
Searching for Seeds to Rest in Libraries

European Collecting Habits towards Malay books and Manuscripts in the Nineteenth Century

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**Searching for Seeds to Rest in Libraries:
European Collecting Habits towards Malay Books and Manuscripts in
the Nineteenth Century**

Abstract

European scholars, colonial administrators, missionaries, bibliophiles and others were the main collectors of Malay books in the nineteenth century, both in manuscript or printed form. Among these persons were many well-known names in the field of Malay literature and culture like Raffles, Marsden, Crawfurd, Klinkert, van der Tuuk, von Dewall, Roorda, Favre, Maxwell, Overbeck, Wilkinson and Skeat, to name only a few. Their collections were often handed over to public libraries where they form an important part of the relevant Oriental or Southeast Asian manuscript collections.

Therefore the knowledge of the intellectual culture of the Malay Peninsula and the Malay World in general depended very much on these manuscripts and printed books collected often by chance or in a rather unsystematic way. The collections reflect in a strong sense the interests of its administrative or philologist collectors: court histories, genealogies of aristocratic lineages, law collections (adat-istiadat as well as undang-undang) or prose belles-lettres build a vast bulk of these collections, while Islamic religious texts and poetry forms popular in the 19th century (especially syair) are fairly underrepresented. Malay manuscripts and books located in religious institutions like mosques or pondok/pesantren schools have not been searched for; until today there are more or less no systematic studies of these collections. As in some statistics religious texts build about 20% of all existing Malay manuscripts, their neglect by Europeans scholars leads to a distorted view of the literary culture in the Malay language.

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No library can exist without books, manuscripts or other written materials. The development of writing and literacy had a tremendous effect on hitherto oral cultures throughout the world. Social anthropologists had carried out research since the last fifty years or so on the consequences of literacy for the organization of human societies, especially in Africa.¹ However, “the most obvious property of writing is that it gives *permanence* to verbal expression. Words can be transmitted through space and over time in permanent and unchanging form”, wrote Ruth Finnegan in her important study *Literacy and Orality. Studies in the Technology of Communication* (1988: 17, italics in the text). Literacy allows the accumulation of information over long time which has far-reaching implications for the practical and intellectual development of a society (ibid. 22). The rise of science and humanities, higher education and expertness was conditioned by the existence of writing systems.

Libraries are important places where collected information from recent or ancient times can be consulted, read and interpreted by its users. In this respect academic and other libraries function very similar to museums: both collect and conserve materials which allows knowledge and research on present-day societies and their past. But the interpretation of the collections of museums allows more far-flung conclusions: the items in a museum reflect the history of those whose items are collected as well as of those who collected them. This is very much the case for libraries too: library collections, especially collections of rare books deliver a picture of the collectors and/or donors, too. In this respect library history is very much part of the history of specific academic fields. The construction of knowledge is highly dependent on the material, in the case of libraries on book and manuscript collections made available to the researcher. For a historian this seems to be a rather banal assumption, but in philology it is often forgotten or ignored.² The vast majority of collections of Malay printed books and manuscripts in European libraries was acquired in the second half of the nineteenth century or in the early twentieth century. This paper examines in what respect the collecting habits of Europeans influenced the analysis and interpretation of Malay society and culture of the nineteenth century and earlier times.

“Malay literature is dead, faded away, since the glory of the Malay kingdoms vanished.” The famous laconic statement by the German merchant, diplomat, entomologist and last but not least philologist Hans Overbeck became misinterpreted and misunderstood in many distorted and false ways. However, those who were able and willing to read more than rather the very first sentence of his book would have

¹ See e.g. Goody (1986).

² For example, in his monumental study on traditional Malay literature Braginsky (2004) pays no attention on the background of Malay texts, which mainly derive from the second half of the nineteenth century, but sometimes were handled as sources dating from the thirteenth or fourteenth century.

found the following notes: “Its [i.e. Malay literature’s] seeds are still there, but they rest in the treasuries of the museums and libraries of the white men and await the sower, who scatters them again on its native soil” (Overbeck 1925: 3). Having experienced the transformations of Malay and other native cultures of the Malay World at the turn of the century Overbeck describes museums and libraries as the only institutions where somebody can read Malay literature. Neither native nor European publishers have been able to produce a sufficient stock of Malay texts (Overbeck 1927: 5ff.).³ So those who wanted to study Malay literature, society and culture were highly dependent on the few libraries which had catalogued Malay books. However, the state of libraries in the nineteenth century was often not the very best either. The well-known Dutch linguist and lexicographer van der Tuuk gave a scathing description of his visit of the library of the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences in 1849:

“Due to the benevolence of Mr. Friederich I also had the possibility to see the museum and the library of the Batavian Society. Great was my astonishment, my goodness, even greater my disappointment. You will understand that I was especially searching for the manuscripts and for the books, among which one would expect the old Dutch lexicographies etc. The famous library consisted of several empty book-cases, which probably once were full. On my question, whether that and that manuscript and book was on loan, I got the answer: ‘Nobody would cause himself so much sweat to let pick up books *for reading them*, even more, people would like to keep such books which have pictures at home, so that they can find the time to cut out these pictures, so that the dear children can play with them.’ It almost unbelievable how much indifference and a wrong admiration are united here to make the formerly rich [Society] poor.” (Groeneboer 2002: 87; italics in the text)

Matters seem not to have changed very much fifteen years later when the famous German traveller and social anthropologist Adolf Bastian visited the same library (Bastian 1869). As this example demonstrates, even if a library had a certain stock of Malay books they were often not catalogued properly, misplaced or kept in an inappropriate manner.

Collecting manuscripts and presenting them to archives and libraries is as old as the European presence in Southeast Asia. The earliest dated Malay manuscripts were two letters from the Sultan of Ternate to the King of Portugal dated 1521 and 1522. When the Dutch arrived in the Malay Archipelago at the end of the sixteenth century they collected, received and sometimes also were presented manuscripts. The oldest

³ However, Overbeck (1927: 11f.) acknowledged the efforts by the Dutch government publisher Balai Pustaka since the 1920s.

surviving Qur'an from the Malay world was a gift from the Sultan of Johor to the Dutch commander of the fleet Admiral Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge in 1606 (Riddell 2002) – the manuscript itself gives only the date of the month and day, but not of the year when it was written.⁴ The oldest list of Malay (and other Indonesian) manuscripts dates back to 1696 when an inventory of the private library of the commander of the garrison of Batavia Isaac de Saint Martin was prepared – altogether 1547 foliants and other books, among them Arab, Persian, Javanese, Makassarese and also 22 Malay manuscripts (de Haan 1900). Further manuscripts were known to be in the possession of François Valentyn and George Henrik Werndly as they were mentioned and cited extensively in their books *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indië* (1724-26) and *Maleische Spraakkunst* (1736) respectively.

The existence of Malay manuscripts was not restricted strictly to Malay society only (Milner 2008: 92ff.; 12f.). Malay manuscripts were known from various places like Aceh, Banten, Ambon, Bima, Ternate or Minangkabau states.⁵ Many Malay manuscripts were traditionally part of an oral performance and might be interpreted as mnemotechnical instruments. Although the majority of 'owners' and 'readers' might have been males, the female role in the writing and performing of traditional Malay literature seems to have been un-estimated so far. Two examples may demonstrate this: the Dutch official den Hamer reported many public evening readings of Malay *syair* in Banjarmasin which last until about two o'clock in the morning. The majority of scribes or copyists of these *syair* were women and many women in Banjarmasin were described as being able to read and write in Malay (denHamer 1890: 531). When the British diplomat John Anderson was sent to the east coast of Sumatra in 1823 he met a female official named Che Laut who was described as multilingual poet and historian being able to compose verses with astonishing fluency (Anderson 1826: 44f.).

Malay manuscripts were usually difficult to obtain and did not circulate easily. The well-known Malay scribe Abdullah Munsyi who went in 1838 to Kelantan as interpreter of a diplomatic mission was able to receive manuscripts for copying purposes only due his personal contacts to a high Kelantan official (Abdullah 1981: 53). Malay manuscripts were usually the property of individuals. Traditionally the 'ownership' of a text was not only secured through the very physical existence of the manuscript, but also through the personal memory. Texts were a crystallization of the relation between teacher and pupil, especially in circles of higher Islamic education. But Malay manuscripts had social functions too: owning a written royal genealogy

⁴ Riddell (2002) argues convincingly that it was copied at Palembang, Jambi or another Sumatran court between 1550 and 1575.

⁵ The 'Malayness' of these manuscripts is currently a matter of debate. Several Malay manuscripts were neither written by nor exclusively for Malays. For an excellent discussion see Milner (2008, chapter 1).

(*silsilah*) was the prerogative of a member of a royal clan (Proudfoot 2002: 121). Therefore a manuscript could not be lend out and copied by just everybody, but was part of the cultivation of social relations. Handing over a manuscript as a gift like the Qur'an by the Sultan of Johor in 1606 was therefore an expression of high political and diplomatic appreciation. James Low, the first European to see a copy of the chronicles of the state of Kedah entitled *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, received a copy of this text from the hands of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Halim Shah of Kedah as a token of recognition (Low 1849: 2). In pre-colonial societies in the Malay Archipelago it was rather untypical to buy a manuscript. This pattern changed when new actors entered the scene: Europeans usually paid for manuscripts. This was not only typical for Malay handwritten books, but also for other Southeast Asian literatures. Behrend described new impacts on the Javanese manuscript tradition by Dutch scholars who collected Javanese manuscripts in search of specific information on local customs (Behrend 1996: 183).

