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Is Jawi Islamic?

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Abstract:

The Jawi script has been used to write the Malay language in maritime Southeast Asia since at least the 14th century and up to the present day. It is derived from Perso-Arabic script, and played a major role in the Islamisation of the region by facilitating the transfer of texts and ideas. However, this article demonstrates that Jawi was never an exclusively Islamic script—except, perhaps, at the beginning of the 21st century. Before this time, it was used to set down a wide range of writings, including of course Islamic *kitab* but also secular romances, multiethnic advertising, and much else besides. This article argues in favour of a more historicised understanding of the Malay manuscript tradition, and against presentist conceptions of religion and culture. It critically examines recent framings of Jawi as inherently Islamic, such as the 2019 controversy about the teaching of Jawi in Malaysian schools, and the assertion by Akademi Jawi Malaysia that “Bahasa Jawi Bahasa Islam,” to show that this idea is modern rather than a reflection of the actual Jawi textual tradition. In doing so, the article draws on Riddell’s extensive work on the Malay manuscript tradition and on religious tolerance and Islam.

Keywords: Jawi, Southeast Asian Islam, Islamic/Islamicate, Malaysian politics and society

During the short-lived Pakatan Harapan government, a furore erupted in Malaysia over the Ministry of Education's plans to introduce Jawi to the primary school curriculum. The Ministry was then headed by Dr Maszlee Malik, a protégé of Prime Minister Mahathir. Maszlee's PhD (from Durham University) on Islamic public administration and his teaching position at Universiti Islam Malaysia apparently led some to suspect him of pursuing a programme of covert Islamisation of the school curriculum.¹ That the proposed pages had in fact been prepared under the previous (Barisan Nasional) government largely went unremarked, as did the fact that Jawi already featured in the Standard Five curriculum.² The largest outcry came from Chinese educational groups, under the umbrella organisation the United Chinese School Committees Association, or Dong Zong, which contended that the teaching of Jawi script amounted to Islamisation.³ Their view was that Jawi was not just a script but a metonym for Islam, and that teaching it to primary school students in the government school system was attempted conversion by stealth. Social media was awash with frankly Islamophobic allegations and Islamist counter-allegations. The backlash against Dong Zong came from such places as Persatuan Pengguna Islam (the Islamic Consumers Association), which urged the government to "make haram" the use of Jawi script on the packaging of non-Muslim products.⁴ According to this perspective, not only was Jawi inherently Islamic, it was so Islamic that it could be besmirched were it to be used by non-Muslims. Eventually the Ministry of Education bowed to the

¹ For an indication of the contours of public reception to him, see "Academics' movement backs Maszlee Malik as education minister despite apprehension," *Aliran* (21 May 2018), accessed at <https://aliran.com/civil-society-voices/academics-movement-backs-maszlee-malik-as-education-minister-despite-apprehension/>

² "Make use of opening for further consultation on Jawi: Kit Siang," *The Sun Daily* (13 August 2019). Accessed at <https://www.thesundaily.my/local/make-use-of-opening-for-further-consultation-on-jawi-kit-siang-BB1254605>

³ "Dong Zong insists khat lessons is Islamisation, starts petition," *Malaysiakini* (12 August 2019). Accessed at <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/487483> By December, the organisation had backtracked from this view, and issued a policy booklet focusing more on *khat* (calligraphy) and on the self-government of Tamil- and Chinese-medium schools, rather than on Jawi per se. See *Isu Tulisan Jawi: Mempertahankan Hak Lembaga Pengelola Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan* (Kajang: Persekutuan Persatuan-Persatuan Lembaga Pengurus Sekolah Cina Malaysia, 2019). Accessed at: <https://www.dongzong.my/v3/images/jawi/jawi%20obm/mobile/index.html>

⁴ This of course begs the question of what a Muslim product is. The Association's position is apparently a product made by a Muslim. NurulSyaida, "Produk Bukan Islam Guna Tulisan Jawi Kelirukan Pengguna" (22 August 2019), accessed at <https://www.ppim.org.my/produk-bukan-islam-guna-tulisan-jawi-kelirukan-pengguna-malaysia-gazette-22-08-2019/>

pressure and made the Jawi content unassessed and at the discretion of individual schools—a rather unthinkable outcome under previous governments, and likely an indication of the underlying fragility and fractiousness of the Pakatan Harapan coalition. Given that education has long been a highly charged arena in Malaysian politics and society⁵ and that inter-religious and inter-racial relations have been under strain for some time, it was perhaps no surprise that Jawi sparked such outrage. But a closer look at the pages in question, and at the question of whether Jawi is in fact Islamic in terms of the historical record, shows the extent to which the controversy was more fantasm than reality.

Jawi is an adapted form of the Perso-Arabic script used in maritime Southeast Asia from at least the 14th century onwards for representing the Malay language. While it played a key role in the transfer of texts and ideas from the Islamic lands to the west to Southeast Asia, throughout its long history it has also been used for a range of purposes beyond Islamic proselytisation and scholarship. In the modern era, in the new nation states of Indonesia and Malaysia, Jawi was largely replaced by romanised script, or Rumi. It has occasionally been a subject of debate and controversy within the region, as a symbol of changing ideas about modernity and Islam. Beginning by examining the origins of the term Jawi, this article proceeds with a brief overview of scripts used for Malay as well as of the range of material produced in those scripts. It traces the role of colonial governments in marginalising Jawi into the sphere of Islam, but also emphasises that Malay and Indonesian intellectuals took a leading role in making Rumi the default script after independence. The changing place of Jawi within the state-mandated Malay-language curriculum after Malaysian independence, examined next, suggests that the Ministry of Education sought to retain a space for Jawi as a part of Malay literature rather than as exclusively Islamic. It concludes with a discussion of a recent articulation of Jawi as exclusively Islamic, evoking Riddell's work on Southeast Asian Islam and religious tolerance, to suggest that the insistence on clear demarcating lines between Islamic and non-Islamic is thoroughly modern.

⁵ See e.g. Tan Yao Sua and R. Santhiram, *Educational Issues in Multiethnic Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD, 2014) and Tan Liok Ee, *The Politics of Chinese Education in Malaya, 1945-1967* (Kuala Lumpur: OUP, 1997).

In one page of the proposed textbook that sparked the outrage, Cikgu Yazid teaches schoolchildren Chun Han and Aidil to read the word ‘Malaysia’ written in Jawi on stamps; in another, Gauri’s older brother shows her the words ‘ringgit Malaysia’ and ‘Bank Negara Malaysia’ in Jawi on banknotes; in the third, a pupil learns to read the national motto (“Bersekutu Bertambah Mutu”) in Jawi (see Image 1). If this were intended as a way of Islamising the school curriculum and/or of asserting Malay supremacy, the pages certainly went about it strangely: they are notable for the ethnic and presumably religious diversity of the pupils depicted in them, and for the emphasis on symbols of secular nationalism. In this, these pages have much in common with Jawi textbooks used in mainstream Malaysian schools up to the early 1980s, when Jawi was still part of the Bahasa Malaysia curriculum (see Image 2). *Belajar Jawi Cara Baru*, produced by the government publishing house Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1983 for students in the third year of primary school, features passages about Salmah, Uzmah, Ah Mui and Kumari going to school together, and Ahmad and Raju climbing a tree. On the cover it even has a picture of a dog, and a woman in Malay traditional dress but no headscarf.⁶ In both state-issued textbooks, from 1983 and 2019, Jawi is not associated with Islam.

