Ivo Castro, Hugo C. Cardoso, Alan Baxter, Alexander Adelaar and Gijs Koster (eds) (2022), "Livro de Pantuns; Um Manuscrito Asiático do Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, Lisboa" (Book of Pantuns; An Asian Manuscript of the National Museum of Archeology, Lisbon)

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Book reviews


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In 1900, during a visit to Graz in Austria, the Portuguese linguist José Leite de Vasconcelos (1858-1941) – whose photograph adorns the back cover of this book – came across what he immediately realized was an important document in the possession of his German colleague, Hugo Schuchardt (1842-1927). Both scholars understood the manuscript’s academic value, yet neither ended up preparing it for publication. In 2018, it was rediscovered by Ivo Castro and Lívia Cristina Coito in the National Museum of Archaeology in Lisbon (p. 96). Entitled Panton Malajoe dan Portugees (Malay and Portuguese Poems), the 39-folio booklet contains five poems in Creole Portuguese, five in Malay, and one playfully alternating between both languages. The poems cover various topics, of which “the theme of unrequited love and of the suffering that ensues” (p. 118) predominates. In all likelihood, they were written in Batavia in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, by multiple copyists supervised by a single figure. The editors assume – correctly to my mind – that the poems reflect the cultural world of the Mardijkers, a community descended from manumitted slaves with diverse Asian origins (pp. 131-132).

This edition is a bilingual (Portuguese-English) volume containing an introduction, a chapter by Ivo Castro and Hugo Cardoso on the history of what the editors dub the Book of Pantuns, one by Alan Baxter and Hugo Cardoso on the poems written in Portuguese (or rather, as they demonstrate, a Portuguese-lexified Creole), one by Gijs Koster on the social, historical, and literary contexts of the Malay poems, and one by Alexander Adelaar on the
latter’s orthographic and linguistic characteristics. The book also contains a full facsimile of the manuscript (pp. 162-244), followed by a richly annotated textual reproduction (pp. 245-347). All eleven poems are translated into English and (standard) Portuguese, while the segments in vernacular Malay also come with a linguistic reconstruction and a translation into generic Malay.

The editors shed important new light on the language history of early-modern Southeast Asia. Creole Portuguese had served as a lingua franca of Batavia’s enslaved people, particularly those from South Asia and Malacca, and Baxter and Cardoso present a useful grammatical outline (pp. 124-127). Despite minor differences between the dialect used in the Book of Pantuns and those described previously by Schuchardt (1891) and Philippe Maurer (2011), all varieties appear to represent developmental stages of the same language. Large segments of Batavia’s population also used Malay. As Adelaar demonstrates, “Mardijker Malay” was quite different from “Betawi Malay”, resembling instead, as he calls it, the “vehicular Malay” of eastern Indonesia (pp. 154-158). While this dialect has gradually vanished in Java, it arguably formed the basis of Sri Lankan Malay and Cape Malay. The similarities between these and other Malay contact varieties have been explored elsewhere (Adelaar 2021).

Readers interested in poetry will find much to enjoy in the book. As Koster demonstrates, most poems violate the rules of traditional Malay pantuns. For example, the symbolic pairing of a ‘foreshadow’ (pembayang) and a ‘true meaning’ (maksud) is generally disregarded. They also reveal thematic influence from Portuguese ‘songs of love’ (cantiga de amor). While the stylistic features of Mardijker poems are pantun-like, their narrative structure often resembles that of another popular Malay genre: the syair. Koster speculates that Mardijkers had different aesthetic preferences to ethnic Malays in this regard (p. 141). I am inclined to agree and would add that Batavia’s Peranakan Chinese community published similar syair-like pantuns until the 1930s. Perhaps such hybrid forms of poetry are best approached as part of a broader spectrum of creolized practices, along with certain batik patterns, keroncong music, tanjidor orchestras, and various other cultural expressions born in Java’s multiethnic ports?

