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## Never-Neverland Revisited: Malay Adventure Stories

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# Introduction

“A rather absurd fairy tale.” That was how the nineteenth-century Bible translator and scholar of the Malay language H. C. Klinkert judged the *Story of Jayalengkara*, one of the Malay adventure stories in his collection. Regarding a similar story, he remarked that it was “[a] tasteless and absurd story. The whole is an absurd mix of Mohammedanism and Hinduism, so tasteless and trivial that it takes courage to read it to the end.”<sup>1</sup> Klinkert was not alone in his negative appraisal of these kinds of Malay narratives. Many of his Dutch and British contemporaries, who studied Malay texts, as well as a number of scholars in the subsequent century, did not think very highly of them. They bemoaned the tediousness of the stories’ (sub)plots, the repetitive nature of the language and the seemingly endless series of supernatural events they described. It is this attitude that has been, at least partly, responsible for the dearth of publications on these texts. Yet, the storehouse of Malay writing is, largely, filled with adventure stories.

This study presents a re-evaluation of Malay adventure stories (hereafter MAS) that form part of what used to be called Classical or Traditional Malay literature, but is nowadays designated as Malay writing.<sup>2</sup> By adopting a cross-disciplinary approach, I aim to show that these narratives are not the meaningless fairy tales, suspended in time and place, that collectors and scholars, from both East and West, have previously held them to be. Instead, it is argued that they are important stories that merit examination afresh, both as narratives and objects of cultural analysis.<sup>3</sup> They are greatly connected, in various ways,

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<sup>1</sup> Een vrij onzinnig sprookje (Van Ronkel 1921, 11). Een flauw, onzinnig verhaal [...]. Het geheel is een dwaas mengsel van mohammedanisme en hindoeïsme, zoo flauw en onbeduidend, dat er moed toe behoort om het geheel ten einde te lezen (Van Ronkel 1921, 12).

<sup>2</sup> The label ‘Malay adventure stories’ here refers to both written and oral narratives.

<sup>3</sup> This study is not a genre study in the traditional sense. What is said about MAS pertains only to the

to the society they have sprung from. A case study of the nineteenth-century Malay *Story of Babram Syah* (Hikayat Bahram Syah; hereafter *SBS*), a story from the west coast of North Sumatra, serves to demonstrate this. An annotated text edition and translation of the *SBS* forms the second part of this study.

MAS were popular in a large area of Southeast Asia from at least the early seventeenth century until the turn of the twentieth century. There are Malay-language manuscripts from Sumatra, peninsular Malaya, southern Thailand, Brunei, coastal Sarawak, Kalimantan, the north coastal areas (Pasisir) of Java, Lombok, Makasar, Bima, Ambon and other areas of eastern Indonesia (Proudfoot and Hooker 1996, 49). Remarks on their currency by contemporary Western observers and the relatively high number of extant texts attest to this. This fact already challenges the conception of MAS as absurd or meaningless, for it is inconceivable that people would continue to compose, copy and read stories that are of no significance to them. However, the question about their meaning remains. What was it that the stories did for their audiences? What human and societal needs did they appeal to? To find an answer to these questions, this study views the stories as acts of communication and as having had an agency of their own. Malay adventure stories engaged in communication with contemporary local socio-economic issues as well as with other narratives that were known locally. Following this line of thinking, the meaning of MAS and of the *SBS* in particular, lies in their functional relationship with their socio-historical context and in the intertextual realm. This approach echoes the functionalism that dominated, in particular, British anthropology in the twentieth century. But it fits in especially with the more recent strand of literary theory referred to as New Historicism. The latter evolved in the 1980s and 90s, primarily through the work of the critic Stephen Greenblatt. It aims simultaneously to understand a text through its historical context and to understand cultural and intellectual history through texts (Greenblatt and Gallagher 2000).

One can try to reconstruct the social, political and economic circumstances at a given time and place through historical research, but it is far more complicated to reconstruct the unwritten rules of a vanished system that regulated the writing and interpretation of texts in the past. This raises a dilemma about whether or not we should even try to strive for historically and culturally valid interpretations of stories that are so far removed from us in time and space. On this issue I follow Stephen Owen, who discusses this dilemma in his book *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World*. Like Owen, I feel that we should continue to read and interpret such stories for the following reasons:

because the poets were promised eternity and we honor old treaties, because they have something to

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*SBS* and the six other, similar narratives that make up the research corpus for Chapters 4 and 5. It is for others to test the findings of this study on a different group of texts.

say that we will not hear elsewhere, because the historical barriers are an injustice we cannot tolerate (Owen 1985, 9–10).

