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Abdullah Munsyi and the missionaries

Introduction

Father of Modern Malay Literature is an epithet often ascribed to Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi, a Malay author who lived in Melaka and Singapore during the first half of the nineteenth century.¹ Two of his works, *Hikayat Abdullah* (Tale of Abdullah) and *Kisah pelayaran Abdullah ke Kelantan* (Account of Abdullah's voyage to Kelantan) are the stories most often singled out as those that form the bridge between traditional and modern Malay writing. Characteristics of these writings viewed by critics as modern elements are the foregrounding of the authorial self through the use of the first-person pronoun, realistic descriptions of historical events and persons, and harsh criticism of the culture, socio-political structure, and practices of the Malay community (Milner 1995). This conventional wisdom defines traditional literature, in contrast, as anonymous, writers preferring to relate events and persons set in a mythical past of a never-never land, written down and performed for the benefit of a certain ruler. I am not concerned here with whether these views about traditional literature are accurate or whether Abdullah Munsyi's writings can be viewed as part of what has been termed 'transitional' literature (Skinner 1978). Suffice it to say that some of Abdullah Munsyi's colleagues wrote in a similar vein as the champion of Malay modernity, and traditional Malay writing is a little more complex than may be encompassed in a topos of anonymity and mythical past.

Abdullah Munsyi is a controversial figure in the history of Malay writing, and opinions about him have varied through time from the extremes

¹ This article is the result of merging two papers I presented in Singapore in 2003 and 2005. I am grateful to the participants of the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) and Casting Faiths conferences for their comments, and also to the two anonymous referees. Most indebted I am to Ian Proudfoot, and especially Amin Sweeney, for painstakingly going through my text. Any errors are of course mine.

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Figure 1. *Teng tŭrbang* ('flying lantern', hot air balloon) illustration in an article on natural phenomena (*tabiat sagala jŭnis kaadaan*), in *Pŭngutib Segala Remah Pŭngatauan*, vol. 1, no. 1, March 1852, facing p. 23

Figure 2. Title page of the *PŮngutib Sagala Remah PŮngatauan*, vol. 1, no. 4, December 1852

of champion of Malay modern thinking to despised collaborator of colonial powers who sold his soul to the missionaries. Examples supporting both these extremes may be gleaned from his two major works and his close collaboration with English authorities, but these two works are at the same time highly politicized and not directly relevant to this article. What does concern me here is to what extent Abdullah Munsyi's writings were influenced by the evangelical impulse that engulfed the world in the nineteenth century.

It is well known that Abdullah Munsyi wrote his works in close rapport with missionaries of the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), who based their activities in the Straits Settlements. Similar to other parts of Asia and beyond, these missionaries did not make many converts, and focused their endeavours on education and dissemination of 'God's word' through the printing press.

One of the necessary preparations for the proselytization of the natives was the establishment of a school system, in which Western arts and sciences were taught along with basic subjects such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. This was expected to change indigenous society and prepare people for the reception of the Christian message, as one of the missionaries in western India argued:

[...] religious truth, social progress, and the advance of scientific understanding were inseparably connected with each other. All truth derived ultimately from the same Christian source. Western learning in India would naturally create the desire for the Christian truth on which it was built. (O'Hanlon 1985:64.)

Printing was another major missionary activity that would have far-reaching effects. Similar to education, the printing press, too, was designed to prepare the natives for the reception of Christian truth by means of publications expounding science and general knowledge accompanied by religious tracts. These topics were combined in magazines produced by missionaries to be used in schools and disseminated among the indigenous population and elsewhere. An example of one of these magazines is *Orunodoi* (Dawn), published in Assam (1846-1880), which 'carried out its improving project by linking Christian literature with apparently secular and objective facts, from accounts of the working of nature to the differential progress of human societies' (Sharma 2003:260).

Missionaries in the Malay peninsula similarly made use of such preparatory activities for the proselytization of indigenous (and also Chinese) populations.² As early as 1817, the Mission Press in Melaka started publication of the *Indo-Chinese Gleaner*, an English-language quarterly that contained 'besides topics on Christianity, items of literature and history, translations

² Actually, missionary activities in the Malay Peninsula initially were completely focused on the Chinese population, because missionaries were barred access to China until the 1840s.

and descriptions of local customs, reports from neighbouring missions and on events in China and elsewhere' (O'Sullivan 1984:67). Similar topics were covered in the bilingual English-Malay magazine *The Malay Magazine Bustan Arifin* (Garden of the Wise), printed at the same location by the Reverend Claudius H. Thomsen in 1821-1822. The prospectus of this magazine clearly outlines its goals, content, and restrictions:

The design of this little work is solely to furnish the Malays of these countries with materials of useful knowledge; while at the same time it may serve as an auxiliary to Europeans, who have the taste for the study of the language.

Its contents will be miscellaneous, and consists of Translations and Treatises on all subjects; but at present the following are the principal: Universal History, Biography, Natural philosophy, Religion, Occurrences, &c.

It is not intended to exclude others from contributing; but on the contrary, invites all who may feel disposed to furnish well written pieces to fill its pages.

The peculiar doctrines of Christianity will not here be discussed, nor any subjects of a Political kind admitted; it being designed to entertain and instruct, not to give offence.

As the subjects of this Miscellany will be furnished by several contributors, their names may be inserted in the first number. One piece for each number will be written by a Native.³

It was not until 30 years later that this first Malay-language magazine had a successor in the form of equally short-lived educational magazines published in Singapore from the late 1840s until the late 1850s. In that period it was the Reverend Benjamin P. Keasberry who published *Taman Pūngatauan* (Garden of Knowledge, 1848-1852), *Pūngutib Segala Remah Pūngatauan* (Collector of Grains of Knowledge, 1852-1854?), and *Cermin Mata* (The Eyeglass, 1858-1859). The same mixture of Christian biblical and other moral stories, practical knowledge, and science can be found in these magazines, also reflecting the subject material of the Malay-language books that rolled off the printing presses in the first half of the nineteenth century. In many of these publications, Abdullah Munsyi had a hand as copyist, writer, language editor, translator, or printer, in which capacities several LMS and ABCFM missionaries employed him. One of the results of Abdullah Munsyi's collaboration with the ABCFM missionary Alfred North is discussed in detail below, as the content of that book had a profound influence on his two major publications.

In a recent article, Diana Carroll (1999:94) argues that, although missionaries influenced the 'tales' Abdullah wrote, at the same time these tales are original works in which the author blended Malay and European sources, taking advantage 'of the age-old Malay tradition of seizing upon [...] any

³ This prospectus is found in: School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, Council for World Mission Archive Collection (CWM), Ultra Ganges Singapore, Incoming letters, Box 1: 1817-1834, Folder 1, Jacket B.

appropriate written material from any source [...] to weave into his own composition [...] crafting his own message for contemporary and future Malays'. She singles out *Sejarah Melayu* as a Malay text that may be read in juxtaposition to Abdullah's *Hikayat*, and as a source of European influence she rather surprisingly mentions articles in *The Indo-Chinese Gleaner*, not *The Malay Magazine* where Abdullah Munsyi's involvement is more apparent (O'Sullivan 1984:71). Although she acknowledges that the *Hikayat* as well as the travel account were written at the behest of the Reverend North, Carroll (1999:126) maintains that the *Hikayat* fits the *kerajaan* literature that was written for the benefit of a Malay ruler, but with a twist: 'from both a Malay and a European viewpoint [it is] a reformist document – a discourse of dissent'. While Carroll's general argument and conclusions are tenable, I would rather argue that Abdullah was not trying to support a Malay court, but rather the establishment of British colonial rule (Sweeney 1980:13).

Although the *Hikayat* is critical of some English officials, it can hardly be called a work of dissent towards the English rajas. This article will track the European influence more directly from the time of writing both works, arguing that the influence of the missionaries was a little more direct and profound than has previously been recognized. Salient in Abdullah Munsyi's case, in contrast to most other missionaries' assistants, is that he never converted to the Christian faith but fervently presented his authorial self as a devout Muslim.

