Writing Reformist Histories: 
A Cleric as an Outsider History-Maker

KHAIRUDIN ALJUNIED

Abstract: This article argues that Southeast Asia is an illustrative yet much-neglected empirical terrain for the study of “outsider history-makers” and their vocations. Through an analysis of the writings of Hamka, a well-known Indonesian cleric, this article demonstrates that “outsider history-makers” in Southeast Asia have been engaged in the production of “reformist histories”—a genre of popular historical works written in an alluring and captivating way to foster a rethinking of commonplace assumptions about the evolution of religious communities, the roles of reformers in society, and the place of spirituality in human history.

Keywords: outsider history-makers, reformist histories, civilizations, reformers, spirituality

Introduction

This article examines the historical works of an Indonesian cleric named Hamka (1908–1981).1 Described by one commentator as “one of the most prominent Southeast Asian Muslim writers of this century... remembered not only for his thirty-volume Tafsir al-Azhar, but also for several novels, [and] an immense quantity of journalistic writings in a number of

1. Hamka is an acronym for his full name, Haji Abdul Malik bin Karim Amrullah.

ISSN: 0272-3433, electronic ISSN 1533-8576.
© 2015 by The Regents of the University of California and the National Council on Public History. All rights reserved.
Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Rights and Permissions Web site: www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp. DOI: 10.1525/tph.2015.37.3.10.
newspapers and magazines,” Hamka dedicated much of his lifetime to writing histories that are still widely read by Indonesians and other Malay-speaking peoples in Southeast Asia. His corpus includes well-trodden themes such as the global history of Islam, great Muslim personalities, and the history of spiritual movements in Islam, and all his works were reprinted several times by virtue of their popularity.

Hamka is particularly worthy of scrutiny because his historical writings have now become a source of reference for professional Southeast Asian historians working on similar topics. One of the doyens of Indonesian Studies has perceptively noted that, in Indonesia, popular history books written by writers such as Hamka “often vastly exceed the influence of academic works, since [their] publication[s are] more widespread and possess great appeal among the people.” Jeffrey Hadler reinforced this point by stressing that Hamka’s writings are acknowledged as sources of reference for both general public and esteemed scholars such as Harry Benda, Anthony Reid, Taufik Abdullah and Deliar Noer, among others. This distinctive trait of Hamka’s works is striking because he single-handedly bridged the gaps between academic and public historians in Indonesia.

How then can we best characterize writers such as Hamka who straddled being a cleric, a preacher, and an educator, while remaining committed to writing popular histories? This article develops the argument that Hamka is best described as an “outsider history-maker.” Originally formulated by Benjamin Filene in this journal, the term outsider history-maker refers to persons “working outside museums and universities, without professional training, and often without funding, [who] are approaching history in ways that fire the enthusiasm of thousands.” Filene’s list of outsider history-makers includes “genealogists, heritage tourism developers, re-enactors, collectors, interviewers, bloggers, scrapbookers, and artists.” Unlike professional historians, outsider history-makers have the potential of creating influential “passionate histories” that cover themes that are often neglected or downplayed by those based in the academe, “core themes that operate on the level of instinct more than intellect.”

This article goes beyond classifying Hamka as an outsider history-maker as defined by Filene. Departing from Filene’s idea that outsider history-makers operate out of “instinct” while professional historians utilize a great deal of “intellect,” I argue that such distinctions do not accurately represent either of them. Both outsider history-makers and professional historians place a great

deal of importance on instinct and intellect. What differentiates one from another is the primary audience at which their respective works are directed. Outsider history-makers such as Hamka seek to make history accessible to the general public while professional historians place a high degree of importance in addressing the scholarly community and expanding the frontiers of the historical discipline in academe.

Outsider history-makers, to my mind, go a step further in that they fuse their individual experiences with that of collective memories in their historical narratives. Rather than relegating or suspending their own subjective positions towards the past, they state their biases openly, their preferences avowedly, and their agendas clearly in order to enliven history for the consumption of the general public. Pierre Nora in his influential essay “Between Memory and History” registered the coming into being of outsider history-makers, which to him, was a result of the disintegration of the age-old distinction between history and memory since the 1950s. The new type of historian, according to Nora, emerged, “who unlike his precursors, is ready to confess the intimate relation he maintains to his subject. Better still, he is ready to proclaim it, deepen it, make of it not the obstacle but the means of his understanding.”

As an outsider history-maker, Hamka clearly proclaimed his individual agendas and purposes. It is for this reason that I find it appropriate to describe Hamka’s works as “reformist histories.” I use “reformist histories” because Hamka’s historical works were guided by the belief that history can be utilized as a tool to reform the minds of ordinary Southeast Asian Muslims. History fulfills a practical function for outsider history-makers such as Hamka who do not merely narrate facts through their reformist histories; instead, they present facts to challenge conventional and commonplace assumptions about the past, in order to bring about changes in the everyday life and ways of thinking of their readers. Outsider history-makers writing reformist histories do not just inform their audience about past events, societies, and movements; they inspire their readers to draw lessons from the past—lessons that can be put to use in the present and the future.

