Words Over Borders: Trafficking Literatures in Southeast Asia

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Abstract
This paper traces the paths of literary works that cross linguistic and cultural borders, and have been adopted into the receiving cultures. Their sources may be as far away as India, or as close as Java and the Malay Peninsula, but have spread and later become well-loved local stories and poems as they provide genres and forms to be emulated and enjoyed. From India came the *Ramayana*, which travelled to Thailand, Cambodia, and Java, and from Java to the Malay Peninsula and Patani. From the Malay Peninsula and/or Sumatra the *pantun* marched into the other islands of the Archipelago, was brought to Sri Lanka and also South Africa, and in the 19th century to Europe. The romantic Javanese *Panji* story caught the imagination Malay and Patani performers who took it to Ayuthia. These texts were thus translated, transformed, and adapted in a wide literary area, resulting in not only various literary performances but also in related arts.

Keywords
Ramayana, shadow play/*wayang, pantun*, *Panji*, Islam, Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia stretches from the Vietnamese peninsula, and then curves into Kampuchea, Laos, and to Thailand, while extending south to the Malay Peninsula. At the end of this peninsula it breaks and is dispersed as the islands of Indonesia and the Philippines. To the west of Thailand are the high mountains with peoples, languages, and cultures called the Burmese or Myanmarese. Hundreds of tribes, races, and cultures and thousands of

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languages crowd the mainland and the islands. Its landmass stretches from the sub-tropical to the deep tropical. Shores, valleys, and hills carve human lives that find their livelihood there.

Thus the roots of culture burrow deep into nature, lessons are learnt from experiences, new comers, and invading armies. Scores of kingdoms, forts, and states grew and expanded, fell and were replaced.

Nature gathers human beings and gives special character to places. In the highland kingdoms like Surakarta and Yogyakarta, the feudal system was intense while the coastal Melaka, that sits before the straits, opened its ports to the cultures of all comers and learnt from their experiences. The wetland dwellers at the edge of Ayuthia developed a culture made possible by the swamps, and those who lived at the edge of the forest in Johor Lama would equally be influenced by nature around it. If nature significantly influences us, then people who dwelled in similar environment may develop quite similar cultures.

Relations between various ethnic groups, trade and commerce, power and politics, were frequently intertwined into each other or caused to intertwine. In times of peace, relationships may grow and show proof of the possibility of shared living; however, in times of war these relationships suffer and may turn to conflict, contest, and adversity. Indeed, their lives were much influenced by these relations.

The Empire of Sriwijaya linked together the states of the Peninsula, Sumatra, Java, Patani, Singgora and Ligor (Siam), and also Kampuchea, while Ayuthia had influence over a great area of what is now modern Thailand, Laos, and a part of northern Malay Peninsula. Melaka claimed influence and power over Patani, Southern Thailand, the Peninsula and several parts of Sumatra, Brunei (which was a much greater state in days of old), Ambon, and Kampuchea. These three kingdoms spread their tentacles over large regions and have no doubt influenced the history of the cultures, and not least their literature, even up till the present times.

Besides politics, religion played as great a role. First came Hinduism, then Buddhism, then finally Islam and Christianity. Religious influences are etched deep and long, though a new layer may be seen to overlay an older one, but this older layer is also often present in the new, and the new have roots in the traditional.

II

As we are well aware, the term "Southeast Asia" was coined by the Austrian scholar, Robert Heine-Geldern, who saw a great many similarities between the geography, nature, and cultures of peoples who dwelt the countries that we now know as Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Myammar. Are the Southeast Asians a figment of his imagination or do they have some real similarities so

that they may be categorised as a geographical region? If we wish to seek differences then we need not bother with too much analysis – there are numerous instances that will lead us to conclude so. However, as Southeast Asians are now searching for their similarities, it is the similarities that are presently emphasised – whether as races and cultures, or with shared political systems and economies. Whether the naming is true or false, the Southeast Asian countries seem to agree to see themselves as sharing a great deal of similarities, and as part of a big family of regional cultures. Only that, in these great cultures they may find smaller sub-groupings of, for example, the Buddhist cultures – comprising of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Burma – and a Malay cluster that encompasses Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

For me, a student of literature, the related subjects of history and politics give endless aspects and perspectives, but in literature, which I understand a little better, I may seek to find the binding threads that have been woven to make the common textile of races and cultures in the region.

If we do have similarities in history and religion we may not avoid the looming question: Is the literature of the island of Roti similar to that of Sunda or the Karena, or is the poetic form known as the *khlong* similar to the narrative oral epic of the Iban, and the oral tales of the Hmong similar to those of the Baduy, an indigenous tribe in West Java? Definitely not, would be the answer. However, on the other hand, there are to be found similarities at every point. We are no doubt on a firmer ground when we return to earlier societies when Southeast Asians shared worldviews, religions, problems, and environments. As for the present, we are cast against the pricks of the modern and modernity and more recently globalisation, and thrown together to enjoy or suffer similar predicaments hitherto unknown to us. This is the main issue that appears before me as the former Editor-in-Chief of *Tenggara*, a journal of Southeast Asian literature for more than thirty years,

This paper is a long journey to find various threads that bound us together and, to some extent, still do, in this great cultural textile we call the literature of Southeast Asia. I see great similarities in the outlook on nature, stories of the survival of the weak through their intelligence, the influence of the *Ramayana* in stories and shadow plays and other forms of performances, the four-line poetic form, the *pantun*, the social function of literature, the *Inu Panji* stories, and now in the overriding presence of modernism and globalism in the region.

III

Nature as Teacher

We begin with the first omnipresent backdrop to human life – nature – that all Southeast Asian communities seem to accept as the most important influence.

In general, for example, a man brought up in the heat of the seasons does not stay indoors, but goes out to the rivers, sea, hills, swamps, and the meadows. He thus becomes an intimate neighbour of nature and lives within it, while nature itself becomes the very base of his life and livelihood, and his field of creativity and, finally, his grave. But we should not forget that because of his closeness to nature, he has developed over time to become its closest and most careful observer who has learnt lessons offered him. Nature, says a Malay proverb, spreads before us as a teacher, to offer instruction – *alam terkembang menjadi guru.* Or as is suggested by a Riau proverb: We must go into the jungles to learn about human life.

