The Trials of Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawīyya in the Malay World
*The Female Sufi in the Hikayat Rabīʿah*

Mulaika Hijjas
School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics, SOAS University of London
mh86@soas.ac.uk

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 characterized by unusually high levels of female autonomy, relative to the surrounding regions. This article discusses for the first time a Malay text, the Hikayat Rabīʿah, about the most famous female Sufi in Islamic history, Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawīyya, and suggests that these assumptions regarding Sufi women in Southeast Asia may require revision. The Hikayat Rabīʿah presents a version of Rabiʿah's life that is not found in Arabo-Persian models. Here, the Sufi female 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 compared with two other Malay Islamic genres, didactic literature for women and esoteric Sufi treatises on ritualized sexual intercourse, to illustrate why it was not possible to imagine a celibate Rabīʿah 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 Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawīyya

* I would like to acknowledge the support of the British Academy in funding the postdoctoral fellowship during which the research for this article was conducted. I am also most grateful to Professor Vladimir Braginsky for his advice in the preparation of the article.

© MULAIKA HIJJAS, 2018 | DOI:10.1163/22134379-17402025
This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the prevailing CC-BY-NC license at the time of publication.
(d. 801). The *Hikayat Rabi'ah*, 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. 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 (1973:18) declared in his still seminal study of Sufi orders, before inevitably singling out Rābi’a al-ʿAdawīyya as ‘the best known’ female Sufi and devoting a single paragraph to the subject of women in Sufism. 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 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-ʿAdawīyya, suggesting that she remains the paradigmatic figure for thinking about such topics.

The analysis of the *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 Sheikh 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 the *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).

---

1  The naturalized Malay spelling is used for Arabic names and terms when they occur in Malay texts.
2  See Andaya 2006:11–41 for a comparison with neighbouring regions; see also Reid 2015:24 and 1988:146–72.
A number of recent anthropological studies, including Smith (2013), Widiyanto (2013), and Birchok (2016), have explored the position of women within contemporary Sufism in Indonesia. They 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 characterizes 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 the *Hikayat Rabi‘ah*. The text was first noted by the philologist Van der Tuuk, very briefly sketched by Van Ronkel (1909:187), and discussed in passing by Hamid (1983:93–4) and Braginsky (2004a:613–4). 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, the sheikhs Syari‘ah, Tariqah, Haqiqah, and Ma‘rifah, in tests of spiritual power; and that she 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 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 the *Hikayat Rabi‘ah* (see Fig. 1), this article will consider the text in the context of other Malay representations of female religious

---

3 Oman Fathurahman’s important article, ‘Female Indonesian Sufis: Shattariya Murids in the 18th and 19th Centuries in Java’ (2018), came to my attention too late to include in the present discussion.

4 Leiden University Library Or 3260 f. 74 v.; see Wieringa 2007:144.
authority. These include not only depictions of women ascetics in ‘secular’ romances, 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 emphasize wifely service and subordination, especially in sexual terms, even delineating this as the preeminent or indeed only form of religious practice. These texts, including the *Hikayat Fartana Islam* and the *Hikayat Darma Ta’isah*, 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 the *Hikayat Rabi’ah*. The second corpus against which the *Hikayat Rabi’ah* will be compared consists of Malay Sufi treatises for (male) adepts, such as the *Syair Bahr al-Nisa*, which prescribes 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 ‘[underlying] (and hidden) assumption that women and their sexuality are associated with potentially dangerous forms of spiritual power’ (Smith and Woodward 2015:320). 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, the *Hikayat Rabi’ah* 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.
Rābiʿa, Rabiʿah, 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 2007:164–5

The opening stanza of the Syair perahu cited above, a Sufi poem in rèncong script and South Sumatran Malay dating to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, lists those exhorted to receive the mystical message of the Prophet. Among the pious assembly of siyak, padita (modern Malay: pendita), malim (Mal.: muʾallim), imam, and katib (Mal.: khatib), there is a single category for women: rabiya. Drawing on a modern Indonesian dictionary, Braginsky (2007:197) glosses rabiya as ‘a female hermit, a pious woman, a Qurʾan teacher’s (or religious teacher’s) wife; a female Qur’an teacher’. 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 Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawīyya. 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.), 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.

