SYAIR PERI TUAN RAFFLES PERGI KE MINANGKABAU: A PRELIMINARY READING OF AN EARLY 19TH CENTURY TRAVELOGUE

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Abstract

The essay is an attempt to read a 19th century travel narrative, rendered in the popular syair form and written by a native Malay from Bangkahulu. The narrative by virtue of its genre, described and mapped the arduous journey made by Raffles and his wife Lady Sophia from Padang to the Minangkabau hinterlands, as heard and imagined by a writer who was not only new to the genre, but also not part of the expedition. The reading of the narratives viz the depiction of the journey, its details and reliability therefore has to be contextualised within these authorial constraints.

Keywords: factual narratives, transitional genres, travelogue, self-narrative, biography, auto-biography, oriental enlightenment.

Introduction

The genre travel narrative, also called travelogue, is one of the several factual narratives which appeared in the Malay literary scene as a byproduct of the dynamic assimilation of European culture by the natives that prevailed during the period of colonial power, probably as early as the 17th century.

In the East, this era of Europeanization was dubbed as Oriental Enlightenment (Braginsky, 1996); the period, later was also known as modernization, witnessed the rapid acquisition and adoption by the
natives of the Western forms of knowledge and culture, deemed by most to be more advanced, superior and sophisticated. And this rather disturbing trend in due course, led to the reappraisal and subsequently the abandonment of local knowledge and culture and more so the ancient heritage (Noriah Taslim, 1998, 2003, 2006).

Among those indirectly affected by this so-called enlightenment fervour, and thus afterwards threatened by or suffered extinction, were the traditional literary genres; these genres were unwittingly replaced by "modern" genres modeled upon Western literary tradition. The new turn, consequently bred new authors who began to make their appearances on the literary scene. Inspired, most of the time by their Western mentors, they began to experiment with the new forms of writing, new literary genres. These were writings that took the form of what we earlier on termed as factual narratives. These were narratives that attempted to describe actual events, either referential or experiential happenings; in most cases involving also eyewitness account, as such the products were more realistic, mimetic and current or topical.

Among the early factual narratives that appeared in the region was a historical narrative, titled *Syair Sipe/men* (Speelman); the text was an account of the capture of Makassar by the Dutch in 1666 (Wells, 1985). Closer at home, was a historical narrative called *Syair Perang Johor*. Written as early as 1744, this probably became the earliest rendition of a historical narrative in the Malay Peninsular (Koster, 2007). The *syair* narrated the series of wars fought by Melaka/Johor kingdom against the Portuguese and Acehnese in 1639–1641.

Another significant factual narrative appearing at almost the same time was the so-called “self-narrative”, more popularly known as biographical or autobiographical texts. One of the pioneer writers that experimented with these forms was Lauddin from Lais, Bangkahulu. He hailed from a Minangkabau royal family; the son of Ki (kyai) Demang Purwasedana, known also as Nakhoda Muda. Lauddin wrote about his father’s and forefather’s life and prowess as pepper traders, their involvement in the political scenario and socio-economic circumstances in Sumatera from 1756–1766 (Hadijah Rahmat, 2001). The biography (or closely resembling it) was written in 1788, at the behest of Mr. Butter Hunnings, a British Resident in Lais Bangkahulu. The work came to be known as *Hikayat Nakhoda Muda*; Marsden, (1830) called it a *Memoir of a Malayan Family*; Drewes in 1951 (in Hadijah Rahmat, 2001) referred to it as the *Biography by an Indonesian*.

The genre autobiography came into the Malay literary scene at a later date; the earliest (and to date, the only autobiography of the pre-modern period) being the seminal autobiographical work of Abdullah Abdul Kader Munshi, the *Hikayat Abdullah*, written in 1843. The text was written under the patronage of Alfred North, a British missionary
In conformity with the genre, the text enumerated Abdullah’s life story, tracing back to his childhood days, his formative years as a young man and his maturity. It recounted his experiences and observations of the 19th century socio-political situation in Malaya under the British rule.

The other factual narrative, of which this essay is more concerned with, was the travel narrative or the genre travelogue. The earliest of the kind was *Hikayat Perintah Negeri Benggala*, written by Ahmad Rijaluddin (from Kedah) in 1811, soon after his voyage (accompanying Robert Scott) to Calcutta in 1810. The text recorded his travel and visit to Calcutta, including the description of the city of Calcutta, the British settlements along the Hoogly river and an account of the British expedition to Mauritius.