These are proverbs wrought from a generations-long experience of the forests, rivers, and seas and what they offer – it has become a mirror for him and his life. And when he composes a song, story or a poem, his images, and philosophy of life, may be seen as products of this sharp observation of how nature goes through time, creating harmony and conflict between species or human societies themselves. These are nature's lessons. *Sekali air bah, sekali pantai berubah,* each time the tide rises, each time the shore changes, says a well-known proverb – this is without doubt another example of this observation, an insight wrapped in poetic language, with its prefect symmetry. Even in a story by a modern Burmese writer, Zawgyi, "The Glorious Summer," and another by Ancan, from Thailand, "Field of Battle," both written in the twentieth century, nature becomes a medium of Fate or the gods to sentence the transgressor. It is nature that helps to set right a world that has lost its balance and its justice.

Humankind often suffered through feudal injustice, for he must live with and under the powers of the mighty but unkind lords, who were not able to temper their desires and emotions. Yet he must still survive and prevail. One of his representatives is the little mouse deer (*kancil* or *pelanduk*/*pilanduk*). Stories about this little creature abound in the Javanese, the languages of Mindanao, Malay, and I have been informed is also to be found in Kampuchea, as the symbol of the small but clever underdog, under the great and the cruel. Nature, through its animals, becomes an example, an analogy or even a symbol.

IV

Ramayana as Inspiration

The next point of similarity in the literatures of Southeast Asia comes through the impact of Hinduism – most noticeably through the *Ramayana*, a religious work that dramatises the struggle between good and evil, the innocent and the ambitious or the intemperate. This old book came with symbols for the Southeast Asians and has enriched their minds and cultures for more than a thousand years (in many forms). Some are, in fact, still used in their writings, ceremonies, and festivals, in many of these Southeast Asian countries.

The story of *Ramayana* begins in the palace of Dasarata, Rama's father, who has three other sons. The romantic and central part of the epic begins when Rama won Sita, the beautiful daughter of King Videhas, at a shooting contest – for he was able to shoot with his bow, one so formidable that nobody else could even bend it. For his achievements too, he was inaugurated as the crown prince. However, his stepmother would only have her own son, Bharata, in his place. The story turns with Rama and Sita being sent into exile; however, the innocent and sincere Bharata would only act as a representative of his brother, Rama, until he returns.

On his perilous journey, Rama fought and defeated the giant, Ravana, the symbol of evil in the story. It was Ravana who contrived that Rama be separated from his younger brother, Laksamana, and Sita be kidnapped. He repeatedly seduced Sita but she remained Rama's loyal wife to the end. Only the help of Sugriva and Hanuman and the supernatural powers could assist Rama to defeat Ravana and reclaim Sita. Her chastity was tested. When the enemies were overcome and Sita's chastity was proven, they returned to rule over Ayodhya.

This epical work of Valmiki branched out to become scores of prose and poetic versions that were relatively shorter. These versions then branched further when they were brought to Southeast Asia. Among the earliest was the *Ramayana Kakawin,* which according to Eva Vanickova (Prusek 133) is the oldest manuscript of an epic ever discovered, i.e. circa 9th century, and possibly written during the reign of Raja Dyah Balitung. However, it must be noted that this is not a translation of the original by Valmiki, though it found its inspiration from *Ramayana*'s pages, but most probably based itself on the shorter South Indian version. It is interesting to note that the form has been transposed into the Javanese poetic form, *tembang gede,* developed as a narrative medium. As a work, Vanickova calls it "one of the loveliest old Javanese epics" (qtd. in Prusek 133). From this written version has grown many performances such as the *wayang* (shadow play) and dances that we shall return to later.

The influence of *Ramayana* in Malaysia was and is not as strong as on the Javanese. The Malay story, called *Hikayat Seri Rama*, as found today, is far removed from its Hindu source. In general, it is truncated or enhanced by the new religion of the Malays, Islam, and censorship against its pre-Islamic beliefs and elements. As it is, only the love story between Siti Dewi and Seri Rama is foregrounded.

The transformation of this work in Malay is indeed intriguing, for with the coming of Islam much of the Hindu-influenced literature in Malay was marginalised or woven unobstrusively into the new emerging culture, with Islam as its base. Thus *Hikayat Seri Rama* contains obvious elements of Islam. Observe, for example, the initial opening paragraphs:

> *Ini hikayat yang terlalu indah-indah termasyhur diperkatakan orang di atas angin and di bawah angin nyata kepada segala sastera perkataan Maharaja Rawana yang sepuluh kepalanya, and dua puluh tangannya. Raja itu terlalu besar ia beroleh kerajaannya, empat tempat neggeri dianugerahkan Allah Taala….* (Shellabear 1)
>
> [This is the story of great magnificence, renowned and mentioned in all quarters by people above and below the wind, to all writers who know the words that concern Maharaja Rawana with the ten heads, and twenty hands. Great was his empire, four sites were there for his empire, given by Allah Taala….]

Notice the addition of Allah Taala in the last line, to replace the Hindu gods.

Besides the numerous similarities between *Hikayat Seri Rama* (HSR) and the *Ramayana* of Valmiki and Kandam's *Uttara Kandam*, in Tamil, Rajantheran Muniandy considers that,

> In several episodes of the HSR, it seems that there was real effort of the writer of HSR to adjust, give a new look, include new episodes, or refine the original ones. For example, in one episode he notices: The inclusion of elements of the Islamic religion as local colour. For example, Rama was said to be descended from the prophet Adam, Ravana was… fated by Allah swt to be born through Nabi Adam; and the episode when Sita was kidnapped by Ravana, Catayu Kisubrisu reminds him (Ravana) of his promise to Adam….
> (239)

Besides these, as mentioned by Muniandy, the talent and the intervention of the writer, local colour, and the re-creation of the work itself makes it a separate work, and not a mere translation of the Rama story from India. Thus R.O. Winstedt's view that saw Malay literature as a literature of translation is not easily proven and accepted. This is how texts of this kind develop and spread – beginning in a certain place or state, and then carried to another, especially during the high season of oral literary culture, and when the works become the property of whoever desired to read, interpret, and retell them, and might be used and recreated into other versions, according to the talents and minds of these authors.

