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A MEDICINE OF SWEETMEATS: ON THE POWER OF MALAY NARRATIVE

1. Introduction

In the 18th century, the coastal areas around the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea presented the picture of a motley variety of petty states constantly engaged in struggles for power, wealth or survival in ever changing configurations and alliances. For foreigners and natives alike this political fragmentation must have been quite bewildering. In spite of this heterogeneity, however, a unifying bond continued to provide a certain cohesion: Malayness. Similar political notions and concepts, similar customs and rituals, the same religion, Islam, the same language, and the same textual tradition provided the Malays dispersed over this vast area with a common identity. Both in this area as a whole and in its constituent parts, the *negeri* (state), it was this Malayness which served as a common bond and permanent cohesive factor.

In the present article we will focus on one component of the Malay textual tradition, notably narrative texts, to show that all stories, the more serious as well as the more playful ones, were exemplary. This exemplariness, it will be argued, allowed them to express and confirm the Malay identity and strengthen the cohesion of Malay life and society. The power of the texts is an ambiguous one: they may not only be regarded as providing examples for imitation, but can also – albeit not without risks – be read as reflections of Malay reality.

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In contrast to the Malay world as a whole, the *negeri* possessed an extra unifying factor, namely the figure of the *raja* (ruler), who was the apex of its political system. The *raja* lived in an *istana* (palace). This was a spacious wooden dwelling on piles that was surrounded by a bamboo-fenced compound in which a number of other buildings – housing members of the royal household, its entourage and its servants – were erected. The royal compound used to be situated near the estuary of some river. It formed the centre of a cluster of a few hundred huts and houses, with an occasional mosque and prayer-house, where lived the *rakyat*: traders, artisans and other commoners.

The palace compound – and in particular the *balai* (audience hall) – was the focus of public life. Here affairs of state were discussed and settled, and here ceremonies affecting the life of the *negeri* were enacted. In the *balai*, on a dais, stood the royal throne, draped in yellow cloth, on which the *yang dipertuan* ('he who is acknowledged as lord'), as the linchpin of the *negeri*, would be seated while performing his ceremonial functions. There, in impassive majesty, he would give audience, surrounded by servants holding the regalia: the royal lance, the sword of empire, the silver *sirih* box and other sacred heirlooms of the dynasty. Also on the dais, to the left and right, the ruler's dignitaries of state would be seated, in an order carefully graded according to each grandee's position in the court hierarchy. These audiences took place according to strict rules prescribing proper behaviour and fitting speech, and for good reasons: these conventions and rules of decorum were vital in formally preserving the power of the *raja* and the cohesion of the *negeri*.

The Malay state was not a political unit in the modern sense – based on abstract legal principles, circumscribed by well-defined territorial boundaries and supported by the mechanisms of a bureaucratic apparatus. The cohesion of the *negeri* was a matter of subtle diplomacy and networks of personal relations. The essential precondition of power, both for the ruler at the centre and for the district officers in the outlying regions of the *negeri* upstream, was personal loyalty. The commoner was expected to be loyal to his local chief, the local chief was bound by loyalty to the person of the ruler. The unity of the *negeri* was founded on the mutual self-interest of the ruler and ruled. The ruler bestowed honour, prestige and power on his district officers and dignitaries. Conversely, the ruler was paid tribute and homage and was even – at least in theory – attributed divine power (*daulat*). In practice the ruler was very much a *primus inter pares*: he performed the same role as the local chief in that, by his justice and munificence (*adil dan murah*), he, too, provided his direct subjects, the *rakyat* who lived in the immediate vicinity of the royal compound, with the necessary income, protection and focus of loyalty.

Seated at his estuary like a spider in its web, the ruler was motivated by a twofold concern. On the one hand he had to maintain sufficient

control over his district officers in the interior to be sure of continuing to receive his share, in the form of taxes or goods, of the products from the interior. On the other hand he had to see to it that he received his share of the profit from the foreign trade passing the river mouth either on its way to the interior or in transit. Only thus could he increase his wealth and secure the basis of his power and his position as the linchpin of the *negeri*.

The district officer acted as the focus of loyalty at the local level; functioning as a petty ruler in his own area, he derived his power in an important measure from his ability to secure a share in the taxes or produce supplied by the local population which he was appointed by the *raja* to rule. In return for these taxes and goods he was expected to afford the population in his district the necessary protection. In return for his appointment he would pay the ruler the necessary tribute and homage and provide him with soldiers in times of war, while leaving the control of foreign affairs to him.

It will be obvious that the balance of power within the *negeri* was a delicate one: it called for the constant diplomatic manoeuvring of both the *raja* and the district officers, as well as the regular ceremonial confirmation of established ties of loyalty. The prime locus of such confirmation were the ceremonies performed during the audiences in the ruler's hall. On specific occasions the district officers would come to the centre and present tribute and pay homage to the ruler. In return the *raja* would bestow symbolic presents (*persalinan*) and titles (*gelar*) on them. In this way on the one hand their prestige was strengthened, enabling them the more successfully to act as patron in the interior. And on the other hand their loyalty to the centre was confirmed, enabling the ruler the better to play his role.¹

