

# The Political Work of Abdoe'lxarim M. s. in Colonial and Japanese Occupied Indonesia (1930s–1940s)

William Bradley Horton<sup>1</sup>

During the Japanese occupation there was no *Volksraad*, where Indonesian members protected by parliamentary privilege could publically criticize the colonial government with impunity. Also the Indonesian Press was muzzled far more severely than it had been in the Dutch time. Nor was it possible for Indonesians to play the role of loyal opposition. Any open criticism or opposition to the Japanese military government meant imprisonment, torture and usually death.

Bereft of arms and modern military know-how, the vast majority of Indonesian leaders were unwilling to commit suicide and either elected to cooperate with the Japanese, hoping to be able to steer the situation to their country's advantage, or stayed in the background.<sup>2</sup>

The claim that many Indonesians were really struggling for independence, obtaining military training, and promoting nationalism while participating in Japanese sponsored organizations like the Java self-defence force PETA and ostensibly promoting Japanese war-related projects during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia in 1942–1945 is both well-known and widely accepted. Both President Sukarno and President Suharto — and the political, cultural, economic and military leaders of a full generation — are widely known to have been involved. Curiously, this acceptance has had little effect on studies of other periods.

In exploring Indonesian political and cultural development in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, our knowledge of the Japanese occupation should encourage reexamination of precisely the materials which seem least political from the not-always-benevolent colonial period (~1942) with its various forms of surveillance and repressive institutions. One such set of materials are literary magazines of the late 1930s and

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1. Waseda University, School of Social Sciences, Contemporary Japanese Studies Program. The author can be contacted at via email at [horton@aoni.waseda.jp](mailto:horton@aoni.waseda.jp)

2. Penders (1980: 67).

early 1940s like *Loekisan Poedjangga*, *Doenia Pengalaman*, *Doenia Pergerakan*, and *Tjendrawasih* which featured “dime novels” by a reasonably wide range of authors. That some authors found themselves jailed for *persdelict* [press violations] or *spreekdelict* [speech violations] suggests there was something that Dutch authorities did not like, while literary journals’ popularity, with print runs of up to 5,000 copies, made them as well distributed as many Balai Poestaka publications and a potentially meaningful media for political work,<sup>3</sup> although only rarely recognized by Indonesians.<sup>4</sup>

These materials may have been off our radar for several reasons. First, there has been a marginalization of both writings and figures which are not amenable to received paradigms — both related to history writing and the Indonesian literary canon. The case of first generation Indonesian political leaders is particularly illustrative. According to Takashi Shiraishi’s attempt to historicize the early *pergerakan* movements (Shiraishi 1990), Islam, nationalism and communism were closely intertwined in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, until the early 1920s partitioning of popular movements in Java into these three ideological streams. That process involved marginalization of certain figures from the *pergerakan* in the minds of scholars as well. A few of the radical Javanese like Marco Kartodikromo of the Sarekat Islam in the 1910s and Sumantri and Semaon of the PKI in the 1920s have recently received some attention, however their works did not stress Islam and thus can be easily assimilated to one particular radical-nationalist-not-Islamist framework. Other figures and their fiction have been almost entirely ignored, whether *peranakan* Chinese or non-Chinese Indonesian.<sup>5</sup>

Second, part and parcel to this “segregated” view of Indonesian history, post-independence scholars have long accepted government sponsored Balai Poestaka publications as the only fictional works worthy of consideration for several reasons, including the much vaunted literary superiority of Balai Poestaka products and a

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3. On the size of literary journal print runs in comparison to *Pandji Poestaka*, see Joesoef Sou’yb (1940) and the discussion below. Unfortunately, Balai Poestaka *Resultaten* for the 1920s detail book loans through the *Volksbibliotheken*, but not sales figures. Balai Poestaka found lending critical for exposing native Indonesians to their publications; significantly, most titles were borrowed fewer than 5,000 times per year, and unpopular titles only a few times.

4. The image of the journalist-activist had a relatively strong presence in prewar fiction, but the novelist rarely appeared, and the politically aware novelist was still rarer. See, for example, the journalist-activists in Tamar Djaja’s *Journalist Alamsjah* (1939); Mahals’ *Marwan Djamal* (1940) and *Wartawan Ksatria* (*Marwan Djamal II*) (1940); and the novelist in Romanita’s *A. Dahri, Romanschrijver* (1940). In one exception, the main character of A. Karim Halim’s *Fadjar Minjingsing* (1940) composes three novels as part of his Islamic mission to the Dayak.

5. Kratz (2000) has endeavored to be inclusive, seeing both Islamic and popular writings as important elements in Indonesian literary development. Nonetheless, his work does not yet resolve this problem. Following the pioneering work of Claudine Salmon in the 1970s and 1980s, and subsequent work of scholars like Myra Sidharta, Thomas Rieger and Leo Suryadinata, there has been a republication boom for *peranakan* authored stories, beginning in 1993 but more intensively after 2000. With very few exceptions, Chinese and non-Chinese works have been separate in both republication and academic discussion. See Rieger (1991) and Siegel (1997) for two of the first few exceptions.

frequent assumption that there were virtually no other works published, neither of which is convincing given our knowledge of this period.<sup>6</sup> Both the apparently substantial difference in distribution of privately published works before WWII compared to Balai Poestaka publications and the more significant continuous publication and promotion of Balai Poestaka works throughout the post-war period have contributed as well to this understanding of which native publications were of importance much as they have contributed to the marginalization of works written or published by *peranakan* Chinese. As a basis for understanding the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s, this assumption is thus somewhat anachronistic; however important it may have been, the dominance of Balai Poestaka was not as absolute as commonly assumed.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps even more critical for ideological and racial filtering, the substantially successful dominance of Balai Poestaka over literary production for non-Chinese Indonesians during the 20<sup>th</sup> century involved an insistence that publications be religiously neutral and apolitical.

The insistence on Balai Poestaka fiction being religiously neutral and apolitical was potentially very important given the context of the late colonial period. Specifically, colonial suppression in the jailing or exile to Boven Digoel of many writers in the late 1920s was also of critical significance for the actual production of publications, both because of the frequently permanent disappearance of those writers and the threat that remained over the heads of writers until 1942.

It is one story written by a former resident of Boven Digoel and published in the immediate prewar period under the growing shadow of war with Japan to which I will turn in order to address the question of political work by marginalized figures and to explore what this may have meant.

### The Story: Hadji Dadjal<sup>8</sup>

Oemar was a Singaporean street salesman of a drink called *cendol*, however, people who knew Oemar gradually came to call him Dadjal<sup>9</sup> because he never went to

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6. Established early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Balai Poestaka was the main government publisher of native Indonesian language books. While there has been increasing recognition of other works since the 1960s, especially pre-Balai Pustaka publications, this period has also seen a proliferation of works oblivious to their presence. Teeuw (1967) notably acknowledges the existence of stories by native Indonesians published outside of Balai Pustaka, that many Balai Pustaka publications lacked any redeeming literary qualities and that private publications did have an attractiveness to their readers. However, his emphasis on Balai Pustaka and Poedjangga Baroe texts and authors is not lost on most readers.

7. This point is clear when considering Balai Pustaka's concern about private lending libraries in the mid- and late-1930s and their subsequent efforts to stimulate the establishment of new libraries dominated by Balai Pustaka works as opposed to "indecent" Chinese stories. See *Balai Pustaka Sewadjarnja 1908–1948*, pp. 29–30.

