JAVANESE-ARABIC HEADSTONES AT PORT ELIZABETH

There is an old Islamic cemetery in Port Elizabeth, the capital of Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. For years, no one could read the Arabic script written on the headstones. Thanks to one Indonesian researcher, it is now known that several Indonesian Muslim scholars, or ulama, were buried there. Long ago, many such spiritual leaders, or kiai, who opposed the Dutch colonial government were exiled to the country. These men included Sheikh Yusuf, whose grave in Cape Town is considered hallowed ground by Muslims in the area.
1. SIR IMAM HAJI ABU RAFI'S HEADSTONE AT SOUTH END VALLEY CEMETERY.
2, 3, 4. HEADSTONES AT JUBILEE PARK CEMETERY, UITENHAGE, SOUTH AFRICA.
A CROSS from property owned by the Mandala Bay Development Agency, before the fork between of Lower Valley Road and Baakens Street, in Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, South Africa, lies a grassy field about two meters above the road. Although the cemetery has no official name, it is referred to colloquially as the South End Valley Cemetery, due to where it sits within the Eastern Cape Province. Few who pass by notice the gravestones that lie within.

The South End Museum, five minutes away by car, says little about this burial ground—only that it was built some time in the 1800s for the Muslim community.

The cloud of mystery has begun to lift, however, thanks to the efforts of Usman Syihab, a professor at the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta, who has been able to decipher the script on 26 of the headstones. “Nearly all used the Indonesian language but were written in Arabic script,” said Usman.

Usman said the most important grave at the cemetery is surrounded by a low, white, curving wall. Inside the cordoned-off area sits a meter-high, rectangular gravestone made from slate. The surface of the stone is etched with Arabic lettering framed by pillars and a mosque dome.

Bismillahirrahmanirrahim (In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful) is etched in wavy calligraphy on top of the stone. Underneath lies an etching of the Muslim testimony of faith, followed by Inna illahi wa inna illaihi rajun (Indeed we belong to God, and indeed to Him we will return), a phrase customarily recited to mark the passing of a Muslim.

Usman recalls the following Malay-Indonesian words written in the Arabic lettering:

“...Sir Imam Haji Abu Rafi who has established the ways our Prophet, Sayyidina Muhammad...”

He said that instantly, he recognized the writing as ‘Pegon Arabic’, a style used in books written in the period between Islam’s arrival in Indonesia and the coming of the Dutch.

One headstone, Usman said, provided details about Sir Imam Haji Abu Rafi, a Javanese figure who spread Islam in Algoa Bay (the old name of Port Elizabeth) for 42 years, before dying at the age of 71 in 1277 on the Islamic hijri calendar (1856).

Other gravestones in the cemetery have writing featuring Indonesian written in Arabic lettering and featuring snippets of Quranic verse. The oldest gravestone is for Nabi San’iyah, the wife of Haji Awaludin bin Abdullah, who died 30 years before Abu Rafi.

UCH traces of Indonesia in South Africa were analyzed, especially those linked to Sheikh Yusuf al-Makassari al-Bantami, a prince from Gowa, South Sulawesi, who is believed to have brought Islam to South Africa. Sheikh Yusuf was exiled by the Dutch to Cape of Good Hope (present-day Cape Town) before being sent to Zandvliet.

While in exile, Sheikh Yusuf carried on the anti-colonial struggle and dedicated himself to spreading the Islamic faith. Nelson Mandela, many years later, named Sheikh Yusuf one of South Africa’s ‘best sons’. The city of Zandvliet is now known as Macassar, to honor the Sheikh’s place of birth (Makassar).

Leaders of the South African Muslim community, which call themselves Cape Malays due to their Indonesian origins, have long known about the graveyard. Today, there are some 700,000 Cape Malays in Western Cape and 300,000 in Eastern Cape. This community was formed three centuries ago, when the Dutch made use of the South African cape to exile ‘agitators’ frustrating the colonial project in Indonesia.

However, most of the gravestone studies have been carried out in Western Cape, whose capital is Cape Town. Research on graves in Eastern Cape have been comparatively lacking.

There are also graves of Indonesians in Eastern Cape. In the town of Uitenhage, both places are hundreds of kilometers from where Sheikh Yusuf first arrived.

