Introduction

If numbers can tell a story, the conversion to Islam of the peoples of the Indonesian archipelago can be counted as a great success. Even if the official statistics claiming that 90% of Indonesians today are Muslim are somewhat exaggerated or ill defined, it is clear that Islam has taken strong root in the region and has influenced many facets of life – from politics and language to the economy and education – over several centuries, as it continues to do today. The diverse and protracted process of the region's large-scale Islamization has given rise to various explanations and interpretations, representing different perspectives on when, where, how and why individuals and communities converted to Islam.

Answers to these questions have been gleaned from many sources: archaeological findings – such as early graves bearing inscriptions in Arabic – have proved important; so has architectural evidence, including the location, design and function of early mosques, holy shrines, and pilgrimage sites. Anthropological studies of present-day Muslim communities that attempt to record their historical traditions regarding Islamization have also been significant. Textual analysis has been employed widely, attempting to find evidence of conversion processes in local texts that offer glimpses into a community’s understanding of its own past.

The goal of this essay is to focus on a little-explored source for the study of conceptions about, and representations of, conversion to Islam: the liter-
ary corpus of the Book of One Thousand Questions. Although this narrative is known in many languages, my emphasis here is on its tellings in Javanese and their relationship to additional, more popular conversion narratives in that language. The comparative study of such sources reveals different ways in which early conversions were remembered, retold over time, and reconfigured to address local, and contemporary, events and agendas.

I begin with some introductory words on the history and transmission of the Book of One Thousand Questions, before turning to the story as it is told in Javanese.

The Book of One Thousand Questions

The Book of One Thousand Questions tells a story of conversion from Judaism to Islam set in seventh-century Arabia. In it the Prophet Muhammad replies to many questions spanning ritual, history, belief and mysticism presented to him by a Jewish leader and scholar by the name of Abdullah Ibnu Salam. The latter, convinced by the Prophet's wisdom and divine inspiration, embraces Islam.

With its roots in early hadith literature discussing the Prophet's encounters with Jews, and its elaboration into a separate text in Arabic in or before the tenth century, the account of this question-and-answer dialogue developed into an important source exemplifying Muhammad’s discursive powers and providing a model of Islam’s ability to overcome other religions by persuasion and peaceful means.

The Book of One Thousand Questions was translated and adapted into various languages and circulated across vast geographical and cultural terrains.

1 Few scholars have written about Javanese versions of the Book of One Thousand Questions. See the very brief notes by Drewes 1986. A discussion of the relationship between Malay and Javanese versions of the Book of One Thousand Questions appears in E.P. Wieringa 2003. The broadest analysis of Malay versions remains Pijper 1924. Pijper (1924:67-71) briefly discussed a single Javanese manuscript (MS. LOr 4001). Book of One Thousand Questions versions are rich cultural and theological documents and can be studied from various angles, with an emphasis on, for example, their pedagogical, theological or ritualistic elements. My stress here is limited to the theme of conversion.

2 The tradition of encounters between Muhammad and the Jews goes back to Qur'anic passages in which the Prophet is posed with hypothetical questions, and with recommended replies. Muslim commentators have interpreted the questions as being posed by challenging Jews, and mention of a Jewish convert to Islam has been taken to refer to Ibnu Salam, the protagonist of the Book of One Thousand Questions, see Dawood 1956:46:10 (all Qur'anic citations henceforth are based on this edition). The Qur'anic citations were later elaborated by some of the earliest writers of Islamic history including Ibn Hisham, Muslim, and al-Tabari. In these hadith writings it is typically related how Ibnu Salam heard of the Prophet's coming while he was picking dates, how he went to meet him and asked three questions which he believed only a prophet could answer. When Muhammad replied correctly, Ibnu Salam converted on the spot (see Tibrizi 1963:1272). For a discussion of the Arabic versions of the text see Pijper 1924:35-54.
Translations were made, among others, into Persian, Turkish, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Malay, Javanese, Sundanese and Buginese.\(^3\) It remained an important text in an expanding, and highly diverse, Muslim world.

In these later retellings of the *Book of One Thousand Questions*, in communities distant from the birthplace of Islam, the old narrative retained its significance, yet a different story also emerged. The translated versions still presented their audiences with the tale of an early and significant conversion that was facilitated long ago by the Prophet himself, guided at every step by revelations from the archangel Jabarail. However, as that story absorbed elements more specific to the receiving culture, it also became a commentary on local notions of conversion, suggesting through the long and winding path of questions and answers that precede the climax of embracing Islam what a particular community, at a particular historical moment, viewed as the crucial elements of belief and practice that justified a religious transformation.

**The Book of One Thousand Questions in Javanese**

In Javanese the *Book of One Thousand Questions* is known by the title Serat Samud or Suluk Samud, highlighting the name Ibnu Salam had assumed on Java. The *Book of One Thousand Questions* developed into a literary corpus which includes texts that clearly resemble one another – to varying degrees – in the frame story, central themes and characters, but, at the same time, differ and cannot be said to be copies of a single text. The two dozen manuscripts I have surveyed, produced between the late seventeenth and early twentieth centuries, show variations in content, form, authorship and affiliation.\(^4\)

These manuscripts were inscribed in various locales including the courts of Surakarta and Yogyakarta, the *pasisir* (coastal region), and possibly Sumatra. Some were written in Javanese script while others were written in *pegon*, a modified, vocalized form of the Arabic script adopted for Javanese.

All texts in this corpus have the following in common: a person by the name of Samud Ibnu Salam questions the Prophet Muhammad on many topics that relate to Islam; the Prophet replies to all questions, at times at length, other times very briefly; central themes raised in the dialogue include God's

---

\(^3\) Translations were also made into Western languages, among them Latin, French, German, Italian, Dutch and Portuguese. My emphasis here is on translation within Muslim communities.

\(^4\) A list of these manuscripts can be found in Ricci 2006:406-11. The most pronounced variation appears in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts, titled Seh Ngabdulsalam, in which Ibnu Salam was transformed from a Jewish leader to a Javanese guru with his own set of disciples. These versions are beyond the scope of this article. All references to the corpus here address only the older, traditional *Book of One Thousand Questions* narratives, in which Ibnu Salam is the disciple, which form the bulk of existing manuscripts.
Conversion during the Prophet’s time, as depicted in the Book of One Thousand Questions, was a seemingly uncomplicated matter. In the 1143 Latin translation, based on an early Arabic version of the story, a simple ritual is portrayed. After Muhammad tells Ibn Salam that on the Last Day the dead reside between Paradise and Hell, Ibn Salam declares that the Prophet has won him over and asks to be received as a follower of his religion. Then, with his pronouncement of the šahāda, the book ends.

