اينستيتوت ڤڠاجين اسيان

INSTITUTE OF
ASIAN STUDIES

Silent the Sea, Writing the Shores – Traveling over the South China Sea

Hendrik M.J. Maier

Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Working Paper No.31

Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Gadong 2017

Editorial Board, Working Paper Series

Professor Lian Kwen Fee, Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

Dr. Koh Sin Yee, Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

Author

Dr. Hendrik M.J. Maier, alumnus of Leiden University, is the Luce Professor of Southeast Asian Studies, University of California, Riverside (USA). He has published widely on Malay and Indonesian language and literature as well as on Dutch colonial literature, and translated the work of a number of Indonesian and Malaysian authors.

Contact: hendrik@ucr.edu

The Views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute of Asian Studies or the Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

© Copyright is held by the author(s) of each working paper; no part of this publication may be republished, reprinted or reproduced in any form without permission of the paper's author(s).

Silent the Sea, Writing the Shores – Traveling over the South China Sea

Hendrik M.J. Maier

Abstract:

How to map the sea? 'Silent the sea, writing the shores' presents a series of reflections on the problems of maps and mapping, narrative and narration, as the background to a discussion of how older Malay writing dealt with the Sea, including the South China Sea – it is an entity beyond human understanding and beyond description. Given the historical fact that the South China Sea had been sailed by Malay – speaking mariners for centuries, it seems probable that they discussed the Sea in their conversations, mapping it out in words rather than in pictures. It is important to realize that the 17th century author Hamzah Pansuri makes explicit mention of the 'China Sea' in his poetry, a rare reference to the South China Sea that may have hung as a silent shadow over later Malay writing. Mapping an ever-moving space may be an impossible exercise, even in our human imagination.

Keywords: *sea, South China, Malay, literature, history*

List of IAS Working Papers

1. King, Victor T., Culture and Identity: Some Borneo Comparisons. Working Paper No. 1 Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2012.
2. Evers, Hans-Dieter and Solvay Gerke, Local Knowledge and the Digital Divide: Focus on Southeast Asia. Working Paper No. 2. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2012.
3. King, Victor T., Borneo and Beyond: Reflections on Borneo Studies, Anthropology and the Social Sciences. Working Paper No. 3. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2013.
4. King, Victor T., UNESCO in Southeast Asia: World Heritage Sites in Comparative Perspective. Working Paper No. 4. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2013.
5. Purwaningrum, Farah, Knowledge Transfer Within an Industrial Cluster in the Jakarta Metropolitan Area. Working Paper No. 5. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2013.
6. Evers, Hans-Dieter, Ndah, Anthony Banyouko & Yahya, Liyana, Epistemic Landscape Atlas of Brunei Darussalam. Working Paper No. 6. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2013.
7. Carnegie, Paul J., Is the Indonesian Transition a Model for the Arab Spring? Working Paper No. 7. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2013.
8. Lian, Kwen Fee, Citizenship Regimes and the Politics of Difference in Southeast Asia. Working Paper No. 8. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2013.
9. Purwaningrum, Farah, Ariff Lim, Syamimi, Evers, Hans-Dieter & Ndah, Anthony Banyouko, The Governance of Knowledge: Perspectives from Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia. Working Paper No. 9. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2014.
10. Facal, Gabriel, Hyper-centralization of Political Power and Fragmentation of Local Authority Networks in Banten (Indonesia). Working Paper No.10. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2014.
11. Hussainmiya, B.A. and Mail, Asbol Haji, "No Federation Please-We Are Bruneians": Scuttling the Northern Borneo Closer Association Proposals. Working Paper No.11. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2014.
12. Abdul Hakim, Mufidah. Pengangun as Ritual Specialist in Brunei Darussalam. Working Paper No.12. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2014.
13. Bensaoud, Mariam. Between R2P and the ASEAN Way:The case of Myanmar's Cylcone Nargis. Working Paper No.13. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015.
14. Abdul Razak, Nurul Umillah Binti, Anuar, Adira Rehafizzan Binti, Pg. Mohd Sahar, Dk. Siti Nurul Islam Binti & Matsuni, Nur Hidayah Binti. Domestic Maids in Brunei: A Case Study. Working Paper No.14. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015.
15. Ibrahim, Zawawi. From Island to Nation-state Formations and Developmentalism: Penan Story-telling as Narratives of 'territorialising space' and Reclaiming Stewardship. Working Paper No.15. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015.

16. Bui, Cuong The. Social Stratification in the Southeast Region of Viet Nam. Working Paper No. 16 Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015.
17. Sagoo, Kiran. Reconsidering Ethnicity: Classification and Boundary Formation. Working Paper No. 17. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015.
18. Ibrahim, Zawawi. Disciplining Rock Music and Identity Contestations: Hybridization, Islam and New Musical Genres in Contemporary Malaysian Popular Music. Working Paper No.18. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015.
19. Shui, Kong Ho. Digital Memoir of the South China Sea. Working Paper No. 19. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2015.
20. Ullah, AKM Ahsan; Yusof, Yusnani Mohamed; D'Aria, Maria. How safe is Safe? 'Safe migration' in Southeast Asia. Working Paper No. 20. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
21. Oishi, Mikio. Co-existing Differences: Towards an East Asian Way Of Incompatibility Mangement. Working Paper No. 21. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
22. Carnegie, Paul J. Of Social Imaginary and Violence: Responding to Islamist Militancy in Indonesia. Working Paper No. 22. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
23. Rosidi, Imron. Being Active Consumers: Indonesian Muslim Youth Engaging With Korean Television Dramas. Working Paper No. 23. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
24. King, Victor T. Convergence and Divergence: Issues of State and Region in Tourism Development in Malaysian Borneo, Brunei Darussalam and Indonesian Kalimantan. Working Paper No. 24. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
25. Dhont, Frank, Marles, Jane E. & Jukim, Maslin. Memories of World War II: Oral History of Brunei Darussalam (Dec. 1941-June 1945). Working Paper No. 25. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
26. Chu, Ta-Wei. Contestation between Riparian People and States: The Sesan River Hydropower Projects, Cambodia. Working Paper No. 26. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
27. Nugroho, S. Post-Authoritarian Discourses of "Indonesia" in Television Commercials. Working Paper No. 27. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2016.
28. Hamdi, Muhammad Faiz Zul, Abdullah, Norhidayah, and Narudin, Hazimatula Diyana. Space, Place, and Identity: How Migration have Transformed Kampong Ayer (Brunei). Working Paper No. 28. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2017.
29. Chin, Wei Lee. Tourism, Communities, and Quality of Life Indicators in Bali. Working Paper No. 29. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2017.
30. Jetin, Bruno. "One Belt-One Road Initiative" and ASEAN Connectivity: Synergy Issues and Potentialities. Working Paper No. 30. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2017.
31. Maier, Hendrik M.J. Silent the Sea, Writing the Shores – Traveling over the South China Sea. Working Paper No. 31. Gadong: Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam 2017.

Silent the Sea, Writing the Shores – Traveling over the South China Sea[1]

Hendrik M.J. Maier

A bird's eye view: like every other bird, a plane can take off from Bandar Seri Begawan to begin a journey to Ho Chi Minh City and offer its passengers a view over the world on a bright blue morning. Many windows, many eyes. At first sight from above, the land of Brunei Darussalam appears like a still life painting, hazy colors, two-dimensional, flat. An Abode of Peace indeed. A silent and still map, as it were: the land below confirms the image that the eye has absorbed from the maps inscribed in textbooks and scholarly publications about Brunei and beyond. Lines and dots, here and there disorderly circling around larger dots: the outlines of the eye's mental map of Brunei are easily recognizable. And in this very instant of déjà-vu, recollection of the future, the contours of a new map are taking shape: a selective repetition of familiar lines and dots covers the landscape, comprehends the world from above – and then some ants move around within these configurations. Roads, cutting the land into two, connecting groups of houses, trees and bushes – black, brown, yellow, green – lay out networks around distinct centers, almost as visible as they are on the map of Brunei that became available to the public eye again towards the end of 2014. No name plates, however, and no black borderlines between Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia, supposed to define national territories and delineate locations where national identities grow. For a fleeting moment or two, in short, the land below appears to the eye as a mirror of the standard map which represents the land of Brunei. A simulacrum of sorts, invoking a sense of mastery and recognition. And then the moving ants, cars, cyclists, pedestrians: the simulacrum appears to be taking the contours of a palimpsest for another instant or two.

[1] A first version of this essay was presented as the key note address at the seminar 'Tenets of Human Development in Southeast Asia', organized by the Southern Institute of Social Sciences, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, March 4-5, 2015, in cooperation with IAS, Universiti Brunei Darussalam and CSEAS, Kyoto University. A special word of thanks to Dr. Bui The Cuong who coordinated the seminar.

And then the coastline appears, protecting land from sea, mirroring the map of textbooks again. The line looks nebulous: brown coast, black water, grey shore. A liminal line, dividing land from sea, connecting sea with land. And then the sea appears to the eye, sparkling and twinkling, moving and shifting. That experience of sparkle and twinkle definitely defies the flat and still knowledge of old-fashioned textbook maps, modern atlases and post-modern Google pictures. It challenges the still life of lines and dots of the simulacrum-turned-palimpsest: motion is hard to memorize and recognize, impossible to localize. Mobility is difficult to grasp in writing and sketching. Movement is arduous to inscribe in printing and drawing. Fluidity does not have itself mirrored on a map, a chart, an atlas. The sea – viewed from above a configuration of constantly shifting spaces, dark blue into grey and green and back again, visibly dislocating on the flows of wind, waves, currents and light – has itself confirmed nor recognized in the still iconography of conventional and memorable maps, in the even light-blue surface of the textbook's 'South China Sea', that is. Maps, fixed and stable, suggest control – and the sight of the sea's mobility dares this very suggestion, made within the framework of the rules of representation that have been developed in cartography, the art of fixating the earth's exteriority in drawing and digitalization. Window nor eye functions as a mirror's mirror after all, so it seems, and a bird's eye view is unable to fixate the world down below, or the map of memory and recognition, for that matter. The simulacrum is shattered: mirroring the map of the sea – flat and blue bleak blank – does not correspond with viewing the sea at second sight. Imagination nor memory runs parallel with experience. And, in another retrospect, with viewing the land neither: ants make the land move just like waves and ripples make the sea move. This very multi-layeredness in the perception of both land and sea opens up to new reflections.

And then, before long nebulas roll over the windows. Grey and white make the sea invisible to the eye, and viewing the world down below becomes a matter of mere imagination again, beyond the experience of its fluid materiality as well as the memory of its maps, those selective representations of the world, land and sea, meant to 'transforming space into place – that is, into known and meaningful locations and environments'.[2] And thus the journey to Ho Chi Minh City

[2] Denis Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 10-11.

becomes a narrative beyond the reflective eye. Confirming maps, mapping the world becomes a matter of writing words and creating memories rather than acting like a mirror of experience.