In the *negeri*, comprising as it did a cluster of small political units each based on personal loyalties, a developed bureaucracy was not necessary. Usually problems were solved in personal contact with the authority concerned, whether this was the district chief or the *raja* himself and his direct representatives, the ministers of state (*menteri*). Reading and writing were skills mastered by only a small number of people in the *negeri*. Scattered over the area, occasionally in the service of some nobleman or the ruler, were found the Muslim dignitaries who dedicated themselves to the painstaking study, transmission and exegesis of religious tracts and treatises and of the Koran, the mainspring of literacy. These people were held in high esteem as spiritual teachers and formed a small circle of initiates who jealously guarded their special knowledge. In addition there were the clerks at court, frequently foreigners who enjoyed the confidence of the ruler. They would compose or copy religious works, works on the history of the state or works for entertainment, as well as write letters on the ruler's behalf. Sometimes noblemen or rulers, too, were active literati and would try their hand at writing literary

works. But this was rather the exception than the rule. Both within the *negeri* and at court communication was predominantly oral-aural.²

Naturally, in an oral-aural culture like the Malay one, a high premium was placed not only on behaving in a gentle, restrained, indirect and diplomatic manner upholding the codes of proper conduct, but also on displaying verbal and rhetorical skill. On official occasions the courtier had to have a sufficient mastery of suitable sayings and appropriate parables, examples and comparisons (*kata dan ibarat*) in order to be able to please his audience and plead his case successfully, or to extricate himself from a knotty situation by witty repartee. By courtiers and commoners alike the same rhetorical skill and playfulness were also valued highly on other occasions. People of all walks of life would try to outdo each other. For these verbal battles they needed a large variety of weapons. In love the young man had to be able to improvise gentle and coaxing addresses and croon sweet love songs to his lady. At village meetings speakers needed a knowledge of proverbs and rhymed sayings in order to be able to persuade their opponents in deliberation. Religious teachers, too, would not shun the devices of rhetorics and would warn their flock about the Day of Judgement in sweet-sounding prose and memorable verse. Story tellers would avail themselves of the phrases and examples of the days of yore to impart beauty and relevance to the tales they had to tell.

This is not to say that writing was not part of the way in which Malay culture was codified and preserved. There were manuscripts. And the same rhetorical weapons that stood the Malay in good stead in verbal exchanges were also required in written documents, for instance, in exchanges of letters. These, too, had to be witty and elegant. Their effect was all the greater if they lent themselves to being read out aloud in a sweet voice, pleasing to the ruler and to the courtly audience. The formal features of most Malay manuscripts bespeak the fact that they served mainly as a prop to memory and were not meant to be read silently, but were supposed to be read aloud or sung to a listening audience. They are teeming with repetitions: formulae, parallelisms, rhythm and rhymes.

The main group of texts not to share these oral-aural features was formed by those that were intimately connected with the Written Book par excellence, the Koran. Most religious treatises and exegetical works were not primarily intended to be read out to a large audience, but rather to be discussed by small gatherings of scholars: their strongly Arabized diction, their unfamiliar syntax and complex turns of thought and argumentation made them difficult to understand for anyone but the initiated scholar. Legal texts as well, in view of the specialized knowledge they required, must have been less fit for public recitation.³

In all predominantly oral-aural textual traditions the attitude of reception the public may take schematically speaking oscillates between two poles: the demand that the text be profitable and the requirement

that it please. The interplay between the devices of the text and the situation in which it was presented determined which of the two functions would be given dominance.⁴

Profitable texts were those texts which were felt to be concerned directly with the upholding of the religious, political and social order of the *negeri* and in a wider sense of the Malay world. If these texts were expected to be primarily profitable, this does not mean that they were not supposed to be pleasing as well. An elegant style could only enhance the effect of those texts that were considered useful in underpinning the *negeri*. By their exemplary reference to reality they confirmed the position of those groups which together possessed religious and political authority. It will be obvious that these texts were taken very seriously, both directing and reflecting as they did the (re)cognitive experience of the Malay public.

Soothing texts were those which were primarily enjoyed for their playful rhetorics: for their play on sounds, rhythm and rhyme, for the elegance of their comparisons, and for their amplifications and elaborations. Some would transport the audience to a never-never land of far-away kingdoms by way of romantic adventures of princes and princesses. Others would warn about the Eternal Life hereafter and point the way there by a path made pleasant by all the devices of rhetoric. Although emotional experience here prevailed over intellectual experience, soothing texts were also in a sense exemplary, in that they, too, offered models, albeit more implicitly, of behaviour according to the Malay way of life.⁵

Of course especially profitable texts, i.e. those texts that served directly to uphold the legal and political order, were found worthy of being recorded and preserved in writing. Legal texts, state histories and religious texts fixed in writing would by their physical existence legitimate the exertion of secular and religious authority (if one may make this un-Malay distinction), provide standards of conduct and function as sources of relevant knowledge.

The comparatively small number of predominantly soothing texts that have been preserved in manuscript form may serve as a confirmation of the assumption that most texts of this type circulated in oral form in the Malay world.

Another dichotomy that can be made within the corpus of the Malay textual heritage is one on the basis of considerations of form. On the one hand there are narrative texts, on the other hand non-narrative ones.

We consider as narrative those texts in which temporal and – implicitly or explicitly – causal relationships prevail, or in other words, texts in which the structure of a sequence of events dominates over whatever other structures there may be perceptible and is considered to be of paramount importance by the listener or reader. An example of a

minimal narrative may be the following fragment from the *Hikayat Indraputra*:

“This story is concerned with telling about when Indraputra was snatched away by the Golden Peacock and with telling about when Indraputra fell down into the garden of the old woman and was taken in by the old woman and with telling about when Indraputra was adopted as his son by the Prime Minister and with telling about when Indraputra incurred the jealousy of the ministers of Raja Syahsyian”.⁶

Non-narrative texts are those in which the thematic elements are contemporaneous or in which there is some shift of theme without an internal exposition of the causal connections. In this category one could place those texts in which the sequence of events is not considered to be the dominant structuring force (as in lyrical poetry, expository prose etc.).⁷