Just how much Malaysian society—and its perception of Jawi—has changed may be discerned in the contrast between this 1983 textbook and another published in 2014. Although “based on the standard preschool curriculum of the Malaysian Ministry of Education,” the book is published by a private company, Penerbitan Fargoes, and appears to be intended for the now ubiquitous Islamic preschools. The man and boy on the front cover are wearing *songkok*, the felt hat worn by Malay Muslims, and the girl is wearing a *tudung* or headscarf. Among the vocabulary words introduced are Arabic ones intrinsically related to Islamic practice, such as *qārī’* (Qur’an reciter), *zhohor* (the midday prayer), and *ṣalāt* (prayer). Furthermore, the guidance for teachers at the beginning of the textbook stipulates that the topics to be covered should include the *sīrah* or biography of the Prophet, Islamic

⁶ *Belajar Jawi Cara Baru Buku Dua Untuk Darjah Tiga* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1983 [first ed.1974]), pp. 39, 65, front cover.

ethics (*adab* and *akhlāk*), and to read and memorise the *sūrah al-Fātihah* and the *sūrah al-Iklās*.⁷ This, indeed, is an Islamic curriculum. The contrast between the 1983 Dewan Bahasa textbook and the 2014 Penerbitan Fargoes one is indicative of how much Malay society has transformed over the more than three decades that separate them, with a much greater emphasis on public expressions of Islamic piety in general, and much expanded expectations of proficiency in Islamic ritual and doctrine expected even of children. The 1983 textbook and proposed 2019 pages are rather identical in content and outlook (albeit with a stronger emphasis on nationalism in the latter). However, the difference in reception here is stark—while Jawi in the late 1970s and early 1980s was a minor and largely unremarked part of the Bahasa Malaysia syllabus, in 2019 it became a lightning rod for identitarian political frustration. Malaysian society as a whole had changed, with Islam—or rather performative Islamic piety—far more to the fore than ever. While public perception in has oscillated between seeing Jawi as inherently Islamic or not, in the early 21st century it is, perhaps more than ever, seen less as a facet of Malay language and culture and more as a symbol of Islamic piety.

It is perhaps no surprise that Jawi was a spark for political controversy in 2019, at a point when the government had changed for the first time since independence, and the Malay majority felt both betrayed by the malfeasance of the previous administration and fearful of the erosion of their special privileges. The deep insecurity within some quarters of the Malay community also manifested itself in phenomena ranging from the offensive but relatively trivial, such as the Johor laundromat that banned non-Muslims from using its facilities “for reasons of purity,”⁸ and the furore about a locally-blended spirit named Timah Whisky, taken to be an abbreviation of the Muslim name Fatimah rather than the Malay word for tin,⁹ to the more consequential, like the large demonstrations against the proposed ratification of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial

⁷ *Belajar Jawi Baru* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbitan Fargoes, 2014), pp. 2-3.

⁸ Shahirah Hamid, “What a royal rebuke and politicians’ silence over ‘Muslim-only’ laundromat say about Malaysia,” *South China Morning Post* (29 September 2017), accessed at https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2113449/what-royal-rebuke-and-politicians-silence-over-muslim-only?module=perpetual_scroll_o&pgtype=article&campaign=2113449

⁹ “What’s in a name? Controversy surrounds Timah whiskey over perceived namesake,” Ian McIntyre, *The Vibes* (18 October 2021), accessed at <https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/44852/whats-in-the-name-controversy-surrounds-timah-whiskey-over-namesake>

Discrimination (ICERD), making Malaysia one of only 18 nations in the world positively in favour of racial discrimination.¹⁰ The Chinese and Indian minorities, meanwhile, may have been more likely to protest over the reappearance of Jawi in the school curriculum under a Pakatan Harapan government rather than a Barisan Nasional one—this was felt to be the moment to press for equality, rather than acquiesce to a perceived erosion.

Origins and usage of the term 'Jawi'

The term 'Jawi' poses something of a puzzle, since it is derived not from anything to do with the Malay language but to the Arabic term for Javanese.¹¹ It is clearly an exonym, a name given by outsiders, and used by 'Jawi' people in their encounters with those outsiders. It is also, again obviously, an inaccurate name, since most people to whom it was applied were not Javanese. Feener and Laffan have traced the use of the *nisba* or onomastic 'al-Jāwī' in an Arabic source of the 15th century, and adduce several examples of Arab geographers in the 14th century using the term to include Sumatra and its people.¹² By the 19th century, Snouck Hurgronje could categorically state that the term 'Jāwah' "included in Arabia all people of Malay race, in the fullest meaning of the term; the geographical boundary is perhaps from Siam and Malacca to New Guinea. Muslims and non-Muslims in Mecca are called Jāwah, but the latter are all slaves."¹³ At least according to Hurgronje, Meccan

¹⁰ Hew Wai Weng, "Himpunan 812 and a New Rivalry in Malay Politics," *New Mandala* (18 December 2018), accessed at <https://www.newmandala.org/himpunan-812-and-a-new-rivalry-in-malay-politics/>; "The ICERD Outrage," *Malaysiakini Special Report*, accessed at <https://pages.malaysiakini.com/icerd/en/>

¹¹ On the fluctuating distinction between Malay and Javanese see also Adrian Vickers, " 'Malay Identity': Modernity, Invented Tradition and Forms of Knowledge," in *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity across Boundaries*, edited by T. P. Barnard, pp. 25–55. Singapore: NUS Press, 2004). Pp. 25-55. A further question is why the modern Indonesian term for the script is not 'Jawi' but rather 'huruf Arab-Melayu'.

¹² R. Michael Feener and Michael F. Laffan, "Sufi Scents Across the Indian Ocean: Yemeni Hagiography and the Earliest History of Southeast Asian Islam" (*Archipel* 70 (2005): 185-208), pp. 192-3.

¹³ Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, *Mecca in the Latter Part of the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007 [1888-9]), p. 231.