Abdullah and the missionaries

The history of missionary activities in the Malay Peninsula is sufficiently discussed in the literature (O'Sullivan 1984, 1986; Harrison 1979) and therefore will be dealt with here very briefly. From the literature it is clear that missionary societies came to the Peninsula in the early nineteenth century because there was no opportunity at that time to proselytize in China. The Reverend William Morrison and the Reverend William Milne set up a missionary post and an educational establishment in Melaka in 1815, wanting to be relatively near to their main area of proselytization and aiming to train foreign and local students in the missionary trade. Their activities were therefore directed mainly to the Chinese community in the Malay world, whereas proselytization among the Malay community was considered unimportant and problematic. After China was forced to open up to Western influence as the outcome of the first Opium War in 1842, both LMS and ABCFM closed down their missionary posts in the Straits Settlements.

Several missionaries specialized in Malay, but they faced a lack of interest and institutional backing from their headquarters in England and America. These few individuals also had to cope with frustrating results as they made

hardly any converts among the Muslim Malay population. Upon their arrival in the Straits Settlements, they were taught Malay by Abdullah Munsyi, who seems to have held a near 100% monopoly on this job. The epithet 'munsi' refers to his profession of language teacher; a title he had apparently earned before the missionaries' arrival (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir 1970:49). The missionaries trained this indigenous informant and language teacher in printing, and introduced him to English as well, although he seems never to have fully mastered that language. He accompanied the LMS missionary Thomsen when the latter moved to Singapore, and according to his *Hikayat*, commuted back to Melaka several times to visit his family and friends and spend all the money he earned in Singapore.⁴ When he was in Melaka he also worked for missionaries there at their special request, and assisted Newbold in his writings.

In the mid 1830s, after Thomsen returned to England, Abdullah approached the American missionaries who had recently settled in Singapore and who, like their English colleagues, were waiting for China to open up. It is possible that Abdullah was eager to meet them because he was in need of a job after his LMS missionary patron had left. However, the reason he gives in his *Hikayat* is that he had never seen an American and wanted to see whether they were the same as Englishmen. He presented himself as a smooth talker and soon became well acquainted with the Americans (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir 1970:287).

Abdullah developed a working relationship with Alfred North, who had come to serve the missionary post as printer. North studied Malay with Abdullah and worked on the LMS premises the ABCFM obtained from Thomsen (O'Sullivan 1986:80). North, who arrived in Singapore in 1836, increased the production of printed materials massively, especially after xylographic presses were moved from Canton to Singapore. But, of course, the bulk of the printing production was in Chinese: of the two million pages reported to have been produced, 1.9 million were in Chinese. The only Malay texts reportedly printed by the press were two tracts and some books, all of which were the result of North's collaboration with Abdullah (Coakley 1998:26). These few books, produced for 'outside customers', had a tremendous impact on the history of Malay writing. One of them was Abdullah's travel account to Kelantan; the others were mostly educational texts, edited and translated by Abdullah. These educational texts had a profound influence on Abdullah's *Hikayat*, one of the core texts of the classical canon and one that was important for the post-colonial formation of the Malaysian language and identity.

In two letters accompanying manuscripts of Abdullah's *Hikayat* sent by North to America, the missionary printer gives some interesting details on how his collaboration with Abdullah resulted in the latter writing his major works. In these letters North reports that Abdullah had made a 'meagre

⁴ This information is based on the account his son Ibrahim Munsyi gives about his father (Sweeney 2006:xxvi-xxvii).

Figure 3. Title page of *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian orang putih* 1855

Figure 4. Chapter opener 'Dari hal kereta asap' (About steam trains), in *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian orang putih* 1855:44

Figure 5. Chapter opener 'Dari hal membuat kitab dengan dicap' (About printing books), in *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian orang putih* 1855:57

Figure 6. Illustrations from an edition of the *Hikayat dunia* texts showing Canton, Cina and Calicut, in *Hikayat pada menyatakan dunia serta keadaannya dengan segala isinya* 1856, facing p. 112

outline of the occurrences of the trip' he took as interpreter for a delegation to negotiate the release of some ships that were being detained in Kelantan. Apparently, Abdullah did not know what to do with the outline, and so North told him how to expand the notes into a travelogue; the result was published as *Kisah pelayaran Abdullah ke Kelantan*. North also states that he had encouraged Abdullah to write a work about his own life, for which North provided a list of topics. North gives us clear insight into his reasons for encouraging Abdullah to write the story. As he had found nothing but 'silly tales' in Malay writing, North thought it was time that someone wrote something sensible 'to improve the minds of the people [Malays]'. However, at the same time the story was also aimed at a European readership, who would find 'whatever Europeans would like to be informed of, which would naturally be concealed from their observation'. To them it would be of even more interest, because Abdullah had exerted himself 'to introduce many of the everyday phrases or idioms of the people; so that the book is also a storehouse for the student of the language'.⁵ The same emphasis on the book being of particular interest to foreigners wanting to learn Malay can be found in the letter North wrote to accompany a second manuscript of the *Hikayat* in November 1843.⁶

Although these letters clearly confirm North's support, we may never know how much of their content was true and to what extent North exaggerated his own role to show off to people in America. Perhaps more important, therefore, are texts that Abdullah reportedly translated and edited as textbooks for Malay schools, which had a profound influence on the ideological content of the *Hikayat*.⁷ These textbooks mended the damage inflicted by 'silly tales that would not help the Malays to progress one single step in civilization'. Still, one of these silly tales rolled off the missionary press around the same time as the writing of the *Hikayat* and the compilation of these textbooks. This was the *Sejarah Melayu*, apparently published to be used in

⁵ The quotations are taken from North's letter of October 1843, published in Skinner 1978:480-1.

⁶ Proudfoot 2000:59-60. North admired Abdullah for his knowledge of Malay, which also may be gathered from a comment he reportedly made about his Malay teacher: 'he is a mine of gold if you only know how to dig it out of him' (S. Dyer to his father, 27 February 1843, in: CWM, Ultra Ganges Singapore, Incoming letters, Box 2, Folder 3, Jacket A).

⁷ In the published text of the *Hikayat* Abdullah stated about North's texts: 'Many of his compositions I translated into Malay; about the Western sciences, stories about the expertise, industry and diligence of Europeans; about the nature of the physical world, the atmosphere, the invention of steamships and steam trains, the making of gas, water supply systems in America, the uses of steam, the whaling industry, and all sorts of other things about science and cleverness of Europeans to show several ways to the Malays so that they could attain and make all those things' (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir 1953:391, 1970:290). However, in one of the manuscript versions of the text it is stated that 'North wrote them in beautiful Malay' (Amin Sweeney, personal communication, 8-2-2006). This manuscript was written at North's behest and therefore this praise for his patron is not surprising, but it leaves us with two contradictive statements about how the Malay textbooks came into being. Or, are both accounts part of the truth and proof of the cooperation between the two men?

schools. According to its introduction, this text was aimed at an indigenous readership, and its publication apparently needed to be explained: 'Why were these useless stories and *Sejarah Melayu* printed, as they were only a waste of money and effort? What is the benefit to be found in them?' the editors asked rhetorically. Their answer was: language, even if the story was useless and full of lies, one would still learn correct and beautiful language by studying it, provided it was indeed written in a style like that of *Sejarah Melayu*. The introduction also prepared readers for a shock: this was a Malay text taken from manuscripts derived from a tradition that was the sole prerogative of royal blood. Now the text was being made available to anyone, by being printed: a revolutionary technique that had made it possible for Western civilization to progress to the extent that it could dominate the world.⁸

One section of this introduction was incorporated into another school text entitled 'Bagaimana jalan membuat kitab dengan dicap' (How to make printed books), which in turn was part of a body of texts produced by Abdullah and the missionaries during the 1840s. Several of these texts were published separately in educational magazines such as *Taman Pūngatauan* and *Pūngutib Segala Remah Pūngatauan*, and they were also published in a few compilations aimed at Malay schools in the Straits Settlements. The most comprehensive compilation is the one published by Keasberry in 1855 under the title *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian orang putih* (Story of white people's knowledge and expertise).⁹

This publication, as well as the texts published in magazines such as *Cermin Mata*, had an influence far beyond missionary schools. For one thing, they attracted the attention of Dutch officials who were desperately seeking appropriate materials for their newly-established government education system (Van der Putten 1995). The colonial government in Batavia sent seven issues of the magazine, together with about ten other titles, to the Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen (Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences) to determine whether these publications would be appropriate reading material to be used in the Netherlands Indies. W. Palmer van den Broek, who reviewed the publications, rejected the *Hikayat Abdullah* because it contained passages with 'uncomplimentary content for the Dutch' (wegens den op sommige plaatsen voor de Nederlanders niet vleijenden inhoud), but recommended that an anthology be made from parts of the *Cermin Mata*. He also advised authorities to search for more issues of the magazine and similar publications. The board decided that Palmer van den Broek would be charged with the compilation of the anthology and the firm De Lange would be asked to order the books from British India (*Bestuurs-vergadering* 1864:183-4). The anthology was published in

⁸ See Proudfoot 2002, for a detailed discussion of the impact printing made upon the reading of manuscripts in the Malay world.

