



# **HAMKA'S GREAT STORY**

A MASTER WRITER'S  
VISION OF ISLAM  
FOR MODERN  
INDONESIA

**JAMES R. RUSH**

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*A Master Writer's Vision  
of Islam for Modern Indonesia*

JAMES R. RUSH

The University of Wisconsin Press

The University of Wisconsin Press  
1930 Monroe Street, 3rd Floor  
Madison, Wisconsin 53711-2059  
uwpress.wisc.edu

3 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden  
London WC2E 8LU, United Kingdom  
eurospanbookstore.com

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Printed in the United States of America

This book may be available in a digital edition.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rush, James R. (James Robert), 1944– author.

Title: Hamka's great story: a master writer's vision of Islam for modern Indonesia /  
James R. Rush.

Other titles: New perspectives in Southeast Asian studies.

Description: Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, [2016] | ©2016

| Series: New perspectives in Southeast Asian studies

| Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015036819 | ISBN 9780299308407 (cloth: alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Hamka, 1908–1981. | Muslim scholars—Indonesia—Biography.  
| Islam—Indonesia.

Classification: LCC DS644.I.H2565 R87 2016 | DDC 297.092—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015036819>

# *Hamka's Great Story*

NEW PERSPECTIVES  
IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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## Preface

There can be little doubt that imperialism shaped the world we live in. The Western colonies and other projections of Western power that blanketed much of Asia and Africa by the early twentieth century created a world system so asymmetrical that whole civilizations reeled in response.<sup>1</sup> Amid the tumultuous stirrings of humiliation and pride that ensued among defeated peoples emerged the ideas and movements that culminated in today's nation-states. Writers and intellectuals across Asia played a key role in absorbing and spreading new ideas from the West and in articulating publicly the degree to which these ideas could be reconciled with their own hallowed beliefs and traditions. Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Islam were passionately challenged, defended, and adapted as intellectuals and activists debated strategies for self-strengthening and resistance and later—after colonies had yielded to nations—for shaping new national societies. Hamka (Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah), the prolific author and Muslim leader who is the subject of this study, may at first appear to be a uniquely Indonesian figure. But his life's work was also part of the great global yearning to reconcile deeply held religious beliefs with the bewildering challenges and possibilities of the imperial world and its aftermath—in his case, to conceptualize Islam for Indonesia.



It was Louis Hammann at Gettysburg College, in a class called Religions of the World, who taught me that there might be something interesting and compelling about what other people believe. He introduced me to the idea, surprising to me at eighteen, that people elsewhere might actually understand everything in the world differently than I do. This insight, and courses about Asia by Gettysburg's J. Roger Stemen and my subsequent stint in Malaysia with the Peace Corps, led me to study Southeast Asian history. Having embarked on this path, I was led by Harry Benda at Yale to Indonesia and to Islam.

I first encountered Hamka in 1971 or 1972 during Indonesian language lessons in graduate school. His stories drew me in. I realized that, like nothing else I was reading at the time, these simple novels and short stories—and others by writers of his generation—could bring Indonesia to life for me, or at least certain

parts of its history. Here were human characters and their dilemmas, intimate scenes of cities and towns and villages and of changing times (steamships, trains, and cars), all rendered in a distinctive Indonesian voice.

For those of us in the West who undertook to study Southeast Asia in the period following World War II, a time when new nations were being formed within the shells of old empires, it was an article of faith that we should move beyond the colonial perspectives of earlier scholars and attempt to understand Southeast Asia as Southeast Asians themselves did, or at least from a regional perspective.<sup>2</sup> This project yielded groundbreaking studies in history, anthropology, politics, and religious studies that drew heavily from Southeast Asian primary sources and fieldwork. For historians, however, the overwhelming weight of Western archival and scholarly sources often meant that our research was heavily influenced by the perspectives, interests, and bureaucratic routines of other Westerners. This was certainly true of my own earlier study of colonial Indonesia, *Opium to Java*, which grew out of my doctoral years.<sup>3</sup> It was this problem that drew me back to Hamka, who wrote not only fiction but in virtually every other genre as well, and prolifically so. Here was a wholly authentic Indonesian voice through which I might see Indonesia from the inside. Hamka did not intend for me, or anyone like me, to read his books. He wrote strictly for his fellow Indonesians. To them, he spoke about almost every subject imaginable. To them, his mind was an open book. And thus, accidentally, it became so for me, too.