An example of such a non-narrative text may be, for instance, the Malay *pantun*, like the following one concluding the *Syair Nuri* by Sultan Badaruddin of Palembang:

To Siam I went to buy me a boat
 The sailors were hauling the sheets
 Does she love me, I wonder, with glances remote?
 A heart is distraught when passion it meets.⁸

On the basis of the two dichotomies made above, a taxonomy of the Malay textual system comprising four classes may be made.⁹

	PROFITABLE	SOOTHING
NON-NARRATIVE	The Melaka Digests <i>Undang-undang Melaka</i>	The Syair of the Wanderer <i>Syair Dagang</i>
NARRATIVE	The Malay Annals <i>Sejarah Melayu</i>	The Story of Raja Muda <i>Hikayat Raja Muda</i>

The Malay textual system was fundamentally encyclopaedic and citational: every word, phrase and sentence in one way or another referred to, and was a variation on, similar words, phrases and sentences in other texts. Every text was a play on previous texts, an imitation in ever-changing ways of existing and already accepted phrases and fragments, and presented already sanctioned notions and codes of behaviour. In short, every text was in some sense exemplary, deriving much of its authority from its appeal to hallowed tradition.¹⁰

This exemplariness was a shared quality of both profitable and sooth-

ing texts, a characteristic of both serious and playful works. The Malay textual heritage, in describing what the world looked like, simultaneously prescribed what it had to be like. It is this very exemplariness from which it derived its power to function as a source of standards of appropriate conduct and a touchstone of relevance, so that it could fulfil its role as a factor in support of the *negeri* and Malay life in general.

For us, who have not been raised in 18th-century Malay society and therefore cannot easily share its values and concepts, a large number of non-narrative texts will have only limited appeal. Malay legal texts and many religious tracts, for instance, do not make easy or pleasant reading. Lawyers and theologians may perhaps delight in dry enumerations of legal prescriptions and fines and in hair-splitting theological casuistry. But it is hard to see how readers of today can appreciate such texts from any other than a professional angle. The *pantun* quoted above will make clear, however, that there are attractive non-narrative texts as well: their attraction lies in their predominantly soothing qualities. Thus the mystical *syairs* of Hamzah Fansuri may still be appreciated by us now.¹¹ Even when detached from their original historical background and social milieu, they may easily continue to attract our interest.

Narrative texts generally speaking will have more appeal for us. One may of course enjoy these texts as more or less direct evocations of 18th-century historical reality, but one may also choose to let oneself be drawn into the intricate network woven by the narrative and try to unravel its tantalizing mysteries. We wish to restrict our illustration of how literary works confirm the Malay style of life and uphold the *negeri* by their exemplariness to narrative texts, both profitable and soothing.

We shall illustrate the intricate interrelation of these different features, both in form and reception, by discussing fragments taken from two major works of the Malay literary heritage, the *Sejarah Melayu* and the *Syair Ken Tambuhan*. We will argue in favour of a reading in which the former text may be treated as a predominantly profitable (*berfaedah*) one, whereas the second one may be read as a primarily soothing text (*penglipur lara*). The texts used may well be based on 18th-century manuscripts.¹²

Perhaps the best characterization of how exemplary narrative works in an oral-aural textual tradition is to be found in Sir Philip Sidney's famous essay, *A Defence of Poetry* (1595). Distinguishing the 'poet' (i.e. the writer) from the moral philosopher and the historian, and extolling him above them on account of his capacity to stimulate his listeners more forcefully to virtue, he remarks:

"Now therein of all sciences . . . is our poet the monarch. For he does not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it. Nay, he doth, as if your journey should lie through a fair vineyard, at the first give you a

cluster of grapes, that full of taste, you may long to pass further. He beginneth not with obscure definitions, which must blur the margin with interpretations, and load the memory with doubtfulness; but he cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion, either accompanied with, or prepared for, the well enchanting skill of music; and with a tale forsooth he comes unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner . . . glad they will be to hear the tales of Hercules, Achilles, Cyrus, Aeneas; and hearing them, must needs hear the right description of wisdom, valour, and justice; which, if they had been barely, that is to say philosophically, set out, they would swear they be brought to school again."

Literature, Sir Philip pointedly remarks, instils wisdom and virtue like a "medicine of cherries". Since cherries do not grow in the tropics, and we would not want to risk discussing Malay narrative in terms that are alien to it, we have adapted his words and spoken of a "medicine of sweetmeats" in the title of our article.¹³

2. *A predominantly profitable narrative: the Sejarah Melayu*

A major theme in the *Sejarah Melayu*, a history of the sultanate of Melaka, is the relationship between the ruler and his dignitaries, as exemplified in the story of the contract concluded by Lebar Daun, the ruler of Palembang, and his dignitaries with Sang Suparba, descendant of Iskandar Zulkarnain and founder of the royal line of Melaka. In this story the ruler is clearly presented as a *primus inter pares*, the ideal status for a ruler in the body politic according to Malay political theory.

In the preface to the *Sejarah Melayu* version we are basing ourselves on (hence for convenience's sake called *the* *Sejarah Melayu*) we are told how the narrator, who identifies himself as Tun Seri Lanang, with the title of Bendahara, is commissioned by the ruler to revise a "story about the Malays that was brought from Goa" (*hikayat Melayu dibawa oleh orang dari Goa*) and to compose a tale (*hikayat*) "about the fortunes and genealogies of the Malay rulers as well as their court ceremonials, so that our grandchildren who will come after us will know about them, will remember them and will subsequently profit from them (*beroléh faédah*)". The narrator then tells us that he has called the text composed by him *Sulalât as-Salatîn*, i.e. the Genealogy of the Sultans, and characterizes the work as "the pearl of all stories and the lustre of examples" (*mutia segala cetera dan cahaya segala peri umpamaan*) (SM. O.2- O.3). In other words, the *Sejarah Melayu* is presented as a text that is both profitable and soothing, but in that order.

