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# Prophets, *pegon*, and piety

## The Javanese *Layang Ambiya*

RONIT RICCI

### ABSTRACT

The tales of the prophets are among the most popular textual traditions across the Islamic world and Java proves no exception. Beginning with the first human and first prophet Nabi Adam, these often vast collections recount the biographies of all those viewed as prophets in Islam, ultimately leading up to the “seal of the prophets”, Muhammad. Many manuscripts of this genre were composed and copied in Javanese, in different periods, locales, and milieus, opening a window to how these core Islamic stories and the messages they carry were understood and transmitted in Java. The essay explores one example, a *Layang Ambiya* composed in the *pěsanren* milieu in the mid-nineteenth century and written in *pegon* (MSB L12), currently housed in the Museum Sonobudoyo, Yogyakarta.

### KEYWORDS

Prophets; Islam; script; *pegon*; *pěsanren*.

### LAYANG AMBIYA, MS. MSB L12

The following excerpts are taken from *Layang Ambiya*, MS. MSB L12 from the collection of the Sonobudoyo Museum in Yogyakarta.<sup>1</sup> It is one among more than thirty such manuscripts recounting the “tales of the prophets” in the Museum’s possession. The *Layang Ambiya* (or *Sěrat Ambiya*) corpus contains one of the largest number of different versions within a single Javanese literary

<sup>1</sup> The title in the catalogue appears as *Sěrat Ambiya* but as *Layang Ambiya* in the manuscript (canto 1, stanza 13). For information about the manuscript see Behrend (1990: 208-209). For an introduction to the *Ambiya* corpus see Behrend (1990: 206-208).

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corpus and possesses a very complex history. It enjoyed great popularity as the lives of the prophets served as models for the believer and engagement with such texts was viewed as bearing rewards. The manuscripts vary greatly in terms of their places of inscription, be it the central Javanese palaces, the northern coast of Java (*pěsisiran*), the rural interior and Islamic boarding schools (*pěsantren*); some are quite brief while many others contain hundreds of pages; they are written in the Javanese, Balinese, and *pegon* script and are inscribed on palm leaf and paper (with print editions also available since the nineteenth century). The manuscript discussed below was inscribed in 1772 AJ/1844 AD in a *pěsantren* milieu by Kyai Ahmad Ngali. It was composed in *macapat* and encompasses seventy-one cantos written across 560 pages in the *pegon* script. The manuscript is missing its conclusion. There are canto (*pupuh*) and stanza (*bait*) markers in red, green, and gold throughout the manuscript and every *gatra* is marked with the Arabic letter *tha*. The manuscript contains many colourful illustrations that relate to the tales, portraying human, animal, and wayang-like figures.

#### CONTEXT (CHOICE OF MANUSCRIPT AND PASSAGES)

We have far more studies of texts produced in the central Javanese courts of Yogyakarta and Surakarta than we do of those written in the countryside and at Islamic boarding schools. We also have more studies of manuscripts written in the Javanese script than in *pegon*, a modified and vocalised form of the Arabic script used to write Javanese. If we consider script not just as a technical means to express an end, in this case content, but one that may be indicative of priorities and identity, there is room to explore *pegon* writing more closely.

I have selected the opening passages (canto 1, stanza 1-6 in *Asmaradana*) and the first section of the fourth canto (stanza 1-13, in *Pangkur*) for inclusion in this collection.<sup>2</sup> The opening pages set the stage for all that follows. Canto 4 offers a glimpse of the life of Adam, first man and prophet according to Muslim tradition, and his wife Hawa's banishment from Paradise which signals the beginning of human life on earth. This primordial scene, and especially Adam's fall in *Selan/Ceylon*, derives from an early Arab tradition which circulated widely in South and Southeast Asia and was retold in many of these regions' languages.

<sup>2</sup> I thank Els Bogaerts, Tony Day, and Edwin Wieringa for their help with the translation.



