Never-Neverland Revisited: Malay Adventure Stories

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6 | Between Faith and Fate: Making Sense of the *Story of Bahram Syah*

After the three brothers had decided to split up, Bahram Syah continued his quest for the miraculous bird along the path named Only God Knows. An hour into his journey, he spotted an orange tree near the roadside. It bore one ripe orange. As he felt hungry and thirsty, he picked it and peeled the fruit with his dagger. But when he put a piece of the orange in his mouth, he was unpleasantly surprised. It tasted very bitter. The second fragment was not much better; it tasted too sour. The third piece was too sweet for his liking. But it was the fourth that amazed Bahram Syah the most. It was rich in flavour and tasted exquisite, like sugar mixed with coconut cream. He wondered what the meaning behind this curious incident might be. After having pondered upon it for a while, he felt that the different flavours referred to the different stages of his quest. His undertaking would be very bitter and sour at the beginning, but the benefits will be abundant and sweet in the end.

This episode of the *SBS* is just one thread of the tightly woven web of the story's preoccupation with interpretation and divination. This chapter strives to assign meaning to the *SBS*. The way this will be accomplished mirrors the twofold approach of this study. The first line of investigation approaches the *SBS* as a text that was written to meet the local demand for enthralling adventure stories with a not too overtly edifying, religious content. It places the story in the expanding Muslim-Malay scene on the west coast of North Sumatra, in the first half of the nineteenth century. This argument revolves around the religious message of the *SBS*: a call for both conversion to Islam and the belief in Divine Preordination. The religious character of the Malay story becomes even more manifest when it is compared with its Acehnese source text.

A second point of departure for reading the *SBS* is the supernatural elements and the protagonists' psychological and emotional frailty. The *SBS* shares these features with

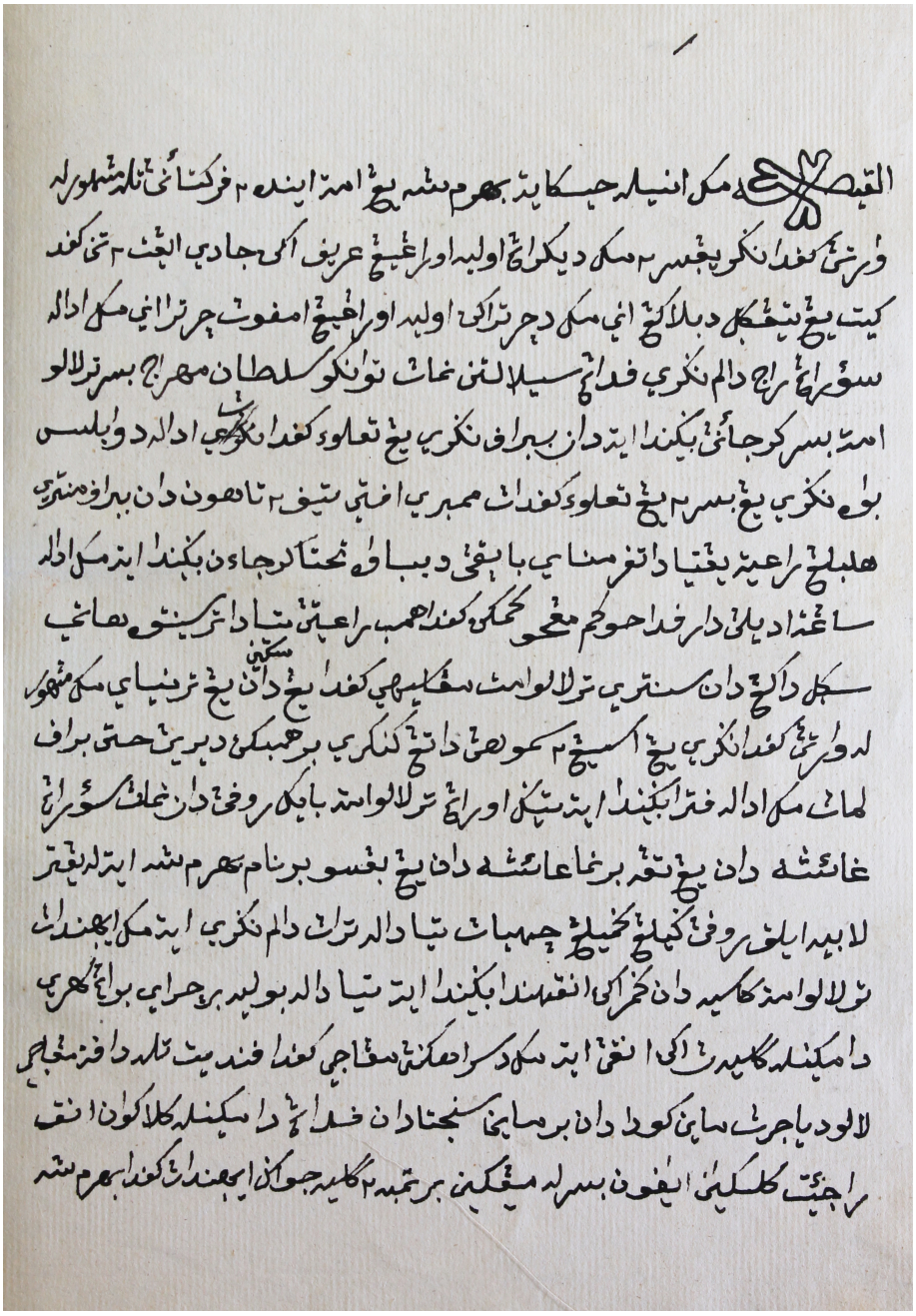

Figure 3. First page of Cod. Or. 3317 containing the *Story of Bahram Syah*

adventure stories from other places and periods. Analogous to the previous chapter on dreams, the current inquiry concerns man's apprehension about his future. It lays bare the existential anxiety articulated in the Malay adventure stories that was discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. An attempt to reconcile these two seemingly conflicting ideas – that of a Divine Preordination on the one hand, and the possibility for man to gain knowledge about and manipulate his own fate, on the other – ties the two strands together. But first, it will be examined how the *SBS* came into being.

The Genesis of the *SBS*

In contrast to Kreemer's claim that the renowned Acehnese *Story of Banta Beuransah* is an adaptation of the Malay *Story of Bahram Syah*, the opposite is argued here; that the *SBS* is a reworking of the Acehnese narrative (Kreemer 1923, 685). The origin of the Malay story must be sought in Barus or Sorkam or one of the neighbouring port communities on the northwest coast of Sumatra in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Malay story was created in response to the growing demand for suitable reading material among the increasing number of newly converted Muslims in this region. A riveting adventure story with an Islamic twist made an ideal vehicle for casual instruction in the basic tenets of Islam.

There are seven manuscripts that contain the *SBS*. They are all kept at the Special Collections of Leiden University Library. Only three of them are unique copies: Cod. Or. 3317, 6058 and 6071. They were collected in Sumatra in the second half of the nineteenth century. The other four manuscripts are copies of the three Sumatran manuscripts: Cod. Or. 6081, Cod. Or. 5968, Cod. Or. 5977a and Cod. Or. 5977b. They are study-copies produced in Leiden in 1912 by Charles Adriaan van Ophuijsen, professor of Malay language at Leiden University, in preparation for a lithograph edition of the *SBS*. With relatively few texts to work with, the following remarks about the inception of the *SBS* remain hypothetical to a certain degree. Two of the three Sumatran manuscripts are dated; both were produced in 1853. They can be pinned down to the same region. Cod. Or. 3317 was copied for Van der Tuuk in Sorkam, while Batak characters and the name of the town of Sibolga on the original cover of Cod. Or. 6058 similarly point to a North Sumatran, coastal origin. The third text is written by or for Van Ophuijsen. Although the text does not refer to its date and place of production, it probably came into his possession during his years as head of the *kweekschool* (teacher training institute) in Padangsidempuan in the 1880s. This town is situated in the southern part of North Sumatra, a mere 70 kilometres from the coastal town of Sibolga. As head of the school, he ordered students and teachers to look for manuscripts and to write down oral stories.

The texts were intended to be published as teaching material (*ENI* 3, 1919, 154–155; Snouck Hurgronje 1927; Rodgers 2005, 17).[1]

An indication that Cod. Or. 6071 does indeed originate in this educational environment is found in its vocabulary. Compared to the other two copies of the *SBS* from Sumatra, Van Ophijsen's copy stands apart. It displays a pattern of lexical variation that suggests a deliberate adaptation of certain words and phrases. Most variant readings have the form of synonyms. One finds, for instance, *'hendak'* in the Van Ophuijsen manuscript, where the other two manuscripts have *'mau.'* The former reads *'parasnya,'* where Cod. Or. 3317 and Cod. Or. 6058 have *'rupanya.'* Likewise, *'tersintaklah'* occurs in Cod. Or. 6071, while Cod. Or. 3317 and 6058 have *'terbangun,'* and so on.[2] It seems that an overzealous student or teacher, or perhaps Van Ophuijsen himself, consequently exchanged certain words with those from a register that was considered to be more appropriate for stories set in a court environment.

