

Malay Kingship in Kedah: Religion, Trade and Society

Review Number:

1500

Publish date:

Thursday, 24 October, 2013

Author:

Maziar M. Falarti

ISBN:

9780739168424

Date of Publication:

2013

Price:

£44.95

Pages:

252pp.

Publisher:

Lexington Books

Publisher url:

<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780739168431>

Place of Publication:

New York

Reviewer:

William B. Noseworthy

In *Malay Kingship in Kedah: Religion, Trade, and Society*, Maziar Mozaffari Falarti offers a fascinating contribution to the study of local history and political models in Southeast Asia. As Falarti demonstrates, the locality of Kedah holds a special place in Southeast Asian history, as the two Muslim graves at Kedah, presumably of Persian individuals, are the earliest evidence of a presence of Islam in Southeast Asia. The first of these gravestone markers dates to between 826 and 829 CE and the second, of Syaikh Abdul Kadir Ibn Syaikh Husin Syah Alam, dates to between 903 and 904 CE. The second grave was apparently discovered in an archeological dig in 1963 and first cited by the Malay scholar Wan Hussein Ami in 1980 (pp. 3, 28). Thus, the author argues, it is natural to focus on Kedah, offering as it does traces of 'the oldest surviving lineage in the Malay and Islamic world' (p. 185). Scholars of Islamic and Southeast Asian history ought to be naturally interested in the nature of the dynasty and its resilience. In order to begin to answer this line of inquiry Falarti centers his analysis on the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*.

The *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* is a traditional Malay text from Kedah that is thought to have been compiled during the 17th and 18th centuries (p. 21). The foreword to the book, written by Carl A. Trocki, asserts that the text has been 'largely ignored or denigrated by both colonial and more recent Malay scholars' (p. xvi) thus, the text is a natural choice for Falarti's focus. Furthermore, the text blended adaptations of the *Ramayana* along with Persian texts *Gheseyeh Soleyman va Simurgh* and the *Hekayateh Simurg* (compiled during the Safavid era of 1501/1502–1722 CE) (p. 24). In Falarti's analysis the text is also compared to other Malay texts such as the *Hikayat Inderaputra*, the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai*, the *Tufat Al-Nafis* and the *Sejarah Melayu*, as well as Buddhist Jatakas such as the *Harita-Jataka* (431 CE), *Kumbha-Jataka* (512 CE)

and the *Mahabhodi-Jataka* (528 CE). The comparison with the Buddhist Jatakas is particularly important as it is used to explain some of the moralistic implications within the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, for instance regarding the ingestion of intoxicants, as Falarti asserts that the scholars and copyists responsible for the compilation of the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* would have been familiar with these earlier stories, which had been in circulation for more than a thousand years (p. 46). Nevertheless, the deep roots of the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* have been questioned, like those of many other Southeast Asian texts, since many scholars were long reluctant to admit that it had 'historical merit' (p. 21) and, in the argument of Maier (1) the text represented a break between traditional forms of knowledge reproduction and modernity, partially as a result of the introduction of Western printing techniques (p. 21). This was particularly the case with a version of the text published by Wan Yahya in 1911.

Wan Yahya's 1911 version of the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* was criticized on the grounds of being edited and compiled from uncited written and oral sources. As the author notes, although it is possible that many of the variations present in Wan Yahya's version could be information gleaned from these uncited sources, that it '... could further be argued that he attempted to disguise, omit or rewrite aspects of the *Hikayat* that he felt were outdated and unrealistic, especially for a new breed of Malay readers...' (p. 31). Despite the lack of available evidence to absolutely confirm the following suggestion beyond doubt, it is furthermore likely that Wan Yahya was not the first scholar to create an edited version of the text. Islamic scholars in Southeast Asia were already creating critical reviews of local literature in the 17th century. In one particularly strongly worded critique of the *Hikayat Inderaputra* by the Gujarit Sufi from Aceh, Sheikh Nur al-Din Ali al-Raniri (d. 1658), the Sheik argued that the *Hikayat* was so worthless that the paper that it was written on could be used for 'washing parts of the body', unless, of course, that paper contained the name of Allah (p. 22). Nevertheless, as Falarti asserts: in both the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* and the *Hikayat Inderaputra* there are fewer references to 'pre-Islamic rulers, drinking of intoxicants and customs of ancient times' than in the Islamic literature (p. 22).