Some of the poems contain valuable snippets of local history. The Cantiga de Tangerang mais Bantam (Song of Tangerang and Banten) describes in detail a picnic organized by a group of women, paying particular attention to the food items they brought along. It also recounts the anti-Dutch campaign of Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa in the late seventeenth century (p. 119). The Panton Joncker (Poem about Jonker) provides “an uncensored local view” (p. 141) of another late-seventeenth-century uprising. Captain Jonker, a Maluku captain who turned against his VOC overlords, has often been presented as a tragic hero and occasionally as a traitorous Muslim fanatic in Dutch historiography. This poem, however, comes very close to casting him as an honourable man and a victim of colonial injustice (pp. 143-146). The Panton dari Sitie Lela maijan (Poem about Siti Lela Mayang) is identified by Koster as a precursor of the
popular Malay tale *Sinyo Kosta*. While the titular “Senhor” became a Portuguese captain in most later versions (A. Teeuw et al. 2004: 337-408), Koster suggests that the original protagonist “presumably comes from the Mardijker quarter on Batavia’s south-eastern side” (p. 138). If so, could not the term *anack Kosta* (p. 332) have denoted a young man of Tamil ancestry? It appears to reflect the Coromandel-Mardijker patronym *Costa* (see Hendrik E. Niemeijer 2005: 42) as well as the Malay and Javanese toponym *Kosta* or *Kusta*, sporadically attested to in literary references to India. The central figure of *Panton dari Sitie Lela maijan* is likewise described as being of South Indian (*klieng*) rather than European extraction (p. 334).

The *Book of Pantuns* has clearly been translated by some of the most competent scholars in the field. Multiple headaches were incurred, I imagine, by its erratic spelling, idiosyncratic handwriting, and the absence of a living speech community with which to consult in the case of Batavian Creole Portuguese. The translation of the Malay segments, which likewise contain a dialect no longer used, clearly benefited from the decision to have a historical linguist team up with an expert in literature. Throughout the 100-page translation, the editors clearly indicate which passages remain speculative and for none of these cases am I able to offer more convincing alternatives.

While I have not encountered demonstrably faulty translations, some of my own interpretations differ in minor detail from those of the editors. The word *sio* (pp. 264, 326), translated as ‘in vain’ (generic Malay: *sia*), could alternatively be interpreted as ‘oh!’ or ‘woe!’, an interjection also attested to in the poetic register of Ambon Malay. *Pakatan* (pp. 314, 342) and *laskar* (p. 344) are translated respectively as ‘agreement’ and ‘common soldiers’, but some early Malay dictionaries gloss the former as ‘word’ (generic Malay: *perkataan*) and the latter as ‘slave’. *Tasik* is repeatedly translated as ‘lake’, but ‘sea’ might also be plausible as Adelaar indeed suggests elsewhere (2021: 93). Creole Portuguese *troebelado* (p. 280) is translated as ‘murky’, but could also mean ‘confused, upset, worried’ as in Sri Lankan Creole Portuguese (Schuchardt 1891: 86, fn. 65). The translation of *safarangh* (p. 296) as ‘saffron’ is technically correct, but one wonders if ‘turmeric’ was not meant here given that it was reportedly sold cheaply in the Tangerang market; in the Creole Portuguese of Malacca, *safrang* refers to both plants (Baxter and Patrick de Silva 2004: 79).

One foresees that this publication will generate fruitful discussions. The assertion that the *Book of Pantuns* is the only example of a Mardijker Malay text (p. 92), for example, could perhaps be contested now that we know what this language looks like. A wordlist compiled in 1780 by Lodewijk Dominicus, which is briefly mentioned by Baxter and Cardoso (pp. 118, 120) and has been discussed at length by Schuchardt (1891) and Maurer (2011), might turn out to contain Mardijker Malay entries upon closer examination. At any rate, future scholars are indebted to the editors for making available an important testimony to the cultural, literary, and linguistic history of Batavia/Jakarta. As Castro and Cardoso point out (p. 100), Schuchardt did not include the *Book of Pantuns* in his monumental work on Batavian Creole Portuguese, as he had planned.
to dedicate a separate publication to it (1891: 17). One can only imagine the exciting directions Creole Studies would have taken had this ambition come to fruition during his lifetime. Perhaps now is the time to catch up, with a long-forgotten corpus finally being released for scholarly research.

REFERENCES