The fact that there are only three manuscripts, which are tied to a relatively small geographical region and short period of time, suggests that the Malay *SBS* knows a relatively short history. In contrast, a wide dispersion and a relatively high number of copies of a text point to a longer history. The *Story of Indraputra* forms an example of such a text (Mulyadi 1986). Moreover, there is little lexical and plot-based variation between the three copies of the *SBS*. This means that the passage of time has not been long enough for scribal errors and adaptations by artistically inclined copyists to occur in the manuscript tradition. This uniformity supports the hypothesis that the *SBS* was created not too long before 1853, the year in which both Cod. Or. 3317 and 6058 were produced.

Earlier in this study, the west coast of North Sumatra was described as a cultural crossroad. Being the watershed between Acehnese, Batak and (Minangkabau-)Malay cultural spheres, and a trading port to boot, Barus in particular facilitated intercultural contacts. This meant that stories wandered from one textual tradition to another. Popular narratives were translated and adapted or became the source for numerous borrowings that were used creatively by writers to create new stories. This explains the existence of the same story in different versions in Acehnese, Minangkabau, Malay or one of the Batak languages. In most cases, it is impossible to ascertain which route the story traveled; whether it was translated from Malay into Acehnese or the other way around, for example. For a long time, the Acehnese in particular were a force to be reckoned with on Sumatra's west coast. The strong Acehnese presence in Barus and neighbouring port com-

[1] For more on this *kweekschool* and the careers of some of its graduates as journalists and writers, see Susan Rodgers' *Print, Poetics and Politics: A Sumatran Epic in the Colonial Indies and New Order Indonesia* 2005, 16–17, 46.

[2] *Hendak* and *mau* mean 'to want'; *parasnya* and *rupanya* mean 'his or her face'; *tersintaklah* and *terbangun* mean 'woken up'.

munities lasted until the Dutch colonization of the region around 1840 and facilitated cultural exchange between Acehnese and Malays.

It was in these surroundings that a popular Acehnese narrative inspired someone with a good command of both the Acehnese and Malay languages to translate the *Story of Banta Beuransah* into Malay and adapt it to his own taste. The Acehnese *SBB* was well-known in nineteenth-century Aceh.[3] The text was composed in the Acehnese *sanjak* verse form with internal rhyme and was transmitted in written form (Joesoef, Oesin and Verheul [1927]).[4] But the legendary hero Banta Beuransah also featured in Acehnese oral traditions. If one compares this to the limited dispersion of the Malay story on Bahram Syah, and considers the fact that there are no reports of oral traditions on Bahram Syah, it becomes clear that the Malay text must be an adaptation of the Acehnese *SBB,* instead of the other way around. For the comparative study of the *SBB* and the *SBS* in this chapter, the 1927 edition of the *SBB* by Moehammad Joesoef, Nja' Oesin and A. Verheul has been used.[5] It is based on an early twentieth-century manuscript. The first parts of the stories loosely correspond. But the second part of the *SBS*, narrating Bahram Syah's futile hunt for carrying male deer, the theft of his magic ring and his friendship with the three grateful animals, is not found in the Acehnese story. Instead, the latter reads that Banta Beuransah's peaceful life after his marriage is disturbed by a war with a king from China, who threatens to abduct Banta Beuransah's newlywed consort.[6]

Considering the northwest coastal provenance of the *SBS*, it is interesting to note that the Acehnese character of Banta Beuransah has strong links with North Sumatra's west coast. The region directly borders the coastal strip of Tapanuli – with Barus, Sorkam and Sibolga – and was believed to be the area where the exploits of Banta Beuransah have taken place in a distant past (Snouck Hurgronje, 1894, 129–130, 142). The *SBB* teaches us that it is, in particular, the area immediately behind Barus' neighbouring coastal

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3 The relative high number of extant manuscripts that date from the nineteenth century attests to the popularity of the *Hikayat Banta Beuransah*. See Voorhoeve 1994 for references to manuscripts containing this Acehnese story.

4 For more on the Acehnese *hikayat* narratives, see Snouck Hurgronje 1894, 75–77 and Hanafiah et al. 1981–1982.

5 I am much obliged to Deni Wiliadi from the Indonesian School in Wassenaar for his assistance with translating the *SBB*.

6 After the research for this chapter was finished, an interesting eighteenth-century copy of the Acehnese *Story of Banta Beuransah* came to my attention. It belongs to the collection of Musium Pusat (Central Museum) in Jakarta. It contains a second plot similar to that of the Malay *SBS*. Instead of the voyage over sea by a king from China to Banta Beuransah's court, the storyteller describes how Banta Beuransah leaves his newlywed wife behind to go hunting in the woods. During his absence, one of his servants steals his magic amulet; the servant uses it to have Banta Beuransah thrown into the sea. There, he is swallowed by a giant fish and saved by a fisherman, who takes Banta Beuransah into his home as a playmate for his pets. The animals, a dog, a cat and a mouse, retrieve the magic amulet for their friend. With the help of the amulet, Bahram Syah is able to return home (Hanafiah et al. 1981–82, 29–39, 158).

town of Singkil that is associated with this Acehnese hero. Passing through the Strait of Malacca, the royal ship of the Chinese king visits every port along Aceh's east and north coast, and then continues its journey southwards along the west coast. However, at the port of Singkil, just before the port town of Barus, the king disembarks and continues his journey upstream along the river to the capital where Banta Beuransah resides (Joesoef, Oesin and Verheul [1927], 78–79).

The Power of Faith

A quick scan of the storyline of the Malay *SBS* and the Acehnese *SBB* already reveals their mutual kinship. But the Malay story is not a faithful translation of its Acehnese source. Instead, it is argued that the *SBS* is a skilful reworking of the *SBB*. What is more, the character of the adaptations says something about the reason why someone took the time and put in the effort to create the Malay text in the first place.

The first similarity concerns the main plot. Like the *SBS*, the *SBB* narrates the adventures of a prince, here named Banta Beuransah. He and his two brothers set out on a search for the multitalented bird of their father's dream. The three young men split up along the way, but it is Banta Beuransah who finds the animal. The story of two jealous brothers, who steal the bird from their younger brother and push the latter into a deep well, is told in the *SBB* too. Next, the series of puzzling encounters of the hero features in both the Malay and the Acehnese narrative. A last correspondence is the friendship between the hero and a gigantic garuda. There is also some overlap in the names of the protagonists. Bahram Syah is the Malay equivalent of Banta Beuransah; the Malay Princess Apalu Apala is recognizable in the Acehnese Princess Apeulah; and the name of the bird in the *SBS*, *Marah* Jalin, resonates the Acehnese Mala'ōn Dirin.

Thus, on first sight, the two texts appear to be nearly identical. A closer look, however, yields a considerable number of minor variations between the two. It is asserted that the variations in the Malay text are the result of an Islamic colouring and Malayization of the Acehnese source text. Procedures that have been followed in the process of adaption are, among others, transposition, elaboration and transformation. The narrative function of certain elements has been retained, while their outlook has been changed. The series of strange events Bahram Syah witnesses in the *SBS* illustrates this aptly. The format of each event is the same, yet their content varies from those found in the *SBB*. The long, detailed and repetitive descriptions of the extraordinary bird *Marah* Jalin in the Malay story are the result of elaboration. Similarly, the four tasks Bahram Syah is asked to perform in order to prove his suitability as a marriage partner of Princess Drifting Beach Hibisicus Flower.

The more outspoken Islamic character of the *SBS* can be linked to the surge in the number of new converts to Islam on the northwest coast in the period the text is assumed

to have been written. While the market for Malay narratives such as the *SBS* was expanding, new works hardly appeared. It took one aspiring writer with a proselytizing drive and a popular adventure story that was not yet translated into Malay to create a 'new' Malay text. For the new story to have a chance of acceptance in a Malay environment it not only had to be imbued with the values and beliefs of the intended readers, it had to appeal to them as well, through the skilful use of the Malay language. The ways in which the author of the *SBS* has attempted to tailor his work for the needs of a Malay audience will be discussed next.

