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Manners, Arts, Languages, Religions, Institutions, and Commerce of its  
Inhabitants: Volume 2

John Crawfurd

Excerpt

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**HISTORY**  
**OF THE**  
**INDIAN ARCHIPELAGO**

**VOL. II.**

**A**

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## BOOK V.



## CHAPTER I.

## LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE OF JAVA.

*Alphabet.—Grammatical Form.—Copiousness.—Redundancy.—Ordinary and Ceremonial Dialects.—Analogy of Sound to Sense.—Figurative Language.—Derivation of the Language.—Literature.—Division into Ancient and Modern Literature.—Lyrical Compositions.—Hindu Literature.—Native Romances.—Historical Composition.—Prose Composition.—Arabic Literature.—Education.—Books and Manuscripts.—General Character of Javanese Compositions.*

OF all the languages of the Indian Islands, the most improved and copious is that of the Javanese. It is written in a peculiar character, of great neatness, which extends to the language of the Sundas, the Madurese, Balinese, and people of Lombok, and, in comparatively recent times, along with the parent language, made some progress in Sumatra and Borneo. It is confessedly formed on the principles of the Sanskrit alphabet, but, unlike some other languages of the Archipelago, it has not fol-

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lowed the well known and artificial classification of that alphabet.

The Javanese language has twenty consonants, and six vowel sounds. The letters of the alphabet, in the *native* enumeration of them, are considered but twenty in number, the vowels being omitted, and considered only as orthographic marks, like the supplementary characters of the Arabic alphabet. Of the Dewanagari alphabet, the Javanese wants no less than fourteen consonants. An European is most struck with the absence of the letters *f* and *v*, and of that sound for which *sh* stands in our own language. With respect to the vowels, the greatest peculiarity is the frequent substitution of the vowel *o* for the *a* of other languages, or rather the transformation of the latter into the former. The Indian words *kama*, love, and *sama*, with, become, in the enunciation of the Javanese, *komo* and *somo*. But this happens without any change in the orthography; for this commutable sound is that vowel of the Indian alphabet inherent in every consonant, without being expressed. This peculiarity I am inclined to consider as quite accidental; for we find, that while the *o* is the favourite vowel of the Javanese, their neighbours, on the same island, and on Madura, adopt the *a*, and tribes as little connected with them as possible on Sumatra, like them prefer the broad sound of *o*. When one consonant coalesces with another, or

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follows it without the intervention of a vowel, the practice of the Javanese alphabet differs from that of the Sanskrit. The Javanese, in such situations, give their consonants new forms, and often place the second in position underneath the first. This is evidently an improvement on the Sanskrit alphabet, where confusion is the consequence of multiplying and combining the characters, begetting rather an alphabet of syllables or of combinations of letters, than of the simple elements of sounds.

The Javanese alphabet, as it relates to its own language, comes up to the notion of a perfect character, for it expresses every sound in the language, and every sound invariably with the same character, which never expresses but one. From this excellence of the alphabet, it follows, that the language is easily read and written, and a false or variable orthography, so common in European languages, is seldom discovered, even among the unlearned. In splendour or elegance the alphabet of the Arabs and Persians is probably superior to that of the Javanese ; but the latter, it may be safely asserted, surpasses in beauty and neatness all other written characters.

All the languages of the Archipelago are singularly simple and inartificial in their structure, and the Javanese partakes of this common character, though it perhaps be on the whole the most complex and artificial in its formation.

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## LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

The noun admits of no variation in its form to express gender or number, which are effected by adjectives, as the first is in our own tongue. One simple inflection represents the genitive case, and the other relations are expressed by prepositions; nay, even the prepositions, in situations where they could not be dispensed with in other languages, are omitted, and the sense left to be made out from the context,—a practice very consonant to the genius of the language.

The adjective is still more simple in its form than the noun, admitting of no distinction of gender, number, or case, and seldom of any change by comparison.

The pronouns are equally invariable in their form. Their position before or after a word determines them respectively to be pronominal or adjective. Those of the first and second person are very numerous. There is none at all of the third, except in a possessive form. Now and then the word *self* is vaguely so used.

