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INTRODUCTION

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The written literatures of Malay and Javanese have a long history — more than one thousand years in the case of Javanese. During this long period the outward appearance of the book changed beyond recognition, themes occupying the minds of the authors and their audiences were adapted to new ideologies, long established literary conventions gave way to completely different ones, and the languages concerned, subject to constant renewal like any natural language, went through successive stages that became more and more incomprehensible with increasing distance in time.

These and other factors contributed to old texts falling into oblivion and new ones rising to popularity. A constant element amidst change, resisting the threat of oblivion, was the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Having arrived early in the history of Javanese literature, both epics found expression in various forms during the long period of Indian influence. The epics remained after the Indianized culture to which they belonged waned and disappeared. Continuing to manifest themselves in all sorts of shapes, their presence was not undermined by the advance of Islam in Java, nor was it by the more recent influence of Western

culture. Information on the history of Malay literature, though providing less detail, shows a similar picture.

The chapters collected in *Traces of the Ramayana and Mahabharata in Javanese and Malay Literature* go beyond mapping epic presence. They show what happened during transmission, adaptation and borrowing, and offer hypotheses on the underlying motives. The authors scrutinize a couple of selected texts and pictorial representations and — again or for the first time — address old questions and raise new ones, going back and forth in time, connecting Javanese and Malay and even Balinese literature.

The author with whom the volume opens, Stuart Robson, gives an overall view of the history of one text, the story of Rama and Sita, from the Old Javanese Ramayana of the ninth century up to the Serat Rama and Rama Keling written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Quite extraordinarily, the intervals between copies (partly hypothetical, partly based on real examples) appear to coincide with important moments in the history of Javanese culture. Taking Teeuw's theory on literary history and on translation as his starting point, the author is able to explain continued Javanese interest in the story from the wider social context as it developed over almost one millennium.

Harry Aveling in the third chapter considers an even longer stretch of time of almost two millennia. He takes a closer look at the "Death of Abimanyu", a story from the Mahabharata, which he follows in its treatment in four different periods in four different literatures: the Sanskrit original (traditionally ascribed to the beginning of the Western calendar), the Old Javanese version of 1157, the undated Classical Malay rendering, and the Modern Indonesian short story "Nostalgia" of 1987 by Danarto. The four versions propound fundamentally different ideals. While Abimanyu in all renderings is a great hero, the Sanskrit text stresses the ksatriya-dharma, the heroic ideal of the nobleman. The Old Javanese exaltation of the poetic beauty of death, on the other hand, brings us to the "tantrism of the battlefield", as it was called by Zoetmulder. The Classical Malay text returns to the ideal of the nobleman, not in the old Sanskrit sense but the Malay way, applying the Malay norm of a good name. "Nostalgia" with its pantheistic overtones holds up a completely different ideal again, in the phrasing of one of

its antagonists: “There is a more noble human destiny and that is to vanish from history.”

A famous story about Bima, one of the main heroes of the Mahabharata, is that of his quest for the water of life. Many versions of this story exist in Javanese. In his discussion of a Malay version, Bernard Arps in Chapter 4 presents an alternative for the usual way we see the phenomenon of borrowing: he invites us to imagine the presence of Javanese elements in Malay literature not as something lent by Javanese culture or selected by Malay authors, but as a deliberate creation on the part of the Malay authors. This procedure, apart from expressing admiration, at the same time leaves room for dealing with certain aspects considered problematic for a Muslim society, such as magic and sorcery: they are projected onto the Javanese, although they are as much alive among the Malays themselves.

Gijs Koster in his contribution (Chapter 5) addresses a Malay Panji story, one of the stories that revolve around the love between Raden Panji, the Prince of Koripan, and Princess Candra Kirana of Daha. Originally Javanese, these stories also found their way into Malay and other literatures of Southeast Asia. How the Malay stories relate exactly to the Javanese stories has still to be cleared up, but they are by no means direct translations. Koster shows that elements from the Mahabharata and Ramayana – most probably taken from New Javanese and Malay adaptations – together with disparate elements from other texts were deployed to foreground the fictionality of the story discussed by him.

In Chapter 6, Helen Creese’s contribution offers an excursion into the realm of Balinese literature and pictorial representation. Created in the nineteenth century, the works discussed belong to a Balinese tradition of continued interest in the Mahabharata and Ramayana. They refer to the episode of the final war with which the Mahabharata concludes. This episode is the subject of one poem in Old Javanese in particular, the twelfth-century Baratayuda, which has been held in high esteem in Bali until now. In addition to the Sanskrit text, and clearly created by the twelfth-century Javanese poet, the Baratayuda contains a passage about one of the army commanders and his wife. In the text it is given a name of its own. Scholars of Old Javanese like to refer to it as a poem in its

own right. It is remarkable that it is precisely this passage that inspired the products of later Balinese authors and artists.

Edwin Wieringa in the last chapter likewise turns to the field of pictorial art. The drawings discussed by him illustrate three nineteenth- to early twentieth-century manuscripts of the *Aṣṭabrata*. The *Aṣṭabrata* is a well-known text in Javanese on royal behaviour, ultimately deriving from the Old Javanese *Ramayana*. The title refers to the eight (*aṣṭa*) exemplary Hindu deities who are portrayed in the manuscripts. Wieringa is interested to know how the language of silhouette and wording relate. Iconography is a highly developed branch of knowledge in Java, both at the general level of categories and at the specific level of individuals. However, in the case of the *Aṣṭabrata* manuscripts the characteristic features were applied too loosely to bring out a systematic relationship between the two languages.

The six chapters of *Traces of Ramayana and Mahabharata in Javanese and Malay Literature* grew out from papers presented at a conference on the Indian epics in these two literatures, held in 2014 at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore. The initiative for the conference was taken by Professor Ding Choo Ming from the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, at that time a Visiting Senior Fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. Keen to bring the worlds of Javanese and Malay studies together, he successfully created the conditions for mutually profitable discussions that led to the present volume. After having been host to the conference of 2014, the Institute also took responsibility for publishing the results. I wish to thank both Professor Ding and the Institute for their commitment to this project.