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XIII

THE CHARACTER OF THE *MALAY ANNALS*

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THE history of Malay studies is marked by slow and cautious progress rather than by moments of sudden advance due to spectacular discoveries: no unexpected archaeological finds, no deciphering of an unknown script mark its course. There is an exception, however: Sir Richard Winstedt's recognition of the Raffles MS. No. 18 in the library of the Royal Asiatic Society as an earlier version of the *Sejarah Melayu* (the *Malay Annals*). This was undeniably an event which all at once cast an entirely new light on this work, so essential for our knowledge of the fifteenth-century Malacca Sultanate.

A full study of the differences between Winstedt's 'discovery'—the 1536 version—and the long-familiar 1612 version is still to be made, but some assessment of the differences, and of the way the editor of 1612 approached the 1536 prototype, will be necessary for every study that concerns itself with the period of Malay ascendancy. It certainly plays a part in the questions to be raised, and tentatively answered, in this essay: What was the point of view, and what was the aim of the author of the *Malay Annals*?

It is well known that the *Malay Annals* incorporate the most diverse materials. These are not used merely as literary ornamentation, but as an integral part of the contents. The author himself acknowledges his debt to the *Hikayat Iskandar*; but besides literary works, he makes use of tales and legends, and by no means local legends only. Dr. A. A. Cense has observed that the sword-fishes' attack on Singapura has its counterpart in the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, where it is an attack on Indrapura; in Bataviaas Genootschap MS. No. 162, as an attack on Tarusan, and in the *Salasilah Berau*, as an attack on Pantai. He then makes the memorable remark: 'So one should never rashly conclude that a particular tale is a local legend, out of which certain historical events can be distilled.'¹

¹ A. Cense, *De Kroniek van Bandjarmasin* (Santpoort, 1928), 175.

This not only means that we must regretfully reject the attempted interpretation of the swordfish episode as referring to an attack from southern India by soldiers bearing a carving of their swordfish totem as a standard. Of more importance for our purpose is the realization that the *Malay Annals* use non-local material for building up the history of Singapura and Malacca.

This single example may serve to illustrate a conclusion to which one is led on reading the *Malay Annals*: for the author, Malacca was the centre of his universe. As a superior country, with a dynasty of perfect legitimacy and antiquity, all happenings in the surrounding world had to have their focus there. He does not record these happenings as mere embellishments, nor does he annex them out of an exaggerated sense of Malacca's importance, but because of his view of the world. 'History', says Burckhardt, 'is the record of what one age finds worthy of note in another', and for the author of the *Sejarah Melayu* what is 'worthy of note' is what concerns Malacca.

Can we go a step farther and try to understand the *Malay Annals* not only on the basis of its author's outlook, but also of his aims and purpose? The orientalist who has never failed to stress the importance of this question of aim and purpose for the study of South-east Asian historiography is C. C. Berg. For Javanese history, he develops the following point of view: The king is the container of a supernatural force, the life-force of his realm. Describing earlier kings means resurrecting them through the magic of language, so that their beneficent power may be revived; and eulogizing the king is a means of strengthening his supernatural power and energy by this same 'linguistic magic'. The practitioners of this magic are the *pujangga*, the court chroniclers, who are also astrologers. (The occurrence of language taboos is another manifestation of the belief in the magic of spoken and written language.) The aim of a Javanese chronicler—say, of the author of the fourteenth-century *Nāgarakṛtāgama*—is therefore to achieve a maximum of supernatural effect, not to combine flattery with a maximum of factual information. For that reason historical data are so rare in Javanese historiography and what data there are must be embedded in eulogistic phrases.¹

¹ C. C. Berg, 'De evolutie der Javaansche geschiedsschrijving', in F. W. Stapel (ed.), *Geschiedenis van Nederlandsch-Indië* (Amsterdam, 1938), ii. 14 ff. Cf. D. G. E. Hall (ed.), *Historians of South East Asia* (London, 1961), 4.

Now leaving out of consideration the question of the applicability of this theory to Java (and the *Nāgarakṛtāgama* in particular)—how far can it help us to understand the *Sejarah Melayu*? Berg's scheme is relevant to quite a number of features of Malay life and letters. The Malay ruler, like the Javanese, bears within himself the force that ensures the well-being of his realm. In Malay, too, there are language taboos and literary magic: take the wonder-working effect of spells, and of the texts of certain *wayang* tales. One even wonders whether the famous passage in the *Sejarah Melayu* which describes the Malay heroes reading the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* on the eve of the Portuguese attack should not be understood as a description of a *rite* of literary magic; the warriors acquire the supernatural force and courage of the legendary Islamic heroes whose exploits are recited.

