practice everywhere. The heavy-handed detection of such “cultural strata” substitutes for analysis of the actual attitudes of religious actors, which are evidently irrelevant in the face of Orientalist deductions. This study consequently contains so many dubious assumptions, questionable conclusions, and outright factual errors that readers should be cautioned to consider it of doubtful value.

This is a pity, because the author has an undoubtedly strong personal attraction to some of the great cultural productions of South Asian Muslims, particularly in the field of Urdu literature. Yet the remorseless habit of reading religious texts in positivistic terms leads to unfortunate results, such as when we are told that Mu'in al-Din Chishti placed “the task of propagation of Islam above all else, [being] intolerant of followers of other faiths and merciless to opponents” (p. 63). Likewise there is a tendency to read poetry naively as a reflection of social reality (p. 83). The bleak portrayal of Indian Muslim saints as simultaneously proselytizing zealots and as corrupters of textual Islam is only leavened by the author’s quotation of verses of poetry and by vivid and surprisingly touching personal accounts of visits to many of these supposedly heterodox shrines. It is hard to make these divergent approaches fit together, and one can only suppose that the dominant paradigm of Soviet Orientalism coexists uneasily here with a more direct and personal appreciation of the saintly traditions of South Asian Islam.

Carl W. Ernst


A number of books had been written on the prose and poems of Malay sufi poets and poetics in the past, but V. I. Braginsky’s ...And Sails the Boat Downstream: Malay Sufi Poems of the Boat (2007) is the first major work that provides an in depth study of the subject. This remarkable work on the philological, religious and literary study of Malay Sufi symbolism focuses on only two poems on the sea and ship symbolism, namely the Rencong Poem of the Boat (Syair Perahu 1) and another Poem of Boat which was wrongly ascribed to Hamzah Fansuri (Syair Perahu 2). But a third poem, Poems of the
Sea of Women (*Syair Bahr an-Nisa*) (BhNs), which shows clear connection to Tantric elements in the ship and sea symbolism, is also included so that a more complete view of the transformations of the symbol of the sea and boat over a millennium can be undertaken.

The preface is an important read. This is where the author provides a clear exposition of the evolution of the spiraling idea formed in the process of writing the book, presumably from its inception 35 years earlier when the author was still in Russia in 1969 to its completion in 2007. In the book the two main essays are enveloped between the Prologue and the Epilogue. The prologue covers the ‘predecessors of Poems of the Boat’ (which is *Syair Bahr an-Nisa*), while the Epilogue critically analyzes the poems of the boat in relation to the Middle Eastern and the Malay-Indonesian tradition.

Thus the author brings to the fore the following stages of development of Sufi creative works (which sometimes partly overlap with each other):

- The transition from Tantrism to Sufism, which is more or less completed at the turn of the 16th century.
- The early radical *waḥdat al-wujūd* (‘existential moism’) of the late sixteenth century to the early seventeenth century (Hamzah Fansuri’s maritime *syair*).
- Later *waḥdat al-wujūd*, i.e., the doctrine of *martabat tuţub* (‘seven grades of Being’) of the seventeenth to early nineteenth century.
- The moderate, ‘ethical’ Sufism in the spirit of al-Ghazzâli of the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century.
- The transformation of the mystical symbolism into religious symbolism *per se* in the mid or late nineteenth century.

Holistically, the study invokes to the readers a deeper understanding and appreciation of the symbolism of the sea and boat which was intrinsically ‘shafted’ onto the underlying landscape, perpetuating Sufi thoughts and evolution throughout the Islamization process in the Malay world. As mentioned by the author, the sea and ship symbolism reflects “every stage of the evolution” of Sufi thought in the archipelago. The factual data based on both Malay and other the different traditions of the Archipelago, India and the Middle East, was exceedingly vast. The author diligently perused old and classical texts in Pali, Javanese, Persian, Arabic, Malay, Iban and other indigenous languages of the Malay archipelago to arrive at his insightful interpretations and conclusions on their significance and relationship to the symbolism of the sea and ship.

