

**BOOK REVIEW**

*Negeri Santubong (300ESS – 1674ES)*

Sanib Said

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Sanib Said is an old-hand in Sarawak history who is never satisfied with its state of historical knowledge. He is troubled by professional historians who continued to rely on the colonial sources emanated from the Brookes dynasty and sources affiliated with its loyalists and sympathisers. Equally worrying is the mentality of some local-born academics who are captivated by the European writings, blindly accepted their claims and uncritical of the indiscreet Eurocentrism embedded in those works. Seen as the ‘godfather’ among aspiring Sarawak Malay historians, his exhortation is listened with respect, his eclectic methods and dizzying claims are tolerated, his staunch dedication to Malay scholarship is admired. *Negeri Santubong* is Sanib’s pontification to the local scholars, the faithful and the unconverted.

A reader is advised to be patient when approaching Sanib’s latest book. It is, after all, a pioneer in coordinating traditional Sarawak Malay texts along the line of western historiography. Yet, traditional texts were not meant for historical investigation. They were intended for recitation among the largely illiterate audience who remembered them and recounted the marvellous stories of the larger-than-life figures to willing believers, reiterating, and reproducing the literary knowledge within the community of memory and traversing generations. A reader is also counselled to disarm her fact-checking mode, hopefully, until the second round of reading, because the book aims not at being pedantic but instructive. Sanib has taken its reader on a bumpy journey through rugged landscape had left her to confront the tumultuous conflict between science and tradition, total history and particular memory, one that invites a comparison to Michel Foucault’s motive: “What, do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing – with a rather shaky hand – a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself ... .” (Foucault, 1972, p.17).

The ‘labyrinth’ Sanib prepared for his reader is grounded on a premise that Sarawak Malay written texts have not been acknowledged as evidence of history. He cited ‘standard’ historical works on Sarawak such as *A History of Sarawak under the White Rajahs* (1909), *Rajahs and Rebels* (1970) and *A History of a Southeast Asian Town in Historical Perspective* (1973). Although these works did offer explanations on the origin of Malay-Muslim population, their analysis ultimately cast Malay as foreigner to the island of Borneo. The ‘foreign’ Malay distinguished themselves in relation to existing indigenous groups by their adoption of Islam. Sanib’s held the latter’s argument on the ‘immigrant’ origin of Malay untenable because historically Borneo stood in politico-cultural relations coterminous with the wider Malay Archipelago. His objection is factual, because migration across the islands in the archipelago was the expression of the very archipelagic culture, as Anthony Milner explains how the unity of Malay culture had facilitated the fluidity of movement: “... Malay people expressing some awareness of a cultural unity and sharing a language, literature and style of life. They dominated a broad region” (Milner, 2016, p.19). In the attempt to underline the historic archipelagic culture as corrective to the prevalent Eurocentrism, a Malay historical geography is proposed in *Negeri Santubong*. The northern zone encompassed Vietnam and Cambodia; western zone covered Sumatera and Peninsula Malay sultanates; eastern zone included Sulu and Visaya; southern zone applied to Java; south-eastern zone referred to Sulawesi and Maluku islands; and the central zone assumed by Borneo. Implicit in the proposed framework is in broadening the term ‘indigenous’

from a land-based sense of belonging into a matrix of regional cultural-religious homogeneity centred on Malay-Islamic identity.

*Negeri Santubong* sets itself apart from the ‘standard’ historical writings for it stands in contiguous relation to the contemporary indigenising humanities. While the explorations of traditional Malay text as source of history are flourishing in humanities circle in the Peninsula Malaysia, the venture remains underwhelmed by the anthropological pursuits in oral history and material culture in Sarawak. In that context, *Negeri Santubong* is a lone wolf embarking on a mission to elevate elements of social memory (represented by the Malay written texts) into a formal historical knowledge. There were three Malay written texts referred in *Negeri Santubong*, the main being an untitled syair the author named Syair Negeri Santubong written in 1886, follows by a rendition from an oral narration by Datu Bandar Abang Kassim dated 1885 called Pembesar Datuk dan Keluarga Melayu Sarawak: Keturunan Raja Jarum Datu Marapati and Hikayat Datu Merpati written by Abdul Gani Tahir in 1939. These Malay sources and their narratives are privileged in the book, while historical sources from archaeology and secondary materials are deployed to plug the gaps in chronology and fill the blanks in key economic facts. Indeed, it is common for traditional texts to obscure chronology and periodization and even more resistant in regard to (rational) truth that had led to its dismissal quite unproblematic to the conventional (European) historiography. Not to Sanib, though. He is certain the texts embodied *the* truth that touched upon real-life magisterial figures and spoke of a real existence of a former glorious *negeri*. These are historical certainties for texts embodying social memory could never be faithful in lies nor collude to it, could it not?