Cartography

The findings of cartography, 'map writing', are interrelated with those of geography, 'earth writing', oceanography, 'sea writing', hydrography, 'water writing', and cosmography, 'cosmos writing'. And since their institutional beginnings, each of these five discursive formations, if that is an appropriate term, have extended their reach over the world and beyond, far, deep and long enough to become the object of interconnected historiographies of their own, driven by the idea that each of them is a cultural and political practice as much as a scientific endeavor.[3] For long, aims and methods of each of these formations have primarily been of a utilitarian bend: they purport to guide mankind across the world and through the cosmos. All of them have interactively and serially mapped certain domains of the globe and beyond, foregrounding certain features of landscape, seascape, earthscape and cosmoscape and connecting the manifestations of these scapes with each other in multifarious ways. They all have been doing so within epistemes which, in retrospect, emerged in certain socio-cultural contexts and were driven by economic-political considerations, in cartography perhaps even so markedly so that it could be argued, in J.B. Harley's spirit,[4] that 'maps are the product of power and they exert power, and therefore in any theory or history of cartography it is necessary to be mindful of the historical and social context in which mapping has been employed'. The experience of everyday life is always pervaded by the interactions between knowledge and information, imagination and authority; and as far as maps are concerned, they 'might best be thought of as 'emergent', called into being to allow particular social tasks to be enacted, yet changeable or replaceable according to the context and problems encountered'.[5] As if cartography is geography, historiography, politics and genealogy combined.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, cartography's claims of scientific neutrality and objectivity have become increasingly undermined by reflections and ruminations upon its socio-

[3] Cf. Jeremy W. Crampton, 'Cartography: performative, participatory, political', in *Progress in Human Geography* 33 (6) (2009), pp. 840-848.
[4] See e.g. J.B. Harley, 'Historical geography and the cartographic illusion', in *Journal of Historical Geography* 15, 1989, pp 80-91.
[5] Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge, 'Rethinking maps' , in Rob Kitchin, Martin Dodge and Chris Perkins (eds.) *The Map Reader – Theories of Mapping Practices and Cartographic Representation* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), p. 35.

cultural contexts, driven by the realization that the creation of a map can be performed in a multitude of ways, based on paradigms that move beyond the self-proclaimed objective, scientific ones, for long considered most authoritative and authentic: maps – perhaps 'charts' is a more appropriate term – are not only more or less meticulous representations of the world but also inscriptions, if not performances or presentations of the world. Mirrors of a very confusing sort. In these reflections, readers and writers of maps have tried to combine attempts at understanding the nature of maps with examinations of the experience of mapping. The resultant shift in the appreciation of maps and map-making is aptly summarized in the opening sentences of the introductory essay to a wonderful anthology of essays about maps and mapping, published in 2011:

> A map is a two-dimensional representation of the Earth and cartography is the creation of such maps. If only it were so simple! The history of cartography reveals a rich engagement with different philosophies of science. As a result, scholarly understanding of what maps are and the processes, procedures and protocols through which they are created and deployed has changed enormously over time.[6]

If only it were so simple! In particular 'the processes, procedures and protocols' have become the object of deeper ruminations: a more careful thought about them should make writers and readers of present-day authoritative maps[7] – those of Brunei and the South China Sea included – aware that representing and experiencing earth, sea, land, cosmos and maps – all five of them! – have been acts of selection that, to make one possible short-cut, have too easily marginalized the presence and narratives of regional people and negated alternative epistemologies in which the conceptualizations and drawings of space have been shaped along 'other' lines.[8] No longer can maps be appreciated as mere mirrors, confirmations or representations of reality alone; they should also be looked at as propositions and inscriptions, and all too often the acts of mapping have served the powers-that-be in their efforts to gain control over parts of the world. Absorbing pictures they may still be in textbooks, scholarly publications, administrative reports; they are also authoritative forms of representation that, J.B. Harley again, have been used as tools of stabilization and

[6] Rob Kitchin, Martin Dodge and Chris Perkins (eds.), *The Map Reader*, p. 5.
[7] Obviously, the digital revolution has also taken hold of cartography, and no doubt the possibility of representing the multi-layeredness of the earth (land and sea) are leading to new kinds of maps; for common readers they are as yet inaccessible – and for the time being we will work from our memory and experience of 'conventional' textbooks and atlases.
[8] Cf. Daniel Clayton, '"Snapshot of a moving target": Harley/Foucault/colonialism', in *Cartographica* 50 (1) 2015, pp. 18-23.

governmentality, of sifting and sorting populations and territories into a grid of power, normalization, comprehension. The socio-cultural contexts in which these 'tools', 'pictures' and 'mirrors' have been developed, practiced, transmitted, and dismissed definitely deserve a second and a third thought. The cosmos is constantly changing form. Maps are changing form. Conventions and contexts have been shifting. And the attempts at filling up blanks and blues have been continued ever since their first appearance in prints and drawings – and in the last decade or two, these attempts have been greatly intensified. As if comprehension of the world – land, sea, earth – is just a never fulfilled dream. As if maps do not only lay out the world, but also justify control and governmentality – and can be substituted for others.

Not only maps – still images – but also mapping – moving images – should be the work of cartography. Mapping can be done in many credible and effective ways; its products are supposed to please and perform within a great variety of socio-cultural contexts in which talking, controlling, drawing, writing and printing are taking place. More importantly, the transitive verb 'to map' and the noun 'map' do not refer to the acts of drawing and printing 'simple', 'two-dimensional spatial representations of the Earth' alone: they equally refer to a great variety of acts of narrating, talking, performing, singing, painting, sculpting, and carving the earth, the world, reality or fragments thereof. A verbal narrative, for one, suggests a map, so to speak, and 'narration' could be described as an act of mapping: it gives a certain form to the space of the earth, the ocean, the cosmos beyond words and sentences as well as beyond pen and printer. They lay out a space,[9] and they are trying to freeze time as well as place. 'Cartography should be understood as the pursuit of representational solutions (not necessarily pictorial) to solve relational, spatial problems', always undertaken within a certain context, always challenging conventions and constantly dislocating mental maps. Mapping takes place in the multifarious interactions between map-makers, map users, maps and material reality, constantly in motion and in emergence, provisional and temporary, shifting focus in every attempt at control and coverage, and easily leading to conflicts and violence.

Mapping takes place in many functions and forms, in other words. Above all, it evokes questions about perspective, aim and effect of that very act.[10] Not every map means to guide readers, navigators and travelers on their journeys across the world and beyond, probably the most

[9] See for instance David Cooper, Christopher Donaldson and Patricia Murietta-Floris (eds.), *Literary Mapping in the Digital Age* (Routledge, New York 2016).
[10] Cf. Chris Perkins, 'Cultures of map use', in *The Cartographic Journal* 45 (2), 2008, pp. 150-158.

conventional idea of the function of a map or chart, also among those who are looking down from a plane or looking around from a ship, a train, a car or a bike. Maps may suggest the practice of navigation; they also may serve the mere suggestion of the navigability of space. Maps point to the possibility of sailing as much as to the representation of sailing, or to the experience of sailing, for that matter.[11] Maps may mean to please the eye and soothe the senses: they may be hooked on the wall for the eye's pleasure, as multi-colored works of art. Maps may mean to play on human knowledge: they archive information, claim and demarcate territory, sanction cultural imaginations and define political mythologies. Maps may serve to delineate land from water and help circumscribe the space of national identity and nationalist ideology.[12] In more philosophical or literary terms, maps have the effect of making invisible the procedures that make them possible, the processes of forgetting: maps are traces substituted for practice, mapping is 'transforming action into legibility', experience into imagination, as if 'being in the world is forgotten'[13] or ignored. In short, 'mapping' does not refer to the act of drawing and printing textbook maps and atlases alone, but also to the act of constructing narratives and images: sensory and aesthetic experiences of the world can be replaced by configurations of lines and dots, but also by series of words which make it possible to ignore those very experiences, forget the very acts, in a variety of imaginary ways. Mapping takes place in telling a tale, painting a scenery, reading a guidebook, appreciating a narrative. Or to put the latter in reverse literary terms, every narration lays out a map of space and time – and, in their turn, readers and listeners tend to create a map off a narrative.

Perhaps all writers and readers could be called cartographers of sorts in that they all try to map – or is 'chart' a more appropriate term, after all? - the space around series of words that are moving ahead on the force of time along the protagonists' actions and events. Moreover, the space

[11] Cf. Philip E. Steinberg, 'Sovereignty, territory, and the mapping of mobility: a view from the outside', in *Annals of the Association of American Geography* 99 (3), pp. 467-495, in particular p. 475.

[12] 'a study of cartographic representations would seem to be especially fruitful for understanding the links between the construction of the ocean as an external space of mobility and the concomitant construction of a global political system of sovereign, territorial states.' (cf. Philip E. Steinberg, 'Sovereignty, territory and the mapping of mobility: a view from the outside', in *Annals of American Geographers*, 99(3) 2009, pp. 467-495). In an effort to follow the Malay writing tradition of (often unacknowledged) emulation and repetition, more wordings of Steinberg's essay have been included in the following, without explicit acknowledgement. Steinberg's publications on 'the sea' should be a great source of inspiration for those who try to make cartographical sense of the mobility of the sea. See e.g. also his 'Of other seas: metaphors and materialities in maritime regions', in *Atlantic Studies* 10 (2) (2013), pp. 156-169.

[13] Cf. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (transl. Steven Rendall) (Berkeley:University of California Press 1991), p. 97.

that narrations are trying to map tends to be given names so that it functions as a place that can be described – a place is a practiced space.[14] And place names, 'locations', tend to serve as beacons, points of recognition in narratives of events and actions, manifestations of the flow of 'time': narratives take time to map out a space – sea, land, shores – and movements in that space.

That is how we could approach the texts that deal with Southeast Asia, Malay texts included. And Malay narratives are what we want to deal with in these reflections of maps over the South China Sea, if only because they have been largely ignored and forgotten in recent survey-like publications about the discussions and activities in and around the 'South China Sea'.

Every form of older Malay writing will show readers that in particular 'the sea' tends to remain a space that is largely passed over in verbal silence. And working with a bird's eye view on the 'South China Sea' and more recent maps of it, older Malay narratives that take place in what is now called Southeast Asia tend to give the sea – naturally experienced as mobile, multi-layered and hence ungraspable – no time at all, concurrent with its bleak picture on modern textbook maps.[15] The Sea is presented as a mystery, as if the light blue on conventional maps corresponds with the blanks in writing. The Sea hardly ever becomes a place; it is evoked as an 'outside', a domain of mobility that is unsuitable for control and fixation, for writing and drawing, if not for mapping and charting. As if it is left to speakers and speech to make this space into a place. Left to others to explore depth, to others to claim control. As if the sea is indescribable and unmappable.

