

Arabic Literary Culture in Southeast Asia in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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In his latest monograph, Andrew C. S. Peacock presents an exceptional study on Southeast Asian manuscript traditions in Arabic before the advent of print in the region. While Arabic was not as widely spoken as Malay and Portuguese in maritime Southeast Asia (p. 17), it played a central role in Muslim intellectual life. *Arabic Literary Culture in Southeast Asia in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* explores “Arabic texts that were composed in seventeenth to eighteenth-century Southeast Asia, or for a Southeast Asian audience, and the Arabic texts that were read and copied in the region” (p. 2). It especially covers Arabic texts collected, copied, or commissioned by several royal courts in the Indonesian Archipelago: Banten, Aceh, Palembang, Bone, and Makassar.

The book gathers 66 Arabic treatises whose manuscripts are preserved in Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia Jakarta, overseas libraries, and private collections or digitalized by scholars and archival schemes. Colophons and marginalia provide subtle and often overlooked information on completion dates, places, ownerships, and patronages, giving an idea of the manuscripts’ circulation and connecting the manuscripts to wider literary networks in Asia, Africa, and Europe. This monograph might be one of the most comprehensive in the field, given Peacock’s ambitious quest of presenting a monograph covering extensive studies of Arabic manuscripts in Southeast Asia, many of which are of Middle Eastern and North African or Indian provenance.

Peacock argues that Arabic manuscripts do not merely function as historical antiques nor *kramat* relics but instead reflect “the texture of Muslim life and thought” (Johns 1996) and constitute the Arabic “textual culture” (Bray and Evans 2007) in the region. He criticizes the prevailing trend of Southeast Asian scholarship that focuses only on textual cultures in vernacular languages such as Malay, Javanese, or Bugis, especially after the rise of *pesantren* in the nineteenth century. Instead, he asserts that “the royal court was the major centre for the writing and reading of an indigenous Southeast Asian Arabic literature before the nineteenth century” (pp. 2–3).

This book examines “the place of Southeast Asia in the broader literary and intellectual networks of the Arabophone Islamic world” (p. 5) and refutes the existing frameworks on Arabic literary networks. Peacock argues that “a common Indian Ocean literary culture in Arabic seems to be based in part on the fallacy that the entire region was united in its commitment to the Shafii madhhab and Ash’ari theology” (p. 401). This criticism may refer to the works of Ronit Ricci (2011), Sebastian Prange (2018), and Mahmood Kooria (2019; 2022) quoted earlier in the introduction. Peacock argues that Arabic literary networks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries “were of far broader reach than the Indian Ocean” (p. 400). This claim is supported by his decade-long research, discussion of which is divided into eight chapters.

Chapter 1 sets out the theoretical frameworks of Arabic manuscript traditions, state formation, patronage, Islamization, and vernacular languages beyond Indian Ocean networks. It argues that Arabic constituted the lingua franca for trading and diplomacy in Southeast Asia. This complemented Malay as another lingua franca of Southeast Asia in forming the Arabicized Malay or Jawi script while contesting against Portuguese as the international maritime tongue of the Indian Ocean trade networks. Chapter 2 examines the proliferation of local textual production in Southeast Asia in Arabic, especially after the medieval Hijaz transformed into an intellectual hub for South and Southeast Asian scholars. This chapter is helpful for general readers who are unfamiliar with the topics of Islamization in Southeast Asia and the instilling of Sufism in the region. It also provides an introduction to scholarly disputes over *wujūdi* (the monist doctrine of “unity of being”/*waḥdat al-wujūd*, associated with Ibn ‘Arabī) theology (p. 18).

Chapter 3 follows up on the trans-regional debates on *waḥdat al-wujūd* that brought theological and sociopolitical consequences to Muslim states and intelligentsia, as exemplified in Acehese scholars’ disputes in Sumatra and the Hijaz. It takes account of several Arabic manuscripts capturing Acehese polemics on the spread of *wujūdiyya* in Aceh and its opposition at the dawn of the seventeenth century. Chapter 4 analyzes the Bantenese royal court’s patronage of the Hijazi scholar Ibn ‘Allān (d. AD 1057/1648 AH), whose commentaries on al-Ghazālī’s treatises were copied, reproduced, translated, and circulated to counter the spread of the *wujūdiyya* doctrine in Java. Chapters 3 and 4 suggest that Hanbalī intellectual influence was introduced in seventeenth-century Southeast Asia through allusions to Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya’s thoughts in Ibn ‘Allān’s *al-Mawāhib al-Rabbāniyya*, composed in AD 1637/1046 AH. This finding, again, challenges the existing idea of “a common intellectual culture across the Indian Ocean” (p. 401) committed to Shāfi’ism and Ash’arism.