As for the risk of subjectivism – of hearing only the voice of the modern-day reader in the reading – I share Owen’s conviction that “the real danger is silence, not ventriloquism” (Owen 1985, 10–11). My motivation for undertaking this foray into the Never-Neverland of Malay adventure stories has been the contrast between the popularity of MAS in the past and their image of tiresome stories of poor quality among scholars in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. But also, it was the very existence of the manuscripts that contain these stories in the here and now that prompted me to reread them. I simply could not bear them to be silent when so much effort and money has been spent on preserving them (in libraries) for future generations. Thus, I offer, here, my readings of these Malay stories and ask the reader to bear with the hypothetical nature of this study.

Adventure entails travel and that is exactly what the young men – and, occasionally, women – of royal descent do in MAS. The initial departure of the main protagonist is often preceded by a dream that reveals the existence of a magical object, a fair princess or a medicine in a faraway kingdom. The dream image instills a longing in the young prince that is so strong that he is compelled to leave hearth and home and set out on a quest. On his journey through unknown lands, he traverses vast plains and dense forests and crosses dangerous seas or several heavens. He encounters wondrous creatures, such as fairy princesses, magical birds, fishes, elephants and sea snakes, talking plants and animals, and all sorts of ghosts. Many of these possess supernatural forces, which they exert either to help or to thwart the hero. Before he is finally able to acquire the object of his desire, he must perform a series of seemingly impossible tasks. But magic comes to his aide and, in the end, the prince always gets what he longed for. After having successfully completed his mission and having gained worldly riches and heavenly wisdom, he settles down, founds a dynasty and leads his subjects to prosperity.

MAS exist in written and oral form. Although the two narrative practices share the Malay language, and are similar in narrative style and content, they are seldom studied together. They are seen as two separate, albeit connected, practices. Moreover, the oral stories have never been considered on a par with their written counterparts. Now that postcolonial and postmodern studies have revealed the historical embeddedness of the categories that were invoked in these evaluations – notably ‘literature’, ‘magic’ and ‘folklore’ – the way is cleared for the inclusion of oral and written MAS in one corpus. Chapters 4 and 5 are based on research on such a, seemingly, hybrid corpus of narratives.

MAS form part of a narrative heritage. That is why in this study, the past tense is used for discussing Malay adventure stories. Written MAS are preserved in Malay manuscripts that are kept in institutional and private collections worldwide; the major ones are found in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, London and Leiden. These collections contain the vestiges

of once thriving writing practices in the Malay-speaking regions of Southeast Asia. Although some genres persisted until the first few decades of the twentieth century in lithograph editions, the societal changes prompted by the onset of modernity entailed the end of 'traditional' Malay writing. The new era demanded new forms to give expression to the thoughts and feelings evoked by life in a modern world. And there, in a print environment, lay the beginnings of modern Indonesian and Malaysian literature. Yet, a few publications on contemporary storytelling in the late twentieth century made it clear that one should not too hastily relegate these kind of stories to a distant past. For instance, the Malay oral story on Panglimo Awang was recorded in the 1980s (Derks 1994). Also, *sijobang*, a tradition of singing a poetic narrative about the legendary hero Anggun Nan Tungga, was a popular form of entertainment in the highlands of West Sumatra until at least the 1970s (Phillips 1981). Dated even later is the recitation of the popular *Story of Malim Deman* from manuscripts in the town of Payakumbuh, West Sumatra: the early 1990s (Suryadi 1996).

Beside stories in prose about the quests of young princes, the heritage of Malay writing comprises a vast array of other kinds of texts, both in verse and prose.<sup>4</sup> The following list is not exhaustive, but serves to give an impression of the variety of Malay writings. There are works that deal with religious matters, such as the basic tenets of Islam, the life of Muslim prophets, and daily religious practices, such as praying and the ritual bath. Some take the form of textbooks, intended for the instruction of new converts, while others are riveting narratives aimed at entertainment and casual instruction. Court libraries kept, among other writings, regulations on local traditions pertaining to members of the ruling house, genealogies and historical works. Next, there are long, romantic poems that enthralled men and women alike. Similarly popular were so-called frame stories resembling the well-known tale *One Thousand and One Nights*. The strong interest in divination and dream interpretation in the Malay World is reflected in dream books and lists of omens and interpretations. The Malay letter is another well-known category of Malay writing. A relatively new genre is the autobiography; only from about the turn of the nineteenth century did autobiographical works start to appear.