Yusuf Agherdien, chairman of the Eastern Cape Malay Cultural Society, has repeatedly called upon Muslim intellectuals to analyze the gravestones at the South End Valley Cemetery. None, however, was able decipher the meaning of the Arabic carved on the stones. “The scholars were fluent in Arabic, but none could understand Indonesian,” Yusuf explained.

A glimmer of hope emerged when Sugie Harjadi, the Indonesian Consul General to Cape Town from 2010-2014, grew interested. During a visit to Port Elizabeth, Sugie passed the graveyard and was informed by another consulate employee that an Indonesian woman from Java was buried there. He expressed disappointment that little else was known about her. “It is important to discover the origins of the ancestors of the Malay community in the Eastern Cape,” Sugie told Tempo early last week.

Soon after, Sugie invited Salman Harun, a professor and exegete expert from Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic State University to Cape Town. During a break lecturing in 2010, Salman came to South Africa and began to decipher the gravestones. He could tell they were written in Pegon Arabic from Java, but as a West Sumatran, he had difficulty understanding the meaning.

The next year, Usman Syihab, a Javanese who is fluent in both Arabic and English, was brought to Cape Town. Unlike Salman, Usman was immediately able to ascertain the meaning of the gravestone script. In total, he translated the writing of some 65 headstones, some of which were located in Jubilee Park Cemetery in the city of Uitenhage. Others are on display at the Saabiren Islamic Library.

It took him two trips to finish the work. Most of the gravestones remain intact, as they were made from a single slab of slate. However, several headstones had to be assiduously cleaned before they could be read.
He was helped by Yusuf Agherdien and his son, Abdalah Agherdien, as well as local workers.

While carrying out the research, Usman learned key information about the life of Sir Imam Haji Abu Rafi, held at the South End Valley Cemetery, as well as Imam Jabaruddin bin Isamuddin, whose grave lies in the Jubilee Park Cemetery. The two figures are known to have brought Islam to the Eastern Cape, but Usman’s discovery helped provide a fuller picture of their biographies.

Sir Imam Abu Rafi and his brother, Imam Abu Salee, are known as founders of the Muslim community in Port Elizabeth. Both were born in Cape Town, and their father was a native-born Indonesian. “The descendants of the two can still be found in present-day Port Elizabeth,” said Yusuf Agherdien. In 1855, Abu Rafi was able to secure land for a Muslim cemetery by lobbying colonial officials in Cape Town. The lobbying resulted in the founding of the South End Valley Cemetery.

Imam Jabaruddin is named on a stone inscription at the Al-Qudama Mosque in Uitenhage. The stone mentions that the mosque was built by Imam Jabaruddin, who came from Java, in 1845. He was also the first imam to serve the mosque. It was learned from Jabaruddin’s gravestone that he died 18 years after founding the mosque.

A connection between Imam Jabaruddin and a person named Bardien—a last name that can still be found today—constituted another important discovery. Usman was able to conclude that Imam Jabaruddin is an ancestor of the Bardien family.

Most of the gravestones were between 100 to 200 years old. “From the writing on them, it could be concluded that those buried there were imams, people of knowledge, and religious scholars (ulama),” said Usman. “Not slaves.”

The script on the gravestones is significant not only in their use of Pegon Arabic, but also because it provides biographical information not normally found. “It was if there was a realization that they lived in a foreign land far from their birthplace, and so it was important to immortalize their life stories,” Usman said.

Agus Arismunandar, an archeologist at the University of Indonesia, said that writing personal history on gravestones was common practice by exiles under the Dutch. “To remember the land of their ancestors and to sustain their identity,” he said.

According to Agus, research on the gravestones in Eastern Cape has been enlightening, as to date, most of the reference material revolved around Sheikh Yusuf al-Makassari. But Agus said, the gravestone findings need to be supported by study of literature and folk traditions to better reveal the histories of the people buried. Sugie Harijadi and Usman agree that more research is needed. They wrote about their search in a book entitled Reading Ancient Tombstones: Tracing the Cape Malay Heritage in South Africa and Its Link with Indonesia. The book was distributed to universities in South Africa and Indonesia in the hope that others would be moved to dig deeper into the history of Indonesian migration to Africa.

