PROFESSIONAL MALAY STORY-TELLING
Part 1. Some questions of style and presentation
by
Amin Sweeney

Preliminary Remarks

It is remarkable evidence of the almost sacred aura surrounding the printed word in Malay society that many literate Malays, when asked about the tales of Sang Kanchil or Pak Pandir, will refer the inquirer to the published texts of Hikayat Sang Kanchil (Dussek, 1915) and Cherita Jenaka (Winstedt, 1941), informing him that these are the 'standard' or 'correct' versions. It is forgotten that the books themselves originated from oral forms, collected over fifty years ago on the initiative of British administrators, and that these oral forms still continue to exist in Malay society.¹

For decades, courses on Malay literature in schools and universities have commenced with a number of lectures on 'Malay folk-literature', using such published texts as Hikayat Awang Sulung Merah Muda (Winstedt, 1957a), Hikayat Malim Deman (Winstedt, 1957b) and the two mentioned above. The methodology employed to study such texts has been identical to that used on literary works; and plot, language, style and imagery are discussed and evaluated.

All this has little to do with oral literature, however. The texts of 'folk literature' published during the last ninety odd years have all been put into literary Malay and are, in varying degrees, to be regarded more as the work of the scribe than of the teller. Thus, for example, if we were to remark that the Cherita Pak Pandir (Winstedt, 1941) works up to a climax with the killing of the ogre, we would, in fact, merely be commenting on the abilities of the compiler, for it is he who joined together a large number of episodes which, in oral tradition, are distinct stories.²

The screen interposed between the teller and ourselves by the interpretation and remoulding of a third party, the writer, has resulted in our losing sight of the oral nature of oral literature and, although every member of Malay society is the bearer of a variety of oral tradition, he often fails to recognize it as such.

In view of the hitherto almost exclusive concern with content, it is my intention in this paper to attempt to throw some light upon the form, style and presentation of oral Malay literature, with special reference to that class of story-telling popularly known as penglipur lara, or what Winstedt termed 'folk romances'. The stories of this type, collected at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries by colonial officers such as Maxwell, Clifford, Sturrock and Winstedt have,

¹ A forthcoming paper, "The Pak Pandir Cycle of Tales," will examine this question.
² And it should be remembered that any evaluation of the compiler's work must be preceded by an examination of the norms and criteria of his time, which are not those of today.
in common with other genres of folk literature, all been adapted into literary Malay; the editors have presented little information on the original form, and what is provided is vague and, in cases, contradictory. The actual work of adapting these tales was apparently always done by Malay scribes such as Raja Haji Yahya bin Raja Mat Ali, and the texts, as they stand, differ only from palace hikayat literature in that they contain examples of 'rhythmical prose'.

This, however, is not a matter for criticism. The main aim of the editors of these works was to provide suitable reading material for vernacular schools, and the adaptors would naturally, and quite rightly so, discard the conventions of oral literature and employ literary style for a written medium. The adaptation of tales from an oral to a literary medium, moreover, was practised long before the efforts of the British, as is apparent from the existence of literary works such as Hikayat Pelanduk Jenaka (Klinkert 1893, Dussek, 1915) and a variety of wayang tales clearly oral in origin. More recently, the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka and such indefatigable amateurs as Zakaria bin Hitam have produced a number of penglipur lara tales, all of which have, in varying degrees, been presented in easily understood literary prose. The Dewan Bahasa is a commercial enterprise and each publication must be a viable proposition. Here again, however, it is to be regretted that, with few exceptions, the editors make little mention of the original form. The whole question of adaptation from an oral to a literary medium makes an interesting field of study and I shall endeavour, in passing, to reveal some of the methods employed by the adaptors of penglipur lara tales.

Stylized and non-stylized form

The differences between the language of everyday conversation and literary style are considerable in any society. When writing, we tend to lavish far more attention on grammar and style than when communicating in informal conversation, where our words, once uttered, cease to exist. Also, when speaking in public, which requires a formal manner, we are likely to employ a literary style and may well prepare and write down our words beforehand. The language we use thus varies between casual everyday conversation and non-casual literary style, depending upon the context.