To illustrate our point we will discuss two anecdotes that occur at the beginning of the 34th story, when a Frankish fleet under the command of Alfongso Zalberkerki (historians will point out that this must be iden-

tified with the Portuguese fleet under Alfonso d'Albuquerque) has appeared in the roads of Melaka and is ready to attack the town. It is the climactic moment of the narrative of the *Sejarah Melayu*, when the decadence at court has reached its zenith. By Malays, then as now, the fall of Melaka has always been seen as a fatal turning-point in their fortunes. Perhaps the finest testimony, not only to its deep emotional importance to them as a past event, but also to its relevance as a lesson in the present Malay condition, is the bitter poem that this episode has prompted one of the outstanding poets of Malaysia, Muhammad Haji Salleh, to write. The narrative power with which the episode is endowed is evidenced by the fascination it has had for so many scholars who – willingly or unwillingly – have been tempted into efforts to pinpoint what it was all about.¹⁴

All these interpretations, the reader may note, tend to foreground only one potential way of reading the text and to draw attention only to those aspects of the narrative that will fit that one interpretation chosen, to the neglect or exclusion of other elements that might lead the reader in different directions.

By its presentation of a series of captivating scenes that show the rapidly increasing moral and social disintegration of the *negeri*, the 33rd story has carefully set the stage for this crucial turn in the narrative. The Prime Minister, we are told, contrary to custom, fails to show his beautiful daughter to the Sultan before giving her in marriage to another man, thus causing estrangement between the Sultan and his prime dignity. The Prime Minister's sons, together with the *jeunesse dorée* of Melaka, after an unsuccessful hunting party shoot the buffaloes in their father's own pen. The ruler lends his ear without due enquiry to rumors that the Prime Minister is plotting to assassinate him, and has him executed without a formal trial. The new Prime Minister appointed by him is a lame, toothless, mumbling old man. The new Prime Minister's son publicly ridicules his aged father with impunity. The sultan, Mahmud, marries the daughter of the executed Prime Minister, who is so sad about her father's death that she refuses ever to smile again. The rueful sultan abdicates and is succeeded by his son Ahmad, who takes more pleasure in the company of the frivolous young nobles of the court than in that of the military officers and state dignitaries. The conclusion is inevitable: Melaka is about to fall. And the Franks will merely be the instrument happening to bring about this fall:

“And the Franks engaged the men of Melaka in battle, and they fired their cannon from their ships so that the cannon balls came down like rain. And the noise of the cannon was like the noise of thunder in the heavens; the flashes of fire from their guns were like flashes of lightning in the sky; the noise of their matchlocks was like that of groundnuts popping in a frying-pan. And the men of

Melaka could no longer hold out on the shore, so heavy was the gunfire of the Franks. Then they bore down upon the shore with their galleys and foysts, and the Franks landed; and the men of Melaka sallied forth, and thereupon they engaged in battle in great numbers. And Sultan Ahmad came forth mounted on his elephant, named Jinakji, with the Seri Awadani on its head and Tun Ali Hati on its croup. And, to balance him on the pack-saddle, His Majesty took with Him the Reverend Master (Sadar Johan), because His Majesty was studying the Doctrine of the All-Embracing Unity of God (*ilmu tauhid*) with the Reverend Master. And Sultan Ahmad went to the bridge to meet the Franks, and his officers accompanied His Majesty in very great numbers. And Sultan Ahmad attacked with his elephant, and the Frankish officers broke ranks and scattered, and thereupon proceeded to the water; and they all withdrew and boarded their ships. And they fired from their ships with the great cannons, whose noise was as when lightning flashes. And His Majesty stood on his elephant at the end of the bridge and His Majesty paid no attention to the cannonballs that fell like rain. And the Reverend Master clasped the elephant's pannier to the left and right with both hands. And the Reverend Master cried out: 'Sultan, this is no place for the All-Embracing Unity of God; let us go home!' And Sultan Ahmad smiled (*senyum*), and His Majesty returned to His Majesty's palace. And the Franks shouted from their ships, saying: 'Take warning, you men of Melaka, by the gods, tomorrow we will come ashore!' And the men of Melaka answered: 'Very well!' And Sultan Ahmad then assembled his men and ordered them to get their weapons ready. And evening fell; and the military officers and the young nobles were all waiting in the audience hall. And the young nobles said: 'Why are we sitting here in silence? It would be well for us to read out a tale of war, so that we may profit (*berfaédah*) from it.' And Tun Muhammad Unta said: 'That is well spoken, sirs. Let Tun Indera Segara go and ask the sultan for the *Story of Muhammad Hanafiah*, submitting that hopefully his humble servants may obtain profit (*faédah*) from it, because they are launching an attack tomorrow.' And Tun Indera Segara then went into the palace and presented himself to Sultan Ahmad. And he submitted to Sultan Ahmad all that they had said. And Sultan Ahmad gave him the *Story of Amir Hamzah*. And Sultan Ahmad said to Tun Indera Segara: 'Tell the young nobles that we would give them the *Story of Muhammad Hanafiah* did we not fear that the bravery of these gentlemen may fall short of the bravery of Muhammad Hanafiah; but if only they could be as brave as Amir Hamzah, that already would suffice. That is why we are giving the *Story of Amir Hamzah*.' Tun Indera Segara then left the palace

bearing the *Story of Hamzah*, and he reported to the young nobles all that Sultan Ahmad had said; and they were all silent and did not respond. And Tun Isap said to Tun Indera Segara: 'Submit to the ruler that His Majesty has spoken wrongly. If the ruler will only be like Muhammad Hanafiah, his humble servants will be like his military officers at Baniar.' And Tun Indera Segara submitted all that Tun Isap had said to Sultan Ahmad. And His Majesty smiled, and Sultan Ahmad said: 'That is well spoken!' And he gave them the *Story of Muhammad Hanafiah*." (SM. 34.1-34.4)

Our fragment consist of two anecdotes that are seemingly unconnected, but which, on closer inspection, prove to be related in form and therefore in meaning: both have the result of making Sultan Ahmad smile (*senyum*).

