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Honoring the Saint through Poetry Recitation: Pilgrimage and the Memories of Shaikh Abdurrahman Siddiq Al-Banjari in Indragiri Hilir[†]

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Abstract: This paper is about poetry and pilgrimage in Tembilahan, Indragiri Hilir, where Abdurrahman Siddiq, a prominent *alim* who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, is buried. In addition to his treatises on theology, mysticism, and ethics, Abdurrahman Siddiq is also renowned for his contribution to Islamic literature in Sumatra. He is a famous Islamic scholar and is respected in Indragiri Hilir for his spiritual messages delivered in the form of *sya'ir* (poetry). Malay Muslims have preserved the saint's legacy through the act of pilgrimage and various cultural events and festivals. This paper argues that the recitation of Abdurrahman Siddiq's poems during the pilgrimage to Tembilahan and Islamic festivals shows how Malay Muslims honor their respected saint.

Keywords: pilgrimage; Malay text; poetry; memories; spirituality



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1. Introduction

The spread of Islam in the Malay Archipelago is reflected in the production of Islamic literature written by Islamic scholars (plural: *'ulama*; singular: *'alim*) from various Islamic backgrounds and schools of thought (*madhhab*). The production of Islamic treatises in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago was part of these *'ulama*'s attempts to (re)introduce Islamic tenets to Malay societies. Various manuscripts that circulated in the Malay world were written by *'ulama* for the reinvigoration of Islam in the archipelago and deliver the theological views of the scholars. The Java and Sumatra islands are places where a large number of Islamic manuscripts and chronicles were produced (see [Chambert-Loir and Fathurahman 1999](#); [Ricklefs 2001](#), pp. 11–12).

The works of contemporary scholars such as Azyumardi Azra, Peter G. Riddell, and Oman Fathurrahman provide important insights into Islamic history and literature, forming a framework through which to understand the life and work of Abdurrahman Siddiq. The historian Azyumardi Azra has studied the networks of *ulama* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He has examined the contested ideas and religious discourse among prominent Islamic scholars in the archipelago at that time, including Hamzah Fansuri (d. 1590?), Nur al-Din al-Raniri (d. 1658), Abd al-Rauf al-Sinkili (d. 1693), Muhammad Yusuf al-Maqassari (d. 1699), Abdul Shamad al-Palimbani (d. 1789), and Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari (d. 1812) ([Azra 2004](#)). Another scholar of Islam in Southeast Asia, Peter G. Riddell, has provided rich information on Islamic literature and the production of Malay texts by, among other things, examining Quranic translation and analyzing Muslim theological thought on *kalam* (theology) and *tasawwuf* (Sufism) in the Malay context ([Riddell 1989, 2004](#)). Similarly, Oman Fathurrahman has studied the abundance of Sumatran literary manuscripts and their connection to other Muslim societies and has observed the contested

religious discourse among Islamic scholars. While some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Muslim scholars promoted Islamic mysticism, others focused on maintaining Islamic orthodoxy (Fathurrahman 2003, 2012; Foley 2008).

The rise of the Islamic Malay literary tradition dates back to the sixteenth century to Hamzah Fansuri, who began writing poems that incorporated Islamic spirituality within the language and forms of the Malay world (Braginsky 2005, 1998; Al-Attas 1985). Hamzah Fansuri is recognized as “the forerunner of the Malay Nusantara Islamic poetic literary tradition,” which significantly influenced Malay Islamic poetic genres among Islamic scholars in Nusantara (Fathurrahman 2012, pp. 52–53; Al-Attas 1988; Riddell 2004). This tradition continued in the early twentieth century, perhaps best represented by Shaikh Abdurrahman Siddiq al-Banjari, whose treatises deal with various Islamic fields, including *kalam* (theology), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and *tasawwuf* (Sufism). Siddiq’s works circulated in the Malay world, especially in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

This paper investigates the relationship between Islamic literature in the Malay world and the current cultural and spiritual expression of Muslim communities in the Tembilahan district; it also examines the effect of Islamic literature on the collective memory of these communities. We began our research by reviewing Abdurrahman Siddiq’s works to understand his religious perspective and spiritual vision. We paid special attention to his *Sya’ir ‘Ibarat dan Khabar Qiyamat* (which literally translates as “The Metaphoric Poems and Messages on the Hereafter”). To examine the impact of literary tradition on pilgrimage, we conducted fieldwork in 2019 by attending the annual commemoration of Abdurrahman Siddiq’s death (*haul*) in the Tembilahan district, Indragiri Hilir Regency, and Riau Province. We visited his grave and participated in the *haul*, during which time thousands of pilgrims from the Sumatran and Kalimantan regions came to Tembilahan. Interviews were conducted with pilgrims and residents in Tembilahan to gain an understanding of their perceptions of—and receptiveness to—Siddiq’s legacy and poetic literary tradition. Interviews were conducted with descendants of Abdurrahman Siddiq and pilgrims from various regions. Further data were collected from informants. A list of informants is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Research Informants.

