

Syair Kisah Perang Rokam: A Malay Historical Verse Form from Malacca

Shaiful Bahri Md Radzi¹, Zubir Idris¹ & Muhd Norizam Jamian¹

¹ School of Malay Language, Literature and Culture, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Correspondence: Shaiful Bahri Md Radzi, School of Malay Language, Literature and Culture, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia. E-mail: sbmr@ukm.my

Received: June 10, 2013 Accepted: July 27, 2013 Online Published: September 29, 2013

doi:10.5539/ass.v9n13p201

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v9n13p201>

Abstract

Syair Kisah Perang Rokam (The Ballad of the Rokam War) is a historical syair depicting the outbreak of the anti-British resistance among the Malay folks of Serkam in the state of Malacca in 1887. The uprising of social unrest rose due to the enforcement of a new revenue system that brought repressed emotion among the people. The account of the events were transmitted orally as a local legend and later composed by a person named Encik Hasin into an oral verse form, the syair. It was then transformed into the written form based on the personal notes of Haji Omar Haji Osman, a local religious personage, teacher and also a local historian. Although, the syair encapsulates only nineteen verses, however, it manages to portray the event, criticizing both the British and the local villagers. The British were criticized for introducing such an unfavourable taxation scheme whereas the locals were criticized for their lukewarm spirit in their struggle against the colonial force. In view of this, the purpose of this paper is to introduce a syair form of historical work originated from a village milieu which was orally composed. This paper will also elaborate the folkloristic nature of the syair and its conceptual implication to the conventions of Malay syair. As a commoner's composition of poetic form originated from the village milieu, the characteristic of folkloristic features were highly visible as it was presented in the language of the everyday Malay society. Such folkloristic features could be seen in terms of words selection, sentence construction, the used of nicknames blended with the elements of humour to bring a jovial mood to the audience although there were also historical elements significantly embedded in the syair.

Keywords: historical syair, anti-British resistance, social unrest, local legend, folkloristic features

1. Introduction

The pantun is perhaps the best and most well-known poetic-rhymed verse forms ever created by the indigenes of the Malay Archipelago. (Note 1) Despite originating from the sociocultural milieu of the quintessential Malay village, the pantun has been celebrated across the Archipelago by peoples of diverse sociocultural and linguistics backgrounds who in their daily communications, may have found the four-line verse form truly capable in functioning as a social criticism, as an expression of customs and traditions; as an incantation of magic and charms; for teaching wisdom and the precious art of behaviour; for amusements especially in song and also in matters of amorous events (Braginsky, 2006, p. 501-502). Due to its characteristics, convention and aesthetic promise, the pantun suits the sociocultural objectives of its creation and it becomes the principal poetic-rhymed form for the transmission of (spoken) knowledge and everyday discourses. However, the real potential of pantun as a formidable medium of literary expression may never be realized. The structural convention of the pantun itself becomes a characteristic limitation in restricting the verbal articulation of ideas. (Note 2)

On the contrary, the syair, (Note 3) another form of poetic-rhymed originated from within the royal court milieu, acclaims much wider usage as it was used as a medium of expression in Malay literary tradition in tandem with the prose form, which gained momentum as literacy and writing-based culture began to engage the literate section of Malay societies. (Note 4) Such poetic-rhymed form is suitable in the composition of various religious treaties or the kitab, (Note 5) literary narratives or the hikayat and historical texts. It is fair to claim that historical narratives have been influential and most widely used by court writers for the purpose of glorifying the greatness

of the Malay sultanate, kingdom, descendent and its past (Braginsky, 2006, p. 565) as demonstrated in the Sejarah Melayu. (Note 6) Court narratives aside, interestingly, there are also several historical works in the syair form which were orally composed sans patronage and which subsequently, were narrated by lay persons. These syair include 'Syair Sungai Perak (The Ballad of River Perak)', 'Syair Kampung Behrang Ulu (The Ballad of the Upper Behrang Village)', (Note 7) 'Syair Keramat Teluk Rubiah (The Ballad of the Sacred Bay of Rubiah)' (Note 8) and 'Syair Kisah Perang Rokam (The Ballad of the Rokam War)' (Harun, 1989, p. 264), an oral transmitted syair depicting the 1887 incident of anti-British resistance among the Malay of Serkam in the state of Malacca. In view of this, the purpose of this paper is to introduce a syair form of historical work originated from a village milieu which was orally composed. This paper will also elaborate the folkloristic nature of the syair and its conceptual implication to the conventions of Malay syair.

