G. Koster
H. Maier
In answer to G.W.J. Drewes: neither


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An open scholarly debate may offer relief from the monotony of a learned periodical. It may provide a stimulating occasion to escape from the solitude of daily work, a forum where one can see one’s ideas tested. But it can only accomplish this if the discussants are prepared to continue the conversation and to take serious note of and go into each other’s arguments.

We found Drewes’ reaction to our article somewhat disappointing for several reasons: it creates the impression that he is unwilling to challenge our principal theses; it disregards – or fails to recognize? – the methodological approach we have adopted; and, finally, it brings scholarly debate down to the level of thumbing the dictionaries. For his convenience, we shall here summarize the main points we tried to make in our article, before proceeding to reply to his critical remarks. If the discussion about the power of Malay narrative then still fails to come off the ground, we, at least, will not be to blame.

The main aim of our article is a simple one. We gave a characterization of the 18th-century Malay world as one of political fragmentation, and argued that a common experience of Malayness was the main factor which provided that world as a whole as well as its constituent parts, the negeri, with a remarkable cohesion. Communication in the Malay world was predominantly oral-aural: in all areas of Malay life, eloquent speech and verbal performance, next to ritual, were of paramount importance. Concentrating on one aspect of Malayness, the shared textual heritage, and notably the narrative part of this, we presented a model of the power that the Malay may have attributed to the tales he listened to. As in all oral-aural cultures, the Malay, we suggested, expected stories to be either predominantly ‘profitable’ (berfaedah) or principally ‘soothing’ (menghiburkan). Those narratives which managed to blend profit with delight, giving instruction and pleasure at the same time, were apt the more readily to win appreciation. Having constructed this model, we tried to give a first concrete illustration of the implications of its assumption for the reading of Malay stories by examining how the mainly profitable Sejarah Melayu and the primarily soothing Syair Ken Tam-buhan may each have served to express and confirm the Malay way of
life and have upheld the negeri by the particular blend of instruction and delight they provide.

Our article is an attempt to create a typology as a tool with which to make sense of Malay texts. To criticize such a model in terms of a polarity of ‘reality’ vs. ‘delusion’, as does Drewes, is to be beside the mark. Models by their very nature do not fit the reality which they try to clarify. Their very strength lies in their blindness to the profusion of petty details. If cogent reasons are adduced they may of course have to be adjusted, but Drewes for one does not provide any such reasons. Let us briefly review his four arguments that may be taken as questioning the validity of our model.

Our statement that all stories, both the serious and the more playful ones, had exemplary power is described as ‘sweeping’. If this means that we have generalized, we can only take it as a compliment: generalization, after all, is the basic operation in the construction of a model. In point of fact, Drewes immediately deconstructs this criticism of his by saying: ‘All those conversant with Malay literature know that often Malay writers are not averse to presenting a lesson . . .’ – a rather sweeping statement, too, it would seem, and one that suggests to us that there may be two kinds of sweepingness: one which tries to be consistent and fully aware of the possible necessity of correction and adjustment and another which is mere rhetorical flourish and does not try to move beyond the smug wisdom of the lecture-room.

Drewes’ criticism of our interpretation of the term daulat as ‘divine power’ may be seen as interesting evidence that Arabo-centrism is a phase in Malay studies that has apparently by no means been overcome yet. By his very spelling of the word as dawlat – why does he not spell kisah and sejarah, too, as the Arabic words they are? – Drewes shows his refusal to consider the function of this word in the Malay context and its meaning as coloured by Malay usage – rather surprising in someone who rightly advocates the importance of a thorough acquaintance with the Malay cultural environment. With reference to Milner’s article ‘Islam and the Muslim State’ in Hooker 1983, which we consider an admirable attempt to define the nature and functioning of Malay kingship as it developed into a peculiar blend of its own with borrowings not only from the Arabs but also from India and Persia, we can only say that to us it is obvious that the meaning of daulat in the Malay world has become far removed from the Arabic dictionary meaning invoked by Drewes. His references to present-day discussions on dawlat – erudite as they no doubt are – in our view are irrelevant because they bear not so much on traditional Malay notions of kingship as on modern Islamic views of the state.

What about our picture of the position of the Malay ruler in the negeri? Is it really such a rosy picture? If it is taken as the model it is, it surely is not. It may, in fact, serve to gauge why one ruler is called zalim, and another adil dan murah. Drewes’ suggestion that in reality the majority of the rulers in the Malay world were zalim rather than adil impresses us as a belated echo of a venerable colonial tradition. It reminds us of all those reports by Westerners and Western-trained Malays that are filled with anecdotes of cases of royal extortion and
Oriental despotism. Reports that may well have been inspired much more by the need to justify the colonial presence than by any humanitarian urge to protect the hapless rakyat.

We feel flattered that so eminent an expert on matters Islamic as Drewes has taken the trouble to repeat in full our views on the activities pursued by Malay Muslim scholars. Comprehendisat. As the theologians of the Sorbonne already knew, the use of learned Latin within the vernacular may be an effective trick for establishing one’s authority where genuine arguments are absent. If the majority of people was impressed by it, Rabelais surely was not. Neither, it seems, do we need to be.

For the construction of a model a measure of abstraction is inevitable and it is this that may lead one to experience a certain stiltedness or even pompousness in the language in which it is constructed. This effect may be all the stronger on someone who is unfamiliar with the underlying scholarly debates that have prompted the adoption, rejection or avoidance of particular words. If Drewes finds fault with our language on this score, so be it. We would only be worried if our model proved ineffective in the concrete cases in which we tested it in the second part of our article. But here again, Drewes’ criticism gives us no cause for reconsideration.

