Never-Neverland Revisited: Malay Adventure Stories

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3 | Malay Adventure Stories: 'Poor Literature'

The discussion in the previous chapter revealed that, in some cases, the Western textual genres do not comfortably fit Malay writings. The outspoken religious nature of some works that were categorized as adventure stories, for instance, prompts the question of whether a classification along Western lines does justice to the Malay writings. Should we read the *Story of Bahram Syah*, for example, as a romance, analogue to the medieval romance from the Middle Ages, or is Vladimir Propp's folktale perhaps a better guide for understanding the work (Propp 1958)? And, what should we do with the *Poem on Mecca and Medina*? Does it speak to us sufficiently as an autobiography, a travel journal or a religious pamphlet?

These are important questions to address. Because, it is argued here, the old ways of looking at Malay texts could not fail to present an unflattering image of the Malay textual heritage. And, because more than a hundred years of research has yielded few alternative approaches to Malay writings, especially in the case of Malay adventure stories. It is time to look afresh at these 'fantastic' tales and find new frames for reading that lead to new understandings about them.

This chapter argues that Malay adventure stories have received mainly negative commentaries in the past because of the Western, nineteenth-century vocabulary that has been used to discuss them. The stories on the wanderings of a young prince through foreign lands, his battles and his multiple marriages have been described as boring, whimsical, childish and fantastic. Post-modern and, in particular, post-colonial studies have shown how descriptions of non-Western textual practices have been shaped by nineteenth-century, Western discourses on literature, race, religion and colonialism. Two Western categories in particular, it is argued, were involved in the dismissal of Malay adventure stories as ridiculous and worthless: 'literature' and 'magic.' Through a com-

prehensive examination of their successive roots and histories, and an analysis of older commentaries on Malay adventure stories, this chapter aims to show how the two classifications, instead of generating useful knowledge about Malay writing, referred back to Western phenomena. A concise account of the intellectual climate in nineteenth-century Europe will serve as the background for these investigations. The main source for the following overview is the comprehensive reader *Colonialism & Modernity* by Paul Gillen and Devleena Ghosh (2007).

To gain an understanding of the mentality of nineteenth-century intellectuals, one has to go back to the eighteenth century. Developments and events that took place in this Age of Enlightenment set the stage for the formulation of new models for thinking about man and his relation to his natural and social surroundings that would determine human actions in the century to come. The Enlightenment project was a cultural movement of European thinkers aimed at societal changes, which were to be induced by questioning both worldly and religious powers. Central to this eighteenth-century turn of events was the epoch-making declaration of human reason as a new source of knowledge and moral compass, replacing divine law. It was propagated that man himself was capable of making sound judgements through empiric research or reasoning.[1] The result of this intellectual movement was that Christianity's grip on society was loosened. But there were another three developments that were at play in prompting this major paradigm shift. First, there is the belief in the existence of natural laws; that is, laws concerning the order of the natural world. Next, the individual was thought to have natural rights. And lastly, Enlightenment philosophy was imbued with a sense of life being in transit, from a primitive origin to a utopian end. Human societies were believed to possess the potential to improve and evolve. One of the many thinkers that were both influenced by and contributed to the new movement was the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). In the publications by his hand that appeared in the early nineteenth century, he presented human life as a struggle for freedom. To attain this latter state, he asserted, enhanced understanding of the self, the other and the world was required. He posited the existence of four stages of this process, the last stage representing the ideal 'free' society, and categorized human civilizations on the basis of these stages. Ideas like Hegel's and those of other innovative thinkers prompted an inquisitive attitude among Europe's intellectuals and introduced the idea of evolutionary change (Gillen and Ghosh 2007, 31–33).

[1] Although many of the discoveries and new ideas of 1800s emerged in the wake of Enlightenment thinking, there is another important nineteenth-century model of representation that formed a counter-movement, and that is Romanticism. In reaction to Enlightenment's focus on rationality, Romantic thinkers made a plea for engaging emotion and intuition in the search for knowledge. The co-existence of these two models explains the sometimes paradoxical representation in this period of certain topics, such as 'magic' (see Meyer and Pels 2003, 7–8). For the sake of the current argument, Romanticism will be discussed in this chapter's paragraph on the history of the concept of 'magic.'

Around the same time, investigations by geologists following this new line of enquiry resulted in the important discovery of 'deep time': the idea that the world was unfathomably older than the mere six thousand years Christian dogma had it believed to be (Gillen and Ghosh 2007, 114–216). In combination with the idea that human societies were capable of transformation, this concept of deep time opened up new vistas, such as the possibility of evolutionary change. The latter hypothesis was scientifically grounded in 1859 by the ground-breaking publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin's main ideas, often summarized as 'the struggle for survival' and 'the survival of the fittest' (or 'natural selection') had a significant impact on contemporary science and society in general. For instance, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Social Darwinism exerted considerable influence in European societies, both in intellectual circles and in popular thinking.[2] Its main architect, Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) had noticed parallels between his own economic theories and Darwin's notion of the survival of the fittest, and linked the latter idea to human societies. Social Darwinism was based on Darwin's determinism, but had one critical additional assumption, and that was the belief that Darwin's ideas did not just extend to physical properties of humans, but also to all aspects of their culture, such as religion, ethics and political institutions. This cultural evolutionism entailed an evolutionary continuum with prehistoric man at its lowest point. Contemporary categories that were allotted the same position as prehistoric man were children, women, the lower social groups and tribal societies. This postulation of primitive man was of crucial importance to Spencer's line of thinking. He needed to portray the primitive as immoral, irrational and aggressive in order to create the temporal space for humans, and their culture, to evolve. As social Darwinism was not a social or political theory as it lacked an ideological component, it contained the possibility for transference to a whole spectrum of ideological positions. For instance, Spencer's evolutionist ideas reinforced already existing religious notions of the superiority of the white race and western civilization (Gillen and Ghosh 2007, 96–98).

