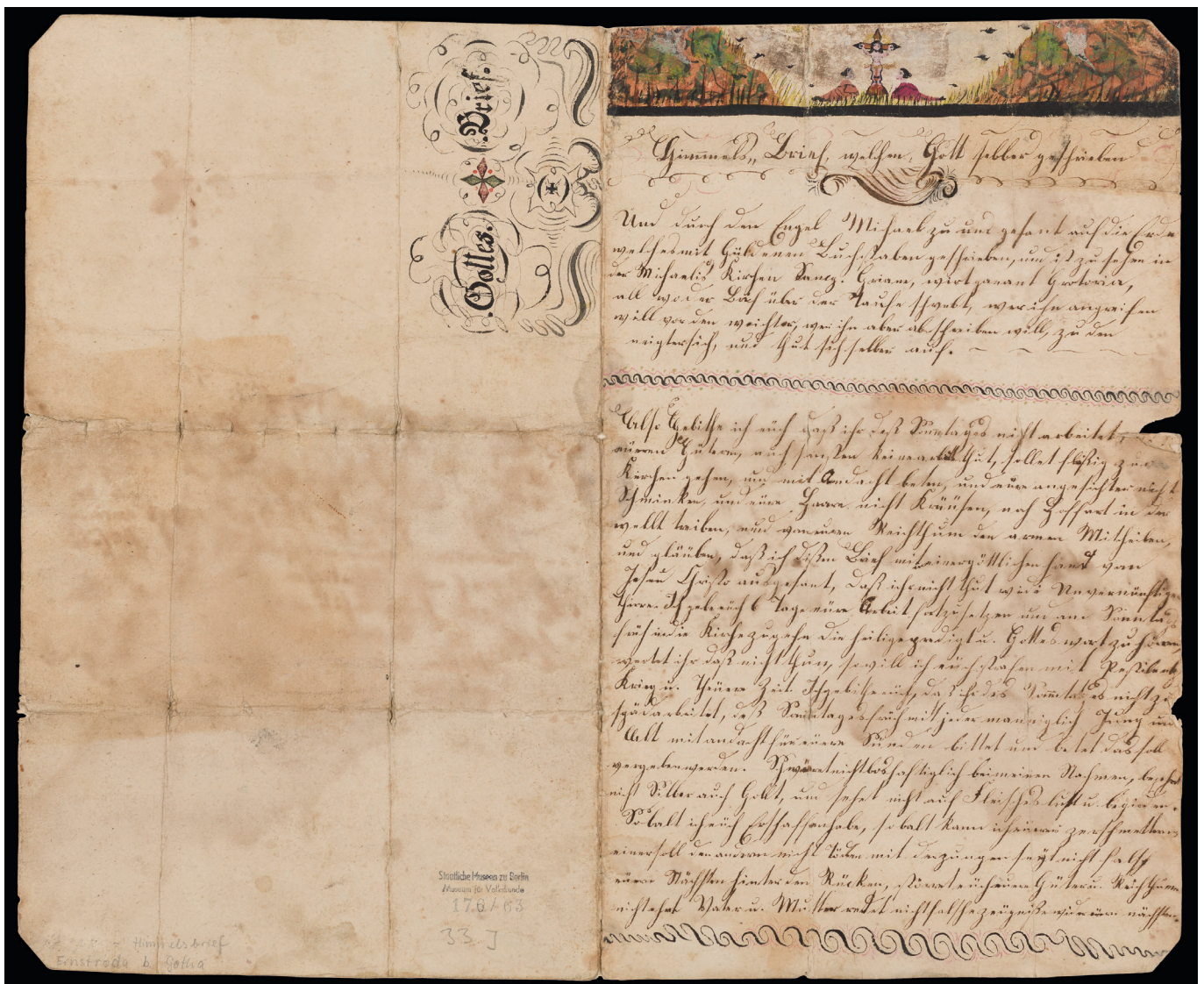


manuscript cultures

Hamburg | Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures

2749-1021



Publishing Information

Agency: How Manuscripts Affect and Create Social Realities

Edited by Michael Kohs and Sabine Kienitz

Every volume of *manuscript cultures* has been peer-reviewed and is also openly accessible on CSMC's website <<https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/publications/mc.html>>. We would like to thank the German Research Foundation (DFG) for its generous support of the Cluster of Excellence EXC 2176 'Understanding Written Artefacts', which has made the printing of this journal volume possible.

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oeding print, Braunschweig
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www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de

Funded by



Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft
German Research Foundation

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A 'letter from Heaven', ID no. I (33 J) 176/1963, Berlin, Museum of European Cultures (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Museum Europäischer Kulturen). Written in Ernstroda near Gotha, Thuringia, and dated 1776. The original sheet of paper was folded once, making four pages. Here we can see p. 1 with the title 'Himmels=Brief, welchen, Gott selber geschrieben' ('Letter from Heaven, which God Himself has written') and page 4. The written bifolium was then folded four times. Two words were visible on the two outer sides resulting from this: 'Gottes Brief' ('God's letter'), shown on p. 4. The upper part of the letter has been cropped and part of the illumination has been cut off. Photography: Christian Krug.