Illustration 1. *Layang Ambiya* - MSB L12 Opening page (3). (Courtesy of Museum Sonobudoyo, Yogyakarta).

A ROMANIZED TEXTUAL EXCERPT WITH ENGLISH TRANSLATION: *LAYANG AMBIYA***Canto 1, 1-6***Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

**Asmaradana**

1. Ingsun mimiti amuji  
 Aněbut namaning sukma  
 Kang murah ing dunya mangke  
 Inggang asih ing ngahirat  
 Kang pinuji tan pęgat  
 Angganjar kawėlas ayun  
 A'apura inggang dosa

1. I begin offering praise  
 By uttering the name of the Immaterial One  
 Who is merciful in this world  
 Compassionate in the afterlife  
 Who is praised without end  
 Rewarding those who inspire pity  
 Forgiving those who have sinned

2. Sawuse muji Yang Widi  
 Amuji nabi Muhammad  
 Lawan kawulawargane  
 Sahabat papat punika  
 Inggang dhilhin Abu Bakar  
 'Umar 'Uthman kaping tēlu  
 Kaping pat 'Ali bagedha

2. After praising the Almighty  
 I offer praise to the Prophet Muhammad  
 Along with his family  
 The four companions  
 Abu Bakar first  
 Umar Uthman is third<sup>3</sup>  
 Fourth is *Bagedha*<sup>4</sup> 'Ali

3. Panědhane kang anulis  
 Marang sagung kang amaca  
 Den agung pangapurane  
 Mosabihat tan<sup>5</sup> aksarane  
 Dukipun tuna liwat  
 Kang langkung longana ira  
 Kang kurang denwuwuhana

3. This writer asks  
 Of all the readers  
 May great their forgiveness be  
 Unclear are the letters  
 Deficient the engraving  
 May what is in excess be reduced  
 And what is lacking, increased

4. Lan panědhanipun malih  
 Dhumatěng kang murbeng jagat  
 Muga tulusa wak ingwang  
 Sělamět ing agama  
 Singgahěna ing dursila  
 Tuduhěna marga ayu  
 Luputa sakeh rěncana

4. And further I ask  
 Of the Creator of the World  
 May He make me sincere  
 Steadfast in religion  
 Keep me far from evil  
 Direct me towards the right path  
 Escaping all temptation

<sup>3</sup> It is not noted (but implied) that Umar was the second companion and caliph.

<sup>4</sup> *Bagedha* (here spelled *bagedha*) is a title for addressing a king and is very often attached to 'Ali's name. In the section below it also precedes Adam's name.

<sup>5</sup> This line has one extra syllable, nine instead of eight. The word *tan* seems out of place and is likely a mistake and the small red Arabic letter *tha* (ث) marking the end of the *gatra* is wrongly placed. Errors are sometimes marked throughout the manuscript by a line or dots above a word, but are sometimes left unacknowledged.

5. Tětkala wiwit tinulis  
 Ing ari Thumma Wagenya  
 Sa'a likur ing tanggale  
 Jumadilakir wulannya  
 Wanci jam sewēlasika  
 Tahun Ehe kang lumaku  
 Kapetang ing mangsanira

5. The writing began  
 On Monday *Wage*  
 On the nineteenth  
 Of the month of *Jumadilakir*  
 At eleven o'clock  
 The year of *Ehe*  
 Calculated within the *mangsa*

6. Anuju mongsa kalih  
 Titi mangsane ing warsa  
 Ana dene sangkalane  
 Datan kari petangnya  
 Karsane kang anurat  
 Den waspada těmbungipun  
 Sakathahe kang amaca

6. Towards the second *mangsa*  
 The time of the year  
 And its *sangkalane*  
 Was not left out  
 This writer wishes  
 That its words be observed  
 By all its readers

#### Canto 4, 1-13

##### *Pangkur*

1. Tambuh tingkat polahira  
 Nabi Adam kalian ingkang rayi  
 Dene datan wontėnan purun  
 Inkang arsa den alap  
 Karya tutup wahu inggih 'uratipun  
 Sakehe kayu a'ucap  
 Eh Adam kėneng bilahi