It was not until January 1982 that I went to Indonesia and launched my research project about Hamka. He was very much on people's minds that year, having passed away only the summer before. (I carried with me his letter inviting me to pursue my research, sent three months before he died.) His colleagues and contemporaries were eager to talk about him. I met and interviewed Mohammad Natsir and Mohammad Roem, his fellow Masjumi stalwarts. I met M. Yunan Nasution, his partner at the Medan weekly *Pedoman Masyarakat* of the 1930s and lifelong friend and Muhammadiyah man. I met Hamka's revered mentor and brother-in-law Sutan Mansur and his wife, Fatimah, Hamka's older sister. General A. H. Nasution, H. B. Jassin, and Abdurrahman Wahid opened their doors. So did Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Hamka's great nemesis of the 1960s and at the time only recently released from the prison camp on Buru Island and still under house arrest. At the Masjid Agung Al-Azhar, Hamka's mosque, I met his son Rusydi and others who knew him well. Eventually, I met other members of his family and a wide array of Hamka's admirers and detractors. (The latter included Pramoedya, of course, and Mohammad Rasjidi,

a Sorbonne-trained PhD in Islamic law who told me conspiratorially that Hamka's writing was all lifted from Arabic-language publications.)

Meanwhile, I scoured libraries and archives and bookstores for Hamka's old books, magazines, and pamphlets. It soon became clear that, whereas certain of his books were circulating prolifically in new editions, others were hard to find. Hamka himself had not saved his own books systematically, his son Rusydi told me, lending them out incautiously to friends and students. I perused the used bookstalls for old copies and found many in threadbare condition, with torn or absent covers and dry, fragile bindings that broke in my hands when I opened them. Of my long list of Hamka's publications, there were many I could not find anymore.

Someone said, "You should try Jassin's archive." H. B. Jassin was an authoritative critic of modern Indonesian literature who played an important role in Hamka's life in the 1960s. He was also Indonesia's first literature archivist. By 1982 the city of Jakarta had housed his vast private collection in a public building at the Taman Ismail Marzuki arts center. "Do you have anything on Hamka?" I asked. "Let me see," answered a young archivist. Soon, he arrived with a large archive box full of books and manuscripts. I had barely begun surveying this gold mine when a second box arrived. Then a third, and so on until there was a table full of archive boxes, all marked "Hamka." In them were first editions of books, prepublication manuscripts, rare pamphlets and magazines, and hundreds of newspaper clippings of articles by and about Hamka spanning thirty years. (Jassin had compiled similar collections for virtually every significant writer of his generation!) With this rich lode added to my own growing collection and related primary documents from the National Library and the National Museum, I was ready to plunge in.

Ready . . . but years passed again as other work kept Hamka on the back burner. A Fulbright Senior Scholar award in 2004–2005 gave me a chance at last to spend a year at the Walisongo State Islamic Institute (Institut Agama Islam Negeri Walisongo), where I again devoted myself to Hamka and began formulating this book.

As I submerged myself deeper and deeper into Hamka's body of writing, it became clear that, irrespective of the genre, from short stories and anecdotes and hastily dashed-off advice columns to serious studies of history, theology, and the Qur'an itself, Hamka was always writing to a higher purpose. I began to see his lifetime of writing as a single text. In it, Hamka was weaving together the threads of Islam's hopeful message with those of his readers' everyday lives and the larger events of their lifetimes, events that were transforming a Dutch

colony of almost incomprehensible size and diversity into the single nation of Indonesia. Thus emerged the organizing concept for this book.

