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On Writing the Not-To-Be-Read Literature and Literacy in a Pre-Colonial 'Tribal' Society

Introduction

To date, there have been no attempts to define the significance, function and spread of literacy in Batak society, nor any study that places the Batak case in a wider Indonesian or Southeast Asian perspective. This article is intended as an attempt to fill in this obvious gap in current scholarship, drawing mainly on two sources: data from the 1920 and 1930 colonial censuses, and information from the Batak manuscript tradition.

The different Batak ethnic groups are distinguished not only culturally but also linguistically. All six Batak groups belong to a single language group, which can be divided into at least two subgroups of mutually unintelligible languages. The closely related languages of the Mandailing, Angkola, and Toba represent the southern subgroup, while the languages of the Karo, Pakpak and the small non-Batak people of Alas (Southeast Aceh) represent the northern group. The language of the Simalungun, though often regarded as a subgroup by itself, is obviously an earlier offspring of the southern branch of the Batak languages (Adelaar 1981).

Prior to the arrival of the German Mission and the Dutch Colonial Government in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the Batak, especially the two larger ethnic groups, the Toba and the Karo, with which this article is mainly concerned, were a tribal society, bound together by kinship ties and lacking a marked social stratification. Any male person belonging to the ruling lineage of his village could consider himself a *raja* (chief). Slavery existed only in the rather mild form of debt slavery in most parts of the Batak area. Besides *raja*, commoners, and slaves, there were a number of specialist categories. These included the *pande* (craftsmen, such as blacksmiths, silversmiths and builders), the *pargonsi* (musicians), and the *datu* (magicians and healers). These professions were normal-

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ly hereditary. The work of the specialist was considered to be of divine origin and was therefore highly ritualized, with its own rules, sacrifices, and taboos (Neumann 1903).

There was a division of labour strictly along gender lines. The professions were almost exclusively a male domain, with only that of the *datu* admitting women specialists in some fields, especially that of the midwife and the medium. In many other activities of greater or lesser importance there was also a division by gender. Only women would weave, fetch water, or gather firewood, whereas fishing and palm-wine tapping were exclusively male activities. Women were also excluded from playing musical instruments and – as will be shown later – from reading and writing.

The Batak used a semi-syllabic script of their own, which ultimately derived from the Indian Pallava script. This script was closely connected with magic and was used by the *datu* in writing their *pustaha* – the only kind of books known in Batak society, written on long strips of bark from the *Aquilaria* tree.

An estimated 2,000 *pustaha* have been preserved and now form part of the ethnographic collections of most major museums in the world, especially in The Netherlands and Germany. *Pustaha* contain texts on the performance of rituals and the interpretation of omens, as well as formulas to be used in the manufacture of medicines. It is commonly believed that the written tradition was restricted to the class of the *datu*. The German missionary Warneck states, for instance: 'It should be noted and recognized that the Batak have adapted a script [...]. But it is not the common property of the people, and the characteristic literature of the Batak has nothing to do with it.'¹ (Warneck 1899:102.)

Today it is still the dominant assumption among scholars that literacy in pre-colonial Batak society was limited. Susan Rodgers suggests a kind of oligoliteracy among the Batak, for instance: 'The script was never used as a medium of mass literacy [...]. Only a small elite group could read and write (better, decipher) this [syllabic writing] system.'² (Rodgers 1988:68.)

The first Batak bark book was acquired by the British Museum in 1764.

¹ 'Es verdient gewiss anerkennende Erwähnung, dass die Batak eine – ihren Ursprüngen nach vielleicht aus Indien stammende – Schrift sich höchst originell zurecht gemacht haben. Aber sie ist nicht Gemeingut des Volkes, und die charakteristische Litteratur der Batak hat mit ihr nichts zu thun.' Warneck is referring here to the myths and legends and to the *pantun*-like *umpama* and *umpasa*, which indeed were almost exclusively orally transmitted.

The English translations of all quotations from Dutch and German texts in this article are mine.

² Rodgers' statement is rather misleading in that the Batak script is in fact a fully phonetic semi-syllabic script. It does not take much effort to master it. Indeed, apart from some peculiarities which are characteristic of manuscript traditions in general, such as the absence of punctuation and the non-separation of words, it is relatively easy to read.

From this it appears that there has been no marked development in the script in the last two centuries. The Batak script had already ramified into a number of regional variants by that time, so that we may conclude that it is quite old.³ Despite this fact, the Batak have never used their script for administrative purposes or for the codification of laws, while even their important genealogies have been passed down orally. The Batak thus were still at a stage of limited literacy. But does this necessarily mean that the use of the script was restricted to a small, privileged group of professional literates, the *datu*?

Some early observers of Batak culture suggest a rather different picture. So the German biologist Franz Junghuhn wrote in 1847, years before the introduction of the first Christian mission:

The children are not instructed in anything, and the only thing they learn, by imitation, is writing, that is to say, engraving particular characters onto bamboo tubes with the tip of their knives and reading what has thus been written. This art of written communication is the only scholarly art they possess; it is, however, widespread among them, especially in Toba, where young men scarcely 14 years old usually make their first literary attempts by sending young girls love letters scribbled on pieces of bamboo 1.5 inches wide by six inches to a foot long. In these letters they praise the full breasts of their beloved, her glossy hair, her strong arms when pounding rice, and end with a request for some tokens of her favour, which is generally granted with alacrity.⁴ (Junghuhn 1847:130.)