V

If we now cross over to the north of the Malay Peninsula, we may also see the great influence of this Indian epic on the culture and literature of Siam. Its greatest presence, however, is seen in a poetic rendition called *Ramakien,* or "The Glory of Rama, Royal Poetry during the first Administration of the Bangkok Dynasty." This poem is considered the longest and the most

magnificent ancient Thai epic. According to Klaus Wenk, its form may have been inspired by the Javanese, and thus indirectly by the Indian masterpiece (Prusek 131). However this 70, 000-line poem is in fact longer than the original *Ramayana.* But for the general public there is yet another Thai version of the Indian epic, which is closer to the heart of the people: shorter, and dubbed the "real *Ramakien*."

Once again, in both these versions the values and the literary culture of the Thais are the main frame of reference. They were inspired by the all-important themes of a husband's love for his wife, her chastity, and the ideal of truth. The language of the work itself was finely created to root itself in the many different episodes so that they may give the greatest impact. Take, for example, this description of a beautiful physical relationship (though the translation sounds quite raw) from a version from the Thai:

> Great waves arose on the shore of the ocean.
> Monsters arose among the ripples of the waves.
> The heavens exploded in thunder like the sound of shooting guns.
> The winds howl excessively.
> Soon the rain fell, *suu, suu.*
> The moat around the palace flooded, filling the entire province.
> There was happiness,
> Love, affection. (Bofman 217)

These Thai versions of the original spread far and wide. Local versions and re-creations may also be read in Burmese, Khmer, Lao, Mon or Talaing, and Sinhalese, throughout Southeast Asia, and also in the East Asian languages – Korean, Japanese, Mongolian, and Chinese (Sahai ix). This, no doubt, was made possible through the spread of the religions of Hinduism and, later, Buddhism. *Ramayana* that has long found its new addresses, shapes, and voices in Southeast Asia, has also long inspired their lives. From the main trunk of the story of Valmiki, many branches of stories have profusely grown, some full ones, some becoming smaller sub-branches that might just comprise of one episode or a piece of a main one, value-added, with its own special interpretation. This epic has also brought forth many sophisticated performances in other related arts, among others the shadow play. It is possible that this form too came from India, but in sophistication, refinement and their extraordinary qualities, it is the product of native artisans and artists, working from their own unique aesthetics and literary or artistic cultures.

Jacques Brunet suggests that from India the form of the shadow play was taken to China, then south to Cambodia, where it is called *Nang Sbek* and this Cambodian form influenced the growth of the Thai form, now known as *Nang yai.* However, there is yet another direction of movement that is as interesting, if not more so. According to Brunet, from India it arrived to Java and Bali, along

with Malaysia, giving birth to the *Wayang Purwa* and *Wayang Kulit*, Shadow Play. From this point another form was born, i.e. *Wayang Siam* or *Nang Talun*. From Southern Thailand, or more exactly, Nakhorn Sithammarat, which is considered as its base, and where the population is mostly Malay, it gave rise to the *Nang Kaloun* in Kampuchea and the *Wayang Siam* in the north of the Malay Peninsula. Beginning with impressive images of the *Ramayana*, those of the shadow play reconfirmed the universal meaning of the Indian story in its local context and relevance. With characters adorned in local dresses and attire, in daily dialects, and a row of favourite clowns and fools, all in the context of the local culture, this theatre became a favourite that was loyally sought after each time it came to the village or city.

A few types of *wayang* or plays, including the shadow play, *wayang purwa* and *wayang beber* in Java, Bali, and certain areas of Lombok in the Peninsula, throughout Thailand, and Kampuchea, carry the stories of Rama and Sita. In Java, it is suggested that the shadow play began as early as the beginning of the Christian era and developed with the Hindu religion and from then on with the new religion of Islam, especially in the *Menak* and *Panji* stories.

Though all these forms are known as *wayang*, meaning shadow, cast by the leather puppets, there are quite a few differences to be discerned between them. However, it is here that we find their difference and uniqueness, and also the genius of this theatre. This is the region where it was tested and grew into popular forms. In this genre, the fine arts of leather carving, narrative presentation, voice throwing, and direction are collected in one single person. For a task that demands so many skills, he is assisted only by an orchestra (big and small), that he also directs. Thus when he succeeds, he is master of many arts and tasks, so that in many communities he is said to be in touch with the supernatural, and often sought out to cure the sick or procure a love potion to reverse the emotions of an unwilling man or woman.

According to I Made Bandem, in Indonesia the shadow play is differentiated from *wayang purwa*, which puts on stage stories from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (12-13). However, the shadow play also put on stories that are Islamic or historical in nature (from the palaces of Yogya, for example, to the life of Christ), which the latter does not. This great and ancient work, clearly has many versions, imitations, re-creations, and influences. *Wayang Jawa*, which is known for its fine puppets, episodisation of the plot to suit the different ages of the audiences (fighting and duelling for the children, love scene for the young, observation of life for the adult and the elderly) is accompanied with the grand gamelan which changes it into a great work of art. *Wayang Bali* is more dramatic, with more rhythmic musical accompaniment, when compared to the former, thus suitable to the character of the Balinese. Also, as the Balinese are still Hindu, these stories and beliefs are thus woven deeper and are more closely

related to their day-to-day lives, when compared to other groups who have converted to Islam or Christianity.

Meanwhile, in Thailand there are two types of shadow plays; firstly, *Nang Yai*, which developed and expanded in Pattalung (and other areas in Southern Thailand) as *Nang talun,* or *Nanthalung.* Likewise, *Nang Kaloun* and *Wayang Siam* are also seen as arising from southern Thailand. However, it needs to be noted here that the *Nang Sbek*, i.e. with the comparatively larger puppets, and accompanied with dancers and narrators who stand before the puppets to emphasise the story, as mentioned by Brunet, has possibly descended from the large puppets of India, which is still used in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Orissa (cited in Mohd. Taib Osman 127). For hundreds, or even thousands of years, in many regions and kingdoms, this is the most important form of performance and oral literature throughout Southeast Asia. The stories are given characters and issues that the audience could identify with. They have contributed significantly to the social and spiritual meaning of literature and its performance aspects, theories of performance, the face and voice of humour, shared values and the qualities of the heroes and heroines that are seen as exemplary.

