

Searching for Islamic Manuscripts in Western Sumatra

No original writing tradition in Minang – the language of the Minangkabau ethnic group of Western Sumatra – existed before the coming of Islam. The Jawi, or Arabic Malay, Islamic writing tradition, which developed over the 17th and 18th centuries, became the main conduit of Sufi learning on Sumatra, producing manuscripts that have since become quite rare. At the beginning of the 21st century, **Irina Katkova** undertook a journey to find surviving examples of this almost vanished tradition.

According to the Association of Malay Manuscripts, about 15,000 Malay manuscripts are not included in Indonesia's library and archive catalogues, disseminated across the archipelago. In May 2006, in Minangkabau, Western Sumatra, I sought out Malay Islamic and Sufi manuscripts written in Arabic and Jawi, most of which date back to the 18th century, by visiting several Shattariyah *surau*, Islamic study centres led by Sufi sheikhs (or *buya* in Minang): *surau* Paseban, Surau Baru, Nurul Huda and Lubuk Ipuh in Ulakan.

From India to Indonesia: the Shattariyah Brotherhood

The dissemination of the Muslim writing tradition in Arabic and Jawi on Western Sumatra is intertwined with Sufi brother-hoods, mainly the Shattariyah, whose centres continue to keep the Jawi writing tradition alive. The Shattariyah *silsila*, or Sufi chain of spiritual succession, was introduced to India in the 15th century from Transoxiana where it was called 'Ishqiya. Shah 'Abdu'llah (d.1485), a descendant of Sheikh 'Umar Suhrawardi, is credited with having changed the brotherhood's name from 'Ishqiya to Shattariyah, a derivation of *shattar* ('the swift-paced'). In his treatise, he divided Muslim mystics into three categories: *akhyar* ('the religious'), *abrar* ('the holy') and *shattar*. Shah 'Abdu'llah believed

that the Shattariyas were superior to other Sufis, obtaining direct instructions from the spirits of the great saints, and therefore able to rapidly follow the Sufi path.

Having been firmly established in Gujarat, Burhanpur and Bengal, the Shattariyah Brotherhood (*tariqah*) was introduced to Medina by the Indian Sheikh Sibgatul-lah in 1605. In the 17th century, the most prominent sheikhs of Mecca and Medina who were adherents of Shattariyah were al-Qushashi (d.1660) and al-Kurani (d.1691). Their Indonesian disciples had a strong preference for this tariqah, so for several generations Indonesian seekers of knowledge in Arabia studied with al-Kurani's successors and sought initiation into the Shattariyah.

Thus, we find a number of unrelated branches of Shattariyah in Java and Sumatra. Although the mystical teaching of Shattariyah spread throughout a vast proportion of the Islamic world, it was a native Sumatran, Sheikh Abd ar-Ra'uf as-Singkeli (1620-1693), who most influenced its history. He spent 19 years in Arabia as a disciple of al-Qushashi and al-Kurani, and in 1661 returned to Aceh as a Shattariyah *khalifa*, or deputy with the authority to initiate new followers. To the present day, Abd ar-Ra'uf (Tuanku di Kuala) is venerated as a *wali*, or Muslim 'saint', and Indonesian national hero.

Shattariyah doctrine was introduced to the western part of Sumatra, Minangkabau, by Abd ar-Ra'uf's disciple Sheikh Burhanuddin of Ulakan in the late 17th century. It subsequently spread via trade routes to villages close to modern Padang Panjang, and further to Kota Lawas, Agam and Kota Tua.

