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Manuscript Studies

Introductory Notes on Abdullah Munshi's *Hikayat Binatang*

*Baharuddin Ahmad*¹

The first school textbook written in the Malay language (1846) is *Bahwa Ini Hikayat Binatang* (On the Chronicle of Animals)² on the subject of Zoology, which is an important part of Natural History. It discusses animal species, their habitats, their uses by men, their bodily features in great details and their habits as well as the geographical areas and climates of their countries of origin; the area where they were first found in those countries and the climates and how they were later brought and transported to other places where they were again reared therein as their second home. The book is probably the first Malay printed work in Latin script on Natural History. It is quite possible that it is also the first work on modern scientific knowledge in Malay. The Malay translator-author of the work is Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi also known as Munshi Abdullah, who is generally regarded as 'The Father of Modern Malay Literature'. Abdullah was a celebrated figure among the British and 'modernized Malays,' but was denounced by the majority of Malays as a traitor to the Malay establishments, rulers and society. There is a possibility that this work was done in collaboration either with Alfred North, his missionary friend or with Benjamin Keasberry, the principal of the school where Abdullah was working with and the owner of the Mission Press of Bukit Zion in Singapore. However, according to Abdullah himself, he was the one who 'translated' or did the work of compiling and probably printing of this *Hikayat*.

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² Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munshi, *Hikayat Binatang - Natural History in Malay* (Singapore: The Mission Press, 1946), 104. (Collector's note in SMN al-Attas Library in its Special Collection).

A question arises as to why Abdullah decided to publish the book in Latinized Malay when his own biography and other works of his were in *Jawi* script. Latinized Malay was earlier used by the British and the Dutch to print New and Old Testaments in Batavia, Penang and Melaka. One possible explanation is that *Hikayat Binatang*, just like other texts related to modern knowledge that were translated into Malay by Abdullah, was written in *Jawi*, but was Latinized at the insistence of either Rev. Keasberry or Wilfred North or both. There was a growing demand for writings in Latinized Malay from both missionaries and British colonial officers. During Abdullah's time, expertise in Latinization of Malay and modern printing facilities were both available.

When Abdullah was a young man in his home state of Melaka, he had composed his first work on Mathematics which he titled *Kitab Ilmu Kira-Kira* (Book of Arithmetic). Abdullah was also the first Malay to write his own autobiography with the title *Hikayat Abdullah*, and he wrote at least two other works that contain the term '*hikayat*' (story or chronicle) in their titles. However, Abdullah included the word *hikayat* in the titles of his works on science and modern knowledge as well. His first three *hikayat* were related to his own life history, his travels by ships to the northern states of Peninsula Malaysia, Kelantan and Terengganu, and to Jeddah. These *hikayat* are well known to many scholars and students of Malay literature and have been debated for a long time. But not his collaborative works with North and Keasberry on science, geography, history and law-related issues. For this reason, Abdullah is mainly known to the present Malay writers and researchers as a man of literature in the strict modern sense of the word, and not as a thinker, reviver of knowledge and a social critic of his time. In my view, he is probably the first serious social critic in modern history among the Malays and perhaps also as one of the earliest reformist thinkers in the Muslim world. As a reformer-activist, Abdullah called for Malay social reformation, self-realization and self-criticism and singled out learning as the most viable way to move forward to achieve social progress in the modern world. Malays must not lag behind in pursuing modern scientific knowledge and knowhow, but instead must equip themselves with modern technology just as the West has done. This,

according to Abdullah, was in-line with the teaching of Islam itself. However, his modernist views made him an enemy of the Malays during his time and to a certain extent even until now.

Hikayat Binatang is a rare book, and there are only three known original copies still available worldwide; one each in The British Library, The Singapore National Library, and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas Library of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), Kuala Lumpur, all in lithographed copies printed by Abdullah while working with The Mission Press in Singapore. It was published in the year 1846 of the Christian era (*Tahun Masehi*). The size of this book is 6 cm x 10 cm. The rarity of its copies may be inferred from the fact that it was not mentioned by Cecil K. Byrd in his *Early Printing in the Straits Settlements, 1806-1858*, which was supposed to be a collection of Malay printings during that period³. Abdullah mentioned in his autobiography and also in his letter to the French collector, E. Dulaurier⁴ that the book was a work of translation from English books. He mentioned about “presently in the process of translating, compiling, printing and publishing many works”⁵, on sciences, especially *Hikayat Binatang*, a work on natural history into Malay. Many later scholars who wrote on Abdullah such as Amin Sweeney and Ian Proudfoot acknowledge this work as belonging to Abdullah, but with there was very little discussion on the title as well as its contents⁶.