2. Two Versions of Syair Kisah Perang Rokam

Little is known about the existence of the text of Syair Kisah Perang Rokam and the knowledge about the actual war which occurred about 124 years ago in Serkam due to the fact only the elders of Serkam would be familiar with the syair as they could be the descendents of those who took up the cause of the war. (Note 9) The location of the written verses of Syair Kisah Perang Rokam had been a subject of interest for many decades amongst researchers of Malay studies. Presently, there are two versions of the Syair Kisah Perang Rokam text. The account of the text was made public to the Serkam residents in 2005 when this elusive text was found enclosed inside a special commemorative booklet published by the family members of one Tuan Haji Omar Haji Othman (1893-1980), (Note 10) also known as Pak Alang, (Note 11) who once lived as a teacher-cum-cleric and had been the local historian of Serkam. Entitled 'Serkam Satu Kenangan' (Serkam in Memory) (Note 12), it appears that the syair in the booklet comprises only 19 romanized stanzas, prompting speculations about its authenticity. The other version is owned by Encik Osman bin Haji Abu, a khat artist in Umbai, Malacca. As his livelihood is depended on such artistic skill, the poem is enclosed in an A4 size photocopy booklet written in a stylish Jawi script which he makes available for sale.

Both versions bear several similarities in terms of the number of verses and the depiction of event but are slightly different in the sequence of the verse arrangement and also in word selection for certain verses. However, judging through both versions of the syair, it appears that Haji Omar's version is, as it were, more 'authoritative' text than Osman's based on the flow of its plot sequence which makes the narrative more convincing in the presentation of the historical facts. The Syair Kisah Perang Rokam, a surviving piece of an important and active local oral history in a modern Malay society, recalls a historical event that forms the basis for a romanticised war folklore which then circuited the villages in and outside Serkam.

Essentially, the syair depicts a group of villagers in their struggle to overcome their anger and despair brought about by the British due to the implementation of a new colonial revenue system in 1887. Here, two reasons may be suggested for its 'creation'. One, Haji Omar's choice of the syair form as a means of narrating the courage and determinism of the peasants to resist the British authority as well as the great hostility between the two sides which emerged in the event is exclusively for commemorative reason. Another, following its composition into the verse form, the syair immediately assumes the critical function as a mnemonic device for indeed, within the commoner's realm, the rightful place of any oral literature is among its listening audience, who, engaged by the structural and poetic devices of the syair, may find it easier to remember the incident before passing it down to future generations. Only then, perhaps some time later, that Haji Omar took the initiative to transform these oral verses, which has served as the villagers' collective memory, from suffering a life as an endless palimpsest into a more permanent form of the written syair which he preserved in his personal record.

Regarded as a local legend now, the folklore was transliterated into its poetic verse form by a local Serkam villager, Encik Hasan & Hasin, which is alluded to in both versions of the syair shown below:

i. Haji Omar's version-stanza 18

Asal syair empunya karang

Ialah Encik Hasan nama seorang

Kisahny dapat dihurai terang

Orang Serkam kononnya berperang

[The actual author of the poem

Encik Hasan is the name of the person

The incident thus clearly has been elaborated

As if the Serkam folks are at war]

ii. Osman's version-stanza 12

Ahli syair empunya karang

Encik Hasin nama seorang

Kisah dapat dihurai terang

Orang Serkam kononnya berperang

[The actual author of the poem

Encik Hasin is the name of the person

The incident thus clearly has been elaborated

As if the Serkam folks are at war]

The obvious exception to these almost symmetrical stanzas is perhaps the slight orthographic irregularity in the storyteller's name. Whilst the names are otherwise a perfect match to their romanized Jawi script (حسين), it is plausible that the name Hasin may have both been in actual fact, an original pronunciation and an initial spelling mistake which seems to have been kept intact for generations without providing a disclaimer. In fact, the name Hasin appears to be somewhat less even uncommon among Malays compared to Husin, the popular namesake of one of Prophet Muhammad's grandsons, the other being Hasan.

In general, within Malay historical works and its preservation, the content of Syair Kisah Perang Rokam may earn itself a generic classification under Malay historiography genre, specifically within the subcategory of 'historical syair.' See Table 1 below for both versions of the syair:

Table 1. The versions of Syair Kisah Perang Rokam text

Haji Omar's Version		Osman's Version	
1.	Bismillah itu mula dikarang	1. (1) (Note 13)	Bismillah itu mula dikarang
	Syair sudah dibuat orang		Syair sudah dibuat orang
	Sebab kampung jadi berperang		Sebab kampung jadi berperang
	Cukai lama sudah terbuang		Cukai lama sudah terbuang
	[Bismillah is first composed		[Bismillah is first composed
	Thus the verse commences its creation		Thus the verse commences its creation
	The reason that war occurred in the village		The reason that war occurred in the village
	The old revenue was being replaced]		The old revenue was being replaced]
	Alhamdulillah mula disurat		Alhamdulillah mula tersurat
	Syair sudah jadi melarat		Syair itu sudah dibuat
2.	Lamun hukumnya terlalu berat	2. (2)	Tahun ini hikmat berat
	Datang daripada kafir murtad		Datang dari kafir keparat
	[Alhamdulillah, it starts to be written		[Alhamdulillah, it starts to be written
	The poem continues to be composed		The poem has been composed
	Nevertheless, the rules are a burden		This year the rules are a burden
3.	Comes from the apostle infidel]	3. (3)	Comes from the apostle infidel]
	Hukumnya datang berdetap-detap		Hukuman datang berdetap-detap
	Orang mendengar banyak meratap		Itu tanda hukuman tetap
	Tanda hukumnya sudah tetap		Orang mendengar banyak meratap
	Bangsai dibuat tidak beratap		Bangsai dibuat tiada beratap
	[The implementation came with soldiers		[The implementation came with soldiers
	People wail as they heard the news		That's the sign that the act is absolute
	That's the sign that the act is absolute		People wail as they heard the news
	Raises the shed without a canopy]		Raises the shed without a canopy]

