
The main title of this book under review announces that it concerns a Javanese text, known as Babad Tanah Jawi or “the Chronicle of Java.” However, as the subtitle makes clear, it is not another edition of the so-called Babad Meinsma (first published in 1874), which is best known in academic circles through W.L. Olthof’s romanization and Dutch translation (first published in 1941). Instead, Willem Remmelink has chosen to make a text edition with English translation of the revised prose edition, of which Carel Frederik Winter, Sr. (1799–1859) was the auctor intellectualis. This text, which for convenience could be called Babad Winter, had been spurned by Meinsma, and until Remmelink’s ‘rehabilitation’ remained in manuscript, kept in Leiden University Library (call number KITLV Or. 8). The Babad Winter abruptly breaks off in an episode of 1743, continuing the historical narrative a bit longer than the Babad Meinsma which ends (no less abruptly) in 1721, but otherwise the main difference between both versions is stylistic. In fact, the Babad Meinsma is Meinsma’s publication of the work of Winter’s assistant, namely Ngabehi Kertapraja’s prose paraphrase of the original verse narrative. Winter’s dissatisfaction with Kertapraja’s job was borne out by the circumstance that it did not match his perceived ideal of ‘standard’ Javanese (whatever he may have meant by this). The Babad Winter remained a draft, penned by an unknown Javanese scribe (who again may have been Kertapraja), in which Winter made several adjustments according to his taste.

The major part of Remmelink’s voluminous publication consists of the Javanese text of the Babad Winter (in Javanese script, pp. 437–986), while the English translation takes up pages 1–421. Its other parts are intended to further facilitate access to the Babad Winter, in the form of illustrations, maps, calendrical details, a glossary, and a substantial index. The brief introduction (xv–xxx) provides all the information necessary to understand the text’s background and its edition. As it is difficult to do justice to a thousand pages-plus book in a short review, let me emphasize therefore at the outset that I have a deep and genuine admiration for what the author has done. Remmelink has invested much time and effort in making the Babad Winter available for an international audience, which is, moreover, freely and openly available over the internet, made possible by a grant from The Corts Foundation. The url is https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/52935. The massive paper edition is a doorstop, weighing approximately 2.5 kg.
What’s not to like? With all due respect, I nevertheless would like to address three things the author has not done. First, there are thousands and thousands of pages of manuscript sources comprising the Babad Tanah Jawi corpus. Obviously, any text edition in this understudied field is a welcome bonus, but I wish that Remmelink had set other priorities. Both the Babad Meinsma and the Babad Winter are little more than handy research tools which were once intended as teaching material for Dutch colonial use. As derivative works, their position within the Babad Tanah Jawi corpus is in my opinion not of vital relevance, and these synopses should not take the place of primary sources. However, it seems that Remmelink is on a personal mission “[t]o belatedly set the record straight and to honour Winter’s contributions to the development of Javanese” (backflap blurb; permanent URL https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3274952).

Remmelink makes quite a point of the controversy about the authenticity of Winter’s Javanese, and his discussion of the latter’s command of Javanese is much concerned with Winter’s mixed Javanese-Dutch descent (xxiii–xxv). The most damning contemporaneous criticism of Winter’s Javanese once came from the non-conformist and always polemically-inclined linguist and philologist Herman Neubronner van der Tuuk (himself, incidentally, also a Eurasian), who snarkily mocked Winter’s Javanese prose works as being written in “Winterese.” In a not entirely detached way, Remmelink sides with Winter, chastising Meinsma for publishing Kertapraja’s text instead of Winter’s revised edition, which he denounces as “a cowardly decision that only allowed him to fend off any criticism by saying it was ‘authentic’ because the book had been written by a Javanese” (p. xxiv). The blurb calls Meinsma’s choice “unfortunate, because it deprived linguists of the first attempts to create a standard Javanese prose language” (backflap blurb; permanent URL https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3274952). However, I would like to point out that although the Babad Winter may have remained mostly forgotten, Winter himself, by stark contrast, was a well-published author, whose many reading materials for students were much patronized by the colonial government.

My second note concerns the reproduction of the Babad Winter in Javanese script, which Remmelink justifies on account of the importance that Winter attached to ‘standard’ Javanese, and hence also to script and spelling (p. xxviii). However, I am afraid that Remmelink’s fondness of Javanese script, which he himself describes as “a hobby that got out of hand” (p. xxviii), may have the unintended drawback of turning the Javanese text into a closed book for many potentially interested readers. Furthermore, it disables a user-friendly search function to peruse the text’s digital edition. I would have preferred a conversion of the text in Latin script, which is long since the default mode for publishing
Javanese texts, ideally accompanied by a freely available online digitization of Kitlv Or. 8.

Thirdly, the index (pp. 992–1045) provides a most helpful who’s who of the Babad Winter, but a slight addition might have augmented its usefulness. As the narrative is crammed with actions by a bewildering cast of characters, an onomasticon is highly valuable for keeping track of the many personal names that appear. Remmelink states that he did not feel the need to identify the real names of the Dutchmen (p. xxx) and consequently, the English translation has such Dutch actors as “Admiral Alduwèlbèh” peopling the scene. It could be argued that in the context of Javanese storytelling, the Javanization of the foreigners’ proper names adds to their ‘exotization’ or ‘othering,’ but it would have been a nice service to the readers of this edition to inform them that “Alduwèlbèh” (also occurring as “Anduwèlbèh” in other babads), which sounds odd to both Javanese and Dutch ears, is in fact a very ordinary Dutch name, namely Herman de Wilde. According to Remmelink (p. xxx), “it often does not make sense” to include the real names of the Dutchmen, “because the person was not in Java at the time and place mentioned in the Babad.” I beg to differ, because this feature touches on the oft-debated issue of fictional versus factual narration, which is of immediate relevance here, as Remmelink categorizes the Babad Winter as a “chronicle.” If this should really be a written record of historical events, what about the old chestnut of its reliability?

It is inappropriate to lay too much stress on what Remmelink has not done when he most successfully has dealt with his own stated objective, namely, to make the Babad Winter accessible to an international public. Remmelink clearly achieved that goal in this monumental book and deserves our gratitude and appreciation. My marginal notes on what the author has not done should not distract from the book’s merits and are merely intended as food for thought for future “babadological” studies, which have received a new impetus with this edition of the Babad Winter.

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