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MALAY POETRY OF THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

This is the story of a people, a race called the Malays; one of the early dwellers of Southeast Asian countries. They have been colonized, captivized, and even terrorized by the colonizers of the West and East. The colonizers came and then left. Politically and economically the Malays were deprived. Their lands and natural resources were robbed. Their freedom and humanity were denied. They were historically planned by the divide-and-rule system of the West. For more than eight hundred years they served their colonial masters. They were even sold and exchanged among the colonial masters.

Then finally came another colonizer but of a different stock, the Japanese. This particular colonizer marched into the Southeast Asian countries, without fear, chased away the British, the American and the Dutch. They ruled the Southeast Asian countries for three-and-a-half years. They brought with them hope and promised the colonized their freedom and prosperity.

The Malays, being *bumiputera* of the Malaya, was not an exception. Their suffering for hundreds of years under the Portugese, the Dutch and the British made them realize how valuable freedom was. The news of the marching in of the Japanese army into the country was received with joy. They were admired and praised as the catalyst of freedom. They were much awaited for in the hearts of millions of people of Southeast Asia, especially the Malays of the archipelago.

This paper depicts the short 'visit' of the Japanese to Malaysia. The 'good' and the 'bad' they brought with them and left behind after they had to leave. The stories are retold in the

form of poetry — the creative medium of the people, the most effective genre of the time.

The Three and a Half Years

It all began in the month of December of 1941. The local people of Kelantan, a northern state of the Peninsula Malaysia were anxiously waiting the arrival of the Japanese army; they were told the Japanese were the saviours of freedom, rescuers of the colonized and builders of prosperity for Asians.

From February 15, 1942 to August 14, 1945, Malaya, Singapore and Sumatera came under the rule of the Japanese. They initially clarified their intention politically as well as administratively: that their presence would bring new and fine hope to the equality and prosperity of Asia under their leadership. They grabbed hold of the newspapers, published their own *Semangat Asia*, *Fajar Asia*, and *Berita Malai* for the process of "the new spirit towards the Japanese policies and smoother administration."¹ The three newspapers were in Singapore, thus making the city the centre of the literary movement of the time. Contributors from Malaya and Sumatera sent their poems to these papers. The Japanese Censorship was then on, and poems were made to propagate the new colonizer: thus began a new era of literary writing especially poetry, which became popular in production as well as in reception. They were well taken and read for some reasons found in the literary history of Malaysia.

Before the era, this poetry had its own course with the influence of teachers who had graduated from the Sultan Idris Teacher's Training College in Tanjung Malim. Their themes were of nationalistic feeling, of melancholic love, struggle for independence in their subtle way. Aesthetically they were very loyal to the tradition of the *pantun*, *syair* and *gurindam*. Poets of the early days "gave their priority to content and idea...not much attention to the technique... their message must reach the society,

society, be effective and reflective."²

The Japanese came with power, rigour and high spirit of freedom for the people. They were equipped with strategies, along with their propaganda.

The most important prerequisite of a successful propaganda is the total control of the mass media. This principle was accepted and exploited by the astute to make sure the Japanese ideas would take root, then assumed control of all means of communications, especially the mass media. Thus the once free and flourishing media was stifled.³

Thematically, patriotism over-rode the others. *Berita Malai* produced 65%; *Fajar Asia* published 50% and *Semangat Asia* had 48% of their poems which totalled up to 55 for the period of 1942-44.⁴ Collective Asian patriotism was the most popular and the ideal was total unification. A poet by the name of Bakhtiar Effendi wrote in 1943 in *Fajar Asia*:

*Lo Asia not to scatter
Like a chain grows stronger
Live and die we be together
Into giyugun or Giyu Tai era.*⁵

This call for unity, to join the Japanese military and to strengthen the Asia-ness really injected strength and belief to the locals. The eagerness to chase the white colonizers out of their countries was clearly manifest. One of them wrote:

***Syonan-Tokyo
One in the South - the Other in the East***

*The south star in the Peninsula
Town that joins
Between Tokyo the protector
With Asia clearly shown*