8. Abdoe'Ixarim M. s., *Hadji Dadjal*, Loekisan Poedjangga th. III, no. 36 (1 Juni 1941), Medan: Tjerdas (70 pp.).

the mosque and never joined religious activities like visiting the sick, going to the home of the deceased, or attending communal feasts. However, he was eager to participate in any discussions of religion, having obtained an elementary education in the basic tenets of Islam, one which greatly departed from the norm. His opinions were strict interpretations of the Koran, finding no value in the various adat or interpretations of religious figures, and was not concerned about customary practice or what other people said about him as a result.

Being very thrifty, he saved enough money from seven years of work to stay one year in Mecca. Completing requisite paperwork while selling *cendol*, Oemar only announced his departure to his neighbors a day or two before leaving, itself a significant individualistic divergence from the norm. Oemar took the bare minimum with him, most importantly equipment for selling *cendol*, since he had heard that there was little that Malays could eat or drink in Mecca. He did not engage in pre-departure ceremonies or special preparations, expecting to engage in such studies on the ship or in Mecca.

Upon arrival in Mecca, Oemar immediately experimented with a new *cendol* blend and began to sell. His peddling, abstinence from various pilgrimages, and a number of other issues soon brought him into conflict with the local elites referred to as *sjech*.<sup>10</sup> He invariably defended his position with logic and reference to the Koran (but not quotations), rendering him unpopular with the *sjech* and most Indonesians, who simply follow what other people tell them. While selling *cendol*, he continued studying Arabic and Islam with a teacher of similar inclinations, however, conflicts with *sjech* and others who did not follow the precepts of Islam continued. One recurrent problem was with descendants of Muhammad who virtually demanded gifts from Indonesians which they claimed would benefit the giver in accordance with the Islamic mandate to give donations to the poor. This was ridiculed by the narrator, while the practice was attacked with a vengeance by Oemar, who pointed out that only certain groups are legally allowed to receive this type of aid and all others must work. Thus these respected figures were *murtad* (people who had abandoned Islam) and were cheating people.

During his residence in Mecca, a friend from Singapore died, leaving a wife and two children. The local *sjech* pressured the family to sponsor a ceremony and prayers

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9. Dajal is an irreligious person who tempts people to engage in bad behavior or to ignore religious tenets. In Islamic discourse it can refer to a creature who exists to tempt humans to evil in the days before final judgment, or in common parlance simply a liar. Christian usage is apparently more in line with a devil. See Echols and Shadily (1994).

10. As they appear in this novel, the *sjech* seem to be somewhere between local administrators, government officials, landlords and tour organizers. Foreigners resident in Mecca seem to have been associated with one *sjech* to whom they paid various fees, turned to for advice, and with whom they may have lived. These are possibly the pilgrimage *sjech* referred to by Deliar Noer (1973: 64, 224, 229), many of whom came to recruit pilgrims willing to be under their care.

to ask Allah to show mercy to the deceased. The money for organizing this ceremony would go to the *sjech*. Oemar attacked this proposal in the strongest terms as it would neither benefit the deceased [for scriptural reasons] nor was it legal to use money from the deceased's estate before his debts were paid. Even after settlement, the remaining money rightfully belonged to his widow and children. This conflict brought Oemar before one of the chief religious legal specialists in Mecca. The *kadhi* was unable to take action because to support the *sjech* would violate Islamic law (as Oemar was right in his interpretation) while supporting Oemar's position would result in the judge being attacked by the local elite for endangering their means of livelihood. Oemar then began to guard this family, escorting them on their pilgrimage to Medina, and eventually marrying the widow at the recommendation of his *sjech*.

After eight years, Omar and his wife returned to Singapore by way of Egypt where they deposited her two children in a school. Upon arrival, the well-respected Oemar found a new vocation managing a small shop while promoting Islam and a religious educational foundation.

### Hadji Dadjal and Revolutionary Social Critique

The simple plot is barely sufficient even for this small novelette, and certainly unsatisfactory for literary critics or connoisseurs of literature. In terms of character development, this story is also far from achieving the goals of Western literature. Oemar, the only character to receive substantial attention, does not change substantially in terms of inner characteristics; he begins and ends as Dadjal. What changes is the depth of his knowledge of Islam and Arabic, while he obtains experience, a wife, children, money, a new profession, and even becomes a *hadji*. Oemar is happy but indifferent — he was happy without these things and did not particularly seek them. Other characters are simply arranged around Oemar and change as necessary to validate his position, motivate the story, etc. In fact, arguments about behavior and Islam fill the novel; the plot simply serves as the framework on which to hang a series of “situations” and redundant explanations or critiques. Some are entertaining, and readers may have experienced a vicarious enjoyment of Oemar's rips into Arabs. Readers would also have recognized the author's moral points, an attractive characteristic in Indonesian literature of the time, and even more so in post-debate Sumatra. Despite the literary weakness, is it possible that this book could have been a serious effort at social and political activism?

Abdoe'lxarim associates his main character and themes with the radical modernist Islam originating in Egypt, enrolling Oemar's foster-children in religious schools there rather than in Mecca or Singapore, and providing a long discussion of

education in Egypt and Indonesia at the end of the book.<sup>11</sup> Oemar's refusal to accept the interpretations of others about Islam does parallel positions of some other Indonesian modernists who sought to eliminate accretions of legends and customs while denying the authority of any of the main schools of interpretation/law.<sup>12</sup> He denies the validity of the interpretations of others — only trusting "Allah and Rasul," and thus rather than tying himself more tightly to canonized interpretations of the Koran and perhaps the Hadith, he is free to interpret them, essentially following the practice of *ijtihad*. This allows many changes, including the possibility of a communist Islam (not directly implied here with the individualistic Oemar, but perhaps compatible with the materialist class-based critiques).

The novel also provides indications of what beliefs and practices are acceptable. Among the objectionable practices are *ziarah* to graves of holy men to request favors, as it is unlikely that dead people can provide assistance, given that granting requests is God's domain (pp. 12–13). Oemar himself only goes to pay respects to Muhammad at his grave. A range of reprehensible behavior, like engaging in usury or attacking pilgrims, is blamed on poor understanding of *tobat*. Rather than *carte blanche* to behave immorally, *tobat* requires both a sense of deep regret and the commitment to never engage in such proscribed behavior again. Oemar also repeatedly expresses distaste for quick, slurred prayers, insisting on the importance of careful, respectful speech when addressing God, not unlike the modes of speech one would use to address a ruler.

The individual critiques and complaints about Islamic practice does not simply follow a pattern set by other Islamic media, but rather these mostly familiar critiques are displayed for another purpose. Indeed, Abdoe'lxarim does not seem to want his readers to follow a formula, but rather logic and common sense. The lack of individual thought and understanding by the vast majority of the populace is thus a recurring theme. This complaint could probably be appreciated by those with European education, and in fact, it could be argued that Oemar's dislike of (incoherent) attitudes and behavior is a primary focus of the novel. This unacceptable lack of individual agency and thought is conveyed in a debate prior to Oemar's departure from Singapore:

I don't want to debate with you because I know you do not have knowledge;<sup>13</sup>

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11. For a description of the modernist Islamic Manar Movement which was circulating in Medan in 1940, see Amir (1923). That Oemar himself was able to pursue his studies did indicate to readers that Mecca had some modernist scholars, a point which has been recently emphasized by Michael Laffan (2003).

