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Syair Perang Siak

Adolf van der Laan
1640-1743
SYAIR PERANG SIAK

A COURT POEM PRESENTING THE STATE POLICY
OF A
MINANGKABAU MALAY ROYAL FAMILY IN EXILE

Edited and Translated
by
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with essays on the text
by
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Central Sumatra and Southern Malay Peninsular
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INTRODUCTION

PERPUSTAKAAN
NEGARA MALAYSIA
The KL154 manuscript of *Syair Perang Siak*, as is typical of syair manuscripts, has two lines written side by side on the page. This line of writing is referred to here as a *verse*. A *verse* often forms a grammatical unit. Four *lines* are linked together by having a single end rhyme. Four linked lines are here called a *stanza*. A *stanza* often forms a unit of meaning and usually has a single grammatical subject.

The usage adopted in this work is that:

- A *line* is a line as set out in the text,
- A *verse* is two lines together (a-b or c-d), and
- A *stanza* is a numbered unit of four lines.

*Syair Perang Siak* relates the stories of four sultans of Siak. These sultans are identified wherever reference is made to them by the title *Raja*. Other members of the royal family are given the title *Tengku*. Descendants of Sayid Uthman are given the title *Sayid*. This device of naming sultans *Raja* and members of the royal family *Tengku* is for the convenience of readers of this work in coping with many unfamiliar names. The title *Sayid* helps separate the new line of sultans. This is not precisely the Malay practice and does not occur in the text. *Raja* also occurs with different senses as parts of names or in quotations, but these instances should not cause confusion.

The fact that we have a manuscript means that someone wrote it down. The person who wrote out the manuscript is here named the *scribe*. It is probable that the syair had previously been composed by someone else. The composer is referred to as the *poet*. This does not rule out the possibility that the *scribe* modified the text.

If the *poet* did not witness the events, he got his information from an informant. There may have been many informants, but, if the *poet* was writing to specific instructions, then there was an informant closely associated with the editorial policy regarding how the material was presented. The editorial informant is referred to as the *owner* of the text.

For a major literary undertaking such as this there would need to be someone of substance who desired that the work be done and was willing to provide accommodation, support and remuneration for the *poet*. The person who instigated and backed the venture is referred to as the *publisher*.

There was a figurehead beneath whose mantle of authority and for whom all worked. He is referred to as the *patron*.

The work was designed for oral presentation so that when completed there would need to be someone to read, chant or sing it. That person is referred to as the *singer*. Those who listened are referred to as the *audience*.

These are terms of convenience to avoid unnecessary ambiguity within the present work. There is no implication in having seven terms that there were necessarily seven
individuals or groups. There are seven roles to be discussed. An individual may perform many roles.

In *Syair Perang Siak*, it will be argued,

the *scribe* of KL154 worked at Senapelan in Siak in 1849;
the *poet* came from Trengganu and worked at Tambelan in 1764;
the *owner* was Tengku Abdullah, second son of Raja Mahmud;
the *publisher* was Tengku Busu, youngest son of Raja Kecil;
the *patron* was Raja Ismail;
the *singer* and *audience* were, in the first instance, Minangkabau from Siak in exile in the Tujuh Puluh and on the shores of the South China Sea after 1761.
North Sumatra showing the River Siak.
Amid current fundamental re-evaluations of the role of the student of literature, it will make for less ambiguity if there is first an editorial statement on the attitude taken here to the text as literature.

This book is about a literary event. That literary event took place within the life of a social group with political ambitions. The literary event was an oral presentation of a narrative poem. All that is left of the event is the text of the poem.

The author of a text destined for print postulates a reader—most likely a reader very similar to himself. He invites the reader into his psyche where the reader shares his experiences. The reader takes possession of the text. It becomes his own to do with as he will. Through time and across cultural boundaries there occur many literary events as readers respond to the author's story.

An orally presented text such as Syair Perang Siak must be seen quite differently. The poet does not need to postulate a reader. The recipients of the story are there about him. The poet is delegated to express their communal story. The literary event can occur only within that community while its membership and memory and aspirations are intact.

If the essential nature of such a traditional Malay syair is to be revealed in a printed edition then the cold embers of the written text must be rekindled, if only to a flickering life, within the mind of the reader. The text is not ours to do with as we will and adapt to our perceptions of literature. In the first instance the reader must attempt to rediscover the social and political setting, the enthusiasms, the motives, the ideals which drove the participants to this considerable work of literary expression. All who listened were interested participants. Not only the story but the events which fed it and the ambitions which drove it were the property of the audience as much as of the poet.

When a community gathers on a festive occasion and is arrayed in strict social order to participate in a literary event that expresses its self image, then that literary expression must be assumed to be highly sensitive to context. The context is the essence which the text is commemorating. The context cannot be left to one side while we consider the text as literature. Without the context there is no literary event.

Those who responded to the literary event were men of action. Political adventuring and armed combat were their lives' work and focus of interest. The perception of their literary expression as the product of a group of literati, self-consciously participating in a literary work for its own sake and focusing on its literary devices, is clearly a travesty of what actually occurred.

The poet, however skilled in his art and however much an individual artist, was servant to the community interest. He followed the beaten literary path through the forest of possible presentations because it was the line of least resistance. His only choice was to use the familiar techniques known to the community. Had he done it differently he would have attracted attention to the 'literariness' of his work. By following the conventions and using the