5 The Syair perahu itself, Braginsky (2007:119, 127) argues, dates to before 1670, but the opening verses are likely to be later additions.
This semantic range of *rabiya* in Malay usage is especially significant in comparison to the depiction of Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawīyya in the Arabo-Persian tradition, where Rābiʿa is renowned for her total rejection of earthly ties, including marriage. Smith (1928), 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. 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 practised 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 of God, motivated by desire for Him alone rather than by 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 the fact 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 amir of Baṣra, she rebuked him, saying: ‘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 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: ‘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 Rābiʿa 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 Rābiʿa does not marry, whereas in the Malay version, the point is that she does.

Though Rabiʿah is the only female Sufi known in the Malay manuscript tradition, there are rather greater numbers of women practising non-Islamic

---

6 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 Van Gelder’s (1993) argument that the best-known poem attributed to Rābiʿa comes in fact from secular love poetry, and see also footnote 1 in his article for a summary of publications on Rābiʿa.
forms of asceticism to be found in the pages of Malay romances. The *Hikayat Panji Semirang*, 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 priests (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’. Interestingly, the food of this community is vegetarian, consisting of bananas and various kinds of tubers (‘ubi, keladi, pisang, talas’; *Hikajat Pandji Semirang* 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.

Another text, the *Hikayat Raja Babi*, again from eighteenth-century Java, also features a princess practising asceticism in the wilderness (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 was expressed in a domain marked off as fiction and as non-Muslim. Though these romances were produced and consumed within Islamized communities, they were often stigmatized 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 reading, and even

---

7 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.

8 A search for *biku* in the Malay Concordance Project locates the word in the *Hikayat Indera mengindera*, the *Hikayat Sharkan*, and the *Hikayat Raja Budak*, all romances. See http://mcp.anu.edu.au/, accessed May 4, 2018.

9 ‘seorang yang amat terang penglihatannya dan segala sesuatu yang dikatakannya tiada sekali-kali salahnya serta segala barang yang ghaib-ghaib pun dapat diketahuinya; demikianlah kepandaian dan keramatnya’; *Hikajat Pandji Semirang* 1937:108.

10 ‘Maka setengah dari pada 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’; *Hikajat Pandji Semirang* 1937:109.

11 British Library MSS Malay C25 f. 5r.
the admonition on every folio of the text not to believe in it (‘jangan beriman akannya’).\(^{12}\)

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-Ghazâlî’s \textit{Naṣīḥat al-mulûk}.\(^{13}\) The translation was made in 1700 through an Arabic intermediary by Haji Ismail, a Malay \textit{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:

\begin{quote}
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 [...].
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Dikatakan bahawasanya Hasan al-Basri rahmatullah atasnya menyahaja ziarah Rabi’ah Adawiyah serta jamaah. Maka tatalka 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 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, ‘Disuruahkan kamu dengan demikian itu firman
\end{quote}

\(^{12}\) See catalogue notes by Annabel Teh Gallop at http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=mss_malay_c_2_fs001r, accessed May 4, 2018. See also Gallop’s blog post at http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/asian-and-african/2015/06/panji-stories-in-malay.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+asian-and-african+%28Asia+and+Africa%29, accessed May 4, 2018.

\(^{13}\) It is probable that the story of Rabi’ā came to the Malay world via Mughal India. A wife of Aurangzeb was known as Rabia Dawrani (‘Rabia of her time’) (Green 2004:81). Rabi’ā was also depicted in Mughal miniatures (Lowenstein 1939).
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, 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. Not for him, it would seem, are the accounts of Rābi’a 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 [that is, spiritually worth nothing] and Rābi’a as truly sincere’ (quoted 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

Cf. Bagley’s translation from Persian: ‘Hasan al-Basri is reported to have arrived at the house of Rabi’ah (al-ʿAdawiyyah) 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 1964:168).

For a discussion of the verse and its interpretation, see Stowasser 1994:90–4, 99.
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 (1998:584) has argued with respect to references to the tenth-century Sufi al-Ḥallāj of Baghdad in Malay and Javanese texts:

[I]f 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.