ISSN (Print) 1867-9617

ISSN (Online) 2749-1021

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Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures
Universität Hamburg
Warburgstr. 26
20354 Hamburg

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Article

Customised Manuscripts to Shape a Community of Readers? Overbeck's Collection of Rental Manuscripts from Palembang (Indonesia)*

Jan van der Putten | Hamburg

In the course of the nineteenth century, lending libraries or manuscript-rental shops seem to have gained a firm footing in the local literary market of several urban centres in the Malay world. In the shadow of a thriving indigenous printing industry predominantly producing lithographic reproductions of manuscript texts in a few urban centres, a number of Malay copyists carved out a niche in the market by continuing the Chinese custom of producing writing on demand and distributing the products among family members, friends and peers.¹ The ownership of manuscripts and access to them were both embedded in a network of human relationships which appear to have been increasingly accompanied by monetary transactions as the encroachment of the colonial system deepened. Handwritten and printed texts were relatively rare in the literary production of the Malay world, which was still firmly rooted in its oral basis, and access to them was difficult and had to be negotiated with the owner or custodian of the collection in question. In the absence of public libraries and bookshops catering to the needs of an indigenous audience in the early nineteenth century, the general public was dependent on specialists to read, perform and explain the content of the tales and treatises.²

Gradually, circumstances changed with the ongoing colonial encroachment by the Dutch in Indonesia and the

British in peninsular South-east Asia, introducing vernacular education systems that spread literacy in Malay in Roman script and also promoted Arabic script, particularly in British Malaya. Missionaries supported such 'modernising' efforts by not only teaching pupils basic reading and arithmetic, but also training the children and young adults to write, translate, print and bind texts into artefacts that could be stored, traded and distributed easily. These efforts mixed with and also displaced earlier literacy fostered in the traditional literary centres of the palace and religious institutions. Towns became the new cultural centres where manuscripts were produced and distributed from, where colonial masters exploited indigenous workers, where foreign traders settled and thrived for many generations, and where newcomers arrived in throngs to innovate and subvert standards, while itinerant troupes of performers, adventurers and artists mixed all the existing traditions into an eclectic potpourri of forms, languages and styles.

Fin-de-siècle Palembang in the southern parts of the Indonesian island of Sumatra was one of those colonial towns where many different peoples and cultures converged. It was the place of the legendary Mount Siguntang where the great-great-grandchildren of the 'two-horned' (Dhul Qarnayn) Alexander the Great reportedly descended to Earth to turn the rice panicles into gold with silver stalks and found the first Malay kingdom of Srivijaya, the origin of the Malay royal lineage. During its long history, Palembang became a Chinese pirate lair in the fifteenth century, later to be conquered by Javanese forces whose cultural dominance of its royal house had a sustained influence on the elite culture of the court. In the early nineteenth century, British (and later Dutch) troops took the town by force, ransacked the court and its library and exiled Sultan Baharuddin, who was a well-reputed patron of the arts and wrote his own poems.

* This paper is part of research project A06, 'Changing Practices of the 19th-century Malay Manuscript Economy', conducted at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, University of Hamburg, and funded by the DFG (German Research Foundation).

¹ Ulrich Kratz (1977), Teuku Iskandar (1981) and Henri Chambert-Loir (1984, 1991) were the first scholars to discuss the existence of lending libraries in the Malay world in a more than cursory manner, while Salmon (1981) and Kumar and Proudfoot (1996) indicated the continuation of Chinese practices in copying manuscripts for commercial purposes. More recently, I published a preliminary paper about the changing practices of the Malay manuscript economy (Putten 2017), which this paper also builds on.

² Cf. Proudfoot 2002.



Fig. 1: Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen, The Netherlands, KK 141-03-02, Schetskaart van de Gemeente Palembang. Map of Palembang in 1930, for an online copy, see Leiden University Libraries <<http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:2012662>>.

The manuscripts of the Palembang library were taken to Batavia and, consequently, were partly dispersed among several collections and partly lost. After Dutch imperialist pacification and consolidation in South Sumatra, Arab and Chinese merchants established themselves more firmly in Palembang, which thrived again in the second half of the nineteenth century, making the town one of the main nodes in the Arab-dominated shipping network spanning the Malay Archipelago.

Ever since early times, Palembang has been a place where people settled to trade forest and mining products from the interior for cloth, silver and other goods transported up river. On the north and south banks of the River Musi, merchants and members of the local elite built compounds that developed into neighbourhoods (*kampung*), which the Dutch numbered for administrative purposes. They divided the *kampungs* into up- (*Ulu*) and downstream (*Ilir*) settlements which correspond with the south and north river banks respectively. Chinese, Arab and other settlers had built their homes here in the vicinity of other compounds where the extended family of the Sultan lived. Quite a few of the *kampungs* were known as either elite Palembang or Hadrami-Arab neighbourhoods where certain families had their main residence and businesses. These groups had an important influence on the spread of literacy within the

town through their activities in an indigenous education system that was religious in nature. A census carried out in the mid-1850s indicates that among the professions in the indigenous community, 67 persons earned a living as a professional letter-writer and/or copyist of the Qur'an (*koran- en brieveschrijvers*), which were trades that were obviously connected, while 46 others indicated that they were teachers.³ The Islamic educational system that some of the Hadrami families maintained in certain neighbourhoods disseminated basic skills in reciting the Qur'an, of course, but also in basic reading, writing and arithmetic among the children who would be sent to the religious centres (*langgar*) by their parents.⁴ These skills were necessary to administer trade with the interior, which was a major source of income for many of the families that lived in town.

Seen against this backdrop of trade and learning that the town shared with other urban centres in regions such as Batavia, Singapore and Surabaya, it does not come as a surprise to learn that Palembang was one of the pioneers of printing in the Dutch East Indies. In 1855 a Dutch official in Palembang sent a lithographed Qur'an to the colonial authorities in Batavia. The Qur'an was printed by a certain Kemas Haji Muhammad Azhari on a press he had brought back on his return voyage from Mecca. Subsequently, the Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences invited the Malay language official stationed in Riau, Hermann von de Wall, to write about this Qur'an and the possibilities a free indigenous press could have regarding the 'intellectual progress of the native population'. Von de Wall gave a detailed description of the layout, the Malay introduction, which displays rules on how to recite the Arabic words, and of the gold-embossed leather covers of the ornate publication. Based on information provided by the Dutch District Officer, von de Wall disclosed how Kemas Muhammad Azhari had procured the press in Singapore for 500 guilders and how proficient the native printer was at printing with it, as he showed the District Officer by printing a short poem during his visit. The language official also commented upon the Lahore-style scribal hand used for copying it for the lithographic process and that copies of the Qur'an sold at a price of 25 guilders a piece.⁵

³ Cf. Storm van 's Gravesande 1856, 466–467.