In the first fragment we are told how the sultan, together with his teacher in Sufi mysticism, Sadar Johan, rides forth into the thick of the battle on his elephant, in the firm conviction that their esoteric knowledge has made them both invulnerable.¹⁵

To his embarrassment, but, it may be thought, perhaps also to his amusement, his revered teacher suddenly shows an unbecoming fear of the Frankish bullets and an unexpected desire to save his 'phenomenal self' when they are in the midst of the battle. He begs his master to return to the safety of the palace as a more suitable place for meditation. And he does so in words that are shocking indeed from the mouth of a Sufi teacher, according to whose doctrine there is no place that is not part of the Only Real, God's Existence (*wujud Allah*): "This is not the place for/of the All-Embracing Unity of God" (*ini bukannya tempat tauhid Allah*).¹⁶ And Sultan Ahmad smiles – an ambiguous reaction. Is he amused? Or embarrassed? Does he smile because the situation is so comical? Or does he smile because his teacher causes him to lose face?

One lesson this anecdote teaches clearly may be that although the ruler shows praiseworthy courage in battle, his courage is an ill-founded one, based as it is on the false teachings of Sufi mysticism.

In the second fragment we are told how the officers and young nobles are sitting together in the ruler's audience hall. They are sitting there, each man wrapped in his own thoughts, isolated, in an uneasy silence, awaiting the imminent battle with the Franks. To prepare themselves for this trial by profitable examples and to break the oppressive silence and create an atmosphere of solidarity through the soothing sound of a recitation, they ask Sultan Ahmad for the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah*, the story about that Shiite paragon of martiality and heroism for the cause of the True Faith, Muhammad Hanafiah. This pious legendary story tells how Muhammad Hanafiah, the son of Caliph Ali by a Hanafite woman, fights the Ummayyads, who have usurped the caliphate and at whose hands his two half-brothers and the Prophet's grandsons,

Hasan and Husain, have suffered a martyr's death. It would therefore seem that the young nobles are really preparing themselves seriously, and it is precisely this that the sultan does not believe. Instead of giving them the more profitable *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah*, he fobs them off with the more soothing *Hikayat Amir Hamzah*. This *hikayat* tells about the exploits of the great warrior and champion of early Islam, Hamzah Ibn Abd al-Mutallib, a nephew of the Prophet, many of which exploits are in fact derived from the biography of another Hamzah, namely Hamzah Ibn Abdullah, a Persian warrior who became famous as a leader of holy wars against the Hindus in India. Although without any doubt also concerned with a Muslim hero, it is full of love adventures and gallant quests in far-away lands.¹⁷

No wonder the frustrated nobles feel greatly offended by this slight inflicted by the ruler. But then they find a way of extricating themselves from this humiliating situation and, by a witty repartee, turn the tables on His Majesty. His Majesty was mistaken in improperly comparing mere courtiers with a great Islamic leader. In fact, they point out, it would be more apt if the ruler should compare his own person to Muhammad Hanafiah and model himself on this hero. Then he would be a true leader, who – instead of slighting his men – would inspire them by his example to behave like proper officers, like Muhammad Hanafiah's officers fighting in his capital, Baniar. And the ruler once more smiles – again an ambiguous reaction. Is he amused? Or rather, embarrassed? Does he smile because he is pleased at the seriousness with which they are preparing themselves for the decisive battle and at the signs of their skill in a battle of words as well? Or is he hiding his discomfort at being outdone in erudition and wit and being lectured to by his own courtiers, usually his companions in more frivolous pastimes?

One lesson which this anecdote may be seen to contain is related to that major theme of the *Sejarah Melayu*: only in harmony with his nobles may the ruler preserve the realm. And to maintain this harmony, an effort is required from both sides.

As has already been indicated, the ambiguous smile of the sultan is a *trait d'union* linking the two anecdotes. It contributes to the lingering indeterminacy that is characteristic of so many stories in the *Sejarah Melayu*. This is underlined by the existence in Malay of the saying *senyum raja*, meaning literally “smile of a ruler”, but often used in the sense of “a forced or hypocritical smile”.¹⁸

This formal correspondence puts us on the trail of another line of interpretation: the possibility of reading the two anecdotes as in some sense mutually complementary. The second anecdote, it then transpires, provides an alternative to the first, which implies the rejection of Sufi mysticism – primarily concerned as it is with personal salvation – as an example for an Islamic ruler who has to provide leadership for his *negeri*. As opposed to this negative example for a ruler who should be con-

cerned with the well-being of his community, the second anecdote presents a positive one, that of Muhammad Hanafiah, who by his good leadership inspired his men to solidarity and courage in defence of the common cause.