Many proverbs, references to classical poetry, new writings, and stories and also the carvings, were inspired and nurtured by the shadow play, an art that has eventually become part of the cultural identity and uniqueness of Southeast Asia. Whatever its name is in each of the countries, one thing is certain, its influence has been long, widespread, and deep. In the Archipelago, however, it is in the islands of Java and Bali that symbols from their stories find intense presence, and also new forms of recreations through the ages, and now through tourism and a new political culture. Other forms of literature and genres often refer to it; carved wooden statues and temples and fashion images – all find their inspiration from these stories. Sculptures, statues, and paintings are seen depicting episodes or characters of the heroes and heroines, and their adversaries, or agents of evil, from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata.* Arjuna, the Hindu god, reappears in the famed Javanese poetry, *Arjuna Wiwaha,* a revered king, who is compared to Arjuna himself. His name is ever present in the literatures of Jawa, Bali, and Sunda. So too is Seri (Siti) Dewi, Rama's consort, who is beautiful beyond compare, but a pawn during the struggle of good to defeat evil. These images and values may still be seen as a part of the texture of Southeast Asian culture.

It is, indeed, very intriguing to study how a Hindu work was Islamised – not only in its characters but also in its text – to effect an overlay over Hindu elements. In many cases, only the most beautiful, religiously neutral parts of the original work were reused, as possibly they are also the most universally appealing, i.e. the romantic love scene between Siti Dewi and Seri Rama, and the fight between good and evil. It is this love-story which has been most frequently emphasised, and has become the basic plot of the popular Malay

shadow play. In short, only a form as strong and as refined as this may allow the puppets to parade across the screen for thousands of times and recount sadness and longing in scores of languages, besides those taken from the villages of the audience to reduce universal reality to that of their locality. Extraordinary, too, is the fact that this genre is experiencing a new breath of life, at least in southern Thailand and northern Malaysia, though in other places it is having problems of relevance and adaptation to a changed or new audience, who are used to newer forms of entertainment, often enhanced by a new technology.

The intervowenness between religion and literature is also seen in the pages or words of poetry and narratives throughout continental and island Southeast Asia, except perhaps the cultures of the Philippines and distant islands to the east of Bali, which are too far away to be influenced. When Hinduism became the most widespread religion in Southeast Asia, many of its concepts and values were shared by those who, inspired by the religion, converted to it. This is also the case when Buddhism (intermixed with Hinduism), came, and stayed at the core of the literatures of Burma, Thailand, Kampuchea, Laos, and Vietnam, since the time of its spread and expansion, and in fact up to the present day. Stories of the life of Buddha became the main plots and were composed to relay the spiritual meanings of the religion. On the other hand, it also offered examples of practical situations that became useful guidelines to the believers.

A literature that functioned as an agent for the spread of Hinduism became equally important when Islam came to the Archipelago, around 13th and 14th centuries. It is now well-known that the Javanese shadow play was among the earliest literary genres to be used as a medium to spread news of its tenets and offerings, and for about 1300 years stories of Muhammad and the prophets, along with the warriors and exemplary characters, became the protagonists of these stories. The development of this new belief, attempts to understand the qualities God, and how to endeavour to become a good Muslim – all these are the themes of importance and choice. Thus in the literatures of Patani (Ligor and Singgora – now in Southern Thailand), Aceh, Mendailing, Riau, Palembang, Bangkahulu, and Lampung, all have tried their hands at these themes, as have the litterateurs of Jawa, Sunda, and Makassar.

VI

From the Malay speaking region too we see another movement. Popular Malay and regional stories like *Hikayat Dewa Mandu* and *Hikayat Inderputera* which have been originally composed in Malay, had spread to states like Bima, and then on to Champa (now parts of Kampuchea and Vietnam), reappearing as *Akayaet Inra Patra* (1997) and *Akayet Dowa Mano* (1998).

VII

The Pantun

Another thread (this time strong and long) that binds many cultures of the region is the verse form known as the *pantun* by Malay-speaking peoples, but also as *pantung* or *panton* by others. This four-line form (this is the most popular, though there are also the two-, six-, eight-, ten-, and up to 32-line forms) is composed and used in Southern Thailand and South Tennasirim (Burma-Myanmar), and by all the races of the Peninsula, including the Aslian, Baba, and Citi Melaka, and numerous races of the island of Borneo, including the Iban, Kadazan, Murut, Bidayuh, Brunei, and Iranun. However, if we cross over to the island of Java, we shall find that this form is admired among the Sundanese, who call it *sesebred* or *sisindiran*, and among the Javanese, who name it the *kentrung* and *wangsalan*. On the island of Bali, it is known as *wewangsalan*. This form is also found throughout Sulawesi (Celebes) from the Sangihe-Talaud Islands in the furthest north, down to Minahasa, Gorantalo, Toraja in the middle, and south to Makassar and Bugis. Across the waters to the east would be the pantun-passionate people of Ambon.

To the south of the island of Java, we will also find the form celebrated in Cocos Island, Christmas Islands, and some areas in Australia. Further north, where Malays were exiled in Sri Lanka and have formed a community, *pantuns* are still found. This, therefore, is one of the region's most sophisticated and ideal medium that has captivated the hearts of many races and communities. Besides stories from the *Ramayana*, it is possible that the *pantun* is clearly the oldest, adaptable, and most colourful string that binds Southeast Asians. The following verse, for example, is found throughout Island Southeast Asia.

Dari mana punai melayang
Dari sawah turun ke padi,
Dari mana datangnya sayang,
Dari mata turun ke hati.

From whence flies the dove,
From the padi to the hut
From whence comes love
From the eyes, down to the heart.

According to the evidence of form, language, and use, the *pantun* is locally inspired and produced – most probably from the Malay-language peoples in the Malay Peninsula, Borneo or Sumatra – in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and Thailand. From here, it spread to many other non-Malay speaking regions and countries. To date we have been able to identify about thirty Southeast Asian languages that use the form and at least in thirty dialects of

Malay. Thus its spread and distribution is very large and has been accepted by many races, tribes, and languages. In some areas it is indeed very old, as it has been used in many customary rituals and ceremonies, in proverbs and early narration. This is a wonderfully common and delightful space where Southeast Asians have met, and may continue to nurture as a common heritage for the future.

