
Soul Catcher provides a number of new insights into the figure of Prince Mangkunagara I. At the same time it endorses and elaborates on the author’s previous arguments on Javanese mystic synthesis, and his arguments on the prevalent role of Islam in Javanese history. Prince Mangkunagara I is among the most well-known figures of eighteenth century Java, especially for his acts of rebellion against Pakubuwono II and against the Dutch East India Company (VOC). In folklore he is depicted as ‘a fighter,’ a perception and attribute for which the Indonesian government granted him a title of national hero together with many others, including the rebellious Prince Dipanagara. Due to the contrasting relations of Prince Dipanagara and Prince Mangkunagara I with the Dutch authorities, the latter was able to establish a principality: the Mangkunagaran dynasty. Additionally, he was among the three major local figures of the eighteenth century (the other two being Mangkubumi—later entitled Hamengkubuwono I—of Yogyakarta and Pakubuwono III of Surakarta), who were involved in the separation of the Mataram Kingdom into three dynasties.

Mangkunagara I has been known by a number of different names. These include Prince Adipati Pakunegara, Prince Suryakusuma, Mas Said, and Prince Sambĕr Nyawa (‘Soul Catcher’). The last of these names has been much quoted in the folklore of contemporary Indonesia, and Ricklefs, a prominent historian of Java, has been drawn into the mystery of the prince’s intriguing nickname ever since his passionate study of Java’s history. In 2018, he was finally able to publish the most extensive biography of the prince. It provides very detailed accounts of important events, the situations surrounding wars and battles and the relationships between other figures and powers. With regard to the prince’s personal and literary activities, it deals with feelings and thoughts, and even his love life! It could not have been completed in such a splendid way without broad primary sources both from the Javanese (32 published and unpublished sources) and from the VOC (16 sources), and a number of reference works. Ricklefs uncovers a number of interesting facts, one of them being that the term ‘Soul Catcher’ was not created by Nicolaas Hartingh. It was the name of the battle flag that Mangkunagara created, and a short article about this was published earlier in Bijdragen (2015). Ricklefs found the prince to be ‘a littérat-eur as well as a soldier and pious Muslim—and, of course, a lover of beautiful women and of Javanese high arts such as wayang and gamelan’ (p. 209). He
also corrected his and other scholars’ previous judgment on the role of female soldier-scribes in the writing of *serat babad Pakunagaran*.

*Soul Catcher* confirms Ricklefs’ previous findings and arguments (such as 2006) on the prevalent role of Islam in the history of Java with the character of mystic synthesis. This Muslim type of mystic synthesis is based on the setting of Islamic Sufism/mystics (*Shattariyah*), marked by three distinctive characteristics (pp. 210–11). First, that it embodied ‘a strong sense of Islamic identity. Javanese identity was a subset of Islamic identity; to be Javanese was to be Muslim.’ The second was in the ‘observance of the five pillars of Islamic practice,’ and the last was the ‘acceptance that indigenous Javanese spiritual forces were real and required respect and veneration.’ With this synthesis—inspired by the thinking of Sultan Agung—one could be a good Muslim at the same time as being a good Javanese. The two identities are reconcilable.

Through the biography of Mangkunagara I, Ricklefs in a way maintains that Islam was not marginal in Javanese history. The newly discovered sources show the dominant role of Islam, including a kind of ‘kraton-led Islamization’ (2014). Ricklefs’ meticulous readings found that Mangkunagara I performed prayers, established mosques, and transcribed six copies of the Qur’an (p. 276) along with being a dedicated devotee of *gamelan*, *wayang*, and ‘western’ cultures, such as drinking Dutch gin. He promoted the group reading of the Qur’an to finish the whole Qur’an in one night, called *katam Qur’an*, which was held in his palace. In 1791, ‘Mangkunagara gathered 376 santris who read from 12 copies of the Qur’an. Another 100 santri mĕri recited half the Qur’an in the middle of the day. A performance of *wayang wong* followed’ (p. 274).

*Soul Catcher* reveals a religious transformation from the predominance of a type of Islam characterized by mystic synthesis to a more reformist type of Islam that appeared at the end of the eighteenth century in the Surakarta court, promoted by the crown prince who later became King Pakubuwono IV. This prince had shown strong signs of religious devotion that differed from mystic synthesis, and once he became king, he furthered his cause by promoting a culture that was anti-Dutch in nature. He replaced senior court figures with religious zealots that later created a political as well as cultural threat to Surakarta, which also extended to other Javanese political realms and involved Mangkunagara I, Hamengkubuwono I, and the VOC. Although an alliance between the latter three succeeded in dismissing the king’s new favorites and sending them into exile, this type of reformist Islam became even more powerful from the middle of the nineteenth century with more dominating, orthopraxic brotherhoods (*tarekat*), namely Kadiriyah and Naqsabandiyah. This rich biography of Mangkunagara I provides historical background to reflect on the transformation of Javanese—as well as Indonesian—society in this twenty-first century.
The 11 chapters of the book are divided into two parts. Part I (Youth and War) consists of six chapters relating to the development of the prince’s life and the situations of war in which he was involved. The opening chapter briefly recounts the socio-political culture, principal figures, events, and times of warfare, along with the ‘courtly intrigues, Javanese high culture, and mystical sciences’ (p. 41) that instill in the prince his rebellious military character as well as the learning required to be both a devout Muslim and a Javanese. The following chapter covers the three-year period when the teenage prince of 16–19 years of age began to get involved in rebellion. In turn, 11 years of the third Javanese war of succession are then narrated through four phases that show the transition in the prince’s war position, from his coalition with prince Mangkubumi, his father-in-law, to breaking the alliance and attaining a senior princedom. This section hints in many places at the mystic synthesis type of Islam, but its significant discussion occurs in the second part of the book.

Part II (War by Other Means) recounts the period that was more peaceful than what was discussed in the first section. Yet this period brought a time of diplomatic war and political activity that was, in its own way, no less dangerous. One important political activity lay in using marriage diplomacy among the three dynasties. The four chapters in Part II cover from the year 1757 (when Mangkunagara I became a senior prince established in Surakarta) to 1795, the year when Mangkunagara I died, and the book concludes with an explanation of the legacies of the prince that have passed over several generations. Ricklefs regrets that Mangkunagara I’s offspring failed to take lessons from him on how to respond to a disruptive era in dealing with the many changes from the Dutch period to the Indonesian state.

In our current period of disruption and change, of growing conservatism, and the polarization between different notions of Islam in relation to the positioning between religion and the state, the publication of Soul Catcher is timely. Readers would expect learning the relevance of the story of Mangkunagara I and lessons related to the mixing of religion and politics which remains the big issue today. The mainstream ‘state-support’ type of Islam represented by organizations such as Nahdatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah seems like a derivative type of mystic synthesis which, in the context of the religiously-secular state, has been challenged by a type of Islam that is more Salafi in its orientation. Readers will be looking forward to the author’s concluding thoughts on this, hopefully through a forthcoming Indonesian translation.

In a book discussion, historian Azyumardi Azra referred to Soul Catcher as yet another major work from Ricklefs. Soul Catcher is indeed a very valuable reference book on Mangkunagara I, the history of the third Javanese war of succession, and the Islamic history of eighteenth century Java; a period about which
we still have many gaps of ignorance toward Indonesian Islam and Javanese history. We are indebted to Ricklefs for his insights into Mangkunagara I, and for his important contribution to the study of Indonesian Islam.

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References