The Myths of the Lettered Native

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Every civilisation can boast of a ‘great book’ that is thought of as definitive of its history, culture and philosophy. *Sulalatus Salatin* has often been hailed as that seminal work for the Malay world. Better known by its Bahasa title *Sejarah Melayu* (*Malay Annals*), the seventeenth century manuscript penned in the Malay classical form of the *hikayat* takes place across parts of modern Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. This book presents the manuscript’s value as both history and mythology of the region by exploring the narrative arcs of four characters—the king Sang Sapurba, the legendary strongman Badang, the child-genius possibly named Nadim, and the wily mousedeer (pelanduk)—to demonstrate the centrality of precolonial Singapore in the making of the two legendary kingdoms of Srivijaya and Melaka. The book will speak to the themes of transnationalism, utopia and adaptability that also inform the development of modern Singapore.
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THE MYTHS OF THE LETTERED NATIVE
There is something peculiar about Sejarah Melayu. Known in English as the Malay Annals and in Arabic as Sulalatus Salatin (Genealogy of Kings), the text is hailed as an important source of information that can shed light on the history of early Singapore and the subsequent great Malay sultanate of Melaka in the 15th century. Yet, for a historical text, it is uncharacteristically full of strange occurrences.

There is an underwater kingdom. Very important people magically appear on a hill. A storm is abated by throwing things into the sea. These are just some of the many miracles within it. Perhaps the text is better categorised as a work of epic literature in the like of Homer’s The Odyssey or Dante’s The Divine Comedy.
Sejarah Melayu was originally written sometime in the fifteenth or sixteenth century. It was later modified in 1612 by the Johor Sultanate’s bendahara or prime minister Tun Sri Lanang on the order of Sultan Abdullah Ma’ayat Shah, or Raja Bongsu. This was the version acquired by Stamford Raffles, which he coined ‘Raffles Manuscript 18’, or ‘Raffles MS 18’ for short. It is widely believed that present surviving versions of Sejarah Melayu were based on the 1612 version, making it impossible to “track changes” from the original, if there were any at all. In 1821, the first English translator of the text, John Leyden, related in his book’s introduction that Sejarah Melayu was based on an earlier Malay manuscript titled Hikayat Melayu obtained from Goa in India. Adding to the mystery of Sejarah Melayu, alternative views have it that the text did not originate
from India’s Goa but from either Indonesia’s Gowa in Sulawesi, or Gua in the Kuala Lipis area of Pahang in Malaysia. There are more than 30 manuscripts in the world today, with about five editions and multiple local versions.

As history, *Sejarah Melayu* is often compared to another text about the same period and place in the Malay world. This is *Suma Oriental* by Tomé Pires, an apothecary from Portugal who had spent time in Melaka and India between 1512 and 1515. Written

![Tomé Pires](image-url)
as a report for the then Portuguese king Manuel I, this book is thought to be more factual in its description of the Malay Archipelago as opposed to Sejarah Melayu. In other words, some historians take Suma Oriental to be the more reliable document. Comparing the two begs the question: Is Sejarah Melayu a work of history or story? To answer that is to engage with the very idea of history itself.

Like most hikayats of royal genealogies, Sejarah Melayu has the purpose of legitimising the rule of a king, namely, the Sultan of Johor.

History is science. It is punctuated with dates, personages and events. These tell us how things came to be. Everything is traceable to a point in the past, and that point is traceable to an even earlier point, and so on. Good historians are those who can make sense of huge amounts of information—what we call, in today’s parlance, ‘big data’. Therefore, the way to determine the credibility of a historian is to test his or her mastery of dates, personages and events.
Or, history is signs. It is punctuated with interpretations, ideologies and worldviews. These tell us how things came to be. Nothing is traceable to a point in the past, and that is the point. Good historians are those who can make sense of multiple meanings, what we call in today’s parlance, ‘big ideas’. Therefore, the way to determine the credibility of a historian is to test his or her sensitivities to underlying meanings behind interpretations, ideologies and worldviews.