To start with, let us look at Drewes’ objection to our emphatic and consistent translation of the word maka with and. Repeating never examined notions of Malay linguistics and stylistics, our opponent states that maka functions as a punctuation mark and therefore need not be emphatically rendered in translation. In our model, however, we have portrayed Malay literature as a dominantly oral-aural one. Among other things, we have argued, this leads to the prevalence of a paratactic style involving an accumulation of brief clauses that are regularly introduced by the word maka. This is a characteristic feature of the oral-aural style of a great many Malay texts, and not only of the Sejarah Melayu, and therefore needs to be accounted for in a translation. If one reads the translation of the corresponding passage in Raffles MS. 18 by Brown (1983:162-3), it becomes clear that, to his credit, Brown has on the whole kept fairly close to the rhythm of his Malay text. Drewes’ view of the function of the word maka betrays the bias of someone who only looks at Malay literature through manuscripts and writing. In other literary traditions, too, these characteristics of the oral-aural style can be indicated. A case in point is Biblical narrative, as, for instance, in ‘And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda; And entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elisabeth. And it came to pass, that . . . ’ (Luke 1:39-41). No Biblical scholar will argue that the repeated use of the word kai (and) in the koine-Greek text is a matter of punctuation. Had the translators of the King James Bible, which we quote here, had the benefit of the advice of Drewes and had they omitted all the ‘and’s from this passage, the translation would certainly have lost a great deal of the peculiar power and beauty of the original as oral-aural narrative.

Most regrettably of all, Drewes hardly takes the trouble to discuss the
merits or demerits of our mode of reading. Instead, he resorts to the level of philological quibbling. While his remarks here admittedly are sometimes to the point, they once again underline his disregard of the fact that Malay texts were meant to be read out aloud and listened to and were not written down to provide material for the intellectual gymnastics of the philologist. The rules of the game as set by Drewes here are very simple: always stick to the letter, and once the dictionary has spoken the matter is closed. That is fine with us, but in that case he should abide by his own rules, which he does not do: *mengeluari* can be found in both Poerwadarminta and Tceuw (1950:195) and Iskandar (1970:500); and *rengga* with the meaning of ‘pack-saddle’ is to be found in both Wilkinson (1906:331) and Klinkert (1947:498). In translating the passage about the elephant ride as we have, we are happy again to find ourselves in the company of C. C. Brown, whose translation was published with an introductory article by the expert in the study of the *Sejarah Melayu*, R. Roolvink. For the time being we prefer to stick to our translation and to balance the pack-saddle in their company, rather than to allow ourselves to be taken for a scholarly elephant ride in one of his square houselets by Drewes. In translating the word *tawhid* as ‘unity’ we did not, of course, intend to dispute the authority of Drewes, who spent much of his long and fruitful life on the study of things Islamic and whose contributions in this field are too well known to need mentioning. But we thought we could translate the word in this manner in good conscience because here, too, we were in the reassuring company of other scholars of repute who surely could not have been in the dark about things Islamic: the lexicographer Iskandar (1970:1197), the Malayist Wilkinson (1906:542-3), and the Islamologist Juynboll (1903:4).

But enough about details. We hoped to make clear in our article that in reading a text one should not confine oneself to using a dictionary to get the meanings of the words straight. Unlike what Drewes seems to suggest, we see no contradiction between professional interest and pleasure. If we sin, it is because we frankly confess that reading may be fun, too. A pleasure that can only be enhanced, we agree, by a thorough knowledge of Malay culture. But then, reading can be performed in various ways. Not all of us can be expected to be interested in reading legal or religious texts: we all have our ruling passions. With our preference for soothing narratives rather than profitable treatises, we inevitably construct a picture of the Malay world that differs from the one Drewes is piecing together through his admirable editions of Islamic theological works. In our view, neither his picture nor ours is to be taken either as reality or as a delusion: both are possible presentations, both serve their own purposes, and both should be amenable to adjustment if new insights regarding points of detail or new theoretical points of view should require. How vast is the distance that separates our sphere of interest from that of Drewes may be illustrated by his irritated reaction to the metaphor we used in the title of our article, ‘A Medicine of Sweetmeats’. The comparison of a literary work with medicine is too widespread to need any further comment. Its comparison to sweetmeats may to some perhaps seem far-fetched, but, as at least some of those conversant with Malay literature may know, it was by no means an
unfamiliar one, as witness the following lines: *Hamba mengarang soeatoe madah / karena hati bimbang dan goendah / Direka sja’ir selakoe djoeadah / Disini tertera njatalah soedah* (Soetan Sahboedin 1921:3).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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**G. J. RESINK**

**TE WEINIG GESTUWD**


Aan het feit dat er onder die oprichters echter zeker nog een tweede ‘B.B.er’ zou zijn geweest indien hij niet ten tijde van die oprichting met verlof in Nederland zou hebben vertoefd, is echter door beide schrijvers voorbij gezien. Die ex-bestuursambtenaar, in Surakarta zijn carrière begonnen, was J. H. A. Logemann, door Gerretson eens ‘het denkende hoofd’ van de *De Stuw*-groep genoemd. Na zijn terugkeer in 1931 uit Nederland is Logemann nl. twee jaar lang, tot de opheffing van de groep, voorzitter van haar bestuur geweest, wat De Jongs kritiek op het B.B. op dit punt toch wel beduidend verzwakt.

Dat men hieraan voorbij heeft gezien is begrijpelijk, want zelfs in het zo lezenswaardige Leidse proefschrift van Dr. E. Locher-Scholten, *Ethiek in fragmenten* (1981), waarin een geheel hoofdstuk gewijd is aan