The missionaries also reported that literacy was widespread:

The art of reading and writing is known everywhere, and it is not easy to find a village which does not have one or more persons who master it. There is no need for special schools for learning it, however. Chiefs may sometimes have their offspring instructed by a *datu* (sorcerer, healer); but the rule is that people learn to read and write from others, and do so without effort, almost like a game, in the numerous hours of leisure.⁵ (Ködding 1888:78.)

³ It is of course impossible to establish any definite date for the introduction of the Batak script. Any date between the oldest known Sumatran stone inscriptions in Pallava script (seventh century) and the oldest known Muslim inscriptions (fifteenth century) is theoretically possible.

⁴ 'Die Kinder werden in Nichts unterrichtet, und das Einzige, was sie durch Nachahmung lernen, ist Schreiben, nämlich eigene Charaktere mit der Spitze ihres Messers auf Bambusrohre graviren, und so Geschriebenes lesen. Diese Kunst der schriftlichen Mittheilung ist die einzige wissenschaftliche, die sie haben; sie ist aber auch allgemein unter ihnen verbreitet, besonders in Tobah, wo Jünglinge, die kaum das Alter von 14 Jahren erreicht haben, gewöhnlich ihre ersten schriftstellerischen Versuche damit anfangen, daß sie jungen Mädchen Liebesbriefe schicken, welche auf Stücke Bambus 1,5 Zoll breit und 0,5 bis 1 Fuß lang gekritzelt sind, und worin sie die vollen Busen ihrer Schönen, ihr glänzendes Haar, ihre kräftigen Arme beim Reisstampfen loben, und schließlich um einige, meist gern bewilligte Gunstbeweise bitten.'

⁵ 'Die Kunst des Lesens und Schreibens ist überall bekannt, und man dürfte nicht leicht ein Dorf finden, wo ihrer nicht eine oder mehrere Personen mächtig wären. Besonderer Schulen

Missionary Schütz moreover reports from his mission station of Bungabondar (Angkola) that literacy was widespread among women: 'Recently the young women who are not yet able to read the Roman script – almost all of them understand the Batak script – have begun to study this'⁶ (Schütz 1891).

About the Karo Batak, however, the contrary is reported. Missionary Joustra, for instance, states implicitly that 'only men master the art of reading' (Joustra 1902:359), and this is corroborated by Middendorp, Assistant Resident of the Simalungun and Karo district: 'In the past, reading and writing (in the Karo language and script) was an art mastered by only a tiny proportion of the male population, and which they taught each other in a way almost like a game'⁷ (Middendorp 1922). One of the first Europeans to visit the Karo highlands (Joachim Freiherr von Brenner in 1887), on the other hand, reports that the script of the Karo was '[...] not the exclusive property of a privileged class, but is the common property of the population as a whole'⁸ (von Brenner 1894:293).

We thus have contradictory evidence with regard to the spread of literacy among the Batak people in pre-colonial times. The surviving accounts encompass a range of scenarios, from an almost fully-fledged literacy among both sexes to an extremely limited literacy as an art mastered by only a small elite of male specialists. The picture is furthermore incomplete because of the fact that all these accounts refer to only a particular region at a particular period of time.

In order to be able to shed more light on this rather vague picture, we need to answer two important questions. Firstly, was literacy restricted to a small class of specialists, as is commonly believed, or was it a fairly widespread phenomenon? Secondly, was literacy widespread among the female population?

zum Erlernen bedarf es aber nicht. Die Häuptlinge lassen hier und da wohl ihre Sprößlinge vom Dātu (Zauberer, Arzt) unterrichten; die Regel aber ist, daß Einer vom Anderen Lesen und Schreiben lernt, und zwar spielender Weise in den zahlreichen Mußestunden.'

⁶ 'In letzter Zeit haben die Jungfrauen, welche die lateinische Schrift noch nicht lesen konnten, – die battasche Schrift verstehen sie fast alle – angefangen, dieselbe zu erlernen.'

⁷ 'Oudtijds was kennis van lezen en schrijven (in Karotaal en -letterschrift) een kunst, die het kleinste deel van het manvolk verstond en die men elkaar speelenderwijs leerde.'

⁸ 'Das wichtigste Kriterium der gesamten geistigen Entwicklung eines Volkes bildet die Schrift, die sich nicht im ausschliesslichen Besitze einer bevorzugten Klasse befindet, sondern Gemeingut der ganzen Bevölkerung ist.'

Widespread literacy?

Anthony Reid, in his *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce 1450-1680*, argues in favour of a high level of literacy in seventeenth-century Southeast Asia, especially in the Philippines, Java, and Bali. On the basis of the evidence of early European observers of Southeast Asia he concludes that the writing system originally introduced from India in the first Christian millennium to serve the purposes of a sacred literature, spread to many parts of Sumatra, South Sulawesi, and the Philippines for quite different, everyday purposes:

Prior to the sixteenth-century expansion of Islam and Christianity, writing was being adopted by largely animist cultures where women were more commercially and socially active than in other parts of the world. Women took up writing as actively as men, to use in exchanging notes and recording debts and other commercial matters which were in the female domain. The transmission of literacy was therefore a domestic matter, largely the responsibility of mothers and older siblings, and had nothing to do with an exclusive priestly class. Writing was facilitated by the relative simplicity of alphabets [...] and] universal availability of writing material [...] in the form of palm-leaf and bamboo-strips. (Reid 1988:221.)

Reid further concludes that, with the arrival of Islam in many parts of Island Southeast Asia, the school-less educational system based on indigenous scripts was replaced by a monastic type of school system based on the Arabic script and dominated by male religious specialists, which often led to a decline in literacy, especially among women. Reid thus argues for a 'school-less literacy' that was rather unusual in most of the world but apparently was very common in Island Southeast Asia. He supports his argument with information from various sources, without, however, mentioning the Batak case. In a personal communication, Reid informed me that he was worried about the Batak apparently being something of an exception to the pattern in other parts of Sumatra. In actual fact, and in contradiction with the mainstream literature on the Batak, the Batak case fits in at least partly with Reid's argument.