1. Heedless of rank they moved about  
 Nabi Adam and his wife  
 Without any will  
 But the wish to possess  
 A cover for their nakedness  
 All the trees spoke:  
 Hey Adam struck by disaster

2. Milane amba lėnggana  
 Tuwan ambil mangke godhongan mami  
 Amba ajėrih ing Yang Agung  
 Tuwan lagi dinukan  
 Dening Allah ta'ala sėmangsanipun  
 Kawula lamun purun  
 Pěsthi tumut dendukani

2. That is why we refuse  
 You now taking our leaves  
 We fear the Almighty  
 You have attracted the wrath  
 Of Exalted Allah for all time  
 If we are willing  
 No doubt we will attract His wrath too

3. Pan wontėn kayu satunggal  
 Ing aranan punika kayu ajir  
 Punika inggih anguwuh  
 Dhumatėng ing nabi Adam  
 Saking wėlas punika ing polahipun  
 Eh ta Adam miwah Hawa  
 Lah ambilėn gadhong mami

3. But there was one tree  
 Known as the fig  
 That called out  
 To the Prophet Adam  
 Acting out of pity  
 Hey Adam and Hawa  
 Go ahead, take my leaves

4. *Tutupna 'urat tuwan giya piněthik  
Gadhonge kang kayu ajir  
Tumulya kinarya tutup  
'Urate Adam lan Hawa  
Sandhing pusěr malah tuměka ing jěngku  
Kalih samya kawělas arsa  
Sěparan2 anangis*
4. Cover your nudity. They quickly plucked  
Leaves of the fig  
And used them to cover  
Adam and Hawa's nudity  
From the navel reaching the knees  
Both pitiful  
Crying on and on
5. *Sahěnggon2 karuna  
Nabi Adam kalian ingkang rayi  
Sahěnggen2 tinundhung  
Tan ana purun kanggonan  
Nanging wontěn ingkang nama kayu garup  
Anguwuh eh Adam Hawa  
A'ahuba marang kami*
5. Weeping everywhere  
The Prophet Adam and his wife  
Driven out from site after site  
None were willing to offer a place.  
But there was the tree named carob  
Who called out: hey Adam Hawa  
Take shelter with me
6. *Yata kang kayu dinukan  
Dening Allah tuměkeng ing dina akir  
Tan awah kayu puniku  
Yata bagedha Adam  
Kesah saking pěrnahe kang kayu garup  
Anangis saparan2  
Tumbuh parane angungsi*
6. With that the tree angered  
Allah till the end of days  
That tree shall bear no fruit.  
And so *bagedha* Adam  
Left the carob's place  
Weeping all along  
Not knowing where to seek refuge
7. *Risampunira mangkana  
Apan sarěng dinukan dening Yang Widi  
Kalawan kang tengga pintu  
Měrak lan ula naga  
Sěrta Iblis lanat wau kang tinundhung  
Andika nira yang sukma  
Marang wau Jabarail*
7. And so it was: after  
Receiving God's wrath together  
Along with the guardians of the gate  
The peacock and serpent  
With deceitful Iblis they were expelled.  
The Subtle One spoke  
To Jibrail
8. *Tudhungěn<sup>6</sup> saking suwarga  
Adam Hawa marak naga lan Iblis  
Cěmara lan kayu garup  
Yata tinundhung sigěra  
Marang dunya anuju tanggal ping tělu  
Tatkala wulan muharam  
Dhawuhe ingkang bilahi*
8. Drive out of heaven  
Adam, Hawa, peacock, serpent, and Iblis  
The fig and carob tree.<sup>7</sup>  
Then at once they were driven away  
To this world on the third day  
Of the month of *Muharam*  
By the disastrous command

<sup>6</sup> Possibly a scribal error for: *tundhungěn*.