Then, we know that in the Malay world there are historical texts which have a supernatural function as preservers of the state myth used in the state ritual: the *Salasilah Kutai* is such a book.¹

In spite of all this, I do not think Berg's hypothesis on the character of (a large part of) Javanese historiography can serve to elucidate the purpose and character of the *Malay Annals*: the differences are too great. The Annalist does not go to extremes in eulogizing Malacca's sultans: a cliché or two serves him for paying his respects to their 'justice' or their activity in 'protecting their subjects', and some are not even awarded this off-hand compliment: 'Sultan Ala'u 'd-Din is merely credited with great physical strength', as C. C. Brown remarks in the introduction to his translation of the *Malay Annals*. There is no lack of fairy-tale happenings in the *Sejarah Melayu*, yet the whole atmosphere is realistic, even matter-of-fact.

Nor do we find in the culture of Malacca a figure to parallel the *pujangga*, the annalist-astrologer, of the Javanese courts. Such *pujangga* may have been employed at the court of Sri Vijaya, and again their tradition *may* have persisted long enough to reach fifteenth-century Malacca, as Situmorang and Teeuw very cautiously suggest as a possibility.² But (a) nothing whatever is known about *pujangga* at Sri Vijaya,³ and (b) the Malacca sultanate does

¹ C. Hooykaas, 'A Critical Stage in the Study of Indonesia's Past', Hall, *Historians of South East Asia*, 323-4.

² *Sedjarah Melayu* (Djakarta/Amsterdam, 1952), p. xi.

³ 'Literary magic' in Sri Vijaya is attested, however, by the minatory formulas in the inscriptions of Karang Brahi and Kota Kapur.

not even know the name of Sri Vijaya, let alone enjoy a 'cultural heritage' of that earlier kingdom. What is there in the culture of Malacca that can possibly be said to derive from Sri Vijaya?

Still, the *Malay Annals* were not created *e nihilo*. If there is no evidence for *pujangga* influence, what about its predecessors in the field of Malay national, or court, histories? We know one, at least, the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai*. The influence this Sumatran chronicle has had on its Malayan counterpart has rightly been noted—if perhaps overestimated. Yet, in spite of its undeniable influence, it is all in all a quite different kind of work. Were it not for a few phrases here and there like: 'He is known to the present day as Marhum Semudra', and were it not for external evidence that a Malik as-Salih and Malik az-Zahir really did exist, the *Pasai Chronicles* could just as well have been a collection of purely legendary tales: they are so formal, so conventionalized, so completely divorced from reality. The major part of the *Malay Annals*, by contrast, obviously depicts real persons, with their foibles and idiosyncrasies, and by means of genealogies the Annalist links up the historical personages with his contemporaries. It is worth noting that the editor of the 1612 version went to great lengths in bringing these genealogies up to date, and thus enabled the *Malay Annals* to retain their character of being a link between the present and the past.

In other words, the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* was almost certainly a predecessor of, and probably a general model for, the *Sejarah Melayu*, but it is not a work that can shed much light on the character of the *Malay Annals*. For this, we have to turn to present-day Malaya.

The Malay courts, and many of the more considerable Malay families, to this day keep two kinds of work which, I believe, were the essential materials with which the *Malay Annals* were constructed. In the first place, diaries of significant events, either of a personal or of a political nature, sometimes with notes on the concurrent happenings in nature. Secondly, genealogical trees of the family or dynasty concerned; as it were, patents of nobility and legitimacy. These writings—together with oral information and personal observation—would account for a vast portion of the Annalist's data, on the historical (that is, the later Malacca) period covered by the *Sejarah Melayu*. I note in passing that this corresponds fairly closely with the views of Drewes, who considers

'personal memorabilia' to be important building-stones for the non-magical part of Javanese historiography.¹

Now the character of these works can help us to understand the character of the *Sejarah Melayu* as a whole, with its concern over the grandeur of the Malay nobility (and especially of the Bendahara) and the legitimacy *par excellence* of Malacca's sultans. Just as the private families' genealogical tables are these families' charters of nobility and greatness, and the diaries also serve in a sense as minute papers which can guide future generations to choose their course of action, so too the *Malay Annals* can serve these purposes for the rulers and the more influential subjects in the realm as a whole. We are now, I think, approaching an answer to the question: what purpose were the *Malay Annals* meant to serve? To get a more precise answer, it may be useful to turn back once more to the *Pasai Chronicles*.

The basic ideology or, as we might call it, the political ethic, of the *Pasai Chronicles* is the same as that of the *Malay Annals*: the subject's unquestioning loyalty and submission to his king, and his avoidance at all costs of the unforgivable sin of *derhaka*: insubordination or treason. This means that within the realm there is no force able or entitled to curb a ruler's excesses. Both the Sumatran and the Malayan chronicle resolve this impossible situation by resorting to the theme of an avenging justice from without: in the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* the Javanese conquer Pasai after Sultan Ahmad's tyranny has assumed the intolerable form of the murder of the Sultan's own two sons; in the *Sejarah Melayu* Singapura is sacked by the Javanese after Sultan Iskandar not only put to death but wantonly shamed the daughter of Sang Ranjuna Tapa, and Malacca is captured by the Portuguese after Sultan Mahmud's brutal assassination of the Bendahara and his family.

