

Writing to Print:

The Shifting Roles of Malay Scribes in the 19th Century

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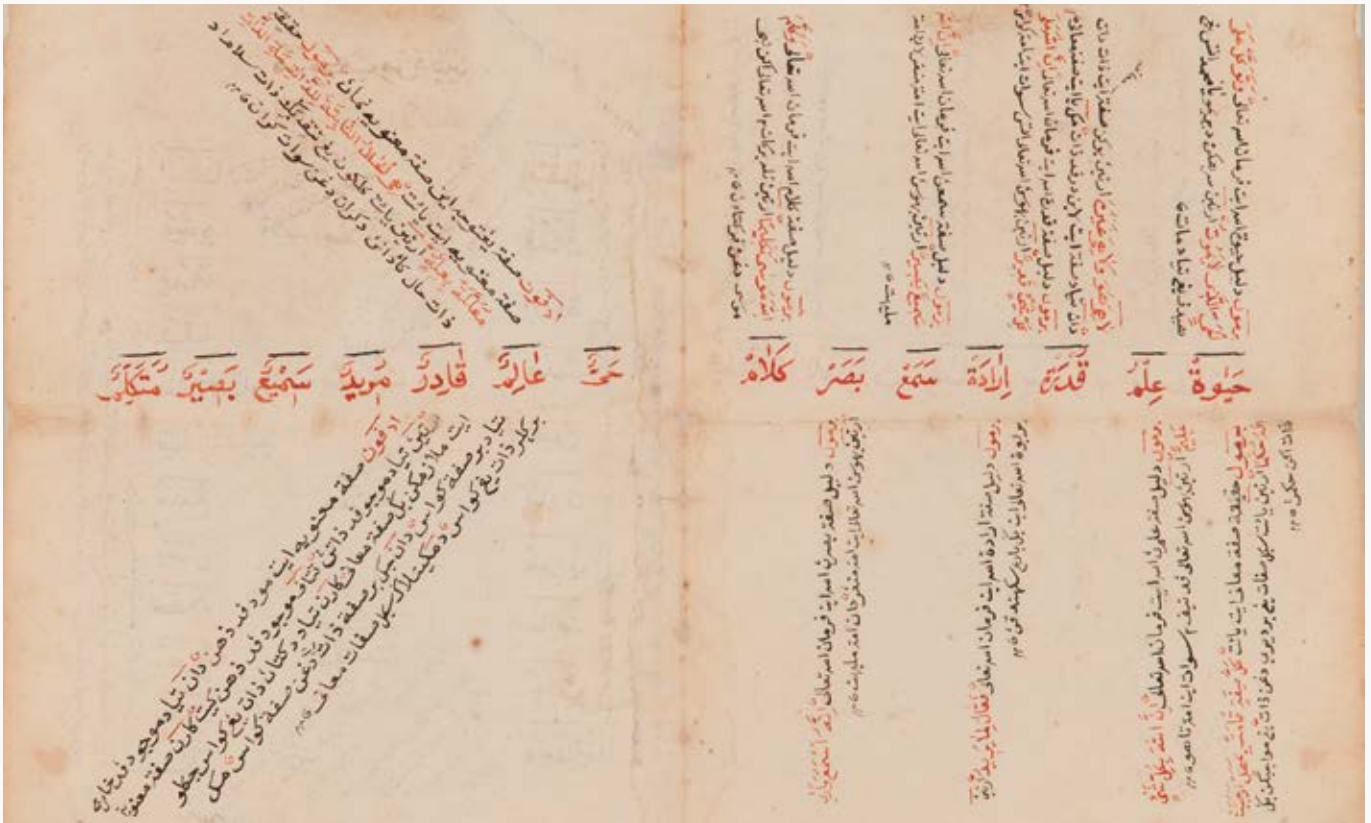
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Human beings communicate primarily through speech and then, writing. To write is to leave marks on paper or other surfaces that someone else can read at a later date to understand the message contained without requiring the writer's presence. Writing then refers to the systematic representation of language in visual form or, for those with visual difficulties, in tactile form.¹ Writing systems, however, can be renovated or replaced. In the case of the Malay language, the contemporary standard of writing in the Romanised alphabet or *Rumi* replaced an earlier system known as *Jawi*, which employs a form of modified Arabic script and was in use for at least 700 years. One of the oldest artefacts containing Jawi script is an engraved stone, *Batu Bersurat Terengganu*, discovered in 1899 and estimated to date from the 14th century. In contrast, Rumi writing has only been in mainstream use in Singapore and the Malay Peninsula for the past 60-odd years. Consequently, Malay manuscripts written in Jawi have been inadvertently rendered less accessible for the modern audience.

