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REVIEW ARTICLE

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THE POEMS OF HAMZAH FANSURI

Translated, edited and with commentary by G.W.J. Drewes and L.F. Brakel, Dordrecht: Foris, 1986. Bibliotheca Indonesica 26, Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, ix + 285 pp. DFL. 75 (paperback).

This is a book that deserves an enthusiastic welcome. Hamzah Fansuri is the earliest Sumatran author known to us by name. His *nisba*, (al-) Fansūrī, is derived from Fansur, the foreign name for Barus, a pepper town on the north-west coast of Sumatra. He may have died around 1600, although the authors believe an earlier date, circa 1590, is more likely. Little is known of his life, but he has left a corpus of poems and prose writings in the mystical tradition of Ibn ʿArabi written with a verve and a passion never equalled in Malay. A variorum edition of the poems has long been a crying need. The authors need no introduction: Dr. Brakel, a brilliant young scholar who had already written a number of important papers on Hamzah before his tragically early death, barely a year after formal collaboration had begun; and Professor Drewes, who has contributed more than any other individual to establishing the field of Islamic writing in Malay and Javanese as an intellectual discipline in its own right and continues to do so. The field, unfortunately, is still underexploited. Despite their importance for the intellectual history of the region and a fuller appreciation of the achievements of the world of Islam, the spiritual and intellectual traditions of Islam in Southeast Asia are not widely known. Part of the reason is that competence in Arabic and knowledge of the traditional disciplines, such as Qur'anic exegesis, Jurisprudence, Dogmatics and Mysticism are indispensable for the task. Scholars so equipped are more likely to be drawn to a study of the Middle Eastern heartlands of the Islamic world than of the so-called periphery. The fact that Professors Drewes and Brakel have brought such expertise to the study of a Sumatran author makes the publication of their book a major event.

Although less than three hundred pages, this study contains a wealth of material, encapsulating almost all that is known of Hamzah, supported by an excellent bibliography, notes, and a number of appendices on such matters as commentaries on Hamzah by other Malay authors, Javanese renderings of some of his works, and the Arabic element in the poetry. As such, it is a vademecum of much that is needed for a closer study of the poems. The authors' approach is brusque, and their terseness of expression

at times verges on the telegraphic. Their no-nonsense approach, shunning hyperbole, presents Hamzah as a remarkable poet in the Ibn ᶜArabi tradition, whose work shows how well established this tradition was in Sumatra in the 16th century. They include in the volume only those poems of Hamzah they regard as authentic, leaving aside a number of poems occurring in the MSS whose authorship is suspect and to which his name was attributed simply to enhance their status. Their arguments are based on such considerations as style, self-identification of the author in the final stanza of a poem, and demonstrable anachronisms in the theosophical terminology employed. Thus a number of the poems published by Doorenbos in his dissertation (*De Geschriften van Hamzah Pansoeri*, Leiden, 1933) are omitted. Among them is the well-known Sya'ir Perahu, which, although a clumsy pastiche, has found a place in a number of anthologies of Indonesian poetry (and was accepted as genuine by Braginsky, who wrote a long article on it in *BKI* 131:407-26).

They correct a number of errors about Hamzah's life. Hamzah, on the basis of internal evidence, was believed to have visited Banten and Kudus in Java. The poem in which the visit to Banten is mentioned is not authentic. That in which a visit to Kudus is mentioned is indeed authentic, but the authors point out that the word widely taken to refer to the small town of Kudus in East Java in the Arabic script is written *q.d.s.*, and this is to be identified as (al-) Quds, i.e. Jerusalem, it being from Jerusalem that the mystic, as did Muhammad, may ascend to the presence of God. In the discussion of this verse, they highlight another potential source of error in the interpretation of 16th-century Malay, to which even native speakers of Indonesian/Malay are liable: that of succumbing to the pressure of modern usage. Two such contemporary scholars explain the line *Di Barus ke Kudus terlalu payah* as 'From Barus to Kudus he wearily goes' - or words to that effect. Drewes and Brakel show convincingly that it can only mean: '(To travel) From Barus to Jerusalem would have been a wasted effort', with the following line closing the verse: 'for in the end he had found God at home' (p. 10). Such errors are a warning that a knowledge of modern Indonesian alone is not sufficient to come to terms with the Islamic dimension of the region.