| Number | Informant | Sex | Age | Area of Origin | Identification/Work |
|--------|-----------|--------|-----|----------------|---------------------|
| 1 | NAS | Male | 45 | Tembilahan | Family/Lecturer |
| 2 | AH | Male | 40 | Pangkal Pinang | Family/Lecturer |
| 3 | AM | Male | 54 | Tembilahan | Author/Lecturer |
| 4 | SH | Male | 50 | Martapura | Pilgrim |
| 5 | BM | Male | 56 | Banjarmasin | Pilgrim |
| 6 | KB | Male | 40 | Jambi | Pilgrim |
| 7 | SM | Male | 60 | Kuala Tungkal | Pilgrim |
| 8 | BAR | Male | 45 | Johor Malaysia | Pilgrim |
| 9 | FG | Female | 22 | Tembilahan | Student |

In our interviews and conversation with the informants, we focus on some issues such as: the motivation for attending the annual commemoration of Abdurrahman Siddiq’s death (*haul*), their knowledge and impression of Abdurrahman Siddiq, views about the current practices of poetry recitation, and about the motivation to take part in a poetry reading competition.

2. Poetry and Pilgrimage

The function of poetry in Islam cannot be detached from the importance of poetry during the pre-Islamic period (*jahiliyya*), which formed the socio-cultural background of Quranic revelation. In Islamic history, there have been prominent personalities who have used “poetic expressions” to articulate their spiritual vision. Islamic scholars, Sufis, and philosophers have utilized “the language of profane or erotic love” and philosophical exposition to explain “the intuitive reason and vision of the heart” (O’Donnell 2011, pp. 72–73;

[Salleh 2013](#)). Mystical poems spread widely over generations in Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and other parts of Asia ([de Bruijn 1997](#); [Luz 2020](#)). The function of poetry in Muslim societies is not only to express spiritual devotion to God and the Universe. Poetry can also represent political interests and social concerns. Nukhbah Taj Langah's study on Muslim societies in post-colonial Pakistan raises an interesting point. Langah examined poetry written by the Siraiki people residing in Punjab, Pakistan, who were seeking recognition of their ethnic identity and living under oppressive government policies. She concludes that "textual expression alone is insufficient to comprehend this process of identity configuration" and that "modified forms of poetry are necessarily adopted to express the repression of their language and culture" ([Langah 2012](#), p. 5).

Other poets are motivated by a desire to express piety and spirituality and the recitation of this poetry can become a part of religious rituals, especially during a pilgrimage. Studies on the Tariqa 'Alawiyya in Java suggest that poems are recited during pilgrimages by Ba 'Alawi, the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad who migrated from Hadramaut, Yemen, to Indonesia centuries ago. These poems express admiration for the Prophet's family and Ba 'Alawi's respected saints ([Alatas 2014](#), p. 315; also [Alatas 2016](#)). Ba 'Alawi poems can be found in inscriptions on salons, tombs, buildings, and mosques in some regions of Java, reflecting the strong connections among the Ba 'Alawi. As Ismail Fajri Alatas has argued that the poems also reflect "a relationship between the mosque, the saint, knowledge, and ultimately the Prophet, in a linkage embodying spiritual authority" ([Alatas 2014](#), p. 315). Because of this ability to provide a spiritual link, spiritual poetry has been inserted in pilgrimage "ritual reading" as part of saint veneration (See [Millie 2009](#)).

The veneration of saints has become an important practice within what Vrijhof and Waardenburgh have called "popular religion," which is preserved within local communities and has developed vibrantly alongside the "official religion" ([Vrijhof and Waardenburg 1979](#)). The Muslim world has witnessed the spread of local pilgrimages made in the veneration of local saints by believers affiliated with a particular official religion. These saints, with their respected spiritual privilege and achievement in disseminating their religion, have become icons of piety within local communities (See [Suvorova 2004](#); [Taylor 1988](#)). Similarly in other countries, the veneration of saints is a fairly common practice in some regions of Indonesia. The grand narrative of Islamic sainthood among Javanese Muslims is mainly and popularly represented by the Nine Saints (*Wali Songo*), which have shaped popular local Islamic pilgrimage patterns.