Arabs included non-Malay speakers and non-Muslims in the category 'Jāwah'. This is a formulation of Jawi identity based on perceived ethnic or geographical origin, rather than language or religion. The photographs included in Hurgronje's book further emphasise the racial rather than linguistic usage of the term, such as the portrait of islanders from Kei and Banda,¹⁴ who would likely not have spoken Malay as a first language. Though one might query whether 19th-century Meccans had the same ideas of race as Hurgronje, the former were perhaps even less likely than the latter to be able to distinguish between, say, Sumatrans and Javanese on the basis of language. Hurgronje also points out the subordinate position of the Jāwah as compared to the Islamic peoples of the Middle East and South Asia: "In contrast to such peoples as the Egyptians, Turks, Persians and Indians, who have played a great role on the stage of Islam," Hurgronje writes, "the Jāwah step with modesty and reserve as if to proclaim with every footfall their conviction that they have not themselves earned their part in the blessings of Islam."¹⁵ For Southeast Asian Muslims of Hurgronje's time, then, the adoption of a Jāwah identity might be seen as a way of entering—humbly, knowing one's proper place—the pantheon of Islamic peoples.

The usage of the term *bahasa Jawi*, 'Jawi language', is well attested in the Malay textual tradition, but always in the context of specifically Islamic discourse. Perhaps the earliest is found in the work of the late-16th-century Hamzah Fansūrī: "Hamzah of Shahrnawi is externally a Jāwī / [But] his essence is the pure light of Ahmad [=Muhammad]"; "His external appearance is impoverished and [he is a] Jāwī / But his essence is the Qur'ān of the Arab nation."¹⁶ In Hamzah's usage here (somewhat reminiscent of Hurgronje), Jawi is a humble, immanent identity contrasted to the transcendence of Arabic and Muhammad. Elsewhere, in his prose treatise *Sharāb al-Ashiqīn*, Hamzah explains that he is writing in *bahasa Jawi* "so that all Allah's servants who do not know Arabic or Persian may be able

¹⁴ Angelo Pesce, ed., *Makkah a Hundred Years Ago: or, C. Snouck Hurgronje's Remarkable Albums* (London: Immel Pub., 1986), p. 88.

¹⁵ Hurgronje, *Mecca in the Latter Part*, p. 233.

¹⁶ "Hamzah Shahrnawi zāhirnya Jawi / Bātinnya cahya Ahmad yang sāfi"; "Zāhirnya miskīn lagipun Jāwī / Bātinnya Qur'ān yang bangsa 'Arabī" (Malay text in Drewes 15:13a and 44:48c, English translation mine). Accessed at mcp.edu.anu

to study” his book.¹⁷ Again, Jawi appears here as a subordinate Islamic language, a necessary resort for those Southeast Asian Muslims who cannot understand Arabic or Persian. Another typical example, about a century and a half distant from Hamzah, is found in the opening lines of *Kitab Futūḥ al-Shām*, which the translator noted is “in the Arabic language and which I transferred into the Jawi language.”¹⁸ The use of the term ‘bahasa Jawi’ seems to be most frequent in the context of translation from Arabic into Malay, when making a comparison between Islamic identities of the east and the west, and most often in *kitab* works (treatises on the subjects of Islamic education and practice, such as *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, *fiqh*, and Arabic grammar, often in a mix of Arabic and Malay or other Southeast Asian languages). The Malay Concordance Project provides a number of other attestations of the use of *bahasa Jawi*, but all from a total of eleven *kitab* out of the several hundred in the corpus.¹⁹ Indeed, it might be more accurate to consider *bahasa Jawi* linguistically as the subset of *bahasa Melayu* otherwise known as “kitab Malay.” As Chambert-Loir notes, this term originates from Johns, and was characterised by Riddell as “a kind of Malay religious dialect” (not mincing words, Chambert-Loir himself calls it the “unholy mixture of Arabic syntax and Malay vocabulary”).²⁰ The average Malay speaker has considerable difficulty understanding this mixture, marking *bahasa Jawi* out as a specialist dialect, quite distinct from *bahasa Melayu*. As we will see, while Jawi script was used for both ‘dialects’ (or perhaps more correctly termed registers)—the religious and the secular—it seems that the writers before the 20th century were clear that *bahasa Jawi* was a distinct realm, and not to be confused with Jawi script.

¹⁷ *Sharāb al-‘Ashiqīn* 1/1. Text and numbering from Syed Muhammad Naguib al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansūrī* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970), pp.297-328. Accessed via Malay Concordance Project (mcp.anu.edu).

¹⁸ “Adapun ini kitāb futūḥ al-Shām daripada kalām ‘Arabī dan sesungguhnya kupindahkan baginya kepada bahasa Jawi.” SOAS MS 11505, f. 1v.

¹⁹ The texts on the Malay Concordance Project are predominantly literary and historical works (as opposed to *kitab*). There are 115 usages of *Jawi* (including variations like *menjawikan*, and excluding *jawi-jawi*, a kind of tree, and the Minangkabau use of *jawi* to denote a kind of ox), compared to 621 usages of *bahasa Melayu* and variants thereof.

²⁰ Henri Chambert-Loir, “Islamic Law in 17th-Century Aceh,” *Archipel* 94 (2017), 51-96. P. 61

As is well known, the oldest surviving example of Jawi script is the Terengganu inscription from the beginning of the 14th century.²¹ While Jawi was the most common way of writing Malay from perhaps the 15th century to the early 20th, it was never the only way of writing Malay. Before Jawi, several Indic-derived scripts were in use, such as in the Muara Tatang and Telaga Batu inscriptions (both 683 CE), and the Kota Kapur inscription (686 CE).²² It is assumed that the adoption of Jawi was contemporaneous with that of Islam, but like conversion itself the process was likely a gradual one. At least one very early Malay Islamic text was *not* written in Jawi: the Minye Tujoh tombstone, dated 1380 CE, inscribed in the Malay language and ‘Old Sumatran’ script (with a related inscription nearby inscribed in Arabic script and language).²³ The Malay-language, Old Sumatran character-inscription is indisputably Islamic, referring to the hijrah of the Prophet and invoking God in both Arabic and Malay terms (“ilāhi yā rabbī tuhan samuhā”²⁴). As Chambert-Loir has noted, Indic and Islamic scripts seem to have been in concurrent use at this period, and continued to be so for the following 150 years at least.²⁵ In places like Kerinci, in highland Sumatra, for instance, the local, Indic-derived script was used up to the second half of the 19th century, though the population had embraced Islam some two centuries prior.²⁶ Islamic texts continued to be written in pre-Islamic scripts at least as late as the 19th century—such as the four manuscripts of a

²¹ For a comprehensive survey of the history of Jawi see Annabel Teh Gallop, “A Jawi Sourcebook: Introduction,” *Indonesia and the Malay World* 43:125 (2015), pp. 13-39.

²² Arlo Griffiths, “The Corpus of Inscriptions in the Old Malay Language,” in Daniel Perret, *Writing for Eternity: A Survey of Epigraphy in Southeast Asia* (Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 2018). Pp.275-283.

²³ Willem van der Molen, “The Syair of Minye Tujuh,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 163-2/3 (2007): 356-375. P. 356.

²⁴ Van der Molen, “The Syair of Minye Tujuh,” p. 371.

