CHAPTER III

Aceh as crucible of Muslim-Malay literature

Teuku Iskandar

Pasai and the introduction of Islam

According to his grave monument in Pasai, Sultan Malik al-Salih, considered by many historians to be the first Muslim ruler in the Malay Archipelago, died in 1297. Although the Hikayat Raja Pasai (The chronicle of Pasai) is not an historical writing in the true sense of the word, it nevertheless gives us a glimpse of the cultural life of one of the earliest Muslim countries in the Malay world.

The Hikayat Raja Pasai is the first piece of Malay historical writing of the Muslim period in the archipelago, but it is not the first Muslim-Malay work. A paraphrase of the prototype of this hikayat can be found in the Sejarah Melayu (The Malay annals), the second oldest historical writing of the Muslim period. Originally written in Malacca during the fifteenth century, it is highly likely that this paraphrase was incorporated into the Annals at this time. The account of Pasai ends with the death of Sultan Malik al-Zahir and the ascension to the throne of Sultan Amad. As Sultan Malik al-Zahir died in 1336, the composition of this version must have been completed not very much later than that year. The other version of the Hikayat Raja Pasai (Hill 1960) has later additions, probably written after the story of Sultan Amad’s son, Tun Beraim Bapa, had become a legend. In either version, the Hikayat Raja Pasai became a model for such later Muslim-Malay historiographical works as the Sejarah Melayu and the Hikayat Aceh.¹

¹ This dating is essentially based on the refutation by Amin Sweeney 1967 of the hypotheses by Roolvink 1954:3-7 and Teeuw 1964:222-34; see further Iskandar 1995:153-5. Note, however, that Brakel 1975, supported by Braginsky 2004:104-113, argued for a later fourteenth-century date on the basis of quotations in the Hikayat Raja Pasai from the Hikayat Muhammad Hanafi ah and his mid-fourteenth century dating of that text.
**Pasai as a commercial centre**

More can be found in the description of the Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta, who visited Pasai in 1345/1346, and presented a vivid picture of its cultural life. What he saw was a thriving Muslim-Malay society with a pious sultan as its leader, supported by able dignitaries. Ibn Battuta’s account gives a glimpse of the greatness of fourteenth century Pasai as the first Muslim-Malay kingdom. Its grandeur was made possible by its position as an important trading centre on the Straits of Malacca. This vivid picture of life in Pasai can be supplemented by later Portuguese accounts, which gave a description of the capital, the commerce and the system of government. In the centre of the capital stood the citadel in which the sultan and his court resided. Within the walls of the city, and also in the suburbs, the high nobles or mandarins (menteri) had their residences (Alves 1994:125-7). The Hikayat Raja Pasai also made mention of menteri and a perdana menteri (‘prime minister’), (Jones 1999:18). It seems likely that the Malay system of government consisting of the four, the eight, and probably the sixteen menteri was already in existence in Pasai.

Portuguese sources also spoke of the government hierarchy, which consisted of the temenggung (minister of defences), the syahbandar (port official) and his deputy, and the qadi (Islamic-law judge). Neither the Hikayat Raja Pasai nor the Portuguese sources made mention of a bendahara (vizier). Tomé Pires, who was in Malacca in 1513, spoke of bendahara only in relation to Malacca. However, he did observe that Pasai was a rich country with a flourishing trade, especially after Malacca was defeated by the Portuguese and Pidie had declared war on Aceh. Pasai, at that time, had more than 20,000 inhabitants, including merchant communities of Bengalis, Rumes (Genoese or Venetians?), Turks, Arabs, Persians, Gujaratis, South Indians, Malays, Javanese and Siamese. On the way to the interior were large towns, where great nobles and important people who were sometimes at odds with Pasai lived. The country produced pepper, silk and gum benzoin. Rice was cultivated only for domestic consumption (Pires 1944:142).

**Malay becomes the language of Islam and Muslim literature**

Islam was preached in the vernacular of Pasai. With its religious and other Muslim literature written in or translated into this vernacular, the Malay language became the language of Islam and was called bahasa Jawi. The literature of Pasai was held in such high esteem that the language it was written in was called bahasa Pasai. For instance, in his work entitled the Mir’at al-Mu’min (1601), Shams al-Din of Pasai stated that he wrote this book in