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*The two Tokyo-Syonan
One in the east the other in the south
Spiritually close
With feelings of repose*

*Tokyo centre of prosperity
The beginning of all regulation
Syonan centre of the south
Come all the consignment*

*Syonan is proud of its star
Shines around
Tokyo stands with its Fujiyama
Guarding the lands under
When Fuji wind blows
Comes along the scented sakura
All over the lands of the sun
Waking up the genuine spirit of Asia.*

Adi Satria

Ichigatsu 2603
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The long gruelling experience living under poverty, witnessing the white masters and their accomplices carted away the economic resources made the local people eagerly welcome the Japanese who they believed to be rescuers and saviours. The promises that the Japanese made before their march in really convinced the writers and the people at large. They expressed these positive feelings and attitudes through poems that they wrote and published in *Berita Malai*, *Semangat Asia* and *Fajar Asia*.

That was a sudden phenomenon which was psychological in nature that existed among the Malay poets. They looked at Tokyo as the origin of freedom, the centre of prosperity, and a leader of struggle against the white masters. The Japanese style of life, their spirit of courage and endurance

in the front lines were examples of exemplary behaviour to the Malays. The poets called for a total realization towards a brighter future life with the Japanese and all the others in the whole of Asia. They demanded that political power must be given back to the people, with the help of the Japanese. The love of the nation, the strong spirit against the white colonizers, the ever-positive dream of independence, and the ever-increasing struggle for the future well-being⁶ should be enlightened day by day in order to achieve the collective dreams nurtured by the Japanese. Among the nationalists that kept the light of struggle burning were "Rasyid Manggis, Bahtiar Effendi, Doktor Gaus, Zuber Salam, Tharuddin Ahmad, Nuraini, Zainal Abidin Ahmad, Masuri S.N. and Adi Satria."⁷ They wrote not only poems praising the Japanese but also poems encouraging the people to join hands and free the nation from the undesired elements (according to time, race and milieu).

Masuri S.N., the youngest poet of the time, was the most prolific. His poems were of the highest spirit and motivation for the betterment of life and struggle. His titles reflected the content of his poems, as seen below:

Bunga Sakura	(Sakura Flowers)	Sept.5, 1944
Perajurit Negara	(Nation's Heroes)	Sept.12, 1944
Majulah Perang	(War Progress)	Oct. 3, 1944
Marilah Bersatu	(Let's Unite)	Oct. 31, 1944
Membela Nusa	(For the Nation)	Nov. 21, 1944
Korban Sejati	(Genuine Sacrifice)	Dec. 26, 1944
Bakti Putera Timur	(Sons of the East's commitment)	Dec. 12, 1945
Kepada Perajurit Tanahair	(To the Nation's Heroes)	June 4, 1945

Let us examine one of his high-spirited power packed poems originally titled "Korban Sejati" from *Berita Malaya* December 26, 1944:

Genuine Sacrifice

*It is not a genuine sacrifice
If only with generous words
Show your proof and commitment
Sacrifice for the people and nation
Look on with awe?
The fallen heroes
Join them in line
For a nation refined*

*It is of the highest respect
Your worldly and sacrifice
Written together with others
Heroes of nation and the people⁸*

The sense of high confidence is already there as the poem was published in 1944: the Japanese had been almost three years in Malaya. The people at large had stopped their resistance against the Japanese, except for the Malayan People's anti-Japanese Army which put up their struggles in the bushes and jungles as they became guerillas. The majority were Chinese in origin (not the Malays); their attitudes had its historical origins in the Sino-Japanese War in the early turn of the century.

Masuri S.N., Zainal Abidin Ahmad, Adi Satria and the rest of the poets of war were the spokesmen of the Malay community of the Nusantara, the people who had been inflicted with physical and emotional sufferings for hundreds of years. The Malays had every reason to support the existence of the Japanese. Economically, psychologically, sociologically and politically, the Malays were much discriminated against by the British, compared to the immigrants. These immigrants had been residing for only a few years in the country and literally they were "imported into the country" to work in the tin mines and the agricultural plantations.

