

An Introduction

The Magic of Islam and Modern Malaya

This book is about Islamic miracle workers and the connections between miracles and material life. To be more precise, it is about historical societies and economies where the production and extraction of natural resources, as well as the uses of technology, were intertwined with the 'ilmu and barkat of the pawangs of the Malay world. Such miracle workers have consistently been dismissed as 'magicians' throughout the scholarship of the Malay Peninsula; this academic attitude was just as noticeable in the early nineteenth century as it is now. And yet, European travellers and Orientalists sometimes perceptively recognised that such miracle workers dominated many spheres of socio-economic life in modern Malaya and Sumatra, and were involved in and influenced political practices in the region. The writings of European journeymen and scholars thus reveal how nineteenth-century Malay society included a universe of peripatetic and professional pawangs.

A small number of the pawangs sat down with Malay scribes (*munshi*) and European scholar-administrators to transmit their traditions and describe their 'magical' activities. This book analyses these oral transmissions, recorded in handwritten Jawi on European paper, of such pawangs who spent most of their professional lives clearing forests, producing rice, trapping elephants, mining for tin and gold or manufacturing guns and bullets, along with imparting to disciples their 'ilmu of shooting. While their traditions were transcribed within the colonial and Islamic contexts of Malaya, the miracle narratives, genealogies, incantations, formulae, charms and techniques for mediating with spirits captured in these manuscripts were actually products of porous Malay frontiers, interwoven with the world beyond. Such frontiers were microcosms of an Indian Ocean ecumene: they provided interstitial spaces through which highly mobile social actors, spirits and traditions all moved across and beyond the politically imposed territorial boundaries of that moment.

The magical activities of the pawangs were thus rooted in larger discursive traditions of the Indian Ocean and broader Islamic world. Following earlier Islamic traditions absorbed from throughout the Indian

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Ocean region, pawangs localised Islamic prophets and assimilated non-Muslim customs and divinities into a distinctive Islamic cosmology of their own. Their oral traditions and manuscripts prompted believers (and more scholarly audiences) to remember, or rather realise, that all aspects of material life, including physical resources, technologies, animals and humans, were inextricably linked to the imagined non-material realms of the Unseen (al-ghaib). Such connections between materiality and the Unseen were not made by Islamic or Oriental peoples exclusively; rather, individuals of diverse backgrounds valued pawangs for their ability to mediate with the Unseen using their 'ilmu, refined sensory perceptions and various material paraphernalia that had been investitured by God, archangels, prophets and Sufi masters.

It is not uncommon for texts of Islamic miracle workers to be short on biographical details about their pawang protagonists. Most of the manuscripts barely mention the names of the pawangs, even as they elaborate on their 'ilmu and expertise. The paucity of biographical information impelled me to search for hagiographies, as well as interview the descendants of the historical pawangs in the places where they congregate today. This book thus draws on material from some recently published as well as unpublished hagiographies of pawangs and the miracle narratives of other men and women who were known spirit mediums, healers, ritual adepts, seers, astrologers, numerologists, Sufi masters and dispensers of barkat. Though they occasionally overemphasise connections between pawangs and specific Sufi fraternities and paths (tariqa), the most recent hagiographies of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pawangs and bomohs consistently stress that their beliefs and practices were inherent to Sufism. For the purposes of this book, I use the term 'Sufism' nominally to include beliefs in an Islamic elite invested with miraculous powers and esoteric knowledge and the devotional traditions of confraternities formed around Islamic genealogies, initiatory rituals and liturgical practices.¹ As Sufis and like most non-pawang Sufis, pawangs were members of paideias or communities of shared knowledge. Paideias perpetuated the idioms, lessons and 'ilmu of earlier generations of pawangs capable of mediating between the 'alam ghaib and the material activities of the visible world. Some of the paideia were relatively informal circles of colleagues, while others were hierarchically structured Sufi tariqas in which members had to obey senior masters whose

¹ Following Bashir (*Sufi Bodies*, p. 10), I also define Sufism 'nominally rather than substantively'; Knysh (*Sufism*, p. 1) defines Sufism otherwise as the 'ascetic-mystical stream' in Islam.

charismatic presence, exceptional practices and ‘ilmu were rooted in lineages (silsila) that extended back in time to eminent ancient prophets and Sufi saints. ‘Sufism’ is certainly a modern term, however. It does not represent any particular conception held by individual Sufis or pawangs about the path they must take to ‘make oneself into a Sufi’ (tasawwuf). It would be simplistic to assume that there was any internal cohesion or shared discipline within either the informal networks or hierarchical paideias of Sufis and pawangs. In reality and in the fashion of most Sufis, pawangs regularly competed within their paideia and beyond for devoted followers, gifts and charitable donations, and chastised the practices of rivals as deviations from Islam and Sufism.