	Haji Omar's Version		Osman's Version
4.	Kisah itu sudah dinazam Kisah hari sudah malam Jam bunyi dua malam Senapang berbunyi berdegam-degam [The episode was turned into a song The event that happened after night fall The clock rings at 2.00 in the morning Sounds of gunfire keep on pounding]	4. (8)	Hukuman itu amat derhaka Banyak orang tiada suka Hingga meninggalkan rumahtangga Raja dimakan api neraka [The episode was turned into a song The event that happened after night fall The clock rings at 2.00 in the morning Sounds of gunfire keep on pounding]
5.	Syamsuddin dengan Rokam Ia lari lintang pukang Kabul kejar dari belakang Dipukul dengan punggung senapang [Syamsuddin comes with Rokam He runs off hay wire The sepoy chases him from behind And hits him with the butt of the shotgun]	5. (9)	Tatkala anak dara Syamsuddin duduk di pintu Pegang penyapu seorang satu Tuan Rokam naik ke situ Hendak dipukul dengan penyapu [When Syamsuddin's maidens sit by the door Holding a broom each one of them Tuan Rokam climbs on the house On him the broom will be smacked]
6.	Bila Syamsuddin berasa sakit Minta tolong lalu menjerit Datang pula orang bukit Datang ramai bukannya sedikit [When Syamsuddin feels the pain He screams loudly calling for help People then come down the hill Not few but in large numbers]	6. (10)	Setelah Rokam sangat gembira Serta ia balik ke Melaka Dibawanya Kabul dengan segera Masuk ke dalam kereta kuda [After Rokam is jubilant He subsequently leaves for Malacca Instantly brings along the band of Sepoy Into the carriage they climb on]
7.	Orang datang bunyi menderam Warna bulan cahaya kelam Orang-orang tiada di pangkal gelam Senapang berbunyi berdegam-degam [People come with a growling sound The moon gleams in gloomily No one is at the foot of gelam tree Sounds of gunfire keep on pounding]	7. (13)	Tersebut kisah seorang dua Kecut bin Rahman namanya dia Ditangkap Rokam dengan segera Disuruh panjat kelapa mula [There was a young man By the name of Kecut bin Rahman And so he was caught out by Rokam And made him climbed up the coconut palm]
8.	Hukumnya ini amat derhaka Banyak orang tidaklah suka Hingga meninggalkan rumahtangga Raja dimakan api neraka [The law is very tyrannous A lot of people really dislike it That makes them abandon their home Let the British be burnt in hell]	8. (14)	Kani cibai Kani hampu Jahat sekali orang Melayu Hutang gua kain belacu Habis lari semuanya itu [Kani Che Bai an apple polisher A Malay fellow who is a damn wicked Owes me some clothing debts Makes me lose everything that I have]

	Haji Omar's Version		Osman's Version
9.	Anak dara Syamsuddin duduk di pintu Pegang penyapu seorang satu Tuan Rokam naik ke situ Hendak dipukul dengan penyapu [Syamsuddin's maidens sit by the door Holding a broom each one of them If Rokam climbs on the house On him the broom will be smacked]	9. (15)	Cina kelentong banyak yang rugi Orang Melayu habis lari Hutang baju banyak lagi Minta tangguh lepas potong padi [Chinese liar suffers a great loss All the Malays have run off Lots of clothing debt were left unsettled Requests for postponement till harvesting is over]
10.	Setelah Rokam sangat gembira Serta ia balik ke Melaka Bawa Kabul dengan segera Masuk dalam kereta kuda [After Rokam is jubilant He subsequently leaves for Malacca Instantly brings along the band of Sepoy Into the carriage they climb on]	10.(16)	Padi di sawah dimakan tempua Dimakan pula lotong dengan kera Orang lari seda bada Tak kira tua ataupun muda [Paddy in the field is eaten by weaver So too by gibbons and monkeys People left in such a mayhem Doesn't matter whether young or old]
11.	Orang penuh ramai ditembak Pak Mat Gemuk kena tembak Serta teriak ibu dan bapak Dalam parit badan bercampak [In the huge crowd many are shot Fatty Pak Mat is struck by a shot Accordingly, he cries for his mom and dad Into the drain his body was thrown]	11. (17)	Begitu bunyi syair ringkasan Perang Rokam empunya kesan Cik Besar membaca lain cara lisan Ingatan sungguh pada perasan [That's the story of a brief poem The effect of The Rokam War Cik Besar can read and tell She remembers it due to her emotions]
12.	Cukup sayu hatinya dia Mak Uda Liah lari ke paya Panjat nyiur setakuk depa Bertanyakan Rokam di mana dia [She feels so sad about the incident Mak Uda Liah runs to the swamp Climbs a coconut palm for several notches Asking for Rokam, where's he?]	12. (18)	Ahli syair empunya karang Encik Hasin nama seorang Kisah dapat dihurai terang Orang Serkam kononnya berperang [The actual author of the poem Encik Hasin is the name of the person The incident thus clearly has been elaborated As if the Serkam folks are at war]
13.	Tersebut seorang muda Kecut Raman namanya dia Ditangkap Rokam dengan segera Disuruh panjat kelapa mula [There was a young man By the name of Kecut Raman And so he was caught out by Rokam And made him climbed up the coconut palm]	13. (4)	Kisah itu suatu nazam Biar hari sudah malam Jam berbunyi pukul dua malam Senapang berbunyi berdegam-degam [The episode was turned into a song The event that happened after night fall The clock rings at 2.00 in the morning Sounds of gunfire keep on pounding]