The ending changes in later Arabic versions. Some contain a speech by Ibn Salam in which he goes through the main points of the new faith. Some versions have the addition that Muhammad gives him the new name Abdullah and he becomes one of the greatest šahābah, a companion of the Prophet (Pijper 1924:52-3).

Examining the later Javanese versions, even if we add up all the elements involved in the scene in any of the versions (no one version includes them all), we end up with only a short list. The single most important element is the recitation of the sadat (from Arabic šahāda). Whether Ibn Salam is told to recite it in Arabic or in Javanese, whether it is elaborated word for word in Arabic, in translation, or both, and whether it is only mentioned referentially, reciting it is an ever-present obligation the convert must fulfil. This is by no means an unusual feature in conversion depictions; it has been central to them since early on, including accounts specifically referring to Ibn Salām’s early biographical notes in Arabic. Another recurring element is the awe

Bulliet (1979:10), in his account of early conversions across the Middle East and North Africa, cites a similar simplicity of ritual.

A summary of the contents of the Doctrina Mahumet, the twelfth-century Latin translation based on an Arabic source, can be found in Kritzeck 1964:89-96.

expressed by Ibn Salām at the ability of the Prophet to correctly answer so many questions, on so many matters, a feat that leads to the conviction that he must be a true prophet, thus providing a rationale for conversion.

An additional common element in the conversion scene includes a new name conferred on the convert. In versions that call him Samud throughout the text, he receives the full name Abdullah Ibnu Salam at the end; in versions that call him Samud Ibnu Salam throughout, the Arab first name Abdullah – ‘God’s servant’, also the Prophet’s father’s name – is given to him at conversion. The Muslim custom of giving a convert a new name is also common to Judaism and Christianity, signifying a new birth and a new life within the adopted religion – and the erasing of the person’s former identity.

Although the origin of the name Samud, as well as the reason for its selection for the protagonist in Javanese (and several Malay) texts, is uncertain, it may well be related to the Qur’anic tribe Thamud. Indeed, in some Javanese manuscripts written in pegon, which unlike Javanese script incorporates the Arabic letter thal, the name appears as Thamud rather than the Javanized form Samud. The prosperous tribe was one of evil, sinful people who did not heed the warning of Saleh, the Prophet sent especially to divert them from their path of idol worship, slave ownership, and disregard for the poor. Thamud members were offered many opportunities to repent and mend their ways. Interestingly, these included their asking questions and requesting proof of Saleh, who replied with exceeding impatience because of their dishonesty and false promises. He was most concerned about their belief in gods of stone and clay and asked them to recognize that Allah is the only God. Finally, when it became clear they would not heed his words, God brought upon them a violent earthquake which decimated their fields, homes and lives.

Samud of the Book of One Thousand Questions may well be linked by several underlying associations to the Qur’anic Thamud. He appears quite different in character yet similarities exist, both in the theme and in the text’s ultimate mes-

---

8 In several Arabic manuscripts discussed by Pijper (those from London, Cairo and Kharida), Abdullah’s name prior to conversion was Ishmawil. Pijper (1924:44) thought it obscure how the legend of Ishmawil (Hebrew Shmuel, English Samuel) appeared in this context and speculated that it may have derived from Shamwil ibn Zaid of the Banu Kuraiza, a Jew who is known to have questioned Muhammad about the Final Hour. I wonder if there is a possible link: Ishmawil-Shamwil/Shmuel- Samud. For a more probable derivation of the name Samud see below.

9 In Java new names are quite often given to people on various occasions which call for a new, and auspicious beginning, such as recovery from illness or escape from danger. Whether and how these traditions of name-changing are related to the change following conversion would require further research, but their underlying logic is similar.

10 Qur’an 11:60-67. See also Marhiyanto 1995:60-78. The name Samud may also be related to Sumud or Samad, names of idols worshipped by the people of ‘Ad who, similarly to the Thamud, were also sent a prophet (Hud) and did not heed his words.
sage: Samud was initially a non-Muslim, one who might potentially accept the true faith but had not yet done so; in the minds of those who heard his name, he and his followers may have been associated with a distrustful and sceptical people; he questioned the Prophet repeatedly, requesting wisdom as proof of his Truth, and was not quickly persuaded; the oneness of God was central to the unfolding debate and the crux of his decision to convert, as expressed in his uttering the šahāda, proclaiming Allah as the only God; the meeting between Samud and Muhammad is depicted as pre-ordained, destined to happen, as Saleh was destined to approach the Thamud, asking that they repent. Finally, the Qur’anic warning reminding readers of Thamud’s rejection of their prophet and their resulting fate – “Thamud denied their Lord. Gone are the people of Thamud”¹¹ – was transformed in the Book of One Thousand Questions into a different, reverse kind of reminder, invoking in its audience a recollection of Samud’s acceptance of Islam and its fruitful outcome.

**Javanese conversions**

The Book of One Thousand Questions, I suggest, represents a non-dominant tradition addressing the topic of conversion to Islam in Javanese historiography, one which is nonetheless significant in offering an alternative ‘version of conversion’. This alternative version presents conversion as a discursive, peaceful and effective process, highlighting persuasion and devotion as the major elements affecting the decision to embrace Islam.

I begin by examining a conversion scene from a Javanese Book of One Thousand Questions which is in many ways typical of other versions in this language; I then turn to the more dominant traditions of narrating conversion to Islam on Java to understand some contrasts between them and the Book of One Thousand Questions tradition; finally, I return to the initial example as a single, yet significant instance that connects the two traditions by way of a genealogical link and consider its message.

**A Javanese Book of One Thousand Questions conversion scene**

The conversion scene presented here appears in an 1823 Javanese Book of One Thousand Questions fragment inscribed in Surakarta.¹² In it Samud asks the

---

¹¹ Qur’an 11:68.