12. On this point see Federspiel (2001: 27).

13. *Berilmoe* indicates possession of both an esoteric type of knowledge as well as a type of "scientific" knowledge which is in some way productive; it does something. *Berpengatahoean* on the other hand indicates more factual knowledge. In any case, the difference between these terms seems to defy translation.

but I hope that there will come a time when God will show the correct way to you with you knowing the truth and thinking about it yourself. That is the reason why each time in exchanging questions and answers with you, there is always an argument, because you think with the brain of others, speak with the mouth of others and hear with the ears of others. But I think with my brain, speak with my mouth, and hear with my ears.

Akoe tidak soeka berbantah dengan kamoe karena akoe tahoe kamoe tiada ber'ilmoe dan berpengatahoean; tetapi akoe harap kelak ada soeatoe masa, Toehan akan menoendjoekkan djoega djalan jang benar kepada kamoe dengan kamoe ketahoei sendiri kebenarannja dan kamoe pikiri. Itoelah sebabnja saban kali bersoal djawab dengan kamoe, sabankali terdjadi perbantahan, lantaran kamoe berpikir dengan otak orang, berkata dengan moeloet orang dan mendengar dengan telinga orang. Tapi akoe berpikir dengan otakkoe, berkata dengan moeloetkoe, dan mendengar dengan telingakoe. (pp. 7–8)

In the picture presented by Abdoe'lxarim, the Islamic masses, especially Indonesians, tend to follow customs as determined by others rather than thinking about what the Koran dictates or what logically must be the case. Accordingly, the need for critical, logical thought both for religious reasons and to ensure one's safety is emphasized throughout the text. In particular, the author singles out things determined by *moepakat* or consensus for special criticism, presumably because this process silences criticism and discourages individual thought (p. 17).

Even if Oemar's fellow Muslims are aware of what is right, they are mute, and only Oemar dares speak the truth without concern for himself; he speaks straight. This is a second theme, the importance of acting out one's beliefs regardless of the consequences in this life. Oemar's insistence on going against customary practices and following a strict interpretation of the Koran even results in a summons to appear before local authorities to defend his words. When resulting in financial benefits like avoiding donations to the descendants of Mohammad (*sajids*), Oemar compensates by tithing to the poor, thereby ensuring that the recipient is eligible for such aid according to Islamic law. Oemar also restricts himself, for example in refusing appointment as a teacher on the public acclaim of students, preferring the model of western education where one who knows more gives an examination and grants the degree. This theme of giving voice to one's beliefs and acting them out — even by not doing something — reappear throughout the text.

Moral themes and the frequently repeated behavioral guidance offered by Abdoe'lxarim to his readers indicate a relationship between the world of religion, Islam, and



the context of living in 20<sup>th</sup> century Netherlands East Indies society. Indeed, the criticisms of Indonesians on religious issues are critical to Abdoe'lxarim, especially as the criticisms apply indirectly to secular issues as well. To mention only one example, the religious elite (*lebai* and *kijai*) are attacked for using God as a tool to acquire money, rather than praising God (p. 30), essentially the same critique as Abdoe'lxarim had once leveled at the Medan journalist Emnast (see below).

Just as secular and religious critiques are related, those specific to Saudi Arabia are very likely not meant to be taken in an exclusively literal manner; rather critiques of the *sjech*, *sajid*, and other Arabs seem to serve multiple purposes. First, they explicitly reject the common belief that the *sajid*, *sjech* or other Arabs including the Badui tribesmen are good by virtue of birthplace and genealogy. Behavior is essential. Second, they are critiques of those in power anywhere, as practices which are beneficial to power-holding classes, however illegal or immoral, tend to be maintained and enforced. The essentially materialist critique of the vested interests of *kadli* [religious judges] on page 28 provides a relatively clear example. These thus double as critiques of government administrators in Indonesia, both Dutch and native Indonesians, although they are never mentioned. Third, the critiques both warn Indonesians that they might be cheated and ridicule them for being suckers.<sup>14</sup>

The religious and social critiques demand thorough questioning of behavior, customs, and the basis of authority in general, as well as the application of rational thought to new contexts. This is potentially revolutionary in its repercussions and very much in line with what the ethici and the colonial state wanted (except *not* in its particular blend with Islam and *with* an added element of subservience). The presentation is not intended to simply critique, but offers direction for social change which is to be driven by understanding, knowledge, fear of God, and simple embarrassment of not-so-progressive members of society. The novel also suggests the possibility of changing society through these understandings and the determination to act and speak in a manner consistent with one's beliefs. Fear of God and the desire to behave correctly become primary driving forces of change, while public embarrassment if challenged openly about mistakes and hypocrisy also becomes important to prevent social inertia from blocking reform. The establishment of the *Perserikatan Persatoean Oelama-Oelama* (PPOO)<sup>15</sup> and the support of like-minded

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14. There was an Indonesian organization dedicated to criticizing the *sjech*, and significantly the Saudi government and its more corrupt predecessors were dependent on Indonesian pilgrims for a substantial portion of their revenue until the discovery of oil in the 1930s or 1940s. See Nagazumi (1980) and Laffan (2003). The motivation to critique Arabs may also have had roots in the betrayal of Indonesian pilgrims in 1927. Eight Indonesians were arrested at the request of the Dutch counsel van der Meulen, held in miserable conditions in Saudi jails for at least two weeks, and then sent back to the Indies where most of them were probably exiled to Boven Digoel.

15. There is a certain similarity to the name Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh (PUSA) which spearheaded the revolutionary social change in Aceh during this period.



individuals as a result of Oemar's efforts validates this program for social change.

The drive for social change through language — the public challenge and correction of incorrect behavior — is manifested in the almost shocking rudeness of the text and is replicated on a variety of linguistic levels. Even the use of *kamoe* at times is direct and sharp compared to the *toean* used consistently throughout this text, reinforcing the sense of brave and perhaps rude challenges to wrongdoing. Using one of the strongest words available, Oemar does not hesitate to declare anyone *kafir* [an unbeliever] (e.g. pp. 33–4, 38). Discussing a *sjech* who had essentially engaged in usurious loans at 50% return over a 3–4 month period, Oemar uses a narrative device of plural “gods” to validate his opinion that the *sjech* does not worship the same god and is *kafir*:

But Mr. Sjech, it might be that his god Allah is that slow and dumb, doesn't understand that that is a cruel act of taking interest. Thus he has a stupid God, perhaps his God is just some stone statues, so doesn't understand all this. My God can't be fooled in that manner because my God knows everything.