⁹ In the latter 1855 version the chapter was renamed 'Dari hal membuat kitab dengan dicap'; see Figure 5.

two parts in 1866 by Landsdrukkerij in Batavia. The first part is in romanization and the second part in *jawi* script, which contains Abdullah's story about his pilgrimage to Mecca and a few other stories. The first part was also translated into Javanese and published in 1877 in Javanese script.

In the mid-1860s the *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian* was re-edited and romanized for use in government schools in the Netherlands Indies, where it was also translated into Mandailing, one of the languages spoken in north Sumatra (Rodgers 2002). In the Peninsula the *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian* was republished in an updated version in the 1880s to be used in the vernacular school system (*Jalan kepandaian*, The way to expertise). All these re-edited texts were updated to reflect modern developments, and were 'sanitized' of most of the blunt criticism of the local population found in the earlier texts. Although a detailed comparison between these and other schoolbooks used in the school system in the Peninsula and the Netherlands Indies would yield interesting insights into the diversity of colonial ideas on education of natives, this falls outside the scope of this article. Only in a few instances can I allude to changes made by the various editors and the connection to Abdullah's other writings.¹⁰

White people's knowledge and expertise

The body of educational texts produced by North, Keasberry, and Abdullah comprises texts on what was called natural history (physical sciences), with texts about the earth, atmosphere and winds; geography and anthropology, containing texts describing the continents and their history;¹¹ and technological innovations and social developments spurred by these innovations. The *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian* deals with topics falling into the last category, containing texts about gaslight in Europe, sawmills, the water system in Philadelphia, steamers and trains. Clearly the texts were intended to prepare the indigenous mind for the advent of these technologies and the changes that would follow. The story about steam locomotives begins with a summary of the development of train technology in England and the railway system, the complexity of its engine ('a big carriage full of instruments just like the works of a watch'; perhaps not the most appropriate comparison for pupils who had never seen a locomotive), and the chain of carriages pulled by the locomotive through the countryside, which was altered to make way for the railway. The story continues by establishing the time required to go from Singapore to other localities in the region, provided that the sea could be crossed by this wondrous means of transportation. For instance, Melaka would take three hours, Brunei

¹⁰ The compilations have different formats and contain different stories. I use the 1855 lithographed edition for quotations, but where necessary also refer to other collections.

¹¹ One of the compilations of these texts is titled *Hikayat Dunia*, which was used in Milner 1995:59-88.

20 hours, and China 48 hours. Time savings and economic advantages were emphasized as the train's most pronounced virtues:

The greatest use of the train is that it cuts long journeys short. Before people experienced the wonder of trains, they had to spend much money and time and go to much trouble to get to faraway places. And if a merchant were to travel for ten days, how much money would he lose in his business? There [in the West] are thousands of big merchants who cannot leave their business every day. [...] And another use of this facility is that it makes all merchandise cheap because travel expenses for long journeys are reduced; for instance, for weavers: because of the cost of transporting cotton over great distances, the cost of bringing the cloth to town was considerable. For that reason, in the old days it was expensive. But the above-mentioned uses are not at all for the benefit of the merchants or the weavers, but for the poor, so that they can buy cheaply. Because of the aforementioned, it brings comfort and prosperity to the poor, just as to the rich.¹²

The introduction of modernity through modern technologies also challenged the indigenous sense of time, which in this passage is clearly equated with economic gain (Comaroff 1997:171). However, profits were enjoyed not only by the rich; the predominant tone in these texts is that the poor would profit equally from economic development or even more so. This emphasis on aiding the poor represents one of the main goals of Protestant missionary societies established in the West at the end of the eighteenth century. The industrial revolution was in full swing in Britain, creating a new social order in the cities, with an industrial bourgeoisie, labourers, and a rapidly expanding class of the poor and wretched. To a certain extent these classes were open classes, which meant that social mobility became possible for people aspiring to join one of the more respected classes. The way to move upwards was of course through education, as many of the missionaries had experienced themselves:

¹² *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian* 1855:50-2. The original text reads: SEBERMULA adalah guna yang terbesar sekali dalam pekerjaan kereta asap itu yaitu mendekatkan perjalanan yang jauh². Adapun dahulu daripada orang mendapat hikmat kereta asap itu maka jikalau orang hendak pergi ke negeri² yang jauh² dapat ada kena beberapa banyak belanja dan susah dan lama di jalan. Dan jikalau ada saudagar pergi dalam sepuluh hari maka beberapalah kerugiannya dalam perniagaannya itu. Adapun di sana ada beberapa ribu² saudagar yang besar² dengan tiada boleh bergerak daripada pekerjaannya pada tiap² hari adanya. ... DAN sebagai lagi gunanya perbuatan itu menjadikan murah harga segala jenis dagangan sebab hilang belanja sewa perjalanan yang jauh² itu yaitu seperti kepada orang yang membuat kain itu maka dari asalnya belanja membawa kapas begitu jauh, beberapa belanja membawa kain itu ke bandar. Maka sebab itulah dahulu menjadi mahal. Maka adapun gunanya yang tersebut itu sekali² bukannya kepada saudagar² atau kepada orang yang membuat kain itu melainkan gunanya itu kepada segala orang yang miskin² supaya boleh ia membeli dengan murah. Maka adalah dari sebab segala perkara yang tersebut itu mendatangkan kesenangan dan kesentosaan kepada segala orang miskin seperti orang kaya² adanya.

Low churchmen, more than anyone else, personified the process: many of them, especially from northern parishes, were former artisans or peasants who had climbed, unsteadily, into the middle class. And, lacking wealth or distinction, they clung tenuously to their new social position. (Comaroff 1997:168.)

As many of the missionaries had managed to climb the social ladder, they expected indigenous people to be able to do the same. Setting up a basic school system was their first and foremost goal; they hoped that conversion would follow, by listening to sermons and reading books.¹³

The emphasis on the poor is all-encompassing in the *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian*. As we saw in the text about steam trains, these are said to benefit the poor because cloth would become cheaper; in the part about sawmills it is expected that the poor would be able to buy cheap boards to build strong houses with floors that would prevent foul smells entering from beneath the floorboards.¹⁴ In a second group of texts dealing with modern institutions such as banks, newspapers, printing, history, library and boarding schools, opportunities for the poor for social mobility through self-improvement are emphasized. As may be expected, this is most explicitly brought forward in the text about a (Christian) boarding school in America where farm work and technical training were combined with ordinary subjects.¹⁵ The institution was funded by the crops the pupils cultivated and the products they made. There were no disciplinary problems such as in institutions of the rich: all the pupils worked hard and were well behaved.

Because of this diligent labour and good disposition the [American] settlements were full of clever and dutiful poor. Therefore the rich are not abusive of the poor as the Malay aristocracy abuse ordinary people, because the knowledge of the poor is equal to the knowledge and expertise of the rich. The people there [America] do not respect someone because of his wealth, but respect even the poor because of their knowledge. All graduates from that institution live in comfort and wellbeing. They do not think that now that they are learned they can sit still doing nothing but eat and sleep, as the people in this region tend to do.¹⁶

¹³ A sermon delivered in London in 1824 is telling in this respect: 'The time is gone by when it will be assumed, that ignorance is the mother of devotion, and that to keep men in subordination, it is necessary to debar them from education. [...] Religion is the surest foundation of the political edifice, and its principles constituted of moral elements, which must eventually, cement and consolidate the several parts of the structure.' (Part of a sermon by John Reynolds preached at Crown Court Chapel in 1824, quoted in Thorne 1997:244.)

¹⁴ See Abdullah's description of settlements on the east coast of the Peninsula in which the foul smell of rubbish under houses was part of the topos (Sweeney 2005:66, 77).

¹⁵ In the early 1840s editions of these schoolbooks, this text was entitled 'On clarifying teaching poor children' (Pada menyatakan mengajar budak2 miskin), but 'poor' was dropped from the title of the later versions. This text was omitted from the 1864 edition published in Batavia.

