conversions, themselves loci of religious and cultural transformation of great magnitude that continued to reverberate through time.²²

¹⁹ Not all members of the early Malay community in Sri Lanka in Dutch times were Muslims. Some who came from Bali and Ambon, as well as Java, were not, although it is often difficult to establish their religious identity with certainty. However, the majority of the early community was Muslim and with time Islam came to be a common feature of the community and, along with the Malay language, came to define it. Hussainmiya 1987: 58.

²⁰ See, for example, Russel Jones, "Ten Conversion Myths from Indonesia," *Conversion to Islam*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1979) 129-158; D.A Rinkes, *Nine Saints of Java*, trans. H.M Froger (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1996); Shaik Hasan Sahib S.A Qadhiri, *The Divine Light of Nagore* (Nagore: Habeen & Fahira Publishers, 1998).

²¹ According to tradition Sunan Giri died in 1506 and is buried in Gresik. Wali, from Arabic *walī*, is usually translated as ‘protégé,’ ‘apostle,’ or ‘saint.’

²² A photocopy of the *Hikayat* manuscript was first generously given to me by B.A Hussainmiya. The discussion below is based on Subidara Mursid, *Hikayat Tuan Gusti*, 1897. Hussainmiya Collection, Department of National Archives, Colombo. Microfilm reel 182. The author self identifies as a retiree of the Ceylon Rifle regiment. The final lines read: *Tamat Hikayat Tuan Gusti yaum alsabt jam dua tengari bulan sa'aban 21 bulan Inggris 22 Januari hijrah 1897. Menulis Subida Ramurasiti pension Selon Raifil Rajimit. Jua adapun aku pesan pada sekalian tuan yang suka membaca hikayat ini jangan saka qalburnya supaya dirahmatkan Allah SWT dari dunia sampai keakhirat* (Thus ends the *Hikayat Tuan Gusti*, Saturday at 2 p.m, the 21st of Sha'aban, (“the English month of) January 22, 1897. Written by Subida Ramurasiti, a retiree of the Ceylon Rifle Regiment. I instruct all those who find pleasure in reading this *Hikayat*: do not allow it (to leave, drift from) your heart so that you may be granted God’s mercy in this world and the next”). I have added the punctuation to the Malay citation.

The genealogy of the *Hikayat* is unknown. Some of its elements are very similar to those appearing in Javanese tellings of Sunan Giri's biography.²³ However, no Javanese manuscripts have been found in Sri Lanka to date. Interestingly, its narrative is not traceable to any known Malay literary work from across Southeast Asia.²⁴ This is unusual as the majority of Malay works written in Sri Lanka are well known also in the wider Malay world and can be found in private and public libraries in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, as well as the UK and the Netherlands. Besides the *Hikayat* I have only been able to locate a single Malay telling of Sunan Giri's biography, one constituting an inter-linear translation from Javanese.²⁵ Whether the *Hikayat* manuscript exemplar is a copy of an older text, brought to Sri Lanka in the early eighteenth century by Javanese exiles, or whether it was introduced there in later years, its very existence as well as its content are suggestive of an on going circulation of conversion narratives in South and Southeast Asia and their susceptibility to contemporary and differentiated reinterpretation. The *Hikayat* may have been told initially in oral form and then put into writing, re-imagining conversion on Java to fit local circumstances and indicating both a trans-regional connection to the Archipelago and to the local community in Sri Lanka, offering a particular perspective on the wali stories and conversion

Although not widely recounted in Malay the *Hikayat*'s story is, as mentioned, well known in Javanese tradition, the biography of one of the nine 'saint' who are said to have converted Java to Islam. There is a multitude of versions of these popular stories and the prominence of one wali or another is very much region-specific. There are many commonalities in these stories, as already noted, including the walis arriving from afar, performing miracles, tending to the needy, accommodating local culture. The story as told in Sri Lanka resembles Javanese versions quite closely but also differs from them.

