CHAPTER TWO

ARABOPHOBIA AND TAREKAT: HOW SAYYID ‘UTHMĀN BECAME ADVISOR TO THE NETHERLANDS COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION

Nico J. G. Kaptein

Introduction

Sayyid ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Aqīl ibn Yahyā al-‘Alawī of Batavia (1822–1914) was a member of the Hadhrami diaspora in the Netherlands East Indies, where he was one of the most prolific ‘ulamā’. As his name indicates, Sayyid ‘Uthmān was a so-called sayyid, the honorific title for a descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad, and thus a member of the religious nobility held in high esteem not only among the Muslim masses in the Netherlands East Indies but throughout the greater Muslim world. He wrote more than 150 books and pamphlets in Arabic and Malay, which he published on his own lithographic press, and through which he emerged as an outspoken polemicist whose primary concern was the propagation of the correct understanding of religion. Furthermore, Sayyid ‘Uthmān is known for his work in the Dutch colonial administration, which he began without an official title in 1889 before becoming ‘Honorary Advisor for Arab Affairs’ in 1891. In this capacity, Sayyid ‘Uthmān collaborated closely with the famous scholar of Islam and government advisor C. Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936).

In this chapter, I would like to focus on how Sayyid ‘Uthmān came into contact with the Dutch and, despite his belonging to the distrusted Arab community, rose to prominence in the Dutch colonial administration to become its Honorary Advisor for Arab Affairs. This will be preceded by a brief survey of the history of the Arabs in the history of the Arāb in the Netherlands East Indies, and of Sayyid ‘Uthmān’s life and career before coming

1 I thank conference participants, especially Dr. Sumit Mandal of the National University of Malaysia, for their helpful comments on my presentation. An earlier draft of this chapter was presented at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA, 7 February 2005.
into contact with the Dutch, which will show the obstacles he had to overcome in order for his appointment to take place.

Arabs in the Netherlands East Indies at the End of the Nineteenth Century

As is well known, almost all Arabs in the Netherlands East Indies traced their ancestry back to Hadhramaut in South Yemen and form part of the Hadhrami diaspora around the Indian Ocean in East Africa, South India and the Malay Indonesian Archipelago. As Arabs, they hailed from different social strata, with the sāda as the traditional religious nobility at the top. Most of the first Arab migrants were men who married local women and produced mixed offspring: the so-called muwallad or peranakan. The Hadhrami diaspora maintained close ties with their native region in many ways: by sending children born in the Netherlands East Indies back to Hadhramaut for schooling; by cherishing their Arabic language; and by sending money back to their families in Hadhramaut. Although the first migrants and their offspring were few in number, they exercised huge influence not only through trade (in Southeast Asia Arab traders were second in importance only to the Chinese), but also through the propagation of Islam beyond the traditional heartlands of the Muslim world. However, the attitude of the Netherlands East Indies’ indigenous population toward Arabs was ambivalent: while they considered Arabs to be natural authorities on religious matters, they also saw them as usurers.

In the Netherlands East Indies Arabs were assigned the civil status of ‘Vreemde Oosterlingen’ (Foreign Orientals), a classification that manifested itself in, among other forms, the pass and quarter system: Arabs were obliged to live together in designated town quarters and to request a formal pass from the authorities to travel outside their town of residence. This system greatly restricted movement, which was precisely the goal of colonial authorities, who saw Arabs as potential adherents to Pan-Islamist ideology which aimed at uniting the world’s Muslims under the banner of the Ottoman Sultan. Thus, Pan-Islamism was inherently anti-colonial. Moreover, the government also regarded Arabs as religious fanatics. The colonial administration’s distrust of Arabs can be summed up in a single word: Arabophobia.2

---

2 This section is based on Huub de Jonge and Nico Kaptein, 2002, “The Arab Presence in Southeast Asia: Some Introductory Remarks”, Jonge and Kaptein (eds.),