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**Farouk Yahya. *Magic and Divination in Malay Illustrated Manuscripts*.
Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015, xxvii+349p., 308 illus., 2 maps.**

Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 5, No. 3, December 2016, pp. 563-567.

How to Cite: Daneshgar, Majid. Review of *Magic and Divination in Malay Illustrated Manuscripts* by Farouk Yahya. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3, December 2016, pp. 563-567.

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Magic and Divination in Malay Illustrated Manuscripts

FAROUK YAHYA

Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015, xxvii+349p., 308 illus., 2 maps

A fully developed scholarly source for illustrated manuscripts dealing with humans, life, the future, beliefs, death, and so on, is much needed by arts, religious, cultural, and ethnical studies scholars. Globally speaking, studies on the history of divination, talismans, and amulets suggest that there is a connection between magic and medicine notes in the eastern and western parts of the world. However, access to a comprehensive collection of Eastern illustrated manuscripts including magic, divination, medicine, and sorcery notes is implausible. There is also a dearth of studies related to such collections in Arab countries and particularly in Persia.

Farouk Yahya considered about 96 published and non-published manuscripts in the Malay-Indonesian world chiefly since the late eighteenth century in an attempt to fill a part of this blank space. Yahya's book thus encourages other Asian scholars to produce similar works about their cultural heritage. He draws our attention to the fictional characters, popular customs, and local knowledge of magic, divination, and medicine of a region where people used to have great respect for magic and magicians. This book is divided into two parts and eight chapters.

The first part comprises an Introduction and Background, whereby the author simultaneously considers three approaches in his study, including (a) a general survey of the manuscripts, (b) an analysis of a particular illustration and note on magic/divination, and (c) an assessment of a specific manuscript. Some Malay manuscripts are unknown and sometimes undated. Apart from the destructive influence of Southeast Asian climates in wrecking the colophons, I recollect a discus-

sion I had with colleagues in Malaysia a couple of years ago regarding many local manuscripts, particularly dealing with Islamic teachings, rituals, and customs, which are anonymous because they were written for the sake of God and not for fame. The first datable (and illustrated) manuscript considered by Farouk Yahya is from 1775 and the latest is from 1933, although there are a few sixteenth and early seventeenth-century manuscripts in European collections (refer to chapter three of the book).

The author promptly highlights the importance of his study to art studies. He also provides readers with hints of whether pre-Islamic and ancient paintings are manifested in the Archipelago. To offer some insight into the application of divinatory and magic notes occasionally written incompletely in the manuscripts, Yahya also conducted interviews with four male practitioners. It is certain that through the use of various methodologies this study addresses different scientific disciplines.

The next section of part one starts with “the Malay spirit world” that helps readers comprehend how various foreign fictional and supernatural elements have entered Malay magic and divination works. This section sheds light on the thought that as long as the language of a community is filled with loaned terms, its cultural heritage is to some/large extent impressed.

Subsequently, Yahya provides additional information about the tools applied by a Malay magician, which are divided into four groups: (a) oral tradition written in manuscripts, such as supplications and incantations; (b) particular objects such as the *keris* (dagger) and magic-medicinal bowl (*mangkuk penawar*); (c) goods and materials including water, candles, lime, eggs, betel leaves, toasted rice, etc.; and (d) effigies of humans and animals. Although magicians in other Asian and Muslim communities apply many of these tools, it seems there is no comprehensive prescription of the ingredients in materials. For instance, I observed a religious quasi-Sufi Persian practitioner who wrote some Arabic and Persian notes using liquid saffron, a plant growing extensively in Iran, inside a bowl. He put the bowl in the kitchen to bestow blessings and wealth upon the people of the house (*ahl-i khāna/manzil*). However, as far as I know saffron was/is not used by Malay magicians or fortune-tellers because it was/is not cultivated there. This implies that geographical context does influence the reception of foreign elements.

Likewise, Yahya displays the parallel role that both magicians and mosque Imams had for some time, to physically or metaphysically guide *orang Melayu*. Logically speaking, the authority of Imams reinforced or increased with the start of another Islamization wave in Southeast Asia, with particular emphasis on orthodox Islam in the *very* beginning of the twentieth century which led to diminishing the importance of magic culture among Malays; the opposite is expected in other societies, with the more contact that Muslims had/have with widespread so-called unorthodox teachings, the more familiar with magic treatments they will be.¹⁾ Later on, the Malay-Indonesians’

1) Many Shī‘ī and Sufī produced their own magic and divination notes by employing Islamic, local, and cultural elements. Likewise, they had a significant influence on Malays before the twentieth century.

links with Middle Eastern oil kings, the re-emergence of a devoted Shī'ī authority in Iran in 1979, and the scrambling Arab governments to *re*-capture the Muslim world's economic-political power, and so forth have all significantly affected the slow (and occasionally secret, non-official) handing down of Malay magical heritage to next generations.

The second part of the book deals with *Manuscripts*, where Yahya explains there are European manuscript collections, but only a small share of Portuguese collections include Malay manuscripts:

In fact, apart from a couple of letters that were sent to them by local rulers, Malay manuscripts are rarely found in the Portuguese collections. This could probably be explained by the antagonistic views held of non-Catholic cultures, especially that of Islam. Additionally, the lack of Malay manuscripts in Portuguese archives is also partly due to the survivability of the evidence, as many records were lost when the Casa da India in Lisbon was destroyed by earthquake and fire in 1755. (p. 42)

The author also describes the physical features, materials, formats, and colors used in the manuscripts. As there is vague understanding of some manuscript images, in chapter five Yahya draws the readers' attention to the connection between text and images. Yahya's attempt to find different samples of divination manuscripts is obvious. He introduces *Ketika Burung* and *Burung Malaikat*, both of which are based on depicting a bird, something that is rarely studied by contemporary scholars. Tables, diagrams, and some hints to help discern between Arabic, Jawi, and Pegon letters are presented as well. *Fāl al-Qur'ān*, or divination by the Qur'ān, are originally from the Middle East and (more or less) South Asian regions but are often found in the Malay world as well. Some *Fāl al-Qur'ān* that are ascribed to an important Shī'ī and Sufi figure, Ja'far al-Šādiq have been analyzed and a connection is pointed out between the structure and procedure of Persian, Ottoman and Malay *Fāl al-Qur'ān*.

