

A PIONEER PUBLISHER IN PALEMBANG, 1905

by
Dr Ian Proudfoot*

Ernst Kratz telah membicarakan kegiatan sebuah perpustakaan pinjaman manuskrip yang bergerak di Palembang pada tahun 1886. Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya mempunyai senaskhah buku Sya'ir Hasan Masri yang dicetak di kawasan yang sama pada tahun 1905. Penerbitnya, Sayyid Abdulrahman, memberikan maklumat mengenai ongkos menyewa dan membeli manuskrip-manuskrip serta berhujah bahawa dengan cara mencetak, buku-buku boleh dikeluarkan dengan lebih murah dan diedarkan kepada pembaca-pembaca dengan lebih mudah. Dengan maklumat ini kita dapat membuat beberapa kesimpulan mengenai perbandingan ongkos di antara bahan-bahan dalam bentuk manuskrip dengan yang bercetak. Kita tidak tahu apakah percetakan Sya'ir Hasan Masri berjaya sebagai suatu usaha penerbitan, kerana pada masa penerbitannya, manuskrip-manuskrip masih disalinkan untuk perpustakaan yang dihuraikan oleh Kratz. Bagaimanapun, menjelang tahun-tahun 1920an, perpustakaan manuskrip tersebut telah tertutup kerana kekurangan pelanggan, dan dengan itu mengesahkan pandangan Sayyid Abdulrahman.

In the *Indonesia Circle* no. 17, Ernst Kratz published an article entitled "Running a Lending Library in Palembang in 1886 A.D."¹ In that article he gives an interesting account of how manuscripts were hired to readers in the Palembang district, throwing light on the concerns of the lenders of the manuscripts (that their property should not be handled carelessly), on the readership, on the conditions under which the manuscripts were read, and finally on the costs involved. To hire a manuscript cost ten cents per day; to replace a lost manuscript cost twenty rupiah.

Kratz derives this information from two manuscripts among those collected by Hans Overbeck in the area of Palembang in the 1920's. These manuscripts had been the stock of a lending library; and the two Kratz discusses were owned by brothers from Kampung 7 Ulu Palembang. The Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya holds a copy of the Sya'ir Hasan Masri which was printed at Kampung 13 Ulu Palembang which conveys comparable information.²

The Sya'ir Hasan Masri consists of 532 pages of letterpress Jawi script, 20 lines to the page, in the usual Sya'ir format. It was published in four approximately equal volumes which appeared between 15 February 1905, and 24 June 1905.³ The printing was done on a press owned by Sayyid Hamid bin Hussein al-Habsyi by Sayyid Abdulrahman bin Hamid al-Habsyi, presumably his son, both of Kampung 13 Ulu. The opening verses of the poem tell us that it is based on 'an adaptation of the hikayat version, doubtless in manuscript form', written on 4 November 1883,⁴ — making this manuscript roughly contemporary with the younger of the two manuscripts used by Kratz. The preface to the poem assures us that the text is well-known and in demand in Palembang, adding that while the title Sya'ir Hasan Masri is current locally, properly speaking it is the story of Hasan Basri.

As with the manuscripts discussed by Kratz, the preface, opening and conclusion of this printed work tell us a little about the literary environment in which it was produced. This time, however, the picture is seen from the other side of the fence, by a publisher, not by the owner of a manuscript.

On the one hand, we find confirmation of Kratz' information on the costs of buying and hiring manuscripts. In his preface, Sayyid Abdulrahman informs us that those who wish to read the manuscript of a popular work like the Sya'ir Hasan Masri must pay ten cents per day.⁵ He later adds that a manuscript copy of the Sya'ir would cost twenty rupiah.⁶ Both figures are identical to those in Kratz' sources, confirming that twenty years later the hiring of manuscripts was continuing in the same way. But on the other hand, the economic factors which must ultimately have led to the disposal of the manuscripts to Overbeck in the 1920's are already evident. Sayyid Abdulrahman explains his motives for printing the Sya'ir by contrasting the high price people formerly had to pay for hiring a manuscript with the ease with which they will be able to acquire the printed version.⁷ He also contrasts the high price of the manuscript with what he assures us is the low price of his printed edition. Unfortunately he does not disclose what this low price is. Perhaps we may hazard a guess, basing our estimate on the prices of books published in Singapore at this time, which were also available in Palembang.⁸ All things considered, a relatively high price by Singapore standards seems appropriate:⁹ between Rp.1 and Rp.1.50 per volume (i.e. between Rp.4 and Rp.6 in total). If this estimate is correct, the cost of a printed edition of the Sya'ir would be 1/3 to 1/5 the cost of a manuscript.

*Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University

It may be more realistic to look at relative prices in another way. Sayyid Abdulrahman appears to have planned to issue the four volumes of his Sya'ir at half-monthly intervals.¹⁰ No doubt his intention was to spread the total price into instalments more within the reach of his purchasers, as well as to reduce his own overheads. In practice his publishing schedule was already slightly behind when the second volume appeared, and had fallen badly behind by the time the fourth volume was completed. Nevertheless we may observe that the cost of *purchasing* this printed text would have been no more than the cost of *hiring* manuscripts over the planned period of publication.

All this does not necessarily invalidate Kratz' judgement that "if one considers the comparatively small numbers of people who were able to read, it shows that even after the introduction of the printing machine hand-copying was still economic . . . Most people had to borrow books and manuscripts if they wished to read and they naturally turned to lending libraries or reading shops for that purpose".¹¹ In fact Kratz' description of the manuscripts of the Overbeck collection shows that manuscripts were still being copied for the lending library during the 1900's.¹² Rather, in this light, it is remarkable that Sayyid Abdulrahman published the Sya'ir Hasan Masri with merely the local market around Palembang in mind. This is made clear in the preface, extolling the fame of the text in Palembang, by the use of the locally-current but admittedly erroneous title, and indirectly perhaps also by the fact that the orthography reflects some of the regional peculiarities noted by Kratz.¹³ Although the publisher openly states that his motive is to make a profit, as well as to make the text more readily available,¹⁴ one must wonder whether his aim was achieved.

To conclude, it may be interesting to touch briefly on the concerns of the publisher of a printed book, to provide a comparison with Kratz' data relating to the owner of a manuscript for hire.

First there are the technical problems which plague letterpress printers. In the Sya'ir Hasan Masri there is no errata sheet, but instead eighteen couplets in sya'ir form (!) detailing compositor's errors (wrong pagination, duplicated pages etc.). There follows the explanation:

barangkali juru tulis banyak pikiran
banyak pikiran hendak lekas kaya
jadinya sya'ir mendapat bahaya
jikalau begitu pikiran dia
segala kerjanya jadi sia-sia.¹⁵

Then, too, there is the concern that other publishers should not 'pirate' his text. Capital is invested in printing and holding stock, all of which is at risk without effective copyright laws. This is a danger not so threatening to the owner of a manuscript, whose smaller capital outlay is protected by the high cost of making each manuscript copy. Because of the need to recoup his capital outlay, the publisher is also keen to sell his stock as quickly as possible. Thus we read:

jikalau mengecap yang lain orang
kami mengata juga melarang
melarang jangan dicap kembali
tidak direlakan sekali-kali
karena hak suda[h] ternilai (?)
silakan sahaja datang membeli
datang membeli dengan segeranya
karena suda[h] murah harganya.¹⁶

The publisher also wishes to whet his customers' appetite for forthcoming publications:

di belakang ini ada lainnya
dicapkan sya'ir indah ceritanya
indah ceritanya bukan sebarang
membacanya sangat memberi girang
sya'ir terbaharu juga dikarang
Maryam Zanariah disebut orang
Maryam dengan Nuruddin bersama
sangatlah indah madu umpama
lagi dicap tidak kan lama
siapa berhajat terimalah nanti.¹⁷

But the recurring theme, always emphasized, is that printed books are so much cheaper than manuscripts. Sayyid Abdulrahman concludes his preface thus:

Ini sya'ir bukanlah alang kepalang indahnya; cobalah tuan2 baca baharulah tau terang sekalian ceritanya, dan janganlah sayang sedikit oleh karena harganya suda[h] murah. Sebelum lagi dicap harga ini sya'ir duapuluh rupiah.¹⁸