Islam's infiltration: the *surau*

One of the unique features of the Shattariyah Sufi Brotherhood is its relatively easy ability to accommodate itself with local tradition. Thus, it became the most 'indigenised' of the brotherhoods. Before the coming of Islam, the people of Minangkabau had their own well-developed religious system, so it should not be forgotten that Islam



Ancient Islamic manuscripts

was merely added to what had gone before, and exhibited itself in a highly syncretistic form. One of the main means of Islamic penetration to the Minangkabau highlands was the *surau*, which in fact already existed before the coming of Islam. During the pre-Islamic Hindu-Buddhist period, a *surau* was used for ascetic practices and praying, and as a home for young single men. Thus, in Malay, '*surau*' can mean a house for praying; a dormitory where post-pubescent young unmarried men lived away from the ancestral house (the dwelling place of women and children) in the matriarchal system of the Minangkabau people; a village Koranic school; or an Islamic studies centre guided by a teacher of a Sufi brotherhood. Therefore, *surau* was an important facet of life in any Minangkabau village.

Islam constructed a whole edifice of learning on the basis of the pre-Islamic *surau*. Large *surau* attracted hundreds of pupils, and consisted of many buildings, but most were small, built on high piles and looked like small inns. There can have been little change from the two previous centuries. Usually, a small *surau* consists of two or three buildings used for Sufi rituals, lodging for pupils and sheikhs (*tuanku* in Malay; *buya* in Minang) and preserving manuscripts. Some *surau* are situated near the mausoleum of a local *wali*, such as *Surau Baru*, located near the grave of Sheikh Muhammad Nasir.

Pupils at Shattariyah *surau* were exposed to the full gamut of Islamic learning, especially in the field of *fikh*, Islamic law. Abd ar-Ra'uf's treatises show considerable respect for the *syari'at*, or Islamic law based on religious revelation rather than on custom. Thus, there are many books on *fikh* in *surau* collections, such as the most popular handbook of Minangkabau, *Minhaj al-talibin* or *Kitab Fikh* (al-Haitami). However, in response to the increase in the number of pilgrims leaving Minangkabau for the holy land in the latter part of the 18th century, different Shattariyah *surau* began to specialise in different branches of learning. *Surau* Kamang specialised in *ilmu alat* (Arabic language); *surau* Kota Gedang specialised in *ilmu mantik maana* (the logical exposition of the meaning of the Koran); and *surau* Kota Tua housed a scholar from Aceh who had come to teach *ilmu tafsir* (commentaries on the al-Qur'an).

In addition to such specialisations, many *surau* collections include treatises on the mystical teaching of the Shattariyah Brotherhood by Abd ar-Ra'uf as-Singkeli and his Gujarati teacher al-Burhanpuri (such as *Al-Tuhfa al-mursala ila ruh al-nabi*, 'The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet'), and historical works by two outstanding local disciples of as-Singkeli, Sheikh Burhanuddin and Muhammad Nasir. All of these works present the basic tenets of Islamic practice. One typical Shattariyah book written by Sheikh Burhanuddin in 1757 indicates a variety of instructional matters available to Shattariyah pupils, such as notes on Arabic grammar, syntax and commentaries on the Koran, Malay notes on medicine and Islamic astrological treatises (*hisab*). These works belong to the repertoire of Jawi manuscripts preserved in many *surau* and private collections, including examples of the Koran, tafsir (*tafsir Jalalain*, *tafsir al-Qurtubi*) and historical treatises.

Most of these manuscripts were composed or copied in the 18th and 19th centuries on European or locally made paper (*dluwang*). The most unique example, dealing with the history of Minangkabau and written in *nash*, one of the six classical Arabic styles of handwriting, is a beautifully decorated, seven-metre-long scroll. Unfortunately, most of these manuscripts are in a very poor, almost unreadable state because of the humid climate and insects. Attempts to preserve them have included storing them in the building of ritual practice (such as at *surau* Paseban), inside a wall or in the ceiling (Batang Kabung), or in a special separate wooden or stone house (Lubuk Ipuh, *Surau* Baru). In some *surau*, Shattariyah pupils are taught not only to read religious books but also to write in Jawi. Copying the manuscripts is one of the most important parts of teaching at Sufi *surau*, as well as a religious duty (*ibadah*). The process of writing and copying manuscripts is considered to be almost magical in Muslim tradition, as it takes a special mystical attitude to undertake, as if one is performing an act pleasing to God.