This book takes the latter approach to understanding historical texts. It sees these texts as attempting to signify something through the use of symbols, be it date or deity. The task of a historian therefore is to unpack the meanings of these symbols. This approach works better for a text like *Sejarah Melayu*, where fact and fiction are intertwined. In thinking critically about Singapore’s past as part of the bicentennial commemoration, this book will consider selected symbols of *Sejarah Melayu* to get a better sense of what the text can offer contemporary readers interested to know more about Singapore’s past. To this end, it will focus on the earlier parts of the manuscript that concern Singapura or, as it’s known by its old name, Temasek.
Sejarah Melayu begins to appear less peculiar if we begin from the premise that it belongs to an established genre of classical Malay writing known as the hikayat. As a genre, the hikayat can be described as a work of narrative prose from the Malay world that spans royal genealogies (like Sejarah Melayu), wondrous adventure stories as well as Islamic tales of prophets and saints, among others. Usually written in the Jawi script, hikayats were often meant to be read aloud to an audience. Given their rich collection of classical manuscripts, the Malays are better seen as lettered natives than lazy natives as they were imagined by European colonialists to the region.

Like most hikayats of royal genealogies, Sejarah Melayu has the purpose of legitimising the rule of a king, namely, the Sultan of Johor. This was particularly crucial for a Sultan of a fairly new kingdom caught up with in-fighting with his brothers while contending with Dutch and Portuguese colonial presence. To garner support, he needed to “prove” his connection to the great kingdom of Melaka that fell to the Portuguese just a hundred years earlier in 1511. The text does this in two ways. First, it traces
the king’s royal lineage to the more established royal by the name of Iskandar Zulkarnain, which is the Malay name of the famous Greek emperor, Alexander the Great.

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Another means through which *Sejarah Melayu* seeks to legitimise the Sultan’s rule is a feature common to other classical Malay manuscripts. This is the use of fantastical stories and legends to embolden the sacred nature of the king. This can be in the form of extraordinary tasks that only he is able to perform, or from the idea that he commands a variety of individuals with unique abilities who are loyal to him. *Sejarah Melayu* has both these features, as the next section will show.

This second feature has seen the hikayat disparaged for promoting blind loyalty to tyrannical feudal lords
among the Malays of yore. The clearest instance of this in *Sejarah Melayu* can be gleaned from the episode about the fatal battle between two best friends, Hang Tuah and Hang Kasturi (or, Hang Jebat as he is known in another classical manuscript, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*). By way of a short synopsis, the king of Melaka, Mansur Shah, had ordered his admiral Hang Tuah to put a stop to Hang Kasturi’s rebellion against his rule, even though Kasturi began his rebellion to defend the honour of Tuah. Kasturi was angered that the king had unfairly sentenced Tuah to death. Despite the irony, Tuah still executed his king’s orders and confronted his friend Kasturi, killing him as a result of a fight.

Yet, it is not entirely fair to paint all hikayats in the same light. While there are several tales of tyrannical kings in some of these narratives, it is also important to note that classical Malay manuscripts oftentimes portray instances of tyranny as bearing heavy costs for unjust rulers. Such is the story of the child genius in *Sejarah Melayu*, which we will explore in the next section. For now, suffice it to say that if the hikayats are taken as premodern manuals for kingly conduct, then these examples serve as warnings for them.
In fact, there are even entire manuscripts dedicated to narrating tales of rebellious individuals such as *Hikayat Raja Babi*, or *The Story of the Pig King*, about the manner in which a prince who was cursed to be born as a pig, an animal shunned by Muslims, overcame his lowly status to attain glory as the mightiest of kings. What meanings can we derive out of *Sejarah Melayu*?
While the two are not natural bedfellows, courtly hikayats like Sejarah Melayu and American superhero comics like Iron-Man share some stark similarities. Both feature living beings, usually humans, with superpowers. Both detail the origin stories of these beings. Most importantly, both forms are not just entertainment. Rather, they are allegories that speak to deeper human desires and fears. In his book Do the Gods Wear Capes? (2011), Ben Saunders suggests that the narrative about the Marvel superhero character Iron-Man is really an exploration of the human will to transform the world on the basis of
reason and technology, while Spiderman is a story about the everyman’s struggles with his gifts and failures. We can ask the same of the superhuman characters in Sejarah Melayu. What do they represent?