The 1920 and 1930 census

The evidence from twentieth-century colonial censuses shows a depressingly low level of literacy in Island Southeast Asia, especially among women. Only 6.83 per cent of adult males and 0.26 per cent of adult females in Java were estimated to be literate, while similar figures are given for most other regions. According to the 1920 census, only about 10 per cent of Toba Batak male adults and 1 per cent of female adults were literate. For the Karo Batak,

the figures were even lower.

In the 1920 census, literacy was officially defined as the ability to write and to read a simple letter to or from a friend, and the issue of indigenous scripts was not addressed at all (*Volkstelling* 1922:3). It is only mentioned that 'very few' census takers used a script other than the Roman script in filling out their census forms (*Volkstelling* 1922:11). The reader is further warned that the figures concerning literacy of the native population are not very reliable, and should only be taken as approximations (*Volkstelling* 1922:17). The high literacy figures for Lampung in 1920 (32.09% for males and 23.4% for females), however, indicate that at least here the census takers registered not only those who were literate in the Roman script, but also those who were able to write and read the indigenous *ka ga nga* script. Therefore it is surprising that for the Batak the 1920 census listed only 10.25% literacy among the male and 1.19% among the female population, despite the fact that the Batak had a similar literary tradition.

The first mission schools in the Batak area were opened in the early 1860's. In the initial phase, the German missionaries favoured the Batak script:

Not only have we no right and no reason to deprive the people of their own script and replace it with our alien one, but the chief argument against doing so is rather that all books printed in our script can only be read by those few who have attended our schools, whereas those printed in the Batta [= Batak] script can be read instantly by all literate Batta.⁹ (Schreiber 1884:169).

It was only decades later that the mission decided to slowly move away from the use of the Batak script: 'The people are strongly in favour of the Roman script, so that only few books are still printed in the old script' (Warneck 1925). Since Warneck wrote this in 1925, we can assume that until that year books were still printed in the Batak script. As far as I have been able to ascertain, however, the last book printed in the Batak script was a school textbook written by Arsenius Lumbantobing, which was printed in Laguboti, a small town on the southern shore of Lake Toba, in 1916 (Lumbantobing 1916).¹⁰ Since the introduction of modern education, which, after the final colonization of the last independent pockets in 1907, also reached the remoter parts of northern Sumatra, the use of the Batak script has rapidly declined. According to Meerwaldt, pressure from the population led the mission to

⁹ 'Nicht nur, daß wir kein Recht und keinen Grund haben, dem Volk seine eigene Schrift ohne weiteres zu nehmen und unsere fremde an deren Stelle zu setzen, der Hauptgrund dagegen ist vielmehr dieser, daß alle Bücher, die in unserer Schrift gedruckt sind, nur von den wenigen Leuten verstanden werden, die bei uns in der Schule gewesen sind, während die in Battaschrift gedruckten, sofort von allen des Lesens kundigen Battas gelesen werden können.'

¹⁰ There is not a single library that has anything like a comprehensive inventory of books in Batak script. Even the collection of the library of the former Rhenish Mission Society in Wuppertal shows astonishing gaps in this respect.

publish the New Testament in Roman script. A Toba edition was published as early as 1885, and the Angkola edition seven years later. Meerwaldt writes that 'in general the Roman script was also used for printed books from then on, and only a few that were useful for mission work in regions newly opened to the mission were printed in Batak characters'.¹¹ Modern education penetrated the Batak lands only slowly. In 1885, a considerable proportion of Angkola Batak and of Toba Batak from the Silindung valley had been exposed to modern education and to the Roman script for 10 to 20 years. In other regions, such as Samosir, Pakpak Dairi, Simalungun, and most parts of Karo, modern education made its appearance only decades later, in some places not before 1905.

Considering the fact that books in the Batak script were still published as late as 1916, and probably even later, it seems hard to believe that in 1920 only 10% of the male population was literate. I strongly suspect that the census only included those who were literate in the Roman script. This view is shared by Reid, who writes: 'The inability of census takers themselves to read the local languages may explain why areas where traditional literacy was in a language and script not taught in school – Java, Bali, and southern Sulawesi – were recorded as having exceptionally low literacy' (Reid 1988:217).

Table 1. Literacy among the native population in Sumatra in 1930

	Age Group 2 ¹²		Age Group 3 ¹³		Total	
	male	female	male	female	male	female
Bataklanden	17.54	4.82	30.07	3.85	22.26	3.92
Simaloengoen en Karolanden	11.64	2.38	19.11	1.44	15.78	1.61
Nias	12.12	5.31	20.3	4.51	15.6	4.49
Lampung	11.10	5.63	46.34	34.3	30.95	22.69
SUMATRA	12.46	3.76	21.69	4.68	17.10	4.11

Source: *Volkstelling* 1935, Census 1930, Table 19.

It was only in the 1930 census that literacy was defined as 'the ability to write a letter in *any* language or script' (*Volkstelling* 1935:73, my emphasis). The higher figures in the 1930 census, which lists 22.26% of Toba Batak males and 3.92% of females as being literate, are certainly mainly the result of the rapid expansion of missionary schools throughout the Batak district. Whereas in 1920, 21,200 boys and 4,301 girls were enrolled in missionary schools, in 1930

¹¹ 'Over het algemeen werd nu voortaan ook het Latijnsche schrift voor gedrukte boeken gebruikt en werden nog slechts enkele, die bij de evangelisatie in voor de zending nieuw geopende landstreken goede diensten deden, met Bataksche karakters gedrukt' (Meerwaldt 1922:303 f.).