	Haji Omar's Version		Osman's Version
14.	Kani Che Bai kaki ampu Jahat betul orang Melayu Hutang ku kain baju Habis lari semua itu [Kani Che Bai an apple polisher A Malay fellow who is a damn wicked Owes me some clothing debts Makes me lose everything that I have]	14. (5)	Syamsuddin dengan Tuan Rokam datang Ia lari lintang pukang Dikejar Kabul dengan segera belakang Dipukul dengan buntut senapang [Syamsuddin comes with Tuan Rokam He runs off hay wire The Sepoy chases him from behind And hits him with the butt of the shotgun]
15.	Cina kelentong banyak rugi Orang Melayu habis lari Hutang kain baju banyaklah lagi Minta tangguh lepas potong padi [Chinese liar suffers a great loss All the Malays have run off Lots of clothing debt were left unsettled Requests for postponement till harvesting is over]	15. (6)	Telah Syamsuddin berasa sakit Minta tolong lalu menjerit Datang pula orang bukit Datang ia bukan sedikit [When Syamsuddin feels the pain He screams loudly calling for help People then come down the hill Not few but in large numbers]
16.	Padi sawah makan tempua Dimakan segala lotong kera Orang lari sara bara Tak kira tua ataupun muda [Paddy in the field is eaten by weaver So too by gibbons and monkeys People left in such a mayhem Doesn't matter whether young or old]	16. (7)	Orang bunyi menderam-deram Warna bulan cahaya kelam Orang tiba di pangkal gelam Senapang berbunyi berdegam-degam [People come with a growling sound The moon gleams in gloomily People come at the foot of gelam tree Sounds of gunfire keep on pounding]
17.	Begitulah bunyi syair ringkasan Kisah Perang Rokam empunya kesan Cik Besah baca dengan lisan Ingat sungguh dalam perasan [That's the story of a brief poem The effect of The Rokam War Miss Besah can read and tell She remembers it due to her emotions]	17. (11)	Orang penuh sekalian ditembak Dapat khabar Pak Mat Gemuk kena tembak Serta berteriak ibu dan bapak Dalam parit badan bercampak [In the huge crowd many are shot Fatty Pak Mat is struck by a shot Accordingly, he cries for his mom and dad Into the drain his body was thrown]
18.	Asal syair empunya karang Ialah Encik Hasan nama seorang Kisahnya dapat dihurai terang Orang Serkam kononnya berperang [The actual author of the poem En Hasan is the name of the person The incident thus clearly has been elaborated As if the Serkam folks are at war]	18. (12)	Cukup sayu hatinya dia Mak Uda lari dalam paya Panjat nyiur setakuk dua Bertanyakan Rokam di mana dia [She feels so sad about the incident Mak Uda Liah runs to the swamp Climbs a coconut palm for several notches Asking for Rokam, where's he?]
19.	Dengan perintah Tuan Rokam Menetapkan cukai di mukim Serkam Mulanya cukai hendak dicengkam	19. (19)	Begitulah semangat orang Serkam Menentang kehendak orang Rokam Macam-macam membuat ragam

Haji Omar's Version	Osman's Version
Orang Serkam membuat ragam	Tak mudah dapat dicengkam
[Now by the command of Master Rokam	[That's the spirit of the Serkam people
Thus fixed the tax for the land of Serkam	Against the will of the Rokam people
It would have been quite a throttlehold	All sorts of tantrums
Lest the men of Serkam fear to uphold]	Not easy to be gripped]

