CHAPTER 5

Two Hundred Years after the First Embassy: Ottoman Turkey, Its Worthless Western Allies and Russian Enemies – the Worst of the Kāfirs

After a considerable temporal hiatus, Ottoman Turkey reappears as a real country to figure prominently in the next group of our texts, which includes prose and verse compositions of the second half of the nineteenth century that tackle the Russo-Turkish Wars of 1853–1856 (the Crimean War) and of 1877–1878. One way or another, these works, taken as a sum total, touch upon all major aspects of the wars in question. They describe the countries involved and their rulers, the causes of the wars and the political manoeuvres leading to and accompanying them, the land and sea battles in different theaters of operations, and the merits (or demerits) of both military commanders and high government officials.

Just as in earlier literary pieces, all this is interpreted in terms of the traditional Malay Weltanschauung, with its strong Islamic background, and is expressed through the formulaic narrative style of traditional Malay literature, with its well-established compositional patterns, conventional tropes and whimsical combinations of the real and the imaginary. And yet, the works on the Russo-Turkish Wars (just like many other synchronous pieces of literature) cannot be reduced to their traditional components alone, as new features that entered Malay literature on the eve of the epoch of modernity are also discernible within them.

The consolidation of British and Dutch colonial rule and the related process of a broader and deeper penetration of Western influence into the life of Malay-Indonesian societies brought about substantial, although controversial, changes in the region.¹ On the one hand, the growing colonial pressure could not but generate a counteraction, intellectual or physical, on the part of these societies. On the other hand, new technology and better communications introduced by Western powers provided these societies with powerful means of interaction with each other and with Muslims abroad, better comprehension of developments in the international world of Islam and the ability to search for support and assistance from there.

¹ The politico-ideological review presented below leans heavily on works by Reid (2005: 226–48) and Göksoy (2011).
In the second half of the nineteenth century, ideas of global Islamic solidarity, pan-Islamic unity and the caliphate-ist movement, although not completely unfamiliar in the Malay world earlier, became considerably stronger and more popular. European rule was proclaimed intolerable because it was non-Muslim. Precisely for this reason, it had to be overthrown by the joint efforts of true believers ‘under the banner of Islam,’ that is, by a kind of jihād. As had occurred before sporadically and now more consistently, this idea of a common fight gained greatly in appeal by linking the seemingly weak and backward Muslims of Southeast Asia with the caliph [the Ottoman sultan] himself, who was popularly imagined as the most powerful ruler on earth, bound to come to the succour of his oppressed co-believers if they could prove worthy of him.

REID 2005: 227

The above-mentioned progress in technology and communications was also exceptionally conducive to the dissemination of pan-Islamic and caliphate-ist ideology. The number of local pilgrims (ḥājjīs), who, duly indoctrinated in the Holy Cities, returned to propagate this ideology at home, increased dramatically. Equally considerable growth of Arab emigration brought to the Malay world quite a number of rich merchants (sometimes sayyīds) who were authoritative in Islamic matters. Frequently involved in distributing the same kind of propaganda, they could also liaise between Muslims of the region and the Middle East, including the Ottoman Empire, through their ramified trade networks. The vibrant Straits Settlements cities, Singapore and Penang, with their atmosphere of greater freedom and less strict governmental control of the Islamic opposition than in Netherlands Indies, presented a good site for the discussion and spreading of pan-Islamic views and even for the armament of indigenous Muslims of more radical persuasion. In addition, Malay and Indonesian pan-Islamists could now dispatch their petitions to the Sublime Porte via the Turkish consulates in Singapore and Batavia2 and use the printing presses of Singapore and Penang for publishing their pamphlets and proclamations, to the great annoyance of the Dutch.

This activity was not fruitless, and between the 1840s and the 1860s a wave of unrest swept over a number of areas of Netherlands Indies: Banten in western Java, Lampung, Palembang and Jambi in southern Sumatra, and Banjarmasin

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2 For the Turkish consulates and the role of consuls in Singapore and Batavia, see Kadi 2015: 163–7.