The *Hikayat* may well represent the farthest limits of the circulation in manuscript form of the wali tales. Sunan Giri (ascribed the honorific Javanese titles *radèn* and *gusti* as well as the Malay *tuan* throughout) is portrayed as the son of the Arabian Sheikh Muḥīddīn. The Sheikh, by virtue of his powers of intercession, averted a calamity about to befall the kingdom of Palembang (on the island of Sumatra) and in return was given the king's daughter in marriage. He later returned to his land and the princess, who had converted to Islam, died in childbirth. Palembang's king feared his infant grandson whose face glowed like the full moon and, putting him in a basket on the river (in a motif familiar from the biblical story of Moses as well as the Javanese chronicles of the prophet's uncle Ménak Amir Hamzah) sent him away, only to be subsequently found and raised by a wealthy merchant woman. The boy grew into a man exhibiting many of the characteristics typical of the walis and other Muslim saints: travelling widely, interceding on behalf of the needy, performing miracles, marrying a local princess and propagating Islam.

The portrayal of Sunan Giri as the son of Sheikh Muḥīddīn is suggestive. The "original" Muḥīddīn (A. Muḥyīuddīn, "reviver of religion") was of course Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240), but the epithet is also widely associated with the greatest of all Muslim saints, 'Abdul Qādir al-

²³ For a recent re-telling in Indonesian, based on the eighteenth century Javanese *Serat Centhini*, see Hariwijaya, *Kisah Para Wali* (Yogyakarta: Nirwana, 2003) 62-102.

²⁴ Hussainmiya 1990: 137.

²⁵ Antoine Cabaton, "Raden Paku, Sunan de Giri (Legende Musulmane Javanaise). Texte Malais, Traduction Francaise et Notes," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 54 (1906) 374-400. This is a much abridged version.

Jilānī (1077-1166). Although several of the walis are said to have had foreign, and most notably Arab, fathers or ancestors, the intimate connection in this telling between Sunan Giri and a figure of such supreme importance in Muslim history and culture is striking. In addition, as a descendent of Sheikh Muḥiddīn, himself a great preacher of Islam, Sunan Giri's genealogy stretches back to the Prophet Muhammad. The appearance of this motif in a Sri Lankan manuscript may reflect its Javanese source. Javanese biographies of the Sheikh circulated in Central Java and were especially popular in the western part of the island. Portraying Sunan Giri as Sheikh Muḥiddīn's son may also be attributed to close contacts between the Malay and Tamil-Muslim communities in Sri Lanka, as the Sheikh was a central focus of devotion among Tamil Muslims in south India and Sri Lanka and the subject of a wide array of Tamil literary works since the seventeenth century.²⁶ According to localized hagiographical traditions Sheikh Muḥiddīn travelled to places like Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka and Java during his many years of wandering and asceticism before returning to Baghdad at the age of forty, in which case he could have fathered Sunan Giri along the way.

IMAGES OF CONVERSION

The *Hikayat Tuan Gusti* stresses several conversion elements repeatedly while remaining silent on others. The erection of mosques, prayer (both communal and individual), the recital of the *shahāda* and the complete shunning of idolatry (*M. berhala*) are consistently upheld. The latter in particular is highlighted when the narrative opens with an idol worshipped by the Palembang king falling to the ground and shattering, signifying approaching doom for the non-believers. Throughout the *Hikayat* different communities encountered by Sunan Giri and his representatives are reminded to refrain from resorting to idolatry. This may reflect the author's concerns in late nineteenth century Buddhist-majority Sri Lanka projected on an earlier, imagined Java. The belief in, or devotion to the Prophet is also emphasized as is the adoption of a new name upon conversion. For example, when Dewi Aranadani, the Palembang princess converts before marrying the Sheikh, she is given the name Siti Jini.

War, violence, and a threat towards those who refuse to convert are significant in this telling. This tendency distinguishes the *Hikayat* from many (although by no means all) Javanese wali narratives which tend to stress accommodation and peaceful means in the conversion process.

For instance, when the great infidel king of Kartasuru (likely Kartasura in central Java) sends a messenger to demand that Sunan Giri pay him tribute, the messenger is told to convert but refuses, only to be humiliated and sent home. The king is furious, gathers many allies and a large army and charges at Giri. The Sunan calls upon God for help and a great swarm of bees appears, attacking the enemy. After the king is killed Sunan Giri announces that any opponent caught should be bound but not put to death unless refusing to accept Islam. The people of Kartasuru joyfully agree to convert and return to their land along with two hundred teachers, leaders and muezzins from Giri who will teach them the five 'pillars' of Islam, how to build mosques and recite the *shahāda*. The *Hikayat* contains several such episodes, all portraying an acceptance of Islam after military defeat and under circumstances of significant threat.

²⁶ Schomburg 2003. On pages 375-463 Schomburg discusses no less than fourteen Tamil genres in which works about the saint were composed.