Printed books are the modern medium, as we are told at the beginning of the poem. After giving the date of the manuscript now being printed, the composer goes on:

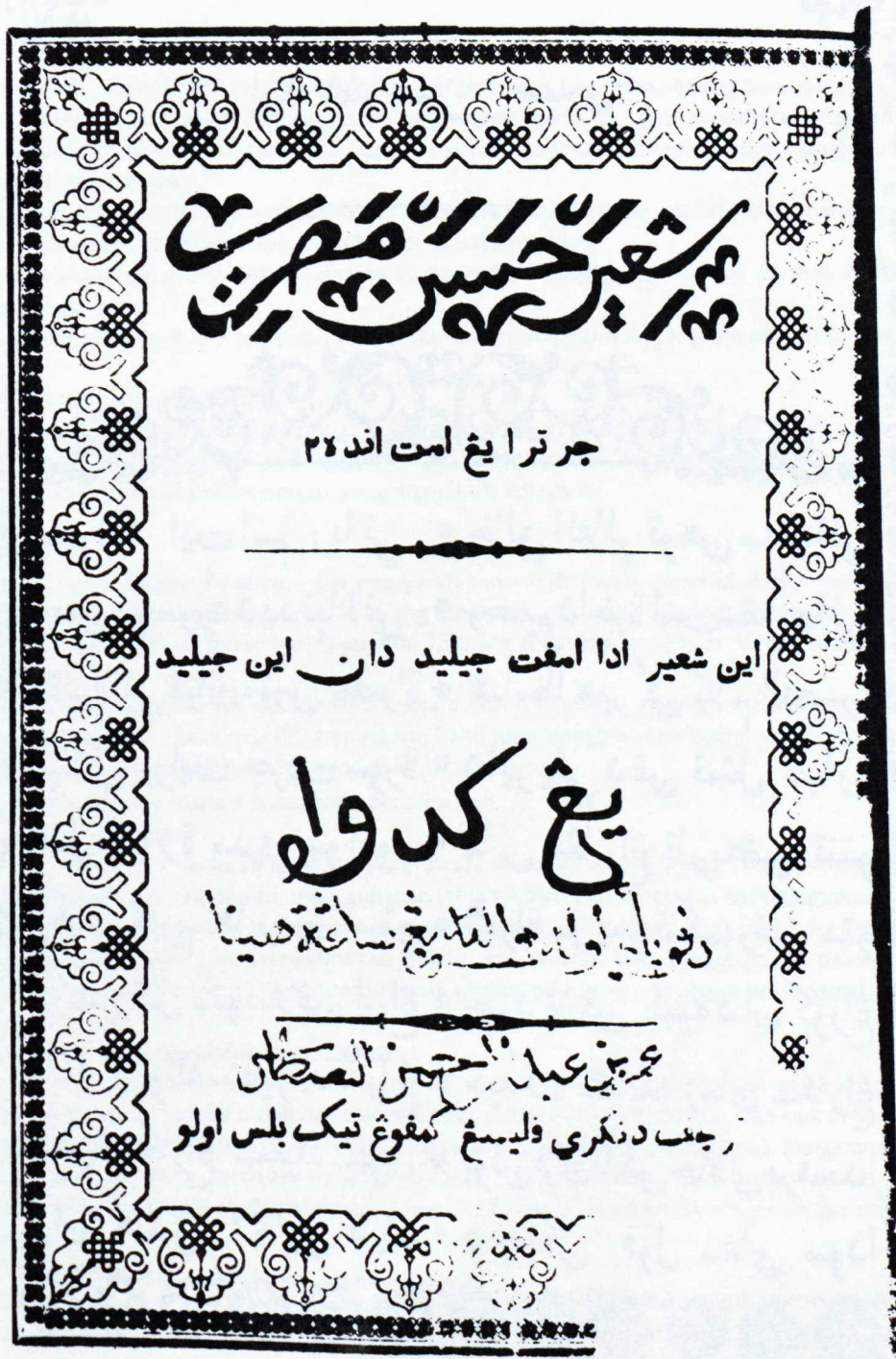
masa itulah sya'ir dikarang
hingga sampailah zaman sekarang
zaman sekarang sampailah suda[h]
bulan dan tahun jadi berpinda[h]
karena hendak mencari fa'eda[h]
dicapkan pula supaya muda[h]
supaya muda[h] orang membacanya
ladi pula murah harganya.¹⁹

