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Islamic Connections

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Islamic Connections

Muslim Societies in South and Southeast Asia

EDITED BY

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INTRODUCTION

Issues and Ideologies in the Study of Regional Muslim Cultures

R. Michael Feener

Over the past fourteen centuries the expansion of Islam has transformed societies all across Asia and Africa, producing a civilization of great complexity and internal diversity. Despite the demographic realities of the modern Muslim world, however, the academic study of Islam remains plagued by a resilient bias privileging the Middle East not only as “central” but also as normative. Such orientations to the study of Islamic civilization have had the unfortunate effect of implicitly reducing other regions (even those in large majority populations that have been Muslim for centuries) to the status of peripheries. While there are arguable cases to be made for the special position of the Arab world in particular — including the position of Arabic as a primary language of Islamic scripture and religious scholarship, as well as the importance of the pilgrimage to Mecca as a pillar of ritual observance — this can be and has been overstated. This persistence of what may be termed an “Arabist bias” has thus impaired understandings of the histories of Muslim societies outside the Middle East and produced distorted images of Islam in the contemporary world.

At the turn of the twenty-first century there are approximately 1.2 billion Muslims worldwide, with most of the major population centres located in Asia and the top five largest Muslim national populations located outside of the Arab Middle East.¹ Today nearly 60 per cent of the Muslims living in the world do so in Asia. By comparison, the combined populations of all of the Arabic-speaking Muslim nations of the Middle East add up to less than 20 per cent of today’s global *umma*. A demographer’s visual mapping of today’s Muslim populations on a geographic model would then place the “centre of gravity” of the Muslim world somewhere between Sukkur and Nawabshah along the banks of the Indus River.²

Despite this, scholars focusing on studies of Muslim societies in South and Southeast Asia continue to struggle against the inertia of dominant biases

that relegate their investigations to the margins of Islamic Studies. Richard M. Eaton, among others, has earlier called attention to the imperatives that he saw implied by such a view of the Muslim world, stressing that “the question here is not whether South Asia can be considered as any sort of periphery, but rather how this region became a cultural and demographic epicentre for the entire Muslim world”.³ Of course, however, the making of South Asia as an “epicentre” of the Muslim world is facilitated not only by its own large Muslim populations, but also by the demographic weight of major Muslim concentrations further east, particularly those of the Malay world. Taking this into account, the intent of this volume is not simply one of not placing South Asia at a newly-reconceptualized “centre” and thus implicitly entailing the creation of new peripheries, but rather attempting to explore the internal connections, comparisons, and contrasts between Muslim cultures in South and Southeast Asia.

Adopting this dynamic, transregional perspective on the Islamic world could have stimulating and wide-reaching implications for future studies, particularly as researchers explore aspects of globalization and “south-south” dynamics between contemporary Muslim societies. Such work, however, must avoid the temptation to simply substitute new “Asian-oriented” proclivities and prejudices for older, Middle Eastern ones. Rather, by its very nature, the attempt to view the connections between Muslim communities around the world must be one that engages dynamic, multidirectional phenomena, rather than falling back on to unreflexive nationalist historiographies and ethnic essentializations, or reifications of contemporary regional stereotypes retrojected to earlier historical periods. As Barbara Metcalf has remarked in connection with her own studies of the history of Islam in South Asia, “Nation, caste, language, and above all religion, are, in their politicised and enumerated form, contingent and recent. Indeed, it is the excavation of the contingent nature of such identities that is the work of critical scholarship.”⁴ That is, we must make it a point to challenge ourselves to think beyond the latent prejudices that inform popular assumptions about “origins”, “Islamization”, and “local cultures”.