The drinking of intoxicants, or rather, *polluted* wine, is one of the first narrative that Falarti analyzes from the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*. The question that is raised based upon the passage is one of interpretation. The central Sheikh Abdullah is clearly an Islamacist Sheik, who advocates the destruction of idols and demonstrates 'religious zeal' throughout the narrative. However, he defends the pre-Islamic king of Kedah against Satan (Iblis) who attempts to get him to drink urine. The question is: why? Falarti suggests that this is because the Sheikh would have seen Kedah as ripe grounds for conversion (pp. 51–2). Thus, the text becomes a juncture for Falarti to additionally open up the discussion of the nature of conversion in Southeast Asian history.

As Falarti notes, Southeast Asian texts have tended to present a royalist view of conversion history. In texts such as the *Sejarah Melayu* and the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* senior Islamic figures such as the Prophet and his descendants (*Seyd's*), saints or mystics arrive, appear in dreams and then visit local rulers, aid them toward profession of Islamic faith. The rulers are then generally circumcised and begin to wait for the arrival of missionaries by ship from either Mecca or Jedah (p. 35). However, others contested this 'top down' conversion narrative, as they argued demonstrated that in many regions in Southeast Asia: such as Johor, Patani, Pasai, Minangkabau, Java and even Cham polities that the process occurred from the merchant class up, as Falarti notes, a large number of scholars have observed that the merchant class, known as the *orang kaya* in Malay, were present and already converted to Islam long before the conversion of either the elite or the peasant classes in many locations across the region (p. 36-37). The discussion of the role of the relationship between the elite and the *orang kaya* eventually flows into Falarti's introduction of a contesting oral history of conversion in Kedah which disputes certain elements of the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*.

The oral conversion narrative presented in Falarti's book is drawn from the records of Sherard Osborne (1838) who noted that a Sumatran Batak known as *serang* Jadee gave his own discussion of the conversion of the sultan of Kedah. According to Jadee's account, hajis appeared from the island of Langkawi and at Kedah very, very early, during the time of the Prophet. These hajis converted the raja and advised him to cease the sacrifice of virgins to the giant *ular-besar* boa. Despite the shifting at this juncture of Falarti's discussion to broader points less apparently directly relevant to the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, the

author does use Jadee's account of conversion in Kedah to embark on a greater discussion of *naga* mythical snake/dragon-like-being narratives. 'Naga narratives', as these plot cycles may be termed were, as Falarti notes, prevalent throughout South Indian (Pallava), Funanese, Khmer and Cham traditions and 'naga narratives' remain quintessential in basic presentations of Khmer cultural values, as narratives that involve *Inâ garai* mythical dragon-serpents are prevalent throughout certain Cham story-telling traditions. Furthermore, as Falarti notes, the 'theme of a Naga asking for tribute from the ruler in return for political power is a popular one in South Asian, as well as Khmer, Cham, Burmese and Mon traditions' (pp. 55–59). Thus, the emphasis on the *ular-besar* in Jadee's account, which may represent a reconsideration of *naga* worship, reminds Falarti that Jadee's account is also reminiscent of certain elements of the Ramayana cycle (where Hanuman gets ingested by Su-Rasa the ogre mother of the Nagas, or, in another case, by Sinhika, another ogre). However, the Ramayana comparison creates a question for Falarti, as generally the naga and Garuda – the natural enemy of the naga – do not *both* come from the same place (Langka, or 'below the waves'). Yet here both are said to come from the island of 'Langkawi'. Thus, the comparison of this narrative to the Buddhist *Sussondi-Jataka* (360 CE) is crucial to Falarti as are Mongolian, Japanese and Chinese versions of both *Ramayana*-like narratives and *naga*-like narratives such as the popular *Baishhe Zhuan* – a Song Dynasty Chinese classic (pp. 58–60).

