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Compromise and contestation in colonial Sumatra
An 1873 Mandailing schoolbook on the Wonders of the West


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Introduction

Language and power issues are central to the study of colonialism, as a wide stream of recent work in anthropology and history has amply shown (Rafael 1988; Fabian 1991; Kuipers 1998: 22–41; Bhabha 1985, 1990; Florida 1995; Sears 1996; Pemberton 1994; Dirks 1992; Thomas 1994). One of the major insights of this scholarship is that colonial regimes in places like the Netherlands East Indies, the Philippines, or the Belgian Congo established hegemony over local populations (and constructed the latter as colonial subjects) in part through discursive practices, that is to say, through descriptive processes, beyond institutional modes of control per se. For instance, colonial states extended their political dominion by sponsoring ethnological projects that defined villagers as natives 'with local languages and cultures', which were in turn deemed suitable for documentation by experts from the metropole (Kahn 1993; Steedly 1996). Also important in this regard was the introduction of school curricula in countries like the Indies which privileged the language of the colonial state and any lingua franca that it favoured, while pushing 'local languages' far down the prestige hierarchy as quaint and 'ancient'. Harnessing the technology of print for state ends was also a crucial element in colonizing projects, as through the creation of official government publishing houses for 'fine literature' (for example, Balai Pustaka in the Indies; see Teeuw 1972). There are numerous examples of the kind of colonizing texts that flowed from state agencies along these lines in the era of high coloni-
alism. David Spurr (1996), for example, points to the discourses of power once at work in British journalism, travel writing, and government edicts in British India and Africa. These types of writing inscribed subjugation for the colonized peoples and lands in texts that exoticized their subjects while often purporting to be simply descriptive. Johannes Fabian (1991) discusses other striking examples of colonizing texts in his illuminating dissection of early language-learning guides and grammars of Swahili written for Belgian civil servants in the Congo in the late 19th century. Textual processes of the sorts that these scholars examine of course were not the entire story of colonial rule, but they did often reinforce larger-scale institutional structures of domination in important ways.

Resistance to colonial rule, a related recent body of anthropological and historical scholarship goes on to assert, also often proceeded by discursive, linguistic and textual means. 'The empire wrote back', to paraphrase the title of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's 1989 study of the rhetoric and hidden power politics of postcolonial literatures in this light.1 Print technology, folkloric writing, dictionary and grammar making, and school textbook authorship could all be captured to a degree in some colonial settings by 'the natives', who used such media (sometimes in the language of the metropole, no less) to contest their colonial subjugation. An obvious example from the schoolbook literature of the society at issue in this essay, the Mandailing Batak, is Mandailing school principal Willem Iskander's poem 'Mandailing'. This was published in 1872 in that author's Mandailing Batak-language anthology of readings for young public school pupils, Si Bulus-Bulus, Si Rumbuk-Rumbuk. The title means approximately 'Mr. Fleet of Foot, Mr. Quick on the Uptake', a gentle honorific for the schoolchild reader who was expected to be quick-minded in his studies. 'Mandailing' sings of the scenic beauty and vastness of this Sumatran region, of its agricultural fertility, and of its linked endemic poverty and great social promise. The poem implicitly urges young Mandailing readers towards self-pride as Mandailing, a social category that the poem was working to construct for these readers, in the first place. 'Mandailing' also conjures up a mournful, lament-like picture of what has happened to the young audience's 'land', tano Mandailing, under Dutch colonialism. At least, that was how many of the poem's southern Batak readers interpreted the work at the time. By the 1920s, when Mandailing was part of northern Sumatra's Tapanuli Residency, 'Mandailing' had become a secret rallying point for anti-Dutch sentiment in southern Tapanuli (Harahap 1987). In 1933 the colonial government banned the poem, as well as further school use of Si Bulus-Bulus.

1 See also Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (eds) 1995 for a good overview sampler of important work in this field, much of it inspired by Edward Said (see, for example, Said 1993).
The culture of colonialism, however, was rarely if ever simply a stark matter of 'colonial state' versus 'local resistance', with clear-cut competing texts (Frederick Cooper and Ann L. Stoler, 1997b, provide an excellent discussion of this point). Moreover, colonialism was often considerably fuzzier in the political, aesthetic, and moral sense than any strict 'centre' versus 'colonial periphery' model typically allows. Homi Bhabha (1997), pointing to the highly ambivalent sorts of mimicry of metropole culture that are often found among colonized elites in places like British India, sensibly calls for a more nuanced study of colonialism, one that would avoid black-and-white portraits of the colonizer and the colonized and deal more subtly with the fact that the two 'sides' frequently merged. There was often a large colonial middle ground filled with such things as local texts that were not only predicated on but also sometimes forthrightly appreciative of metropolitan literary canonical standards. Equally ambiguous and shot through with double loyalties were colonial persons such as (most obviously) the offspring of unions between European men and their local common-law wives. As Ann Staler has expertly shown in her studies of ideologies of childhood and motherhood in the colonial Indies (1996), and also racial boundaries and sexuality there (1997), an approach attuned to the social institutional and ideological ironies of colonialism's cloudy middle ground holds much promise for Indonesian studies.

In this paper I would like to examine a concrete printed text reflecting this part-'mimicry of Dutch canons', part-resistance situation, written by the Mandailing schoolmaster mentioned above, Willem Iskander (1840-1876). My reading of this will illustrate the anthropology-of-literature approach to middle-ground colonial texts of this sort, a methodology that is alert both to the colonizing aspects and the resistance potential of these works. A year after the school textbook authorities in Batavia issued Willem Iskander's Si Bulus-Bulus, Si Rumbuk-Rumbuk, the same government office published his more advanced reader, Taringot di Ragam-Ragam ni Parbinotoan Dohot Sinaloan ni Alak Eropa, di Ata Mandrailingkon (On the varieties of knowledge and expertise of the Europeans, put into the Mandailing language), also written in the Mandailing Batak language. As we shall soon see, this was Willem Iskander's highly imaginative Mandailing reworking of a Malay-language textbook entitled Ceritera Ilmu Kepandaian Orang Putih, which had apparently been compiled and adapted by the translator, writer, and language teacher Abdullah Munsiy for the Protestant missionary Benjamin Keasberry's school in Singapore. The school was founded in 1840 and the Malay text was published in 1855.2 Willem Iskander was appointed head of a small

2 Jan van der Putten provided me with excerpts from the 1855 Malay textbook. On the career of Abdullah Munsiy, or Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (a man of ambiguous Straits Settlements social
teacher-training institute, or *kweekschool*, in the nascent Dutch East Indies government-sponsored school system in Sumatra in 1861. This institution was located in Tano Bato, Mandailing. He had also been commissioned by the government to write vernacular textbooks to help his young Mandailing pupils polish their new literacy skills in Latin-alphabet print (the textbook discussed here was in that alphabet, not in a Batak script). Coffee production in the southern Batak highlands was expected to increase, and east Sumatra's Deli coastline also showed promise for European plantation development. Both these economic endeavours, along with the projected growth in the civil bureaucracy of the highlands, would create a need for school-trained lower-level indigenous clerks (Nasution 1983; Masjkuri and Sutrisno 1980-81; Kroeskamp 1974:26-46, 297-359). The development of government primary schools was designed to answer this need for future workers trained in basic European-style literacy and simple arithmetic. The son of a family of Mandailing hereditary nobles, Willem Iskander had been taken out of elementary school in Panyabungan in the early 1850s by Assistant Resident A.P. Godon to work in the latter's office. Godon then sponsored Willem's journey to the Netherlands to study Dutch and pedagogy from 1857 to 1861. Willem was instructed, however, to return to Sumatra to spearhead primary school development in this part of the Batak highlands.

The fact that Willem Iskander was trained as a teacher in Europe was remarkable for the outer islands at this time. Even local Sumatran *kweekschool* training was confined to one institute during this period: the 'Rajas' School' in Bukittinggi in West Sumatra. After four years in the Netherlands, Willem Iskander returned to the Indies to found the Tano Bato school, to train future teachers and to write Mandailing-language curricular materials for the pioneer regional colonial schools.

* A Batak text at odds with itself

*Varieties of Knowledge* was a highly ambiguous, internally conflicted school text on several fronts. First, it was a 'Mandailing text' that was based in unac-

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3 See the descriptions of Willem Iskander's career in Van Dijk 1986 (pp. 16-17) and Harahap 1976 and 1987. See also Masjkuri and Sutrisno 1980-81:32-4, 72-4. Harahap's 1976 volume includes 17 pages of reprints of useful Medan and Jakarta newspaper stories about Willem Iskander's career, published on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the latter's death. On the Tano Bato school see also Kroeskamp 1974:320-3, and for further sources for Inspector Van der Chijs's 1865 visit to the school, Kroeskamp 1974:357, note 62. Van der Chijs was impressed by Willem Iskander's teaching methods. For comparative information on the German Rhenish Mission schools in mid-19th-century Sipirok (north of Mandailing), see Masjkuri and Sutrisno 1980-81:36-41.
knowledged ways on the above-mentioned Malay textbook for Keasberry's school in Singapore. Passages from Ceritera Ilmu Kepandaian Orang Putihi make it clear that Willem Iskander used this 1855 work as his main source here. The two books cover many identical topics (for instance, Philadelphia's city water systems, Europe's accomplishments in publishing and printing and technological wonders in the field of transportation). However, Willem Iskander's Mandailing-language schoolbook is not by any means a line-by-line translation of the earlier Malay work for the mission school. A main feature of the 1855 volume, for instance, is the picture it paints of a 'backward China' and the attention it gives to 'village-bound Malays'. Willem Iskander for his part adds 'backward Java' to the sample of Asian societies said to be in need of enlightenment. He also often adds details about specifically Mandailing village ways of thinking and situates his lessons for his young Mandailing readers in the geography of the Indies. Further, he often refers to the Netherlands when writing about Europe's technological wonders. Nowhere does he mention the title or name of the author of the 1855 Malay work. A sense that authors could freely appropriate attractive texts from each other and adapt them for their particular purposes without any form of acknowledgement was typical of the southern Batak publishing scene not only in Willem Iskander's time, but in school textbook production throughout the 1920s. For instance, some of Sutan Martua Raja's textbooks (1917-19, 1918) seem to contain reworkings of passages on slavery from the 1855 volume, again without any form of acknowledgement.