<sup>7</sup> The Javanese text, in this list of those banished from Paradise, mentions two trees: the casuarina (*cěmara*) and the carob, whereas above it was the fig and carob who dared to help Adam and Hawa and risked God's wrath. I kept the translation consistent with the storyline.

9. Inggih tinurunkĕn sigĕra  
Adam Hawa kĕlangkung kawĕlas asih  
Pan cinatur tibanipun  
Wontĕn ing gunung Selan  
Nabi Adam apisah lan garwanipun  
Yata wahu nabi Adam  
Tumbuh polahe anangis
9. Yes, quickly sent down  
Adam and Hawa in lamentable state  
It is told that they fell  
On Mount Selan  
Nabi Adam separated from his wife  
And *nabi* Adam  
Bewildered, wept.
10. Tinutuh salira nira  
Nabi Adam sambate amĕlas asih  
Anangis siyang lan dalu  
Wontĕn ing 'Ardi Selan  
Inggang netĕra waspa nira mĕdal marus  
Tibeng siti 'Arga Selan  
Dadi sutiya mirah abĕrit
10. Reproaching himself  
Nabi Adam pitifully cried  
Weeping day and night  
On Mount Selan  
His eyes shedding tears of blood  
Touching the ground on Mount Selan  
They turned to red rubies
11. Mangkana ni babu Hawa  
Tibanira ing Gunung Siyĕm anangis  
Iblis Lanat tibanipun  
Aneng luhuring ngarga  
Ana dene pĕksi mĕrak tibanipun  
Dhawah aneng bumi Bĕstam  
Ula tiba ing Yamani
11. Thus mother Hawa  
Fell on Mount Siyem weeping  
Deceitful Iblis fell  
On a mountain top  
As for the peacock it fell  
Dropped down in the land of Bestam  
The serpent fell in Yemen
12. Ucapĕn bagedha Adam  
Aneng Selan siyang dalu anangis  
Anutuh saliranipun  
Duraka ing Pangeran  
Ping kaliye Nabi Adam tangisipun  
Apisah lawan kang garwa  
Kalangkung marma ing galih
12. Let us speak of *bagedha* Adam  
In Selan he wept day and night  
Blaming himself for  
Rebelling against God  
Secondly Adam wept on account of  
Separating from his wife  
Exceedingly troubled in his heart
13. Tumĕnga tĕnga ing tawang  
Nabi Adam inggih mangke ani'ali  
Ing tulise lohi almahfuth  
Alama dennya tumĕnga  
Nabi Adam amalah jangkĕp sewu tahun  
Anutuh saliranira  
'Aradhe<sup>8</sup> kawula lali
13. Looking up to the sky  
Nabi Adam soon saw  
The writing of the Preserved Tablet  
Long he looked up  
Nabi Adam for a full thousand years  
Reprimanded himself  
For forgetting he was but a slave.

<sup>8</sup> Possibly *ngarad* = 'to pull, drag, to subject to forced labor'.

## COMMENTARY

The stories of the prophets' lives form a central textual tradition of a global Islamic civilization. Told in many languages, genres, and places they recount the deeds and sayings of figures viewed as prophets in Islam (from Arabic sin. *nabī*, pl. *anbiyā*), familiar from the Jewish and to a lesser degree Christian traditions, many of whom are not considered prophets by these latter religions but nonetheless are well known, like Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, David, Solomon, and others. In the Muslim tradition the stories of the prophets inevitably lead up to the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad, considered the final, or "seal" of the prophets after whom no further true prophets will appear in the world. The biography of Muhammad, from his birth and childhood to his early struggles, failures, and successes in convincing others to follow the path of Islam, and his death as well as stories of his companions and family members, are all typically included in, and form the closing section of, the cycle of tales.