This book has helped motivate the Cape Malay community to preserve old artifacts. At present, Yusuf is fighting to have the graveyard designated as a historic site. “We also want to make plaques to make known that the graves were for people of Malay heritage from Indonesia,” Yusuf said.
SAVED GRAVE ON A SANDY HILL

The grave of Sheikh Yusuf al-Makassari, a major Islamic scholar from Gowa, South Sulawesi, is located on a small sandy hill in Fasley Bay, not far from his home of Kampung Makassar, Cape Town. Based on Lontar Bolangangan (papyrus) documents, Sheikh Yusuf was born in Gowa on the 8th of the month of Shawwal, 1036, on the Islamic hijri calendar (July 3, 1626), and died on the 22nd of Dhul-Qa'dah, 1109 Hijri (May 23, 1699) at the age of 73. He was initially exiled to Sri Lanka in September 1684, along with his two wives, children and several students.

Sheikh Yusuf was exiled by the Dutch after being arrested in Girebon, West Java, for his role in helping Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa oppose colonization. At the time, Sheikh Yusuf was not only the son-in-law of the Sultan, but also the highest ranking Islamic scholar, or ulama, in the kingdom. “He was highly involved with the political dynamics in the Banten Kingdom. He was an ulama who was also an activist, as was Abdullah An-Sinkili, Sheikh Yusuf’s teacher in the Aceh Kingdom,” explained Prof. Dr. Azizumardzi Azra, author of the book The Network of Middle Eastern Scholars and the Indonesian Archipelago in the 17th and 18th Centuries.

The Dutch worried Sheikh Yusuf’s arrest might foment a rebellion among his followers, and so he was exiled to Sri Lanka in 1684. There, he continued his religious propagation and political activism. “Sri Lanka was on the route of the haj pilgrimage. His followers and fellow ulama used this fact to keep in touch,” Azizumardzi said.

In Sri Lanka, Sheikh Yusuf composed several major works, some of which went by the title of Sykebyiya (Spyilan means Ceylon or Sarandib, an Arabic term used during the Middle Ages for Sri Lanka). Failing in their attempt to diminish Sheikh Yusuf’s influence by sending him to Sri Lanka, the Dutch sent him to the Cape of Good Hope, present-day Cape Town.

Sheikh Yusuf arrived in Cape of Good Hope at the age of 68. He was initially sent to a farming village in Zandvliet, which lies at the mouth of the Eerste River. He arrived along with 49 family members and several followers. The group formed a small community that later came to be known as Kampung Makassar. “Together with his 12 students, they quietly conducted religious learning and worship,” Azizumardzi explained. This resulted in an increase in the number of Muslims in Zandvliet.

Zwemmer, a Dutch national who graduated from university with a degree in evangelism, regretted that Petrus Kalden, a preacher from the Old Dutch Church of Cape Town, failed to convert Sheikh Yusuf to Christianity. According to Azizumardzi, Sheikh Yusuf developed an Indonesian style of Islamic preaching that incorporated Malay cultural overtones, was influenced by the Nagyabandiyah and Khaawatuyah religious orders, and was consistent with the nature of his studies in Saudi Arabia.

After Sheikh Yusuf’s death, Islamic teachings were forced into the shadows due to a 1652-1795 Dutch ban. Nearly a decade after the passing of Sheikh Yusuf, Islamic education experienced a kind revival with the 1793 arrival of another exiled scholar, Imam Abdullah bin Qadi Abdussalam. A prince of Tidore and a prisoner of the state, Abdullah came to be known as Tuan Guru. He had a band of followers that included Abdul Rafa’i, Noro Iman, and Badordeyn.

Before being sent to Cape Town, Tuan Guru was exiled on Robben Island for 13 years starting in 1780. There, he wrote about Islamic jurisprudence and even founded an Islamic school on Dorp Street. According to Cape Town historian Ebrahim Rhoda, Tuan Guru’s overt religious proselytizing was done to counterbalance Dutch missionary activity. His efforts were given a de facto stamp of approval after the new British government permitted the opening of the Auwal Mosque, where he became the imam in 1795.

Tuan Guru died in 1807 and was buried at Tana Baru, Bokaap, Cape Town. His style of religious instruction proved successful. According to a report by John Campbell from the London Missionary Society in 1812, during the time of his preaching, the number of Muslims surged in Cape Town, and five mosques were established. In addition to Sheikh Yusuf and Tuan Guru, other ulama and Sheikhbs were exiled to the Cape Town area and died in the city, including Sheikh Matura (Prince Cakraningrat the Fourth from the Madura Kingdom, who was buried on Robben Island) and Sheikh Abdurrahman from Padang (buried in Constantia, Cape Town).