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

The Hikayat Rabi‘ah: Manuscripts and Contents

Though the Hikayat Rabi‘ah survives in only two exemplars, the scarcity of surviving manuscripts is less a reliable indicator of its 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 the Hikayat Rabi‘ah survive in compilations alongside other, similar Islamic didactic stories, many of which may have been directed at female 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, the Hikayat Rabi‘ah, the Hikayat Raja Jumjumah, the Hikayat Nabi bercukur and the Hikayat Nur.

Ricklefs, Voorhoeve and Gallop (2014:162) follow the contents list on the flyleaf of ms 37082, probably written by R.O. Winstedt, which incorrectly gives the title of this text as the Hikayat Zubaidah.
Muhammad (Ricklefs, Voorhoeve and Gallop 2014:162). The other is Perpus-
takaan Nasional Republik Indonesia (PNRI) Ml. 42, a collection of eleven short
narratives that was given to the Bataviasha Ch 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 the *Hikayat Si Burung Pingai*, which combines Sufi
and shamanic elements (Braginsky 2005); the *Hikayat Fartana Islam*; several
Fatimah narratives; and a divergent version of the *Hikayat Darma Ta’asia*, giving
extra agency to the usually powerless wife in the tale (Hijjas 2013). Several of
the other texts seem to be intended to instruct women on their proper religious
duties, conceived of as providing 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 Suma-
tra, showing that the text was known there too.18 That the *Hikayat Rabi’ah* was
found on both the western and eastern edges of the Malay Muslim world sug-
gests that the text was once fairly widespread.

These two surviving manuscripts of the *Hikayat Rabi’ah* contain broadly the
same narrative. The PNRI manuscript19 begins with a section relating Sheikh
Junaid’s persuasion of Rabi’ah to marry him, which is not present in the SOAS
manuscript. This opening makes more sense than the abrupt one in the latter
exemplar, though in other respects the SOAS manuscript usually has better
readings and a marginally more elegant style. That both copyists (and Van
der Tuuk) struggled with the protagonist’s name, especially her nisba, suggests
their lack of familiarity with Rābi‘a al-ʿAdawīyya. The longer version of the
narrative (PNRI Ml. 42) begins with Rabi’ah ‘in service’ (‘berkhidmat’20) to
Sheikh 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. Sheikh Junaid assures
her that he will bring her desire to Allah (‘mendatangkan berahimu kepada
Allah Ta’ala’21), a curious turn of phrase that presages the importance of bodily

18 Leiden University Library Or 3260 f. 74 v; Wieringa 2007:144.
19 PNRI Ml. 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.).
20 PNRI Ml. 42 fac. 50.
21 PNRI Ml. 42 fac. 51.
desire in the denouement of the story, and quotes in return a Qur’anic 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. Rabīʿah responds that she is neither physically healthy nor beautiful enough to marry, whereupon the sheikh cites another hadith to the effect that those who marry are beloved by the Prophet, whereas those who divorce are his enemies. Once again Rabīʿah 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’). When faced by another hadith from the sheikh, Rabīʿah 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 Sheikh 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. Rabīʿah is only swayed by this appeal to the predominance of the teacher-student relationship, rather than the husband-wife one. That is, she makes her decision based on her devotion to her teacher in the Sufi path. Furthermore, she extracts a promise from Sheikh 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, Rabīʿah prostrates herself at the feet of Sheikh Junaid (‘bersujud di bawah qadam syeikh’) until his death seven years later. Widowhood merely brings more suitors to her door, with apparently every male in Baghdad, from pendita, raja, and penghulu (village headman) to ordinary rakyat (commoners), coming to seek her hand. Rabīʿah declares that marriage is haram to her, but this does nothing to dissuade four sheikhs in particular. Mature, handsome, and worthy of reverence, the four sheikhs