In Java, as mentioned above, the *Sĕrat Ambiya* forms a vast and diverse corpus. As an example of its variability Timothy E. Behrend notes in his catalogue that in the Museum Sonobudoyo's collection of more than thirty exemplars no two manuscripts are identical (Behrend 1990: 207). Further, complicating the picture is the fact that this corpus blends into others at the edges and overlaps to one degree or another with "branch texts" like those focusing on a particular prophet (for example, *Sĕrat Yusup*), a member of the Prophet's family (Patimah Ngali, for example, portraying the lives of the Prophet's daughter Fatimah and her husband Ali), or a particular episode (for example, *Sĕrat Samud*, recounting the dialogue of the Prophet with the Jew Abdullah ibnu Salam). In the Javanese *Ambiya* the familiar stories are often set in Java and present their themes through a local filter that both teaches much about Java at the time of compilation and writing and about the core features of the tales.

The *Ambiya* textual tradition is central to Javanese Islam: to imagining and internalizing the creation of the world and the early history of humanity, major developments before, leading up to and throughout the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime, his legacy and the history of early Islam. If we explore these texts more closely, they also present, in addition to these broad strokes of history and its particular trajectory, a model for correct behaviour and attitudes in this life, a paradigm of how good Muslim men and women should act, the rituals they should carry out like the five daily prayers or fasting during Ramadhan, and the acts they must avoid, like worshipping idols or doubting God's omnipotence. At an even more detailed level – although of course linked to "correct behaviour" and sometimes transgressing it – the texts explore the most fundamental of human relationships including those of husband and wife, parent and child, siblings, ruler and his subjects, ruler and prophet, guru and disciple, elders and youth, foreigner and locals, friends and companions. Through these relationships the text also engages with a range of emotional responses and social contexts: Episodes depict doubt, fear, anger, jealousy, passion, love, rivalry, courage, kindness, regret, remorse, hope, stubbornness,

and terror – offering a repository for thinking about what it means to be human in particular cultural contexts.

Judging from the fact that *Ambiya* texts were written and copied in the palaces of Central Java as well as in rural areas, along the north coast and in *pěsantren*, it is clear that the tales were popular across different milieus of Javanese society. Thus, we find the extravagant, beautifully illuminated exemplar of 1267 pages inscribed in Haměngkubuwana V's scriptorium in Yogyakarta (MS MSB L25j, written 1844-1851), alongside much briefer, undated and simpler manuscripts written from Cirebon to Madura and a broad range of tellings in terms of length, sophistication, and the use of artistic devices and colour. The Javanese *Ambiya* texts have been studied by several scholars, including Poerbatjaraka, Brandes, Van Ronkel, Juynboll, and Vreede, who for the most part prepared synopses of different versions, an important step in creating a basis for comparative study and a mapping of the larger corpus. What their studies reveal is that although the versions tend to be different, it is also the case that quite often two or more manuscripts will have entire sections that are the same, possibly pointing to a similar production context, such as, for example, the Javanese *Pasisir*.<sup>9</sup> There remain many avenues to explore the *Ambiya*. Among them, as Behrend notes, are the questions of transmission and inter-textual relations between multiple manuscripts and sub- or branch-corpora, which are fundamental to our ability to map this very complex tradition.

#### THE FIRST SIN OF THE FIRST PROPHET

Adam is considered the first human and also the first prophet in Islam and therefore his biography typically figures in the opening sections of *Ambiya* manuscripts. In the verses included here from the fourth canto Adam and Hawa are banished from paradise and sent from a heavenly, divine realm to a world of human existence in which pain, loss, and separation are inherent from the start. The verses present the old tradition, appearing already in tenth century Arabic writings and later spreading across South and Southeast Asia: That of all places on earth Adam fell on a mountaintop in Selan (that is, Ceylon, known in Arabic as Sarandib and currently as Sri Lanka) while the other accomplices in the transgression of God's command fell elsewhere, each to their own fate, alone.

