

15 NOV, 2019

## IMPACT OF COLLECTED MALAY WRITINGS

New Straits Times, Malaysia

## MALAY MANUSCRIPTS

# IMPACT OF COLLECTED MALAY WRITINGS

Limited collections in European libraries provide interpretations that linger over time, to the extent of distorting the image of Malay culture and religion

A. MURAD  
MERICAN

**T**HERE is a renewed interest among aficionados and connoisseurs of Malay writings in recent times.

Books narrating Malay society, history and culture, as well as classical Malay texts, especially written and published before World War Two are much sought-after. And second-hand bookstores and some of the newer independent booksellers know this too well.

Collecting Malay printed books is not new.

The vast majority of collections of Malay books and manuscripts in European libraries were acquired as early as in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The construction of knowledge about the Malays was much carried out during that period through the collections in European libraries.

And the collections influenced the analysis of Malay society and culture of the period and in earlier times.

In 1925, Hans Overbeck, German merchant, diplomat, entomologist and philologist, made the famous proclamation that "Malay literature is dead, faded away, since the glory of the Malay kingdoms vanished".

Holger Warnk, German scholar of Southeast Asia from the Goethe University in Frankfurt, clarified that Overbeck was many times misinterpreted and misunderstood.

Overbeck was also a collector of Malay books. His views were distorted had we not read his sub-



The Perak Museum in Taiping. The many Malay manuscripts from various places in the Malay Archipelago and the various courts in the Malay peninsula are seen by European collectors as a mirror of Malay society. FILE PIC

sequent notes: "Its (i.e. Malay literature's) seeds are still there, but they rest in the treasuries of the museums and libraries of the white men and await the sower, who scatters them again on its native soil." (Overbeck in *Maleisch leesboek*, Leiden: 1925:p.3).

Then museums and libraries in Europe were seen to be the only institutions where one could access Malay literature.

There was an insufficient stock of Malay texts.

Scholars and researchers would have to depend on the few libraries which had catalogued Malay books.

Warnk in a paper titled "Collecting Malay Books in Nineteenth Century Europe" written some years ago, noted that collecting manuscripts and Malay writings and presenting them to archives and libraries were as old as the European presence in Southeast Asia.

An example of early Malay manuscripts were the two letters from the Sultan of Ternate to the King of Portugal dated 1521 and 1522.

The manuscripts from the first Dutch travels were brought to the Netherlands as curiosities and often were handed to scholars at

universities such as Leiden or Cambridge.

The letters, and the many Malay manuscripts from various places in the Malay Archipelago, namely Aceh, Banten, Ambon, Bima, Ternate and Minangkabau, and the various courts in the Malay peninsula are seen by European collectors as a mirror of Malay society.

Earlier this month, I delivered a public lecture titled "Indigenous Perspectives from the Malay Archipelago: Malay Descriptions of the West before 1876" at the Malay Heritage Centre located at the Kampong Glam Malay enclave in Singapore.

In the lecture, I addressed early Malay sources in Malay manuscripts and other written texts before the establishment of colonial governments in the region.

These texts tell us of Malay life and cosmology, Malay interactions with foreigners and the Malay system of governance, trade and diplomacy.

In these, and in early Malay books, "the reader receives an authentic image of daily life, manners and customs and even the 'soul' of the people".

Warnk explained that most of the books in the libraries were not

intended to educate the local population, but the European colonial administrators who had to learn the Malay language to gain a better knowledge of the colonised.

It was not surprising that the main focus of interest were literary works with information on the local community and their customs (*adat*).

It should be noted that the texts located in European libraries reflect more the tastes and needs of its collectors.

This is more so for literary writings. The kind of literature circulating among the local population may be different to the interest of the collectors.

Concerning writings on Islam, the limited number of Islamic theological literature in European libraries then, and the lack of interest in those available, according to Warnk, might have had an impact in viewing South-east Asian Islam as "non-native", "foreign" or just as "tilt over local cultures".

This shows that libraries are not neutral institutions in directing ideas and thoughts on human societies and civilisations.

Based on the writings, Islam in the region has been viewed in an Orientalist way, mainly as "fanat-

ic", "aggressive", "superstitious", "decadent" or just "unscientific".

Further, religious texts coming from this part of the Malay world were not regarded as "original" or "pure" in the expression of Malay life. They were seen as being of secondary importance.

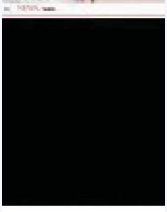
Writings on theology were not offered in a large scale to European collectors.

But whatever little that the libraries store has the effect of providing and instituting interpretations and views that linger over time, to the extent of conditioning and distorting the image of Malay culture and religion to the Malays themselves.

We must also not forget the role and influence of such colonial institutions as the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences, established in 1778, and the Perak Museum Library in Taiping, opened in 1883 and still standing to this day.

These are extensions of the European libraries in their collecting and cataloguing habits.

The writer is a professor at ISTAC-IHUM and the first recipient of the Honorary President Resident Fellowship at the Perdana Leadership Foundation.



15 NOV, 2019

## IMPACT OF COLLECTED MALAY WRITINGS

New Straits Times, Malaysia



Page 2 of 2

### SUMMARIES

Limited collections in European libraries provide interpretations that linger over time, to the extent of distorting the image of Malay culture and religion

THERE is a renewed interest among aficionados and connoisseurs of Malay writings in recent times. Books narrating Malay society, history and culture, as well as classical Malay texts, especially written and published before World War Two are much sought after.