In traditional Malay society, before the days of mass education, the great majority of the population were illiterate, and penmanship was an exclusive art. Writers were professionals, combining, as Skinner (1963: 27) has pointed out, the tasks of artist and craftsman. In such a society, literary style was bound by many conventions, in keeping with its exclusive nature. The reading public in this age of manuscript

---

3 And even this is found in some early or unsophisticated palace literature, e.g. Hikayat Raja-raja Pasai (Hill, 1960) and Salasilah Kutai (Mees, 1935). Some of the folk romances still contain traces of the 'kampung world view,' however.

4 An Academic Exercise of the University of Malaya has been written concerning the materials collected by Encik Zakaria (Yaakub bin Isa, 1971).

5 Two exceptions are Selindung Bulan Kedah Tua (Awang Had, 1964) and Si Suton (Hamsiah, 1964b), which contain some brief remarks on the presentation.
literature and widespread illiteracy was limited, but hikayat and sha'ir were read aloud to audiences, so that society was often well-acquainted with the content of such works.

It should not, however, be thought that oral Malay literature was (or is) limited to the language of everyday conversation. Just as the language of written literature is a stylized form of everyday speech, regulated by various conventions, similarly in the pre-literate or semi-literate areas of Malay society, we find that oral tradition has developed stylized forms of language and presentation, which also differ considerably from those of everyday speech. This stylized oral form, as regards language, is best seen in the most developed genres of oral literature, such as wayang kulit and Mak Yong, where the use of distortions of grammar and pronunciation, special wayang words and phrases, and various other devices, results in a 'heightened' form of the local dialect (see further Sweeney, 1972: 63–72). However, in speaking of stylized form, we cannot confine our remarks to the style of the language in isolation; a presentation of oral narrative literature in stylized form is not just a recital but will, depending upon the genre in question, employ other media of communication such as singing, musical accompaniment and drama which, from our modern viewpoint, constitute separate art forms, but which, in oral Malay tradition, are fused together in the totality of the art. In this paper, therefore, the term 'non-stylized oral form' is used to describe the language and gesture of everyday conversation, while 'stylized oral form' refers to that mode of expression where the language employed and its presentation are not those of normal speech.

Furthermore, just as penmanship was at one time almost entirely in the hands of professionals, so we find that the exponents of stylized oral narrative, too, are usually professionals, and the reverse is certainly the case, i.e. a professional performance is always in stylized form. This is hardly surprising: a businessman must be able to provide a commodity which his potential customers do not already possess. Yet every member of Malay society is a bearer of oral tradition, and the great majority are active bearers in varying degrees, but, in the case of narrative, the medium will usually be the language of everyday speech. The professional performer must therefore present his wares in a saleable form.

While we are only concerned with oral narrative in this paper, it may be noted that in non-narrative oral literature, too, the exponents of stylized form are often professionals as, for example, in the field of traditional medicine and spirit mediumship. There are, of course, exceptions, e.g. pantun, songs and lullabies, proverbs, camphor language etc. And even in the case of oral narrative there are exceptions as, for example, the dalang tiru and dalang budak of the wayang Siam (Sweeney, 1972: 41). And, as regards penglipur lara, in those genres where the technique is relatively simple, as in Pahang, it is not unknown for individuals to have picked up stories in stylized form but never to have performed them professionally. Such a person might recite snatches of his stories in stylized form, but I have never heard of a full stylized performance being presented by an amateur. [While professional story-tellers may perform at marriages and circumcisions, performances are by no means restricted to such occasions, and may be held at any time (except perhaps during Ramadhan)].
The different modes of expression may be shown on a triangular figure, where,

A = oral, non-stylized, amateur, informal.
B = literary, stylized, (formerly) professional, formal.
C = oral, stylized, professional, formal.

The types of narrative literature presented in these categories are not mutually exclusive and a wide variety of adaptation is possible between A, B and C: literary stories are retold in everyday speech (B → A); they are also adapted to the stylized oral form, thus, for example, written Panji tales are presented in the wayang Jawa (B → C). Stories in stylized oral form may be recounted in everyday speech (C → A) or may be turned into literary works as, for example, Selindung Bulan Kedah Tua (Awang Had, 1964) (C → B). Non-stylized tales may be written down, as in the Cherita Jenaka (A → B) or many be turned into stylized renderings, as in the case of dalangs, who often adapt simple stories for presentation (A → C). As regards points A & C, however, there are certain classes of story which are usually told only in the non-stylized form as, for example, Pak Pandir and mousedeer stories. Even when told by a professional storyteller, they will be in everyday speech. He will not tell them 'ex officio' and they do not form part of his marketable stock-in-trade. More will be said regarding the narration of these amateur stories in the forthcoming paper referred to above.

