

Book Review:

Indonesian Manuscripts from the Islands of Java, Madura, Bali and Lombok (Dick van der Meij)

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This book on Indonesian manuscripts from Java, Madura, Bali and Lombok is by Dick van der Meij, an expert on Javanese manuscripts and literature who, in the course of his long career and bibliographic explorations both in the field and in libraries, may well have handled personally more Javanese manuscripts than most other present-day scholars. The book appears in Brill's prestigious HdO (Hanbuch der Orientalistik) series, and despite its daunting length (xliv + 575 pages, 494 illustrations) is conveniently and elegantly produced, in a deceptively slim albeit heavy hard-cover volume, accompanied by a commensurately hefty price (153 Euros).

The work is presented in eight chapters with a similar number of appendices. A 'General Introduction' surveys the languages and scripts encountered in Indonesian manuscripts, and acknowledges topics which are not covered in the book, namely bindings of codices, paper and watermarks, and documents and letters. The first chapter, 'Manuscripts' – the longest, with over a hundred pages – ranges far and wide touching on writing cultures, manuscripts as (often imperfect) physical objects, illustrations and other decorative elements, manuscripts commissioned by foreign scholars, and composite volumes containing multiple texts. Chapter 2, 'Access to Manuscripts', discusses public and private collections, and briefly touches on various technical means of

reproducing manuscripts, including digitisation leading to online access. Manuscripts written on palm leaf are the subject of Chapter 3 entitled ‘*Lontar* and *Gebang* (Nipah) Manuscripts’, although *Gebang* is relegated to the final two of the 90 pages. This is, therefore, a very detailed exposition on all aspects of (*lontar*) palm leaf books, from their protective covers, and strings and ornaments, to the process of writing and numbering palm leaves, ways of reinforcing leaves, manuscript boxes (*kropak*), illustrations, and types of damage encountered. Chapter 4, on ‘Verse, Verse Meters and their Indications’, introduces Javanese, Sundanese and Balinese literary verse structures, and varying visual methods of indicating breaks between verses, stanzas and cantos, and changes of meter, in both paper and palm leaf manuscripts. Chapter 5, ‘Mistakes and Corrections in Manuscripts’ surveys how scribes corrected or indicated errors in the text. Chapter 6, ‘Dating and Calendars’, introduces the range of calendrical systems used in the region and the Javanese use of chronograms, *candra sengkala*, for dates, leading logically into Chapter 7, ‘Colophons’, which surveys how dates are recorded and expressed in manuscripts, with some lively and evocative examples. The final chapter, 8, ‘Other Information on Dating and Ownership’, discusses inscriptions by owners, ex libris stamps and labels, library stamps, and the Javanese use of *sandiasma* or acrostichons ‘where the name is indicated usually by the first syllables of verse lines’.

The eight appendices present 1) lists of *candra sangkala* or chronogram words in Javanese manuscripts; 2) alternative names for *macapat* metres; 3) illustrations of *pada* marks, introducing new verse meters, in Javanese, Sundanese and Madurese manuscripts; 4) lists of *sasmita salinining tembang* words or phrases, indicating changes in metre, from Java, Lombok, Bali and Sunda; 5) similar lists from Javanese texts from Java; 6) verse schemes of commonly encountered verse meters in Bali, according to I Gusti Putu Jlantik; 7) *kakawin* verse meters; and 8) a table to calibrate the Javanese and Arabic years to the Gregorian calendar, according to *Djidwal memindahkan tahoen Djawa dan ‘Arab ketahoen Masehi*, first published in 1932. The book ends with a glossary, a list of manuscripts quoted, a bibliography and index.

In the notes to the reader which open the volume, the author explains that ‘this book is meant for general readers, specialists and curators.’ While seemingly a contradiction in terms to aim at both generalists and specialists, this book does in fact meet its author’s objectives in readability. However arcane the topic, the writing style is engaging and anecdotal, with numerous photographs which greatly help to clarify and illustrate the matter discussed. The downside of this idiosyncratic and meandering approach is that some personal comments are very speculative (for example on p. 120, a discussion on the concept of the ‘popularity’ of texts), and it is also difficult to use the book methodically as a reference tool to look up any particular topic. Thus an explanation of the Javanese writing system – comprising *aksara* that carry the inherent vowel /a/, which can be modified through the addition of *pasangan* to kill the vowel, and new vowel signs – is not located at the start of the book, as might be expected, but towards the end in the chapter on scribal mistakes (p. 323).