Writing mainly in the vernacular Malay-Indonesian language to reach to his primary audience, Hamka hoped that Southeast Asian Muslims would become cognizant of the achievements of their ancestors, and therefore believe that they too could construct a flourishing civilization by learning how their forebears succeeded and by understanding the factors that led to their downfall. This article critically examines a few strands of Hamka’s reformist histories. First, these histories compellingly describe the vastness of Islamic civilization while connecting its disparate and fragmented strands. By linking

8. Hamka, Sejarah Umat Islam (Singapura: Pustaka Nasional, 1994), 2. This is a Singaporean reprint of the first edition that was published in Jakarta in 1965.
the Arab world of Islam with other centers of the faith in Africa, Asia, and Europe into one seamless and synergistic whole, as evinced in his nine-hundred-page *Sejarah Umat Islam* (*History of the Muslims*), Hamka sought to reform the self-identity of Southeast Asian Muslims into a feeling of belonging to a millennium-old civilization.9

The second strand of Hamka’s reformist histories underscores the agency of grassroots reformers in determining the course of Muslim history and the lessons that can be learned from their attempts to overcome the odds that were stacked against them. In his books on the celebrated reformer Sayyid Jamaluddin Al-Afghani and a personal account of his own father’s struggles, Hamka hoped to convince readers to see these personalities as dedicated individuals who sought to reform their societies through their writings and the institutions that they established. These two personalities, in Hamka’s formulation, were archetypes for later generations of Muslims to emulate in their endeavor to realize a modern and progressive society that was freed from foreign domination. Their life stories are signposts for Muslims to cope with change and reform in their societies.10

One last but no less distinctive strand of Hamka’s reformist histories lies in their emphasis on Islamic mysticism as an instrument of Muslim life. In Hamka’s view, the growth and decline of Muslim societies could be attributed partly to the spiritual tendencies of Muslims. His *Tasauf: Perkembangan dan Pemurniannya* (*Islamic Mysticism: Its Development and Reform*) documented Islamic mysticism as an essential core of Muslim life that was both a potential source of strength and an obstacle to Muslim progress.11 His main thesis was that Islamic mysticism must undergo a continuous process of reform for it to serve as a contributive factor in the Muslim quest for relevance and self-determination.

Before proceeding to discuss these three strands of reformist histories in detail, a note about the general landscape of Muslim historiography as well as the other overlapping contexts is needed here, in order to explain why Hamka was so active in history writing from the 1950s to the 1980s and the circumstances that made his historical works so appealing up through today. The years following the end of the Second World War witnessed the growth of a new trend in historiography throughout the Muslim world that was driven by the ideals of Islamic resurgence. Muslims of varying backgrounds and professions took on the essential task of writing new Muslim histories to achieve several purposes, such as galvanizing Muslims to unite under the framework of nation-states, critiquing and

offering alternatives to Orientalist writings about Muslim histories, providing new perspectives on the forgotten struggles of Muslims against colonial rule, and celebrating the achievements of Muslims prior to the ascendance of the West.\textsuperscript{12} The group of fledgling writers who helped to expand the postwar Muslim historiography included clerics. For instance, the Pakistani cleric Maulana Abul A’la Maududi’s book, \textit{A Short History of the Revivalist Movement in Islam}, enjoyed immediate commercial success upon its initial publication in Urdu in 1963. It was translated into English and other languages in the following decades.\textsuperscript{13} Sharing similar success was the Egyptian don Ahmad Shalabi who also wrote popular Muslim history books that enjoyed widespread admiration. After being dismissed from the \textit{Dar al-Ulum} (House of Sciences) in Cairo, Shalabi taught for several years at the Islamic University of Indonesia (1955–1963). Shalabi’s book \textit{The History of Islam and its Culture} (first published in Arabic in 1970) enjoyed a wide reception throughout the Muslim world and was reprinted several times in the Malay-Indonesian languages.\textsuperscript{14}

A similar trend in historical writings within the wider Muslim world was also evident in Southeast Asia. Muslim historiography received an encouraging boost during the period of decolonization, thanks to students who were trained in Western and Islamic universities.\textsuperscript{15} Hundreds of new histories of Islam were published to inform and inspire the public about the splendors of the pre-colonial era. The spread of mass education and literacy and the advent of print capitalism resulted in the mass production of books, journals, and magazines, which further enhanced the consumption of these popular books on Islamic history. In Indonesia from the 1960s onwards, reformist Muslims organized conferences and wrote new Muslim histories that would indirectly challenge the official national histories produced by the Indonesian state.\textsuperscript{16}

Hamka was at the crest of this new wave of Muslim historiography in addition to participating in various efforts to reform the Muslim community in Indonesia and the Malay World. He strove to popularize the reformist ideas from the Middle East and South Asia within the Indonesian context. His project of Islamic reform was Janus-faced in that he sought to expose his readers to the developments in the global Muslim community as a whole, while, at the same time, addressing problems and issues in the local context. Such an outlook was in part inspired by one of his mentors, Agus Salim.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Yvonne Haddad, \textit{Contemporary Islam and the Challenge of History} (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982).
\item \textsuperscript{13} Maulana Abul A’la Maududi, \textit{A Short History of the Revivalist Movement in Islam} (Karachi: Islamic Publications, 1963).
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ahmad Shalabi, \textit{Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Islam} (Singapura: Penerbitan Pustaka Nasional, 1970).
\item \textsuperscript{16} Michael Wood, \textit{Official History in Modern Indonesia} (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 165–66.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Hamka, “Haji Agus Salim sebagai Sastrawan dan Ulama,” \textit{Panji Masyarakat} 284 (December, 1979): 39.
\end{itemize}
Indeed, what clearly distinguished him from other Indonesian writers in his time was not only that he wrote in the vernacular Malay-Indonesian language or that he focused on Islamic history. Rather, his importance comes from the fact that his historical works obliquely addressed local challenges and also exposed his audience to the general discourse of reformist modernism that he sought to promote.