An anxiety about the possibility of a reversal of faith – of converts reverting to old ways – is palpable in the *Hikayat*. In several instances audiences of those who had converted under the influence (spiritual or military) of Sunan Giri are reminded, by him or by his confidante Sunan Panji, not to go back on their commitment. For example, after the king of ‘Alenggar is defeated by Sunan Giri, He embraces Islam. His subjects follow his path and he instructs them to limit or eliminate their idol worshipping, build a mosque, and recite the shahāda and daily prayers, after which they are pronounced to be “perfected in the faith” (M. *sempurna beriman*). Then,

“One Friday all people came to the mosque along with the gurus, leaders and king. They gathered at the mosque and prayed and read the sermon. Afterwards Sunan Panji spoke to those attending the Friday prayer. ‘Listen all of you: old and young, leaders and king. I command you all not to forget the five daily prayers and the Friday prayer. I am about to return to my land. After residing here for four years I will sail away tomorrow.’

After those present heard Sunan Panji’s words they replied: ‘yes our lord, Sunan, all of us shall not forget to pray and recite the Qur’an, and all that you have taught us we will never forsake. And if you meet Tuan Gusti please convey our respect and greetings so that he may not forget us.’”²⁷

Following this episode Sunan Panji seeks out the king and speaks to him in person, reinforcing his message:

“Do not rule as you did previously. Rule according to the Qur’anic prescriptions and maintain the words of the Qur’an as your highest priority.”²⁸

The king replies: “Yes, I will never give precedence to anything above the words of the Qur’an and those of Sunan Giri.”

Before Sunan Panji takes his leave the following day the king asks him, as did his subjects before him, to convey the king’s respect and greetings to Sunan Giri.

The concern that those newly converted would forsake Islam – depicted in this scene and others – is countered, or mirrored by, the converts’ eagerness to be remembered by Sunan Giri (referred to as Tuan Gusti), the man who first introduced them to Islam. A sense of doubt, loss and elusiveness inherent in the conversion process on both sides highlights its stakes. It is a process pervaded with ambiguity, with a sense of insecurity mixing with triumphant confidence, military imposition colliding with long held beliefs, and charismatic personalities from afar encountering local kings, ministers, ascetics and gurus.

The sense of precariousness regarding the depth of conversion is perhaps related to the imposed acceptance of Islam as depicted in the *Hikayat* or, once again, a reflection of the Muslim community’s sense of vulnerability living as a minority within Sri Lankan society. There is a kind of ambivalence emerging from the *Hikayat Tuan Gusti*, a narrative that translated and transmitted the experience of Javanese conversion to South Asia, in which new converts to Islam, perceived as still wavering among deeds, words, and new and old beliefs,

²⁷ Mursid 1897: 96-97. Here and below I have added the punctuation, which does not appear in the Malay manuscript.

²⁸ Mursid 1897: 97.

were admonished to remain Muslim but were themselves depicted as eager to be recognized and remembered, to be accepted into the fold.

The emphasis of the *Hikayat* on the erection of mosques, communal prayer, and the Friday sermon (A. and M. *khutba*) points to the significance accorded to Islamizing practices that would strengthen the emerging community, leading the individuals who recently subscribed to it to fortify their faith.

Sunan Giri also resorts to other means of acquiring and preserving his authority, and thus the power Islam will hold over his followers, to be passed down through his line of descent.²⁹ Towards the end of the *Hikayat* he tells Sunan Panji to deliver iron to a blacksmith (M. *tukang besi*) so that the expert craftsman can produce a *keris*. The *keris*, a kind of dagger, was both a weapon and a highly charged spiritual object, a sacred heirloom passed down through the generations, particularly valued and guarded within the families of Java's ruling class. Sunan Panji immediately asks Sunan Giri to specify the quantity of iron required and the latter instructs him to give the blacksmith 40 *kati* so that the weight of the *keris* can be 20 *kati*.³⁰ Sunan Panji summons a blacksmith by the name of Pandita Qadiman who hurries to meet Sunan Giri, trembling with awe and repeatedly paying obeisance and conveying his respect to the Sunan. After he receives the iron and is told the desired weight of the *keris* Pandita Qadiman takes his leave and journeys to a place called 'Asiqin, where he meditates and performs austerities (*bertapa*), including refraining from food, for forty days and nights. These ascetic practices are meant to generate the special powers needed to produce a *keris* as the *Hikayat* states explicitly that the heat for welding the *keris* should come not from a burning fire but from the inner fire created by the Pandita's practice (Malay and Arabic 'amal). Although the *Hikayat* does not go into the complex details of the art of *keris* making, the mention of the iron's weight and the blacksmith's retreat and austerities while producing the *keris* hint at the critical importance of measurements, materials and especially the spiritual powers of the *keris*-maker that were thought indispensable to producing a potent, supernaturally endowed *keris* in Javanese and Malay societies.³¹