It will be clear that this fragment of the *Sejarah Melayu* confirms the claim made in the preface: it must have impressed the Malay public as being highly profitable indeed in that it provided an example buttressing the coherence of the Malay *negeri*. But it also confirms the second claim of the preface: it truly shines forth like a resplendent gem that is soothing to behold. The narrative is presented in a rhythmic and elegant manner. It is composed of short, well-balanced sentences, strung together paratactically and frequently punctuated by the word *maka*, and presented in a formulaic type of diction. Comparisons and elaborations ornament the skeleton of the narrative, which proceeds in an orderly and balanced manner. Its soothing effect is enhanced by the subtle wit pervading the fragment, which precludes any simplistic conclusions about the precise import of the passage as a whole: while the story explicitly teaches a few lessons in some of its parts, both through serious positive examples and humorous negative ones, it nevertheless allows the audience the freedom to have thoughts of its own. Does the fragment ultimately praise or blame? Does it make the listener a witness to a final blaze of glorious chivalry and courtliness before darkness falls over Melaka? Or does it mercilessly expose the irresponsibility of a ruler wasting his time on a mystical ego-trip and of a court trifling its time away with mock battles in wit and erudition while the *negeri* finds itself on the brink of disaster? Probably the Malay public did not draw a final conclusion. And neither do we. And perhaps the Malays reacted like Sultan Ahmad and smiled, as we smile now.

3. A predominantly soothing narrative: the *Syair Ken Tambuhan*

The *Syair Ken Tambuhan* is a poem that draws on the originally Javanese courtly erotic *matière* of the genre of the Panji story. This genre enjoyed great popularity in the Malay world, and has with considerable variations in the names of the protagonists been cultivated in frequently very lengthy but sometimes also short narratives, both in prose and in verse form. It has even been adapted for the stage in a Malay class of drama, the *bangsawan*.

The story of this *syair* may be summarized as follows: Prince Kertapati (Inu Kertapati) of Koripan has been engaged by his parents to marry a princess of Banjarkulon. However, when out hunting in the pleasure garden of his father, he meets the princess of Daha, who under the name Ken Tambuhan is staying at his father's court as a captive and is weaving the wedding-gift for the princess of Banjarkulon with her fellow-captives. He immediately falls in love with her, and without the consent of his parents makes her his wife. By a ruse the angry Queen of Koripan

manages to separate the two *karma*-bound lovers: she sends the prince away to hunt deer for her and in his absence has Ken Tambuhan killed by the executioner in a lonely spot in the forest. Finding her body, the prince commits suicide. Thanks to the intercession of the Gods the two are brought back to life again, and with the consent of their mutual parents are solemnly married and become King and Queen of Koripan.

Whereas the *Sejarah Melayu*, as we have seen, in its preface gives explicit priority to an intellectual mode of reading (*faédah*), the reverse is the case with the *Syair Ken Tambuhan*. Here clearly the recommended attitude of reception is the emotional one, as is intimated in the *syair*'s prologue. "Listen, ladies and gentlemen, to a story, a *hikayat* that folks of old possessed. Its words, it is true, do not offer many examples. It has been written down just as it is told. This is the tale of Ken Tambuhan, the king's daughter who became a captive. If what people say may be taken seriously, everyone who hears this will feel compassion and commiseration." (SKT. I, 1-2.)

An example of how a text may invite one to let oneself be carried away by a soothing emotional experience is provided by the following passage, a variant of a type-scene that is widespread in Malay narrative, namely that in which the dress of the hero or heroine is described.¹⁹

"When Ken Tambuhan had finished dressing, she wore a silken robe that was purple as the sky at sunset. Around her breast she had wrapped a saffron-coloured cloth of Indian satin, on which patterns had been drawn in gold-paint.

The sash she was wearing was a Malay cloth. Her ear-studs were shaped like palm-leaves and were the work of slaves. To buy such priceless beauty no treasure could suffice; all who beheld it felt wistful.

On both arms she wore two *kana*-bracelets inlaid with red gems. The colour of her lips was a fiery red and her mouth was like the bursting pomegranate.

She wore gold rings studded with tiny gems, diamonds mounted on *lapis lazuli*, and inlaid with costly and beautiful opals that looked fine with her golden nail-protectors.

In her hair she wore a garland of *cempaka* flowers that matched her beautiful hair-pins well. She was slenderly built, neither tall nor short, and looked even sweeter when her face unfolded into a smile.

When the princess had finished dressing, she presented a beautiful

sight, most pretty to behold. She was without peer in all the world: all who beheld her were spellbound with amazement.

She looked like a puppet in the *wayang*, of which the shadow may at any moment fade. Her face was of a resplendent beauty; all who beheld it felt affection and love." (SKT. I, 28-34.)

Passages like the above, describing the appearance and manners of royal persons, are to be found in ever-varying amplifications and elaborations in a great many Malay narratives. They must have instilled sweet feelings of affectionate sympathy, of protective tenderness and of courtly erotic love, similar to those described in these stories, into the hearts of the Malay listeners. The refrain-like repetition of formulaic lines like "All who beheld it felt affection and love", "She presented a beautiful sight", and so on, seduce the public into identifying with the protagonists in the narrative. Exemplary scenes are presented that prefigure proper, refined manners, feelings and emotions, which therefore invite imitation by all members of the *negeri*. Thus the listener is allowed to get a taste of a world that is more ideal and elevated than that of his own every-day, often sordid and humdrum existence. The abundance of pleasant-sounding rhymes, polished rhythms and pleasingly familiar formulas – to which our translation hardly does justice – give one a sensation of beholding a radiant jewel from ever-varying angles. The comparison of Ken Tambuhan's appearance to that of a *wayang* puppet underlines the elusive ideal nature of beauty, which is always threatening to vanish. The soothing experience of beauty evokes the emotional experience of a sweet sadness: "All who beheld it felt sad at heart".²⁰

Viewed from another angle, the impact of the passage, as of the entire *syair*, resembles that of a fairytale. Stories that are predominantly oriented towards a soothing effect (*penglipur lara*) tend to be set in some never-never land: in far-away Java, in the exotic, unfamiliar Near East, or in the impenetrable jungles of the Malay world itself.