---

22 PNRI Ml. 42 fac. 52.
23 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 the SOAS Digital Library. Transcriptions of both manuscripts are accessible at Zenodo. See SOAS MS 37082, https://digital.soas.ac.uk/AA0000130/0001/16j?search=37082, accessed May 4, 2018; transcription of PNRI Ml. 42, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1160330, accessed May 4, 2018; transcription of SOAS MS 37082, http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1188770, accessed May 4, 2018. The episode involving the comparison to dogs is present in both texts, and is identical in its key features.
are named after the four stages on the mystic path according to Malay Sufism: Sheikh Syari'ah, Sheikh Tariqah, Sheikh Haqiqah, and Sheikh Ma'rifah. Despite Rabi'ah receiving them hospitably and courteously, spreading out a carpet for them and presenting them with betel quids, she rebuffs their request to choose one of them as a husband, telling them that ‘though you four sheikhs are worthy, I shall hardly consent [to marry] you, when even the dogs under my house would not so consent’ (‘ya tuanku sheikh empat orang sungguhlah tuan hamba sheikh yang mu’tabar jangankan hamba redhakan tuan hamba anjing hamba di bawah rumah hamba itupun tiada redhakan tuan hamba’). Incensed, the four sheikhs 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’). The sultan duly summons Rab'iah 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.

Rabi'ah's quotation of a well-known saying about asceticism and rejection of the world is a sign of the superiority of her learning to that of the four sheikhs, who neither recognize 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 sheikhs are the dogs. Rabi'ah cites this alleged hadith, ‘the world is a carcass and those who seek it are dogs’, 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’, reproduced in Figure 2). Rather than coming from the commonly accepted sayings of the Prophet, this aphorism seems instead to be drawn from the Indo-Persian Sufi

---

24 SOAS MS 37082 f. 21.
25 SOAS MS 37082 f. 21.
26 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/, accessed 4 May 2018.
tradition.\textsuperscript{27} 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; Ahmad and Siti Hajar 1996:208).

The two ways in which Rabiʿah 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 (\textit{redha}, a word Rabiʿah 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, Rabiʿah 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 Rabiʿah relates to the sheikhs. Here, she positions herself as the subject, and the sheikhs as the objects of desire (or disgust, as the case may be). Rabiʿah 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 Rabiʿah’s response to the sheikhs Syariʿah, Tariqah, Haqiqah, and Maʿrifah 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, Rabiʿah 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’\textsuperscript{28}). Thus, when speaking to the sultan, she assumes the passive position that she rejected when speaking to the sheikhs. 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.

\textsuperscript{27} Referred to by Rumi; see Williams’s note to line 3963 (Williams 2006:413), quoted in the poetry of the eighteenth-century Sindhi Sufi Shah Latif; see Schimmel 1976:247 and 1975:409. 472.
\textsuperscript{28} SOAS MS 37082 f. 22.
The sultan proceeds to interrogate (‘siasat’) the four sheikhs. Beginning with Sheikh Syariʿah, the sultan first enquires whether the sheikh is truly knowledgeable about the syariʿah path (‘tahuah engkau sebenar-benarnya kepada jalan syariʿah?’). The sheikh’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 sheikh’s body, to be pulled by four Zangi.\(^{29}\) Just as the Zangi are about to start rending him apart, the sheikh retracts his statement, declaring that he was not in fact knowledgeable about the syariʿah—at least not on that particular day (‘tiada hamba tahu kepada jalan syariʾah hari ini’\(^{30}\)). Sheikh Syariʿah is then released, and the other three put through similar trials (Sheikh Tariqah is to be stabbed with a kris by the same Zangi, Sheikh Haqiqah is to be submerged in a basket in the sea, and Sheikh Maʿrifah is to be burned on an enormous pyre). At the critical moments, the other three sheikhs also renege on their claims to mystical knowledge.

The sultan then returns his attention to Rabiʿah, asking her the same questions and subjecting her to all four trials. Rabiʿah 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 Rabiʿah al-Dawiyah itu akan tali dan tiada tahu ia dihelaikan itu dan tiada tahu kepada sekalian orang melainkan bertemu kepada Allah Taʾala’\(^{31}\)). When she is about to be stabbed, she enters into the initial 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 final lam and is able to breathe ‘like a child in its mother’s womb, and Rabiʿah 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 Rabiʿah al-Dawiya itu seperti anak di dalam perut ibunya maka tiada ia tahu Rabiʿah al-Dawiya akan dirinya dan tiada ia sangka melainkan bertemuikan Allah Taʾala juga seperti duduk di dalam khalwat tujuh hari dan tujuh malam di dalam air laut itu janganikan ia mati sehelai rambutnya tiada basah’). When cast into the fire, she enters into the letter ha, arrives once again into the presence of Allah, and ‘her

\(^{29}\) 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.