²⁵ Henri Chambert-Loir, “Tulisan Melayu/Indonesia: Aksara dalam Perkembangan Budaya.” In Henri Chambert-Loir. *Iskandar Zulkarnain, Dewa Mendu, Muhammad Bakir dan Kawan-Kawan: Lima Belas Karangan Tentang Sastra Indonesia* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2014), pp. 185-206. P. 190.

²⁶ Uli Kozok, “A 14th-Century Malay Manuscript from Kerinci,” *Archipel* 67 (2004): 37-55. Pp. 42-43.

Sufi poem written in South Sumatran *rencong* script studied by Braginsky.²⁷ On this evidence, script alone does not define what is Islamic. As a matter of historical record, ‘non-Islamic’ scripts were used for ‘Islamic’ purposes throughout the history of Malay writing.

The reverse is also true—the ‘Islamic’ script was widely used for ‘non-Islamic’ purposes—and evidence for this exists in far greater volume. Large swathes of Malay literature in the manuscript age, written of course in Jawi, are difficult to characterise as Islamic. Panji tales, for instance, were a highly popular literary genre in the 19th century and earlier. Though they were composed and consumed by thoroughly Islamised communities, Panji tales—with their references to pre-Islamic deities like Betara Kala, characters who descend from the upperworld, heroines who threaten to commit ritual suicide—can hardly be said to be Islamic in either inspiration or ethics. Indeed, Malay-world ‘*ulamā*’ at least from al-Rānirī in the 17th century onwards occasionally condemned such literature as dangerous to readers’ faith.²⁸ So while some critics may have identified texts like these as un-Islamic and exhorted readers to reject them, they did not (unlike Persatuan Pengguna Islam) demand that they not be written in Jawi.

In the age of print, starting from the rise in Malay lithographic printing in the late 19th century, Jawi publications in a range of genres flourished. Proudfoot’s documentation of early Malay printing encompasses several streams of publishing in the Malay-language and in both scripts: Jawi- or (increasingly) Rumi-script Baba presses, the Jawi- and Rumi-script mission and colonial government presses, and the overwhelmingly Jawi-script Muslim presses. The designation ‘Muslim’ here denotes, as Proudfoot explains, the agents of the press (“Malay, Javanese, Jawi Peranakan, and other printers who share a common Muslim identity”) rather than its output (“not all their publications were overtly Islamic, but a great many were”).²⁹ As well as books there were also Jawi newspapers, the earliest extant being *Peredaran al-Shams wa’l-Qamar* in Singapore, of which only the 30 August 1877 issue survives.³⁰ Jawi was used by non-Muslim Malay speakers, such as by the Peranakan Chinese writer and publisher Yap Goan

²⁷ Vladimir Braginsky, *...And Sails the Boat Downstream: Malay Sufi Poems of the Boat* (Leiden: Semaian, 2007), pp. 112-161.

²⁸ Vladimir Braginsky, *The Heritage of Traditional Malay Literature* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004), p. 383-6.

²⁹ Proudfoot, *Early Malay Printed Books*, p. 27.

³⁰ Gallop, Annabel Teh, “Rare Malay newspaper in the Wellcome Library.” <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2014/01/rare-malay-newspaper-in-the-wellcome-library.html>

Ho, who published several lithographed Jawi books in the 1880s.³¹ As Proudfoot remarks in his seminal survey of early Malay printing, before the late 19th century “Malay-speaking Chinese had been participants in Malay oral and manuscript culture. Their contribution to supposedly traditional Malay manuscript literature is not susceptible to disaggregation.”³² That is, it is not possible to discern whether the reader of a lithograph of *Syair Siti Zubaidah* or *Syair Sultan Abdul Muluk*, titles popular within the Chinese and Malay communities alike, was a Muslim or not (let alone how good of a Muslim he or she was). Jawi was also used for Christian evangelical material, such as a Malay translation of the New Testament in 1889.³³ In the 1930s, there were Jawi advertisements for Tiger Beer, featuring a man in a *songkok* and *sampin* holding aloft a pint glass.³⁴ These last two examples, admittedly, might be interpreted as attempts by the West, represented by the Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap and Fraser & Neave, respectively, to lead Malay Muslims astray. The same cannot be said for Malay erotica in Jawi script that apparently thrived from the 1940s and 60s, and which was surely a home-grown product.³⁵ Advertising in newspapers from the 1950s, such as the advertisement for Kicap Cap Kuda Terbang, “much enjoyed by Malays, Chinese and Indians,” indicates that the target audience were not just Muslims (see Image 3). Major Malay-language newspapers in British Malaya and independent Malaysia continued to appear in Jawi, all the way up to 28 January 2006, when the final issue of the weekly *Utusan Melayu Mingguan* left the press.³⁶

The reasons for the decline of Jawi commercial printing invite further research, but for the present purposes suffice to note that the increasingly self-conscious Islamisation of Malay society did not support Jawi-script newspaper sales. Quite the opposite, in fact. It can also be observed that as Jawi moved out of the secular sphere (romantic *hikayat*, advertising, erotic novels, newspapers) and survived

³¹ Claudine Salmon, “Malay Translations of Chinese Fictions in Indonesia.” In Salmon, Claudine, ed. *Literary Migrations: Traditional Chinese Fiction in Asia (17th-20th Centuries)* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2013), pp. 248-276. P. 252.

³² Ian Proudfoot, *Early Malay Printed Books* (Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Malaya Press, 1993). P. 22.

³³ *Wasiat yang Baharu: yaitu Segala Kitab Perjanjian Baharu atau Injil* (Amsterdam: Nederlandsch Bijbelgenootschap, 1889) (Library of Congress BS 315.M25). With thanks to Darryl Lim for providing images and information about this publication.

³⁴ <https://www.malaysiadesignarchive.org/advertisement-tiger-beer/>

³⁵ Nazir Harith Fadzilah, “Erotika Melayu,” <https://glamllelaki.my/gaya-hidup/13887/>

³⁶ Ding Choo Ming, “Daripada Penghentian Utusan Melayu Kepada Nasib Tulisan Jawi,” *Pemikir* 45 (2006).

only in the religious (*kitab*), there was a decrease in numbers of readers and in the kinds of topics thought suitable for Jawi. Up to the early 20th century, almost everything written in Malay was written using Jawi script. This included all forms of texts, from romantic tales to business letters and of course Islamic texts. Some manuscripts, including Islamic ones like *Syair Perahu* mentioned above, were written in scripts other than Jawi, such as *rencong*. After the mid-20th century, the situation was reversed. Secular and quotidian Malay text was overwhelmingly in Rumi, and almost the only material published in Jawi were religious books. The conviction that Jawi is Islamic, held by both sides in the 2019 controversy, reflects precisely the conditions of the beginning of the 21st century, rather than an accurate or complete record of the history of Jawi as a whole.