Most Singaporeans know the legend of Sang Nila Utama, the Indonesian prince who gave Singapura its name. Less people are aware of the tale of his father, Sang Sapurba, the first in the long line of Malay royals. This is where we should begin. Sang Sapurba appears early on in the text when he magically manifested himself on Bukit Seguntang, a hill in Palembang, alongside two other royals, Nila Pahlawan and Chandra Pandita. One version puts them down as brothers, but the version by Leyden is less clear about their relations. Regardless, Sang Sapurba claims to be a descendant of Raja Suran, who was in turn descended from Iskandar Zulkarnain. Magical things happen with Sang Sapurba’s sudden appearance. The night before, the rice-fields on the hill where he would appear gleamed and glittered like fire. Come daylight, it was discovered that the rice grains had turned to gold, their leaves to silver and their stalks to brass. The white bull that Sang Sapurba rode on morphed into a human being named Bat’h, who immediately sang praises of the king.
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These miraculous events gained the attention of the Palembang chief Demang Daun Lebar who kindly hosted the three royals as his guests. Demang had a beautiful daughter named Wan Sundaria, whom Sang Sapurba married. But, this was a marriage secured on certain conditions. For the two to wed, Demang agreed to install Sang Sapurba as king as long as he never treats Demang’s descendants with disrespect, shame or opprobrious language. In return, Demang vowed that his descendants will always be loyal to Sang Sapurba’s lineage, even if they were to behave tyrannically. Later in his life, Sang Sapurba moved from Palembang to Minangkabau, where he once again became king after instructing one of his warriors to kill a giant serpent that had been terrorising the land using his magical sword, Chora Sa Mendang Kian.

While there is no mention of Singapura in the legend of Sang Sapurba, his story lays down some foundational myths about the concept of citizenship.
that are reinforced in later stories, including Sang Nila Utama’s. One is the idea that citizenship is not defined by where you come from but what you do at a particular place.

The tale of Sang Sapurba, the metaphorical father of the Malays, suggests that the community is itself prone to migration. Indeed, Sang Sapurba was himself a migrant who had made both Palembang and Minangkabau his home, contributing to these places in ways that changed the norms of how society operated there. Sang Sapurba is a citizen made of roots and routes.

The story should not be taken as weakening the indigenous status of the Malays as bumiputera, or sons of the soil. Rather, it suggests that this group is neither insular nor static. Their identity changes as they move through time and space. The Malays today may be Muslims, but they were once Hindus—making them inheritors of two great traditions. Yet they were not just passive recipients. They had transformed these traditions into something they could call their own. Thinking of contemporary Singapore, we might ask ourselves how the legend of Sang Sapurba can help us think about citizenship, identity and belonging.
Let us turn to another character, Badang. Little-known by the Singapore public, Badang took centre-stage in 2015 when his legend was performed at the National Day Parade. His origin story was just as fantastical as Sang Sapurba. Like the king, Badang was a migrant who made his mark elsewhere, contributing much to his new home, Singapura. Depending on which accounts you read, Badang was either of Orang Asli or Siamese descent. He worked at Salwang, believed to be in modern-day Aceh in Sumatra, as a slave but later became a great warrior as a result of a fantastic encounter. Over several days while out fishing for his master, Badang noticed that the fishes he had trapped were reduced to bones. He decided to camp out to catch the thief, and discovered that it was a water spirit. Steeling himself, Badang confronted the spectre, who offered to grant Badang anything he wished if he were to let it go. Badang agreed and chose great strength. The process was nothing short of icky. Badang had to consume whatever the spirit threw up, which he did.