⁴ Cf. Peeters 1995.

⁵ See Wall 1857.

Around this time, the Dutch colonial authorities had issues with freedom of publishing by subjects in the colonies⁶ and only allowed Bruining the printers and the firm E. J. L. Führi & H. M. van Dorp to set up shop in Batavia in the late 1840s after protracted negotiations. This step meant a breach in the monopoly held by the colonial printing establishment, the *Landsdrukkerij*, which the authorities had carefully guarded in order to retain complete control over what texts would circulate *en masse* in the colony. Over the next few years, however, the government would enforce new regulations that were stricter governing the production and circulation of printing, which also made it more difficult for indigenous people to print books in the Dutch East Indies.⁷ The Batavian Society, eager to embrace more tolerant regulations,⁸ had therefore asked the Malay language specialist, who gladly obliged. However, Dutch local authorities had missed out on earlier developments in Palembang when the same Kemas Muhammad Azhari had already been reproducing the Qur'an in the late 1840s on a press procured in Singapore. From the colophon of the Qur'an produced in 1848, six years prior to the one discussed and welcomed by the Dutch commentators, we learn that not only the printing press was imported from Singapore, but also the knowledge needed to handle it properly, in the person of Ibrahim ibn Husain, who originated from Sahab Nagur and was taught by Abdullah Munsyi at Keasberry's missionary school in Singapore.⁹ It seems that colonial censorship and intelligence services were not as rigid and (water-)tight as is often surmised in these early years of the colony.

The town of Palembang has produced substantial numbers of Malay and Javanese manuscripts which have been preserved in various repositories. This makes Palembang an important node in the literate networks that constitute the Malay world.¹⁰ As mentioned above, substantial parts of the rich royal collection of manuscripts were taken by Dutch troops and transported to Batavia, where the manuscripts were divided up among several collections in the course of time. In an appendix in his edition of two Malay renderings

of Arabic texts by Shihabuddin and Kemas Fakhruddin written in Palembang in the late eighteenth century, the Dutch scholar G. W. J. Drewes presented an extensive, annotated list of titles that were produced in Palembang or connected to it.¹¹

Islamic treatises on jurisprudence, mysticism and other fields of religious knowledge seem to constitute most of the topics in these manuscripts, but Palembang also gained a reputation for its narrative poems of the adventurous and romantic type. Other kinds of texts were mainly produced by members of the extended royal family at the royal court or outside it.¹²

This rich heritage has been preserved to this day, not only in the post-colonial repositories that exist in Jakarta and Leiden, but in Palembang itself, which houses quite a number of small private manuscript collections. The majority of these collections have already been digitised and studied by a team of researchers at the Universitas Indonesia.¹³ Other efforts to preserve the city's manuscripts have also been undertaken. Most recently, the DREAMSEA Programme had the opportunity to access several collections in October 2018 in order to preserve the content and make it easily accessible for scholars and other interested parties.¹⁴

It is against this relatively rich literary backdrop that we find a local print shop, which printed texts typographically for the Palembang market,¹⁵ and at least one lending library, which were both run around the turn of the twentieth century. Ulrich Kratz has made some concise but interesting comments about a manuscript rental shop, focusing on two manuscripts that originated from the 1880s,¹⁶ and a few years later the same scholar published a detailed description of the rental manuscripts in the small Palembang collection procured by the German scholar and trader Hans Overbeck in the 1920s.¹⁷ The

⁶ Proudfoot 1995.

⁷ See Fasseur 1976.

⁸ See Groot 2009, 289 for more information about the issues surrounding the Dutch colonial press and the Batavian Society.

⁹ See Peeters 1996 and Putten 2006.

¹⁰ Cf. Putten 2018.

¹¹ Drewes 1977, 198–244.

¹² Iskandar 1996, 431–507.

¹³ Ikram 2004.

¹⁴ The DREAMSEA Programme is a programme carried out by the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (CENSIS) at the Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University (UIN) in Jakarta and the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures at the University of Hamburg, funded by Arcadia, to digitise endangered manuscripts in South-east Asia. For more information about the digitised manuscripts in Palembang, see <<https://dreamsea.co/>>, accessed on 30 January 2021.

¹⁵ Proudfoot 1982.

¹⁶ Kratz 1977.

¹⁷ Kratz 1980.

manuscripts in this collection will be discussed in more detail in this paper in an attempt to establish how they may have been customised to serve as one collection to be rented out to the general public, as the manuscripts have similar characteristic features that may have been added later. I argue that by adding characteristics concerned with their layout and binding, an anonymous cultural entrepreneur seems to have given the collection a similar appearance that is easy to recognise as belonging to him or her. In turn, this infuses the manuscripts with the agency to attract a certain clientele interested in borrowing them. These plans obviously failed, though, as the local entrepreneur sold the collection to Overbeck in the 1920s. Overbeck stated that the manuscripts originated from a Malay lending library that was forced to close down because there were not enough readers who used it.¹⁸

This Palembang lending-library collection is also of particular interest because a few of the manuscripts contain lists (albeit concise ones) with the names of those who borrowed them and several other details.¹⁹ I will start with a short description of the physical appearance of the manuscripts and continue by focusing on a certain model of illumination, the deluxe leather bindings and what we can conclude from the names mentioned in the bindings of some of the manuscripts.

The collection

Overbeck's collection of manuscripts from Palembang, which are now part of the National Library of Indonesia's collection, comprise seven original Malay manuscripts that mainly contain narratives related to the Javanese narrative tradition used in the shadow-play repertoire. With reference to the detailed description of the individual texts in the manuscripts provided by Kratz and observations I made about the collection,²⁰ it is possible to make three subdivisions within this collection to gain a better understanding of the provenance and use of the manuscripts: ML 513 and ML 516 as group one, ML 506, 508(b), 514, 515 and 517 as group two, and ML 508(a&c) as the third sub-group.