In this meticulous work, the Malay indigenous religious and literary culture found in the oral folklore and sophisticated court literary traditions, were oftentimes shown to be intertwined with both the Hindu elements (in
the earlier period) as well as with the Middle-eastern or Islamic thoughts and practices in the later centuries. In addition, the fact that there still exist tribes and populations of non-Muslim Malays in the region having rites and customs depicting the sea and boat symbolism, enables the author to make a wise guess on the condition and characteristic of the original or traditional Malay state or philosophy of the sea and the boat symbols in its pure sense — meaning Malay minus the Islamic or Sufi dimension. The author skillfully utilizes this methodology to compare and contrast until he is able to arrive at a clear Malay element or characteristics among the jungle of diverse symbols and connotations when dealing with the subject.

Another important question is: on which Sufi interpretations filter into the Malay concept of the cosmos, etc. through the symbolism of the sea and the boat? Through his keen analysis of relevant Qur’anic verses relating to the boat or the Ark and through the poetics of Middle-eastern Sufis, the author manages to identify which interpretations of the Sufis finally came to be embraced by Malay Sufis. No doubt, they had already possessed a rich conceptual view of the world through the symbolism of the sea and boat.

In analyzing the Sufi and Tantric heritage of Syair Bahr an-Nisa, Bragisky makes a detailed study of the Sufi aspect of Syair Bahr an-Nisa which was dedicated to the Sultan of Aceh, Alauddin Riayat Syah Sayyid al-Mukammal (1589–1604). It is the narration of the tempestuous and perilous sea called the Sea of Women in which the Gnostic was to set sail. After crossing this sea, the ship will reach a mysterious bay on the shores of which the Fortress of Omnipotence (Kota Kudrat) is situated. The fortress is surrounded by seven concentric walls with four gates in them and near the gates are four makams or stations which correspond to the Sufi Path. The goal of the Gnostic seeking for union with the Supreme Reality is to penetrate the fortress.

In Syair Bahr an-Nisa the psychic constitution of the human in Sufism can be represented as a system of concentric circles: the outermost of these circles is the soul (the carnal or animal soul) governing the functions of movement and perception of the particular. The next circle, viewed as ‘subtle body,’ is the heart which is capable of perceiving the universal. The carnal soul and the heart together represent the female principle of the Gnostic. In the depth of the heart, which makes yet another circle (sometimes referred to as the ‘eye of the heart’), is the Divine Spirit. Then concealed in the depths of the latter, that is, the centre of the entire system, abides the Divine Essence (sir, Rahsia—mystery).

Comparison of the key concepts and practices of Tantrism and Sufism leads the author to conclude with certainty that Syair Bahr an-Nisa is a product of the synthesis of typically Tantric overtones in the Sufi texts. He,
however, emphasizes that the process of synthesis is not a simple and largely mechanical mixture of elements. The problem of the origin of the Sufi-Tantric synthesis in Aceh, for instance, is quite complex and it remains to determine whether this synthesis came about in north Sumatra itself or whether it came there ready made from the experience of Sufi orders of India which began to penetrate three centuries earlier.

In Java, during the early Mataram epoch (9th–11th century) and late Singasari period where both Shivaite and Buddhist Tantrism and their syncretisation took place, the sea and ship symbolism played a definite role. The elaboration of these maritime motifs can be found in the *Kekawin Ramayana* which was propagated in the court of Sriwijaya in Sumatra. Tantric heritage can be traced also in the rituals performed by Adityawarman who performed sexo-logic practices, drank wine, engaged in ritual laughter and made bloody sacrifices on cremation grounds. In the literature, the world of misery is represented by the sea where the soul of the reckless is drowned, the boat is the means of crossing the sea of existence and achieving final salvation.

Tantric ideas of poems during the early era of Islamization could be easily transformed into Sufi concepts in the Malay Sufi poetry specially by Hamzah Fansuri who described it far more completely than was believed so far. Hamzah’s *syair* was said to condemn and ridicule practices and adepts of a certain Science of ‘forest,’ which included yoga practices aimed at achieving cognition of the Absolute, a science well known in north Sumatra. In condemning Tantric yoga practices, the Sufis are warned of the ‘island of radiance’ visualized as a radiant island of gems in the midst of the ocean of nectar which should not be localized in the heart.