For diplomatic, political, trading and to a lesser extent liturgical purposes the Dutch East India Company (VOC) employed already in the eighteenth century many Malay translators. Katharine Smith Diehl mentions the first translator for the Malay language working for the VOC in 1744 (1990: 194). In 1795, the year of the dissolution of the VOC, they still employed six Malay translators (ibid. 196).⁶ Several of them were able to produce manuscript copies, although to my knowledge it is not known whether any of their works still exist until now. During the British interregnum the situation changed when several higher educated British administrators, scholars and amateurs became deeply interested in local cultures and customs, most notably Thomas Stamford Raffles, John Leyden, William Marsden, John Crawfurd, Thomas Newbold and William Farquhar. They began to collect manuscripts on a large scale. Raffles e.g. bought more or less every manuscript he was able to get and employed in Malacca five Malay scribes – among them Abdullah Munysi – to copy those books whose owners did not want to sell him their copies (Voorhoeve 1964: 257).

Surprisingly the role of the Malay *munysi* (lit. 'expert in language and literature') in the nineteenth century is so far a rather neglected research topic. Malay *munyis* were not only employed for diplomatic correspondence by the great trading companies or colonial governments, but also for Malay language teaching and copying manuscripts for private persons. Many European colonial administrators, researchers, missionaries etc. made use of *munyis* in the nineteenth century. The lexicographer H.

⁶ These were: Gerrit Kool, chief Malay translator since 1790; Adam Domingo, since 1787, most likely a Portuguese creole from either Tugu or Malacca; Andries Stevens, since 1795; Amir Hassan, since 1770; Sadiq Hakiem, since 1792; Idries Achmut, since 1795; the last three all being Muslims (Diehl 1990: 196).

von de Wall extensively discussed in the 1860s matters on the Malay language with local Malay experts like Raja Ali Haji and Haji Ibrahim in Riau as main informants (van der Putten 2001: 1). Adolf Bastian employed during his stay in Singapore in 1864 a Malay *munsyi* partly to refresh his Malay of a former trip, partly to discuss the contents and backgrounds of Malay literature (Bastian 1869: 3). From this man Bastian even learned to read the Jawi script with a certain fluency.⁷ The Methodist missionary and Malay scholar William Shellabear was trained to speak Malay and read *Jawi* texts by an interpreter of the Supreme Court in Singapore named Ismail, a former pupil of the very same school in which Abdullah Munsyi worked as teacher (*The life of the Reverend W.G. Shellabear*: 30f.). The most famous example, of course, is Abdullah Munsyi himself whose many discussions on Malay language and literature are well-documented in his autobiography (Abdullah 1997). How much and in what ways these and many other Malay and non-Malay *munsyis* influenced their European pupils and/or vice versa became influenced by them needs further investigations and cannot be answered satisfactory so far.⁸

Very soon the Dutch followed the example of the British. Stimulated by the efforts of Raffles and others they employed Malay scribes on a regular basis at the General Secretariat of the Government in Batavia. Their main task was to produce enough manuscripts as materials for the Malay language training of Dutch administrators in the Netherlands.⁹ Some scribes were even sent off to the Netherlands to work as language teachers in the Academy of Delft. Other Malays were employed to buy books for a sufficient library stock. Abdulkadir, the father of Abdullah Munsyi was send by Dutch colonial authorities in 1821 on such an expedition to Riau, Lingga and Terengganu, returning with altogether more than sixty manuscripts (Proudfoot 2003: 7ff.).

Europeans depended very much on the cooperation of natives to have direct access to manuscripts. First collections were bought mainly by amateur scholars rather than by academic experts or trained librarians (Ding 1987; Proudfoot 2003). Large scale acquisitions were rather exceptional like the take-over of the libraries of the Kraton of Yogyakarta by the British in 1812, of the Kraton of Palembang in 1821 and of the Sultans of Banten by the Dutch in 1830 respectively. Collecting manuscripts by Europeans in the nineteenth century caused a commercialisation of the manuscript

⁷ This conclusion can be drawn from the sources Bastian mentions in his text: among them is the correspondence to a 'Sultan' of Muko-Muko in Western Sumatra as well as several Malay *hikayat* texts unedited during Bastian's times like the *Hikayat Indra Putra*.