3. The Text

The Syair Kisah Perang Rokam may be considered to be a modest creation. Such a notion is based on two facts, that the text construction was attempted along traditional conventions of syair composition and that it only has a total of nineteen stanzas which is a fairly limited number of composition. Furthermore, as it was composed by an ordinary village folk, the verses openly display a less than refined 'form' vis-à-vis the convention of syair composition. All Malay literary works, whether in verse or prose form, usually begin with a doxology, the introductory section of the work. Here, an author usually takes the opportunity to praise Allah and begs for His mercy in order that He may grant him the strength, guidance and protection ahead of the completion of his task. It is then followed by the dedication and eulogy to the king, nobles and other patrons of the arts before expressing his/her own 'conceited' apologies to suggesting, in what is thought as a deeply 'Malay' sense of humility, one's inability to reach the expected level of composition. (Note 14) Regarding this matter, Muhammad (1991, p. 5) explained at length the importance of this introductory section to the author before such an undertaking is to proceed. He stresses that this compulsory preface is where the author gains the specific powers that directly influence him/her in the composition; in the case of this syair it is none other than Allah, The Almighty. As such, it proved Muhammad's claims that the ritual is both a custom as well as a practical manifestation of the writer's beliefs.

As such, without the basic and authoritative opening-glorifying the Almighty Allah, eulogizing the benefactors and apologizing for one's 'imperfections'-in the introductory section, the composition conclusively proves itself to be an orally-derived syair. Such a lacunae becomes justifiable as the author's main intention is none other than to deliberate upon a series of events that have stirred the emotions among his village folks as grief, fear, panic and despair played havoc with their wretched lives. Indeed, the patronizing Malay royal household is out of the author's priorities for the Malaccan sultanate had collapsed a long, long time and now the land was ceded to Britain, the last of the European colonial superpowers. (Note 15) The other observable feature is the exaltation to the Almighty Allah in both versions of the syair wherein, the author deploys the Quranic phrases Bismillah and Alhamdulillah though they are restricted to the first word of the first couple of stanzas. Bismillah in Arabic means 'In the name of God' whereas Alhamdulillah means 'Praise be to God'. The former is part of a longer version of BismillahirRahmannirRahim meaning, 'In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.' Although only partial, it still serves the worshipper's intended acts of supplication such as that of asking for blessing, strength, guidance and protection for the undertaking from Allah. Such a phrase also actually acts as a simple prayer for every Muslim would usually be expected to recite it before they begin doing each of their daily chores, including such purposive composition of the syair in question. Similarly, reciting Alhamdulillah clearly reflects the author's intention in thanking Allah for His blessing and guidance-earlier rather than later in the syair-in pursuing his bardic task to its fruition.

The main body of the text which forms a large portion of this verse form is the description of the event proper, the outbreak of the anti-British resistance among the Malay peasants of Serkam, Malacca. This isolated incident occurred in 1887 when the British introduced a revised form of revenue system which was considered to be unjust by the locals as they felt that it would definitely victimize and suppress the poor Malay peasants. Reaction to such an unpopular and unfamiliar scheme is found in Hasin's accounts of the peasants' emotion; their acts of resistance; the retaliation by the British to curb the situation; the villagers' discomfort and the scenes of the uprising (whose details will be further discussed later). The above are illustrated in stanzas 3 to 17 of the Haji Omar's version, dedicating 15 out of 19 verses on the Serkam's historic social unrest (for further detail, see Table 1).

Lastly, the colophon or the concluding section of the text is made up of stanzas 18 and 19. Interestingly, in the penultimate verse, the author takes the opportunity to reveal his identity by naming himself as Hasan (stanza 18 of Haji Omar's version) and as Hasin (stanza 12 in Osman's version). The self-proclamation of one's authorial voice is apparently unprecedented in Malay literary tradition and as such practice is largely unconventional. However, this may be seen as an exception to the general rule precisely because such oral composition took

place outside the Malay palace, the domain of (high) Malay culture and letters. This invokes a comparison between syair and the works of Abdullah Munsyi, in that both enjoyed the benefit of a late nineteenth century post-Malaccan literary milieu, that is, the absence of a feudal referent. Their works were not intended to glorify the fallen empire. Like Abdullah who wrote in order to criticize the Malay society and their sultan, as for instance in *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi dari Singapura ke Kelantan* (1838) and *Hikayat Abdullah* (1849), Hasin's literary intent was to portray the villagers' struggle and opposition towards the British for imposing an oppressive system of taxation on the natives.

Besides revealing his identity, Hasin, in the Osman's version, used the final stanza as a conclusion in which the people's resistance to repeal the colonial tax system is duly summed up. It is interesting to note that the final stanzas in both versions are rather different in comparison to the relatively corresponding narrative in each version despite both disclosing a dissimilar sequential arrangement. In Haji Omar's version for instance, the essence of the verse clearly focused on the actual cause which generated social tension and led to the escalation of the revolt against the implementation of revenue system. In contrast, in Osman's version, the author takes a different perspective as he is more concerned with the village folks' spirit in fighting the colonial system. But perhaps, the issue that begs the question the most is just how could such contrasting views have occurred if the syair was composed by the same person? One explanation for such discrepancies is if the syair was edited by a later scribe, which is quite possible since it was originally derived from a non-binding folklore which is naturally bound to changes, as and when possible or necessary. The discrepancies in the final stanza of both versions are shown below:

i. Haji Omar's version-stanza 19

Dengan perintah Tuan Rokam
Menetapkan cukai di mukim Serkam
Mulanya cukai hendak dicengkam
Orang Serkam membuat ragam
[Now by the command of Master Rokam
Thus fixed the tax for the land of Serkam
It would have been quite a throtlehold
Lest the men of Serkam fear to uphold]

ii. Osman's version-stanza 19

Begitulah semangat orang Serkam
Menentang kehendak orang Rokam
Macam-macam membuat ragam
Tak mudah dapat dicengkam
[How spirited were the Serkam's folks
How they denied Rokam's demanding rogues
How cunning and determined were these folks
How they slipped out of that stranglehold]

On the whole, the text of Syair Kisah Perang Rokam therefore, can be divided into three main parts, namely, i) introduction, stanzas 1-2; ii) main event, stanzas 3-17; and iii) the conclusion section, stanzas 18-19 as illustrated in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Synopsis of the Syair

Section of Poetry	Stanza Number	Detail description
Introduction	1-2	Ritual praising of God, Allah (Doxology)
Main Event	3-17	Description of incidents
Conclusion	18	Disclosure of the author's/narrator's identity
	19	Summary of the narrative

In terms of stylistics, the *Syair Kisah Perang Rokam* text is presented in the language of the everyday Malay society strewn with a liberal dose of humour. One of the most glaring practices of colloquialism in the *syair* is the use of nicknames through which the characters such as Pak Mat Gemuk, Mak Uda Liah, Kecut Raman, Kani Che Bai and Cik Besah (all names are from Haji Omar's version) are identified. These names do not belong to anyone but are merely nicknames commonly used in everyday life which are based on the person's appearance, status, ethnicity, and word play. Pak Mat Gemuk for instance, is an elderly Malay man of a rotund appearance whose proper moniker is perhaps either Ahmad or Muhammad; Mak Uda Liah must surely be the fourth sibling of the family and her name may either be Jamaliah, Jaliah, or Saliah, etc. but shortened into 'Liah' for ease of reference. Similarly, Cik Besah, may be a handle for Habsah, Aisyah or Esah. As for Raman, he is definitely Abdul Rahman or solely Rahman with a skinny shrunken figure as if in shrinking manner. But these local names aside, a moniker like Kani Che Bai is somewhat unusual if not 'foreign' in origin. 'Bai', meaning brother in Hindi, is a typical reference for any northern Indian man-Pakistani, Afghanistan or Sikh (Punjabi)-among the Malays who tend to stereotype them by their impressive beard and burly personality. Likewise, 'Kani' is an unlikely name for a Malay but it may be identified with those of the sub-continent stock. However, from a different perspective, Kani Che Bai may not actually be a person's name at all. In fact, if one were to scrutinize Haji Omar's stanza no. 14 and Osman's no. 8 closely, it is plausible that 'Kani Che Bai' is merely a derivative wordplay of the phrase 'Kaninae Chibai!' an extreme level of profanity in the Hokkien dialect for it literally means 'Fuck your mother!' Such a view is credible as both stanzas in question clearly portrayed the author's intention in cursing and swearing the apple polisher whom he considered as wicked for owing him some money. By time, later copier or compiler may have changed it out of politeness from a bad word to a person name in order to neutralize and lower the insult tone so that it become acceptable for all audiences of all ages. Therefore, on the one hand, by mentioning all these characters, it justified the folkloristic nature of the commoner's creation of the *syair*. On the other hand, it draws our attention to the fact that the *syair* is without doubt depicting the struggles of the common people in coping with and making difficult adjustments to their livelihood in order to survive the impact of the newly enforced revenue system.

Besides nicknames, other practice of colloquialism may be found through word selection and sentence construction. The word 'berdegam-degam' as in 'Senapang berbunyi berdegam-degam' (Haji Omar, v. 4)-'imitation of gunshots sound' and 'kelentong' (Haji Omar, v. 15), 'lie' would be much better if replaced with 'bertalu-talu' (Pounding sounds of gunfire) and 'penipu' for 'liar' respectively. Accordingly, in the construction of sentences, the author uses certain words that are considered inappropriate in sentences such as, 'Banyak orang tidaklah suka' (Haji Omar, v. 8) and 'Minta tangguh lepas potong padi' (Haji Omar, v. 15). 'Banyak' (a lot) in the former sentence for instance, is suitable for non-human usage including animal and livestock and should be replaced by 'Ramai' which is suitable for human. Whereas, in the latter sentence, the phrase 'potong padi' which is colloquial in nature should be replaced with a more proper term such as 'menuai padi' (rice harvesting).