In his earlier article about the lending library in Palembang,²¹ Kratz focused on the manuscripts encoded as

'ML 513', *Hikayat Galuh Digantung*, and 'ML 516', *Hikayat Tumenggung Ario Wonggo*, items copied in the 1880s and previously owned by two brothers, Kemas Abdul Hamid and Kemas Ali bin Kemas Hasan, who lived in Kampung 7 Ulu. The brothers wrote several ownership statements in Arabic and Latin script on the flyleaves and endpapers of their respective manuscripts, which they signed. To these statements they added some rules for borrowers to follow. The rental price amounted to 10 cents a day except for Thursday nights,²² with a minimum rental period of one day (less would only damage the valuable asset – it was already turning black [from soiling], while the middle of it was still clean – and the reader would not be able to finish the reading anyhow, so the owner stated).²³ It was stipulated that relatives also needed to pay and that readers should take good care of the valuable items, the loss of which would have to be compensated by a charge of 20 guilders. Readers were not allowed to read the manuscript too close to an oil lamp or in the presence of small children [?]. In ML 516, another note was added to the almost identically formulated admonitions: 'A note to all of you: if you want to rent [borrow] this tale, you may visit [me to borrow it]. If I don't know you [already], you should bring some proof [of identity] with you. If you don't bring any, don't be cross with me, but you won't get it. Just so you know'.²⁴ These admonitions were further highlighted in two almost identical *syair* (rhymed narrative structures) added at the beginning of the texts, which was a fairly common practice for rental manuscripts.²⁵

What is of particular interest here is that both manuscripts were luxuriously bound in leather in an Islamic way that was

²² Thursday nights are believed to be auspicious in the Islamic world, as it is possible to have one's prayers answered. Perhaps this is the reason no fee was charged. The text on the flyleaf of ML 513 reads: *malam juma'at tidak masuk sewah jika siang mesti masuk sewah* ('No fee will be charged on Thursday nights, [but] during the day a fee must be paid').

²³ The Malay text on the flyleaf of the front cover of manuscript ML 516 reads: [...] *Dan lagi saya // pesan kalau maca tida' sampai habis tida' usa sewa ini surat sebab rusa' sa // ya punya barang mulanya suda hitam tengahnya masi s-y-h[?] putih sebab itulah saya pesan [...]*.

²⁴ The Malay text on one of the first pages of manuscript ML 516 reads: *dikasih ta'u kepada tuan sekalian kalua mau' sewah kayat // boleh datang tetapi kalau belum kenal hendaklah tuan // bawa' keterangan kalau tidak adah keterangan janganlah tuan // kecil hati kepada saya mesti tidak dapat supayah ta'u*.

²⁵ Kratz 1977 quotes the text of this *syair* along with a comparison between the two versions. See Chambert-Loir 2013 on the use of *syair* in the rental manuscript in the Fadli collection from Batavia.

¹⁸ Kratz 1980, 91.

¹⁹ For a discussion about the phenomenon of lending libraries, see Fermanis 2018, Putten 2017, Iskandar 1981, Kratz 1977.

²⁰ Kratz 1980, van der Putten 2017.

²¹ Kratz 1977.



Fig. 2: ML 513, the opening pages of the *Hikayat Galuh Digantung*.



Fig. 3: ML 516, *syair* at the beginning of the text *Hikayat Tumenggung Ario Wongso* in a similar double-lined frame to the one used in ML 513. The headpieces for which there was space have not been added. The envelope flap of the leather binding is also visible on the left-hand side.

quite common, replete with an envelope flap and tooling.²⁶ Another striking similarity is that the opening pages of the prose text in ML 513 and the *syair* in ML 516 are enclosed in comparable double-lined frames. The distinction between the manuscripts is that the former is adorned with a rather abstract floral pattern as a headpiece (Fig. 2) and the latter seems to be unfinished, as the space reserved for a possible similar pattern was left blank (Fig. 3). The aforementioned

characteristics – the names of the (original) owners, their statements on the flyleaves, the bindings and headpieces – clearly mark these two manuscripts as being one subdivision of the collection.

The characteristic of being bound in quite expensive leather bindings with decorated headpieces of the two facing pages at the start of the manuscript is shared with almost all of the other manuscripts in this collection. This brings us to the second sub-group of this collection, which comprises the following five manuscripts: ML 506 *Hikayat Maharajah Boma*, ML 508(b) *Hikayat Bambang Tok Sena*, ML 514 *Hikayat Pendawa Lebur*, ML 515 *Hikayat Pendawa Lebur* and ML 517 *Hikayat Indranata*. These manuscripts form one group united by the similar floral pattern of the headpieces in the two facing pages at the beginning of four manuscripts, with the exception of ML 515, which has a slightly different illumination. It seems very clear that one artist was responsible for all of these illuminated headpieces, as an identical palette of watercolours was used consisting of blue, red, yellow, grey and brown, and the patterns, which are very European in style, are very similar to each other (Figs 4–7).

Furthermore, the calligraphically

designed first word of the text – *al-kissah* ('the story') – is identical in each of these manuscripts. The examples of this word in ML 514 and ML 517 are clearly written in the same hand (Figs 6 and 7).

The latter manuscripts (ML 514 and ML 517) are more closely connected through their former owner, who inscribed his name on them: Muhammad Safi'i, Kampung 9 Ulu. He rented out the manuscripts under similar conditions as those mentioned in the ones owned by the two brothers in Kampung 7 Ulu in the 1880s. These two manuscripts stand out from the others because they include a short list of borrowers' notes

²⁶ See Plomp 1993 and Scheper 2015 for details about Islamic bindings from South-east Asia.



Fig. 4: ML 506, *Hikayat Maharajah Boma* with clearly a different hand on the first page and an embellished and rubricated *al-kissah*.



Fig. 5: ML 508(b), *Hikayat Bambang Tok Sena*, with the illuminated facing pages of the opening.



