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NOTES ON THE *SEJARAH MELAYU* AND ROYAL MALAY ART

Numerous objects are mentioned in the *Sejarah Melayu*, or *Malay Annals*, a semi-historical account of the Malacca sultans, their ancestors, and their descendants, first written in 1482, by a Johore prince, Raja Bongsu, also known as Tun Sri Lanang.¹ The objects include textiles, weapons, metalwork, furniture, musical instruments, tombstones, vessels, buildings, gardens, and fortifications (see appendix).² The importance of these objects is twofold: first, although they are accidental to the narration of the story, they give us hints about of the material culture of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Malacca and the surrounding port cities. Second, they tell us something about how artistic objects were to be understood in Malacca in those centuries.

The objects in the *Sejarah Melayu* are used like props on a stage to suggest the setting. The main thrust of the narration is on the characters moving in and out of a given scene or anecdote, but the contextual relation between a scene and an object or a series of objects which appears in it sometimes gives hints about its appearance and purpose. The kris is a royal symbol, in one instance, a gift in another, and a deadly weapon in a third, where it is used in the famous dual between Hang Tuah and Hang Kasturi. In this third instance, Hang Tuah's secret affair with one of the palace women attendants is discovered by the sultan, who then orders Hang Tuah to be executed. Knowing that Hang Tuah is no ordinary fighter, the prime minister takes it upon himself to put Hang Tuah in fetters. This punishment enrages Hang Kasturi — Hang Tuah's dearest friend — who revolts by running amuck in the palace. In despair the sultan invokes Hang Tuah to deal with Hang Kasturi. The prime minister releases Hang Tuah, who is given the sultan's kris which kills Hang Kasturi. The kris performs more than just symbolic and practical functions. It conveys the deeper message that no one should ever revolt against the sultan³ because that violates the Malay ethos.

Another scene is a royal wedding. The ruler of Palembang, Demang Lebar Daun prepares for the ceremonial lustration. A series of objects are described whose presence is central to the scene; a seven-tiered bathing pavilion is built with five spires of the finest quality; when it is

completed Demang Lebar Daun initiates the festivities with a wide variety of entertainments that continue for forty days and forty nights. Buffaloes, oxen, and sheep are slaughtered to feed the guests. Princes, ministers, courtiers, heralds, chieftains, and all the people feast and drink to the accompaniment of every sort of music. Then the ceremonial water in the golden vessels studded with jewels is brought in. The prince and his bride are borne in procession seven times round the pavilion, and take the purification bath on the central platform. The prince unwraps his towel and puts on his royal sarong, called *darapata darmani*, and the princess wears hers, called *burudaimani*. Both are invested with the complete insignia of sovereignty, whereupon they sit on the golden dais. They eat the ceremonial rice while everybody watches. Finally they crown themselves with the royal ornamented headdress. In the last part of the ceremony the menfolk are led by the prince onto the royal golden yacht, while the queen rides a silver one.⁴

The first six chapters of the *Sejarah Melayu* treat materials which are largely legendary; the subsequent chapters are essentially about the rise and fall of the Malacca sultanate. The legendary story traces the beginnings of the Malay kings to Alexander the Great of Macedonia. Raja Bongsu bases this lineage on the *Hikayat Iskandar*, a Malay translation of the Perso-Arabic romance about Alexander the Great, his model for writing his *Sejarah Melayu*. The *Hikayat Iskandar* confirms the nobility of the Malay rulers: Raja Bongsu asserts that the line runs from Alexander down to a succession of kings in India whose descendants had spread across the vast Malay archipelago and Indianized the Malay rulers in Palembang, from where the founder of the Malacca sultanate had come early in the fifteenth century.⁵

