

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Nafahat Al-Ridwan: Riwayat Hidup Shaykh ‘Uthman Sarawak By Shaykh Muhammad Zayn Al-Din Bin Shaykh ‘Uthman Al-Sarawaqi Translated, Edited And Introduction By Fazril Salleh**

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#### ABSTRACT

This is a book review on nafahat al-Ridwan: Riwayat Hidup Shaykh ‘Uthman Sarawak by Shaykh Muhammad Zayn Al-Din bin Shaykh ‘Uthman Al-Sarawaqi. This book has been translated, edited and its introduction section written by Fazril Salleh. It is published by Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) in Malay, year 2018. ISBN: 9789672158073. This book is an excellent introduction to the life and works of Shaykh ‘Uthman Sarawak, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Sarawak-born scholar of Islam. It is also valuable for its literary value and hagiographic style of its time.

*Keywords: Shaykh ‘Uthman al-Sarawaqi, hagiography, biography, ‘Ulama in Borneo in 20<sup>th</sup> century,*

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*“Seseorang yang telah tinggilah nama Negeri Sarawak dengan sebab dia dan bertambah-tambahlah negeri itu beberapa ilmu yang menerang.”*

*“Thus, ennobled is the name of the State of Sarawak and ever prosperous is the place enlightened by multiple degrees knowledge from such a person.”*

*(verse 3, pg. 58 Nafahat al-Ridwan)*

This book is a rare yet important glimpse about the life of a major figure of Sarawak’s scholar of Islam (‘alim, *ulama besar*), Shaykh ‘Uthman bin ‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Sarawaqi or Shaykh ‘Uthman Sarawak (b. 1863CE – d.1921CE). He was born in present day Kampung Sinjan in Kuching, Sarawak. During his lifetime, he was both a Muslim Shaykh and a teacher who was authorized to instruct on the study of Islam at Masjid al-Haram, Mecca – the most important site of Islam in the world. It was also explained in the book that he was also part of the *perabangan* family. Shaykh ‘Uthman was raised under the tutelage of local scholars of Islam of his time. This means that he was not unfamiliar with local politics, and he was indeed one of the key leaders of Sarawak Muslim community during his time. Perhaps the most interesting read in the book is Shaykh ‘Uthman’s relationship with Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah, or Buya Hamka, a prominent Indonesian ulama, philosopher, politician, historian, and writer in the twentieth century. In Buya Hamka’s book, *Ayahku* (my father), it is stated that one of his father’s teachers in Mecca was Shaykh ‘Uthman Sarawak.

The main content of this book is the *manaqib*, *Nafahat al-Ridwan* (1922), a biography and hagiography of Shaykh ‘Uthman of Sarawak written by his biological son, Shaykh Muhammad Zayn al-Din. *Nafahat al-Ridwan* was published by Matba’ah al-Ahmadiyah, Singapore. The *manaqib* narrates the life-story of Shaykh ‘Uthman Sarawak, along with details of his student life, traits and exemplary character. Some of his most important teachers and fellows were also mentioned in the text.

The book consists of two main sections. The first section consists of the romanized, transliterated original text of *Nafahat al-Ridwan* – the autobiography of Shaykh ‘Uthman al-Sarawaqi (in English: Shaykh ‘Uthman the Sarawakian); the second section consists of the original copy of the book *Nafahat al-Ridwan* in classic *Jawi* script. Other sections are authorship background section where the methodology of transliteration, edition, and major primary and secondary sources are explained.

This is an especially helpful section as reading point of departure to navigate throughout the content of the main text because it elaborates in some detail the sources and arrange them in way that they are readable in a narrative that is easy to digest by general readers. For academic readers, the inclusion of the original copy of *Nafahat al-Ridwan* text and other texts such as the Author’s *abyat* (chain of scholarly authorship), which links Shaykh Uthman’s authorship both to Hadith Sahih of Imam Bukhari and Imam Muslim. There is also a copy of his sale of land agreement at Pulau Medang, Riau, Indonesia, probably meant to show Shaykh ‘Uthman’s presence and locality.

The most important aspect of this book is the copy of original texts of *nafahat al-Ridwan* itself. The wide availability of this copy of original of some of the most important documents directly associated with Shaykh ‘Uthman Sarawak now offers a new window for researchers who may be interested in multiple aspects of his personal autobiography. More importantly, other than his contributions as scholar of Islam, it is also claimed that he was well-versed in the field of philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and business. If true, the persona of Shaykh ‘Uthman’s scholarship is a multi-dimensional one, which hints the nature of being a major scholar of Islam in Borneo during his time.

Beyond Shaykh ‘Uthman Sarawak’s persona, the availability of this copy also opens a window for a hagiographic study of religious, political, and other community leaders in Sarawak. This in turn will give an opportunity for researchers to view the mobility of knowledge, both by the persona concerned themselves as an active agent of knowledge, and the author(s) of the hagiography that may reflect the writing style and worldview of their days on how they describe the life of important and respected person of their time in written literature.

Consider the possibility of discovering similar documents (i.e hagiography) from Sarawak-born Christian, Buddhist, and other religious leaders for instance. Would we see similar patterns similar patterns of intra- and inter- religious debates that evolved into a form of polemics and apologies in during Medieval Europe? Or do we see different trends of dialogue among great normative traditions in Sarawak proper that may inform the evolution of history of ideas regarding the perennial philosophical questions such as the idea of justice and toleration?

The other possible way to engage the book is to identify key terms that may give clue about how a certain word such as *Negeri*, was used in those day to describe a certain polity. One can trace the term *Negeri* in other similar texts written during similar times, before and after to extract a certain understanding of the idea of statehood among the communities who were using the term both as popular and literary descriptor, and as container of meaning.