Given the degree to which we are all surrounded by such contemporary imaginings, we need to be extra vigilant and self-critical in developing ways of conceptualizing and commenting on the historical formations of Muslim societies in South and Southeast Asia. This book seeks to address issues and ideological arguments that have compromised the success of earlier attempts to explore the connections, comparisons, and contrasts between historical expressions of Islam and Muslim culture in these two regions, and this volume as a whole presents a collection of new studies of these issues, initially presented

at a conference hosted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore in June 2007. This conference brought together an international and interdisciplinary group of scholars working on various aspects of Islam in South and Southeast Asia to discuss these issues in a forum where each could benefit from the other's specialized knowledge.

Of course, this was not the first international conference that has attempted such work. In 1974, a workshop on "Islam in Southern Asia" was held in Heidelberg to sketch out the state of the field of Social Science research on Muslim societies in South and Southeast Asia. The meeting was a landmark in bringing together scholars specializing in both these areas, but little was done by way of systematized comparison, or explicating historical linkages, and the resultant published volume contains only very short papers averaging three pages per participant, followed by transcribed minutes of the ensuing discussions. The aim of that work, as explained by conference convenor Dietmar Rothermund, was to stimulate social scientific work on "regional approach[es] to Islam as a way of life, a set of values, and a world of ideas".⁵

Over the three decades since then, debates on regional Islam have advanced considerably, particularly in anthropology, through the work of scholars such as Talal Asad, who has promoted conceptualizations of diverse Islamic traditions that strive towards coherence, if not uniformity, while simultaneously maintaining various degrees of particularism.⁶ Taking into account such dynamics of the development of Islamic civilization on a broader scale, we start to see new ways of conceptualizing cultural patterning and modes of practice across diverse regions of the Muslim world. This volume brings together the work of specialists on Muslim societies of South and Southeast Asia, enabling us to compare notes on what has been done to date as a step towards closer collaboration in the development of theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches for the study of Islam as a global tradition. One of the areas that would appear to be fruitful for such comparative conversations is that of *Islamization*.

Diverse processes of Islamization have been at work across South and Southeast Asia for centuries, including both religious conversion and cultural transformation following the military conquest of agrarian states. However other modes have been arguably more influential for subsequent developments and seem to cry out as potential material for comparative studies of the histories of Islam in the two regions. For example, as an historian of Muslim Southeast Asia, I am particularly struck by some of the ways in which South Asianists have discussed the Islamization of the Malabar Coast.⁷ These include various modes of Islamization following the trade routes across the Indian Ocean,

ranging from the conduct of commerce within common legal frameworks to patterns of socialization such as ritual participation and intermarriage.⁸ These are precisely the issues that have long dominated discussions of the Islamization of Southeast Asia, but generally speaking, scholars working in this area have not fully engaged with studies of analogous developments in South Asia. Some Southeast Asianists have at times looked towards Malabar and other areas of South Asia for specific material on connections between the two regions — for example, in discussions of the architectural forms of mosques.⁹ However, as yet, there has been no serious work done that discusses the historical dynamics of Islamization in South and Southeast Asia as part of interconnected processes of social transformation. Such an integrated approach to discussions of these developments could help us to overcome some of the major obstacles that have impeded cross-regional discussions of these two major areas of the Muslim world, including the still-dominant tendency to discuss issues of “influence” in terms of unidirectional flows from west to east.

For decades, processes of Islamization in Southeast Asia have been discussed in terms of “networks” of various kinds, particularly Muslim merchant diasporas and Sufi orders. Despite such talk of networks, however, the assumptions underlying most existing histories of Islamization unfortunately end up looking more like supply chains, with “Islam” as a commodity, that for some reason, always moves eastward towards apparently receptive markets in Southeast Asia with little or no discussion of what might have been carried in the other direction, or of the impact that such contacts and encounters might have had on Muslims living in South Asia or further west. Accordingly, debates on Islamization in Southeast Asia, at least, have been obsessed with “origins” and often preoccupied with identifying “the” source for the arrival in Southeast Asia, as if complex processes such as the creation of regional Muslim cultures worked in ways analogous to technology transfer. However, such “unitary” theories of Islamization are not only empirically unverifiable, but have often also allowed for too-easy incorporation into polemics of identity politics for various religious and ethnic groups in the modern period. These unwanted side effects of scholarship might be nipped in the bud, as it were, by more actively challenging stereotypical perceptions and developing more nuanced understandings of the historical formations of diverse Muslim cultures in Asia, as well as of their interactions with one another and the broader world.

