

THE SKEAT COLLECTION AND MALAYAN ETHNOGRAPHY

The Skeat Collection was assembled by the late Walter William Skeat (1866-1953), who was a notable collector of ethnographic material in Malaya in the 1890s and whose books are still in use. It contains English-language and Malay-language books, journals and offprints, some Malay manuscripts, and various items from Skeat's working papers and diaries, and is held in the Tylor Library of the Institute of Social Anthropology at the University of Oxford.

Skeat grew up in Cambridge, where his father was Professor of Anglo-Saxon and a Fellow of Christ's College. Skeat himself later became a classical scholar of the same college. After graduating, he decided to make his career overseas. He joined the Selangor Civil Service in 1891, and became District Officer, Kuala Langat, in 1895. He then began the systematic collection of artefacts and data which he used in writing his two major books, *Malay Magic* (1900) and, with C.O. Blagden as joint author, *Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula* (1906).

Late in life he produced an account of an expedition, of which he was joint leader, to north-east Malaya in 1899-1900 (Skeat and Laidlaw 1953). This was his third important publication. He also wrote a number of papers for learned journals as well as essays of a more popular type.¹

A note by Dr R.H. Barnes, describing the acquisition by stages of the Collection, is appended to this essay. I am indebted to Dr Barnes and to Miss J. Anderson, both of the Oxford Institute of Social Anthropology, for their help during my brief visits to Oxford to work on the Skeat Collection.

¹ See Gullick 1988: 143 where I list Skeat's published works. I

On his return from the expedition Skeat was found permanently unfit for service in the tropics. During the period 1900-1914 he was occupied mainly in writing. He then became an official 'guide-lecturer' at the British Museum (1914-1934) and spent the years of his retirement, until his death in 1953, in Devon.

On returning from Malaya in 1897 Skeat had presented his large and valuable collection of Malay and Malayan aboriginal artefacts to Cambridge University, and 'the very great interest so kindly taken' in it helped him to obtain University funds for his expedition of 1899-1900. But this support was confined to a small, though influential group of Cambridge dons who had recognized the importance of the pioneer ethnographic work done by A.C. Haddon in his expeditions of 1888 and 1898 to the Torres Straits. Haddon advised and encouraged Skeat in planning the latter's Malayan expedition. However, anthropology, then called 'comparative ethnology', was a new and undervalued discipline at Cambridge. The first lectureship, to which Haddon was appointed in 1900, carried a stipend of only £50 per annum, and for some years no accommodation was provided for the new department.

The large collections of material which Haddon and Skeat brought back from their expeditions were - in Skeat's words - 'housed in a temporary building of a truly lamentable character'. Moreover, the artefacts were left in their packing cases for many years until funds had been collected for the erection, by stages, of the present Museum building. About 1920 Haddon, by now elevated to a Readership, unpacked his collection and put it on display (Quiggin 1942: 104). Skeat's collection had to wait still longer. Let him take up the story:

In 1938, when some substantial progress had been made with the building of the new Museum, Mr T.T. Paterson, who had become Curator, wrote to me as follows: 'Since ever I came to the Museum, some years ago ... I had been struck by the "Skeat Collection". To my mind it is one of the most interesting collections for the teaching of anthropology, in view of the complete picture it presents of the material culture (of one Asiatic people). Therefore since I became Curator at the beginning of this year ... I kept well in the forefront the problem of adequate exhibition of your material.'²

have since traced two minor items not included in that list. These appear as Skeat 1901 and 1902 in the list of references at the end of the present essay.

² Quoted from a draft Introduction written by Skeat to his journal of the expedition (Skeat and Laidlaw 1953). Either the editor of *JMBRAS* or R.O. Winstedt, who assisted Skeat (then over eighty years old) in preparing his manuscript for publication, decided to omit the passage on Skeat's collection of artefacts at Cambridge from the Introduction, presumably because this was not thought to be relevant to the Journal. The typescript of Skeat's draft Introduction is held in the Skeat Collection at Oxford.

However, Paterson's plans were frustrated by the outbreak of war, as everything of value in the Museum's collections was stored away for the duration. It was only after the war that Skeat's former colleagues from the British Museum were able to assure him that his collection was now adequately displayed. It seems that Skeat, then over eighty years old and living in Devon, never saw the display of material which he had presented fifty years before on condition that it was to be 'exhibited within a reasonable space of time'. It may now be seen at the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Downing Street, Cambridge.