Further, they resolve a number of textual uncertainties. One example is the puzzling word *matahari* in a line of poem XXXII (p. 140 verse 7): *supaya jadi engkau matahari*, 'so that you may become the sun'. They propose that *matahari* is a misspelling of the Arabic word *mutahhari(yun)*, and that the line thus means 'so that you may become one purified'.

There are many aspects of the poems that establish Hamzah's individuality. One already mentioned is the inclusion of his name in the last stanza of each poem - indeed, it is something of a paradox that poems giving an account of his quest for *fanā'*, to lose himself in God as a drop of water loses its individuality in the sea, should preserve his name. Another is the remarkable technical skill revealed in such features of the

verses as the rhythm, the varying position of the caesura, and the unforced mastery of rhyme. Yet another is the skillful blending of Arabic words and phrases in the structure of Malay sentences and the invariably felicitous choice of Arabic word forms which rhyme with Malay and with each other. This skill extends to the setting of verses from the Qur'an, *hadith* and mystical apophthegms within the structure of the verse that strengthens, enriches and extends the potentialities of the form. This is revealed in a special way when in the Ibn ᶜArabi manner he studs the poems with various of the most beautiful names of God in a manner that creates multilayered arabesques of resonance. Indeed, the measure of osmosis between Arabic and Malay that Hamzah achieved can only have been fecundated by centuries of cohabitation between the two languages under the roofs of hundreds of traditional religious schools.

Above all, however, he is distinguished by his sense of the presence of God, and his consuming passion to be with Him, his complaints to Him, and, at times, his daring familiarity with Him, expressed in such anthropomorphic terms as in poem XIX (p. 86 verse 13):

Hamzah miskin hina dan karam
Bermain mata dengan Rabb al-ᶜalam
Hamzah, lonely, destitute though he be,
makes eyes at the Lord of the Universe.

The Malay *bermain mata dengan*, however, suggests a reciprocity which 'makes eyes at' does not express. It is difficult to be sure in such cases whether theological preference or grammatical norms should be the deciding factor in determining the meaning. The Arabic word *dallala* for which *bermain* may be the Malay equivalent (see G.W.J. Drewes, *Directions for Travellers on the Mystic Path*, Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 81:190) does not take the preposition *bi-*, Malay *dengan*; thus it appears that Hamzah was writing a natural Malay idiom, intending the sense in which it would normally be understood. The phrase is indeed daring, one more likely to be uttered in an 'intoxicated' than a 'sober' mystical state. Hamzah was a poet of genius, and the way in which this daring to exchange glances with the Lord of the Universe is contrasted in the second half of the quatrain with his immobility when laid in earth is a striking example of his virtuosity.

Since one of the goals of the book is to make Hamzah's writing accessible to scholars concerned with other areas of the Islamic world who have no knowledge of Malay, the English renderings merit some discussion. These renderings, expressive and accurate as they are, are the fruit of a struggle to come to terms with intractable material. Unfortunately, 'Arabized' Malay of this kind, although lucid within its own terms of reference, does not readily submit to the demands of elegant and concise English expression. It is scarcely possible to overemphasize the technical skill and subtlety concealed within the deceptive simplicity of the quatrain that is the basic building block of Hamzah's poems.

Even taking this into account, however, there are a few places where key points in Hamzah's thought may not have been fully communicated, Qur'anic echoes in the verses have not been identified, or slips have occurred. A useful starting point to consider such matters is poem XV (p. 88 verse 8):

Hunuskan mata tunukan sarung
ithbatkan Allah napikan patung
Laut tawhid yogya kauharung
Itulah ilmu tempat bernaung

It is rendered:

Draw the blade and burn the sheath
Affirm God and forswear idols
Take to the Ocean of Unity
That is the knowledge which provides shelter.