Raja Bongsu was aware that there were problems with this lineage: Alexander preceded the Prophet Muhammad by many centuries, and many more centuries were to elapse between the Prophet Muhammad and the gradual Islamization of the Malays. The Malays could not be Muslims prior to the Prophet Muhammad. So Raja Bongsu adopts a textual strategy by inserting the bismillah as the opening line of his preface; he then precedes

or follows his Malay sentences with Arabic phrases and locutions. The authority of Arabic, especially the *bismillah*, eradicates or at least mitigates the stigma of an infidel past. He refers to himself as a *fakir* who is aware of his weakness and the limitation of his knowledge, mounted, as he is, "on the steed of ignorance."⁶ At the end of most chapters, in typical Muslim self-effacing fashion, he declares the standard affirmation: "God knoweth the truth. To Him do we return." Yet even a pagan past had its own glory, of which the Malacca kings are eager to partake. That light of glory is filtered through the prism of Islam and refracted to the material world as something pure. Purity was expressed, on the one hand, by the idea of pure blood sanctified by the Hindu caste system, or some residual form of it and, on the other, by the purity of the Arabic language, Qur^ʿanic or otherwise, in the minds of the non-Arab Malays. The textual strategy operates through both time and faith; both are treated in a way that enhances the focus of the *Sejarah Melayu* which according to the preface is to chronicle the genealogy of Malay rajas, to set down in writing the ceremonies of the royal courts, and to inform the royal descendants of their history. Whenever he has to conceal or to reveal, Raja Bongsu resorts to Arabic phrases for maximum impact.

As the narrative gets closer to his own time, Raja Bongsu is constrained by other considerations. The most pressing of these is the Malay sense of propriety. It forces him to speak guardedly, especially about palace intrigues, crimes, jealousies, all aspects of seizing, using, and maintaining power. Power is expressed in terms of the objects connected with the reign of each ruler. Inevitably, these objects are made of gold: "Where there is sovereignty, there is gold."⁷ No one but the shah is permitted to wear gold, no matter how rich he is, unless it is a present from the ruler; then he is permitted to wear it in perpetuity.⁸ This obsession with gold runs throughout the book, from the early Indianized period to the setting up of the Islamic port cities in the fifteenth century. The reader is often benumbed by the numerous references to golden objects — a bejeweled chair of gold, golden caskets filled with precious stones, horses with gold trappings, golden yachts, a Pahang cleaver inlaid with gold, plates, bowls, trays of silver or gold and so on. The reader begins to wonder whether these references are literary conventions or statements of fact. As there are no other texts like the *Sejarah Melayu* from the fifteenth and sixteenth century, we have no choice but to take Raja Bongsu's presentation at its word.

The book also lists what the commoner cannot do. It

states that commoners cannot use the color yellow for cloths, curtain fringes, bolster ends, mattresses, wrappings. Strung jewels cannot adorn the houses of commoners. They cannot have closed verandas, hanging pillars, posts that reach the roofbeam. Commoners cannot have summer houses or boats with windows and cabins. White umbrellas are reserved for kings and yellow umbrellas for princes. Commoners cannot have metal casings on their kris, not even half way up the sheath. Commoners are forbidden to wear ankle bracelets of gold; silver-knobbed gold anklets are a royal privilege. Regardless of rank, no one is permitted to enter the palace without wearing his sarong in the overlapped fashion, his kris in front, and a scarf over his shoulders. Anyone who wears his kris behind will have it confiscated by the gatekeeper. The penalty for defying this order is death.⁹ Courtly etiquette and injunctions were taken seriously; there was no appeal for the offenders. Over time, however, when Malacca was overrun by the Portuguese in 1511 and the seat of Malay power moved to Johore, these injunctions were less strictly enforced.¹⁰

While the tradition of courtly courtesies was still very much alive in the palaces of twentieth-century Malaysia, most of the royal treasures from earlier times were no longer extant. Most gold objects were melted down or looted; stone objects weathered away by neglect; wooden objects perished in the humidity of the tropics. We can only imagine what they looked like. Some of them are mentioned in such a way that one can visualize some approximation of them, but references to palaces, gardens, and fortifications are not often backed up by adequate description. There is a fairly good description of the fortified city of Bija Negara, but it gives an impression that Raja Bongsu may have relied either on someone else's description or on a miniature painting; the latter is more likely because the description has a pictorial quality about it. He writes that the fort is of black stone with walls seven fathoms thick and nine fathoms high. The masons are so skilled that no space can be seen between the stones. The gate is of hammered gold, studded with jewels. The fort encompassed seven mountains. In the middle of the city was a lake as wide as the sea in which the king kept fish of every sort. In the middle of the lake was an island of great height whose summit was always wrapped in foggy mist. This island was a pleasure garden planted with fruit trees and flowers from all over the world. In the forest reserve of the island were all sorts of wild beasts. The king went there when he wished to hunt elephants. Raja Bongsu conceded that if he were to go on, he would write a book as thick as the *Hikayat Ham-*