Skeat's disappointment undoubtedly contributed to his decision to transfer his books and papers to Oxford. Another factor was that, in the 1930s, the Colonial Office had instituted a training course at Oxford for recruits to the Malayan Civil Service (Heussler 1963: 124). An approach was made to Skeat, among other retired administrators, to contribute books to the reference library. The final bequest of books and papers was made at Skeat's death (see Dr Barnes's note below).

The presence of the Skeat Collection, by then held at the Institute of Social Anthropology, encouraged Kirk Endicott, who was a student at the Institute in the 1960s, to undertake a major study in Skeat's field, based partly on Skeat's materials (Endicott 1970: vii).

The original Skeat Collection is what remains of the reference material collected by Skeat for his own use. It is valuable, but rather heterogeneous. An annotated list of the Malay texts, both handwritten and printed, has been compiled (Ricklefs and Voorhoeve 1977: 127-9). Among them (item 15) is a copy of the *Salasilah Negeri Patani*, which is one of two extant texts of a local history of the Malay State of Patani.³

Skeat had discovered a copy in the hands of a Malay informant when he was in Patani in April/May 1899. The owner would not part with it, but Skeat persuaded him to make him a copy. The modern editors of what is now usually called the *Hikayat Patani* have found it a valuable source for comparative analysis of the text (Teeuw and Wyatt 1970: 31-6).

Skeat was at all times an assiduous collector of Malay and aboriginal ritual formulas. He attached much importance to linguistic material of this kind as a source of ethnographic information. The final hundred pages of *Malay Magic* is made up of Malay incantations as recorded by Skeat in romanized Malay. There are also some manuscript notes by Skeat on the vocabularies of aboriginal groups, and he published a paper on the language of the

³ Patani had originally been one large Malay state. However, in the course of the nineteenth century the Siamese had divided it into a group of smaller states (see map at p. 4 of Skeat and Laidlaw 1953). In 1902 they deposed the Malay ruler of the reduced Patani. 'Patani' is here used to denote the reduced Patani and other successor states as a group.

Besisi (Skeat 1896).⁴

The large collection of assorted journal articles and off-prints are catalogued by author in the Institute's 'Skeat Catalogue'. Skeat was much interested in education, and the Collection includes a number of Malay schoolbooks in use a century ago. In this part of the Collection one may discover obscure publications whose existence would otherwise be unknown, and obtain access to things which it would now be difficult to locate elsewhere, or indeed would not be found in other reference or research libraries in this country.

Skeat's diaries, typed drafts and manuscript notes are only a small part of the Collection but, as original and unique material, they are of particular value for research. Skeat's diary of the year 1899-1900, which he spent in north-east Malaya and the adjoining area of Thailand, fills two notebooks. Written in pencil, it covers almost 400 pages. There is a wide variation in the number of words on each page but, at a rough estimate, it comprises some 80,000 words. It does not cover some weeks in 1899 when Skeat was attempting to reach the summit of Gunong Tahan, the highest peak in Malaya. At this point he merely notes that he kept a separate record of that period, which almost ended in disaster (Gullick 1988: 138).

The manuscript diary, as it now exists, bears the mark of editorial revision by Skeat to make it usable by a typist as the draft of the account of the expedition published in 1953 (Skeat and Laidlaw 1953).⁵ As the published version, which does take in the ascent of Gunong Tahan, is about 70,000 words it seems that a considerable part, perhaps 15,000 words, of the diary text is not included in the published account. Examination of the original diary shows that, while much of the omitted material consists in unimportant facts about the movements and arrangements of the expedition, some ethnographic material has been pruned. In spite of much

⁴ Skeat's 'Besisi' are still to be found in the Carey Island area of coastal Selangor and are more correctly known as the Ma' Betisék. Some researchers, however, refer to them as the Mah Meri, their own term meaning 'people of the forest' which they apply to *all* aboriginal groups and not to themselves alone (Wazir-Jehan Begum Karim 1981: 13).

⁵ Skeat prepared a full account of his expedition soon after his return from Malaya in 1900. His hopes of publishing a book on the expedition came to nothing (Gullick 1988: 149). However, he planned to present his typescript version, based on his original diary, to Cambridge to be used in support of his specimens at the Museum. As his collection did not go on display, he retained the typescript and, on the outbreak of war, deposited it for safekeeping in the cellars of the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford. The 'personal account' published in *JMBRAS* (Skeat and Laidlaw 1953) is a revised version of it. He may have begun to work on it again in the late 1930s after his retirement, but he certainly did not complete a final revision until 1952 (information from Skeat's letters in the Oxford Institute's file of correspondence with Skeat).

deletion and alteration of particular words and phrases it is generally possible to read the original text of the diary.