The *penglipur* aspect is also evident in the following passage, which presents a state wedding – that of Ken Tambuhan and Inu Kertapati:

"His Majesty stepped outside onto the veranda, and ordered that the musical instruments be played. The ministers and district officers were thronged together, a sign that happiness had come to the *negeri*.

Dense clouds of dust hung over the shopping-streets and markets. All the commoners, the entire community, all quickly gathered together, wanting to wait upon the ruler's son.

It was crowded outside and crowded inside. The musical instru-

ments would not stop playing. All sorts of plays were performed, even types hailing from Cambodia and Siam.

There was *joget* and *tandak*, there was *wayang* as well. The crowd of onlookers included men as well as women. Some of them were almost drunk with amorous passion, and had no thought for food and drink.

His Majesty's orders were that there should be celebrating day and night. On the palace veranda, too, there was to be feasting. The royal retainers enjoyed themselves greatly. Their jesting and joking made a great din.

All who were young were gathered together. Not one was there among them who was old. Forty days of feasting had the ruler prescribed to celebrate the wedding of His Highness, his son.

He ordered a tiered bathing-pavilion to be built, where his royal son might be ceremonially bathed. All sorts of precious gems were there, fitted to the pavilion on his orders.

When all the preparations were finished on the seashore away to the east, and when all the equipment had been fitted, the prince and Ken Tambuhan were carried there in solemn procession.

In throngs the ladies and maidens came down the river, some powdered their faces, others washed their hair. All sorts of *kidung*, *tembang* and *syair* were sung as they bathed in the water." (SKT. IX, 102-111.)

Here again we have the same abundance of ever-varying elaborations and amplifications, and again the beautiful sounds and rhythms noted above – again a passage that is resplendent as a multi-faceted gem that soothes the weary heart. The recitation of the *Syair Ken Tambuhan* itself would have been quite fitting on an occasion like the one presented in it, in which the unity of the *negeri* finds expression in the shared celebration by all its members of a royal marriage. In describing such an important ritual, the *syair* at the same time demonstrates how the *negeri* could be held together, and what a proper Malay state and its rituals should be like. At the centre of the action is the ruler: he is the figure who controls the scene and he sets each new development of the narrative in motion by his commands. Inside the court is celebrating, and the ruler, his dignitaries and the district officers are “jesting and joking”, while outside the commoners are making merry, “drunk with amorous passion”. The entire passage is pervaded with references to all sorts of art

forms, some more vulgar ones like *joget* and *tandak*, others more refined ones like *kidung*, *tembang* and *syair*. These arts join the different sections of the community together, while they also give coherence to the *negeri* as a whole: the *wayang*, visible from both sides of the screen, and the resounding boom of the *gamelan* join court and commoner alike in shared revelry, conjuring up and confirming the state's coherence.

As a final sample of exemplariness in the *Syair Ken Tambuhan* we would quote the following passage:

“Among these many princesses there was also the daughter of the ruler of Tanjungpuri. She looked like a nymph descended from heaven, rarely met and seldom found.

Her name was Raden Puspakencana. Her demeanour was grave and sensible. Cleverness and wit she had to the full. Her appearance possessed all the feminine charms.

At that time someone comparable to her would have been hard to find. Her beauty was like that of Mandudari. She was loved by the king and by the queen, and was favoured above the other princesses.

Fourteen years of age was the girl. The king had named her Ken Tambuhan. Lovely and sweet was her every action; it filled one's heart with longing and tenderness.

All who beheld her appearance were amazed; affection and love were felt by all. Excellent were her breeding and manners, befitting her courteous speech.” (SKT.I, 13-17.)

Apart from undeniable soothing qualities, this description of Ken Tambuhan also clearly has intellectual potential: she is presented as the embodiment of all those qualities that a genuine Malay princess should have, of the way a lady of high birth, and a refined lady in general, was supposed to look, speak and act. The *syair* subtly interweaves example with example: Ken Tambuhan is compared to princess Mandudari of the *Hikayat Seri Rama*, a woman known to the Malay as the very epitome of feminine beauty, cleverness and loyalty. Every Malay will immediately have been reminded by this reference of the story of how Mandudari managed by a ruse to avoid being given away by her hapless husband, king Dasarata, to the evil demon-king Ravana, who, impressed by her beauty, demanded her as his wife. From the dirt of her own skin (*daki*) she fashioned a princess, Mandudaki, who was her exact image, tricking the unsuspecting Ravana into accepting this copy as his bride. Thus Ken

Tambuhan, herself a model of Malay femininity for others, is given her own model in this exemplary character.²¹

4. *In conclusion*

Above we suggested that both the *Sejarah Melayu* and the *Syair Ken Tambuhan* were pervaded by exemplariness. This could with equal right be said of texts of the Malay heritage in general. For all situations in life, both formal and informal, this heritage offered an abundance of examples. Proper behaviour, appropriate sentiments, fitting demeanour and good government all had their precedent and example, which were necessary for maintaining the coherence of the *negeri* and the character of the Malay style of life.

