In the Center of Authority
The Malay Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa

INTISARI is an academic imprint of **Kawah Buku**, It was founded in late 2021 with the goal of publishing scholarly works in the social sciences and humanities. The logo serves as a symbol of our aspirations. The stars represent wisdom and knowledge, and a modern flower with traditional *batik*-inspired patterns blossoms and grows from the open book, transferring the book's local cultural and historical knowledge to the readers.

All in all, a careful reading of the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa shows that this narrative, so solidly entrenched on the soil of Kedah, evokes a number of topics of general relevance; the dual nature of man; the tensions between ideology and practice; the uneasy relationship between politics and religion; the ambivalent nature of teaching. All these problems could be summarized in a dual dilemma: the problem of language—always oscillating between referentiality and persuasion—and the problem of life—always oscillating between personal responsibility and surrender to God, to Fate, to Truth.

In the Center of Authority
The Malay Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa

Hendrik M.J. Maier

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This path-breaking study is so much more than an exploration of a Malay indigenous historical text. It is an exemplar of how to use primary sources of all kinds to retrace the paths human minds have taken as they construct their pasts. What Amin Sweeney did for our appreciation of Malay oral literature, Hendrik Maier has done for 19th-century written texts. This is an essential work for appreciating the complexity of Malay studies and the richness of Malay inventiveness. May it inspire more research by the current generation.

— ***Virginia Matheson Hooker***, Emeritus Professor,
Australian National University

This is a classic study of a monumental text in the history of the Malay world. An erudite and versatile scholar of comparative literature, Hendrik Maier uncovers the shifting significance of the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa, both by insiders and by outsiders, by admirers and detractors of all things Malay. He shows the ways in which Orientalists' rendering of the text altered what was once an organic and dynamic oral heritage into a textualized and ossified canon. Clearly, the project of decolonization is far from complete. By uncovering the fragments of colonial legacies that haunt us till this very day, Maier provides us with new ways to read and re-read Malay traditions. A gripping analysis of cultural imperialism that offers hopeful possibilities of resistance. A seminal work!

— ***Khairudin Aljunied***, Associate Professor,
National University of Singapore

The most exciting study of traditional Malay literature for decades, with wide theoretical implications. Circling around a single pre-modern text—looking at how that text has been read over time by British scholar-officials and modern Malaysians—Maier argues that colonial learning brought a break with the past, undermining the authority of heritage. Advocating 'strong textualism' and 'intertextual' methodologies—and exploring 'strangeness'—he suggests such texts could assist in creating a new type of knowledge, less dependent on the West.

— ***Anthony Milner***, Australian National University
and author of *The Malays* (2008)

In the Center of Authority is an eye-opening book that explores the heart of how a literary culture is formed and shared, and how composers absorb from that culture and, at the moment of composition, consciously or unconsciously, draw from other oral or written texts as they compose their works. Besides a close reading of the text, the personages, and the events in the unfolding of the *hikayat*, Maier also gives space to the contributions of British scholars like Hugh Low and Richard Winstedt and how their readings may shed light on the interpretation of Malay classical texts. The study further looks at the various editions of manuscripts and the printed works themselves, along with analyses of them and their possible function in a British colonial curriculum. However, in the end, Maier finds order, though the thought of indeterminacies still lingers.

— ***Muhammad Haji Salleh***, Emeritus Professor
and Malaysian National Laureate

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This edition is published by arrangement with Cornell University Press, for sale worldwide.