WRITING AND READING MALAY MANUSCRIPTS

In composing a sentence, a writer essentially pens combinations of signs drawn from a pre-defined set (an alphabet) that correspond to specific sounds of speech. These combinations are then deciphered by the reader according to rules commonly understood amongst speakers of the particular language. Reading itself is broadly defined as the act of extracting information from any encoded system and processing the extracted information to form meanings.² A reader's understanding of a text may shift as meanings are contingent upon the time and place in which the text is read, relative to the time and place in which the text is produced. Moreover, individual or collective interpretations can also be shaped by other socio-cultural factors such as familial upbringing or prevailing moral values.

The practice of copying and re-copying manuscripts can be viewed as a simultaneous act of reading and writing whereby the Malay scribe (*penyalin*) actively interprets and reinterprets the text as he copies. The larger role of the Malay scribe is to render the text copies accessible to his intended reader. Hence, he also assumes the mantle of author/



editor as amendments are made. A good scribe should possess an intellectual inventiveness capable of re-contextualising a text for better audience engagement. It is important to note that the scribe often strove to preserve the ideas and vocabulary of the original texts and that they were rarely altered whimsically. A good case study is the translation of the Indian *Mahabharata* into Malay, titled *Pandawa*, where tales from the former were translated and adapted into more secular versions in tandem with Islamic beliefs.³ With adaptation, it is commonplace to find several versions of the same text with variations on editorial and linguistic styles. The aforementioned variations make it possible to trace either genealogies or networks of copyists from a group of texts as well as provide some insight into the intellectual and cultural environment of the time as the scribes react and respond to each other's style and commentaries.

Only a fraction of the total Malay manuscripts survive today and their limited numbers impede a full understanding of the history and development of Malay writing. From the Malay perspective however, the physical manuscript is not as valued, even when a manuscript is kept for ceremonial or heirloom purposes, due in part to the hot and humid conditions of tropical Nusantara (the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago), which ensure limited shelf-lives of these manuscripts. Consequently,

knowledge transmission via text is not entirely dependent on the preservation of physical manuscripts. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, Malay literary manuscripts functioned much like scoresheets for a predominantly oral culture of memorisation and recitation. Manuscripts would be passed around at reading assemblies or *majlis pembacaan* where the texts within would be recited aloud, ensuring a wider reach to both literate and illiterate audiences.⁴ In this way, the text is preserved firstly, in the individual reader-reciter's memory, and secondly, as part of social memory.

NEW MASTERS, NEW WORK VALUES

Initially, Malay scribes were employed in royal courts to compose epistles in fine calligraphy. Such employment or receipt of royal patronage accorded the scribes regular salaries and a special status in society. Although scribes could be employed by private individuals, religious centres and royal courts were the key producers of manuscripts. The insertion of foreign powers in this region as colonial masters from the 16th century onwards brought about complex changes to the socio-cultural fabric of the indigenous populations.

With the arrival of the English and Dutch powers, Malay scribes found a new employer in these colonial parties particularly towards the 19th century.

Aside from official correspondence, British scholar-administrators would employ scribes to copy manuscripts for the purpose of their own study of the Malays — a practice that was emulated by the Dutch. Soon, the two powers competed with each other to acquire Malay manuscripts, creating their commercial value as collectibles. Interestingly, a substantial number of Malay manuscripts, dating mostly to the 19th century, exist in collections held in Leiden, the Netherlands and other centres outside of the Nusantara.

THE MALAY SCRIBE'S INVISIBLE HAND

The Malay manuscript tradition underwent its greatest change at the height of colonisation in the 19th century as the Europeans paid more attention to the manuscripts as objects rather than their content. Consequently, more and more manuscripts included colophons (sections containing either biographical information such as the scribe's name, the date of the manuscript's completion and/or the name of commissioning party) where previously they were not attributed to specific authors or scribes. Instead, Malay manuscripts were regarded as a form of shared heritage belonging to the community-at-large.

Despite this anonymity, colophons were added to the manuscript either at the beginning, end or sometimes weaved into the main text (particularly with the

(ABOVE) The *Sifat Dua Puluh* is a tauhid treatise on the 20 attributes of Allah with explanations and discussions on Islamic theology and philosophy. Collection of the National Library Board.

syair form, a traditional Malay rhymed narrative that is sung aloud to a fixed melody). These here comment on when and how a manuscript was written, thus rendering the often laborious process of copying visible and providing some clues to the scribe's personality. This end colophon of the *Hikayat Abu Nawas* states its completion on a Saturday in the Islamic month of Zulhijjah (no year) within the Kallang River (*Sungai Kallang*) vicinity.