Apart from developments in the field of ideas, the reverberations of Enlightenment's plea for investigation, the search for knowledge, combined with the spirit of progress prompted advances in the field of technology as well. The nineteenth century saw some ground-breaking novelties that profoundly changed daily life, especially in the field of communication and transportation. Telegraph and, later that century, the telephone shortened distances, while the steam engine – applied in the steamboat and locomotive – revolutionized the way man traveled. Electricity was a second 'motive' power that was discovered and practically applied in the 1800s; it would ignite the second Industrial Revolution later that century. And finally, in the light of the following discussion about

[2] A good introduction to the impact of Social Darwinism on European thought is Mike Hawkins' *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought 1860–1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (1997).

colonialist expansion, there are the various inventions that led to advances in the domain of firearms that need to be mentioned here (Gillen and Ghosh 2007, 45–47).

It is around this point that the European histories of nineteenth-century thinking, technological innovations and colonialism began to converge. Scholarship and colonial expansion stimulated each other in several ways and the technological advances made (re)colonization and fruitful exploitation of the colonized areas possible. After the liquidation of the VOC, the Dutch colonial government residing in Batavia had initially been reluctant to recolonize the areas that had been left to the indigenous rulers after the departure of the company's traders and administrators. Due to the deplorable state of the Dutch economy after the Napoleonic rule, Dutch military power in the East was limited and concentrated on Java. However, explorative forays into areas of the Archipelago that had not yet been incorporated in the colonial administration had revealed ample opportunities for profitable crop cultivation. Moreover, independent trade ports formed yet another potential source of income for the Dutch. Thus, in order to replenish the Dutch treasury, colonial expansion was needed to secure these profitable sources.

The scholarly publications on geology, flora, fauna and peoples of island Southeast Asia that appeared in the nineteenth century formed a useful guide for the Dutch in their colonial enterprise. With the rising importance and prestige of science, Western states began to fund explorative expeditions. Coastlines were charted and data were collected on a wide array of topics such as geology, biology and anthropology. The Dutch, like other colonial powers, were fascinated with the collection, codification, and naming of exotica: flora, fauna, inanimate objects or humans. It was due to, among others, Enlightenment thinker Carl Linneaus that the enormous amount of data generated by these new investigations could be categorized; he developed a flexible classification system that made it possible to establish relations between living things (Gillen and Ghosh 2007, 140–144).

There is, however, another way that Western discourse on the Archipelago is closely entwined with Dutch colonialism. Lately, a whole new body of scholarly literature has appeared that demonstrates how Western knowledge on the colonies, produced mainly in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, operated in the specific historical, intellectual and economic setting of Western imperialism and colonialism. These postcolonial subversive critiques, set off by Edward Said's influential work *Orientalism* (1978), argue that Western scholarship on the colonies produced a Western discourse that constructed a colony that was dependent on and reproduced the positional superiority and hegemony of the West. This system of representations was impregnated with European superiority, racism and imperialism (Gillen and Ghosh 2007, 155–158).

Although colonies were established by the use of physical and military power, it is argued that a crucial factor in the continued success of colonialism lay in what Nicholas Dirk calls "cultural technologies of rule": "subtle techniques of dominance manifest in the realm of language, taste, morality, scholarship and the production of cultural

memory," that profoundly altered the basic experience of the world and the self by the colonized (Gillen and Ghosh 2007, 133–135). Colonies ruled through the coding, delineation and reconstitution of various systems of knowledge, such as vernacular grammars, archeological displays and the formalization of religious texts. Examples include the Dutch and German nineteenth-century discourse on Sumatra's 'Batak,' and the British creation of 'the rural Malay' (Smith Kipp 1996; Andaya 2002, 2008; Perret 1995; Kahn 2006). From this follows that scholars such as Van der Tuuk and Klinkert, and missionaries alike, form part of the apparatus of colonialism.

Paradoxically, the Age of Reason yielded the proclamation of the Rights of Man and the anti-slavery movement, but also, through the evolutionist ideas of the following century, a reinforcement of racism. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the European colonizers' moral dilemmas stemming from colonization had been mainly abated by considerations of a religious nature. Colonialism, motivated by imperialist tendencies, the prospect of profitable trade and, perhaps, an inquisitive mind were primarily justified by the religious obligation to spread the gospel. With the Enlightenment project new justifications of colonialism became available. One of them was that the 'primitive' peoples inhabiting the colonies needed the European colonizers' guidance in order to advance. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, new models of thinking resulted in a new world view, but at the same time reinforced older assumptions, such as the superiority of the white race (Gillen and Gosh 2007, 92–98). The growing power of European states, the impulse to measure and categorize and the scientific interest in biological difference worked together to create of heightened sense of white racial pre-eminence. Social Darwinism made many Europeans assume that they were inherently superior to other peoples; the global dominance of Europeans seemed to prove it. The different peoples of the Archipelago, on the other hand, were seen as savages without written laws or history. Following evolutionary ideas, they were thought of as representing a low stage in human and cultural development. This line of thinking allotted a paternalistic role to the already advanced European nations; they were to take the primitives by the hand as children and guide them to development.