Tapi toean Sjech, boleh djadi dia poenja Toehan Allah ada begitoe bebal dan bodoh, tidak mengerti bahwa itoe adalah perboeatan makan riba jang kedjam. Maka dia poenja Toehan jang bebal, barangkali Toehannja adalah patoeng-patoeng batoe sadja, djadi tak mengerti itoe semoea. Saja poenja Toehan, tidak bisa dibikin bodoh begitoe roepa, kerna Toehan saja mengetahoei itoe semoea. (p. 33)

The author seems to be trying to either shock the reader into rethinking his or her beliefs or to replicate the intimidation of face to face confrontation and thus force behavioral change. At least at times the language is extremely *kasar* [crude, rough], thus in a certain sense must be called revolutionary. For example, one chapter begins by noting that “orang bodoh jg baroe sampai ke Mekkah, dan beloem mengerti tipoe moeslihat sjéh<sup>2</sup> dan lintah darat di sana, mémang akan mendjadi koerban dari beroepa-roepa hal” [stupid/innocent people who just arrived in Mecca and do not understand the strategies of the *sjech* and leaches there will become the victims of a variety of things], hardly something which *haji* wish to hear about themselves nor the traditional picture of Arabs (p. 10). Similarly but characteristically, “Sjech jang memang boeaja ini” [This *sjech* who is really a crook] juxtaposes a rude word with a reference to a normally respected, Arab, Islamic figure (page 13). The author clearly hopes, exemplified by sections of his story, that such “*sjech*” will try to behave in an appropriate manner if regularly challenged. This appears explicitly with the

narrator mentioning the *sjech*'s care to provide no grounds for Oemar's attacks during a pilgrimage to Medinah (p. 44), but also in the improving attitudes of *sjech*. After being challenged, the *sjech* Arsjad, allowed Oemar to do as he pleased because "he now understood that Oemar was not someone who could be cheated (*diboeajai*)" (p. 13).

The desire to change the understandings of the readers is manifested in a number of places, some of which have already been mentioned. The primarily Malay and Acehnese audience imagined themselves to be very good Muslims, thus the critiques relate to Islam, however they are equally applicable to other aspects of the modern, colonial world: "Therefore we came here not to suddenly be transformed into Arabs or to imitate the clothes of Arabs, but rather to fulfill Islamic obligations (*roekoen*) by becoming a *hadji*. It is not our skin that becomes *hadji*, but ourselves, our heart and spirit which is sure of the Islamic religion. Its much better if the money which is used for buying those [arab] clothes is used by you for study rather than for display" (p. 18). A few lexical changes yields a more conventional nationalist critique and exposes the underlying structure: "Therefore we came here not to suddenly be transformed into Europeans or imitate the clothes of Europeans, but to fulfill the demands of the modern world by getting a modern education. It is much better if the money which is used for buying those [European] clothes is used for study rather than display." By 1941, no Indonesian would want to explicitly follow Hanafi of *Salah Asoehan*, even if in practice some did behave in that way.<sup>16</sup>

The behavior of Oemar is clearly shown to be correct, not just in the logic which almost never fails, his victories in debating, and in the happy ending, but also in various small points scattered throughout the book. For example, his strategy of earning money while studying despite the initial challenges to him, is shown to be the correct attitude:

His Arabic became better and skilled. The conditions for Oemar in Mecca was very different from his friends, his knowledge grew and his money as well. So for him the world was alright and the afterworld secure!

Bahasa 'Arabnja semakin mahir dan baik. Keadaan Oemar di Mekkah berbédá djaoeh dari teman-temannja, 'ilmoenja bertambah dan wangnja poen demikian. Djadi bagi dia doenia boléh achirat dapat! (p. 19)

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16. In at least some ways Abdoe'lxarim could be characterized as guilty of this with his passion for music (including jazz), his bourgeois approach to Marxism, characterized by his own explanation of the meaning of the letters M. s. in his name (Mau Senang [want to enjoy himself]), and perhaps in his eclipse during the "anti-corruption" backlash which followed the social revolution in East Sumatra in 1946.

With the readers of *Hadji Dadjal*, we can even conclude that if “achirat dapat,” logically Oemar’s interpretations met the approval of or were at least not offensive to Allah. Speaking the truth and radically challenging those who are wrong even at the expense of social unity and “peace and order” must also be the correct way to a new Islamic society. This is indeed how the story concluded, with his religious foundation helping to change “Singaporean” society.

## The Author

While the discussion above indicates a strong possibility that the novel *Hadji Dadjal* could have been radical in its simple contents, was it the author’s intention to engage in such political activities? If so, was the author engaged himself in political activities in 1941? A greater understanding of the author and the context for publication of the 1930s–1940s is necessary to understand this work. Once again, the “radically different” Japanese period and the immediate postwar period may be of particular use in perceiving true intentions.

Abdoe'lxarim Moehammad Soetan, sometimes referred to as Abdu'l Xarim or Abdul Karim, was a journalist and politician born in Idi (East Aceh) on June 18, 1901 (or 1900). He studied in a kweekschool and took courses to be a “*tekenaar openemer*” (draftsman), joining the Department of Public Works (*Burgerlijke Openbare Werken*) in Langsa in 1914. He became the chairman of the *Vereeniging Inlandse Personeel B. O. W.* union branch in Lho' Seumawe (now Lhoksomawe) and then branch chairman for the multi-racial Nationaal Indische Partij (NIP). In 1920, he was transferred to Padang and then to Kupang (West Timor) in 1921, presumably to remove him from his field of political activity. Due to that transfer, he resigned from the “secure” government position and became NIP commissioner for Sumatra until it was disbanded in May 1923. In 1924, Abdoe'lxarim became the leader of the Langsa PKI branch and then the CC-PKI commissioner for Sumatra. In 1925 he was jailed for 10 days for sneaking away to Penang, as the attorney-general had apparently restricted him to Langsa for several years. He was then in and out of jail, reportedly jailed for 13 months from August 1925 for his political activities, and again in November 1926 for 7 months before being sent to Boven Digoel with his young child.<sup>17</sup>

Abdoe'lxarim was also active in the press, leading the editorial staff of *Hindia Sepakat* (Sibolga, 1922) and *Oetoesan Rakjat* [*Ra'iat*] (Langsa: Peroesahaan

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17. *Medan Area* (1976: 705–6). The suggestion that Abdoe'lxarim was in prison for a critical 13 month period is contradicted by Ruth McVey’s study of the PKI, which mentions him as the Acehnese representative in the fateful January 1926 PKI meeting. This version is again contradicted by a report cited in McVey (1965: 331, 482 notes 37–38) which claims that Abdoe'lxaim was to be sent to a trade office in Penang in August 1926. It is possible that a modification of the dates of Abdoe'lxarim’s imprisonment might have been useful for his son, Nip Xarim, a member of the team which compiled *Medan Area Mengisi Problemasi*.

Samoedera, 1923), a publication appearing 3 times per month. While exiled to Boven Digoel, Abdoe'lxarim would have been unable to be active in the press, but as an individual willing to work, Abdoe'lxarim was included in the cooperative group. He pursued his musical interests and presumably spent time playing the role of father to his young son, Nip. As a cooperative prisoner "willing to work", he was among the first released and allowed to return home. After returning from Boven Digoel (1932), he lived in Medan, establishing the small printer-publisher "Aneka" which issued some of his works and eventually founding *Penjedar* for which he apparently continued to work.<sup>18</sup> This periodical was published by Indische Drukkerij, which also published *Tjenderawasih* (and published one of Abdoe'lxarim's books). *Penjedar* was led in 1938 by Moehamad Saidt and in early 1941 by Matu Mona (hoofdred.) and Djamaloeddin (red.), with contributors including Seidō Miyatake in Nara.<sup>19</sup> By September 1941, both the listing of contributors and the name "De Atjeher" had disappeared, and it seems likely that Abdoe'lxarim was either not writing or taking a very low profile. He also occasionally wrote for *Abad 20* from its recreation in 1939–40, apparently until his son left the editorial staff for the Philippines and Emnast became the editor.<sup>20</sup>

Abdoe'lxarim had some experience writing stories, as novelettes had appeared under his name and published by his own publishing house in 1932 [*Ratna Kasihan Melati Deli* (*Boekoe tooneel dari toedjoeh bahagian*)]<sup>21</sup> and 1933 [*Pandoe Anak Boeangan*].<sup>22</sup> Following the publication of those books, he had taken a relatively low

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18. Faced with the question of his role, the columns by De Atjeher seemed a logical possibility in that they addressed ostensibly non-political issues, namely education and social issues. Furthermore, a note in De Atjeher's column in issue no. 25, 1938, states: "Ma'loemat: Toe'an Abdoel'lxarim Ms. sekarang sedang berpergian ke Atjeh. Soerat2 boeat redaksi, djangan diadreskan kepada beliau persoonlijk" [Announcement: Mr. Abdoe'lxarim Ms. is now traveling to Aceh. Letters to the editor should not be addressed to him personally]. This seems to confirm that De Atjeher was his pseudonym, but Anthony Reid's attribution of De Atjeher's writings to H. M. Zainuddin (1979: 36, n. 74), presumably on the basis of an interview with H. M. Zainuddin conducted in the 1970s, suggests that Abdoe'lxarim might have had some other unmentioned role in that newspaper.