Despite the apparent digression away from the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* presented by Jadee's account of conversion, Falarti does use the discussion of 'naga narratives' to link back toward creating a view of a specifically 'Kedah model of Malay-kingship', through the simple analysis of the title of the text. Falarti asserts that even the title demonstrates blending of Thai, Sanskrit, Pali and Malay titles, with Merong meaning snake/dragon in Thai and Mahawangsa meaning 'great dynasty' (p. 57). Furthermore, in the analysis of this 'great dynasty' Falarti tries to determine if there was any form of social-contract between the ruler and the ruled. By liberally interpreting the idea of the social contract through the religiously charged term 'covenant' Falarti does assert that there is a model in the Demang Lebar Daun and Sri Tri Bauna, although this 'covenant' was infrequently repeated in other Malay texts (pp. 73–5). Thus, referring back to the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, Falarti demonstrates that in the case of rulers from Kedah, as was the case with other rulers in the Sejarah Melayu, 'violations of the covenant on the part of a ruler could cause his downfall' (p. 84). However, the fall from grace was not necessarily permanent. As was the case with Phra Ong Mahawangsa, one could fall and then reascend in favor (p. 45). Regardless, the idea of the covenant between the ruler and the ruled, in Falarti's vision, justifies a reconsideration of the relationship between the raja and his main naval force during the 17th to the 19th century: the *orang laut*.

It is the relationship with the *orang laut* set in combination with the ulu/ilir upstream-downstream networks of Kedah and the *overland* trade routes of peninsular Malaysia that Falarti combines to suggest that there are certain tensions within the previously presented, relatively uniform, conceptions of Malay models of kingship (p. 19). This, for Falarti, contests certain 'riverine models' put forth by Gullick and Milner (p. 4), particularly as Falarti's conception of the 'Malay world' is quite broad, including the *orang laut* and *orang asli* original peoples and 'the Cham people (in contemporary Southern Vietnam)' (pp. 11–12, 97).⁽²⁾ Within this conception one wonders, if *kerajaan* was not a state but the condition of having a raja, what sort of conditions might have led to the circumstance of a *raja di raja* in the early modern Malay world? Or was the Malay world during the early modern period completely absent of such a concept of a king of kings? Was this a notion that was erased with the arrival of Islam?

The above enquiries rise out of one of the greatest contributions of this volume, besides the unveiling of the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, namely the excellent review of the theoretical tensions that exist in scholarly discussions of the 'Malay world' model, through the examples of the *mukim* parish structure demonstrated by Bonney, riverine models as presented by Bronson and maritime polities as per the discussion of classic historian of Southeast Asia O. W. Wolters.⁽³⁾ These notions are further complicated by the apparently nearly identical glosses of *negeri* as territorial units and *nagari* as villagers (pp. 14–17). Meanwhile, within these *nagari* or *mukim* units there were also systems of local administrators. On land, the *penghulu* would preside over the *mukim* with a *kweng* or a *toh kweng* that served as the district headman over one or more *mukim* (pp. 145–6). Meanwhile, at sea, the *Laksmana* naval admirals became the *raja laut* as the senior rulers of the

sea routes that were so critical in linking the Siak sea lords to the sultan of Kedah (pp. 125–6, 131). These *Laksmana* were critical in Kedah's 1838–1839 revolt against the Siamese (Thai), as evidenced by the 19th-century Thai *Phongsawadan Muang Zaiburi*'s discussion of the maritime forces that were employed by both Tengku Muhammed Saad and Wan Mali (or Che Mali) (p. 116). Meanwhile, when Laksmana and their *orang laut* captured booty or slaves it was distributed accord to *adat* customary law (p. 103) as they shifted from port to port throughout Southeast Asia (p. 125). Thus, Falarti seems to support the suggestion that literary tropes travelled along the sea routes of Southeast Asia, along with the admirals and the traders, from Merbok/Kedah, Songkla/Patani, Funan and the Cham polities (p. 149) and thus it is clear that the crux of Falarti's contribution rests not only on his *complicating* but also his *broadening* of the Malay world, while emphasizing that this world was not *solely* maritime in nature (p. 184).

Notes

1. H. M. J. Maier, *In the Center of Authority: The Malay Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (Ithaca, NY, 1988).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. M. Gullick, *Indigenous Political Systems of Western Malaya* (London, 1988 [1958]) and A. C. Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule* (Tucson, AZ, 1982).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. R. Bonney, *Kedah 1771–1821: The Search for Security and Independence* (London, 1971); B. Bronson, 'Exchange at the upstream and downstream ends: notes toward a functional model of the coastal state in Southeast Asia', in *Economic Exchange and Social Interaction in Southeast Asia*, ed. K. Hutterer (Ann Arbor, MI, 1977), pp. 39-52; O. W. Wolters, 'Studying Srivijaya', *JMBRAS*, 52, 2 (1979), 1–32.[Back to \(3\)](#)

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1500>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/61187>