This wide variety is linked to the different environments in which Malay writings were produced and consumed. There was the community of maritime traders and cap-

<sup>4</sup> There are several works that offer an overview of Malay writing; I name only those that I consider the most useful as an introduction. Richard James Wilkinson and Richard Olof Winstedt jointly wrote a three-volume work on Malay literature (1907). In 1925, Hans Overbeck published an anthology of excerpts of Malay texts in German translation. Next, there is Christiaan Hooykaas' *Over Maleische literatuur* (1937). More recently, there is *Kesusastraan Klasik Melayu Sepanjang Abad* by Teuku Iskandar (1995) and the rich work by Braginsky, titled *The Heritage of Malay Traditional Literature: A Historical Survey of Genres, Writings and Literary Views* (2004). Since most Malay manuscripts date from the nineteenth century, the following publication is of special interest: *Malay Literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* by Siti Hawa Haji Salleh (2010).

tains, for whom rules and regulations pertaining to the seas and seafaring were relevant. As faithful Muslims, they studied translations of Arabic religious treatises, while on long, lonely nights in foreign ports they turned to romantic verses narrating the predicament of the itinerant trader or *dagang* to soothe their homesickness. The court as a place where Malay writings were kept and composed was already mentioned. Then there were the numerous centres of Muslim religious learning, called *madrasah* or *pesantren*. Their collections consisted of writings in Arabic or Malay on religious matters, written by authors from either foreign or indigenous soil (see also Van Bruinessen 2012, 83–100, 225–240). In the nineteenth century, lending libraries operated in some of the larger cities on Java and Sumatra. They catered to the members of the urban middle class, who favoured mainly (symbolical) romantic narratives and adventure stories. One such a library was run by Muhammad Bakir, an author and copyist of Malay writings, in late nineteenth-century Batavia (Chambert-Loir 1984). Lastly, references to female composers and copyists as well as to specific kinds of texts that were read or recited in all-female circles bear witness to the existence of gendered writing practices in the Malay World (Den Hamer 1890; Hijjas 2011). Unfortunately, to date, not much research has been done on this topic.

Malay writings are written on European paper, in a more or less standardized form of Malay. The script that has been used is derived from the Arabic script; it is called *jawi*. Many Malay writings are anonymous; their colophons neither mention the name of the author or translator, nor that of the copyist. In addition, references to a date or place of production of the original text or the copy used by the copyist are scarce. It is very important to keep in mind that our knowledge and understanding of Malay writing is fragmentary and to a considerable degree hypothetical. The extant manuscripts offer us only a partial view of the actual nature and range of Malay writing practices in Southeast Asia. However, the picture that can be reconstructed on the basis of the available evidence in the manuscripts shows that Malay texts were written and copied at least from the late sixteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century. The area of their dispersion ranged from various places in what is now Indonesia, Malaysia, the southern part of Thailand and Sri Lanka. There has been a general consensus among scholars working on Malay writing that the beginnings of this particular manuscript tradition is to be found in the period when Islam took root in island Southeast Asia, i.e. in the thirteenth century. A recent (re)discovery of a fourteenth-century manuscript containing a Malay legal code feeds the speculation about the existence of pre-Islamic writing practices; the text is written in a pre-Islamic script on indigenous paper made of tree bark. It could well be that the Muslim-Malay manuscript tradition formed a continuation of older, indigenous writing practices. Or a continuation of an oral tradition, for that matter (Kozok 2006).

The history of Malay writing is entwined with that of patterns of human mobility. The Malay language and writing practices were able to spread over a vast area mainly through networks of (maritime) trade, Islamic missionary activities, traveling students

of religion and pilgrims. Refugees from regions plagued by armed conflicts and migrants who regularly visited their native *kampung* added to the already high mobility in the area. But these movements of people, manuscripts and ideas not only led to the spread of Malay writing, but also resulted in the remarkable continuity and consistency that Malay writing is renowned for. The language used in the manuscripts and the contours of several genres show a striking homogeneity across a vast geographical area and over a period of almost three hundred years. This extraordinary consistency is stressed in almost all introductions to Malay writing, explicitly or implicitly, through the assumption that there has hardly been a historical development in Malay writing. While I acknowledge the fact that stories travel and that they have no regard for boundaries that separate languages and cultures, I do feel that this focus on the assumed homogeneity of Malay writing has obscured another side of MAS that offers promising lines of investigation.

