CHAPTER TWELVE

IN THE NAME OF FATIMAH:
STAGING THE EMANCIPATION OF THE HADHRAMIS
IN THE NETHERLANDS EAST INDIES

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Introduction

In the 1930s an increasing number of nationally oriented movements and parties in the Dutch East Indies started to stage dramas at special events and festive occasions, such as a congress, an anniversary, and other days of remembrance. They were aimed at adding lustre to a meeting, to entertain the audience, to propagate ideals, to bring up societal questions, to furnish information, and to promote emancipation. It was a kind of educational theatre that was directed at underlining the signature of the organisation and reinforcing the identity of its members. Such events became popular among the Indonesians and the Asian minorities, such as the Chinese and Hadhramis, who were politically and socially separately organised, in full accordance with the official division of the population into Europeans, Vreemde Oosterlingen (Foreign Orientals), and Indonesians.

The plays were based on the European model and had little or nothing to do with the traditional forms of theatre of these population groups, in which dance, music and masquerade often played an important role. The genre, called tonil – from the Dutch toneel (play) – or sandiwara, was usually staged in the schouwburg, the playhouse of the European community. The stage plays were written by a member of the organisations concerned capable of writing in an eloquent style and were performed by dramatis personae recruited from their own ranks. Almost every branch of a national political or societal organisation had its own drama club, alongside other secondary associations such as sports clubs, a women’s society and a drum band.

In this chapter, I want to dwell upon the drama Fatimah that was staged at the third congress of the Persatoean Arab Indonesia (PAI), the Union of Indonesian Arabs, in 1938. The PAI was founded in 1934
by some Indo-Hadhramis, so-called muwallad or peranakan, who saw it as their main goal to advance the emancipation of the Hadhramis and their integration into the society at large. In the footsteps of the Indische Partij, the party of the Indo-Europeans, and the Partai Tionghoa Indonesia, the party of the Indo-Chinese, its founders accepted Indonesia as their fatherland and Indonesian culture as their culture, opinions that were not shared by everybody in these minority circles.

_Fatimah_, the second drama to be performed at a congress of the PAI, was written in Malay by H. Bafagih, who also wrote the earlier play. He was a journalist connected to various journals and acted for a while as First Secretary of the Hadhrami organisation _al-Rābitah al-‘Alawiyah_. The play, which consisted of eight acts of various lengths, was written at the request of the General Board of the PAI. It was so pleased with the result that, at the congress, a cheap trade edition of the text was offered for sale. The drama was acted out by both leading figures and ordinary members of the union. In the congress programme it was announced using the words sensational, sad, and moving.

The play was well received by the PAI following, but came as a bombshell to other members of the Hadhrami community. It led to so many objections among opponents of the organisation that further performances had to be postponed. For this reason, the play provides a unique entrance into the preoccupations and frustrations of the Hadhramis in the Dutch Indies in the years leading up to World War II. It shows what the members of the minority were bothered about, and what was thought necessary to end these problems. Plays, just like other cultural expressions such as ballads, songs, folk operas, prayers, proverbs, and poems, as Reynaldo Ileto and others have made clear, are indispensable for understanding societies from within and “from below”.

_The Story Line_

Fatimah is the underage daughter of the wealthy trader Naṣir bin Oemar Asjaibie. Naṣir is seriously ill and he feels the end is drawing

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