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**The trials of Rābi'a al-'Adawīyya in the Malay world:
the woman Sufi in *Hikayat Rabi'ah*.**

Abstract:

Sufism is often taken to be the form of Islamic practice that was most welcoming to women. Similarly, Southeast Asia is commonly said to be characterised by unusually high levels of female autonomy, relative to the surrounding regions. This article discusses for the first time a Malay text, *Hikayat Rabi'ah* about the most famous female Sufi in Islamic history, Rābi'a al-'Adawīyya, and suggests that these assumptions regarding Sufi women in Southeast Asia may require revision. *Hikayat Rabi'ah* presents a version of Rabi'ah's life that is not found in Arabo-Persian models. Here, the Sufi woman saint usually known for her celibacy marries and is widowed, then bests four suitors in trials of mystical prowess, before agreeing to marriage to the Sultan, himself a Sufi adept, and achieving through him an ecstatic ascent to Heaven. The text is considered against two other Malay Islamic genres, didactic literature for women and esoteric Sufi treatises on ritualised sexual intercourse, to suggest why it was not possible to imagine a celibate Rabi'ah in the Malay world.

Keywords: Sufism, women, marriage, Malay manuscripts.

This article analyses a Malay textual representation of the best known female mystic in the Islamic world, the ninth-century Baṣran Sufi Rābi‘a al-‘Adawīyya (d. 801). *Hikayat Rabi‘ah*,¹ surviving in only two nineteenth-century manuscripts and discussed in detail here for the first time, is a unique attempt to imagine women’s Sufi devotion in the Malay manuscript corpus, exploring whether it was possible for a woman to serve God alone rather than a husband. In stark contrast to Arabo-Persian tellings of her life, in the Malay tradition Rābi‘a does not remain celibate. This is all the more surprising given the scholarly consensus that women in Southeast Asia were notable in the regional and wider Muslim contexts for their relative autonomy (see Andaya 2006:11-41 for comparison with neighbouring regions; Reid 2015:24; Reid 1988:146-172). Moreover, Sufism is often understood to be the sphere of Islamic practice, in the Middle East and elsewhere, which was most hospitable to women. “Mysticism was the only religious sphere where women could find a place,” Trimingham declared in his still seminal study of Sufi orders, before inevitably singling out Rābi‘a al-‘Adawīyya as “the best known” female Sufi and devoting a single paragraph to the subject of women in Sufism (1973:18). In her foundational book on women in early modern Southeast Asia, Andaya also notes the significance of Rābi‘a of Baṣra and of Sufism generally to women, arguing that “[t]he spread of Sufism had significant implications because it was generally sympathetic towards women’s spiritual ambitions” (2006:87). Meanwhile, a recent collection of

¹ The naturalised Malay spelling is used for Arabic names and terms when they occur in Malay texts.

anthropological studies “about Islam, female leadership, Sufism, power, sexuality and feminist praxis in the world’s most populous Muslim society—Indonesia” (Smith and Woodward 2013:1), likewise opens with a poem attributed to Rābi’a al-‘Adawīyya, suggesting that she remains the paradigmatic figure for thinking about such topics.

The analysis of *Hikayat Rabi’ah* that follows contends that this scholarly consensus on the significance of Sufism generally and of Rābi’a specifically to women in Southeast Asian Islam may require revision. The Malay Rabi’ah is not only married—to one Syekh Junaid, presumably referring to al-Junaid al-Baghdādī (d. 910)—but is then widowed, pursued by numerous suitors, the most persistent of whom she bests in a series of trials of spiritual prowess, and finally, much against her will, is married to a certain Sultan Abu Sa’id of Baghdad, thanks to whom she achieves ecstatic union with the divine. Though *Hikayat Rabi’ah* is a short text, related in a relatively unsophisticated style, it provides significant insight into the question of women’s agency within Islamic devotion in Southeast Asia, pre-twentieth-century evidence for which is both difficult to come by and to interpret (see Andaya 2006:42-69).

A number of recent anthropological studies, including Smith (2013), Widiyanto (2013) and Birchok (2016), have explored women within contemporary Sufism in Indonesia to show that despite dominant patriarchal structures, some women are able to exercise spiritual authority within Indonesian Sufi hierarchies. There are, however, no dedicated studies of women in Southeast Asian Sufism before the twentieth century, whether of textual representations or historical figures, with the

notable exception of Florida's (1996) account of gender relations and sexuality in nineteenth-century Javanese literature, including the Sufi poem *Suluk Lonthang*. Florida characterises these texts as "male fantasies," which "inscribe ... the articulation of elite male desires vis-à-vis women" (1996:209). Just as Florida's work provides much-needed historical perspective to accompany contemporary studies of women in Javanese Sufism, the present study examines how women's religious agency was imagined in nineteenth-century Malay Sufism.

As is the case with most texts from the Malay manuscript tradition, nothing is known about the author, date of composition or place of origin of *Hikayat Rabi'ah*. The text was first noted by the philologist Van der Tuuk,² very briefly sketched by Van Ronkel (1909:187), and discussed in passing by Ismail Hamid (1983:93-4) and Braginsky (2004:613-4). Ismail Hamid and Braginsky omit what is for the present purpose the most striking aspects of the story: that Rabi'ah is not celibate but (twice) married, that she bests her four suitors Syeikhs Syari'ah, Tariqah, Haqiqah and Ma'rifah in tests of spiritual power, and that she is finally achieves a (very corporeal) spiritual bliss through the intervention of her second husband, before ascending to Heaven in an apotheosis that is directly likened to the *mi'rāj* of the Prophet Muhammad. The Malay Rabi'ah is clearly quite different from the Arabo-Persian Rābi'a, and the difference is the opposite of what might have been expected. Rather than having more spiritual autonomy than her Arabo-Persian counterpart, the Malay Rabi'ah has less, thus complicating the current understanding of women and Sufism in Southeast Asian Islam in the pre-modern period. The Malay Rabi'ah's spiritual transcendence is

² Leiden University Library Or 3260 f. 74 v., see Wieringa 2007:144.

described in terms that clearly allude to mystical sexual practices that were then current in Muslim Southeast Asia, suggesting why celibacy was not open to her as a means towards union with the divine.

In order to understand *Hikayat Rabi'ah*, this article will consider the text in the context of other Malay representations of female religious authority. These include not only depictions of women ascetics in 'secular' romance but also in Islamic didactic tales and in treatises on esoteric Sufism. While earlier romances do sometimes feature women performing ascetic acts (*bertapa*), the avowedly Islamic didactic tales directed at women emphasise wifely service and subordination, especially in sexual terms, even delineating this as the preeminent or indeed only form of religious practice. These texts, including *Hikayat Fartana Islam* and *Hikayat Darma Ta'siah*, close off any possibility of the rejection of wifehood embodied by the Arabo-Persian Rābi'a of Baṣra and form one important corpus against which to interpret *Hikayat Rabi'ah*. The second corpus against which *Hikayat Rabi'ah* will be considered is Malay Sufi treatises for (male) adepts, such as *Syair Bahr al-Nisa*, which prescribe sexual practices for the attainment of mystical gnosis. With their evident links to yogic-Tantric practices, such treatises seem to have been a persistent undercurrent within mainstream Islam in Southeast Asia. Indeed, as Smith and Woodward document in their discussion of ritual sexual practices at Mount Kemukus in Java (2015), belief in the efficacy of ritual sex remains very much alive. They argue that these beliefs spring from the "underlining (and hidden) assumption that women and their sexuality are associated with potentially dangerous forms of spiritual power" (Smith and Woodward 2016:320). Such ideas about women and sexuality,

and about sexual practice as a means to gnosis, may drive the emphasis on sexual devotion in the didactic texts for women. With respect to these two sets of texts, *Hikayat Rab'ia* stands at an oblique angle: partaking of but also reworking their discourses, to depict that rare creature in the Malay world, the woman as Sufi subject.

