

### Vladimir Braginsky

*The Turkic-Turkish Theme in Traditional Malay Literature. Imagining the Other to Empower the Self.* Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015, xvii + 303 pp. [Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, 301]. ISBN 9789004290709 (hardback); 9789004305946 (e-book). Price: EUR 75.00.

In 1899 Sultan Taha of Jambi, who had for four decades held out in upper Jambi in armed resistance against the Dutch after their conquest of his capital in 1858, commissioned a new history of Jambi and its rulers, which differed considerably from the existing earlier chronicle. In 1857 the sultan had appealed in vain to the Ottoman Sultan ‘Abd al-Majid for military support against the threat of Dutch invasion, and he was to do so again to Sultan ‘Abd al-Hamid II in 1902 and 1903. In his broad overview of references to anything Turkish in Malay literature, Vladimir Braginsky suggests that the rewriting of Jambi’s history served the main purpose of strengthening Taha’s Islamic credentials and claims of ancestral Turkish connections, in preparation for the new appeal to the Ottomans in the following years. The earlier chronicle, *Hikayat negeri Jambi*, had described Jambi’s founder, Datuk Paduka Berhalo, as a ‘Turkish man’ and a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad through his great-grandson Zayn al-‘Abidin; the new chronicle, *Silsilah keturunan raja Jambi*, made Berhalo no less than a son of the ‘king of Istanbul.’ Another set of significant additions in the new chronicle concerned a more prominent role for Berhalo’s son Orang Kayo Hitam, whose heroic deeds—defeating Mataram’s efforts to impose sovereignty over Jambi, and the peaceful union of Jambi’s upland districts to the coastal region—appear to presage Sultan Taha’s own struggle against the Dutch and his holding out in upper Jambi.

The *Silsilah keturunan raja Jambi* is the last of many Malay dynastic chronicles that are extensively summarized and analyzed in this book. Although it was probably composed in response to the political conditions of the day, all of its constituent elements are traditional and can be found in earlier Malay or Javanese narratives. (Braginsky points especially to similarities with the Minangkabau *Tambo* and, in Orang Kayo Hitam’s adventures, the Javanese Panji cycle.) Other Malay dynasties also claimed descent from a raja of Rum (Byzantium or the Ottoman Empire); in some cases this vaguely Turkish ancestor has retained traits of the legendary world conqueror Iskandar Zulkarnain, whose miraculous deeds are the subject of a well-known early Malay *hikayat*. In the 1899 Jambi chronicle the ancestor is more clearly identified with the Ottoman Empire and its capital Istanbul but otherwise there is no indication of acquaintance with or even interest in the current state of that empire.

At this point in his narrative, Braginsky has taken the reader through a vast corpus of Malay literature and dutifully marked every single mention of what he recognizes as Turkic peoples, Turks, and 'Turkey.' He divides the corpus of texts in roughly four groups, of which 'fantastic narratives of the king of Rum, that is Turkey' and legendary histories of Malay dynasties (such as the Jambi chronicles) make up the third. The first group consists of texts based on mediaeval Persian or Arabic originals, which occasionally refer to Turkic peoples of Central and West Asia. The *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain*, for instance, mentions Turkmen, Ghuzz, Khazar and Alan, which Braginsky glosses as Turkic (although the names cannot have meant much to the Malay audiences). The second group consists of a small number of texts from Aceh and Johor that reflect and improvise on the brief episode of Acehnese-Ottoman diplomatic interaction in the 1560s. Thus the protagonist of the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* leads an (imaginary) embassy to Istanbul on behalf of Johor, learns fluent Turkish, and is received in audience by the Ottoman sultan, thereby outdoing the (real) Acehnese mission.

The final group of texts, dating from the late nineteenth century, consists of works of traditional form that deal with recent international political events, the Crimean War (1853–1856) and the Russian-Ottoman War of 1877–1878. The author of one of these narratives, *Hikayat peperangan al-maulana sultan Istanbul*, writing in the cosmopolitan Straits Settlement of Penang, even mentions his sources, consisting of 'Egyptian, Indian, Persian and English newspapers' and oral information from one Ahmed Efendi, a Turkish visitor to Penang (p. 173). This work still contains many of the standard elements of the Malay *hikayat*, including the miraculous, but also more or less accurate information on actors and events on the Caucasian front. The author attributes a major role to the Circassian warrior (*ghazi*) Muhammad Shamwil, who is hardly noticed by other historians of the war. Braginsky suggests that the figure of Shamwil (a son of the famous resistance leader Shaykh Shamil), who fought to liberate his own land from Russian occupation, appealed more to Malay sensibilities than the more effective and more famous Turkish general Ahmed Muhtar Pasha because his defensive *jihad* was reminiscent of Aceh's anti-Dutch resistance (p. 194).

This book attests to Braginsky's erudition and mastery of Malay literature. His extensive summaries and analysis of the works concerned pay attention to many other aspects besides Turkic-Turkish references, such as the political ideologies and symbolic geographies of the Malay kingdoms, and the explicit or more commonly implicit interconnections between the various texts. The book is, among other things, a study in intertextuality. However, it begs the question of whether there actually exists such a thing as the 'Turkic-Turkish theme' in

the vast corpus that is surveyed. Braginsky speaks freely of 'Turkish' and 'Turkic' where the Malay texts use a variety of other terms such as Rum, Istanbul, Turan, or Ghuzz, which have different connotations and do not appear to have been understood by the Malay authors and audiences as part of a single Turkic-Turkish complex. Braginsky acknowledges that there is a problem here and that 'the issue of the Malay understanding of what the Turkic-Turkish 'Other' is still needs a thorough investigation based on a greater wealth of material' (39). I believe the problem has little to do with shortcomings in the impressive wealth of material presented in this book but lies in Braginsky's construction of a pan-Turk 'Other' out of discrete references to various alien peoples and places.

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