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Java in Jerusalem: New Directions in the Study of Javanese Literature and Culture

Introduction

Although the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University on principle welcomes any interesting topic of research, Javanese literature must have been quite out of the ordinary even for this open-minded Institute. Nevertheless, it accepted the proposal that was submitted by Ronit Ricci under the title “New Directions in the Study of Javanese Literature.” And so it came about that a group of seven Javanists from around the world are presently carrying out research on Javanese literature in Jerusalem. These are, besides Ronit herself (Jerusalem): Ben Arps (Leiden), Els Bogaerts (Leiden), Tony Day (Graz), Nancy Florida (Ann Arbor), Verena Meyer (New York) and Willem van der Molen (Leiden). During the year, several other researchers will join the group for a couple of weeks to a couple of months, i.e. Siti Muslifah (Solo), Opan Safari (Cirebon), Edwin Wieringa (Cologne), Yumi Sugahara (Osaka), and George Quinn (Canberra). The focus of the group is on Javanese literature from the seventeenth century to the present; the project lasts from September 2018 until June 2019.

The project

Keeping in mind the decline of Javanese Studies in universities worldwide the New Directions project has three interrelated aims: first, to access, read and analyse texts not studied to date, a basic but indispensable prerequisite to our ability to better generalize and theorize. Second, to re-read texts studied

by earlier generations of scholars but employ in our analysis theoretical paradigms previously untapped in the field and knowledge from adjoining areas including religious studies, performance, gender and cultural studies. Third, and based on the first two goals, to broadly rethink and remap major dimensions of the field including periodization, contextualization, literary categorizations, and interpretive methods.

The groups' goals will be approached through a combination of individual and collective research. Each group member has selected a Javanese text to be read throughout the fellowship period and is working individually on that text, or texts. In addition, each group member selects a section from their chosen text and leads the group in a joint reading of, and commenting on that section. Participation of scholars who are members of different departments, who teach and write on a host of topics related or complementary to Javanese Studies means that, by definition, the group employs a comparative perspective. Media studies vs. Islamic studies, comparative literature with history – the potential to bring all these view points to bear on the texts read together allows for multiple ways of producing meaning.

The research group offers scholars of Javanese something that is for us very rare, yet taken for granted in other fields: an opportunity to convene in one room, read texts together, discuss, debate, and learn from one another. In addition, developing collegial conversations about Javanese literature over lunch, brainstorming with a fellow researcher down the hall and sharing knowledge with potential students – the less formal yet important aspects of building and maintaining an intellectual community – are also for the most part missing from the lives of scholars in the field. The opportunities fostered at the Institute for all these types of interactions, and others, create an unprecedented space for an exchange of ideas, creative energy, and collaboration within the field that, we hope, will reverberate through publications, future teaching and mentoring, and additional collaborations whose impact will be felt far beyond the Institute's walls.

Outreach

Group members are also contributing in very significant ways to the development of Indonesian Studies in Israel, a field that has only recently been established and is offered only at the Hebrew University. The presence of a group of distinguished and experienced scholars has already made possible a range of diverse events and initiatives including an Indonesian film screening, a lecture on Javanese dance, Javanese dance classes (see fig. 1), a semester-long course in Old Javanese and various seminars, with a wayang performance, gamelan concerts and additional events planned for 2019.

Fig. 1 – Dance class of Els Bogaerts (picture by Els Bogaerts)

Individual research

Ben Arps is devoting his year at the IIAS to the story of Amir Hamza, with two book projects. The first is a philological edition, translation, and contextualization of the text in an early seventeenth-century manuscript. Titled *Caritanira Amir* (“The story/adventures of Amir”), this is the oldest known Amir Hamza text in Javanese. It is fascinating for the light it helps to shed on the history of Islam in Southeast Asia and the history of Javanese language and literature. Ben’s second book is about the story of Amir Hamza in its various modes of telling (literature, storytelling, shadow and rod puppetry, dance drama) in Java, in Southeast Asia, and beyond, across the centuries.