Fig. 6: ML 514, headpieces of the *Hikayat Pendawa Lebur*.



Fig. 7: ML 517, illuminated facing pages of the *Hikayat Indranata*.

serving as flyleaves in the manuscript ML 514 (see below for a discussion of these), while the other manuscript (ML 517) has a puzzling feature: the ornamentation on its blue leather covers has been cut out (Fig. 8). One possible reason for this is that the owner or someone else wanted to reuse these tooling ornaments for another book, but it is highly unusual nonetheless.

The dates when the copies were completed or those mentioned in the ownership statements of all five items in this sub-group, 1903 (ML 506), 1916 (ML 508(b)), 1906 (ML 514), 1903 (ML 515) and 1908 (ML 517), indicate that the lending library was in operation in the first few decades of the twentieth century. The characteristics enumerated for grouping these five items together indicate quite clearly that

these manuscripts were indeed part of one homogeneous collection. However, there are a few other characteristics that complicate this picture. First of all, there are only two manuscripts that include statements of ownership by Muhammad Safi'i of Kampung 9 Ulu. The other items in this sub-group lack any indication of ownership, but they do contain some other data that tells us something about their provenance. ML 506 provides us with a detailed – and interesting – copying history of the text, as the scribe wrote his name, Muhammad Akip of Kampung 23 Ilir, on every twentieth page of the manuscript along with a number to indicate he had copied another twenty pages that day. In conjunction with the colophon at the end of the text (page 390), these notes indicate that Muhammad Akip bin



Fig. 8: ML 517, blue cover with tooling cut-outs.

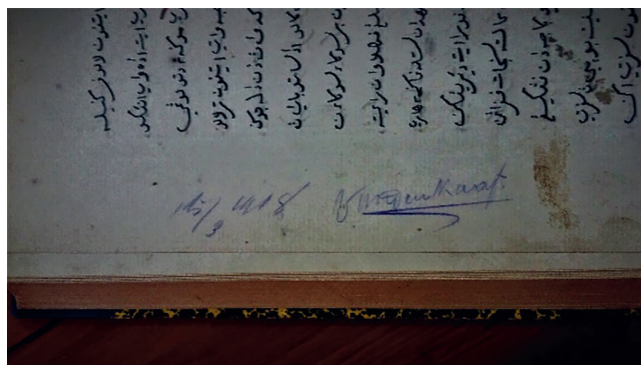


Fig. 9: ML 506, p. 164 of the manuscript showing a signature along with the date, 15 March 1918 CE.

almarhum (the late) Muhammad Asim bin almarhum paduka nenenda Marewa finished the copying in the month of Rajab 1321 H (September–October 1903 CE). On a few pages we also find another name written in the right-hand margin, combined with the date of 15 March 1918 in one instance, which is possibly an indication that the manuscript had changed hands that day (Fig. 9). There are more scribbled notes in the margins of some of the other pages as well, one of which reads 4 Oeloe (Ulu), a designation of the Kampung where the (new?) owner lived.

What is far more intriguing than the illegibility of these names, though, is the clearly different hand that started writing the text of ML 506 (Fig. 4). This calligraphy evidently was not done by Muhammad Akip, who carried out the rest of the copying. The most significant feature that ties these items into the same sub-group is the inclusion of a similarly designed and coloured headpiece in the opening pages of four manuscripts. The owner of two items (ML 514 and ML 517) wrote down his name, but the other manuscripts do not have any such proof of ownership in them. Now, here in ML 506, we encounter Muhammad Akip as the copyist of practically all the text in the manuscript except for page one, which was written by another scribe. We can only speculate about the reason why the scribe stopped writing after finishing the first page under the headpiece, or possibly even adding the writing at a later stage, but the catchwords at the bottom of page one were repeated by Muhammad Akip as the first words of the next page, showing that the text continues without any disruption.

The last item belonging to this sub-group 2, ML 508(b), is part of a multiple-text manuscript containing three different texts that were put together at a later stage. Based on the type of illumination seen on the opening pages, texts (a) and (c) may be grouped together (Figs 10 and 11), while

text (b) evidently can be ascribed as belonging to the group discussed above. The three texts in this manuscript comprise a two-page *syair* about a visit by the Javanese vice-president of an Islamic organisation for trade and religion and an anecdote about one of its members (text a), an unfinished copy of the *Hikayat Bambang Tok Sena* (text b), and a copy of the *Hikayat Raden Gandawarya* (text c). The three texts were copied in different hands and state different years of copying and/or indications of ownership.

Text (a) may be connected to the establishment of a local branch of Sarekat Islam, the Islamic trade and political organisation, in the 1910s. It mentions 14 Rabiulawal 1332 H (10 February 1914 CE) as the date of the Javanese vice-president's visit and, interestingly, fills the headpiece with information on where the *syair* could be procured: 'Whoever wants to buy the Syair Syarikat Islam can come to Mr Haji Khatib's shop at Kampung Sekanak Sungai Tawar'.²⁷ The unfinished text (b) is concluded with the following ownership statement: 'The mark of this tale (*alamat hikayat*) of Kiagus Haji Agus bin Kiagus Abang of Kampung 2 Ulu, [who] was able to buy it from the Chinese named Baci in Kampung 4 Ulu on 15 Jumadilawal 1334'.²⁸ This is a clear indication of the involvement of local elite and Chinese members of the population in Malay literary practices, something that has

²⁷ The Malay text reads: *siapa // suka mau' beli syair // Syarikat Islam boleh dating di // toqoh [sedekah?] Ci' Haji Khatib Kampung Sekanak Sungai Tawar*. The reading of *toko* ('shop') is uncertain; it seems to say *sedekah* ('alms'); see Kratz 1980, 93 as well.