¹⁶ *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian* 1855:14-5. The original text reads: SEBERMULA adapun sebab pekerjaan yang baik ini dan adat yang baik ini menjadi penuhlah segala negeri2 itu dengan orang yang miskin pandai dan yang baik maka tiadalah boleh orang kaya itu menghinakan orang miskin sep-

Education of the poor should be facilitated so that they can become as clever as the rich and earn respect because of their knowledge. The text notes that the West once had the same problem, but modern developments changed all that. All Western countries purportedly have libraries where people can borrow useful books about the real world, unlike the Malays, who write stories about giants and ghosts containing no useful knowledge at all. Moreover, they keep books hidden from interested people so that they have no access to the knowledge contained in them (Proudfoot 2002). This point of criticism in the text directed to Malays about libraries is reiterated in the part about the use of newspapers, in an enumeration of the advantages of this medium. In addition to the information they provide, the most prominent characteristic of newspapers is that they provide a discussion forum that everyone is free to engage in. Inventors can spread information about the use of their work and people can emulate them, writers can disseminate knowledge for others to learn, and state authorities cannot act without the consent of the people because their actions will be reported in the newspaper. 'It is not as with Malays here, who are afraid of people in authority; in the West the authorities are afraid of ordinary people.'¹⁷ The Malay reader is thus confronted with a reversal of the traditional notion that writing is commissioned by the ruler and therefore will never be detrimental to the wellbeing of the ruler and the polity. Here he is taught that writing is an instrument to keep the authorities in check, so that they do not issue laws and regulations that would harm the population. The prerequisite for this development of a critical mass through the dissemination of writing was of course the introduction of printing.

This topic is dealt with extensively in the *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian* and was also partly copied in the introduction to the *Sejarah Melayu*, published in the early 1840s. The text starts by sketching briefly the historical background of printing in Europe, where people used to write with a quill, like Malays, but then got the idea to design letters that could be used over and over again. This was also done in China, but at that time Europeans had no knowledge of what was going on in that part of the world. Printing started by using wooden type, but soon people cast tin fonts that were used instead, as is still the case with contemporary presses. The text continues with a detailed technical

erti orang besar² Melayu itu menghinakan orang kecilnya karena ada ilmunya orang miskin itu seperti ilmu dan kepandaian orang kaya juga adapun orang di sana tiada ia menghormati orang sebab kayanya melainkan jikalau orang miskin sekalipun jikalau ada ia berilmu maka yaitu dihormati orang adanya adapun segala orang yang keluar daripada tempat pelajarannya itu mendapatlah sentosa dan selamat kehidupannya selama-lamanya maka tiadalah mereka itu berpikir sebab sudah ia menjadi pandai sekarang biarlah ia duduk sahaja cuma² dengan tiada bekerja dengan makan tidur sahaja kecualinya seperti pekerjaan orang sebelah sini itulah kesukaannya.

¹⁷ *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian* 1855:55. This passage was omitted from the romanized version published in Batavia for the obvious reason that the Netherlands Indies authorities were wary of putting seditious ideas into the heads of the indigenous population.

description of printing presses and how they are operated, clearly designed to be used as manual for the print shop run by the missionaries themselves, in which they employed schoolchildren, making printing one of the practical subjects taught at these schools. The technical part concludes by saying that a description is not sufficient for children to understand the complexities of the printing business, and therefore readers should go to one of the print shops in the Straits Settlements to see for themselves. This part is followed by an exposition of five advantages of printing, the part that was copied in the *Sejarah Melayu*. Firstly, printing produces authoritative texts that will last for hundreds of years in the same form without readers having to doubt whether it was really as the author had written it down. This is clearly an attack on the Malay tradition in which manuscripts were copied and always updated to suit the preferences of a new ruler, but at the same time replete with errors made by ignorant copyists. Secondly, printing is much faster than copying: one printer has the power of 200 or more copyists. Thirdly, printed texts are much clearer to read than handwritten ones, which come in all shapes and forms. Of course there are people who would argue that handwritten texts are easier to read, because they are as yet unfamiliar with printed books. It has to be acknowledged that children taught at schools are wiser than old folks 'who had caused the demise of their "self" in the traditions of their forefathers'.¹⁸ Fourthly, if clever people hear that there is a way to produce thousands of books, they will feel encouraged to write new texts, which in turn will trigger other people to produce texts to the advancement of the sciences. This is what happened in Europe; after the development of printing the nations developed at great speed until they came here and were able to subjugate the people of these regions. Fifthly, texts will become available to everyone because production is much cheaper than copying by hand.

In the explanation of the last advantage and in a few other places the direct intimacy of the classroom and a sense of individualism are evoked through the use of the pronouns *aku* and *engkau*.¹⁹

¹⁸ The Malay of the original text: yang telah mematikan dirinya dalam adat nenek moyang (*Ceritera ilmu kepandaian* 1855:66-7) is quite awkward and suggests a literal translation from an English expression.

¹⁹ Milner 1995:70-1. This pair of pronouns is used in traditional texts in intimate conversation and in contexts where a distinct difference in status exists between the two interlocutors, for instance a raja would use *aku* to his servant, who would answer with *patik*, *hamba* or *sahaya* to refer to himself. It was not used for the authorial voice in the way Abdullah used *aku*, and as it is used in these school texts. The occurrence of the pair *aku* and *engkau* may be an indication of pieces that were fundamentally reworked by Abdullah, but this needs further research. What also needs further investigation is the search I did in Proudfoot's database for these pronouns; more than half of the total occurrences of this pair in the 46 prose texts in this database were found in the Malay Bible! Might there be some unexpected proof here of the influence of missionaries and Bible translators? <http://online.anu.edu.au/asianstudies/ahcen/proudfoot/MCP/> (accessed 5-5-2005).

If you ask me what is the use of cheap books, I will answer: isn't it a good thing that there are many books for the poor so that they will be stopped from idly walking around and falling into bad ways? And if he can obtain these books cheaply, so that he can sit down and read together with his wife and children, isn't that a thousand times better than indulging in indolence and ignorance, just eating and sleeping like animals? Furthermore, if books are cheap, they become tremendously useful in places of learning. If you think there is no use in that, I would respond, if you own a manuscript full of useful words, eloquently and clearly phrased, and beautifully composed and correctly written, well, what a delight it is for you, and how high will be the price you will require for it, and perhaps you would hide it from others' eyes. But imagine a big school packed with pupils, and in front of each one of them a nice book which they need not borrow or rent from others. If the books get lost or tattered, even poor children may easily obtain the same book again. If this book should fall into the hands of arrogant hajis or others who are envious of poor people acquiring great knowledge, or people who hold the opinion that worthy knowledge should not be debased by giving it to the common man, and there are thick-headed rajas afraid that their subjects will become cleverer than they are, and that they will lose their authority, all of them we would oppose on two grounds. Firstly, that knowledge was created by God [Allah] for all human beings, and therefore it is absolutely not right for one person to conceal knowledge from another. It is as if you stole an heirloom from its inheritor. Secondly, when printing was originally invented in Europe, there were clever people envious of common people acquiring knowledge. But at that time, there were also cleverer people still, who were not envious because they realized that, while common people would become clever, the already clever people could become even cleverer. And there was an even greater advantage in Europe at that time: if many of the common people were becoming clever, the rulers would surely be afraid to languish in their stupidity and oppression and stick to their futile games, for this would gnaw at them daily to the point that they would get up and start learning.²⁰

²⁰ *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian* 1855:68-71. The Malay text reads: Maka jikalau engkau bertanya apakah guna kitab yang murah harganya itu maka aku jawab akan dia bukankah baik ada kitab2 banyak kepada orang miskin supaya tertegallah ia daripada berjalan2 yang tiada berfaedah dan masuk dalam pekerjaan yang jahat itu. Dan kalau ia boleh mendapat kitab2 itu dengan murah harganya supaya boleh ia duduk membaca dengan anak bininya bukankah itu terlebih baik seribu kali daripada tinggal dalam malas dan bodoh dengan makan tidur sahaja seperti binatang. Dan lagi jikalau kitab itu murah harganya maka menjadi terlalu besar gunanya dalam segala tempat belajar. Maka jikalau pada sangkamu pekerjaan ini tiada berguna maka aku jawab akan dia jikalau ada kepadamu sebuah kitab tulisan tangan yang penuh dengan perkataan yang berguna dan yang halus lagi terang bahasanya dan elok pula karangannya maka betul sekali hurufnya maka beberapalah indahnya yaitu kepadamu dan beberapakah mahal harganya engkau kehendaki dan barangkali engkau sembunyikan daripada mata orang lain. Maka cobalah engkau berpikir jikalau ada tempat belajar yang besar itu penuh dengan budak2 maka adalah di hadapan masing2 sebuah kitab yang baik dengan tiada meminjam dan sewa kepada orang lain maka jikalau hilang dan rusak maka jikalau anak miskin sekalipun boleh senang dapat kitab begitu lagi. SYAHDAN jikalau kiranya kitab ini sampai ke tangan haji2 yang congkak atau orang lain2 yang menaruh dengki akan orang2 miskin mendapat ilmu yang besar atau orang yang ada menaruh sangka bahwa tiada patut ilmu yang baik2 itu dirusakkan kepada segala orang