VIII

The Functions of Literature

In our journey into Southeast Asian literature we have found yet another common ground. In the Malay-speaking areas of Southeast Asia we notice that the term for literature, *sastera*, harks back to its Sanskrit root, which means, among others, an instrument for instruction. Literature is bestowed with a heavy burden of tasks – for it is a treasure house of the history, emotions, dreams, and thoughts of the human race. It is here that one finds its finest achievements, its dignity, and self-esteem. This is no place for slander or calumny, rather a sacred space where the collective wisdom and expressions are refined into a speech and music of their life. For the greater part of the stories and poems, literary works were, and are, composed for their social use, and it may be said that few indeed were and are composed for the writer's individual entertainment and wishful fancy. This last phenomenon came only as a modern/post-traditional development when the individual is given centre-stage. Before the 19th century, however, writers and scribes, oral narrators and puppeteers were the recognised leaders, sages or thinkers of and for their community. They were a part of that community and were responsible in spreading its communal values and helped to ensure its survival. Individual talents and traits may be added to this great pool of shared values and cultures – otherwise literature was still created for the society, to instruct it and assist in its continued existence. It thrived alongside religion and enhanced the latter's spread through its many forms and narratives works.

While it is used for instruction, it also foregrounds a moral kind of instruction over others and is therefore clearly didactic, not only in its purpose but also in its structure. For most, it was a very significant, and sometimes quite holy space, with a great purpose and meaning, including also to advise its audience (both the lettered and the unlettered) on numerous issues, from strategies of love, to the construction of a palace or royal garden, to the meaning of personal dignity and being a good man or woman in his or her society and, therefore, to contribute to that community.

IX

From Panji to Inao

In our review, we noticed that even before the advent of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* to the Archipelago, there were the home grown mouse deer stories and the *pantun*. There is yet another common literary space that some of the Southeast Asian countries share, this time through an inspiration that originated in Java, an old and sophisticated civilisation.

Java offers us a set of stories surrounding a culture hero, Prince Panji. These well-known stories are at the core of the Javanese literary tradition, told in many forms and versions – in narrative prose, poetry (*kakawin*), and stage performances. So attractive were they that Java's neighbours, initially the Malays, often "translated" them into their own language – and as Malay was the lingua franca of the region for at least a thousand years, the stories spread with it to various parts of the Archipelago. Interestingly, though these were claimed to be translations from the original Javanese, to date none of the originals have been found. It is possible that it was fashionable to claim anything of quality to come from the Javanese, although they were works of local re-creations – or that they were originally from the Javanese (but distance and time had helped the Malays to write their own version from a general storyline and set of characters). The corpus was so great that according to Harun Mat Piah, there are 80 manuscripts extant of the Panji story in the Malay language alone. This is indeed an incredibly huge number for *Sulalat al-Salatin/Sejarah Melayu* (the Malay Annals) has only 22 all around the world.

Panji stories tell of a journey of Raden Inu Kertapati to find his lover/fiancé, Raden Galuh Cendera Kirana, after they were separated. While seeking him, Raden Galuh Cendera Kirana disguised herself as a man. They finally met on a battlefield and it was there that her identity was again restored. So the narrative concludes with a marriage – a neat and satisfying conclusion.

Patani, once under the suzerainty of Siam (Ayuthia), was and is a Malay-speaking state which had relationships both with the Malay States of the Peninsula and the Archipelago, and Siam. As a part of the Malay cultural and literary region it knew at close quarters the Panji stories of the Malay versions. Rattiya Saleh, in her dissertation, *Panji Thai dalam Perbandingan dengan Cerita-cerita Panji Melayu* (1988), expertly describes in detail how Raden Inu Kertapati, the hero, landed in the courtly culture of Siam.

Thus, this long literary journey of the Panji stories, while originating in Java and travelling through the Malay-language states, had arrived at the court of Patani in the far north. From there, it was taken by a Patani princess (a version has it that she was a slave) to Ayuthia, and resurfaced as Ino/Inau/Inao poems and shadow play stories of the Siamese.

X

Islamic Elements

The other great influence is Islam and its literary traditions. Islam came to Southeast Asia in the 14th century, essentially to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, South Thailand, and parts of Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. There seem to be two theories of its arrival – one, drawing the map of expansion through China, and the other through the Muslims of the Coromandel Coast. The latter seems to be the more accepted hypothesis, as Malay history records a heavier traffic between India and the Archipelago, and this is quite a well-trodden path to the south. India itself not only absorbed the Islamic literary arts of the Moguls and those of the Middle East but also carried its own versions of these works to the Malay Archipelago. But it is pertinent at this juncture to note that the literary arts of the Arabs and Persians and even Turkish influences came south through two methods, one directly, meaning from source to the target, brought by the Arabs or Persians scholars, missionaries and traders themselves, and secondly, through the intermediary of Indians.

With the new religion also came the new alphabet, replacing the local or Sanskrit- or Pallava-based scripts, and with it flowered a writing tradition and calligraphy that over the years seeped into the local arts, architecture, textiles, and even pottery. Malaysians, Bruneians, Southern Thais, and Indonesians further developed their own styles and illuminations and today see this alphabet as part of their very identity and as the core of some of its most magnificent arts. A manuscript-writing tradition is one such art that is very colourful, varied and infused with local colours, designs, tastes, and styles. Among the most famous are the magnificent and exquisite *Taj al-Salatin*, now in the British Museum, the *Sejarah Melayu,* at the University of Leiden Library, and also the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, in the Malay Manuscript Centre at the National Library of Malaysia.

Like Hinduism, Islam came with its narratives to spread religious instrtuctions in bare narratives or fine and ornate and attractive stories. Two of them, *Hikayat Muhammad Ali Hanafiah* and *Hikayat Amir Hamzah*, were much loved as they foreground the courage, piety or devotion of these heroes, and have been classified by Ismail Hamid (Harun Mat Piah et al. 268) as Islamic epics. The iconic *Sulalat al-Salatin* describes how they were read the night before the great fight against the Portuguese to inspire the Muslim Melakans to repel their infidel invaders.

However much these works were revered, they are large works and needed much time to tell, to digest, and to enjoy. Thus, it was the other shorter narratives and stories of the prophets and saintly figures that were more easily accessible and enjoyed. Ismail (Harun Mat Piah et al. 347) divides these narratives into five types, i.e. firstly, stories about Prophet Muhammad;

secondly, stories about Prophets of Allah (other than Muhammad); thirdly, stories of the Prophet's companions; fourthly, the knights/warriors of Islam, and finally, the exemplary religious men and women.