¹² The fragment appears in a compilation of 20 texts inscribed by various hands, circa 1823-1860 [?], and bound as a volume. It is untitled and anonymous, inscribed in Surakarta in 1823, probably as a copy of a Palembang manuscript. For cataloguing purposes, based on content analysis,
Prophet to be his witness, or to allow him to bear witness, that he acknowledges Muhammad’s religion. At this point the text does not mention Islam as such. Muhammad responds to Samud’s claim by praising God, in a Javanese version of the Arabic alhamdullilah. He blesses Samud and asks him to repeat the confession of faith, which he then recites, first in Arabic, then in Javanese. Samud’s followers, here referred to as sabat, the title bestowed on the Prophet’s historical companions, ‘follow in Islam’ (Javanese tumut Islam).

The archangel Jabarail then tells the Prophet to acknowledge Samud as his father for all time, in this world and the next, and the Prophet does so. The Javanese verb used by Jabarail, ngaku, can mean not simply to acknowledge in a general sense but to acknowledge, recognize or adopt a person as one’s relative, which is likely what Jabarail is proposing here. Incorporating this familial element adds a dimension of great depth to the conversion because Samud would not only be converting to Islam but, in doing so, would enter the Prophet’s closest circle of kin as a revered elder. The genealogy of the protagonist, and by extension of the story, would thus become the most authentic possible not only for passing down the Prophet’s words but for doing so via a man who, due to his great learning and leadership authority, became a revered figure even for Muhammad.

Abdullah, the name of Muhammad’s father, who died before Muhammad was born, is highly symbolic in this context. It presents Samud at story’s end as replacing Muhammad’s biological father – whom he never knew – thus connecting the Prophet and the converted Jewish leader by the closest of ties. It also symbolizes the process through which Judaism preceded Islam, ‘gave birth’ to it and inspired it. Ultimately, however, Islam prevailed and
Muhammad was recognized as the final prophet. This outcome is echoed in several *Book of One Thousand Questions* texts in the question about a son who is stronger than his father, a son who is born of a father whom he is later able to overcome, as Muhammad overcame Samud in the debate. This motif – of acknowledging Samud as father to the Prophet – appears, to the best of my knowledge, only in Javanese, where the name change (from Samud to Abdullah) also consistently appears and is most pronounced.

The text mentions yet again that Samud’s companions all became Muslim (Javanese *samya Islam sedaya*) and that all were in awe of Muhammad for answering the questions. The companions then returned home to their land, which is not mentioned by name. We do not hear whether Abdullah left with them, nor whether they spread their new faith to others.

So far this description of conversion is similar to those found in other Javanese *Book of One Thousand Questions* versions, stressing as it does Samud’s acceptance of Muhammad’s teachings, his acknowledgement of the Prophet, and his wish to join the Muslim community. The Prophet gladly accepted the new convert, along with his followers, and admitted them into the new faith by way of several ritual acts. The depiction is brief yet condensed and quite powerful. Samud’s decision was based entirely on conviction, seemingly free of social, economic or political motivations, portrayed as complete, whole-hearted, pure.

Before discussing this scene further I turn to the more dominant, pervasive Javanese stories that narrate early conversion to Islam. It is against this background that the *Book of One Thousand Questions* version of conversion must be examined.

**Javanese conversion narratives: the dominant tradition**

There is no doubt that the most popular, well-known and oft-cited stories depicting and explaining Java’s conversion to Islam are those pertaining to the lives and deeds of the *wali sanga*, the nine ‘saints’ that are said to have introduced Islam to Java and to have overseen the initial stages of the conversion of its people. Since the sources on the *wali* are vast, only a few points are

---

18 The reply is that iron – extracted from stone – can crush the stone when made into a tool. Interestingly, in this example the son overcomes the father by force.

19 Most of these elements, in almost identical form, also appear in the undated (but inscribed prior to the 1840s, based on paper type) Samud, Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, Jakarta. MS KBG 434. These include the recital of the *šahāda* (Javanese *sadat*), Samud being acknowledged as father by the Prophet following Jabarail’s advice, the change of name, the conversion of the companions, and their return home.
highlighted here. Their mention here is, first and foremost, meant to point to additional Javanese literary traditions of conversion to Islam besides the Book of One Thousand Questions, ones whose dissemination has been quite remarkable. In many cases they too, like the Book of One Thousand Questions versions, were composed – at least in written form – during a period when the conversion of Java to Islam was largely accomplished, a fact likely to have affected their tone and emphasis.

These stories do not always explicitly or implicitly connect conversion in Arabia to conversion on Java, as the Book of One Thousand Questions does. They focus on the specificity – in terms of challenges and successes – of converting Java to Islam.

And yet, such links to an Arabian past do occur, and they are highly significant for the authority they bestow on Javanese wali. In the Serat Walisana, an undated manuscript copied in the Pakualam court of Yogyakarta in the nineteenth century which combines histories of the wali with many other moral tales and advice, the following depiction is found: when the wali all gathered after the Friday prayers a bundle suddenly appeared. Opening it they discovered a garment and a letter from the Prophet. The letter instructed Seh Malaya, also known as Sunan Kalijaga, to wear the garment in this world and the next, as a sign of inheriting the Prophet’s role. The Javanese reads mengko sira genti ingsun (‘you shall be my successor’) and corresponds to the Arabic meaning of the title khalīfa, used by the Prophet’s early successors and by subsequent Muslim rulers. The Prophet thus personally designated for himself a Javanese successor.

Further proof of this choice came when Sunan Bonang suggested that he make an identical copy of the garment for himself and try it on, wishing to verify the choice of a new leader. The wali sewed a garment and all attempted to don it, one by one, but it was too large, too tight or otherwise inappropriate for all who did so. Sunan Kalijaga was the only one whom the garment fit perfectly. Sunan Bonang then proclaimed that Kalijaga was fated to be the religious leader of the island of Java.

Evident here is the crucial importance of genealogy – biological or symbolic – for Islamic traditions. Just as Samud in the Book of One Thousand Questions was acknowledged by Muhammad (and proclaimed as his father), so Sunan Kalijaga was granted the unique status of khalīfa by the Prophet himself. He was destined to continue Muhammad’s role and mission – in which conversion was central – in the Javanese context. The legitimacy of both leaders was unquestionable.

---

20 Serat Walisana, Pura Pakualaman Library, Yogyakarta. MS Pi. 32. Additional versions of this text, in which the same motif appears, are found in other collections.