South China Sea

'South China Sea' is a name. In the past century, it was inscribed in maps that were produced by European cartographers and then emulated by local mapmakers, working outside of Europe – and then it emerges in narrations and mappings that refer to what is called 'Southeast Asia' since the

[14] Cf. Kenneth R. Olwig,' Place contra space in a morally just landscape', in *Norsk Geografisk Tidskrift* 60, 2006, pp. 24-31.

[15] See Philip E. Steinberg, 'Sovereignty, territory, and the mapping of mobility: a view from the outside', in *Annals of the Association of American Geography* 99 (3), pp. 467-495.'Most' and 'usually 'suggest the possibility of exceptions to this silence of the sea: in her wonderful *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010) Margaret Cohen creates a separate genre of 'sea novels' that emerged in European/American writing in the nineteenth century; its central theme is perhaps best summarized in the oft-quoted line of Joseph Conrad's sea novel, *Typhoon* (1902): ' The sea never changes and its works, for all the talk of men, are wrapped in mystery.'

1950s. As is the case with every other name, 'South China Sea' has a history that has been transmitted through narratives – and that name's validity has been questioned and challenged. Like every other name, 'South China Sea' has a genealogy that meanders through a variety of discursive formations and writing traditions. The English name's beginnings can presumably be traced back to 'Mar da China', the name Portuguese traders and sailors gave to the waters around China, the land they were fascinated by – and perhaps it is unnecessary to note that 'China' is another name, with an even longer history, another genealogy. 'Mar da China' and 'China': both names have had a rather indefinite reach in the world; for long, they tentatively referred to borderless and geographically unspecified and porous areas as well as to hard-to-determine centers. 'Mar da China' became embedded in a very multifarious discourse about a space that became gradually better known as having its own identity, its own borders, its own imagination – as a place, that is: a good illustration of the effect that name-giving can have. 'China' emerged as a collective if not generic term for a vaguely defined territory and a heterogeneous and ever unstable state (or states) which, Portuguese and other Europeans after them came to realize, could be interrupted, penetrated and surveyed by way of diplomacy, trade and violence. 'Sea of China': as if the Sea was considered a part of 'China', belonged to 'China', and should be described, explored and comprehended in terms of China, from the perspective of China, in the shadow of China. As if the sea and the islands beyond the coasts should primarily be claimed to be part of the land of China,[16] a claim, it should be added, that in recent years has been foregrounded and challenged with greater intensity than ever before.

'Mar da China' was translated in other European languages. 'China Sea', 'Mer de la Chine', 'Chineesche Zee' were the terms used by outsiders, merchants, scholars and missionaries who were more fascinated, intimidated and challenged by the majesty of 'China' – its wealth, its authority, its culture, its size, its mysteries, as presented in the growing number of narratives about the region - than by the knowledge and power of Champa, Dai Viet, Brunei, Sulu and Palawan.[17]

[16] See, e.g., Johannes L. Kurz, 'What is the 'historical in China's claims to the South China Sea? A survey of relevant pre-modern Chinese texts' (Paper presented at workshop 'Reframing the South China Sea', Institute of Asian Studies 11-13 November 2013, Universiti Brunei Darussalam).

[17] It could be wondered why names such as 'Brunei Sea' or 'Borneo Sea' or even 'North Sea' (and their translations in local languages) did not emerge with enough authority to be stamped on the maps of Southeast Asia: traces of colonialism and imperialism. A similar wonder concerns the names of the islands and shoals within the South China Sea - Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands, Pratas Islands, Macclesfield Bank and Scarborough Shoal.

Of course, not only Europeans have given names to the sea around 'China'. In the presence of Europeans, Chinese scholars, merchants and politicians tend to use the term 'Nan yang', 'Southern Ocean', thus embedding the waters in completely other narratives, produced in their part of the world, created from a different center of authority, performed in the framework of a distinctly different perspective, in other languages, other writing.[18] And once Europeans had expanded their presence in the region and formed a more extensive image of the waters around 'China' and a fuller idea of what 'China' and the lands around it were all about, they introduced a more specific term, perhaps influenced by the Chinese name and perspective:[19] 'South China Sea'. 'South China Sea' and its translation in other languages, each and all of them were inscribed in a slowly shifting conceptualization of the area that emerged in later mappings, in later narrations, obviously still circling around China. 'South China Sea': so dominant and comprehensive has that name become that it is now the common term in international discussions about the freedom of the Sea, an idea that, somewhat paradoxically, circles around notions of stewardship and governmentality of the ocean, controlling the waters, pushing other names aside, and leaving to China the initiative for making claims of possession and restricting free movement.

Brunei, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, Indonesia, the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China, and the Philippines: sooner or later the national languages of each and all of these present day nation-states were bound to come up with names, each with an own genealogy, an own representation in writing of the mobile space beyond the coasts of the territory they are supposed to cover and protect. Not all of them have followed the name of 'South China Sea', even though they, too, have been forced to develop a more clearly defined idea of the boundaries, freedom and omnipresence of this particular maritime part of the Earth. Dark, deep, voluminous, its sparkling presence has for long been a largely undisputed entity beyond the definitions of international organizations such as the International Hydrographical

[18] Obviously, 'Nan yang' stands in another genealogy of names which could be reconstructed on the basis of the essays in *China and Southeast Asia* (ed. Geoff Wade) (London-New York: Routledge, 2009), six volumes of information about the South China sea and the lands around it. A *mer a boire* indeed.

[19] 'In China, north was accorded primacy as the sacred direction. Across the empire's wide plains, the south brought sunlight and warming winds, and so was the direction towards which the emperor looked down on his subjects', in Jerry Brotton, *A History of the World in Twelve Maps* (London: Penguin books, 2013), p. 58. Noteworthy in this context is the 1922 publication of Koninklijk Nederlandsch Aardrijkskundig Genootschap, *De zeeen van Nederlandsch Oost-Indie* (Leiden:Brill 1922) which offers a detailed overview of Dutch knowledge of the 'Chineesche Zee' and the 'Zuid-Chineesche Zee', and of course the serial *The China Sea Directory*, published by the Hydrographic Department Admiralty in London, for the first time in 1867.

Organization – and beyond the authority of conventional maps in textbooks and atlases which try to suggest to their readers that light blue refers to a mobile and multi-layered unknown, beyond control.

Those in Southeast Asia who did follow the term 'South China Sea' do so, it seems, in imitation of former British, American and Dutch colonial masters and their mapping inventory of the world. *Laut Cina* (or *China*) *Selata*n is the official term in Indonesian and in Malay, *Dagat Timog Tsina* is a Tagalog term – and in textbooks and newspapers in Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines 'South China Sea' is used as a name as well. Divergence from this political (and cartographical) authority has been tried: in some languages alternative terms have emerged with indefinite reference to, cartographically speaking, the very same Sea. *Bien Dong* ('Eastern Sea') is the term in Vietnamese, inscribed in a different discourse, created from a different perspective; *Dagat Kanlurang Pilipinas* ('West Philippine Sea') is a Tagalog term that has emerged in yet another discursive formation, with different effects and distinct claims. These differentiations should show that the name of 'South China Sea' and its translations in local languages are not as self-evident as its use suggests in the European and American historiography and politicography, whose terminological inventions are dominating international discussions and disputes, to the doubtful benefit of all.

Be that as it may, the name's focus on 'China' has certainly dominated historiographical and political discussions about this particular sea, this specified part of the Sea, this place. This is, for instance, expertly illustrated by the essay of Stein Tonneson about the 'location of the South China Sea'.[20] Interesting is the essay because it makes an attempt at 'locating the 'South China Sea' on the world map. Intriguing is it because the author cannot resist the temptation of engaging with the attempts of late twentieth century European historiographers at comparing this sea with the Mediterranean, not only to foreground the differences between the two.[21] In many of these historiographical exercises, the South China Sea has been described as an empty and timeless

[20] 'Locating the South China Sea', in: Paul A. Kratoska et al.(eds.*), Locating Southeast Asia: geographies of knowledge and politics of Space* (Singapore: Singapore University Press 2005), pp. 203-233. In connection with the historiography of the South China Sea, the glorious study of Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea – The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2005) deserves special mention.

[21] It could be wondered if a juxtaposition with the Caribbean Sea, with its extensive shores and many islands operating in the shadow of the landmass and the authority of the US, would not be more relevant and enlightening than a comparison with the Mediterranean.

space, some spooky monster-like obstacles in the middle – islands and shoals – and traversed by two trade lanes, the western partly continental route, across land and along the shores of the Malay Peninsula, Thailand, Champa and Vietnam (all of them more or less contemporary terms for distant shores) and the eastern maritime route along the coasts of Borneo and the islands south, east and north of it.[22] The picture has been created that the South China Sea should be discussed as a plain, light-blue space for trade, throughout history most often dominated by Chinese ships, its shores serving as the place of specific sailing routes from and to China. As if the South China Sea can 'simply' be mapped as a near-empty space transected, or rather: bordered, by some transit coast-oriented trading routes. As if communications and interactions between and among states, settlements and peoples along its shores have always been of secondary relevance in the efforts at describing and naming its location. As if there have not been numerous narratives traveling over the Sea on the waves and currents of the open Sea itself, rather than along its shores. As if the South China Sea has not been in constant movement outside these transit routes as well – and as if the experiences of open sea and its islands and shoals could be forgotten. As if the 'presence of indigenous people' can be ignored. And, in this context most tellingly, as if a blind eye can be turned to the silence in Malay writing: in older Malay writing the 'South China Sea' remains a still presence beyond the word *laut.* A sea with no name. *Laut* acts as a metaphor, an imaginary entity rather than a lived reality, an experienced mobility. *Laut* does not refer to a material place, a place of navigation and navigability, but to a concept, a space of contemplation and reflection.

Malay writing

In Malay writing, the imperial and colonial term of 'South China Sea' and its Malay rendition – *Laut China Selatan* and *Laut Cina Selatan* – did not emerge until the end of the nineteenth century when printed materials began to compete with written materials as well as conversations for the attention of the growing number of readers and listeners of Malay, one of the many effects of the presence of British and Dutch administrators and surveyors on the shores of the Sea.[23] In early nineteenth century Malay writing – most of it repetitions, emulations and transformations of earlier

[22] Focused on the dynamics of trade as almost all historiography of Southeast Asia unfortunately is, Tonnesen's remark is a puzzling one: 'even today, the South China Sea is more of a maritime thoroughfare than a channel of communication between its surrounding lands.' (p. 227). As if trade is the main reason of existence of the 'South China Sea'. As if trade is the primary drive in contact and communication.