Uppermost on Hamka’s list of concerns was the rapid growth of secularism among Muslims in Indonesia. Secularist thinking came in a variety of forms: from those who advocated a privatization of religion, separate from the public sphere, to those who envisioned the creation of socialist state, to the proponents of militant communism. The mass executions of communists in Indonesia in the 1960s sent shockwaves to all Muslims not only about the brutality of the state, but also the spread of communism in that country.\(^\text{18}\) One thread that binds these different strands of secularist thinking was the reinterpretation of the importance of Islam in the lives of ordinary Indonesians. Since the 1960s, this secular trend has troubled many Indonesian clerics and Muslim activists, including Hamka.\(^\text{19}\) To combat secularism, Hamka advocated a modernized Islamic education. Hamka was part of the Muhammadiyah modernist movement that was critical of the backwardness of the traditional ulama (Muslim scholars) and their adherence to old interpretations of Islamic history that did not appeal to the emerging class of educated Muslims. The Muhammadiyah movement founded schools that taught modern subjects along with the Islamic sciences. Students were also taught world history as part of the movement’s efforts to keep the students’ abreast of the developments in the larger ummah (global Muslim community).\(^\text{20}\)

Among the other germane issues was the mushrooming of heretical Sufi cults in the country and, with it, the rise of anti-Sufi thinking among many mainstream Muslims. In the 1970s, for example, Javanese mystical groups agitated for official recognition of their heterodox practices, a move that gained the ire of major Muslim organizations such as the Muhammadiyah. The divide between Sufis and anti-Sufis became so marked during this period that some Sufi groups were accused by their adversaries as closet communists, or at least, of providing shelter for former communists.\(^\text{21}\) History writing was thus one avenue that Hamka used to remind the Muslims about their shared heritage, the need to preserve it and to remember those personalities that

worked towards the restoration of Islamic brotherhood. This could also explain why Hamka’s works continue to remain popular. The issues that he touched on through his reformist histories are still very much alive and vigorously debated in Indonesia.  

Because Hamka’s reformist histories dealt with these pertinent challenges, he and many other clerics with similar approaches broadened their appeal and made “significant contributions to public discourses, . . . even in setting the terms for such discourses.” Jeff Hadler was scarcely exaggerating when he described Hamka as “the most popular ulama (cleric)” in Indonesia from the 1960s till the 1980s. By the 1930s, Hamka’s books were already found in the libraries of local schools. His ardent followers were school students and young adults. Mesmerized by his historical works, a notable group of young scholars went on to do research on many topics about the history of Islam in Southeast Asia that Hamka documented in the Sejarah Umat Islam. It is to Hamka’s reformist histories that we now turn.

Globalizing the Connected Histories of the Muslim Peoples

This section examines the first aspect of Hamka’s reformist histories—its enticing prose and unique arguments that were employed to describe the vastness and connectedness of Muslim history, as shown in the Sejarah Umat Islam (History of the Muslims). A monumental work that resulted from two decades of research (from 1939 till 1961), this book was the first global history of the Muslim peoples to be written in the Malay-Indonesian language. Divided into seven parts and thirty-nine chapters, the book begins, like most histories of Islam, with pre-Islamic Arab society and the conditions that gave rise to the first Muslim, Muhammad. His approach to the life of the Prophet is innovative because he does not only utilize traditional sources such as the hadiths (Prophet sayings) but also the works of non-Muslim scholars whom he found to be objective and reliable. This is followed by the period of the Righteous Caliphs (Khulafa Rashidun), the Umayyads, the Abbasids, and the Muslim kingdoms in Spain, Africa, Persia, South Asia, and Turkey. The last chapter of the book traces the history of Islam in Southeast Asia up to the

22. For debates over Islamic issues which Hamka touched in his reformist histories, see Carool Kersten, Islam in Indonesia: The Contest for Society, Values and Ideas (Hurst & Company and Oxford University Press, 2015).
seventeenth century. As a form of reformist history, the *Sejarah Umat Islam* manifests some interesting features that enabled it to shape the thinking of the masses.

Hamka wrote in a style that evokes emotions and provided historical facts with a sense of contemporary and contextual relevance. *Sejarah Umat Islam* incorporates the use of all four types of emplotment strategies in historical writing as explained by Hayden White (romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire) throughout the book.\(^{27}\) This style of writing history is, of course, not unique to this particular work by Hamka, nor to him alone. It is a style that distinguishes many public and popular histories in Indonesia and beyond. Simon Schama called such a style of writing the “poetic connexion” in that historians strive to “persuade our readers or our viewers to suspend their disbelief; to spend a while imagining they are indeed in a world akin, I suppose, to dreams or memories, a fugitive universe.”\(^{28}\) From this, it follows that Hamka’s structuring of the book makes Muslim history applicable to the present while being a basis for reflection and further action. The Muslim past, from this vantage point, is not a foreign country; it is, instead, a living trove of wisdom and a mirror of introspection, which Muslims are called upon to empathize, reflect on, and draw upon, to understand their own circumstances and to strive towards the construction of a better future.