The *SBS* conveys the Islamic message of *takdir* or Divine Preordination as contained in the sixth Article of Faith. As explained in Chapter 2, Muslim doctrine is often summarized in six – sometimes shortened to five – articles of faith that state what one must believe in to be a Muslim. The sixth article pertains to the belief that God has preordained everything that has happened in the past and that will happen in the future. This belief entails the concept of Divine Will and the acknowledgement of God's Power (Nigosian 2004, 93–105; Sodiq 2010, 98–108). In the *SBS*, this idea is symbolized by the three different paths travelled by Bahram Syah and his brothers. Bahram Syah chooses the road named Only God Knows, and thereby surrenders himself to God's will. His fate is a happy one, as it is he who ultimately succeeds in acquiring the bird for his father. His brothers, in contrast, make a wrong turn. As a result, they lose all their possessions and become enslaved by a foreign king.

The *SBS* expresses the idea of *takdir* in two ways. First, by the frequent depiction of seemingly impossible events or unnatural phenomena, which are explained by Bahram Syah as signs of God's omnipotence. And second, by Bahram Syah's exemplary behaviour and attitude towards life. His choices and actions display an unwavering trust in God and a belief in Divine Preordination. This religious appeal for faith in God's power and complete surrender to Him is unique to the *SBS*; it does not have a counterpart in the Acehnese source text.

Bahram Syah interprets some of the uncanny incidents witnessed by him as the work of God. By making the impossible happen, he argues, God shows man the force of His divine power. The sky-high waves that rise from a mudhole mentioned earlier were explained by Bahram Syah in this manner (*SBS* 14a–15b). A similarly baffling occurrence involves three wells that are situated next to each other. Bahram Syah is surprised when he sees how the excess water from two wells flows into the third, dry, one:

> Bahram Syah pondered upon it in amazement, saying to himself, "As for the meaning of this left and right well, they are like the rich people; and the middle well, it is like the poor and destitute people. When the hearts of the people who give alms are opened by God, the poor people receive the means to stay alive. This relates to all undertakings: when one's intention is good, one will receive that which one desires, God willing." After this, Bahram Syah walked on without resting (*SBS* 13b–14a).

And when even the Angel of Death apparently lacks sufficient faith in God's power to trust that Bahram Syah can indeed fly over the raging Sea of Fire, Bahram Syah admonishes him as follows:

> "Why are you speaking like that? With the consent of God, may He be exalted, the Lord, the Master of all worlds, I can do things even more impossible than this, God, may He be exalted, willing! If our Lord bestows a favour on me, I will fly!" (*SBS* 17a).

Crossing strange lands on his own and thwarted by jealous brothers and ghosts alike, Bahram Syah finds many obstacles on his way to the abode of the bird *Marah* Jalin. It is telling that he shows no fear or trepidation. Time and again, he claims to put his trust in God and whatever He has predestined for him. Convinced of the virtue of his enterprise, he believes that fate is on his side, "[...] when one's intention is good, one will receive that which one desires, God willing" (*SBS* 13b–14a).

The display of God's grandeur in the *SBS* is set in the larger framework of the text's call for conversion.[7] One of the story's scenes succinctly articulates this call to embrace Islam. At a certain point in the story Bahram Syah meets a princess, who is held hostage by a spirit. The spirit's *semangat* or life force is contained in a glass flask, while its body is elsewhere. When Bahram Syah suggests to the princess that she should open the flask, she answers:

> "How can we possibly have a look at it; we will both die! If opened only slightly, his body comes to us in a flash." Bahram Syah said, "Oh Princess, choose what seems right to you: to adhere to this spirit's religion or to the Islamic faith? Now, if you adhere to this spirit's religion, you will inevitably end up in hell. If you adhere to the Islamic faith, you will surely enter Heaven" (*SBS* 18a).

The message is clear: those who convert will be saved in the Hereafter; those who continue to put their faith in spirits and ghosts will suffer. An apt lesson in a region such as the northwest coast of Sumatra, where syncretic religious practices involving the belief in spirits were rampant in the mid-nineteenth century.

In general, the idea behind the call for conversion in the *SBS* is a positive one. Life is hard and living dangerous, but there is an almighty God to assist man on his journey in this world. Faith in God brings confidence and security, here and in the Hereafter, that is what the text reads. In contrast, the Acehnese *SBB* paints a far more negative picture of man in society, while it does not present faith in God as a remedy for the social ailments it describes. The interpretations of Banta Beuransah's extraordinary encounters teach the audience that man is, above all, selfish and that one should not expect any consideration

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[7] The strong association of the *SBS* with the Quranic story of the Prophet Yusuf, which will be addressed later in this chapter, supports the current argument. The *Sura Yusuf* can be read as a pamphlet calling upon the reader to embrace Islam.

from others. This difference between the two texts can be seen, for example, in the passage on the three wells mentioned above. The Acehnese story depicts three wells, two of which overflow, with the water spilled, while a third remains dry. The image serves to show the utter selfishness of the rich. In the Malay reworking of the story the water of the overflowing wells is received by the dry well, like the alms of the rich are received by the poor. This part of the *SBS* not just urges the Islamic readers to give alms, one of the five obligations of a Muslim, but also tells of God's mercy. For it is He who causes the rich to give alms. Likewise, the Malay narration of the hero's confrontation with an extraordinary orange tree carries a far more positive meaning than the Acehnese. In the latter version, the tree bears many ripe oranges, but each one of them is boasting that it is the most delicious of all and therefore deserves to be picked. A learned man explains the image to Banta Beuransah as a metaphor for man's narcissism. The author of the Malay story reduced the number of oranges to one. Here, it is the multi-flavoured nature of the orange that makes Bahram Syah wonder about the hidden meaning of this peculiar experience. Unlike Banta Beuransah, Bahram Syah provides the answer to this question himself; he sees the different flavours – ranging from bitter to sweet – as representing the different stages of his quest (*SBS* 13a–14a).

In short, the Acehnese narrative tells its readers that the world is ruled by self-indulgence, self-glorification, religious sins, disrespect, animosity and greed. Secrets are best kept secret as no one can be trusted, save for oneself. While the *SBS* gives man agency and teaches him to improve himself and put his trust in God, the Acehnese *SBB* portrays him as a potential victim of his fellow human beings, and implicitly advises the readers to keep their wits about them.

Due to the efforts of a devout Muslim author who was well-versed in both Malay and Acehnese, the Acehnese narrative was turned into a tool for the informal instruction in the basic tenets of the Islamic faith. 'Islamization' of existing narratives was a common procedure in Central and North Sumatra. Older, Hindu-flavoured tales with multiple gods and heavens and a hero who underwent numerous magical transformations were deemed inappropriate for a Muslim audience. The author of the Minangkabau *Story of Puti Balukih*, for instance, claims to have written the text to replace the *Story of Malin Deman*, a tale rich in magical scenes. He wanted to provide his fellow Muslims with a story that was known from the *hadith* (Islamic tradition) instead, and that was suitable to recite on the long evenings during the Ramadan. D. Gerth van Wijk suggests that the *Story of Puti Balukih* came into being during the years of the Padri movement, which is the same period that it is assumed the *Story of Bahram Syah* was composed (Gerth van Wijk 1881, i–ii).

But for the message of the *SBS* to be digested, it needed to be wrapped in a story that would appeal to its Malay readers. There are two ways the author of the *SBS* operated to achieve this. For one, the author adapted the story according to the Malay world view. He did this by creatively reworking certain passages of the Acehnese story. The Acehnese

text, for example, relates how the two treacherous brothers of Banta Beuransah ran off to live in the jungle after their failed attempt to murder their younger brother had been brought to light. Ashamed and fearful for their brother's revenge, they remained in the wilderness for years. Their bodies started to grow hairs and, in the end, they looked more like animals than human beings. In the Malay story, the two brothers try to hide within the walls of the state's capital. After being found, they are reprimanded by Bahram Syah, but suffer no further consequences of their heinous behaviour towards him. The author of the *SBS* used this idea of humans who 'dehumanize' after a long stay in uncultivated regions to adapt the story for Malay readers. An echo of the image of the young men living in the woods is found in the *SBS* in the story of Bahram Syah's hunt for a pregnant male deer. When the young prince returns to the capital to present the meat his pregnant wife craved, he is not allowed to enter the gate. His appearance has been switched with that of the deceitful servant Turani. The men guarding the capital's gates address him as follows:

> "You must be the spectre Huntsman! You came from the woods, so go back into the woods! You really look like a Gulambai. Oh cursed wretch, get away from here!" (*SBS* 70a–b).