This passage nicely epitomizes the main aim of the missionaries' educational drive: it was aimed at poor and ordinary Malays, who could improve their fate if only they would go to school. For that they needed books, which could only be produced by printing presses. Stupid rajas and arrogant hajis would try to prevent commoners from attaining knowledge by keeping books inaccessible to others, but the same obstructions had occurred in Europe and citizens had overcome them thanks to their diligence and determination.²¹ The conclusion of this text calls upon Malays to buy a press costing a mere 1,000 dollars and to send some bright young lads abroad to study and translate a few scientific texts that would awaken Malay interest in science and make the Malay nation one to be reckoned with (kelak bangsa Melayu ini terbilang kepada bangsa lain2).

If the thick-headed elders and the teachers who claim to be clever and the arrogant hajis forbid you and curse you for what you do, you still must carry out these honourable tasks [of studying and translating] and become a respected human being.²²

The radical and polemic tone of this text seems to be designed to provoke discussion among its readers, a discussion the missionaries were happy to engage in. However, there was no 'public' forum for such a discussion other than schools and wayside preaching. *The Malay Magazine* of the early 1820s provided space in each issue for native contributions (see the prospectus), but it is unknown whether a native ever contributed to the magazine. The later magazines of the 1840s and 1850s were apparently not designed for open discussion of religious topics, such as was known in India. These magazines

kecil dan raja2 yang bebal pun ada yang takut rakyatnya menjadi terlebih pandai daripadanya takut hilang kebesarannya, maka adalah kepada segala mereka itu kami lawan atas dua perkara. Pertama2 maka bahwa sesungguhnya adalah segala ilmu itu diturunkan Allah taala bagi segala manusia maka sebab itu sekali2 tiadalah patut seorang menyembunyikan dia daripada seorang. Maka adalah seolah2 engkau lah pencuri pusaka daripada warisnya adanya. Kedua dalam negeri Eropah pun pada asalnya apabila orang mendapat ilmu cap itu maka barang orang pandai ada menaruh dengki supaya jangan diketahui oleh orang banyak akan ilmu itu tetapi pada masa itu ada pula orang yang terlebih pandai maka yaitu tiada menaruh dengki sebab diketahuinya sungguhpun orang kecil itu menjadi pandai tetapi orang yang telah pandai itu boleh menjadi terlebih pandai pula. Dan lagi ada suatu faedah yang terlebih besar dalam negeri Eropah pada masa itu maka jikalau banyak orang rakyat menjadi pandai niscaya menjadi takutlah raja2nya itu lagi tinggal dalam kekebalannya dan anaiayanya dan tinggal dalam permainan yang sia2 karena ini menjadi congkèl yang menyongkèl dia pada tiap2 hari sehingga ia bangun pergi belajar.

²¹ Saliently, the editor of the Netherlands Indies censored the text from overly direct criticism of rajas and hajis, and in the version that was published for Straits Settlements schools in the 1880s the texts were 'rectified' by the editor.

²² *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian* 1855:75-6. The Malay text reads: SEBERMULA jikalau orang tua2 yang bebal dan guru2 yang mengaku dirinya pandai dan haji2 yang congkak2 meneguhkan engkau dan mengumpat engkau sebab pekerjaan itu maka pergilah juga engkau membuat akan perkara2 yang mulia ini sampai engkau menjadi manusia adanya.

only provided general knowledge and religious stories. The whole enterprise was set up to educate and convert natives who could spread Protestantism by using their inside knowledge of the community, but as noted earlier the missionaries in the Peninsula made hardly any converts, nor did they succeed in creating a critical mass that could be engaged in an open discussion that perhaps would spark interest among a wider circle of indigenous people.

The above passage also calls for public renunciation of traditional ways and structures that obstructed the intellectual development of the Malay nation. The same is argued for the kind of texts that should be produced for the new medium of printing: the old stories are no longer suitable, new types of writing need to be created. In one of the last texts in the *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian*, about what is called a 'knowledge of narratives' (*ilmu hikayat*), that is history, pupils are again taught that Malay stories are full of lies and fantastic events that could never have happened. In contrast, European 'knowledge of narratives' had resulted in truthful accounts of what had transpired in history, which serve as lessons for the coming generations. In the old days kings could wage war triggered by a minor provocation which would send tens of thousands soldiers to their death, leaving as many widows and orphaned children. But now, the text explains, when the kings of England, the Netherlands, and France want to make war, they have to ask permission of an assembly of hundreds of well-educated people chosen by the citizens. Malays should therefore forsake their blind trust in the old traditions and adopt the new 'knowledge of narratives' so that they will become as clever as Europeans.²³

Abdullah's writings

Although missionaries made some progress with ordinary people who seemed, however, to have converted mainly for economic reasons, much to their regret and frustration they failed to form a group of indigenous intellectual followers who would continue on the path laid out for them. In his correspondence Keasberry states that he was brought to tears in the case of a certain Ali, a Malay teacher from Melaka who converted and taught at the missionary school; Keasberry was forced to excommunicate him in the early 1840s because he was living with a woman who was not his lawfully wedded wife (O'Sullivan 1986:136). It was not until 1860 that Keasberry could proudly report that he had one promising indigenous pupil who would be useful in publishing Malay materials. He also alludes to a group of graduates of his school who subscribed to *Cermin Mata*, a magazine he published in 1858-1859:

²³ *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian* 1855:76-85. See Proudfoot 2002:136-7 for an abbreviated translation of this text. The missionaries' hope to develop a more democratic and liberal system of government seems to have been genuine and was probably one of the reasons the colonial government was not all that happy about their activities.

The mission press is constantly employed in issuing tracts & useful works for distribution, & for the use of schools. I send by this opportunity a Malay quarterly pamphlet which is edited by Rajab, who is becoming very useful in this way; most of the articles in the work are his own production, written in good idiomatic Malay & are much admired by those who are competent to judge in the language. The work is called 'The Eyeglass to those who seek knowledge'. Most of the young men formerly educated in the mission school, subscribe to it; so by this means we hope to establish a sound & useful literature among the Malays, which by the blessing of God, may in time take the place of those romances & legends which tend so much to corrupt the minds of the natives.²⁴

In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, all the missionaries' hopes were fixed on Abdullah, whom the Reverend J. Stronach called 'almost the only learned native scholar in the Malay language now to be found'.²⁵ In a later letter Stronach said that he believed that Abdullah's knowledge of the Malay idiom was unmatched in the whole Malay world.²⁶ The only missionary to raise objections against Abdullah and his use of Malay was the Reverend Beighton, who caustically criticized the translation of St John's Gospel by American missionaries in collaboration with Abdullah. He argued that the terms Abdullah used in this translation would denigrate the Christian faith in the eyes of Malays (O'Sullivan 1986:227), but his criticism does not seem to have diminished the trust most of the missionaries had in Abdullah and in his command of Malay.

From the late 1830s until 1843 Abdullah worked mainly for Alfred North, who apparently had his own difficulties with his informant but had learned how to work with him to achieve good results, as his reported opinion about Abdullah implies: 'he is a mine of gold if you only know how to dig it out of him' (see footnote 6). North was in great need of educational texts to print on his press, apparently because the schools were running out of useful teaching materials.²⁷ As stated in the *Sejarah Melayu* and the *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian*, the old Malay materials would keep people in a state of darkness, or corrupt the minds of the natives, as Keasberry informed people in England. Abdullah's story of his life in the port cities of Melaka and Singapore would therefore be a welcome addition to the materials at hand. Abdullah had already proven that he was capable of writing a story that was considered innovative compared to traditional writing: an account of his voyage to

²⁴ Keasberry to LMS, 20-2-1860, in: SOAS, CWM, Ultra Ganges Singapore, Incoming letters, Box 2, Folder 2, Jacket B.