19. Miyatake Seidō [also read as Miyatake Masamichi] published an Indonesian-Japanese dictionary during the war (1<sup>st</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> printings, 1942–Oct. 1943), a Malay language version of Aesop's fables (Sept. 1943), a survey of the languages and literature of the South Seas (1943), and a collection of translated articles by Indonesians which had appeared in *Asia Raya* (1944).

20. Mochtar Nasoetion, popularly known by the pen-name Emnast, was educated in a MULO school in Medan, becoming a journalist in 1932. After serving as a reporter for *Sinar Deli* and *Pelita Andalas*, he was the leader of the weekly magazine *Lukisan Dunia* for five years. He also worked for *Abad XX* with Adinegoro, becoming editor in July 1940, and was on the editorial board of *Doenia Pengalaman* in late 1939 and early 1940. During the Japanese occupation he worked for *Sumatora Shimbun* and the monthly *Minami*. He spent four years in the TNI, and after independence joined the North Sumatra Public Education Inspectorate.

21. Advertized as the first play published in Sumatra, it sold out in 20 days, according to the advertisement for the forthcoming second edition printed in *Pandoe Anak Boeangan*.

22. *Pandoe Anak Boeangan* has become reasonably well known in academic circles since the 1990s (see e.g. Shiraishi 1997 and Rieger 1991: 161–3), primarily due to the subject matter (colonialism and political exile) and its style. More recently, it has been included in a volume of stories from the colonial period about

profile, issuing some non-fiction historical/biographical works in 1934 [*Abdul Aziz Ibnoe Soe'oad, Pahlawan Tanah Arab*] and 1938 or 1939 [*Teukoe Oemar Djohan Pahlawan, Panglima Perang Besar di Tanah Atjeh*].<sup>23</sup> The publication of the book on the founder of the Saudi regime is interesting but perhaps not surprising if we consider the popular interest in events in the Arabian peninsula at that time and the fact that Abdoe'lxarim's brother-in-law Nathar Zainuddin (1880–1950) was both a dedicated PKI member and Muslim. Abdoe'lxarim also wrote a book on women in Aceh, *Moetiara Atjeh* [1939], which could have either been a novel with a strong historical and moral message or a non-fiction book.

Most of his publications in serial form after Boven Digoel seem to have been either anonymous articles or possibly columns under a pen-name, although Abdoe'lxarim did write under his own name on music and singing once at the request of a magazine editor, focusing on their use as a means of effectively communicating with the masses and overcoming divisive foreign influences (including Arab Muslim and Western Christian influenced music). His hesitance to write about a subject in which he was not truly expert or had not formally studied is evident not only here, but also in the words of his fictional character, Oemar.

In April 1940, Abdoe'lxarim joined the debate over novels and their value which had raged in several periodicals following the December 1939 meeting of writers and publishers in Medan. He wrote at the request of a reader of *Seruan Kita* who sent him a copy of Emnast's *Tan Malaka di Kota Medan*, asking about its accuracy and value. In his article, Abdoe'lxarim strongly criticized the sensationalist selling of a product through utilization of leaders' names, which he saw as originating in Andjar Asmara's Dardanella theater troupe presenting a story about Dr. Sansi. The case at hand involved selling a story using the name of a great man, Tan Malaka. Abdoe'lxarim found this inexcusable, and suggested that someday Emnast write a book about the leader Tan Malaka as a means of making up for his mistake. He was attacked rather viciously in another article published in *Seroean Kita*, with Emnast (1940) questioning Adboel'lxarim's loyalty to nationalist causes because, after a four or five year stay in Boven Digoel, he was released and thus must have signed an agreement to stay uninvolved in politics. This was undoubtedly particularly unpleasant coming from a journalist apparently without any strong political convictions and no substantial chance of facing jail or exile.

As Emnast had declared, Abdoe'lxarim had undoubtedly signed an agreement to

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Boven Digoel (Pramoedya 2001).

23. Anthony Reid (1979b) states that Abdoe'lxarim indeed wrote a popular biography of Teuku Umar in 1939. This biography apparently stimulated local interest in Teuku Umar, as well as reactions by Acehnese in the national press, explaining that this figure was not (yet) significant to Acehnese as a hero. Hanzo Hasibo utilizes this publication in his article, "Teukoe Oemar dan van Daalen," *Minami* (1 April 1943), pp. 30–31.

forsake politics and to stay out of trouble in exchange for his family's release from Boven Digoel. The possibility of a one-way ticket back to malarial Boven Digoel must therefore have always hung over his head.<sup>24</sup> Had Abdoe'lxarim given up activism and turned to empty popular writings and hypocritical complaints about others? Coming shortly after this exchange, *Hadji Dadjal* might be considered a reaction to Emnast's attack, but beyond the novel itself we may see evidence of Abdoe'lxarim's intentions in his other actions and writings. Indeed, given the track record Abdoe'lxarim had from the 1920s when his political commitments led him to resign from government service and resulted in a series of stays in prison, it is difficult to believe that he would suddenly become completely apolitical.

By June 1941, a number of the serial publications of Sumatra born in the boom of 1938–39 had run into difficulties. There was generally a shortage of skilled writers, made worse by the periodic arrest of individuals like Mohammad Saleh Oemar<sup>25</sup> in 1940 and Matu Mona<sup>26</sup> in 1941. There also was a certain amount of disruption caused by debates over the role of novels and appropriate content. This was apparently one of the reasons why Poestaka Islam's apparently successful literary periodical *Doenia Pengalaman* moved to Solo in mid-1940, obtained a new editorial staff, and developed new problems in both subscription rolls and its network of writers.<sup>27</sup> These pressures and the generally sensationalist and mediocre quality of *Loekisan Poedjangga* novels —

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24. This did happen on occasion, as it did to Oeska [Oesman Soetan Kaadilan] who found his Indonesian language true-story narrative of escape from Boven Digoel mangled by censors and still banned, although a former Dutch official, D. van der Meulen, claims to have earlier offered to have it published in unexpurgated form in a Dutch language geographical journal. His work as a journalist was an invitation to the authorities to return him to Boven Digoel.