It is argued here that each Malay text, irrespective of its geographical origin, is subjected to two contradictory forces at the moment of its creation: a homogenizing pull and a heterogenizing one.<sup>5</sup> The first is responsible for the marked consistency of Malay writing over time and space. This force keeps texts that are written in the different corners of the Malay World within the larger tradition of Malay writing. At the same time, each Malay text also belongs to a local textual network, and it is from this network that the other force emanates. This heterogenizing pull derives its power from local factors, such as indigenous and colonial politics, economy, religious trends and social dynamics. Each historical locality had its own societal needs that prompted certain texts and genres to ‘appear’, either through new compositions or copying texts that originated elsewhere. This latter force, however, has rarely been addressed in studies on Malay writing. Together, these contradictory forces shape the outlook of what I call ‘localized’ Malay writing: the total of all Malay writings at a certain time and place. Such a localized entity is very concrete and can be understood as an instantiation of the abstract idea of a greater Malay writing linking three hundred years and numerous regions. With this study and its main focus on the link between texts and ‘the local’ I hope to illuminate this hitherto neglected aspect of Malay texts.

The current study is structured along the lines of the two shaping forces mentioned above. The first two chapters illustrate the workings of the heterogenizing pull. Here, the *SBS* is featured in the context of localized Malay writing practices in Barus (and Sorkam).<sup>6</sup> The research corpus for these chapters consists of 58 titles of Malay writings

<sup>5</sup> I drew my inspiration for this approach from Ronit Ricci’s illuminating book titled *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (2011). Ricci uses the *Book of One Thousand Questions* – from its Arabic original to its adaptations into the Javanese, Malay and Tamil languages – as a means to consider connections that linked Muslims across divides of distance and culture.

<sup>6</sup> The research corpus for Chapter 2 includes 5 texts that were collected in Sorkam. Sorkam is a small coastal village situated approximately 25 kilometres to the south of Barus. See Chapter 2.



and seven titles of Minangkabau-Malay writings that were present in Barus between 1851 and 1857. The objective is to show how Malay writing – including adventure stories – on the northwest coast of Sumatra in the mid-nineteenth century was shaped by its socio-historical context. This trajectory, then, leads to an explanation of where, when, how and why the Malay adventure story *SBS* was written. In Chapters 4 and 5, the local context is abandoned in favour of that of the larger Malay World. This is the operating space of the homogenizing force. The *SBS* is examined as part of a different, second corpus of texts. It comprises seven MAS, written and oral, that originate from different periods as well as from different regions of the Malay World. At first sight, the heterogeneous character of this research corpus might seem odd or even inappropriate, especially in a study that argues that even such seemingly fantastic writings as MAS are linked to a specific social reality. However, I contend that all MAS, written and oral, have commonalities that negate boundaries of time and space and, therefore, should be considered as members of the same family. This familial bond, it is stressed again, is the result of a leveling force that emanates from the ‘grand’ Malay writing.

On the basis of an investigation of this second group of texts, it is argued that one of the functions of MAS was the preservation and transmission of important cultural knowledge. Chapter 4 explains how the stories present an animist ontology that provided the readers with the basic categories they needed to be able to understand and act upon the world they inhabited. The stories taught them the means to safeguard their mental and physical health, the treatments for various illnesses and how they, as human beings, differed from animals, ghosts and natural phenomena. This is followed in Chapter 5 by the exposition of a Malay dream theory that is conveyed in MAS. The texts’ preoccupation with dreams, omens and their interpretation testifies to the apprehension about one’s individual fate in life (and in the Hereafter) that existed in the Malay World and the wish to influence the course of one’s fate.

Chapter 3 connects the two parts of this study. First, it points out the historical assumptions that underpinned negative judgments of MAS in the past. Then, it paves the way for the discussion of the Malay world view presented in the next chapter by posing a question about what the supernatural in MAS represents, if not magic in the Western sense of the word. Finally, all the threads of significance that have carefully been laid out come together in the final interpretation of the *SBS* in Chapter 6. The story of Bahram Syah’s quest for a multi-talented wonder bird called *Marah* Jalin turns out to combine two seemingly contradictory messages on the malleability of man’s fate in life. One propagates the mainstream Muslim opinion that everything will work out for the best if only one completely surrenders oneself to God. The other presents the world as a book with omens that can be read and interpreted to discover one’s fate, so that one can try to change the course of that fate.