But besides this similarity we note that the *Sejarah Melayu* adds an element of nobility and dignity to this simple theme. The relationship between ruler and realm is no longer dominated by the crude mechanism of submission and revenge, but is regulated by a contract into which both parties freely entered at the dawn of Malay history: the compact between Sri Tri Buana—the first ruler—and Demang Lebar Daun—the ancestor of the Malay commoners.

... Both of them took a solemn oath to the effect that whoever

¹ G. W. J. Drewes, 'Over werkelijke en vermeende geschiedsschrijving', *Djawa*, xix (1939), 249.

departed from the terms of the pact, let his house be overturned by Almighty God so that its roof be laid on the ground and its pillars be inverted. And that is why it has been granted by Almighty God to Malay rulers that they shall never put their subjects to shame, and that those subjects however gravely they offend shall never be bound or hanged or disgraced with evil words. If any ruler puts a single one of his subjects to shame, that shall be a sign that his kingdom will be destroyed by Almighty God. Similarly it has been granted by Almighty God to Malay subjects that they shall never be disloyal or treacherous to their rulers, even if their rulers behave evilly or inflict injustice upon them.¹

This undertaking not only lends a note of human dignity to the contacts between king and commoner, but it also gives the *Malay Annals* a dominant theme and an enduring relevance and actuality. The theme is of a succession of sultans, by no means ideal figures; on the contrary, they are 'human, all too human'. But the whole is more than the sum of the parts, and the power of the dynasty is greater than that of the individual rulers. It is the *daulat* of the supremely legitimate dynasty that makes Malacca the great centre it is depicted as being, able to withstand Java, Siam, and China. This royal *daulat* is enhanced by the loyalty—despite the individual sultans' failings—of the subjects, with the Bendahara as their grandest representatives.

Now, thanks to the motif of the solemn compact, the *Sejarah Melayu* is given not only a dominant theme for the recording of events of the past, but also a relevance for the needs of the present, for the ancient covenant still (in 1536 and 1612) holds good.

This, I think, allows us to assess the purpose of the *Malay Annals*. Besides being a charter, staking a claim to legitimacy and greatness, and a chronicle, to instruct and divert, it is also a guide for the present: as long as the age-old contract is respected by both parties, *ta' 'kan Melayu hilang didunia*, and the *daulat* of the dynasty and the realm will reassert itself in the future.

This last phrase, 'in the future', may seem out of place. We think of the *Malay Annals* being written at a pathetic little court, harried by Portuguese and Achinese, and forced to exchange the splendours of Malacca for a site at a squalid backwater. We know that the Malacca sultanate *had* no future, and we see the forces of d'Albuquerque as the vanguard of a new age, that was to increase

¹ C. C. Brown's translation of the *Malay Annals* in *JMBRAS* xxv (1952), 27.

its ascendancy over Malay culture for several centuries, until at last a reaction set in, in our time.

However, this has not much relevance for the situation in 1536 and 1612. Not only that the authors of the *Malay Annals*, of course, could not foresee the developments of future centuries, but, of greater importance: in their time the Portuguese position was not one of complete dominance. We may tend to overestimate that position because we see, as it were, all the power of other western invaders coming in its wake. But as J. C. van Leur has shown, when the Portuguese came to South-east Asia in the early sixteenth century they had a certain military superiority, but by no means dominated the scene in that area.¹

Events prove this: in 1551 the Malays only just failed to recapture Malacca, and for the Annalist of 1612 not Portugal, but Achin was the principal enemy; and there was of course no reason for the Malays to consider this power as belonging to a new, and inherently stronger, order. Dr. C. Hooykaas has already suggested in 1937 that the 1612 version of the *Malay Annals* (the only version then known) might have been, as it were, a Malay response to Achin's *Tâju's-Salâtin*, which had been completed a few years earlier.² If this is so, it might in part explain the enthusiasm with which the Johore court greeted the 'history brought from Goa', that is, the 1536 version of the *Malay Annals*, and their decision to bring it up to date.

But even if we do not see the revision of the *Malay Annals* as a move in a Battle of the Books—and this situation naturally can not apply to the earlier and essential version of the *Sejarah Melayu*—I think we may conclude that the aim of the Annalist was not merely to draw up a court chronicle. A more fundamental purpose was to vindicate a claim to greatness: of the dynasty, the Bendahara, and the realm as a whole; and, most important, to provide a mythically based, a truly sacral, code of political conduct by which this greatness could be retained or restored.

¹ J. C. van Leur, *Asian Trade and Society* (The Hague-Bandung, 1955), 118.

² He points out that the very title of the *Malay Annals*, *Sulâlatu's-Salâtin*, sounds as an echo of the Achinese *Tâju's-Salâtin* (*Over Maleische Literatuur* [Leiden 1937], 201). The account of the *Malay Annals* in the second edition of Hooykaas's book of 1947 is the same as that of the first, that is, it does not take into account Winstedt's discovery of 1938.

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