²⁵ Stronach to LMS, 31-3-1841, in: SOAS, CWM, Ultra Ganges Singapore, Incoming letters, Box 2, Folder 2, Jacket B.

²⁶ Stronach to LMS, 30-9-1841, in: SOAS, CWM, Ultra Ganges Singapore, Incoming letters, Box 2, Folder 2, Jacket B.

²⁷ Keasberry to LMS, 15-3-1841, in: SOAS, CWM, Ultra Ganges Singapore, Incoming letters, Box 2, Folder 2, Jacket B.

Kelantan that was written in full accord with Western taste, replete with criticism of backward Malay traditions and an ignorant population ruled by a despotic aristocracy. In 1840 he was assigned the task of writing a much more important work: a truthful story, interesting and containing information for foreign readers about Malay traditions, and full of useful knowledge for Malay pupils. North's expectations must have been high, and pressure on the author must have been strong; to fail his patron might damage his reputation and perhaps even end his career at the 'European court'. It took Abdullah more than two years to complete his *Hikayat*, but because of the closing down of the missionary posts in 1843, it would be another six years before the book was edited and published on Keasberry's lithographic missionary press in a deluxe edition.

Both the influence of over thirty years of collaboration with missionaries and the terms of the assignment are clearly reflected in the *Hikayat*, which is a highly ambivalent and ambiguous text, neither traditional nor modern, written in sometimes beautiful, sometimes quite awkward Malay, with some passages aimed at a Malay audience but others clearly intended for Western readers. A scholar of Malay recently typified the content of the *Hikayat* as follows:

Hikayat Abdullah is a hotchpotch of tales: anecdotes about the author's youth; descriptions of his personal experiences with British administrators, scholars and missionaries; reports of the growth of Singapore; descriptions of Chinese activities; reflections on the Malay language; diatribes against the laziness and indolence of Malays; criticisms of Malay rulers; and counsels to his readers (Maier 2004:211).

The text did not fail North's expectations nor did it fail to attract attention and admiration from predominantly Western scholars, and critical reviews from many Malay scholars and commentators. Carroll (1999) has drawn attention to the importance of *Sejarah Melayu* for the structure of the *Hikayat*. In three of its chapters the *Hikayat* relates the rise and fall of the Malay ruler of Singapore: how Tengku Long agreed to Raffles's proposal to become ruler and his settlement in Singapore, how he sold out to Governor Crawford because of his indolence and ignorance, and how eventually the Sultan also lost the last remnants of dignity and respect after he put his trust in a commoner who misled him for personal gain. This storyline is interlaced with several chapters about the new English rajas, whom he sometimes criticizes but more often praises for their enlightened rule over the frontier towns of Singapore, Melaka, and Pulau Pinang. Governor Butterworth was the English raja who ruled at the time that the *Hikayat* was being prepared for publication. The governor was favourably disposed toward Keasberry's educational endeavours, therefore the praise for Butterworth inserted into the lithographed edition does not come as a real surprise. Abdullah depicts this governor as a kind and well-educated man who really cared for the citizens,

especially Malays, and who even assisted in putting out the fire which had broken out in the Malay quarter. His greatest achievement as governor was the eradication of piracy in Singapore waters and the Straits of Malacca, an achievement of the utmost importance in the mercantile society of the port cities, which makes Abdullah exclaim:

So Allah moved his heart to find a way of removing this danger from the seas. In this he was assisted by English warships which boldly chased the pirates and put a stop to their depredations. May Allah preserve Queen Victoria on her throne. I give a thousand thanks to Allah for the peace and happiness of life under the English flag and under the rule of a Governor who is so wise. (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir 1970:300.)

In the translation the name 'Allah' has been retained to indicate that God was referred to by this Arabic-derived noun in the *Hikayat*, as was also the case in Malay writings of Christian missionaries in Singapore. Translations of the Bible and other Christian texts in Malay made ample use of Arabic for specific terms, such as Allah for God and Rasul for prophet or apostle. It is telling that in the *Hikayat* the name of the Prophet Muhammad does not occur, and that Rasul is used in both Christian and Islamic contexts, such as *Kisah segala Rasul* (Acts of the Apostles) and *Allah dan Rasul* (God and his Prophet).²⁸ However, Abdullah makes no attempt to conceal his religious identity as Muslim; on the contrary, time and again he emphasizes his Islamic faith. This may be seen as a reaction against the pressure exerted by Christian missionaries on the Islamic congregation in the port cities, and as an attempt to convince the Malays among his audience that his faith had not waned as a result of his collaboration with the missionaries (Carroll 1999:109-10). Whatever the reason, Abdullah's emphasis on his Muslim identity is there for all to see, which is striking given that the text was written at the behest of missionaries and printed and reprinted on their printing presses. On the other hand, the missionaries could hardly object to Abdullah's terminology; the words represented the author as a pious believer — could the missionaries possibly ask for more? — who, from a linguistic point of view, could be either a Christian or a Muslim.

One of most prominent recurring topics in Abdullah's writings is language. This may come as no surprise since he was born in Melaka as a descendant of an immigrant merchant family hailing from southern India and Arabia. Abdullah grew up in a multilingual environment, where Malay

²⁸ The same holds for *Kisah pelayaran Abdullah ke Kelantan*, in which the only clear Islamic context occurs when he explains Sayid's background as a descendant of Rasul Allah (Messenger of God, that is Muhammad), so again there is no mention of the name Muhammad. According to Sweeney (2005:259-60), Abdullah only once mentioned the name of Muhammad, which subsequently was censored by the editor of the 'Account of Abdullah's voyage to Mecca' (*Kisah pelayaran Abdullah ke Mekah*), the editor being none other than the Reverend Benjamin Keasberry.

and Tamil were the main languages he heard and spoke during his youth. In his *Hikayat* he emphasizes that he studied these languages with teachers, as he also did with Arabic in studying the Koran, which is in accordance with tradition throughout the Islamic world. Furthermore, Abdullah relates his dealings with Indian soldiers with whom he exchanged his ability in writing the Koran for their teaching him Hindustani (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir 1970:48-9). Besides being a merchant, Abdullah's father also made a living from his writing abilities, which he used for writing letters and contracts for other merchants, assisting the Dutch in their administration, and even teaching the odd foreigner (Marsden) interested in studying Malay beyond basic everyday conversation.²⁹ Demand for such teachers rapidly increased during Abdullah's youth as a result of missionary activities and growing interest by colonial officials in indigenous language and culture, and it is not surprising that Abdullah followed in his father's footsteps. They were language brokers dealing in words and concepts which they could translate, write down in a good hand and in articulate phrasings, or teach. No wonder language was of paramount importance in Abdullah's writing; it was the source of livelihood for him and his family, and therefore it was of importance to himself (as the assignment for the *Hikayat* was a work about himself), but of course he also had to show his patrons that Malay was an important aspect of life in the port cities in order to secure his role as broker. As suggested above, the *Hikayat* itself was an assignment that Abdullah delivered to his client-patron North.

For the education enterprise of the missionaries in Singapore, language teaching was important both for pupils of divergent ethnicities, and for the missionaries themselves. The *Sejarah Melayu* was published only because of its linguistic merits. In his requests for a new printing press, Keasberry emphasized the lack of good materials: 'the few Thomsen did publish are defective' and 'those which are published in Batavia are written in a style & idiom quite different from that spoken in the island'.³⁰ Abdullah's *Hikayat* must have been considered a godsend. North was pleased with the *Hikayat* 'in beautiful Malay', also stating that the author had 'taken particular pains to introduce many of the everyday phrases or idioms of the people' (Letter from North, October 1843, quoted in Skinner 1978:480-1). Many others, however, have been much less complimentary about the book, noting the unidiomatic bazaar Malay phrases which show purportedly Abdullah's Tamil-Arab descent (Traill 1979). In this context it is relevant to quote from the ending of one of North's letters: because of its idiomatic expressions 'the book is also a

²⁹ Abdullah's *Hikayat* seems to be the only source for this information about Marsden being a student of his father. For the services rendered by Abdullah's father to the Dutch in Melaka and Riau, see Proudfoot 2003.