The sea *syair* by the poet are also the outcome of Malayo-Persian literary synthesis and “by no means the products of blind imitation of Persian specimens.” The semantic field of Hamzah’s maritime symbolism is formed by some 50 nouns and verbs from these about 100 attributes of different kinds. There are 40 attributes for the word ‘sea’ (*laut, bahr*), 14 attributes for the word ‘wave’ (*ombak*) and 6 for the word ‘ship’ (*markab*). Hamzah’s poem based on erotic symbolism combine numerous Persian images with the typically Malay conventions of the lovers’ behaviour. The metaphor for coition — ‘ship conquering the sea,’ ‘sailing upstream,’ ‘circular motion of sailing’ (*gelek*), *berkisar menyelam mutiara*, etc. is definitely Malay. The male organ is *kapal*, female organ is described as sea, gate, fortress, estuary and jewel. This ‘estuary’ has an erotic connotation in the Malay maritime symbolism, and the copulation symbol is pictured as a sea voyage of the Gnostic seafarer. In some specific cases the flowing sea is closely related to the symbol of milk of ‘makrifat’ (*ma‘rifat*) (mystical knowledge) but in Tantric
dimension this sea or river seems to be “none other than the stream nectar.” Therefore, echoes of Tantric doctrines and practices are still easily distinguishable.

This spiritual poetry is definitely a model of literary synthesis. As commented by Syamsudin of Pasai, only the ’arif or perfect men with brilliant intellect and insight can understand the deep meaning of the poems’ Sufi doctrine. Regarding the explanation of the science of union, there emerge three different terms throughout the poem as the angle from which it discusses changes. The first section describes the necessary preliminaries before mystical coition where one should learn that sexo-practice can be both poison and antidote, it can lead to fulfilment of the goal or to failure. It is dangerous and curative at the same time.

It is at the last stage of mystical ascent of the ’arif that the bliss of ’supreme union’ is attained. The Supreme Beloved in Sufi dimension is the symbolic portrayal of fanā’ where the adept who, having gained ma’rifat (the most wondrous knowledge), attains blissful union with the Supreme Beloved. The ascent corresponds to four Sufi stages or paths, the makams of syariat, tarikat, hakikat and ma’rifat.

The most frequent and significant Sufi symbols of the sea are identified, for example, with ‘enormously deep sea (Bahr al-Amik) symbolizes the incomprehensible Divine Essence(Zat [Dbū]; tempestuous sea (laut yang tiada pasang surut) refers to God’s Being preceding the Creation; ‘storm’ (taufan [tinjān] symbolizes God’s Creative Word (‘Be!’–Kun); ‘wave disappearing in the sea’ (ombak yang gharik di dalam laut) — the creation returning to God; the pearl (mutia) is the symbol of the fixed essence (ayan sabitah [a’yān thābitah]); sail (berlayar) means to tread the Sufi path; the reef (karang) symbolizes an obstacle on the path, ‘to be drowned in the sea’ (karam di dalam laut) is to experience unity. This kind of symbolism is popular and common in Achenese and Malay Sufi poetics.

Nevertheless, some differences between certain symbols are note worthy. Jauhar or jewel is normally associated with essence, gem or substance, but in Hamzah’s poem, it is associated with body, flesh, carnal love, desire or lust. The science of jauhar is a false science, a ’veil’ on the Sufi Path towards the genuine knowledge of God. The Science of akad or ‘bonds’ is equal to the science of women. This viewpoint, that both the ‘science’ of ‘forest yoga’ and ‘ilm al-jauhar’ serve the flesh, not the spirit, and thus both are limited and, in their turn, limit God’s Omnipresence as both are unable to distinguish between the true spiritual Light (Light of Muḥammad) and a false ‘bodily radiance’ or false love passion. In treading the Sufi path, both of them should
be opposed as they stand in the way of \textit{\textit{\textit{\textit{ilm Allāh}}, the Sufi gnosis; becoming a veil towards attaining Divine Presence.}

In the \textit{Epilogue} the place of the two main poems was cleverly weaved in a broader context, covering the religious, anthropological and literary spheres. This the author did in order to facilitate a more profound interpretation of the poems as complex compositions made up of heterogenous components integrated by specific Sufi concepts. An attempt is made to reveal, albeit partially, the extra-textual, or rather intertextual relations of boat symbolism in both the poems. This is significant as in traditional Malay culture and literature the Sufi symbolism of the boat co-existed with the ritual-mythological boat symbolism of the kind specific to archaic traditions of non-Muslim peoples of the Malay Archipelago which were still alive in the beginning of the 20th century. The boat symbolism is one of the components of the ritual-mythological complex which also includes the symbolism of tree, bird, house (sanctuary), the sun, the moon, and the snake. Symbols are intimately interlaced. This being the case, the Malay tradition furnishes an idea of the final stage in the history of boat symbolism and, in addition, makes it possible to investigate the process of adaptation of its Sufi form into a new cultural area.