In addition to the diary itself, there are two other sources of related information. Skeat entered ethnographic information in notebooks under pre-arranged subject headings, probably taken from the second edition of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* prepared by the Anthropological Institute (Anthropological Institute 1892; see Urry 1972; Coote 1987). This fact is interesting confirmation of Skeat's preliminary contacts with the Anthropological Institute and cognate bodies, to whose journals he contributed numerous papers after his retirement from Malaya (Gullick 1988: 143). Primary fieldwork records of this period are comparatively rare among the archives of social anthropology, and so Skeat's surviving notes are documents of intrinsic historical interest.

Secondly, Skeat wrote an Introduction to the published account of his expedition, to which reference has been made above in connection with the display of his material at Cambridge.

The Collection also includes some working notebooks with pages divided by perforations, so that slips can be torn out. On these slips Skeat wrote individual Malay words and their English meaning. Presumably he intended to remove the slips and rearrange them in alphabetical order as a dictionary or vocabulary. He himself never produced a dictionary, but he did, in 1895, collaborate with R.J. Wilkinson, who was in the early stages of collecting material for his *Malay-English Dictionary*, the first edition of which was published in 1901 (Wilkinson 1901). In the revised edition of 1932, Wilkinson (1932: i) describes how he and Skeat collaborated. One can find items in Skeat's notes, where there is a notable similarity with entries in Wilkinson's dictionary (e.g. *utama*; Wilkinson 1901: 3).

In addition to the contents of the Skeat Collection at Oxford, the Skeat family retain a few of his papers and letters, and one of his annotated copies of *Malay Magic*. The other annotated copy of this book and Skeat's annotated copies of *Pagan Races* and of Wilkinson's dictionary are held at Oxford.

In the course of two short visits to Oxford, I have made only a general appraisal of the Collection and its potential as a source for reference and research purposes upon which to offer some tentative comments. Dr Endicott gave very close attention to the conceptual material to be extracted from *Malay Magic*. This book also contains much descriptive information relating to rights of passage and Malay court and village life. Examples of the latter are passages on housebuilding and rice cultivation (Skeat 1900: 143, 218), and his description of the Selangor regalia which he had inspected since the royal capital was in the Kuala Langat district (*ibid.*: 40). In addition there is the extensive linguistic material (incantations etc.) already mentioned.

In this respect, Skeat's work is best treated as a contribution to the total stock of ethnographic material on Malay culture collected by administrators in the latter part of the nineteenth

century. W.E. (later Sir William) Maxwell, who was Resident of Selangor when Skeat joined the State service in 1891, was outstanding among his contemporaries.⁶ Maxwell had founded in 1877, and became the first editor of, the *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. He contributed to that Journal more than thirty papers (listed in Lim and Wijasuriya 1970). Maxwell's major essays include two monographs on Malay 'slavery' and Malay land tenure (Maxwell 1884 and 1890).

Skeat himself wrote papers for *JSBRAS* and was also joint founder and editor of the *Selangor Journal* (1892-1897). Skeat's numerous contributions to the latter publication include a series of eleven papers on 'Malay Customs in Southern Selangor', which are the first drafts of passages in his book, *Malay Magic* (Skeat 1900).⁷

Other administrators wrote for these journals. In addition, Skeat and other district officers produced annual, monthly and special reports in the course of their official duties in the late 1880s and the 1890s which are a useful source of fragmentary data on Malay culture, especially its economic aspects.⁸

Thereafter the bureaucracy became more desk-bound. One of Wilkinson's purposes in founding the series of *Papers on Malay Subjects* in 1907 was to provide a source of ethnographic information for a new generation of British administrators (see Burns 1971, especially pp. 9-10; Hooker 1970). Wilkinson and Winstedt were prominent among administrators who continued to write (as Skeat, now in England, no longer could) for *JSBRAS*.⁹ More technical papers were published in the *Journal of the Federated States Museums* from 1905.

Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula, written mainly by Skeat but with chapters on linguistic subjects by C.O. Blagden, was

⁶ William Maxwell (1846-1897) served in Malaya from 1865 to 1894, reaching the position of acting Governor. He then became Governor of the Gold Coast, where he died in 1897. He was a member of a celebrated 'colonial service dynasty' in Malaya. His major achievement was the introduction of a system of registered title to land, including peasant smallholdings, in Malaya (Maxwell 1894).

