
Honours and opprobrium have been heaped on Nur al-Din al-Raniri (d. 1658) in almost equal measure over the past decades. During this time scholars of Islam in Southeast Asia have sought to make sense of his role in shaping the practice of the faith at the paradigmatic court of Aceh in the seventeenth century, and thereafter in the region as a whole. And yet we know precious little about him beyond the oft-cited instances of his fiery repression of the scholarship of his indigenous predecessors—most notably Hamza al-Fansuri (d. 1527) and Shams al-Din of Pasai (d. 1630)—and his much-reported view of traditional Malay *hikayat* being little better than emetics. For all his heavy-handedness and apparent inability to play nicely, though, it is clear that he became a magnet for rising scholars across the region such as the future Shaykh Yusuf of Makassar (d. 1699), who sought connection with the Arab master (or at least his name) when he arrived at Aceh some months after the latter had been compelled to leave for Gujarat in 1644. Still Raniri kept writing in India for a Southeast Asian audience, most notably for the court of Banten under Sultan Abu l-Mafakhir (d. 1651), continuing to play his part in the shaping of orthodoxy and no doubt being well remunerated for his troubles.

In this sense Raniri never really left the Malay (or rather Jawi) World. To be sure much has been made of his relationship to that world before and after Aceh in terms of his apparent mastery of the Perso-Arabic tradition, and then his rendering of that tradition in the language of his patrons. Some even speculate that his expertise spoke to a polyglot sensibility and perhaps even a Malay mother. Or had he even come to Aceh at the invitation of a prince whom he had known in Pahang before being carried away as a royal hostage by Iskandar Muda (r. 1607-36)? Suffice it to say, for all the summaries and cataloguings of Raniri’s works, the field has lacked an accessible and sustained critical exegesis of perhaps his most famous text, the *Bustan al-salatin*, which Paul Wormser has expertly dissected in the book under review. The result of this exhaustive and at times brilliant inquisition is an encyclopedic text in its own right, replete with useful summaries of the didactic episodes within the *Bustan*, maps of the mental horizon of the...
late Arabic tradition, and divinations of the many errors and praiseworthy renditions that can be sourced to that tradition.

Wormser divides the main elements of his treatment into six chapters: the historical and historiographic context (I), Nur al-Din’s life and work (II), the structure and content of the *Bustan* (III), the issue of its authorship and inspiration (IV), its vision of the world (V), and an overall interpretation of the text and its merits (VI). In so doing, Wormser goes well beyond previous studies, such as Ann Grinter’s unpublished dissertation of 1979 and Siti Hawa Saleh’s 1992 edition of the rather more unusual chapters of book two, and convincingly argues that the *Bustan* is unlikely to be the result of Raniri’s own invention, but rather represents the industrious rendering of elements from many texts by several translators working in an atelier under his guidance. This is not to say that the individual parts, sourced from such monuments as the *Kitab ‘aja’ib malakut*, *Daqa’iq al-haqa’iq*, and the *Rawd al-rayyahin*, were strangers to each other. Rather Wormser proposes that, in its form and assemblage, and excluding the discordant (but obligatory) chapters extolling the merits of Aceh and its sovereign, this agglomeration may well reflect a now lost compilation of the late Arabic tradition, with a decided emphases on describing a world of pious and wise rulers who had replaced a cacophonous past of Persianate dictators. Indeed, Wormser shows that the former was a world of Jewish and Persian villains: Persia (and even Persian) cannot offer much more than a substrate model for ‘his’ Islamicate history, which is very much centred on the central Arabic lands up to the fateful year 922, which saw the execution by the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadar of the antinomian mystic Mansur al-Hallaj.