This edition published in 2025 by

INTISARI, *an imprint of* **Kawah Buku**
(*Registered under Soeloeh Merdeka Publishing*)
Bandar Baru Bangi
43650 Selangor
press.kawahbuku.com

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Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Maier, Hendrik M.J., 1960-
In the Center of Authority : The Malay Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa / Hendrik M.J. Maier
ISBN 978-967-26405-0-9
1. Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa.
2. Malay literature—Criticism, Textual.
3. Folk literature, Malay.
I. Title.
899.23

Edited by Ahmad Tajuddin
Layout and typeset by Iskandar Kamel
Proofread by Ikmal Rafiq, Ruhan Shahrir and Azan Safar
Cover design by YoungZheng Liew and Amin Landak
Cover artwork by Azmannor

Published in Malaysia
Printed by Vinlin Press
2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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A Note on the Spelling

All quotations from Malay texts written or printed in Arabic script have been transliterated. The spelling of all Malay quotations, with a few exceptions, has been adapted to the official 1972 spelling so as to make them easily readable.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Scholarly tradition has it that writing is always done against the background of reading and discussion.

First of all, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the books and articles mentioned in the bibliography as well as to their authors; they have afforded me many hours of intellectual excitement. Reading, indeed, is not an innocent activity—it is the texts that provoke the ideas we may have long had and challenge the opinions that are entertained around us.

I would also like to thank the many people who have helped me during my visits to the Malaysia; special mention should be made of Muhammad Haji Salleh.

I wish to express my gratitude to the staff of the library of the Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology in Leiden and to the staff of the Section Oriental Manuscripts of the Leiden University Library for their efficient assistance, and to drs. R.S. Karni who succeeded in convincing me of the advantages of modern technology.

The study of the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa has drawn me into unforeseen and sometimes even unwanted directions, for all sorts of reasons. Apart from those who encouraged me just by asking how my research was going, there were some who effectively helped me in developing my ideas and took the time to discuss and read earlier drafts: Will Derks, Gijs Koster, Jerry Mager, Willem van der Molen, Sandy Niessen, Jack Prentice, Nina Sirakova, and Roger Tol.

The book was written during my academic affiliation with Leiden State University and the Catholic University Nijmegen. In its original form, it was defended as a Ph.D. thesis in Leiden. I feel, however,

especially indebted to the scholars and graduate students of the Southeast Asia Program of Cornell University where I spent the academic year 1985-1986; more than any other group of people they showed me what scholarship really is about.

AN INTRODUCTION

> A text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture.

This is a succinct definition of a text, a variation on a definition from a text which itself is such a tissue of quotations, and readers with some curiosity and will to knowledge could not only try to locate this quotation, but also trace some of the centers of culture, some of the points of authority from which it may have been drawn—the first line of a genealogy. If they are then sufficiently intrigued, they will do the same with the whole text of which this particular quotation forms a part, and thus the genealogy could be endlessly extended and refined. The texts that are found to be the centers of culture could, in their turn, be similarly explored for quotations from yet other texts, and so on and so forth. A network of lines between innumerable points. A nebula with vague contours, dazzling to look at.

The above definition of a text—of course it is a variation on Barthes', and it should be seen as one of the many that have been produced by French structuralism and its progeny to explain the principle of intertextuality—is the red thread in the tissue of this book on the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa, a Malay text which, conceived by an unknown author in an unknown place at an unknown date, is usually considered as presenting the history of the rulers of Kedah, a small Sultanate on the Malay Peninsula.

For readers who are better versed in the Malay heritage as a whole, Barthes' definition simply confirms what they have already long known: like any other fragment of this heritage, the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa was both conceived and perceived against the

background of the corpus of knowledge which the Malay scribes and their public had in common. The Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa was a tissue of quotations drawn from other texts, and a distinct one at that, offering, in its turn, quotations from other Malay scribes and recitors who constructed yet more fragments. In chapter 4, in many respects the center of this book, it will be argued that this dependency on other texts for construction as well as for signification is one of the characteristic features of the communicative system of every culture which, like nineteenth century Malay culture, has a dominantly oral-aural character.