21 Tinakdir ing nungswa jawa/jebèng kali kang ngimami. Serat Walisana, 133.
We now turn to additional stories found in the *wali* corpus. According to Javanese chronicles the *wali*, mostly active during the fifteenth century, were teachers, healers and miracle workers who, sometimes coming from afar and sometimes of local descent, lived in different parts of Java and introduced the people to Islamic beliefs and institutions. Usually referred to as the *wali sanga*, traditions of their identity and number vary by region, period and affiliation. What I wish to stress here are the two central elements that appear in their hagiographies: their tolerance towards pre- or non-Islamic Javanese culture and their attempts to curb the spread of controversial mystical teachings.

Accounts of the *wali* are by no means in total agreement, including in their views on combining Javanese cultural elements with the new Islamic notions of faith and practice. Nevertheless, with some exceptions, the *wali* appear to have accepted the continuing practice of such earlier traditions as shadow puppet theatre (*Javanese wayang*) and gamelan music. Furthermore, they are even sometimes credited with introducing to Java, or inventing, some of the ‘most Javanese’ cultural elements, like the local tellings of the Ramayana or the *macapat* metrical verse forms. Such attributions suggest that the *wali* supported a form of Islam which recognized and respected prior tradition in the belief that more adherents would be gained if they were not forced to leave behind older ways. *Wali* leadership thus showed a tendency towards openness, flexibility and the acceptance of local customs which was not unusual for *sufi* teachers elsewhere.

So far we have seen a depiction of the *wali* as following a strategy of propagating Islam by peaceful means, education and persuasion, similar to the core elements appearing in the *Book of One Thousand Questions*. However, Eaton describes a similar tradition rooted in sixteenth-century Bengal, where a large conversion project to Islam was underway. In a discussion of the Muslim holy men (Persian *pir*) he writes: ‘In popular memory, some of these men swelled into vivid mythico-historical figures, saints whose lives served as metaphors for the expansion of both religion and agriculture. They have endured precisely because, in the collective folk memory, their careers captured and telescoped a complex historical socio-religious process […]’ (Eaton 1993:207-8.) He also mentions a local tradition of 12 derwishes who came to Bengal ‘from the west, to spread the light of Islam’ (Eaton 1993:224).


Thus Sunan Bonang is credited with the invention of the *bonang* musical instrument, central to the gamelan; he, along with Sunan Kaliąga and Sunan Giri, are sometimes credited with inventing the *punakawan*, the clown figures that provide comic respite during shadow puppet theater plays (Sofwan et al. 2000:75, 121).

On this aspect of the *wali* attitude, and its support by the kings of Mataram, see Simuh 1999:20-1. On a similar attitude among Bengali Sufis see Eaton 1993:218.
their actions did not follow only this single trajectory. Two main types of struggles challenged Islamic leaders on Java at the time. The first was directed outwards, in an effort to strengthen the hold of Islam where it had already taken root and extend it further. The last Hindu-Buddhist kingdom on Java, Majapahit, was attacked by disciples of Sunan Ampel and Sunan Giri. In Demak, the most important Islamic state on Java’s north coast in the early sixteenth century, the *wali* are said to have collectively erected a mosque aligned with the one at Mecca, and to have conquered the Hindu-Buddhist kingdom at Kediri with additional conquests reaching major ports and many inland areas of East Java. Sunan Gunungjati ruled in Banten and, sometime after 1552, moved to Cirebon and established another royal ruling line (Ricklefs 2001:42-3). Gresik, a major international trading centre on Java’s coast in the fifteenth century, became another important centre of Islam when Sunan Giri established his headquarters nearby. These examples, and others, point to the participation of the *wali*, their descendants and followers, in the political and military campaigns contributing to the establishment of Islam on Java.

The second type of struggle experienced by the *wali* was among themselves over power, involving competition and sometimes deep disagreements. The latter focused on how much to accommodate local traditions and, above all, on the types of knowledge that should and should not be revealed to the masses. It was a struggle surrounding this issue for which their internal rivalries are best known.

At the centre of the controversy was the figure of Seh Siti Jenar. This famous and ambiguously regarded *wali* biography has been compared with that of al-Hallaj, a famous martyr executed in tenth-century Baghdad for the perceived heresy of proclaiming himself one with God. According to some

---

26 Ricklefs 2001:42. Among the conquered towns and ports Ricklefs lists Tuban (circa 1527), Madijn (c. 1529), Surabaya, Pasuruan, Mount Penanggungan (a holy area for Hindus of the region), Kediri and Malang. Ricklefs (2001:40-1) stresses the dearth of contemporary historical documents prior to the early seventeenth century (which coincided with the rise of the VOC and its documentation system), a result of which is that many historical events of the previous period remain imperfectly known. For a more complete survey of the development of Islamic states on Java see Ricklefs 2001:36-58; Pigeaud and De Graaf 1976.

27 Ricklefs 2001:45. Sunan Giri founded a line of spiritual teachers that lasted until 1680, the only *wali* who had successors. As can be seen from the examples cited above, the histories of some *wali* have been better reconstructed temporally than those of others. The majority of circulating *wali* traditions, however, are not so much concerned with dates as with deeds, teachings and the construction of a local Islamic genealogy.

28 The comparison between al-Hallaj’s biography and that of Siti Jenar may be a relatively late development. According to Michael Feener’s study on the place of al-Hallaj in Southeast Asian Islam, his doctrines were not taught in traditional *pesantren* nor were they central to the intellectual development of Islam more broadly in the region. However, in large part due to the very influential work of Hamka (itself drawing significantly on the scholarship of Western Orientalists like Massignon), increasing attention has been paid to al-Hallaj and his Indonesian incarnations...
versions of this story Siti Jenar was sentenced to death by the council of wali for teaching secret religious doctrines to the uninitiated, which included what could potentially be understood as a similar heresy. The conflict was not so much about the essence of the teachings but rather about the other wali’s claim that access to them by those not yet qualified would have serious moral, social and political ramifications. The Siti Jenar episode is important in suggesting that – as one would expect in regard to such a complicated process – not all conversion efforts on Java came about in a peaceful, conciliatory manner. It adds a dimension of danger, threat, struggle and aggression to a story which is often imagined as lacking such elements.