Sunan Giri is pleased with the *keris*, described as exceedingly beautiful, and pays the artisan forty *durham* in gold, perhaps a gold coin payment for every *kati* of iron he initially received. Then Sunan Gusti endows the *keris* with a name, Bintang Awan, a common practice that personalizes the *keris* and is often related to its owner's personality, deeds or wishes. Finally, Sunan Giri takes the *keris* and stores it above the pulpit (A. *minbar*) in the mosque, in a niche in the wall (A. *mihrāb*) that indicates the *kiblat*, the direction of Mecca and thus of Muslim prayer.³²

²⁹ Sunan Giri was the founder of a line of spiritual lords that lasted until 1680, while none of the other *walis* had successors to their authority. Ricklefs 2008: 41.

³⁰ A *kati* equals 625 grams, or 16 *tahil*. The *tahil* (Javanese *tail*, Chinese *tael*) was a widely used weight for gold, silver and opium. *Wilkinson Malay-English Dictionary* (1959) 1149.

³¹ Blacksmiths and other master craftsmen (including poets) were often endowed with the title *Empu* or *Mpu*, one that carried magical or mystical associations. The *Hikayat* does not employ this title for the Pandita. Several Malay families in Sri Lanka still possess *kerises* brought by their ancestors from Indonesia.

³² Sunan Giri's *keris* can apparently still be viewed by privileged visitors to the mosque. In 2009 the then vice-presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto paid a visit to Sunan Giri's tomb in Gresik and was allowed to see and even touch the *keris*. Yoni Iskandar, "Pegang Keris Sunan Giri, Prabowo Bakal Jadi Wapres?" (Will holding Sunan Giri's *keris* propel Prabowo to the vice presidency?) *Kompas* June 24, 2009. www.kompas.com (accessed August 12, 2010). The practice of placing a *keris* in the *mihrāb* deserves further research but appears to be quite unusual.

In the context of considering the ways in which the Islamization of Java was narrated to a Sri Lankan Malay audience through the *Hikayat*, this brief scene is telling. Javanese histories link tales of great armourers with the appearance of the walis, the bearers of Islam, often depicted as the patrons of the armourers' art.³³ This connection between the walis' wisdom and blacksmith knowledge, especially in the literature of the Pasisir period (fifteenth to seventeenth centuries), likely points to a coinciding of the early arrival of Islam on the coasts of northeastern Java (including, especially, Giri and Surabaya) with a flourishing of trade and the arts at the time.³⁴ It may also be an attempt on the part of Javanese authors to reconcile pre-Islamic sites and objects of power with the newly emerging authority of Islam. For the purpose of my discussion the connection made between Sunan Giri, the art and practice of keris making, and the centrality of the mosque as the keeping place of the keris (where it is placed in the wall towards which all believers turn in prayer), suggest that the *Hikayat* was transmitted to Sri Lanka from the Pasisir region of Java, a region that can be said to be the "cradle of Javanese Islam." The region was also the seat of power of Sunan Giri's descendents, where they ruled during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, possessing political and religious command.

In both these respects – as the site of early conversion and a center of an expanding Islamic influence – the region possesses a powerful hold on the imagination when the Islamization of Java is recollected.³⁵ I can only speculate on how much of this history was known to those reading the *Hikayat* or listening to it in 1897 but it may well be that this was the kind of story that was passed down through the generations, itself – like the keris – a kind of heirloom to guard and revere.

LOOKING BACK TO AN EARLIER ERA OF GLOBALIZATION?

What was, and is, the significance of reading the *Hikayat Tuan Gusti*? Why did members of the Malay community in Sri Lanka hold it in high esteem and re-tell it into the twentieth century?³⁶ What does it tell us about the way Islamization was committed to memory, about literary networks and the Malay community's embedded-ness in both local and global contexts?