In recent years, Indonesian Muslims have witnessed the process of the "localization" of sainthood; plans to promote new saints have been initiated by local people in some regions so that pilgrims would have new destinations to travel to beyond the popular tombs of the Nine Saints. Observers, therefore, have argued that pilgrimage and saint veneration practices are traveling in line with the reconstruction of new narratives of sainthood. Martin Slama's and Saefuddin Zuhri's research findings on Muslim tombs in Bali suggest that this "traveling" is inseparable from economic interests. The narrative of sainthood is a part of local initiatives that are not free from cultural, ethnic, and economic contestation ([Zuhri 2013, 2018](#); [Slama 2014](#); [Masduki 2018](#)).

3. Abdurrahman Siddiq: His Life and Treatises

The life and work of Abdurrahman Siddiq has been studied from different perspectives. Abdurrahman Siddiq is well known among Malay Muslims in Riau for his role in spreading Islam. His treatises in Malay accelerated his religious mission (*da'wa*) to spread Islam among the Malay people ([Abdullah 1982](#)). In the early- and mid-nineteenth century, many people of Banjarese ethnicity migrated from South Kalimantan to Sumatra and many to Tembilahan in Indragiri Hilir, whose contour and landscape resemble Martapura and some other areas in South Kalimantan ([Raihani 2018](#); [Putra 2019](#); [Almakin 2016](#)). Abdurrahman Siddiq was one of these migrants. For a knowledgeable person such as him, migration was likely seen, at least partly, as a way to disseminate Islam and become part of the existing Sultanate's mission in Indragiri Hilir ([Yusuf et al. 1994](#), pp. 37–38).

Abdurrahman Shiddiq was born in 1274 Hijriyyah (Islamic lunar year) or 1867 CE.¹ His father was Muhammad 'Afif ibn Anang Mahmud ibn Jamaluddin ibn Dipasunda ibn Pangeran Diponegoro and his mother was Shafura bint Muhammad Arsyad (Mufti of Lamak Pagatan) of Banjar (Dewan Redaksi Ensiklopedi Islam 1997, p. 27; Sahabat 2010, p. 47; Syahransyah and Dahlan 2004, p. 42). Siddiq spent his childhood in Martapura. His aunt raised him after his mother passed away when he was three months old. It was his aunt, Sa'diyah, who introduced him to the knowledge of Islam in his early years of learning by reciting the Qur'an (Abdullah 1982, p. 19). His religious education continued in Dalam Pagar, West Sumatra, with such teachers as Haji Muhammad Said Wali, Haji Muhammad Khattib, and Shaikh Abdurrahman Muda. In 1882, he completed his studies in Padang, West Sumatra, and then departed to Mecca in 1889 to study.²

In Mecca, he learned Islam from different study circles/groups (*halaqah*) in Masjidil Haram with various Islamic scholars, such as Shaikh Said Bakri Syatha, Shaikh Said Babasyid, Sayyid Ahmad Zaini Dahlan, and Shaikh Muhammad Nawawi al-Bantani. He then returned to the Malay–Indonesian Archipelago, staying some years in Martapura and then migrating to Sapat, Indragiri Hilir in Sumatra. In 1911, he traveled to the Malay Peninsula for *da'wa* (Islamic preaching). After returning from Malaysia, he built a mosque and a *pesantren* (traditional Islamic school) in the coconut plantation area in Indragiri Hilir, located in Parit Hidayat.³ Thanks to his reputation, Siddiq was offered a government position in Indragiri Hilir as a *mufti* (Muslim legal expert), which he held from 1919 to 1939.

Abdurrahman Siddiq wrote some works, which circulated in the Malay Peninsula and enriched Islamic literature in Sumatra. His works deal with various themes of Islam. On *kalam* (theology), he wrote *Fathul 'Alim fi Tartibit Ta'lim li 'Aqidil Iman* (Victory of the Learned in the Analysis of the Creed of Faith), in which he elaborates on Islamic faith, God's attributes (*sifat*), the concept of predestination, and life (Siddiq 1904)⁴. Some other books include *Risalah 'Amal Ma'rifat* (Treatise on Ma'rifat/Spiritual Knowledge), *Risalah fi 'Aqid al-Iman* (Treatise on the Islamic Faith), *Asrar al-Salat* (The Mystery of Praying) (See Syahransyah and Dahlan 2004), *Kitab al-Fara'id* (The Book of Property Rights), and *Risalah Syajarah al-Arsyadiyyah wa ma Ullhiqa Biha* (The Treatise on the History of Arsyad and other Related Matters). In one book written in Malay Arabic script (*Jawi*) titled *Sya'ir 'Ibarat dan Khabar Qiyamat*, Siddiq shared his thoughts on theology and Sufism through a series of poems. Unlike other Muslim scholars who wrote *hikayat* (tales), Siddiq preferred to explore Islamic theology and Sufism through religious poetry (*sya'ir agama*) (Fang 2013). Siddiq made significant contributions to Malay Islamic literature, both in terms of theme and form. Siddiq's contribution to Malay Islamic literature is at least twofold. First, he contributed to the enrichment of Islamic discourse, especially on *kalam*, *tasawwuf*, and *fiqh*. Second, he contributed to the style of Malay prose and poetry.