Another spectacular travelogue was Abdullah Abdul Kader’s *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah*, which was written in 1830s (the first edition was published in 1838, see Sweeney, 2005) under the patronage of Raffles, the British Governor in Singapore. The text was an eyewitness account of the journey and voyage made by Abdullah Abdul Kader to the East Coast of Peninsular Malaya (including Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan). It gave vivid and detailed description and commentary of the life, custom and socio-economic condition of the Malays in those states, including an unprecedented commentary on the Malay Rajas.

Within the framework of Malay literary history, factual narrative such as biography and autobiography were characterized and classified as transitional genres (between traditional and modern, Skinner, 1978), so too was the genre travelogue which appeared almost concurrently. The emphasis on facts and objective realism, the eyewitness account of events, the so-called journalistic style of narration (especially visible in *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah*) detached these texts from their predecessors. Nevertheless, besides the structural and stylistic peculiarities, these texts still assumed the genre form of *syair* and *hikayat*. *Syair* for example, became the favourite genre form for most transitional authors. Most of the texts written during the transitional period were rendered in *Syair* form, for example: *Syair Sipelmen*, *Syair Hemop*, *Syair Perang Menteng* (and other war *syairs*), *Syair Mukomuko*, *Syair Peri Tuan Raffles Pergi ke Minangkabau*, *Syair Kampong Gelam Terbakar* etc.

Apparently, *syair* came to be accepted as a very popular genre form in the Malay world especially in 18th–19th century (Noriah Taslim, 2008). *Syair* was renowned for its democratic character; it could serve various genres from romance to history/chronicles/annals, *adab*, the Sufi allegory and *kitab*; as well as accommodate a wide spectrum of themes. As such, *syair* came down through the years in various genres and its popularity was proven by the huge corpus of *syair* texts available in the literary archive.
Syair Peri Tuan Raffles Pergi ke Minangkabau as a Travel Narrative

Syair Peri Tuan Raffles ke Minangkabau (forthwith SR) is another attempt by a Malay author to compose a travel narrative; and probably the only one rendered in the syair form. SR was written in Bangkahulu, most probably under Raffles request (in the text he was addressed as “Tuan Besar”) or some other “tuan”, but dedicated to Raffles:

Inilah karangan suatu kisah
Mengatur nazam syair yang indah
Dari kerana berhati susah
Kepada Tuan Besar disandarkan madah

(verse 2)

Based on the internal evidence, and the admission made by the writer, SR was believed to be written in 1818 almost concurrent with Syair Mukomuko, a historical syair (written around 1810–1816 by Raden Anom Zainal Abidin, see Wells, 1985) also hailed from Bangkahulu.

(i) Introduction to the text

The text SR discussed in this essay refers to the version edited by Raimy Che-Ross and published in MBRAS, Vol LXXVI, Part 2, 2003. The edition was based on the printed Jawi texts (and most probably the earliest syair to be printed) published in the journal Malayan Miscellanies (Vol 1, no 13, 1820) under the English title “Poem in the Malay Language, Descriptive of the Journey of the Lieut. Governor to Menangcabow”; and the Malay title “Syair Peri Tuan Raffles Pergi ke Minangkabau”. The text was transliterated and edited by Raimy based on the printed manuscript kept in the British Library (BL) page 3801. The edited text consists of 160 verses of syair.

The text was written by a Malay (most likely Minangkabau Malay), who was probably working for Raffles in Bangkahulu, or otherwise someone who had been in close contact or was closely associated with the British (he was comfortable with some English words, names and titles). He was in all likelihood, a cosmopolitan Malay who had a good deal of experience living in a cosmopolitan port like Bangkahulu. Based on his own confession which he reiterated several times in the syair, the account of the journey was based on “khabar” (hearsay), nevertheless reliable “khabar” that he obtained from “orang tempat percaya” (reliable people) who probably accompanied Raffles on his
journey to the hinterland, for he (the writer) himself was not part of the party. Of this he said:

Sebab demikian fakir berkata
Karangan ini khabar berita
Tidak dilihat dengan mata
Khabar orang tempat percaya

(verse 149)

In summary, SR recorded the journey made by Raffles and his wife (Lady Sophia) from Padang to the Minangkabau hinterland (Mukim Tiga Belas Kota, including Selaya, Sening Bakar, Seruasa, Pagar Ruyung, Simawang) which covered a distance about 250 miles and took about 12 to 14 days. The aim of the journey as Bastin (1994:45) put it was:

Partly exploratory; to visit the traditional home of the Malay people, partly scientific; to collect botanical and geological specimens and partly political; to conclude a treaty with the Minangkabau rulers to counter-balance the restitution of Dutch power in Sumatera.