[Insert Figure 1 here. Caption: Figure 1. Opening lines of *Hikayat Rabi 'ah*. SOAS MS 37082 f. 19.]

Rābi'a, Rabi'ah, *rabiya*: women as religious specialists

*Ada kabar nin suwatu,
Kabar siyak lawan padita,
Kabar rabiya lawan malim,
Kabar imam kalawan katip,
Kabar ni sahi mangulana.*

This is a message,
A message for the mosque care-takers and the pundits,
For the female and male religious teachers,
The message for *imam* and preachers,
This is the message from our master *shaykh*

(Braginsky ed. and trans. 2007:164-5).

The opening stanza of *Syair Perahu* cited above, a Sufi poem in *rèncong* script and south Sumatran Malay dating to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century,³ lists those exhorted to receive the mystical message of the Prophet. Among the pious assembly of *siyak*, *padita* (modern Malay: *pendita*), *malim* (Mal.: *mu'allim*), imam, and *katib* (Mal.: *khatib*), there is a single category for women, *rabiya*.

Drawing on a modern Indonesian dictionary, Braginsky glosses *rabiya* as “a female hermit, a pious woman, a Qur’an teacher’s (or religious teacher’s) wife; a female Qur’an teacher” (2007:197). Similar definitions for *rubiah* are provided for modern Malay (female ascetic, pious woman, wife of a religious teacher, woman religious teacher, *Kamus Dewan* 2002:1153) and for late nineteenth-century Malay (dedicated to the Lord, religious woman, Klinkert 1930[1892]:490). This Malay term is of course derived from the name Rābi‘a al-‘Adawīyya. In Malay usage, *rabiya* or *rubiah* evidently comes to mean not this particular person in the Sufi pantheon but any female Islamic religious specialist. Indeed, while there are a plethora of job titles and roles for her male counterparts (*siyak*, imam, *khatib* et al.), the *rabiya/rubiah* is apparently the only term for a female religious specialist. Along with this singularity of *rabiya*, it is also striking that the semantic field covered by the term is rather wide: from hermit or ascetic, living an isolated and presumably celibate life; to teacher, engaged rather than secluded; to teacher’s wife, fully enmeshed in domestic and conjugal relationships.

³ *Syair Perahu* itself, Braginsky argues, dates to before 1670, but the opening verses are likely to be later additions (2007: 119, 127).

This semantic range of *rabiya* in the Malay usage is especially significant in comparison to the depiction of Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawīyya in the Arabo-Persian tradition, where she is renowned for her total rejection of earthly ties, including marriage. Smith, in what is still the major scholarly monograph on Rābiʿa, draws on anecdotes, aphorisms and verses attributed to her in Arabic and Persian sources from the ninth century onwards to build up an account of her life and teachings.⁴ Said to have been born in Baghdād towards the end of the eighth century CE and dying in Baṣra in 801, Rābiʿa is reported to have practiced the extreme asceticism and renunciation characteristic of Sufis of that time and place. The doctrine attributed to her is that of so-called pure love for God, motivated by desire for Him alone rather than from hope of reward in heaven or fear of punishment in hell. One characteristic anecdote relates that Rābiʿa was seen running holding a flaming brand and a bucket of water, and when questioned about it answered that she intended to set fire to paradise and douse the flames of hell, so that people would worship God simply out of love (Smith 1928:99). This teaching is nowhere to be found in the Malay version of her life. Even more pertinent to the question of representations of women in Malay Sufism is that in the Arabo-Persian tradition Rābiʿa is depicted as resolutely celibate. Though she is said to have received an offer of marriage and a lavish dowry from the Amīr of Baṣra, she rebuked him, saying that “It does not please me that you should be my slave and that all you possess should be mine, or that you should distract me from God for a single moment” (Smith 1928:10). When, in another account, the

⁴ Though Smith begins her study by cautioning that most accounts of Rābiʿa date from some 200 years after her death (1928:xiii), her account of Rābiʿa’s “life and thought” proceeds on this evidence. More recent scholarship has been more source-critical. See Geert Jan van Gelder’s (1993) argument that the best-known poem attributed to Rābiʿa comes in fact from secular love poetry, and see also fn. 1 in his article for a summary of publications on Rābiʿa.

renowned Sufi ascetic Ḥasan al-Baṣrī asked to marry her, she put a series of questions about the afterlife to him. He answered that such matters were hidden, to which she replied that as “I have these four questions with which to concern myself, how should I need a husband, with whom to be occupied?” (Smith 1928:12). As we will see, this testing of Sufi insight between Rābi‘a and a suitor is also found in the Malay telling, as are similar arguments against marriage put forth by her. The critical difference is that, in the Arabo-Persian narratives, the point of the anecdote is that Rābi‘a does not marry, whereas in the Malay version, the point is that she does.

Though Rabi‘ah is the only female Sufi known in the Malay manuscript tradition, there are rather greater numbers of women practicing non-Islamic forms of asceticism to be found in the pages of Malay romances. *Hikayat Panji Semirang*,⁵ a Malay romance from eighteenth-century Java, includes a description of a female ascetic community, headed by a woman named Biku Gandasari. The Malay word *biku* is derived from Prakrit *bhikku*, monk, nun, or mendicant, and is found in other Malay ‘secular’ romances, usually in the formulation *biku brahmana*, mendicants and priests⁶ (Wilkinson 1901:143). Biku Gandasari is described as “possessing great clarity of vision, and whatever she said was never wrong, and she knew all about even ineffable things, such was her intelligence and her sacredness” (“seorang yang amat terang penglihatannya dan segala sesuatu yang dikatakannya tiada sekali-kali salahnya serta segala barang yang ghaib-ghaib pun dapat diketahuinya; demikianlah

⁵ The text used here is the transliteration based on an unidentified manuscript in the library of the Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen, which is possibly C. St. 125, now in the Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia.

⁶ A search for *biku* in the Malay Concordance Project locates the word in *Hikayat Indera Mengindera*, *Hikayat Sharkan* and *Hikayat Raja Budak*, all romances. See <http://mcp.anu.edu.au/>

kepandaian dan keramatnya,” 1937:108). Interestingly, the food of this community is vegetarian, consisting of bananas and various kinds of tubers (“ubi, keladi, pisang, talas” 1937:108) , and so is more suggestive of Hinduism or Buddhism than Islam. The devotees are arrayed according to the level of their ascetic practice (Mal. *tapa*, Skt. *tapas*), and sit with their arms crossed upon white stones, without protection from the wind and rain (“Maka setengah daripada orang-orang yang bertapa itu belum cukup tapanya dan tempatnya di sebelah kanan, duduk di atas batu putih dan selalu bersedakap [read: sedakap] saja; jika hujan kehujanan dan jika angin keanginan; setengahnya pula duduk di atas karang rata, maka berbagai-bagailah tempat pertapaan itu,” 1937:109). Another text, *Hikayat Raja Babi*, again from eighteenth-century Java, also features a princess practicing asceticism in the wilderness (Usup Abdul Kadir 2015:26). This description of a female ascetic community indicates at minimum that in late eighteenth-century Malay literary circles it was possible to imagine women amassing power through ascetic practice. It is significant that this idea took place in a domain marked off as fiction and as non-Muslim. Though these romances were produced and consumed within Islamised communities, they were often stigmatised as dangerous fictions that were potentially harmful to one’s Islamic faith. Other manuscripts of similar romances feature marginalia warning readers to never forget Allah and His Prophet when reading⁷ and even the admonition on every folio of the text not to believe in it (“jangan beriman akannya”).⁸

⁷ British Library MSS Malay C25 f. 5r.