¹² Children (excluding infants) and adolescents.

¹³ Adults.

these numbers had increased to 26,819 and 8,733 respectively (Aritonang 1988:364). Again, it might be argued that the census mainly gives percentages of Roman-script literacy. This can be countered with the argument, however, that in 1930 the use of the Batak script had already declined to such an extent that Toba Batak manuscripts were only being produced for the growing tourist market. After more than 60 years of Christian mission activity and modern education in large parts of the Bataklanden, the Batak script had become more or less obsolete and socially insignificant.

Table 2. Native literates without elementary education as a percentage of the total number of literates

	Age Group 2		Age Group 3		Total	
	male	female	male	female	male	female
Bataklanden	2.28	2.03	13.53	5.49	9.75	3.86
Simaloengoen en Karolanden	12.88	13.5	44.62	24.07	37.87	19.74
Nias	1.8	1.34	3.55	1.16	3.01	1.23
Lampung	23.24	49.2	75.06	94.46	68.72	90.92
SUMATRA	7.17	10.9	35.9	56.06	28.43	42.87

Source: *Volkstelling* 1935, Census 1930, Table 22.

The situation was quite different in the northern part of the Batak region, however, notably the Karo highlands. Here the inscription of love and 'destiny' laments¹⁴ on tobacco and betel lime containers was popular until at least the third decade of the twentieth century, and at least one manuscript was produced after the Second World War. It is surprising, therefore, that the literacy figures here are similar to those for the Nias district, where no indigenous script ever existed. As I will show later, the literacy figures for the Simalungun and Karo district include not only those with literacy in the Roman script, but also those with literacy only in the Batak script. Nevertheless, it seems more than likely that the census takers included only a small proportion of those who were literate in the Batak script.

The Karo and Simalungun Batak highlands were independent until 1904, when Dutch troops entered the Karo highlands to introduce the Pax Neerlandica.¹⁵ The Dutch mission in Karo and its German counterpart in Simalungun, which followed in the wake of the troops, were not very successful in converting the Karo and Simalungun Batak to Christianity. The first school in the Karo highlands was opened in 1905; after little over ten years there were 1,470 students enrolled in 23 schools. During the First World War the

¹⁴ 'Destiny lament' is the term I use for a lament bewailing a person's fate.

¹⁵ System of law and order imposed by the Dutch colonial government in the Netherlands East Indies.

attitude of the Karo Batak towards the Dutch grew rapidly more negative, and the rise of a Messianic movement in the area made all missionary activities in parts of the Karo region impossible (Berg. 1920; Neumann 1918). Parents were opposed to the close connection between the schools and the mission and moreover wanted a curriculum which included instruction in the Malay language. After 1916 parents began withdrawing their children from the mission schools, and in 1920 there were only 200 students left here, so that the mission was forced to close all its schools. In the following years most schools were taken over by the people, and in 1930 school attendance reached a new peak of 1,647 pupils (1,548 boys and 99 girls), enrolled in 48 schools (François 1931). Most of these private schools were converted into public schools after a school reform in 1926. People enrolled as pupils in the interim period may have been classified by the census takers with those who had never attended any school.

The 1930 census shows that indeed a high percentage of Karo and Simalungun Batak literates never enjoyed any formal schooling.¹⁶ The figure given for them is close to the Sumatran average of 31.2% (28.43% for men and 42.87% for women). This extraordinarily high number of 'uneducated' literates in Sumatra – twice as high as in Java – is explained by the popularity of autochthonous scripts, such as the *ka ga nga* scripts of Kerinci, Rejang, and Lampung in South Sumatra, that were exclusively transmitted domestically (Volkstelling 1935:77).¹⁷ The high number of adult male literates without any schooling in the Simalungun and Karo district – three times as high as in the neighbouring Batak district, and more than ten times higher than in Nias – might thus also indicate that many of these 'uneducated' literates mastered not the Roman but the Batak script.

Domestic literacy

The Lampung residency in southern Sumatra shows exceptionally high literacy rates in the census.¹⁸ Reid regards this as the last survivor in a pattern of literacy in a pre-Arabic and pre-Roman script, which may once have been far more widespread, in the absence of any formal education. In 1930, 46 per cent

¹⁶ Elementary education was defined as a modern form of education in state or mission-owned schools, or in Islamic schools (*pesantren*).

¹⁷ Another factor in this was the widespread knowledge of the Arabic script in predominantly Muslim Sumatra, which was taught not only in *pesantren* but also informally, as is still the case today, in small *pengajian* classes.

¹⁸ The neighbouring Ogan-Komering Hulu district in the Palembang residency and, to a much lesser extent, the Bengkulu residency and the remainder of the Palembang residency also show relatively high percentages of literate persons without schooling.

of adult males and 34 per cent of adult females were able to write, while, in contrast to the common 'modern' pattern, the higher age groups showed much higher literacy rates than the lower ones. The proportion of literate persons with a school education by gender is 83 males to 17 females – not much different from the ratio given for Sumatra as a whole (84:16). The ratio between male and female literates without formal schooling, however, is 52:48 – a striking difference with most other residencies, which had ratios ranging from 70:30 (Palembang), through 79:21 (Bengkulu), to 96:4 (Aceh, Jambi and Bangka) (*Volkstelling* 1935:74). It can therefore be assumed that it was not modern education that contributed to the high literacy rates among women. Reid thus concludes that:

The great majority of these literates could write, not in the Roman script taught in the government schools, nor yet in the Arabic script learned for reciting the Koran, but in the old Indonesian *ka ga nga* alphabet. This was taught in no school and had no value either vocationally or in reading any established religious or secular literature. The explanation given for its persistence was in the local custom of *manja*, a courting game whereby young men and women would gather in the evenings and the youths would fling suggestive quatrains (*pantun*) written in the old script to the young women they fancied. (Reid 1988:218.)