A second area of ambiguity in Variety of Knowledge relates to the script it is printed in, namely soerat Oelando – the Dutch, that is, Latin script (called soerat Oelando by many residents in parts of southern Tapanuli until the end of the colonial period). The Batak languages all used Indic syllabaries, probably of many centuries' standing (Kozok 1996; 1999a; 1999b; 2000). The Mandailing syllabary was used extensively for inscribing texts used in augury and divination and laments onto a variety of natural materials (bamboo, tree bark). As Kozok notes, literacy in the script may well have been widespread by the time of European contact (in this part of the highlands, the period following the Padri Wars of the 1820s to the early 1830s). Some of Willem Iskander's school pupils may well have known this script, in which undoubtedly there existed a sophisticated village literature, linked to Mandailing's extensive ritual speech repertoire (described by H.N. van der Tuuk during his fieldwork in the 1850s; see Van der Tuuk 1971). However, in his Tano Bato teaching Willem Iskander was pushing his young charges into a very different sort of literacy: one that was tied to European print technology, that was an inevitable element of the underlying political and economic agendas of the colonial schools, and that (more promisingly, for the enthusiastic Willem) pushed the young Mandailing schoolchild beyond his bagas sioparpidoan (lesson house) to take cognizance of
all literatures that employed the Latin script. Such a body of knowledge, or *parbinotoan*, would open the window wide to the technological advancement of Mandailing as a land, a *tano*, Iskander claimed throughout this optimistic, hortatory 1873 schoolbook. In its focus specifically on Mandailing's potential as an enlightened land, Willem Iskander's textbook was considerably more than simply a translation of the 1855 Malay schoolbook. The study of *Varieties of Knowledge*, he continually reminded his young readers, would equip them for a brilliant future of material and intellectual success in the Indies. In other words, the author viewed his writing and teaching efforts as a contribution to the creation of a robust Mandailing presence in the world.

Learning the Dutch alphabet was, in fact, just that — induction into the writing system of the colonial state. Literacy in the Latin alphabet would also ineluctably force the young Mandailing reader to grapple with the dangers of Indies modernity, and correspondingly, to begin to view the Indic script as 'the old Batak letters'. This large-scale consigning of the southern Batak syllabaries to an antiquarian status by the government schools, and later the national school system, formed part of a larger institutional process of constructing 'Batak village cultures' as tradition-bound, outmoded, and opposed to Indies, and later national Indonesian, modernity.\(^4\) *Varieties of Knowledge* was thus at the same time a Mandailing adaptation of a complex, Singapore-based Malay textbook for Mandailing child readers and a text cast in the writing-system of the colonizers, created by a Mandailing schoolteacher involved in a Dutch colonial project for 'educating the natives'.

*Varieties of Knowledge* was also an *Ata Mandailing* (a Mandailing-language) product, as Willem Iskander put it explicitly at the end of the title of his book. This, too, had its ironies. As Mary M. Steedly has pointed out (1996), the very idea of areas like Sumatra 'having local languages' such as Acehnese, Minangkabau, and the several Batak dialects (in the usual formulation: Toba, Karo, Simelungun, Dairi/Pakpak, and Angkola and its close cousin Mandailing Batak) had colonial roots. Steedly observes that for the Karo highlands Christian mission policy inscribed locality into Bible translations and the choice of language for church and school use: the missionaries chose Karo Batak in preference to Malay or Dutch as their proselytizing medium. This in effect reified the notion of 'a Karo language' where this may well have remained unformulated by the highlanders until then. Karo themselves then adopted such linguistic labels as part of their own group identity through the 1920s and 1930s. Van der Tuuk's own linguistic fieldwork in the mid 1850s may also have had a strong hand in fixing ideas of the social reality of 'the Batak languages' and of sharp divisions among them. Van der Tuuk, with

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\(^4\) For a discussion of these processes in the Sipirok region, to the north of Mandailing, see Rodgers 1986, 1991a, 1991b, and 1997.
his idea that Mandailing Batak and so on constituted natural linguistic units, helped with the vetting of some of Willem Iskander's textbook drafts for the school authorities.

Varieties of Knowledge not only was written 'in the Mandailing language', but also formed part of broader textual processes in the Indies at the time, when 'traditional cultures' like those of Minangkabau (Kahn 1993) and Java (Pemberton 1994) were assuming ideological concreteness for both foreign scholarship and local consumption. To make matters more complicated still, Varieties of Knowledge was a Mandailing-language text about the technological wonders of the West - a book designed to convert Tano Bato pupils to a worldview that valorized European skills in science and engineering while denigrating Mandailing's 'backwardness'.

The 47-page soft-cover book included 13 entries, apparently designed for reading practice and class discussion for 12- or 13-year-olds (it is more advanced in subject, syntactic complexity, and vocabulary than Si Bulus-Bulus, written for beginners). Like Cerita Ilmu Kepandaian Orang Putih, the chapters of Varieties cover such subjects as how European houses are heated and lit, how books are published, how libraries and savings banks are set up, how trains and steamships facilitate inter-regional travel, and how people with lots of sinaloan, expertise, do estimable things like forecasting the weather for travellers before they set out on trips. Willem Iskander instructed his Tano Bato students to study these wonders with patience and diligence and then to capture the treasure storehouse of European knowledge and expertise for Mandailing ends. This gives the book an odd, liberationist tone in parts, alongside its more obvious pro-Dutch mood. Southern Batak ideas of the supernatural power of certain kinds of esoteric knowledge are important for understanding the latent seditious features of this schoolbook. Although overtly flagrantly accommodationist, and even self-hating, Varieties of Knowledge operated at another level as a goad to and a detailed handbook for child readers, stimulating them to imagine themselves in charge of all those trains, steamships, and printing presses, piloting tano Mandailing towards an indigenous version of Indies modernity through special access to the 'luck powers' of the mighty Europeans.

Printing technology and what Willem Iskander clearly hoped would be greatly increased Mandailing access to the ways of thinking associated with print literacy form key elements of his teaching project in this textbook. Parts of Varieties of Knowledge read like virtual how-to guides to typesetting, printing and binding books, distributing books, and so on. Willem Iskander (again following the Ceritera) is equally voluble on the subject of the turns of mind he associates with European-style book production: openness to new knowledge, the desire to efficiently disseminate such knowledge widely, and a critical attitude to received traditions. Print and print consciousness (for that is clearly
what he is advocating here) will fortify the Mandailing and equip them for a prosperous future in the Indies (this social context is taken as a given in this schoolbook, although the earlier Si Bulus-Bulus has been interpreted as being more forthrightly nationalist; see Harahap 1976, 1987). Varieties is resolutely upbeat in its vision of a bright Mandailing future, although Willem Iskander’s own life was to end tragically a few years later, before any of his ambitious plans for the social transformation of Mandailing public schools could come to fruition. He died in 1876 during a second study trip to the Netherlands (a suicide, some modern South Tapanuli commentators insist).

Since Willem Iskander’s chapters dealing directly with print production issues not only provide a key to the book’s argument about progress and backwardness, but also are crammed to an unusual extent with language and power agendas (on the part of both Willem Iskander and the colonial state), I shall focus my attention on them. I do so, again, in order to illustrate an anthropological style of reading Latin-script texts – Batak texts printed in the colonial period – which I feel may be a productive one for the study of this early generation of schoolbooks, and also of the prodigious vernacular literature produced in towns like Sipirok, Padangsidimpuan, and Sibolga from the 1910s through the 1930s. As I have suggested in other publications (Rodgers 1991b, 1997), this later period proved to be a flood-tide time for Angkola, and to a lesser extent Mandailing. Batak-language print publications. This literature took the form of Tapanuli newspapers, Tapanuli and Deli-coast novels, antiquarian volumes, and verse narratives. Many of these works, like Varieties of Knowledge before them, were subtly double-voiced, at once colonized and proudly involved in more hidden processes of ethnic self-fashioning.