⁸ See catalogue notes by Annabel Teh Gallop at http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=mss_malay_c_2_fs001r See also Gallop’s blog post at <http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/asian-and-african/2015/06/panji-stories-in->

In contrast, in texts that identify themselves as Islamic, female asceticism is far more difficult to locate. The earliest mention of Rabi'ah in the Malay manuscript tradition that it has been possible to identify occurs in the Malay translation of a Persian mirror for princes, al-Ghazālī's *Naṣīḥat al-mulūk*.⁹ The translation was made in 1700 from an Arabic intermediary by Haji Ismail, a Malay *munsyi* or language teacher to a European (Ricklefs, Voorhoeve and Gallop 2014:120). In its syntax as much as its content, the Malay rendition displays its fidelity to the Arabic version:

It is related that Hasan al-Basri, may Allah's blessing be upon him, was in the habit of paying visits to Rabi'ah Adawiyah and praying with her. When they [sic] reached the door, they said: "Do you give us leave to enter?" Rabi'ah Adawiyah answered: "Wait a moment and I will replace the screen between it and them." And she gave her leave. They entered. They enquired about it. They [sic] answered from the other side of the screen. They asked her: "Why did you put up a screen between us and you?" She said: "You were instructed to do so by the word of Allah the Exalted: "And ask you of them from outside the screen"." Thus it is obligatory upon all men never to look upon a strange woman. For indeed this will be repaid in the next world with all possible repayments as is related in the [following] narrative . . .

Dikatakan bahasawanya Hasan al-Basri rahmatullah atasnya menyahaja ziarah Rabi'ah Adawiyah serta jamaah. Maka tatkala sampai mereka itu kepada pintu, berkata mereka itu, "Engkau beri azinkah [sic] bagi kami pada masuk padamu?" Berkata Rabi'ah Adawiyah, "Nanti olehmu sesaat dan aku jadikan kembali antaranya dan antara mereka itu dinding." Dan memberi izin

malay.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+asian-and-african+%28Asia+and+Africa%29

⁹ It is probable that the story of Rābi'a came to the Malay world via Mughal India. A wife of Aurangzeb was known as Rabia Dawrani ("Rabia of her time") (Green 2004: 81). Rābi'a was also depicted in Mughal miniatures (Lowenstein 1939).

ia. Maka masuk mereka itu. Bertanya mereka itu atasnya. Maka dijawab akan mereka itu di luar dinding. Maka kata mereka itu baginya, “Kerana apa engkau gantung antara kami dan antaramu itu dinding?” Maka berkata ia, “Disuruhkan kamu dengan demikian itu firman Allah Taala: “Dan tanyakan olehmu akan mereka itu daripada luar dinding.” Maka wajib atas segala laki-laki itu bahawa jangan melihat kepada perempuan yang asing sekali-kali. Maka bahawasanya dibalas dengan dia dalam akhirat dengan segala balas dan dalam dunia seperti yang datang dalam hikayat [Jelani Harun ed. 2006:213].¹⁰

Despite the awkwardness of the prose, with the Malay rendering the Arabic word by word, it is evident that the point of the anecdote is not to do with Rabi’ah as a Sufi but with Rabi’ah as a woman, who must be shielded from the gaze of strange men (even such presumably irreproachable men as Hasan al-Basri and his fellow ascetics). Though elsewhere al-Ghazālī quotes with approval some more sobre verses by Rābi’a,¹¹ in this anecdote he uses her to insist upon gender propriety: renowned mystics who are women may receive visitors who are men, so long as this propriety is observed. Al-Ghazālī cites the Qur’anic verse 33:53, which has long been contested on the grounds that it originally referred to the Prophet’s wives rather than women in general (for discussion of the verse and its interpretation see Stowasser 1994:90-4, 99). Not for him, it would seem, the accounts of Rābi’a

¹⁰ Cf. Bagley’s translation from Persian: “Hasan al-Basri is reported to have arrived at the house of Rabi’ah (al-‘Adawiyah) with some (of his friends). ‘It has been a long way,’ they cried out; (‘permit us to come in’). ‘Wait one hour,’ she replied. Then she ordered a rug to be put up as a curtain, and they came in and greeted her; and she answered them from behind the curtain. ‘Why have you put up the curtain?’ they asked. ‘I was ordered to do so,’ she replied ‘for the blessed God on High has said (Q. xxxiii. 53), “Ask them from behind a curtain.”’ It is a man’s duty never in any circumstance to look upon a strange woman. . .” (Bagley trans. 1964:168).

¹¹ *Iḥyā’* book iv, see Smith [revised by Pellat] 2012.

roaming the streets of Baṣra brandishing a flaming torch and a bucket of water. In contrast, the Persian Sufi Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d. 1221?), in his *Tadhkirat al-Awliyā’*, reports an anecdote with quite the opposite message. In ‘Aṭṭār’s account, Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said: “I passed one whole night and day with Rābi’a speaking of the Way and the Truth, and it never passed through my mind that I was a man nor did it occur to her that she was a woman, and at the end when I looked at her, I saw myself a bankrupt [i.e. spiritually worth nothing] and Rābi’a as truly sincere” (qtd. in Smith 1928:14).

Al-Ghazālī’s version of Rābi’a seems to have been the guise in which she first appeared in Malay from the Indo-Persian world—not as a transcendent Sufi or resolute renouncer of earthly ties (for which, ironically, there were already precedents in Malay literature in the form of the *tapas*-amassing Panji heroines) but as an exemplar of female propriety. That Rābi’a may have arrived in the Malay world via the works of al-Ghazālī parallels what Feener has argued with respect to references to the tenth-century Sufi al-Ḥallāj of Baghdad in Malay and Javanese texts: “if we are to explain the various ‘survivals’ of Ḥallāj in Muslim Southeast Asia, we should do so not in terms of direct transmission . . . of specifically Hallajian teachings, but of a reflection of Ḥallāj and his teachings as disseminated here through some of the more ‘standard’ secondary works, such as al-Ghazālī’s *‘Iḥyā’*, which were widely studied throughout the late medieval Muslim world” (1998:584). Like al-Ḥallāj, it would seem, Rābi’a is known in Malay not in her more radical Arabic or Persian incarnations but via her depiction in the works of the archetypically sober Sufi al-Ghazālī. But if al-Ghazālī is how she entered Malay Islam, this does not

explain how she appears in *Hikayat Rabi'ah*, which, as we will see, does not relate his anecdote about veiling. As Jones observed after an exhaustive search for Arabic or Persian antecedents of another Malay Sufi narrative, *Hikayat Ibrahim ibn Adham*, about which more later: the “tentative conclusion may be drawn that the Malay *hikayat* is an original Malay creation” (1985:38). If *Hikayat Rabi'ah* is likewise “an original Malay creation,” what does it reveal about Malay attitudes towards female Sufism?