A few examples will suffice to illustrate Hamka’s evocative, persuasive, and advocacy-oriented writing style. He explained, for example, that the chapter on the life of Prophet Muhammad was written for the sole reason of providing “lessons for my people who are at the nascent stages of awakening.”\(^{29}\) A few pages later, in a preamble for the chapter on Andalusia, Hamka stressed that readers will encounter “with much sadness the expulsion of Muslims from Spain... Hence you will witness the never-ending struggle and reach the conclusion that Islam has gone through so many tribulations. It fell asunder too often! But it rose again, and stood firm and moved on. Islam will not succumb!”\(^{30}\) A third example is found in the pages on the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mu’tazz (847–869). Hamka portrayed the caliph as an unpopular king whose tyranny, lust for power, and love for worldly wealth led to his assassination and the ceding of power to Turkish mercenaries. Writing in a hyperbolic way to warn his readers about the dangers of following in the footsteps of Caliph Al-Mu’tazz, Hamka wrote: “Thus came to an end the life of a human being who traversed all avenues for position. The Turks become more powerful

---

as a result of this, distributing the monies from the state treasury to fill up their stomachs.”

The second reformist aspect of the *Sejarah Umat Islam* is its presentation of the vast history of Islam and Muslims in an interconnected and comparative way, rather than in separate, distinct regional or national units. Notably, Hamka’s approach is in line with his contemporary, the path-breaking Islamicist Marshall Hodgson. Hodgson maintained that, “Islamic civilization should be studied not only in the several regions where it flourished, but also as a historical whole, as a major element in forming the destiny of all mankind. The vast Islamic society certainly has been this.” Hamka made frequent comparative references between the societies and histories of the Arab-Muslim world and those of their African, Turkish, and Southeast Asian counterparts. As an outsider history-maker who was not bound by the rules of academic history, he went further to move effortlessly across time and space in two main ways.

In the first place, Hamka sought to draw similarities and parallels between occurrences that took place in one Muslim context with those of another. This approach to the narration of Muslim history is employed throughout the book. One interesting example is the section on Arab society before the coming of the Prophet. Here Hamka explained the differences between the language of the people of Hijaz and those in Yemen in the sixth century. Such differences, to him, could be closely compared to the variations between the Malay language in Indonesia and in Malaysia in the 1960s. Later, in a section on the Caliph Al-Mustakfi (905–949) who reigned for less than a year before he was deposed, Hamka compared the fate of this Abbasid caliph with the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Majid II who was deposed and exiled by Kamal Ataturk after reigning for barely two years (November 1922–March 1924).

Aside from drawing parallels between different contexts, Hamka leaped from one time zone to another to show recurrences within one geographical area. Frederick Cooper has criticized such an approach, branding it as “leapfrogging legacies.” By this, he meant a historian who commits the fallacy of showing connections between events in two different time periods without explaining the processes that took place in between and the circumstances that may explain these recurrences. For outsider history-makers like Hamka, leapfrogging legacies are a source of strength rather than weakness because such an approach engenders more alluring historical narratives. The history of the city of Tripoli in modern-day Libya is a case in point. Hamka discussed how and why Tripoli was continuously subjected to foreign colonization, the longest

---


duration of which was under the Turks in the sixteenth century. Many hundred years later, in 1912, the same city was again subjected to colonial rule, this time by Italy. Hamka did not discuss what happened between these two different time periods, or why Tripoli was prone to foreign invasion.\textsuperscript{36}

In a similar way, Hamka narrated what he views as an unbroken chain of battles between Muslims and the Crusaders. Although mainstream historians maintain that the Crusades ended in the thirteenth century, Hamka argued otherwise. To him, the spirit of the crusades remained in the hearts of the European imperialists for several centuries only to re-emerge in the twentieth century. “During the first world war,” Hamka wrote, “Palestine was taken over by the English. Lord Allenby, the commander of the English forces, was obviously not able to suppress what was embedded in his heart when he exclaimed: ‘Now the Crusades have formally ended with this conquest of Palestine!’”\textsuperscript{37}

One other reformist feature of Hamka’s \textit{Sejarah Umat Islam} is its heavy emphasis on Malay-Islamic history. The attention given to the Malay World was a marked departure from most textbooks and surveys of the global history of Islam that were published from the 1930s to the 1960s. Until the late twentieth century, Southeast Asia was always marginalized within the field of Islamic studies because the beliefs and practices of Muslims in that region were presumed to be derivatives of Middle Eastern Islam.\textsuperscript{38} Hamka filled this lacuna in the literature by dedicating one-third of his nine-hundred-page book to describing the evolution of Islam in the Malay World, covering topics such as the Hindu-Buddhist legacies, the theories of Islamization, the spread of Islam in different kingdoms throughout the region, the impact of colonialism, and early Muslim resistance towards colonial rule. Hamka’s approach to sources and revisionist elucidations of the Islamization of the Malay World vividly demonstrate the book’s reformist character.

