

The Art of the Qur'an in Java

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A study of Qur'an manuscripts from Southeast Asia has revealed a number of distinctive artistic schools. The common denominator of each school is a strong sense of regional identity, with particular styles of manuscript illumination associated with Aceh, the states of Terengganu, Kelantan and Patani on the East Coast of the Malay peninsula, and the south Sulawesi diaspora communities. Large numbers of illuminated Qur'an manuscripts are also known from Java, but here we find a wide variety of decorative styles, meaning it is not possible to talk of a single 'Javanese' school of Qur'anic illumination. This article lists a few distinctive features associated with Javanese illuminated Qur'an manuscripts, as a contribution towards a better understanding of the art of the Qur'an in Java.

Key words: art, illumination, Qur'an, Java.

Kajian terhadap naskah-naskah Al-Qur'an dari Asia Tenggara telah memperlihatkan adanya sejumlah gaya seni khas. Patokan umum masing-masing gaya adalah kuatnya identitas kedaerahan, dengan gaya khas iluminasi naskah yang berhubungan dengan Aceh, negeri Terengganu, Kelantan dan Patani di Pantai Timur semenanjung Melayu, serta masyarakat diaspora Sulawesi Selatan. Banyak naskah Al-Qur'an beriluminasi juga diketahui dari Jawa, namun di sini kita menemukan banyaknya ragam gaya hiasan, sehingga tidak mungkin untuk membicarakan adanya gaya tunggal iluminasi Al-Qur'an 'Jawa'. Artikel ini mencatat beberapa ciri khas yang berhubungan dengan naskah-naskah Al-Qur'an Jawa beriluminasi, sebagai sebuah sumbangan terhadap pemahaman yang lebih baik terhadap seni mushaf di Jawa.

Kata kunci: seni, iluminasi, Qur'an, Jawa.

Introduction¹

For some time now it has been known that Southeast Asia is home to a number of regional schools of Islamic manuscript illumination, with distinctive styles identified in Aceh and on the east coast of the Malay peninsula, and also associated with the Sulawesi diaspora (cf. Gallop 2005). While decoration is found in many genres of Islamic texts, the finest illumination tends to be found in Qur'an

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the *Islamic Area Studies Conference*, Kuala Lumpur, 22-24 November 2008, and at the *Symposium Internasional Manassa*, Yogyakarta, September 11-13, 2012.

manuscripts. When a Qur'an manuscript is illuminated, its geographic origin is most easily detected from the structure, motifs and colours of the decorated double frames found at key points of the text, although regional identity is also reflected in a host of other 'internal' features, including the shape and colour of verse and *juz*' markers, and the selection and composition of marginal ornaments.

The Acehnese style of Qur'anic illumination is probably the most coherent regional artistic school, in the sense that large numbers of illuminated Acehnese Qur'ans are known – certainly well over a hundred – that all conform faithfully to a clearly-defined formula (Gallop 2004). Among the most characteristic structural features of Acehnese double frames are extended vertical borders on either side of the textblock; arches on the three outer sides of the textblock on each page; and two tendril-like 'wings' flanking the arches on the outer vertical sides of the frames. Similar concise definitions pertaining to structure, motifs and palette can also be supplied for regional artistic styles associated with illuminated Qur'ans from Terengganu and Patani on the east coast of the Malay peninsula, and those decorated in either the 'geometric' or the 'floral' Sulawesi diaspora styles.

This is not the case, however, for illuminated Qur'ans from Java, in which the double decorated frames exhibit an extraordinary variety of colours, shapes, forms and patterns (Fig. 1), although there is more conformity in the 'internal' features of these manuscripts. The term 'Java' probably also needs refining; a recent study of Qur'an manuscripts from Banten (Gallop & Akbar 2006) identified a distinct corpus of large-format calligraphically-superb manuscripts that bear little resemblance to most other Qur'an manuscripts from the island of Java. On the other hand, so far it has not been possible to differentiate clearly between Qur'an manuscripts from ethnically Javanese, Sundanese or Madurese communities, and so in this paper 'Java' will be understood broadly to include Madura, while the special case of Banten will not be addressed here.