Into the first type, Ismail includes two stories, *Hikayat Hur Muhammad* and *Hikayat Peri Menyatakan Nabi Bercukur*. Other related stories include, *Hikayat Isra'* and *Mikraj and Hikayat Seribu Masalah*. In the second type, i.e. the prophets mentioned in the *Qur'an*, we may include stories of Moses, Solomon, Joseph etc. Stories of the Prophet's companions, on the other hand, are featured in *Hikayat Tamin al-Dari, Hikayat Abu Syamah,* and *Hikayat Hasan dan Husin*. The exploits of the heroes, *pahlawan* or warriors, are to be read in *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain, Hikayat Malik Saif al-Lizan,* and *Hikayat Samaun*. Finally, in the category of the stories of the pious and exemplary believers, Ismail includes *Hikayat Lukman al-Hakim, Hikayat Raja Jumjumah,* and *Hikayat Ibrahim ibn Adham*.

Many of these were works composed in the local narrative *hikayat* tradition and adapted into the Malay and some other Indonesian languages, thus giving the genre not only new material but also other local approaches and strategies to their narrative styles and preferences. In addition, there are hundreds of religious works that deal with basic pillars of the religion, worship, interpretations of the *Qur'an* and the traditions of the Prophet. These are important essays but, unfortunately, do not come within the perimeters of literature and, therefore, have to be left to the religious scholars for the time being.

Other than the basic or central religious works, Islam also deposited the genres/forms of the *hikayat*, the *syair* and the frame-story into the Archipelago literary traditions, which were subsequently emulated and adapted in the local languages. The *hikayat* itself as a genre began with clear Islamic elements and stories but later was composed and written in Malay or Achehnese or Sundanese. But as in all kinds of cross-cultural learning the receiving, local literary traditions were active participants rather than mere receptacles and therefore lent their local elements and styles to it, if not to recreate it for local needs and styles.

Another form that is claimed to have originated from the Arabic is the *syi'r* or as it is known in the Archipelago, the *syair*. In Malay this is a mono-rhymic verse form, used for narration and sometimes even also for discussions and instruction in religious, sufistic, and moral matters, thus quite didactic in nature. To date, it is not yet clear when the form came to the Peninsula and the Islands and why it found itself to be so popular. However, poet-scholars such as Hamzah Fansuri were known in the 16th century for their sufistic poems that deal with the way to *makrifatullah*, to know Allah, as in the *Syair Burung Pingai, Syair Burung Nuri, Syair Perahu*, and others who followed in his footsteps.

This poetic form branched out into not quite religious narratives such as the *Syair Siti Zubaidah*, *Syair Bidasari,* and *Syair Dandan Setia*. These were very

popular in the 18th and 19th centuries and were the favourite sung works often presented by readers and semi-professional artists. Many earlier stories too came to be recast in this form, though their origins were in fact pre-Islamic. These are, among others, *Syair Ken Tambuhan*, a recasting of the Javanese Panji story.

Love stories too came to be told in this form, which it handled well, especially in its sung forms, like the *Syair Ikan Terubuk dengan Pepuyu, Syair Kupu-kupu, Syair Lalat dengan Nyamuk,* and *Syair Bunga-Bungaan*. In short, this was a dominant form before the coming of the free verse around 1930's. In fact, *Kesusasteraan Melayu Tradisional* (2000) has a list of not less than 160 titles of the more known *syairs*, while in the 19th and early 20th centuries they were regular features of newspapers and weeklies or monthlies.

If we survey the sources of Malay adapted works we find that the Persian elements are less easy to discern. While we may stumble on the character of the Persian King Nusshirwan Adil from time to time, as he is much respected for his exemplary impartiality and great sense of justice, we know of him only from third hand references or merely the mention of his magical name. However, it is in the ingenious form of the frame story or *cerita berbingkai*, i.e. story-within-a-story form, that we find clear Persian elements, that too through the intermediaries of India and the Middle East.

Some of these stories are great travellers themselves, which have made great border crossings. For example, the ancient Indian *Sukasaptati* which offers 70 stories (Ismail Hamid, *Kesusasteraan Melayu Lama dari Warisan Peradaban Islam* 113) was translated into various languages, among the more important ones in abridged Persian *Tutinameh*, by Naksyabi in 1330. This was later rendered into Turkish. A modern Persian version in the 18th century by Muhammad Qadri, was adapted/translated into Hindustani, coming as it were a full circle, from one Indian language into another Indian language. One of these versions, exactly which we are not able to discern for the moment, came with Islam to the Archipelago and was further abridged into *Hikayat Bayan Budiman*, The Story of the Courteous Bulbul.

Unfortunately, this short survey has no space for details and specifics, however, suffice it is to say that there are other frame-stories that originated from Persia, India or the Arab-speaking countries that have come into the Malay Archipelago and found versions not only in Malay but also some other local languages. Among them, Ismail (*Kesusasteraan Melayu Lama* 120-24) lists *Hikayat Bakhtiar* (from *Bakhtiar Nama*) and *Hikayat Kalilah dan Daminah* (from *Pancatantra*, through the Pahlavi language, Arab and finally Malay, in two versions, first the *Hikayat Kalilah dan Daminah* and *Hikayat Pancatandran*, the last was translated by Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir). Some other famous frame stories found in Southeast Asian shores are *Hikayat Ghulam*, *Hikayat Bibi Sabariah,* and *Hikayat Seribu Satu Malam* (One Thousand and One Nights), mostly known

initially as separate stand-alone stories but translated as a fuller version in 1895 by Alang Ahmad Muhammad Yunus.

Culture certainly travels in strange ways – while many take the direct routes to ports and countries as the crow flies or as the sails catch the winds, many too are the cases like the frame stories of India. For example, the *Sukasaptati* or the *Kalila wa Daminah*, while originating in India, had travelled to a few countries in the Middle East (see Liaw Yock Fang 178), and finally were translated into Arabic. It is this Arabic version that was translated into Dutch and from this version was then to Indonesian/Malay, the lingua franca of the region.