25. Mohammad Saleh Oemar was born on March 29, 1909 in Pangkalan Berandan, Langkat. An active journalist from age 18, after receiving a sentence for attending a closed meeting, he helped to establish the PNI-East Sumatra branch, the Partindo-East Sumatra branch (1932) and the local Gerindo branch in 1939. He was the initial editor-in-chief of *Poernama*, a popular magazine published three times per month by Doenia Pengalaman from January 1940, but was soon jailed. On 28 August, 1941, he joined *Penjedar*, soon replacing the imprisoned Matu Mona. M. S. Oemar was involved with Bunka-ka [Cultural Section] during the Japanese period, but also led the "Talapeta" peasant youth organization and the "Kaidjo Zikeidan" [kaijō jikeidan] seamen's organization aimed at guarding the coast. The *sandiwara* group "Ginsei Gekidan" almost exclusively used his stories, while he was personally active in "Barito" and "Yamato." However, his arrest and torture apparently at the instigation of the former Dutch police agent Tengku Arifin reduced his public prominence until 1945. See Reid (1979) and *Medan Area* (1976).

26. Matu Mona, a pseudonym of Hasbullah Parinduri (1910–1987), was a Mandailing Kota Nopan writer and journalist born in Medan. Editor of the weekly *Penjedar* from 1940–1 and the Medan literary journal *Tjendrawasih* (February 1940–1), in September 1941 he was arrested, sent to Banjarmasin for trial, and imprisoned in Sukamiskin with a 1 ½ year sentence for publishing Hadharijah's *Soeasana Kalimantan* in *Tjendrawasih*, although according to his own recollection it was for writing an article which the Dutch found insulting. From 1942 he was associated with a *sandiwara* group on Java, periodically writing for *Pandji Poestaka*. In addition to fiction, Matu Mona wrote biographies of M. Hoesni Thamrin (1941, c. 1950, 1952) and W. R. Supratman (c. 1940). For general biographical information see Rieger (1991: 227–8), Oshikawa (1990), Pamusuk Eneste (1990: 10), Rivai (1963), and Poeze (2001).

27. Another reason for its move was the promising boom in publications aimed primarily at non-Chinese readers of Java, such as *Bioscoop Romans* and other Kabe publications from 1939–41, which suggested the possibility of challenging the Chinese owned literary periodicals *Tjerita Roman* and *Penghideoepan*.



the periodical in which this novel appeared — may have been factors in the editor Joesoef Sou'yb's decision to accept a social reformist work from a politically risky author. If the government took action, it would probably include the confiscation of all copies of that issue, a financial disaster which struck several periodicals during this period. Of course, the most important consideration was probably the incessant demand for material to feed the presses. In mid-1941, *Tjendrawasih* and *Loekisan Poedjangga* were still appearing bimonthly, thus requiring four novelettes a month in Medan alone. In Fort de Kock (Bukittinggi), *Roman Pergaoelan* also appeared twice monthly under the editorship of Tamar Djaja, while additional stories and other types of writings were needed for irregular publications, magazines and newspapers.

Not much is currently known about the distribution of *Hadji Dadjal*, however, Joesoef Sou'yb claimed that in late 1939 or early 1940 *Loekisan Poedjangga* had a circulation of 10,000 books, possibly meaning the total number of books per month. If the distribution were still the same 1½ years later, then around 5,000 copies would have been printed. There would have been six months of undisturbed distribution before communications deteriorated in early 1942. The copy used for this article, obtained in the H. B. Jassin Literary Documentation Center, was owed by “Bibliotheek ‘Asjik” and approved by Borneo Minseiboe, confirming that copies reached other islands and continued to circulate during the first part of the Japanese occupation. However, Medan publications almost certainly had their best distribution in Sumatra where readers could obtain them through subscriptions, purchases, and borrowing from friends and private lending libraries.

The publication of *Hadji Dadjal* in June 1941 coincided with the beginning of the “unreal” period between the cutting of ties to Japan and the actual war in the Indies. The Netherlands had been occupied by Germany in May 1940 and Europe enveloped in war. Germans and NSB members were interned, but Japanese had not yet departed the Indies in large numbers. This context seems to have had little effect on the writing of *Hadji Dadjal* as the author avoids explicit reference to political issues, but it might have influenced its reception. On the other hand, the establishment of PUSA (All Aceh Ulama Union) in 1939, and its anti-status quo, anti-ulèëbalang (Acehnese traditional elite) stance may have influenced both the writing and its reception in North Sumatra. In fact, the Medan periodicals *Penjedar* and *Seruan Kita* “became the most widely read journals in Aceh.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite the absence of any clear connection between the writing of this novel and the start of WWII, according to *Medan Area Mengisi Problemasi* (1976), Abdoe'lxarim was active in the anti-fascist movement from around 1935 until the end of the Japanese

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28. Reid (1979: 28). Aceh's close relationship with East Sumatra was strengthened by Medan's role as a large publishing center and the absence of a local publishing industry until the Japanese occupation.



occupation. However, any activity of this kind must not have been apparent to the Dutch authorities as he was imprisoned on December 8, 1941 and sent to Tjimahi. Rather, their concern was that he might cooperate with the Japanese. He was released by the Japanese on around March 10, 1942, and allowed to return to Medan.<sup>29</sup> Abdoe'lxarim's luck continued to improve as Shin'ichi Hayasaki, apparently the final prewar Japanese consul in Medan, was appointed mayor of Medan in 1942, a post which he occupied until the end of the war.<sup>30</sup> Abdoe'lxarim had reportedly initiated secret contact with him before the consulate had closed, a fact which was presumably important for Abdoe'lxarim's selection as the official responsible for price controls in Medan (July 1942), then more appropriately the head of the city publicity department *Balai Penerangan* (Sept. 1942). In early 1943, he was apparently the mayor's assistant for foreigners, which may have brought him into more regular contact with Chinese, including some who were leftists, and of anti-Japanese orientation (*Medan Area*, 490).<sup>31</sup> In May 1943, he was jailed by the Kenpetai because of his Marxist background, but was released within 13 days.

While the Kempeitai's arrest might have been intended to determine if Abdoe'lxarim were a loyal subject of Japan, it may also have encouraged him to play a larger role in Japanese sponsored institutions. From November 1, 1943, Abdoe'lxarim was a member of the *Shū Sangi Kai Sumatra Timur* [East Sumatra Residency Council]. From November 28, 1943 he occupied a key position in BOMPA (Badan Oentoek Membantoe Pertahanan Asia [Body for Helping the Defense of Asia]), managing its daily affairs and administration, as well as serving on the committee for *Pembangoenan Semangat Barisan Soekarela* [Building the Spirit of the Volunteer Front], presumably from May 1943.<sup>32</sup> Mohammed Said (1973: 157–158) even claims that Abdoe'lxarim was actually the founder of BOMPA, which he had modeled on Sukarno and Hatta's

29. See his essay "Gema Laoetan Tedoeh," *Minami* th. I, no. 1 (Dec, 1942), p. 58, for an interesting commemoration of the approximately 1000 "little people" who were arrested by the Dutch on December 8, 1941. Not only was his own internment not mentioned, but commemoration of the actions of Japanese soldiers comes only as a careful afterthought.

30. *Tokyo Nichi-nichi Shinbun* (『東京日日新聞』), 13 October 1942. Hayasaki Shin'ichi's name (早崎真一) is rarely mentioned in writings about the war, or even newspapers, and almost never in its complete form. See [http://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kota\\_Medan](http://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kota_Medan) (accessed December 27, 2011) and, Reid (1979). According to both *Medan Area Mengisi Problemasi* (1976) and Said (1973), S. Hayasaki was a former Medan based trader and a longtime acquaintance. On 11 December 1945, he accompanied the resident ("Governor") Tetsuzō Nakashima from Medan to Tebing Tinggi on a special train, which was surrounded by around 300 Indonesian youths who demanded arms (*Medan Area* 1976, 623–34).

