

Wissenschaftliches Teilprojekt A06

Changing Praxis of the 19th-century Malay Manuscript Economy

Prof. Dr. Jan van der Putten

Liyana Taha, M.A.

Description of the project

Due to the advent of colonialism in the Malay world of Southeast Asia in the course of the 19th century, rapid changes affected the indigenous population in all aspects of their daily lives. Most particularly formal education, printing and a burgeoning lithographic industry in urban centres modified the information economy of the region, and had far-reaching consequences for manuscript culture in the region. Perhaps rather paradoxically, a new market seems to have emerged for manuscripts to be produced and read in the urban centres, and some cultural entrepreneurs capitalized on this trend by collecting, copying and writing manuscripts by hand to subsequently rent them out to readers. The best known and researched collection of such manuscripts is the Jakarta-based Fadli collection consisting of at least 77 manuscripts produced in the second half of the 19th century and (in part) preserved in repositories in Jakarta, Leiden and St Petersburg.

A survey of the catalogues of these and other collections indicate that there were other, more modest, collections of such manuscripts which will be included in this project to come to a better understanding of the Malay manuscript tradition as a whole, and find out what changes occurred in the manuscripts. The project is premised on the understanding of a manuscript as an agent effectuating social relations between different parties and will try to map a reading culture as it existed and developed in urban centres of the Malay world.



Hikayat Sultan Taburat, ML 183A, p. 96
National Library of Indonesia

Objectives

Through an analysis of paratextual and codicological elements in Malay manuscripts, this project aims to investigate changes in the manuscript culture of the region and the growth of a reading public in urban centres. In the 19th century manuscripts oozed out of their confinement of royal and religious centres into a market where colonial officials and literate indigenous people could obtain and enjoy them. This wider dissemination had effects on the social embeddedness of manuscripts and made them into an object attractive and relevant to other groups outside their traditional audiences, such as locally-born Chinese and Indians. As the producers were Muslims of local or translocal extraction this alludes to a crossing of ethnic and religious boundaries in a colonial cosmopolitan context.



Hikayat Angkawijaya, Cod. Or. 3244, left: p. 1, right: p. 208
Leiden University Library



Malay manuscript culture

At present, standardized forms of Malay are used in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei — a spread that was induced by the language long-time use as lingua franca as well as learned language of Muslim Southeast Asia since the 15th century. A manuscript culture developed at royal courts in the many polities that were established in the region where Malay was adopted as literary language in a modified Perso-Arabic script named Jawi, in some cases, such as at the Acehnese court, alongside a manuscript tradition in the local language. This cultural configuration of the manuscript production changed with the encroaching influence of modernity brought by the colonial regimes in the course of the 19th century.