²⁸ The Malay text reads: '*alamat hikayat Ki Agus Haji Agus bin Ki Agus Abang // Kampung 2 Ulu perigi kecil[?] dapat beli sama orang // Cinah nama Baci Kampung 4 Ulu adanya // Tanggal 15 Jumadilawal tahun 1334* (19 March 1916 CE; the year may also be read as 1337H, which would yield 16 February 1919 CE).

also been noticed with respect to the clientele of the Fadli lending library in Jakarta.²⁹

The third text, (c), concludes with a colophon stating that a certain Kemas Ahmad in Kampung 3 Ulu finished composing the tale at half past five on Saturday afternoon, 3 Jumadilawal 1336 H (14 February 1918 CE).³⁰ The paper on which texts (b) and (c) are written has six holes punched near the middle of the folio, indicating that these manuscripts had been joined in a previous binding. These elements show that the manuscripts were revamped, obviously in Palembang prior to their acquisition by Overbeck in the 1920s.

One manuscript belonging to sub-group 2 of the collection remains to be discussed, which again is similar, but has a few distinct features of its own. This is ML 515, which contains the Malay translation from a Javanese tale entitled *Hikayat Pendawa Lebur*,³¹ on folio-sized paper in a brown leather binding with tooling and an envelope flap. The beginning of the text in the manuscript is also embellished with illuminated headpieces, but different colours have been used and it is designed like a banyan tree (*waringin*), representing the tree of life in heaven, as the caption under the headpiece explains in addition to naming the title of the tale (Fig. 12). The text starts with a *syair* in two columns divided by two vertical lines, which informs the reader that the author translated the tale from Javanese and briefly states the content of the tale. The text, which spans more than 440 pages, shows quite a few embellished or otherwise highlighted punctuation words marking a new section of the text. Such visually enhanced words are quite common in Malay manuscripts and seem to become more decorative in the manuscripts in the Batavia lending-library collection, although perhaps less

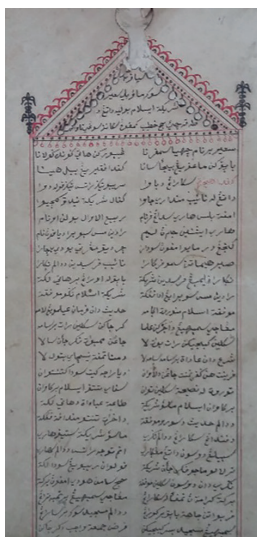


Fig. 10: ML 508(a), start of the *syair* with a headpiece containing details of where to buy the *syair*.

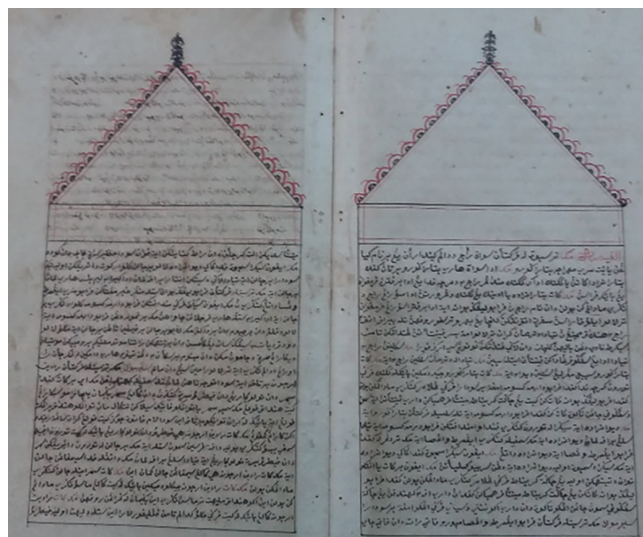


Fig. 11: ML 508(c), start of the *Hikayat Raden Gandawarya* with a similar headpiece to ML 508(a).

frequently in the Palembang manuscripts discussed here.³² The text ends in a triangular-shaped colophon in which the scribe identifies himself as Tahir bin Ali from Kampung 19 Ulu. He states that he finished the copying on 7 Ramadhan 1321 H (27 November 1903 CE). He also adds that if family members and friends wish to 'use' (*memakai*) the tale, they should come to his home, where they should also return it. A few pages after this colophon, which contain a *syair*, Nong bin Syam from Kampung 11 Ulu signed his name as the new owner of the manuscript in 1909. On the flyleaf of the back cover, we find a note in blue pencil stating that Usuf and Abdul Hamit, both of Kampung 8 Ulu, rented out the manuscript. Unfortunately, no more details about the date or year are mentioned.

The text in this manuscript clearly relates to most of the others in this small collection and so does the layout and binding. As in some of the other items in this collection, we find proof of a change of ownership here, indicating that manuscripts were valuable items that were traded within the local community. There is also proof of borrowing by an individual whose residence was quite near the owner's home, as we may surmise that Usuf and Abdul Hamit borrowed the manuscript from Nong bin Syam. As mentioned earlier, lists with names of borrowers were also included in the manuscript. This is a point that will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

²⁹ See Chambert-Loir 2013, 21–24.

³⁰ Kratz 1980, 93.

³¹ The relationship between the texts in manuscripts ML 514 and ML 515, which have been ascribed the same title, requires further research. Making reference to Drewes, Kratz mentions a five-volume manuscript, which complicates the issue even more (1980: 95–96).

³² Cf. Putten 2017, 191.

Borrowers' notes

The sources of our knowledge about the existence and daily affairs of lending libraries in the Malay world stem from the collections procured by colonial officials looking for study materials for the libraries of their home institutions. For them the manuscripts from lending libraries may have been a last resort, a possible desperate catch in their quest to find written materials about and produced by people in the Malay world. These were not the richly decorated manuscripts from the palace tradition or exquisitely adorned religious manuscripts – the manuscripts in these collections, which some colonial officials did buy eventually, were ephemera to be used and then discarded like newspapers or other such short-lived media. Fortunately, the proprietor and manager of the Fadli collection in Batavia decided to sell his collection to officials of the Batavian Society and did so in two batches in 1889 and 1899 respectively.³³ A few other manuscripts once owned by small-time entrepreneurs made their way into the repositories of the institutions in a much more random and individual manner, mostly through the legacies of scholars such as Hermann Neubronner an der Tuuk, Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje and Richard James Wilkinson.