31. While Mayor Hayasaki may have been a critical starting point, from at least 1943, Abdoe'lxarim seems to have operated more at the *shū* (regency) level, thus under the authority of Governor Nakashima.

32. *Sendjinkoen dan Tentara Soekarela* (Medan: Badan Penjiaran, [2603]), p. 3. For an example of Abdoe'lxarim's own writing during this period (possibly written shortly after his release from Kempeitai detention), see his essay in the same volume, "Arti Soekarela Bagi Kita," pp. 69–79. Abdoe'lxarim's position in BOMPA has been described as chairman, but the *Kita Sumatra-sinbun* of December 13, 1943 mentions him as "Ketoea Pejabat Oemoem," while on February 14, 1944, he is mentioned as being "Setia Oesaha Oemoem" under the "Ketoea Besar" Mr. Moehamad Joesoef and the Assistant, Aboe Bakar.

organizations on Java, effected through the assistance of Governor Nakashima and the Bunkaka (propaganda section). Whether or not this is correct, it is clear that Abdoe'lxarim was a — perhaps the — key figure in BOMPA. In addition to this, both Abdoe'lxarim and his son Nip Xarim were apparently on the *Sumatora Shimibun* editorial staff under Adinegoro.<sup>33</sup> He was indeed somewhat active in the press, publishing at least 3 special articles in the magazine *Minami* under his own name in 1942–43, including an article about the end of Dutch rule and a lengthy obituary for Tjipto Mangunkusumo.

The series of formal positions, however, does not capture the complex nature of Abdoe'lxarim's activities during the war. Throughout the occupation, Abdoe'lxarim seems to have been an active part of several networks. For example, from 1943, apparently as part of an “Anti-Fascist Movement” involving Abdoe'lxarim and his brother-in-law Nathar Zainuddin, Abdoe'lxarim cultivated contacts within the Kempeitai (Sutan Sulaiman Effendi and Amir Rasjid). Abdoe'lxarim knew Amir Rasjid well since he had been exiled to Boven Digoel with his brother, Abdul Munir, the former secretary of the PKI in Medan. At the time when Abdoe'lxarim contacted him, Amir Rasjid, having served in the Kempeitai, then the propaganda section (Bunkaka), had returned to the Kempeitai (in early 1943). Presumably due to their friendship and his leftwing credentials, Abdoe'lxarim was able to get Amir Rasjid's cooperation. Both during his stint in the Kempeitai and in the Tokkoka Tokai Gunsyu, specifically in the Tokko Bocho Han (Secret Police, Political Section), in which he worked after 6 months of intelligence training in the Singapore Bocho Han Gakko, Amir provided information about investigations and arrests to Abdoe'lxarim.<sup>34</sup>

Abdoe'lxarim's position in BOMPA, the committee for *Pembangoenan Semangat Barisan Soekarela*, as well as his other formal positions resulted in chances for him to travel throughout East Sumatra, as well as to give speeches on radio and to mass rallies. In one speech, reproduced in part in the *Kita Sumatora Sinbun* of 8 September 1944 (“Xarim M. S.: Kewadajiban Berat Menanti Kita”), he expressed himself to the crowd in the following way:

For us, the decision of the Government is a very heavy burden. Before that type of decision was presented, we already had given as much energy as we could, of course now it is like 24 hours in a day are not enough for us. In the

33. Soebagio I. N. (1987: 53).

34. *Medan Area* (1976: 489–490). The primary source for this information is clearly Abdoe'lxarim's son, Nip Xarim, who was also involved in these activities. While coming from one source, the information presented seems quite plausible, given the personal relationships, and the individual backgrounds. Presumably contact with Abdoe'lxarim was also useful for Amir Rasjid and Sutan Sulaiman Effendi in their intelligence work, as is suggested by the efforts of Abdoe'lxarim and Amir to throw suspicion off their fellow travelers and onto political enemies.

past, before the decision was made, every time I spoke in front of a lot of people, with no hesitation I said that the goal of Japan is to give independence to Indonesia. The dream of obtaining independence has filled the desires of the Indonesian people for more than a quarter century. I am sure that in the future, in the whole East Asia, there will not be any people who can beat the Indonesian people in their actions as Japan's friend in life and death.

Bagi kita kepoatoesan Pemerintah itoe adalah soeatoe beban jang amat berat. Kalau doeloe sebeloem kepoatoesan seperti itoe diberikan, kita soedah mentjoerahkan tenaga sebanjak-banjaknja, tentoelah sekarang waktoe 24 djam seolah-olah terlaloe sedikit bagi kita dalam sehari. Dimasa jang laloe, sebeloem kepoatoesan itoe ditetapkan, ditiap-tiap saja berbitjara dihadapan rakjat jg banjak, saja selaloe berkata dengan tiada sangsi-sangsi, bahwa toedjoean Nippon ialah hendak member kemerdekaan kepada Indonesia. Tjita-tjita oetoe memperoleh kemerdekaan soedah lebih seperempat abad lamanja diboelatkan dalam keinginan rakjat Indonesia. Saja yakin, dimasa depan diseloeroeh Asia Timoer tidak ada soeatoe bangsa jang akan dapat melebihi bangsa Indonesia dalam tindakannja sebagai kawan sehidoep semati dengan Nippon.

While lending themselves to more than one interpretation, Abdoe'lxarim's words seem to be highly critical of the Japanese administration; Indonesians must work more than physically possible, Abdoe'lxarim might not say Japanese goal is to give independence to Indonesia anymore, and Indonesians will be Japan's loyal friend (but maybe not now). A pro-Japanese reading is only suggested in the title of the newspaper article with its reference to "duty" and his confidence that "in the future" Indonesians would, in their actions, be Japan's best friends to the very end. That Indonesian nationalist youth would be impressed with his bravery is no surprise.

Key to his prominence not just during the Japanese occupation but also during the early revolutionary period<sup>35</sup> were his ability to communicate effectively with the Indonesian population, especially the radical youth, without worrying the Japanese

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35. Abdoe'lxarim was active in politics and administration during the revolutionary period as well. Abdoe'lxarim became the deputy head of the Sumatra PNI (1945), as well as founder and chair of the Sumatra PKI (1945-) until the PNI Sumatra leader A. K. Gani demanded that he choose between the two parties in December 1945. (Abdoe'lxarim finally left the PKI in 1952.) He was also a resident assigned to the governor of Sumatra from late 1945 (Reid 1979: 171, 173-4). He was retained by the Indonesian government, acting in various capacities until 1951. In independent Indonesia Abdoe'lxarim was less prominent but still active in both politics and journalism, dying on November 25, 1960 as a new member of the MPRS representing North Sumatra and an instructor in the *Akademi Pers dan Wartawan Indonesia* in Medan. For more this and other details of Abdoe'lxarim's life, see Reid (1979), *Medan Area* (1976), especially pages 704-7 and Pramoedya (2001: XIII-XVII).

authorities and his abilities as perhaps the best public speaker in East Sumatra. In fact, Dr. M. Amir explained *Sukarno's* popularity by writing 'Anyone who has heard our Bung Xarim M. S. speak must understand the meaning of this contact between leader and people, as if there was a "magnetic field" between them.'<sup>36</sup>