Chapter 5 discusses the growing participation of Southeast Asian scholars in grasping sophisticated Arabic texts by the Sulawesi-origin scholar Yūsuf al-Maqāsirī (d. AD 1699/1111 AH), who later settled as a royal mentor and mufti in the mid-seventeenth-century Banten Sultanate and whose Arabic writings became primary sources for the court, before discussing works by his followers from southern Sulawesi. It shows how al-Maqāsirī traveled beyond the Indian Ocean in pursuit of knowledge (pp. 157–193) and how his followers from southern Sulawesi began a “bazaar” (colloquial) Arabic literary tradition that was “very different from the *fushḥā* of the classical texts, mixed with local phrases and grammar” (pp. 17, 362). Chapter 6 focuses on the understudied Banten scholar ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abd al-Qahhār, who induced Sufism to Banten royals in the eighteenth century, while comparing his literary culture to his contemporary but better-known Sumatra scholar ‘Abd aṣ-Ṣamad al-Palimbānī. In contrast to the glory days of the Palembang Sultanate, the fall of Banten Kraton changed the trajectory of manuscript tradition to patronize composing new Arabic texts in Java and recycling older manuscripts rather than importing new Arabic texts from the Middle East.


Chapter 7, arguably the main chapter of the book, showcases the manuscript collections of the Banten Sultanate. This, the longest chapter, goes from tracking orientalist documentation of the existing Arabic texts currently preserved in Indonesia and the Netherlands to classifying the manuscripts into several categories based on their themes and utilities. Overall, the Arabic manuscript collections of the Banten court reflect a common readership across Southeast Asian regions, engaging with disputes in global Islamic scholarship while also showcasing “bestsellers that were read widely in both the Middle East and India” (p. 397). Chapter 8 sums up the key findings and arguments, notably by highlighting the wide reach of the Arabic language and manuscripts in Banten, Aceh, Palembang, Bone, and Makassar, stressing the historical value of Arabic collections that did not circulate widely beyond their local courts of origin and extending the theoretical framework of Arabic literary networks to have a “far broader reach than the Indian Ocean” (p. 400).

This book is rich with primary sources, illustrations, and historical analysis. Many of the manuscripts it discusses have not been discussed before, making their appearance in this book the “sole source for many of the texts discussed here” (p. 6). The volume stands out as a crucial work for understanding Arabic literary culture in the Muslim world, particularly in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Southeast Asia. Its thorough examination of Southeast Asian royal courts positions the book as an essential resource for specialists as well as students beginning their study of Arabic manuscripts and global Islamic intellectual history.

Despite its merits, the volume is not without its shortcomings. Peacock appears to miscomprehend “Arabic cosmopolis” and “monsoon Islam” as limiting categories of closed and distinctive Muslim lives and thought in the periphery (p. 401), while adopting the unfit political term *dār al-Islām* (abode of Islam) to describe globalized literary networks (Cf. Calasso and Lancioni 2017). While the author’s claim about the vast influence of Hanbalism is somewhat valid, it tends to be overly deterministic. This is because Peacock relies mainly on allusions to al-Jawziyya’s ideas, using them to downplay the legal pluralism in the Indian Ocean, which according to him was unified around Shāfi’ism and Ash’ārism (pp. 3–5, 401–402). The author’s characterization of Pasai as a “remote corner of the *dār al-Islām*” (p. 27) seems contradictory, given his position against Southeast Asia being viewed as a peripheral region. Despite these criticisms, this book is one of the more significant contributions to the field of Southeast Asia’s Arabic literary culture and the broader Muslim world.

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Transnational Philippines: Cultural Encounters in Philippine Literature in Spanish

AXEL GASQUET and ROCÍO ORTUÑO CASANOVA, eds.

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Readers, students, and scholars interested in Southeast Asian literature will be gifted with an unusual account of the history of the Philippines born from an exploration of works written in Spanish about the Philippines and by Filipino authors. Taken together, the 12 chapters of *Transnational Philippines* reveal the logic of colonial and postcolonial ideologies, the processes of assimilation and emancipation, the entanglement of the Philippines in global networks of trade and culture, and the impact of these on the literary traditions that followed the encounters among Spain, Mexico, Cuba and Puerto Rico, the United States, and the Chinese and Japanese peoples in the Philippines. The breadth of the book's temporal scope (from the sixteenth century to the Japanese occupation in World War II) and the diversity of the textual genres examined (missionary chronicles, travelogues, poems, essays, novels, and short stories) provide a fundamental historical overview of the subject and a compelling argument for understanding the Philippines as a transnational space.

This volume expands on existing works dedicated to the analysis of transnational aspects of Filipino culture, such as Denise Cruz's study of the construction of Filipino femininity through cultural contact across the Pacific in what she calls the "transpacific filipina" (*Transpacific Femi-*