The points of the triangle ABC do not, however, represent self-contained and independent categories, and each of the sides of the figure may be regarded as a continuum. Here we shall mention only A:C. For example, as I have demonstrated previously (Sweeney, 1972: 49–53), a dalang may recount his repertoire in narrative form, without the aid of puppets or music, for the benefit of a pupil. He will tend to veer between two modes of narration, casual or non-casual, depending on the social context. The less casual his approach, the more closely his speech resembles that of a wayang performance; and the more casual it is, the more his speech becomes that of everyday conversation. Similarly, the non-dalang professional story-teller, when 'off-duty', may recount his story in simple narrative, which will be casual or non-casual, again depending on the context. In the latter case, although his narration will mainly be in everyday speech, he may include passages of so-called 'rhythmical prose'. In the same way, members of his audience will often be able to retell the tales in everyday language and may well include snatches of stylized language they have remembered.

The apparently contradictory information provided by collectors, concerning the presentation of penglipur lara tales, has resulted from a failure on their part to take into account these considerations. Thus, Maxwell (1886: 87) speaks of the story-

---

7 And here the exception proves the rule: when Mahmud (Perlis) recently performed in Kuala Lumpur, he presented the story of Pak Kaduk in stylized form, and this was considered a great joke by Mahmud and other professional performers who were present.
teller “intoning the words in a monotonous chant as if he were reading aloud from a book.” On the other hand, Winstedt (1957a: 149) tells us that “the prose parts of a Malay folk-tale are told by the rhapsodist in the language of conversation,” and (1957b: flyleaf) speaks of “shapeless colloquial passages.” Both Maxwell and Winstedt lay stress on the fact that the tales were taken down ‘verbatim’ from the lips of the reciter, and in this lies the key to the problem: no story-teller could perform in stylized form at dictation speed; and no transcriber could hope to keep up with and record faithfully the language of a typical stylized rendering, even though this be Maxwell’s ‘native writers’ using jawi script, not to mention Europeans such as Winstedt, who also claims to have transcribed stories ‘verbatim’. Winstedt was, therefore, no doubt correct in speaking of ‘the language of conversation’; it is only unfortunate that he omitted to mention or was not aware that such renderings were, apart from the inclusion of rhythmical prose, recounted in the non-stylized form. Thus, it is clear that Malay writers, such as Raja Haji Yahya, did not adapt their works into literary form from the ‘monotonous chant’ of the stylized form, but worked from the ‘colloquial passages’ of the non-stylized form. And when later scholars, such as J. C. Bottoms, (1963: 6), expressed a desire to know “to what extent the end result is different from the original . . . . We want those ‘shapeless colloquial passages’ which are said to have been tidied; and we want them in their original form,” they would, even if this wish were granted, still have gained little insight into the penglipur lara as an artistic form.8

In recent years the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka has published a number of penglipur lara texts. The introductions to all but two of these works tell us nothing about the stylized form. For example, in the introduction to Bongsu Pinang Peribut (Hamsiah, 1964a), we are told that, in general, penglipur lara tales from Pahang are presented in ordinary prose. And indeed, when the tapes are consulted, these tales are found to be rendered in the non-stylized form, apart from some passages of rhythmical prose. The concern of the editors to preserve as much as possible of the original in their texts,9 therefore, while admirable from the point of view of preserving the content, will not, however, enable us to appreciate the artistic performance of the penglipur lara.

Here again we see that collectors and editors did not take into account the existence of, nor attempt to distinguish between, stylized and non-stylized forms. The Pahang tales published by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka are Bongsu Pinang Peribut (Hamsiah, 1964a), Raja Donan (Zaharah Khalid, 1963) and Raja Gagak (Zaharah Taha, 1963). My examination of the reciters, respectively Ahmad bin Hood, Esah binti Mat Akil and Jidin bin Ali, revealed this distinction: Jidin and

---

8 Bottoms himself apparently did not distinguish between stylized and non-stylized, for, although he notes that stories are sung, he recorded them all in the non-stylized form (Bottoms, 1963: 20).