*zah*¹¹ — a reference to the Malay translation of a Persian romance about the warrior, Hamza, the son of Abdul Mutallib, the Prophet's uncle. The illustrated *Hikayat Hamzah* was probably the source of the miniature painting he used for his description.

The Malay rulers were very particular patrons of the arts. While checking on the workmanship of his new palace, Sultan Mansur Shah expressed his displeasure because one of the crossbeams was undersized and its color too dark, a new crossbeam was immediately procured to replace it.¹² The workers on this palace were well rewarded. When Mansur Shah and his entourage visited the *Batara* of Majapahit, his entourage arrived in five hundred large ships, a vast assembly of small craft, and a fleet of forty three-masted cruisers. The *batara* presents him with a kris with a fretted pattern along the edge of its collar-guard. When he returned to Malacca the sultan was welcomed home by his people, who beat the state drums, blew the pipes, and sounded the trumpets.¹³ Over time this ceremony and these objects were permanently associated with the tradition of an Islamic sultan's homecoming. Other objects from the Hindu-Buddhist tradition also became associated with Islamic ceremonies over time. When Sultan Muhammad Shah announced his wish to pray in the mosque on the twenty-seventh night of Ramadan, his courtiers carried his prayer rug in the procession together with his betel bowl, drums, royal turban, cassock, litter, and dais, all mounted on an elephant. Turban and cassock were the privilege of royalty, and only after the sultan's approval could others use them. Ceremonies had to be followed to the letter: if any errors were made, it was the duty of anyone who remembered the right way of proceeding to correct them.¹⁴

The mosque where the sultan prayed is known only by its builders: "the men of Tentai," a place not readily identified. Tome Pires says the Malacca mosque had been the finest known in that part of the world, but the Portuguese had burned it down and erected a fort in its place.¹⁵ It may have been similar to the Demak mosque in Java, built in 1497, with which Malacca had commercial, trade, cultural, and marriage ties. The Demak mosque still stands today. It consists of a square *haram utama*, or sanctuary, measuring 24 by 24 meters; 16 pillars support a three-tiered roof. The veranda surrounds the *haram utama* on all four sides. Entrances to the *haram utama* are in the north, south, and east walls. Another Javanese mosque in the Demak style is the Japara mosque. The illustration in Wouter Schouten's *Oost-Indische Voyagie*, published in 1660, shows that the Japara

mosque has a five-tiered roof, surrounded by a moat.¹⁶ No longer extant, the Ternate mosque in the Moluccas archipelago is in the Demak style as well, as illustrated in a 1599 Dutch print.¹⁷ A Portuguese ship captain, Antonio Galvao saw the Ternate mosque and described it as follows:

The Ternate mosque is constructed upon 36 poles twice the thickness and height of a man, to which height it is wholly jammed with clay and stones so as to look like another fortress. On this is a floor of tightly joined beams and of *lantai*; [over this] three ranks of four-sided roofs, one above the other, like ceremonial canopies, set apart at equal distance so as to leave large intervals between them, and resting on four very high poles. These, as well as the trusses and the roofbeams, the borders and all the rest, are decorated with carved foliage in many different patterns of festoons.¹⁸