Like his villain brothers in the *SBS*, Bahram Syah is no longer recognized as a human. Having been hunting and slaughtering deer in the woods for months on end, Bahram Syah makes a horrifying spectacle. Dirty, emaciated, with his hunting clothes worn and torn, and hair unkempt he resembles the ghost hunter, as well as another ghostly creature called *gulambai*. The former entity is a ghost hunter with a frightening appearance, who roams the woods with his ferocious hunting dogs. An oral story from Perak, peninsular Malaysia, relates how the *hantu pemburu* was formerly a human being from Ketapang, situated on the most southern tip of Sumatra. One day, he went on a hunt to indulge his pregnant wife who craved for the meat of a female deer pregnant with a male young. He took off, together with his hunting dogs. Unfortunately, he had misunderstood his wife's request; instead of a female deer pregnant with a male young, he tried to find a pregnant male deer. Of course, he failed to find one. But he swore never to return to his wife without a pregnant male deer. In the end, he sent his dogs into the sky to look for the deer. As he watched his dogs fly off into the sky, his head grew into his back. Then, one day a leaf fell on his throat and a tree started to grow from his body, right in front of his face. It was with this horrifying appearance that he continued to roam the woods (Maxwell 1881, 11–29). An encounter with the *hantu pemburu* can be fatal. When addressed by the ghost, a person may develop a high fever, but can recover. If one actually crosses the path of a *hantu pemburu*, symptoms such as excessive vomiting and voiding result in a quick death (Skeat, 1900, 117 n. 1). *Gulambai* belongs to a specific Minangkabau-Malay

pantheon and is an old and dirty looking male ghost believed to cause fires (Van der Toorn 1890, 54, 100).[8]

Similarly, the next citation from the *SBS* contains the name of another ghost that is associated with a Minangkabau-Malay world view instead of an Acehnese one. When Bahram Syah has finally arrived in the state of Gastu Gasta, he tries to approach the princess who owns the bird *Marah* Jalin. Disguised as a minor servant of Grandmother Kebayan, who regularly visits the court to sell flower bouquets, Bahram Syah urges her to ask the princess what price she is willing to sell her pet bird for. As part of the performance put on by the two, Grandmother Kebayan reviles Bahram Syah for his improper behaviour:

> Grandmother Kebayan rose, wanting to give Bahram Syah a blow. Furiously she said, "Oh son of the ghost Singiang-ngiang, who lives in the woods! Son of Bincacak, child of Singiang-ngiang. You maimed Kling! Son of the ghost named Ketumbi who lives under the cornerpole of the house! Son of the ghost who resides in dead tree trunks!" (*SBS* 34a).

Bincacak is considered to be the son of a female ghost named *Singiang-ngiang rimbo*, whose husband and father of her children is unknown. The phrase *anak Singiang-ngiang anak Bincacak* is used in the Minangkabau language in a derogatory way to denote a child of whom the father is unknown (*Ms.* 181, 1073). Such references to non-Islamic ghosts and spirits are unique to the Malay version of the story. Their presence in the Malay text might seem to conflict with the Islamic message of the story. But, to many Muslims living in the coastal area between Barus and Sibolga in the mid-nineteenth century, the co-presence of non-Islamic and Islamic ghosts and saints would not have been problematic.

Malayization is further visible in the names of protagonists, objects, and geographical places that occur in the *SBS*. These names are not randomly chosen. It is argued that they are not mere fantasy names devoid of any meaning, but well-chosen toponyms and anthroponyms that participate in the creation of the textual world of the *SBS*. Also, it is foremost in these Malay names that the author shows his artistic skills as a writer. Composed with concern for both sound and meaning, they contribute to the charm of the *SBS*.

Some of the names in the *SBS* display rhyme and alliteration, much more than in its Acehnese source text. It makes them sound pleasant to the ear. Examples are Princess Apalu Apala, Princess Ambaru Ambara, the state of Gastu Gasta, and King Hangat Garang. The same poetic function perhaps explains the otherwise strange choice of the name Aisyah for one of the two brothers of Bahram Syah (the second brother is called Ghaisyah). In the Islamic world, Aisyah is commonly known as a woman's name. One

[8] As discussed in Chapter 2, Malay writings that originate in the coastal region of northwest Sumatra betray Minangkabau influence.

of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad was named Aisyah (Shaver Hughes and Hughes 1995, 156–161). Translation of such poetic and therefore seemingly meaningless names reveals some interesting meanings.[9] Princess Kesumba Air Mawar can be translated as Princess Kesumba and Rosewater, King Hangat Garang as King Fierce and Fiery, Tunggang Papan valley as the Slanting Board valley.[10] The name of Bahram Syah's consort and owner of the bird *Marah* Jalin translates as Princess Drifting Beach Hibiscus Flower (Princess Ambaru Ambara). The name evokes the image of a coastal tree of medium height, commonly found in the tropics, whose large and attractive flowers last for one day only and drop into the water at dusk (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*). The pretty yellow flowers with a black-purple heart stay afloat and are taken to faraway places by a river's stream or the currents of the ocean. An apt image for a fair princess who is taken away from her native ground on a long journey over sea by a prince.

But the original use of names in the *SBS* is also aimed at the vivid depiction of the world traveled by the protagonists. Take, for instance, the next passage that describes the owner and the whereabouts of the bird *Marah* Jalin:

> "It is the pet of Princess Drifting Beach Hibiscus Flower, who is the child carried in the folds of Princess Apalu Apala's sarong, and the offspring of His Royal Highness *Marah* Inda Sultan the Magnificent. She lives in the state of Gastu Gasta in the village called The Queen's Field. The mountain is called Field of the Wild Camels, the valley, Slanting Board, on the island called Sinawilan. The estuary goes by the name of Narrow Passage, and the bay is called Smooth Curves" (*SBS* 2).

The language of this passage is evocative and paints the landscape of the state of Gastu Gasta in words. The mountain resembles the humps of a camel; the sides of its valley are as smooth as slanting boards. The bay forms a perfect smooth curve and its estuary is narrow and difficult to pass by boat. Similarly, the newly founded state of Bahram Syah, which is situated right between Flower Village and the state of Gastu Gastu, is called In Between Good Plains. The name of his palace, Work of the Intoxicated Gods, highlights

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[9] The name of the story's main protagonist, Bahram Syah, is a notable exception to this rule. The name Bahram Syah can be traced to the Persian historical figure of Bahrām V, a Sasanian ruler who ruled from 420 to 438 CE. He was a shrewd politician and a fearless commander of his army. Legends about his life were circulating in oral form and were elaborated into literary form by the Persian authors Firdawsī (d. 1020) and Niẓāmī (d. 1207). Stories about Bahrām's childhood and youth, his struggle for the throne, the war against the king of China and emperor of Rūm, and his adventures in India are found both in Persian and Arabic literature (Scott Meisami and Starkey, 1998, 128). In Malay writing, only his name has survived. The adventures narrated in the *SBS* are not related to the life and career of the renowned ruler.

[10] *T.* 339: *kesumba*, "kind of plant (*Bixa orellana*) that can be used to produce a red dye." The annatto coloring is extracted from the seeds of the achiote tree. *Bixa orellana* is also known as the lipstick tree, as some indigenous groups from Central and South America use the dye as lipstick and body paint.

its extraordinary elegance, while the name of the moat, Dragon-Snake Encircling the Whole World, stresses the defensive qualities of the moat.

To sketch the state where Bahram Syah's older brother Aisyah will meet his demise, the author opted for much grimmer names. Upon Aisyah's question what the name of the state was he had arrived in, a herald replied:

> "Oh my Lord, this is the state called Piles of Passion, in the valley of the hill named Pillar Peak. The capital is called Silulidan, the port Silulinang, the bay Water Conduits, and the promontory Cleaver Worn Behind the Ear. The island is called Simangkirang, and the name of our king is King Fierce and Fiery" (*SBS* 11a).

The references to lust or passion, a weapon and a hot-tempered ruler indicate that *nafsu*, 'lust' or 'passion' rules this land. They foreshadow Aisyah's unhappy fate.

Lastly, the ingenious use of the Malay language in the *SBS* is primarily illustrated by the names given to the flower arrangements Bahram Syah presents to the princess. The bouquets bear highly imaginative names, such as Lantern Spinning to the Left and to the Right Encircled by Burning Candles, Cloud Barely Visible in the Rays of the Moon and the Light of the Scattered Stars and, lastly, Cloud Spinning Blown by the Wind and a Gentle Breeze (*SBS* 31b).[11] One only need visualize the names to grasp the graphic power of these words.

The World as a Book: On Reading One's Fate

The primary narrative of the *SBS* relates the adventures of the son of a king, who leaves his native state in pursuit of a magic bird for his father. But a single text may contain more than one narrative. On a second level, the *SBS* presents a narrative about the search for meaning. 'Meaning' here refers to the meanings that are hidden behind unusual events; they disclose facts about a person's future or attest to God's greatness and power. The text's fixation with the production of meaning can be substantiated by the following elements. To start with, the story's main character, Bahram Syah, can be seen as a champion of interpretation. His status as such, moreover, is emphasized by the fact that he is linked in the text to the Quranic champion of interpretation, the Prophet Yusuf. Third, the repeated occurrence of dreams in the *SBS* accentuates the text's preoccupation with the future. What is more, as a *mise-en-abyme*, the series of strange encounters and their interpretations by Bahram Syah, contains the story's meta-narrative in a nutshell. They

[11] Tanglung Berjentera Kiri Kanan Dian Terpasang Berkeliling dan kedua karangan bunga itu Awan Tersingit di Sinar Bulan Bintang Temabur m-m-*ya*-k-*ya*-r-*ya* dan ketiga karangan bunga itu Mega Berpusing Ditiup Angin Mengiring Bayu Lemah Lembut (*SBS* 31b).

are short stories on the search for meaning connected to man's fate that are set in a larger narrative on the quest for meaning.