Such is the background against which Western knowledge on Malay writing and its evaluations by early collectors and scholars should be understood. The tendency of these men to categorize and impose hierarchical orders stems from the intellectual climate that formed them, likewise their preoccupation with 'origin' and 'purity' in relation to cultures. The accumulation of knowledge about the colony occurred within the framework of colonialism, and ultimately served colonial interest. The cultural embeddedness of European men who came to the Malay World to study the Malay language and literature inevitably led to their disappointment, when all that they managed to find were scores of texts on Muslim doctrine and religious practices, booklets on 'magic' and other 'superstitious beliefs', 'untrustworthy' histories and, lastly, 'poorly written', 'sentimental' poems and 'tedious' and 'fantastic' adventure stories. Instead of questioning their standards, they

labelled those texts that did not neatly fit the requirements of a specific literary or textual genre as 'poor' or 'inferior' 'literature.' Key in their evaluations were their own, Western, ideas of what a text should look like to be called 'literary.'

Unfamiliar with such cultural phenomena as partial and oral literacy, the European collectors of Malay manuscripts looked for and expected to find in the Malay World a written literature roughly similar to their own.[3] Central to the so-called high literature in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century were realist narratives, in particular the realist novel. Realism was a theory of writing in which the ordinary aspects of life are depicted in a straightforward manner to reflect life as it actually is. Realist writings often present detailed descriptions of everyday life and are primarily concerned with the lives and preoccupations of members of the middle and lower classes. Realism downplays plot in favour of character. The movement began around the middle of the nineteenth century in reaction to the highly subjective approach of Romanticism, the artistic and philosophical movement that held sway in cultural circles in the first half of that century. The realistic novel of the nineteenth century was characterized by a unified and plausible plot structure, sharply individualized and believable characters and a pervasive illusion of reality in fiction (Morris 2003; Schipper 1979, 34–52). Many Malay writings, in contrast, were not narratives, but rather enumerations of religious and customary laws, commentaries on renowned collections of Arab religious writings, texts on medicine, magic, dreams and divination and genealogies. Moreover, the narratives that were collected lacked the requirement of probability.

It is enlightening to take a look at pre-nineteenth-century comments on Malay writings; they show how the disdain for Malay writings that was prevalent among the later scholars was closely connected to their culturally informed perception of literature. Scholars and collectors such as George Hendrik Werndly (1694–1744) and François Valentijn (1666–1727) saw Malay as a language of learning, like Latin in Europe. They read the works to unravel the knowledge that was contained in them. The complaint so commonly found in nineteenth-century sources that Malay writings are overly repetitious and lack originality is conspicuously absent in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century commentaries. To the scholars of the latter period, 'copiousness' and 'decorum' were the marks of good literature. And borrowing material from earlier sources was a common practice in Europe among contemporary authors (Sweeney 1994, 330). Whereas Valentijn (1724) saw, for instance, the Malay 'mirror for princes and kings' *Taj us-salatin* as a "noble book" and "the best Malay book that I know". Winstedt remarked on that same book two hundred years later that it was "poorly written," "of small literary worth" and "atrocious in its language" (Valentijn 1724 and Winstedt [c. 1991] cited in Sweeney 1994, 330). Before Darwin's and Spencer's ideas came to influence Europeans' view of the

[3] Sweeney's pioneering *A Full Hearing* (1987) is the best source for information on orality and literacy in the Malay World. Kozok 2000 presents a case study of partial literacy in North Sumatra.

world and its societies in the second half of the nineteenth century, the first half saw the peak of an intellectual and literary movement referred to as Romanticism. It originated in the late eighteenth century, partly as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution. At the same time, it was also a revolt against the aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment and a reaction to the scientific rationalization of nature. The European Romanticists found in Malay writing too much of the "old rhetorical commonplace" tradition they had just rejected. The infamous label 'Classical' for Malay writing originates from this period; with it, the Romanticists relegated Malay writing to the past (Sweeney 1994, 331).

A few recent studies on Malay texts have explicitly addressed and exposed the fallacy of the Eurocentric gaze for understanding Malay texts. It is mainly in research on the Malay dynastic histories that this trend has been most visible, though. The pioneering work on both Malay and Javanese historical writings by J. J. Ras (1968, 1994) laid the basis for later studies, such as those of Drakard (1990), Sergei Kukushkin (2004) and Francis R. Bradley (2009). Central to their work is the notion that Malay court histories are not histories in the Western sense of the word. Instead, they are writings that present a consciously manipulated picture of certain past events to legitimate current affairs and to facilitate a desired future. It was never the composer's intent to faithfully represent history as it happened. Thus, Malay histories are not 'untrustworthy histories,' as has been argued, but compositions written at the behest of the ruling *raja* to legitimate his right to the throne or to justify his actions, past or future (Ras 1969, 1994; Drakard 1990; Bradley 2009; Kukushkin 2004). A similar re-evaluation of Malay adventure stories has yet to be undertaken and is what this study aims to accomplish.

Efforts to further the study of the Malay language paralleled the advance of the Dutch colonial administration in the Archipelago. They were intensified in the second half of the nineteenth century. This was no coincidence. The Malay grammars, dictionaries and textbooks that appeared in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century were cultural instruments of Dutch colonialism. Malay had been used for centuries in Southeast Asia as a *lingua franca*, mainly for inter-ethnic trade purposes, and the Dutch had become aware of its potential. They promoted Malay as the preferred means of communication with the different ethnic groups subjected to their rule.[4] The need was felt for the standardization of the language and the publication of Malay reading material; this would not only facilitate the study of the language by prospective government officials, but also spread Malay among the different peoples living in the colony. Government-sponsored indigenous schools with Malay on the curriculum first started

[4] Long before the colonial government had seriously taken up the promotion of the Malay language for worldly purposes, the church and missionary organizations had already recognized the reach of the Malay language and had used it to spread the word of God among the indigenous population of the Archipelago (Swellengrebel 1974, 173–203).

to appear in this period, and serious attempts were made – by the two colonial powers in the Malay region, the Dutch and English – to standardize the Malay language.