Returning to his master’s land, Badang cleared the jungle in record time. Impressed and indebted, his master set Badang free from the bondage of slavery. Badang then travelled to Singapura,
a thriving kingdom, where he demonstrated his strength to its king by launching a large boat into the water on his own, when 3,000 men had earlier failed. For this, the king appointed him the special post of court champion, or hulubalang. Later,

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Badang bested the champion of a rival kingdom in South India when he hurled a heavy rock from the king’s palace to the mouth of the Singapore River. The rock is today known as the Singapore Stone, fragments of which are on display at the National Museum of Singapore.

There is no doubt that the legend of Badang reproduces the duality of roots and routes in Sang Sapurba’s tale when it comes to sense of belonging. Yet, one important difference between the two legends can be couched along class lines. Sang Sapurba is a story about an elite who had assumed
Badang’s success story was a rarity as opposed to the narrative of Singapore’s meritocracy, which pitches success as something attainable by anyone who works hard.

his natural place in the hierarchy of things. Readers then and now expected that he ended up where he did. Badang, on the other hand, is a rags-to-riches story. From a position of low status within the Malay world, Badang rose to a position of high station.

At first glance, it seems only natural to speak of Badang’s legend as prefiguring Singapore’s contemporary practice of meritocracy. But it is important to note here that Badang attained his success not out of sheer effort alone. Badang’s success story was a rarity as opposed to the narrative of Singapore’s meritocracy, which pitches success as something attainable by anyone who works hard. Badang did not just work hard—he had also resorted to dubious means such as threats. His success also necessitated a lot of intervention from more powerful beings—the water spirit, his master and
the king. Seen in this light, his story places as much emphasis on outside help as much as one’s own wit.

On the topic of wit, it is apt to now revisit the legend of the child genius who had saved Singapore from a relentless attack by shoals of garfish, or todak. This is an important but tragic story that had given two places in modern Singapore their names, Tanjong Pagar (or, “fenced cape”) and Bukit Merah (or, “red hill”). Despite its significance, Sejarah Melayu only has a short description of it in chapter ten of the Leyden version. An interesting aspect of the story concerns the gender of the child. While the Malay noun “budak” was used to describe the child genius, Leyden had translated it as “boy”. The child’s gender was later affirmed in popular culture when the child was given the male name “Hang Nadim” in the 1961 film Singapura Dilanggar Todak. Today, with changing attitudes to gender roles, it is necessary to ask if the child could in fact be female.

When news of the garfish attack reached the king Paduka Sri Maharaja, he ordered his men to form a ‘human wall’ of their thighs to stop the garfishes from reaching inland. This resulted in a high number of casualties until a child suggested that the king should construct a wall made from plantain stems instead. The
king found the child’s plan to be sound, and ordered it done. True enough, the attack ceased and very little lives were lost. The place came to be known as Tanjong Pagar. Sadly, the king’s advisers said that that the child could one day outwit the king,
and recommended to have him or her killed. While this was not captured in *Sejarah Melayu*, it was said that the king had hired assassins to murder the child in his sleep at his home on a hill. That hill came to be known as Bukit Merah.

This is a difficult story to stomach. It appears to uphold the earlier pact made between Sang Sapurba and Demang Daun Lebar that a king has to be obeyed even if he was badly behaved. In this sense, the story could be taken as suggesting that the Malays value loyalty over justice, making them an uncritical lot with little capacity for political action. However, it is important to note that the injustice suffered by the child genius did have repercussions. Leyden’s version of *Sejarah Melayu* has it that “the guilt of his (or her) blood lay upon the country”, suggesting some kind of curse at work. Soon after the child’s death, the Maharaja too died, and Singapura’s rule was passed over to his son Iskandar Shah. Iskandar’s time as king was equally fraught. Enraged by rumours of infidelity about one of his concubines, Iskandar sentenced her to death. Furious at this wrongdoing, her father Sang Rajuna Tapa, who was also the prime minister, decided to betray his king to the rival Majapahit empire,
effectively ending the reign of Sang Sapurba’s descendants in Singapura. If we consider the extended version of the story of the child genius, it does appear that what goes around comes around. This complicates the view that Malays are prone to authoritarian rulers. On the contrary, it can be taken as a warning to despots.