The reason that there are so few studies on localized Malay writing is that the primary condition for such an investigation is difficult to meet; one needs a substantial number

of titles of Malay works that are known to have been written or consumed in a specific period and region. But since many manuscripts lack references to a date and/or place of production, and collectors generally did not document when and where they acquired their manuscripts, the circumstances for such an enterprise are not favourable. It has been the work of another Bible translator that presented me with the unique opportunity to construct a suitable corpus of texts for a study of Malay writing practices in a nineteenth-century North Sumatran port settlement. From 1851 until 1857, Herman Neubronner van der Tuuk lived and worked in the relatively small coastal trade community of Barus. He had been sent to North Sumatra by his employer, the Dutch Bible Society (*Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap*, hereafter NBG), with the assignment to translate the Bible into one of the Batak languages. But, as he was interested in the Malay language as well, he also collected Malay texts to further his knowledge of written Malay (Groeneboer 2000, 24; Groeneboer 2002, 93, 273–277). Both his Batak and Malay manuscripts are now kept at the Special Collections of Leiden University Library (see also Clara Brakel-Papenhuyzen 2007 and 2014).

With this study, I seek to offer a new perspective on Malay adventure stories. Of course, there have been others who have endeavoured to do the same. Two scholars in particular must be mentioned in this framework for their original contribution to the study of Malay adventure stories. In *Notes on the Structure of the Classical Malay Hikayat* (1979), Alessandro Bausani draws a parallel between the structure of the Malay adventure story and that of Indian Hindu myths. Central to his argument are the frequent transformations experienced by the protagonists of Malay adventure stories and the multiple levels of existence the stories present. The latter, Bausani argues, is a faint echo of the Hindu cosmos, which consists of different layers of ‘heaven’ that serve as the abodes of the gods. He links the transformations to the Hindu concept of the godly *avātar* or incarnation.

Braginsky connects the plot of Malay adventure stories to the Sufi path that leads the believer to unification with his godly Creator. Through meticulous analyses of the *Story of Syah Mardan* and the *Story of Indraputra* he interprets both texts as Sufi allegories (Braginsky 1990, 107–135; 2004, 727–742). Although I will not attempt to present a full scope analysis of the *SBS* in this manner here, the latter story does contain elements similar to Sufi allegoric imagery encountered in texts from the Archipelago and the wider Muslim world alike. Prime example is the precious stone that features in the *SBS* (see also Braginsky 2011 and De Bruin 2012). It can take on any colour and weight and serves as Bahram Syah’s token of betrothal to Princess Drifting Beach Hibiscus Flower. Its counterpart, and token of betrothal of the princess to Bahram Syah, is a multi-talented bird, another symbolic image known from the Sufi tradition.

My findings do not refute those of Bausani or Braginsky. Instead, they provide an additional angle to view these Malay writings from. It is no coincidence that the current study brings to the fore animist concepts that are present in MAS. For with their focus

an animism, Hinduism and Sufi Islam, respectively, the three studies form a triad that corresponds to the different world views that once were, and, in some cases, still are, valid in the Malay World.

## The Story of Bahram Syah: A Summary

Chapters 4 and 5 of this study frequently refer to passages from the *Story of Bahram Syah* (*SBS*). Chapter 6 presents a detailed reading of this story. To guide the reader through these chapters, a summary of the story is given next.

I

King Maharaja the Great of the state of Southern Plains and his wife had three sons: Ghaisyah, Aisyah and Bahram Syah. They were handsome young men. The youngest, Bahram Syah, was the apple of their eye. One night, when the king was sleeping in his private chambers, he had an unusual dream. He dreamt that a messenger from God approached him. The holy man told the ruler about an extraordinary bird that was called *Marah Jalin*. The bird was a very special animal indeed. It could speak like a human being, and when it did, gold and silver were scattered from its beak. When it recited a story, its eyes sprinkled diamonds and all sorts of gems, and when it flapped its wings and wagged its tail, precious stones of various sorts flew out from its nose. The body of this *Marah Jalin* emitted exotic fragrances and his breast feathers were of a brilliant red, like the seeds of a dragon's blood plant. The messenger said to Maharaja the Great that people had swooned after having set eyes on this amazing creature. The animal was the pet of a princess named Drifting Beach Hibiscus Flower; her abode was a kingdom called Gastu Gasta. Unfortunately, the dream came to an end before the king had the chance to ask the messenger for the exact location of this country.