According to the story as told in the *Ambiya* before reaching the section translated above, Adam and Hawa were clothed prior to consuming the forbidden fruit and their garments vanished as a result of their wrongdoing. The original clothes Adam wore in Paradise are described in detail, using the *krama inggil* register, toward the end of the second canto. His attire included an exceptionally beautiful garment (*busana kang luwih adi*), ceremonial batik apparel and a crown (*kampung lan makutha*), an unspecified article of clothing

<sup>9</sup> For more details on these earlier publications and the *Ambiya* production sites see Behrend (1990: 207) and Pigeaud (1967: 130-132).

for the upper body (*rasukan*), a fine sash (*paningsět adi*), and patterned trousers (*lancingan riněbda pita*).<sup>10</sup> Adam is further described as one whose looks could not be rivalled, beloved of God. Clothes, then, according to the *Ambiya* telling, were a pre-transgression phenomenon. After Adam sinned, he did not suddenly discover his nudity and feel deep shame having earlier been oblivious to it, but rather he noticed his condition because it was indeed new. After Adam and Hawa commit their sin the clothes, as well as Adam's crown, disappear, and again the items relevant for Adam are listed with only slight variation: first the crown (*makutha musna ilang*), then the batik garment, headcloth, pants, and shirt (*kampuh dhěsthar lancingan kulambi*). On this occasion the text also mentions Hawa's garments, from which the reader can infer that she too was dressed from the start and only lost her clothes after tasting the fruit. In her case a *kampuh* and sash (*cuměnthing*) are mentioned, but no upper garment.<sup>11</sup>

The clothes that humanity's progenitors wore were specifically Javanese. Their significance in the text is tied to their role in marking Adam and Hawa's humanity as well as their Javanese identity. Especially for Adam, for whom the depiction of attire and his looks more generally is far more detailed, the clothes reflect and express his high status and his closeness to God. This emphasis on outward appearance and its symbolic meanings explains why the loss of the clothes was experienced as devastating and the search for their replacement so frantic. The "garment episode" is filled with seemingly small details – for example, what precisely Adam used to cover his body, what type of sash Hawa wore in Eden – that prove to be telling as they reveal approaches to humanity's original form, to nudity and dress, to aspects of identity related to place, gender, and rank. And this episode is but one among many, many others filling the *Ambiya's* pages in which small, concrete, imaginable details with which readers and listeners could identify add up to an intricate perspective on religion and life.

As our selected passage opens Adam and Hawa search fervently for something with which to cover themselves, and leaves seem like a good solution, yet the trees fear God's wrath and all but the fig refuse to help. The trees also refrain from offering the couple a place of shelter and rest as they rush around dazed, until once again a single tree, the carob, volunteers its shade. These details draw on Jewish traditions and commentaries and reflect the multiple ways in which the *Ambiya* tradition as a whole builds on Jewish tellings and interpretations of the prophets' lives, a tendency that was acknowledged for centuries but began to be criticized and then shunned from the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Canto 2, p.25, stanza 47, in *Sinom*.

<sup>11</sup> Canto 3, p. 45, stanzas 65–66, in *Dhandhanggula*.

<sup>12</sup> Tottoli (2002) writes that with the exception of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathir who lived in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (d. 1328 and 1373, respectively), the prophets' tales were hugely popular in the Arab world and commonly accepted by its great thinkers. The tales' status began to wane when Abduh and Rida, and then others, in the context of a conflict with the West, strongly criticized the inclusion into Muslim interpretation and history what