4. Abdurrahman Siddiq's Poetry

Abdurrahman Siddiq published many books of literature, some of which used poetry to deliver Islamic messages to his audiences. As mentioned earlier, one of his most fascinating works is *Sya'ir 'Ibarat dan Khabar Qiyamat*, a book that contains thousands of verses. This book reflects Siddiq's interest in literary tradition. He utilizes the Malay language to deliver religious messages and "proverbs" or "adages" for Muslims wishing to reach a higher spiritual level (Siddiq 2001, p. 1). This book also indicates that Siddiq was not an ordinary *alim* who wrote books on religion. He was an expert in the local Malay language and a skilled poet who attempted to produce work of the same literary value as other respected writers of the time.

Compared with Siddiq's other works, *Sya'ir 'Ibarat dan Khabar Qiyamat*, shows a different writing style. There is neither an introduction nor any chapters to indicate section breaks or topics within the book. Therefore, readers must read from the beginning to the end to understand the themes that Siddiq presents. There are also no analyses or direct citations of the Qur'an or hadith, although the content of the text references the Qur'an and hadith. Another book written in *Jawi* titled *Hadzihi Risalah fi 'Aqid al-Iman* (this is the *Treatise*

on the Islamic Faith) serves as a useful comparison. *Hadzihi Risalah fi 'Aqaid al-Iman* was written in Indragiri in 1919. The book is divided into chapters. The title and chapter titles are written in Arabic script in Malay language, while the content is in *Jawi*. *Hadzihi Risalah* begins with a long introduction by the author, followed by chapters such as *fasl fi bayan al-ta'alluq* (chapter on the elucidation of *ta'alluq*/Surrender to God), *fasl fi aqsam al-'arba'ah* (chapter on the divisions of the four), *fasl fi bayan al-barahin* (chapter on the elucidation of evidence), and *fasl fi bayan al-uluhiyyah* (chapter on the elucidation of divinity). At the end, he provides chapters on *khatimah fi bahts usul al-din* (the conclusion on the study of the foundation of religion) (see [Nazir 1992](#)). The book discusses Islamic theology, creed, and *kalam* as reflected in the title and chapter titles. This book presents a systematic exposition of Islamic faith and some aspects of Islamic theology that Muslims and believers (*mu'min*) should know and understand. Finally, after the conclusion, he writes a section on "concise advice" (*nasihah qalilah*), where he summarizes the main messages and advice drawn from the book. Given the nature of *Hadzihi Risalah fi 'Aqaid al-Iman*, it is surprising that Siddiq did not include any poems ([Siddiq 1936](#)).

On the other hand, *Sya'ir 'Ibarat dan Khabar Qiyamat* is a book of poetry, as the entire book is about poetry. The title is written in the Malay language, even though the title resembles Arabic. There are four keywords in this book taken from the Arabic language: *sya'ir* (poetry/poem), *'ibarat* (advice), *khabbar* (information), and *qiyamat* (the hereafter). In this context, Siddiq uses *'ibarat* to mean "metaphoric," as the poems describe the hereafter in metaphorical language. *Sya'ir* was and has often been utilized and practiced by Malay Muslims to deliver moral messages to society. Malay Muslims greatly respect words in the form of *sya'ir*,⁵ partly because of their ability to tap into an intrinsic spiritual dimension and touch upon the audience's hearts.

Sya'ir 'Ibarat dan Khabar Qiyamat consists of 1857 verses from the beginning to the end in an uninterrupted stream without chapters or subchapters. At the beginning of the book, Siddiq provides opening remarks in the form of a short *du'a* (prayer). Then, he briefly explains the objectives of the book. He mentions that his intention in writing the book is to deliver the message of Islam to the public. This book is about his "warning" to Muslims about their life in this world and hereafter.