In terms of sources, Hamka afforded a balanced and thoughtful view of Orientalists and their studies of Islamic history at a time when most Muslim writers were cynical towards Orientalism.\textsuperscript{39} Muslims in the Malay World, Hamka urged, should be open-minded and not be swayed by \textit{tekanan politik} (political pressures) so much so that they become biased against the works of non-Muslim scholars.\textsuperscript{40} Orientalist writings about Islam and Muslims were to be critiqued and corrected when interpretive errors get in the way of accurate representations of Muslim pasts. The works of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Hamka, \textit{Sejarah Umat Islam}, 325.
\item \textsuperscript{39} See, for example: A. L. Tibawi, “English Speaking Orientalists,” \textit{Islamic Quarterly} 8 (1964): 25–64.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Hamka, \textit{Sejarah Umat Islam}, 666.
\end{itemize}
Orientalists must, however, be credited when they exhibit a perceptive and in-depth understanding of Muslim societies. Hamka acknowledged the scholarly interventions of Thomas Arnold, Gustave Le Bon, R.A Kern, and N.J. Krom, whose writings on Islam tended to be fair and objective. He was more circumspect towards Dutch Orientalists because of a sense that imperialistic and missionary ends may have colored their research. Hamka’s methodological position was thus analogous to another prominent Southeast Asian historian, Syed Naquib Al-Attas, who also acknowledged the contributions of Dutch Orientalists with a guarded awareness of their biases and prejudices. In the opening pages of *Sejarah Umat Islam*, Hamka wrote at length:

Finally, we must be thankful towards the Dutch scholars who have researched the history of Muslim kingdoms during their periods of greatness. A reading of the research of the Dutch scholars provides us with many sources on the evolution of Islam and its growth in Indonesia. They were the ones who propounded the theories of history and the attendant facts, to the point of the minutest details... But the research of these scholars should not to be accepted uncritically. There are two issues, which they could not distance themselves from fully, and their historical writings may be tainted by these ‘hidden agendas.’ They are: First of all, colonial and hegemonic interests. Secondly, the Christian missionizing ends.

However, Hamka did not dwell on a drawn-out critique of Orientalism; to do so would have given too much attention to the very knowledge that he hoped to deconstruct. He sought instead to transcend the limitations of these works by providing his own revisionist interpretation of the Islamization of the Malay World. Hamka criticized Orientalists who attributed the spread of Islam in the Malay world to missionaries from India, thus post-dating the arrival of the religion to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. He instead pointed to evidence from Chinese, Arab, and Persian records that suggested that Muslim missionaries and traders had already set foot in the Malay world as early as the seventh century, during the period of the Umayyads.


seventh century onwards, Arabs established colonies in the region, and these Arabs converted the Hindu-Buddhist Malays to Islam and introduced a new religious life and worldview among the Malays.

Hamka acknowledged the roles of other Muslim missionaries from India, China, Persia, and the agency of the Malays themselves in furthering what the Arabs had achieved. These later Muslim missionaries gradually propagated Islam in the region, making the Malay world one of the most populous Muslim regions in the world. How did they achieve this? Hamka proposed a seven-stage periodization framework that was designed to encourage his readers to rethink how Islam developed in the Malay world within the context of the global evolution of the faith.\(^{45}\)

Encyclopedic and, in many respects, a tour de force, the *Sejarah Umat Islam* suffered from one glaring limitation: the bulk of the text covers the history of statesmen and caliphs, their intrigues, successes, and failures. It would be too far-fetched simply to label the book as a political history because Hamka devoted many pages to cultural, intellectual, and social developments within various Muslim societies, along with geographical details of many parts of the Muslim World. In a passage within the text, he stated that “[o]nly the kings fell, Islam itself did not. If in the past the kings were the bastions of Islam, in the years that ensued, the bastions of Islam were the hearts of ordinary Muslims.”\(^{46}\) We can only surmise that Hamka saw that a reformist history of such length and scope could be made simpler and more accessible to his lay readers by focusing on powerful figures that influenced the shape of events in the Muslim world. Hamka’s method of addressing the limitations of his own magnum opus was to write his own biographies of Muslim grassroots reformers.

### On the Agency of Grassroots Reformers

The grassroots reformers that became the subjects of Hamka’s sharp pen were Sayyid Jamaluddin Al-Afghani (1839–1897) and Hamka’s own father, Abdul Karim Amrullah (1879–1945). I use the term “grassroots reformers” because the term aptly captures Hamka’s description of these two figures as *tokoh pergerakan dan tajdid*, which can be translated as “social movement and renewal personalities.” The two figures were involved in the intellectual reform of the Muslims at the same time that they were active in collectives that endeavored to change various aspects of their social, educational, and economic conditions. Born in Afghanistan, Al-Afghani travelled across the Middle East, South Asia, and Europe to promote Pan-Islamic unity, Islamic modernism, and resistance against West during the heydays of European


colonialism. While Al-Afghani was involved in transnational causes and promoted the creation of a global Muslim identity, Abdul Karim Amrullah had its eyes centered on the reformation of the local Indonesian community by advocating the abolition of bid’ah (innovation in Islam) and the adoption of modern forms of education. The two seemingly overlapping projects of these reformers are reflected in the titles of the books, namely, *Said Djamaludin Al-Afghany: Pelopor Kebangkitan Islam* (*Said Djamaludin Al-Afghany: The Pioneer of Islamic Revivalism*) and *Ayahku: Riwayat Hidup Dr. H. Abdul Karim Amrullah dan Perjuangan Kaum Agama di Sumatera* (*My Father: A Biography of Dr. H. Abdul Karim Amrullah and the Struggle of Religious Groups in Sumatra*). These two books ought to be analyzed together rather than separately, since they are similar in several ways.