**FAITHFUL COPIES:
AN EXCEPTION TO THE RULE**

The introduction and subsequent adoption of Islam by Malay rulers from the 13th century onwards stimulated a new avenue of output for the scribes. Furthermore, a core injunction for all Muslims to read the Quran encouraged literacy for all instead of earlier precepts of literacy being reserved for the noble and priestly classes. Islamic texts were written/translated into the Malay language to provide guidance on the newfound faith of the Malays. Key Islamic tenets such as monotheism differed greatly from the preceding animistic or Hindu-Buddhist beliefs thus texts explaining and clarifying these newer ideas and principles were essential.

As religious *kitab* (meaning "book" in Arabic) were regarded as sacrosanct, this was one of the few instances in which a text's author and the subsequent scribes were clearly attributed so as to establish

the authenticity of a text. The importance of naming author and scribe(s) lie in determining the chain of transmission from a religious teacher to his students. Often, such texts were produced under the supervision of a teacher through oral transmission. In some cases, the text had to be retained in its entirety (such as the Quran as the Word of Allah) and original language, Arabic. However, notes could be added to the margins, between lines or any available space around the text, which are often indicative of the scribe's understanding of the subject matter.

**ON THE CUSP OF MECHANISED
MASS REPRODUCTION**

The introduction of mass printing technology in the 19th century threatened to undermine the need for scribes. However, the Malay scribes still had one more important role to play and the demand for their services continued unabated in the early period of Malay printing.

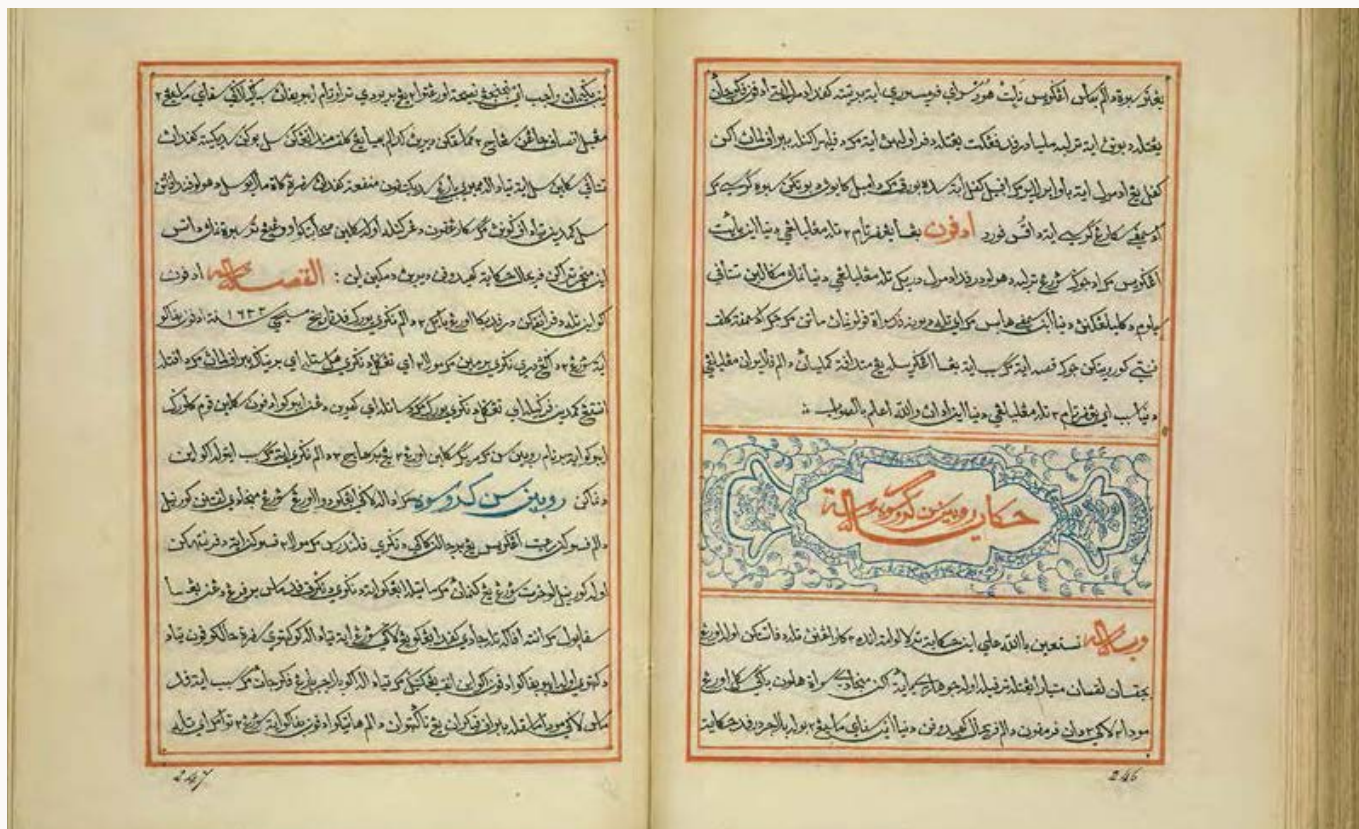
The Christian-based journal, *Bahawa hendaklah engkau menyembah Allah dan berbakti kepadanya sahaja*, is one of the publications in Singapore that involve Malay scribes as part of the printing process and highlights the important role of missionary presses in the emergence of Malay printing in Singapore. The most important was the Mission Press in the hands of Reverend Benjamin Keasberry