First, I will present a brief review of some similar anthropological studies of print literatures in ‘contact zones’ of colonialism. Then I will give a short historical sketch of Willem Iskander’s pivotal role in Batak formal school history. After that I shall go on to examine translated passages from Varieties of Knowledge. To date this work has been available in Mandailing Batak, not in translation. By contrast, Si Bulus-Bulus has been much more visible in Indonesian literature studies, with a solid Indonesian translation provided by Basyral Harahap (1976, 1987). Si Bulus-Bulus has also sparked much newspaper comment in Tapanuli and Medan, both in the 1910’s to 1930s and during the New Order. Since my field research deals with Angkola Batak-language ritual oratory and print literature, and given that Angkola

5 See Harahap 1976:90-107 for newspaper stories of this sort from the New Order period. Colonial-period Batak-language newspapers from Tapanuli that often included articles on Willem Iskander’s lasting influence include Poestaha, Oetoesan, Sipirok Pardomean, and Tapian na Oeli.

6 My fieldwork, starting in 1974 and continuing through eight return visits, has been based in Sipirok, in two nearby villages, and, to a lesser extent, in Padangsidimpuan.
Batak and Mandailing Batak are quite close dialects, I work directly with the original of Varieties.

The colonial schoolbook as a literature on the margin of state and locality

Willem Iskander concludes Varieties of Knowledge with the following telling passage, at the end of an otherwise rather mundane discussion of the great worth of weather prediction knowledge in 'advanced lands':

If our friends [in school] are diligent in reading this book, coming to grapple with and learn the knowledge it contains, the Government will rejoice, and it will also be assiduous in ordering people with expertise to write more and more books.

One of these 'people with expertise' would have been Willem Iskander himself, while others would have been his students, several of whom did indeed go on to become prominent textbook writers in the southern Batak dialects. That first generation of Willem Iskander's own students in turn educated later waves of vernacular textbook authors from Padangsidimpuan and Sipirok. These were major school towns that contributed teaching staff to schools in many areas of Tapanuli in the 1920s and 1930s. Local school principals/textbook authors of those decades included men like Sipirok's Sutan Martua Raja, writer of the elegant Angkola Batak-language anthologies *Dua Sadjoli* 1 and 2 (1917-1919) and *Rante Omas* (1918), and Sutan Pangurabaan Pane, a prodigious publisher of 'unofficial' school textbooks in Angkola Batak and Indonesian. He issued many of these from his small Sipirok print shop, 'Sutan P', in the 1930s. Sutan Pangurabaan was the father of the national Indonesian literature authors Armijn and Sanusi Pane. The cockiness of his 'Sutan P' imprint (a backwoods publishing house that churned out large numbers of forcefully written Angkola Batak-language alternative textbooks for an audience he saw as hungry for new material) is indicative of Willem Iskander's legacy, many decades after the Mandailing schoolmaster's death. In the latter's vision for the future of the school system, his teachers were to be brilliant, vastly energetic, widely read, well spoken, and most importantly, well published. They were to be Batak civic leaders working within the Indies state, but beyond it too, for *halak hita*, 'our sort of folks'.

The schoolbooks that Willem Iskander and his Tapanuli schoolteacher/author successors produced constituted a remarkable multivalent colonial literature that was at once colonized by state political and economic

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agendas and liberating for child readers in places like Panyabungan, Tano Bato, Sipirok, and Padangsidimpuan. This was a contact zone literature, to use anthropologist Sally Engle Merry's term from her *Colonizing Hawai’i* (2000). In this useful study of the early American colonial presence in Hawai’i, Merry writes that New England missionaries, American lawyers, and Hawai’ian village chiefs and villagers met in such contact zones as the formal courts, the church, and the schoolhouse. They negotiated meaning there about Hawai’ianness and Hawai’ian agency as colonization proceeded. Power-charged situations such as family law disputes provided especially important cultural arenas for the instantiation of state control, but also worked to give voice to Hawai’ian resistance. Debates about such matters as Hawai’an 'sexual freedom' in comparison with the staid family models of the New England missionaries were particularly full of hidden discourse about tradition and modernity, with the latter being associated by the courts with Americanization. Hawai’ian village litigants could press for more political say in their lives under colonialism in a coded language about sexual behaviour and family mores. Texts from these contact zones (for instance, court records of such family law matters) 'provide a special lens on everyday life' of Hawai’ians under American dominion, Merry (2000:9) asserts. She goes on to note that interpreters of such texts must take care to specify the social location of the authors and the nature of legal language in these settings. Despite such complexities of interpretation, these contact zone texts are open to anthropological readings:

> These case records provide a rare opportunity to glimpse the tensions and conflicts of everyday life, to hear the stories of ordinary people who were not otherwise producing archival texts, and to understand the complex role of legal institutions in the dramatic social changes that preceded and facilitated the American takeover of the islands in 1898 (Merry 2000:9).

Reading these texts with an eye towards state power, but also towards indigenous Hawai’ian concepts of argument, law, and family obligation, Merry details a double process: state imposition of a foreign legal system and missionary imposition of a strange blend of social worth and supernatural salvation, but also Hawai’ian responses to these imported orders of meaning and force. She finds much ambiguity: new Hawai’ian Christians sometimes mimic the strict religious codes of the missionaries, while other converts bring Christian teachings more into line with Hawai’ian ideas of power, time, and textuality. Many Hawai’ians continually oscillated between these two stands.

Colonial encounters generate many such literatures from the contact zone, texts which relate not only to new court systems but also to trade, travel, language learning, and, perhaps most of all, to new formal school systems. It seems to me that colonial school systems like that of highland north-
ern Sumatra in the 1870-1930s period possess many of the institutional and ideological features that Merry finds in Hawai‘i’s colonial law courts, that is: a formal institutional structure imposed by the state to govern indigenous communities; the ironic warm embrace of this institution by those communities; a dense, globalizing intertextuality among the literatures of the several countries involved; and an on-going series of power negotiations about agency, person, textuality, and the powers of language, as concrete policies such as the obligation for school principals to write curricular materials get put into place. The printed texts produced by the colonial Sumatran schools offer an excellent insight into the minute push and pull forces of colonialism. A careful reading of them can provide material for case studies of the complicated forms of resistance apparently engaged in by so many southern Batak as formal schooling became a badge of personal and family success in Tapanuli in the 1920s and 1930s.8

In *Contracting Colonialism*, Vincente Rafael (1988) has provided another illustrative example of how anthropologists may read an island Southeast Asian contact-zone literature in detail for its dynamics of domination and resistance. His technique will also be productive here. In this well-known study of the Jesuit mission to the Tagalog and of the corresponding Tagalog 'domestications' of Spanish Catholic rites and theology, Rafael examines a range of guidebooks produced in early contact times. Most prominent among these were Spanish missionary grammars of Tagalog (ones that use Latin and Castilian Spanish as their reference points) and a Tagalog printer's book for Tagalog speakers on how to learn Castilian Spanish. In Rafael's view, these texts worked actively as statements about language ideologies, which themselves were about the wider political dimensions of the Tagalog/Spanish colonial state situation. For instance, in the case of the Castilian language-learning textbook by the Tagalog printer, 'Pinpin [the printer/author] construed translation in ways that tended less to oppose than to elude the totalizing claims of Spanish signifying conventions' (Rafael 1988:55). Such linguistic and popular pedagogical sleights of hand took place in step with Tagalog attempts to reinterpret core Christian mission messages, such as that concerning the meaning of confession. In this connection Rafael asserts that confession gained surprisingly strong popularity among new Tagalog converts early on, in part because the priest-confessor pair resembled the age-old Tagalog patron-client pair, in whose case a debt relationship bonds the partners in an arrangement in which the more powerful, wealthy party must provide protection and sustenance to the subordinate partner. Rafael reads

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such colonial-era contact-zone texts as Pinpin's Spanish-language guide not so much for their explicit content as for their veiled messages concerning language and agency in this regard. This has also proved a rewarding anthropological method in the examination of texts springing from the interaction between state centre and local societies in Indonesia in more recent times (on New Order government publications and local literatures read in this way, see especially Keane 1997a, 1997b, and George 1996; for a discussion of the colonial historical backdrop to such textual politics, see Sears 1996 and Florida 1995).

Texts of such a socially complex sort only begin to make sense in a historical context, a subject to which we turn next in regard to Willem Iskander's teaching career.

Willem Iskander's textbook-writing role in colonial Indies school history

One of Willem Iskander's main biographers, Basyral Harahap, reports that the Mandailing school pioneer was born in Pidoli Lombang, Mandailing, in March 1840, the fourth son of Mangaraja Tinating Nasution and Anggur Boru Lubis (Harahap 1976:3). The young Sari changed his name to Willem Iskander during his first stay in the Netherlands, possibly as part of his baptism as a Christian. In a detailed account of the Mandailing schoolteacher's two trips to the Netherlands, Cees van Dijk confirms Willem Iskander's conversion to Christianity and suggests that the baptism was a cause for family tension for him on his first return home (Van Dijk 1986:16-7).