⁸ The only exception is Abdullah Munsyi due to his many autobiographical writings and notes by friends and former pupils.

⁹ More detailed information on the Malay scriptorium in Batavia can be found in a famous article by P. Voorhoeve (1964).

production in the Malay world. Administrator-scholars like Raffles rouse the consciousness for the money value of Malay books and created a market for the commercial copying of manuscripts (Proudfoot 2002; Ding 1987). Many Europeans in the nineteenth century did not care very much on what kind of manuscript they bought, but acquired these books as if they collected bugs, precious porcelain or botanical materials.¹⁰ One of the last collectors of this kind was probably Hans Overbeck whose extensive specimens of ants and other Southeast Asian and Australian insects are currently located in the Museum of Natural History in Dresden while his Malay manuscripts are found in the Museum Pusat in Jakarta.¹¹

This habit of buying more or less any manuscript they could get however should not lead to the assumption that European collectors were offered all existing manuscripts nor that Europeans did not had preferences in special text genres. Europeans followed certain interests when they collected Malay books which were seen as a mirror of Malay and other societies. Through texts – it was assumed in early Malay reading and school books – the reader receives an authentic image of daily life, manners and customs and even the ‘soul’ of a people.¹² In other words, Malay literature was seen as mirror of an state of Malay society and served as mere ethnographical reference. Most of these textbooks were of course not intended for educating the local population, but the European colonial administrators who had to learn the language to gain a better knowledge of the colonized. Therefore it is not surprising that a main focus of interest were literary works with information on local peoples and their customs (*adat*). The well-known stories *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and *Hikayat Seri Rama* are good examples for this kind of texts.¹³ For even more practical reasons was the interest in books on dynastic histories (*Sejarah Melayu*, *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* a.o.) or the law of particular states (*Undang-Undang Melaka*, *Adat Aceh* a.o.). The knowledge of these works enabled colonial officials to administer and control native states more easily and to interfere in local dynastic or other disputes.¹⁴

¹⁰ There was of course critique by Malay intellectuals on this too. Abdullah Munsyi e.g. bitterly complained about the sell-out of Malay cultural resources (Abdullah 1997: 208). The surviving books of Raffles’ collection consist of some eighty Malay manuscripts and several others in various Asian languages (Ricklefs & Voorhoeve 1977: 133-143), however, many more were lost during a fire on the ship when Raffles returned to Europe.

¹¹ For an overview of major collections of Malay manuscripts outside Southeast Asia see Ding (2008: 55ff.).

¹² See e.g. van Ophuijsen (1912: v) or Meursinge (1842: iii-iv).

¹³ The Swiss linguist Renward Brandstetter edited an abridged translation of the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* because it was “an important goldmine for ethnographic research” whose two main characters were “the personification of the Malay temperament” (Brandstetter 1894: iii).

¹⁴ The approach of European colonial administrator-scholars of this time cannot but be called biased. Winstedt regarded traditional Malay prose *hikayat* literature as “the works of the finest period of Malay literature” which was neglected by Malay society of his time because of “Muslim prejudice” –

From these habits of acquiring manuscripts derive several consequences. First of all, nineteenth century collectors usually were not very interested where they obtained their books. Sometimes we know today from diary notes, inventory entries and other sources where and when manuscripts were acquired by their collectors. This is the case e.g. for the collections of von de Wall, Klinkert, van Ophuijsen, W. E. Maxwell or Farquhar. Other collectors, however, did not leave data where they received their manuscripts or collected them at various places (e.g. Brandes, Raffles or Snouck Hurgronje). Until the 1970s many philologists and librarians paid not much attention on the original settlements of Malay manuscripts. The remark by the Dutch philologist van Ronkel that the provenance of manuscripts is not really of importance, is here a case in point (cited after Drewes [1977: 198]).¹⁵ Drewes on the contrary successfully demonstrates that many valuable results can be received by studying the local origins of manuscripts: his analysis of Palembang manuscripts allowed deep insights into the intellectual life centred around the Kraton before it was plundered in 1821 (ibid. 198ff.).

The first Malay teaching books were filled with prose texts, either fictional *hikayat*, law texts or dynastic *silsilah*, or give examples of official correspondence.¹⁶ Ch. A. van Ophuijsen's *Maleisch leesboek* (1912) was made out of 53 samples from diverse Malay literature genres, but contains no poetry or religious texts at all. Ding Choo Ming in his important paper "Access to Malay Manuscripts" gives interesting data on the contents of Malay literature. Ding (1987: 433) estimates the number of all existing Malay manuscripts of about 10.000 – this might be corrected to 13.-15.000 today – copies, being about 800-1000 different titles. These Malay manuscripts titles are divided into the following genres:¹⁷

theology	Islamic legends	law	prose fiction	lyric	history	diverse
37,5%	5,75%	5,14%	18,75%	14,51%	5,85%	12,5%

Table 1: literary genres of Malay manuscripts (based on Ding 1987)

while "orthodoxy turned the Malay to later Arabic models" which led him to "losing the clear and succinct quality of his own idiom" (Winstedt 1958: 5).