Modernising Malay script

In both British Malaya and the Netherlands Indies, the introduction of Rumi script for Malay was initiated by colonial administrators towards the end of the 19th century. In both cases, literacy in Rumi was confined to the small cohorts of students educated in colonial schools, with far larger numbers literate in Jawi learned in traditional schools. Rumi was introduced for use in Malay schools in British territories in 1878, but, in the words of Chambert-Loir, it “was certainly restricted to the world of school, while in society in general Jawi continued to be used.”³⁷ In the Netherlands Indies, similarly, colonial education policy introduced Roman script and standardised spelling, set out in Ophuijsen’s *Kitab Logat Melajoe* in 1901. Nevertheless, as Fogg notes, “through the 1920s Muslim Indonesians were probably more likely to know *jawi* than romanised Indonesian.”³⁸ In both the Netherlands Indies and British Malaya, colonial officials tended to have both disdain for and unease about Jawi, associating it with what they conceived to be traditional Islamic education, which they feared might foment anti-colonial resistance. The 1904

³⁷ Chambert-Loir, “Aksara,” p. 200.

³⁸ Kevin Fogg, “The standardisation of the Indonesian language and its consequences for Islamic communities,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 46.1 (2015): 86-110. P. 90

Annual Report on Education in British Malaya, as Milner notes, held that Jawi was “associated with the unintelligent study of the Koran,” and claimed that Rumi was “associated in the Malay mind with the vigour and intelligence of white races,” recommending that Jawi be “gradually discontinued.”³⁹ On the eve of independence, another colonial deliberation on Malay education was perhaps more fateful for the future of Jawi. The 1951 Report of the Committee on Malay Education returned to the question of Jawi and Rumi in schools, firmly tying Jawi to the religious domain. Arguing that Malay children were “disadvantaged” compared to their non-Malay schoolmates, because the former had to spend additional hours in Islamic education classes in the afternoon, the report proposed that “a half-hour period in each school day should be set aside for the instruction of Muslim pupils in the principles of Islam, in the Koran, in the Arabic characters, and hence gradually in the Jawi script also; this instruction would be given by specialist religious teachers trained for the purpose.”⁴⁰ Bringing Islamic education within the purview of the colonial education system, and thus neutralising any potential source of opposition to colonial rule, may have been a significant (if unspoken) policy objective. The report also mentions the benefits of removing the study of Jawi from non-Muslim students, whom it assumed would regard time spent acquiring Jawi as an “unreasonable” burden.⁴¹ The subsequent 1956 Report of the Education Committee reiterated the choice of Rumi as the default script, “provided that arrangements are made for the learning of Jawi by Muslim pupils.”⁴² To this extent, then, the colonial regime encouraged the association between Jawi and Islam, and the segregation of non-Muslim students from Jawi. From being a multi-purpose script in use by a multi-confessional community, as it was in the hands of Yap Goan Ho in the 1880s, Jawi was on its way to becoming an Islamic script.

It must be emphasised, however, that neither the Dutch nor the British colonial regimes attempted to remove Jawi altogether. Colonial schools and administration largely favoured Rumi, but the place of Jawi in local textual economies remained. Fogg observes that under Dutch colonialism Jawi

³⁹ Qtd. in A.C. Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 251.

⁴⁰ *Report of the Committee on Malay Education, Federation of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Press, 1951), pp. xxx.

⁴¹ *Report of the Committee*, p. xxx.

⁴² *Report of the Education Committee* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Press, 1956), p. 5.

script retained its place, and that the “complete disappearance of *jawi* as a viable alternative to romanised Indonesian occurred later but rather quickly, from roughly 1948 through 1956.”⁴³ That is, this disappearance took place not at the hands of the Dutch, but those of the independent state of Indonesia, which required religious schools to teach Rumi, removed Jawi from the curriculum of secular schools, and erased Jawi from symbolic national uses such as on coins.⁴⁴ A similar, if tardier and less sweeping, process took place in postwar Malaya, with Malay intellectuals advocating for Rumi in the name of progress. This even took place in Jawi periodicals, as Amoroso points out, with the Jawi-script *Majalah Guru* running an article in 1947 arguing for both scripts as “the Malays’ scripts.”⁴⁵ Though Cik Pinah of Sungai Sumun lamented in the letters page of *Saudara* in 1936 that Jawi was falling into disuse as Malays pursued “Western civilisation that speeds off with its aeroplanes,”⁴⁶ this side of the argument appeared to be losing traction. There are even indications of a current of opinion against Jawi script on grounds that we might now call modernist Islamic. A *Saudara* leader article by Muhammad Arifin Ishak in 1937 went so far as to criticise “kitab Jawi” for being “endless in their religious rules and regulations, valid and invalid, halal and haram, sin and blessings—that is, the things that are an insult to the intelligence of informed people, and are completely unsuitable for the desires of the people of the present age. When might one reach the matters that are at the root of Islam, such as the sciences of tafsir, hadith, tashrik, ta’rikh and so on, if [we are] always [immersed] in [that] from youth to old age?”⁴⁷ While not calling for the abolition of the script, Muhammad Arifin Ishak is (perhaps more radically) attacking the corpus of texts written in Jawi, the traditionalist religious canon, and doing so because in his view it impedes Malay

⁴³ Fogg, “Standardisation,” pp. 92-3.

⁴⁴ Fogg, “Standardisation,” p. 93.

⁴⁵ Donna Amoroso, *Traditionalism and the Ascendancy of the Malay Ruling Class in Colonial Malaya* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014), p. 184.

⁴⁶ “mengejari tamaddun (peradaban) barat yang sedang laju dengan bahtera2 terbangnya itu,” Cik Pinah, “Keadaan huruf dan persuratan Melayu,” *Saudara* (22 January 1936), p. 4. Accessible at: mcp.anu.edu.au/N/SK/731.html4

⁴⁷ “‘kitab Jawi’, yang tiada berekesudahan syarat rukunnya, sah batalnya, halal haramnya, dosa pahalanya, iaitu perkara2 yang menjadi nista kepada akal fikiran orang yang berpengetahuan serta tiada munsabah sekaliz bagi menjadi nista kepada akal fikiran orang yang berpengetahuan serta tiada munsabah sekaliz bagi kemahuan kaum zaman ini. Bilakah boleh sampai kepada perkara2 yang menjadi akar umbi ugama Islam seperti ilmu tafsir, ilmu hadis, ilmu tasrik, ilmu tarikh dan lain2nya jika senentiasa demikian dari muda hingga ketua?” Muhammad Arifin Ishak, “Jalan keselamatan bagi orang-orang Melayu,” *Saudara* (20 Feb 1937), p. 2. Accessible at: mcp.anu.edu

Muslims from accessing the higher echelons of Islamic learning. That Muhammad Arifin Ishak ignores the vast quantities of *tafsir*, *hadith*, and so on that in fact existed in Jawi script is perhaps a reflection of the inroads made by colonial education and by Kemalist ideas, seeking to do away with tradition in the name of progress towards Islamic modernity.⁴⁸

The role of Malay intellectuals themselves, rather than colonial agents, in marginalising Jawi comes to the fore in the 1954 Kongres Bahasa (Language Congress). Responding to pressure from the group of young writers known as Angkatan Sastrawan '50 (themselves clearly influenced by Indonesia's Angkatan '45), the Congress declared in favour of both script systems.⁴⁹ In their recommendation to the Kongres Bahasa, the writers M. Asraf and Usman Awang presented a number of advantages of Rumi over Jawi, and just one disadvantage.⁵⁰ They took care to make a distinction between the script and Islam, stating "firmly that the question of script has no connection whatsoever with the question of the Islamic faith, because a person's position cannot and may not be established based on whether he or she knows Jawi script or not . . . it is clear that anyone who tries to muddle up religion with script is in truth someone who is deliberately trying to confuse the thinking of the Malay people in general by putting on the mask of Islam."⁵¹ In this view, script and religion are firmly separate; the Jawi script is declared technically unsuited to the Malay language, and is seen as an impediment to a modernised Islam. And it was this position that carried the day, and may have paved the way for what came to be enshrined in law.