This can be perceived as well in a meeting of around 30 September 1945, held in response to a report from the Aneta news service published in *Pewartu Deli* (29 September 1945) claiming that the Sukarno-Hatta government on Java had collapsed and that the two leaders were under house arrest. After Mr. T. M. Hassan explained that the news was false and part of a "war of nerves" and formally announced the Declaration of Independence of 17 August, there was a big round of applause. However, after Abdoe'lxarim gave a speech filled with fire and called upon the youth to defend independence, the audience was pounding on the walls with enthusiasm.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

With this as background, we can now reconsider the 1941 novel *Hadji Dadjal*. In this novel, Oemar is shown being rejected by many elements of society, while the narrator criticizes large sections of all populations mentioned. If the goal was to make readers behave like Oemar, either through example or through thinking as an individual, those individuals would have indeed had problems living comfortably in Indonesian society. On the other hand, the existence of people who either accept Oemar's arguments or who are of similar orientations, as well as the idyllic ending with both personal happiness and public respect for Oemar and the successful functioning of a modern (ist) Islamic school in the local community, seem somewhat contradictory. These were intended to give the reader a sense that if they followed this modern route they would not be alone; at least in the long run as more conservative individuals became increasingly uncomfortable. The happy ending and encouragement through vague references to other believers seems to be the sugar coating to make the (frequently repeated) medicine go down. However, this seems to suggest that this text at least had revolutionary pretensions which would affect traditional social relations, religious beliefs, educational practices, and relations with the government. In perhaps more than simple coincidence, these were all to change dramatically, and violently, over the next five years (1941–1946) in the areas most directly targeted by Abdoe'lxarim, East Sumatra and Aceh. This novel's ability to actually change the readers by itself is, of course, another matter.

Nonetheless, it is here that Abdoe'lxarim's attention to cultural and religious

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36. Reid (1979: 179 n. 26) quoting a 1946 Medan publication.

37. *Medan Area* (1976: 114–116).

issues are inherently political, political in perhaps a more radical way than the efforts of many of the most dedicated Indonesian nationalists. I would suggest that this work can even be considered revolutionary in the sense that it was intended to take a member of the target social group and make him or her unable to live in that social environment again. This is perhaps similar to Hayden White's suggestion that "art and literature become 'revolutionary' or at least socially threatening, not when they set forth specific doctrines of revolt or depict sympathetically revolutionary subjects, but precisely when they project — as Flaubert did in *Madam Bovary* — a reading subject alienated from the social system of which the prospective reading subject is a member" (White 1990: 87). Nonetheless, Abdoe'lxarim did see the creation of a new society where these modern, Islamic subjects could once again live as part of a community. This is even more clear in light of Abdoe'lxarim's appeal to the Japanese authorities in July 1942 on the creation of an Islamic high court for Sumatra.<sup>38</sup>

Abdoe'lxarim's ability to shift his activities to a different field of activity while maintaining some degree of intellectual and moral integrity can be perceived in this work as well as the other works that he published. However, during the Dutch colonial period "politically sensitive" subjects would have provided a one-way ticket to exile in the tropical disease-ridden Boven Digoel. As a result, Abdoe'lxarim wrote in a special way to disguise his true meaning from the sophisticated eyes of the Netherlands East Indies authorities, perhaps even more than many Indonesians did during the Japanese occupation. Thus the setting was outside Indonesia, *hadji*'s were ridiculed for their beliefs, Arabs criticized for their failure to protect Indonesians, already replaced Islamic leaders in Mecca and elsewhere called crooks and their hypocrisy exposed, while nowhere is the hand of the Dutch state or politics *per se* apparent. However, to accept that this publication was not also about Indonesia is naive.<sup>39</sup> Abdoe'lxarim clearly intends his discussions of Islam, Saudi Arabia and Singapore to be taken *in part* as metaphors for secular issues and the Netherlands Indies. Not only did Abdoe'lxarim make clear his Universalist pretensions, but many of the critiques apply to government civil servants in Indonesia as well, and some people criticized were from or even in Indonesia. However, most importantly, if implemented, the types of changes in thinking and behavior presented in this novel would have amounted to a revolt against the Dutch state which was kept in place through massive ignorance, self-interest and hypocrisy.

While neither sophisticated in its Islamic message nor in its presentation of

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38. Special thanks are due to Yasuko Kobayashi for sharing this information.

39. It may also be naive to assume that the colonial government felt this way, since in the 1920s they had been extremely concerned about the Russian consul spreading propaganda among Indonesian pilgrims and two organizations for Indonesians with similar goals. For more information, see Nagazumi (1980) and Laffan (2003). The Dutch consul in Jeddah during the 1920s, D. van der Meulen, became a local official in two different jurisdictions in Sumatra during the 1930s (Meulen 1981).

Islamic signs (such as quotes from the Qu'ran), it is unlikely that readers of a pop novel would have appreciated such sophistication. Thus while it is likely that Abdoe'lxarim was not as committed to Islam as *ulama* like Hamka, the issue of religious sophistication provides little reason to doubt the sincerity of the author's commitment to a reformed Islam.

Abdoe'lxarim's arguments are not the same as those presented in radical Islamic discourse in Indonesia, but he does seem to have borrowed part of its radical flavor and strategies, while making simple critiques on contemporary practice which were similar to, but not the same as those of the reformist elite. In a number of cases, the critiques were drawn from inequitable socio-economic relations and then followed by a validation found in an interpretation of Islam. [A more conventional Islamic approach would be to begin and end with scriptural arguments.] One simple illustration of this is *Dadjal's* refusal to accept the opinions of others (p. 4). The author actually asserts that most of the religious elite is sleazy, making it impossible to accept their interpretations, and thus mandating a return to Rasoel and Allah. This is quite different than a general critique of *taklid* (strict adherence to one of the major juridical traditions) and *bid'ah* (new innovations) in matters related to worship which are common elements of modernist Islam.

While this novel definitely has radical ramifications, there were a number of groups of Islamic activists in Sumatra who were similarly radical. The uncompromising Persis from the 1920s attacked others for being *kafir* (unbelievers), as well as the fiery left-leaning Islamic teachers of the Thalawib in around 1924 engaged in a similar discourse, while the Aceh discourse (of which Abdoe'lxarim was a close observer if not participant) was also strident. However, for readers who read exclusively novels, this work may have come as a shock, while for other readers it may have subtly affected their thinking about certain well known social and religious "problems." *Hadji Dadjal* needs to be read as an effort to reach audiences which were either not politically motivated or were very passive in their orientation to religion and politics. It is neither an average political tract written for politically active groups nor simple amusement.

The message to fear God, not other people, to act out one's own beliefs including by speaking, and essentially to act "berani karena benar" [brave because right] bear an uncanny resemblance to the Sarekat Islam of the 1910s and Java. Abdoe'lxarim's environment, the heavily Islamic areas of Sumatra and the internment camp of Boven Digoel, effectively left him in a situation similar to Haji Misbach, who, like Rumpelstiltskin, missed the division of the Sarekat Islam and PKI in the early 1920s and ultimately choose the PKI as his vehicle for radical religious activity. Abdoe'lxarim in the early 1940s seems to have carried his Islamic and radical "Marxist" politics into the domain of the popular novel, and to the wider public.



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