During the last decade or two, several authoritative centers of textual studies have emerged which have made Western critics more than ever aware that what is valid for texts in a dominantly oral-aural culture also holds for texts in a culture like our own, so strongly dominated by literacy. Here, too, texts are conceived against the background of the knowledge authors have of other texts. Here, too, texts are perceived against the background of the knowledge the public has drawn from other texts. The difference from a predominantly oral-aural culture is that the knowledge which the readers have at their disposal does not necessarily run parallel to the knowledge of the author whose text they try to understand. In order to make a text meaningful, we can draw a frame of reference from a much wider variety of centers of culture than the author may have intended, and once our interpretations have been made public, they may continue their existence even after having been repudiated by other readers, by other interpretations.

The greatly conflicting interpretations which the writings of Low, Winstedt, and chapter 8 of this book offer of the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa are a fine illustration of how different features of the same text can be foregrounded by drawing quotations from different points of authority.

James Low, writing in 1849, accepted the claims the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa made for presenting the history of Kedah: by way of careful induction, observation, and comparison he came to the conclusion that the main points of the narrative corresponded with historical reality. His annotated translation of the main body of the Hikayat was thought important enough to be printed in the *Journal of*

the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia, a powerful center of knowledge about Malay culture in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Writing some hundred years later, Winstedt denied the Hikayat any claim to Truth. He presented it as a farrago of folktales, largely irrelevant for historical research, and he did not think it worth a literary reading either. It was a boring and silly text, like almost all texts of the Malay heritage with which the British had become familiar. Apart from a limited number of so-called historical texts which provided British research with some evidence that supported the data and dates distilled from non-Malay sources; the corpus of the heritage was gradually put to sleep. Even the impressive number of more easily available text-editions that have been published since the beginning of this century were unable to wake it up.

The concept of intertextuality—down to the smallest detail a text is permeated by a complex lineage of other texts—could be found to be a rewarding tool not only for reading the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa but also for reading the readings of the Hikayat. It will come as no surprise that even the most superficial reading of these readings makes abundantly clear that the tissue of quotations that permeates British texts has a different pattern from the tissue that permeates Malay texts: the centers of culture are different, so different, in fact, that it seems more practical to call them incommensurable.

A similar incommensurability can be shown to exist in the treatment of the Hikayat by British readers, among whom Low and Winstedt deserve our special attention as they paid more attention to the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa than the others. Obviously, they posed different questions: they selected and neglected different notions—their texts have a different genealogy.

In order to account for these differences, some of the concepts that have been developed by Michel Foucault could be of great help. To formulate it in his own terms: like any heritage, like any field of knowledge, Malayistics—the corpus of texts, written in English, that discuss things Malay, just a small fragment in the nebula of Western knowledge—is an unstable assemblage of faults and fissures and heterogeneous layers, each of them operating from a set of rules and regulations that criticizes certain problems, excludes certain perspectives, and restricts the collection of knowledge.

The centers of culture, to which lines could be drawn from the layers in which Low and Winstedt operated, may be innumerable indeed, but, then, the déjà-lu, the déjà-vu, the déjà-vécu of a reader is limited. We have read certain books and certain essays, we have had our experiences of life, and we have been told what are important concepts and ideas—and then we decide that certain lines may be more rewarding than others in determining some of the quotations, some of the rules of knowledge that organized the layers from which Low and Winstedt respectively operated. Reading is a selective activity, resulting in fragments that can cover only a small part of the genealogy of texts that are studied, signifying those texts from a necessarily restricted perspective—it is practically impossible to explore all possible lines.

However, this is not to say that the reading of the readings of Low and Winstedt as offered in chapters 2 and 3 are purely arbitrary interpretations. The centers of culture may be innumerable, the organizing capacity of a reader may be limited; yet it seems perfectly permissible to attribute more authority to some of these centers than to others. Some rules can be thought to be more dominant than others in the organization of knowledge, some regulations can be considered more effective than others in the definition of relevant and rewarding questions—and this applies to the readings of Low and Winstedt as well as to the reading of their readings: the Scottish Enlightenment and Tylor, it will be argued, have been the main centers of culture which provide the necessary questions.

