

From Zâbaj to Jâwa

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When the Dutch Orientalist C. Snouck Hurgronje travelled to Arabia in 1884, he noticed that all Southeast Asians, whether pilgrims or long-term scholars, were known collectively as ‘the Jâwa’ and individually, as Jâwîs. Long forgotten was another Arabic term used for much of insular Southeast Asia: Zâbaj.

By Michael Laffan

Land of gold and spices: Suvarnadvîpa, Śrîvijaya, Zâbaj

From antiquity, island Southeast Asia was an important link in the sea route between China and the West. The goods found in its ports, including gold, spices, and aromatics lent the name ‘golden’ to the region. Ptolemy wrote of a Golden Peninsula on the way to China, and Indian sources came to equate Sumatra in particular with ‘the land of gold’, ‘Suvarnadvîpa’, later identified with the maritime state of Śrîvijaya (founded ca.670).

What Indian scholars called Suvarnadvîpa, the Arabs came to call Zâbaj. And while nineteenth century European readings of early Arabic texts, like the ninth century *Akhbâr al-sîn wa'l-hind* and the *Kitâb al-masâlik wa'l-mamâlik*, could only imagine Java as the locus of Zâbaj, the evidence contained in those texts, whether of its products, fabulous courts and dangerous itineraries, favours Śrîvijaya.¹ The other notable feature of these texts was that they often included tales of the bizarre, such as winged harpies or giant beasts that could swallow an elephant whole. As such Zâbaj functioned as a place at the edge of the known, in this case Muslim, world. And thus it was Islamization that signalled its erasure from texts and maps.

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Although there is no evidence of state-sponsored Islamization in Southeast Asia until the later thirteenth century, a major shift in identification is already notable in the sources in the mid twelfth century. Around 1025, Śrîvijaya was sacked by the Tamil Cholas, and its capital was relocated from Palembang to Malayu. This information slowly filtered to the outside world and, over a century later, it seems to have led al-Idrisî (ca. 1100-ca.1165) to describe a great island in Southeast Asia he called Qamar, with its capital Malây. He also mentioned that the coasts leading to Qamar thronged with foreign traders.

With the apparent decline of Zâbaj and its brief replacement by Qamar, Java begins to make its first appearance. Yâqût (1179-1229), for example, listed Jâwa in a larger entry on the islands of the Indian Ocean, but described it as one of the lands of China, ‘to which the sailing is on a sea that is difficult to navigate and quick to destroy’. He also paused to note that others had ‘greatly exaggerated the description of this sea and its length and breadth, saying contradictory things detracting to the intelligence of their reporter. In it are great islands of number known to God alone. The largest and most famous of these

are the islands of Ceylon, which has many cities, and then the island of al-Zânaj [i.e. Zâbaj].² Such echoes of Zâbaj still featured in the geographies, but it was now starting to fade from the more practical maps of the mariners for good.³

This displacement of Zâbaj in the texts, first by Qamar and ultimately by Jâwa, is connected to the fragmentation of Śrîvijaya and then the ascendance of its eastern neighbour. In the fourteenth century the Javanese chronicler Prapañca wrote of a raid on Sumatra by the king of Singasari, which he claimed occurred in 1275, adding that its rulers were still loyal vassals to Java. While the attacks may actually date from the 1260s, foreign visitors to the region would have been aware that ‘Jawa’ was now the dominant regional power.⁴

Still, like the news of the Tamil raids, such new knowledge would slowly percolate into charts and texts compiled well away from Southeast Asia. It also seems that if the Arabic sources, that of Marco Polo, and Prapañca are read together, one might gain the sense that (perhaps Muslim) outsiders could have been installed as viceroys for Java in some ports in exchange for the exclusion of Buddhist missionaries. Idrisi and Marco Polo made remarks about Muslim trade and conversion in the Indian Ocean and Sumatra respectively while Prapañca lamented that Buddhist missionaries could no longer travel west of Java.