³⁰ Keasberry to LMS, 14-9-1841, in: SOAS, CWM, Ultra Ganges Singapore, Incoming letters, Box 2, Folder 2, Jacket B.

storehouse for the student of the language'. Clearly North thought of it as a textbook that would be very useful for (foreign) students of Malay, as apparently was indeed the case.³¹ One of the characteristics of Abdullah's language in the *Hikayat* is the frequent use of all sorts of traditional sayings and proverbs, of which Hadijah Rahmat (2001:239-43) lists a total of 151 examples. In a passage telling about his translation of a Tamil *Pancatantera*, Abdullah reveals his apparent motivation for this plethora of wise words:

I familiarized myself with the story and took great pains in translating it, because I found in the book a number of stories and words, similes, metaphors, and comparisons which would add to the reader's intellect and wisdom and wit. However, the story and the episodes in them are untrue, and therefore you [*engkau*] should not pay attention to the story and the episodes, because I do not ask you to believe the story and episodes. Do I not realize that they are the works of man and therefore untrue? But what I want you to do, after you have taken its gist, is to get rid of its rubbish.* With this kind of ignorance teachers ordered the burning of many old manuscripts and stories in many of the Malay states because they contain lies and nonsense. Why would you heed those lies? Let them remain where they are. But you should pay attention to its composition, and the beauty of the coherence of the words and the sweetness of its words, so that you may gain capital for writing books which are true and correct, and useful [*berfaedah*] indefinitely.³²

This passage says much about a number of Abdullah's ideas as maintained by him throughout his writings. First, we see the missionaries' inspired topos of Malay classical literature containing nothing but lies; they considered this literature to be merely fictitious; the pupil-reader should discard it as rubbish. This also leads to the conclusion that Abdullah totally disregarded Malay writing of a distinctly Islamic character, which is probably the mainstay of this traditional Malay literature that he was so firmly familiar with. This Eurocentric notion of literature also resulted in collections of Malay manuscripts with complete absence of this type of Malay writing: in the opinion of European manuscript hunters, Malay literature consisted of histories, romances, and ballads. The awkward sentence about the burning of manuscripts probably refers to information found in his father's records about his mission to locate manuscripts for the Dutch in Trengganu (see Proudfoot 2003). It also echoes the introduction to the *Sejarah Melayu*, which states that however bad a piece of Malay writing is, it

³¹ The popularity of the *Hikayat* as a textbook is apparent from the many reprints of the work, but is also substantiated in an article in the newspaper *Jawi Peranakan*. The article reports errors in a new edition of the *Hikayat* and states that a previous expensive edition published by someone in Europe had sold out because 'the white people studying Malay like to peruse the *Hikayat*' (*Jawi Peranakan*, 7-11-1887).

³² Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir 1953:376; see also Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir 1970:279-80. I have translated this passage in a much more literary fashion than Hill did in his translation, so that the structure of Abdullah's sentences become clear. It also prevents errors such as shown in Carroll, 1999:102, as she works from Hill's translation rather than from the text.

is still worthy of publication, and thus preservation, because of its language.

Second, we find another instance of Abdullah's rather pedantic voice directed to Malay school pupils (using the pronouns *aku-engkau*), and this paragraph is not even one of the many that are introduced by *nasihat* ('advice, counsel'), the word he frequently uses to indicate a moral counsel.³³ It seems clear that he is addressing schoolchildren: in the majority of school texts published for missionary schools this is the normal way to address the intended reader. That he was also writing for his foreign pupils is apparent from an interpolation found in the English translation of an earlier manuscript version of the *Hikayat*, which was presented to J.T. Thomson (emphasis added):

So, I forewarn all such as wish to see and read the above work (Galilah and Daminah) that I have placed it in the hands of Dr North, an American, one who bathes to his heart's content in the sea of Malay language; for he is an especial *disciple* of mine, in whom I have the greatest trust in translating English into Malay according to the correct idiom.³⁴

Of great importance was this 'correct idiom' which, in Abdullah's eyes, was apparently synonymous with proverbs, sayings, and metaphors gleaned from old manuscripts. North, his special 'disciple', was becoming well versed in these 'traditional types of expressions' and found the *Hikayat* a storehouse of such expressions relevant for students of Malay.³⁵

A third idea brought forward by Abdullah in the quoted passage is that the study of Malay will provide 'capital' (*modal*) for students to write 'useful' (*berfaedah*) books. The economic terminology used by Abdullah is in line with his role as language broker, but this is only part of his awareness of language as a means for development and self-improvement; he was also well aware of its philosophical component. Krishnan (2001:112-9) has drawn attention to Abdullah's use of the word *faedah*, originally an Arabic word which combines the meaning of economic gain and spiritual and intellectual usefulness. This word is very frequently found in traditional Malay writing in the sense of 'moral significance of a story for the listener/reader', and it is used

³³ Apparently these *nasihat*, which have attracted much scholarly attention, were only inserted into the lithographed edition of the text. The manuscripts do not contain any of them, which leads to the conclusion that Keasberry must have inserted them, which does not seem far-fetched if one examines Keasberry's own Malay writings replete with *nasihat* (Amin Sweeney, personal communication, 8-2-2006).

³⁴ The same pronoun and pedantic tone seem to be present in Raja Ali Haji's *Bustan al-Katibin*, a linguistic textbook written in the early 1850s addressing an audience of Malay pupils. However, a thorough comparison is needed to decide whether this is indeed the case.

³⁵ This passage is found in a footnote in Hill's translation of the *Hikayat* (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir 1970:280, note 17) and was inserted after the word 'rubbish' in the translation from the published *Hikayat* (see asterisk). Galilah and Daminah refers to Abdullah's translation of the *Pancatantera*.

by Braginsky (1993) in opposition to *indah* ('beautiful') for a systematization of classical Malay literature. In broad lines, the core of this system consists of morally beneficial texts, while the periphery is formed by tales of beauty, which tend to emphasize entertaining and soothing elements. The notion that Malay texts were expected to provide *faedah* as a criterion for good writing has been amply adduced by scholars (see, for instance, Sweeney 1980:28-31), and Abdullah was very much imbued with this notion. However, through his use of *faedah* for both economic gain and moral significance of texts in ambiguous contexts (such as in the quoted passage), the two aspects of its meaning converge, and therefore lead to the interpretation that the writing of texts provides moral benefit to readers and economic gain to its author, with the possibility that the roles of author and reader can be exchanged. Therefore, studying old texts, as Abdullah frequently emphasizes, has the same corollary, and is an important means of self-improvement as was taught by the missionaries. Malay lack of interest in the study of their own literature is therefore presented as doubly deficient: morally wrong and economically stupid.

The shortcomings of Malays are enumerated in the epilogue to the *Hikayat*, which Abdullah wrote some time after he had finished the main part of the work (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir 1970:24). The epilogue comprises an extended lament with admonitions and exhortations to his Malay classroom audience, echoing missionaries' preconceived notions based on eighteenth-century European history. Abdullah reports that he pondered for some time the question why the Malays do not develop, and came to the conclusion, very familiar to readers of Abdullah's works, that the rajas are to blame, because they rule tyrannically, fail to educate their sons so that they become even worse than their fathers, and keep the old stupid *adat* firmly in place, discouraging their subjects from self-improvement. Their subjects are so imbued with respect for *adat* and their raja that they wallow in their indolence and ignorance, saying that they are poor, so what can they do about it. Abdullah then refers to Britons of the old days when they walked around in animal skins, made human sacrifices, and daubed their limbs with blue paint, details from a story he apparently translated for Keasberry, who published it in his magazine *Taman Püngatauan*.³⁶ But of course those people left their ignorant *adat* behind and developed into a great nation. The key to this development is the study of language, through which new knowledge can be absorbed and new concepts grasped. 'Truly it is language which civilizes man and improves his knowledge and understanding, directing all his energies and raising the level of his own culture besides imparting it to others. By means of language alone can the secrets of the human mind be

³⁶ 'Hikayat orang asal nügri England' ('The origin of the English people'), published in instalments in *Taman Püngatauan*, January-May 1848, and illustrated with lithographic pictures by Keasberry.