***Hikayat Rabi'ah*: manuscripts and contents**

Though *Hikayat Rabi'ah* survives in only two exemplars, the scarcity of surviving manuscripts is less a reliable indicator of lack of influence or circulation than of the partiality and incompleteness of the Malay manuscript corpus as we know it today (Proudfoot 2003:2-3). Both extant examples of *Hikayat Rabi'ah* survive in compilations alongside other, similar Islamic didactic stories, many of which may have been directed at women readers and all of which have a distinctly heterodox flavour, at least from the point of view of modern reformist Islam. One of these anthologies is SOAS University of London MS 37082, dated to 1840, which includes, among others, *Hikayat Rabi'ah*,¹² *Hikayat Raja Jumjumah*, *Hikayat Nabi Bercukur* and *Hikayat Nur Muhammad* (Ricklefs, Voorhoeve and Gallop 2014:162). The other is Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia (PNRI) MI. 42, a collection of eleven

¹² Ricklefs, Voorhoeve and Gallop (2014: 162) follow the contents list on the flyleaf of MS 37082, probably written by R.O. Winstedt, which incorrectly give the title of this text as *Hikayat Zubaidah*.

short narratives that was given to the Bataviaasch Genootschap in 1868, having been obtained from a Dutch collector with some connection to Gorontalo, northern Sulawesi (*Notulen* 1868:40). The other stories in the collection are also varied and heterodox, including *Hikayat Si Burung Pingai*, which combines Sufi and shamanic elements (Braginsky 2005), *Hikayat Fartana Islam*, several Fatimah narratives and a divergent version of *Hikayat Darma Ta'sia*, giving extra agency to the usually powerless wife in the tale (Mulaika Hijjas 2013). Several of the other texts seem to be intended to instruct women on their proper religious duties, conceived of as unstinting service towards their husbands. The nineteenth-century Dutch philologist H.N. van der Tuuk noted that he borrowed a copy of a *Hikayat Rabi'ah* from "a native of Padang," west Sumatra, showing that the text was known there too.¹³ That *Hikayat Rabi'ah* was found on both the western and eastern edges of the Malay Muslim world suggests that the text was once fairly widespread.

These two surviving manuscripts of *Hikayat Rabi'ah* contain broadly the same narrative. PNRI MI. 42¹⁴ begins with a section relating Syeikh Junaid's persuasion of Rabi'a to marry him, which is not present in SOAS MS 37082. This beginning makes better sense than the abrupt one of the latter exemplar, though in other respects SOAS MS 37082 usually has better readings and a marginally more elegant style. That both copyists (and van der Tuuk) struggled with the protagonist's name and especially her *nisba* suggests their lack of familiarity with Rābi'a al-'Adawīyya. The longer version of the narrative (PNRI MI. 42) begins with Rabi'ah "in service"

¹³ Leiden University Library Or 3260 f. 74 v, Wieringa 2007: 144.

¹⁴ PNRI MI. 42 was no longer available for consultation by 2006. I have used the modern Jawi transcription provided by the Perpustakaan Nasional, which obviously leads to a number of philological complications. Page references are to those of the facsimile (fac.).

(“berkhidmat”¹⁵) to Syeikh Junaid, who is attracted to her beauty and her other (unspecified) qualities. He allows a decorous seven months to pass before proposing marriage to her, but Rabi’ah refuses on the grounds that he is her teacher and because she does not want to marry since she desires no one but Allah. Rabi’ah utters (in Arabic), “I ask for nothing other than God”; a sentiment congruent with her asceticism as depicted in the Arabo-Persian tradition. Syeikh Junaid assures her that he will bring her desire to Allah (“mendatangkan berahimu kepada Allah Ta’ala”¹⁶), a curious turn of phrase that presages the importance of bodily desire in the denouement of the story, and quotes in return a Qura’nic verse enjoining marriage (Sūrah al-Nisā’ 4:3). When this fails to persuade her, he then cites a Prophetic hadith that marriage is part of the sunnah. Rabi’ah responds that she is neither physically healthy nor beautiful enough to marry, whereupon the syeikh cites another hadith to the effect that those who marry are beloved by the Prophet, whereas those who divorce are his enemies. Once again Rabi’ah resists, with the declaration that she is dedicated to Allah alone: “my heart is inclined to Allah the Exalted,” “hatiku cenderung kepada Allah Ta’ala.”¹⁷ When faced by another hadith from the Syeikh, Rabi’ah declares—foreshadowing the trials to come—that she would rather be sold ten times in a day, cast into the fire or submerged in the sea than be married. At this juncture Syeikh Junaid brandishes what is apparently the ultimate sanction: a hadith declaring that anyone who defies his (or her) teacher is an unbeliever and his (or her) deeds will all come to nought. Rabi’ah is only swayed by this appeal to the predominance of the teacher-student relationship, rather than the husband-wife

¹⁵ PNRI MI. 42 fac. 50.

¹⁶ PNRI MI. 42 fac. 51.

¹⁷ PNRI MI. 42 fac. 52.

one. That is, she makes her decision based on her devotion to her teacher in the Sufi path. Furthermore, she extracts a promise from Syeikh Junaid that she will marry only if she be allowed to remain a virgin. She thereby circumvents the responsibilities of married women relating to the sexual gratification of their husbands, enumerated in the didactic texts discussed below.

Following this chaste marriage, Rabi'ah prostrates herself at the feet of Syeikh Junaid ("bersujud di bawah qadam syeikh") until his death seven years later.¹⁸ Widowhood merely brings more suitors to her door, with apparently every male in Baghdad, from *pendita*, *raja*, *penghulu* (village headman) to ordinary *rakyat* (commoners), coming to seek her hand. Rabi'ah declares that marriage is *haram* to her, but this does nothing to dissuade four syeikhs in particular. Mature, handsome and worthy of reverence, the four syeikhs are named after the four stages on the mystic path according to Malay Sufism: Syeikh Syari'ah, Syeikh Tariqah, Syeikh Haqiqah and Syeikh Ma'rifah. Despite a hospitable and courteous reception from Rabi'ah, who spreads out a carpet for them and presents them with betel quids, she rebuffs their request to choose one of them as a husband, telling them that "though you four syeikhs are worthy, I shall hardly consent [to marry] you, when even the dogs under my house would not so consent" ("ya tuanku syeikh empat orang sungguhlah tuan hamba syeikh yang mu'tabar jangkalan hamba redhakan tuan hamba anjing hamba di bawah rumah hamba itupun tiada redhakan tuan hamba"). Incensed, the four

¹⁸ This is the point at which SOAS MS 37082 begins, which forms the basis of the next part of the summary, as it is the better version. While it is less than ideal to create a composite text, neither surviving manuscript on its own comprises a complete version of the narrative. Digital images of SOAS MS 37082 are accessible from SOAS Digital Library. Transcriptions of both manuscripts are accessible at Zenodo. The episode involving the comparison to dogs is present in both texts, and is identical in its key features.

syekh proceed at once to Sultan Abu Sa'id, complaining that Rabi'ah likened them to dogs under her house ("Rabi'ah al-Dawiyah [sic] mengatakan hamba sekalian ini seperti anjing di bawah rumah"¹⁹). The sultan duly summons Rabi'ah to his presence. She explains that she was referring to a Prophetic hadith that the world is a stinking corpse and that those who desire it are dogs, clarifying that she is like the corpse and that those who desire her are like dogs beneath her house.

[Insert Figure 2 here. Caption: Figure 2. "al dunyā . . ." in SOAS MS 37082 f. 21.]