In the final lines of the *Hikayat* Sunan Giri is preaching at the mosque on Friday and, once again, reminding his audience not to forget to recite the shahāda, to pray five times a day, recite the Qur'an, refrain from doing evil and from eating forbidden foods. The list goes on until, for the first time in the *Hikayat* and immediately before its closing lines, he speaks of the Day of Judgment, the threat of hell, and the promise of paradise. This section is laced with untranslated Arabic terms (*ḥarām*, *mu'min*, *yaum al -qiyāma*, *'amal*, *yā'tīm*) indicating a

³³ The walis are also often depicted as patrons of other art forms, including gamelan music and the wayang shadow theatre.

³⁴ Theodore G. T. Pigeaud, *Literature of Java*, 3 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967-1970) Vol.I:278. Pigeaud speculates on the possibility that increasing amounts of steel were traded along the coast during this period. To Tome Pires, the Portuguese traveller of the 15th century, Gresik, the nearby trading center, was 'the jewel of Java in trading ports,' cited in Ricklefs 2008: 41.

³⁵ The main reason to believe that the *Hikayat* was of eastern Pasisir provenance is that Sunan Giri figures so prominently in it. The veneration of particular walis was, as mentioned, often region-specific.

³⁶ In interviews with community members Hussainmiya found that the *Hikayat* was very popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, personal communication 2009.

Muslim ethos pervading the story, one that nonetheless required repeated reinforcement. Although admonitions to remain Muslim appeared throughout the story, their detail and tone gradually increased, reaching a climax in this final section. Here conversion and its stakes are projected on Java long ago, but in the translated text's closing lines also echo for contemporary listeners in Sri Lanka engaging with, and remembering, the story and its message. Sunan Giri's words – represented as direct speech - in addressing his audience, resound beyond the inner realm of the text, figuratively reaching the ears of those gathered in Colombo and Kandy, instructing and guiding them in their own lives, collapsing the boundaries between past and present.³⁷

But Reading the *Hikayat* in early twentieth century Sri Lanka, towards the end of the “first age of globalization,” was not solely about remembering conversion per se. It was also, in part, about reaching back towards an earlier globalized age, one in which Islamic civilization was spreading into new terrain – in this case Southeast Asia - incorporating additional peoples and cultures into its global fold. Although that earlier period did not witness the steamship or the nation state, it too is represented in textual sources as characterized by powerful forms of mobility, connectedness, and inter-dependence, attributes that at the very least should complicate our acceptance of the adjective “first” in current categorizations - both temporal and substantial - of globalization's history.

Reading the *Hikayat* and other Sri Lankan texts in the present invites us to rethink the boundaries of the “Malay world.” It also provides clear evidence for South/Southeast Asian ties, interactions and exchange among communities across Indonesia, Sri Lankan Muslims, south Indian Muslims, and others, and points to circulation and transmission patterns which have often been difficult to confirm, due in part to the fragmentary nature of available evidence. It allows us to examine an important dimension of such trans-regional contact across Islamic societies – the participation in literary networks - central to the Malay community's sense of identity for at least two centuries.

Additional research is needed to more fully contextualize and understand the processes of writing, copying and retelling the *Hikayat Tuan Gusti* in Sri Lanka. In closing I would like to consider how the significance of this text and its relationship to the broader issues of literary networks, Islamization and memory that I have raised can be encapsulated by the word ‘travel.’

The *Hikayat* is, in a way, a form of earlier (pre-Orientalist, pre-enlightenment age) travel literature. Although it shares some of the features of later literature of this category it has different goals and a different texture to it. It emphasizes movement and travel for the purpose of trade, acquiring knowledge and propagating Islam; it highlights the journeys of Sheikh Muḥiddīn, Sunan Giri's father, from Arabia to Southeast Asia, and those of Sunan Giri himself throughout his career, as well as the travels of sailors, merchants and soldiers. Thinking about the *Hikayat* within paradigms of travel writing may help us see more clearly the significance of mobility – of individuals, ideas, and beliefs – both within the narrative and in its interpretive frameworks. And these forms of mobility, with the contacts, disseminations and contraction of distance – whether physical or symbolic – that they allowed were certainly not first invented in the nineteenth century.

³⁷ For a similar narrative strategy of “pulling” the reader or listener into the story in a different religious tradition, the Hellenic world of the 3rd century, see John Elsner, “Hagiographic Geography: Travel and Allegory in the Life of Apollonius of Tyana,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 117 (1997). 28.