⁷ Skeat's articles in the *Selangor Journal*, twenty-three in all, can be identified by the initials 'W.S.' appended to them. He wrote on a variety of subjects, such as the customs of Javanese immigrants who had settled in the Kuala Langat district as well as those of the local aboriginal groups.

⁸ See, for example, reports published in the *Selangor Government Gazette* of the 1890s (PRO [Public Records Office, Kew] Series CO469).

⁹ Lim and Wijasuriya 1970 lists the Wilkinson/Winstedt *JSBRAS*/*JMBRAS* input, and Bastin and Roolvink 1964: 10-23 is a complete list of Winstedt's enormous output; note Winstedt 1925 in particular. Wilkinson and Winstedt were both personal friends of Skeat, the former from Cambridge student days.

published in 1906 (Skeat and Blagden 1906). It has not stood the test of time as well as *Malay Magic*. Neither author had a profound knowledge of aboriginal cultures. In their Preface they described the book as 'essentially a compilation from many sources', written to bring within the covers of a massive two-volume work all which was then known.

Much of this data was of inferior quality. Writing in 1910, Wilkinson summed up the existing state of knowledge of the aboriginal groups with the dismissive comment that 'with all this mass of literature we know next to nothing about the aborigines of the Malay Peninsula' (Wilkinson 1910). However, he excepted from his criticism Skeat's 'prolonged study of the Coast Besisi [which] added very materially to our knowledge of the aborigines' (see Skeat 1896).

Although *Pagan Races* has been overtaken by later and better research among aborigines, it still has its uses. Skeat went to much trouble to obtain a large and comprehensive collection of photographs for use as illustrations, which are an excellent record of aboriginal life in his time. He also wrote an Introduction entitled 'Environment', which is a first-rate description of the Malayan jungle and its flora and fauna as a habitat, and he also included a bibliography which, among other things, takes in the work of continental scholars of his day on Malayan aborigines (Skeat and Blagden 1906: 1-16, xxv-xl).

In planning his expedition of 1899-1900, Skeat chose north-east Malaya and the Malay area of southern Thailand as a region which, at the turn of the century, had been little affected by external economic and demographic pressures. It had, and still has, the largest concentration of Malay population in the Malay Peninsula. The States of Patani, Kelantan and Terengganu each presented interesting features of Islamic activity and organization.

Skeat began his travels at Singgora (Songkhla), which is further north than the limits of the predominantly Malay cultural area. Hence he has valuable data in his journal on Siamese and other non-Malay communities and the effect of alien Asian cultures on the Malays of the region. One of his companions, Annandale, was much interested in this aspect of their work and wrote about it in his own anthropological notes, based on the Skeat and the Annandale/Robinson expeditions (Annandale and Robinson 1903). Another of Skeat's contemporaries, Graham, who was the Siamese-appointed Adviser to the Malay ruler of Kelantan (from 1903 to 1909), also described some features of Siamese influence on Malay culture (Graham 1908). In later years, Skeat himself wrote a popular essay on the Siamese (Skeat 1909). This cross-cultural aspect of the work of Skeat and others in the north-east region of Malaya would repay further analysis.

However, the main focus of Skeat's fieldwork in 1899-1900 was Malay culture. As with *Malay Magic*, the data Skeat obtained during his expedition forms part of a larger body of information: Hugh Clifford (1895 and 1902), Henry Norman (1895) and C.F. Bozzolo (unpublished, 1889) had been there before him. His companion during the expedition, Nelson Annandale, returned to north-east Malaya a year or two later (Annandale and Robinson 1903). Graham, in

addition to his book on Kelantan already referred to (1908), wrote one on Siam (1924) which has passages on the Patani area, and in his official capacity he wrote annual reports on Kelantan.

Skeat's short popular essays (Gullick 1988: 144) on north-east Malaya offer little new in factual information but preserve, as illustrations, numerous photographs taken by Skeat or his contemporaries.

Modern writers have tended to concentrate on specific political, economic or Islamic themes.¹⁰ However, there is still useful data from Skeat's time awaiting more general analysis.

Skeat's reaction to the news (in 1951) that the Oxford Institute had recently made considerable additions to his Collection by the purchase of books by Dutch authors was characteristic of the man: 'I was particularly pleased ... Dutch contributions to our knowledge of Malaya are *invaluable*. Two of them came to see the Cambridge collection in Downing Street *twice*, and were deeply interested' (Oxford Institute's files). Always a modest man, he viewed his own work, and his specimens, books and papers, as a contribution to a collective effort in scholarship and research. In this essay I have tried to describe the Skeat Collection at Oxford in that context.