\(^{30}\) SOAS MS 37082 f. 22.

\(^{31}\) SOAS MS 37082 f. 23.
body looked like radiant metal and, far from being burned, not a hair fell from her head’ (‘tembaga suasa gilang gemilang jangankan hangus seheliai rambut-nya pun tiada yang luruh’32). 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-kas̲h̲f)’ (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 sheikhs 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 akan suamimu’33). Through her prodigious feats, Rabi‘ah escapes marriage to the four sheikhs, 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 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 Sheikh Junaid. The sultan agrees and they are married by a khatib (preacher and mosque official). 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 the Hikayat Rab‘iah. What follows is a remarkable account of how the Malay tradition imagined a female 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 initial lam and the final lam. All Rabi‘ah’s limbs began to move and

32 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 be found (Braginsky 1993; 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.
33 soas ms 37082 f. 26.
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. Rabīʿah 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 Saʿid.

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, Rabīʿah 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 standing 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 Rabīʿah, Sultan Abu Saʿid is the agent through whom she attains metaphysical 'nikmat' (Ar. naʿimah), which is used in Malay to denote both corporeal and transcendental bliss. The use of the similarly heavily loaded term 'miʿraj' (ascent) to describe Rabīʿah's experience recalls the Prophet's journey to heaven while still alive, the subject of the well-known Malay Hikayat Nabi miʿraj (see Wieringa 2016; Van der Meij and Lambooij 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.

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 ‘Lā hawla wa lā quwwa illā Allāh’ (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’\(^{35}\)). 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 the *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 quoting the 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 female 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 the *Hikayat Fartana Islam*, the *Hikayat Darma Ta’sia*, the *Hikayat Fatimah bersuami*, and the *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 devot-

---

\(^{35}\) SOAS MS 37082 f. 28.
edly 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. The 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, [for] her place is in hell’ (‘barang siapa perempuan disuruh oleh suaminya maka tiada dikerjakan maka dimurkai Allah Ta’ala perempuan itu dan jikalau ia sem-babyang dan puasa sekalipun tiada diterima Allah Ta’ala segala amalnya itu di dalam neraka akan tempatnya’; see also Hijjas 2015). The pahala (Skt.: phala: fruit, religious merit) of wifely bakti, as one 1789 manuscript of the Hikayat Fartana Islam opines, is far greater than that of standard Islamic duties: pouring her husband’s bath water gains her greater merit than fasting for three months, while pouring him water to wash his hands gains her greater merit than giving alms to beggars.

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 sheikh in the 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 (Hijjas 2013:254). These didactic texts for women also consistently emphasize 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 berisetubuh 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’). As the Hikayat Nabi mengajar anaknya Fatimah has the Prophet state: ‘oh my daughter Fatimah, any woman

---

36 Leiden University Library Klinkert 33 f. 26.
37 Royal Asiatic Society Malay 47 f. 335.
38 Royal Asiatic Society Malay 47 f. 333.
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’). 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’isia, Fatimah, and Fartana Islam, Rabi’ah cuts an anomalous figure. However partial her success in maintaining her autonomy, the 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 involve 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 in the work of Braginsky (2004b, 2007, and 2017) on a number of Sufi-tantric texts. Braginsky establishes that there existed a ‘Tantric undercurrent in north Sumatran Sufism’ (2004b:142), which was polemicized against by Hamzah Fansuri at the turn of the seventeenth century as only being practised 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 Islamized version of yogic or tantric practices (Braginsky 2004b:154). Despite Hamzah Fansuri’s objections, and no doubt the objections of many other, more orthodox Muslims after him, the practice of what he called ilmu akad or ilmu jauhar continued. Sevea (2015) has recently discussed a Malay text from late nineteenth-century Perak detailing similar practices. These teachings 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’ (quoted 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 allaibinéngengngé 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 prac-

39 Leiden University Library Klinkert 33 f. 27.
tices, 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, arguing that the two had a far more complex relationship than has previously been thought—with yogic concepts presented in Sufi texts in so Islamized a fashion that one could recognize 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 the 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; the fact that the Bugis material studied by Saenong terms itself ‘Sufism’ suggests quite the opposite. If originally yogic or tantric, the idea of ritualized sexual intercourse as a path to ma’rifah seems to have become naturalized 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 it is obvious that women are essential to this practice of ilmu jauhar, it is also obvious 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 (2009:433) has written with regard to tantra:

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.