¹⁵ However, I have to be fair to van Ronkel as I have checked Drewes citation: I have not been able to trace the lines where van Ronkel should have made this remark in the particular article.

¹⁶ See e.g. Niemann (1870), Meursing (1842), Wilkinson (1897) or de Hollander (1845).

¹⁷ However, a corpus of 10.000-15.000 Malay manuscripts is not very impressive when one keeps in mind that this only would be the collection of one medium-sized mosque library in the Middle East or North Africa (Sibai 1987).

If the data from 1987 are still relevant it becomes evident that religious texts form a great part of all existing Malay books.¹⁸ If we compare these with data from manuscripts located in European libraries, we will note some differences.¹⁹ The following statistics (total numbers) derive from Wieringa's catalogue of Malay manuscripts in Leiden, which lists acquisitions up to 1896 (Wieringa 1998):

theology, Islamic legends	Christian texts, Bibles	law	prose fiction	lyric	history	auto- biograph y	language, literature	diverse
18,91%	1,93%	13,78%	30,77%	13,46%	12,5%	1,28%	3,84	3,53%

Table 2: literary genres of Malay manuscripts in the Netherlands up to 1896 (based on Wieringa 1998)

A similar picture do we get from Ricklefs and Voorhoeve's catalogue (1977) on Indonesian manuscripts in the United Kingdom in table 3. The data (total numbers) for the Malay texts including letters, notes and fragments are as follows:

theology, Islamic legends	Christian texts, Bibles	law	prose fiction	lyric	history	auto- biograph y	language, literature	diverse
17,62%	0,99%	7,25%	35,25%	7,59%	11,37%	0,33%	6,26	13,34%

Table 3: literary genres of Malay manuscripts in Great Britain (based on Ricklefs & Voorhoeve 1977)

¹⁸ I am very much aware about the problems using such statistical data. Is the *Hikayat Raja Iskandar Dhulkarnain* to be classified as Islamic legend, as prose fiction or history? Is the *Syair Perang Mengkasar* a historical or lyrical work? Similar problems arouse around many other titles.

¹⁹ The data I use here chiefly derive from the Netherlands and the United Kingdom because the collections from these two states are quite well catalogued. Good catalogues also exists on Malay manuscripts in Denmark, Malaysia and Indonesia. Far less well described are the collections of Malay manuscripts in France, Germany, Russia, the United States and South Africa, we still know next to nothing about Malay manuscripts in Italy, the Iberian Peninsula, Turkey or India. From a German point of view the lack of a catalogue of Malay manuscripts in Germany is a great nuisance, as money from the huge project 'Inventory of the Oriental Manuscript' is available since quite a long time.

The difference between 18,75% titles of Malay prose fiction and the actual presence of 30,77% and 35,25% Malay prose fiction manuscripts in Leiden and the United Kingdom respectively is most obvious here. Law texts (Leiden: 13,78%) and historical works (Leiden: 12,5% / UK: 11,37%) are also fairly overrepresented. Muslim theological works on the other hand which make more than one third of all Malay manuscript titles play a much smaller role in European collections. This is further confirmed by a closer look into some other Malay manuscript collections. The Malay manuscripts presented by Lieutenant Thomas Newbold to the Royal Asiatic Society of Madras in 1838 have partly disappeared. However, Newbold made a descriptive list of his twenty manuscripts which contained one book of theology, one of Islamic legends, four on law, two of prose fiction (none of lyrics), seven of history, two *Kitab Terasul* (books on letter-writing) and three which might be classified among diverse titles (Newbold 1838). The Malay books in the Library of Congress described by Teeuw (1967) consist of one poem, two Islamic legends, two books of prose fiction and three of history. There was no title on Islamic theology, which is here, however, not very surprising as this collection formerly belonged to the Protestant missionary Alfred North.