Garrulous, sentimental, and opinionated, Hamka earned a vast readership. Despite his entertaining and popular style, he dealt in serious matters. Readers turned to him for guidance in a profound arena of their lives. Indeed, for millions of Indonesian Muslims, Hamka became the master storyteller of their generation, the creator of a master narrative or Great Story that, in Robert Berkhofer's formulation, ordered the past, interpreted the present, and predicted the future.<sup>4</sup> In a Great Story, it is not just the large print that matters—the Prophet Muhammad, monotheism, the Five Pillars of Islam, the Qur'an and Hadith, or, for that matter, Indonesia—it's all the fine print, too. It's stories and proverbs and figures of speech, heroes, villains, and local histories. It's gossip and jokes and what ails you. Hamka's Great Story provided answers not only to the many small questions on people's minds—Is it okay to eat margarine?—but also to the very large ones. How should I live? What does it mean to be Muslim? To be Indonesian? One could find one's bearings inside the Great Story. This is what Hamka provided for his readers. (He also provided them a rousing account of his own life, which is a pretty great story, too.)

What Hamka provides for the rest of us, students of Indonesia, is the rare and probably unique range of his lifetime of writing and his important perspective and influence as a Muslim public intellectual during the country's formative years. To grasp his Great Story is to enter the prevailing discourse of a large swath of modern Indonesian society. This discourse is ordinarily glossed as "modernist," and its main underlying elements are widely understood to mean Islam heavily influenced by Muhammad Abduh and other late nineteenth-century reformers and characterized by the embrace of modern Western learning and a call to purity, including the rejection of superstition, magic, and outdated teachings of Islam. "Modernist" thinking in Indonesia is associated with the mass organization Muhammadiyah and commonly juxtaposed with "traditionalist," a term that means a rejection of the modernist claims and an adherence to the older teachings of the Shafi'i school of law as long practiced in Java, transmitted by revered and often charismatic teachers (*kyai*) and associated with Muhammadiyah's rival mass organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU).

Understanding these categories is essential to understanding many aspects of modern Indonesian history and politics, since the cleavages of the two orientations have often been in play at key moments. Scholars have used them repeatedly, if often superficially. Hamka's Great Story reveals the "modernist" identity intimately and exposes its many-layered depth and human content. Yet his Great Story was not limited to modernists alone. As NU's Abdurrahman

Wahid told me, at the mosque that Hamka led, Muslims of every stripe “were proud to pray.”<sup>5</sup>

Among the first to call attention to Hamka in the West were two of my own early mentors. In 1956 Harry Benda translated a passage from Hamka’s *Ayahku* (My father) in which Hamka describes how the indomitable Haji Rasul defies the Japanese wartime occupiers by refusing to bow to the emperor.<sup>6</sup> Rufus Hendon, also of Yale, was the first to translate one of Hamka’s short stories into English. This was “Anak Tinggal” (“A Deserted Child”) in 1968.<sup>7</sup> Karel Steenbrink was among the first to recognize Hamka’s significant role and wrote several insightful articles about him. Later still, Jeffrey Hadler’s “Home, Fatherhood, Succession: Three Generations of Amrullahs in Twentieth-Century Indonesia” of 1998 and his 2008 *Muslims and Matriarchs: Cultural Resilience in Indonesia through Jihad and Colonialism* astutely placed Hamka and his family in the sociocultural and political milieu of the Minangkabau heartland of the early twentieth century. Deliar Noer, C. W. Watson, Henk Maier, Mun’im Sirry, and Wan Sabri Wan Yusof have all written of Hamka in valuable English-language studies.<sup>8</sup>

Despite this, Hamka more often than not has appeared as a bit player in studies of modern Indonesian history, as in Anthony Reid’s study of Medan, *The Blood of the People*, where he appears peering over the shoulders of other city luminaries in a photograph from 1939.<sup>9</sup> In Azyumardi Azra’s *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia*, a mere paragraph is devoted to him in the epilogue.<sup>10</sup> In another sense, however, Hamka has been ubiquitous. He has been a source in countless works of modern Indonesian history, including groundbreaking studies of the Muhammadiyah and Islamic modernism by Taufik Abdullah, Alfian, Deliar Noer, and William Roff (writing about Singapore and Malaya). Indeed, for certain key episodes in the development of Islamic modernism in Sumatra, it is no exaggeration to say that Hamka wrote “the first draft of history.”