As the most recent religion for the majority of the Malaysians, Indonesians, and Bruneians, Islam is a dominant factor in many of the writings, and its beliefs, tenets, and literary traditions were/are transposed into narratives and poems, and even attempts have been made at formulating new theories of literatures with Islam as its inspiration. Muslim values have seeped deep into Malay, Javanese, Achehnese, Makassarese, Buginese and other Archipelagic cultures, psyche, and literatures. Local stories sometimes followed Middle Eastern examples and tended to be narrated around a pious and noble hero or heroine and themes of good governance, justice, and generosity. As Islam came to the region and the need for manuals on good governance (besides those interwoven into narratives like *Hikayat Isma Yatim* and *Sulalat al-Salatin*), a new genre of guidance for kings and administrators came into being. Among the most well known are the *Taj al-Salatin* (The Crown of Kings) and *Bustan al-Salatin* (The Garden of Kings).

Although the *ghazals* and *qasidahs* were highly developed in the Middle East and even in India, however, they did not take roots in Southeast Asia – perhaps we have our own forms like the *pantuns* that are highly flexible and adaptable. In fact, there is a substantial corpus of religious *pantuns*, from the ritual to the sufistic. On the other hand, certain forms like the *marhaban* and the *berzanji* came in the Arabic form and remained in that language, but beautiful as they are we don't consider them to be literature, as they are mostly praises of the Prophet in their original Arabic language.

As the stories were adapted and translated into Malay, the language of administration and religion in what is now Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and also Champa, these works were available to readers in these countries. For some works, such as *Parang Sabil*, one finds versions in Malay, Achehnese as well as in a Mindanao language, and the *Taj al-Salatin*, in Javanese and Buginese, besides Malay, a story which helps to guide kings and palace officials in their administrative duties.

Historical works too tend to take Arabic titles and with moral tendencies to teach, a didactic element found in many Islamic works. Thus historical works like *Sulalat al-Salatin* (The Genealogy of Kings, or often entitled as *Sejarah Melayu*), the *Tuhfat al-Nafis* (Precious Gift), and a host of other local histories of

Siak, Pahang, Bima etc. follow Islamic genealogical or *salsilah* models. These are lasting influences or learning that have stayed with the Southeast Asian writers, who built on these Islamic foundations but over time have found their very own voices and styles that have been woven from the local traditions with strings and threads from the Islamic ones.

It is interesting to note that while in the earlier centuries India brought the *Ramayana,* the *Mahabharata* and the *Jataka* stories to most of Southeast Asia, during the Mogul era, India also brought Islamic stories to Muslim Southeast Asia, especially the Malay World countries.

XI

Modernism and Globalism

In the second half of the 19th century Southeast Asia struggled with new values as a result of colonialism and modernism. It was a traumatic and bitter period for artists and authors alike – for the very earth of tradition that they stood on was slowly eroding; changes were quite dramatic. In certain places it came in the form of an intervention which rudely ambushed them out of their old genres and styles of narrating. Many had to choose, adapt or abandon the past.

In the 20th century another great wave swept into the region – this time it was universal globalism that tended to sweep away uniqueness, special qualities and literary practices. And the most disturbing aspect of this phenomenon was the passionate urge among the young to change, which in turn tended to marginalise the local and the traditional lifestyles and concepts, not only in literature but also in architecture, painting and, in fact, the whole outlook on life itself. To seek out "progress" in literature and other fields of endeavour became the norm and the desired path for many. However, while many jumped into the bandwagon of "development" and "progress," we must acknowledge that there were quite a few who held on to their old and deeply embedded forms, narrative strategies, and rhymes. In Thailand, Angkarn Kalayanaphong, Jiranan Prapeetcha, and Naowarat Pongpaiboon reuse their poetic forms, while in Indonesia W.S. Rendra and Sitor Situmorang, and in Malaysia Usman Awang and this writer himself celebrate their traditions but also give a new echo to their old ones.

There was much dialogue, no doubt, in the discussion on the method of identifying the core of local identities in this unbearable tsunami of globalisation. Many have been swept away or taken to new and foreign shores. However, for some who are able to survive, their traditions have stayed with them as floats and flotsam, to carry them home again. At present, many of the writers of the region, ironically, are being brought together again by another string that binds, that of globalisation which, as I suggested earlier, on the one hand, gave them strength to stand their traditional ground (which may be

considered a common Southeast Asian cause), and, on the other, to adjust so that while they adapt themselves to the times and perhaps benefit from the modern verse and narrative forms that have come from the West but have become quite universal by now.

No doubt the commercial and capitalistic nature of this new wave worried many, and some have waged war against it, though not too successfully. For the moment, it is difficult to see the path into the future as there are many parallel movements forword, though the commercial and capitalistic are seen to be winning. It is in this predicament that literature retaliates by strengthening its roots and special colours, to convince itself again of its own unique strength and social significance. As globalisation takes its own roots, some writers even feel a certain sense of superiority in their literary heritage and its achievement. As a result they pick up important and popular features from the old experience, even from their oral repertoire, to be used as a medium for the new age.

For example, a young writer, Salleh Yaacob, from Malaysia, rejects globalisation and moves on with a sense of pride in his roots and tradition in his poem "Makna Jasad" (The Meaning of the Body), and speaks it eloquently in the mellifluousness of his oral tradition,

Jasadku ini kawan sebuah sejarah berpanjangan
Makna hidup
Dalam tanda dan lambang
Yang tak pernah selesai
Kerana asasnya berbeza
Tetapi biarlah aku menyusup masuk
Ke dalam benua hidup ini
Dalam cuaca berbagai-bagai
Untuk melihat kebenaran
Untuk memahami kekuasaan
Untuk menghurai kefanaan
And memahami kejadian
Yang maha ajaib.

My body is friend to a long history
Life's meaning
In signs and symbols
That never end
For their bases are different,
But let me break into
Life's continent
In its different climes
To observe truth
To understand power

To explain this temporality
To understand creation
Most wonderful.

A poet from Southern Thailand, Kanokphong Songsomphan, sees literature as a weapon to defeat globalisation, to return Southeast Asian to its real character that is now being progressively destroyed. Literature is thus an antidote to contemporary diseases that blight the populace. Many may soon realise that literature will reappear as the cure, that which restores a balance and also become the protector of humanity. This is the "power of literature."