⁴⁸ Amoroso, *Traditionalism*, p. 184 fn. 63.

⁴⁹ Chambert-Loir, "Aksara," p. 200.

⁵⁰ M. Asraf and Usman Awang, "Memorandum Mengenai Tulisan Rumi Untuk Bahasa Melayu" (27 March 1954), reprinted in *Memoranda Angkatan Sasterawan '50* (Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti, 1987), p. 20.

⁵¹ "Kami katakan dengan tegas bahawa soal tulisan tidak ada hubungannya sama sekali dengan soal agama Islam, kerana pendirian seseorang tidak dapat dan tidak boleh ditentukan dari tahu atau tidak tahunya dia akan tulisan Jawi . . . nyatalah bahawa orang yang mencoba mencampurbaurkan soal agama dengan soal tulisan itu sebenarnya orang yang sengaja hendak mengelirukan pikiran rakyat Melayu umumnya dengan bertopengkan agama Islam." M. Asraf and Usman Awang, "Memorandum Mengenai Tulisan Rumi Untuk Bahasa Melayu," p.20. Given M. Asraf's decidedly atheist poem "Syurga," which declares that "the great creator / is only opium" ("maha pencipta / hanya madat sahaja"), one might question whether he was arguing in good faith here. The poem originally appeared in the magazine *Mastika* in 1950—in Jawi (reprinted in A.M. Thani, ed., *Esei Sastera ASAS 50* (Kuala Lumpur; Dewan Bahasa dan Sastera, 1981), p. xxvi).

Jawi in the curricula of independent Malaysia

As is well known, Article 152 of the Malaysian Constitution, promulgated at Independence in 1957, declared Malay the national language of the new nation. The Constitution did not, however, specify script.⁵² The status of Jawi vis à vis Rumi was addressed only in the National Language Acts 1963/67, which state that “[t]he script of the national language shall be the Rumi script: provided that this shall not prohibit the use of the Malay script, more commonly known as the Jawi script, of the national language.”⁵³ Thus it seems clear that the default script for Malay—for official government business, including education—was to be Rumi, but that Jawi could continue to be used elsewhere. Jawi remained legally legitimate—for instance, literacy in Jawi and in Rumi were equally acceptable as a criterion for establishing the “adequate knowledge of Malay language” necessary for being granted citizenship.⁵⁴ Yet the privileging of Rumi in quotidian and official usage meant that by default Jawi retreated into the exclusively religious sphere.

There remained one place within the education system of independent Malaysia where Jawi retained a role: the Malay language curriculum. Colonial-era Malay-medium primary schools began with Jawi and gradually introduced Rumi. In postcolonial Malaysia, the reverse was the case. From 1957 to 1970, there were two streams of Malay language classes: Bahasa Melayu (for first-language learners) and Bahasa Kebangsaan (the ‘national language,’ for students with a different first language). While the syllabi of these two streams were largely identical, apart from the fact that Bahasa Melayu was about a year advanced from Bahasa Kebangsaan in terms of the difficulty of its content, two topics were not taught to the latter group: poetry and Jawi.⁵⁵ The utilitarian focus is rather evident here—apparently the national

⁵² *Federal Constitution* (Incorporating all amendments up to P.U.(A.) 2009), Part XII, 152 (1). Accessed at https://www.jac.gov.my/.../10_akta/perlembagaan_persekutuan/federal_constitution.pdf

⁵³ Clause 9, National Language Act 1963/67 (Revised 1971). Accessed at http://www.commonlii.org/my/legis/consol_act/nla1963671971234/

⁵⁴ Saran Kaur Gill, *Language Policy Changes in Multi-Ethnic Malaysia* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), p. 51.

⁵⁵ Asmah Haji Omar, *The Teaching of Bahasa Malaysia in the Context of National Language Planning* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1976), pp. 37, 39.

curriculum planners considered both poetry and Jawi superfluous to the requirements of non-Malays. After the communal riots of 1969, Malay was renamed Bahasa Malaysia,⁵⁶ and the two streams of Bahasa Melayu and Bahasa Kebangsaan were merged. The revised syllabus introduced in 1970 included Jawi within the Bahasa Malaysia classes of all years of secondary school.⁵⁷ While it has not been possible to track the changes in educational policy regarding Jawi after 1970, at a government-curriculum primary school in Kuala Lumpur in the 1980s, I recall the occasional desultory Bahasa Malaysia class given over to Jawi, where we never progressed much beyond sounding out two-syllable words. By the time I was in secondary school, Jawi was no longer on the Malay language syllabus at all, and the only Malaysian students who acquired proficiency in it were enrolled at Islamic schools. This may have been a decisive, if unheralded, moment in the Islamisation of Jawi.

Jawi appears to have provoked occasional outcry during this period, such as when the opposition leader Lim Kit Siang fulminated against the teaching of Jawi in schools in 1984. Prefiguring the controversy of 2019, Lim argued that it was a “dangerous precedent . . . to make Jawi a compulsory subject, by making it part of Bahasa Malaysia. If this is not challenged, then in future, some over-zealous education officials would suggest that Islamic civilisation should also be taught as part of Bahasa Malaysia!”⁵⁸ In fact, as we have just seen, Jawi had been a compulsory part of the Bahasa Malaysia syllabus since 1970. As the Federal Territory Deputy Director of Education, Haji Zainal Bahaudin, remarked to the press at the time: “Everybody must learn Jawi as it is now taught as part of Bahasa Malaysia in the primary school syllabus. Previously Jawi was taught during religious classes and as such only Malay pupils were taught. Parent[s] should be clear that Jawi is now regarded as part of the academic subject and since Bahasa Malaysia is a compulsory subject, pupils – regardless of race – must study it.”⁵⁹ Whereas Lim here assumes that Jawi is inherently associated with Islam, a precursor for

⁵⁶ Asmah Haji Omar, *The Teaching of Bahasa Malaysia*, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁷ Asmah Haji Omar, *The Teaching of Bahasa Malaysia*, p. 45.