Further, the original copy enables the study of Sarawak/Borneo indigenous literary culture in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Other notable literature is *Hikayat Panglima Nikosa* (1876). If only these could be compared in terms of their word usage, writing style, and rhetoric, one would be able to glimpse the written Sarawak Malay literary features of that era. Also, both literatures – one *hikayat* and the other *manaqib* – centred on a protagonist but are presented in a very different writing style in Malay. One can also trace if there is a possible relationship between *Hikayat Panglima Nikosa* and *Nafahat al-Ridwan*. The former was written in 1876 and the latter in 1922, 48 years later than the former. It is probable that Shaykh ‘Uthman Sarawak has encountered *Hikayat Panglima Nikosa* some time in his life earliest as a teenager and beyond, considering that he was part of the educated *perabangan* family and thus a literate who played important role in Sarawak nationalist politics throughout the period.

In terms of sourcing, the book actually explained the exact sources where it obtained relevant information about Shaykh ‘Uthman Sarawak. For instance, the original photocopy of the *Nafahat al-Ridwan* contained in the book was directly sourced from a manuscript obtained from Haji Attaelah Zainuddin, grandson of Shaykh ‘Uthman Sarawak and son of Shaykh Muhammad Zayn al-Din, the

author of *Nafahat al-Ridwan*. Other manuscripts of *Nafahat al-Ridwan* seen and referenced are: 1. a photocopy from Ustaz Abdullah bin Tohir (Kuala Lumpur), 2. A photocopy from Ustaz Haji Adlan Abang (Kuching), and 3. A photocopy from Haji Osman bin Dato' Seri Setia Abang Haji Razali (Brunei). It is mentioned in the book that a manuscript copy that he possesses is the one given to him by Haji Attaelah Zainuddin.

Other notable written sources, other than *Nafahat al-Ridwan* and *Ayahku* mentioned in the book pertinent to understanding the life of Shaykh 'Uthman Sarawak are:

1. Mekka in the Latter Part of 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Daily Life, Custom and Learning. The Muslims of East-Indian Archipelago (1931)
2. Penerbitan Khas Sambutan 10 Tahun Angkatan Nahdatul Islam Bersatu (BINA), 1969-1979 (1979), Ketokohan dan Pemikiran Syeikh Othman Sarawak in Laporan Bengkel Kepimpinan dan Kebudayaan Negeri Sarawak (1982)
3. Islam dan Peranan Ulama-ulama Sarawak (1988)
4. "Syeikh Othman Sarawak, 1863-1921 Tokoh Ulama Bumi Kenyalang" in Ulama Silam dalam Kenangan (1992)
5. "Memperkenalkan Tokoh Silam ke-12 Almarhum Sheikh Othman Sarawak" (n.d)
6. Prosiding Nadwah Nusantara II: Sumbangan Ulama dan Tokoh Agama Borneo (2003)
7. The Origin of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern Ulama in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century (2004) by Azyumardi Azra
8. Koleksi Ulama Nusantara Jilid 1 & 2 (2009)
9. The Malays of South-west Sarawak before Malaysia (1970) by Tom Harrison.

This shows that the manuscript is in fact present in society from at multiple locations throughout Borneo, Peninsular Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia where presence of Shaykh 'Uthman Sarawak is felt. Thus, this book systemizes further the study about Shaykh 'Uthman Sarawak, in addition to earlier cited sources. It adds transliteration in Roman alphabets from *Jawi* script of *Nafahat al-Ridwan*, and edited the classical Malay written literature then to fit some of the prefixes and suffixes with present day Malay lexical conventions.

I deem this book by Fazril Salleh an important preliminary source, certainly as starting point to get to know better about Shaykh 'Uthman Sarawak and his contributions to the world of Islam, especially in Sarawak in its greater part in Borneo. With persona such as Shaykh 'Uthman Sarawak, it can be said that Sarawak is also notable when it comes to contribution towards knowledge production, in this case of Islam, to the world. This could be the source of inspiration for those who seek a character to emulate in advancing scholarship.

Again, perhaps the most surprising and notable source beyond *Nafahat al-Ridwan* itself is from Buya Hamka's *Ayahku* (1950). The book tells the story about Buya Hamka's own father Haji Rasul or Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah. It is claimed that Buya Hamka in *Ayahku* listed Shaykh 'Uthman Sarawak as one of the teachers and 'ulama at Masjid al-Haram who were then his father's teacher, which supposes that Borneo is not devoid of major scholars – they are just undiscovered.

I have a few suggestions to go from here. As I noted earlier, the publication of the original copy *Nafahat al-Ridwan* opens doors for further research in hagiography of local notable persons particularly in Sarawak and its meaning-making both as society and state. If similar texts (or other written, artifacts, or oral) could be found in other religious communities (i.e Christian, Buddhist etc.), a comparative and

intersubjective studies could be made to analyse the wealth of normative discourse happening in late nineteenth and early twentieth century in this part of the world.

Finally, this book is a valuable addition to those seeking to understand the history of ideas if Shaykh ‘Uthman Sarawak’s *exact* contribution to Islamic and other knowledge could be recovered. It is most unfortunate that Shaykh ‘Uthman Sarawak’s home in Mecca was destroyed in a fire in 1920CE, which presumably destroyed most if not all his written works just a year before his demise as reported in this book. This should not deter the search for Shaykh ‘Uthman Sarawak’s contribution to knowledge, however, because the answer may hold an important key to show that Borneo is also a place of indigenous knowledge, albeit not necessarily secular or Western ones. Consequently, Borneo does not necessarily have to suffer the darkening reputation of being at the edge of an Empire, because it has a confident knowledge discourse of its own at least dating back from late nineteenth to earlier twentieth century.

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