As narrative texts, Malay adventure stories were particularly suitable for linguistic study. Thus, they were collected in considerable numbers by linguists, Bible translators and governmental officials. With Malay adventure stories under the looking glass of learned men from the West, opinions about them started to appear in private letters, reports and publications. The picture painted in the reviews and commentaries was not a flattering one. Three assumed shortcomings kept reappearing in the critiques. The stories were judged long-winded and boring, nonsensical, and considered as mere adaptations of great works from foreign civilizations. Now all three points of critique converge in the nineteenth-century Western concept of 'literature'. Thus, repetition in Malay adventure stories – the assumed main cause of the tediousness of the stories – was deemed a matter of inadequate literary style. Unrealistic, fantastic depictions violated the literary requirement of probability. The fact that many adventure stories were the reworking of other texts proved that they lacked perhaps the most important prerequisite of literary works according to Western ideas, that of originality. In short, Malay adventure stories were seen as writings of inferior literary quality. How, then, can we explain their former popularity in the Malay World? To their nineteenth-century audiences, these stories were neither monotonous, nor senseless. Public readings that lasted well into the night drew large gatherings and a continuous demand for these kinds of texts prompted the creation of new stories. A look at the nature of the repetition and the supernatural in the narratives, as well as at the ways new narratives come into being brings us closer to an answer.

With repetition on every level of the text and between different texts within the genre, it takes effort from a modern-day reader to a finish a complete Malay adventure story. Firstly, adventure stories display a limited vocabulary. A concordance of the *SBS* shows that only seven words together make up almost 20 per cent of the text: *pun, maka*, *kepada*, *yang*, *dan*, *ia* and *itu*.[5] The repetition continues on the level of the sentence. Similar to other adventure stories, many sentences in the *SBS* follow the same pattern: 'He spoke, "[...]" and went.'[6] These findings are corroborated by the concordances of Malay narrative texts of the online Malay Concordance Project that was set up by Ian Proudfoot.[7] The use of stock phrases, paraphrases, and parallelism (to give two or more parts of the sentences a similar form in order to give the whole a definite pattern) also fall into the category

[5] The high occurrence of punctuation words such as *maka*, *hatta* and *syahdan* and the focus particle *pun* in Malay narrative writings is connected to the aural nature of Malay written texts. These words constitute the 'audible punctuation' during performances where the text is read aloud in front of an audience (Sweeney 1980, 21).

[6] Maka ia pun berkata, "[...]," lalu berjalanlah. *Jalan* and *kata*, together with *ada* ('to be') en *ke* ('to, towards'), are four more words with a high occurrence in the *SBS*.

[7] A project of the Australian National University; http://mcp.anu.edu.au/Q/mcp.html, accessed 7 October 2013.

of repetition that marks this type of text. An example of a common form of parallelism occurs in the *SBS*:

> Ghaisyah left and journeyed without stopping, from one resting place to another, from one plain to another plain, and from one patch of jungle to another (*SBS* 8b).

Another type of repetition consists of a series synonyms that denote one and the same event. The following sentence from the same story describes how the king faints when he is struck by the radiant light emitted by the precious stone called Jewel of the Queen:

> The king collapsed, fainted and became unconscious because he was struck by the rays of the magic stone Jewel of the Queen (*SBS* 35b).

Repetition is found on an intertextual level as well. Malay adventure stories continuously echo passages from other stories, oral and written ones. Stories wander without regard for ethno-cultural and linguistic boundaries. The origin of certain motifs, personal names or narrative devices that are encountered in Malay adventure stories does not contribute to the meaning of these stories. The adventures of Bahram Syah in the Malay *SBS*, for instance, have nothing to do with the Persian stories on the life and career of the Persian ruler Bahram Syah or Bahram V that were widely disseminated in the Islamic world. Even a quick scan of the *SBS* yields a number of parallels with other Malay narratives. Bahram Syah's unfortunate fate as an exiled deer hunter in the second part of the *SBS* is reminiscent of the Malay oral story on the ghost hunter (*SBS* 70a).[8] Next, his adventures with the three loyal animal friends, and the story of his magic ring that was lost in the sea and swallowed by a fish, finds an oral counterpart in an story from Perak, Malaysia, titled the *Story of Kherudin* (*SBS* 71a–81a; Laidlaw 1906, 27–57). And lastly, there are conspicuous analogies between the *SBS* and the Quranic story on *Yusuf*. Part of the plot of the Malay text, some of the textual dreams that it features and its religious message overlap with the story of Yusuf.[9]

Marked by these repetitions, Malay adventure stories did not suit the literary palate of the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western reader. In the second edition of his 1845 textbook and grammar of Malay, J. J. de Hollander shares his opinion about this type of Malay text with his readers:

> Most of the time, the authors of these stories appear to have had no other goal than to entertain the reader. With respect to the Malay reader, they serve this goal very well, but they cannot please the

[8] For more on this particular ghost, see Chapter 6.

[9] The analogies between the *SBS* and the *Sura Yusuf* are discussed in Chapter 6.

> European reader, as most of these works are marked by a plain scenario, a dreary way of representation, monotony and uniformity (De Hollander 1856, 312).[10]

A second recurring point of critique concerns the fantastic or magical characters that inhabit the textual world of the stories. To the Western reader, Malay adventure stories depicted a fairytale world with an exuberance of magic and inhabited by supernatural beings. Speaking animals and flowers, magic potions, genies in bottles, journeys through multiple heavens on mythical steeds and miraculously revived protagonists: adventure stories stage them in abundance. The nineteenth-century critics used the label 'fantastic' or 'supernatural' in reference to events in the story that could never happen in reality and not be explained rationally. With no connection to the real world, these narratives were seen as meaningless. 'Superstition' was another word they used for speaking about the fantastic in adventure stories. But I argue that these stories are meaningful precisely because of the presence of the fantastic. That is why this type of narrative is examined in more detail next.