A similar situation existed in the Batak lands. Here, too, we have an indigenous script and a tradition of written love poetry in Angkola-Mandailing, Simalungun, and Karo. Nevertheless, the 1930 census gives very low literacy figures for the female population. Only 3.92% of Toba Batak and 1.61% of Karo and Simalungun Batak women here were listed as being literate. The figures for them are thus similar to those given for the Nias district, where no indigenous script existed and the majority of the few literate women acquired their literacy through formal elementary education.

Table 3. Proportions of native literates without formal schooling by gender

	Age Group 2		Age Group 3		Total	
	male	female	male	female	male	female
Bataklanden	81.53	18.47	94.44	5.56	93.28	6.72
Simaloëngoen en Karolanden	83.65	16.35	96.28	3.72	95.23	4.77
Nias	78.38	21.62	92.75	7.25	89.73	10.27
Lampung	50.98	49.02	51.84	48.16	51.71	48.29
SUMATRA	71.33	28.67	74.22	25.78	73.91	26.09

Source: *Volkstelling* 1935, Census 1930, Table 21.

The percentage of adult female literates without formal education in the Simalungun and Karo district is low when compared with the Sumatran average, but still relatively high compared with the Batak and Nias districts.

It should be kept in mind, however, that a figure of 24 for these adult female literates as a percentage of the total number of female literates makes for a very small absolute figure, considering that only 1.44% of the female population was classified as literate. This is illustrated by Table 3.

It can therefore be concluded that the census gives no indication of any significant role for women in the transmission of literacy. In fact, the figures strongly suggest that, prior to the introduction of the modern school system, Batak women were excluded from mastering the Batak-script.

Batak manuscripts

Although the census seems to verify Susan Rodgers' assumption of an oligo-literate society, my research on Batak literature suggests a rather different picture of literacy in Batak society. One of the main grounds for the assumption that Batak literacy was restricted to the *datu* class has been that the literary products of lay persons – letters and laments – have never been the subject of scholarly research.

My studies of Batak manuscripts, and especially of the love and destiny laments written as part of a widespread tradition, tend to confirm the observation of early visitors to the Batak area that a majority of the male population was literate, though not missionary Schütz's observation that literacy was shared equally by women. Junghuhn's reference to love letters in Toba (Junghuhn 1847:130) does not necessarily imply that the recipients of these letters could read them. Here, too, it seems likely that these letters were read to the girls by an intermediary. It should further be added that Junghuhn's reference must be treated with some caution. Junghuhn spent only a very short time travelling through the southern Batak area and the Silindung valley and never reached Toba proper – the region on the southern shore of Lake Toba. Although the presence of Toba Batak manuscripts is well documented, the collections do not include love letters of the kind mentioned by Junghuhn. Other remarks by Junghuhn, such as that *pustaha* were written by chiefs, suggest that he had little insight into the literary life of the people. His observations do, however, support the argument that literacy was not restricted to a class of specialists but was fairly widespread among the people.

Although there were (and still are) female magicians and healers in the Batak lands, Voorhoeve's detailed studies of *pustaha* do not indicate that any of these manuscripts were written by women. A *pustaha* usually begins with an enumeration of the chain of transmitters, while in letters, *pulas* (a special kind of threatening letter) and laments – the other popular genres in the Batak manuscript tradition – the writer's name and/or clan name is likewise often mentioned. Women were of course the recipients of love laments, but

Neumann reports that the texts were read to them by an intermediary (Neumann 1933:184). Apart from missionary Schütz's statement, there is no evidence that women could read the Batak script and no indication that they were ever engaged in writing. As far as that is concerned, the Batak case does not support Reid's assumption of a female-dominated pattern of literacy in pre-Islamic 'animist' cultures. This is not surprising, however, since the Batak never used their script to record domestic and commercial matters, and there was not much that may have been worth recording. Trade never played an important role in the mainly agricultural Batak economy, and those involved in foreign trade (in horses, camphor, and other forest products) were almost exclusively male. The Batak script was used mainly for religious and magical purposes, and even the literary products of non-professional writers (in the popular genres of laments and *pulas*) reveal a strong magico-religious undercurrent.

Table 4. Batak manuscripts in German collections

Attempts at a systematic inventory of Batak manuscripts have been made by Petrus Voorhoeve and Liberty Manik. Voorhoeve has published comprehensive catalogues of Batak manuscripts included in British, Irish, and Danish collections, while many more manuscript collections are described in various volumes of booklets in the Leiden University Library (Pigeaud and Voorhoeve 1985; Voorhoeve 1961, 1975; Voorhoeve and Kozok 1993). Liberty Manik compiled a comprehensive catalogue of almost all Batak manuscripts in German collections (Manik 1973). This catalogue covers 500 manuscripts, which is roughly a quarter of all existing Batak manuscripts.

According to Manik's catalogue, about 43% of all manuscripts are bark books or *pustaha* and another 43% are written on bamboo, the remainder

being on bone (12%) and paper (2%). Of the bamboo manuscripts, 50% comprise laments and letters, and thus are not written by specialists, or *datu*, but by non-professional literates. This clearly suggests that literacy must have been much more widespread than is generally assumed.