Within Indonesia, Hamka has been the subject of a large body of Indonesian-language scholarship and critical writing. This includes several doctoral dissertations and master’s theses, among them works by M. Yunan Yusuf, Samsul Nizar, Muhammad Nazar, and Mansur, as well as astute critiques and appreciations by Abdurrahman Wahid, Dawam Rahardjo, Nurcholish Majid, Azyumardi Azra, Ahmad Hakim, M. Thalhah, and others included in the bibliography. I have called upon this literature extensively.

Hamka wrote often about Orientalists, by which he meant Western Christians and Jews who studied Islam. By his definition, I am inescapably one of them. As a boy, I was a regular at Sunday school and church; I memorized

Bible verses and learned probably hundreds of hymns whose sweet melodies and lyrics—"Oh, He walks with me and He talks to me, and He tells me I am His own"—still linger in my mind. So, although I have long since abandoned the theological teachings of my family church, my spiritual sensibilities continue to be shaped by my upbringing. Culturally, I am Christian.

In the same sense, I am American. I have lived my life during a time of American ascendancy in the world and have been shaped by its neighborhoods and schools, by its material wealth and power, and also by its own Great Story. (When I was twenty-two, for example, I was a Peace Corps teacher in a Malaysian high school. No Malaysian volunteers had come to teach in my American high school. This didn't strike me as odd at the time.) The fact that I often find myself at odds with my country's behavior in the world makes me no less American. There is no escaping. I am an American Christian writing about an Indonesian Muslim.

Even so, as a historian of Indonesia and Southeast Asia, I have spent the better part of my career attempting earnestly to breach the boundaries of my own history to grasp with empathy the history of others. I present this study of Hamka in that spirit.

## *Acknowledgments*

This book has been a long time coming, and my debts are large. Among those who helped get me started were Anthony Reid, Rufus Hendon, William Roff, William Frederick, William Liddle, Robin Winks, Ibu Hermina Tobing, and Katharine Pierce. A Fulbright grant under the Islamic Civilization Research Program in 1982 funded my first year of research about Hamka in Indonesia, during which I had the tremendous good fortune of meeting Tjuk Pratiwo-wijanto, who assisted me in matters of language and research throughout the year. My good friend Onghokham opened many doors, including those of his own unique home. Alfian, of the Lembaga Ilmu Pengatahuan Indonesia (LIPI, the Indonesian Institute of Sciences), was my research sponsor. Many others were generous, including Taufik Abdullah, Mochtar Naim, H. B. Jassin, and the many figures who agreed to lengthy interviews. At the Masjid Agung Al-Azhar, Rusydi Hamka, M. Sjafi'i Anwar, Zainal Arifin, and Lukman Harun were enormously generous. Amora Lubis guided me helpfully through the sites of Hamka's early formation in West Sumatra. I was fortunate to meet Karel Steenbrink, a fellow student of Hamka, at the Universitas Islam Negeri (State Islamic University) Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. In Jakarta I was hosted warmly by the family of Soegito Sigit in Kebun Kacang and enjoyed the good company and advice of Toenggoel and Nelly Siagian, Fred and Alice Bunnell, Yang Su Wan, Saraswati Sunindyo, Mark Hoffman, Krishna Sen, David Hill, and Nasir Tamara, among many others. At the U.S. embassy, William La Salle, Phil Cohen, Fred Coffey, and Riley Sever assisted me in Fulbright and other matters; at the Pusat Dokumentasi Sastra H. B. Jassin (H. B. Jassin Center for Literary Documentation), Harkrisyati and Oyon Sofyan were endlessly helpful.

Subsequently at Yale I had the good fortune to share my early research with the Southeast Asia Council, including James Scott, Hal Conklin, Joe Errington, and Charles Bryant, and also Jeffrey Hadler, an undergraduate at the time who later became an authority on Hamka and the Minangkabau and whose counsel has been invaluable. Others who have fostered this work over its long years of gestation include Robert Hefner, John Sidel, Henk Maier, Michael Feener, Laurie Sears, and Ami Ayalon. At Arizona State University, Mark Woodward has been a boon to this project alongside a host of other colleagues, including Juliane Schober, Chris Lundry, Peter Suwarno, Christopher Duncan, Christine