Indeed, the long and complex histories of Islamization in both South and Southeast Asia present a rich heritage of layered changes along an array of often intersecting vectors, and there is still much that we have to

learn, particularly about the earlier periods. Recently, new materials are coming to light, including some that point toward revisions of our earlier understandings about the interconnections of the development of Islam in both these regions. For example some still preliminary observations at coastal sites in Aceh report the presence of early Muslim grave markers at Lamreh carved in a distinctive obelisk-like form (known as *plang pleng*) that bear possible southern Indian stylistic overtones. These are found in an archaeological context that also contains significant amounts of southern Indian red ware pottery. Similar markers are also found at Gampong Pande in Banda Aceh. Another early Islamic site, in the vicinity of Perlak, is known locally as Cot Meuligue, a name that may have been derived from the Tamil *malikai* (“palace”, “mansion” or “temple”).¹⁰

More established textual source bases for our knowledge of the early modern history of Islam in the Indonesian Archipelago show even clearer evidence of close connections to centres of Muslim culture in South Asia and beyond. Indeed, in the sixteenth century, new arrivals to the Archipelago, such as the Portuguese traveller Tomé Pires, were struck by the strong presence in Malay ports of Muslim merchants “from different Moorish and Kling nations”.¹¹ At that time new forms of Islamic art and culture were beginning to take root in Aceh, the royal forms of which (at least) were clearly influenced by models developed at the Mughal court in everything from landscaping to literary composition.¹² We can also trace more direct linkages in the field of Islamic religious scholarship at that time, and international trends in a number of fields known throughout the Muslim world that continued to be reflected in South and Southeast Asia through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — often facilitated by the movement of scholars from many different regional backgrounds back and forth between various parts of Asia and the Middle East.¹³ Patterns of movement across various parts of the Muslim world were, however, significantly altered by the increasing intervention of European colonial powers over the course of this period; in the process, new kinds of connections were facilitated by structural changes of states and the introduction of new means of transportation and communication.¹⁴ These include, for example, the establishment of regional centres of lithograph printing for texts in South Asia that catered to Southeast Asian Muslim markets. These new colonial connections between the two regions have also left their traces in patterns of local practice such as in Pariaman and Bengkulu on the west coast of Sumatra, where local observations of Ashura preserve elements first brought over by Sepoy soldiers staffing British pepper ports there.¹⁵

Further permutations of intra-Islamic relations across the eastern half of the Indian Ocean littoral have occurred over the course of the twentieth

and twenty-first centuries as post-colonial movements of goods, people, and ideas have facilitated transregional conversations on redefining Islam along a spectrum ranging from Sufism to Salafism, with many variations in between. Despite the existence of such dynamic modes of contemporary interaction between Muslims from these two regions, most previously existing scholarship on exchanges between South and Southeast Asia appears to maintain a unidirectional orientation. In my own searches in the secondary literature on Islam in South Asia, I have not yet turned up any sustained treatments of reciprocal influences coming from Southeast to South Asia. The overall impression that most scholarship to date tends to present, then, is one of Southeast Asia as a perpetual recipient of Muslim cultures from further west. However, when one is aware of the networks of various types that have historically linked Muslim communities in South and Southeast Asia, it would be almost impossible if all streams of influence flowed in the same direction. Although such a preconception is still prevalent among scholars — not to mention in popular perceptions — I am led to wonder if perhaps the issue is not that reciprocal influence did not exist, but simply that it has not been looked for. This is not a simple expression of wishful thinking, but a critique based upon my own experience of pursuing some analogous work in one of my own primary fields of research — that of historical connections between the Indonesian Archipelago and the Arabian Peninsula.