As a boy Willem Iskander went to elementary school in Panyabungan, a major Mandailing market centre (Masjkuri and Sutrisno 1980-81:31; Van Dijk 1986:16), around the year 1850. This school was one of Sumatra's first government-run primary schools. Assistant Resident Godon had founded it with the aim of expanding basic Latin-alphabet literacy education in the Panyabungan and coastal Natal areas in order (as noted) to prepare a cadre of young Mandailing men for entry-level clerkship positions as Sumatra's economy turned towards plantation cropping. In the context of the growing upland coffee trade at the time, the malarial seacoast town of Natal was a significant outpost in this enterprise, since it linked the southern Batak area, with its farm produce, to West Sumatra. By the 1850s Godon had appointed two men (Laut from Kotogadang, near Bukittinggi in West Sumatra, and Haji Nawawi from Natal) to staff his new primary school in Panyabungan (Masjkuri and Sutrisno 1980-81:31). Godon recognized Willem Iskander’s

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9 As contended in a newspaper article entitled 'Menempatkan Willem Iskander Sebagai Cendekiawan Nasional', reprinted without mention of the source in Harahap 1976:91-4.
drive and brilliance and sponsored further pedagogical studies for him in the Netherlands, where he stayed from March 1857 to 1861.

In the Netherlands, Willem Iskander did preliminary work in Vreeswijk and Arnhem and then moved on to his teacher training studies in Amsterdam (Harahap 1976:3; Van Dijk 1986:16). By October 1860 he had his hulponderwijzer (assistant teacher) degree. Harahap reports that Iskander's sponsors supported further studies for him at this point, but his health broke down and he had to return to the Indies (Harahap 1976:3). Harahap goes on to say (my translation):

He arrived in Batavia in December 1861, then went via Padang and Natal to Mandailing at the start of 1862. With the strong direct backing of the Governor General in Batavia, as well as the recommendation of Prof. H.C. Millies to the Minister for the Colonies and the Governor General, he was eventually able to set up a kweekschool (teachers' training college) in Tano Bato, where he himself became teacher. By mutual aid and common effort, the residents of the area constructed an extremely simple school building. Willem Iskander then began to teach in his new school in October 1862. (Harahap 1976:3.)

Harahap may be painting too rosy a picture of the local support for Willem Iskander's Mandailing school plans here. Masjkuri and Sutrisno (1980/1981:31) report in their history of schooling in North Sumatra that 'At this time [when he had just returned from Amsterdam and was building his schoolhouse] Willem Iskander encountered much resistance because of the local residents' hatred of the Dutch'. The Padri Wars, which had brought Islam and considerable anti-Dutch feeling to the southern Batak regions from Wahabist enclaves in Minangkabau, had only ended in the 1830s and, as we shall see, some of Willem Iskander's curricular materials were pronouncedly pro-Dutch in tone. Van Dijk (1986:16-7) reports that Willem's Christian conversion also complicated his efforts to build a school.

Willem Iskander's tiny and somewhat besieged Tano Bato teacher training institute was only the second to be set up outside Java. The kweekschool in Bukittinggi, established in 1856, was Sumatra's first; it went on to become the famous sekolah raja, or Rajas' School – as it is known even today in schoolteacher circles in Sipirok and Padangsidimpuan (Kroeskamp, 1974:320-2, takes a decidedly dimmer view). Masjkuri and Sutrisno (1980-81:32-4) rightly point out that Willem Iskander's less prepossessing school in Mandailing, though a short-lived establishment, had a great advantage over some of the other early Indies teacher training colleges in that it had him as principal, however. This was because of language use in the classroom: Iskander was fluent in Dutch, Malay, and Mandailing Batak and moved among these languages and between the Mandailing and the Latin script with great ease in preparing his course materials. In some of the other very early outer-island teacher-train-
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...ing establishments the Dutch teachers had relatively little knowledge of the local languages and sometimes were not sufficiently fluent in Malay either. Their indigenous pupils for their part often had had little access to Dutch before matriculation. The northern Sumatran situation was quite different, as Malay was fairly widely known here as a lingua franca in trade even before the colonial state began to formally promote it as a language of commerce and education (Hoffman 1979).

Among Willem Iskander’s pupils in the Tano Bato school were the local luminaries Radja Parlindoengan and Mangaradja Goenoeng Pandapotan (Said 1976:45). Willem Iskander apparently was a great success with the school authorities in terms of career trajectory by this time, for in 1874 he was asked to return to the Netherlands as the head of a small party of inlander (native) kweekschool teachers, all of whom were to enrol there for more advanced training (Van Dijk 1986:16-7). The government hoped to sponsor eight teachers in this way, but only three passed the exams. Undeterred, Willem Iskander temporarily closed his Tano Bato school and set off for Amsterdam with Raden Mas Surono from the kweekschool in Solo, Mas Adisasmita, a Majalengka primary school teacher, and Barnas Lubis, from Willem’s own school (Masjkuri and Sutrisno 1980-81:33). The trip ended tragically: not a single one of the young men lived to return to the Indies.

The two teachers from Java and Barnas Lubis died of an illness, while Willem Iskander may well have committed suicide in Amsterdam in 1876. Van Dijk (1986:17) reports this as a fact, pointing to accounts of Iskander’s despondency after the deaths of his friends. It probably was suicide, though the exact cause of his death at the age of 36 remains a subject of much dispute and continued hard feelings in South Tapanuli today. Some there assert that he killed himself over a failed love affair with a Dutch woman, who first promised to return with him to Sumatra and then reneged on her vow under great family pressure. Others, such as Harahap, report that Willem Iskander was formally married to a Dutch woman, Maria Christina Jacoba Winter (Van Dijk agrees), and that his death came five months into the marriage, while Maria Winter lived to the age of 69 (Harahap 1987:6). A common informal oral story I found in Sipirok in the 1970s and 1980s was that the supposedly perfidious, flighty boru Belanda (Dutch woman) led the lonely, virtuous Mandailing schoolteacher into an emotional impasse when he found himself in love with her but also felt morally and professionally obliged to return to his school development duties in Sumatra.

The historical facts remain debatable. What is certain, however, is that upon Willem Iskander’s death in Europe the Kweekschool Tano Bato was moved to Padangsidimpuan, where it eventually reopened on a larger scale in 1879 under the direction of L.K. Harmsen. By 1884 it had graduated its first pupils. Some of these young men and their many successors from both
the Padangsidimpuan school and the Sekolah Raja in Bukittinggi – like Soetan Oloan, Goeroe Batak, Soetan Indar Boengsoe, Dja Manambin, and Dja Tigor (Said 1976:45) – went on to become prominent figures in education in Tapanuli in their own right. Others left teaching to pursue careers in Sumatran journalism (for instance, the newspaper editor Dja Endar Moeda was a Kweekschool Padangsidimpuan product (Said 1976:45; see also Adam 1995:126-38)).

When Willem Iskander first went to school in Panyabungan, the government schools had a fairly simple, clear-cut teaching mission, but by the late 1870s the teachers' training colleges like the one in Padangsidimpuan had a new, extended task: they were now to develop into centres for the study of local language and culture (Masjkuri and Sutrisno 1980-81:34-5). Folktales and proverbs were to be collected in the surrounding areas for use as curriculum material in the local language. Under the energetic leadership of Christian Adriaan van Ophuysen the institute in Padangsidimpuan did grow into a folkloric centre in this way after 1879 (Masjkuri and Sutrisno 1980-81:34-5).

Willem Iskander’s schoolbooks stood in marked contrast to these later 'old Batak culture' volumes. Among his early publications were *De Brave Hendrik*, a textbook based overwhelmingly on a Dutch model. In 1871 came a Mandailing Batak-script textbook entitled *Leesboek van W.C. Thurn in het Mandhelingsch Vertaald*. Although this 88-page book was printed in the Batak syllabary (and thus seemingly a 'Batak text'), it was essentially a translation of Thurn's short chapters on such subjects as the importance of cleanliness and regular eating habits for well-mannered children. Then, in 1872, came what many consider to be Willem Iskander’s masterpiece, his deeply innovative and indelibly Mandailing *Si Bulus-Bulus, Si Rumbuk-Rumbuk*. This 22-entry anthology of short reading selections was closely focused on the world of the Mandailing schoolroom, not some fictive past of folklore or the forestlands as in the kinds of tales later collected by the Padangsidimpuan cultural studies centre/kweekschool. *Si Bulus-Bulus* consists of short poems on such topics as 'School' and 'The Lesson of a Father to his Son as he Sets off for School'. There are also light dialogues between young brothers and lullabies sung by mothers for baby girls. Then there are chapters on fierce Garuda birds, hunting trips, and 'Tuan Columbus' and his heroic voyages of discovery (the child reader is urged to emulate the explorer in his school endeavours). Also included are a number of moving passages on the themes of child death (for instance, a father’s lament for a very young girl in 'On the Death of his Daughter') and the death of parents of young schoolchildren. Importantly, the language of these funereal chapters is kept at the everyday level and does not dip far into the style of the *andung* or lament speech. In Mandailing and Angkola, *andung* are mourning wails sung over a corpse in a low, moaning sob. *Andung* are also used to lament the departure of a daugh-
ter on her bridal journey from her father's house (for an example of a later printed version of a fine andung, see Soetan Hasoendoeven's Sitti Djaoerah, pp. 168-9 of my English translation of this 1927 Angkola-language novel, Rodgers 1997). In most of southern Tapanuli, andung constitute a female genre. The droned laments are full of ornamental metaphors (such as 'Head, the Honoured Bearer of Burdens', 'Legs, the Bold Striders', in place of the regular speech words for head and leg). As a hereditary aristocrat, Willem Iskander would probably have had ready access to the buffalo sacrifice feasts where such special language varieties were used in profusion. However, although his death-focused chapters do tap into partly the same range of sad feelings as does the formal andung, the language of his poetry and prose in Si Bulus-Bulus is resolutely mundane and unadorned. The this-worldly focus is even more pronounced in Varieties of Knowledge.