However, based on Raffles letter to “the court of Directors, Fort Marlborough”, dated 5th of August 1818 (in Rainy Che-Ross,2003:73) he admitted that the purpose of the journey was political more than anything else; it was primarily to expand British power in the Minangkabau hinterland (although the syair also affirmed that Raffles did visit the historical site viz the stone inscription, at Pagar Ruyung and also recorded names of flaura and fauna he had seen along the way).

Raffles was the first European to visit the Minangkabau hinterland, as he himself had admitted: “... that this was the first occasion of any European having crossed the Hills and visited the Country of Minangkabau ...” (in his letter 5th August, 1818, ibid). And the event was presumably so significant that a native was then assigned to compose it in the vernacular language – viz Malay. It was also noted that Raffles too had recorded the journey and after his death, the account of the journey was rewritten by his wife, Lady Sophia (Raffles, 1830).

The Malay writer, like his 19th century predecessor, chose to compose the journey in the most popular genre form of the time, viz syair (although in many ways, the syair had lost a lot of its uniqueness and beauty, (see Noriah Taslim, 2008 for elaboration). Being a cosmopolitan Malay, the author chose the bahasa Melayu commonly spoken in most cosmopolitan ports like Bangkahulu (Wells, 1985) – viz the bahasa Melayu kacukan, or bahasa basahan/rendah (the hybrid Malay or low Malay) and not the bahasa Minangkabau (although the syair was
interspersed with Minangkabau words) or the bahasa Melayu tinggi – the classical Malay as often used in conventional syair or the classical hikayat. This was so unlike Syair Mukomuko (its counterpart) which showed preference for the more conventional and formulaic language of the classical hikayat and syair.

Considering he was not part of the party that accompanied Raffles on his journey, the author, as has already been mentioned, had to rely on “khabar-khabar” and these apparently came from several sources/informants; thus the stories were sketchy, conjectural and varied, and unfortunately too, many were also unreliable. Of this he was apologetic and asked to be corrected:

Khabar ini bertukar-tukar
Setengahnya salah setengahnya benar
Fakir mengarang dengan mendengar
Baiki nazam di atas syatar.

(verse 110)

Bearing that in mind, the nature of his syair, such as the details given about the journey – the route, the terrain and the weather, and more so the description of people, places and events, have to be viewed within this authorial constrain.

According to Raimy Che-Ross, the syair was unprecedented in the sense that it was the only Malay text which gave full focus on Raffles (in the text, he was called Tuan Besar) – from beginning to the end. In his purview, he also gave credit to the author for being objective in his description, of which he says (2003:17), “and there is little in the way of cloying praise for either the British or the Malays”, or so it seems.

Upon further scrutiny, one can however glimpse the author’s slant towards Raffles and his wife; whenever they were mentioned, their names were always appended with lofty words – such as “bangsawan, jauhari, arif budiman, bestari” – these were conventional words of praise (or probably clichéd words) appended to names of dignitaries and courtiers. In fact, even in describing their appearance, character and deeds, they always came up in a positive light; to quote a few lines:

Tuan Besar itu sangat jauhari
Kepada siapa tiada ia peduli
Tambahan Madamnya yang bistari
Sedikit tidak gentar dan ngeri

(verse 15)

Tuan Besar itu baik lakunya
Bicaranya betul dengan sungguhnya
On the other hand, images of the locals were less favourable, except for a few who received the author’s kind words; one such person was Sutan Beraim. He, however was Raffles associate and ally. This is one of the descriptions given to him:

*Sutan Beraim sangat tukal
Berjalan ke darat serta Tuan Besar
Tidaklah takut ngeri dan gentar
Sebab pekerjaan banyak yang benar*  
(verse 63)

Generally the locals were described stereotypically as “uncivilized” (they liked to fight, their behaviors were rough, they were also aggressive); of low moral quality (they were insincere in their flattery, coward, dishonest, swindler). These characteristics were implied almost everywhere in the narratives. A few verses below probably would illustrate the points above:

*Memunuh orang tidak berkata
Dibunuhnya tuan-tuan dengan senjata*  
(verse 107)

*Orang Darat panjang bicara
Dibawanya alat dengan senjata
Berapa tombak rudus yang nyata
Akalnya tajam jangan dikata*  
(verse 66)

*Banyak dianya menyongsong pergi
Serta penghulu hulubalang berani
Perkataannya banyak manis berseri
Setengahnya busuk daripada tahi*  
(verse 67)

(ii) The character of SR as a travel narrative

As a preliminary to my discussion, I would like to start by once again
referring to Raimy Che-Ross’s comment (2003:70) on the SR; this is what he says about the text:

The text exhibits inherent characteristics arguably refreshing for its time: a consistent emphasis on factual evidence; crisp, sharp, objective narrative, minimal repetition and an unerring eye for substantial objective detail.

Drawing upon the comment, one therefore can say that the syair had indeed met all the criteria of a factual narrative albeit a travelogue—a genre that invest on the accuracy of facts and objective rendition of events (there were even attempts to locate time, date and day). Notably, the style and form of the syair were shockingly unconventional both in word use and arrangement. The language itself was colloquial, contemporary; the vocabulary was interspersed with local dialects (Minangkabau) and English words; the sentences were conversational, structured in simple and daily speech. The verse lines and rhymes were irregular and inconsistent with the metrical pattern of a conventional syair and thus would be awkward if the text was to be sung in the melody of a syair, as it was meant to be in the normal practice.

As a syair, the text would hardly appeal to the ears of the Malays; and this prompted me to conclude (in conjecture or otherwise) that it was written to be read (and not sung) by probably non-Malay readers (the Malays were mostly illiterate at the time, see Sweeney, 1980; Noriah Taslim, 1994) viz the Europeans who were more receptive to and familiar with the “low hybrid Malay” – the language of intercourse in the port settlement such as Bangkahulu. There was even an attempt by the author to facilitate European understanding of certain culture specific terms, by substituting it with English words; for example “Nan Putih” (white nun) for the Malay ulamas in white robe, “Tuan Gadis” (virgin queen) for an unmarried female ruler.

Most probably, in his effort to emulate as closely as possible to the mode of travel narrative, the writer had kept rigidly to the narration of facts as he had heard. By so doing he inadvertently kept his imagination to the minimal (or avoiding imagination? Or not imaginative?), avoided embroidering his narratives and giving lengthy or detailed descriptions of the journey. He also trimmed down physical and topographical features found along the journey which he as a local regarded as common sight or trivial.

The informants, being also locals, could only relate what they apparently saw as happening; after all they were only accompanying Raffles or merely assisting him with the journey and not partaking in the events. Thus, they were oblivious of the real motive of the journey and what actually transpired between Raffles and the local chiefs; they too
were never close enough to him to gauge his feelings and emotions, or to empathise with all the difficulties that he had encountered along the way or to have an inkling of what appeal to him or distracted him along the journey. All these remained unexplored and unexplained in the narratives.

These situational constrains plus the author’s own considerable lack of imagination to add details, colours and feelings to the narrative, resulted in the narratives becoming dry, colourless and impoverished in both topographical and emotional details. Consequently, the narrative came forth as a travelogue which was not only based on “khabar-khabar” and thus probably unreliable and lacking in depth, but was also deprived of imagination that could add details, colour and emotions to the otherwise colourful, exciting and arduous journey.

And this of course differs substantially from records made by Raffles himself about the journey. With his inquisitive mind as a traveler and a keen interest on the surroundings, layered by his own sentiments and prejudices as a colonial master, Raffles observation of the journey definitely would be more detailed and exhaustive; thus his records would be more than just a mere account of a journey, but also an account of an experience.

Forthwith, the essay would endeavor to look at the characteristics of the syair as a travel narrative, which mapped and described Raffles journey through the eye, not only of a local, but also of someone who was not even an eyewitness. At several junctures, references to and comparisons with Raffles own account as found in writings by Gullick (1995), Bastin (1965) and Raimy Che-Ross (2003) will be made.