These three mosques provide some hints about what the Malacca mosque looked like. The roof was probably five or seven tiers high, tapered at the top. The haram was undoubtedly square, four or five times larger than the size of the one in Demak, as the port of Malacca had a population of 190,000 people, not counting the outlying territories and coastal districts.¹⁹ Bridges over the moat joined up with entrances on the north, south, and east sides; the mihrab was on the west side. One of the entrances was probably reserved for the sultan who rode his elephant to the mosque. In all likelihood, the mosque was elevated on stilts, a common feature in traditional Malay architecture. The elevation of the floor was probably the height of a standard elephant because the text suggests that the sultan, upon arrival, descended from the royal dais to the litter which was then borne in procession into the mosque. More than likely, the pillars were ornately carved with a variety of floral and vegetal motifs. Malay art has at least forty types of floral design, which one character in the *Sejarah Melayu* commits to memory.²⁰ The courtyard must have been spacious enough to accommodate people who attended the weekly Friday prayers and the yearly Id al-Fitr and Id al-Adha, when the congregations tended to be larger than usual. It is conceivable that the mosque area with its garden and cemetery was surrounded by a wall, with grand gateways where guards were stationed to keep out unwanted people.

Why is it, then, that the mosque — so central to the life of the Muslims — received only the briefest mention in the *Sejarah Melayu*? Probably because the mosque had little to do with the palace, except when letters were delivered to the sultan, who summoned the *khatib* to read

them.²¹ Raja Bongsu also had an ambivalent attitude toward persons associated with religion. He pays attention to them, but in a rather nasty way. He detested foreign missionaries as shameless hypocrites, preaching one thing and doing the opposite. He emphasized their odd, lustful, greedy, status-seeking behavior, and regarded them as mean and vengeful, using religion for worldly ends.²² He sketches these characters in a series of remarkable vignettes: true gems as studies of human folly. As for local divines, he highlights their ineptitude, always depending upon the theologians of Pasai to help them solve difficult religious issues. And he did not hesitate to condescend: "Tun Muhammad was, for a Malay, a learned man; he has a smattering of Arabic grammar and syntax and canon law and some slight knowledge of doctrinal theology."²³ Perhaps Raja Bongsu was a crypto-Shi'ite in a world dominated by the *madhab* of Shafi'i, as was the Malacca-Johore court. He chose the sayings of Ali²⁴ to make his point, instead of drawing upon the Sunni hadith. The intellectual atmosphere was such that he was not obliged to dwell upon the mosque any more than necessary. He found what the mosque stood for was repugnant — hopelessly orthodox, foreign dominated, and unresponsive to change, while Raja Bongsu was forward-looking, an attitude reflected in the very writing of the *Sejarah Melayu* itself, the work of a polyglot literatus whose allegiance was to the palace rather than the mosque.

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APPENDIX

The items mentioned in the chronicle are as follows: the number in parenthesis refers to the page in the English translation (cited in note 1) where the reference appears:

A. Textiles: robes of honor with royal insignia (15), robes of honor with ornaments of rich distinction (15), banners, pennons (18), sarong of *darapata darmani*, sarong of *burudaimani* (27), scarf (31), curtain fringes (54), sarong, jackets, handkerchief (54), yellow umbrella (55), ceiling cloths (58), royal turban, cassock (58), prayer mat (58), scarlet jacket (58), headcloth in yellow and purple designs (101), headdress with aigrettes and tassels (134), Malay jacket with loose sleeves (135), a thousand jackets of one sort or another (135), headcloths ready-tied on blocks, twenty or thirty of them in constant use (135), rainbow headcloth (161).

B. Weaponry: ordinary kris (54), sword of state (57), state lance (57), shield hung with bells (77), kris with fretted pattern along the edge of its collar guard (77), adze (32), kris of very fine workmanship (82), Sunda knife (83), kris with gold plated sheaths (88), "heeled sword" (100), the state sword of Champa called *Beladalu*

(109), lance with a fringe (134), a long kris (138), a Pahang cleaver inlaid with gold (154), bedragoned sword of kingship (186), Persian bow (206).

C. Metalwork: coins (13), golden caskets filled with precious stones (15), the gate of hammered gold (15), crowns studded with precious stones (24), ducks made of gold (46), anklets of gold (56), metal casing on sheath of kris (56), armlets with dragons and clasp (56), jeweled armlets (56), armlets with clasp (56), armlet (56), silver armlets (56), betel bowl (58), ewer (70), golden chain (77), betel chest (134), salver (163), bowl of gold alloy (186), plate, bowl, and tray of silver, gold or gold alloy (187).