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 the Hikayat Rabi’ah is that a space, albeit a modest one, is cleared for women to be Sufis. Rabi’ah’s chaste marriages to Sheikh 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—and 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 the Syair perahu.

Conclusion

‘The world is like a woman,’ or so says the hero of the seventeenth-century Malay Sufi romance the 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). 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 (1939:468) study of representations of Bibi Rabiah in Mughal miniatures often paired her with Sultan Ibrahim, suggesting that in Mughal India they were thought of as the female and male exemplars of Sufi sainthood. The similarities

---

40 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 dibinasakannya akan dia’; quoted in Grinter 1979:118). Grinter notes the occurrence of this anecdote in a number of other Malay texts, including al-Ghazālī’s Nasihat al-muluk and the Taj al-salatin (1979:286). Jones (1983:204) traces it ultimately back to al-Ghazālī and ‘Aṭṭār.
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 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: the *Hikayat Rabi’ah* runs to only a dozen or so pages and survives in only two manuscripts, while the *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 female Sufi in the Malay imaginary.

A final comparison between Rābi’a and Ibrahim, this time in their Persian incarnations, comes from ʿAṭṭār, 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 Ibrahim 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 ʿAṭṭār 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, the *Hikayat Rabi’ah*, the only Malay text about a female 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 sheikhs—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 the *Hikayat Rabi‘ah* is not the world as a woman, as in the *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 as 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.

The *Hikayat Rabi‘ah*’s leitmotif 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 ritualized 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’). 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 embodies first the alluring woman and then the rotting body, before being spirited to heaven. In the *Hikayat Rabi‘ah*, it is not so much that the only good female 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.

41 SOAS MS 37082 f. 29.
References

Unpublished Sources
British Library MSS Malay C25
Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia Ml. 42
Royal Asiatic Society Malay 47
SOAS University of London Library MS 37082
Leiden University Library Klinkert 33
Leiden University Library MS 3260

Published Sources
Ahmad, Ali and Che’ Man, Siti Hajar (1996). *Bunga rampai sastera Melayu warisan Islam*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
Andaya, Barbara Watson (2006). *The flaming womb: Repositioning women in early modern Southeast Asia*. Hawai‘i: University of Hawai‘i Press.
Bagley, F.R.C. (1964). *Ghazālī’s book of counsel for kings* (Nasīḥat al-mulūk). London: OUP.
Baharom, Hajah Noresah et al (2002). *Kamus Dewan*. 3rd ed. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
Birchok, Daniel Andrew (2016). ‘Women, genealogical inheritance and Sufi authority: The female saints of Seunagan, Indonesia’, *Asian Studies Review* 40:583–99.
Braginsky, Vladimir (1999). ‘Hikayat Syah Mardan as a Sufi allegory’, *Archipel* 40:1307–35.
Braginsky, Vladimir (2004a). *The heritage of traditional Malay literature: A historical survey of genres, writings and literary views*. Leiden: KITLV Press.
Braginsky, Vladimir (2004b). ‘The science of women and the jewel: The synthesis of Tantrism and Sufism in a corpus of mystical texts from Aceh’, *Indonesia and the Malay World* 93:141–75.
Braginsky, Vladimir (2005). ‘Five pious ladies on the swing: Some considerations of the Hikayat Si Burung Pingai’, *Indonesia and the Malay World* 97:257–64.
Braginsky, Vladimir (2007). ... *And sails the boat downstream: Malay Sufi poems of the boat*. Leiden: Department of Languages and Cultures of Southeast Asia and Oceania.