³ Cyclic K. Byrd, *Early Printing in the Straits Settlements, 1858-1906* (Singapore: Singapore National Library, 1970).

⁴ Letter of Abdullah to E. Dulaurier was in Malay Jawi script. See Annabel Teh Gallop, *The Legacy of the Malay Letters* (London: The British Library for The National Archives of Malaysia, 1994), 173.

⁵ Regarding *Hikayat Binatang*, Abdullah wrote in his letter, “...sudahlah hamba salinkan dari Bahasa Inggeris punya kitab-kitab seperti *Hikayat Dunia*, iaitu geografi dan ilmu bintang dan ilmu tabi’at dan *Hikayat Eropah* dan *Hikayat Kapal Asap* dan *Hikayat Binatang*, iaitu Natural History.....” Annabel Teh Gallop, *The Legacy of the Malay Letters*, 175.

⁶ Ian Proudfoot, *Early Printed Malay Books* (Kuala Lumpur: Academy of Malay Studies and University of Malaya Library, 1993), 6,690. On the use of jawi and Malay with Latin scripts, see, 6, 15,18. See also, Amin Sweeney, *Karya Lengkap Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi, Jilid 2 –Puisi dan Ceretera*, (Jakarta: Perpustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2006), 244.

What makes the book interesting is its numerous illustrations of different animals that help make it appear as an attractive pictorial book on the animal world. The illustrations themselves were made in Singapore rather than in India, where illustrations for previously printed books in Singapore and Malaysia were made. Both Abdullah and Keasberry were known to have learnt the art of making book illustrations. So, the illustrations in this book, which were beautifully done, could have been the work of either one of them.

For the historians of Malay education, Malay literary scholars, and historians in general, this book is extremely invaluable as it is the first printed Malay school textbook⁷ on science, and indeed the first ever Malay school textbook known to us. Its contents are written in a straight forward manner and in simple language making it a suitable textbook for teaching lessons to young boys on zoology. It consists of 103 pages, including the illustrations, and begins with the subtitle ‘Natural History in Malay’ followed by the main title ‘Bahwa ini Hikayat Binatang’ and ends with the following verse:

*“Tiadalah suatu jua pun kejadian yang bernafas,
Menunjukkan hikmat Tuhan itu dengan puas puas”*

Which may be translated as follows:

*“Not a single created thing that breathes
That does not indicate, unlimitedly, the Divine wisdom”*

This book employs many scientific terms to describe genus and species of animals. All Malay biological terms later used in the categorization of the genus and species of animals were adopted from the terminologies employed earlier in this book by Abdullah such as *mamalia*, *reptilia*, *amfibius*, *kuadruped*, *beipid* and many others, which were borrowed from Latin and English. Abdullah had also added Malay proverbs into this textbook when describing time and distance, which makes the work more interesting and understandable to young Malay learners. For example, the early morning light or the

⁷ Hadijah Bte Rahmat, “An American missionary journey into the Malay printing world,” in ed. Lalita Sinha, *Rainbows of Malay Literature and Beyond*, (Penang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2011), 116-117.

first light that falls on earth, which is also the time when chickens begin to leave their barns, is described as '*trang tanah*.' This term has the same meaning as '*bulum terbang lalat*,' since flies begin to fly from place to place when the first morning light appears on earth. Toads need just a fly to keep them still fed for a period of '*sa'jamaat*,' that is, one week or seven days, and chick hatches in three weeks (*tiga jumaat*). Malays normally use similitudes such as '*sepuhnama*' to mean a month or '*sepekan*' for a relatively near distance. The Malay term used by Abdullah for hybrid is '*mati-bragan*,' since a toad goes for hybrid for a season and becomes like glass and later can be turned again to life during the summer season. For different seasons, Abdullah coined new Malay terms, for examples, *samar* for summer and winter as *musim dingin* and *thalj* for snow.

The Malay world of Abdullah's time was more exposed to the Middle Eastern countries, especially Turkey and Iran, and also the Indian sub-continent. Works on Islamic theology and texts on law and Sufism from the regions were influential on Malay thought. Many of them were translated and commented upon by Malays. In a new departure, Abdullah instead introduced the Malay World to European and African countries with their different agro products and climates wherein animals were reared and breed. The countries include Scotland (Shetland), England (England), Holland (Hollanda), Germany (Girmani) and Guinea (Gini), Berbers (Burbari) and Egypt (Masir). Among the many products of animals mentioned by Abdullah in their Malay terms in this work are the scarlet cloth (*kain sakalat*) and combed wool (*kain kumbar*), candles (*diyan*), and strings (*tali buni-bunian*). The term used for rattlesnake is *ular krek krek* .