The son of Sultan Maharaja the Great of the state of Southern Plains is no ordinary young man. Like all the heroes of Malay adventure stories, he is unimaginably handsome. But more than, for instance, his Acehnese antagonist Banta Beuransah in the *SBB*, Bahram Syah stands out for his perceptiveness and his proficiency in assigning meaning. He 'sees' meaning in the world that surrounds him, and 'reads' strange events or encounters as a code that needs to be deciphered. The preconditions for his engagement with interpretation are established at an early point in the story. Bahram Syah's decision to follow the path named Only God Knows demands that he actively and creatively engages in interpretation, since he will cross uncharted lands.

Bahram Syah holds the assumption that behind certain phenomena in the world important knowledge is to be found. He also proves capable of interpreting these phenomena himself, without the help of others. In the following citation, Bahram Syah assigns meaning to one of his puzzling encounters:

> After walking for about four hours or so, Bahram Syah came across a small plain. It was short and narrow. There he found lots of water buffaloes, they were in their hundreds. Bahram Syah chased them several times, but they did not pay any attention to him. They took their eating very seriously; they did not even raise their heads. The bodies of these water buffaloes were fat and fleshy. Bahram Syah was extremely fascinated to see that these water buffaloes were really fat and fleshy while their food was scarce and hard to find. "What could this signify?" He said to himself, "The reason that these water buffaloes are fat and fleshy is that they see that the plain is just small and they think, 'If I do not take eating grass seriously on the plain, the grass will be finished by the other animals.' That is why these water buffaloes are fleshy and fat: because they are mindful and responsible. In the afternoon, they stop eating, and their owner comes to take them home. On the way, they drink water. Hence, whatever the undertaking, it must not be taken lightly. God, may He be exalted, will then grant whatever you wish!" (*SBS* 15a).

This extraordinary scene and the riddle it constitutes for Bahram Syah forms part of a series of odd encounters he has during his expedition to the state of Gastu Gasta. The peculiar orange tree with its multi-flavoured orange and the scene with the three wells, both mentioned earlier, are two more examples of these bewildering experiences.

His talent for ascribing meaning stands out even more when Bahram Syah is compared to his antagonist in the Acehnese source text of the *SBS*. In the *SBB*, Banta Beuransah has similarly odd encounters. But he, in contrast, is not capable of making sense of these events. He does not even consider them as potential signs. Without the assistance of a learned man, who informs him of the meaning of the puzzling scenes, Banta Beuransah would have remained ignorant of the lessons that can be learned from them. Bahram Syah's inclination to seek meaning everywhere is so strong that he runs the risk of over-

interpretation.[12] And he himself is aware of this. Brooding over the meaning of the words his father conveyed to him in a dream, he suddenly realizes that it is not wise to scrutinize his father's words for a deeper meaning. To do so would be the act of a 'crazy' person and torturous, he remarks (*SBS* 20b).[13]

The most renowned interpreter in the Malay World is the Prophet Yusuf. His exploits are narrated in the twelfth chapter of the Quran, the *Sura Yusuf*. With the central status of the Quran in Islamic doctrine and practice in mind, it is not difficult to understand how this story became widely known in the Islamic world. With its fascinating plot and detailed narration, this *sura* in particular appealed to the masses. Along with the written word of God traveled oral traditions on the various prophets. From the early period of Islamization onwards, these two traditions inspired authors in various regions of the Islamic world to write new compositions. A *Qisah Yusuf*, (Story of Yusuf) is found in one of the earliest extant Malay manuscripts; it is dated 1604 CE (Salleh 2010, 205; Wilkinson 1907, 16). Various collections worldwide hold copies of Malay texts relating to Yusuf deriving from different parts of the Malay World.[14]

Parts of the *SBS* echo the story of the Prophet Yusuf. Similarities occur on the level of plot, protagonists and main theme. It is argued that these correspondences play an important role in the creation of the metadiegetic meaning of the *SBS*. Pivotal in this process is the analogy between the Prophet Yusuf and Bahram Syah. Part of the plot of the *SBS* is loosely based on the story of Yusuf. Like Yusuf, Bahram Syah is envied by his brothers. In both cases, it is the fatherly love for their brother that causes the jealousy. The brothers conspire to get rid of their father's favourite son. As the idea of a cold-blooded murder does not appeal to all of them they decide in the end to push Bahram Syah/Yusuf into a deep well. The Quran reads:

> "Surely Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we, though we are a band. Surely our father is in manifest error. Kill Joseph, or cast him forth into some land, that your father's face may be free for you, and thereafter you may be a righteous people." One of them said, "No, kill not Joseph,

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[12] Whereas, among other literary critics-*cum*-philosophers, Julia Kristeva states that it is only interpretation that can save a human being from madness, it is madness that lurks in the act of interpretation. During his research for his thesis on paranoia, Jacques Lacan discovered that paranoia is not so much a human condition that leaves reason and logic behind, "[...], but is, rather, based on a surfeit of reason and interpretation [...]" (Lacan 1932 cited in Lechte 1996, 6). When faced with a constant call for interpretation, one can either produce a 'relevant' interpretation and stay sane, or succumb to the temptation of over-interpretation and become mad.

[13] For more on dreams, see Chapter 5.

[14] They usually bear titles such as *Story on God's Prophet Yusuf* (Hikayat Nabi Allah Yusuf) or *Story on Yusuf* (Hikayat Yusuf). The complete manuscript of an 1836 copy of the *Story on God's Prophet Yusuf* that is kept in the Houghton Library of the Harvard University in Cambridge can be accessed online: http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/10652763?n=1&imagesize=1200&jp2Res=.25&printThumbnails=no (website accessed 2 November 2013).

> but cast him in to the bottom of the pit and some traveler will pick him out, [...]" (Arberry 1964, 226–227).

The Malay rendering of these concise verses is more elaborate:

> "Oh younger brother Aisyah, how do you feel about our situation?" Aisyah replied, "Oh older brother, whatever you think, I agree with it." Ghaisyah continued, "Oh younger brother, listen! We are three brothers and, in my opinion, we are the ones who should receive more respect than Bahram Syah, for we are older than him. But as it stands now, it will definitely be Bahram Syah who receives the most respect when we arrive at our parents' home, and thus we will be humiliated. Princess Drifting Beach Hibiscus Flower will be his wife, as he is the one who found the bird *Marah* Jalin. He will reign as a king and have the princess as his consort." Aisyah said, "In that case, it will be better if we kill Bahram Syah with our creeses; he will be dead for sure!" Ghaisyah replied, "That won't work, as the princess will commit suicide if we kill him, and then we will both be lost too! I think we better play a trick on him and take him to the well to bathe. When we arrive at the well, we will take it in turns to bathe while we make him draw water from the well. As soon as his attention slips for a moment, we will push him into the deep well. In this way, Bahram Syah will definitely die and we will reach our goal. And if you, younger brother, become king, I will marry the princess!" Aisyah replied, "Oh older brother, that is the best plan I have ever heard; it is perfect!" (*SBS* 43a–43b).

After their fall into the well, both Bahram Syah and Yusuf are hauled up from the depths; Yusuf by passing traders who sell him as a slave, Bahram Syah by King Midday who adopts him as his son (Arberry 1964, 227; *SBS* 43a–44b). At this point, the narratives start to diverge.

But there are more parallels. The *SBS* shares one of its themes with the story of Yusuf; that is, the search for meaning and interpretation. Bahram Syah resembles Yusuf in his qualities as interpreter of dreams. On several occasions, the *Sura Yusuf* states that Yusuf was instructed in the art of the interpretation of "narratives, visions, and dreams" by God. His fame for being a skilled interpreter of dreams spread quickly; even the king of Egypt solicited his advice on two of his enigmatic dreams (Arberry 1964, 226–238). It is interesting to note that this particular skill of Yusuf is presented in the Quran as a sign of God's power, intended to convince unbelievers to convert. In fact, the whole *Sura Yusuf* can be read as a pamphlet calling on unbelievers to embrace Islam. Yusuf's ability to see the hidden meanings behind signs such as dreams and events is contrasted to the ignorance and inability of unbelievers to see the signs of God's greatness.