Illuminated frames in Qur'ans from Java

Many Qur'an manuscripts from Java survive, including over a hundred known illuminated Qur'ans.² Qur'an manuscripts from

² An earlier version of this paper (Gallop 2008) included an Appendix listing 84 illuminated Javanese Qur'ans held in public and private collections in

Java are generally written either on laid watermarked paper of European (generally Dutch or English) manufacture, or on Javanese beaten treebark 'paper' known as *dluwang*. While not all Javanese Qur'ans are written on *dluwang*, the use of *dluwang* in a Qur'an manuscript can be seen as a strong indicator of its Javanese origin, for apart from closely related areas such as Lombok and some early examples encountered in Maluku and Nusa Tenggara, *dluwang* is rarely used elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Qur'ans written on *dluwang* tend to be simpler and less lavishly decorated than those on European paper, probably for socio-economic reasons.

Double decorated frames in Javanese Qur'ans are usually located at the beginning of the Holy Book enclosing the *Surat al-Fatihah* on the right-hand page and the first verses of the *Surat al-Baqarah* on the left, as is the case in nearly all Southeast Asian Qur'ans. Double frames at the end usually enclose the *Surat al-Falaq* on the right-hand page and *Surat al-Nas* on the left, although other permutations are also encountered,³ and occasionally a larger number of surahs is framed. When decorated frames are found in the centre of Qur'ans from Java, these invariably mark the start of *Surat al-Kahf* (Fig. 1). The layout of the text is usually designed so that *Surat al-Kahf* starts at the top of the right hand-page, but sometimes the double frames simply enclose the double-page spread on which the *Surat al-Kahf* starts, wherever these first words may be.

As noted above, there is great variety in the structure of decorated double frames in Qur'ans from Java, and it is not possible to define a single 'Javanese style' of decorated frame. At present, the best that can be done is simply to enumerate certain seemingly distinctive features, which may later help to identify underlying sub-groupings of Qur'ans from Java. While the following features are not necessarily found in the same manuscripts, they do seem to be more common in Qur'ans from Java and Madura than from other parts of the Malay world.

Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, UK, Netherlands, France, Germany and Australia, based on personal observation, personal communications, and published sources. Since 2008, many more illuminated Qur'ans from Java have been documented.

³ In British Library Add.12343, dated to the early 19th century, the final double decorated frames enclose *Surat al-Nas* on the right-hand page and *Surat al-Fatihah* on the left-hand page.

A notable structural feature of some illuminated Javanese Qur'an manuscripts is a marked preference for straight lines and a commensurate absence of curves, and thus one distinctive style of illuminated double frames combines triangular arches on the outer sides of the textblock with a wide surrounding rectangular border. This results in a stark juxtaposition of vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines in contrast to the more sinuous curves of other regional styles of illumination, even though sometimes floral embellishments or trefoils are added (cf. Wieringa 2008). These principles of composition can be seen in some of the simplest decorated manuscripts, with frames simply outlined in black or red ink, as well as in more elaborately coloured ones.

In general in Qur'an manuscripts from Nusantara, double decorated frames are embellished with arches and finials on the three outer sides of each page, with the whole double-page composition symmetrical about the gutter of the books. In some Javanese Qur'ans, however, it is not uncommon to find double frames that are symmetrical about the central axis of each page, a phenomenon not noted in any other part of Southeast Asia. Another structural feature more common in Qur'ans from Java than elsewhere is the occasional use of unusually-shaped cartouches for the text within double decorated frames, such as oval, round or cusped almond panels, especially in the middle of the book to mark the beginning of the *Surat al-Kahf*.

As noted above, the finest illuminated Qur'ans from Java are written on paper of European manufacture. Many Qur'ans are written on *dluwang*, but these tend to have much simpler decoration, if at all; two early examples are held in the British Library in the John Crawford collection, and hence probably date from before 1816, when Crawford left Java. One has illuminated frames in red and black ink;⁴ the other has simple frames in black ink only.⁵ And yet a recent phenomenon is the appearance on the international art market of numerous Qur'an manuscripts written on *dluwang* with brightly-coloured decorated frames, often in very vivid hues, and in a plethora of non-traditional shapes and patterns. On close visual examination, it became clear that in many such cases, an authentic 19th-century Qur'an manuscript written on *dluwang*, originally

⁴ British Library, Add.12312 (Gallop & Arps 1994: 100).