Both books followed the same narrative structure, tracing the indelible impact that western colonialism and Muslim lack of development had on the formative years of these two grassroots reformers. Hamka went on to explain the forms of resistance that the two men faced both inside and outside of Muslim society. He examined the ways in which these reformers transformed Muslim minds in order to prepare them to cope with the challenges of Western modernity. Undergirding these biographies is the emphasis given to the strategic alliances that these men forged with equally talented and committed personalities to further their reformist goals. Hamka’s biographies, from this perspective, differed significantly from most Western biographies, in which “a biographer usually focuses on his or her subject’s individuality, those aspects, attitudes, and abilities that separate the subject from the masses.” Al-Afghani and Abdul Karim Amrullah were not necessarily distinct from the Muslim masses. Hamka showed how many individuals and groups in their milieu aided their causes while molding their worldviews and ideas.

Both books also reflect Paula Backscheider’s point that most “decisions to write a biography of a specific person have an element of intellectual or personal passion.” Personal passion drove him to write the biography of his father, who was, as Harry Benda handsomely put it, “one of the most impressive and influential representatives of Indonesian reformism.” Hamka maintained that one of the factors that spurred him to work on the biography was the fact that, since he was “the eldest child and was able to observe him [his

father] up close, I knew more about his aspirations, his acquaintances, his likings, his passions, and his idiosyncrasies as a human being.”

Intellectual motivations, in turn, encouraged him to write the biography of Al-Afghani. He praised the European, American, and Muslim scholars who had all recognized the long shadow that Al-Afghani has cast in the history of revivalism in Asia and Africa, so much so that no study of Islam would be complete without a reference to him. His biography thus adds to a growing body of work on Al-Afghani that is now being written in the Malay-Indonesian language.

But Hamka’s authorial motivations were not only guided by personal passions, familial connections, and intellectual curiosities. A close reading of these biographies reveals that Hamka was also driven by other aims that were in line with his vocation as an outsider history-maker engaged in the writing of reformist histories. Above all, he hoped that these biographies would instill a sense of pride in the hearts of Muslim youths—a group to which he directed most of his works throughout his writing career. By telling the life stories of Al-Afghani and Abdul Karim Amrullah, Hamka hoped to make Muslim youths realize the importance of piety, fortitude, and determination in any person’s attempt to reform his society. Ignorance of these virtues could result in the creation of a generation of Muslims whose “spirits are diminished” (berjiwa kecil) and who would forget that they were once a great people.

Hamka specifically targeted Muslim youths as the main audience of these biographies because this group played the most important role in expanding the appeal of the Islamic reformism that was pioneered by both Al-Afghani and Abdul Karim Amrullah. In Sumatra and Java, where Abdul Karim Amrullah spent most of his life spreading the message of Islamic reformism, youths from Muslim schools helped to recruit many Muslims to join reformist organizations such as the Muhammadiyah.

Secondly, the study of the lives of personalities served to remind Muslims in the Malay World of the need to see themselves as belonging to a genealogy of struggles for freedom and reformation. The life journey of Al-Afghani, according to Hamka, and the multitude of obstacles and opportunities that he had undergone were not unique; rather, they were typical of the kinds of experiences that will be faced by any Muslim who seeks to follow his path. His father, Abdul Karim Amrullah, faced setbacks that were similar to those encountered by Al-Afghani. In point of fact, one chapter of the biography of Abdul Karim Amrullah was devoted to a discussion of the fates of Al-Afghani and his followers in the Arab world and Southeast Asia, by way

51. Hamka, Ayahku, i. In Malay: “sebagai seorang anaknya yang tertua dan dapat melihat beliau dari dekat, saya lebih banyak mengetahui cita-citanya, lingkungannya, kesukaannya, kese-nangannya dan perangai-perangainya sebagai manusia.”

52. Hamka, Said Djamaluddin Al-Afghany, 11.


of showing that the reformist project was not only global in reach, but also that
the life of one Muslim reformer would inevitably reflect or at least mirror that
of another. Hamka also admonishes his readers to avoid arguing about
Al-Afghani’s nationality in the closing pages of the biography:

[W]e are not concerned with whether he [Al-Afghani] is Iranian or Afghan.
What is clear is that he belongs to the entire Muslim world. Indonesia is his
homeland too. His portraits are hung in Indonesia but not in Afghanistan or
even in Iran. The history of the reformist movement in Indonesia begins with
the diffusion of the ideas and teachings of Djamaluddin and Abduh into
Indonesia, at around 1906AD/1326M.\textsuperscript{57}

Third, the two biographies served as launching pads for the critique of
selected social groups in society. Hamka singled out the umara (leaders) and
the ulama (religious scholars) as groups that had been the source of hindrance
to progress, stifling the ability of Muslim societies to adapt to modern life.
These two groups schemed against reformers to protect their status and
positions. Ideally, the leaders and religious scholars were supposed to be
the torchbearers of development, unity, and intellectualism. But in the case
of Al-Afghani, the reverse held true; these groups rejected him. Writing in an
emotive way, Hamka explained:

The biggest obstacle to Muslim unity. . . . was not anyone else but the kings.
And they were supported by a group called the ulama! The kings exploited
the common people, oppressing them, making them ignorant, and the ulama
supported the kings! Both of these obstacles must be removed. First by way
enhancing the energies of the common people, eradicating their ignorance. And
more importantly by breaking the ropes of taqlid. That is to follow blindly.\textsuperscript{58}

Abdul Karim Amrullah, by Hamka’s account, faced the same resistance from
state-sponsored ulama in his society. Among his father’s staunch enemies
were Sufi scholars who labeled Abdul Karim Amrullah and his followers as
orang-orang sesat (deviant people).\textsuperscript{59}