The chapters that discuss those two layers of knowledge are preceded by a chapter in which the workings of authority and intertextuality are demonstrated in a more restricted manner. It will be shown how early discussions on Kedah and the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa are echoed in the writings of later Malayists. Chapter 1 primarily aims to give a brief sketch of the context in which the Hikayat was read and used after it was discovered about 1830.

Intertextuality has been the main tool in the preparation of this book. The concept of authority has been used as the regulative principle of this intertextuality. The first chapters of *In the Center of Authority* are intended to show that it is possible to give a rewarding picture of Malayistics by following the British readings of a single fragment of the Malay heritage, the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa. Low and Winstedt

are exemplary for the two layers into which British involvement with the Malays in the Peninsula can be divided; and these two layers are described, very conventionally, in the wider context of Western activities in the Peninsula, the data about which have been drawn from the existing corpus of books and articles about the British presence in Southeast Asia.

Most Malayists operate without much reflection on their work. They combine a certain responsiveness to their object of study with the kind of common-sense that is generally accepted in their culture, and a more or less solid knowledge of the "loci classici" of their field of study. Epistemological problems are usually evaded, rhetorical modes are used rather than reflected upon. The result: a great amount of data and ideas collected from various perspectives. In Low's days they circled around the assumption that knowledge is an assemblage of accurate representations, and therefore there is only one way to represent reality, gradually discovered by mankind as a whole. In Winstedt's days these data and ideas circled around the presumption that there may be many ways to represent reality, all of which have some kind of persuasiveness, but that there is just one privileged class of representations, the British one.

Malaysia has become an independent state. The West has gone through a cruel war. Europe has lost much of its self-confidence. The context in which the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa is read has changed and new questions have emerged that are considered more relevant, more rewarding—the conditions for being "in the true" have changed. These days, the conclusions of both Low and Winstedt are appreciated, but with great reservations.

This is not to say that Low's questions or Winstedt's answers are fundamentally wrong or incorrect—the fact that their work was thought worthy of publication in authoritative journals should serve as an invitation for a serious treatment of their writings. It seems more appropriate to assume that they are simply no longer able to sustain the conversation, the furtherance of which, as Richard Rorty suggests, is the main duty of European scholars.

A first step is to make explicit some of the rules and regulations that have dominated Malayistics so far—to lay bare and to determine the

conditions of signification that led Low and Winstedt to conclusions that are now regarded as unconvincing, or even inconsistent.

Looking in wonder at the weakness of arguments and at inconsistencies is one side of the picture—suggesting another approach is its complement, even though we should bear within us the sad knowledge that there is no reason to think that our spirit is now in possession of the best vocabulary for formulating this. It is rather a matter of restating the field of study in such a way that we can pose the questions which could lead to a more rewarding dialogue with the Malay heritage, provided that we want to continue the conversation about it among ourselves.

This is done in chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 which, each in its own way, circle around the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa, the exemplary text of the Malay heritage and of the Malayistics' heritage alike. Chapter 4 is the construction of a picture of the Malay heritage at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the Hikayat was presumably already in existence. Chapter 5 and chapter 6 describe the downfall of the heritage within Malay culture in terms of a break-away from orality towards printing. It was printing (used in a wide sense) that brought about a radical transformation within intellectual circles; eventually Malay communities were no longer willing to accept the skillfulness and relevance of the heritage and became insensitive to the effects the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa tried to impose upon them.

From about 1820, the British presence made itself increasingly felt on the Peninsula, and it is possible to show that within the network of Malay knowledge—until 1850 largely incommensurable with the West—British influence and Muslim modernist authority were the main centers of culture that forced Malay intellectuals to reorganize their knowledge along new lines. New questions and new answers had to be formulated—which brought to an end the authority of the heritage. It fell into decay; it was pushed aside; and that is why present-day Malays are at a loss to know what can be done with these texts which no longer play the role they played in the oral-aural context of the nineteenth century.