Other techniques of expressing the human state and seeing the future are augury and physiognomy. According to Yahya, the first deals with interpreting signs in nature, which can be done by referring to earthquakes, eclipses, lightening, dreams, human limb movements, and so on. The latter (physiognomy) is also known as *firasat* and it is "to decode the inner character by developing a grammar of observable bodily features" (p. 151) and it covers humans, animals, and objects. The iconography part of the book essentially motivates readers to decode the secrets of signs and paintings that are extensively used in manuscripts. The relation between Chinese motifs and the Malay magic and divination culture is evident, as Yahya highlighted "A Chinese porcelain saucer with a 4 × 4 magic square in the bottom [produced at the] Jingdezhen, Jianxi province [of] China."

Chapter seven is also interesting as it refers to magicians and gender. In the section "Female Magicians," readers discover the importance of introducing Muḥammad's household (e.g. Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn) into talismans. It should be noted that the importance of the four Rightly-guided caliphs of Islam (Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and 'Alī) are displayed in other Malay manuscripts by placing them far from each other (in the corners of the page) often in separate polygons,

flowers, circles and ovals (see Fig. 47, p. 71; Fig. 254, p. 218; Fig. 285, p. 246). It recalls the ottoman rulers such as Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512) and his son Selim I (r. 1512–1520) who ignored Persian-Shī‘ī Safavid officials’ cursing the first three caliphs by adding their names (Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthmān) and symbols to their banners (See Yürekli 2015). Also, I understood that the “calligraphic lion on scroll of Mehmet II” (1458 AD) preserved in the Topkapi Serai Library resembles—in terms of designation only—the “calligraphic lion on the standard of Sultan Muhammad IV of Kelantan” (r. 1899–1920) appeared on page 192 of Yahya’s book (See Shani 2011, 123). It signifies that Middle Eastern Islamic traditions and religious-political movements had impact on Malay folk prose as well as Malay notes on magic. Yahya indicates that *selusuh Fatimah*, which served to facilitate childbirth, belonged to (possibly) after the mid-nineteenth century; it coincides with the (re-) writing of several Malay *hikayat dan buku* that include Islamic (Sunni, Shī‘ī and Sufi) elements (See also: Wieringa 1996, 93–111). However, Yahya claims that:

The manuscripts are therefore not only an important resource for a study of Malay visual art and magical and divinatory practices, but also for an understanding of the production and consumption of Malay manuscripts in general. The private and personal nature of their contents means that the manuscripts are different to Malay manuscripts of other textual genres such as poetry, literary and devotional works, which are often recited aloud in public. (p. 296)

The process and printing of magical and divination notes after the twentieth century along with their current status, for example in Malaysia today, form the last part of this book. To finalize his discussion, Yahya concludes that rather than manuscripts written and owned by magicians, the most illuminating manuscripts usually belonged to the religious and royalty classes of society, and more beautiful and high quality manuscripts “were commissioned by European patrons.”

This comprehensive book resembles a well-written encyclopaedia in targeting every aspect of Southeast Asian notes on divination and magic, and can be supplemented with the detailed manuscript catalogues written by Wieringa (1998), Iskandar (1999), and also Skeat (1900). Yahya’s effort suggests that the descriptive works on Malay culture are no longer effective. He also reminds enthusiastic scholars that now is the time to use his book in order to select a type of note on magic and divination and trace its development, and following Winstedt’s analytical view, attempt to answer what for/how these magical notions entered and connected with the Middle East, South Asian and the Malay-Indonesian world.

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Mother Figured: Marian Apparitions & the Making of a Filipino Universal

DEIRDRE DE LA CRUZ

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015, 320p.

In March 1989, a transgender woman named Judiel Nieva reported that the Virgin Mary appeared to her atop a guava tree in the town of Agoo in the Philippine province of La Union. After much initial fanfare, a theological commission of the Roman Catholic Church declared the apparition as *Constat de Non Supernaturalitate*, or “clearly evident to be not supernatural.” In the 20 years since then, however, Filipino devotees to the Virgin Mary have continued to flourish, with some even making pilgrimages in different Marian shrines in and outside the country. Based on the *Catholic Directory of the Philippines*, more than 800 parishes nationwide are dedicated to the Virgin Mary as its titular patron. It is perhaps too simplistic say that the Marian devotion in the Philippines has persisted simply because of the intensity of Filipinos’ religious faith. What underlies the continued devotion to the Virgin Mary in the largest Roman Catholic nation in Asia?

Deirdre de la Cruz’s *Mother Figured: Marian Apparitions & the Making of a Filipino Universal* is a meticulous historical and ethnographic examination of the devotion to the Virgin Mary. It is published at a time in which the Catholic Church in the Philippines is embarking upon a 9-year spiritual journey that will culminate in the commemoration of the 500 years of Catholicism in the Philippines (Palma 2012). The book’s publication also finds resonance amidst Pope Francis’s radical new evangelization, which places great emphasis on the vibrancy of religious life among Catholic communities in the Global South.

This book has many important and significant key points which are approached from a number of angles using close textual analysis of church records and other historical documents. One important theme is the interaction between religion, the mass media, and lay actors in shaping