Braginsky successfully distinguishes the three layers in the boat symbolism in the two main Malay Sufi poems studied — the first layer uncovered is the Qur’anic symbolism, the classical Sufi (Middle Eastern) symbolism and lastly, the ritual-mythological (Malay and Indonesian) symbolism of the sea and ship. In the Qur’an, ships are one of the signs indicating the Greatness of Allāh and testifying to the fact that faith in Him alone is the true faith. This is also incorporated into the context of the narration about Allāh’s creative activity which is perpetuated for the benefit of man. ‘Ship’ also serves as a means to test the faith of men because in stormy weather the seafarers appeal to Allāh in a state of fear, but after He saves them, they ‘turn away’ from their Saviour. The ship also manifestly appeared as the vessel, the Ark of the Prophet Nūḥ (peace be on him), and the concept of testing the faith. Following these is not difficult to discern the parallels in many descriptive elements of Qur’ānic motifs of boat and seafaring in the works of the most prominent Arab poets of pre-Islamic times.

The ship symbols in classical Sufi literature only play a significant role in the basic form of mystical interpretation. The semantic fields are of ship, sea, storm, favourable wind, pearls, and land, island or shore. The esoteric orientation of the Supreme Truth (God) is usually symbolized by sea or the boundless ocean, and union with God can be attained by being drowned in the
sea, which renders the ship as an obstacle. Consequently, the sea is the spiritual experience gained by a Sufi on his path to God and only God is to be relied upon. In the Middle-eastern symbolism, the ship symbolizes reliance on something other than God. Thus the ship is associated with death as well as faith.

As a philologist, Braginsky makes the unknown texts, the Rencong version of the poem accessible to the present generation. In reconstructing the poems, the author used the 'best,' preferably the oldest 'principal' manuscript of the poem and produced it as precisely as possible. He Malayises the Arabic words which abound, following the orthography of the Kamus Dewan in the Romanization process. Full credit should be given to the author for the close translation of the Arabic and Persian, not to mention the already extinguished Sanskrit and Old Javanese besides archaic Malay.

Besides the critical text and translation of Syair Bahr an-Nisa, readers get a bonus in the form of a Javanese poem of the boat.\(^1\) and its translation, found in Appendix 1, pp. 396–398 of the book under review. This text was from P.J. Zoetmulder’s 1995 work “Pantheism and monism in Javanese suluk literature: Islamic and Indian mysticism in an Indonesian setting” which was edited and translated by M.C. Ricklef and published in Leiden, Nederland by KITLV Press. Another bonus is a synoptic text of Syair Perahu 1 by P. Voorhoeve\(^2\) which is appended in Appendix 2, pp. 423–440 the work under review. For the Malay linguists, archaic Malay words rarely found today such as membaib—piercing, gharik — disappearing; markab — ship; mutia, old word for mutiara; palis—rubbing, mamang, daim, ajab, burhana, bangsi, cula and many others will be of interest.

Unquestionably the book will be of immense importance for researchers on both Malay literature and those whose interest falls into the area of Sufism and Malay contribution to Sufi thought. To the reviewer, reading the book is similar to making a Sufistic journey in a ‘boat’ through the ‘sea’ of the history of the Malay archipelago. In this mystical ‘boat’ of the book, the mast and hull are the two main chapters which contain the gems of the poems, the bow is the ‘prologue,’ while the stern encompasses the ‘epilogue.’ Hopefully one can indeed land into the island of paradise after ‘sailing the boat downstream.’

Kamsiah Binte Abdullah

\(^1\) MS Leiden Code. Or. 1795 II, pp. 434–440.
\(^2\) India Office, MS. EUR. C 214.