[23] See e.g. Paula Pannu, 'The production and transmission of knowledge in colonial Malaya', in *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 37 (3) (2009), pp. 427–451.

work, varieties upon earlier performances, other recitals - the term *laut* tends to refer to the waters beyond the coasts where various forms of Malay were used. 'Sea, ocean', tells Wilkinson's dictionary.[24] Older Malay writing narrates of journeys and missions across and over the sea without a name, on waves, winds and currents never mentioned, performed by protagonists who travel between human settlements - and these states (*negeri*) carry names that evoke locations on the shores of what present-day cartographers call Borneo, Kalimantan, Malaysia, Brunei, Sumatra, Java, Sulawesi, Champa, Thailand, China, and Never-never Land. In these Malay narratives, each of these locations is represented by names of states or mandalas, places without borders, places without clearly delineated territories. In cartographical or narratological terms, these travel narratives map out a network of points of communication and exchange around the Sea: heroes and heroines are exploring ever moving shores, ever shifting estuaries and shoals beyond the sea. Perhaps Cynthia Chou's compelling summary of the narratives of the *Orang Laut*, the 'People of the Sea', is the most appropriate evocation of the way older written narratives in Malay tend to refer to the silent Sea as a superior and sovereign mandala, at once excluding and including its shores and the land beyond. *Alam Melayu*. And its ultimate ruler remains unknown and unnamed.

'The Orang *Laut* regard all political borders and boundaries imposed on the region as temporary markers. They see the region as a borderless social space whose breadth and width is defined only by the extent of their mobility. They call this social space the *Alam Melayu* or Malay world, a social space unified by their history and genealogy. It is an area of unbroken historical tradition that overrides all borders, and the ultimate sovereignty lies with the rule of the Raja *Laut*.' And: 'the social space they recognize is constructed in terms of permanent mobility and whatever can be reached by sea – a region comprising a network of social relations sharpened by the extent of people's mobility.'[25]

The dots in this nomadic or rhizomic network of 'social relations' and 'historical traditions' across a nameless Sea – 'a borderless social space (-) defined by the extent of people's mobility'

[24] Adding a number of specific names that must have looked mostly unfamiliar or unknown to early nineteenth century Malay writers – and leaving outsiders and 'indigenous people' with the question of how and why English writers make a difference between 'sea' and 'ocean' (R.J. Wilkinson, *A Malay-English Dictionary* (London: Macmillan & Co 1959), p.662.

[25] Cynthia Chou, 'Southeast Asia through an inverted telescope: maritime perspectives on a borderless region', in Paul A. Kratoska et al.(eds.), *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space* (Singapore: Singapore University Press 2005), pp. 236-239.

– consist of locations in borderless states positioned on the shore, on the coast, and on the islands, defined by self-contained shorelines. Nomadic are these places as the network over the Sea constantly changes form – new relations, novel names, other connections: the mobility of human settlements tend to concur with the cultural mobility on the shore. Rhizomic is the network between places as settlements are frequently moving and emerging on a shifting coastline so as to make sure that successive rulers can keep an eye on the Sea, preferably from the mouth of an estuary, and courts can retain some kind of suzerainty over the interior and the exterior, land and sea, equally unknown, always for the time being.

In Malay writing, locations as well as networks and movements are mapped out in narrations rather than in drawings: Malay scribes and clerks, so it seems, did not perform mapping in a picture-like cartographical manner but in a verbal way – and in this context it should be noticed that the Malay word *tulis* parallels the English phrases 'writing reality' and 'drawing reality' at once, inscribing people, places and events on paper, traces of activities in the world and traces of other traces.[26] 'Indigenous' forms of mapping, certainly not meant to refer readers, navigators and travelers to the practice of sailing the Sea, but rather to the possibility of sailing the Sea: early nineteenth century Malay manuscripts are material representations of drawing navigability rather than of writing the practice of navigation; the representation of maritime experience is left to others. More importantly, older Malay writing shows its readers (and listeners) how to find their way in negotiations and communication with others on distant shores rather than how to find a way across the water. The mapping of Malay writing is meant to show the local public the way through diplomacy and politics rather than through sea and land, in short.

Little is known of the availability and use of chart-like maps – predecessors of the presently conventional maps in textbooks and atlases – among people in the Malay speaking world until the end of the nineteenth century. Even less is known of how the 'indigenous' people effectively sailed the sea without consulting the maps for which historians, working with conventional notions of

[26] *Tulis, karang and rancang*, all three of them refer to the act of writing, performing, constructing, planning, inscribing – Malay words have an often very extensive reach in the practice of daily life, and their intent is hard to define in English again. The same could be said of English words and the word 'map' is a good example. To make matters even more confusing, older Malay writing does not offer a verbal equivalent for the English/American words 'map' and 'chart', and it may be telling that the word *peta* did not become the more common Malay term for 'map' until the 20th century, while Wilkinson still refers to *peta* as '(Skrt) Sketch - plan; design; Etym: portrait (….) But in modern Malay of a map, a working plan, or any basis for working on.' Issues of 'inside' and 'outside' loom large over these attempts of making sense of Malay in terms of English, too.

cartography, so far have been looking largely in vain. Local sailors and their masters, more or less Malay speaking, may have shared such maps with literate outsiders, and perhaps they considered them as secret and sacred objects that could not to be shared with others, or with Europeans for that matter.[27] However, indications of the production of locally drawn nautical maps or charts are few before the nineteenth century[28], and, more tellingly, no concrete reference to the use of charts has been found in older Malay manuscripts, the sole local testimonies of the days of yore in the *alam Melayu*: those two facts make it more than conceivable that Malay writers were simply not very familiar with charts, and more than that: they were not interested in writing or drawing the sea, presumably leaving the description of maritime experience to 'others', among them the *orang laut* as well as Europeans and Chinese navigators. And mariners, those who effectively sailed the sea,[29] were not necessarily willing to share their knowledge of the sea's mobility, beauty and dangers with those who lived on the land beyond their conversations. Or, to put this in positive terms: seafarers, familiar with indigenous methods of navigation, did not necessarily have much interest in using chart, compass and sextant until they interacted with strangers from overseas.

Experience rather than imagination: Malay speaking sailors, it seems, sailed the waters primarily on the force of their recollection of tales and songs about the movements of celestial bodies, of fishes, worms and birds, of waves and wind, mobile points of calibration in which the human spirit and the order of nature may have been connected as effectively as in the fixated points of compassed, geometrically constructed drawings. Reports such as the ones of the British merchant, Thomas Forrest, who sailed the waters around what he called 'Borneo' and 'New Guinea' towards the end of the eighteenth century, refer to Malay speaking guides and pilots who apparently did not yet use nautical charts but, instead, primarily performed stories that they had heard and remembered, in order to find their way across the often treacherous waters – but some of them were eager to be shown the maps Forrest made readily available to them.[30]

---

[27] Some Malay sailors may, nay must have been familiar with the maps, guides and descriptions of sea routes that were created and consulted by Chinese sailors and scholars, as though it could be wondered in how far such maps confirmed their memorized knowledge.

[28] A convenient overview of early Southeast Asian mapping is given by Joseph E. Schartzberg, 'Southeast Asian nautical maps' (in J. Brian Harley and David Woodward (eds.), *The History of Cartography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) Vol 2, Book 2, pp. 828-838.

[29] And lived on the sea, harvesting products of the sea and involved in trade.

[30] About Thomas Forrest, see Panida Boonthavevej, *A Quest for Insularity – Thomas Forrest's Voyage to New Guinea and the Moluccas* (Saarbrucken: Scholars' Press, 2013). The experiences of Forrest in the second half of the 18th century are also described in Joseph E Schwartzberg's 'Southeast Asian nautical maps'.

The use of sextant and geometry led to charting the world in maps – and the maps that were created in written narratives are, in their turn, different from the maps that were performed in conversations, in terms of recollections and experiences, in terms of form as much as of maps that were shaped by measurements of sextant and other technological tools. Malay speaking sailors, traders and fishermen conversed (*bicara*) the Sea, so it appears, rather than draw (*tulis*) it. They experienced and sailed the sea following flows and currents, wind, and stars, memory at hand, rather than observing and inscribing the Sea and its shores, images, charts and pictures at hand. 'Being in the world' was created again and again in these conversations, different from making a drawing, reading a chart, 'representing the world', 'imagining the world', including the sea.

In short, older Malay writing suggests that the Sea was, literally, beyond description and inscription; its multi-layeredness and movement were not immediately addressed. The Sea is evoked as a mysterious presence – its center is anywhere and everywhere, its boundaries are indefinite. In retrospect, it appears safe to assume that Malay writing's representations of the world were supplemented by immediate conversations which were performed by the 'people of the sea' (*orang laut*), the mariners, the masters, the authority. And only now and then, traces of these conversations of practical experience found their way into written narratives about the relations and connections between the settlements that were constructed outside and around the Sea, on its shores.

In the Malay writing tradition [31] the Sea's presence is acknowledged by way of circumvention, in the spirit of awe.

Writing the sea

Malay writing which so often presents protagonists as sailing the Sea for distant shores demonstrates that mapping the ways across the world can be performed in more than one way and,

[31] Current ideas about early and older Malay writing are created by manuscripts which, produced and preserved in the nineteenth century, were (in one way or another) copies of older texts that have been lost to fire, war and indifference: the early Malay writing tradition was as mobile as the sea in which rhizome-like emulation and emergence were as important as tree-like preservation and repetition. In the following, only some examples of older Malay writing are quoted and discussed, texts that are thought to be 'representative' for the most important genres in older Malay writing as a whole; they are thought to be of central importance in that ever-shifting configuration, prominent touching stones in present-day efforts of making sense of the Malay writing tradition. They are canonical texts within Malayistics (see in particular Vladimir Braginsky, *The Heritage of Traditional Malay Literature – A Historical Survey of Genres, Writings and Literary Views* (Leiden:KITLV Press 2004), a peformative effort at comprehension.
.

reversely, that not every mapping functions to guide readers, writers and protagonists across the sea, around obstacles and hindrances. Older Malay mapping is primarily performed in narratives about settlements, contests, negotiations and, ultimately, about the procurement of fame and respect, the most prominent theme and purport of Malay writing. Manuscripts offer descriptions of *laut* which hardly ever move beyond telling the name of the ship, the points of departure and destination, and the duration of the journey; finding the route to reach human settlements overseas and describing the maritime adventures back to the point of departure are actions and events that are blank or hidden behind a written sentence or two. As if the Sea's mobility cannot be grasped. As if experiencing the sea can be ignored. As if the Sea is beyond the writerly imagination. As if writing is meant to produce narratives that map out a moral code, a code of political behavior rather than a landscape, a seascape. As if readerly and reciterly attention should be steered away from the Sea, from the experience of its perpetual movement and mysteries.