The signature poem of Si Bulus-Bulus, 'Mandailing', is also written in a self-consciously non-traditional, non-folkloric style. It is written about contemporary Mandailing, the Mandailing of the 1870s, for an Indies-period Mandailing child to read, memorize, and recite (even today, many South Tapanuli residents can recite this poem by heart, as Si Bulus-Bulus came back into public school use after the Indonesian Revolution). Its first stanzas run as follows:

O Mandailing godang!  
Tano inganan ku sorang,  
Na niatir ni dolok na lampas  
Na nijoling ni dolok na martimbus,  
Ipulna na laing bubus.  

Oh, Mandailing Raya!  
Land of my birth,  
Hemmed in by tall mountain peaks,  
Solemnly observed by grand volcanoes,  
Their smoke billowing without cease.

Tor Sihite tingon julu:  
Patontang dohot tor Barerang,  
Gurung-gurung na manompi Lubu,  
Boi na mangadop tu dolok Sigantang.

Mt. Sihite is there upstream,  
Facing Mt. Barerang,  
Its mountain spine hoisting Mt. Lubu aloft,  
Its broad forehead facing Mt. Sigantang.

Muda u tailion tu utara  
Lao manindo tu irisaya  
Jongjong ma u ida Lubukraya,  
Asa manjoling Dolok Malea ...  

If I look towards the north,  
Then glance towards the northeast,  
There I see Mt. Lubuk Raya standing tall,  
And over there, in the corner of my eye, Mt. Malea.

In this way the child reader surveys Mandailing's geographic vastness, surrounded as it is by this ring of high volcanoes. The child observer is in charge of this surveillance – the poem has a vigorous agency in this regard. Then, Mandailing's economic promise ('O na marsaba na bolak!', Oh, land with such wide, wide rice paddies!) is contrasted with the decrepit state of its roadways and towns in the 1870s. Schooling, the poet says, is the only
means of lifting the region and its children out of poverty. The child reader is
directly recruited for this task in the poem’s locally famous conclusion:

Tinggal ma ho jolo ale,  I leave you now, dear small friend,
Anta piga taon ngada u boto; How long we'll be apart I know not,
Muda u ida ho mulak muse, But if I should see you once again, coming home,
Ulang be nian sai ma oto. Don’t any longer be bogged down in ignorance.

Lao ita marsarak, Then, as we part,
Marsipai got dope au di o: I must still advise you gently:
Ulang lupa paingot danak, Never, never forget to remind the children
Manjalai bisuk na peto. To always search for a craftiness that rings true.

And what might this 'bisuk na peto', this craftiness, slipperiness, trickiness be? Willem Iskander answers this question in his 1873 textbook on the marvels of the West and the modes of thought that produced and sustain these.

*The politics of print in On the Varieties of Knowledge and Expertise of the Europeans*

How-to guides in a single society can index transfers of knowledge between social classes or negotiate changing gender hierarchies (Bell 1999). When such guidebooks deal with transfer of knowledge between societies, especially ones joined in hierarchical relationships in colonial contexts, they can take aboard particularly complex political freight. Willem Iskander’s *Varieties of Knowledge* was a schoolbook of this sort, as of course was the Keasberry school’s *Ceritera Ilmu Kepandaian Orang Putih* before it. Its author intended to take some of the major bodies of technological knowledge of the West (for example, on plumbing, wooden house construction, railways, and, most crucially, book publication, library organization, and the production and distribution of newspapers) and make these readily accessible in simplified form for young Mandailing in school contexts. In reading *Varieties of Knowledge*, the Mandailing pupil would imaginatively enter a world where classmates would grow up to become printing press operators and where Mandailing houses and roads would exchange 'backwardness' for a technologically advanced Indies modernity. On a more mundane level, the schoolbook offered reading practice in the Dutch script at a level about two grades above that of *Si Bulus-Bulus*. While student readers who perused this 47-page collection of essays would not be able to walk out of the schoolhouse door and build a printing press or lay pipes for indoor plumbing (the book contains no engineering blueprints and so on), the volume did open wide vistas to them of some of the main technologies that Willem Iskander assured them underlay Western economic prosperity.

Willem Iskander also often asserts in *Varieties of Knowledge* that certain
Western mental qualities (in his portrayal, openness to new ideas, curiosity, flexibility) underpin the power of countries like the Netherlands and Marikin, or America (in the same way as the Keasberry schoolbook, Varieties of Knowledge, includes passages about the wonderful city water system of Philadelphia). His schoolbook also offers his Mandailing pupils a sort of key to those technological and intellectual treasure houses. While superficially an almost entirely pro-Dutch schoolbook, Varieties of Knowledge functioned at another, more latent level to embolden Mandailing school children to imagine themselves, and not just the clever Westerners, as the active operators of technologies that (Willem Iskander argued) could be brought to Panyabungan and Tano Bato from places like Amsterdam and Philadelphia.

Willem Iskander’s assignment of such strong agency to his imagined Mandailing audience is most clearly apparent in his five chapters on the marvels of print technology and associated phenomena, such as public libraries, which communities could organize for themselves. These chapters also show the considerable internal conflicts of this schoolbook: its hierarchizing imagery of a ‘more progressive’ and modern Europe versus a ‘backward’ Mandailing partially left behind in time; its denigration of Mandailing, and even more of Javanese, Malay, and Chinese methods of learning and communication; and its warm assurances that in spite of all this backwardness, Mandailing young people are still inherently quite smart and eminently capable of capturing the technologies of the West for Mandailing projects of self-improvement. These would in themselves make the Mandailing countryside look more like that of Holland: the ironies of the book and Willem Iskander’s overall attitude towards modernity are deep ones.

The volume’s thirteen chapters all deal with more serious topics than the jauntier concerns of Si Bulus-Bulus with giant Garuda birds and brave woodsmen. Varieties of Knowledge covers, in a uniformly prose format, as opposed to verse: ‘The Lighting of Lanterns in Houses and along Village Roads among Europeans’; ‘How to Get Water into Houses’; ‘A Few Words on Saving Money’; ‘On the Production of Books with Pictures’; ‘On Building with Planks’; ‘On Collecting Books’ (that is, establishing public libraries); ‘On Steamships’; ‘On Trains’; ‘A Chapter on Newspapers’; ‘A Chapter on Printing Books’; ‘On Newsletters and their Uses’; ‘This Planet is Round’; ‘On the Weather: Predicting it for Journeys’. The ‘a chapter on’ formula here more exactly reads in the original: ‘a bamboo-section length on’ – a reference to the Batak practice of inscribing messages onto lengths of bamboo. Willem Iskander is joking with the child reader here. There are a number of such typically Mandailing touches in the book.

The focus throughout Varieties is on this world. The tone is matter-of-fact, and the sentence structure conversational, rather like that of a kindly adult instructing a bright, receptive adolescent pupil. The assumed reader here
does seem to be male. The switch to a mixed-gender audience in Mandailing- and Angkola-language schoolbooks only came in the 1910s, when many girls were going to school. Examples are Sutan Martua Raja’s *Dua Sadjoli* 1 and 2 (1917, 1919) and *Rante Omas* (1918), in which the child characters sometimes include girls.

Perhaps the best way of gaining a quick idea of the major features of Willem Iskander’s rhetoric on modernity, the accomplishments of the Europeans, and the role of schoolbooks and school studies in Mandailing’s ‘advancement’ is by looking at some translated excerpts from his chapters on language and printing. The first in this series is Chapter 4, ‘On the Production of Books with Pictures’, which reads as follows in my translation. As it is a short chapter, it can be considered in full.

And what else? [This is a topic-changing device, found also in conversation and *hobar-kobaran*, or tales]. Well, for a long time now Europeans, and also Americans, have been producing books with pictures of the earth in them. And so, in those books there is material on the various sorts of things people make in those spots and on what kinds of events have taken place there. Moreover, there is material on things that have turned out successfully in these large countries, here on earth, and on what type of *adat* they have, and on the size of their populations and their beliefs, and on the way their government functions. And then, too, there is information in those books on what their holy texts say, and on the products for sale that issue from those continents, and on people’s behaviour and the sorts of clothes they wear, and their *adat*, both its bad aspects and the good ones. And there is information too on their soil, whether it is fertile or barren – in fact, whatever there might happen to be in those continents, that is exactly what will be recorded in these books. And then, too, there are pictures in those books, pictures of the land, or of people or animals, along with all the various types of houses found there. And you know, these books will be used in schools, and untold numbers of little children will look at them and read them. And so, whoever happens to read what is written there, it will be as if he had actually seen that far-off country in person, as if he had seen with his very own eyes all the things that happen to be there, in those wide, wide distant lands: why, it is as if he had taken hold of all the continents laid out on the earth’s surface, as if he had seen and touched them quite directly for himself.

Now, as for the price of these books, they are actually very cheap, for thousands and thousands, even tens of thousands of thousands of copies are printed at once. They are printed with a steam press, making it like the work of over a hundred people. And because of this even very poor people, both men and women, are able to buy these books, since they are so inexpensive.

And so, because of this, people who read these books are no longer narrow-minded. Rather, now they are aware of everything that is going on in the world, all the major events, all the major discoveries.