Love laments

Batak literature was almost exclusively an oral literature. It is remarkable that laments constitute the only literary genre to have been transmitted in writing. During my research I transliterated and translated more than 120 manuscripts containing Karo Batak laments and a much smaller number of laments from the Simalungun, Angkola, and Mandailing regions.

Figure 1. Tobacco container inscribed with a love lament
(Museon, The Hague, No. 51211)

The level of literacy among the Lampung people of southern Sumatra has been explained by the importance of love poetry in courting rituals. The same seems to hold true for the Karo Batak, among whom richly ornamented tobacco and betel lime containers, made of bamboo and engraved with love laments were given to the beloved as a token of the lover's affection, as has been observed by the Dutch missionaries Joustra and Neumann. These missionaries also describe the love lament tradition as a lay tradition, which points to widespread literacy among male adolescents (Joustra 1901a, 1901b, 1902; Neumann 1929, 1933). According to them, all Karo Batak laments are essentially love laments, even if this is not evident from the text itself. Joustra's and Neumann's brief articles on Karo Batak laments contain sufficient evidence, however, that they had only a superficial knowledge of the genre. They only mention laments engraved on betel lime and tobacco containers (as in Figure 1), which account for only half of all manuscripts, however. The majority of the laments on such objects were indeed laments about love and fate, and were used in the ritual of courtship. Other objects engraved with laments, including buffalo bones, gunpowder containers, amulet belts, and plain, undecorated sections of bamboo, were certainly not suitable as tokens of affection. Although engraved with laments about love and fate, they were in fact protective magic devices or amulets used to ward off ill fortune.

Love magic and magic devices

When I first began transliterating laments, I came across a number of manuscripts that were either incomplete or fragmentary, reduced to only a few lines of text. I decided from the beginning not to disregard these fragmentary manuscripts, though it was only much later that I realized that this approach was in fact essential for a deeper understanding of the genre as a whole. Laments written on undecorated sections of bamboo, buffalo bones, and amulet belts tend to be particularly brief and fragmentary. In some cases, the object in question contained more than one text.

Other texts besides these fragmentary laments are divinatory texts and magic spells. When they occur on the same object with the text of a lament, there is a remarkable correspondence between them. If, for example, an object is inscribed with a divinatory text aimed at determining an auspicious day for starting a journey, then the lament on the same object is a destiny lament by a young man who has been expelled by his kinsmen and is in search of a better fate on the Malay eastern coast. If, on the other hand, the object is inscribed with magic spells and a lament, the spells will always be aimed at attracting the affections of a woman and the corresponding lament

a love lament. It thus seems obvious that the writers of these laments were trying either to escape their misfortune or to attract the affections of a woman they loved with the aid of divinatory texts and magic spells. A similar interpretation seems plausible in the case of laments written on bamboo flutes. Here again, presentation of the object in question as a token of affection can be excluded. Only men could become musicians, and the playing of musical instruments was in fact considered inappropriate for women. It is well-known, however, that especially flute music was used as a magic device of allurements.

Laments written on buffalo bone and amulet belts seem to have a slightly different function. Here the writer's sadness or grief is not imparted to the object and absorbed by it, but is instead deflected by it. These buffalo bones are often perforated, and I assume that they were either hung up or worn on the body as amulets.

Oral laments

Batak laments span a variety of distinct regional, social, and cultural traditions. Besides the written tradition of love and destiny laments, there is an oral lament tradition. It, too, includes love laments and destiny laments, but also wedding laments¹⁹ and funeral dirges. Although the oral and the written tradition are in many ways quite different, they obviously share some common features. Among the Angkola and Mandailing the written and oral traditions are both referred to as *andung* (mourn), and they share with the oral tradition of Toba (where there was never a written lament tradition) a common idiom, called *hata andung*, or 'the language of lament'.²⁰ The *andung* idiom is distinct from everyday speech and has its own vocabulary of about five hundred words. Although a special vocabulary, it had (at least to a certain extent) to be acquired by everyone, especially women, who were expected to be able to sing a lament at the death of a close relative. In spite of the fact that the tradition of singing dirges (and, to a lesser extent, love and wedding laments) is still alive in some parts of the Batak area, only a very limited number of *andung* texts have ever been published. The archaic and highly metaphorical language of the laments has never been subjected to serious

¹⁹ Wedding laments are chanted by the bride at her home just before she is picked up by the groom's party.

²⁰ There is a remarkably similar metaphorical language of lament among the Finnish Ingrians and Karelians. The cultivation of this language, which is 'vague and difficult to interpret' and 'highly restricted and stereotypical', can be explained according to Nenola-Kallio by '[...] the belief in supernatural forces that threaten society' (Nenola-Kallio 1982:51). Winkler similarly reports that Batak laments are performed 'from fear of the spirits of the dead' (Winkler 1925:68).

scholarly investigation²¹, with the result that the very few existing Angkola and Mandailing Batak lament texts are extremely difficult to understand.²²

The chanting of funeral dirges was a common tradition among all Batak groups, forming an integral part of funeral ceremonies. In most cases only immediate relatives, especially the women, sang these laments. This tradition is nowadays threatened by the spread of Islam and Christianity, for it is regarded as a pagan tradition, closely associated with ancestor worship. In regions that have been the subject of missionary activities for long periods, in fact, laments are no longer performed. The funeral dirges have a similar function to the above-mentioned written laments. They too include a protective and preventive component, and are performed in order to delight the spirit of the deceased and to prevent the latter's soul from interfering in the lives of those left behind.

