Oriental Philology after *Orientalism*

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One can hardly imagine a more typically Orientalist discipline than philology. Its heyday in the late nineteenth century coincided with the height of colonial domination of Asia by some European nations. Thanks to the critical programme of Edward Said and those inspired by him in the late twentieth century, we now understand how Oriental philology went fist in glove with the violence of colonialism. Philologists could dissect the wording of Oriental texts because colonial armies stuffed them into Western libraries and museums. Indeed, the field itself 'now carries a hint of criminality'.[1] How do we live with the original sin of Oriental philology, which is rooted in the expropriation of the written heritage of Asian societies? Can we reconcile the epistemological premises of philology with indigenous ways of handling texts, or will they always be each other's Other? What possible use does today's world have for such a culpable and disengaged discipline as Oriental philology?

To explore these questions, let's start with a case study: a large group of Indonesian palm leaf manuscripts called the Lombok Collection. From July to November 1894, the Dutch waged war on the Maharaja of Lombok. This was no quashing of a peasant rebellion. The king was reputed to be the richest indigenous ruler east of Java. He possessed arsenals of modern firearms, fortified strongholds throughout his realm and a number of British steamships recently purchased from Singapore. The subjugation of the Maharaja was slow and protracted, but on 19 November the Netherlands East Indies army finally seized the treasure hoard of Cakranagara, the king's

1. Sheldon Pollock, 'Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World', *Critical Inquiry* 35.4 (2009): 946.

central palace. Along with 230 kilograms of gold, seven tonnes of silver coins and innumerable precious stones and ornaments, the royal library of palm leaf manuscripts became the property of the East Indies government.[2]

Not many rampaging armies take a philologist along with them, but this one did. J.L.A. Brandes was the government's language official and a board member of the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences, the colony's leading scholarly institution. In June 1894 the society sent a special request to the military: 'that, if the expedition to Lombok goes ahead, the interests of the Society be attended to by having collections made of weapons, clothes, objects of daily use, and especially manuscripts'.[3] Brandes's role in the expedition was apparently to manage the collection of these manuscripts. The society's annual report noted that Brandes, 'being on the island of Lombok during the conquest of Cakranagara, had the good luck of saving the library and manuscripts of the king'.[4] Perhaps it would have been better luck not to bombard the library in the first place. Brandes assiduously catalogued these manuscripts, and after his death in 1905 the Indies government transferred them to Leiden University. In its new home, the Lombok Collection became a critical resource for the burgeoning field of Old Javanese philology.

After *Orientalism*, we are much less comfortable with this kind of provenance. What was once the leisurely perusal of palm leaves now feels more like handling stolen goods. And the right thing to do with stolen goods is to give them back to their original owners. In this spirit, one of the manuscripts from the Lombok Collection was returned to the Indonesian state in 1973, along with a part of the Cakranagara treasure a few years later.[5] There are innumerable legal, ethical and political issues around the repatriation of colonial loot that I won't address here. As philologists, we don't really mind who owns the manuscripts, just as long as everyone still

2. Alfons van der Kraan, *Lombok: Conquest, Colonization, and Underdevelopment, 1870–1940* (Singapore: Published for the Asian Studies Association of Australia by Heinemann Educational Books [Asia], 1980), 16–99.

3. Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen, *Notulen van de Algemeene en Bestuurs-vergaderingen van het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* [Minutes of the General and Board Meetings of the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences], Volume 32 (Batavia: Albrecht & Rusche, 1895), 77 (my translation).

4. Ibid., 129 (my translation).

5. Jos van Beurden, *Treasures in Trusted Hands: Negotiating the Future of Colonial Cultural Objects* (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2017), 138–39.

gets to read them. This indifference to ownership may seem like good scholarly neutrality to some and unforgiveable moral cowardice to others. But I think it is neither neutral nor cowardly. By pressing the issue of access (meaning free, equitable and impartial access), philologists are making the moral assertion that these texts are precious because of the knowledge they contain, because they give opportunities for anyone to learn and study. We are rejecting the colonialist attitude, found also in the postcolonial world, that these texts are mere trophies to be won, possessed and hoarded by the victors of some political struggle.

If we look at things this way, then we have to face the problem of how Oriental philology constitutes its object of study. Philology plucks texts out of their cultural contexts and subjects them to alien procedures of analysis, dismemberment and reassembly in the form of critical editions, translations and commentaries. This encounter is all the more alien in Indonesia, where indigenous ways of working with texts often seem at odds with those of the modern discipline. A key aim of philology is to produce a useful and authoritative text edition from a variety of manuscript copies. The philologist does this by selecting, combining and emending the best readings supplied by the surviving manuscripts, in order to reveal 'the excellence of the original creation'.[6] But Indonesian manuscripts often vary in an undisciplined manner, frustrating our attempts to work out their genetic relations. Texts are fragmented and get mixed together in irregular ways. Written transmission is intertwined with oral recitation, performance occasions and the visual arts, which often makes it hard to discern any singular 'original creation' at all. Colonial philologists frequently disparaged Indonesian textual practices with insults like '*slordig*' (sloppy), '*nieuwerwetsche*' (newfangled) and '*verbasterd*' (bastardised). They rarely stopped to ask why those practices made sense to and were valued by Indonesian scribes.

