CHAPTER 3

Serving the Muslim Community: Scholar and Publisher in Batavia (1862–1885)

1 Introduction

This chapter examines the life of Sayyid ‘Uthman in the years after he settled in Batavia in 1862 until 1885. I have chosen the year 1885 as it was around this time that Sayyid ‘Uthman became an object of debate within the circles of the Dutch colonial administration, before he eventually entered into the service of the government in 1889. Moreover, it appears that 1885 was the year when there was a shift in Sayyid ‘Uthman’s activities, from teaching to writing.1

The earliest activities of Sayyid ‘Uthman after his return from the Middle East are mentioned in the Qamar al-zaman and the Suluh zaman. According to the Qamar al-zaman (stanza 65), Sayyid ‘Uthman returned to the Netherlands East Indies because he longed for his birthplace. This may well have played a role in his considerations, but his mother and his grandfather had died and it seems, in fact, that there was not much to return to. Although I have seen no indication of this, it is possible that Sayyid ‘Uthman had become disillusioned with Hadramaut, having failed to make his mark as a prominent scholar there. According to the Qamar al-zaman (stanza 69), Sayyid ‘Uthman’s return to Batavia in 1862 was met with great pomp and circumstance by his family. This claim is questionable as there were not many members – if any at all – of the Al Yahya in Batavia, although there may have been some family members from his mother’s side. The only thing known is that upon his arrival in Batavia, Sayyid ‘Uthman met with a half Malay, half Arab son of a relative (seanak sawdarahnya) from his mother’s family. Furthermore, he visited the graves of his grandfather, grandmother and mother in Petamburan. Hereafter, he travelled to Surabaya to see his elder brother, Sayyid Hashim, who as a child had been taken by his father from Batavia to Mecca, but who had apparently returned to the Netherlands East Indies and settled in Surabaya.2

1 Van den Berg, Le Hadramout, 164.
2 Suluh zaman, 8. Hardly anything is known about this brother, but it seems that he was active in Surabaya as a scholar around 1891; al-‘Attas, al-Durar al-bahiya, 4–5, includes an approval (taqriz) given by him.
2 Earliest Activities in Batavia

It is mentioned in the *Qamar al-zaman* that after Sayyid ʿUthman settled in Batavia many people approached him with requests for teaching. The *Suluh zaman* (p. 8) elaborates that he accepted these requests, albeit reluctantly:

> In fact, I do not belong to the great ‘ulama’ and I do not possess much knowledge, but only a little, which I got from my teachers, together with their blessing. But in case someone would like to get the blessing of my teachers, I will comply with this wish as best as I can.

Both the *Qamar al-zaman* (stanza 75–83) and the parallel passages of the *Suluh zaman* relate that Sayyid ʿUthman started to teach on an irregular basis and that he did this for the sake of Allah and not for the salary. I think that these remarks about this initial unwillingness to teach and the refusal to take a salary are designed to underline the protagonist’s humility and virtuous character. However, it seems that Sayyid ʿUthman had no income upon his return to Batavia, and so it is reasonable to conclude that, in reality, this teaching will have formed a major, or perhaps the only, source of earnings. Consequently, it was fortuitous that Haji ʿAbd al-Ghani Bima, who was old and no longer able to teach for health reasons, asked Sayyid ʿUthman to replace him in his teaching position at the mosque of Pekojan.³ In the 1850s, Haji ʿAbd al-Ghani Bima had been one of the leading scholars in the Jawi colony in Mecca, but apparently had returned to the archipelago in his old age. Taking up this opportunity, Sayyid ʿUthman taught on a regular basis and the number of his pupils started to grow. Later, he was also asked by a certain Haji ʿAbd al-Muʿin to teach in the mosque of Pasar Senin in Kampong Besar.⁴

Thus, shortly after his return to Batavia, Sayyid ʿUthman’s position as a teacher was well established. Both the *Suluh zaman* and the *Qamar al-zaman* emphasise that he was very strict in upholding the rules of religion in his teaching, and that he shunned anyone who falsely claimed expertise in Islamic matters or who used religion for their own material gain. There is not much known about Sayyid ʿUthman’s pupils. This is largely because teaching was not to be the main focus of his career. Nevertheless, there is some information available on a number of pupils, the best known being ʿAli al-Habshi (1870–1968), who left for Hadramaut at the age of ten; prior to this he had followed the lessons of

---

³ *Qamar al-zaman*, stanzas 77–79. This person originated from the island of Sumbawa and used to teach in the Jawa colony in Mecca, Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka*, 262–263.

⁴ *Suluh zaman*, 9. I do not know anything about this person.