It crosses over time in order to haunt future generations.
It is something that the world capital cannot create itself,
And cannot control it from appearing, and cannot get rid of it.
Fighting against globalisation may or may not achieve results;
I am not confident that it can.
But I am confident in the power of literature and its status as the voice of humanity.
I believe it
Will fight globalisation at all time in order to return it to the correct path.

In a seminar of "Southern Thai Writers and Poets, Malaysian Writers and Poets" (21-23 July 2001), this state of being besieged was keenly experienced by writers of both countries, and while there was confidence in their fight against globalisation, there was also a sense that writers were caught in an ironic situation, where they were helpless to effect change. They were the victims of a new greed that emanated as much from within and as from without. However, in the last analysis, they found some strength in the situation that they still have their ideals and languages to fight from/with, and to these they have dedicated themselves.

It is no longer easy or comfortable to be a writer in contemporary Southeast Asia, for a literary work is no longer a heap of pretty words. Literature had to be accompanied by ideals, a fighting stance, and a language that is no longer romantic and "nice." If they wish to play their role well, they must be at the forefront with their skills and wits, besides being critical analysts of the times. At the beginning of the post-modern era, it is interesting to note, some poets have returned to their ancient functions and purposes – to relay information, to give description of the rude reality before them, and describe the social scene as realistically as possible. The poet has to describe humanity's present and future – and for now the present is quite in disarray – the forests are felled on the orders of the local and international capitalists who are in effect the ruling power over the whole region.

Several poets try to see into their predicament – even into the core of the situation so that something may be learnt from this sad state of affairs. For example, a relationship between peoples enhanced through the internet, turns a local writer into an international one. Arena Wati, Baha Zain, A. Latiff Mohidin, and A. Rahmad, from Malaysia, gain some benefits in a small world in which they cannot avoid being neighbours, nosy or respectful. They write of cultures and experiences beyond their own borders and consciousness, for they are citizens of the world and write for it. In these travels, writers meet candidates for their characters, perhaps also transformed into the desired protagonists. For example, we see A. Rahmad, a Malaysian novelist, meeting Andi Stanbok, a dancer at the Spanish Fiesta Folkloriko. Rahmad confesses,

> I have high hopes of writing a global kind of story so that it may be a kind of example for my Malaysian readers, i.e. dancers and artists who are well educated and strong as Andi Stanbok and his cousin, Letisia Cardona, but have chosen to become amateur or wayside dancers. (2001)

Rahmad continues that writing a story or a novel in the wide spaces of the universe presents him with a freedom to travel towards his authorship. He reminds himself that however good a piece of work is, it can no longer just root itself to its own motherland. These are the risks (and benefits) of globalisation, travelling and writing that cross borders.

In the meantime, in Indonesia writers like Subagio Sastrowardojo, Goenawan Mohamad, Taufiq Ismail, and W.S. Rendra, in the 1950s-1980s, did not avoid describing human beings that they met in Asia, the United States or Europe. Their travel, experiences and work oftentimes reflect the global edges of Southeast Asian experiences. As writers loyal to their reality, they allow themselves to enter their narrative lines as honestly as possible. Thus we hear of love between an Indonesian man and a French or Italian woman. In the following poem, it is an Italian woman who awaits her Indonesian lover, written in a *pantoum* form that originated from the Archipelago but made popular by the French. The poem is called "`Lagu Gadis Itali," (Song of the Italian Maiden).

Kerling danau di pagi hari
Loceng gereja bukit Itali
Jika musimmu tiba nanti
Jemputlah abang di teluk Napoli.

Kerling danau di pagi hari
Loceng gereja bukit Itali
Sedari abang lalu pergi
Adik rindu setiap hari.

However, more than ever before these borders merge and mesh into one another, and cultures meet and quarrel, writers quote each other as they also live in a bigger world, across political borders, and as they travel further they tend to feel that the country beyond has also partly become their own. The brutality and harshness of Sarajevo, Congo or Darfur, Palestine and Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iraq touch our sensitivities, sense of justice and humanity, and whatever the colour of their skin, whatever their race or religion may be, they are equally the sufferers of this injustice and this inhumanity. In the end, Southeast Asian writers and peoples are all inhabitants of a small planet, and writers must tell their stories, for they have chosen to become its citizens and take up the pen (or the keypad of the computer). Literature offers an expression of identity and uniqueness of culture and language. However, in the world of contemporary technology, modern individual tends not to be much more than an imitator, a worker, and a consumer. To choose to become a writer is to inhabit a higher rung of existence and duty, for he contributes significantly to change an empty face and a passive culture of the consumer and fill it with a more active stand and new ideas. In truth, he must choose both – to be a creator and also to enter the new world and experience its offerings to the full. But he must not feel the victory of technology and economy are sufficient for the new century for too many material artifacts are again mere empty shells, devoid of the richness of identity or soul.

XII

Conclusion

Literary contacts are real and often have real impacts on literatures that they came to. Writers are challenged by new stories and strategies of narratives. Being creative artists themselves they further add their talents and genius to the works that they have come to read or listen to, thus making them oftentimes co-authors of new versions, that are dipped in the colours and hues of the local literary traditions of the state or the languages.

This conclusion is witness to the journeys that words take, across borders and oceans. Sometimes these words and narratives came to closed doors but soon with the mellifluous sounds of their language and music, and not to forget the meaning that they offered, readily opened them wide.

As Southeast Asians move together into the century, they will find more and more common spaces and also a common fate to share, thus making them members of a larger literary family, as in the past, who must learn or benefit from them. They are bound by threads that are a part of the greater fabric of living in the region. Often too, they are a part of a greater design, although each of them holds dearly to its own thread and hues, sense of beauty, and a set of local motifs.

Literature is always dynamic, always dialogic with its times, always learning from the most recent wisdom and idiocy, wherever it may hail from. Many Southeast Asian writers now learn from the many complex literary strategies of Marquez, Cortazar or Desnoes, for these Latin American writers too struggle with their own realities and have found quite a few ways to describe them. Their description of this human predicament that touches on our lives in whatever language is emphatically relevant and should be as relevant today. A door is not merely a way out, it is also a way in for the neighbours close-by, or those from faraway. This is illustrated by literature over the ages in the region and beyond. Now they know the doors and windows of literature are quite wide open, the air and sounds of many languages fill the rooms. Though there is pollution from the valley, there are still lessons to be learnt from man's mistakes – ours and others'. Literature will always be challenged by their functions, old or new.

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