The dream image of the wondrous bird had instilled a longing in the king. His desire to own it was so strong that he threatened to abandon his throne to go on a quest for the animal. As his absence would cause havoc in the kingdom, Bahram Syah offered to leave the kingdom with his two brothers to find the trophy pet for their father.

When all the necessary preparations had been made, the three brothers mounted their horses and rode through the gate, accompanied by their servant Selamat. After having traveled through the dense jungle for 12 days, they arrived at a summer pavilion. There, they found a letter in which they were told about a three-forked road that lay ahead of them. The path to the right, the letter informed them, would lead the traveler home safely; likewise the path in the middle. As for the path to the left, it had no end and was named Only God Knows. After a peaceful night of sleep, the young princes traveled on and reached the three-forked road. They decided to split up: Ghaisyah, the eldest, took

the path to the right, Aisyah took the middle one, and Bahram Syah put his faith in God and rode his horse along the path named Only God Knows.

## II

After a journey of three and a half months, Ghaisyah arrived at a kingdom named Whirling Sand in the Bay of Dew. He asked the ruler for directions to Gastu Gasta, but neither the ruler, nor the sea captains and traders had ever heard of a kingdom by that name. Uncertain where to go next, Ghaisyah decided to stay. To pass his time, he started to play chess with the harbour master and local dignitaries, but within a short period of time, he had lost all of his possessions. In the end, he became a poor beggar and had to do menial jobs to get something to eat.

## III

A similar fate was predestined for Aisyah, the middle brother, who had taken the middle road. After he had traveled for three months, he passed the border of a kingdom named Piles of Passion. King Fierce and Fiery was the head of state. Aisyah passed his time by gambling and interpreting portents. He lost everything he owned and became destitute. As a debtor to King Fierce and Fiery, he became enslaved by the king. For years to come, he would spend his days cutting grass for the king's horse.

## IV

Bahram Syah's adventures, now, were very different from his brothers'. One day, after an arduous journey of three months, his eye caught a single orange tree near the side of the road. It bore only one orange. He took the fruit, peeled and ate it. He was amazed to discover that each of the pieces had a different taste: bitter, sour, sweet. The flavour of the last segment was surprisingly rich: a mix of various tastes, with a sweetness of sugar mixed with coconut cream. Bahram Syah wondered what this strange phenomenon could mean. Within a blink of the eye, he interpreted the remarkable event: the different flavours, he believed, referred to the stages of his quest: difficult at first, but with benefits abundant and sweet in the end.

Somewhat later, he came upon three wells. Two of them overflowed and filled the dry well in the middle. This scene too was aptly interpreted by Bahram Syah: the water of the overflowing wells was like alms to the poor. It signified that God would provide one with whatever one would need to stay alive. A series of other strange events followed: people digging into already steep ravines and piling up the soil on top of high mountains, water forming high waves in a mudhole and a large, lush plain full of skinny water buffaloes and a small, dry plain, with several thousand fat water buffaloes. Each time, Bahram

Syah explained the curious spectacles as symbolic messages that related to his quest. He believed that with these miracles, God had intended to show His disciple His power and greatness. Somewhat later, an encounter with the Angel of Death increased Bahram Syah's confidence. The Angel told him where to look for the state of Gastu Gasta – on the other side of the boiling Sea of Fire – and revealed that Bahram Syah still had a long life ahead of him.

After these puzzling scenes, Bahram Syah resumed his journey. Along the way, he rescued a princess named Goddess in Bondage, who had been held captive by a malevolent spirit. As a token of her gratitude, she gave Bahram Syah the Magical Stone Jewel of the Queen. It was an amazing gem; it could take on any colour and weight and the intensity of its light made people fall unconscious. This precious item, she told him, could be traded for the prize bird in Gastu Gasta. Before the princess bade Bahram Syah farewell, she gave him three magic hairs that could work wonders for him.

One day during his wanderings, Bahram Syah had a dream in which his father appeared to him. He warned his son of the troubles he would find on his way and told him to keep his wits about him at all times.

## V

Seventeen years had passed since Bahram Syah had left his parents' palace. He felt weak and homesick and lay down beneath a giant tree for a nap. Suddenly, an immense noise that sounded like thunder woke him up. He jumped to his feet and saw how a giant sea snake was trying to devour a few young garudas in a huge nest above Bahram Syah's head. Bahram Syah killed the snake with his sword, cut it up and fed the pieces to the young giant birds. As a token of her gratitude, the mother garuda flew Bahram Syah across the raging Sea of Fire in the direction of Gastu Gasta.