The presence of the Japanese was a “grace to the Malays as they had the chance to not only realise and articulate their dreams of freeing the country, but also to have the political power in their hands again. Even after more than three years in the hands of the Japanese, Masuri S.N., one of the spokesmen optimistically pronounced his dreams, his enthusiasm and his undivided belief of achieving independence and the people’s freedom. I quote his poem of 1944 in its original Bahasa Melayu:

Marilah Bersatu

*Mari bersatu, wahai rakan
Menyerah tenaga mengatur barisan
Besar kecil, tua muda sekalian
Berpada teguh, menjadi ikatan*

*Segala kerja sama dibuat
Berat ringan sama dipikul
Jangan pilih pangkat darjat
Bekerjasama mengayun cangkul*

*Bukan masanya berpecah belah
Satu ke barat, satu ke timur
Tenaga semua perlu tersimpul
Agar Asia Menjadi makmur*

*Wahai saudara bangsa Asia
Tetapkan hati, mengadap derita
Awal bermula, azab sengsara
Kelak bertukar bahagia raya.*

30.10.1944⁹

It is a call of unity and intergrity, a reassurance of a bright milieu and future, a reiteration of political power that belonged to the Asians, for the people who had been colonized for many centuries. It is a suggestive change of attitude, from the silent protest of the past to an open participation of struggle for freedom. Poets like Masuri S.N. injected a serum of courage

and endurance to the people, believing that the fight could finally succeed with their full support and cooperation, physically as well as mentally. Pamphlets and propaganda by the Japanese mass media slowly caused the people to look to a change for the better. Poems from the three main media and others like *Fajar Asia*, *Sinaran Matahari*, *Suara Timur* and *Matahari Memancar* fully utilized the opportunity given by the Japanese with their slogans of "Asia for Asia" and "for a Greater Asian prosperity" to strengthen their courage. Immigrants, were retreated by the Japanese for historical causes as much as for their hatred towards the British.

Love for the country and the ever-willing sacrifice of body and soul were clearly portrayed by the nationalist poets. Masuri S.N. puts it vividly in his "Membela Nusa" (as extracted):

*Kanda berjuang, di medan perang
Dinda bela, medan belakang
Rasakan dekat, dinda di sini'
Walau nyata, berjauh diri.....!*

*Jangan dinda menjadi bimbang
Teruskan membina, garis belakang
Kanda kan nanti menjelang pulang
Pabila uai, menang berperang.....!¹⁰*

The Malays were exposed to the media and became even more spirited in their struggle as the Japanese were their backers and supporters. They openly cooperated with the Japanese although they hardly knew them even after two or three years. Historical truth fauned their aspirations to repossess what they had lost to the West and others. Apart from the fiery propaganda, the poems written and published served as a catalyst for agitation. The people demanded social and spiritual changes and they were willing ultimately to die for the cause:

- i. *Biar lawan banyak berbilang
Datang meluru menyerang kami
Kami rela, mati berjuang
Kerana membela, IBU PERTIWI*

- Masuri S.N. "Bisikan Arwah Hang Tuah."¹¹

- ii. *Kapal kita terbang tinggi
Mengadang musuh dengan berani
Melawan menghambat bukannya aperi
Sehingga musuh habis lari.*

- Ibrahim Ali "Musuh Cuba menyerang."¹²

- iii. *Gemilang langit nilakandi Asia
Awan tebal pekat terkuak lenyap
Dihalaukan fajar pancaran Timur,
Surya nan membawa aliran permai"
O, tidak lagi kelok rintik bergema
Tidak lagi air mata jatuh meluap
Gegak gempita sorakan berdebur,
Asia berseru: Banzai! Banzai!*

- N. A. Shah, "Asia Baru."¹³

Some used symbols and land images, but the majority were more direct in their approach, in the way they were taught to think, react and strategize themselves by the Japanese in order to boost their aspirations to grow stronger. Consequently, poems of the Japanese period underwent tremendous changes from the earlier Malay traditional poetry not only in the way the poets expressed their intentions but also in the kind of language they used. The traditional way of "by indirection" was very little practised, and was considered by Muhammad Haji Salleh "as a new period in the development of modern Malay poetry."¹⁴

This "new period" was of course related to the way of how the Japanese treated the people, especially the Malays. They

had had a low profile existence for hundreds of years, as they were colonized and ill-treated by their masters. They badly needed the changes. When the opportunity came, they grabbed it for their own good and their future well being.