This is a competent translation of the words, but does not bring out the essential coherence between the lines. This is largely because the rendering of the second line, 'Affirm God and forswear the idols', does not express the antithesis between *napi* and *ithbat* - denial and affirmation - which are the twin pivotal concepts of the sentence of divine unicity, *lā ilāha illā'llāh* - there is no god but the God. By translating *napi* as 'forswear', the symmetry of the sentence is lost, and with it, its point of reference, the sentence of the divine unicity, the declaration that is *Tawḥīd*. The stanza, however, does have difficulties. As it stands, it may be read as meaning either: the knowledge that you should plunge into the ocean of *Tawḥīd* is your place of shelter; or: recognition that the ocean of *Tawḥīd* is your place of shelter. If the position of lines two and three were, however, reversed, or the stanza were read '*pantun*' style, line one with line three, line two with line four, the result would be:

Draw the blade, burn the scabbard
It is the Ocean of Unity into which you should plunge
In Affirming existence of God, and denying that of idols
is the knowledge that is the place of shelter
wa'llāhu aʿlam.

This is an interesting example of the danger of translating what the text is deemed to mean, using a convenient short cut, rather than what it says, since the words 'affirmation' and 'denial' represent key organizing concepts in Hamzah's thought. A similar example occurs in the rendering of poem VII (p. 64 verse 14). While obviously to translate *napi dan ithbat jangan berputus* as 'and continuously recite the creed' is not incorrect, it does not fully bring out the point, which is that one should not cease to affirm existence to God and deny it to everything other than He. To subsume these two acts under the words 'the creed' weakens the effect of the line. It will be perceived how complex and tightly wrought is Hamzah's verse and how any English rendering is liable to fall short in communicating its meaning and connotations.

A second example of the same type is the authors' treatment of poem XXXII (p. 142 verse 11):

Satukan (hendak) hangat dan dingin
Tinggalkan jua loba dan ingin
Hancurkan hendak seperti lilin
Mangkanya dapat kerjamu licin

They render it:

Be indifferent to heat and cold
Desist from cupidity and desire
Have them melt away as wax
Then your work will go smoothly.

While the word *satukan* may indeed be understood as 'be indifferent to' (Winstedt, quoted by Drewes, p. 172, translates the line 'When heat and cold have become the same'), numerous other occurrences of the words *satukan* and *wahidkan* suggest that the verbal suffix *-kan* in the first line is not used in the same sense in which it occurs in the second and the third. In these two latter, it has the common causative sense, but in the first it more probably signifies the declarative sense of the second form of the Arabic verb, to state, regard the root meaning of the verb to be the case. *Satukan* then is equivalent to the Arabic *waḥḥada*, the verbal form from which *tawḥīd* is derived, meaning to declare, recognize as one. If the suffix in the first line is understood in this way, then the sense of the stanza flows coherently as follows:

Let heat and cold be seen to be one and the same,
let greed and desire be abandoned;
let them melt away as wax (in the flame),
Then you will have achieved your difficult task.

There are a number of examples of the use of *-kan* in this sense which might appear to pass unrecognized in the translations. One occurs in poem XVL (p. 92 verse 14): *Satukan hendak Mahmud dan hamid*, a line the authors render: 'identify the praiseworthy and him who praises'. It is not clear what 'identify' might mean here. There are a number of possibilities. But the choice of this word obscures the significance of *-kan* in this context, and could lead to a misunderstanding. The sentence juxtaposes a passive and an active particle, an object and a subject. The sense is clear: 'Let praised and praiser be seen to be one and the same'.

Another occurs in poem III v. 12 (p. 50): *Wahidkan* (= Malay *satukan*) *olehmu fāʿil dan mafʿūl*. The line is translated: 'identify agent and effect'. In addition, (*ismu'l-fāʿil*) and *mafʿūl* have not been identified as terms of Arabic grammar, meaning subject and object respectively. The line can only mean: 'let subject and object be seen to be one and the same'.

The point in the three examples is crucial and salutary, for the lines in question all express the central principle in Hamzah's theosophy: heat and cold, the praised and praiser, subject and object, although conceptually different, in essence are one and the same.

There are a few instances where the translation could be more helpful to the student. The line *Kau sangka tasbih membilang tulang* - poem XL (p. 88 verse 10) - is rendered 'You think that *tasbih* means fingering a rosary'. Hamzah is fond of punning, and the point of the line is not to be understood unless it is made clear that the rosary used by Muslims to count the recitation of the Names of God is a *tasbīh*, but that *tasbīh* here means 'utterance of the formula *subḥāna'llāh* - may God be exalted'. The full sense of the line then is 'you think that the utterance of *subḥāna'llāh* involves nothing more than counting the bones' (of a *tasbīh*).