Moreover, while I abide by the vocabulary of the Jawi manuscripts by referring to the Islamic miracle workers of the Malay world as pawangs (or by synonymous titles such as bomoh, guru, tabib, pir or shaykh), I do not wish to elide their class and cultural differences. Some of the pawangs held distinguished positions in society while others worked as their lieutenants or were considered subordinate pawangs. According to one British scholar-administrator in 1908, pawangs ranged from individuals with royal pedigrees who sustained lucrative careers and senior positions in Malay courts, down to petty religious dignitaries who operated at the village level and were of ‘no special importance’.²

Pawangs were also ethnically diverse. They have frequently been described in academic literature as ‘Malay’ because they assimilated pre-Islamic, specifically Malay traditions, along with Islamic terms and concepts to serve societies demographically dominated by Malay-speaking Muslim individuals.³ While the category ‘Malay’ has expanded and contracted throughout the early modern and modern periods to either incorporate or exclude various individuals, groups and communities, the pawangs I studied were undeniably Malay in that they circulated throughout the modern Malay world, temporarily or permanently, settled in parts of the Peninsula and were members of Malay-speaking paideias. The Islamic sources and European writings I consulted all portrayed pawangs as coming from diverse ethnic origins, however. Pawangs came from Malay, Javanese, south Indian, Arab, creole, Chinese or Eurasian backgrounds; they also included Muslims from aboriginal communities (Orang Asli) and sea and riverine peoples (Orang Laut). While the great majority of pawangs were practising Muslims, some of the so-called ‘Islamic miracle workers’ in modern Malaya were non-Muslims, including some Orang Asli and pawangs of south Indian

² Wilkinson, *Incidents of Malay Life*, p. 50.

³ Winstedt, *Malay Magician*.

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and Chinese descent. These non-Muslim miracle workers operated on a temporary basis. They became 'Islamic' only when they were actively possessed by the spirits of Muslim pawangs and Sufi shaykhs while they were healing clients, exorcising spirits or conducting seances.

Finally, it is important for contemporary religious scholars and historians of Islamic societies to affirm that pawangs could be either male or female. Some female pawangs were especially valued for their barkat-filled breast milk or postmenopausal bodies, even as their male counterparts were celebrated for incarnating heavenly fluids in their semen. In some texts, pawangs were described in strictly gendered terms either as female midwives (*bidan*) delivering rice crops, or as men taking up specifically 'male' responsibilities in taming female spirits and feminine guns. The sex of other individual pawangs was sometimes disguised in Jawi manuscripts, however, by their having deceptively gender-neutral or cross-gendered names. For example, a renowned pawang of Perak in 1895 held the title of Raja Ngah (Middle Raja), and was described as an 'amusing lady' and 'woman in male attire' by the British Resident of the Malay state.⁴ In fact, pawangs often cross-dressed and acquired cross-gendered roles and sexualised bodies in the course of their rituals. Male pawangs, for instance, performed maternally as midwives of rice and ore and delivered breast milk (*sic*) to their clients, while some female pawangs cultivated a male selfhood to trap elephants, control guns and craft bullets. This book unearths manuscripts containing the traditions of such varied miracle workers, from the rice and mining pawangs to the elephant bomohs and gun gurus.

Translating Magic in British Malaya

The Jawi and Romanised Malay texts discussed in this book were selected from a broader corpus of Malay manuscripts about Islamic theology and praxis (including 'magic'), and the religious economies of the Malay world and Indian Ocean ecumene. Like any other scholar of Malay history, I remain indebted to the academic treatises on Malay literature and history of the early modern and modern Malay world. Over the past few decades, postcolonial scholars have paved the way for researchers to better appreciate Malay texts and understand their significance.⁵ Until recently, however, the manuscripts that I concentrate on in this book had been almost entirely neglected by historians, or dismissed

⁴ Swettenham, *Malay Sketches*, p. 154.