In the last analysis, the biographies that Hamka wrote are but a reflection
of who he was. Or, in the words of Shirley Leckie, “[a]ll biography is, in part,
autobiographical.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{57.} Hamka, \textit{Said Djamaluddin Al-Afghany}, 175. In Malay: “Tidaklah kita perdui apakah dia
orang Iran atau Afghan. Jang terang ialah bahawa dia kepunjaan seluruh dunia Islam. Indonesia
inipun negerinya. Di Indonesia lebih banjat gambaran digantungkan orang, daripada di Afghan
atau di Iran sendiri. Gerakan tajdid Islam di Indonesia selalu di mulai sedjarahnja dengan masuknja
faham dan adjaran Djamaluddin dan Abduh ke Indonesia, disekitar tahun 1906M/1326M.”

dari kesantuan kaum Muslimin. . . . bukanlah orang lain, tetapi radja2 sendiri. Dan dia disokong
oleh golongan jang dinamai ulama!Radja memeras tenaga rakjat, menindasnja, memperbodohnja
dan golongan jang dinamai ulama menjokongnja! Kedua penghalang besar itu harus disingkirkan.
Pertama dengan menegangkan ketjerdasan rakjat, memghilangkan kebodohannja. Dan terutama
lagi ialah memutuskan tali rantai taqlid. Iaitu menurut sadja dengan membuta tuli.”

\textsuperscript{59.} Hamka, \textit{Ayahku}, 290–92.

\textsuperscript{60.} Shirley A. Leckie, “Biography Matters: Why Historians Need Well-Crafted Biographies
Hamka as an outsider history-maker pursued his own ideas of reforms without necessarily making these ideas too explicit in his narratives. This implicit strategy is replicated in his examination of Sufism.

**Sufism as an Instrument of Muslim life**

No discussion of Hamka’s reformist histories would be complete without a reference to his writings on Sufism (Islamic mysticism). Michael Feener has observed that Hamka’s writings on Sufism “represented a major step in establishing Islamic mysticism as a legitimate force in contemporary Indonesia.” Such a feat could not have been accomplished, of course, without his illustrating the historical roots of the mystical traditions of Islam to justify his position, towards which end he published *Perkembangan Tasauf dari Abad ke-Abad* (*The Development of Islamic Mysticism from Age to Age*, 1952), later expanded and republished under the title *Tasauf: Perkembangan dan Pemurniannya* (*Islamic Mysticism: Its Development and Reform*, 1983). Tasauf: *Perkembangan dan Pemurniannya* did achieve its goal of establishing mysticism in the minds of the Malay-Indonesian public, as seen from the wide popularity which the book enjoyed for more than four decades. Extending Feener’s line of argument, I would argue that Hamka’s main intent in writing a compact yet reflexive book that traces the origins and global career of Sufism from the time of Prophet Muhammad until the twentieth century resulted from his desire to correct and reform erroneous understandings of historical Sufism. Aside from that, he used the book as a vehicle to develop the central point that Sufism had been a powerful instrument of Muslim life, and that it could still play this role so long as it was properly conceived and practiced. Tasauf: *Perkembangan dan Pemurniannya* is thus a reformist history of global Sufism written by an outsider-history maker whose goal was to encourage a rethinking of the place and functions of spirituality in Muslim life.

One-fifth of the book is devoted to discussing and correcting non-Muslim definitions of Sufism. If the Orientalists were given due acknowledgement in the *Sejarah Umat Islam* for their meticulousness and devotion in studying Islamic history, in *Tasauf: Perkembangan dan Pemurniannya*, Hamka went to great length to deconstruct and dismantle their ideas on Sufism, and thereby gives his own perspective on what Islamic mysticism should be. The Orientalists, according to Hamka, committed several errors in explaining Sufism. Most disturbing to him was the claim that Sufism was a foreign import into the heart of Islam. Most Orientalists, according to Hamka, “were of the view that [Sufism] drew primarily from Persian or Hindu teachings, or from Christianity.

63. Julia Howell has rightly observed that Hamka “recommends his modified *tasawwuf* as a remedy for modern materialism.” See Julia Howell, “Indonesia’s Salafist Sufis,” *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2010), 1040.
or Greek philosophy. And there are those who held that the roots of Islamic Sufism could be traced from all of the above.\textsuperscript{64}

He questions this misconception of Sufism, arguing instead that Sufism grew from its own telaga (well) of which its foundations were the Qur’an and the Sunnah (the examples shown by the Prophet Muhammad). Hamka went on to assert that the parallels between Sufism and other religions and philosophies do not necessarily prove that these different variants of thinking and practices drew from each other. He inferred (without actually referencing or qualifying his stand with historical arguments) that the striking resemblances between Sufism and other spiritual practices and philosophies arose out of man’s desire and sincerity in searching for the true meaning of God. Put differently, it is the innate nature of man to be spiritual regardless of his religious or philosophical backgrounds. This innate spirituality common to all men and women was the shared basis that made Sufism almost akin to Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Hellenistic spiritualities.\textsuperscript{65}

But the Orientalists, in his view, were not the only ones who misunderstood the origins, purposes, and essence of Sufism. Hamka used the book to problematize mistaken ideas about Sufism by Muslims themselves. He directed his attention to Muslims in the Malay World who overlooked the fact that the pristine form of Sufism was the one that was practiced by the Prophet Muhammad, who held on to the ideals and injunctions of the Qur’an. In Java, Indonesia, Hamka stressed, where Sufi practices have been predominant for many generations, there existed Sufi practices lacking any scriptural basis. These practices have, at times, become a religion of their own that is “neither Islam, nor Buddhist, and nor Christian.”\textsuperscript{66} To Hamka, this was one of the excesses of Sufism that ought to be corrected through a presentation of pious predecessors who followed the spiritual path of the Prophet of Islam.