Jâwa, Jâwî aromatics, Jâwî people

Either way, when Ibn Battûta (1304-77) claimed to have visited the Sumatran town of Samudra ca. 1345, he stated that he had arrived in ‘the island of the Jâwa people’ (*jazīrat al-jâwa*); people he had met on the Malabar coast of India. Whether Ibn Battûta ever made it to Sumatra is moot, but the Jâwî link with Sumatra is certainly supported by the fact that he correctly identified the island as the source of the famous aromatics used at the court of the Sultan of Delhi, including the prized aloes wood known as *ūd jâwî*, and the incense called *lubân jâwî*.⁵

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Still, even at this time Zâbaj and its wonders were not totally vanquished. Rather they were removed to the realms of parageography, of which the *‘Ajâ’ib al-makhlûqât of Qazwîni* (1203-1283) is an excellent example. One sixteenth century Persian translation of this work even provides illuminations of the purported wonders of Zâbaj.⁶ But even as the illustrator drew harpies, winged civet cats, and an elephant being devoured by a bear, Jâwa was in the process of being affirmed in Arabic usage as a coverall for a very real people. And much like Ibn Battûta had noted communities of Jâwa in Southern India, in the sixteenth century the Portuguese continued to encounter the same ‘Jaõa’ in the Indian Ocean.

One of the earliest Southeast Asians to identify himself individually as a Jâwî was Hamzah Fansuri (d. 1527). It was also the appellation used by future Southeast Asian scholars in the Middle East. But while scholars like Hamzah Fansuri adopted the name, it is important to consider that Jâwa and Jâwî were contextual markers implying greater pan-ethnic resonance for people beyond the archipelago. Among Southeast Asia’s still Islamizing peoples themselves, the designation Jâwî was instead used to describe a bond with Islamic culture, whether as Jâwî Muslims, or by their use of Malay and its distinct modified Arabic script, still known today as *jawi*. Such a concept of Jâwî being a cultural ascription is strengthened if we accept Anthony Reid’s contention that Chinese immigrants to the archipelago in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries could gain the appellation Jâwî by mingling with Sumatrans.⁷

Zâbaj as Japan?

Although Jâwa, taken as a whole, was an emerging Muslim zone in the sixteenth century, some Muslim visitors still made use of the the accounts of the classical geographers in order to comprehend it. One seventeenth century description of a



Nasnas collecting camphor oil, from a Persian version of the ‘Ajâ’ib al-makhlûqât of Qazwîni

Courtesy of Leiden University Library

Persian embassy to Siam gave an account of the lands that we would recognize as Southeast Asia, but its author made one important addition, namely Japan, an inclusion he justified by citing passages on Zâbaj from the older works, including Qazwîni’s book of marvels.⁸

The identification of Zâbaj with Japan is not actually so surprising. For although the tales of Zâbaj, its rulers and products were initially drawn from fact, only the wilder stories associated with those tales endured in the literature as Southeast Asia became better known to Muslim travellers. And once these peoples began to join the community of Islam, a change of name was required. It is thus no coincidence that from the late thirteenth century Jâwa began to be the mutually accepted term for a region, while Jâwî was applied to its peoples. And in that long process Zâbaj would continue its transit to the fringes of the known Muslim world, and then to the imagination. <

Notes

1. For one presentation of material in the early Arabic texts see G.R. Tibbetts, 1979. *A study of the Arabic texts containing material on South-East Asia*. Leiden: Brill.
2. Shihâb al-Dîn Yâqût bin ‘Abd Allâh al-Hamawî, F. Wüstenfeld, ed., 1866-73. *Jacut’s geographisches Wörterbuch: aus den Handschriften zu Berlin, St. Petersburg und Paris*. 6 vols. Leipzig: vol.1, p. 506.
3. An example is a recently discovered thirteenth century chart that has Southeast Asia overshadowed by a large island called Qamar. Jeremy Johns and Emilie Savage-Smith, 2003. ‘The Book of Curiosities: A Newly Discovered Series of Islamic Maps’. *Imago Mundi* 55, pp. 7-24.
4. Mpu Prapañca, 1995. *Deśawarāna (Nāgaraktāgama)*, Stuart Robson, trans. and ed. Leiden: KITLV Press.
5. Ibn Battûta, 1987. *Rihlat Ibn Battûta al-musammâ tuhfât al-nuzzâr fî gharâ’ib al-amsâr*, Talâl Harb, ed. Bayrût: Dâr al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, p. 470.
6. L.Or. 8907. I am particularly grateful to Prof. Jan Just Witkam for bringing this text to my attention.
7. Anthony Reid, ‘Hybrid identities in the fifteenth century straits’. Forthcoming in G. Wade, ed., *The Ming factor*. Singapore: ARI.
8. Muhammad Rabî’ Ibn Muhammad Ibrâhîm, 1972. *The Ship of Sulaimân*, trans J. O’Kane, Persian Heritage Series no.11. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

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Sixteenth century copy of the mid twelfth century World Map of Al-Idrisi