

A Rare and Unusual Malay *Parabaik*

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A visible marker of the Islamicisation of a culture is when the Arabic script is used to write “the vernacular languages of the new faithful” (Gallop, et al. 2015, 14) – driven largely by the revered status of the Qūr’an as God’s Word, which is written in Arabic. The earliest instance of the adoption of the Arabic script was in the case of Farsi, the Persian language, around the 8th or 9th century AD (Gallop, et al. 2015, 14). To graft the Arabic script onto a new language, the original script underwent modification. This typically results in an extension of the alphabet with additional letters that are often modified forms of existing ones. For example, the letter *pe* (Arabic پ with three dots underneath instead) was added to Farsi to capture the ‘p’ sound.

In Southeast Asia, similar developments occurred wherever Islam had been firmly established, and the most prevalent, well-known form is Jawi: the Malay language rendered in Arabic script. In this case, five letters were added to the original 28 to cover the ‘g’, ‘ny’, ‘ng’, ‘ch’ and ‘p’ sounds. These additional letters differ from the Persian modification of Arabic, suggesting that adaptations of the script were often localised. The earliest evidence of Jawi is the inscribed *Batu Bersurat Terengganu* (Terengganu Stone), dated 702 AH (1303 AD). Jawi remained as the main vehicle for the Malay language for well over 600 years, until a mainstream switch to the Romanised alphabet in the mid-20th century. Other regional languages that had employed the Arabic script include Javanese (termed *Pégon*), Bugis/Makassar (*Sérang*), Acehnese, Gayo, Minangkabau, Sundanese, Maguindanao from Mindanao and Cham on mainland Southeast Asia (Gallop, et al. 2015, 14).

An overwhelming majority of surviving Jawi manuscripts in private and public holdings that are known today date from the 19th century.

The manuscript featured here from the Asian Civilisations Museum’s collection, is dated 15 Ramadan 1250 AH (15 January 1835). What sets this manuscript apart is its concertina or folding-book format as this is not representative of Malay manuscript traditions, which are influenced by Islamic bookbinding practices favouring the codex or book form. Instead, the concertina format is a popular form known as *parabaik* in Myanmar, which is predominantly Buddhist and where the main scripts are based on Indic forms.

On the basis that the folding-book format is more readily encountered in mainland Southeast Asia, Farouk Yahya attributes Malay manuscripts in this format (albeit rare) to the northern Malay states such as Patani, Kelantan, Perlis and Kedah (Yahya 2016, 59). The colophon affirms this as the copyist is named as Bayu bin Dhaman Syah of Patani, and the owner was Fakir Ramli of Burma. Aside from highlighting the cross-pollination of cultural forms (an Islamic writing system on a Buddhist bookbinding format), it is tantalisingly tempting to speculate about the identity of the owner, Fakir Ramli. *Fakir* refers to a Muslim ascetic, but is applied as well to Hindu mendicant monks in India. Perhaps *fakir* has been applied loosely here and Fakir Ramli could have been a non-Muslim monk. If so, it is fascinating to consider the possibility that this text was commissioned for his own study.

Parabaik manuscripts are intended for general use “such as recording business transactions, administrative matters, current events, and rough drafts for palm-leaf copyists” (Fraser-Lu 1994, 288). The paper is coarse and thick, made from the pulp of the *ma-hlaing* mulberry tree (*Brousonettia papyrifera*). Most likely based on the Chinese papermaking method, the mulberry pulp is spread over a canvas frame, then dried as long strips and peeled off the frame. The paper is then either left



Figure 1. An ‘uncoloured’ Burmese *parabaik* from the mid-1880s featuring illustrations of Buddhist religious and festive occasions. The *parabaik* on the right is of the charcoal-coated or ‘black’ type and features draughtsman’s drawings of buildings and funeral pyres. Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board

in its original colour, or coated with finely ground charcoal that has been boiled in either rice water or mixed with a glue made from animal hides before it is folded down (Figure 1). The manuscript here is of the latter ‘black’ *parabaik* type. A *kan-gu-zan* (Burmese: white steatite/ soapstone crayon) is used to write on the blackened pages. The charcoal coating allows for mistakes to be rubbed off, and for the entire *parabaik* to be reused by re-coating the pages.