The most obvious indication that a manuscript was meant to be rented out in its former life was admonitions and regulations added by the owner, who might have copied or bought the manuscripts for the purpose of making a living. The owner would clearly state his or, sometimes, her name in a note on the flyleaf of the manuscript along with some details about how to handle the valuable object, where to return it and how much it would cost per day. Such signed statements may be repeated quite frequently and highlighted in *syair* form at the beginning or end of the text in the manuscript, as we also find in the manuscripts from Palembang. The frequency of such statements – or simply Muhammad Bakir's signature in the manuscripts he copied for his rental business – suggest that he rented the manuscripts by the



Fig. 12: ML 515, *Hikayat Pendawa Lebur* with an illuminated headpiece on the opening pages.

quire rather than as individual bound objects.³⁴ Borrowers were cautioned to handle the manuscripts with care, as they were the assets of their owner. The entrepreneur and copyist Muhammad Bakir was quite brutal in voicing the spells he issued in his manuscripts to punish wrongdoers, threatening them with a number of diseases if they damaged his manuscripts.³⁵ Lending out manuscripts from their home in Kampung 7 Ulu, Palembang in the 1880s, the two brothers Kemas Ali and Kemas Abdul Hamid also warned people not to write in them, as these were already deteriorating due to the usual wear and tear caused by all the borrowers.³⁶

These warnings were intended to prevent such damage to the manuscripts. The general lack of notes, comments or other marks by the users in the preserved manuscripts might suggest that readers were obedient followers of the rules, but many other factors may also be added as reasons for the lack of marginalia.³⁷ The admonitions by the owners do seem to suggest that there was a common practice of sorts, namely

³⁴ See Chambert-Loir 2013, 5 and Putten 2017, 187.

³⁵ See Putten 2017, 191.

³⁶ The Malay text in pencil on fol. 2^r of ML 516 reads as follows: *Dan lagi saya kasih ta'u kalau sewa janganlah tuan // kasih tulisan pada ini kayat suda kerusakannya orang sewa // dia tulis di sini jadi rusak orang punya barang // dia bikin gampang punya orang tidak pikirkan punya orang // kalau rusak sekarang saya pesan dengan sebetulnya.*

³⁷ Cf. Mulaika Hijjas 2017.

³³ Chambert-Loir 2013.

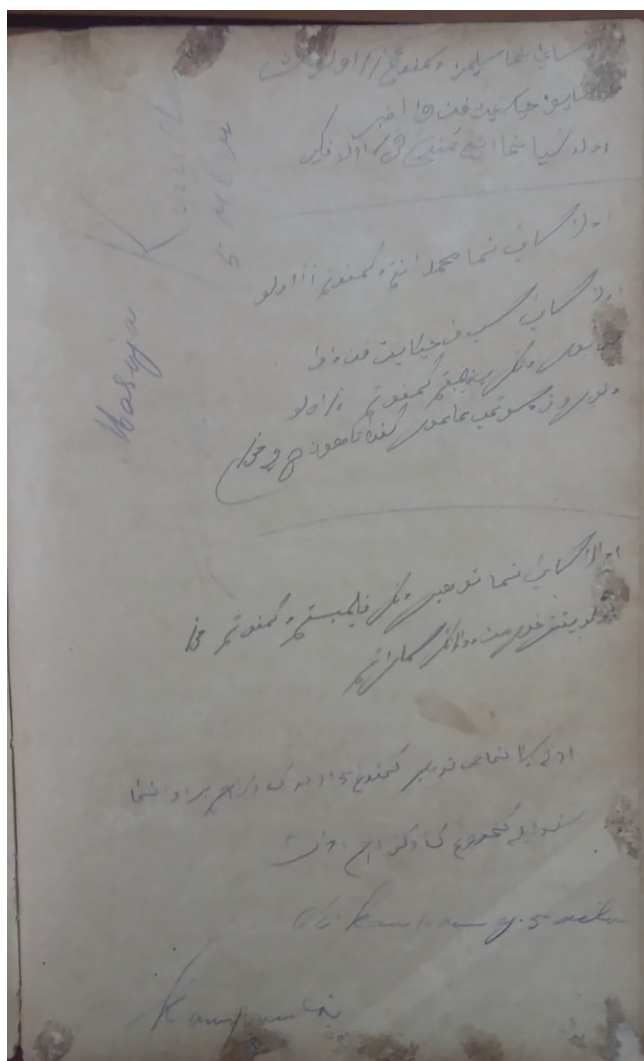


Fig. 13: ML 514, flyleaf at the end of the manuscript with a list of borrowers.

using blank spaces in manuscripts for doodles, scribbles or other purposes. The fact that these are rarely or no longer found in the preserved manuscripts may be due to their reduced attractiveness for collectors in the past, as the manuscripts would fetch a lower rental or selling price. It may be that active copyists such as Muhammad Bakir would make a new, ‘clean’ copy of the text to keep it attractive for their clientele and discard the old, ‘tainted’ duplicate of the text.

