Review Essays

Arriving at the Point of Departing *Recent Additions to the Hasan Mustapa Legacy*

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Ahmad Gibson Albustomi, *Filsafat manusia Sunda: Kumpulan esai HHM, Teosofi dan filsafat*. Bandung: Skylart, 2012, x + 200 pp. ISBN 9786021890820. Price: IRP 46,000.00 (Paperback).

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The Sundanese *alim* (learned man), writer and colonial official Hasan Mustapa (1852–1931) has always struggled to break free from his historical and political contexts. His copious output of mystical and other writings was composed in registers and genres that no longer signify as widely as they did in his time; his works are not widely available, and his manuscripts have been jealously guarded; his individualistic adaptations of Islamic concepts have provoked the ire of Islamic intellectuals anxious about deviating from accepted canons; and his cosy relationships with the colonial government have excluded him from the privileged category of ‘national hero’ (*pahlawan Negara*) occupied by Hasyim Asy’ari and other Muslim leaders.

After spending lengthy periods studying Islam in Mecca, Mustapa had a career as a government-appointed religious official (*penghulu*) in Aceh and Bandung. Beginning around 1900, he produced a stunning corpus of work, mostly in Sundanese, aimed at two broad goals. First, he wished to make a normative statement about the Islamic faith. There is nothing notable about that, except that his statements are distinguished for being shaped not only by Islamic concepts but also by the realities of Sundanese life. Second, he wanted this message to be of value to Sundanese Muslims. His works emanate compassion and respect for Sundanese Muslims confronting the realities of life in colonial West Java. The resulting works are ethnically specific Islamic mediations, replete with literary analogues sourced from Sundanese custom, myth, lore, history, food-ways, and agricultural life.

For the scholar and activist Ahmad Gibson Albustomi (b. 1965), Mustapa’s imprisonment in history is a challenge to be overcome. The majority of the thirty articles compiled in *Filsafat Manusia Sunda* are about Mustapa’s work, and form a notable attempt to mediate Mustapa’s project in forms accessible to contemporary Indonesian readers. ‘Kang Gibson’, as he is known in Bandung, is a charismatic figure who works on the staff of Bandung’s Sunan Gunung Djati Islamic State University (UIN). In his years as a student there, he was a core member of the Pasamoan Sophia foundation, which conducted regular discussions on Mustapa, Sundanese culture and everyday philosophy. Other members have become Islamic intellectuals in their own rights, including Iip Yahya, Bambang Q. Anes and Dede Syarif. The playwright and poet Hidayat Suryalaga (d. 2010) was an elder of that group. In his postgraduate work, Kang Gibson made a significant study of one of Mustapa’s most widely-read works, *Treatise on the Foundations of Islamicness*.

Kang Gibson draws a strong thread of Sunda-nationalism from Mustapa's work. According to Gibson's historical contextualization of Mustapa's thinking, Sundanese culture had developed in the pre-Islamic period to the point where its subjects were able to respond to the Islamic message. In other words, a primordial Sundanese identity was the template upon which the Islamic religion was so firmly embraced. In Gibson's reading, Mustapa understood himself as the meeting point for a dialogue between these two 'systems'.

In a number of essays Gibson picks up on a theme emphasized by Mustapa in his *Treatise on the Foundations*: his dislike for homogeneity. The life-cycle of a Sundanese Muslim, according to *The Treatise*, was a journey through seven stages (*maqam*) from homogeneity to an endpoint consisting of never-ending possibilities. The threshold between each stage is the individual Muslim's decision to abandon the certainty of singularity for the confusion of a plurality of names and meanings. As the Muslim passes through the seven stages, her reliance on social ties and conventions decreases, while her ability to move in an agile fashion between diverse contexts and identities increases. Mustapa's journey is a transformation from entrapment in social status to liberation through embracing the complexity of life.

This all sounds heavy, to be sure, but Gibson is keen to make Mustapa's ideas broadly relevant, mobilizing them to support his positions on a number of contemporary conflicts dogging West Java. The textual regimes of modernists and traditionalists, in Gibson's critique, are retrograde because they take religious life back to the period before the Sundanese managed their blend of Islam and Sundanese civilization. In contemporary West Java, Gibson argues, local realities have been written out of Islamic experience, causing a decline in the quality of public Islamic life. Mustapa's message is being overlooked. Gibson is not the only activist or intellectual to summon Mustapa into contemporary contexts. Asep Salahudin, a preacher and educator based at the Suryalaya *pesantren* in Tasikmalaya, has been doing a similar thing, writing a series of newspaper and magazine articles in which Mustapa is called upon as an authoritative support for locally inflected Islamic interpretations, in opposition to a homogenizing impetus that can be observed in contemporary West Java and elsewhere.

Not all the essays are about Mustapa. Some are concerned with debates about Sundanese culture. A sense of loss pervades these. The Sundanese have lost touch with their culture, Gibson argues, because of their preference for the 'foreign' cultures of Mataram (Java) and Islam. Gibson regrets that as a result of this orientation to Islam and Mataram, Cirebon has been excluded from Sundanese memory. In fact, he argues, the founder of Cirebon, Sunan Gunung Jati, was a descendant of the legendary king of Pajajaran, Prabu Siliwangi,

and Cirebon should be in fact recognized as the crossroads where Sundanese culture made fruitful encounters with Islam and other foreign influences.