Hamka also disagreed with many of his reformist compatriots (including his own father) who deemed Sufism to be the root cause of Muslim decline, passivity, and weakness. Sufism, according to most Islamic modernist critiques, is but a retreat from real life propagated by reclusive figures.\textsuperscript{67} The global history of Sufism, in Hamka’s eyes, provided a more nuanced assessment of the role of Sufism and other spiritual movements in Islam. Sufism was an alat (instrument) of Muslim life that empowered many Muslims to overcome various challenges in life. When properly understood, lived and taught, Sufism

\textsuperscript{64} Hamka, \textit{Tasauf: Perkembangan dan Pemurniannya}, 38. In Malay: “berpendapat bahawa pokok pengambilannya ialah ajaran Persia, atau Hindu, atau agama Nasrani atau Filsafat Yunani. Dan ada yang berpendapat sumber Tasauf Islamy ialah dari semuannya itu.”

\textsuperscript{65} Hamka, \textit{Tasauf: Perkembangan dan Pemurniannya}, 65–66. A revisionist scholar on Sufism affirms Hamka’s argument by stating that “[r]ather than thinking in terms of ‘adaptations’ or ‘borrowings,’ we may be better off seeing parallels as art of what has been described as a ‘semiotic koine’ that was common to Muslims, Christians and Jews in the early centuries of Islamic rule.” See Nile Green, \textit{Sufism: A Global History} (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 17.

\textsuperscript{66} Hamka, \textit{Tasauf: Perkembangan dan Pemurniannya}, 251.

could return Muslims to the glorious days of high intellectualism, military prowess, and civilizational excellence that he examined in the *Sejarah Umat Islam*. To quote Hamka at length here:

The analysis of some of these effects has made it plainly obvious that Sufism can be an instrument to cope with life, yet it can also be fatal. With Sufism, great personalities such as Diponegoro, Imam Bonjol, and Cik Di Tiro resisted the colonizers. With Sufism, Amir Abdul Kadir fought the French. Even the country now established as Libya, was once built upon zawiyas (Sufi lodges) for the people of the suluk (Sufi path) . . . But not a few among the Sufi groups in the East have blocked the paths to progressive thought, because development in [mystical] experiences was not balanced with knowledge and intelligence.68

On this score, Hamka’s interpretations anticipated the latest revisionist scholarship on global Sufism that deconstructs the long-held idea that Sufism is but a set of mystical exercises and experiences. Nile Green, for that matter, has recently underlined this point by maintaining the Sufism should be properly conceptualized "as primarily a tradition of powerful knowledge, practices and persons."69

One commonality that can be discerned in Hamka’s work on Sufism as well as his biography on Al-Afghani discussed above lay in his evaluation of partisan histories. Hamka was critical of the sort of histories that are clouded by sectarian divisions within Islam. He stressed that Sufism was not the sole property of Sufis but that it was part of the many branches of Islam, practiced and to be internalized by all Muslims.70 Nor should Al-Afghani be seen as belonging to a given sect, Shiite or Sunni. Al-Afghani was the pride of the whole world of Islam.71 Hamka drove home the point that these divisive perspectives and partisan histories obscure a more comprehensive and fair view of the Muslim pasts. His own narrative was thus reformist in that he sought to promote an alternative method that transcends Muslim ethnic parochialism, sectarian fanaticism, and ideological bias in the writing of history.

**Conclusion**

Outsider history-makers writing reformist histories have widened public knowledge and appreciation of the past in ways that are not so easily achieved


by professional historians. The reasons for this are quite obvious, as seen in the case of the Indonesian cleric Hamka. Outsider history-makers can move freely across different themes without having to meet the demands of specialization. They are also able to write narratives that are wide-ranging in scope while taking occasional leaps across time and space in their narratives; feats that are impossible for those who are bound by the conventions of scholarship. The emotive prose and journalistic style which outsider history-makers utilize to structure their reformist histories also give these works the power to enthuse readers to read about the past in the same gratifying way as they would read works of fiction. More crucially, the calls to action that are so often embedded within reformist histories give them the necessary appeal to readers who prefer to view history not merely as an account of past happenings, but as tools for thinking that would be relevant for everyday life.

In 1991, Graeme Davison summed up the various strands of public history using a fashion metaphor: “People’s History is history in blue jeans; Public History is history in a tweed jacket; Applied History is history in a grey flannel suit.” I would add that Reformist History is history in flamboyant robes, written sometimes by clerics and, at other times, by social activists and grassroots reformers, whose presentation and representation of the past can pique the interest of the masses. And for that reason, they deserve our careful attention.

Khairudin Aljunied earned a PhD in the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, and is an Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore. He is the author and editor of six books, the most recent of which is a social history of anti-colonial activists entitled *Radicals: Resistance and Mobilization in Colonial Malaya* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University, 2015). His contributions to public history include book chapters published in coffee-table publications such as *Malay Heritage in Singapore* (2011), consultancy work for heritage conservation in Malaysia, serving as a co-curator for historical art exhibitions at the Nanyang School of Fine Arts (NAFA) in Singapore, and interviews for historical documentaries on various aspect of Southeast Asian pasts.