The verb, like that of other languages, may be divided into active and neuter. There is but one mood, the imperative, determined by any change in the form of the verb. The rest are left to be understood by the context. The simple form of the verb expresses present time, one auxiliary a perfect past, and another an indefinite future, and these are all the tenses of a Javanese verb. With

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the characteristic brevity, or rather looseness, which belongs to the language, even these signs of the tenses are often omitted, and the meaning left to be gathered from the context.

The most perfect portion of the verb is the passive voice, unless we except the processes by which verbs are changed from intransitive to transitive.

The most complex and artificial processes of Javanese grammar are those by which one part of speech is formed from another. Most of the parts of speech admit of being changed one into the other, even with a degree of versatility beyond that of our own language. This is most commonly effected by prefixing or affixing inseparable particles, or both; but it not unfrequently happens, that the same word, in its primitive and most simple form, is used for several different parts of speech,—a practice which particularly obtains in the spoken dialect, the more formal language of composition being usually somewhat more artificial in its structure.

The Javanese language is not less remarkable for its copiousness in some respects, than for its meagreness and poverty in others. In unimportant trifles, it deals in the most puerile and endless distinctions, while, in matters of utility, not to say in matters of science, it is utterly defective. These characters of the language belong to the peculiar state of society which exists among the people of

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Java, which I shall endeavour to illustrate, by entering at some length upon the subject.

There are two sources of copiousness in the Javanese language, one resulting from the natural tendency of this language, and perhaps of most other semi-barbarous tongues, to degenerate into redundancy, and the other from political causes. In the first case, it descends to the slenderest ramifications of distinction, often more resembling the elaborate arrangements of science than the common language of the world. It wantons in exuberance, when species, varieties, and individuals are described,—while no skill is displayed in combining and generalizing. Not only are names for the more general abstractions usually wanting, as in the words fate, space, nature, &c. but the language shows the utmost deficiency in common generic names. There are, for example, two names for each of the metals, and three for some; but not one for the whole class,—not a word equivalent to metal or mineral. There exists no word for animal, expressing the whole class of living creatures. The genera of *beasts*, *birds*, *insects*, and *reptiles*, are but indifferently expressed; but for the individuals of each class there is the usual superfluity, five names, for example, for a dog; six for a hog and elephant, and seven for a horse.

The disposition to generalize which appears in every polished language, and so discoverable in the



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structure of almost every sentence, is, in short, a stranger to the Javanese. It is fitted for the language of pure description, of the passions, or of familiar life, but wholly defective when any degree of subtlety or abstraction is implied, as may well be expected in the language of a simple and semi-barbarous people.

It is, of course, on familiar occasions, that the minute and painful redundance of the language is most commonly displayed. The various postures or modifications of position in which the human body can be placed, not only for ease and convenience, but from whim or caprice, are described in a language so copious, that the anatomist, the painter, or the statuary, might derive assistance from it. There are with the Javanese ten ways of standing, and twenty of sitting, and each has its distinct and specific appellation. To express the different modifications of sound, there are not less than fifty words. In such cases the ramifications of meaning are expressed by distinct words, and the nicer shades by changing the broader vowels for the slenderer ones, the greater intensity being expressed by the first, and the lesser by the second. Thus, *gumrot* means the noise of a door on its hinges, while *gumret* and *gumrit* mean the same thing, each in a less intense degree.

The great source of copiousness in the language,

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## LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

however, is that which springs from the fabric of society, considered in a political view. This peculiarity of the language runs to so great an extent, that speech is in fact divided into two dialects, the ordinary language, and one invented to express deference and respect. This distinction by no means implies a court or polished language, opposed to a vulgar or popular one, for both are equally polite and cultivated, and all depends on the relations in which the speakers stand to each other, as they happen to be inferiors or superiors. A servant addresses his master in the language of deference, a child his parent, a wife her husband, if there be much disparity in their ages, and the courtier his prince. The superior replies in the ordinary dialect, the language still affording modifications and distinctions, according to the rank of the person he addresses, until that rank rises to equality, when, if no intimacy subsists between the parties, the language of deference is adopted by both, or when, if there does, ceremony is thrown aside, and the ordinary language becomes the only medium of conversation. An extensive acquaintance with the language of deference is held a mark of education and good-breeding. With persons who frequent a court, or are in habits of intercourse with the great, the phraseology is refined and copious ; but of the ordinary peasant,