The last Jawi writer in Western Sumatra

During my field work, there was still one living representative of traditional writing in Jawi among Shattariyah sheikhs of Western

Sumatra: Imam Maulana Abdulmanaf Amin al-Khatib from *surau* Nurul Huda in Batang Kabung (Tabing). According to his 2002 autobiography, he was born on 8 August 1922, and was initiated into *tariqah* Shattariyah via *bai'at*, the ritual initiation oath of fidelity to the brotherhood, by Sheikh Paseban in 1936. He copied manuscripts and wrote, and was undoubtedly a real treasure of Islamic spiritual tradition.

He maintained a vast network throughout the surrounding *surau*, and taught many pupils. Among his 20 books are a series of hagiographical works about the lives of the four eminent *auliya* (saints) of Western Sumatra: as-Singkeli, Sheikh Burhanuddin, Sheikh Paseban and Sheikh *Surau* Baru. In 1976, the series was published for the first time in Padang under the title *Mubaligul Islam* (The Propagators of Islam). One of the agiographical works in this series, *Sejarah Ringkas Auliya Allah as-Salikin. Syeh Burhanuddin Ulakan* ('A Brief History of the Faithful Saints of Allah. Sheikh Burhanuddin from Ulakan'), is considered to be the most important source for studying the history of Islam in Western Sumatra. Sheikh al-Khatib also composed treatises dealing with Shattariyah Brotherhood doctrine, such as *Mizan al-Qulub* ('The Measure of Hearts'), and a history of Muslim penetration of Minangkabau, *Kitab Menerangkan Perkembangan Agama Islam di Minangkabau semenjak dahulu Syeh Burhanuddin sampai ke zaman kita sekarang* ('A book narrating the history and development of the Muslim faith in the land of Minangkabau since the time of Syeh Burhanuddin to the present day'). Sheikh al-Khatib worked not only as a writer but also as a copyist of famous sheikhs' treatises, thus preserving the literary Sufi heritage. I met al-Khatib at Batang Kabung, but owing to illness he was unable to grant me an interview. He died on 12 October 2006, and was buried on the territory of *surau* Nurul Huda.

According to the latest data from local Minangkabau scholars, one year after the death of Sheikh al-Khatib only several Jawi language copyists, and no writers, continue the tradition of handwriting in some old *surau* near Padang (in the coastal city of Pariaman). Thus, Sheikh al-Khatib was in fact the last Minangkabau Jawi language writer. Having

composed 22 manuscripts, he contributed much to Minangkabau Islamic literature.

Dr Adriyetti Amir (Dean of Philological Faculty of Andalas University in Padang) cites only two more people who wrote and copied manuscripts in Jawi: H. K. Deram (d.1997) and Mukhtar Abdullah (d.2000). They were not sheikhs of Shattariyah but recipients – *orang surau* in Malay; *urang siak* in Minang – of *surau* Islamic education.



Sheikh Abd al-Munaf al-Khatib, (d.2006), was the last Minangkabau Jawi language writer. Sketch by Sakulchat Chatrakul Na Ayuddhaya.

It is difficult to cite the total number of manuscripts in Western Sumatra, as there are numerous *surau* and many private collections; 16 manuscripts are in the collection of Adityawarman Museum in Padang and another nine are exhibited in the Philological Faculty of Andalas University. According to my investigations, based on visiting several *surau*, approximately 50 manuscripts are preserved in Lubuk Ipuh at Ulakan, approximately 80 at *Surau* Baru and the largest collection, more than 100, belongs to *surau* Paseban. Hence, *surau* are Sumatra's so-called *scriptorium*, or places of Islamic manuscript preservation, especially given that some *surau* are no longer active as Sufi centres of learning and ritual practice but now have only one main function – to conserve the Islamic written spiritual heritage.

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