Although the Japanese stayed for three and a half years, it was only the beginning. After the Japanese left in 1945, the voices of independence and freedom expressed through poetry became even stronger. Masuri S.N. and Usman Awang were very positive in their call for the new order: their idealism sought through independence and total freedom for the people.¹⁵ History depicts the past. When the British put up their White paper of the Malayan Union (1946) the reaction of the Malays was even more tense and aggressive. The Malayan Union had a foreshadow of the bleak future of the Malays in the Malay States. A series of political protests were staged by the people — the Malays. Poets used the mass media like *Mingguan Hiburan*, *Majalah Kencana*, and *Majalah Mastika* and *Mingguan Utusan Zaman*. They published a total of 274 poems from 1947-49.¹⁶ Of the total, 39.8% put the national struggle as their theme, while 13.7% called for change in the country: changes on the social, the economic, political and administrative aspects.¹⁷

Conclusion

Political history goes along with literary history in the case of the Malays in 1940's. The short stay of the Japanese from 1941-45, was a boom to them. They realized how the West had manipulated them for hundreds of years. Poetry was made a tool of struggle for the people. Poetry was very effective and truly left a very positive catharsis. All along the 1940's, poetry offered reflections and refractions of the Malays as a whole.

The 1940's was the beginning of a new era politically and in the development of modern Malay poetry. The strong voices of the people were heard and felt both by the Japanese and the British. This "dumb and mutilated" race before the 1940's finally achieved their political goal in 1957. Poetry played a very important role

before the decade. Part of the success was certainly owed to the Japanese.

Notes

1. Ali bin Ahmad, 1974. *Tema sajak-sajak Melayu 1933-1960*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, p.37.
2. Pyan Husayn and Suhaimi Haji Muhamad eds., 1981. *Embun pagi: Antologi puisi sebelum perang*. p. xxiv.
3. Florinda B. De Fiesta. 1990. "Underground mass media during the Japanese occupation of the Philippine: A historical study and content analysis of selected buerilla newspaper." MA Thesis, University of the Philippines. The same situation had taken its course in the case of the Malaysian newspapers and magazine of that time.

The poems quoted in this paper, originally written in Bahasa Melayu, were translated into English by this writer.

4. Ali bin Ahmad. p. 40.
5. The original in Malay:

Wahai Asia janganlah bercerai
Ikatan kuat sebagai rantai
Sehidup semati jangan berderai
Memasuki giyugun atau Giyu Tai.

"Giyugun" and "Giyu Tai" were the two early defence mechanisms created by the Japanese for the local people, especially the Malays.

6. Li Chuan Siu, 1966. *Ikhtiar sejarah kesusasteran Melayu baru 1830-1945*. Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Antara, pp. 102-103.

7. Ibid. p. 101.
8. Puan Husayn and Ismail Ahmad, eds. 1978. *Puisi Zaman Jepun*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, p. 15. Originally the poem contained four verses.
9. Ibid. p. 10. the translation of the poem is given below.

Let's Unite

Let's unite, friends.
Submit and march
Big and small, young and old
Strongly unite, form a fold.

Let's work together
Shoulder all tasks
Forget the ranks
Together we grasp

It is not the time to split
One to west, the other to the east
Let's be together
So Asia can prosper

O people of Asia
Endure the pains
The beginning is always hard
It will change to happiness

10. Ibid. p. 11.
11. Ibid. p. 12.
12. Ibid. p. 24.