The account addresses not a context where Muslims come as foreigners to convert a local population by force – as representations in other regions at times suggest – but rather the execution of a religious figure by his co-religionists. Through it a violent element within the tradition is openly acknowledged, and widely told, even to this day. Whereas the foreign element of conversion on Java is usually seen as peaceful, associated with trade and travelling mystics, the wali stories combine both trends – peaceful and not – and in this respect may be most convincing. Social, doctrinal and political issues emerge in these tales, underscoring the perceived danger of chaos, misunderstanding, neglect of ritual and social-religious practices if Siti Jenar were allowed to have his way.

The question arises as to whether Javanese literature offers additional and alternative depictions of conversion that differ from the way the very popular – and mostly positive – hagiographies of the wali relate the process, in modern Indonesia (Feener 1998). On Siti Jenar’s popularity and for a version of the story from Banjar, see Steenbrink 1984:198.

29 Siti Jenar was not the only religious teacher to whom tradition ascribes such a death. Two others said to have been executed for heresy were Pangeran Panggung and Seh Among Raga (Rinkes 1996:43-5).

30 However, depending on the critic’s affiliation and historical perspective, Siti Jenar has been portrayed as propagating Hindu-Buddhist ideas (Sofwan et al. 2000:207), and of being a Shi’i (Rahimsyah 1997:212). In addition to an extensive discussion of the Siti Jenar episode, Nancy Florida (1995:353-66) lists additional sources related to Siti Jenar’s life in Dutch, Javanese and Indonesian. On Siti Jenar’s beliefs and fate see also Rinkes 1996:15-48.

31 Ricklefs suggests several elements which may have contributed to Java’s Islamization being typically portrayed as predominantly peaceful, obscuring important aspects of the process. Among them are the debates on the relative importance of traders, emphasis on the sufi element, the lack of evidence of foreign military expeditions imposing Islam by conquest, and discussions of the foreign sources of Indonesian Islam (Ricklefs 2001:17).

32 The distinction between ‘foreign’ and ‘Javanese’ is not clear-cut. Raden Patah, for example, the rebel prince who refused to pay homage to Majapahit, is depicted as the son of the Javanese king Brawijaya, but his mother was a Chinese princess and he was raised in a Sumatran court. Some of the wali, including Sunan Ampel, came from afar but became deeply involved with the Javanese and spent most of their lives on Java.
depictions that convey some of the tumultuous elements found in the Siti Jenar episode.

**Additional Javanese conversion paradigms**

Evidence suggesting the existence of differing viewpoints on conversion can certainly be found in Javanese literary works, complementing the *wali* traditions. These literary works depict a more aggressive and competitive process. In the sixteenth-century text translated by Drewes as *An early Javanese code of Muslim ethics* mention is made of ‘holy war’ (*Javanese perang sabil*). Babad Tanah Jawi versions depict the majority’s acceptance of Islam and the minority’s subsequent flight to the mountains. Some accounts depict the destruction of ancient books under Islam. The late nineteenth-century Serat Dermgandhul rejects Islam as foreign to Java, forced upon the island’s inhabitants through violent means, and proposes an alternative – and hardly flattering – etymology for the title *wali*.33

An account contrasting with peaceful conversion that is closely associated with the story of Samud as it, too, relates an episode in the life of the Prophet, is found in the Pandhita Raib narratives inscribed in Surakarta in 1792, and found in the Mangkunagaran palace in that city.34 Pandhita Raib was a teacher of Judaism in the country of Kebar, who drew the people of that land away from Islam. The story relates the Prophet’s struggle against Pandhita Raib, and his eventual victory over him, after which Pandhita Raib and the people of Kebar finally submit to Muhammad and his companions. As Ibnu Salam was known in many versions to have come to meet the Prophet from his land Khaibar, an important Jewish centre in seventh-century Arabia, this story of fierce competition and struggle between Muhammad and a Jewish leader from that locale appears to offer a different perspective on – and a different resolution to – the theme at the heart of the Samud texts.35

33 These references are made, respectively, in Drewes 1966:309-65, 1978:17 (where partaking in a holy war is listed as an obligation); Damono and Sondakh 2004:115 (on Islam’s takeover in Java). The term *wali*, rather than being derived from Arabic and referring to a ‘protégé of God’, received a Javanese etymology. The author recounts that the heron, known as the hypocrite among birds, carries its tail not like other animals but the other way around (*Javanese walikan*) as a plume attached to its head. The *wali* are likened to the heron, as according to the text what they had in mind was the opposite of what they pretended to want to achieve. They are thus portrayed as liars, devious hypocrites (Drewes 1966:363-4). Additional non-*wali* accounts of political instability and warfare are discussed in Smith-Hefner 1989:260.

34 These are all titled Serat Pandhita Raib, MSS MN 297, MN 298 and MN 299. For their content, as summarized here, see Florida 2000:190-1.

35 I have not come across mention of Khaibar in the Javanese *Book of One Thousand Questions*. 
The Pandhita Raib story in turn may well be linked to another Javanese corpus, that of Raja Kandak, which again depicts an episode from the life of the Prophet and his family during the early days of propagating Islam.\(^{36}\) The story tells of a war fought by the Prophet and his four companions against Raja Kandak, a king who disagreed with Islam’s teachings and refused to accept them. After he fell in battle his brother, one of his wives, and three jinn kings attempted to continue the struggle but were all defeated by Ali. Although Raja Kandak is not described as a Jewish king, this story may be a variation on the same theme.\(^{37}\)

All these episodes, likely adopted from Arabic or Persian sources, depict an explicitly non-peaceful way to attain the conversion of communities during the time of the Prophet. The Jewish element and Khaibar as a site of conflict and confrontation strengthen the impression that, when viewed side by side with the Samud story, these Javanized narratives offer an alternative way of thinking about the process of conversion to Islam, both during the Prophet’s time and, much later, on Java.

I now return to the Samud fragment presented above. We have seen that it contains many of the elements typical of Javanese *Book of One Thousand Questions* versions depicting conversion to Islam, like Samud’s acknowledgement of Muhammad, the recital of the confession of faith, and the acquiring of a new name. Above all it is typical of the *Book of One Thousand Questions* corpus in the way it presents conversion as peaceful, and characterized by respect, conviction and persuasion. However, this particular version is also linked to the more dominant – and not necessarily peaceful – traditions by its genealogy of transmission. Although this is a unique, non-representative versions I have read, but it does appear as the Jews’ hometown in Arabic versions discussed by Pijper (1924), as well as in Tamil and Malay ones.

