Educational Activities of al-Irshād Arab Association in the Dutch East Indies: The Islamic Reformist Thought of Aḥmad Sūrkatī and its Influence

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Founded in 1914 by Aḥmad Sūrkatī (d. 1943), a Sudanese ‘ulamā’, al-Irshād is an organization that advocates Islamic reformism and has been mainly active in the management of modern-style Islamic schools. The research to date, which regards al-Irshād as an organization of Ḥaḍramis, who have comprised the vast majority of the Arab population in Indonesia, points out that its educational activities were separate from the public education system of the East Indies and promoted the forging of Ḥaḍrami identity. However, little attention has been paid to the position of Sūrkatī, whom, although not a Ḥaḍramī, should be considered as the central figure in al-Irshād’s Islamic reformist efforts.

Unlike other Arab Islamic reformists, Sūrkatī’s thought show no tendency towards Arab nationalism and consistently promoted “egalitarianism.” His “egalitarianism” enabled al-Irshād to become an organization open to all Muslims. The author also points out that Sūrkatī intended to adjust al-Irshād’s schools to the East Indies public education system, in order to enable indigenous prībumi students to enroll as well. In the late 1920s, Sūrkatī began to clearly show his idea that the Arabs should orient themselves to the local society of the East Indies; and it was from around the same time that the question of belonging to either Ḥaḍramawt or nascent Indonesia began to be discussed within the Arab community. We also find both an orientation towards both Ḥaḍramawt and local society within al-Irshād. Nevertheless, during the late 1930s, when Sūrkatī expressed his objection over an orientation towards Ḥaḍramawt, the educational activities of al-Irshād also came to lean strongly toward an orientation towards local society as a whole.

The author concludes, therefore, that the Islamic reformist thought of Sūrkatī had a decisive influence on the educational activities of al-Irshād, and it navigated al-Irshād in the direction of negating the organization’s Ḥaḍramī character for the purpose of integrating itself into East Indian, or rather Indonesian, society.