And so, even though our own place might happen to be out on the edge of things, or in a very small village indeed, even though we ourselves might be in considerable economic difficulties, nevertheless we will know what sorts of things
there actually are in the world once we read such books. We'll know more than, say, the child of very rich people who doesn't have books like these.

And then, too, regarding these books, there is another sort, a very short kind of book in terms of length, but its pages are quite wide and big: a picture book on the continents. And the names of all the countries in the children's big book are written there. And if small children read their big book, then they can go and see big pictures of all the continents in detail in their small book – and in that way the appearance of the land will be sharp and clear for them. How long a country is, how wide, where its roads are, what its rivers, where its borders: all that will be clear.

Now, the Chinese are also adept at making pictures of the countries upon the earth, but it would be better if, when they produce those pictures, they did not make the picture of their own country as big and wide as the sheet of paper and put European countries and other large areas way out in the corners of the page, making them take up only a tiny bit of space. Even though these countries are actually larger than China, the Chinese still make their own regions look the biggest. And so, because of this, their knowledge is limited: they remain like turtles attempting to climb trees. And they don't yet have ships big enough to withstand large ocean waves, and so the Chinese have not yet reached truly far-off lands. According to the way the Chinese think, the peoples of distant countries are all stupid, while they themselves are the only smart and expert people. But you know, when European children see Chinese geographies, they laugh at them. The Europeans, as it happens, have shown the Chinese genuine geographical pictures who knows how many times, but the Chinese don't want any of that. They won't agree; they just prefer to follow the customs of the old folks, and keep preferring their broken-down old ships to the better European ones, those firmly fitted big European vessels that can withstand the pummelling and tossing of the big sea waves.

But it is not only the Chinese who err in this respect: the Malays and Javanese are the same. For they believe that Rum is the largest and grandest country here on earth. And if people from here go to Mecca and meet Turks there who have come there by way of Ruhum, why, these Turks will tell those Mecca pilgrims that Ruhum is the very biggest country on earth. But to tell the truth, the Turks themselves are still rather ignorant, for they don't know what your good school friends know, they don't yet know what we said above, their schools are not yet correct. And then, too, the ships of the Turks have not yet circumnavigated the globe in search of information about large new countries. They just sit there in their own country, to the point that we can say: 'Well, the Turks are still wallowing in narrow-mindedness'.

A number of unflattering oppositions are given in this chapter: a technologically advanced Europe versus a backward China, Java, Malaya, and Turkey; a Europe alert to the educational needs of its children versus Asian countries and their lack of educational enlightenment; the supposedly accurate geographies of Europe versus the purportedly biased, ethnocentric ones of countries like China; European views of scientific facts that European children can respect, versus Chinese representations that European youngsters
laugh at. The imagined Mandailing reader is coaxed into believing himself to be in an intermediate position between the two opposed poles. With diligent study at school, and thanks to books such as Varieties of Knowledge, he can hope to escape Asian technological and intellectual backwardness and join the advanced Europeans. Willem Iskander's optimism here seems not only painfully colonial but also ironic from the vantage point of contemporary observers, knowing as they do how exclusivist the colonial school system in Tapanuli eventually became in the 1920s, with the spread of HIS and MULO\textsuperscript{10} schools and the extremely limited access they gave to Dutch-language training for all but the most privileged Batak children.

'Knowledge' here is that encoded in printed books, accessible to a world community that Mandailing youngsters will (supposedly) soon join. In the southern Batak areas, extremely powerful supernatural 'luck forces' are often thought to be inherent in the ritual orations of high rajas, who can help transfer tua (magic prosperity, luck) from the lineage ancestors to the living through benedictory speeches and certain ceremonial acts such as tortor dances, performed with raised arms. Secret messages from the lineage dead are also contained in the surat timbago holing, or secret writings embedded in woven ulos cloaks and baby carriers, gold bridal jewellery, rajas' weapons, and the rice baskets and specially prepared foods assembled as blessings during horja, or water buffalo sacrificial feasts. These writings are not in 'the old script', but exist beyond that level in terms of power and authoritativeness. In this passage from Chapter 4, Willem Iskander seems to have been attempting to re-order the hierarchy of parbinotoan (knowledge) relevant for children: the ability to accomplish miracles in the world, once attributed to the tua of the long-dead, was now conferred by small Dutch-script schoolbooks.

Willem Iskander becomes more specific in the how-to mode in the subsequent chapters on language and print literacy matters: Chapter 6 on libraries, Chapter 9 on newspapers, Chapter 10 on book publishing, and Chapter 11 on circular newsletters. Each of these focuses on how these various areas of printing are actually arranged, materially and socially, in the huta (villages) of the Europeans. Part of Chapter 6, 'On Collecting Books', for instance, reads:

\begin{quote}
Well, now, it seems that in all European countries, even in small villages, the people have come to an agreement to all make a joint contribution of their money, with each person giving a certain amount that he wants to contribute to the cause. And when they have collected enough money, one of them goes to purchase books, hundreds and hundreds of them. And they place all these books in a big house and lock them up safely in the room of the person who lives there: that is,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} HIS = Hollandsch-Inlandsche School, an elementary-level Dutch school for indigenous Indonesians; MULO = Meer Uitgebreid Lager Onderwijs, a school for advanced elementary education.
the one they have made book guardian, so that none of the volumes disappear.
And then people will come there, to that house where all the books are, once a
week or maybe once a month: and everyone gets to take a book.

Clearly Willem Iskander is describing these arrangements for children who
have never seen such a thing as a public library. He continues:

And the man who stands guard over this house has a notebook, and in this he
notes down who took what book and on what date. And so everyone gets to take
books back to their home, promising to return them after a certain time. And when
the time comes, they all come back to return the books they have taken out, and
then they all take out new books, one per person once again. And they just keep
doing this, on and on.

In the next paragraph Willem Iskander alerts the children to the link between
libraries and the production and distribution of new books. He quite evid-
cently sees books as human products pure and simple, in contrast to the surat
timbago holing ceremonial texts.

Each of them will pay a fee each year to the man who watches over the books, all
those who take part in this arrangement. Some pay a quarter ringgit, some pay
half, some a whole ringgit. What this money is used for is purchasing newly writ-
ten books; if they hear that a new book has just been published or written in some
town, then they'll go there to buy it, and they bring it back to the village and add
it to the collection of all the books they already have. Now, because of this, folks
in that village never lack for books to read, for while the books they already have
haven't yet all been read, they are already getting new ones. Now, these books are
all quite inexpensive, for they are all printed books. Some cost a tali, some a suku,
some a full rupiah, while some may cost more than that. And people make sure the
binding is very tight and firm, so that the volumes don't fall apart too quickly. Some
of the books are rather thin but have a large content, since the letters inside are tiny,
and close together to boot. They are rather hard to read, but since people there have
been used to reading that sort of thing from the time they were little, these books
can be read fluently, even though the letters are squeezed close together.

Recall that this textbook appeared in the 1870s in an upland area where
printed Latin-script texts were strange artefacts and where books in small
print perhaps seemed impossible to decipher to some adults in the school-
children's environment. But the readers are told that cracking the code of
these books, with their difficult contents, is within the power of enlightened
library patrons thanks to another miracle, the dictionary:

And then, too, they really know exactly what is said in these books. They don't
have to go asking the general public about this. And if occasionally they come
across a word that is too refined and difficult for them to understand, they just
open a very large book, and there the meanings of all the words are clarified for
them. And so people who read know what is what right away, and they will also know how to use that difficult word when they speak in future.

This sort of intertextuality between regular books and code-breaking dictionaries did not exist in the indigenous literature. This new view provided the kind of lexical world that dictionaries encompass: all words for all readers. Here again, Varieties of Knowledge offers the child reader a window on a mode of acquiring knowledge that goes beyond the content of any single text, and beyond the parbinotoan of any single community.

Then Willem Iskander returns to one of his favourite themes: lambasting the Malays and Javanese for fixating on nonsense. This next paragraph takes particular aim at beliefs in ghosts and evil spirits, which Iskander well knew also played a prominent part in the Mandailing worldview at the time. He obliquely criticizes similar spirit beliefs in places like Tano Bato by pillorying the befuddled Malays and Javanese and their befuddled texts:

Now, what is said in these books is not like what one finds written in Malay books, or the sort of thing that is written in the books of the Javanese – these all talk about things like jinns and ghosts and begu [evil spirits], or things like dorma spells, curses, patulidi spells [cast with the aid of sugar-palm fibres], and protective magic and all sorts of other useless fallacies.

No, the things one finds in the books of the Europeans are not like that at all: only true things are discussed there, and if any of the material they contain happens to be not strictly true, such as traditional sayings, in any case it offers good lessons. And if a person who is not much of an expert happens to write a book, and if what is in that book is not completely true or if it is not written very well, then people just won't make much use of that book. Angry books will be read critically. Some books clarify the rules and laws of peoples of far-off lands; if any of those rules are better than the ones that are in use, then those new ones will be applied. And there are books that explain about all the little snakes and insects, and others about four-legged animals. Other books tell how to tend dry fields and how to make fruit and vegetable gardens thrive. Others teach you how to make fine farm implements, so you won't get too tired in your gardening tasks – so that one person can do the work that was once done by ten.