In this last regard Wormser suggests that the year in question may have been chosen deliberately to assert his parallel project of defining the bounds of Sufi orthodoxy at court, shoring up his (and his Pahang-born patron’s) unsure position by prosecuting wayward local understandings. This had involved the immolation of the works of scholarly predecessors like Shams al-Din and even their emulators, such as Kamal al-Din, though it is worth noting that Raniri seemingly held Shams al-Din in some esteem at one point in the *Bustan*, even if Wormser finds this is evidence of an interpolation by a local translator (p. 84). Then again one might argue that Raniri was only ever condemning the local interpretations of his Jawi predecessor. For it is clear that the capacious works of jurisprudence that Raniri
produced—especially the Sirat al-mustaqim—harmonized readily with the more sober offerings of Shams al-Din.

In placing this weighty and, as Wormser shows, relatively less popular, work under the microscope, he offers insight into a twice-estranged foreigner’s modular vision of history that reflected little or no concern for the actualities of its deposition. By comparison with the hallowed realms of a past and better age there is no room in Raniri’s geography for Southeast Asia, or even the subcontinent from whence he came. Indeed Wormser makes the plausible argument that Raniri, like many other Arabs of Hadrami origin living in Gujarat, would have felt themselves adrift in a hostile Indo-Persianate (and increasingly Shiite) world as they took on the role of being ‘cultural missionaries’ to a benighted Sunni present. There is also practically no space given in the Bustan to any consideration of women’s active role in society, regardless even of the fact that Raniri would himself serve under a queen in the wake of the death (reputedly by poison) of his master in 1741.

Within a few short years, Raniri would himself leave the court for his birthplace, though, as noted above, he remained well connected to his Jawi allies across the region. Based on the 1657 dedication to his Fath al-mubin, such agents were implied as being present from the ‘islands’ of Patani, Songkhla, and Kedah on the Malay Peninsula, to Banten and Makassar in the archipelago. Concerning the last of these referents, Wormser makes the logical connection to Shaykh Yusuf (p. 114), though he was yet to return to the Archipelago. Still, Yusuf was but one of many who often preferred to copy rather than produce syntheses of their own. Seen in this light, Raniri’s mention of an ally in Patani may well point to an atelier where one may have found the mentor of one ‘Abd al-Hakim al-Jawi al-Fatani, who seems to have been one of Ibrahim al-Kurani’s pupils alongside Shaykh Yusuf in Medina.1

1 This first known ‘Fatani’ transcribed a work on putative hadith in the weeks after Kurani had dealt with a treatment on the subject on Thursday 14 Muharram 1075 (7 August 1664). This he followed with an enumeration of the works of Zakariyya al-Ansari, which he completed on Wednesday 29 Ramadan 1075 AH (15 April 1665). Both tracts are now found bound together with texts transcribed by Shaykh Yusuf in Medina in 1665, and whose own final leaf al-Fatani annotated (Princeton University Library MS Garrett 3872Y, ff 85v-137r).
In pondering the apparent multiplicity of Jawi allies for the project to explain the true other world and its salvific potential, one might also turn the gaze back on the compiler who does not seem to have policed the quality of the translations produced under his remit. These ranged, as Wormser shows in learned detail, from faithful to bizarre. Jokes are perfectly understood and lessons eloquently transmitted in some instances. In others, kings become lands, tribes become individuals, Turks are confused with Ottomans, and the names of Christian sects made meaningless. In this sense then, the master is rendered a shaky husband of his textual preferences, whose choices would have been made even more obscure by the emendations of later copyists.

So was Raniri someone special or rather emblematic of the sort of cultural ambassador drawn to Southeast Asia? Was he a man who was fully confident in the world he felt that his Jawi audience deserved to know about, or was he someone whose place was always uncertain, being subject to the whims both of his patrons above him and the translators below? Whatever the case, it is clear that with time, such cultural missionaries as Raniri would be supplemented and then largely replaced by many like-minded Jawi sojourners equally committed to a single past that they, surely, had been witness to all along, and in the face of the constant challenge of deviation, whether local or Indian. In this sense, then, the much-vaunted Arabic Cosmopolis of recent scholarship speaks more to the idea of the primacy of lands and language rather than their practical centrality.

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