As locals who only lived along the fringes of European community, the author or more precisely his informants would never gain knowledge of the “internal affairs” and “hidden motives” of the European, more so their political agendas. They would not know for instance why Raffles made the journey to the Minangkabau hinterland; they were only required to prepare the trip, which include preparing the perahu, enrolling the soldiers as guards – (verse 79). In SR, the motive of the journey as translated by the author was “a gesture of friendliness”, urged by his “desire to meet the people”; of this the texts says in just a line “ke Negeri Padang dianya rindu (verse 6). Why later it was not Padang which became Raffles destination but the interior of Minangkabau, was never explained, but just followed.

So also was the motive of summoning all the chiefs from Mukim Tiga Belas Kota, unknown to the party. The gathering which in fact was a very eventful one was mentioned rather casually in three verses:

_Hari siang Tuan Besar jaga_  
_Berangkat semuanya ke Balai Selaya_
Let us compare those with Raffles’s account of the gathering, especially the scale of the gathering and the confusion that arose from the proceeding (in Raimy, 2003:50):

About noon I was informed that all the chiefs of the adjoining districts had assembled and were desirous of a conference. In number they amounted to some hundreds, and I therefore requested they would select ten or twenty, with whom I could personally confer. After about an hour’s dispute and when I found by their clamour that they were likely to separate in disorder, I was compelled to say that I would confer with the whole of them if they wished it.

Similarly, what transpired in the gathering with the chiefs, what letter was being signed and what was recorded by Raffles assistants, were only seen as happening and not accessible to the party. Perhaps it was not even in their interest to ask and know since these events had nothing to do with them. Unknown also was the real reason why Raffles gave away gifts of cloths (kain cita dan sakhlat) to all the chiefs of Mukim Tiga Belas Kota. The author had in fact given a rather naïve explanation; he interpreted it simply as a smart gesture made by Raffles “akan jadi tandanya bersahabat” (verse 87). While Raimy Che-Ross (2003:35) on the other hand sees it in a different light; he translates the present as “dubious gifts” from Raffles.

As someone who gathered his stories from several sources, the author would never be able to clarify exactly why the men from Gantung Chiri and Solok had come to block Raffles journey in midway. How much road toll was paid by Raffles, was it in the form of money or in kind; and in fact he was only guessing when he said that Raffles gave them money. Whereas in Raffles records (in Gullick, 1995), he explained that the rouse was caused by the Solok group who was dissatisfied with the
allotment of presents earlier on; they apparently had received less. To avoid unwanted incidence, Raffles ordered that they be given the extra cloths due to them (and no money was paid).

Having to rely on secondary sources, the author too was unable to state facts more precisely, accurately. The actual distance of the journey, the number of days for Raffles to reach a certain destination, were given in rough estimates viz “di jalan tidak beberapa hari”. Similarly, he was not able to gauge the number of soldiers accompanying Raffles, the number of rivers they had to cross and how these rivers were crossed. He had at best managed to conjure a rough picture of the journey:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Berjalan itu tidak berhenti} \\
\text{Hendak lalu ke Aur Duri} \\
\text{Di jambatan lama sampan menanti} \\
\text{Di sanalah menyeberang berganti-ganti.}
\end{align*}
\]

(verse 45)

The only difficulty recorded was the leaky boat:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Orang nan banyak hatinya rusuh} \\
\text{Sampan bocor tiada pengayuh} \\
\text{Aimya dalam rupanya keruh} \\
\text{Menyeberang di sana berkecoh-kecoh.}
\end{align*}
\]

(verse 46)

Compare the description of the same journey as found in Raffles record (Raimy Che-Ross, 2003:45):

We had to swim our horses across a rapid stream, and in the course of three hours we had successively crossed at least twenty streams of the kind; over some we carried in small canoes, over others we were borne on men’s backs, and through some we boldly waded.

... 

Although we had been four hours on the road, we did not estimate our distance from Padang, in a direct line, at more than six miles ...

Lacking in imagination, compounded by the sketchy information provided by the informants, affect also the author’s description of the characters. They appeared transparent and shallow. Cliché words, stereotype description were used to give traits and personalities to characters; for example the use of standard words such as dermawan, budiman, arif bijaksana, pandai, cerdik, baik sangat jauhari, were arbitrarily used to describe good characters (including for the locals). In depth description of character, such as his
Cita sakerat bungkusan dibawa
Kuli menjunjung bersama pula

Setelah tiba di Balai Selaya
Tuan Besar muafakat pula bersama
Dengan Penghulu Tiga Belas Kota
Surat tanda tangan dianya minta

Rapat Penghulu Tiga Belas Kota
Mengasih tanda tangan yang diminta
Juru tulis berdiri menyuratkan kata
Di dalam kertas sudahlah nyata

(verse 81 – 83)

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emotional state and psychological setup which could be assessed from his facial and body language were not explored. This in part could be due to the author’s inability to imagine characters emotion in specific situations.