First, a few passages from the *SBS* serve to give an impression of the nature of the fantastic in Malay adventure stories. It is told how Bahram Syah wants to fight a powerful spirit named Thunder and Lightning. The spirit is engaged in a battle elsewhere, but his soul is kept in a glass bottle that hangs above Bahram Syah's head.

> Bahram Syah said, "Oh Princess, do not be afraid and release the soul!" The princess removed the flask's stopper at once and the soul appeared, like lightning, hotter than fire. It looked white and behaved like a cat jumping into the light [from a dark, secluded spot]. Bahram Syah jumped to the right and then moved to the left. The spirit's soul was cut through completely and broke into two pieces; its head darted off to the far end of the house and its body shot away to the other side of the house. In an instant Thunder and Lightning fell down from the sky in the middle of the palace yard like a thunderbolt that cleaves the earth. Both Bahram Syah and the princess were shocked; the princess immediately opened the door of the palace and saw Thunder and Lightning's corpse, which was as big as a mountain. The capital and the yard were completely blocked because of its huge size. Then, the corpse became smaller until it had the size of a human being (*SBS* 18b).

One of the most gripping passages of the *SBS* describes the hero's perils during his voyage flying over the raging and boiling Sea of Fire, while he sits on the back of a giant garuda. It contains several references to the use of magic:

> A few moments later, dawn broke. Bahram Syah tied the elephants up at the back of the adult garuda,

[10] Veelal schijnen de schrijvers dier verhalen geen ander oogmerk gehad te hebben, dan den lezer te vermaken; waar toe zij den Maleijer zeer goed kunnen dienen, maar welk doel zij bij den Europeaan gewoonlijk geheel missen, zoo door de hoogst eenvoudige conceptie, als door de vervelende wijze van voorstelling en de eentoonigheid en gelijkvormigheid hebben, die in de meeste werk van deze soort heerscht (De Hollander 1856, 312).

using the beam that was holding them together. When Bahram Syah had finished, the garuda went up to her nest and spoke, "Oh my son Bahram Syah, get on my back and hold me tight! Do not forget to take good care of yourself!" Bahram Syah jumped on the back of the garuda and said, "Oh my brother and sister, stay here! I will go!" The garuda's nest, which could contain three *kulak* of tree buttresses, was completely covered when the adult garuda spread her wings. She flew off and soared around her nest three times.

Flying upwards, high in the sky, she went as fast as lightning. Bahram Syah's mouth, nose and ears droned and up they went, flying without a rest. It was as if the mountains and the trees were spinning. [...]. The garuda flew on, but she kept on going down to the surface of the Sea of Fire as she was feeling weak. After they had flown like this for another while, going down all the time, they almost fell into the Sea of Fire. The tip of both the left and the right wing of the garuda were scorched as if burned, and the breast feathers were singed, and she said, "Oh my son, I tell you that we both are going to die now, so please drop that elephant!" Bahram Syah took the white hair of the spirit king and the garuda spoke, "Oh my son Bahram Syah, I tell you, I cannot hold it any longer now. It seems as if we will both come to our end here, falling into the flaming Sea of Fire. Please give me just a little bit of food!" Bahram Syah immediately sliced off the flesh of the calf of one of his legs with his dagger and said, "Oh my mother, open you mouth, here is a bit of food that was left!" The garuda ate it and swallowed the flesh of Bahram's calf.

Next, Bahram Syah said a charm over the white hair of the spirit named Thunder and Lightning and, at that same moment, the whole world became light again. Then rain began to pour down on the garuda and she regained her strength. She felt joyous and flew playfully through the air, gracefully bending her wings like a dancer and like an eagle defying the wind, her eyes glittering as she looked down (*SBS* 26a, 28a).

Adventure stories abound with scenes in which magic plays an important role. Charms, amulets, magic stones, feathers, hairs or boxes, rosewater or magically endowed water are the attributes of magical acts. In the following quotation, Bahram Syah works magic with three very special hairs:

The princess took three hairs from the fontanelle of the spirit's head. There were three different kinds of hair. She said, "Use these during your travels. You must know that if you want to produce water, or if you desire light, use this white hair together with a spell. And if you want to make fire, then use this red hair together with a spell to cause a fierce fire. And if you desire an intense darkness, then use the black hair with a spell and it will become dark without a fail. Your enemies will see nothing but pitch darkness" (*SBS* 20a).

Another scene depicts a royal couple that is under the influence of the powers of an extraordinary stone:

His Majesty began unwrapping the magic stone. He first removed the black wrapping and the stone's light was black; second, he removed the red wrapping and it was red; third, he removed the yellow wrapping and the stone's light was yellow; fourth, he removed the blue wrapping and the light was blue; fifth, he removed the green wrapping and the radiance became green; sixth, he removed the purple wrapping and the radiance became purple; seventh, he removed the white wrapping and then a white light appeared. Now, the magic stone Jewel of the Queen was completely visible. The stone

> dispersed its light and it struck His Majesty's face brightly like the rays of the sun. The king collapsed, fainted and became unconscious because he was struck by the rays of the magic stone Jewel of the Queen. Bahram Syah sprinkled some rosewater on the faces of His Majesty and the princess. His Majesty regained consciousness (*SBS* 35b).