Szuter, Hava Samuelson, Susan Gray, Shank Gilkeson, James Edmonds, and, importantly, the members of the Islamic Studies Research Alliance, including Yasmin Saikia, Chad Haines, Nabil Kamel, Hasan Davacu, Shahla Talebi, and Chouki El Hamel. I am indeed indebted to Chouki. My thanks, too, to my friends at James's Table, where the conversation is always good and the advice is usually good: Steve MacKinnon, Anne Feldhaus, Claudia Brown, Julianne Schober, Alex and Gabriela Henn, Aaron Moore, Nila Bhattacharjya, and James Foard. Peter Iverson, a historian of the Navajo, read the entire manuscript critically and helpfully. Now there's a friend! Also at ASU, Ralph Gabbard at the University Libraries has been a blessing.

In 2004–2005 a Fulbright Senior Scholar grant afforded me the opportunity to spend the better part of a year at the IAIN Walisongo in Semarang, where I was sponsored by the institute's rector, Abdul Djamil. My wife, Sunny, and I are grateful to Pak Djamil for hosting us so generously. I profited greatly from the practical assistance and knowledge of my colleagues there, including Ahmad Gunaryo, Abdurrahman Masud, M. Darori Amin, and Elly Sholihan. A. Khoirul Umam was my enterprising research assistant. His help was invaluable. Many thanks, too, to Hermawan Sulisty and his wife, Iing, for fostering our stay in so many ways, and to several others in Indonesia who in this and later visits provided additional sources, guidance, insights, and encouragement; among these are Esther Sianipar, Branden Eastwood, Mochtar Pabottingi, Ahmad Sjafi'i Maarif, Azyumardi Azra, Gusti Asnan, Teuku Chairul Wisal, and Irfan Hamka.

The Institute for Humanities Research at Arizona State University has kindly provided a subvention to underwrite the book's index. My great thanks.

Finally, I wish to thank Gwen Walker at the University of Wisconsin Press and the editors of the *New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies* series for taking *Hamka* aboard. I am especially grateful to my referees at the press, Eric Tagliacozzo and Anna M. Gade, for reading the manuscript both generously and critically and for challenging me to improve important sections of it. It is much better for their astute interventions. What errors remain are mine alone.

I have lived with Hamka a long time. This means that people who are close to me have been living with him, too. The project began when my children, Meg and Billy, were still little. Now they live in distant cities and have children of their own. For them, this eventually became the "don't ask Dad about his book" book. It was not so easy for my wife, Sunny, who married into the project nearly twenty-five years ago and has endured to the end, knowing in her own inscrutable way when to ask and when not to. (There have been exceptions.) I am grateful to her for giving me the space I needed to bring Hamka's story to a close. And for so many other good things along the way.

## Note on Spelling, Transliteration, and Translation

During the period under discussion in this book, the spelling of Indonesian words shifted from colonial-era practices (e.g., *masjarakat*, *pandji*, *repoloesi*, Tjilatjap, Soekarno) to postcolonial ones (*masyarakat*, *panji*, *revolusi*, Cilacap, Sukarno). This shift did not occur uniformly, and in the 1950s and 1960s one finds examples of both side by side in many Indonesian publications, including Hamka's. In this book, the original spellings are used when they occur in book and periodical titles, e.g. *Pedoman Masjarakat*, *Sedjarah Umat Islam* (but *Sejarah Umat Islam* in later editions); otherwise, contemporary spellings are applied.

Names can be problematic. I have used the postcolonial spelling for Sukarno, for example, but the older spelling for Soeharto—both to reflect Soeharto's practice of signing his name this way and to minimize the likelihood that readers will confuse these two leaders with similar single names. Ease for readers has also guided the treatment of pluralizing some frequently used Indonesian nouns with an English "s"; thus we have *ulamas*, *kyais*, *pantuns*, and *shaykhs*. In contrast, the "s" is not used for several other words in plural form, for example, *adat*, *negeri*, *penghulu*, and *kaba*.

In the case of Arabic, the original spelling is used for publication titles and direct quotations. In other cases, a simplified system of transliteration that reflects scholarly conventions and the *Chicago Manual of Style* has been applied. Some inconsistencies may remain. Translations from the Indonesian are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

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