Printed books, in other words, allow one to bend the world to one's own economic purposes. Print literacy is a tool for tapping the bounty of the physical world. In this respect, it is a very new kind of tua.

And there are also books that tell of the customs of peoples in the past, so that we will know the good aspects and the bad and be able to abandon the bad aspects and adopt only the good. And then, too, there are books teaching how to take care of one's body, so one doesn't get sick all the time. And also books on how to deal with small children, so that their hearts won't admit bad habits, so that bad behaviour can be avoided.
In other words, books on conduct for the modern Mandailing child. Willem Iskander here ends his chapter with a ringing condemnation of secrecy in dealing with parbinotoan, or knowledge.

Whoever reads the books of the Europeans, once he knows what is said in them, he can become an expert, and smarter all the time, and come to know what is true and what is not, and what sort of knowledge is useful and beneficial to him. Not like people here, just versed in secret knowledge that does not come to anything, just expert in spell-casting magic and curses and all sorts of things that are not nice.

And there is yet another type of book, little ones for little children: easy to understand, so the little kids can grasp what is said there. But if small children get accustomed to reading these little children's books, that is good, since they won't be too intimidated to take on the task of reading bigger books. They can learn how to read fluently this way; the books are easy to understand.

And in addition, the Europeans are not stingy: if a person owns a book, he does not take delight in hiding it in a chest, as folks here tend to do (folks who refuse to lend out a book for fear that other people will find out what is in it). Rather, Europeans stress lending their books to others who want to read them. And they are encouraged to do this, for often many thousands of copies will have been printed of a book and no one need fear that there won't be enough to go round.

Knowledge, 'properly defined', is infinitely expandable. It gains social worth by being spread. This is a key European accomplishment, Willem Iskander instructs his charges:

And now, you know, if the Europeans had not received lessons from all those books of theirs, they would not be as smart as they are now. They would be ignorant, like people in the past, like the grandparents of their grandparents.

He is implying here that they would be ignorant like many Malays, Chinese, and Javanese – stuck in a past age of ignorance. Mandailing school-child readers can become time travellers in this respect, chasing the Europeans towards a future of scientific knowledge and prosperity, escaping from a stultifying village past. Newspapers as well as books will push Mandailing youth along this route.

Chapter 9: A Chapter on Newspapers

Now, one good thing about Europe is that if anything happens in that continent, everyone will find out about it right away. Now, the thing that causes this is the following: there will be a person of means who will order folks to prepare a place in which to roll out sheets of paper, and in this printing-house there will be many different kinds of printing tools. And people will round up all the news that it is useful to know, everything proper and suitable, from all the countries around. And then they will print it on thousands and thousands of wide sheets of paper, and then the man will order these delivered to the homes of people in that big
country. Now, the people who receive these papers will pay the person who publishes them whatever fee may be appropriate. Some people get their newspapers each day, in the evening, others get theirs once a week, and then too there are those who just get their papers once a month. Now, newspapers are like many other things, some are highly priced and folks have difficulty paying for them: some subscriptions cost 20 rupiah, others 30 rupiah a year.

Now, as for the use of newspapers, it is that everyone can find out whatever has happened in the world, whether he happens to live in the centre of the village or way out in the periphery, or even if he lives completely outside the village. Now, whoever can read newspapers, why, it is as if he were able to reach out and touch those areas talked about in them, so that he can see and grasp whatever folks have done – his country is no longer shadowed by clouds, and he can tell the sheep from the goats, the little grasshoppers from the big Garuda birds.

And the second great use of newspapers is that, if there is a new bit of knowledge that people discover in whatever country, the newspaper can immediately make that finding public and clarify exactly what the new discovery is. And so everyone, the Public-the-Two-and-the-Three [this is an oratory phrase, also found in *turi-turian*, or chanted epics], in fact, can all put that finding to immediate use if they think this discovery is beneficial. They can abandon their old customs and put the new practice into use, so that things can be done more easily, so the good is spread. So if, for instance, one person gets a tool that is turned in a slightly new way, everyone can find out about it right away. So, as was said above: the Europeans are not stingy with their knowledge and discoveries.

And a third use is that newspapers resemble books in a way, for when evening falls, one can read the paper a bit before going to sleep, so that one will know what good new things may have happened.

Again, Willem Iskander is writing in his unflaggingly optimistic mode here: print literacy and its products are consistently useful and intellectually enriching.

Fourthly, there is a benefit for people who are smart enough to write well and adept at putting forward an argument in a newspaper. Such a person can demonstrate his knowledge in this forum. He can write about any good thing he likes and then send that to the head of the newspaper, and then thousands and thousands of people will be able to read what he has to say. And everyone will know about it right away, and his expertise will be of benefit to all the folks who read that paper. It is as we said above, the spirit of the Europeans is not like that of people here; if people here note down something good and useful, they want to keep it a close secret, so that the great majority of people won't find out about it. They want to keep things hidden under a woven basket.

Fifthly, ill-intentioned people may be frightened a little. When dishonest and vicious people who frighten the public do something bad, people will write about that in a newspaper. Or, if influential bigwigs misbehave, news about that, too, will be published in the paper.

Moreover, as for the man who manages the paper: he will always be on the lookout for the latest news and the most recent notices concerning newly introduced rules and regulations, always alert to good things and bad, and the prices
of commodities. And he will also collect all the news coming in from far-off countries, so he won't have to wear himself out ordering people to go to those areas and search out the news directly. After he has collected all this information, he will put it all in his newspaper and explain all his views and his choices – the good decisions he's made, and the bad ones too, he'll write about all of that.

And if there remain some traditions that people still follow, bad ones, perhaps, he will chide the folks still adhering to these old ways, so that they'll adopt the new, better ones. And then, too, if there is a person spreading false rumours, he will clarify the real situation in that case, too.

Willem Iskander then moves on to the benefits of scholarly journals, although it is possible he may be discussing magazines here.

In addition, there is yet another type of newspaper, but this one is a bit like a book.

In this, only major items are recorded, such as new facts or discoveries. Because such reports are long, they cannot be inserted in the daily newspaper; so they are put in this type of special book. Whoever reads such a book, its use is not the same as that of reading a daily newspaper. And he will have to study it very carefully in order to grasp its meaning, for the information in it is very complex. Once one understands its meaning, then it has a great deal of use.

The uses of print literacy are made plainly evident in this chapter. We also observe Willem Iskander's usual punctiliousness in describing different aspects of publishing for children for whom the schoolbook in front of them is probably the only printed text they have ever seen. More print media are a good thing, restrictions on print a bad thing, Willem Iskander seems to be telling his readers.

The newspaper appears in this chapter as the prime enemy of older, secretive approaches to knowledge. Newspapers will quickly disseminate information on new discoveries to a wide public, discourage the hoarding of knowledge at many levels, and unfailingly act in the public interest. Described in rosy tones such as these, newspaper publishers are important actors in the construction of civil society – an optimistic vision of a situation that Willem Iskander hopes will characterize Mandailing as well as European societies. His upbeat list of five major public benefits of newspaper publishing is apt to lead his child readers to believe that the publication of daily and weekly papers and journals is entirely possible for Sumatra. How is Mandailing to reach this enviable state? By acquiring a printing press. The next chapter is perhaps the most important in Willem Iskander's argument about communication and its form, content, and modern relevance. Note here the minute details of the process of preparing type, setting up a page, and so on.
Chapter 10: A Chapter on Printing Books

It is as long as four hundred years now that the Europeans have possessed the art of printing books. Before they knew how to print, their way of writing books produced unclear texts, as is still the case among the Malays and Javanese today. They would use a wooden plate the same size as the paper and engrave the individual letters on it, much as the Chinese do nowadays (but it is not known if the Chinese knew how to do this back then). Now, the longer this went on, the more people thought to themselves: 'If we just keep doing things this way, that won't be so good, for if we only engrave wooden plates with letters, that'll be our only way of getting news around, as slowly as that. We'll only be able to print one copy of a book at a time. It will be better if we use the letters separately, so it'll be possible to divide them up or line them up just so.'

And so, after that, they made movable type. But it was still all of wood.

And so they thought: 'Now, wood falls apart pretty quickly. It will be better if we make the letters of lead, so that they may be used a long time.' So they made lead letters by smelting the metal. And people make type in just the same way even today, and the lead letters last for years and years. You can keep on using them, and print who knows how many copies of a book that way. Then, once you've finished using that particular arrangement of type, you put all the letters back into their storage boxes, letter by letter. Then, if you want to print a new book, well, you just take them out again for that.

And that is the way one prints a great number of copies of a book.

The way to do this would be to first get a table and on top of this table to set out little four-sided boxes. You put the lead letters into all these little boxes.

In one box you put the a's, in the second one you put the b's, in the third the c's, and thus all the way to z. And if a printer is going to print something, whatever it might be, he gets the text and spreads it out in front of him on the table. Then he finds the letters to follow his model text. He picks them up with three fingers, one by one.

Each of the letters that he has thus picked up in his fingers he then attaches to a tool he is holding in his right hand. This tool will accommodate up to twenty to thirty lines of type, set up line by line. Once his hand has become full of type in this way, he brings it all back to the top of the table and lays out the type along a sort of crossbar. Once he sees that he has enough type to fill a page, or however much space he wants to, he sets it all out there in front of him, and then he lines it up carefully along the print frames. And that is how he sets up however many pages. If he uses wide sheets of paper, he can print four pages at a time, and eight pages if the page size is smaller. In the case of really tiny pages, he can print 24 pages at a time.