How is it possible for Abdullah to suggest the need for textbooks for schools? Early Malay treatises were written for general Malay readership. There were works of lullabies, children tales, other small treatises and lyrics that were meant for young girls and boys. However, for Abdullah, textbooks must be provided for certain standards or classes of pupils, especially for primary and secondary school students. He seemed to be very well read, possessing a lot of information on what was going on in the field of education in England and around the world thanks to his English, American and other

foreign friends. His determination to produce textbooks for Malay schools and reading materials for the general Malay public resulted in his composition of the earlier mentioned Malay book on Mathematics. *Hikayat Binatang* is probably his second textbook, and there were other writings of his on various subjects such as geography and history, including a work on world history or 'sejarah dunia,' which he mentioned in his letter to Dulaurier he was in the process of preparing them⁸. There is no indication that Abdullah knew of any works produced by Muslim philosophers, thinkers and geographers such as Ibn Khaldun or Ibn Batutta. This perhaps explained his amazement of Western writings on many aspects of natural science and world geography when the same kind of knowledge was available in the writings of Muslim scientists before the modern period. He was not a trained theologian, though he had great love and respect for his religion and the messages contained in its teachings. Abdullah was rather a social critique and a keen observer of what was happening in his own society. His passion for reforms of Malay society through education merited him to be considered as a great social reformer of his time, quite interestingly preceding other Malay and Middle Eastern religious and social reformists such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Redza, who have been influential among Malay Muslims.

In the final part of every chapter (*fatsal*) there is a poem (*shayer*) that is surprisingly laden with Christian influence, calling for a right understanding of each chapter and the lesson that can be learned from it. This raises the question of whether these poems were written by Abdullah himself or by North or Keasberry. There is the possibility that these poems were added later on by someone else, and not originally written by Abdullah. The extent of influence of biblical teaching in the work needs a further study.

Many Malay readers may not be happy with what appear to be traces of Christian influence in these poems. They would view this insertion in the poems as an attempt by the Christian missionaries to either spread Christianity or modernize and secularize the Malays.

⁸ In his letter to Dulaurier, Abdullah asked him about the possibility of getting for him ink in different colors for the purpose of providing in print colorful illustrations of tropical flowers. Remarkably, Abdullah had already attempted at color printing during those days. See Annabel Teh Gallop, *The Legacy*, 175.

Abdullah himself considered Christianity a religion, and Jesus a unique prophet. However, he remained a Muslim until the end of his life. Abdullah said that nobody can be a Christian simply by reading the Bible, unless that person himself wants to be a Christian. In his view, anyone could read the Bible as a book of knowledge and information, not as a book in order for Muslims to believe in Christianity. In his autobiography, Abdullah urges Muslims to always believe in the teachings of Islam. He maintains that, unlike the Qur'ān, the Bible is not the verbatim word of God. He often mentioned the Qur'ān as true guidance and often quoted Islamic teachings in his works. He advised Malay rulers to follow the teachings of Islam in the manner *Tajus Salatin* (Crown of Kings), a Malay treatise that was widely read during his time, advises kings to maintain their status and quality as true Muslim kings and princes.

The great interest of Abdullah in natural history could also be attributed to Raffles, who, apart from being a colonial administrator, had a similar interest in the field. Many British and American scientists then had special interests in natural species found in the tropical Malay world. Raffles was said to prefer living in Bencoolen (Bangka Hulu) rather than in Singapore, as this place provided him with abundant opportunities to serve his great interest in natural history. The Malay world was a haven for scientific collections of animals, insects and plants that later ended up displays in museums and centers for scientific learning in England, Singapore and the United States. The keen interest of Raffles, Keasberry, Wilfred North and Turnbull Thomson in natural history was vividly described by Abdullah in his autobiography.

Regarding the scientific content of *Hikayat Binatang*, Abdullah himself said that it comprises materials that were taken or copied or gathered from several sources before being translated (*disalin*) into Malay. In his letter to Duerlrier, he said the work was copied (*disalin*) from English sources. 'Disalin' may also mean to translate, to compile or to add whenever necessary, as was apparently done by Abdullah in this work. There is no reason to doubt that he had at his disposal many sources of English works on natural philosophy, a privilege that was not shared by other Malay translators, since he was then the only person who could read, write and translate from English or Hindi into

Malay. Since Abdullah made no mention of the sources that he had used for writing the book, a further research needs to be conducted on this issue.

As a concluding remark, I would say that the other aspects of Abdullah as a writer/translator of works dealing with science, geography and history are still largely neglected by scholars and historians. But this is an important aspect of Abdullah's contributions to Malay society and its intellectual development that requires further research. In my view, a complete translation of *Hikayat Binatang* into English should be attempted, as this would help create further interest in this important work that is, without doubt, of great historical significance.



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