In Malay writing, a ship is not supposed to lose its way on the waves, in a thunderstorm, a maelstrom. That is a non-event, a narrative possibility that should be evaded. Seldom does a ship sink, even more seldom so if the ship is described as well-equipped and well-prepared. Sinking and losing the way may have been events in conversations about everyday experiences among mariners, they are near to inconceivable events in writing the Sea, in sailing the Sea, an act that tends to focus on its shores: navigator (*mu'allim*), captain (*nakhoda*) and admiral (*laksamana*) are presented as repeating and recognizing the names of mountains they see from their ship at sea and they are oblivious of the possibility of meeting a storm, a maelstrom, a wave. As if reciting narratives in the Malay world does not want to have itself decelerated by long 'drawings' of the Sea, let alone disrupted by disasters in open sea. Tragic accidents are as rare as fortuitous journeys: writing actions, events and dialogues are circling around the always successful search for fame, respect and name on the shore. As if verbal decelerations and disruptions at sea would but slow down the speed of the narration which tend to organize itself in short blocks of words around one action, one event, initiated and connected by the very repetitive *maka* ('and then'). As if descriptions of the atmosphere of the maritime space – its beauty, its mysteries, its depths, its threats; of the sensations of water – its currents, its waves, its ripples; and of the emotions of travelers – their fears, their agonies, their bliss – could only spoil the excitement and anticipation of reaching a distant shore, a beach, an estuary: narration is meant to move fast ahead, from one action to another event on the journey to success. As if notions of space are subordinate to the

drive of time. As if only the virtual silence of the Sea enables the narration to map the world out full speed, in every reading anew. As if laying out the intricacies of politics rules over the evocation of the wonders of nature. As if awe and menace can be overcome by words. And blankness by silence.

***

Not only detailed representations and evocations of the Sea are lacking in older Malay writing; the same could be said of earth, world (*darat, bumi*), the other outer appearance of the earth; the exterior materiality of mountains, planes, and forests[32] is as seldom explored by pen on paper as the force of waves, wind, and water. To be more precise, cartographically and narratologically speaking: explorations of landscape and seascape are limited to descriptions of the points of departure and points of arrival, sensory and aesthetic experiences of travelers at sea (*laut*) and on land (*darat*) being largely absent. Malay texts, in other words, tend to map out not natural space[33] but social space, not nature (*'alam*) but manners (*bahasa*); they offer lessons in politics – how to find the way to fame and respect - and not in nature – how to represent or indicate the way to another place. [34] Older Malay writing developed a cartography of its own.

Laut does not need any specification of the Earth *('alam*) as a whole, so to speak: the Sea is the almost silent background against which the actions of connection, events of exchange of words, goods, weapons and women take place on the shores.[35] As if the presence of *laut* is beyond

[32] A genealogical note could be added: whenever a Malay narrative does explore the experiences and sensations of 'nature' more or less *in extenso*, it can be safely assumed that it presents a Malay rendition of Javanese or Persian narratives.

[33] Malay writing does not offer any image of the spatial patterns of land and sea; questions such as 'does the Sea enclose land', 'what is behind the horizon', and 'what are the limits of the world' ('alam) are not explicitly addressed beyond an occasional reference to Koran or hadith.

[34] 'Landscape constitutes a discourse though which identifiable social groups historically have framed themselves and their relations to both other social groups and the land', is Denis Cosgrove's delineation of landscape – a largely similar definition could be formulated for seascape by substituting 'sea' for 'land' (cf. Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press 1998), p. xiv). The same could be said of Cosgrove's evocation of landscape in another context in which references are made to the act of mapping in various media: 'If landscape is regarded as a pictorial way of representing or symbolizing human surroundings, then landscapes may be studied across a variety of media and surfaces: in paint or canvas, writing on paper, images of film as well as in earth, stone, water and vegetation on the ground. Each or any of these allow us to disclose the meanings that human groups attach to areas and places and to relate those meaning to other aspects and conditions of the human existence.' (Denis Cosgrove and Peter Jackson, 'New directions in cultural geography', in *Area* 19 (2), (1987), pp. 95-101.

[35] Two recent publications about routes and trade around the Sea deserve mention in this connection, because they are so elegantly detailed in their descriptions not only of trade, so central in outsiders' historiography, but also of diplomacy, politics and fame, so central in Malay writing. Both very eloquently open up to further reflection: Derek

control, yet open to experience, discovery and practice beyond the written word. As if the Sea's appearance with its movements and mobility defies description – too dangerous, too voluminous, too mobile, too deep, too sacred to be fixated, to be remembered in either words or images. As if the Sea is trying to remain beyond writing's efforts at mapping the world: still and empty and awesome. Older Malay writing is reluctant if not unable to describe the experience of sailing the Sea, unwilling to address the Sea, uncharted waters, which are protected from 'the earth' (*darat*) by shores, estuaries, mangrove forests, around named settlements and locations (and not territories) where negotiations and conversations take place, performed on the greyish liminality between 'sea' and 'land'.

> The single ocean possessed a genuine unity of its own. The trading connections that linked the opposite ends of maritime Asia resemble links in a chain which would join together again even if one link were temporarily broken. In effect, the single ocean was a vast zone of neutral water, which rulers inside and outside Southeast Asia independently and for their own interests wanted to protect.[36]

The configuration of Malay writing

Malay writing is shaped into a configuration through writing and reading texts, by juxtaposing one text to another, following similarities and creating differentiations in the process. And in moving through particular or singular texts, that configuration takes on a new shape every time again, reminiscent of the experience of the mobility of the Sea, the waves and the shores. Every narration is mapping out the world in its own way in a new reading. Each and all narratives repeat as well as emulate the mapping performed by others as well as by themselves.

The *Sulalat as-Salatin*, for long better known by the name of *Sejarah Melayu*, is probably the most accessible work for present day readers who want to engage with the configuration of older Malay writing, and with its presentation of the Sea in particular. The work has been transmitted in many texts, in ever more variant versions;[37] multiple echoes of their sentences, style,

---

Hong, *Sino-Malay Trade and Diplomacy, from the Tenth through the Fourteenth Century* (Athens: Oxford University Press 2009) and Ruzy Suliza Hashim, *Out of the Shadows – Women in Malay Court Narratives* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia 2003).

[36] O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspective* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies 1982), p. 39.

[37] See A. Samad Ahmad, (ed.), *Sulalatus Salatin (Sejarah Melayu)* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1979), *Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals)* (ed. W. Shellebear) (Singapre:American Mission Press 1896), *Sedjarah Melayu menurut terbitan Abdullah Abdulkadir Munsji* (ed. T.D. Situmorang and A. Teeuw (Djakarta:Djambatan 1952) are

themes and events can be traced in other Malay writing. *Sulalat as-Salatin* is one of the many works in which *laut* remains largely unspecified beyond its diverging opening chapter; the Sea's mobility is hardly mentioned even though it plays a central if not fundamental role in laying out the events and actions that are undertaken by a succession of protagonists.[38] Once in the beginning its identity as 'otherness' has been explored and action in the Malay state of origin is begun on the shore, *laut* becomes a metaphor of Distant Emptiness, an unknown and unknowable entity, a maritime virtuality.

In the opening chapter, Raja Suran, a descendant of Iskandar Dzulkarnain, is settling down in Tumasik on the shore, in anticipation of further adventures; he is presented as speaking his thoughts: 'This land (*darat*) I already know. What might the content of the sea look like? It would be good that I enter the sea so that I know what its situation is.' And in a glass casket – many windows, many eyes - His Majesty has himself descended to the bottom of the sea. 'And Raja Suran sees some of the Majesty (*kekayaan*) of Allah the All-Powerful *subhanahu wa ta'ala*'. 'And he comes down in a world (*dunia*) named Dika'. 'And His Majesty sees all sorts of beautiful things' and then he reaches a very large country where, he sees, the Barsams are living, countless in number, some of them Muslims, others unbelievers, and then he meets Raja Aftabu 'l-Ardh, 'Sunshine of the Earth': 'I come from a world (*dunia*)[39] and I am the ruler of humans and my name is Raja Suran', and then he assures this local ruler 'that there are many worlds (*dunia*) in this cosmos *('alam*)'. Before long, Suran is made ruler of the world of Dika down in the sea – and does the bottom of the sea not function as a shore of sorts? And he marries princess Mahtabubu 'l-Bahr, 'Moonlight of the Sea',[40] and then the couple has three sons – and then Suran starts wondering what will happen to his descendants: 'what will happen to my three sons under the earth (*di bawah*

some of the more recent (printed) versions, which are usually used in discussions about 'Malay literature', next to *Sejarah Melayu "Malay Annals"*, Translated by C.C. Brown, with a new introduction by R. Roolvink (Kuala Lumpur:Oxford University Press 1983).

[38] For an authoritative description and analysis, see Henri Chambert-Loir, 'The Sulalat al-Salatin as a political myth', in *Indonesia* 79 (April 2005), pp. 131 – 160. Strangely enough, the central role of the 'Sea' as the embedding space from where human rulers and authority, central protagonists in the myth, emerge seems largely ignored.

[39] Wilkinson defines *dunia* as 'World below; this mortal world' and *alam* as 'World in various senses: the earth (-), the realm (-) the universe'. Very confusing. *Dunia, bumi, alam, darat, tanah*: the entangled use of these words with reference to earthly stability should remind English-speaking people, at least, of the cartographical and philosophical difficulties of working with words such as 'earth', 'world', 'land', 'continent', 'sphere', 'domain',' globe', 'zone', 'cosmos', 'region'.

[40] Notice the names of the ruler and his daughter: celestial names, points of navigation indeed – as if the 'the Sea' is a self-contained cosmos on its own.

bumi)?'. Before a winged horse brings Suran up to the sea shore so that he can found the state of Bidja Negara, His Majesty instructs Aftabu'l-Ardh to send the three to the world (*ke dunia*) once they are grown up 'so that the regal power (*kerajaan*) of Sultan Iskandar Dzulkarnain will not be broken'. And then, the three sons appear on the mountain of Mahameru, close to Palembang, on the land (*tanah*) of Andalas. And the Sea remains a silent presence all along, undescribed, unspecified. And then the oldest son, Sang Suparba, becomes the ruler of Palembang. And so on and so forth. And once Suparba has established himself as the ruler of Palembang, in an estuary on the coast, he entertains relations and communications with the rulers of China and Majapahit, living on shores far overseas, and he 'wants to see the sea' and he sails along Tanjung Pura and Bintan where he leaves his son, Nila Utama, to rule, and he sails along Ruku, Balang, and Kuantan before he is eventually made 'Raja di Minangkabau'. And then Nila Utama begins a journey along the coast – or the shore. And so on and so forth.