After a gruelling trip, Bahram Syah finally arrived at the border of Gastu Gasta. There, he met an elderly woman named Grandmother Kebayan. She adopted Bahram Syah as her son and helped him to gain access to Gastu Gasta's court. Disguised as a servant of Grandmother Kebayan, he accompanied her to the court to offer flower bouquets for sale to Princess Drifting Beach Hibiscus Flower. It was there, in the audience hall of Gastu Gasta, that Bahram Syah saw the bird *Marah Jalin* for the first time. He began to talk to the bird in all the languages of the world, and to the amazement of the princess and her father, the bird instantly responded to Bahram Syah. The wondrous creature started to speak, while it danced gracefully on the golden tray it was perched on. Delicate perfumes pervaded the air and glittering gold, silver and diamonds flew around. Then, Bahram Syah asked the princess whether she wanted to trade *Marah Jalin* for the Magical Stone Jewel of the Queen. When he showed her the jewel, both she and her father swooned and collapsed. Such was the intensity of the multi-coloured light of the stone. Bahram Syah then sprinkled rosewater on their faces and, as a result, they regained consciousness.

In the end, it was agreed upon that Bahram Syah would marry Princess Drifting Beach Hibiscus Flower. The bird and the stone were exchanged as their tokens of betrothal to each other.

But Bahram Syah asked to postpone his wedding for seven years; he first wanted to pay his parents a visit in the state of Southern Plains. Now that he had finally acquired the bird of his father's dream, he wanted to offer the animal to his father, to soothe the king's debilitating longing for it. For the second time, the garuda mother flew Bahram Syah over the Sea of Fire.

## VI

Bahram Syah first picked up Princess Goddess in Bondage, who he had rescued earlier. Together, they traveled to the kingdoms where his two foolish brothers had been living in anguish for so many years. The two were freed by their youngest brother, and the four of them continued their journey to Southern Plains, together with the bird.

Gaisyah and Aisyah felt humiliated by what had happened to them. And what was even worse was that it would be their youngest brother instead of them, who would earn all the credit for having found the desired bird for their father. Thus, they began scheming to get rid of Bahram Syah. One day, when they had stopped at a pavilion to rest, they invited Bahram Syah to bathe with them. They asked him to fetch them some water from a well and he obliged. But when he stood on the edge of the well, his treacherous brothers pushed him into the deep well. Without their little brother, Ghaisyah and Aisyah arrived at their fathers' court, with the bird. They told the king that Bahram Syah had suddenly disappeared. To convince their grieving father that the disappearance of his favourite son had been predestined, they lied that they had had dreams that had foretold the loss of Bahram Syah. Their gift of the bird to the king failed to relieve his anguish: the bird looked sick and refused to show his extraordinary skills.

## VII

Contrary to his brothers' expectations, Bahram Syah miraculously survived his fall into the well. And, one day, he was found and saved by a king named King Midday, who had stopped at the well to fetch some water. As the king was already old and had no heir, he adopted Bahram Syah as his son. Sometime later, the king fell ill and passed away. As son of the old king, it was Bahram Syah's task to fund the commemorative meals and give away the prescribed alms to the poor. In honour of his adoptive father, he spent all his riches on food and alms. In the end, an all-white fighting rooster was all he had left. But when he had it slaughtered for another commemorative meal, he found a magic ring in the bird's cloaca. The ring turned out to host a powerful ghost, who was able to fulfil all Bahram Syah's wishes. Still longing to see his parents again, Bahram Syah asked the ghost

to change his appearance into that of a pilgrim who had just returned from Mecca. As soon as word got around that a *haji* had arrived in Southern Plains, Bahram Syah's father received the young man in his audience hall. There, having regained his own appearance, he let the bird perform all his special tricks. The whole court stood in awe.

Bahram Syah's task was now fulfilled and it was time for him to return to Gastu Gasta to marry his sweetheart princess. But when he arrived at the court, the vassal kings turned out to have had second thoughts about the marriage of their princess to a foreigner. They pressured the father of Princess Drifting Beach Hibiscus Flower to test Bahram Syah to find out his worth. And that was what happened. First, the vassal rulers challenged him to build a golden cargo ship all by himself and to enter in a sailing competition with them. Next, they asked him to build a golden rice barn. Third, he was asked to produce a cloth big enough to cover a whole mountain. And lastly, the kings wanted him to build a complete new capital. With the help of the ghost from his magic ring, Bahram Syah passed each test gloriously and was able to marry the princess. After the wedding, they settled in Bahram Syah's own capital that was named In Between Good Plains.