Once he has affixed all the letters there in their place, he takes an iron tool that they'll adhere to [...].

Here Willem Iskander goes on to provide more concrete details on this subject. He then continues,

[...] and once the pages are all printed, they are all carried to a bookbinder, who sews them together into books. Once they are all tightly bound together so the
bundles of pages won't fall apart, small merchants will take them to their shops, so that the consumers from the Public-the-Two-and-the-Three will be able to see the goods on display.

At this point Willem Iskander shifts the focus back to Indies social locales:

Now, even though all this has been described in detail, my small friends reading this book will probably still find many things unclear. It would be better to see for yourself. Now, one need not walk a huge distance to be able to see all this, because in Padang itself there is a printing press nowadays for publishing books. Under the cloud covering the islands of the Indies there are in fact as many as eight regions with printing presses: Padang, Batawi, Samarang, Surabaya, Solo, Pasuruan, Mangkasar, and Ombun Island.

Now, my friends the Two-and-the-Three, never fear! I know you are shocked at the idea of printing this book. But, just so you'll know and understand, let me say that such a thing would be of great value for everyone. As for the uses of printing books, there are five good reasons for it.

And Willem Iskander of course proceeds to enumerate these. Some of the relevant sections read as follows:

Firstly: the words in a book won't change around all the time. If a text is going to be printed, the person writing it will check the printer's plates first for any errors. These will be corrected before numerous copies are made. Then, even dozens and dozens of years after the text was first printed, and if lots of the books have fallen apart or disappeared, the text can just be printed again. The person who wrote the book will not have to feel bad, since it has been set into type and that can be used as a template. So the people who read that book can rejoice: they well know that the stories inside will not change by so much as a word from what they were back in the past.

Secondly: the books are ready quickly. If you don't have a printing press but want to compile a book, why, it may take weeks and weeks, or even months and months, if you have to write it all out by hand. And if you copy just so much as even one book, that in itself will wear you out. But if it can be printed, hundreds and thousands of copies can be published in a short while, for one printer can do the work of two hundred scribes. If there are as many as two or three printers in a publishing house, why, untold numbers of trees can be turned into books just like that.

Thirdly: the letters will show up clear and sharp, so they will be easy to see and read. As to books written out by hand, though, the letters will look all different, for some people make more or less fat letters and others thin ones. Some letters will be separated from the others by wide spaces in some people's handwriting. Some people make tiny little letters, others huge big ones. Some make long ones, some short ones. Some folks have good handwriting, some just make scrawls. When you're teaching a small child to read, the child will sometimes say: 'Now, I can read that teacher's handwriting well enough, but I can't understand that other one's'.

Now, books that have been printed all come out clean and clear, whether they've been printed in Mangkasar or Padang or wherever. It doesn't matter. All
the letters of all the texts will stand up straight, they won’t run into each other, they won’t lie aslant. They’ll all stand straight and tall.

Willem Iskander’s firm realization of the efficiency and the replicability of print publication certainly predates a good deal of more recent formal scholarship on the transition from oral to print literacy (Ong 1982; Goody 1986; see also H.M.J. Maier’s excellent account of transitions from orality to literacy in Malay hikayat literature, Maier 1988:73-100). Iskander apparently also felt that some people would doubt the value of a shift from script literacy (he is probably referring to Malay manuscript texts, not bamboo and bark Batak syllabary texts) to Latin-alphabet print publishing.

But there are some people who say that books that have been written by hand are clearer and easier to read than books that have been printed.

Now, the reasons why people think this way are as follows. There are two modes of thinking involved here. First, some people are just a lot more used to reading handwritten books than printed books, which they only read very occasionally. However, if we put both a handwritten book and a printed book in front of a small child who is just beginning school, he will be able to read the printed book more easily. In view of this, that small child is cleverer than the old person who said that handwritten books are clearer and easier to read – for the old person is just stuck in the adat and the customary ways of his ancestors. The other reason derives from the fact that the printed books these people have seen contain lots of printing errors. That is because people here in the Indies are only just learning how to print books and are not as expert at it as people in Europe. But in such cases that is the fault of the printer, not of printing knowledge itself.

Note how the child reader here is assigned social superiority to the village elderly, no matter how good a grasp of the old lore the latter might have.

Fourthly: once the tools for easily producing thousands of books are there, people with expertise and cleverer folks will take to sharing their findings and views with alacrity, for they can foresee that their knowledge will reach wide audiences and will be spread around the earth. And then too, if there happens to be a person from abroad who produces a book about some bit of foreign specialist knowledge that we don’t yet know about, why, we will be able to buy that book cheaply, for its price will be right and low. So a person’s expertise will grow and grow. This will be so even though he himself may not be all that clever. His thoughts will be clearer, for he will have sniffed the aroma of the fine knowledge issuing from the hearts of cleverer folk [...].

This sort of thing is what has won Europe its respected status in the world, Iskander concludes, going on to cite the fifth advantage of print publication: ‘low prices’. Here he repeats his (and the Keasberry schoolbook’s) usual argument in favour of the economies of scale of print publishing. He concludes this relatively long chapter (six pages) with a discussion of the ways in which
print publication facilitates the production of schoolbooks for children of every means in a reasonable time. Images of five-storey publishing houses with dozens of print-shop workers in European cites round off this section in the book. Chapter 11 breaks little new ground from these paeans to print, reading, scientific methods, and commercial book production, but discusses these themes again with regard to a new kind of print text – news circulars.

All told, these chapters on print, publishing, and the accessibility of the typeset word are calculated to promote a form of literacy quite opposite to that in the Batak script texts inscribed on bark, antler, and bamboo that are so well described by Uli Kozok (2000). The views on print communication that Willem Iskander urged upon his Tano Bato pupils would have been quite revolutionary in the context of their worldview had the communication lessons of Varieties of Knowledge actually been fully put into practice. He was writing about the transfer of new knowledge among people of whatever political rank in societies with perfect fluency, suggesting that the poorest Sumatran mountain village would participate in worldwide media conversations, and predicting that no heard of texts 'written not to be read' would long survive if his mode of teaching was successful. In his view, schoolchildren would outshine rural sorcerers and medicine men, and Mandailing as a tano, a land, would escape from poverty and marginality as a result of Mandailing young people pursuing careers as conduits of technology. In point of fact, however, this utopian view of print as progress and formal schooling as the high road to social betterment became just one among a plethora aired in late 19th-century highland North Sumatra. The transition to strong print literacy in itself proved to be a more complex change than Willem Iskander admits in Varieties. As late as at the time of my fieldwork in Sipirok and Padangsidimpuan, in fact, more than a hundred years after publication of this textbook, there was a jumble of literacies in South Tapanuli. These did include schoolroom literacy of the type promoted by Willem Iskander, but also aurally-attuned, ritual kinds of literacy associated with village-based Arabic Islamic prayer recitation in the southern Batak area. A resilient Angkola and Mandailing Batak-language oratory tradition strongly supported 'power readings' of ceremonial objects of the surat timbago holing kind. There was also a thriving, if secret, spell-caster-sorcerer practice of interpreting omens of betel-leaf arrangements and other portents. Latin-script print literacy did yield a large body of Angkola and Mandailing Batak-language popular literature in the 1920s and 1930s, as noted above, but in the period of independence this has become surrounded and swamped by literature in the Indonesian language, now the dominant medium of books, newspapers, and schoolbooks in Tapanuli. Although in some rural schools Batak is the medium in the first three grades and Angkola and Mandailing remain the languages spoken in the home and in everyday interaction, Batak
is in effect encircled by Bahasa Indonesia, which is mostly associated with modernity and school and career success.

Varieties itself has vanished from the southern Batak literary scene, while the more forthrightly pro-Mandailing and more poetic Si Bulus-Bulus has survived as Willem Iskander's emblematic literary work. Perhaps the 1873 textbook penetrated the contact zone between Dutch colonial concerns and Mandailing aspirations too far. In imagining future Mandailing as a prosperous and cosmopolitan country, Willem Iskander in effect put on wings of lead by printing his tale in the Dutch script, in the context of European technological accomplishments, at a time when such narratives bore the imprint of colonial power politics.

Conclusion

Cooper and Staler (1997b) point to the need to bring the colonizer and the colonized and the metropole and the colony into the same field of analysis, and to recognize that each pair of 'sides' mutually constituted each other. They call for historically nuanced case studies to see (for instance) how 'caste' and 'tribe' emerged as colonial constructs, how the bodies of knowledge generated by colonial-era anthropologists were sometimes used for the benefit of colonial rule, and how colonized elites in Africa, India, and the Indies sometimes adopted the rhetorics, taste, and literary forms of their colonizers. Early public schools in regions like the Indies in the 1870s were prime meeting-grounds for the metropole and the colony in this connection.

The pedagogical literature connected with such schools constituted a contact-zone medium in its own right, and also seems to make most sense when read in an analytical framework as expansive as Staler and Cooper's. When the author of schoolbooks in such cultural arenas was himself a visitor between the colony and the metropole (which was geographically true in Willem Iskander's case), these textbooks may have much political colouring. In the case of Varieties, this colouring was not only self-contradictory but also perhaps tragic.

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