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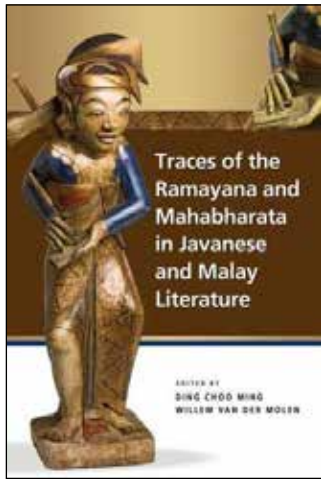
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Book reviews

Ding Choo Ming and Willem van der Molen (eds), *Traces of the Ramayana and Mahabharata in Javanese and Malay Literature*. Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018, 229 pp. ISBN 978-981-4786-57-7 (softcover), 978-981-4786-58-4 (E-book PDF). Price: USD 29.90 (softcover).



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The Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa epics are part of Indonesian culture and ubiquitous throughout the country, not only in the Javanese and Javanese-inspired world but also in the national cultural identity of many other Indonesian peoples as well as in Malaysia. The title of the present volume seems to indicate something else. The word “traces” would imply that influences of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata might be hard to find, but they are not. Hence, another title would probably have been more appropriate to cover the contents of the six articles in this volume that deal with the two epics that have influenced Southeast Asian literature and ways of thinking in a way so profound it is virtually unfathomable. The book is a compilation of papers presented at a conference organized by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore in 2014. It is remarkable that no work by scholars from Indonesia and Malaysia has been included in the book.

The book contains seven chapters including the short introductory Chapter One written by Willem van der Molen (pp. 1-4). Chapter Two is written by Stuart Robson (pp. 5-29) and entitled: “The Rāmāyaṇa in Java and Bali: Chapters from its literary history”. In his chapter, Robson quite rightfully points out that we should look at the Rāmāyaṇa in Indonesia as a literary product of this area and not as the Indian version it is not. Most importantly, Robson firmly states that the Rāmāyaṇa was not “translated” in Java and surroundings but rather “adapted” to local circumstances and literary practice. How the adaptation of this text and others was tackled still remains a puzzle

because of the lack of sufficient numbers of philologically sound text editions. Chapter Three by Harry Aveling (pp. 30-57) is entitled: "Abimanyu gugur; The death of Abimanyu in classical and modern Indonesian and Malay literature". Aveling looks at the scene of the death of Abimanyu as told in the Old Javanese *Kakawin Bhāratayuddha* (1157-1159 AD), the Malay *Hikayat Pandawa Lima* (probably thirteenth to fourteenth century) and Danarto's short story "Nostalgia" of 1987, besides referring to the way it is told in the *Mahābhārata*. Each of them tells the story in a different way for different audiences:

"Each sets the young warrior's death within a very different ideological framework: not only warrior-Dharma, but also tantric conceptions of beauty in love and death, the virtue of dying with a good name, and a contemporary Javanese understanding of spiritual self-transcendence" (p. 32).

The article expertly shows how the story was adapted to new audiences in Hindu and Islamic settings to ensure that it did not lose its attraction for a new public.

Chapter Four: "Drona's betrayal and Bima's brutality; Javaniserie in Malay culture" is by Bernard Arps (pp. 58-98). He looks at the role of Javanese texts and other cultural treats in the Malay world, paying special attention to the Nawaruci in Malay and its Javanese roots. In my view, his most important remark in connection with the Javanese presence in Malay literature is:

"Alleged Javanese authorship of Malay texts, for instance, is an element of javaniserie. Such a claim helps legitimize the work as extra-Malay at the same time that it *is* Malay. But javaniserie could also involve actual translation or adaptation from Javanese, rather than first-hand Malay composition in javanesque style. Javaniserie is a mode of diegesis, of worldmaking" (p. 86).

This is a very interesting point and should be explored in greater depth in other areas in which the Javanese presence in literature and other cultural expressions - Bali springs to mind - is conspicuous. The nub of the argument is that the Javanese-inspired texts in Malay and other traditions in Indonesia were not necessarily composed by Javanese at all but by Malays who used them to tell the people what "not" to be rather than what to emulate.

Chapter Five is by Gijs Koster (pp. 99-136) and bears the title: "Ramayana and Mahabharata in Hikayat Misa Taman Jayeng Kusuma". He compares the story content of the *hikayat* with that of scenes from the Mahabharata in its Old Javanese and later forms of Javanese. He points out that intertextuality has multiple layers and it is wise to distinguish these layers first before one can hope to understand how intertextuality in these texts really works. Koster demonstrates the "intertextual presence of elements from Mahabharata and Ramayana in HMTJK" (p. 127) and suggests that they derive from adaptations from the Old Javanese texts in Modern Javanese and Malay at the time the *hikayat* was composed and that these elements are also combined with elements from other sources in an "eclectic" way (p. 127). I feel the term "eclectic" might be

problematic because the – for us as modern readers – notion of eclectic might not necessarily agree with the notions the composer of the *hikayat* had in mind. They could be eclectic because the story is looked at from the perspective of the Mahabharata, but the composer probably had no such thing in mind and created a story that would make sense and please his or her contemporary public.

Chapter Six: “The death of Śalya; Balinese textual and iconographic representations of the Kakawin Bhāratayuddha” is by Helen Creese (pp. 137-179). Creese points to the four major narrative interventions in the Mahābhārata material for the Bhāratayuddha by Mpu Panuluh: 1. A quarrel between King Śalya and Aśwatthāmā; 2. Nakula’s visit to his uncle, King Śalya; 3. The Śalya and Satyawatī episode in which the king has to leave his spouse to go to battle; and 4. Śalya’s death (p. 144). It appears that these scenes, composed in Indonesia, “have captured the imaginations of nineteenth-century Balinese poets and artists as well as modern Balinese painters” (p. 144). How this has been done forms the bulk of her contribution.

The final Chapter Seven is by Edwin Wieringa and is called: “The illustrated Aṣṭabrata in Pakualaman manuscript art” (pp. 180-215). The Aṣṭabrata contains lessons to be learned from the characters of eight Hindu deities as first expounded to Wibhīṣaṇa by Rāma in the Rāmāyaṇa. Wieringa looks at two manuscripts of the text made for foreign scholars and beautifully illustrated at the Pakualaman Court in Yogyakarta. Wieringa postulates that the illustrations may only seem to offer visual diversions rather than add meaning to the text. He pays special attention to the iconography of each individual deity in the manuscripts and points out differences that could “open a potential pathway to further research” (p. 191).

The book expertly shows some of the ways the Rāmāyaṇa and Māhabhārata have been adapted and used in the Indonesian and Malay world. The diverse ways the Malays, Javanese, and Balinese have dealt with the contents of both epics is fascinating to discover and warrants more in-depth study than the authors of the contributions could possibly offer in this volume. A rather longer introduction that might have pointed out some of the topics not addressed in the articles in the book but important to bear in mind – the ubiquitous representations of both epics in modern Balinese temple art, visual art and dance springs to mind – might have given the reader of the book some inkling of the limitations of the book. This having been said, another conference with a similar topic may address these “shortcomings” for many more “traces” of the epics are still to be found in the Indonesian and Malay worlds.