Before ever visiting that part of the Middle East, I had read much about the role of southern Arabia, and Wadi Hadhramaut in particular, in contributing to the development of Islamic culture in Southeast Asia. Upon arrival there, however, I found myself struck by the extent to which elements of Malay Muslim tradition had influenced diverse aspects of culture in this part of the Arabian Peninsula — including, but not limited, to dress, diet, and language. While large-scale migration between Southern Arabia and Southeast Asia is a relatively recent (late nineteenth- early twentieth-century) phenomenon, their connection on the more elite level of Islamic religious scholarship dates well before that. In searching through Arabic sources documenting such earlier connections, I was surprised to find texts, some dating as far back as the fourteenth century, in which not only were scholars from both regions engaged in the study of the same texts — but in which prominent Arab figures present themselves as the eager and appreciative students of Muslim scholars either hailing from, or long associated with, the Indonesian Archipelago.¹⁶ This is information that considerably complicates stereotypical views of a unilinear transmission of Islam from west to east, and it was sitting in the pages of Arabic texts simply waiting for someone to look for it. This leads me to wonder if there aren't analogous materials

from South Asia that have managed to stay out of the scholarly spotlight thus far. It is hoped that the work presented in this volume will stimulate further work among scholars working in both South and Southeast Asia to explore the dynamics of multivectoral interactions between these two large and important areas of the Muslim world.

Keeping an eye open for such data and investing some effort toward critically evaluating dominant preconceptions of Islamization patterns might not only turn up some heretofore unstudied sources, but also facilitate some new spaces for critical reflection. Envisioning cultural interactions between Muslim societies along multiple vectors can help us come to terms better with the internal complexities of the Muslim world in ways that facilitate new understandings of the interrelations of its various parts. One important benefit of such an approach can be in its challenges to the kind of lingering diffusionism that persists when one continues to privilege a Middle Eastern “centre” of the Muslim world. Moving beyond this to reframe our approach can help to open us up to more nuanced appreciations of Islam as a global civilization. The focus on complex and multivectoral interactions, both historical and contemporary, between Muslim societies in South and Southeast Asia, then, should not be simply about highlighting one alternative region of the Muslim world over another, but rather of reflecting upon demographic realities as a means of stimulating new ways of approaching the study of Muslim societies. Some analogous movements are already afoot among our colleagues who study “global Christianity”, and we may have much to learn from their work in the future.

At present, however, this volume aims to present a stocktaking of this field of enquiry and to expand our knowledge of particular connections and cases of comparison and/or contrast. This is something undoubtedly in need of further development and the essays that have been prepared for this volume comprise some significant contributions towards this end. Work along these lines can help to expand the body of specialist studies that are still much needed to bring more material into consideration in the study of Muslim societies outside the Middle East. The respective specialized studies of Muslim societies in South and Southeast Asia are already rich and complex fields in and of themselves, each with its own vast literatures and significant developments of method and analysis. Bringing these two scholarly communities into conversation through studies such as those published in this volume can help researchers in both fields of specialization to learn of, and be inspired by, discoveries and approaches being developed in neighbouring fields, as well as to warn us of possible pitfalls and dead ends that have cut off other experiments and efforts at interpretation.

This volume begins with an essay by Daud Ali that presents a critical overview of diverse historiographic trends in the study of Muslim societies of South and Southeast Asia. Beyond its rich survey of existing scholarship, his essay explores selected aspects of approaches from both of these fields that could be drawn upon to inform new approaches to understanding the development of Islamic traditions in transregional contexts. This is followed by a richly documented account of parallel processes of Islamization on the Malabar Coast and in the Indonesian Archipelago by Sebastian Prange. His analysis of primary source material there provides fresh insight into the dynamics of multidimensional Muslim networks criss-crossing the Indian Ocean in earlier periods. Torsten Tschacher's essay, which immediately follows it, further helps open up new possibilities for moving beyond simplistic and unproductive debates about the "origins" of Islam in Asia, by advocating a shift from models of linear transmission to those of "circulation". Such an approach can be useful in developing more integrated understandings of the contemporaneous development of related constellations of Arabic-based Shaf'i and Sufi vernacular traditions across the Indian Ocean littoral in the medieval and early modern periods.