Figure 7. Steam train passing through the countryside, illustration taken from 'Deri hal kreta asap' (About steam trains), in *Taman Pūngatauan*, vol. 3, no. 28, April 1850, facing p. 73

revealed. A great nation necessarily has a fine language' (Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir 1970:315). However, Malays fail to teach their children the necessary discipline for studying and becoming smart, and therefore will remain the proverbial frogs under the coconut shell, thinking that the shell is the sky.³⁷

Conclusion

In his *Hikayat*, Abdullah welcomes the new developments and ideas brought by missionaries and colonial officials, and tries to convince the Malay portion of his audience of the beneficial effects of these developments. We know today that missionaries tried to educate the indigenous people with the (barely) hidden agenda of proselytizing the Christian faith and developing a community that would be easier to manage and could be deployed for economic purposes. The question then arises: to what extent was Abdullah aware of this agenda of the 'new' white rajas he so much admired? Can his *Hikayat* be read as a 'discourse of dissent', as Carroll argues? Was Abdullah consciously formulating 'a new concept of "the individual"', as Milner (1995:33) puts it? These scholars also point out that Abdullah's choice to name his tale a *hikayat* is something that must 'have startled Malay readers' (Milner 1995:39), and that it may have been intended to make the content 'easily accessible to his Malay audience' (Carroll 1999:93).

These scholars, however, seem to forget that Abdullah, for the first time ever in the history of Malay literature, wrote for a printing press. The products of this press were distributed to schools and through a few other channels, most probably not including bookshops (Malay bookshops appeared a few decades later). Malay children surely formed part of the initial audience, while the other part consisted of foreign students of the language, at whom the publication may have been principally targeted, if one considers its price of four dollars. The second edition was only to appear 30 years later in 1880, apparently ordered by the Royal Asiatic Society, which sold 75 per cent of the print run to the Education Department (Proudfoot 1993:99). If the *Hikayat* startled anyone then it must have been Malay teachers, who would have had at least some familiarity with Malay literary tradition and may have had a hard time explaining the content to their pupils.

Of course, the combination of the term *Hikayat* and the name of its author in the title was a novelty, but so was the fact that it was printed and that the government bought a portion of the copies to send to Malay rulers. The title

³⁷ The Malay expression runs: seperti katak di bawah tempurung, sangkanya tempurung itulah langit, which may be Abdullah's own invention as it is not found in traditional Malay texts besides Abdullah's in the database of Ian Proudfoot's Malay Concordance Project. <http://online.anu.edu.au/asianstudies/ahcen/proudfoot/MCP/> (accessed 5-5-2005). Three examples of its use are found in *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian*, which is not in Proudfoot's database (yet).

is an example of how Abdullah highlights the implied author, which he also does by the use of the pronoun *aku*. However, scholars tend to pass over the difference between Abdullah's travel account to Kelantan, where he used *sahaya* for the authorial voice and *aku* in reported speech, and his 'unedited' travel account to Arabia where he used both *sahaya* and *aku* for the authorial voice. It seems that there has been an effort to make Abdullah's travel account to Kelantan and his *Hikayat* internally consistent in the use of the two pronouns. The *Hikayat* is meant to be about Abdullah himself and therefore the more intimate *aku* should be used, while his travel account is presented as a more objective report for which *sahaya* as authorial self is appropriate. This suggests self-conscious correction work – but by whom? Abdullah? Or one of the missionaries who edited the works for the printing press (North for the travel account and Keasberry for the *Hikayat*)? The prominent use of the pronouns *aku-engkau* in the Malay-language Bible may be an interesting lead to follow in establishing the missionaries' influence on the *Hikayat*.

Abdullah was of course aware of the missionaries' agenda and it may be argued that he therefore emphasized his own Muslim identity, but to what extent could he see through the haze caused by his admiration for British innovations? The scathing criticism Abdullah vented against Malay ruling elites was induced by the content and tone of the textbooks he apparently translated and adapted for the missionaries. North was an especially effective agent in promoting Abdullah's absorption of knowledge from the West, consisting mainly of information about new technologies and their consequences. The sharp tone of these texts seems very much to reflect late eighteenth-century Europe with its rapidly expanding social class of poor people and growing anti-royalist feelings in the decades after the French Revolution.³⁸ Missionaries had taken the opportunity to improve their situation and climb the social ladder by studying hard and spreading the gospel. It was their conviction that the indigenous people of Southeast Asia could do the same, provided they got rid of their rulers and their old traditions. It is exactly this message that is disseminated by Abdullah in his *Hikayat* and in the account of his voyage to Kelantan. Both major works reflect the influence Abdullah absorbed during the 30 years he worked for missionaries and colonial officials, but North's role in the writing of these works was the most direct and the most conspicuous. Ironically, North himself subverted his role by self-aggrandizingly writing to members of the Wilkes expedition that he had provided all the topics for

³⁸ A relevant comparison can be drawn with the Baptist missionaries who established a missionary post in the Danish enclave of Serampore in India in the early nineteenth century. In order to convert the indigenous population, the English missionaries at this post studied popular culture and languages, whereas the government institution focused on classical culture and languages, such as Persian and Sanskrit. The six missionaries had been suspect in the eyes of the British government and two of them apparently had police records for openly showing sympathy with the French revolutionary cause (Kopf 1969:72-3).

Abdullah's *Hikayat*. Whatever North's direct role may have been, the ways he influenced Abdullah while the two of them worked together compiling school textbooks are noticeable throughout the book.

In this article I have argued that the texts later published under the title *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian* left an ineffaceable mark on the *Hikayat*: Abdullah had just finished, or was still in the process of, translating and adapting those texts to be used in schools when 'he received the assignment' of compiling a story about himself and his times. There are indications that the *Sejarah Melayu* was used by Abdullah as a model to compose his own work (Carroll 1999). Furthermore, North commissioned Abdullah to edit this work for his printing press, which badly needed new teaching materials. If the *Hikayat* can be called a 'discourse of dissent', then the 'dissent' was certainly not aimed at the enlightened missionaries, even though some mild criticism toward English officials can be discerned. Abdullah was very much aware of the effect harsh criticism could have. As he told North, he left out some parts of the story of how the English took possession of Singapore 'for fear the English would be displeased' (Proudfoot 2000:64).

In the development of Malay writing, which has a distinctly Islamic character, the influence of Christian missionaries was profound, especially during the first half of the nineteenth century. This is highly ironic in more ways than one. Of course, there is the religious difference, but the evangelical thrust was not (yet) directed at the Muslim community. Most of the missionaries who came to the Malay Peninsula were being trained to proselytize among Chinese people, and were basically waiting for China to be opened up for missionary activities. Proselytizing efforts among the Malay population were entrusted to a few individuals who lacked a strong and ongoing institutional backing, which meant that there was no guarantee of successors when they left or died. Most of these individuals concentrated their activities on printing, partly because they became frustrated about the low number of converts they made among the Malay population.

The Reverends Thomsen, North, and Keasberry are famous for their commitment to the development of printing in the Malay world. Keasberry stayed on to continue his difficult and frustrating task as an independent missionary after the missionary societies decided to close down their posts in the Peninsula. Keasberry secured some financial backing from the colonial government, which also gave him some printing orders. He also received money from the government as well as the Johor sultan for his activities educating Malays, and he did printing orders for private companies. In this way he was able to keep his missionary post going for another 30 years, until his death in 1875. Another irony of this evangelical impulse: at the time of his death there was a small but thriving printing industry in Singapore that used the lithographic printing technique to reproduce texts. The Reverend Medhurst intro-

duced this technique in Southeast Asia for the printing of non-Latin scripts, which was further developed and popularized by Keasberry. Abdullah's *Hikayat*, the 1855 edition of *Ceretera ilmu kepandaian*, and the education magazine *Cermin Mata* all rolled off Keasberry's lithographic press at Bukit Zion, Singapore, which was operated by pupils of his school. It may be surmised that a number of the printers who operated presses in Singapore from the 1860s onwards were trained at Keasberry's institution. Another possible source of knowledge of lithographic printing for Southeast Asian printers was Abdullah, which is attested in the colophon of a Koran lithographed in Palembang in 1848 (Peeters 1996:182-3). Only around the turn of the century did Methodist missionaries and the colonial government supersede the thriving printing industry of Singapore with their capital-intensive typographic presses. The irony comes full circle when Wilkinson, in competition with Islamic presses producing popular books appealing to local tastes, selected *Sejarah Melayu*, *Kisah pelayaran Abdullah ke Kelantan*, and *Hikayat Abdullah* to be published in the Malay Literature Series, a newly-established series to disseminate 'good quality' reading materials to vernacular schools. Apparently, then, although the selected texts were not appealing to local tastes, colonial interference boosted the importance of these works and eventually secured Abdullah's reputation as Father of Modern Malay Literature.

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