9 With regard to language, the editors attempted to achieve two conflicting aims: to adapt the tale into literary prose and yet at the same time to preserve the language of the original, (i.e. the unstylized form of the teller). This, of course, is impossible and resulted in such linguistic mortal sins as “Yang saya ubah dalam penulisan cherita ini ialah perkataan-perkataan yang, pada hemat saya, salah tata-bahasanya.” (Zaharah Taha 1963, viii.)
Esah, in the proper social context, present their stories in stylized form; both are professional story-tellers. Ahmad Hood is an amateur, presenting his tale only in the non-stylized form, which is a non-marketable commodity.

Genres of Professional Story-telling

At this point we may proceed to examine the penglipur lara in some detail. The materials for this study were gathered intermittently over a period extending from 1968 to 1973. The earlier part of the work concentrated mainly on the tarik selampit of Kelantan. The second phase of the study included a survey of the states of West Malaysia and Patani in Southern Thailand. In this task I received the full cooperation of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka who generously allowed me to consult their collection of tapes and inventory of narrators from which I was able to trace a number of story-tellers previously recorded by the Dewan. Information from my students also enabled me to contact several others and to establish that no performers were to be found in certain areas. A large part of the task, however, involved travelling from village to village and making inquiries 'on the ground'.

Almost every member of Malay society is able to recount, at least when pressed, short animal, farcical and origin tales etc., but few can relate longer stories of the 'folk-romance' type. Of the latter, the majority narrate the tale in the language of everyday conversation and expect no reward for their trouble from the members of their own society. A number of narrators, however, in the proper social context, will relate their tales in stylized form, and for this task they will receive a fee of some kind. A more detailed study was made of a representative sample of the latter, the results of which appear in this paper. Field methods used were largely similar to those employed in my study of the shadow-play (Sweeney, 1972: 8-11). Recordings were made of the same story-teller performing the same story on different occasions, to assess the degree of variation. In some cases this involved recording the whole story; in others only samples were collected. Some story-tellers were recorded twice within a matter of days and then again a year later. One Kelantan performer was recorded four times over a period of four years.

A popular term for folk romances and their narrators is penglipur lara. As far as I am aware, the term, used specifically of oral story-tellers, first appeared in print in 1886 (Maxwell, 1886: 87). However, none of the performers examined in this study referred to themselves, or were referred to, by this title. In Kelantan, Patani, Perlis and Kedah, the various genres of story-telling and their performers are usually known by the name of the hero of the most popular story in the repertoire of each genre. Thus, in Kelantan-Patani we find the Tok Selampit who performs the tarik Selampit, Selampit being the hero of the tale of the same name. Similarly, in Perlis and Langkawi there is the Awang Batil or Awang Belanga, and the Selampit (a different

10 See note 16. The recording sessions of the Dewan Bahasa were obviously not 'traditional' occasions.
11 He has adapted the tale into shu'ir form and in his story-telling he veers between non-stylized and literary style.
12 The very limited number of story-tellers encountered meant that selection was unnecessary in most areas, with the exception of Pahang.
Part II, 1973 Professional Malay Story-Telling

Genre and tale from that of Kelantan; in Kedah there is the *Tok Jubang*, who performs the tale *Jubang Linggang*. I did not encounter this practice in Pahang where, apparently, story-tellers are simply referred to as *ahli cherita*. Isahak, a Perlis storyteller of the *Selampit* type, also referred to himself by this term. The various genres studied are distinguished in the figure below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Presentation</th>
<th>Music</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tarik Selampit</td>
<td>Kelantan</td>
<td>singing</td>
<td>rebab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Patani</td>
<td>chanting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perlis [only one performer, a Kelantanese]</td>
<td>speech</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selampit</td>
<td>Perlis</td>
<td>chanting</td>
<td><em>gendang</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Langkawi</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Keling</em> or none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awang Batil</td>
<td>Perlis</td>
<td>chanting</td>
<td><em>batil</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Langkawi</td>
<td>or</td>
<td>rhythmic speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jubang</td>
<td>Kedah [the two performers are of Patani extraction]</td>
<td>singing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>or</td>
<td>chanting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahli cherita</td>
<td>Pahang</td>
<td>singing</td>
<td><em>rebana</em> or none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(no specific name)</td>
<td>Trengganu</td>
<td>or</td>
<td>chanting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaba</td>
<td>Selangor [only one performer, an immigrant from Sumatra]</td>
<td>chanting</td>
<td>violin [properly, a <em>rebab</em>]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2.