⁵⁸ Lim Kit Siang, “Education Ministry’s regulation that Jawi is a compulsory subject violates Article 152 of Malaysian Constitution” (speech given at Selangor State DAP Committee Meeting, 1 June 1984), accessed at <https://bibliotheca.limkitsiang.com/1984/06/01/education-ministry%E2%80%99s-regulation-that-jawi-is-a-compulsory-subject-violates-article-152-of-malaysian-constitution/>

⁵⁹ Lim, “Education Ministry’s regulation.”

“Islamic civilisation,” Haji Zainal makes the case for Jawi as a part of Bahasa Malaysia, and, as such, the common curriculum—and one might go so far as to say the common heritage—of all Malaysians. In 1984 (as, in fact, in 2019) it is the Education Ministry that argues for Jawi as Malay, as distinct from Jawi as Islamic.

As scholarship on Islam and politics in Malaysia has repeatedly emphasised,⁶⁰ the state is under considerable pressure from groups within and without to integrate a particular kind of Islam within the government apparatus. Fatefully enough, among the government bodies most zealously advocating for the increased Islamisation of Malaysian society is the Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan—also known by its acronym, JAWI.⁶¹ Among JAWI’s notable interventions are the 2015 detention of the eminent scholar of Malay literature, Kassim Ahmad, then aged 82,⁶² and a 2016 raid on a transgender beauty pageant.⁶³ As well as from factions within the state, the pressure to Islamise Jawi also comes from civil society groups, both those that fear Islam, such as Dong Zong, and those that champion it, such as Persatuan Pengguna Islam. Indeed, Lim Kit Siang in 2019 recognised this. Recalling that he learned Jawi while detained as a political prisoner in 1969, he asserted that it did not “make me any less of a Chinese, and may have helped in making me more of a Malaysian.”⁶⁴ If by 2019 Lim had come to see that Jawi need not be equated with Islamisation, he still needed to defend himself against misquotations (i.e., that he did not say one *had* to learn Jawi to be a Malaysian). Popular opinion in many quarters still held it self-evident that Jawi *is* Islamic, the question to which we now turn.

⁶⁰ Patricia A. Martinez, “The Islamic State or the State of Islam in Malaysia,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 23 (2001), pp. 474-503; Meredith L. Weiss, “The Changing Shape of Islamic Politics in Malaysia,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 4 (2004), pp. 139-173; Johan Saravanamuttu, “Malaysia in 2020: Political Fragmentation, Power Plays and Shifting Coalitions,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2021), pp. 169-184.

⁶¹ <https://jawi.gov.my/>

⁶² Ida Lim, “JAWI’s detention, arrest of Kassim Ahmad was illegal, court rules,” *Malay Mail*, 21 December 2015, accessed at <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2015/12/21/jawis-detention-arrest-of-kassim-ahmad-was-illegal-court-rules/1027049>

⁶³ Boo Su-Lyn, “JAWI raids transgender ‘beauty pageant’ for breaking fatwa,” *Malay Mail*, 4 April 2016, accessed at <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2016/04/04/jawi-raids-transgender-beauty-pageant-for-breaking-fatwa/1093293>

⁶⁴ “‘Learning Jawi to be a Malaysian’ not my words: Kit Siang,” (media statement, 5 August 2019), accessed at <https://dapppg.org/learning-jawi-to-be-a-malaysian-not-my-words-kit-siang/>

What is an Islamic script?

The contemporary conviction that Jawi is an Islamic script is exemplified by a pamphlet published recently by an organisation called Akademi Jawi Malaysia, which has as its mission the ‘revitalisation’ of Jawi.⁶⁵ The pamphlet proclaims that “The Jawi language is an Islamic language” (“bahasa Jawi bahasa Islam”), explaining that an “Islamic language” is one that shares key “Islamic vocabulary,” such as *insān*, *‘ādil*, and *‘aql*, which originate in the Qur’an. An Islamic language, further, is one that shares this key terminology, but also “benefits from” (*memanfa’atkan*) the Arabic language and script of the Qur’an.⁶⁶ One of the pamphlet’s most revealing claims is the enumeration of Islamic languages: Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, Urdu, and Jawi, in that order. Clearly, the intention is to place Jawi in select company, even if ranking last. The absence of African languages of Islamic learning such as Hausa and Swahili indicates the exclusions that operate in this conception of Islam as a Middle Eastern and Asian phenomenon. Also illuminating is the pamphlet’s list of the “main Jawi-language intellectuals” (“ilmuwan utama bahasa jawi”): Hamzah Fansūrī, Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānirī, ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf al-Singkilī, Dāwūd al-Fatānī, Raja Ali Haji, Wan Ahmad al-Fatānī, Za’ba, and Syed Naguib al-Aṭṭās. The majority of these men are of course *‘ulamā’*, representing an indeed distinguished but also very particular strand of Malay-language intellectual endeavour. Again, that which is omitted here—the authors of what are usually acknowledged as the major works of Malay literature, such as *Sulalatus Salatin*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* and the like—provides an indication of the pamphlet’s ideas of value. Indeed, the effect is to assert the difference between the Jawi language, *bahasa Jawi*, and the Malay language, *bahasa Melayu*, and the primacy of the former over the latter. In Akademi Jawi Malaysia’s conceptual framework, the Jawi language is Malay *and* Muslim, and works in Malay must also be on Islamic subjects in order to be admitted into the canon. It may be that this

⁶⁵ www.akademijawi.my

⁶⁶ *Risalah Bahasa Jawi* (Kajang: Akademi Jawi Malaysia, n.d.), p. 6.

unambiguous position—Jawi is Islamic and nothing else—would only be possible at this particular historical juncture.

The Islamisation of Malayness, of which Akademi Jawi Malaysia's conception of Jawi is one manifestation, is part of a long-standing process. This has been accompanied, as in much of the Muslim world, by the syariatisation of Islam, the privileging of discourses of law over those of, say, folk or Sufi practice. Much effort in studies of Jawi-script texts as now practiced in Malaysia is expended on demonstrating that Malay Islam was always a bastion of syariah-minded piety. This syariat-isation of Islam is to a great extent born out of the encounter between diverse Muslim societies and Western-mediated modernity, beginning with the intensification of colonial power around the late 19th century, turning towards an emulation of a Western model in the mid-20th, then towards a rejection of that model in the global Islamic revivalism of the 1970s onwards, and reaching a particular peak in the post-9/11 world. The very question of whether or not a script is 'Islamic' is highly anachronistic, and of limited meaning to societies that used Jawi widely. As scholars of Islamic intellectual and political history such as Ahmed, Aydin and Bauer,⁶⁷ have argued, the drawing of crisp lines separating the Islamic and the non-Islamic is an obsession of modernity, a result of the rationalisation of religion practiced both by Western epistemic regimes and Islamist responses to them.