Thus is the world mapped out in the opening pages of the *Sulalat as-Salatin*, characterized by Chambert-Loir as the 'dynastic myth of origin': the first named ruler in the Malay world emerges from the silent sea – the sacred space of regal power, so it seems – to settle on the shore, but his descendants look back nor reminisce on the mysterious maritime experiences of their first ancestor. From now on events and adventures around the regal dynasty are described in terms of a land-oriented 'situation', leaving the sea behind as a silent and mobile background, charged with ancestral energy and blank sacrosanctity. From here and now, the protagonists are dealing with a wide variety of settlements along the shores around the Sea: the *Sulalat as-Salatin* presents a series of narratives about the travels of princes, courtiers and envoys, challenged in exchanges and negotiations on more or less distant shores around letters and presents, women and weapons. As if the experience of the sea could be ignored and forgotten – but it is not.

For present day readers interested in the historiography around the name of 'South China Sea', the silence of the nameless and indefinite Sea is most striking in the chapters that deal with the apparently sensitive contacts between 'Malaka', 'Cina' and 'Majapahit', described as states on the shore that are ruled by descendants and relatives of Suparba: in these fragments, too, the journeys across the water are largely passed over in virtual wordlessness, even the one of Malaka's envoys who, on their way to China, end up in Brunei and force the local Sultan to relate himself to their master in Malaka and show his respect for his 'brother' overseas in a regal letter: politics

on the shore are described in attempts to map out the *Alam Melayu* around a blank awe. Communication and connection is what counts, wherever the successive protagonists come and go: the exchange of presents, the word plays, the verbal competitions, the battles, invariably leading to fame and respect. The Sea is merely a background, a space that has to be 'protected' from the human noise of time. 'The Majesty of Allah, the All-Powerful'.

After Suran's adventures in the Majesty of Allah, the Sea is to remain the outside space throughout the *Sulalat as-Salatin*, with one exception, equally presented in the mythical preamble that lays out the ideology of Malay writing in terms of its shore-based orientation: Nila Utama, Suparba's son, curious about the land (*tanah*) on the other side, is crossing the sea between Tanjung Bemban and Temasik, and a storm comes down, and the only way to save the ship is to throw Nila Utama's crown overboard, presented as the basic heirloom of the central regal family in the Malay world. It is a fateful event: the superior symbol of regal power disappears into the Sea for good, as if the ultimate authority over the world is lost to the Sea, so to speak. And it is worth noticing how this narrative of ultimate loss has found its way into the sea nomads' conversations, as recorded by Cynthia Chou: the ultimate sovereignty over the Sea lies with the rule of *Raja Laut*, a mobile and unspecified authority, echoes of which can be heard as well in the emergence of Suparba, the first Raja of Palembang and beyond.

The Sea, the space where this ultimate regal authority has its seat, lies outside the shores where human actions and events take place, circling around communication and negotiation. Communication and negotiation: every text that engages with the configuration of Malay writing could be read as a confirmation of these two points of calibration. Here, some fragments of one particular text of the *Sulalat as-Salatin* are evoked because it is one of the best known versions of the *Sulalat* in the Malay reading world, often quoted, often interpreted, and included in the so-called Malay Concordance Project[41] – and those three features should suffice for assuming that the *Sulalat as-Salatin* should be read as making part of the present day canon-in-becoming of older

[41] The Malay Concordance Project, set up by the late Ian Proudfoot, offers an ever growing corpus of Malay texts (many of them a particular version of a work) on-line for detailed consultation, a treasure trove for everyone interested in older Malay writing. It could be argued that that the texts that are included in the Project are of central prominence in the canon-in-becoming.

Malay writing: it has acquired a central and authoritative place in the discussions and publications in and about older Malay writing.[42]

The 'Genealogy of Rulers'[43] has itself read as a loosely connected chain of tales about the beginnings, the glory time and the demise of the regal family of Malaka, distant descendants of Iskandar Dzulkarnain, and it has been very tempting for cartographers and historians alike to read the text's place names, signifiers on their own, as referring to places in the historical and material reality around the South China Sea and then embed them in a comprehensive interpretation of the work as a whole in terms of historical reality. As a series of narrations, the *Sulalat as-Salatin* is mapping out events and actions around the rise and fall of a powerful settlement, the historical Malaka, on the shore of the 'Strait of Malacca', the name in English writing, on the shore of *laut*, the name in Malay writing. Another attempt at observing a simulacrum, so to speak – but sooner or later every simulacrum is bound to fall apart in the mobile presence of the Sea and the experience of movement. 'Let he who reads this not concern himself with it to the exclusion of all else', warns a writer of the *Sulalat*'s introduction his public: sooner or later, words of representation and imagination ('it') are supplemented with words of experience ('all else') - and then they lose contact with each other. Do not only read what is in writing but also pay attention to all else that is beyond it. There is a reality beyond the words of every Malay text, beyond Malaka, beyond the shore. Another reality.

Here some *Sulalat as-Salatin* fragments are very sketchily summarized, descriptions of the Sea and its shores, locations in which the narrative is mapping networks of communication and relation. Traces and echoes of the *Sulalat* can be read in the variant versions of *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 'The Tale of Hang Tuah', one of which has been included in the Malay Concordance Project and, therefore, could be considered part of the canon just like the particular version of the *Sulalat as-Salatin*. A work of high status and authority, too.

Hikayat Hang Tuah may be more than just a canonical work: it could be appreciated as a vade mecum of older Malay writing as it is able to refer its readers to almost every theme, narrative line, topic, sentence in other Malay texts. A guide to older Malay writing, in short. A map on its

[42] The first sentence of Chambert-Loir's article: 'The Sulalat as-Salatin is unanimously regarded as one of the most, if not *the* most important texts of Malay literature.'
[43] Its English title, 'Malay Annals', is a misleading misnomer.

own. Also in *Hikayat Hang Tuah laut* remains a silent shadow over the verbal mappings of shores, settlements and networks of communication and negotiation; the Sea is the background of the journeys, abductions, battles and diplomatic missions which Hang Tuah and other courtiers are performing in the service of their nameless and timeless Lord, the Sultan of Malaka. Of the journeys, for instance, to the coastal states called 'China', 'Brunei' and 'Majapahit', names that can be found on later maps, located around the 'South China Sea', a name equally found on later maps, in later writing. In 'Tale of Hang Tuah', too, these journeys overseas are described in a mere sentence or two. 'And then they prepared the ship, and then they set sail, and after so and so many days they arrived in so and so', followed by a more or less extensive description of the newly reached settlement, its court, its ruling elite, and then, more extensively, the wordplays, fights, negotiations around gifts, women, letters and weapons. Follows a return home overseas, in an equally succinct description of a mere sentence or two about preparations and perhaps the number of days the return journey takes. And of course also *Hikayat Hang Tuah* refers to the story of a crown that is irretrievably lost in the Sea. No descriptions of experiences or sensations *di laut*, however. No maritime events or actions. No descriptions of fear or threat, excitement or beauty. Mystery, mobility and danger elide representation: the Sea is outside time, outside materiality, beyond writing.

The mapping of *Hikayat Hang Tuah* confirms the statement Wolters made about the way writers mapped their world: 'The single ocean possessed a genuine unity of its own'. A space beyond the coasts. As if the Sea is to be 'protected' as a space of freedom from human organization and activities of settlements on its shores; freedom from action and events, so tell us older Malay texts, comprehends the Sea. Freedom from voice and noise. Freedom from writing and reading. An empty space that suggests a transcendental presence, philosophically speaking, a place on its own, but not really. Still, it may be good to repeat, in good Malay fashion, the words of *Sulalat as-Salatin*: 'Let he who reads this not concern himself with it to the exclusion of all else'. The cartography that is performed by Malay writing may have been difficult to fathom, most of all for those who effectively experienced the sea and made sense of its very mobility – waves, winds, currents – in speaking Malay, including that very experience in their conversations, their intimate knowledge, their memories which go beyond reading and writing.

Exclusion and silence

Freedom from the voice of experience: maritime silence emerges from the *Silsilah Raja-Raja Brunei* ('Genealogy of the princes of Brunei')[44], a narrative that maps events around the regal family of Brunei, in the historical reality of *alam Melayu* a glorious state in an estuary on the eastern shores of the South China Sea. It hardly mentions *laut*. And from *Hikayat Indraputra*, 'The Tale of Indraputra', which may offer extensive descriptions of the creation and launch of ships but observes silence over Indraputra's adventures at open sea, apart from his descent to the bottom of the (nameless) sea where he, visiting the beings of a settlement on the shore of another world, has experiences that invoke reminiscences and anticipations of Raja Suran's adventures in the 'world of Dika' in the *Sulalat as-Salatin* and of his own sensations of the maritime origin of his authority. 'And then he observes the Majesty of God's creation'. And after this ritual purification he continues his adventures in diplomacy on the shore, without another reminder of the Sea. The Sea has become another world, a 'genuine unity of its own' indeed, yet mirroring verbal reality. And a similar silence emanates from *Hikayat Nakhoda Muda*, 'The Tale of the Young Captain', which narrates events and adventures in named settlements on the shore, that liminal space, performed against the background of that silent and unnamed Sea.

In one shape or another, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and its main protagonist, the admiral of the Malaka fleet 'who is devoted to his lord and serves his lord in many ways', may have had a hand in the composition of another work that, in defiance of its title, appears to remain even more explicitly in silent awe of the Sea: *Undang-undang Laut*. 'Code of the Sea' has been transmitted (and preserved) through variant versions, just like so many other Malay work, and fragments of these variants have been assimilated in other texts, just like fragments of so many other narratives. At the title suggests, all versions present a number of laws and regulations that should be observed in sailing the Sea, that is: in mapping its mobile surface. But then, *Undang-undang Laut* shows that writing does not always cover speaking, that writing rules does not necessarily refer to practice, and that writing a code cannot be substituted for talking experience: the most striking feature of the Code is the almost complete lack of concrete and immediate engagement with *laut*. 'Code of the Sea' does not give counsel of how to face or experience the sea at large in all its flexibility and movement; instead, it offers strict and stable advice of how to rule a ship, primarily

[44] See 'Silsilah Raja-raja Brunei' (ed. P.L. Amin Sweeney), in *JMBRAS* XLI,2 1968.

dealing with the prerogatives of the captain, presented as the *raja di laut*, 'prince at sea'. 'The captain on a ship replaces the ruler at sea' writes the text, and 'he is the vice-regent of the believers (*khalifatu'lmu'min*)'; the navigator (*mu'allim*) functions as a priest and the ship's passengers and crew are his community of believers *('ummat*)'. As if a ship is a state on its own, operating in an unknown context, upon an unknown outside, that 'genuine unity of its own'. The ship as a moving island, its bottom like a shore, its captain like a ruler. As if a ship of state, institutions and all, is moving upon an infinite and omnipresent Being that defies description. The 'Code of the Sea' is almost silent about the sea, and it only deals with the ship and the rules for captain, navigator, crew and passengers on the ship and on the shore, travelers across the Sea.