Els Bogaerts frames the analysis of the *Serat Nitik Sultan Agung* within the concept of performance literature. The texts relate how Sultan Agung (r. 1613-1645) in a miraculous way conquers the surrounding world, subjugating its inhabitants to Mataram as well as converting them to Islam.

Representing the sultan as a pious and invincible ruler, they (re)create the history of Mataram, including the confrontation with “foreigners,” from a Javanese point of view. The texts contained in the nineteenth-century Javanese

manuscripts belong to a storytelling repertoire which is characteristic of Yogyakarta, simultaneously sharing stories and motifs with other Javanese and Malay textual traditions.

Tony Day is reading the early 19th-century encyclopedic poem *Serat Centhini* as if it were the draft of a “novel,” the master genre of literary modernity in Europe but also one that can be identified in many variant forms around the world in pre-modern times. He plans to write a book that will offer comparative readings of the *Serat Centhini*, the Dutch-language *Max Havelaar*, and the Indonesian *Bumi Manusia* tetralogy by Pramoedya as ‘novels’ about “Java” in different phases of its ‘modernity.’

Nancy Florida’s project explores the metaphysical poetry of M.Ng. Ronggasmita, an early nineteenth-century Sufi sage from the Surakarta keraton. A member of Java’s most celebrated family of literati (the Yasadipuran-Ronggawarsitan family), Ronggasmita composed a collection of Sufi songs (*suluk*) in 1815 during an unexpected sojourn in Aceh. The collection is titled *Suluk Acih* (Songs of Aceh). Her task is to translate and analyze a number of those songs, with an aim of bringing them into conversation with the greater discourse of premodern Sufi metaphysics.

Verena Meyer is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Religion, Columbia University. Joining the group during the first semester of 2018/2019, she worked on textual traditions around the becoming of saints. She especially focused on a mid-nineteenth-century manuscript of the Sèh Malaya telling the story of Sunan Kalijaga’s reform at the hands of Sunan Bonang and his subsequent encounter with Nabi Kilir (Khidr). This textual research will serve as a foundation for thinking more broadly about different kinds of genealogies of knowledge and initiation in contemporary Java and their relationship with each other. The next stage of this project foresees ethnographic research on the ways in which such traditional narratives are used and deployed by Javanese Muslims in everyday theologizing.

Willem van der Molen is preparing a text edition, including a translation and commentary, of the *Serat Panji Paniba*. This text was written in 1816, as a versified version of a *wayang gēdog* play – perhaps the same one that was performed as part of the festivities for a royal wedding that year? In addition to an interpretation of the text as a whole, based on close reading, attention will be paid to a couple of specific topics, such as versification, grammar, and the representation of the historical setting.

Ronit Ricci is working on two projects this year. The first is an exploration of interlinear translations in Indonesia, with a focus on Islamic interlinear translations from Arabic into Javanese and Malay. Her aim is to study this translation practice from various perspectives, considering its religious, intellectual, historical, visual and metaphorical dimensions.

The second project is a preliminary study of *Serat Anbiya* manuscripts, compilations presenting the prophets' biographies as recounted in Java. She is interested in reading tellings produced in keraton and pesantren contexts, written in pegon and Javanese script, in prose and tembang, and in thinking about the role these stories – which touch upon so many key aspects of human life – may have played in Javanese Muslim society.

Outcome

Which outcome do we expect from the New Directions project? One important outcome already referred to are the activities carried out throughout the year. The project will conclude in the second half of June 2019 with a three-day conference entitled “Java in Jerusalem: New Directions in the Study of Javanese Literature and Culture.” It will be an opportunity to present the work carried out during the year and to share it with a wider circle of scholars. Then there are a planned edited volume on New Directions and special issues on particular themes, plus individual publications. Another outcome we hope for is renewed energy to work on long-set aside projects now revived, continued collaborations amongst ourselves and additional scholars in the field, panels at conferences, possibly a summer school in Java.

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