CHAPTER 1

An Indigenous Biography: The Qamar al-zaman

1 Introduction

The most complete sources for the biography of Sayyid ‘Uthman are two life stories in Malay, written shortly after he had passed away in 1914. These texts, entitled the Suluh zaman and the Qamar al-zaman, respectively, deal with his life from birth until death and are very similar as far as their content is concerned. Both texts are closely related and originate from Sayyid ‘Uthman’s immediate family. The present chapter starts by providing information on the background and provenance of both texts and explains their relationship. In addition, I will present a full translation of the Qamar al-zaman, in order to give a view on the life of Sayyid ‘Uthman, as perceived within his own milieu. This approach allows me to compare this ‘view from within,’ as I phrased it in the introduction, with the description of the life and work of Sayyid ‘Uthman that I will present in the second part of this book, and which enables me to provide ‘a view from without’ on his biography in the third part of the book.

2 The Suluh zaman and the Qamar al-zaman

The older of the two texts is probably the Suluh zaman, the full title of which is Suluh zaman ada menceritakan hal keadaan almarhum Sayyid ‘Uthman dari masa diberanakkan hingga pulang ke rahmat Allah, ‘The torch of the era: The story of the life of the late Sayyid ‘Uthman from his birth until his return to the Mercy of God.’ This text is in prose, but on the back cover are five stanzas of poetry that appeal to the reader to follow the good example of the mufti Sayyid ‘Uthman. The last stanza gives some information on the text itself and reads as follows:

This story has just been published
Sayyid ‘Abd Allah is the one who published it
it is for sale and has been printed in his printing office
it is for sale for a low price.¹

¹ ini hikayat baharu terbitnya/Sayyid ‘Abd Alah yang mengeluarkannya/terjual dan tercetak di percetakannya/dijual pun dengan murah harganya.
The *Suluh zaman* was written by Sayyid ‘Abd Allah, who was one of the sons of Sayyid ‘Uthman.\(^2\) The text is not dated, but may have been written before 1924; in any case it is older than the *Qamar al-zaman* that dates from that year.

The second biography of Sayyid ‘Uthman is a poetic rendering of his life story, the full title of which reads *Qamar al-zaman menyatakan keadaannya al-marhum al-Habib ‘Uthman dan ta’rikhnya*, ‘The moon of the era: A description of the life of the Late Habib ‘Uthman and his times.’ This poem was published in a small lithographed booklet together with five religious admonitions, and is written in Malay using Jawi script. The title page states that the poem was composed by Shaykh ibn ‘Alwi ibn ‘Uthman ibn Yahya, meaning Shaykh the son of ‘Alwi, the son of ‘Uthman ibn Yahya; that is to say, the grandson of Sayyid ‘Uthman. Shaykh was the name of the second of the ten sons of ‘Alwi,\(^3\) and ‘Alwi was the oldest son of Sayyid ‘Uthman, who had been born in Hadramaut.\(^4\) Moreover, the title page mentions that it was printed and sold in the shop owned by Sayyid ‘Alwi ibn ‘Uthman, located in Kampung Petamburan in Weltevreden. The final page of the booklet mentions that the writing was finished on 21 Rabiʿ al-thani 1343 (= 19 November 1924).

Thus, both the *Suluh zaman* and the *Qamar al-zaman* originate from the direct family of Sayyid ‘Uthman. Of course, this closeness to the protagonist of the story could mean that any actions that shed a negative light on Sayyid ‘Uthman might have been left out, but, on the other hand, it also guarantees a high degree of authenticity of the information provided. These works are not primarily concerned with providing factual information on the life of Sayyid ‘Uthman, but both have a clear edifying dimension. As mentioned, the *Suluh zaman* appeals to readers to follow the good example set by Sayyid ‘Uthman during his lifetime. By comparison, a wish is expressed on the title page of the *Qamar al-zaman* that the life story of Sayyid ‘Uthman be an ‘example for people of understanding’ (Arabic *‘ibratan li-uli l-albab*, Qur’an 12: 111). Alongside the clearly edifying passages in both works, they also present solid information on various things, for instance, book titles, events, and individuals. Whenever it was possible to check these data against information from other sources, both texts have always proved to be reliable from a historical point of view. In

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2 According to ‘Abd al-Qadir, *Genealogical chart*, he was the fourth son of Sayyid ‘Uthman. Together with three other brothers, he signed the obituary of his father in the Padang journal *al-Munir*, see Chapter Eight.

3 ‘Abd al-Qadir, *Genealogical chart*.

4 Shahabuddin, *Otobiografi*, 105. Later we hear of his presence in Batavia, but it is not clear when ‘Alwi left Hadramaut for the Dutch East Indies. Perhaps he was taken as a child by his father to Batavia. See also Chapter Eight.