In the translated section Adam's story ends rather abruptly yet it is recounted in more detail later in the canto. One of the sections that is later expanded is that of Adam glancing up at the sky and seeing the *loh al-mahfuth*, the "Preserved Tablet", on which all events past and future are inscribed. What is clear from the brief excerpt is that the Javanese author was following the much earlier tradition recounting the location of Adam's fall, his separation from Hawa and his anguish following their misdeed and banishment. There is a strong emphasis on sorrow and misery which are, according to the author, the result of the act of disobeying God as well as the separation imposed on husband and wife. These emotions are expressed primarily through weeping: Adam and Hawa both cry continuously, inconsolably, the reader at times feeling as if swept away by a river or a huge wave, about to drown. There is an echo here to the initial encounter between Hawa and Iblis when the latter shrewdly entered paradise and wandered about it weeping, until Hawa heard him and out of pity asked what was wrong. But Adam's tears are also those of blood, hardening into gems. This latter detail, which can be viewed as a descriptive poetic device, in fact offers an explanation for the abundance of gems, including rubies, found in the earth of what is now known as Ratnapura district, not far from Adam's Peak, the mountain in Sri Lanka where Adam is said to have fallen.<sup>13</sup> More broadly the tears, the concrete site of earthly banishment, the pain of losing what cannot be regained and the roots of an unfulfilled longing that will forever accompany Adam's descendants, bring to life the centrality of this episode to human, and within it Muslim, history.

#### WRITING THE AMBIYA IN PEGON

The second theme I wish to address is the use of *pegon* in Javanese manuscripts. *Pegon*, the writing of Javanese in a modified form of the Arabic script, constituted a central element of Java's gradual Islamization. It allowed those who did not know Arabic exposure to Islamic teachings, especially within the *pésantren* milieu, and its use heralded a new phase in Javanese writing and literary production.<sup>14</sup> Although the script employed was the Arabic one and it was written from right to left, the number of letters (twenty), their sequence, and pronunciation followed that of traditional Javanese script, *aksara Jawa*.<sup>15</sup> I. Yahya, M.A.K. Hasan, and Farkhan in their study of the early seventeenth-century interlinear *Masā'il at-Ta'līm* (2018: 38) state that little has

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was viewed as external influences. Additional reasons for the change in approach included the adoption of new (also Western) critical approaches to the study of religion and, following the establishment of Israel in 1948, the wish to purge any Jewish elements which had been so integral to the tradition.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the tradition of Adam's banishment as depicted in Arabic, Malay, and Javanese sources see Ricci (2019, especially chapter 6, "Nabi Adam: the paradigmatic exile").

<sup>14</sup> For a summary integrating earlier scholarship on *pegon* and an important study of the earliest extant manuscript of an interlinear translation from Arabic to Javanese using *pegon* see Yahya, Hasan, and Farkhan (2018, especially pp. 34-40).

<sup>15</sup> Arabic script consists of twenty-nine letters, while *jawi* (Malay written in the Arabic script) consists of thirty-five. For a comparative table see Yahya, Hasan, and Farkhan (2018: 39-40).

changed between the *pegon* of four centuries ago and its current use. Although such uniformity is impressive, further study is needed to assess the nuances of gradual change that may have occurred over time and within particular traditions of writing. The main change, or variability seems to have been in the way Javanese vowels (ě *pěpět*; e *taling*; and o *taling tarung*) were represented in *pegon*.<sup>16</sup>

According to Saiful Umam (2004: 94-98), *pegon* was used for four categories of writing: personal notes, literary texts, *primbon* and Islamic writings, the latter referring to fields of knowledge, such as *tasawuf*, jurisprudence, and theology. The *Ambiya* stories belong to the second category, that of translated or local literary traditions. However, *Ambiya* were also written in the Javanese script and therefore allow an exploration of the question of whether the choice of script had an impact on content or form. Again, caution is in order as any statement must be tentative until further research is conducted, but a few initial thoughts will be offered based on MS. MSB L12.

In this context the two opening pages of the manuscript are interesting to consider because they contain the formulas and blessings familiar from many manuscripts, whether *Ambiya* tellings or others, written in *aksara Jawa*. Even before turning to content a look at these pages suggests, they are similar to the opening ones of additional manuscripts: The writing is framed beautifully with colourful flower and leaf-like designs. At the top of the first page is the *bismillah* invocation, and beneath it the name of the *těmbang* metre for the first canto (*pupuh Asmaradana*) accompanied by three small flowers. A small flower also marks the end of each stanza. The *gatra* are marked not with slanting lines but with the Arabic letter *tha* (ث).