Religious matters overshadow the narrative of the Serkam war as the actual revolt was led by the local imam, Mohammad Said bin Marsah against what must have been in general, a non-Muslim entity. Therefore, the great but unavoidable feeling of disgust and anger towards the British government was clearly mobilized by the author of the *syair* as the local folks were depicted to be utterly scornful and cursing the Europeans as infidels and apostates (kafir murtad) as in 'Datang daripada kafir murtad' (Haji Omar's, stanza 2). Similarly, the author's hatred and ill-feeling borne towards the British is reflected in 'Raja dimakan api neraka' (Haji Omar's, stanza 8). Here, 'Raja' is perhaps a symbolic referent for the British colonial government which now became the poor villagers' arch-enemy. It is almost instantaneous in a Muslim and non-Muslim discursive practice to invoke the imagery of hell-fire into which tyrants, oppressors, transgressors and hypocrites will be sent, so Muslims are taught to believe by Islam, including, figuratively-speaking, bad 'governments'. The religious theme in the *syair* is fairly straightforward, and the author's 'comments' merely suggests his understanding of the teaching of Islam and his great faith in Almighty Allah for the salvation of his people.

The element of humour is significantly blended in the *syair* during its composition to bring about a jovial and lively mood to the audience. However, one finds that the sense of humour is rather directed as the banter is targeted perhaps at certain well-known public figures of Serkam. These personalities are usually portrayed as local 'clowns' who either due to their foolishness or just being plainly unlucky, are caught in the wake of the social confrontation and its predicaments, where the British authority is portrayed as the natural bully. One such predicament can be seen in stanza 13, whereby a local man, Kecut Rahman, was immediately forced to climb a coconut palm shortly after being arrested by the British troops. This unfortunate man had to suffer an unpleasant prank inflicted upon him by his captors. As shown below, it serves in part as a psychological ordeal to be used to foil the peasants from further demonstration:

Tersebut seorang muda
 Kecut Raman namanya dia
 Ditangkap Rokam dengan segera
 Disuruh panjat kelapa mula
 [There was a young man
 By the name of Shrunken Raman
 And so he was caught out by Rokam
 And made him climbed up the coconut palm]

Two other humorous acts constructed in the syair involve the characters Pak Mat Gemuk, who was struck by a gunshot (Haji Omar, stanza 11) and Mak Uda Liah, who ran towards the swamp in panic for safety to evade captivity (Haji Omar, stanza 12). In the 'amusing' case of the former, Pak Mat Gemuk let out a loud cry which the author unwittingly described as child-like, for he was calling out his parents out of a sheer pain as the shooters took him out which flung his fat body down in a gully (Serta teriak ibu dan bapak & Dalam parit badan bercampak). As for the latter, the author showed the distraught woman who could not go up a coconut tree higher than her arms span, was a panicky who kept asking if she was 'high and dry' enough from her ever lurking captor, Rokam, (Panjat nyiur setakuk depa & Bertanyakan Rokam di mana dia).

Apart from these humorous scenes, it seems logical to suggest that the composition was in fact a two-pronged criticism levelled at the British and the folks of Serkam. It is interesting to note the manner in which the author executes his criticism in the poetry. The former were criticized for introducing such an unfavourable tax scheme as much as their bloody suppression of the revolt which was overshadowed perhaps by an anti-Islamic zeal. Meanwhile, the latter were criticized for waging a conflict with the mighty colonial, an act of attrition which only demonstrates their stupidity and impracticality. Such a futile effort did not bring about any comfort and benefit to anyone but only adds to the misery of the people at large. Their lukewarm spirit in their struggle against the colonial force were not spared by the author who has resorted to quite a sarcasm as to depict most of them as local 'clowns.' The incident also created tension, fear, despair, frustration, panic and chaos to their otherwise rather calm rural livelihood. Due to the disturbance, most of the villagers had to abandon their homes, farms and livestock as they fled in numbers for safety taking refuge in other places (Omar, v. 15). In the aftermath of the incident, the conditions in the village were clearly mirrored in the poem. As the Serkam area was a rice growing area, the paddy fields were sadly abandoned by the warring folks, and left the pastures for the taking to weaver birds, gibbons and monkeys (Haji Omar, v. 16).

4. Historical Elements

Despite their depiction of the event which was more of an entertainment, the existence of historical elements embedded in the narrative cannot be denied because it most significantly reflects the anti-colonial consciousness of the village folks. According to the Straits Settlements Annual Administration Report Malacca for the year 1888, Hervey (1889, p. 3) states clearly that:

28. All the 17 Mukims of the Southern District were assessed, but owing to the organized resistance in this district, which culminated in the Serkam disturbances, only \$1,713 were collected in the last two months of the year, after the disturbances were suppressed.