The author’s particular expertise and fields of interest are evident from the longest and most detailed chapters, which are Chapter 3 on palm leaf manuscripts, and Chapter 4 on Javanese verse structures. Thus although the bindings and writing supports of Javanese paper manuscripts are excluded from this study, the equivalent codicological aspects of palm leaf manuscripts are analysed in great detail: the wooden or bamboo protective covers, and the ways these can be decorated; the types and sizes of leaves used, and possible relation to the content of the texts within; and the pattern of holes through which strings are fed to ‘bind’ around the palm leaf books. Particularly fascinating is the series of detailed photographs showing different ways of stitching leaves together to strengthen the opening and final pages, displaying great artistry (pp. 198-206) as well as regional variations, particularly between Bali and Lombok. The chapter on verse structures (complemented by appendices 2-7) reveals the depth of Van der Meij’s knowledge of Javanese literary traditions, as well as his great familiarity with a very wide range of manuscripts, in which the different verse structures are signalled visually in an intriguing variety of graphic forms, both textual and decorative.

These two fields are the greatest strengths of this volume, which will be an indispensable resource for scholars working in these subjects. The chapter on palm leaves, in particular, will also be of very great interest to scholars working on other palm leaf traditions from mainland Southeast Asia or South Asia. The other highlight of this book is the many, sometimes quirky, codicological aspects of Indonesian manuscripts which, 'hiding in plain sight', may never have been discussed in print before as a genus, but which have been noticed by the author and deemed worthy of being brought to our attention. These include the presence of library stamps and their potential value for dating a manuscript (pp. 420-423); manuscripts written in commercially-produced exercise books with pre-printed lines and labels (pp. 428-429); the presence of signatures in Indonesian scripts (pp. 433-436); the existence of fore-edge inscriptions (p. 418); and tying pieces of leaf or strings through holes as 'book marks' in palm leaf manuscripts (pp. 189-193). Some of these aspects are typically not mentioned in studies of Indonesian manuscripts because they are regarded as merely recent developments, especially when associated with western repositories. But, in many cases, 'recent' is now more than a century old, and these details in fact constitute an inalienable part of the object's biography. Van der Meij has done a great service in recording the presence of such phenomena in detail in this book, in all cases complemented with illustrations, because this will hopefully mean that future researchers will be more aware of the value of paying attention to such paratexts and material features that can contribute to a fuller understanding of manuscripts and their social lives.

Some other aspects of manuscripts from these four islands are not so well served. Although lip service is paid to the existence and presence of Arabic manuscripts in the Introduction (p. 7), despite their all-pervasive presence in Java, Madura and Lombok at least, Arabic manuscripts are not otherwise discussed at all in the book. There is similarly almost no attention paid to Malay manuscripts, which are found throughout the region in question, particularly in the cosmopolitan milieux of the port cities along Java's north coast. There is also relatively little focus on Javanese manuscripts written in *pegon* (Arabic) script, considering the very large numbers produced in a *pesantren* or madrasah circles in Java.

Thus, the Islamic cloak enveloping the manuscript cultures of Java and Lombok is, on the evidence of many parts of this book, no more discernible than the thinnest gauze.

The many photographs – nearly all taken by the author, often of manuscripts from his own collection – are very helpful. All are sharp and sometimes have useful red arrows indicating the specific word or feature discussed, although unfortunately the photographs of the paper codices are uniformly rather too dark to be fully legible (for example, ill. 297 and 298 are very dark, compared to ill. 299, which was supplied by Leiden University Library, which is lit perfectly). The numerous illustrations all have excellent detailed captions, in every case giving the title, date where known, language, origin, owner and shelfmark of the manuscript.

In short, the book delivers both less and much more than suggested by the title. The range of manuscripts discussed is more limited than the broad encyclopaedic coverage of the writing traditions of Java, Madura, Bali and Lombok that a reader might have expected from a book on ‘Indonesian manuscripts’ from these islands. Conversely, many aspects of Javanese manuscripts and their verse structures, and particularly the materiality of palm leaf manuscript traditions of the region, are explored in extraordinary detail and are accorded a respect and level of appreciation not found in any previous publications, opening the eyes of all manuscript scholars to dimensions of book history not hitherto subject to academic study. This book is certainly an essential companion for any philological or codicological study of the manuscripts of the Javanese cultural zone in particular, and for comparative studies of all Indonesian manuscripts, and other palm leaf manuscripts, in general.