## VIII

After a while, Princess Drifting Beach Hibiscus Flower became pregnant. Seven days into her pregnancy, she began to yearn for the meat of a male deer that was pregnant with a female young. Thus, Bahram Syah instructed the palace guards not to let anyone enter after his departure, then gathered his hunting dogs and left for a hunt. But despite his efforts, all he found were carrying female deer. Exhausted by his futile hunt in the jungle, he lay down to sleep. While he was sleeping, he dreamed that his father visited him. The king informed his son that he should hunt for female deer, as there is no such a thing as a pregnant male animal. He also told Bahram Syah that his wife had already given birth to a handsome boy, and that his magic ring had been stolen by one of his servants, Turani. And before he disappeared, the king advised his favourite son to give his love to animals instead of human beings in the future, however filthy the animals might be. Then, Bahram Syah woke up, killed a female deer with young and took the game home. To his surprise, his own palace guards did not recognize him and refused to let him in. In fact, he looked like the treacherous servant Turani, who had stolen Bahram Syah's magic ring. With the help of the ghost from the ring, Turani had switched appearances with his former master. With nowhere to go, but with God on his side, Bahram Syah decided to turn away from his capital and see what would happen.

He walked along the outstretched beach for a while and then turned inland. Near an abandoned cottage, he found a scrawny dog. He fed the dog and the skinny creature kept following him. Somewhat later, he saw an emaciated black cat. He gave it something to eat. The cat joined Bahram Syah and the dog, and the three of them continued their journey together. The last animal to join the party was a mouse. Its food was being stolen

by bigger mice and, as a result, it had become undernourished. This animal too was taken care of by Bahram Syah.

After having wandered about for a while, Bahram Syah arrived at a kingdom called Shaded River. Its ruler, His Majesty Encircling the World, adopted Bahram Syah as his son. Five years passed. Then the king decided to marry Bahram Syah to Princess Kesumba and Rosewater, who lived in a nearby fishing village. The young couple were often seen with their pet animals on the beach, watching the fishing boats return with their catch.

In the meantime, the three grateful animals had made a plan to retrieve their master's stolen ring. When darkness fell, the three gathered at the beach and started to swim. Their destination was the island that Turani had run to with Bahram Syah's ring. Fatigued, the animals reached the island's shore. Next, the black cat successfully tried to befriend Turani. The thief grew very fond of the cat and took it with him to his sleeping chambers every night. One night, when Turani was sound asleep, the mouse stuck its tail in Turani's nose to make him sneeze. With the sneeze, the ring – which Turani kept in his mouth during the night – flew out of his mouth. The cat then caught the ring, gave it to the dog and together they swam back to the mainland. But the strong winds and the tide wore the animals out and the dog had to let go of the ring. The ring kept sinking deeper and deeper into the sea until a big silver bream came along and swallowed it.

On one of the days that Bahram Syah and Princess Kesumba and Rosewater were on the beach, inspecting the day's catch, Bahram Syah noticed how one of the fish was much bigger than the rest. He asked his wife to roast the silver bream for him. When she started to gut it, she found her husband's stolen magic rings in the fish's intestines. Bahram Syah was overcome with joy. He used incense to summon the ghost in the ring and told the ghost to give him back his own appearance and destroy Turani's island. With Turani taken care of and having regained his own looks, Bahram Syah was finally able to return home to his wife Princess Drifting Beach Hibiscus Flower and his new-born son.

Sometime after his return, a second son was born. But even this joyous event could not alleviate Bahram Syah's longing to see his parents in Southern Plains again. In the end, it was decided that Bahram Syah and Princess Drifting Beach Hibiscus Flower, together with their youngest son and the cat, the dog and the mouse, would leave for Southern Plains. Their eldest son would stay in Gastu Gasta to succeed the old king.

When the royal couple arrived in Southern Plains, they were welcomed by Maharaja the Great. To celebrate the return of the youngest prince, festivities were held for days on end. The youngest grandson Nadir Syah proved to be a talented young man. After a number of years, he was installed as the new ruler of the Land of Twelve Streams and given the title Sultan Sikandar Alam.





a. Sumatra and the Malay peninsula



b. The Barus region

Figure 1. Maps (courtesy of Erik van Elven, 2014).