Rabi'ah's quotation of a well-known saying about asceticism and rejection of the world is at once a sign of the superiority of her learning to that of the four syekhs, who neither recognise the quote nor intuit her meaning. Significantly, however, when she responds to the sultan, Rabi'ah reframes the analogy: she is now the corpse, the passive object of desire, and the syekhs are the dogs. This alleged hadith, "the world is a carcass and those who seek it are dogs," which Rabi'ah cites first in Arabic and then in Malay (corrected for errors in the Jawi, this should read: "al-dunyā jīfatun wa ṭālibuhā kilābun," "dunia itu bangkai yang terlebih busuk dan segala manusia yang ingin itu anjing,"²⁰ reproduced in Figure 2). Rather than coming from the commonly accepted sayings of the Prophet,²¹ this aphorism seems instead to be drawn from the Indo-Persian Sufi tradition (referred to by Rumi, see Williams 2006:413 note to line 3963; quoted in the poetry of the eighteenth-century Sindhi

¹⁹ SOAS MS 37082 f. 21.

²⁰ SOAS MS 37082 f. 21.

²¹ At least one contemporary mufti has ruled that this is a fabricated hadith. See <https://nawadir.org/2017/03/29/hadith-query-the-world-is-a-carcass-and-its-seekers-are-dogs/>

Sufi Shah Latif, see Schimmel 1976:247; see also Schimmel 1975:109,472). It is cited and again termed a hadith in at least two other texts in the Malay manuscript tradition: a poem by Hamzah Fansuri (c. 1600, Drewes and Brakel 1986:60, 159) and a treatise by Tuan Tabal (c. 1840-1891, Ali Ahmad and Siti Hajar 1996: 208).

The two ways in which Rabi'ah relates this aphorism warrant closer attention. The question of which party is the dog and which the carcass is important in terms of agency, the act of consent or willingness (*redha*, a word Rabi'ah repeats many times in the course of the narrative). The second version, told to the Sultan, is indeed the more standard, in the sense that it accords more closely with how it appears in Rumi, Hamzah Fansuri and Tuan Tabal. Here, Rabi'ah is the carcass: completely lacking in agency and subjectivity, but possessing an attractive power that is also disgusting and ultimately destructive. This is the standard Sufi understanding of women, like other worldly things, as anathema to spiritual transcendence. The more interesting version, when considering how a woman could be imagined as a Sufi, is the first one, which Rabi'ah relates to the syeikhs. Here, she positions herself as the subject, and the syeikhs as the objects of desire (or disgust, as the case may be). Rabi'ah possesses the agency to accept or reject them, and she is such an exemplary Sufi that naturally she rejects them outright. Indeed, even her dogs are good enough Sufis to reject the rotting carcass. The import of Rabi'ah's response to Syeikhs Syari'ah, Tariqah, Haqiqah and Ma'rifah is that she—and her hypothetical dogs—are better Sufis than they are.

But this initial version is soon overturned. When questioned by the sultan, Rabi'ah inverts the analogy, likening herself to the stinking carcass and thus making anyone who desires her a dog (“yang busuk itu hambamu dan segala yang ingin akan hambamu itu seperti anjing di bawah rumah”²²). Thus when speaking to the sultan she assume the passive position that she rejected when speaking to the syeikhs. The space momentarily opened up for female agency by a kind of misreading of the tradition is swiftly closed again. The ‘correct’ version is validated by the sultan, and is the one in which the woman is again utterly without agency. It might be argued that the first version is a scribal error or misunderstanding, but the fact that it occurs in both surviving manuscripts suggests that this is not the case. Rather, it is a small but critical subversion of the discourse about women and religious agency.

The sultan proceeds to interrogate (“siasat”) the four syeikhs. Beginning with Syekh Syari'ah, the sultan first enquires whether the syekh is truly knowledgeable about the syari'ah path (“tahukah engkau sebenar-benarnya kepada jalan syari'ah”). The syekh's response that he certainly possesses such knowledge (“tahu jua hamba,”) turns out to be rather glib, as he swiftly recants once faced with the sultan's trial. Four ropes are tied to the syekh's body, to be pulled on by four Zangi.²³ Just as the Zangi are about to start rending him apart, the syekh retracts his statement, declaring that he was not in fact knowledgeable about the syari'ah—at least not on that particular day (“tiada hamba tahu kepada jalan syari'ah hari ini”²⁴). Syekh

²² SOAS MS 37082 f. 22.

²³ “Zanggi” or “zangi”: “Pers. Ethiopian, African, Zanzibari; (by extension) a giant, a monster” (Wilkinson 1901:355). Also “janggi,” “an adjective expressive of remote or fabulous origin” (Wilkinson 1901:226). On janggi in Javanese literature see Jákl (2017).

²⁴ SOAS MS 37082 f. 22.

Syari'ah is then released, and the other three put through similar trials (Syeikh Tariqah is to be stabbed with a kris by the same Zangi, Syeikh Haqiqah is to be submerged in a basket in the sea, and Syeikh Ma'rifah is to be burned on an enormous pyre). At the critical moments, the other three syeikhs also renege on their claims to mystical knowledge.

The sultan then returns his attention to Rabi'ah, asking her the same questions and subjecting her to all four trials. Rabi'ah declares in all cases that her knowledge is "perfect" ("sempurna") and, indeed, she comes through all the trials unscathed. When the Zangi pull on the ropes tied to her, she "entered herself into the letter alif, that has neither time nor place" and thus remained unconscious of the ropes, the rending and the surrounding people and instead "met with Allah" ("tiada tahu Rabi'ah al-Dawiyah itu akan tali dan tiada tahu ia dihelakan itu dan tiada tahu kepada sekalian orang melainkan bertemu kepada Allah Ta'ala"²⁵). When she is about to be stabbed, she enters into the letter intial *lam*, once again meeting with Allah, and the kris fails to wound her at all. When she is cast into the sea, she enters into the letter final *lam* and is able to breathe "like a child in its mother's womb, and Rabi'ah had no awareness of herself and no anxiety but simply met with Allah the Exalted as though she were in a hermitage for seven days and seven nights in the sea water—far from dying, not a hair on her head was so much as wet" ("beroleh nafaslah Rabi'ah al-Dawiya itu seperti anak di dalam perut ibunya maka tiada ia tahu Rabi'ah al-Dawiya akan dirinya dan tiada ia sangka melainkan bertemukan Allah Ta'ala juga seperti duduk di dalam khalwat tujuh hari dan tujuh malam di dalam air

²⁵ SOAS MS 37082 f. 23.

laut itu jangankan ia mati sehelai rambutnya tiada basah”). When cast into the fire, she entered into the letter *ha*, arrives once again into the presence of Allah, and “her body looked like radiant metal and, far from being burned, not a hair fell from her head” (“tembaga suasa gilang gemilang jangankan hangus sehelai rambutnya pun tiada yang luruh”²⁶). The letters in which Rabi’ah finds refuge of course spell out Allah, and are a demonstration of a sort of letter magic or ‘ilm *al-ḥurūf*, through which “exalted mystics (*ghulāt*)” sought ““the unveiling’ (*al-kashf*)” (Fahd 2012). Thus not only does Rabi’ah come through unscathed, but the trials also bring her into the presence of Allah—precisely the destination of the Sufi path of *syariah-tariqah-haqiqah-ma’rifah*, the journey on which the syeikhs bearing those names failed to advance.