The authors have identified many of the allusions to scripture and other sacred texts with which the poems pullulate. This identification is not exhaustive - how could it be? One additional example perhaps deserves a note. Poem VII (p. 60 verse 11) says of the people of this world that they are *terlalu shadīd* (the last word of line 3). The sense of *shadīd* as it occurs in the Qur'an in 100:8, *wa innahu lihubbi'l-khayri la shadīd*, referring to man's rapacity in his eagerness to acquire worldly goods, is so apposite to the burden of the verse, that this Qur'anic phrase was probably in Hamzah's mind when he wrote the poem.

There are a few slips to which attention could be drawn. In poem XVI (p. 90 verse 1 line 2), *nāṭiq* is rendered 'endowed with speech'. *Nāṭiq*, however, in some contexts means 'rational', as in *haywān nāṭiq*, 'a rational animal' - the classical definition of man -, thus 'endowed with reason' is the appropriate rendering.

In poem VI (p. 58 verse 7 line 4) it should be noted that the particle *illā* is not part of the Qur'anic citation, as the English translation might suggest (indeed, the word is mistakenly included in the Qur'anic citation on p. 176 among the list of Qur'anic quotations and terms). Hamzah often uses Arabic words in Malay as if they were Malay. The line *tiada lagi lain illa ᶜmā yarā'* (my quotation marks) then needs the insertion of quotation marks, viz. 'there was nothing but "what it saw" '.

The identification of the son of Abraham, chosen by God as victim (*dhabīḥ*), has been a matter of debate in Islam. The authors draw attention to this on p. 167, commenting on poem XXII (p. 110 verse 13), where Hamzah compares himself with Ismāᶜīl, drawing attention to Goldziher's remark that in the 8th century 'the opinion that the intended child of sacrifice was Ismāᶜīl rapidly gained ground'. This view, however, requires qualification. The opinion that the *dhabīḥ* (victim), was Isḥāq persisted strongly until at least the 12th century, and was certainly the view of Ṭabarī, Zamakhsharī and Rāzī. Ibn ᶜArabi in the *Fuṣuṣ al-ḥikam* regards Ishāq as the *dhabīḥ*. In view of his affiliation to the Ibn ᶜArabi tradition, it is noteworthy that Hamzah should have followed the more recent view and identified himself with Ismāᶜīl.

Despite such peccadillos - which in fact are simply an illustration of the difficulties in the task the authors have set themselves, a task in which there is no journey's end - the work will remain indispensable for many years.

It is difficult to exaggerate its importance to students of Islam in Southeast Asia. But it is not an easy book to use. There is no alternative to a meticulous study of all the texts made available and the key works listed in the bibliography in order to gain an adequate context within which to situate Hamzah's religious thought, and without which it cannot be fully understood. Hamzah's poetry is rich in its allusiveness. It has a tangential relationship to many elements in the spiritual tradition of Islam. How much of this was the result of learning by means of formal study, how much of a creative imagination that seized on and transformed a variety of themes, concepts and images belonging to the popular domain of Sufism, is a question beyond answer. The book takes us to the point at which we can begin to understand Hamzah. It takes us to the point where there are new perspectives to be explored. Yet the challenge that Hamzah offers is worth taking up. The poems tell something of the story of a soul so afire with divine love that it wills itself destroyed in flames like the wood of the tree which, when it is consumed, yields camphor. The allusion is local. But the image of the burning tree is not unrelated to al-Ḥallāj's response to the Qur'anic story of Moses' vision of the burning bushes presented by Gardet (*Mystique Musulmane*, Paris, 1961, p. 266). My role, al-Ḥallāj says, is to represent the bush. The burning bush, at one and the same time flame created and voice uncreated, becomes the symbol of a mystical union in which human subject and divine subject make an exchange such that one gives testimony of the other according to the reality of the one and only witness, God.

POSTSCRIPT

Ik stel het zeer op prijs dat ik gedurende de laatste veertig jaar de gelegenheid gehad heb met Professor Drewes in een uitwisseling van gedachten te treden over ons gezamenlijk studiegebied. Het is mij dan ook een grote vreugde om op deze wijze mijn genegenheid en hoogachting voor mijn hoogbejaarde leraar en collega te kunnen betuigen.

AHJ