The rift between Oriental philology and its object was aggravated by the postcolonial turn that followed *Orientalism*. Now it was the philologists who came under attack, for not appreciating the validity and value of indigenous practices. For Southeast Asia in particular, 'the work and the equipment to grasp it have not been made in the same shop, and the shop where the

6. S.O. Robson, *Principles of Indonesian Philology* (Dordrecht: Foris Publications, 1988), 3.

latter is made is never Southeast Asian'.[7] Oriental philology was seen by postcolonial scholars as out of touch with what Asian people actually do with their texts. No matter that most philology on Indonesian texts nowadays is done in Indonesia by Indonesians, because their methods and approaches descend directly from colonial scholarship. The rift remains. In the words of one critique: 'it may be the case that scholarly accounts of the "Old Javanese text" can tell us more about philological idiosyncrasies than about anything "the Balinese" might or might not have been doing'.[8] Philology seems to have lost its authority to teach us anything real about the Orient, but has instead become a dusty monument to its own hang-ups and prejudices.

What's an Oriental philologist to do? I want to offer two suggestions for how we can get by in a postcolonial world that seems to have little room for us. First, what can we do about the discipline's complicity in colonial rule? Many of the manuscripts we study are implicated in histories of European colonialism, though few as egregiously as the Lombok Collection. We cannot undo colonialism and we may doubt whether simply transferring the ownership of these manuscripts will really set things right. But what we can do is use our ability to read Oriental manuscripts to enrich the study of colonial history. Instead of just reading the coloniser's archive against the grain, why not also read the archives of the colonised? For example, the Lombok Collection contains all manner of documents that give us insight into the political, cultural and religious life of the Maharaja's court. Yet this collection has very rarely been mined for such historical information. Our knowledge of the events of 1894 is still based almost entirely on European sources, a common situation in the historiography of colonialism. This is a job for Oriental philologists, because to make those sources available to historians, we need to transcribe them from their original scripts, translate them into modern languages and write all the footnotes needed to make sense of them. Too many indigenous archives remain closed because historians do not have the philological keys to open them.

7. A.L. Becker, 'Introduction', in *Writing on the Tongue*, ed. A.L. Becker (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1989), 3.

8. Richard Fox, 'Substantial Transmissions: A Presuppositional Analysis of "the Old Javanese Text" as an Object of Knowledge, and Its Implications for the Study of Religion in Bali', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 159.1 (2003): 101–2.

Second, we need to heal the rift between indigenous textual practices and disciplinary philology. We cannot just barrack for one side or the other, either belittling the tradition or denouncing the discipline. In fact, philologists of Indonesian texts have long been conscious of the need for such a reconciliation.[9] We know that we should take seriously the text's whole history, from its original archetype through its lines of transmission to its surviving manuscripts. We know that we should consider how written traditions interact with orality, performance, visual art and mass media.[10] We know that the analytical methods we apply to texts should be in harmony with the practices that produced those texts, that they should be made in the same shop. It's challenging to transform our philological methods to meet these needs, while keeping our disciplinary commitment to systematicity and comprehensiveness. But we have made a start on this. Philologists have begun to change our methods for working with Indonesian texts, in order to better account for occasions of performance, oral delivery, copying from memory and the intermixing of fragmentary originals.[11]

Said's message for Oriental philology was largely one of rebuke. It still stings. The discipline's complicity in colonial domination cannot be brushed aside. Its estrangement from the real-life textual practices that are its supposed object of study is an ongoing problem. But hope may lie in a new agenda of work for Oriental philologists. We can use our expertise to

9. P.J. Worsley, *Babad Buleleng: A Balinese Dynastic Genealogy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), 92; Willem van der Molen, 'Aims and Methods of Javanese Philology', *Indonesia Circle* 9 (1981): 11.

10. Amin Sweeney, *A Full Hearing: Orality and Literacy in the Malay World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Adrian Vickers, *Journeys of Desire: A Study of the Balinese Text Malat* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2005); C.C. Macknight and I.A. Caldwell, 'Variation in Bugis Manuscripts', *Archipel* 61 (2001): 139–54; Helen Creese, 'Im-Materiality: Where Have All the Akṣara Gone?', in *The Materiality and Efficacy of Balinese Letters: Situating Scriptural Practices*, ed. Richard Fox and Annette Hornbacher (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 166–90.

11. Bernard Arps, *Tall Tree, Nest of the Wind: The Javanese Shadow-play* Dewa Ruci *Performed by Ki Anom Soeroto. A Study in Performance Philology* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016); Henri Chambert-Loir, 'The History of a History: Variant Versions of the *Sulalat al-Salatin*', *Indonesia* 104 (2017): 121–77; Campbell Macknight, Mukhlis Paeni and Muhlis Hadrawi, trans. and eds., *The Bugis Chronicle of Bone* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2020); Wayan Jarrah Sastrawan, 'How to Read a Chronicle: The Pararaton as a Conglomerate Text', *Indonesia and the Malay World* 48.140 (2020): 2–23.

recover colonised voices in history, and we can develop methods that are more suited to the realities of indigenous texts. Oriental philology may yet have the good luck of saving its moral standing and scholarly mission in the aftermath of *Orientalism*.