Reading Batak manuscripts

Although oral laments are still found in the Batak region, it would be speculative to assume that written laments were sung in a similar way. According to the missionary Joustra, the written laments were either read aloud, chanted in the style of rhythmic prose, or read silently by a lonely lover to soothe his suffering heart (Joustra 1902:359). This assertion is quite dubious, however.

Junghuhn gives the following report of the practice of reading among the Batak:

When reading texts, all Batak have the strange habit of pronouncing the vowels in a very long-drawn [...] and singsong way, while appearing to be lost in deep reflection. It seems almost impossible for them to read quietly and silently to themselves; on the whole, the proceedings are very slow.²³ (Junghuhn 1847:260.)

The same practice was observed by Meerwaldt, who describes it as 'a chanting spelling-out of the words, with many repetitions of half-read words and of parts of sentences'. Meerwaldt concludes that 'the readers neither realized nor comprehended what they were reading unless they knew it by heart'

²¹ The only publications worth mentioning in this connection are Marcks 1930 and Sarumpaet 1982.

²² Lists of *andung* words are published in Baharadja 1938 and 1939, Hariara 1987, and Marbun and Hutapea 1987.

²³ 'Beim Lesen der Schrift haben alle Battaer die sonderbare Gewohnheit, alle Laute sehr langgedehnt [...] singend auszusprechen, wobei sie in tiefes Nachdenken versunken scheinen. Es scheint ihnen fast unmöglich still vor sich hin und schweigend zu lesen; überhaupt geht dieses Geschäft sehr langsam vonstatten.'

(Meerwaldt 1922:302).²⁴

The act of silent reading, now commonplace in post-industrial societies, is unusual at least in pre-industrial societies. The word for 'to read' in four of the five Batak languages is *baca* or *basa*, which is a Malay loanword that itself derives from the Sanskrit *vaca*. Another word for 'reading' is *manjaha*, from *jaha* ('if'). This refers to the reading of *pustaha*, in which divination texts always start with the word *jaha* ('if this sign is observed, then ...'). Karo Batak is the only language that does not use either of these words, but has an indigenous word *ogé*. The meaning of *ogé* is not only 'to read' but also 'to glean', and thus coincidentally is the same as that of the Latin *legere* and the Dutch *lezen*.

We know from the contemporary Balinese manuscript tradition that Indonesian manuscripts can be read fluently despite the peculiarities of the script, such as the lack of punctuation and word division. Junghuhn's and Meerwaldt's account of how the Batak read is consistent with this, however, if we consider that the bark books served the *datu* as a mnemonic aid. The word *ogé* may therefore point to a 'gleaning' from the text, a selective reading whereby the text is scanned for keywords. I believe that Meerwaldt's remark that a text can only be read fluently if its contents are recited partly from memory may hold true for apprentice *datu* making their first attempts at mastering the magic arts, but not for an experienced *datu* who himself is the author of a number of bark books. It is unlikely that such a *datu* would have to resort to memorization of his own texts. What is more likely is a contextual reading in which the text serves as a mnemonic aid. Through a selective reading of the text, an experienced reader would glean (*ogé*) enough information to be able to recite this text in a reconstructed form. Thus it is not a word-for-word recitation of the written text that is involved, but an impromptu reconstruction on the basis of this text. This can, of course, only be done by an expert who fully understands the subject of the text.

Reading the not-to-be-read

Laments, on the other hand, are prose texts, and Karo Batak laments at least are relatively easy to read. A selective mode of reading these as was suggested in the case of *pustaha* is therefore improbable. That these texts would be

²⁴ 'De kunst van lezen was bij hun geleerden [*datu*] nooit wat wij daaronder verstaan, maar veelmeer een op langgerekten zingenden toon opdreunend spellen der woorden, waarbij nog veel herhalingen van halfgelezen woorden en ook van zindeelen gemaakt werden. Het gelezene werd dan ook niet verstaan of begrepen, vóórdát de lezer het tevens van buiten kende. Om dit euvel zooveel mogelijk te verhelpen en het Bataksche schrift tevens te blijven gebruiken, werd door de zendelingen de schrijfwijze met woordscheiding ingevoerd.'

read aloud is similarly unlikely. The reader would in that case face several obstacles. One such obstacle is posed by the shape of the text-bearing objects, such as the bamboo tube, which would have to be constantly turned around by the reader in the process of reading. This would impede the kind of fluent reading that is essential for recitation of these pieces of rhythmic prose. Furthermore, the writing in some manuscripts is so small that it can only be read from a maximal distance of 20 centimetres. These physical obstacles aside, it seems to me unlikely that there was any need for reading these manuscripts. A typical lament (called *andung* in Angkola-Mandailing, *suman-suman* in Simalungun, and *bilang-bilang* in Karo) comprises a series of formulaic expressions the order of which is fairly free. It may well be supposed that these formulas were well known to most contemporaries, for whom it would not have been difficult to compose a lament extempore in performance.

A Karo Batak lament invariably begins with the archaic opening formula *Maka io ari kuté bilang-bilang ni buluh*, 'This is a lament on bamboo', followed by the phrase 'which once grew in the thick earth, under the high sky, to be chopped down by the son of clan X to give me a space to talk about my sad fate, and to be turned into a tobacco container'. The lament then goes on to describe the unhappy fate of the writer, who typically is an orphan. He has become a gambler and, after accumulating a big debt, is disowned by his kinsmen, so that he is obliged to leave the Karo highlands in search of a better livelihood on the Malay eastern coast. It can be assumed that most of these rather stereotypical themes and expressions were commonly known. The same is true, of course, for the many similes and the occasional *pantun* incorporated into laments. The language of laments thus is deeply rooted in the oral tradition, and an oral presentation seems much more likely than a recitation of the text from a manuscript.