[Semiaian 24.]
Braginsky, Vladimir (2017). ‘The manner of the Prophet—concealed, found and regained’, *Indonesia and the Malay World* 45:132:250–91.
Doniger, Wendy (2009). *The Hindus: An alternative history*. New York: The Penguin Press.
Drewes, G.W.J. and L.F. Brakel (1986). *The poems of Hamzah Fansuri*. Dordrecht: Foris.
Ernst, Carl W. (2005). ‘Sufism and yoga’, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 15:135–43.
Fahd, T. (2012). ‘Ḥurūf’, in: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. 2nd ed. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SLB_2971 (accessed 25 September 2017).

Fathurahman, Oman (2018). ‘Female Indonesian Sufis: Shattariya Murids in the 18th and 19th Centuries in Java’, *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies* 11:40–67.

Feener, R. Michael (1998). ‘A re-examination of the place of al-Hallaj in the development of Southeast Asian Islam’, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 154–4:571–92.

Florida, Nancy K. (1996). ‘Sex wars: Writing gender relations in nineteenth-century Java’, in: Laurie J. Sears (ed.), *Fantasizing the feminine in Indonesia*, pp. 207–24. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Gelder, Geert Jan van (1993). ‘Rābi‘a’s poem on the two kinds of love: A mystification?’, in: Frederick de Jong (ed.), *Verse and the fair sex: Studies in Arabic poetry and in the representation of women in Arabic literature*, pp. 66–76. Utrecht: Houtsma Stichting.

Gobillot, Geneviève (2013). ‘Celibacy’, in: Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Everett Rowson (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. 3rd ed. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_e13_COM_24383 (accessed 25 September 2017).

Green, Nile (2004). ‘Auspicious foundations: The patronage of Sufi institutions in the late Mughal and early Asaf Jah Deccan’, *South Asian Studies* 20–1:71–98.

Grinter, Anne Catherine (1979). *Book IV of the Bustan al-salatin of Nuruddin ar-Raniri: A study from the manuscripts of a seventeenth-century Malay work written in north Sumatra*. [PhD thesis, SOAS University of London.]

Hamid, Ismail (1983). *Kesusasteraan Melayu lama dari warisan peradaban Islam*. Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti.

Harun, Jelani (ed.) (2006). *Nasihat al-mulak: Nasihat kepada raja-raja, karangan Imam al-Ghazali*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Hijjas, Mulaika (2013). ‘The fruit of good intentions: *Hikayat Darma Ta‘sia* in the National Library of Indonesia’s Ml. 42’, in: Jelani Harun and Ben Murtagh (eds), *Crossing the sea of Malay literature*, pp. 250–74. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Hijjas, Mulaika (2015). *Penghulu segala perempuan: Fāṭima in Malay didactic texts for women*, in: Chiara Formichi and R. Michael Feener (eds), *Shi‘ism in Southeast Asia: ‘Alid piety and sectarian constructions*, pp. 79–98. London: Hurst & Company.

Hikajat Pandji Semirang (1937). *Hikajat Pandji Semirang: Salinan dari kitab asalnja jang tersimpan di Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen*. Batavia: Balai Poestaka.

Hikajat Radja Moeda (1916). *Hikajat Radja Moeda Sjah Merdan*. Weltevreden: Indonesische Drukkerij.

Jäkl, Jiří (2017). ‘Black Africans on the maritime silk route: Jengi in Old Javanese epigraphical and literary evidence’, *Indonesia and the Malay World* 45–133:334–51.

Jones, Russell (1985). *Hikayat Sultan Ibrahim ibn Adham: An edition of an anonymous
Malay text with translation and notes. Berkeley: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of California.

Kadir, Usup Abdul (2015). Hikayat Raja Babi. Kuala Lumpur: Buku Fixi.

Klinkert, H.C. (1892) [1930]. *Nieuw Maleisch-Nederlandsch zakwoordenboek*. 5th ed. Leiden: Brill.

Lowenstein, Felix (1939). ‘Saint Magdalene—or Bibi Rabia Basri in Mogul painting?’, *Islamic Culture* 13:466–9.

Meij, Th.C. van der and N. Lambbooi (eds and trans.), with Oman Fathurahman (2014). *The Malay Hikayat Mi'raj Nabi Muhammed*. Leiden: Brill.