Although readers’ scribbles are rare, it is even rarer to find notes in which readers wrote down their opinion about what they had read as a service to the next borrower in a pre-modern, ‘Good reads’ fashion. This makes Rasyimah’s note – found in a copy of the *Hikayat Syah Firman* circulating in the town of Tanjungpinang in Riau in 1863 – so unique:

‘Hikayat Tuan Puteri Nur Lelah was borrowed by Rasyimah on the fourth day of Rabiulawal in the Dutch year 1863 and was read for two nights. Just before the third night it was returned to

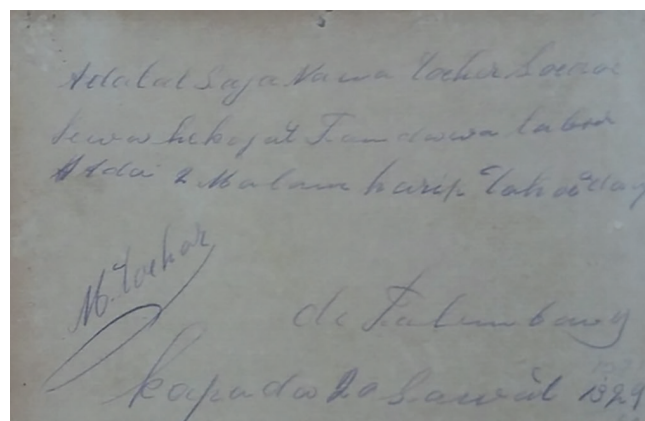


Fig. 14: ML 514, note on the flyleaf by Muhammad Tahir in Latin script.

its owner. We express our profuse thanks for that, because we greatly enjoyed hearing about the exploits of Syah Firman and his brother, together with their wives Tuan Puteri Indera Seloka and Tuan Puteri Nur Lela Cahaya. Then it was returned’.³⁸

Occasionally we do come across names of borrowers and possibly dates when they borrowed the items. Adding notes of this kind would have been part of the library’s user management policy or general records and such lists would probably not have been kept together with each manuscript or been part of it. The inclusion of these notes may have been caused by the need for paper for repairing or rebinding the manuscript. Possibly the paper contained old notes that had already served their purpose and could be discarded, or indeed were included in the manuscript on purpose so that the records were kept with the item. Whatever the reason for their inclusion, in ML 514, one of Muhammad Safi’i bin Muhammad Saleh’s manuscripts, we can find notes comprising borrowers’ names, places of residence and sometimes a year and date and the title of the text added on the folio pages that form the connection between the book block and the back cover of the manuscript (Figs 13 and 14). There are at least twelve people who signed their names and stated their place of residence on the paper during a period of 19 months between the first and last date mentioned in these statements (29 Rabiulawal 1328 – 20 Sawal 1329 H; 10 March 1910 – 14 October 1911 CE). All of them were males living in the south end of the town (*ulu*), near but not in the same *kampung* as the owner in Kampung 9 Ulu. One of the clients may have left us with some more personal data than just his name, as he seems to have signed the ‘register’ twice, once in Latin characters that state his name as Toeher Soedoe. He rented the *Hikayat Pendawa Lebur* for two nights and ‘may want to

³⁸ Quoted from Mulaika Hijjas 2017, 233.

read it again', a note says.³⁹ The other note is in modified Arabic script (Jawi) and is easier to read: 'My name is Tuhir. [I live] in the town of Palembang, in Kampung 13 Ulu, [a] respected [person?] in Semarang'.⁴⁰ The list is proof that the manuscript was borrowed more or less on a regular basis in a very local area and did not cross the Musi River, which flows through the city of Palembang. In fact, apart from the copyist of ML 506, who identified himself as Muhammad Akip of Kampong 23 Ilir, all the people who were either (former) owners or borrowers of the manuscripts can be traced to one of the Ulu neighbourhoods. This emphasises the restricted area of circulation of the manuscripts and the closeness of the relationships between the owners and borrowers.

Epilogue

The manuscripts and the information that can be garnered from them give us some insight into the reading culture of an urban centre in the Dutch East Indies around the turn of the twentieth century. Most of the texts in these manuscripts are Malay renderings of Javanese narratives connected to the shadow-theatre repertoire. All of the manuscripts show signs of intensive use, which suggests heavy borrowing and frequent reading. The German scholar and businessman Hans Overbeck reportedly acquired the lending library's manuscripts in one purchase in Palembang in the 1920s.

Statements in the manuscripts indicate their ownership by different individuals in a variety of neighbourhoods in the town of Palembang over a period ranging from 1883 to 1918. Despite this diversity, the manuscripts show conspicuous similarities in terms of their layout, illumination and binding, which turns the items into quite a homogeneous manuscript collection. One possible cause for such homogeneity is that an indigenous, anonymous entrepreneur in Palembang acquired the seven manuscripts from their respective owners and made the items part of a single collection that his customers would recognise easily. If this line of reasoning is indeed valid, then the new owner infused the manuscripts with a certain agency to offer them to people living in his vicinity as a portfolio with

entertaining reading material that connected members of the community. When these efforts proved to be unprofitable, he sold the customised collection to the German scholar.

The flyleaves of some of the items in the collection contain notes that their borrowers occasionally added. The multiple-page list that was included in manuscript ML 514 may be the entrepreneur's administrative list, allowing him to see who had borrowed the manuscript on what dates. It may have been a second list that was intentionally included with the manuscript, not uncommon in western libraries, or accidentally included when the manuscript was rebound. Whatever the reason may have been to include it, the list shows in a concrete and almost tangible way a community of readers who all lived at the south end of town, very near the original owner of the manuscript. It also provides the clearest indication of how this one manuscript brought a small community of readers together who shared the experience of borrowing and reading it. I suggest that the agency apparently contained by this manuscript is also valid for the whole collection of seven manuscripts, which connected interested people in Palembang and made them into a reading group, giving them a similar experience of sharing the same texts which, conventionally, were read out loud in front of one's family and friends.

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³⁹ The notes are quite hard to decipher, as they are written in fading pencil or ink and may have endured quite some wear and tear. The note Muhammad Tahir Sudu wrote here seems to read *Adalah saja nama Toher Soedoe // sewa hekajat Pandawa Laboeh // Ada 2 malam harip tahoe oelang // M. Toher (signature) // di Palembang // kapada 20 Sawal 1329* ('my name is Tuhir Sudu. I rented the Hikayat Pandawa Lebur for two nights [and] would like to do so again [?]'). The note was signed M. Tahir, Palembang 14 October 1911.

⁴⁰ The Jawi note seems to read *adala saya nama Tuhir di negeri Palembang di Kampung 13 // Ulu yang terhormat di negeri Semarang*.

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