In the name of God the Most Merciful and the Beneficence;
 Arising from the deep-peaceful heart;
 To enjoy a peaceful garden, all the praises and thank the Lord of the universe,
 to follow the sayings of the respected and trusted person (Muhammad);
 The believers would earn forgiveness and obtain the heaven tranquility.
 To begin with *Shalawat* and *Salam*;
 to the Honorable Prophet *Sayyidul Anam* with the text of the Great Qur'an;
 Compulsory to follow (Quranic messages) with respect
 Above all, listen to the story;
 emerging from a gloomy hearth;
 not because (I expect) the dear brothers to recognize me.
 I am telling you a story;
 to all my dear families and brothers;
 the signs of the judgment days;
 wrong folks obtained the truth.
 The right persons may also use bad words;
 Telling the truth achieving the anger,
 and (therefore) they must be contented and persistent ([Siddiq 2001](#), p. 1).

In the early part of the book, Siddiq's poems address various issues and directly deal with theological subjects, including predestination (*qadar*) and dimensions of Islamic spirituality. About the divinity of God, Siddiq writes as follows:

God's Supremacy (Almighty) is endless;
the evidence can be seen
Night and day change;
making the sky with no pole.
Glory (be) to God;
Much thanks to God
Eliminate all complaints and grumbles;
to correct our trust in God (Siddiq 2001, p. 2).
Glory (be) to God, the One and the Almighty;
(who) has forgiven all small and great sins.
Enclosing the goodness and distancing the evil;
eliminating anger and bringing patience (Siddiq 2001, p. 4).

Beyond theological issues, Siddiq also addresses the five pillars of Islam. In particular, he emphasizes the need for Muslims to perform *salat* or *sembahyang* (prayers). His messages on prayer are powerful, emphasizing that prayer is the foundation of Muslim spirituality and there may be spiritual consequences if it is ignored. However, as the messages were written in poetry, they can be interpreted as advice rather than a command:

The world's value is the reason;
(which would lead you) to earn knowledge and (good) deeds;
(You) just pray and fast passionately;
do not ignore the Prophet narratives and the Quranic verses (Siddiq 2001, p. 4).
Perish if you do not pray;
think of night (dark) and day (light)
You would not realize that your age becomes less;
(while you) do not find the stock (good deeds) to return (to the hereafter) (Siddiq 2001, p. 5)
The reward of praying is limitless;
(they are) more than the (number of) stars
You would lose your reward once you ignore it;
in the hereafter (your deeds) would also not be counted (Siddiq 2001, p. 5).
Because praying is the pillar of religion;
perform it together!
Prayer is substantial;
To ignore it (may cause you) to lose (your) glory / *karama* (Siddiq 2001, p. 5).

Having explained God's attributes, His authority, and will and exploring the meaning of praying, the necessity of fasting, and other obligations that the believers (*mu'min*) should accomplish in their daily life, Siddiq's poems then focus on the hereafter, including heaven, hell, God's reward, and destiny.⁶

It should be noted that delivering spiritual teachings through poetry is common among the saints who intensely address notions of the hereafter (*akhirah*). The saints' wise

sayings and teachings of Islamic spirituality and morality are more attractive to audiences. As argued by Sean Foley in his study of the Sufi Orders, including the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya, “sources such as poetry and correspondence reveal the innermost desires of participants and their daily lives” (Foley 2008). Some leaders of the Sufi Orders and their followers have utilized poetry to preserve devotional practices as well as strengthen sainthood imagery.

5. Celebrating Abdurrahman Siddiq: Poetry and the Pilgrims

Every year, thousands of people come to Sapat village, Tembilahan, which is located about 300 km from Pekanbaru, the capital city of Riau province. To reach the area, pilgrims from outside Riau can journey from Pekanbaru to Tembilahan district by car. They can then continue the journey via a speedboat to Sapat village. The majority of people living in Tembilahan, Indragiri, are of Malay ethnicity. In some areas, however, Banjarese people from South Kalimantan are predominant, followed by other ethnic groups such as the Bugis (from South Sulawesi), Javanese (from Java), and Minang (from West Sumatra). The Banjarese people have resided in Tembilahan for a long time, and their culture and heritage, including their language, food, dress, and song, are prevalent. In Tembilahan, other ethnic groups such as the Bugis, Malay, Javanese, Chinese, and Minangkabau speak the Banjarese language in daily life.⁷ According to Siddiq’s grandson, Abdul Hamid, who also lives in Tembilahan, the Strait of Malacca, was instrumental in accelerating the migration and exchange of people in Riau. This migration brought Banjarese and Malaysian (Johor) businesspeople as well as *ulama* to the region.⁸ Two prominent *ulama* of Banjarese origin who migrated to Tembilahan were Tuan Guru Sapat (Shaikh Abdurrahman Siddiq) and Tuan Guru Reteh (Syakh Abdurrahman Ya’qub) (Ya’qub 1956; See Nuh et al. 2018).

