

The Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC)

presents the Workshop:

Changing Praxis in the 19th-century Malay Manuscript Ecology

In studies about Malay manuscripts and literary practices the 19th century is generally considered as the period of transition between a 'traditional literature' or 'classical Muslim tradition' and the advent of a Western-based 'modern' literary tradition. One scholar dubbed this century 'transitional' as indigenous writers close to the colonial institutions applied new writing strategies to present their stories, such as the ubiquitously-praised 'realism'. Malacca-born and Singapore-based Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi has been earmarked as the most influential agent who almost single-handedly changed the face of Malay literary traditions and his works have attracted much scholarly attention.

Inevitably changing practices of Malay manuscript traditions in the 19th century developed in close contact with results of the mechanical reproduction of texts in the form of lithographic printing industries established in urban centres. Apart from doctrinal Islamic texts, a large number of edifying entertainment texts was churned out by the print shops in the Muslim quarters of Singapore and other towns. The popularity of these texts was supported and boosted by a burgeoning entertainment industry, which besides European opera companies and Chinese acrobats and opera troupes, included Indian 'vaudeville' companies that made a stopover in one of the Southeast Asian cities. These developments in 19th-century cultural practices in the Malay World may be considered as being induced by the advent of High Colonialism and an ongoing process of monetization of the society in Southeast Asia. Closely related to the expanding availability of texts through printing and increased importance of money in economic exchange was the establishment of lending libraries, which were set up by certain indigenous individuals who rented out manuscripts, and possibly also lithographed books, from their collections to the public. The biggest and best known lending library was managed by members of the Fadli family in Batavia (present-day Jakarta) in the second half of the 19th century. Among the family members Muhammad Bakir was the most active in accumulating, copying and composing texts to be rented out to new audiences. This 'Fadli' collection consisting of at least 77 manuscripts was sold in

instalments to the Batavian Society for Arts and Sciences and a few individuals, and more than half of the total number of manuscripts survived in repositories.

This workshop intends to look into and map some of the changes that took place in this so-called 'transitional' period in Malay literary history by inviting established and young scholars to present their research about 19th Malay manuscripts. In this framework it is important to realize that one of the basic premises of the research projects of the CSMC is to consider manuscripts as cultural objects, rather than exclusively focusing on the texts contained in them. Undoubtedly, the texts contained in the manuscripts are important and often the main object of study, but we rather put codicological, paratextual, formal and/or paleographic and other 'scriptural' aspects of Malay manuscripts in the centre of attention of this workshop.

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CSMC

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