\(^{36}\) In the catalogue of the literature department at the University of Indonesia, where this anonymous, undated text can be found (*Hikayat Raja Kandak MS FSUI CI 54*), its content is described as one among several such episodes. The others listed are the shaving of the Prophet, his ascension to heaven, and Samud (Behrend and Pudjiastutu 1997:170-1). Pigeaud (1967-70, I:133) also mentions the Kandak war, along with the meeting with Samud and several other episodes, as common themes in Javanese biographies of the Prophet.

\(^{37}\) Another example is found in the Malay *Hikayat Raja Khaibar* in which, once more, the king of Khaibar, in this case not a Jew but not yet a Muslim either, fought the Muslim army led by the Prophet and was defeated. His daughter Syaffiyah married Muhammad and converted, paving the way for all of Khaibar’s residents to do the same (*Hikayat Raja Khaibar MS PNRI W81*; see Behrend 1998:329). Four other Malay texts with this title are listed in the catalogue. Those dated are from the nineteenth century. The Prophet Muhammad did indeed marry a Jewish woman by the name of Safiyah, whose father Huyey ibn Akhtab, the leader of the Jewish Banu Nadir tribe of Khaibar, was killed in battle with the Prophet’s army. An Acehnese version of this text exists as well, attesting further to its wide circulation in the archipelago. *Hikayat Raja Khaibar, MS PNRI VT 262*, no details given; Behrend 1998:324.
instance within the *Book of One Thousand Questions* tradition, it is worth dwelling on here precisely because the connection explicitly made between the different traditions of conversion allows for a more complex view of both.

*The Samud fragment; A Book of One Thousand Questions attributed to a wali*

As seen above, the description of conversion in the 1823 Samud fragment is quite detailed but does not fundamentally differ from depictions in other Javanese *Book of One Thousand Questions* versions. What is special about this instance, however, is the way it ties in with a larger picture of Javanese conversion traditions, highlighting some ambiguities about the process which other versions do not make evident. As is well known, many Javanese works do not mention their genealogy of transmission, names of authors and translators, or places of inscription. This text, which does incorporate certain identifying details, allows us a glimpse into possible readings of the *Book of One Thousand Questions* as a conversion story on Java.

This version of the Samud story connects it to the more dominant Javanese conversion narratives of the *wali*. The link is achieved by its attribution to Makedum Rahmat, otherwise known as Raden Rahmat or Sunan Ampel, who is said to have ‘Javanized’ it, making it accessible to a local audience. Raden Rahmat is remembered as a central figure in the conversion of Java to Islam in the fifteenth century. The text reads:

```
This rendering in Javanese of the parable/
The Samud Ibnu Salam/
Accordingly has as its beginning/
Makedum Rahmat/
Who settled in Ngampel Gadhing/
As for his settling/
This was by the will of his forbears/
And so this was copied/
With the permission of Campa's king/
Thus came it to be/
For granted surpassing knowledge/
Was Sunan Rahmat of Ngampel Denta/
Greater than all his peers/
And so he who requested this/
Was Lord Sunan Rahmat/
Who dwelled in Ngampel Denta/
Was permitted by his father/
And having been permitted by his father/
```
Then set forth on his voyage to the island of Java/
To become a principal saint.  

To contextualize this passage and learn of Sunan Ampel’s role as it is recalled in Javanese histories, we turn to the Babad Tanah Jawi corpus. This chronicle, of which many versions exist, recounts Javanese history from the days of Adam to the eighteenth-century kings of Mataram, including the transition from Hindu-Buddhist rule to the rise of Islamic states on Java. Although its earliest known versions were written long after the events depicted, it provides at the very least a glimpse of certain ways in which the spread of Islam on Java was remembered.

According to the 1874 Meinsma edition of the Babad Tanah Jawi, Raden Rahmat was the son of Ibrahim Asmarakandi (of Samarkand in central Asia) and Dewi Candrawulan, the princess of Campa. Ibrahim convinced Campa’s king and all his people to embrace Islam. Raden Rahmat’s aunt Dewi Dwarawati from Campa married Prabu Brawijaya, the king of Majapahit, the last Hindu-Buddhist kingdom on Java. Raden Rahmat wished to visit his aunt and was granted permission by his father to travel to Java with his brother and cousin. Upon arrival he was given land in Ampel Denta, a seaside region near Majapahit’s capital Surabaya in eastern Java, and married a Javanese woman of noble descent, the sister of the future Sunan Kalijaga (Ras 1987:20). His first deed was to erect a mosque, and then a pesantren, which became a
centre for the propagation of Islam. He became known by the honorific title sunan (Sunan Ampel, for his dwelling place) and was considered a wali.

His uncle by marriage, King Brawijaya, was satisfied with his actions but did not himself want to convert to Islam. Sunan Ampel was allowed to spread Islam peacefully in the Majapahit lands, and indeed he sent many messengers out of Ampel to convert all over Java and Madura. After the death of Syekh Maulana Malik Ibrahim, eldest among the wali in the early fifteenth century, he became the leader of Islam in Java.41

Returning now to the Javanese Samud story, the ‘Javanization’ of which is credited to Sunan Ampel, we find mention of key elements of this history in the brief lines of the text’s conclusion. Sunan Ampel is mentioned initially by his title makdum, then as sunan. His familial connection, as son of the king of Campa, here referred to by the Javanese-Muslim royal title susunan, is stressed, as is his asking permission – and his father granting it – to journey to Java. The land he was given on the island, the site known as Ngampel Denta or Ngampel Gadhing, is mentioned three times, emphasizing the locale as crucial to his biography, the place where he began his endeavours as a teacher and propagator of Islam. Although conversion is not explicitly discussed, Sunan Ampel is depicted as having noble ancestors (likely a reference to his father’s Islamic roots in Samarkand and to his role in converting Campa, as well as his mother’s royal lineage), as possessing superior knowledge (Javanese ngèlmi kang linuwih, often referring to esoteric knowledge), and finally, as one whose voyage to Java culminated in his becoming a prominent wali, leader and guru for the emerging Muslim community of East Java.