Every year, an annual commemoration of Siddiq (*haul*) is celebrated by the Muslim community. The events to celebrate his birth and commemorate his death are organized by Siddiq’s descendants and Malay Muslims in Indragiri. The procession of the *haul*, similarly to other religious gatherings conducted by Indonesian Muslims, is divided into at least three sessions. The first is a formal session where pilgrims gather in the mosque near Siddiq’s grave alongside a public figure and government officers, including the governor, the regent, politicians, bureaucrats, and *ulama*. Public figures are usually given space and time to deliver short remarks, while the local *ulama* explain the contribution of Siddiq to the Malay Islamic world. Next, there is an informal session, which is the “obligatory visit” to the grave where people recite *du’a* both individually and collectively (see Figure 1).

While it is very common for the pilgrims to recite Quranic verses, especially the Quranic chapter (*surah*) *Ya Sin*, the local imam recites the long prayers. The pilgrims gather and pray together as a means of requesting God to bless the dead and their loved ones. The commemorated saint becomes the intermediary between ordinary people and God during the prayers. The third session is a poetry recitation. Some parts of the prayer and poems are taken from *Sya’ir Ibarat dan Khabar Qiyamat*. A local guide leads the prayer. His prayers are followed by the recitation of certain poems written by Siddiq. After the recitation of *sya’ir*, pilgrims continue their prayers. Most of the *sya’ir* described during the *haul* are about *qiyamat* (the hereafter) and ethics (*akhlaq*). This practice resembles the poetry recitation of “treatises, letters, and *ijaza* (license of knowledge narrations)” among Ba ‘Alawi in Pekalongan and Solo, Central Java (Alatas 2014, pp. 313–14).

In Tembilahan, some pilgrims stay in hotels, while others stay in villagers’ guesthouses before finally visiting Abdurrahman Siddiq’s grave. At the recent commemoration (10 April 2019), the researchers visited the venue to witness how the memories of Siddiq have been preserved for many years by local Malay Muslims. The pilgrims were greeted by local leaders, politicians, businesspeople, and bureaucrats who came from the province of Riau to attend this event (see Figure 2). The pilgrims mainly came from districts in Riau province, while others came from the neighboring regions of Sumatra, such as Jambi, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra; from South Borneo (Kalimantan Selatan); and from Sulawesi (Celebes). Some pilgrims had also traveled from Malaysia. Similarly to other pilgrimages

to the graves of the renowned saints on Java Island, some pilgrims came to Tembilahan as part of a group of people organized by travel agents, while others just arrived with family members.



Figure 1. Pilgrims praying at the grave of Tuan Guru Sapat (Abdurrahman Siddiq) in Tembilahan (Source: Authors' collection).



Figure 2. Pilgrims participating in the religious gathering organized by local authorities in Tembilahan (Source: Authors' collection).

As mentioned previously, the grave of Siddiq is frequently visited by pilgrims from South Kalimantan who admire Syekh Arsyad al-Banjari, an ancestor of Siddiq. Most of the pilgrims from South Kalimantan believe that Siddiq is the descendant of Arsyad al-Banjari, a charismatic *ulama* from Banjar who wrote *Nasihah al-Muslimin fi Fadhail al-Jihad*, *Risalat al-Ushuluddin*, *Tuhfat al-Raghibin*, and *Sabilul Muhtadin lit Tafaqquh fi Amr al-Din*.⁹ The constant presence of Banjarese people at the grave of Siddiq in Riau indicates that Siddiq remains an

influential and iconic figure in the minds of the Banjarese. Various Islamic study groups or *majelis taklim* from Banjar come privately or collectively for pilgrimage in Tembilahan. Among the pilgrims, the Banjarese are the second largest group, after Malay people. In Banjarmasin and Martapura in South Kalimantan, a *majelis taklim* often organizes pilgrim programs to Tembilahan as a means of commemorating the prominent and respected *ulama* of Banjar ethnic origin.