For Islamic Southeast Asia, Riddell's work on the Malay manuscript tradition similarly shows that ideas of normative Islamic practice in the past were not the same as those of today. His emphasis on religious tolerance also indicates how the past may illuminate the present. Riddell's longstanding and meticulous study of the Islamic intellectuals of the 'Malay-Indonesian world' and their texts, from his doctoral dissertation on al-Singkili to his indispensable guide to the Muslim intellectuals of Southeast Asia to his recent monograph on Acehese Islam,⁶⁸ is marked by his own position as a Christian

⁶⁷ Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: a Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: an Alternative History of Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

⁶⁸ Peter Riddell, "'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Singkili's *Tarjuman al-Mustafid*: a critical study of his treatment of Juz' 16." (Ph.D. thesis), (Canberra: Australian National University, 2004); *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses* (Singapore: Horizon, 2001); *Malay Court Religion, Culture and Language*.

theologian. His commitment to taking seriously the diversity of ways in which Muslims have and continue to articulate their faith is evident in his own answer to the question of ‘what is Islam?’:

Islam is a Hui Chinese peasant popping occasionally into his mosque, which resembles a pagoda and has the Islamic creed (*shahada*) on the wall in Chinese, not Arabic. Islam is equally a Javanese peasant going straight from Friday prayers to the rice fields, where he will leave an offering to the goddess of the rice, Dewi Sri. Islam is also a Lombok folk Muslim who tells me that Islam had only three pillars, not five.⁶⁹

Alongside Riddell’s stance that it is not up to Christians to decide who the ‘real’ Muslims are, one might also set the position of ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf al-Singkilī, about whom Riddell has written so extensively. If, paradoxically enough, Jawi is more Islamic now than it has ever been, it remains possible to draw examples of tolerance from within the older Jawi textual tradition itself. In al-Singkilī’s *Daq’āiq al-Hurūf* (edited by Riddell’s teacher A.H. Johns), we find a warning to Muslims themselves not to attempt to adjudicate who is a ‘real’ Muslim and who is not: “It is dangerous to accuse another of kufr. If you do so and it is true, why waste words on it, and if it is not true, the accusation will turn back on yourself.”⁷⁰ This reticence to rush to judgement is not unique to al-Singkilī, but reflects what has been called “a remarkable disinclination to *takfīr* or anathematization in the history of societies of Muslims.”⁷¹ At the same time, Riddell has also been clear that intolerance has also occasionally been a feature of Islam in Southeast Asia. At a conference panel on Malay manuscripts I convened several years ago, Riddell listened attentively to a paper proposing the 17-th century Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānirī as a fine example of statecraft for modern Malaysia. His subsequent question—did the presenter feel that al-Rānirī’s execution of those he deemed heretics and the burning of their books in front of the great mosque of Aceh was something that should be emulated in the present day?—went unanswered. The religious tolerance propounded both by Riddell and al-Singkilī is more characteristic of the long and rich tradition

⁶⁹ Peter Riddell, *Christians and Muslims: Pressures and Potential in a Post-9/11 World* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), p. 166.

⁷⁰ Trans. in A.H. Johns, “*Daq’āiq al-Hurūf* by ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf of Singkel: Part I,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1/2 (1955): 55-73. Pp. 56. “Bermula: yang mengkafirkan itu sangat bahayanya, karna jikalau ada ia kafir maka tiadalah perkataan dalamnya, dan jika tiada ia kafir neschaya kembali kata itu kapada diri kita ...” Malay text in A.H. Johns, “*Daq’āiq al-Hurūf* by ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf of Singkel, Part II.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 3/4 (1955): 139-158. Pp. 143.

⁷¹ Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, p. 106 fn 255.

of Malay-language textual production in Arabic script than it is of bureaucratic Islam in modern Malaysia
—more characteristic, that is, of Jawi rather than JAWI.

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Appendix: List of images.

Image 1: Proposed pages of Jawi textbook (via Malaysiakini, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/504806>).



Image 2: Jawi textbooks from 1983 (top and bottom right) and 2014 (top left).

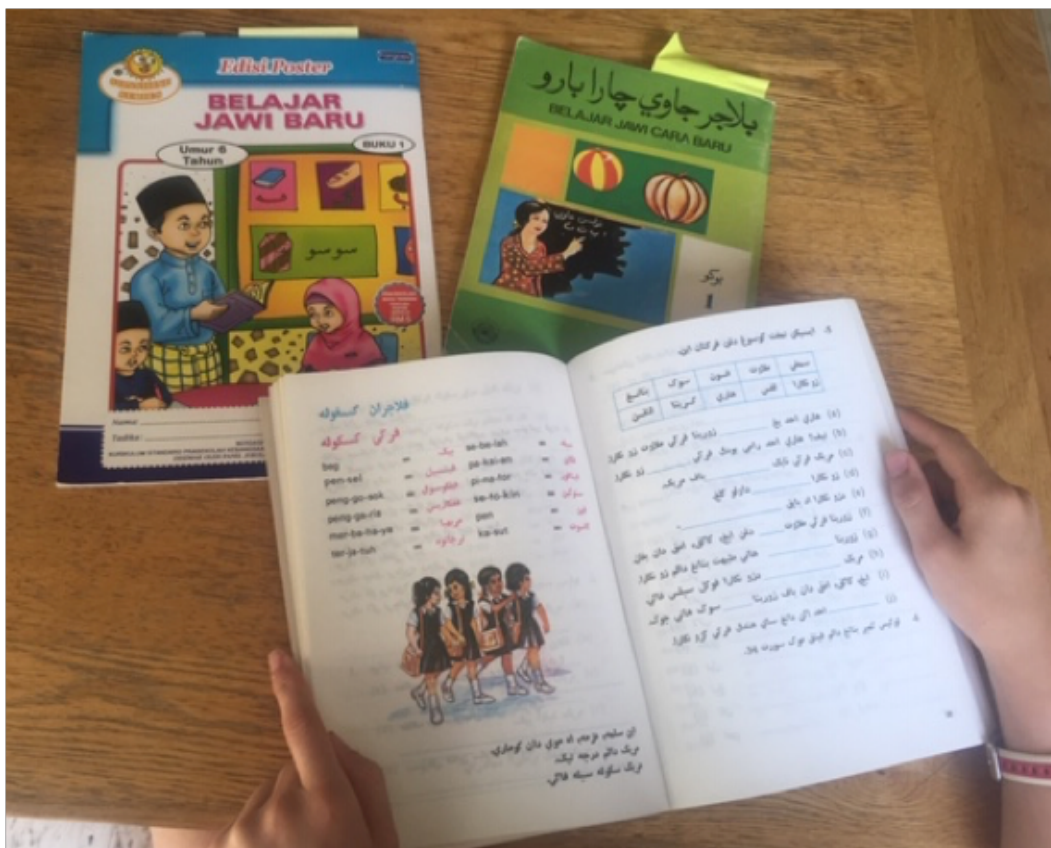


Image 3: advertisement for Kicap Cap Kuda Terbang (in *Majlis*, 4 August 1950).

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