Here’s what the author views as objective truth about *negeri* Santubong. Datu Marapati, a runaway Javanese prince variably known as Radin Dipati Jauhari and Radin Parbita Sari married to a princess of ‘Johor’ Datu Permaisuri. Their eldest son Jipang was offered into marrying the daughter of Abang Adi, the local Sarawak governor of Lidah Tanah, whose jurisdiction included Landeh, Simboh and Batu Kawah. His sister, Dayang Seri Bulan, married into the royal families of Brunei. The union of these aristocratic roots from Java, Johor, Brunei and local Sarawak aristocrats brought forth the Perabangan class specialising in the arts of governing and administration. The other significant royal link was the court of Brunei of which the titles Datu Patinggi and Datu Temenggung emanated from and to which accorded the title holders the authority to carry out law and governing (“*memegang perintah di dalam negeri*”, p. 89). These titles remained in the Perabangan family, for example, Datu Patinggi Amir, the son of Datu Patinggi Kayam inherited the title from his father, whose title was then passed to his brother Datu Patinggi Hasyim (p. 104). Another truth cited from the texts was the role of agriculture as the primary source of livelihood for the common people and the means of extraction for the ruling class. There were mentions of the abundance of food farming in the temporary sojourn of Datu Marapati entourage in Tanjung Datu (“*sarat dengan kebun tanaman*”, p. 143), and the capital of *negeri* Santubong in Batu Buaya (“*serta dengan kebun pun jadi, di dalamnya banyak daun keladi*”, p. 144). Agriculture was the source of taxation for *negeri* Santubong as Datu Marapati went to collect revenue in the rice-producing area in Samarahan (“*telah dapat dia beras padi dengan kemunjurannya bergedung-gedung olehnya*”, p. 98). Where the texts silence, the author intervenes – through conjectural extrapolation – by addressing the gaps to qualify into an acceptable historiography. For example, in relation to the dates of the start of *negeri* Santubong to 300BCE was based on the earliest date of an inter-regional trade between southern India and Southeast Asia, while the end of Santubong era was fixed to the death of the Brunei regent in Sarawak Sultan Tengah in 1647CE, whom despite his royal origin, was not mentioned in the syair. Another extrapolation is found in Chapter 5 on the subject of economy featuring the archaeological portrait of a port-city Santubong detailing export commodities like beads, jungle produce, precious metals and irons, otherwise not mention in the Malay sources.

Has Sanib’s *Negeri Santubong* succeeded in convincing academic readers of the significance of Sarawak Malay texts as documentary source for historical reconstruction? The current reviewer’s response is affirmative on the basis of that echoing E.U. Kratz (1980) that traditional Malay texts

speak with its fellow contemporary texts, citing each other and allowing current researchers to verify the claims and to check the consistency. Kratz found that *Silsilah Raja-Raja Sambas* is “factually linked” to other sources like *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, *Silsilah Melayu dan Bugis* and *Silsilah Raja-Raja Brunei* (Kratz, 1980, p.264). Hence, what has often seen as problems of historiography offered new possibilities in methodology that employs inter-textuality and a “writing from the margins” practice (Reid and Paisley, 2017, p.7). The topic of marginalisation has been a critical theme in post-colonial historiography driven by the distrust that colonial-Eurocentric history writings render hidden most of what construed as indigenous forms of knowledge. The repression has been aptly described by Foucault as follows: “... all that discourse happens to put into words is already found articulated in that half silence which precedes it, which continues to run obstinately underneath it, but which it uncovers and renders quiet” (Foucault, 1998, p.306). Sanib concern over the marginalisation of Sarawak Malay sources is in line with the ongoing revisionism taking place in social sciences and humanities. As long as the traditional texts are not accepted on par with other historical evidence like oral history and material culture, they remain the restless other on the outside of formality, the “culture without history” (Foucault, 1998, p.292).

Revisionism has put history writing into sharp relief between a means to preserve and perpetuate memory and the other, a mode of historical research and critical analysis (Cubitt, 2007, p.51). To strike a balance between the two is not possible because historical research does require a suspension of preference to people’s memory even to the point of eviscerating it. In *Negeri Santubong*, the reviewer learns that historian has to choose between preserving the memory or deconstructing it. The author clearly chose the former at the expense of the latter, hence, one may find the book indistinguishable from the traditional texts that it faithfully represents, thereby, inherits some of their limits. In taking position, the author is inevitably drawn into ideological question because the historiographical oblivion that he took issue against is constructed by Eurocentric ideology. Hence, when Sanib the historian is using traditional texts as a way of invigorating Malay history-writing, he is realising the power of revisionism “a potential vehicle for emancipation and enlightenment” (Cubitt, 2007, p.53), by engaging his writing as a means of political instrument to resurrect what has been ideologically suppressed. On a grand scale, the engagement in revisionism in humanities led to the watering down of value neutrality as the only acceptable position in scientific writing. *Negeri Santubong* is a platform for the author to signal out the drought in Malay-centric history-writing to his readers that they must take action too. In his promulgation, he should be able to take heart that the 19<sup>th</sup> century stellar social scientist Max Weber accepted “the universal role of moulding human beings, of inculcating political, ethical, aesthetic, cultural or other attitudes” is properly belonged in the “area of instruction” (Antonio, 2011, p.3). By substituting Eurocentrism with what is construed as a culturally Malay perspective, his position should also be seen ideological because value judgement is always partisan. This is not to claim it should be given free rein but it does explain the cultural ideals permeating the author’s outlook when he opted to prioritise memory conservation over methodological incision. The present reviewer chose to contextualise his option, making sense of the problem that he identifies and placing it within a larger discourse of revisionism in humanities. She can positively conclude, altogether, *Negeri Santubong* is a pedagogical piece from the writer who is going through a transition from a trained Rankean to a socially-committed historian. The limitations in this book are precisely the starting point for the converted.

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