Readers looking for detail about Mustapa's life and work will not find much of value in this volume. The essays are brief and punchy. But nevertheless, this book is a notable for two reasons. First, Kang Gibson succeeds in presenting Hasan Mustapa in frames intelligible and meaningful for contemporary audiences. To use his own words, he has freed him from 'the monopoly of philologists with their textual approaches'. Second, Gibson's mobilization of Mustapa in contemporary disputes is a welcome intervention. Mustapa's vision was a unique one, but the man never lost touch with the idea that Islamic spirituality and the outer realities of Sundanese life could be brought into harmony. It is timely for this harmony to be promoted as something of relevance in the present.

The five volumes of *guguritan* (non-narrative verse) published by Kiblat and the Bandung-based Sundanese Studies Centre represent the first major edition of Mustapa's mystical verse. A number of his verses were published during his lifetime and in the decades after his death, but these are rarely encountered now. Nine *guguritan* were published in 1987 (Iskandarwassid, Rosidi and Josef 1987), and Ajip Rosidi's monumental 1989 work (Rosidi 1989) included five. But these slender volumes are the first widely available editions of Mustapa's work. Only one has already been published: *Asmaranda Nu Kami* was included in the Iskandarwassid/Rosidi/Josef volume.

There is a story behind the publication of these particular works. Up until the mid-1980s, it was thought that most of the surviving works by Mustapa were to be found in the manuscripts forming the legacy of his second scribe/secretary, Wangsaatmadja, who worked for Mustapa between 1923 and 1930. On a visit to the library of Leiden University in 1984, however, Ajip Rosidi ascertained that the Sundanese specialist and cataloguist R.A. Kern had not realized that a number of Sundanese manuscripts from the collection of C. Snouck-Hurgronje were in fact works by Mustapa. The copyist was Wangsadihardja, who worked as scribe for Mustapa before Wangsaatmadja. These five slender volumes contain transliterations into Latin script of works from these manuscripts. Each book bears the title of the *guguritan* found within it, given titles by Rosidi after key words found in the opening lines of each. The transliterations were skillfully made by Ruhaliah, a senior lecturer in the Regional Language program at Bandung's University of Education (UPI).

I need to come clean about my level of comprehension of these texts. I have studied Sundanese for quite a few years now, but my skills are inadequate for exploring Mustapa's world, or at least the world revealed in the *guguritan* (as opposed to his prose, which is simpler). Many passages left me scratching

my head. But even the Sundanese to whom I turned for assistance, all of them literary people, find his work challenging. This is not surprising, for Mustapa considered obscurity to be a virtue. He makes frequent references to the Qur'an, but references to the better known conceptual repertoire of Sufism are relatively few in this selection. Instead, the reader must deal with Qur'anic Arabic reproduced beside the language of ancient Sundanese spirituality, as well as the lexicon of *Kejawen* (Javanese spirituality).

Despite my inadequate comprehension, I found these works thrilling, and succeeded in discerning a number of Mustapa's core themes. The first is his concern for the individual Muslim subject and its interaction with society and religion. All five works fit within this frame. There are no prayers or supplications in these works, and not much direct attention to Islamic doctrine. Mustapa's vision is highly introspective. A second theme is his insistence that humans live in many 'worlds'. While Muhammadiyah leaders were urging Indies Muslims to transform themselves into 'moderns', and while NU's first generation of leaders were defending the institutions and structures of tradition, Mustapa was journeying through all kinds of worlds, seen and unseen, of which the *alam dunya* (worldly existence) was only one. In Mustapa's vision, the individual Muslim subject strives to move between unseen worlds which offer varying levels of authenticity, security and comfort, and social life is only one of those worlds. Mustapa saw social life as the world of 'naming' (*lalandian*), in which humans are given roles according to their individual situations.

A third theme emerges as an emphasis on transformative trajectories. These works are full of references to transitions, especially the one from youth to maturity. Ideally, this is a journey from dependence on relationships and community to an independence that liberates the subject and enables it to become a contributor to that community. But he did not encourage Sundanese Muslims to think they would ever arrive at a destination. In Mustapa's world, there is no end to leaving, setting out, travelling, arriving, returning and so forth. In one famous phrase, Mustapa describes himself as finally 'arriving at the point of departure'.

A fourth impression is his palpable contempt for certainty. In the reality of daily life, the only certainty is naming. The 'authentic world' (*alam sajadi*) is the one of eternal movement, of resistance to singularity. This last point is attractive to younger thinkers in contemporary Bandung. Confronted by an Islamic society ever more geared to be alarmed at diversity, they find Mustapa an authoritative source of approval for their indigenous diversity project. I struggle to think of any Muslim writer of the early twentieth century who offers a vision anything like Mustapa's. Perhaps we need to go back to Hamsah Fansuri (d. 1590?) to find someone similar. It is ironic that such a message should come

so loud and clear from the tortured world of colonial West Java. We owe much to Ajip Rosidi, Ruhaliah and others behind this project for making these works available.

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