It is intriguing, and indeed in some ways fitting, that the Samud story be associated with such a figure. Sunan Ampel, of royal foreign lineage but with familial ties to a great Javanese kingdom which would soon fall to the forces of the new faith, was a major figure in bringing Islam to Java. He was an important religious scholar, second leader and elder of the wali. His deeds encompassed converting, teaching, and the construction of mosques and pesantren (religious schools) at a time when these were completely new to the island, making the Surabaya region the first on Java to convert. These actions, as well as sending out messengers to other areas and his marriage with a daughter of the local elite, were all strategies in the peaceful introduction of the new religion. The way the connection is made in the text between Sunan Ampel and the Samud story, especially through the use of the words ngibarat (metaphor) and teladha (example, model), points to the dialogue between Ibnu Salam and

41 His sons Sunan Drajat and Sunan Bonang, and his disciples, son-in law Sunan Giri and brother-in-law Sunan Kalijaga, were all wali as well. He was among the planners of Demak, the first Muslim kingdom on Java, and among the builders of its mosque in 1466. Upon his death Raden Rahmat was buried in the Ampel mosque (Rahimsyah 1997:65-6; Sofwan et al. 2000:55-6).
the Prophet – with its elements of persuasion, inspiration and devotion – as a desired model for the Sunan’s, and others’, activities on Java.42

But the story is neither this simple nor this ideal. Just as Islam’s spread on Java was a complicated and multi-faceted process, so Sunan Ampel’s story itself is more complex than it first seems. Among his many deeds was the acceptance as close disciple of the man who would attack Majapahit, bringing about the demise of Brawijaya, his own uncle (Ras 1987:22; Damono and Sondakh 2004:73-5). That man, known as Raden Patah, would become the ruler of Demak, the first Muslim polity on Java. The close relationship between the two men points to an ambiguity regarding the atmosphere and attitudes in this early conversion stage as understood by Javanese writers of history.43

Raden Patah refused to pay homage to King Brawijaya, on the grounds that it was improper for a Muslim (Javanese tiyang Islam) to bow to an infidel (Javanese tiyang kapir).44 This act of defiance was followed by a revolt led by him and his brother, joined by all Muslims in the area, described as followers of Sunan Ampel and Sunan Giri. Assembling a large force, they entered Majapahit. Brawijaya, who wished to see his son one last time, was able to do so before disappearing in a flash of light and a thundering sound. The last Hindu-Buddhist kingdom on Java had fallen and Sunan Ampel then proclaimed Raden Patah heir to the throne.45
Raden Patah is remembered both as an important figure in the Islamic history of Java and as one who brought about the death or vanishing of his own father, betraying the land’s supreme ruler, the king, and destroying a kingdom which, although by the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century when it collapsed had been weakening gradually, had a grand past closely associated with a Javanese age of power and influence. Sunan Ampel’s close ties to him – as guru, family elder, and supporter of his rule – complicate the notion that this early bearer of Islam to the island represented the use of peaceful means alone.

Acknowledging this ambivalence, I nonetheless wish to suggest that connecting Sunan Ampel with the Samud story is significant in terms of thinking about depictions of conversion on Java and their relationship to elements of persuasion and tolerance. The association of the two stories, and the two protagonists, emphasizes Sunan Ampel’s (however symbolic) following in the footsteps of Samud. What needs to be kept in mind, I think, is that every story, every angle taken on this matter, presents us with a particular episode of a drawn-out and unquestionably complex process, and should not be read as an exclusive depiction of events as they took place or even of the way the wider transformation was inscribed to memory.

In the Babad Tanah Jawi accounts examined we saw that, at least initially, intolerance and exclusivity were not portrayed as a concern at the time on either side: beyond Sunan Ampel’s own deeds, this tendency is perhaps most evident in the stories of the king of Majapahit, who allowed his nephew to convert others as he pleased, although he himself did not wish to become a Muslim. Crediting the introduction of the Javanese Book of One Thousand Questions to Raden Rahmat connected an ancient story of conversion to Islam in an atmosphere of persuasion, teaching and peaceful means to a well-known local figure who followed the same path. It suggested a parallel between early conversions in Arabia and initial conversions on Java. Such links made the story relevant and credible, echoing with familiar traditions. Its genealogy stretched from the Prophet Muhammad through a Javanese wali, to the present time of its audience.

These episodes, stressing the personalities and strategies of both the king and the guru on Java as well as the Prophet and the Jewish leader in Arabia, are, necessarily, part of a larger picture. The wider frame of narratives as grand as the conversion of Java or Arabia includes instances of violence, coercion, and struggles for political and economic domination. Just as the process of conversion in the Prophet’s time is known to have encompassed military campaigns and episodes of aggression, so did the spread of Islam on Java and elsewhere in the region no doubt take many forms. It may be that by linking the stories of Sunan Ampel and Samud, the Javanese author wished to stress Sunan Ampel’s early career of persuasion and tolerance. The connec-
tion, however, rather than point to that initial stage alone, may underscore the ambiguities of conversion and the various contradictory personality types and strategies it entailed.

When considering representations of conversion to Islam in Javanese, the question arises as to who is and is not represented in surviving chronicles, especially when almost all were written long after the initial stages of the process. Even through the obscuring filter of time and selective sources, we find ambiguity regarding the means and attitudes involved in conversion, an ambiguity suggested in the biography of Sunan Ampel, who began his proselytizing career under the wings of his non-Muslim uncle the king and continued it by supporting that same king’s heir, who refused to bow to his infidel father.

The link made in a single Javanese Book of One Thousand Questions between this important Javanese wali and the Samud story echoes with many of the events that shaped Islam’s beginnings on Java: the fall of Majapahit to internal Muslim Javanese forces was a turning point of immense importance in Javanese history. Memories of flight and destruction have survived despite the dominant tradition’s allegiance to Islam. And the power struggles among the wali themselves and the execution of a member of their council were formative in shaping the tone and tendencies of Javanese Islam. It may well be that the emphasis on a peaceful process of conversion is the result of developments that occurred much later than the reported events, and of ideologies that favoured such a view.