It seems that the enterprising Sayyid Abdulrahman saw himself — as we must too — as an agent of change. And that change would eventually lead to the dissolution of the Kampung 7 Ulu manuscript lending library, which Overbeck tells us eventually closed for lack of customers.²⁰

NOTES

1. E.U. Kratz, "Running a Lending Library in Palembang in 1886 A.D.", *Indonesia Circle*, no. 17 (1977), pp. 3–12.
2. Koleksi Kebangsaan, Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya, PL5110.3 SHM. Four volumes, bound as one, continuous pagination, covers of volumes I, III and IV missing. Hereafter referred to as SHM.
3. The former date is given as stated at the end of volume I; the latter is given in the concluding verses of volume IV (SHM, p. 530 as 531) as 20 Rabi'al-akhir 1323.
4. Given in the opening verses of volume I (SHM, p. 4) as 3 Muharram 1301.
5. "In sya'ir yang amat indah2 ceritanya dan masyhur didalam negeri Palembang hingga yang punya sya'ir jadi satu pesewaan. Siapa2 yang hendak membaca mesti bayar satu hari sepuluh sen". (SHM, p. 1)
6. "Sebelum lagi dicap harga ini sya'ir duapuluh rupiah". (SHM, p. 3) See also extract quoted below.
7. SHM, p. 4 and also p. 1 following the quotation in note 5:
"Maka dari sebab itu kami capkan ini sya'ir supaya gampang orang membacanya".
8. See Dato' Saudagar Putih, *Hikayat Ganja Mara*. Penang, 1897.
(Koleksi Kebangsaan, Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya, fPL5110.3 HGM. Put), final page.
9. The Palembang market will not have supported a long print run; furthermore the letterpress type-setting will have meant somewhat higher production costs than lithography. Around this time, a 200-page book printed in Singapore with a small print-run, of 500 copies, on the order of a publisher in Perak was to sell for \$1.00 per copy. *Straits Settlements Government Gazette*, 1907, p. 2959.
10. SMH, note at end of volume I: "di belakang ini tanggal tersebut 15 hari akan dikeluarkan jilid yang kedua [,] juga jilid yang ketiga dan yang keempat".
11. Kratz, "Lending Library", p. 3.
12. E.U. Kratz, "A Brief Description of the 'Malay' Manuscripts of the 'Overbeck Collection' at the Museum Pusat, Jakarta", *Journal of the Malaysian Branch, Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 53, pt. 1 (1980), pp. 90–106. Among four manuscripts copied during the 1900's, two (M1.514, 1 July 1906; M1.517, 13 March 1908) bear an appeal to users to take care of the manuscript.
13. Kratz, "Lending Library", p. 5: especially the frequent dropping of final -h.
14. SHM, p. 4: see last extract quoted below.
15. SHM, p. 531–532 (as 532–533).
16. SHM, p. 532 (as 533).
17. SHM, p. 532 (as 533).

18. SHM, p. 3.
19. SHM, p. 4.
20. Kratz, "Brief Description", p. 91.



Title page of the Sya'ir Hasan Masri, vol. 2.

اينله شعير حسن مصري



بسم الله ايت اسم رباني * خالق العالم توهن سحبانني
رحمن يغ موره ديدنيا اني * رحيم داخرة امت مئسيهاني
مئسيهاني هبان مؤمن مضراة * هبامظا هير كن كلام اللحصرة
مپتاكن روايت چريت سورة * داير يغي دشن تمثل عبارة
تمثل عبارة مددا سواتو * ماس مئاراع تاريخن تنتو
تيك محرم هارين سبتو * هجراة سريبو تيك رتس ستو
تيك راتس ستوبلاشن اواراغ * جم دلافن لبيه دان كوراع
ماسا ايتوله شعير دكاراغ * هيغك شغفيله زمان سكاراغ
زمان سكاراغ سغفيله سودا * بولن دان تاهن جادي برفيندا
كران هندق منچاري فايد * دچفكن فول سغاي مودا