As I will explain in the following chapters, scenes like these were not disturbing to a nineteenth-century Malay audience. In the Malay World view, these seemingly bizarre events were possible under certain circumstances. But to early Western commentators, these scenes did not make sense at all. Moreover, the resemblance of adventure stories to European fairytales meant that these Malay narratives were considered mere fairy- or folktales in Europe. An early nineteenth-century commentary that is illustrative of this attitude is found in the work of John Crawfurd (1783–1868), a Scottish physician and colonial administrator in English service.

> Malayan romances, whatever be their origin, are singularly destitute of spirit. To point a moral is never attempted; and the gratification of puerile and credulous fancy seems the sole object. All prose composition is remarkably monotonous (Crawfurd 1820, 56).

The derogatory remarks on two adventure stories by Klinkert presented at the beginning of this study are rooted in this same attitude. This negative stance was not confined to nineteenth-century scholarship; it persisted well into the following century. For instance, C. Hooykaas' presentation of adventure stories in his overview of Malay writing, published in 1937, evokes a nineteenth-century spirit in the vocabulary that is used to discuss these narratives. They are 'fantastic' stories, set in a 'magical realm,' with 'fairytale kings' and 'wonder birds,' and nowhere is the use of this vocabulary questioned.

The Malay reworking of texts from foreign textual traditions, such as Indian, Arab or Persian, led nineteenth-century scholars to believe that the authors of Malay works lacked imagination and creativity. The texts violated the literary prerequisite of originality and were subsequently considered as less significant.[11] In the words of Overbeck (1938, 308):

> There is often more joy over a single, corrupted Sanskrit text, the original of which has since long been known, translated and commented upon, than over 99 'unpretentious' stories from which one can learn about a people's soul.

The assumed scarcity of original material has been addressed by many; examples are found in, for example, Crawfurd, De Hollander, J. Pijnappel, and Bausani (Crawfurd 1820, 50; De Hollander 1856, 295, 303, 311; Pijnappel 1870, 144–148; Bausani 1979). The

[11] Er is dikwijls meer vreugde over één verbasterden Sanskriettekst, waarvan het origineel lang bekend, vertaald en gecommenteerd is, dan over 99 'pretentie-looze' verhalen, waaruit men de ziel van het volk kan leeren kennen (Overbeck 1938, 308).

same paradigm underlies the organization of early histories of Malay writing; the texts are categorized based on the provenance of their assumed sources or the era in which the borrowing is assumed to have taken place. Reflecting his view that Malay writing was but an amalgam of plots, characters and themes borrowed first from Hindu, and later, Muslim India, Richard Winstedt presented the Malay 'romances' in a chronological scheme in *A History of Malay Literature* (1939). He saw them as products of the period of transition from Hinduism to Islam, broadly the fourteenth until seventeenth century (Winstedt [c. 1991], 50–58). But such an approach does not attest to the reality of Malay narrative practices. As the case of the *SBS* demonstrates, Malay adventure stories were not just written in the early period of Malay writing, but in later centuries as well. Even as late as 1962, Bausani betrays a similar attitude when he makes the distinction between 'foreign' and 'indigenous' elements in adventure stories and stresses the little 'original' material they contain. He concludes, with Hooykaas, "[. . .] that Malay classical literature, which consists to a large degree of *hikayat* 'is neither Malay, nor even literature'" (Hooykaas 1937 cited in Bausani 1979, 17).

A look at these unenthusiastic reviews of Malay adventure stories uncovers the nineteenth-century assumptions that underpin them. The repetitive nature of Malay adventure stories has been explained by Amin Sweeney, who linked it to the aural nature of the Malay narratives. Besides being read in private, the stories were also read out aloud in front of an audience. In this aspect, they resembled the oral adventure stories that were recited by professional storytellers in the Malay World. The repetition, parataxis and the use of a restricted vocabulary that characterize the narratives stories functioned as memory aids that made it easier for the audience to keep up with the story line. The presumed oral origin of the written Malay adventures story and a continuous exchange between oral and written narrative practices further reinforced those aspects of the texts that are usually associated with oral narrative practices.

But in nineteenth-century Europe, the concept of oral or aural narrative practices had no connection with contemporary ideas about literariness. Print culture and the recent realist turn in Europe's great literatures had programmed the inquisitive European scholar to look in the Eastern colonies for realist narratives akin to their own. With such a mindset, they were unable to recognize the repetitive nature of Malay writings as fundamentally linked to the pre-print nature of Malay society. Instead, they attributed it to poor literary taste and skills among both readers and writers of Malay adventure stories.

The roots of the charges that Malay writings lack originality can also be traced back to the European nineteenth-century mentality. Beside a general interest in 'origin' and 'sources' generated by the evolutionist debate, ideas related to Romantic primitivism propagated the model of the Noble Savage: the primitive man who lives a simple life according to nature's law and is morally uncorrupted by society. The expectations of the European collectors and scholars of Malay writing were, at least partly, influenced by

these notions of the uncorrupted and pure state of the 'primitives' they encountered in the Archipelago. As culture was seen by some as genetic to race, they expected to find a 'pure' culture, with cultural expressions that were free from foreign 'contamination.'

A second factor that fueled this particular critique is the occidental conviction that oriental cultures were monolithic. The British, for example, 'created' the category Hinduism in an attempt to create order in the pagan chaos they encountered in India (Mishra 2002 cited in Gillen and Ghosh 2007, 41–143).[12] Examples of similar Western constructs that veiled complex ethnic and cultural expressions in a Southeast Asian contexts are the 'ethnicization' of Sumatra's Batak and the invention of 'the rural Malay' (Smith Kipp 1996; Andaya 2002, 2008; Perret 1995; Kahn 2006).