<<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/javanesequran.html>>

⁵ British Library, Add.12343.

without any decoration, had had illumination added to enhance its retail value.⁶ More recently, the very large number of such decorated *dluwang* Qur'ans has led me to reassess my initial evaluation that the illuminated frames in all such manuscripts were modern embellishments, and to leave open the possibility that in some cases the decoration – even if not original to the 19th century – may have been added some decades earlier, rather than just a few years ago. Indeed, in other parts of the Islamic world, throughout the centuries there have been occasional examples of the adding of decorative elements to Qur'an manuscripts, with the intention of honouring and glorifying the Holy Book.

Colours and motifs

Throughout Southeast Asia, the most prominent colour in Qur'anic illumination is red, followed by yellow, often used in combination with black ink and reserved white (the background colour of the paper, which is left uncoloured and therefore appears white in a decorative scheme). In Qur'ans from Java, although red and yellow are still omnipresent, they no longer play such a dominant role. Instead, a very variegated palette is noticeable, and perhaps a wider use of gold than elsewhere, while at the same time manuscripts with simple monochrome ruled frames are not uncommon. But one of the most unusual characteristics of illuminated Qur'an manuscripts from Java is the marked use of blue pigment, in a variety of shades, ranging from deep indigo blue to a lighter blue wash, immediately reminiscent of the widespread use of indigo in the batik industry in Java (Figs. 1, 2).

As well as variety in the structure and palette of double decorated frames in Javanese Qur'ans, there is an equally wide range of decorative patterns and ornaments. But one motif stands out for the frequency with which it occurs in Qur'an manuscripts from Java, and its complete absence in Qur'ans from elsewhere in the Malay world: the Chinese *banji* or swastika pattern. The uniform technique used to compose this pattern in the Qur'an manuscripts is also highly distinctive, as reconstructed through the evidence of a

⁶ This category of 'enhanced' manuscripts is described in an unpublished paper (Gallop 2006); one such Qur'an, with a colophon giving the place of production as Sumenep, Madura, is now held in the British Library, Or.15877. See also the article by Ali Akbar (2012a) and the response by A. Hakim Syukrie (2012).

number of unfinished manuscripts: rows of fine lines in black ink were drawn at right angles to each other, forming a fine grid of tiny squares, which were then filled in individually with black ink to form the *banji* pattern in mosaic form (Fig. 3). It is usually encountered in black on white, but blue and red examples are also known. At least one manuscript in which the *banji* pattern occurs was copied in Demak in 1850,⁷ and it is possible that this motif is in fact particularly associated with manuscripts from the culturally-mixed north coast *pasisir* regions of Java. The *banji* pattern can also be seen on the binding of at least one Qur'an from Java,⁸ and is a common motif in other media such as woodcarving and textiles, including in Bali and other areas beyond Java.

Apart from the evident impact of Chinese art in the adoption of the *banji* motif, another distinctive characteristic of some Javanese Qur'ans is a greater awareness than in other parts of Southeast Asia of Indo-Persian and Ottoman practice. Such features include, for example the setting of lines of writing in 'cloudbands', the use of little gold horizontal slivers between lines⁹ (Fig. 1) and the use of 'doorway pivots' in the gutter of the book from which decorated frames can be suspended.¹⁰

Internal features of Javanese Qur'ans

As is the case with most Nusantara Qur'ans, in Qur'an manuscripts from Java there are usually 15 lines per page, and these are nearly always set with a frame of ruled lines. The text frames in Javanese Qur'ans are simple and generally consist of between two and four ruled lines, usually just in black ink but occasionally in a combination of black or red ink. A common permutation is two closely-spaced black lines followed a larger gap and then another pair of closely-spaced black lines, or one black line with a gap followed by a pair of closely-spaced black lines.¹¹ The calligraphy in Javanese Qur'an manuscripts shows enormous variation in competence and style, with many superb and vigorous examples with a pronounced forward slope.

⁷ Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia, MSS 3596.

⁸ Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia 2004.2.2.

⁹ Cf. Deroche et al 2005:243.

¹⁰ Cf. Widya Budaya, W.330 (Johns 1996: 35).

¹¹ In this case, as in other studies by the present writer, the convention is to describe the text frames from the innermost to the outermost.