The Batak lament tradition, although a literary tradition, is therefore unique in that it lacks the characteristics normally associated with literacy: the laments were not read aloud or in silence, nor were they committed to writing in order to be passed down – there is no evidence that laments were ever copied, and the objects on which they were inscribed, such as betel lime or tobacco containers, were objects of practical use. This can only be explained by regarding the laments as components of protective magic spells designed to ward off misfortune, illness, and even hostile bullets; conversely, they could serve as love charms. Once drawn into the sphere of magic, the textual aspect of the message became more and more irrelevant. The text became fragmented and was often reduced to only a few lines, or even a few words of the opening formula (see Figure 2).

Although these laments were recorded in writing, they were not meant to be read: the mere existence of a text was sufficient to turn the piece of bamboo or bone on which it was inscribed into a magic device. The function of

the text thus was not much different from that of the magical figures frequently found on the same objects. As I have shown above, even in the profane lament tradition a strong magico-religious undercurrent can be detected. The fact that some objects contain not only laments but also short divination texts and spells, suggests that the latter, too, may have been written by non-specialists.

The lament tradition thus indicates not only that the art of writing was not restricted to a small group of magician-healers, but also that magico-religious knowledge itself was not exclusively their domain.

Letters and pulas

Aside from laments, there are two other genres of written texts that were very probably produced by laymen: letters and *pulas* (threatening letters), usually inscribed on small pieces of bamboo. The total number of these manuscripts is relatively small. This is hardly surprising, however, considering that the letters in question were written for only a single, special purpose and then discarded. Most of them were addressed to Europeans – missionaries, colonial civil servants, or administrators of European plantations – which is why they found their way to museum collections. The letters are generally short, comprising mainly one or more brief commands or requests, and were mostly written by local chiefs. It is of course possible that the senders of some commissioned a specialist to write the letter on their behalf.

This is ruled out in the case of *pulas*, however. These letters, demanding the return of an abducted child or the payment of outstanding wages, for instance, are always accompanied by miniature figures of weapons and a fire-making kit to reinforce the threat contained in them. The person uttering the threat usually remains in hiding and, until the matter is settled, is regarded as an outlaw. The party to whom the threat is directed will usually entrust an intermediary with the task of getting in contact with the person uttering it in an effort to settle the matter. *Pulas* were especially common in the Karo Batak lowlands, but were also found in other parts of the Batak region.

Westenberg describes the practice of *pulas* as a legal institution to which the common people, the powerless and the oppressed could have recourse to defend their rights (Westenberg 1914:591). Such an institution can only function in a society of which most of the members are literate, however. The practice of *pulas* therefore strongly supports my hypothesis of widespread literacy. These letters, too, often contain a magical component. If the threat concerns a matter in which a recently deceased person was involved, then the writer of the letter, usually a relative of the dead person, would not disclose his own name, but would pretend that the letter was written by the spirit (*bégu*) of the deceased.

Specialists in an egalitarian society

Another category of manuscripts that deserves further attention are the bamboo and bone manuscripts with a magico-religious content. These comprise about a third of the 500 Batak manuscripts catalogued by Liberty Manik. They are often incomplete or very short, or contain mainly magical drawings with only a small amount of text. Some of them were probably produced by apprentices of a *datu*, and thus are a product of the process of learning the script and the magic arts.

Figure 2. Amulet belt (Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen, Amsterdam, No. 1772-8). One bone plate is inscribed with a short divinatory text aimed at determining an auspicious day for the performance of the *erdemu bayu* ritual (part of the marriage ceremony). The other five plates are inscribed with a love lament. Each bamboo ring contains a fragmentary love lament. The laments also contain a statement that the belt shall ward off hostile bullets.

Although the *datu* is the Batak religious specialist, knowledge of religious matters, the conduct of rituals, and so on, was not his exclusive domain. Batak society was a very fluid society, with no strict boundaries between social categories such as lay people and professionals. Today, many of the remaining non-Christian, non-Muslim Batak conduct a range of minor rituals themselves without consulting a specialist. Moreover, many *datu* are only

part-time magician-healers and are also involved in agricultural activities, while many commoners have a certain amount of knowledge and expertise in the field of magic and religion. Recently the dominant view of the *datu* as a 'Zauberpriester' (sorcerer-priest) was challenged by Sitor Situmorang. According to him, priestly functions were held mainly by clan elders, and only an extremely small group (*belasan*, 'between eleven and nineteen', as he puts it) of people were eligible for such functions at the turn of the century. At the same time, he says, each village had at least one *datu*, and most of these *datu* functioned as specialists in only one particular field (Situmorang 1993:111). The same situation can be observed today. In regions that were not so much affected by the mission, most villages have one or more *datu*, and there is no clear-cut boundary between professional, semi-professional and casual healer-magicians. The rather plain and amateurish appearance of many of the bamboo and bone manuscripts inscribed with magic formulas and divinatory texts may thus perhaps be explained by the fact that they were produced by people with only marginal experience in the art of magic and the production of magical implements.

It can thus be concluded that the key characteristic of Batak society, that is, a rather egalitarian social organization without significant stratification, prevented the script from becoming the exclusive preserve of a small privileged group of specialists. Here it should be added that the phonetic, and hence democratic, character of the Batak script facilitated its use by a large proportion of the population. The widespread occurrence of literacy, beyond a narrow minority, did not conduce to a wider exploration of the potentials of writing, however, which may be partly explained by the close association between script and magic.

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