who pioneered the use of lithography to reproduce calligraphic styles so that his publications would appeal to a Malay audience familiar with hand-copied manuscripts. In contrast, earlier missionary publications were typographic prints that could not capture the flair and cursive form of handwritten Jawi, with scripts regarded as too uniform and stilted by Malay readers.

In contrast, lithography, called *cap batu* (stone-stamping) in Malay and favoured by indigenous printers, could convey the grace and fluidity of a scribe's handwriting. Like copying, scribes would draft a master page on paper that was then etched into a limestone tablet which acted as a printing plate to reproduce multiple copies of the original hand-composed design. As such, the same scribes with their skill sets could continue to be employed since "a book printed by lithography was essentially a manuscript reproduced".⁵

A MISSION TO PRINT

For the translation of Christian treatises and other English texts, the missionaries often worked closely with renowned scribe and writer, Munshi Abdullah, sometimes termed the "Father of Malay Printing" as he had imparted lithographic printing knowledge to Malay society.⁶ In addition to translations, the cooperation between Keasberry and Abdullah in the 1840s and 1850s resulted in multi-coloured lithograph



42 (ABOVE) *Chermin Mata*, a lithograph, is one of the earliest and more lavishly illustrated Malay periodicals. It was a quarterly journal compiled by Reverend Keasberry in collaboration with Munshi Abdullah. *Chermin mata bagi segala orang yang menuntut pengetahuan*, no. 4, 1859, Singapore: Bukit Zion. Joint copyright of The British Library Board and the National Library Board of Singapore.

editions of Malay texts written, copied and edited by the latter. These editions include Munshi Abdullah's autobiography, *Hikayat Abdullah*, published in 1849. Keasberry used the proceeds of the press to run a boarding school for boys in River Valley Road. Here, students were taught English and Malay as well as the art of printing, sowing the seeds for the next generation of the Malay publishing industry.

Aside from the missionary presses, colonial regulations in the Dutch East Indies (today's Indonesia) on local printing and publishing indirectly stimulated the growth of Singapore's Malay publishing industry. The *Reglement on de Drukkerijen in Nederlands Indië* was issued on 10 November 1856 requiring all printers, publishers and sellers of printed material to apply for licences. In addition, copies had to be deposited free-of-charge with the government. Penalties for violation included confiscation of the publications, shutting down of printing presses, imprisonment and even prohibition from future work as printers or publishers.⁸ In contrast, the British administration in Singapore enacted less restrictive policies. As a result, many Javanese printers from the Dutch East Indies shifted their bases of operations to Singapore or more specifically, Kampong Gelam. This led to the establishment of the Malay printing and publishing industry in Singapore which subsequently became one of the major publishing centres in the Nusantara in the 19th and 20th centuries. ●

EXHIBITION DETAILS

"Yang Menulis" (They Who Write) is an exhibition collaboration between the Malay Heritage Centre (MHC) and the National Library (NL) and features manuscripts drawn from NL's Rare Materials Collection. It was first on show at the Malay Heritage Centre from 2 November 2012 to 24 March 2013. It is currently on display (from 30 March to 12 May) at the National Library Building, at the Promenade, Level 7. "Yang Menulis" will also travel to Pasir Ris Public Library (14 May to 12 June), Jurong Regional Library (14 June to 11 July) and Woodlands Regional Library (13 July to 11 August).

ENDNOTES

1. Coulmas, 1996
2. Fischer, 2004, p.12
3. Siti Hawa, 2010, p.213
4. Braginsky, 2002
5. Proudfoot, 1997, p.172
6. Gallop, 1990
7. van der Putten, 1997
8. Altbach & Hoshino, 1995, p.479

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2. Gallop, A. T. "Early Malay Printing: An Introduction to the British Library Collection, *Journal of Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*," 63(1), pp. 97-98.
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4. van der Putten, J.(1997) "Printing in Riau, Two Steps Toward Modernity." *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Riau in Transition*, 153(4).



(ABOVE) A typeset page of *Bahawa hendaklah engkau...* is an example of a translated Christian treatise published for missionary work. *Bahawa hendaklah engkau menyembah Allah dan berbakti kepadanya sahaja*, 1832. Singapore: Mission Press. Collection of the National Heritage Board.