Suffice a quotation of just one article in the Code, the one which makes the suggestion that the Sea is the place of transition, if not the origin of every human movement and activity on Earth – 'the navigator has to be very careful in sailing at sea and on land – , as if every navigator, every *raja*, should be aware of *Sulalat as-Salatin*'s 'myth of origin' in the world of humans and that his journey in life starts at sea, or rather on the bottom of the sea, that alternative other world.[45] The article addresses the issues of danger of coasts and shores and everything around and beyond them, the cosmos (*'alam*) that is, which is meant to be sailed on a ship across the sea of life: almost in passing, the text suggests that sailing may be a spiritual act and that writing the Sea is as much a matter of observation and imagination as a challenge to experience and practice, as much of writing as of talking:

> The navigator has to be very careful in sailing at sea and on land; and wind and waves and currents and troughs and shoals and moon and stars and years and seasons and bays and the reaches of a river, and capes and islands and riffs, and sandbanks and mountains and hills: the navigator has to be very much aware of all of them so that his journey will be safe and secure. And he prays to *Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala* and His prophet *sallah Allahu alaihi wassalam* that he be saved from danger, for the navigator is like a priest for the people on a ship and the people on that ship are like his

[45] The correspondence with the 'myth of origin' of *Sulalat as-Salatin*, as suggested by Chambert-Loir, is obvious. Moreover, it would also be interesting to compare *Undang-undang Laut* and its assumed authority in circles of sailors and traders who are traveling the Sea, infinitely open, multilayered, mobile and fluid, with Hugo Grotius' *Mare Liberum* (1609), a contemporary treatise on the 'free sea' which was to be of central importance in European discussions about the freedom of the sea, being a space where movement should be free for people of all nations; this freedom of movement, however, should be protected by certain rules to make sure the sea does not become a space of anarchy and contest. Such a comparison could at least lead to a re-evaluation and reformulation of the phenomenon of so-called 'piracy' in the South China Sea.

herd.[46]

***

Virtual absence of descriptions and specifications of *laut* – its beauty, its dangers, its volume, its mystery, its waves as well as its wind of transcendence – is observed by older Malay writing not only in the speedy and time-bound prose that is mapping out places of actions and events on the shore, beyond and between 'land' and 'sea', or on a ship on the water. Also in poetry, a form of writing which, more driven by mellifluousness and euphony – the voice - than by stammer and disjunction – the pen – , could make events and actions move in a versatile speed and make space for descriptions of nature and protagonists' experience, *laut* in all its 'glory' and 'majesty' tend to be ignored. Also in *syair*s – written poems, lines of words in search of sound, consist of an extensive series of four-line verses, constructed and performed on a rigid, almost mathematical scheme of rhyme and wording[47] – the Sea tends to remain nameless. And also in *syairs*, the act of sailing across the Sea on an usually well-equipped ship hardly ever triggers evocations of sensation, emotion and atmosphere: actions and events around the protagonists, who are meant to survive searching, wandering and fighting by way of an exchange of letters, presents, merchandise and weapons on the shore, tend to avoid every possible suggestion of the imaginary presence of waves, currents, winds, depths and darkness.

Only in the longer *syair*s that were first written down when the vocal energy of Malay writing and recital began to be interrupted by printed materials, efforts of describing the Sea may be found, be it not in abundance either. To cut a long story short, take a fragment in one of the versions of *Syair Siti Zubaidah* ('The Poem of Siti Zubaidah')[48] in which the flotilla of a prince, sailing along the coast on a pleasure trip, is hit by 'heavy winds' and 'violent and foaming waves' that make His Majesty break into tears of fright; 'he thinks of his parents and of the dreams he once had', and 'while a storm comes down and the sky turns black', he prays to the Lord of all Honor that the turmoil may come to an end - and then the prince safely lands on the shore again and then he watches a dance performance with a smile on his face. A speck of foam turns into a

[46] R.O. Winstedt and P.E. de Josselin de Jong, 'The maritime laws of Malacca', in *JMBRAS* 29,3, 1956, pp.22 – 59.
[47] See G.L. Koster, *Roaming through Seductive Gardens - Readings in Malay Narrative* (Leiden: KITLV Press 1997), pp. 35-52.
[48] *Syair Siti Zubaidah Perang China* (ed. Abdul Mutalib Abdul Ghani) (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1991), pp. 41 -42. Its earliest versions date from around 1850.

maritime experience and sensation: threatening is the Sea, dangerous, awesome. Its shadow, its alterity cannot always be ignored, its presence not always be excluded, but it does not have an extensive place in reading and recital yet. The mapping of *laut* largely remains beyond Malay writing.

Readers – navigators and travelers of sorts – could be told that sailing through space and time on paper is like exploring words and sentences as much as examining philosophical issues and describing experiences. In the *Syair Siti Zubaidah*, the narrator's observation of the stable land while traveling the Sea is given an equally philosophical (and cartographical) turn in his ruminations about the consequence of practice being disassociated from observation, talking from writing, immediacy from distance: 'Fate can no longer be reflected upon/God's will has already been meted out/as if a high mountain is visible/ and there is no way to go there.'[49] The verse sounds like a multilayered echo of a cartographical text.

***

Echoes and traces of *Syair Siti Zubaidah*, *Undang-undang Laut*, *Hikayat Nakhoda Muda*, *Sulalat as-Salatin*, and *Hikayat Hang Tuah* – representatives of different genres, different rules, different appreciations - can be found in every form of Malay writing which, in its turn, may leave echoes in other texts, including those of a primarily religious or philosophical character: that is how the configuration of Malay writing is taking shape, creating maps of cultural imagination, collective memory, political ideology in the process. Echoes are perhaps strongest appreciated of one group of texts in particular: the work of Hamzah Pansuri, an early seventeenth century writer who produced work of a religious if not philosophical character. Some of the creations that are attributed to Hamzah's pen – prose as well as poetry - explicitly address the traveler, the Seeker, the wanderer; they circle around images and experiences of Sea, waves, and ships - and the narrator – or is he the poet, or the copyist? - presents himself time and again to his public as a safe and successful navigator across paper as well as across the spiritual waters of the world. God's omnipresence within and without mankind's writing is evoked, and the world may be like the ship that is evoked in the Code of the Sea. Metaphors and comparisons galore: He is ubiquitous and yet unknowable, inside and outside, 'like the Sea'.

[49] For a discussion of these lines, see Koster, *Roaming through Seductive Gardens*, p. 85.

> Oh Seeker! God's being – He is most High – is like the sea without borders and without closure. This world in its entirety is like a tiny speck of foam within the sea, and what avails a single human to be in that foam? Nothing, that is, but in the words of God – He is most High – everything of this world vanishes. Oh Seeker! This world is like a wave, God's presence is like the sea; and although a wave is different from the sea, its essence is not different from the sea.[50]

In Hamzah's poetry, the complement to this evocation of the sea is explored in an admonition to the traveler, who, riding on a wave, becomes part of the sea, transforming transience into eternity, becoming one with the One:

> You are the lofty Sea/as the mirror of God, eternal/exchange the murky for the pure/so that you attain the divine. Reach for the eternal Sea/drop your transient existence/tie your anchor to a rope/cast it forever in the pure Sea.

This paradoxical association of exclusion with inclusion, exterior with interior – humans are the sea as well as a wave or a speck of foam in the sea – sounds like a very deep, if not unfathomable deference to 'the Sea' (*laut*) as an entity which can be experienced and named; it is open to experience and comparison, yet it remains unknown and undifferentiated – and eventually it is an Entity without shores, an infinite Being in which humans of the world are bound to submerge. [51] 'This world is like a wave, God's presence is like the sea, and although a wave is different from the sea, its essence is not different from the sea.' The awareness of the sea's ultimate 'unity of its own' in combination with its similarity to Him[52] can be traced in all Malay writing, most prominently so when those prosaic words are read in direct dialogue with Hamzah's narrative poetry[53]:

> The Sea of reality (*bahr al-haqq*) is very deep indeed/its waves become the cosmos *('alam*)/ in its origin it has day nor night/ in that Sea the world submerges. Listen, oh wanderer/ the Sea has ebb nor flood/ its estuaries have shallows nor shoals/ many people get tied to it. The Sea is not a sparkle/

[50] Cf. Syed Muhammad Naguib Al- Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970), p. 26.
[51] Images of the ship are used as well in association with humans and the sea: 'Many ships sink/the sea's surges are immensely fierce/its reefs are sharp as spears/if one is not experienced and skilled enough/the ship will strand and break into pieces.'
[52] Manifestations of sufistic teachings – in particular the (inconclusive) discussions about the balance between *tanzih* and *tasybih* - resound in Hamzah's wordings, as they do in older Malay writing in general.
[53] Here, the English version of Hamzah's Malay verses is based on the translations of Hamzah's poetry in G.W.J. Drewes and L.F Brakel, *The Poems of Hamzah Pansuri* (Dordrecht/Cinnaminson: Foris Publications 1986); no effort has been made to retain the rhythm and rhyme of the originals, and the polyvocality which the use of these poetic devices should evoke has been ignored.

becoming the needy, the poor, the rich/its space is with the Supreme/ in which God and slave are hidden. Its beginning cannot be fathomed/its ending has many manifestations/ its inside cannot be opened up/although it has many names indeed.

And perhaps most comprehensively and paradoxically:

Our Lord is like the fathomless sea/ its waves are full in all directions/sea and waves are each other's companions/ eventually the waves just sink back into the sea.

Lines and images of Hamzah's poetry were strong enough to be remembered, copied and emulated by Malay writers into the nineteenth century[54], even though it is not clear how much the variant versions of his work diverge from his 'original' creations – three hundred years of copying, reciting and repeating have produced variant versions. Each in its own way, these differing versions are engaged with every other nineteenth century Malay writing, casting their shadows and echoes across Malay writing in multiform ways beyond the mellifluously balanced phrases of poetry. This intertexualization goes beyond the exhortative sentence in some versions of the *Sulalat as-Salatin*: 'Let he who reads this not concern himself with this to the exclusion of all else', in readerly retrospect perhaps the deepest reminder of the comprehensive presence of the Lord and His Majesty, the Fathomless Sea, from which Malay writing tries to emanate in waves of practical explorations of fame and name, beyond the shore, transitory and temporary at once, only to submerge eventually in that deafening silence.