It is well-known for Javanese society that “the large numbers of surviving manuscripts written in Arabic script testifies to the central role that religion played in the acquisition of literacy in rural Java” (Behrend 1996: 164). This was also known to contemporary scholars of Javanese culture in the nineteenth century.²⁰ A similar statement can be drawn for Malay society. Muslim scholars and dignitaries were the main actors in establishing literacy and often functioned as clerks at court (Koster 1997: 17f.). If we take the oldest manuscripts (excluding letters) into consideration, this becomes even more obvious. Arabic manuscripts belong to the oldest books from the Malay Archipelago. Already in the early seventeenth century a significant degree of Islamic scholarship has to be testified (Johns 1996: 34) and was well-described by scholars like Drewes, Rinkes, al-Attas, Brakel, Bausani or Johns, to cite only a few. The oldest Qur’an from Southeast dated before 1606 has already been mentioned. The so far oldest dated Malay manuscript from the 1590 is a commentary of a theological-philosophical tract (Al-Attas 1988). The collection of the famous Dutch Orientalist Erpenius (died 1624) which today is located in Cambridge contains commentaries on the Qur’an, on Arabic prayers and on Arabic poems (van Ronkel 1896).²¹ When in 1823 the British diplomat John Anderson visited the East Coast of Sumatra, he made the following assumption on Malay theological books:

²⁰ See e.g. Veth (1875, Vol. 1: 360f., 434ff.).

²¹ The few – however isolated – Malay manuscripts located in the libraries of Gotha, Hamburg and Leipzig were all Muslim theological works or works on the Arabic language, too (Pertsch 1893: 28; Brockelmann 1908: 153f.; Vollers 1906: 369).

“The Malays have many books relating to religion, war, history, and the laws, or adat adat, poetry &c. Several of the inhabitants are well informed upon these subjects, and devote a considerable portion of their time to study. The principal books treating of religion, under the general designation of Masalilal Muftadin are the Koran, Minkat, Seratal, Mastakim, Masalilal, Bedaia, Sirat, Oosool, Tipalasaral, Jermi Arab, Tajiut, Surat-ul-Kiamat.” (India Office Records, F/4/739 20282)

However, if we take a closer look into Winstedt’s – unfortunately – still highly influential book *A History of Classical Malay Literature* we will note that only 14 out of 163 pages of the text are reserved for “Muslim theology, jurisprudence and history”, none of those works regarded to be worth to appear in translated form in the long appendix (Winstedt 1958). Why have religious texts been ignored and not been collected in the same manner as genealogies or prose stories over quite a long period?

The answer is two-fold: European collectors did not obtain religious manuscripts in a large scale first because they were not interested in them and second because these books were not offered to them. The interest of administrators and scholars in these books was limited first because it required a sufficient knowledge of the Arabic language and Muslim religion. The study of Arabic during the nineteenth century was restricted to arm-chair scholars working at European universities or academies. Furthermore religious texts were often not regarded as an ‘original’ or ‘pure’ expression of Malay cultural life and therefore were seen as being of secondary importance. Islam in Southeast Asia has been viewed in the nineteenth century in a strong Orientalist way mainly as ‘fanatic’, ‘aggressive’, ‘superstitious’, ‘decadent’ or in the best case just as ‘un-scientific’. This is fairly well reflected in a note dated 1871 by then Acting Magistrate of Province Wellesley A.M. Skinner who became a few years later first Inspector of Schools of the Straits Settlements.

“(…) Nor is there any teaching among the natives that deserves the name of Education. (...) The Malay boys learn what is called *Mangajee Qur’an!* Most of the boys follow the Arabic by memory rather than by the letters before them.” (cited after: Rauf 1964: 20, italics in the text)

Islamic education did not have high regards among colonial administrators and scholars. It is therefore only consequent that the books used for teaching were also seen as rather useless.

On the other hand these manuscripts were not offered in a large scale to European collectors. Mostly located in mosques, religious schools or other places of theological instructions they were kept by religious teachers which made it not possible

to study or copy many of them. The corpus of religious works in the Malay language is voluminous as we have seen. However, until today we do know next to nothing on the nature and contents of manuscripts and printed books located in the many religious institutional libraries throughout maritime Southeast Asia. We only have one catalogue of books of the library of a *pesantren*, two studies of books used for religious teaching in Java and Madura in the 1880s and 1980s and a list of books found in bookshops in Patani from the 1980s. Throughout the Islamic world mosques served as centres of education, therefore each famous or important mosque kept its own library (Sibai 1987: 5f.). However, not a single mosque library in Southeast Asia has ever published a catalogue of their manuscript stock. The catalogue of the Pesantren Tanoh Abèe 50 km south of Banda Aceh mentions about 900 manuscripts existing in its library (Wamad and al-Fairusy 1980).²² According to the family tradition this *pesantren* was founded already in the seventeenth century and is said to have more than 2000 manuscripts in possession in the nineteenth century (Chambert-Loir 1996). The collection was started in the early nineteenth century, the last dated manuscript is from the year AH 1318 (AD 1900/1) (Wamad and al-Fairusy 1980). There are no manuscripts of prose fiction, historical works or even stories on the wonders of the Prophet located in Tanoh Abèe. The collection is restricted strictly to Muslim theological titles, some are copies from originals located in Mecca. Chambert-Loir (1996: 39) estimates about 180 Malay titles to be found in the whole collection.²³ A similar picture of a high degree of Islamic intellectual life is reflected by the important article of van den Berg on books used in Islamic teachings on Java and Madura (1886). Although the majority of these works were written in Arabic and Javanese, also a few books in Malay are mentioned. Meant only as introductory survey van den Berg nevertheless highlights the importance of an intellectual tradition totally neglected and misinterpreted by contemporary Dutch colonial authorities. This “maintenance of an Islamic tradition” – so the subtitle of an important paper on Patani in South Thailand by Matheson and Hooker (1988) – became very much obvious by the long list of Islamic literature found in Patani in the mid-1980s.²⁴ I was in Malay-Islamic bookshops in Patani myself in 2002 and again in 2004 and can confirm that it is still maintained in Southern Thailand, although a great number of these books is not produced in Patani any more, but printed in Bangkok.