Tschacher's essay draws in particular upon relatively understudied material from southern India in the form of Muslim Tamil textual traditions. Recent work by a new generation of scholars on such texts is beginning to revive, and more thoroughly pursue, earlier explorations of the historical relationships between Muslim societies in southern India and the Indonesian Archipelago.¹⁷ Ronit Ricci's contribution to this volume in particular treats material from the religious and literary textual traditions connecting these two regions. There she provides an extended discussion of Javanese texts of *The Book of a Thousand Questions* as a manifestation of the complex cultural and literary currents involved in the ongoing development of vernacular Muslim cultures in both South and Southeast Asia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This period of the development of print culture in colonial contexts receives further treatment in Jan van der Putten's study of the intersections between text and performance in the production of *wayang Parsi* or *bangsawan* theatre. His depiction of the complex ways in which these forms of popular entertainment brought together strands of culture, commercial interests, and new technologies linking South and Southeast Asia, open a window on the complexity of connections between these two regions in the colonial period.

Kees van Dijk's chapter presents a very different aspect of how the mechanisms of European control framed dynamics of interaction between

Muslim communities under British and Dutch rule. Through his close examination of archival materials from the period of World War I, he presents a compelling picture of the ways in which an emerging system of modern geopolitics attempted to monitor and manipulate understandings of Islam both within and between Muslim communities in South and Southeast Asia.

The ongoing struggles over authoritative interpretations of Islam in the modern period are examined in subsequent chapters. Iqbal Singh Sevea discusses the ways in which the Ahmadiyya's aggressive engagement with print culture intensified and transformed patterns of Islamic textual transmission between South and Southeast Asia. Their attempts to promote Ahmadi visions of what constitutes "true Islam" were, however, fiercely contested by other Muslim groups who used the same new technologies and cultural strategies for their own ends. Terenjit Sevea's contribution to this volume provides a focused investigation of another set of modern voices of Islamic reform: those associated with the English-language periodical *Progressive Islam*. This publication featured the writings of prominent Muslim intellectuals and activists from both South and Southeast Asia, brought together in conversations on a renewal of global Islam to be pioneered by "the *umma* in the East".

Transregional dynamics of Islamic reform are also the subject of Peter Riddell's reflections in his essay on patterns of comparison and contrast in the careers of Southeast Asian Muslim activists over the seventeenth through to the twenty-first centuries. This *longue durée* overview helps to establish some broader frameworks for understanding contemporary developments at the intersections of global Islam and local contexts. While Riddell's essay concludes with a focus on a prominent figure in contemporary Malaysian Islamist politics, the two remaining chapters of this volume provide focused treatments of two explicitly apolitical Muslim movements stretching across Muslim South and Southeast Asia.

In both of these studies, attention is focused on the experiences of particular individuals involved in such groups and how they imagine the various ways in which their chosen confessional communities link together Muslims in both regions. Farish Noor does this through his relation and analyses of selected first-hand oral life narratives of members of the Tablighi Jama'at in contemporary Southeast Asia. Rob Rozehnal then provides rich observations on another contemporary transnational Muslim movement: the Chishti Sabiri Sufi order. His essay includes notes on the experience of Malaysian pilgrims to the shrine of Pakpattan Sharif in the Punjab as well as discussions of the ways in which print and electronic media facilitate other modes of transregional interaction between participants.

Together all these essays aim toward a critical re-evaluation of the dynamic interactions between Muslim communities in South and Southeast Asia to understand better both historic and contemporary formulations of Islam, and the formation of specific Muslim communities. In doing so the volume as a whole seeks to move beyond the dominant existing paradigms of transmission and diffusion that have resulted in overly-simplistic conceptions of Islamization depicting South and Southeast Asia as merely conduit and consumer, respectively. There is thus a clear need to move beyond untenable models of “core and periphery” — as well as scorecard-type approaches to issues of “influence” — in order to develop new orientations to the study of global Islam that will be more useful in developing nuanced understandings of the complex histories and contemporary manifestations of Islam in Asia.