⁵ See for instance, Matheson and Andaya, *Tuhfat al-Nafis*; Andaya, *Perak*; Hajji Salleh, *Malay Literature*.

as a hotchpotch of magic, legend, fantasy, folklore, gossip, rumour and entertainment. Indeed, on the face of it, these Jawi texts appear to lack the sort of factual data one would seek in writing social, economic, political, cultural or environmental histories. For at least one historian and linguist, such manuscripts seemed short of the ‘stuff of historians’ and lacked ‘emphasis on the true and the real *for its own sake*’.⁶ Even Ismail Hussein, a proponent of the *Study of Traditional Malay Literature*, advised a younger generation of scholars in 1966 to focus their attention only on the 0.03 per cent of total Malay manuscripts that have survived the test of time (and climate). Only these texts were considered ‘reliable’ enough for scientific academic research and any attempt to study manuscripts from the broader corpus of Malay textual traditions would involve a ‘tremendous amount of philological spadework’.⁷ For these same reasons, I too was counselled by senior historians and anthropologists to avoid studying the magical manuscripts of the pawangs. Indeed, upon first encountering these texts in archives and shrine libraries, I realised that they were unedited, abstruse and full of deeply esoteric contents that would only be fully accessible to other pawangs. Added to these difficulties, these ‘Malay’ texts had been orally transmitted in a primary language that had assimilated many other languages and vehicular Malay varieties used throughout the frontier regions of the Malay world. While the extracts I quote in this book might make these magical manuscripts seem rather conventionalised, they were actually written in a range of literary styles, both within and across manuscripts. Writing style varied from chapter to chapter in many of the texts because munshis had transcribed the oral transmissions of multiple narrators. Senior academic interlocutors warned me about the intractable nature of these magical manuscripts as historical evidence.

These manuscripts compiled magical traditions that were in circulation throughout the territories directly or indirectly administered by British and Dutch colonial regimes. In the Malay Peninsula, separate administrative units were gradually unified into the superstructure of British Malaya in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁸ It has been estimated that up to 90 per cent of all surviving Malay manuscripts were written during this period, but they transcribed much older traditions that had survived in oral transmission.⁹ Most of the

⁶ Skinner, ‘Transitional Malay Literature’, 470; 480–1, italics in original; also see Skinner, *Prosa Melayu Baharu*.

⁷ Hussein, *Study of Traditional Malay Literature*, p. 18.

⁸ The following discussion of colonialism in the Malay world draws extensively from Andaya and Andaya, *History of Malaysia*, pp. 160–86; also refer to Lees, *Planting Empire*.

⁹ See Gallop, ‘A Jawi Sourcebook’.

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manuscripts analysed in the following chapters were copied down in the states of Perak, Melaka and Negeri Sembilan after the establishment of the British Resident system in western Malaya in 1874.

A British presence on the Peninsula had already been formally established a century earlier, when the East India Company (EIC) leased Penang and the territory that later became Province Wellesley from the Sultanate of Kedah in 1786. Thereafter in 1795, the EIC acquired Melaka from the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company, VOC), which had earlier been annexed by the Portuguese from the Sultanate of Melaka (1400–1511) in 1511 and then occupied by the VOC starting in 1641. The next significant British intervention in the Malay Peninsula occurred when the EIC acquired the port of Singapore in 1819, by installing an amenable sultan in the territory and signing a treaty with him and a local chief. Five years later, the British and Dutch regimes signed a treaty recognising the Malay Peninsula as a British ‘sphere of influence’.¹⁰ They divided the Malay world as lying on either side of the Straits of Melaka, thus establishing the earliest boundaries of what would become postcolonial Malaysia and Indonesia. Following the terms of this 1824 Anglo-Dutch treaty, the EIC conceded its own claims over Sumatra, Java and the islands located south of Singapore to the Dutch (see Map I.1). The British subsequently merged Melaka, Penang, Province Wellesley and Singapore into a new administrative unit known as the Straits Settlements in 1826. British intervention in Malaya expanded in 1874, when the Governor of the Straits Settlements installed another compliant sultan in Perak and signed the Pangkor Treaty with him to formally establish the colonial Resident system. According to the English text of this treaty, the newly appointed sultan obligated himself and his successors to granting a British Resident effective political control over all matters ‘other than those touching Malay religion and custom’.¹¹ Since other historians have painstakingly elaborated on the commercial imperatives that drove British intervention in Malaya in the late nineteenth century, I will refrain from doing so here, except to mention that the governor appointed in 1873 was receptive to lobbying from financiers who had invested in tin mines in Malaya. These investors were particularly concerned about various civil wars erupting between

¹⁰ Andaya and Andaya, *History of Malaysia*, pp. 125–8.