Poetry or more precisely *syair* (long poems with four-lined stanzas with an end rhyme a-a-a-a) were another genre which escaped to a certain degree the attention of

²² I would like to thank Sirtjo Koolhof for supplying me with a copy of this rare catalogue.

²³ This confirms to a recently published manuscript catalogue of the Ali Hasjmy collection in Aceh which consists to more than 80% of religious manuscripts mainly written in the Arabic language, another 10% being works on Arab grammar. Prose *hikayat* literature is restricted to less than 5% in this particular collection (Fathurahman and Holil 2007).

²⁴ The importance of the Muslim discourse for the intellectual history in maritime Southeast Asia was highlighted by Peter Riddell in his recent book *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World* (2001).

European observers – in sharp contrast to the *pantun* (short four-lined poems with an a-b-a-b end rhyme), which was regarded as natural and pure expression of a people and made its way into the works of French and German romantic literates like Hugo, Baudelaire or Chamisso. The *syair* genre, however, although the most popular Malay literary genre in the nineteenth century (Proudfoot 1993: 29), is fairly underrepresented in European manuscript collections. Many *syair* were based on materials from Persia, Egypt, Turkey or other Middle Eastern regions (Matheson 1983: 17) – again this illustrates the importance of Muslim cultural networks and its interactions.²⁵ *Syair* are difficult to understand and to translate compared both to prose fictional or historical stories due to their verse character.²⁶ Scholars in search for works which could bear Western reason and fit into their literary tastes would judge a *syair* probably as boring or disordered. Further Malay literature of the nineteenth century in general was regarded as a result of a period of cultural and literary decline which led Hans Overbeck to his statement “Malay literature is dead”. In Overbeck’s opinion (1927: 1) new Malay works of importance have not been written any longer in the nineteenth century although he was the first European scholar who paid attention in particular to this genre.²⁷ Overbeck was not alone with his judgement: inspired by nineteenth-century evolutionary positivism many administrator-scholars like Frank Swettenham, Hugh Clifford, Richard Winstedt or Richard Wilkinson draw the same conclusion on Malay literature and on Malay culture and society in general. This assumption is contradictory to all data we have on nineteenth century Malay literature. Overbeck (1927: 11) mentioned that *syair* were still very popular in the Malay Archipelago in 1926. At the tiny island of Penyengat in the Riau Archipelago just a few miles off Singapore the production of *syair* flourished throughout the nineteenth century (Matheson 1983: 8). The Dutch resident of Riau E. Netscher mentioned in 1858 that a number of poetry and prose works had been written in Riau and reported that there was no decay of Malay literature in Riau at all (Netscher 1858: 67). Ten years later, the Dutch Bible translator H. C. Klinkert wrote that *hikayat* were gradually disappearing whereas there was no shortage in poetry (*syair*) (Klinkert 1868: 312, 370). Only a few years later a publishing house was established by the court of Riau which printed several *syair* (van der Putten 1997). Several new *syair* were composed in the second

²⁵ It was even possible for European collectors to acquire Malay manuscripts in the compounds of the Al-Azhar University in Egypt in the early nineteenth century (Warnk 2006).

²⁶ It is difficult to define what precisely attracted Malay in particular to this genre in the nineteenth century. According to Virginia Matheson emotional effects of a poem, which was rather sung than recited, might have been very important. Furthermore she mentioned that a *syair* fulfilled many ideals of Muslim aesthetics (Matheson 1983: 24ff.).