Without detracting from the importance of the violent events and dynamics mentioned, it is significant that a major theme of recollections of the conversion of Java is its gradual and largely peaceful character. In the discussion above I suggested that the inclusion of the Samud story among depictions of Javanese conversions offers a particular view of the matter which is in line with many other depictions in Javanese literature. Its link to Sunan Ampel, with his acceptance by Brawijaya and the freedom he had to convert, build mosques and teach, created within its own tale of persuasion an echo of an episode imagined as one of openness, dialogue and tolerance on Java – one central to remembered conversions – and linked this episode to one of similar nature during the Prophet’s time.

The link made between a wali and Samud’s tale is an exception within the Book of One Thousand Questions corpus in Javanese. However, what is in the background is not an attribution of the text’s additional manuscripts to sources other than the wali but rather an almost complete silence regarding the arrival of the Samud story to Java. Therefore, this particular version allows us a glimpse of the crucially important realm of textual and religious genealogy, often obscured by the typical anonymity of authors and transmitters of such texts. The wali’s link to the Book of One Thousand Questions corpus is significant,
above all, in inviting us to think about how the different traditions of conversion to Islam do and do not relate to one another and what each has to tell us about history, especially how history is remembered, reshaped and retold.

The central emphasis of Javanese Book of One Thousand Questions versions regarding conversion remains that of a peaceful embracing of Islam. This fact may account in part for the corpus being less popular and less familiar on Java than the wali stories, with their elements of intrigue, power struggles and manoeuvring, although judging by the number of extant versions of the Book of One Thousand Questions and its reframing in the late nineteenth century it was by no means a negligible work.46 It provides an important model for how Java’s conversion to Islam was conceptualized and remembered, one that contains important lessons and images of tolerance that should not be overlooked.

Concluding thoughts

Examining various representations of conversion is important for understanding a process which was heterogeneous, long and very complex. The purpose is neither to try and salvage certain ‘historical facts’ about conversion from texts like those of the Book of One Thousand Questions corpus nor to advance a particular view of Java’s conversion history, but to understand how the distant developments portrayed in such literature were remembered, imagined, and recast for subsequent generations.

Most Javanese Samud manuscripts available to us at present, as well as most wali tales and the additional sources depicting early conversions mentioned above, were written or rewritten in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when a majority of Java’s population was already Muslim. This fact had a significant impact on the tone, perspectives and agendas of these texts, as they both shaped recollections of past conversions and spoke to contemporary notions of what it meant to become and remain a Muslim, and, more specifically, a Javanese Muslim.

The Book of One Thousand Questions proposes a model of conversion through ongoing questioning, the exhibition of broad knowledge and divine inspiration, and – first and foremost – through persuasion, followed by devotion. In this regard it complements certain conversion traditions in the region and offers an alternative to others.

Although the Book of One Thousand Questions’ narrative explicitly depicts a

46 By ‘reframing’ I am referring to the Sêh Ngabdulsalam versions, in which the Jew Ibnu Salam is transformed into a Javanese guru with his own set of disciples. These texts are beyond the scope of this article.
conversion in seventh-century Arabia, its Javanese tellings offered teachings and images informed by local sensibilities and practices, thus ‘converting’ the original story into one in which the Prophet, the convert, and the debate all took on Javanese identities. In this way it became an important textual source for the study of conversion to Islam and its representations on Java.

Both for newly converted Muslims wishing to understand more of their people’s history and faith, as well as for those living in long-converted communities debating and studying their religious tradition, the Book of One Thousand Questions offered a starting point for discussing a wide array of topics and terminology. In this sense it could always be approached anew and did not lose its relevance. The translation and dissemination of such a text in its localized forms was a sign of Islam’s successful incorporation on distant shores.

In the conclusion to his book on Bengal’s conversion, Eaton (1993:315) writes: ‘What made Islam in Bengal not only historically successful but a continuing vital social reality has been its capacity to adapt to the land and the culture of its people, even while transforming both’. These words ring equally true for Java – and the wider Indonesian archipelago – as the transmission of texts like the Book of One Thousand Questions transformed the religious landscape while being localized into particular language, culture and conversion histories.

Ricklefs (1979:126) writes that ‘Islam adapted successfully to the main prefiguration of preexisting Javanese religion, not altering the mystical theme but giving it a new vocabulary, range of explanations and rituals’.

References

Unpublished sources

Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia, Jakarta
Samud MS KBG 434

Karaton Surakarta Library, Surakarta
Samud Fragment in Para Nabi Nerangaken Bab Rijal Saha Sanes-Sanesipun, inscribed 1823 [?], MS KS 339.1

Pura Pakualaman Library, Yogyakarta
Serat Samud, inscribed 1884, MS St. 80
Serat Walisana, MS Pi. 32
Published sources

Behrend, T.E.

Behrend, T.E. and Titik Pudjiastutu

Bulliet, Richard W.

Damono, Sapardi Djoko and Sonya Sondakh

Dawood, N.J.

Drewes, G.W.J.


Eaton, Richard M.
1993 *The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier 1204-1760.* Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press. [Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies 17.]

Feener, Michael R.

Florida, Nancy K.


Kritzeck, James

Marhiyanto, Kholilah

Pigeaud, Theodore G.Th.

Pigeaud, Theodore G.Th. and H.J. de Graaf
Pijper, Guillaume Frédéric
1924  
_Het boek der duizend vragen._ Leiden: Brill.

Rahimsyah, A.
1997  
_Biografi dan legenda Wali Sanga dan para ulama penerus perjuangannya._ Surabaya: Indah.

Ras, J.J.
1987  
(ed.) _Babad Tanah Djawi; De proza oversie van Ngabèhi Kertapradja voor het eerst uitgegeven door J.J. Meinsma._ Dordrecht: Foris.

Ricci, Ronit
2006  

Ricklefs, M.C.
1979  

2001  

Rinkes, D.A.
1996  

Simuh
1999  

Smith-Hefner, Nancy J.
1989  

Sofwan, R., H. Wasit and H. Mundiri
2000  

Steenbrink, Karel A.
1984  
_Beberapa aspek tentang Islam di Indonesia abad ke-19._ Jakarta: Bulan Bintang.

Tibrizi, al-Khatib Muhammad ibn Abdullah Allah
1963  
_Mishkat Al-Masabih._ Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf. Four vols. [Translated by James D. Robson.]

Wensinck, A.J.
1995  
_The Muslim creed; Its genesis and historical development._ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [First edition 1932.]

Wieringa, E.P.
2003  