For the Malays themselves, too, the heritage has become a dormant corpus to which only a small number of scholars and hobbyists really feel attracted. It has created uneasiness among Malays who, in search

of a National Identity for Malaysia, are making efforts to revive the new state's interest in it—so far largely in vain. How can the beauty of a Hikayat Seri Rama, the elegance of a Hikayat Inderaputera be unfolded to modern Malaysians? And what about those so-called historical texts such as the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa: do they refer to reality and, if so, to what degree? Where does referentiality end and figurality begin? How can we make the nineteenth century Malays more understandable? Why read the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa at all if it does not enrich our own experience of life?

The Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa may not only be connected with Kedah reality, with nineteenth century Malay reality, but also with other texts—and once we have seen all the failures of referential readings so far, in terms of truth and correspondence with reality, we may decide it is more rewarding to focus on the textual aspects of the Hikayat rather than on the question as to how far it refers to Kedah at all. Not because it does not refer to anything in the world—every text does in one way or another—but simply because the priority of its figurality may be more promising for keeping up a fruitful and rewarding conversation.

The question that gave birth to chapters 7 and 8 is a simple one: why did a Western reader in 1980 find the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa worth reading? There were very mundane reasons. Since 1970 the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa has been available in a nicely printed book with an attractive geometrical cover. Besides, anybody who knows Malay—a necessary condition for becoming a good reader of the heritage—would be intrigued by the unusual title of the book and become curious about its content, the more so if it was not given any attention in his classes.

In the beginning there was amazement. Amazement about its content. Amazement about the assurance of Malays and Malayists alike that it represented the History of Kedah. How could anybody write such a strange narrative, and how could we possibly think that a story about a Garuda bird or a story about a tusked Raja could in any way refer to real events in the Peninsula? Amazement about the lack of attention, among modern readers, to the elegance of this work, for the complexities of the narrative. Amazement about the easy identification of this particular version of the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa

with other versions. How could one so easily ignore the differences between the various versions, so striking, so impressive? Those were enigmas which awaited a solution.

We could try to awaken this text, or any fragment of the Malay heritage for that matter, by exploring its strangeness or by trying to make it relevant to our own life—or by combining the two.

The Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa's strangeness is explored in chapters 1 to 6. Chapter 7, a short survey of the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa texts now available, should be read as a prelude to chapter 8 which tries to make understandable why reading the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa can be an exciting experience in spite of its very strangeness. Chapter 8 offers a close reading in which the narrative of that attractive 1970 edition is broken up into heterogeneity and ambiguity. Formal recurrences and imitations are numerous and manifold, suggesting the possibility of organizing the narrative into a complex configuration of antitheses and identifications: the more repetitions, the greater the diversity of meaning.

In this close reading, the moment for deciding about its referential value has been postponed. Reading is not necessarily interested in the question as to the extent to which an interpretation refers to reality; it can restrict itself to making the text have meaning. The power of its conclusions does not lie in their capacity to refer to Kedah but, rather, in their ability to continue the conversation about the beauty of the Malay heritage, its profundity, its playfulness. The Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa can only gain if we appreciate the words as the things that should be accounted for—we can better not discuss it on the level of reality, as Low did, nor on the level of summaries, as Winstedt did, but on the level of the narrative itself, the words on the page.

In the Center of Authority makes both wide and restricted claims. Wide because it discusses the field of Malay studies as well as the transformation of the Malay textual system on the basis of a single work, the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa. Restricted because it is so incomplete and fragmentary. This ambiguity could make it an easy target of criticism—hopefully it will make a contribution to a new sort of investigation in which the heritage will regain something of its luster. It is worth it.

The sad knowledge that this reading of the text will be followed by other readings, equally selective, equally fragmentary, need not to discourage us. Each text is subject to rereading and exposure to error because reading and understanding operate from many options, from many centers of culture.