Van der Tuuk's dislike of Malay stories of a fantastic-Islamic nature proves a suitable case for an exercise in discerning the historical paradigms that gave rise to a negative image of the Malay adventure story. The assumed homogeneity and concomitant higher value of the Arabic Islamic culture led Van der Tuuk to view the Islamic-Malay narrative writings as poor derivatives of much greater, 'original,' religious and textual traditions from the Middle East. He deemed adventure stories with an Islamic twist in particular responsible for imbuing Barus' society with all kinds of 'nonsense' linked to a form of Islam that was 'perverted' by superstitious beliefs. Next, influence of the Romantic idea of the Noble Savage can be discerned in Van der Tuuk's rigid conception of the Batak as uncorrupted primitives with a 'pure' and monolithic culture, and of Islamization as a potential threat to their unspoilt state. Malays, on the other hand, he described as a mixed lot. Of various or mixed ethnic background, from different corners of the Archipelago and often adhering to a syncretic form of Islam to boot, they formed a stark contrast to the 'noble' Batak of the interior, in his eyes. And although Van der Tuuk from time to time opposed colonial policies in Sumatra, he formed part of the Dutch colonial establishment; colonial interests were his interests as well. This affected his judgement of stories on the Muslims' early wars against *kafir* kings and tribes. In Barus and its surroundings, it was commonly believed that the infidels that fought the Muslims in the stories were the Europeans. Therefore, the Dutch government considered such stories as potentially capable of strengthening an anti-colonial attitude among the local Muslims. It was for this same reason that the government later prohibited public readings of the *Story of Hasan and Husain* (Hikayat Hasan Husin) in Aceh in the first half of the twentieth century (Meuraxa [1973], 387).

There remains one last point of critique to be addressed; that is, the condemnation of fantastic or magical elements in Malay adventure stories. It is asserted that the nineteenth-century view of magic and its role in the Malay narratives has been determined by three contemporary Western paradigms. First, the hegemonous literary model that prescribed

[12] Pankaj Misra, "The Invention of the Hindu."www.newstatesman.com/node/143655, published 26 August 2002, accessed 28 July 2004.

that literature should depict a probable reality; second, the stress on rationality; and third, the monotheism of Christianity. The concept of 'magic' is a thoroughly Western concept with a history stretching back to early Judaic-Christian times. Its roots lie in the concept of 'true' versus 'false' religion, with magic seen as part of paganism. Later on, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this negative view of magic as 'wrong' was reinforced by the Protestant demarcation between religion and magic. It was this Protestant legacy that was adopted by influential Victorian theorists like by Edward Burnett Tylor and James George Frazer. Contemporary discussions about magic became entangled in evolutionist and Social Darwinist discourse and the assumption took root that the concept of magic formed a universal analytical category that could be used to compare different cultures (Tambiah 1990).[13] The 'fallacy of magic' was the main point of the scholars' arguments, and the concept was used to negatively distinguish savage or primitive logic from a modern, Western one. Magic was deemed "a monstrous farrago" by Tylor and "a spurious science" hiding behind "a bastard art" by Frazer (Tylor 1873 I, 133 and Frazer 1911, 53, cited in Meyer and Pels 2003, 9).

But there was a paradox in the representation of magic and the supernatural in this era that might have contributed to the increased interest in Malay adventure stories in the nineteenth century. The denunciation of magic happened at a time when people in Europe were fascinated with 'modern re-enchantments.' Folklore studies – "[...] the refuge for Puritans fascinated with the rites and spells that their own religion abjured [...]," thrived and there was a general interest in the occult (Meyer and Pels 2003, 9). This came to expression in literature as well, where the gothic and mystery novels announced the persistent replacement of reason by magic and the irrational. The period saw scores of publications on shamans that judged magical practices as false and deceptive, yet truthful.[14] This ambiguity found its way into European Enlightenment discourse through Romantic interest in shamans. In reaction to Enlightenment's focus on rationality, Romantic thinkers, such as Herder and Diderot, made a plea for engaging emotion and intuition in the search for knowledge. Shamans and the like were ascribed an innate divine quality: an ability to attain a state of ecstasy that allows them to apprehend the divine and to intuit a patient's imagination (Meyer and Pels 2003, 6–12).

[13] Twentieth-century scholars, such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Keith Thomas and Hildred Geertz have successfully contested this (Tambiah 1990, 42–83).

[14] The idea that magic, although basically 'deceptive,' could actually be progressive and functional was later taken up by, among others, Malinowski (Meyer and Pels 2003, 8).

If Not Magic, What Then?

Now that the historical roots of the negative view of Malay adventure stories have been uncovered, the following question arises: if the fantastic in Malay adventure stories does not denote practices of 'a spurious science' or 'paganism,' what then does it represent?

The works by the American psychologist Jerome Bruner (1915–) provide concepts and a theory that can be used as tools in the search for an answer to this question. Based on his theory, it can be argued that the fantastic passages in Malay adventure stories are expressions of a coherence system or world view that is culturally specific to the Malay World. An educational psychologist by profession, Bruner is renowned for having contributed to the development of psychology as a 'science of mind' and what is called the 'cognitive revolution' in psychology.[15] Bruner addresses the question of how human beings gain knowledge about the world and come to a sort of coherent image; an understanding of the world upon which they, in turn, act. His theory revolves around the idea that reality is a narrative construct. He argues that the mind employs two modes of thought to produce a coherent image of the world: a narrative mode and a paradigmatic one. Narrative thinking is sequential, action-oriented and detail-driven. It is instrumental in a narrative construction of reality. In the paradigmatic mode, the mind transcends particularities and makes use of categorization as a fast and economical way to get a grip on the world outside the thinking subject. Man perceives the world not 'as it is,' but as it is 'moulded' by the cognitive categories used by the mind. For Bruner, like for other (neo-)pragmatists, such as Charles Peirce, John Dewey and Richard Rorty, there is no such thing as a single, fixed world or a truth or reality to know. The world is what our mind makes it to be and thus a construct. 'Reality' is presented in the act of knowing. Thus, for Bruner, there are 'actual minds,' but 'possible worlds' (analogous to the title of one of his books).