As a competent interpreter, Bahram Syah does see the signs that attest to the power of God. One day, on his journey to the state of Gastu Gasta, he comes across a mudhole in the middle of a plain:

> Its length was about two spans of outstretched arms, its width about two and a half. Bahram Syah saw that the water in the mudhole formed waves. It was as if the waves reached up into the sky,

> and when they grew bigger and broke, it sounded like thunder and hurricanes. Bahram Syah was highly amazed seeing this mudhole transforming itself and he thought to himself, "What could it mean that this mudlhole has waves just like the sea?" He said to himself, "This mudhole has waves because it is something which has never been seen by a human being, and now, when God, may He be exalted, wants to show His power which has never been witnessed before, it may be seen. I hope that it also reveals something about my fate: I am looking for this bird *Marah* Jalin and if God, may He be exalted, wants to show His power, I will acquire it." After this, Bahram Syah continued (*SBS* 14a–14b).

This passage not only renders Bahram Syah as an expert interpreter, but as a Muslim as well. But not an ordinary one. His likeness with Yusuf transfers onto Bahram Syah Yusuf's special status as God's 'chosen one' as well.

Next, some of the dreams that occur in the story of Yusuf have left their imprint on the *SBS*. Yusuf's first dream that indicated that one day he would be a great and powerful ruler resembles one of the 'false' dreams of Bahram Syah's envious brothers. Yusuf saw eleven stars and the sun and the moon prostrating themselves before him (Arberry 1964, 226). In the *SBS* the two brothers made up a dream to make their father believe his youngest son had died during the quest. There had been an image of the sun, the moon and the stars in this dream, but the stars had suddenly vanished (*SBS* 44b).

One of the most renowned scenes in the *Sura Yusuf* is the one where Yusuf interprets a rather troubling dream dreamt by the king of Egypt. While asleep, the king witnessed how seven lean cows devoured seven fat ones. There also was an image of seven green ears of corn and seven ears that had withered (Arberry 1964, 230–231). Yusuf interpreted the dreams as references to the seven good years that were to come, with rich harvests, followed by seven years during which people would suffer shortages. The king was advised to stock up during the good years, so that his people would be able to survive the seven difficult years (Arberry 1964, 231). The image of the fat and lean cattle reappears in the *SBS* as one of Bahram Shyah's cryptic encounters, together with its message of prudence. In one of the fields he crosses during his wanderings, Bahram Syah sees a large gathering of buffaloes in the middle of a green, lush field. What he finds strange is that the buffaloes are extremely lean, "[...] as if they would float away when blown by the wind." Their food, however, is plentiful. He then walks on for another while until he arrives at the border of a small field, where there is hardly any grass. Yet, the water buffaloes that are grazing there look fat and fleshy. Pondering upon this scene, Bahram Syah concludes that the lean buffaloes are negligent; they only start to eat late in the afternoon, and thus return to their enclosure near the village with an empty stomach. The fat buffaloes realize that they need to graze the whole day to fill up their stomach. The lean cows take the abundance of food for granted, and this is exactly what Yusuf warns the king and people of Egypt for in the *Sura Yusuf*.

A second intertextual link indirectly supports the equation of Bahram Syah with Yusuf. It concerns the relation between the *SBS* and the Malay oral story on the ghost

hunter (see above) (*SBS* 69b–70a). One of the *mantra* or charms (formula) that were used by the traditional healers to ward off or cure the effects of a confrontation with this *hantu pemburu* contains a reference to the Prophet Yusuf:

> "I know your origin, O man of penance,
> Whose dwelling was upon the hill of Mount Ophir;
> [You sprang] from a son of the Prophet Joseph who was wroth with his mother,
> Because she would eat the hearts of the birds of Paradise" (Skeat 1900, 119).

These words suggest that, in the Malay World, the *hantu pemburu* was associated with (a descendant of) Yusuf. Even though the charm does not attest to the identification of the *hantu pemburu* with Yusuf, the marked connections between Bahram Syah, Yusuf and the *hantu pemburu* yield an interesting equation: Bahram Syah = Yusuf, Bahram Syah = *hantu pemburu*, and *hantu pemburu* = Yusuf.[15]

These textual traces are like breadcrumbs left behind by the author. In the intertextual realm of the Islamic-Malay World, they lead the reader from the *SBS* to another story, that of Yusuf. Notwithstanding the 'distance' between the two narratives – one is the actual story one reads or listens to, the other involves remembrance – the story of Yusuf is capable of leaving its imprint on the *SBS* through its analogies with the latter. It is conspicuous that the story of Yusuf happens to convey a similar, double message as the *SBS*. The first part relates to faith, Islamic faith: Surrender yourself to God, under all circumstances, good and bad, for he is great and powerful. The second part has to do with fate and interpretation. Although the fate of a human being is in the hands of God, man can gain insight into his fate through the interpretation of dreams and visions.

The Malay story seems to take this last point further than the Quranic tale. To Bahram Syah, everything he perceives during his wanderings potentially carries meaning, not just dreams. He acts in a world of full of signs. The knowledge he gains from his surroundings steers his actions during his search for the bird, and reassures him of its positive outcome. Some of his interpretations of dreams and unfamiliar events present them as signs of God's omnipotence; others are related to the future. This heightened attentiveness for meaning hidden behind the visible world corresponds to what was said earlier about the world conjured by texts on Malay divination, including dream books and Malay adventure stories (see Chapter 5).

To recapitulate, Bahram Syah's quest for the wonder bird is paralleled on a higher level by his quest for meaning and knowledge about future events. Next to his interpretative skills and the Yusuf analogies, the story's main theme is expressed through the fictional dreams that are featured in the *SBS*. Whereas the Acehnese text contains one dream only – which, significantly, both dreamer and dream interpreters fail to interpret – dreams are

[15] Unfortunately, there are no other sources that affirm this claim. Neither can I think of the foundation of this association between the two figures.

a marked presence in the Malay *SBS*. Bahram Syah has several dreams, while his father's dream about the precious bird *Marah* Jalin is recounted in detail several times throughout the story. The latter dream sets the story in motion; the other dreams keep the story going until the end.[16]

The two fake dreams, reported by Bahram Syah's brothers to cover up their crime against Bahram Syah and their father's acceptance of these reports as an explanation for his son's disappearance, express the belief in dreams as portents. Having arrived at their father's court without Bahram Syah, Ghaisyah informs his father about the assumed death of Bahram Syah:

> "It has been twenty years since we saw him. We believe he is dead, because of the different dreams we had. I dreamt that we were traveling together with Bahram Syah and that we saw the sun, the moon and all the stars. Shortly after that, all the stars were vanished, gone, without a reason; only the sun and the moon were still visible. [...] When Ghaisyah had told about his dream, Aisyah too paid homage to his father and spoke, "Oh my father, listen to what I have dreamt! One day we were traveling and were feeling very hungry, so Bahram Syah cooked some rice. When the rice was ready, the three of us had a meal. When we had finished eating and drinking, we wanted to cook some more rice and then we saw that only two of the three hearthstones were left" (*SBS* 44b).

After having listened to Ghaisyah and Aisyah, the king cannot be angry with them for losing track of their younger brother. For he believed it had been predestined; nothing that the young men could have tried would have prevented Bahram Syah from vanishing. It had been written in the stars.

A final element that contributes to the text's invitation to read the world as a book about one's fate in life is the series of odd encounters Bahram Syah has. While he traverses uncharted lands in search for the bird *Marah* Jalin, he witnesses several unusual scenes. Most have already been mentioned.[17] Two more can be added: people who keep digging into an already steep valley and pile up the soil on top of a huge mountain, and an unborn dog and goat that bark and bleat in their mother's womb (*SBS* 14a, 15b). Bahram Syah assumes that these spectacles have significance relating to his own life, and he interprets them symbolically. Each of the scenes functions within the narrative as a special type of frame story called *mise-en-abyme*.[18] As embedded stories on interpretation in a story on the search for meaning, the scenes mirror the work as a whole.

The idea of divination and interpretation implicitly articulated in *SBS* is congruent with what other Malay adventure stories and Malay dream books tell us: that man is capable of finding out what the future will bring him and, more importantly, he is capable

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[16] See also Chapter 5.

[17] The mudhole with waves that reach the sky, two overflowing wells that fill a third, dry well, the miraculous orange, and the lean and fat cows.

[18] A classic study on this literary device is Lucien Dällenbach's *The Mirror in the Text* (1989).

of acting upon this knowledge to change his fate for the better. In the Malay World, such seemingly trivial events as a dog that enters one's house or mice that ruin one's *sarong* can reveal knowledge that is not available to man elsewhere. The same holds for dreaming about one of the above events. The information acquired through recognizing and interpreting omens and portents pertain to an individual's future, his health, wealth, social standing (slander or a having a good name) or his status as a faithful Muslim. At the roots of this preoccupation with the future lies the assumption that fate can be manipulated. But now the question rises of how this idea of the manipulation of fate can be reconciled with the religious appeal in the *SBS* to belief in divine preordination?