Parabaik pages can measure as large as 85 by 30 cm, or as small as 7.5 by 4 cm, with an average size of 45 by 20 cm. This manuscript falls on the smaller end of the scale, with 20 pages that measure 17 by 9 cm each. Although folded in a concertina format, a Burmese *parabaik* is usually opened two pages at a time (Figure 2 on page 124). Here, the Jawi text is oriented in portrait format, and arranged in two columns of 18 lines. Jawi, like Arabic, is read from right to left, and so, the

manuscript begins on the rightmost page when fully extended (Figure 3). The Jawi text is written only on the recto, however, faint traces of previous writing in landscape orientation can be seen on both the manuscript’s recto and verso. Further investigation is required before more details of the palimpsest can be furnished.

The Malay *parabaik* is a collection of three *syair*, poems that are usually sung aloud.¹ The first, *Syair Dendang Fatimah* (*Song of Fatimah*), makes up the longest section (15 pages). It begins with supplications and honours the ‘*ahl al-bayt*’ (Arabic: People/Family of the House), a Muslim tradition to refer to the family of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The members named here include Fatimah (his daughter), Ali (her husband and the Prophet’s cousin), and Hasan and Husayn (her sons/the Prophet’s grandsons). Although revered by Sunni Muslims as well, this family carries a special significance for Shi’ite Muslims, pointing



Figure 2. The unusual Malay *parabaik* opens twofold, showing columns of Jawi text. Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board.

to an interesting aspect in the Islamicisation of Sunni-majority Muslim Southeast Asia which exceeds the scope of this article.

Broadly, the *syair* contains advice, exhortations and admonitions directed at a child to grow up to be pious and filial towards her/his parents. Variations of this *syair* exist and it is usually sung to a newborn child as s/he is rocked in a ceremonial cradle that has been elaborately decorated. This is called *adat berendoi* or *adat naik buai* (Malay: roughly, the custom of “ascending the cradle”). *Endoi* means “cradle/swing” in the Perlis Malay dialect. This *adat* forms part of a series of traditional Malay rituals carried out within a baby’s first months that are intended for the

family to express their gratitude for being blessed with children, and as a symbolic way of providing guidance to the child. The custom continues to be practised today in many parts of the Nusantara (the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago).²

The last two *syair* are far shorter, titled *Nasihat Kepada Laki dan Perempuan* (*Advice for Men and Women*, pages 15 to 17) and *Inilah Syair Anak-anak Muda Berkahwin* (*Herewith A Syair for Youths Who Are Marrying*). Like the first *syair*, these poems would fall under the *nasihat* (Malay: advice) genre and serve as didactic texts to guide young people onto the true path, as understood within the Muslim tradition. □



Figure 3. The fully unfolded recto of the Malay *parabaik*. The manuscript is read from right to left. Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board.

This rare and unusual Malay parabaik manuscript will be displayed in the upcoming Islamic art gallery at the Asian Civilisations Museum, scheduled to open at the end of 2018.

Notes

1. A traditional Malay poetry genre, the *syair* is typically composed of a series of quatrains in the rhyming scheme *aaaa*, *bbbb*, *cccc* and so on. What sets it apart from another popular Malay quatrain form known as the *pantun*, is that it carries an idea(s) over, from one stanza to the next. *Syair* can be narrative or didactic, covering diverse subjects from romantic tales to historical events to treatises on religion and philosophy.
2. Nusantara is a compound word in Old Javanese, comprising the terms, *nusa* ('island') and *antara* ('between'). Originally used in an oath, as recorded in the *Pararaton* and *Nagarakertagama* manuscripts, by Gajah Mada, the prime minister/military leader of the Majapahit kingdom, in 1336 AD, *nusantara* then referred to islands outside of Java which he vowed to capture as vassal states for the kingdom.

In the 20th century, the term was re-introduced to collectively designate the islands of today's Indonesia. Hence, *nusantara*, in its most basic form, is understood as "archipelago" to speakers of the Malay and Indonesian languages. The concept of Nusantara, however, is used in the contemporary sense to refer to the region encompassing the Malay Peninsula, the Indonesian islands, Brunei, southern Philippines and Thailand et al, where the indigenous peoples share a fundamental unity in language, culture and values.

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