²⁷ In one of his last papers Overbeck considered the “*syair* being probably the main part of Malay literature” (Overbeck 1938: 300).

half of the nineteenth century and subsequently published in Singapore, Penang and elsewhere.

Therefore, the texts located in European libraries reflect more the tastes and needs of its collectors than the kind of literature which circulated among local populations. Philology which seems to have a kind of political revival throughout Malaysia and Indonesia (Proudfoot 2003: 1) played a major role in constructing a Malay world by using materials regarded as ‘representative’ located in relevant collections. As we have seen some genres were highly popular among European collectors and scholars while others more or less escaped their attention. I can only indicate some consequences here. The limited number of Islamic theological literature and the lack of interest in those available might have had a considerable impact in viewing Southeast Asian Islam as ‘non-native’, ‘foreign’ or just as ‘tilt over local cultures’, in other words being ‘less Islamic’ and therefore ‘less fanatic’ than other Muslim, especially Middle Eastern countries. Interpretations like this were carried on well into the mid-twentieth century and beyond. During the Aceh War Dutch colonial officials and soldiers used this cliché to fight ‘fierce, fanatic Muslims infected by Islam’ whereas collaborators were seen as living in a ‘purer’ and more ‘original’ state of local culture.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the Malay literary world witnessed a major change through the introduction of (lithographic) printing. Throughout the Muslim world this development which meant a revolution in reading habits and modern education was enthusiastically welcomed by many.²⁸ Lending libraries were established in Batavia and Palembang and probably in several other places throughout the Malay Archipelago (Chambert-Loir 1991; Kratz 1977). The printing of Malay books in Singapore, Penang, Riau, Johor and to a lesser extent also at other places meant a huge transformation of Malay literature. Formerly rare manuscripts could circulate now in large numbers at comparatively low costs. This lowered the value of manuscripts in a certain way, but opened new markets (Proudfoot 2002: 126ff.). The majority of publishers was located in Singapore and was not of Malay, but of Arabic and/or Javanese descent, while a few Chinese and Indian Muslim presses printed Malay books too (Lee 1989: 6ff.; Proudfoot 1987: 2).

From the very beginning at Gutenberg’s times printing was a commercial enterprise. Most publishers had agents throughout all larger towns in the Malay Peninsula, Sarawak, Sumatra and Java. Printed books had to be registered – at least in theory – by the British colonial authorities in the Malay Peninsula. From these data we know what titles had been most frequently been re-edited and sometimes even the

²⁸ See e.g. Metcalf (1982: 205ff.), Glass and Roper (2002) and Bobzin (2002).

number of copies. Hans Overbeck (1927: 5) as a contemporary eye-witness mentioned an average number between 500 to 1000 copies, the highest number ever printed being 2000 copies. Again it reveals that the interests of local customers do not correspond with the tastes of European readers. Islamic theological literature, *syair* and prose *hikayat* stories were commercially the most successful books published up to 1920 (Proudfoot 1986: 104; Proudfoot 1993: 29). Networks to the Middle East further strengthened the strong position of religious works in Malay literature. When in 1884 a printing house was established in Mecca, it was a Malay from Patani who ran it for several years and edited from the very beginning theological works in the Malay language (Md. Sidin 1998: 109).

Printed books from Asian publishers were regarded by European observers as inferior to manuscripts. Therefore they were less collected and even less studied. Overbeck and many other contemporaries hold a low opinion on the physical qualities of these titles (printing style, binding, paper quality etc.) and on the contents which were described as “unimportant” (Overbeck 1927: 1). He complained about Arab-Malay publishers in Penang and Singapore having not been able to produce new works of quality or to reprint the ‘good’ books of former times, but only to publish thin booklets with stories deriving from Arabia (ibd.: 11). The holdings of these printed works before 1900 in European collections are even more neglected and less described than the manuscripts. Proudfoot’s enormous catalogue (1993) lists only holdings in larger libraries, but does not mention particular collectors like the French missionary-scholar P. Favre or the German missionary E. Lüring. The collections of these two men are located in Paris and Frankfurt respectively and contain several titles not listed in Proudfoot’s catalogue. Another problem is that several collections are catalogized in libraries, but the transcriptions of Jawi script by un-experienced nineteenth century colleagues which turned out to be inaccurate or insufficient had crept into modern OPAC-systems.

Summarizing finally, this paper can be read as a plea for more editions of Malay manuscripts – in this respect the efforts of the late Wan Mohd. Shaghir Abdullah who edited many religious and other Malay texts as facsimile must be highly praised – and for more catalogues of Malay manuscripts as well as for printed books, especially in Germany, France, Italy and the Iberian Peninsula. This might enable us in the twenty-first century to get a deeper understanding of intellectual life and society of the nineteenth century and earlier times.

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