NOTES

1. Recent population data list the largest Muslim national populations as: Indonesia 182 million, Pakistan 134 million, India 121 million, Bangladesh 114 million, Nigeria 61 million, and Egypt 61 million. Malise Ruthven, with Azim Nanji, *Historical Atlas of Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004). A collection of studies on various doctrinal, political, and demographic issues related to population issues in Muslim societies can be found in Gavin W. Jones and Mehtab S. Karim, eds. *Islam, the State, and Population* (London: Hurst & Company, 2005).
2. I would like to thank Gavin Jones for his help in calculating and plotting these demographics.
3. Richard M. Eaton, *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 2.
4. Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Contestations: Essays on Muslims in India and Pakistan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 197.
5. Dietmar Rothermund, ed., *Islam in Southern Asia: A Survey of Current Research* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1975), p. vii.
6. Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University CCAS Occasional Papers, 1986), pp. 17–18.
7. This work, and its relevance for the study of multidimensional Muslim networks across the Indian Ocean is discussed in Sebastian Prange’s contribution to this volume.
8. See, for example: André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).
9. See, for example Mark R. Woodward, *Islam in Java: Normative Piety in the Sultanate of Yogyakarta* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), pp. 55–57.
10. E. Edwards McKinnon, personal communication, February 2009. See also E. Edwards McKinnon, “Indian and Indonesian Elements in Early North

- Sumatra”, in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, edited by Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), pp. 22–37. I would like to thank Ronit Ricci for her help with identifying this Tamil term.
11. Armando Cortesão, ed., *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires: An Account of the East, from the Red Sea to Japan, written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515, and The Book of Francisco Rodrigues*, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1944), I, p. 142.
 12. Vladimir Braginsky, “Structure, Date and Sources of *Hikayat Aceh* Revisited: The Problem of Mughal-Malay Literary Ties”, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 162, no. 4 (2006): 441–67.
 13. The groundbreaking study of such movements from Southeast Asia has been: Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern Ulama in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).
 14. I have discussed these developments at greater length in R. Michael Feener, “New Networks and New Knowledge: Migration, Communication, and the Refiguration of Muslim Community in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries”, *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 6, edited by Robert Hefner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
 15. R. Michael Feener, “Muharram Observances in the History of Bengkulu”, *Studia Islamika* 6, no. 2 (1999): 87–130.
 16. An early example of this can be found in texts of Abdullah As’ad al-Yafi’i (d. 1367) described in 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. Later documentation of the role of Sufi scholars associated with the Indonesian Archipelago as teachers to Arab pupils can be found, for example, in the case of ‘Abd al-Samad b. ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Jawi (a.k.a. ‘al-Palimbani’), who taught Ghazali’s *‘Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din* to the Yemeni sayyid scholar ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Sulayman al-Ahdal (d. 1835). Al-Ahdal reports this himself in his biographical collection entitled: *al-Nafas al-Yamani wa’l-ruh al-rahayni fi ijazat al-qudat bani’l-Shawkani* (Sana’a: Markaz al-dirasat wa’l-abhath al-Yamaniyya, 1979), pp. 138–43.
 17. The pioneering work in this direction was undertaken a century ago by Ph. S. van Ronkel. See, for example, his: “Het Tamil-element in het Maleisch”, *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, uitgegeven door het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* 45 (1902): 97–119; “Tamilwoorden in Maleisch gewaad”, *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, uitgegeven door het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* 46 (1903): 532–57; “Maleisch labai, een Moslimsch-Indische term”, *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, uitgegeven door het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* 56 (1914): 137–41; “A Tamil Malay Manuscript,” *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 85 (1922): 29–35.