However, the immediate result of Rabi’ah’s achievement of divine gnosis is rather disappointing, at least from the perspective of women’s autonomy within Islamic devotion. For the sultan’s judgement upon her is that she is “greater than all other women” and that no man is fit to be her husband—other than the Sultan himself (“terlalu lebih daripada perempuan yang lain dan seorang pun tiada harus akan suamimu itu melainkan aku jugalah seorang akan suamimu”²⁷). Through her prodigious feats, Rabi’ah escapes marriage to the four syeikhs, only to be confronted with yet another proposal, this time one even more difficult to refuse. Though she reasserts her attachment to Allah and her rejection of the world, the sultan counters

²⁶ SOAS MS 37082 f. 25. In the seventeenth-century Malay Sufi allegorical romance *Hikayat Syah Mardan*, a similar explanation of the significance of the letters and of their association with the elements earth, water, air and fire may also be found (Braginsky 1990; *Hikajat Radja Moeda* 1916: 21). It may therefore have been a fairly common trope of Malay Sufi literature. I am indebted to Professor Braginsky for this reference.

²⁷ SOAS MS 37082 f. 26.

with further Qur'anic verses and hadiths enjoining marriage. Rabi'ah spends ten days and nights in meditation, neither eating nor drinking nor sleeping, and then returns to the sultan with her decision: she agrees to marry him on the condition that she remains celibate, just as in her previous marriage to Syeikh Junaid. The sultan agrees and they are married by a khatib. After this, however, Rabi'ah returns home, locks the door and refuses to allow the sultan to enter.

The conclusion and climax of the story is, as we have seen, not even hinted at in earlier scholarly accounts of *Hikayat Rab'iah*. What follows is a remarkable account of how the Malay tradition imagined a woman Sufi would achieve ultimate unity with God:

Sultan Abu Sa'id then enacted three states upon Rabi'ah outside the house. Sultan Abu Sa'id stood within [?] the letter alif, then acted upon the letter initial lam and the letter final lam. All Rabi'ah's limbs began to move and every hair on her body stood on end and all her sensations rose up and she felt herself attain ecstasy. Then she lost consciousness of herself and the doors of heaven [?] opened in front of her door. Rabi'ah did not regain consciousness; she was like a prostrate corpse for seven days and seven nights. Then she made the ascent to her most noble Lord. Then her breath was returned to her by Sultan Abu Sa'id.

maka Sultan Abu Sa'id berlakukan tiga hal kepada Rabi'ah al-Dawiyah di luar rumah itu maka berdirilah Sultan Abu Sa'id kepada huruf alif maka diperlakukan kepada huruf lam awal datang kepada lam akhir maka Rabi'ah al-Dawiyah pun bergeraklah segala anggotanya dan berdirilah segala romanya [ms. reads: rumahnya] dan berbangkitlah segala rasanya maka ia pun berasai beroleh ni'mat lalu lupalah ia akan dirinya maka terbukalah pintu syurga jannah al-'umawi [?] di hadapan pintunya maka tiada juga Rabi'ah al-

Dawiyah khabarkan dirinya seperti mayat terhantarlah dalam tujuh hari dan tujuh malam maka lalu ia mi'raj kepada tuhannya yang maha mulia hatta kalikan [arakian?] dikembalikan nafasnya oleh Sultan Abu Sa'id.²⁸

The passage is obviously defective (the final letter of Allah is missing, for instance). The error of "rumah" (house) for "roma" (body hair) in the passage just cited may also reflect the copyist's bewilderment with exactly what is supposed to be taking place. What it might mean to "enact" a "state" or "stand" within a particular letter remains obscure. Nevertheless, the overall import is clear enough: through the Sultan's intervention, Rabi'ah attains an encounter with the Divine that is emphatically corporeal and is directly likened to sexual ecstasy. The phallic connotations of the verb "mendirikan" and of the vertical letters are probably no coincidence. A Bugis manual on sexual intercourse between husband and wife, further discussed below, has the husband recite "I am Alif stand[ing] up on the body of Fatima" and identifies the husband as 'alif' and the wife as 'ba' (Saenong 2015:106-7). Having agreed to abstain from physical intercourse with Rabi'ah, Sultan Abu Sa'id is the agent through whom she attains metaphysical "nikmat" (Ar. *na'imah*) which is used in Malay to denote both corporeal and transcendental bliss. The use of the similarly heavily loaded term "mi'raj," "ascent," to describe Rabi'ah's experience recalls the Prophet's journey to Heaven while still alive, the subject of the well known Malay *Hikayat Nabi Mi'raj* (see Wieringa 2016; Meij 2014). Thus what Rabi'ah experiences is an ascension, enabled by Sultan Abu Sa'id, like that of Muhammad, enabled in some versions by the Angel Jibra'il.

²⁸ SOAS MS 37082 f. 29

When Sultan Abu Sa'id finally enters Rabi'ah's house he finds that she has vanished "to the presence of her Lord" ("telah ghaib ke hadhrat Allah"). He then circumambulates (*tawaf*, Ar. *ṭawāf*, where it usually refers to the circumambulation of the Ka'abah) her house while reciting the Sufi formula "La hawla wa la quwwa illa Allah" ("There is no might nor power except in Allah"). Then he too is taken up to Heaven: "thus did both husband and wife vanish [from this world]" ("maka ghaiblah dua suami isteri"²⁹). Again, this insistence on seeing Rabi'ah as part of a marital pair is not found in the Arabo-Persian tradition, where the whole point is that her single-minded dedication to Allah leads her to reject earthly ties, including marriage. In the Malay version, in contrast, Rabi'ah never leaves her gender behind. She is always a woman, and thus she always requires a husband. As a Sufi woman, she can only attain transcendent bliss through the intervention of a suitable Sufi man.

Intertexts of *Hikayat Rab'iah*: didactic tales for women and esoteric Sufi treatises

Teachings on the subject of women in Islamic devotion are to be found not in the high prestige *kitab* texts of the religious educational establishments, which, based on Arabic originals, assume a male readership and generally appear to have little to say to women (though quite a bit to say about them), but among the demotic, didactic short narratives now labelled Islamic *hikayat*. Written in Malay, though frequently

²⁹ SOAS MS 37082 f. 28.

quoting Qur'an and hadith, these short tales often feature as protagonists the Prophet, his daughter Fatimah, the Angel Jibra'il and even Allah Himself. It may be that these hikayat were used to instruct the women religious teachers, or the wives, sisters and daughters of Muslim community figures—that these works were the required reading of the *rubia/rabiya*, the pious women of Muslim Southeast Asia. Malay didactic *hikayat* relating specifically to women include *Hikayat Fartana Islam*, *Hikayat Darma Ta'sia*, *Hikayat Fatimah Bersuami*, and *Hikayat Nabi Mengajar Anaknya Fatimah*. Though they differ considerably from one another, and even between different versions of the same text on the amount of religious autonomy they allot to women, the texts generally sing from the same hymn sheet: a woman's paramount duty, religious or otherwise, is to devotedly serve her husband. This service, always termed *bakti* (from Sanskrit *bhakti*, where it implies devotion to a deity) even takes precedence over specifically Islamic responsibilities such as fasting, prayer and charity. *Hikayat Nabi Mengajar Anaknya Fatimah*, for example, clarifies that the Prophet instructs his daughter that “any woman who is told by her husband [to do something] and does not do it, that woman will incur the wrath of Allah Ta'ala and even if she fasts or prays, these good deeds will not be accepted by Allah Ta'ala” (“barang siapa perempuan disuruh oleh suaminya maka tiada dikerjakan maka dimurkai Allah Ta'ala perempuan itu dan jikalau ia sembahyang dan puasa sekalipun tiada diterima Allah Ta'ala segala amalnya itu di dalam neraka akan tempatnya,”³⁰ see also Mulaika Hijas 2015). The *pahala* (Skt.: *phala*: fruit, religious merit) of wifely *bakti*, as one 1789 manuscript of *Hikayat Fartana Islam* opines, is far greater than that of standard Islamic duties: pouring her husband's bath water gains her greater