The *SBS* plays with the idea that there is indeed room for man to influence his own fate. The concept of predestination is not undisputed in the Islamic world. Throughout Islamic history the issue of predestination versus free will has divided Muslims and sparked heated debates. However, most Muslims assume a middle course, which was represented as early as the tenth century by the reforming thinker al-Ash'ari. He claimed that God had provided man with

> [...] a measure to choose between options determined by God, with God knowing what options would be chosen before the event. Mankind was seen as being equipped to make the proper choices by the provision of guidance from God in the form of scripture [...] (Riddell 2001b, 27).

Muslims in nineteenth-century Sumatra were familiar with this middle course. It was propagated, for example, by the renowned author Raja Ali Haji of Riau, Sumatra (1808–1870). He acknowledged the fact that God's will shapes the "outline of history and the framework of society," but believed that the individual is responsible for his own choices within that framework (Riddell 2001b, 191). Thus, man is responsible not so much for his destiny, as for the actions that lead to a certain destiny. In Malay-Islamic thought the future holds several destinies in the form of predestined paths. It is up to man to make the right decisions and take the right actions to ensure the best of all possible destinies.

The Malay adventure stories, dream books, and divinatory practices in the Malay World are evidence of a second, alternative, idea of the future and man's fate in this world and the next. A short detour to divination among the ancient Greek might help to define this view. Analogous to the world portrayed in the *SBS* and the other Malay adventure stories, to the Greeks, the world they inhabited was full of signs that awaited interpretation. Once 'translated,' these signs would reveal important knowledge on an individual's future. The Greeks believed that with this information they were able to anticipate their future in such a way that it could be changed for the better. They saw the future as open, but not empty. Kim Beerden (2013) explains this view by coining the term 'optional futures.' If one looks at the Malay perception of fate and future the Malay adventure stories and dream books give testimony of, this idea that there is no predestined fate proves valid as well in the Malay case. Instead, there is a future that holds various

options. It is to the individual to try to learn about the options through the interpretation of dreams and other signs. But only an attentive person is able to reap these benefits. In the Malay stories, the characters are repeatedly warned not be *lalai* or careless, but to pay attention to their environment. From the explicit Islamic notion of one future that holds several possible destinies, to the idea of an open, but not empty future does not seem too big a step. The prominence of a syncretic form of Islam in the coastal regions of North Sumatra in the nineteenth century left room for the acceptance of such heterodox ideas. Thus, next to the Holy Book, there was a second 'book' that was consulted by the majority of the Muslim-Malays: the world that surrounded them. Natural phenomena and certain events – witnessed either in a waking state or in dreams – revealed information that could be used to influence one's destiny, if interpreted correctly.

Summarizing, the *SBS* and other Malay adventure stories testify to man's existential anxiety about living in the here and now, and about his future, in both this world and the Hereafter. They provide their readers with remedies for these universal human concerns. First, faith in God, and second the possibility to learn about one's future and to act upon this knowledge in order to change it for the better. Interestingly, this same pair features in a description of the nineteenth-century world of Sumatran west coast merchants and seafarers by Tsuyoshi Kato. Here, faith in God and the interpretation of omens are mentioned in relation to the hazardous and speculative nature of their profession. The west coast community

> "[...] accommodated peoples of many lands and customs so that the *adat* was eclectic; above all, its possibilities were open-ended. Even those born in poor families could succeed. [...] Good family background was not exactly a disadvantage, but what counted more were education, daring, keen business instinct, good interpersonal connections, and good luck. Even after everything else failed, *given faith in God and auspicious mystical signs* [emphasis mine], one could always hope for a better break in the future" (Kato 1980, 750).

A 2002 MA thesis on the *Story of Bahram Syah* by Malaysian Zahariah Binti Zainuddin attests to the timelessness of the religious message communicated by *SBS*. Her reading demonstrates that she herself has taken up the text's call to have faith in God's Onmipotence. She attempts to prove that the miraculous events depicted in the story are true, as in 'have really happened.' In other words, she contends that birds can speak, ghosts can fight with human beings, and water in a puddle can form waves that reach the sky. As evidence she presents the statements of a contemporary Muslim philosopher and activist and Quranic verses that relate of the wonders God can work. Unfortunately, her approach makes the main argument of her thesis resonate one of the messages of the *SBS*, and nothing more.[19]

[19] This study by Zahariah Binti Zainuddin fits in with a contemporary trend within the scholarly approach of Malay writings in Malaysia and Indonesia that has been visible since the 1980s. The texts were

Never-Neverland Revisited

Within research on European folktales there is a strand that concerns itself with 'breaking the magic spell' that is assumed to have been cast on these narratives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[20] The main tenet of the publications is that the profusion of 'magic' in the stories has made scholars refrain from finding new perspectives on them for a long time. A socio-historical approach was taken in order to negate the estranging effect of the 'magic' on modern day readers. Robert Darnton's work on French fairytales has already been mentioned as an exponent of this school. Another example is Nancy L. Canepa's study on folktales from Italy. In *From Court to Forest* (1999), she shows how Giambattista Basile's *Lo cunto de li cunti* (The Tale of Tales, 1634–1636) reflects a contemporary social reality by recreating seventeenth century everyday life in Naples (Haase 2008, 887–889). This is exactly what this study aimed to do for Malay adventure stories: to demystify stories that once appealed to large audiences by recreating the historical context they derive their meaning from. But it works the other way around as well. Malay adventures stories contribute to our understanding of a historical reality, as they allow us a glimpse of a mental world of another place and period.

The unknown regions traversed by the wandering heroes of the Malay adventure stories have been described here as strange and uncommon. The young adventurers exchange the protection of their fathers' courts and states for the perils that come with a journey through uncharted land. It has been argued that the unfamiliar surroundings presented in the narratives facilitated the transmission of knowledge on the concept of *semangat* loss and the ensuing mental and physical afflictions. For an adventurous voyage provides ample opportunity for arousing those emotions – fright and fear, surprise, pain, love, and longing – that makes life force flee the human body it forms part of.

But this image needs to be somewhat modified. It is true that the stories' main protagonists experience these foreign lands as unfamiliar. They see and hear extraordinary things that are not found in their homeland. But a closer look at the stories suggest that these textual worlds are not as estranging as they seem or have been labelled by earlier scholars. The landscape and the societies depicted in them turn out to be rather detailed

strategically mined for precious 'traditional' Malay wisdoms and values that were to serve contemporary (Muslim-)Malays as a moral compass. This approach became popular after Malaysia's leading political party United Malays National Organization (UMNO) actively articulated the Malay ethnic identity as congruent with a Muslim identity. Some recent examples are *Konsep Nilai Dalam Kesusastraan Melayu* (Values in Malay Literature), Siti Aisah Murad (1996), *Nilai Melayu Dalam Pantun* (Malay Values in *pantun*), Mohammad Rashid Muhammad Idris (2011) and *Syair Saudagar Miskin: Analis Struktur Dan Nilai Budaya Serta Suntingan Teks* (Syair Saudagar Miskin: Structural Analysis and Cultural Values), Siti Zahra Yundiafi (2010).

[20] After the title of one of Jack Zipes' influential publications on folktales*: Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories on Folktales and Fairy Tales* (1979).

representations of the environment in which the stories were produced, copied, and consumed. The realist element in Malay adventure stories has been noticed by Winstedt as early as 1907. In an era when other scholars were bemoaning the poor literary quality of adventure stories, Winstedt sang their praise; he called them "the cream of Malay literature" (Winstedt 1907, 28). He was especially appreciative of the imaginative, impressionist oral adventure stories that were marked by, what he called, a "naive realism": "Local colour takes the place of conventional description." In the poetic register of his time, Winstedt describes how the stories acquired their distinctive realist traits: "All these romances must have had an Odyssey of adventure up and down the Malay Archipelago, and the prose parts have picked up much flotsam and jetsam in the wanderings of reciters: local pantuns, local words, local custom" (Winstedt 1907, 37).