D. Furniture: jeweled chair of gold (14), glass case (22), wood shaving 7 fathoms long (32), raised seat (44), royal dais (58), heavy stool (65), central platform (27), seven-tiered bathing pavilion with five spires (27), royal litter (68), four chests of gold (95).

E. Musical instruments: drum of sovereignty (28), trumpet (55), kettledrums (55), clarinet (55), musical instruments of every description (57), drum (58), royal gong (74), gong called *Jeming* (109).

F. Tombstones: gravestone (39), tombstones of Malikus Salih (44), tombstone of Malikut Tahir (49), tombstone of Malikus Mansur of Samudra (49), tombstones of Asmayuddin (49), Chief with the Big Tombstone (200).

G. Vessels: golden yacht for men, silver yacht for women (28), royal fleet (29), three-masted cruisers (69), 500 large ships (76), a fleet of 40 three-masted cruisers (76), a fleet of 60 ships (198), Medang Serai, a royal vessel with tortoiseshell bamboo wainscotting (200), barge (202).

H. Architecture: palace of Bentan (29), audience hall (31), summer houses (29), reception cabins (54), enclosed verandas (54), hanging pillars (54), roof beams (54), mosque (49, 58, 88, 103), inner and outer gates of palace (55), throne room (58), inner hall (58), outer hall (58), balcony (55), pavilion reserved for ladies (74), palace (47), palace of Sultan Mansur Shah (86–87), new palace (88), mosque built by men from Tentai (88), continuous lines of dwelling houses from Tanjung Tuan to Jugra (120), trellis of veranda (129), gallery of a house (130), bridal chamber (131), doorways, lattices, windows, roofs (132), gangway (134), innermost apartments (196).

I. Garden: gardens (19, 20, 29), garden of Puteri Gunung Ledang (104).

J. Fortifications: fort at Dinding by the Perak river (18), fort at Glang Gui (18), fort of Malaka (121), the fortifications of Pahang completed in three days (156), outer fort (188), fort of Sang Stia (189).

K. Texts: *Hikayat Iskandar* (13), inscription in the Hindustani language (23), *Hikayat Hamzah* (20, 168), excerpts of *Hikayat Raja Pasai* (40–58), the book *Durr Mansum* (100), a copy of the Qur'an (42, 101, 118), *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah* (168), letters (32, 33, 89, 96, 102, 154, 159, 178, 201).

NOTES

1. C. C. Brown, "Sejarah Melayu or 'Malay Annals.' A translation of Raffles MS 18," *Journal of the Malayan Branch Royal Asiatic Society*, 25, 2-3 (October, 1952): 1-276.
2. See Appendix.
3. Pp.85-86.
4. Ibid., pp. 27-28.
5. Ibid., p.13.
6. Ibid., p.12.
7. Ibid., p.186.
8. Ibid., p.54.
9. Ibid., p.140.
10. Ibid., p.196.
11. Ibid., pp.19-20.
12. Ibid., p.87.
13. Ibid., p.83.
14. Ibid., p.59.
15. Armando Cortesao, ed. and trans., *The Suma Oriental of Tome Pires* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1944), p.248.
16. Reproduced by H. J. de Graaf, "The Origin of the Javanese Mosque," *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 4, 11 (March, 1963): 1.
17. C. C. Berg, C. Wessels, H. Terpstra, *Geschiedenis van Nederlandsch Indie*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: N.V. Uitgeversmaatschappij "Joost van den Vondel," 1938), p.369.
18. Antonio Galvao, *A Treatise on the Moluccas*, ed. and trans. H. M. Jacobs (St. Louis, Mo., Jesuit Historical Institute, 1970), p.289.
19. *Sejarah Melayu*, p.147.
20. Ibid., p.140.
21. Ibid., p.89.
22. Ibid., pp.53, 62, 141, 155.
23. Ibid., p.119.
24. Ibid., pp.73, 136.