Notulen (1868). *Notulen van de Algemeene en Bestuurs-Vergaderingen van het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen*. Vol. 4. Batavia: Lange & Co.

Proudfoot, Ian (2003). ‘An expedition into the politics of Malay philology’, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 76–1:1–53.

Ricklefs, M.C., Voorhoeve, P. and Gallop, Annabel Teh (2014). *Indonesian manuscripts in Great Britain: A catalogue of manuscripts in Indonesian languages in British public collections*. Rev. ed. Jakarta: Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient, Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia and Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia.

Ronkel, P.S. van (1909). “Catalogus der Maleische handschriften in het Museum van het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen.” [Verhandelingen van het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen] 57–1:1–546.

Saenong, Farid (2015). ‘ʿAlid piety in Bugis texts on proper sexual arts’, in: Chiara Formichi and R. Michael Feener (eds.), *Shi‘ism in Southeast Asia: ʿAlid piety and sectarian constructions*, pp. 99–114. London: Hurst & Company.

Schimmel, Annemarie (1975). *Mystical dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Schimmel, Annemarie (1976). *Pain and grace: A study of two mystical writers of eighteenth-century Muslim India*. Leiden: Brill.

Sevea, Teren (2015). ‘Sex to the next world: Holy descent and restorative sex for the mualad’, in: Chiara Formichi and R. Michael Feener (eds), *Shi‘ism in Southeast Asia: ʿAlid piety and sectarian constructions*, pp. 115–35. London: Hurst & Company.

Smith, Bianca J. (2013). ‘When wahyu comes through women: Female spiritual authority and divine revelation in mystical groups and pesantren-Sufi orders’, in: Bianca J. Smith and Mark R. Woodward (eds), *Gender and power in Indonesian Islam: Leaders, feminists, Sufis and pesantren selves*, pp. 83–102. London and New York: Routledge.

Smith, Bianca J. and Mark R. Woodward (eds) (2013). *Gender and power in Indonesian Islam: Leaders, feminists, Sufis and pesantren selves*. London and New York: Routledge.

Smith, Bianca J. and Mark R. Woodward (2015). ‘Magico-spiritual power, female sexuality and ritual sex in Muslim Java: Unveiling the kesekten of magical women’, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 27:317–32.
Smith, Margaret (1928). *Rābʿia the mystic and her fellow saints in Islām*. Cambridge: University Press.

Smith, Margaret [rev. by C. Pellat] (2012). ‘Rābʿia al-ʿAdawiyya al-Qaysiyya’, in: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. 2nd ed. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_6160 (accessed 25 September 2017).

Stowasser, Barbara Freyer (1994). *Women in the Qurʾan, traditions, and interpretation*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Trimingham, J. Spencer (1973). *The Sufi orders in Islam*. Oxford: OUP.

Widiyanto, A. (2013). ‘Reframing the gendered dimension of Islamic spirituality: *Silsilah* and the “problem” of female leadership in *tarekat*’, in Bianca J. Smith and Mark R. Woodward (eds), *Gender and power in Indonesian Islam: Leaders, feminists, Sufis and pesantren selves*, pp. 103–16. London: Routledge.

Wieringa, Edwin (2007). *Catalogue of Malay and Minangkabau manuscripts in the library of Leiden University and other collections in the Netherlands*. Vol. 2, *Comprising the H.N. van der Tuuk bequest acquired by the Leiden University Library in 1896*. Leiden: Leiden University Library.

Wieringa, Edwin (2016). ‘Haji Adam’s 1926 Malay poem about the Prophet’s ascension: A polemical anti-Wahhābī defense of traditionalist Islam’, in: Yumi Sugahara (ed.), *Comparative study of Southeast Asian kitabs: Local and global dynamism in transformation of Islamic tales* [Comparative study of Southeast Asian kitabs Vol. 4], pp. 27–55. Tokyo: Institute of Asian Cultures.

Wilkinson, R.J. (1901). *A Malay-English dictionary*. Singapore: Kelly and Walsh.

Williams, Alan (trans.) (2006). *Spiritual verses: The first book of the Masnavi-ye Ma’navi*. London: Penguin.