The verse markers are generally plain red ink circles. In many manuscripts a black dot can be seen in the middle of the circle; this mark was made by the scribe while writing the text in black ink, and only at a later stage were the red circles added. In some grander manuscripts, these red circles have been infilled with gold pigment, resulting in gold roundels outlined in red ink.

Surah headings are usually in red ink and set in simple black ink frames. A particularly Javanese feature is the elaborately knotted and often exaggerated form of the letter *ta' marbuta* which often occurs in surah headings; this can be linked to the Javanese-script feature of decorative *pada* which mark a change of stanza or canto in Javanese works in verse.¹²

The main marginal annotations commonly found in Javanese Qur'an manuscripts are *juz'* markers, indicating the division of the Qur'an into thirty parts of equal length, and occasionally subdivisions of *juz'* such as *nisf* (half), *rub'* (quarter) and *thumn* (eighth). In many Javanese Qur'ans a highly distinctive graphic form of *juz'* marker can be found: the first word of the *juz'* is highlighted in the text, either in red ink or in bold, and halfway down the outer vertical frame of each facing page, a decorative (usually semicircular) marker is inscribed with the number of the *juz'* (Fig. 4). These double symmetrical *juz'* markers located on the outer vertical frames of two facing pages are one of the most characteristic features of Javanese Qur'ans, and one of the most reliable indicators of the Javanese provenance of a Qur'an manuscript, as this feature is not found in any other regional tradition in Nusantara. However, not all Javanese Qur'ans bear these symmetrical *juz'* markers on facing pages; in some manuscripts only a single *juz'* marker is found, as in other Nusantaran Qur'ans.¹³

Other marginal annotations sometimes found in Javanese Qur'ans are *sajdah*, marking places for prostration, *maqra'* indicating portions of the text selected for recitation, and – most distinctively – the letter *'ayn*, indicating places for genuflection

¹² On this feature see Gallop 2005b:208-209; Wieringa 2008.

¹³ For example, in 2004 the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia acquired a group of five illuminated Qur'an manuscripts from Java; four of these manuscripts (2004.2.1-4) have *juz'* markers always presented in symmetrical pairs on two facing pages, while the final manuscript (2004.2.5) has single *juz'* markers.

(*ruku'*) (Fig. 4). These marginal inscriptions may be found in other Southeast Asian Qur'ans, or Qur'an manuscripts from other Islamic regions, especially the Indo-Persian realm (apart from *maqra'*, which appears to be a specifically Nusantara feature). But within Southeast Asia, Javanese Qur'ans are notable for the frequency of marginal '*ayn*'.¹⁴ Moreover, these '*ayn*' are often written in very calligraphically-elaborate ways, sometimes with a pyramidal construction of horizontal lines in red and black. One of the most individualistic manifestations of this tendency can be seen in a Qur'an manuscript copied by Bagus Abu Hamid in the environs of the court of Surakarta (Wieringa 2008).

Another internal textual feature sometimes seen in Javanese Qur'ans relates to the midpoint of the text. As already noted above, in Southeast Asian Qur'an manuscripts it is common to find double decorated frames in the centre of the Holy Book, but their exact location varies from region to region. The choice of the beginning of the 16th *juz'* in Acehese Qur'ans can be regarded as a logical division of the Qur'an into two parts of equal length, each comprising 15 *ajza*. But when the Qur'anic text is divided into two on the basis of a word count, a different midpoint is indicated: this is the occurrence of the words *wal-yatalattaf*, 'and let him behave with care and courtesy' (*Surat al-Kahf*, Q.18:19), and these words are quite often highlighted decoratively in Javanese Qur'ans (Fig. 2).

Javanese Qur'ans are nearly always presented in a single volume, as is the case throughout Nusantara (with a few notable exceptions in Banten). However, one of the finest Javanese Qur'ans seen was originally created in 15 volumes, each containing two *ajza*, and with a double decorated frame at the start of the volume; only four volumes now survive in Utrecht University Library.¹⁵

Some preliminary observations on the art of the Qur'an in Java

The discussion above of decorative features in illuminated Qur'an manuscripts from Java reveals considerable uniformity in internal layout and presentation, yet diversity in the structure and com-

¹⁴ Marginal '*ayn*' is a standard feature of Sulawesi-style Qur'ans, but is almost never found in Acehese or East Coast Qur'ans.