How was Lady Sophia’s feeling during the precarious and strenuous river crossing? How did she feel when she and Raffles were surrounded by a crowd of apparently unfriendly and armed natives when they first arrived at Gantung Chiri? What was her reaction when confronted with a group of weeping women, who tried to hold her back from leaving? Similarly, what was Raffles feeling and reaction when he was stopped midway by a group of uncompromising men from Solok or when the Chiefs from Mukim Tiga Belas created a rouse?

What were their physical conditions during the journey, or when they had to spend a night in the forest, or sleeping in a crowded and uncomfortable hut, or when they were short of food and water, or when they had to face the severe weather? We hardly found any description that could give us some clue as to the state of mind and body of these characters; to put simply these were beyond the grasp of the author.

For example let me just quote Raffles’ report of the arduous journey, and the strenuous effect on his body:

We had a very hot and fatiguing walk for about an hour
In ascending the hill … (in Rainy Che-Ross, 2003:54)

The road was even worse than we had passed the day before
the descent being very rapid, and the only firm hold which
our feet could have being upon the roots of trees, which intersected the path in every direction, and from which the earth had been washed away. In many places this path was knee-deep in mud for considerable distance, and we could only pass stepping from root to root. This was even more fatiguing than leaping from rock to rock, and our shoes being soaked through, our feet soon became so tender that it was real pain we moved on: every step, on account of the steep descent, was a strain to the muscles of the leg, and a wound or blow to the foot (in Gullick, 1995:34).

Being not an eye witness, the author also trivialized certain major happenings, such as the astounding welcome at Gantung Chiri, the scale of which was reduced to one verse as follows:

_Tibalah Tuan Besar di Gantung Chiri_
_Baris diangkat tambur berbunyi_
_Gelamat orang dalam negeri_
_Melihat Tuan Besar laki-laki padusi_

(verse 78)
Compare now with Raffles description of the welcoming party (in Raimy Che-Ross, 2004:49):

... in our course from Bukit Batu to the place, our party had been strengthened until it amounted to several thousands – the people of the country being collected at the different eminences near where we passed; they welcomed us as they joined the throng, by most discordant howls and cheers which can be well conceived ... on the whole, I cannot well conceive anything more savage than the manners of this noisy party ...

He was also for example, unable to describe in details a misadventure that befell Raffles at one point of the journey; he did mention the incident but was unaware of the severity of the incident experienced by Raffles. The event was mentioned very mildly viz:

\begin{verbatim}
Takdir Allah Tuhan yang kaya
Berjalan itu tidak bersama
Setengahnya dahulu ke dalam rimba
Setengahnya tinggal di mana-mana

...  
Sultan Beraim sangat tukal
Berjalan ke Darat serta Tuan Besar
Tidaklah takut ngeri dan gentar
Sebab pekerjaan banyak yang benar

Sultan berjalan dengan perlahan
Kawannya banyak mengiringkan
Membawa zuadah bekal di jalan
Di mana berhenti situ dimakan
\end{verbatim}

(verse 61 – 64)

The mishap was recorded by Raffles (in Raimy Che-Ross, 2003:46):

... before we came to out resting-place for the night, they were pretty well exhausted; for in consequence of some misapprehension in the party which had gone before us, we had to walk nearly twice the distance we had calculated upon, and this over the most fatiguing road, with little or nothing to eat or drink.

Raffles's version was therefore contrary to the author's report of the journey in verses 61 and 64 above; and as Raffles complained about
the lack of food and drink, we therefore can surmise that Sutan Ibrahim (and the food supply) was not amongst Raffles’s troupe. The author has misrepresented the episode.

Similarly, being unable to gauge the actual motive and the grouses behind the barricade in Solok, the author’s description became less intense and not provocative:

Setengah jam baru berjalan  
Ke hilir Solok ke situ jalan  
Orang Solok menanti di jalan  
Kerjanya hendak melalaikan

Berkatalah Penghulu Darat bangsawan  
Kepada Tuan Besar dianya bilangkan  
“Selaya saja Tuan lebihkan  
Solok di mana Tuan tinggalkan?