I make no claim to have met or even to have traced all the performers of *penglipur lara* in stylized form. Nevertheless, I believe it possible to provide at least a rough estimate of their numbers and distribution. In Perlis I interviewed four performers (2 *Selampit* type, 1 *Awang Batil*, and 1 *tarik Selampit* whose performer is a Kelantanese who settled in Perlis many years ago), and heard of no others still alive. In Kedah proper only two could be traced (both *Tok Jubang* of Patani extraction) but two others are to be found in Langkawi (one *Selampit* and one *Awang Batil*). According to information provided by many persons in Kedah, both *Selampit* and *Awang Batil* were previously also found in Kedah proper. Today, however, they only survive in the periphery of the area. Only one performer was traced in Patani (*tarik Selampit*) and four in Kelantan (also *tarik Selampit*). In Pahang I interviewed three performers but am aware of the existence of at least five others in Pahang and four

---

13 I am most grateful to Datuk Syed Idrus al-Idrus of Alor Setar for allowing me to consult his recordings of these Langkawi performers.
in up-river Trengganu who perform a similar type. I suspect there are more, but bad communications and the fact that reputations only extend to a few surrounding villages make the task of tracing performers a formidable one.\textsuperscript{14} There is also one performer in Selangor, but he is a Minangkabau immigrant, resident here for the past 35 years, who recites \textit{kaba} mainly for Minangkabau speakers.\textsuperscript{15} I did not succeed in tracing any performers in the other states of West Malaysia.

**Professional status**

By ‘professional story-teller’, we mean a performer who, in the traditional context,\textsuperscript{16} is formally invited to perform at a specified place and time, and expects to be rewarded for his trouble. This definition of professional status thus includes not merely performers who derive a major part of their incomes from their art, but extends also to those who may perform perhaps only once in five years and are content with a ‘small reward, a hearty welcome and a good meal’.

The elite of story-tellers are to be found in Perlis. Two well-known performers are Ismail bin Hasan, an exponent of \textit{Selampit}, and Mahmud bin Wahid, who performs \textit{Awang Batil}. Both apparently derive an important part of their incomes from performing. Ismail expects to be paid M$ 25 for a five-hour performance, in which he chants the stories of \textit{Selampit} or \textit{Si Suton}, usually without any accompaniment. On request, however, he will include his \textit{gendang Keling}. This is a four-man orchestra, consisting of a \textit{serunai} (oboe), two \textit{gendang} (hand drums), and a pair of gongs. The \textit{gendang Keling}, while not actually accompanying the performer’s recital, is used to provide opening music and to illustrate various performances described in the story. Thus, for example, when the narrator describes a \textit{wayang kulit} at the ruler’s court, he stops chanting and, accompanied by the \textit{gendang Keling}, simulates a \textit{wayang kulit} performance for several minutes. In the absence of the orchestra, he will make do with drumming on his thighs.

Mahmud, the exponent of \textit{Awang Batil}, recites his story and accompanies himself on a \textit{batil} (brass bowl). He also makes use of masks during his performance, which are of the type used in the Kedah \textit{Mak Yong}, one being a mask of the \textit{hulubalang} (a captain, who is sent to summon people,) the other of the \textit{nujum} (astrologer). When

\textsuperscript{14} Although many stories have been collected by Zakaria Hitam (see note 4), as far as I am aware, no distinction has been made between stylized/non-stylized.

\textsuperscript{15} He is atypical in that he learnt his stories from the published \textit{kaba} texts, and is not included in this study.

\textsuperscript{16} I have emphasized the matter of traditional context for two reasons: research workers are accustomed to pay their informants a fee regardless of whether the latter are amateurs or professionals in their own \textit{milieu}; secondly, in view of the fact that a recording session is not a traditional occasion for a performance, the onus is upon the research worker to create the atmosphere required for a typical performance. When recording amateurs, he must put the informant at his ease by creating the informal atmosphere in which the story would normally be told to friends and relatives, and, indeed, an audience should be present. When a professional is to be recorded, the research worker must again be able to create the correct conditions in which such a presentation would normally be given. If this is not done, the informant, faced with a stranger armed with a tape-recorder, may not be able to relate the situation to his own pattern of experience; in such cases he may decide that a stranger would not understand the stylized form or, again, if the context is too informal, he may feel the occasion merits the non-stylized form that he would use in ‘off-duty’ narrations.
Plate 1. A Kelantan *Tok Selampit*, Mat Nor of Bachok, performing with his *rebab*.
(Photo Muzium Negara)

(Photo Muzium Negara)