¹¹ There was a debate over whether a Malay text of the Pangkor Treaty referred to both ‘advice’ (*nasihai*) from the British Resident, along with discussion (*bicara*); this Malay rendering differs from the English text in terms of how the ruler was only obligated to listen to the advice of the Resident, but not act upon it. See Andaya and Andaya, *History of Malaysia*, p. 162.



Map I.1 The Malay world and Java.

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Malay rajas (often supported by Chinese mining groups) in the lucrative states of western Malaya and clashes amongst gangs of Chinese migrants.

By 1889, the British Resident system had been extended from the state of Perak where it had been first introduced, into Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang. Many of the texts I studied were originally transmitted by pawangs who had worked in these four states before and after they became loosely unified into the Federated Malay States in 1896. While these manuscripts typically include colophons mentioning the names of the munshi who had transcribed the pawangs' narratives, as well as the names of European scholar-administrators who had requested them, the political developments described above are rarely mentioned explicitly. That the pawangs were both aware of and deeply immersed in the colonial world is mainly evident in their notes concerning western shooting techniques and supernatural weapons purported to be of European or American origin, and in their descriptions of amoral white jinns and belligerent white demons (*'ifrit*). Along with supernatural beings invested with other racialised or ethnic traits, the pawangs assimilated these white spirits into a resolutely Islamic cosmology.

On the whole, pawangs demonstrated great adaptability in continuing their professional activities under British or Dutch rule. Some pawangs responded to the terms of the 1824 Anglo-Dutch treaty by continuing to circulate between the British and Dutch spheres of influence, often making a living by transporting livestock or importing western rifles in addition to initiating their devotees into Sufi tariqas and transmitting their spiritual traditions to neophyte pawangs. Other pawangs reacted to the introduction of the Resident system by demanding royalties from the various British residencies. Some even challenged European domination. The State Pawang at the court of Perak (holding the regnal title of Sultan Muda or Young Sultan), for instance, was indicted for conducting a spiritual assassination of the first British Resident of Perak, James W. W. Birch.¹² In October 1875, the State Pawang and his subordinate pawangs petitioned spirits to murder Birch. His effective communication with the spirits was made evident a month later when the Resident was speared to death by assailants possessed by homicidal jinns.¹³ Other pawangs challenged the infidel (*kafir*) British authorities to battle in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Melaka, Terengganu and Borneo.¹⁴

¹² In the court of Perak, an eminent pawang regularly served as the State Pawang with jurisdiction over geopolitical affairs. See Winstedt and Wilkinson, 'History of Perak', 134–5.

¹³ These spirit-possessed assassins have been memorialised in the oral histories of bomohs such as a Bugis bomoh I first met in the Riau Archipelago in 2013, Dato' Yunus ibn 'Uthman (d. 2018); see Chapter 5.

¹⁴ For a discussion of one such miracle worker in Terengganu, Sayyid 'Abdul Rahman al-Idrus (1817–1917), see Said, *Tujuh Wali Melayu*, pp. 33–43.

As eschatological restorers of Islam (*mahdi*), these kafir-slayers were venerated by armed retinues for being able to fire flame from their mouths and shoot lightning from their cleavers; their followers also believed the pawangs carried kris daggers that had been sacralised by Sufis, along with guns passed down to them from Prophet Muhammad himself.