We have suggested that soothing texts may also be read referentially if we decided to accept their invitation to do so, and the *Syair Ken Tambuhan* may well serve to illustrate this. Soothing and fairytale-like though it may be, it does afford some good glimpses of Malay life and the workings of the Malay state. The modern historian of the Malay world tends to sharply divide the Malay textual heritage into the large bulk of useless and irrelevant fanciful tales on the one hand, and the small number of texts from which "facts" may reliably be derived on the other. Would it not be feasible, one wonders, for him to shift his attention to what may well be an unexplored field of referential information?

But what about those allegedly referential texts, of which the *Sejarah Melayu* is perhaps the one most cherished by the historian? Are those seemingly realistic glimpses of Malay life the *Sejarah Melayu* has always been so highly praised for really as reliable as the historian likes to believe, or is he the victim of the "reality effect" of a grand narrative tradition? Did d'Albuquerque really appear before Melaka in 1511? One thing is certain: his opponent, Sultan Ahmad, did not exist.²²

NOTES

- 1 It should be noted that we have given only a typical sketch of the Malay body politic, without going into the many differences of detail that might on closer inspection be indicated between the states of the Malay world. The best description of Malay political institutions is still provided by Gullick (1958). In Reid and Castles (1975:1-43) the nature and concept of the state in 17th and 19th century Johor, 18th century Perak and 18th and 19th century Kedah are discussed by Leonard Andaya, Virginia Matheson, Barbara Watson Andaya and Dianne Lewis. Milner (1982) has greatly stressed – and in our view over-stressed – the pivotal importance of the figure of the *raja*. For a critical review of Milner (1982), see Gullick (1982).
- 2 On the basically oral-aural nature of communication in the Malay world, see Sweeney (1980:13-16). About the tasks of the copyist at court see Skinner (1963:27), and Gullick (1958:53).
- 3 For a discussion of the respective patterns of thought and expression of predominantly oral and predominantly literate cultures, see Havelock (1963) and Ong (1982).
- 4 See Havelock (1963:105 and 108-109) on the dual function of the Homeric Greek oral poet as the useful instructor of the tribe and a teller of pleasing and seductive tales.

- 5 This distinction follows Jauss (1977), who in the receptive aesthetic experience of the reader distinguishes between an intellectual and an emotive aspect of catharsis. Jauss (1977:62) stresses the role of catharsis in shaping social norms.
- 6 See Mulyadi (1983:51).
- 7 Our criteria for distinguishing between narrative and non-narrative are derived from Tomashevsky in Lemon and Reis (1965:66) and Rimmon-Kenan (1983:14-15).
- 8 This subtle translation is quoted from Overbeck (1934:127). The original text may be found in *Antologi* (1980:233).
- 9 Taxonomies as mere classifications for convenience's sake made on the basis of observed similarities should not be confused with genres, i.e. groups of conventions or devices that are related and motivated in a particular way, and are allowed to guide the production and interpretation of texts. See Koster forthcoming:4-5.
- 10 See Havelock (1963:36-60) about the Homeric poems as the encyclopaedia of the archaic Greek world. On the principle of variation within identity in the Homeric poems, see Havelock (1963:92). For a demonstration of the operation of this principle in a traditional Malay work, see Koster and Maier (1982).
- 11 For a demonstration of how to read these predominantly soothing non-narrative texts, see Braginsky (1975), Muhammad Haji Salleh (1980) and Thomas (1984).
- 12 See Abdullah in Situmorang and Teeuw (1952) and Teeuw (1966), which for convenience's sake will henceforth be referred to by us by the abbreviations SM and SKT.
- 13 For these quotations see Sidney 1971:39-41. For a critical discussion of the emphasis on the 'Oriental Otherness' of Malay literature, see Umar Yunus (1984:169-170).
- 14 See Wilkinson (1907:16), Brakel (1975:9-11), Yusoff Iskander and Abdul Rahman Kaeh (1978:193-195), Milner in Hooker (1983:40-41), and Umar Yunus (1984:56-58). Umar Yunus (1984) presents the first full-scale inquiry into the textual forces structuring the Malay Annals, making a daring break with the hallowed tradition of reading this work only in a referential mode. For the poem, see Muhammad Haji Salleh (1981:87-88).
- 15 See Milner, in Hooker (1983:39-41), on the magic power (*keramat*) that the Sufi mystic was believed to acquire through meditation.
- 16 On Sufi doctrine on this point, see Kraemer (1921:21-55), Muhammad Naguib al-Attas (1970:66-97) and Milner, in Hooker (1983:41).
- 17 For the Story of Amir Hamzah, see Van Ronkel (1895); for the Story of Muhammad Hanafiah, see Brakel (1975); and for Malay Islamic romances in general, see Ismail Hamid (1983).
- 18 See Wilkinson 1906, Part II, under *senyum*.
- 19 The fact that we are offering here a scene with a heroine as subject is of course not to suggest that an equally emotive effect would not be inherent in the many descriptions of the dress of handsome male heroes which occur in the Panji stories.
- 20 On the Beautiful in Malay poetics, see Braginsky 1979.
- 21 For the story of how Mandudari tricked Ravana, see Achdiati Ikram (1980:fol. 155-158).
- 22 About "reality effect" in narrative, see Barthes' essay, published in translation in Todorov (1982). For the non-existence of Sultan Ahmad, see McRoberts (1984:26). By his firm grasp of the relevant intertexts as well as an unusual attention to the intratextual dimension of the Malay Annals, he arrives at a refreshingly critical new view.

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This article is an adaptation of a lecture presented to the Leiden University Workgroup on "Court Poetry and Poets East and West" on May 1st, 1984. Unless otherwise stated all the translations are our own. We wish to thank Drs. F. van Baardewijk, Drs. C. M. S. Hellwig, Dr. S. O. Robson and Drs. R. Tol for their comments and suggestions.

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