It is not difficult, for instance, to recognize a nineteenth-century Malay trade port on Sumatra's northwest coast in the world portrayed in the *SBS*. The narrative may feature events that are unusual and unfamiliar to protagonist and reader alike, but it unfolds against a background that is highly recognizable, at least to the nineteenth-century reader.[21] The world traveled by Bahram Syah consists of seas, beaches and bays, large rivers and broad estuaries, mountains and valleys, and uncultivated areas with dense forests that alternate with patches of cultivated land. The sea plays a prominent role; maritime trade connects the state with the wider world. Rulers and their families live in the main settlements, while the ordinary men and women live with their children spread out in small clusters of simple huts. One of the main settlements is situated upriver, while a large community of merchants lives near the estuary. This spatial orientation corresponds to the *hulu–hilir* polity model (upstream-downstream) that characterized several Sumatran Malay states for a period of time, among them Barus and Jambi (see also Watson Andaya 1993, 111–114). The beach hosts a community of fishermen. The busy trading port is visited by all kinds of vessels from foreign ports, including Chinese junks. Textiles are one of the main trade commodities. Business is conducted at the market place. The latter is painted especially vividly by the author; each market day of the week caters to a specific clientele. Debt bondage is a common phenomenon, as is the trade in slaves. In case money is needed in the short term, younger family members can be pawned to merchants. A second popular form of entertainment besides gambling is the interpretation of portents or omens. As for the political organization, the political power is in the hands of the ruler, but his rule is based on consensus with his vassal rulers:

> "Oh all officials in the Land of Twelve Streams, you should know that from now on, you should not fight! If you try to settle a conflict by fighting, all the gold will be wasted and the inhabitants of the state will flee." [...] "Strength lies neither in stone and iron, nor in a broad moat and weapons, but it is in consensus that strength is to be found!" (*SBS* 55b).

[21] See the description of mid-nineteenth-century Barus in Chapter 1.

Then, there is the merchant class. The *SBS* depicts merchants as wealthy citizens with a certain degree of authority. It is significant that in the story, it is a merchant instead of the king who resolves a heated conflict among the vassal rulers. In Barus, Sorkam and other Sumatran trade ports rich merchants enjoyed a high social status; likewise, their counterparts in the *SBS*.

A pawn letter by the copyist *Haji* Abdul Wahid, who also copied the *SBS* for Van der Tuuk in Sorkam, provides another opportunity to address the realist elements in this story.[22] The letter reads that a certain *si* Gantiyati pawns some of his possessions to members of the Sorkam elite to raise money for a commemorative meal (*selamatan*). The letter lists all the valuable items that are pawned; among them are different kinds of cloths, some with gold thread, golden earrings, and a wooden chest. The religious duty to organize such meals held for all Muslims, not only the well-to-do, and people had to sell or pawn valuable possessions to raise the necessary funds. Van der Tuuk witnessed the financial stress this caused among Barus inhabitants. For a regular *selamatan* one easily spent ten guilders, more than most people in the region earned in a month (Groeneboer 2002, 312). In the *SBS*, Bahram Syah is forced to sell all his possessions after the death of his royal stepfather in order to gather enough money to perform the customary commemorative meal. The pawn letter from Sorkam suggests that Bahram Syah's predicament must have met with sympathy from the story's readers; for they themselves regularly had to find ways to meet with the demands their religion put on them.

Lastly, the state capital that is founded by Bahram Syah has the features of a merchants' *hilir* community. Himself being a *dagang* or 'foreign wanderer', Bahram Syah expresses his feelings of affinity with people who live far away from their loved ones at home, such as traders and seafarers: [23]

> "As for the captains, merchants and dignitaries, let them live here with me in the capital called In Between Good Plains. I wil reign the state together with my mother. As I am a foreign wanderer here, I will join the other wanderers and captains and merchants who once lived elsewhere, but now have come to foreign ports and are also called wanderers. It is there that I will decide on matters concerning the state!" (*SBS* 65a-65b).

This study aimed to rid Malay adventure stories of their supernatural aura by examining

[22] The pawn letter is inserted in Cod. Or. 3234. Cod. Or. 3317 is the manuscript that is used for the edition in Part II.

[23] *Dagang* has the double meaning of merchant and (foreign) wanderer. Moreover, a *dagang* topos is found in Malay writing. It is customary that authors or copyists present themselves in the colophon to the reader as a *dagang*. They describe themselves as lonely wanderers, who are far from their loved ones in their native *kampung*. Often, poverty is their only companion. In addition, they portray themselves as ignorant, and beg their readers to forgive them for any mistakes the text might contain. See also Gijs Koster, "Auteurschap als noodzakelijke kwaad: De verteller als vreemdeling in het Maleise syair-gedicht" (1990).

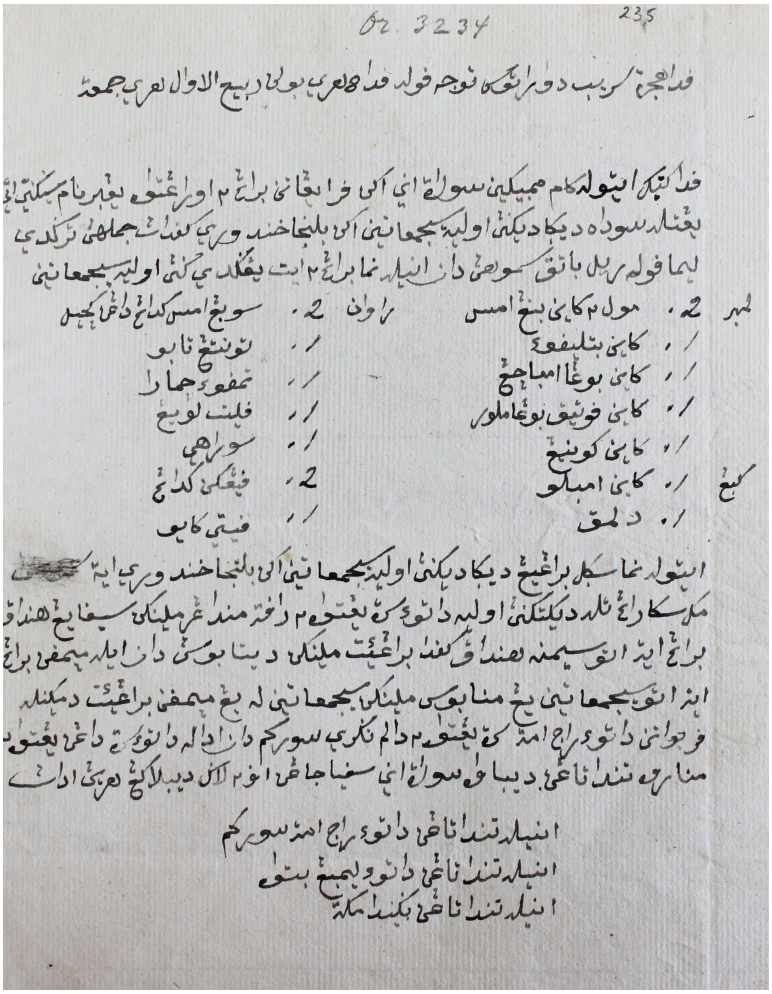

Figure 4. Draft of a pawn letter by copyist *Haji* Abdul Wahid in Sorkam, page 1 (inserted in Cod. Or. 3234). The letter is dated 8 Rabiulawal 1270 AH (9 December, 1853). Among the goods that are pawned by a certain *si* Gantiyati are various kinds of textiles, golden earstuds, large porcelain plates, and a wooden chest. The last three lines give the names of the moneylenders, who had to sign the document: *Datuk Raja* Amat of Sorkam, *Datuk* Limbang Batua, and *Baginda* Megat. *Datuk Raja* Amat was the ruler of Sorkam, *Datuk* Amat II; he was also known as *Raja* Parang Tua Tanjung.

the stories in the context of society. It has been shown how they are firmly rooted in the environment they were conceived and/or consumed in. The narratives turn out to be far more realist than has been assumed. They have relations with various worlds outside the text: the social, religious and natural world. Their basic fairytale plot may be found in different regions of the worlds in different cloaks, but that does limit their meaning to this one element of the stories. A case study of the *SBS* and an analysis of an additional six adventure stories revealed the interconnections between these texts and the west coast society. For instance, texts were created in answer to societal changes, such as the rapid march of Islam or the changed political constellation after the (re)colonization of the area. Next, Malay adventure stories played a significant role as a means of communication of important cultural knowledge. They taught the readers what made them human beings opposite other forms of life, and how to maintain their health and to cure illness. Second, they conveyed concepts on dreaming, such as a dream classification and methods of dream interpretation. And, set in a courtly environment, they provided ideal examples of male and female behaviour. But this is not all. Malay adventure stories offered ways to cope with the universal human feeling of uncertainty that is the result of a life that is always in flux. A reading of the *SBS* explained how these narratives propagated trust in the power of God and Divine Preordination, while at the same time they stressed the possibility of discovering one's fate through the interpretation of dreams and omens.

The knowledge that was transmitted through Malay storytelling pertained to many facets of man's life. Adventure stories were an important vehicle for the transmission of Malay cultural concepts, values and attitudes. They were popular, and that meant that they travelled easily. In this feature may even lie the key to unravelling the enigma of the Malay World: the question what force was responsible for the expansion of the Malay World and its continuation through time and space. Perhaps it was narrative.