³⁰ Leiden University Library Klinkert 33 f. 26.

merit than fasting for three months, while pouring him water to wash his hands gains her greater merit than giving alms to beggars.³¹

While the resistance of the Islamic tradition to celibacy is well known (see the discussion in Gobillot 2013), if anything, Malay Islam seems to have been even less approving of the idea of ascetic denial of sexuality, with the Sufi syekh in *Hikayat Darma Ta'sia* going off to his hermitage (*khalwat*) to perform his devotions (*bertapa*) during the day, only to return to a cooked dinner and the ministrations of his wife in the evening (Mulaika Hijjas 2013:254). These didactic texts for women also consistently emphasise the importance of sexual service, promising heaven itself as the reward for a wife who, following the example of Fatimah's *bakti*, "having had intercourse with her husband kisses his feet and is then kissed in return by her husband." As Fatimah receives religious merit for this, so do ordinary women on a daily basis, the text continues, so that Allah the Exalted may cause them to enter heaven without further calculation on the Day of Judgement ("berbuat bakti seperti Fatimah penghulu segala perempuan maka setelah sudah bersetubuh dengan suaminya maka ia lalu mencium kaki suaminya maka dicium oleh suaminya maka sama dengan Fatimah pahalanya kerana Fatimah berbuat bakti demikian itu maka sehari-harilah kami berbuat demikian itu maka dimasukkan Allah Ta'ala ke dalam syurga jannah al-na'im tiadalah kira-kira lagi pada hari qiamat"³²). As *Hikayat Nabi Mengajar Anaknya Fatimah* has the Prophet state: "oh my daughter Fatimah, any

³¹ Royal Asiatic Society Malay 47 f. 335.

³² Royal Asiatic Society Malay 47 f. 333.

woman who sleeps with her legal husband will be rewarded by Allah the Exalted as one who has fought in a holy war” (“hai anakku Fatimah barang siapa perempuan tidur pada suaminya yang halal maka dianugerahi Allah Ta'ala seperti orang perang sabil”³³). All these texts systematically exclude women from the domain of religion, let alone from asceticism: women must be wives, and wives are to serve their husbands, so that their husbands may serve God. In the company of such subservient and sexually compliant women as Darma Ta'sia, Fatimah and Fartana Islam, Rabi'ah cuts an anomalous figure. However partial her success in maintaining her autonomy, *Hikayat Rab'iah* is the sole extant example known in the Malay manuscript tradition of an attempt to delineate an autonomous religious agency for women within Malay Sufism.

The second group of texts relating to sexuality and religious practice in Malay Islam are the treatises explaining Sufi practices that involves ritual coitus, with particular emphasis on the control of breath and sexual fluids. Though these texts seem to have been fairly widespread in the Malay world, they have been little studied, apart from the work of Braginsky on a number of Sufi-Tantric texts (2004, 2007, 2017). Braginsky establishes that there existed a “Tantric undercurrent in north Sumatran Sufism” (2004:142), polemicised against by Hamzah Fansuri at the turn of the seventeenth century as only practiced by young men “in love with their male organ” (“akan orang muda kasihkan alat,” Braginsky 2007:41). This *ilmu jauhar*, the science of the jewel, included the concept of *cakra*, here termed *maqam*, with the presiding goddesses replaced by the Prophet's wives, in what appears to be an Islamised

³³ Leiden University Library Klinkert 33 f. 27.

version of yogic or Tantric practices (Braginsky 2004:154). Despite Hamzah Fansuri's objections, and no doubt the objections of many other more orthodox Muslims after him, what he called *ilmu akad* or *ilmu jauhar* continued. Sevea has recently discussed a Malay text from late nineteenth-century Perak detailing similar practices (2015). These teaching were promulgated by a preacher who, in the words of the colonial administrator and scholar Winstedt, "taught an obscene form of pantheism" and "an obscene travesty at an immeasurable distance of [sic] the Divine Love celebrated by the mystics of Persia" (qtd. in Sevea 2015:118). Yet it is clear that, in some Southeast Asian Muslim circles at least, this was precisely what was considered Sufism: the Bugis texts studied by Saenong, mentioned above, are called "*tasawupe allaibinéngengné* or 'Sufism of husband and wife'" (Saenong 2015:108). These Bugis texts, strongly reminiscent of the Malay *ilmu jauhar*, and with an emphasis on sexual fluids that distinctly recalls yogic or Tantric practices, continue to be transmitted as part of Bugis wedding ceremonies (Saenong 2015:108,110). Conceptions such as these may also underlie the beliefs of those Muslim pilgrims to the grave of Pangeran Samudro on Mount Kemukus who, according to Smith and Woodward (2015:327-30), hold that the ritual performance of transgressive sexual acts will magically bring about their wishes.

While Ernst has debunked the idea that Sufism or mysticism in Islam was derived from yoga, and argues that the two had a far more complex relationship than has previously been thought, with yogic concepts presented in Sufi texts in so Islamised a fashion that one could recognise the Indic elements "[o]nly with the benefit of Indological resources" (Ernst 2005:42), the converse seems to have been the case

with the Malay material. It would seem difficult, if not impossible, to make sense of texts like *Syair bahr al-nisa* without some understanding of Tantric yoga. This is not, of course, to say that the Muslim practitioners thought of what they did as Tantric yoga. Quite the opposite is suggested by the fact that the Bugis material studied by Saenong terms itself 'Sufism'. If originally yogic or Tantric, the idea of ritualised sexual intercourse as a path to *ma'rifah* seems to have become naturalised in certain strands of Malay Islam. It may even be this undercurrent that is in part responsible for the insistence on marriage as a religious duty in Malay Islam in the didactic texts for women, above and beyond what is enjoined upon women in Arabo-Persian sources, and for the impossibility of Rabi'ah remaining unmarried in the Malay version of her life. After all, if intercourse is not for pleasure or procreation but rather for the achievement of *ma'rifah*, then it is even more incumbent upon wives to be sexually compliant.

If women are obviously essential to this practice of *ilmu jauhar*, also obvious is the fact that they are so as the means for the male adept's achievement of enlightenment. Their own gnosis is not a topic of concern in the treatises. As Doniger has written with regard to tantrism, "there is no evidence that actual Tantric women were equal partners in any sense of the word; to the question What's in it for the women (once called "the most embarrassing question you can ask any Tantric"), it would appear that the answer is: Not much. . . for the most part the rituals were designed to benefit people who had lingas, not yonis" (2009:433). Much the same could be said for the female participants in *ilmu jauhar*, it would seem. Yet, again in a similar way to Tantra, the practice may have opened up some

possibilities for women's spiritual agency. The significance of *Hikayat Rabi'ah* is that a space, albeit a modest one, is cleared for women to be Sufis. Rabi'ah's chaste marriages to Syeikh Junaid and then to Sultan Abu Sa'id do allow her to occupy herself with God, while nevertheless having a husband. Her ultimate ascent—the *mi'raj* to the presence of God—is achieved through metaphysical rather than actual intercourse with Sultan Abu Sa'id. This may be a response to both the didactic texts for women, which enjoin sexual compliance as a religious duty of female Muslims, as well as the *ilmu jauhar* texts, which insist on transcendence for the male practitioner through intercourse with his wife. That a woman, though a wife, might amass mystical power and attain enlightenment—might be a Sufi practitioner at all—was perhaps some small consolation to the *rabiya* who were the wives of the *siak*, *pendita*, *mu'allim*, imam and *katib* named in *Syair Perahu*.