¹⁵ Utrecht University Library, MS 1435 (Or.31, HS.1.B.11-14), Qur'an, *juz'* 21-26, 29-30, in 4 vols.

position of the decorated frames. This is an unusual outcome, as the other main regional schools of Qur'anic illumination in Southeast Asia tend to display unity in both aspects, and the question naturally arises as to what this variety signifies. Is it simply the case that Javanese manuscript artists were able to draw upon a wide repertoire of decorative forms? Such a simplistic answer is unlikely, for all over the Islamic world Qur'anic illumination has tended to be prescriptive and conservative in nature, and decorative choices have generally been determined by certain conventions.

A more likely scenario is that this variety reflects distinctive sub-groupings within Java, for example based on regional origin. Thus it might eventually be possible to distinguish a *pesisir* style of Qur'an illumination, or a Yogyakarta or Surakarta style, or an East Javanese style, or a Cirebon style.¹⁶ Other influential factors might derive from the social milieu, with an urban/rural or a *kraton/kampung* divide. It would not be surprising if different artistic standards and choices prevailed in palace scriptoria, compared with those evident in Qur'an manuscripts used by the families of merchants, or in madrasah circles.

And yet a consideration of the *pesantren* world raises a number of intriguing questions. During the 19th century, there were well-established madrasah networks in Java, and these are associated today with large collections of manuscripts, generally written on *dluwang*, and primarily in Arabic. What is surprising is the relatively small number of Qur'an manuscripts documented in *pesantren* collections from Java,¹⁷ although considerable numbers of Qur'an manuscripts written on *dluwang* are known. Thus a fruitful avenue for further research would be the role played by Qur'an manuscripts in *pesantren* curricula.

Another striking aspect of Javanese Qur'an illumination in general is its relatively unpolished presentation. The Javanese manuscript tradition probably boasts the most beautiful and refined artistic works on paper in the whole of maritime Southeast Asia (a taster of the scale and quality of these products is presented in Behrend 1996). More recently, one particular style of illuminated

¹⁶ See, for example, a Qur'an in the Kraton Kacirebonan, which unusually has illuminated frames around each page which contains a *surah* heading. Mushaf M in Akbar (2012c).

¹⁷ This phenomenon has also been commented on by Ali Akbar (2012b).

Javanese frontispiece has been analysed in detail by Behrend (2006), revealing the exceptional sophistication of the Yogyakarta chancery and atelier in the 19th century. And yet there are few Qur'ans from Java which match the quality of the finest illuminated and illustrated manuscripts in Javanese language and script. There are of course exceptions, and the two finest Javanese Qur'an manuscripts known today appear to have been copied by the same scribe¹⁸ at the court of Surakarta in the late 18th century. One is still held in the palace of Yogyakarta today, known as Kanjeng Kiai Qur'an, copied by Ki Atma Perwita in a five-month period from 1797 to 1798¹⁹; its sibling is now held in the Museum Purna Bhakti Pertiwi in Jakarta.²⁰ Both manuscripts are written in a superb hand, with illuminated surah headings, and are almost unique in South-east Asia in that every single page bears an illuminated frame. And yet compared with the large numbers of finely-illuminated Javanese manuscripts known, it is surprising to find that Kanjeng Kiai Qur'an is the only illuminated Qur'an manuscript in the Widya Budaya library of the Yogyakarta Kraton. The minor court of Yogyakarta, the Pakualaman, is even more renowned for its production of illuminated manuscripts in the 19th century, and yet the library also holds only one illuminated complete Qur'an.²¹ The implication arising from these observations is that within palace scriptoria, there was a greater emphasis on the production of lavishly illuminated manuscripts in Javanese script, rather than on copies of the Qur'an, and that therefore the majority of Javanese manuscripts of the Qur'an extant today were produced outside court circles.

Unravelling the numerous interwoven strands of the many Javanese styles of Qur'anic illumination will be a complex task, but compared to the situation a decade ago, the current climate is extremely promising. Probably the most significant development is the work of the Puslitbang Lektur Keagamaan of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, based at the Bayt al-Qur'an and Museum Istiqlal

¹⁸ Akbar 2012e.