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¹⁰ The north-east region has proved a fertile ground for modern research. The classic Firth studies (Rosemary Firth 1943; Raymond Firth 1946) of a Malay fishing community need no introduction. Fraser 1960 and 1966 describe a Patani Malay fishing village. The Kelantan studies edited by Roff (1974) are historical, cultural and biographical essays supplemented by a valuable bibliography of published work on Kelantan. Cuisinier's work (1936) on shamans and related topics was used by Endicott as a supplementary source and relates closely to one of Skeat's principal interests; see also Firth 1967. Matheson and Hooker (1988) analyze Islamic religious books. Islam is one of the main themes of the Roff collection and, in a political context, of Kessler 1978. Khoo Kay Kim 1988 illustrates the Malay perception in Skeat's time of Siamese cultural 'aggression' (as do Matheson and Hooker). Shaharil Talib 1984 is a political and social history of Terengganu resistance to external pressures. Teeuw and Wyatt (1970) have similar descriptive material on Patani.

In addition, there is yet more varied literature on Malay culture and society in the north-east, which can be traced through the *Index Malaysiana* (Lim Huck Tee and D.E.K. Wijasuriya 1970; Wijasuriya and Lim Huck Tee 1974 and 1985), Cheeseman 1959 and other more specialized bibliographies. Lim 1962: 185 has some unusual entries.

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APPENDIX: A NOTE ON THE SKEAT COLLECTION

In 1936, A.S. Haynes, a friend of W.W. Skeat, learned of the possible dispersal of Skeat's personal library. He then contacted the University to see if it would be possible to lodge the library somewhere in Oxford. In 1937, Henry Balfour offered to provide storage for the books at the Pitt Rivers Museum until a permanent home could be found for them. Eventually, Professor Radcliffe-Brown, who had just assumed the Chair of Social Anthropology, agreed to accept them for display in the Department of Social Anthropology. Skeat gave a number of books without charge, but the main part of the Collection was purchased with funds provided by Captain Walter Ogilvy, so that it could be presented to the University as a free gift. The University's gratitude and the conditions were published in the *University Gazette* of 23rd November 1938. The entry read:

Decrees carried *nemine contradicente*....

2. That the thanks of the University be accorded to W.W. Skeat, Esq., Captain Walter Ogilvy, M.B.E. and A.S. Haynes, Esq., C.M.G.,

whose joint efforts have secured to it a valuable collection of Malayan books, and that the collection be accepted with gratitude on the following conditions:-

- (1) that its unity be preserved under the title of the Skeat collection of Malayan books;
- (2) that a separate catalogue be prepared;
- (3) that it be made accessible, under proper safeguards, to all persons who may wish to make use of it;
- (4) that additions be made to it from time to time as may be appropriate and proper.

A copy of this decree is kept posted in the Bagby Room of the Tylor Library in the Institute of Social Anthropology, where the books are shelved.

Skeat provided additions in 1939, including 150 pamphlets and the 'bulk' of his Malay manuscripts, Malay lithographed books, and Malay printed works. In the same year, Haynes solicited a grant of £23. 6s. 8d. from the Colonial Secretary, Straits Settlements, Singapore for the purchase of additional books for the collection. The actual selection and purchase of the books was made by Skeat in consultation with Radcliffe-Brown. In 1940, Skeat's son, T.C. Skeat, passed on an extensive collection of Malay manuscripts belonging to G.M. Laidlaw. Skeat had persuaded Laidlaw's daughter to present them to the Library. The Collection was further supplemented in 1942 by books from the bequest of Captain H. Berkeley. Skeat's sons T.C. and W.O. Skeat sent a final consignment of books, notes and manuscripts to the Institute of Social Anthropology in 1955.

The Collection's unity is still preserved, and it is still separately catalogued. The library continues to purchase scholarly works on Southeast Asia which are added to the Collection. It also includes a number of publications by staff and former students of the Institute, whose own research it has greatly aided, and it provides an invaluable resource in teaching. The manuscripts and off-prints are securely stored in the Tylor Library.

An annotated list of the Malay manuscripts may be found in Ricklefs and Voorhoeve 1977: 127-9 (see list of references above). Reference to a further Malay manuscript from Skeat's original collection now held in the University's Bodleian Library may also be found on page 104 of the same work.

The Skeat Collection is open for consultation by senior members of the University. Other persons who have a serious scholarly interest in the Collection may obtain access by application to the Institute.

R.H.B.