Given the professional, political and religious diversity of the numerous pawangs in British Malaya, it should come as no surprise that a significant proportion of them corresponded amicably with European scholars and administrators. Such was the cordial nature of the relationships between many pawangs and colonial administrators in parts of British Malaya that the manuscripts discussed in this book can be fairly described as the product of ‘terrains of exchange’, to use Nile Green’s evocative words.¹⁵ Many pawangs and Malay-speaking Muslim headmen (*penghulu*) willingly shared their oral and textual traditions with Muslim munshis employed by British administrators. Indeed, European travellers and missionaries from various parts of the globe had observed and interacted with pawangs in the Malay world before British and Dutch spheres of influence were established across the Straits of Melaka. By the late nineteenth century, many Muslim informants, translators and scribes were employed by the British authorities in the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States. Most of the elite Muslim munshis in British Malaya worked for royalty, pawangs and penghulus, while others were employed at the offices of the British Residencies in western Malaya. European administrators often hired scribes to copy texts that were ephemeral and written on media that were subject to deterioration, as well as to reproduce portable copies of manuscripts that were housed in the libraries of courtiers. In the late nineteenth century, they also encouraged munshis to document native testimonies and transcribe oral traditions (including the ‘ilmu of the pawangs). For example, the Assistant Resident of Perak, William E. Maxwell (d. 1897), hired scribes and interviewers in Perak, Penang and Singapore to document ‘autochthonous’ traditions and to learn the esoteric and eclectic language used in ‘magical’ texts.¹⁶ Maxwell feared that Malay traditions, customs and ceremonies would ‘diminish as [western] civilisation extends’ in the peninsula. By 1878, he had become convinced that it was urgent to record popular religious traditions and obtain ‘explanations about

¹⁵ Green, *Terrains of Exchange*.

¹⁶ Maxwell served as the Assistant Resident in 1876 and resumed this office in 1878 to serve until 1882. Maxwell was also the most prolific contributor to the *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (*JSRAS*) in between July 1878 and December 1890. Also see Yahya, *Magic and Divination*, p. 255.

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various customs and ceremonies' in Malaya.¹⁷ While the office of the Residency was being established in Perak, he encouraged munshis and Muslim scholars to collect oral traditions of ancient miracle workers (*keramats*), some of whom lived long lives and continued to walk around modern Perak ensuring that their favourite rice fields would be fertile.¹⁸ From the 1870s to the early 1890s, Maxwell's munshis laboured to record historical traditions, genealogies, myths, fairy tales, proverbs and folklore in the Jawi script; their notes would later be edited and published by Maxwell.

This book begins its exploration of pawangs' traditions with a Jawi compendium of forest and agrarian 'ilmu compiled for Maxwell by Hajji Raja Yahya, himself a pawang, munshi, noble and *penghulu* of Belanja village in Perak. Besides Hajji Raja Yahya, several other munshis transcribed pawangs' narratives for William E. Maxwell and later for his son, William G. Maxwell (d. 1959), after he became Acting Resident of Perak. The father and son Maxwell duo collaborated with munshis to record elephant incantations (*mantra gajah*) as recounted by pawangs and mahouts in northern Malaya. Munshis such as Hajji Raja Yahya and Uda Muhd. Hashim (the son of a prominent Islamic leader in Perak) also copied down pawangs' instructions regarding shooting and bloodsport traditions for W. E. Maxwell. All the chapters in this book demonstrate that the Maxwells and their munshis were operating within a larger terrain of exchange in which pawangs, district officers, *penghulus*, scribes and scholar-administrators shared oral traditions, genealogies and ephemeral texts. Many of the notes jotted down in the Islamic manuscripts and unpublished European texts by European administrators and munshis reveal how these Orientalists acquired the secret oral and textual traditions that were being preserved within the pawangs' *paideias*. These notes suggest that scholars of Oriental history and customs were often respected by pawangs as their companions (*sahabat*).¹⁹ They therefore received a first-hand education in the pawangs' activities on the frontier

¹⁷ Cited from Maxwell, 'Notes on Two Perak Manuscripts', 193. Also see Chakrabarti and Sen, "'The World Rests on the Back of a Tortoise'", which investigates early nineteenth-century European geologists who immersed themselves in traditions connected to the sacred geography of India.

¹⁸ These *keramats* included a *Panglima Gharar* from the village of *Ginting Rotan Segar* who regularly impregnated fairies and the terrain of Perak. *Gharar* rode through the ricefields of modern *Rotan Segar* on an elephant to ensure that these fields remained the 'most fertile in Kinta'. See Maxwell, 'Legend of *Toh Panglima*'.

¹⁹ *Winstedt*, 'A Malay Pantheist Charm', 262. Also see an epistle shared by a Perak pawang, *Shaykh Hussein*, with W. E. Maxwell wherein the pawang describes his European peer as *sahabat* (MS 46945, p. 14). A stamp of *Kuala Kangsar* allows us to deduce that the epistle was received on 3 October 1881.