¹⁹ Widya Budaya W.330b (Akbar 2012d; Johns 1996: 35; Lindsay, Soetanto & Feinsten 1994: 208-9).

²⁰ Akbar 2012e.

²¹ Is.1, with three pairs of double frames at the beginning, middle and end of the text, the final pair uncoloured, being drawn in black ink only (Saktimulya 2005: 58). Is.14, which contains a selection of surahs revealed at Mecca, has an illuminated double frame at the beginning (Saktimulya 2005: 66).

in Jakarta, through its surveys of collections of Islamic manuscripts scattered throughout Indonesia, and its journals *Jurnal Lektur Keagamaan* and this journal, *Suhuf*. Equally important is the interest and dedication of individual writers, scholars and collectors, particularly through the use of blogs and websites to publicise their discoveries and writings.²² Other important sources of information are the catalogues of auction houses and book dealers, and, in this digital age, even records of sale on e-Bay, where occasionally Javanese Qur'an manuscripts are offered for sale page by page (Fig. 4). It will no doubt not be long before the mists lift to reveal a clearer picture of the art of the Qur'an in Java.[]

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²² See the blogs by Ali Akbar: *Khazanah mushaf al-Qur'an Nusantara* <<http://quran-nusantara.blogspot.co.uk/>>; Abdul Raman Bahrom <<http://abudervish.blogspot.co.uk/>>; Herman Syah <<http://naskah-aceh.blogspot.co.uk/>>; and Oman Fathurrahman <<http://naskahkuno.blogspot.co.uk/>>.

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Fig.1. Decorated frames marking the beginning of *Surat al-Kahf*, with decorative coloured slivers between the lines of text that reflect Indo-Persian or Ottoman influence. This feature, and the unusual almond-shaped illuminated frames, are indicative of the Javanese origin of this Qur'an manuscript, ca.19th c. BQ&MI

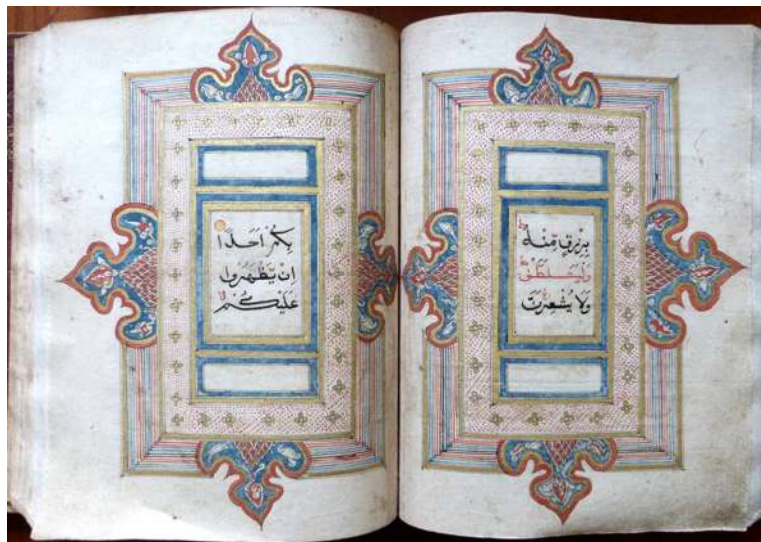


Fig.2. Illuminated double frames marking the midpoint of the Qur'an, highlighting in red ink the phrase *wal-yatalattaf* (*Surat al-Kahf*, Q. 18:19). BQ&MI/NQ/QL/A/0051/2000



Fig. 3. Detail of a decorated panel with the *banji* (swastika) motif, from an illuminated Qur'an from Java. Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, 2004.2.3.



Fig.4. Symmetrical semicircular *juz'* markers on two facing pages, and two decorative marginal red-ink inscriptions of 'ayn, in a Javanese Qur'an which has been disbound and offered for sale on e-Bay in separate bifolia of four pages each.

<http://www.ebay.com/itm/12-PAGES-ANTIQUA-MALAY-JAWI-ARABIC-ISLAMIC-QURAN-KORAN-MANUSCRIPT-LEAF-16TH-/281018653571?pt=Antiquarian_Collectible&hash=item416e045b83#ht_523wt_721>; consulted 29.11.2012.