The first few stanzas, the *mukadimah*, invoke and praise God using the familiar formula beginning with “*ingsun mimiti amuji*” which, according to Behrend (1990: 207), identifies the manuscript with certainty as belonging to the *Pasisiran* tradition. The author then praises the Prophet Muhammad, his next of kin, and his companions, who are listed according to the well-known order: Abu Bakar, Umar, Uthman, and Ali. This is followed by an apology, a conventional statement of humility and self-degradation by the author or scribe who belittles his linguistic abilities and writing skills and begs his audience’s patience, then asks God for His guidance and compassion. Finally for this section, the time of writing is specified, including the day of the week according to the combined Hijri and Javanese calendars (*Soma Wage*), the day of the month, the time of the day, the Javanese year within the cycle (*Ehe*), the *mangsa*, followed by a *sangkala*, a chronogram marking the *Saka* year. In all these details – the idioms, use of *těmbang* and *těmbang* markers, the cultural conventions of praise and humility, dating and illuminated opening frames – although they vary from manuscript to manuscript, the *Layang Ambiya* does not depart dramatically from contemporary manuscripts written in the Javanese script.

In terms of the writing itself the manuscript exhibits several common tendencies. Looking to the representation of the Javanese vowels, noted above,

<sup>16</sup> On the representation of these vowels in *pegon* see Pudjiastuti (2009).

we find the following: the ě *pepet* is marked with a small tilde-like sign (~) above the letter.<sup>17</sup> The e *taling* is marked with the Arabic diacritic *fatha*, a small line, above the relevant letter followed by the Arabic letter *ya*, the latter often topped with the *sukun*, a small circle used to mark the absence of a vowel. However, the *sukun* is sometimes missing.<sup>18</sup> The o *taling tarung* is marked by a *fatha* above the letter followed by a *waw* topped with a *sukun*.<sup>19</sup> Another phenomenon appearing throughout the manuscript has to do with scribal errors: when a word was written incorrectly it was not erased but rather left as is, usually without diacritics, and re-written correctly. An example is found in the fourth canto (stanza 13 line 3) where the “Preserved Tablet” is mentioned, first written erroneously (*a.l.m.h.th*) and immediately after correctly (*al-mahfūth*). Another point to note is that the connecting of letters within words, often done according to the rules of Arabic (which allow for some letters to be connected, either from one or both sides, and others not so), is sometimes done idiosyncratically, disregarding those rules. For example, in the fourth canto stanza 12 line 5 the word *tangisipun* is divided into two parts: *tangis* and *ipun*. The Javanese letters representing sounds that do not exist in Arabic are written using modified Arabic letters, namely *dha* by the letter *dal* with three dots beneath it, *nya* by a *ya* with three dots beneath it, *nga* by an ‘*ain* with three dots above, and so forth. Finally, the writing also includes Arabic letters that are not part of the *aksara Jawa* system, used to spell Arabic words or names (such as *Hawa*, *Muhammad*, *ṣahābat*), and so the script encompasses both *pegon* in the strict sense of the word (Arabic letters following the Javanese alphabetical order and sounds) and additional Arabic letters that complement it and allow for a wider range of expression.

The study of the *Ambiya* corpus – wide and deep as an ocean – could fill a lifetime. But I hope that even this brief discussion of script, poetic metres, the use of the Javanese idiom and adoption of the tales’ content hints at how and why this core Islamic textual tradition took root and blossomed in Java.

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<sup>17</sup> See for example canto 1 stanza 1 line 2, the word *aněbut*. On Javanese ways of indicating the *pěpět* and a comparison to its representation in Malay see Wieringa (2003, especially pp. 505-511).

<sup>18</sup> For an e *taling* with an unmarked *ya*, see the word *den* in line 2 (Opening page, Illustration 1). For a *ya* (in fact two of them) marked with a *sukun*, see the word *Ehe* in line 9 (Opening page, Illustration 1).

<sup>19</sup> See for example the word *mongsa* in line 10 (Opening page, Illustration 1).

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