In Malay folklore, the mousedeer came to symbolise not just courage, but wit.

There are many other “superheroes” in Sejarah Melayu whose stories deserve unpacking. One of these is the pelanduk or wily mousedeer, a non-human character that had made a brief appearance in Sejarah Melayu. As Sultan Iskandar fled north of Singapura to seek a new settlement, he witnessed a mousedeer chasing one of his dogs to the river’s edge. Inspired by the mousedeer’s courage, Iskandar decided to establish a kingdom at the mouth of the river, naming it Melaka because he was sitting under a tree of that name as this happened. In Malay folklore, the mousedeer
came to symbolise not just courage, but wit. There is even an entire hikayat dedicated to it by the title of *Hikayat Sang Kancil*. It is not a stretch to say that the pelanduk story channels the preference for brains over brawn that similarly animates the legend of the child genius of Singapura.
A FINAL THING NEEDS TO BE SAID ABOUT *SEJARAH MELAYU*. In the interpretative sense of history as the study of cultural signs, the text is history. But, the text is also not quite history. Put another way, *Sejarah Melayu* continues to inspire existing narratives drawn from its content. We have mentioned the performance of Badang at the 2016 National Day Parade. At his Budget speech this bicentennial year, Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat likened Singapore to the Sang Kancil: “Like Sang Kancil, the small but quick-witted mousedeer, we can make our way in the world”.

Some of the most novel rewriting of stories from *Sejarah Melayu* can be gleaned from literature.
Here, Malay writers have themselves used some of the stories as fodder to discuss contemporary issues. For instance, Alfian Sa’at’s poem ‘Hang Nadim Speaks’ makes clearer the value of exercising political agency in the face of authoritarianism. The first four lines demonstrate this:

*I was a boy with a good idea*
*I never asked for the throne,*
*All I wanted was not to live*
*In a village of cripples.*

In his story ‘Schizo Singa’, the Malay science fiction writer Hassan Hassaa’Ree Ali imagines the founding of Singapore on the basis of a hallucination suffered by Sang Nila Utama, speculating that what he probably saw was a tiger and not a lion. Still, the mighty reputation of the lion in the founding of a new country suggests that its majestic stature, which could impress Sang Nila’s trading partner in China’s Yuan dynasty. This draws attention to the power of stories as narratives that can define a nation.

Encouragingly, *Sejarah Melayu* had also inspired non-Malay writers. Two stories are worth mentioning
here. The first is the short story ‘Bukit Larangan’ by Manish Melwani that rewrites the story of Sang Nila Utama’s discovery of Singapura in light of the myth of the were-tiger. It imagines Sang Nila mistaking the were-tiger for a lion, while narrating an alternative history of ancient Singapura that featured this community of magical man-animals at its heart. Another intriguing short story is ‘Garden’ by Ng Yi-Sheng which creatively uses some of the characters from Sejarah Melayu such as Dang Anom (the concubine who was sentenced to death by Sultan Iskandar Shah) in an interactive ‘choose-your-own-adventure’ tale that collapses multiple timelines and characters of Singapore history, suggesting the intertwining of old fables and modern sensibilities. That the appeal of Sejarah Melayu crosses periods and cultures make it a world text deserving of our attention.
About the Author
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Dr. Nazry Bahrawi is an academic, literary translator and essayist. He specialises in the comparative study of Indian Ocean cultures between Muslim Southeast Asia and the Middle East. He has translated two Malay literary works into English, and is currently translating a short story anthology of Malay speculative fiction from Singapore. His op-ed commentaries have appeared in Al Jazeera, The Guardian, South China Morning Post and Today. He is a senior lecturer at Singapore University of Technology and Design.

About the Artist
Rukmunal Hakim

YesGo! Studio is a small illustration studio founded in 2011, currently located in Bintaro, South Tangerang, Indonesia. In its early years, the studio was run together by Jules Tjitra and Rukmunal Hakim. They have worked on several commissioned illustration projects in Jakarta, and have never stayed in just one illustration style.

At this moment, YesGo! Studio, is run by Rukmunal Hakim as its creative director.
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