Reach for the eternal Sea/drop your transient existence/tie your anchor to a rope/cast it forever in the pure Sea. Once you know yourself you are a traveler/then you are the sea without reefs/The sign that you are in error and misfortune/is that you are too much in search of this world.

A unity of its own – *laut Cina*

Only a few fragments of Malay manuscript writing are accessible to present day readers and, therefore, it is perhaps not even appropriate to make survey-like comprehensive statements about the configuration of 'Malay writing', evoked in so many places, performed in so many contexts, in so many years and seasons, composed in so many forms. The effect of verbal acts of

[54] And into the present day, see e.g. Syed Muhammad Naguib al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970). For a supreme introduction to Hamzah Pansuri (and to older Malay writing in general) see, of course, also Vladimir Braginsky, *The Heritage of Traditional Malay Literature – A Historical Survey of Genres, Writings and Literary Views* (Leiden: KITLV Press 2004).

communication and negotiation in ragged estuaries and on shifting shores, every comprehension is created in the dialogues between and among particular readings and recitals, mobile and sparkling – and definitely not in a single bird's eye view. Perhaps a negative comprehension is more appropriate: in these indefinite dialogues and engagements, no matter how incomplete and limited, the Sea remains invisible and indescribable, inside and outside the narratives at once. As if *laut* resists every form of mapping, in the wake of that authoritative saying of the Prophet, quoted in the introduction of many versions of the *Sulalat as-Salatin*: 'Concern yourself with the Majesty (*kebesaran*) of God and trouble not your mind over the Essence of God' - and in the shadow of Hamzah Pansuri's evocations of 'our Lord like the fathomless Sea' In the end, beyond all their negotiations and communications on the shore, 'oh seeker'!, protagonists, writers and readers should submerge like waves in the 'pure Sea', 'in permanent mobility in breadth and width, defined only by the infinite extent of this very mobility'.

***

In every reflection upon the fractured configuration of Malay writing, poetry tends to function as a brake on the speed of prose, if only because it tends to focus its public's attention on language rather than on the world beyond that language: for long, Malay poems have told their readers, among other things, how *laut* remains a verbal shadow in prose narratives. Moreover, given the fact that poetry – propelled by the manifestations of rhyme, rhythm, alliteration - is more directly driven by sound and vocality than prose will ever be, it could be argued that its mellifluous voices - melody, pulse, rhyme, pitch - flow more easily into written poetry than into written prose in order to fill up an empty line, a blank space, a vacant page. Effects of immediate experience. Effects of the real, maybe.

In Hamzah's poetry, *Laut Cina* serves as a rhyme, as a filling word. For its mellifluousness, Hamzah may have taken it from the oral conversations among sailors about their navigation across that particular sea as well as from their experience of the navigability of life. *Laut China* not only fills up a blank space, a slot; it also forces the poet to undertake a resounding exploration of that sea, that particular location, before letting it flow back into the conventional Sea of life, presenting *hina*, *sina*, *cina*, *gajahmina* (lowly, Sinai, China, whale)[55] as reminders of particularities before

[55] In their summary of Hamzah's poems, Drewes and Brakel seem to touch on the double image of 'China Sea' in a rather tentative voice: 'the China Sea, known for its typhoons, represents the primeval Ocean agitated by the storm of

returning to the conventional metaphors, to the imaginary if not transcendental and 'pure' space again.[56] A short vocal intervention in the conventional practice of writing.

> Hamzah of Shahri-naw may be a man lowly (hina)/ but he was not pleased with Mount Sinai/his permanent abode is the *laut Cina*/ where he plays with the whale (*gajahmina*). He is in awe of the whale/ having his abode in the China Sea/ and looking for water at Mount Sinai/was for him the action of a lowly man. The China Sea is very deep/there are all sorts of beings of the cosmos *('alam*)/ in the form of jinns, angels and Adam/all of us submerge in that sea. Its reefs are numerous, its shores extensive/ its bays are pretty like estuaries/it is good to swim in that sea/then this you will soon be able to appreciate. Typhoons are constantly aflame/they come down in an untimely manner/ dive into them entirely/ so that you may attain a reward. (-) The whale is swimming around/in the sea searching for water/the sea is very much an appearance/ for humans, pious and sinful.

Laut Cina, 'China Sea': Malay readers and listeners are referred to that specific place, be it for a fleeting moment or two only. *Diamnya daim di laut Cina/bermain-main dengan gajahmina*: sounds and words that break the Sea's silence. The line reads like a slip of the tongue, the trace of a conversation, a written echo of rhyming noise, but it seems strong enough to be repeated in other versions of this particular verse and, secondly, it makes cartographers – travelers and navigators as well as listening sailors – realize that Hamzah's work, too, is trying to map out the world, be it in an unconventional manner in terms of older Malay writing in which the Sea is hardly ever specified:[57] mention is made not of shores, negotiations and letters alone, but of activities at open sea, introduced as a specific location, 'China sea' (*laut cina*), as well. However, after this short

creation. (-) the whale, swimming about in the sea in search of water and even looking for it on the rocks on the shore, is the image of those unenlightened people who are looking for the water of life outside the Divine Ocean in which they have their being.'(Drewes and Brakel, *The Poems*, p. 40 and p.140).

[56] It may be useful to add the balancing commentary on the poem's first lines by Shamsuddin, a close contemporary of Hamzah, in Drewes and Brakel's translation: 'What does it mean that the shaykh has his abode in the China Sea? Answer: These words mean that he would let those possessed of consummate knowledge be permanent in God's greatness, but in point of fact the same holds true of those who are not possessed of this knowledge: they know His greatness but do not enjoy the delight of this majesty, namely God's reality.'

[57] Of course, the juxtaposition of *laut Sinai* and *laut China* is not created for reasons of rhyme alone – Hamzah's mellifluousness creates many layers of meaning – and it is possible, e.g., to interpret this juxtaposition as a reference to the two extreme points of the world as imagined by Hamzah: the ultimate point of 'below the wind' versus the ultimate point of 'above the wind'. It may also be read as a reference to a verse in the Qur'an (2:115: 'To God belong the East and the West. Wherever you turn, there is the face of God. God is all-encompassing, all-knowing'. Moreover, on the basis of the commentary of Hamzah's contemporary Shaykh Shamsuddin, the conclusion could be drawn – another layer of interpretation - that 'Hamzah is not satisfied with a momentary encounter with the Lord, as was Musa's lot on Mount Sinai; the China Sea, i.e. the storm-beaten Divine Ocean, is his permanent abode.' (Drewes and Brakel, *The Poems of Hamzah Fansuri*, p. 172 and p. 207): as if the 'China Sea' makes part of the ultimate and exclusive Essence, if not the ultimate horror vacui.

specification, including the play with a whale[58], *laut* continues its silent presence without location, merely serving as a reminder of the presence of God as the Sea, that 'unity of its own' in which human waves appear rolling to the shores only to be rolling back and submerge again. Confusing and intricate imagery indeed. It is in this 'purity' in which every ship, every human is eventually bound to cast an anchor or to be shattered.

Hamzah's words of the Sea and their echoes and shadows have been hanging over Malay readers and writers since the beginning of the seventeenth century, so it seems; they are confirmed and challenged in every fragment of the configuration of Malay reading again. The Sea is a nameless Being. An alternative world. The Real Truth. A sea without shores. But: 'Concern yourself with the Majesty (*kebesaran*) of God and trouble not your mind over the Essence of God'

The Sea – and *laut cina* in particular – may have been a central topic in the multi-lingual conversations among sailors and traders at sea, it certainly was not treated as such among 19th century Malay writers and their public on the shore - and they created a different cartography in their narratives about traveling the world. Perhaps needless to add, the silence that is being observed in older Malay writing about the 'China Sea', the 'South China Sea', could be seen as one of the initial causes of the many problems in present day Southeast Asia once it became confronted with writing traditions as well as indefinite conversations in which numerous references were made to that very sea and claims were made of the Chineseness of that sea.

Parallels, divergence and confrontation

In the 19th century, the older Malay writing's cartography of *laut* initially appeared to run parallel to the European cartography of the China Sea: in the manifestations of both forms of 'map writing', the sea is presented as a silent space, a blank-bleak place, and writing nor drawing was meant to mirror or represent the sea's mobility and mystery, its depth and danger beyond the surface, leaving the experience of navigation and navigability to ignorance and secrecy, information and conversation. But while, later on, islands and shoals appeared on outsiders' mappings and

[58] It is tempting to create more interpretations of Hamzah's poetry and its evocations of *laut* and *gajahmina* and its efforts at mapping of '*alam Melayu* by juxtaposing it to Herman Melville's classic American novel, *Moby Dick*, with its explorations of sea, whales and cartography, for instance on the basis of Robert Tally's essay 'Spaces that before were blank': truth and narrative form in Melville's South Seas cartography' (in *Pacific Coast Philology* 42,2 (2007), pp. 181-198).

drawings and the freedom and purity of the Sea was broken by name-calling and experience, up to the present day older Malay writings have retained their echoes of sacredness and silence in every new reading again - in defiance of ever growing discussions among conflicting narrative traditions and claims of control and governance of the sea.

A present day bird's eye view is unable to appreciate the South China Sea, flexible and moving, as the mirror of a textbook map alone, even less so when that view is obstructed by the clouds that sever imagination and reflection from experience and observation. Imagination has been made aware of the possibility that the Sea has been mapped in an ever expanding variety of novel narratives and charts that, recently driven by digital technology, are making conflicting sense of maritime space in terms of place, in terms of might and right, in terms of politics and assertion, of depth and surface, of multi-layeredness and mobility. The authoritative silence that is still being evoked by older Malay writings has definitely been challenged by novel experiences: no longer do negotiation and communication take place on the sea's ultimate shores alone; the South China Sea has become a fractured domain around mainland, islands and shoals and their coasts that are inscribed in names and experiences, around a bottom which is made to rise and become a newly negotiated coast as well. And each of these fragments is claimed by scientists and politicians and their experiments rather than remaining undescribed by scribes and reciters and their imagination.

And when the bird from the Abode of Peace descends from the clouds and begins its landing on the other shore, a bright morning in Ho Chi Minh City – a view over the sea, the shore, the land again – , the blank-bleak silence of the Sea is facing the hard-core movements of waves and ants again. Experience is confronted with imagination, mobility with simulacrum. Interaction is shifting. Mirrors and mental maps are shattered. And so are older Malay writings.