When we think about movement and travel in the Muslim world we find their epitome in the hajj. Sri Lanka is situated on the route from the Archipelago to Arabia, and ships filled with those embarking on the pilgrimage stopped regularly on its shores on their way to the holy cities. Even before the advent of the steam ship and certainly after, this annual movement of people allowed for contact between Sri Lankan Malays and pilgrims from the wide Indonesian-Malay world from whence their ancestors had come. It may be that the more frequent arrival of ships as the nineteenth century progressed created a renewed sense of connection to those lands, and revived awareness of a past shared with both the pilgrims and, in a broader sense, all Muslims. Modern travel, which allowed for faster journeys and a contraction of space as well as for ever growing numbers of pilgrims passing through, meant that Sri Lanka's location along this pivotal path provided the Malays with a reminder of the fast globalizing, technology-savvy, Western dominated world around them but also strengthened their sense of what it meant to be Muslims and members of a community that possessed its own tradition of globalization.³⁸ Attributes of "the first age of globalization" -of accelerating technology, efficiency and speed –crossed paths and interacted with perceptions of an earlier period during which Islam had dramatically extended its geographical and cultural reach. As service in the Malay Regiment, with its rich literary culture, faded into the past, as distances were growing smaller and the forward-moving ships and ideals of modernity seemed to prevail, so was found also, concurrently, a movement back in time and space, pointing us to the ways in which multiple temporalities co-exist and overlap.

This travel back in time is also worth considering when assessing a book like the *Hikayat Tuan Gusti* as a source for thinking about history and its diverse representations. Although the histories of the walis have often been regarded as fantastic, mythical tales that are either entirely fictional or, at best, may contain a grain of barely recognizable truth, the biographies of these important figures – if placed in context both in Java and, much later, in Sri Lanka – can reveal something of how authors, in both places, revised the past transmitted to them by their predecessors in a way that brought it in line with contemporary needs.³⁹ One seemingly minor difference between Sunan Giri's biography as told in Java and in Sri Lanka may hint in this direction: in Javanese versions Sunan Giri eventually meets his long lost father. In the Malay *Hikayat* Sheikh Muḥiddīn returns to Arabia after fathering Sunan Giri, planting a seed in faraway Java but never travelling back to meet his son. We may think of the Sri Lankan Malays as never meeting their "father" or "family" in a metaphorical sense but nonetheless a group that, like Sunan Giri, was able to create a new community of Muslims.

In his introduction to the anthology *Other Routes: 1500 years of African and Asian travel writing*, Tabish Khair writes that "travel, then, is not just a matter of going away. It is also a matter of coming back, even when the return never takes place in person. It is this Janus faced aspect of travel that makes it impossible to separate the "imaginary" elements of travel

³⁸ Print media in the form of books and newspapers was another way by which Sri Lankan Malays strengthened their contacts with Southeast Asia during this period.

³⁹ In thinking about this aspect of reading the *Hikayat* I have been inspired by Felice Lifshitz's work. In her critical discussion of historians' use of the category of "hagiography" to anachronistically describe the biographies of saints written in the ninth to eleventh centuries in Europe, she writes that during that period biographers departed from accepted writing models in order to "enmesh the saint's activities explicitly within a larger historical context... particularly concerning issue of burning concern such as when and how an area was first converted to Christianity..." Felice Lifshitz, "Beyond Positivism and Genre: "Hagiographical" Texts as Historical Narrative," *Viator* 25 (1994).99-100.

from the “real” elements.”⁴⁰ For the Malays of Sri Lanka the *Hikayat* was a way of returning, even if not in person, and only as a journey of the imagination: the travels it depicted foregrounded and represented their travels to their own shared past – a shared ancestry and places that used to be called home – a past that connected them to the communities of Southeast Asia as well as the global Muslim community. Finally, the journeys of Sunan Giri in the *Hikayat* speak also to the travels of the story along trans-regional literary networks, the memories it carried and the representations it transmitted and sustained.

⁴⁰ Tabish Khair, "African and Asian Travel Texts in the Light of Europe: An Introduction," *Other Routes. 1500 Years of African and Asian Travel Writing*, eds. Tabish Khair, Martin Leer, Justin D. Edwards and H. Ziadeh (Oxford: Signal Books, 2006). 2.

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