Adapun adat selama ini  
Selama bersahabat dengan kompeni  
Solok Selaya keduanya negeri  
Disamakan sahaja oleh kompeni.”

(verse 96 – 98)

Compare that to the detailed rendition of the episode by Raffles (in Raimy Che-Ross, 2003:52):

... at daylight the drum was beaten, and everything in readiness for our departure, when a serious difficulty was started. In the distribution of the presents the day before, it was stated that one piece of cloth had been stolen, and the Chiefs of Solo had consequence received one piece less than the Solaya. This was represented as likely to the occasion of a feud between the two people after my departure. I would have given another piece of cloth, but I found the whole statement to be an imposition; for when I offered to do so, a new demur arose; the Chiefs of Solo came in body, saying that I had slept two nights in Solaya, and not one in Solo; that I had therefore done the honor to the former; that the two towns had always maintained an equality, which was now lost, unless I would consent to stay two nights at Solo. This I represented to be impossible; the Chiefs of towns had received me at the boundery, and it was left with them to conduct me whither they pleased; they took me to Solaya; the drum was now beating, and I must be off. I promised however to visit them on my return; but nothing would pacify them, and we had nigh come to an open rupture ...
And yet, another shortcoming in the depiction of the journey was the author’s considerable neglect of details in the landscape – the topographical features, the terrain, vegetation, land use etc., without which the journey seemed to be passing through a non-vibrant, colourless, featureless setting. Similarly, the kind of weather and the temperature too did not seem to be of significance to the journey. The author being a native to the area probably felt that these were not significant or interesting enough to be recorded; or he may be so used to the environments that these were merely common sights and experiences. And of course not being an eyewitness is also a disadvantage. Such being the case, he missed or omitted to describe the condition of the physical surrounding, its natural landscape and scenery, the land use etc., which normally would attract an explorer.

There was however some mention of the condition of the water in the river, even then it was only recorded in one line:

_Aimya dalam rupanya keruh_  
(verse 46)

Another feature that attracted his description was the rain:

_Hari pun hujan basah pakaian_  
(verse 42)

And:

_Hari pun hujan aimya besar_  
(verse 43)

These are rather minimal descriptions of the setting, unappealing and uninteresting, compared to Raffles’s description of the setting, of which I quote in part below:

The whole country, from Pagar Ruyung as far as the eye could distinctly trace, was one continued scene of cultivation, interspersed with innumerable towns and villages, shaded by the coconut and other fruit trees … (in Gullick, 1995:33)

The ascent hitherto had been gradual, and the scenery very romantic, … we found here abundance of granite marble, great varieties of lime stone … (in Gullick, 1995:33)

The road was execrable, in some parts wet and muddy, exceedingly difficult to pass (Gullick, 1995:33)
Conclusion

SR in many ways is a travel narrative; it was composed by a native Malay who may well be a good writer of his time, but not good enough to present a convincing historical or factual journey. Beside not being an eyewitness, and a disadvantage of being a local/native, the author too seemed to be struggling with the unfamiliar and challenging creative skill to represent realistically a factual narrative. So much so, his narrative failed to bring forth a convincing picture of an arduous and challenging journey. Probably even more critical, the narrative was unable to capture Raffles’ motive and personal experience of the journey, his perception of the hill people, their culture and the environment. Unfortunately too, he could in the end only manage to conjure a picture of the journey which is fragmentary, uninteresting, uneventful and uninformative.

He too probably faced other challenges; the demand and constraint of the new genre might also induce him to avoid elaborating on details and ornamentation which he felt might engulf or subdue the facts. Composing in the syair form too has effect on his creativity; content has to be controlled by convention, which means composing in the syair form will pose restriction on such things as details or elaborations. This is so unlike the hikayat; its prose form allows more flexibility for ornamentation and mimetic details. In comparison, this could also be one of the reasons why SR is so lacking in descriptive details, the shortcoming noted above.

In the end, SR came forth as a travelogue that barely helps the Europeans to understand the native and their land. In its present style, the text also failed to appeal to the local Malays who adored the ornamental contents, the elaborations of scenes, the mystery and excitement of a journey (as in their much loved folktale). I presume, this could be the reason for the limited copies of the edition and also the reason why the text remains undiscovered as noted by Raimy Che-Ross (2003:25).

References


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