In the hotel where we stayed during fieldwork, we met some groups of pilgrims who had traveled from Banjarmasin and Martapura. The pilgrims were from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds and included university lecturers, schoolteachers, businesspeople, Islamic teachers, and Muslim leaders. One of the pilgrims told us that he came with a group of 80 people from Banjarmasin. He said that the pilgrimage was an annual activity for him and his group. For the current year, they had started the journey from Banjarmasin via Jakarta (Java) and then traveled through Kuala Tungkal in Jambi before finally reaching Tembilahan. He explained that after attending the *haul* of Tuan Guru Sapat/Syaikh Abdurrahman Siddiq, his group would continue to Batam and Penyengat Island for another pilgrimage. On Penyengat Island, they were planning to make a pilgrimage to the grave of another saint of the Banjarese ethnic group: Syaikh Sihabuddin Al-Banjari. He said, "By making this pilgrimage, we as Banjarese can recognize the history of Banjarese people and remember the '*ulama* who originated from Banjarmasin. We feel very proud of them, and we search and expect *barakat* [blessings] from their *karamah* [generosity or marvel of God's friend] with this visit."¹⁰

Another pilgrim from Banjar emphasized a different benefit that he expected from the pilgrimage: "By attending this *haul*, we can meet many [ethnically] Banjarese families residing here [in Tembilahan]."¹¹ According to this pilgrim, there are many pilgrims from South Kalimantan who do not stay in hotels. Instead, they prefer staying in the homes of the Banjarese "families" in Indragiri Hilir. Regarding his intention and motivation for joining this pilgrimage, he said, "We want to know more about the history and struggle of '*ulama* from Banjar, as well as to learn their virtue, exemplary good deeds, noble morality, and ethical behavior" (Interview in 2019). Surprisingly, during the *haul* ceremony, the Banjarese pilgrims brought their own *ulama* to give an official sermon (*khutbah*), deliver Islamic messages, and provide advice (*tausiyah*). That year, the pilgrims brought K. H. Syaiful Bahri bin Nasaruddin from Tapin Regency, South Kalimantan.

6. Recital of Abdurrahman Siddiq's Poems in Indragiri Hilir

The narratives and memories of Siddiq are well preserved among Malay Muslims through different cultural events. They are primarily preserved through the recitation of his poems by Malay and Banjarese Muslims during various cultural events, including the following: (1) the commemoration of Abdurrahman Siddiq's death (*haul*); (2) a poetry recitation competition that takes place during an Islamic festival of *Peringatan Hari Besar Islam* (PHBI) (Islamic holiday); and (3) the recital of his poems in school and at wedding parties. The competition to recite Abdurrahman Siddiq poetry is organized annually and engages the Department of Education in the local government. Students from primary up to junior and senior high school in the Indragiri Regency participate in this competition. The competition is usually linked to an Islamic holiday and conducted during an Islamic festival or sometimes during the month of Ramadhan. Schools train their students to memorize and narrate Siddiq's poems in preparation for this annual competition.¹²

An informant (F.G., a female, 22 years old) told us about her experience of being a part of the poem recitation in Tembilahan. Her father is of Banjarese descent (born in Tembilahan) and her mother is Malay, so she can speak both Banjarese and Malay languages. She was formally introduced to the poems of Abdurrahman Siddiq in her first year of high school in 2012. Although her parents never recited poetry, she witnessed her grandmother recite one of his poems as a lullaby. Her ability to read *Jawi* was nurtured at school, because it is part of the local curriculum in Indragiri Hilir.¹³ According to her, there are two events where poetry recitations are organized in Indragiri Hilir. The first is *Festival*

Lomba Seni Siswa Nasional (FLSSN) (National Student Art Competition Festival), which is managed by the local government (Ministry of Education and Culture); and the second is *Gema Muharram*, a celebration of the Islamic New Year prepared by the community and supported by the local government. The informant told us about her experience in the poem recitation competition.

“Abdurrahman Siddiq has thousands of verses in his book. During the competition, the committee will give us two opportunities in our performance. First, we should recite some verses of Abdurrahman Siddiq’s poem selected by the committee. Second, we decided on and recited our preferred verses of the poem in our performance. The most famous part of the poem is the first two verses starting with *bismillah* [introduction], and *alhamdulillah* ends our recitation. In the middle part of our recitation, we could choose various verses as we wanted. Sometimes, we modified our poetry recitation by incorporating theatrical performance to draw the judge’s attention. I won the 2015 competition representing my school. In our experience, reciting Abdurrahman Siddiq’s poem is more religious than simply cultural because the events usually were conducted during Islamic festivals.” (See Note 13)

This experience shows how this popular event makes people more familiar with the narratives of Siddiq. From an early age, local students are introduced to Siddiq’s legacy in the form of *sya’ir*, from which they learn about his spiritual messages and moral values. As of 2019, Syaikh Abdurrahman Siddiq’s death commemoration had been conducted 82 times by Malay Muslims in Indragiri Hilir. Recently, more students have participated in the domestic school poetry recitation competition. Likewise, during religious gatherings and wedding parties, Siddiq’s poems on ethics and good conduct (*akhlaq*) are recited for couples and guests.