Of particular importance to the main argument of the following two chapters is Bruner's idea that the mental categories and narrative constructs – that together form coherence systems or world views – are culturally defined, and vary between cultures.[16] They come into being and are shared in a continuous social interaction with other hu-

[15] He promoted the mind and its workings as the true subject of psychology, as opposed to the mechanical biochemical processes that were studied in tests by men in white coats in laboratories. A prolific writer, not eschewing multidisciplinary approaches for which he turned to such diverse fields as literary criticism, linguistics and anthropology, his writings offer an account of the development of his thinking on the human mind: *On Knowing: Essays for the Left hand* (1962), *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986), *Acts of Meaning* (1990), "The Narrative Construction of Reality" (1991), *The Culture of Education* (1996), *Minding the Law* (2000) and *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (2003).

[16] A second work that has inspired the current research on 'magic' in Malay adventure stories for this study clearly shares its main premises with Bruner's work on reality as a culturally informed construct: *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (1990) by Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah. The following chapter

man beings, mainly in the format of narrative. His assumption that cultural products such as memories, songs, stories and literary genres, as symbolic systems, give expression to the way the mind constructs reality in a narrative mode proves valid for the Malay adventure story.[17] This approach yields the indigenous categories that make it possible to understand the stories and the supernatural, magic and fantastic depicted in them on their own terms.

Chapter 4 investigates and explains this Malay way of viewing the world and describes in detail the paradigm it is based upon: the concept of a divisible human body consisting of a physical body and a detachable 'vital force' referred to as *semangat*.

Afterword[18]

The historicity of the categories and ideas that were involved in the apprehension of Malay adventure stories in the past can only be discerned in retrospect. The present provides us with the distance that is indispensable for the broad view that reveals relationships the actors who lived the experience at the time were not able to see. Post-modern studies in general and, where the non-Western world is concerned, post-colonial studies in particular, have brought forth the realization that the dominant scholarly discourse on non-Western literatures in general has been thoroughly Eurocentric. One would assume that in the wake of this awareness, significant progress has been made in the field of the study of non-Western writings, such as the Malay. And the call for taking, for instance, the East on board was taken up and resulted in works on such concepts as 'Asian modernisms.'[19] But, instead of introducing a new frame for viewing Asian cultural expressions, they merely – to quote Eric Hayot's words in his innovative work *On Literary Worlds* – "[...] moved around the furniture, while the house remained the same"

reverberates with his thoughts on multiple orderings of reality and the translation of cultures as found in the Chapters 5 and 6 of his work.

17 Bruner has taken his argument even further and stated that not only the mind forms reality, but that reality forms the mind as well. Take, for instance, what he has said on the topic of literary genres in "The Narrative Construction of Reality" (1991). He sees literary genres as conventional ways of representing human plights, and thus as representations of a social reality. At the same time, he considers them as "ways of telling that predisposes us to use our minds [...] in particular ways," as invitations to a particular style of attributing meaning (Bruner 1991, 15).

18 These thoughts developed after this chapter was finished; they were prompted by the ideas in the latest book of the literary critic Eric Hayot, titled *On Literary Worlds* (2012).

19 On the modern in visual arts, see for instance, *Asian Modernism: Diverse Development in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand* (Furuichi and Nakamoto, eds., 1995) and 'The Southeast Asian Modern: Three Artists' (Clark, 2012). An example of the discussion of the modern in relation to Malay or Indonesian literature is found in GoGwilt's work (2011) on Pramoedya's 'pre-Indonesian' Indonesian language, and the disappearance of the genre of *nyai* literature.

(Hayot 2012, 2–5, 9). Precisely by naming these new fields of study they were placed on a different plane than their Western counterpart. In addition, as mentioned in the previous chapters, the assumed universality of Western discourse on literature and Western literary history means that works from other horizons than the Western one were described in terms of difference and deviation, thereby negating any claim that they have an intrinsic value of their own.

A second and more promising development that set off in the wake of post-colonial studies, and was presumably propelled by the rise of the popular notion of the globalization of our planet, is the theoretical debate on World Literature in the field of Comparative Literature. The debate started about a decade ago and concerns the creation of a more inclusive World Literature.[20] What is at stake here is a systematic mode of analysis that makes it possible to describe and compare texts of various times and places. The result of such a mode would be that 'world' in 'World Literature' covers as many regions of the world as possible, instead of just the Western ones. But scholars such as David Damrosch, Franco Moretti and Hayot are aware that

> To risk 'world' in its most expansive form requires [...] risking also the meaning of the term 'literature'. There is no guarantee that this latter term is not the universalizing vision of a European concept inappropriate to the analysis of texts and stories operating under radically different conceptions of the meaning of writing and storytelling [...] (Hayot 2012, 35).

Both categories will have to be expanded for the concept of a true (truer) World Literature to be conceived. Then, 'literature' would be a large-scale term that includes "all of its possible avatars" and to be understood as having "any number of specific articulations, some of them, even belonging to the literature of the modern world-system" (Hayot 2012, 35). Such a concept of literature would include Malay texts from Southeast Asia: modern or contemporary ones, as well as older ones, such as the stories that were read on Sumatra's northwest coast one hundred and sixty years ago.

[20] The issue is addressed in monographs and edited volumes – David Damrosch, chair of the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard University is notable in this field – and in journals, such as the *New Left Review* and *Literature Compass* (see Hayot 2012).