Conclusion

“The world is like a woman,” or so says the hero of the seventeenth-century Malay Sufi romance, *Hikayat Ibrahim ibn Adham* (Jones 1985:134). She is “dressed in fine clothing, so that from a distance those who do not know her lust after her. But those who are intelligent and sensible and versed in religious matters, when they approach the woman and get close to her, discern that the woman is old and ugly. So they detest her” (Jones 1985:135). This is the advice given by the hero, Sultan Ibrahim, to his wife, Siti Saliha, as he is extricating himself from her in order to

continue on his Sufi quest. She swoons in despair, and he almost takes pity on her but steels his resolve by reflecting that he is being “held back by a woman, and negligent towards my Lord Most High” (Jones 1985:134-5).³⁴ This, of course, is the analogous situation facing Rabi’ah, who tries to reject her suitors because she wishes to devote herself wholly to the Sufi path. It is intriguing that Lowenstein’s study of representations of Bibi Rabiah in Mughal miniatures often paired her with Sultan Ibrahim (1939:468), suggesting that in Mughal India they were thought of as the female and male exemplars of Sufi sainthood. The similarities between Rabi’ah and Ibrahim in the Malay manuscript tradition go further than this: both were based on supposed historical figures from the Islamic lands to the west (Ibrahim is likely to be modelled on a military leader who died in Balkh in the late eighth century), both featured in Sufi hagiographical collections (Braginsky 2004a:615), and both were so reworked in Malay from their Arabo-Persian models that they bear almost no resemblance to their supposed models.

But the dissimilarities between the two are even more telling, illustrating the difference that gender makes. While Sultan Ibrahim suffers some pangs when abandoning his wife, abandon her he does. He succeeds in following an uncompromisingly ascetic path, renouncing first his kingdom, then his wife and

³⁴ The *Bustan al-salatin*, also dating to the same period, similarly opines that “the world is like a woman, who incites and deceives all men. When a man desires her, she brings him to her house and makes merry with him. And the end of it is that he is destroyed by her” (“Dan lagi misal dunia itu upama seorang perempuan yang perdeser lagi menipu segala laki-laki. Apabila berahilah laki-laki itu akan dia, maka dibawanyalah ke rumahnya hingga diramah-ramahinyalah akan dia. Maka pada kesudahannya jadi dibinasakannyalah akan dia,” Grinter 1979:118). Grinter notes the occurrence of this anecdote to a number of other Malay texts, including al-Ghazālī’s *Nasihah al-muluk* and the *Taj al-salatin* (1979: 286). Jones traces it ultimately back to al-Ghazālī and ‘Aṭṭār (1983:204).

finally his son. Rabi'ah, in contrast, is not in a position to refuse her suitors and can only fend off some of them and place contractual limits on the marriages that she is forced to accept. The difference between the material traces of the two texts is also significant: *Hikayat Rabi'ah* runs to only a dozen or so pages and survives in only two manuscripts, while *Hikayat Ibrahim ibn Adham* is over 130 manuscript pages in its long recension, which has five extant manuscripts, while the short recension is represented by a further five (Jones 1985). This textual marginality may well be a reflection of the marginality of the woman Sufi in the Malay imaginary.

A final comparison between Rābi'a and Ibrahīm, this time in their Persian incarnations, comes from 'Aṭṭār, according to whom the latter spent fourteen years travelling to the Ka'ba because he performed two *rak'a* in every place of prayer en route. When Ibrahīm at last arrived, he found that the Ka'ba itself was not in its place. An unseen voice then informed him that the Ka'ba had gone to meet a woman who was on her way to Mecca—this, much to Ibrahim's annoyance, was Rābi'a (Smith 1928:9). That the Ka'ba went out to meet her—and not him—is a clear indication of which Sufi 'Aṭṭār considered the greater. Such a story, it would seem, is more likely to have a place in the Persian than the Malay literary tradition. As we have seen, though Sufism is routinely identified as woman-friendly, and Southeast Asian women are usually thought to have enjoyed comparatively high levels of autonomy and agency, *Hikayat Rabi'ah*, the only Malay text about a woman Sufi, tells quite a different tale. Here, Rabi'ah struggles to dedicate herself to God alone, having to marry twice, and ultimately being taken up to Heaven through the

intervention of her husband, in an act that directly refers to ritual sexual intercourse as a means to gnosis.

Nevertheless, Rabi'ah's spiritual power and authority—especially as evidenced in her defeat of the four syeikhs—delineates a small space for female Sufi agency outside of, and indeed in opposition to, marriage. Though the text provides a narrative of Sufi womanhood congruent with cultural expectations that all women marry, it is nevertheless important to note the spaces of resistance against this expectation that it opens up. The metaphor used in *Hikayat Rabi'ah* is not the world as a woman, as in *Hikayat Ibrahim ibn Adham*, but the world as a rotting carcass, desired only by dogs. It seems significant that Rabi'ah uses this aphorism, rather than Ibrahim's plainly misogynistic one of the world as an old, undesirable hag who at first sight appears an alluring beauty. In Ibrahim's anecdote, the sin is committed only by the woman, who tempts even men "intelligent and sensible and versed in religious matters." These men then see their error, but no mention is made of their lustful impulses as a failure in the Sufi path. In Rabi'ah's aphorism, as discussed above, she first figures herself as the desiring or rejecting agent, and the suitors as the carcass, thus avoiding the more usual association between women and temptation.

Hikayat Rabi'ah's letmotif of the Sufi as corpse is attested from the early centuries of the tradition, with the idea that the student in the hands of the master should be as passive as the corpse in the hands of the undertaker, and that the Sufi adept should consider his cell a tomb and his garment a shroud (Schimmel 1975:103-4). The aim of the Sufi is the ultimate renunciation of the world—death. Rabi'ah enters a death-

like state five times in the course of the text: torn apart, stabbed, drowned, burned, and finally brought to ecstasy in the presence of God, with each successive experience bringing her closer to the final transcendence. All these experiences are orchestrated by Sultan Abu Sa'id, and all of them involve recourse to *'ilm al-ḥurūf*. After the ritual performed by Sultan Abu Sa'id, evoking comparison with the ritualised intercourse in the esoteric treatises, it is Rabi'ah herself, once famed for her beauty as well as her piety, who has become "like a prostrate corpse" ("seperti mayat terhantar"³⁵). If Ibrahim, the paradigmatic male Sufi is first attracted to the alluring woman but then, seeing her true ugliness, rejects her, then Rabi'ah, the paradigmatic female Sufi is first the alluring woman and then the rotting body, before being spirited to Heaven. In *Hikayat Rabi'ah*, it is not so much that the only good woman Sufi is a dead one (as all good Sufis should be like corpses, after all), but that the only way a woman could be a Sufi was by also being a wife.

³⁵ SOAS MS 37082 f. 29.

Manuscripts:

British Library MSS Malay C25

Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia MI. 42

Royal Asiatic Society Malay 47

SOAS University of London Library MS 37082

Leiden University Library Klinkert 33

Leiden University Library Or 3260

Websites:

SOAS MS 37082, <https://digital.soas.ac.uk/AA00000130/00001/16j?search=37082>

Transcription of PNRI MI. 42, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1160330>

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