7. Conclusions

Early twentieth-century Indonesian Islam provided a space within which Islamic Malay literature could develop. This literature, including prose and *sya’ir*, has profoundly influenced current Islamic narratives among Sumatran and Malay Muslims. Abdurrahman Siddiq’s works, as a continuation of the literary tradition presented by previous *ulama*, demonstrate how Islamic narratives and the formulation of Islamic spirituality in the form of poetry still have a place in the lives of twentieth-century Malay Muslims. Although Islamic poetic narratives have become less recognized and have not been very popular among Indonesian Muslims in recent times, they remain essential for Malay Muslims. It is through Siddiq’s *sya’ir* that the narratives of Islamic spirituality are still preserved. *Sya’ir* has become the spiritual vessel through which contemporary Malay Muslims recognize and remember Siddiq. The recitation of *sya’ir* by Malay Muslims, both pilgrims and residents of Indragiri Hilir, during the *haul* of Siddiq indicates that poetry provides spiritual nuance to the pilgrimage. Although the recitation of poetry to commemorate *ulama* has become less popular among Indonesians, Malay Muslims in Indragiri Hilir, energized by the Banjarese who want to preserve the identity of Siddiq, still keep this tradition. It appears that the combination of spiritual messages and poetry, as can be seen in the case of Siddiq, not only renders the words more potent and memorable but also facilitates their preservation and dissemination through various cultural events.

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Notes

- ¹ Some scholars claim that 1274 Hijriyah corresponds to 1857 CE, but this is based on a miscalculation in reconciling the Islamic calendar and the solar calendar. The rejection of the above date is based on a miscalculation in reconciling the Islamic calendar and the solar calendar. According to this view, 1284 Hijriyah is not 1857 CE, but 1867 CE. (See [Rahmadi 2010](#), p. 85).
- ² Another version says that he went to Mecca in 1887 from Bangka Island, South Sumatra.
- ³ There is no substantial evidence or ruins to indicate that a large madrasah or pesantren was set up in Sapat village. Although the historical existence of a *pesantren* (Islamic school) in the Sapat village of Indragiri is still debated, the memory of Abdurrahman Siddiq remains well preserved among Malay people. In recent times, most of the people who visit Sapat village, where Siddiq died and was buried, are pilgrims. (See [Muthalib 2008](#)).
- ⁴ This book was written in Bangka and South Kalimantan in 1902 and was first published in Singapore in 1929; although Siddiq's name does not appear in [Fang \(2013\)](#), Siddiq's contribution was instrumental in enriching the Islamic literary tradition in the early 20th century.
- ⁵ Interview with Abdul Hamid (10 April 2019) in Sapat, Tembilahan, Riau. See also ([Samah 2013](#)).
- ⁶ His poems on the hereafter appear mainly in *Sya'ir 'Ibarat dan Khabar Qiyamat*, on pages 12–17 as well as on other pages.
- ⁷ It is reported that in August 2007 the governor of Riau province (HM Rusli Zaenal) and the mayor of Indragiri Hilir (H Indra Muchlis Adnan) received awards from The Committee of Banjar Culture Board (Lembaga Budaya Banjar, LBB).
- ⁸ Interview with Abdul Hamid (10 April 2019) in Sapat, Tembilahan, Riau.
- ⁹ For a discussion of the work of Arsyad al-Banjari, see Noorhanidi Hasan, "The Tuhfat al-Raghibin: The work of Abdul Samad al-alimbani or of ([Hasan 2007](#); [Abdullah 1990](#)).
- ¹⁰ Interview with pilgrim 1 from Banjarmasin, 11 April 2019 in Tembilahan, Indragiri Hilir.
- ¹¹ Interview with pilgrim 2 from Martapura, 11 April 2019 in Tembilahan, Indragiri Hilir.
- ¹² See a news report on this competition at <http://pekanbaru.tribunnews.com/2018/09/12/gema-muharram-hari-ini-perlombakan-sya-T1-textquoterightir-ibarat-kiamat-milik-tuan-guru-syekh-abdurrahman-Siddiq> (accessed on 20 March 2021).
- ¹³ Interview via Zoom with the former participant of the Poetry Recitation Competition, March 2021.

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