Such statement by an officer of the Empire is conclusive evidence that the incidents described in the Syair Kisah Perang Rokam did happen in the penultimate year. Although they were merely 'disturbances' to the British, it was considered a war to the Malays since they were confronting a mighty colonial power and they even named it Perang Rokam (The Rokam War). In reality, it was totally an exaggeration as there was no open battle between both sides. The old tax scheme known to the folks as 'sepuluh satu,' or the 10:1 system or the Penghulu system had been in enforced for so long that it was the preferred system by the villagers. Under this mechanism, the folks of Serkam would be paying one unit for every 10 units of village products such as coconut, paddy, tapioca, palm nectar (gula Melaka), and fruits. (Note 16) The British authority had the opinion that the existing tax scheme was uneconomical which would lead to corruption and fraud especially by the unscrupulous revenue collector himself. (Note 17) Thus, for the British, the introduction of a new system for tax collection was unavoidable as it would enable a permanent form of payment in cash whereby tax assessment would be on the basis of land size, approximately about 50-60 cent per acre.

Therefore, based on Haji Omar's notes, when Penghulu Dol bin Said told of the news of the new revenue system after returning from the briefing given by the Resident Commissioner of Malacca to his people in the mosque

during a Friday prayer, he received a strong opposition from his people led by the influential local imam, Mohammad Said bin Marsah, also known as Tok Andak. (Note 18) His response led Penghulu Dol to be criticized and mocked as a British agent by the people. Tok Andak declined all offer for negotiation with British officials despite his penghulu's advice. Instead, he called upon the villagers to repel the new revenue policy and to declare a holy war against the British as he deployed anti-Christian sentiments to mobilize a localized resistance. Using the mosque as his base, he had the backing of his congregation including influential community leaders like Tok Shamsuddin, Mata-mata Jamal and Haji Ahmad Gemok.

With regard to the British, sign of dissatisfaction towards the existing scheme which lead to the amendment was due to the importance of land as part of Malacca revenue since the state possesses fewer natural sources compared to the other Straits Settlements, Penang and Singapore which relied more on trade for income. Therefore, in the case of Malacca, the British had to encourage cultivators to prosper and to put the collection of land revenue on a proper footing. Such an ill-feeling among the administrators is visible in the extracts of 1886 Administration Report of Malacca shown below (Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements 1855-1941, Vol. 3 1884-1891, 1998, p. 183):

11. In past years this has been hampered with many difficulties. Land has been held under many different systems of tenure, and the many incomplete or partial attempts which have been made from time to time to modify or alter them have only resulted in greater confusion...

12. The old system generally was the native one, the understanding being that Government was entitled to one tenth of the yield either from jungle produce or from cultivation. Land uncultivated and unpaid for three years was forfeited. The Penghulu of the district was usually employed to collect the tenth. It is evident that this system is open to considerable abuse, and the result has not been satisfactory.

13.the system of paying tenths on produce offered temptations to subordinate collectors, as well as to those who had to pay-a result which must be demoralizing to everyone concerned. Those who advocate keeping up this form of tenure cannot have studied the matter sufficiently to appreciate the difficulties with which it is surrounded, nor did the fact that its popularity among the people merely arises from the chance afford of evading payment of taxes.

Other historical elements mirrored in the syair is the name of Rokam or Tuan Rokam which was mentioned several times as the officer who led the British troop into Serkam to suppress its local resistance. 'Rokam,' after which the war was named, according to Haji Omar's notes, derived from the corruption by local folks of Mr. J.B. Alcolm, the name of the British Demarcation Officer responsible for initiating the enforcement of the new revenue system. However, based on the Administration Report of Penang for the year 1889, Mr. J.B. Alcolm was actually officially identified as Mr. Elcum, an officer who was then transferred to Penang. Based on his vast experience in resolving the disturbance in Malacca two years earlier due the implementation of the revenue system, his expertise in regard to the Penghulu system were sought by the Penang colonial authorities as evident from the extract below (Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements 1855-1941, Vol. 3 1884-1891, 1998, p. 483):

162. The rates are collected by Penghulus and Collectors who receive a fixed salary and a percentage on the amount they collected. The Penghulu system is at present unsatisfactory. Mr. Elcum, who has had experience of Malacca, says the Penghulus are regarded as tax-gatherers and those appointed by Government are not such reliable men as those elected by the people of Malacca. It appears hardly practicable to combine the duties of collecting assessment with those of headman. Now that District Offices have been established there would not be any hardship in making people to pay their rates and taxes together with quit-rent at the office.

Syair Kisah Perang Rokam also highlighted the significant role played by the Sikh contingent to curb the revolt. Based on the Straits Settlements report for the year 1886, the Sikh Contingent was first established in Malacca on 1st April 1883 whereby it helped formed the Police Force of Malacca by integrating with the Malay and Kling Contingent, resulting in police force with the strength of one sergeant, two corporals and 22 constables from the total of 304 men. In 1886, a year before the incident occurred, the Sikh Contingent consisted of one sergeant, two corporals and 29 constables from the total of 318 men under the command of the Superintendent Mr. H.O. Newland. Their good conduct and well discipline usually gained praises from their British superior. Also mentioned in the report is how they were allowed to engage themselves with other business ventures such as money-laundering and bullock-carting (Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements 1855-1941, Vol. 3 1884-1891 1998, p. 197). By the end of 1887, the overall enrolment of the Sikh Contingent throughout the Straits Settlements was 219 men of all ranks and files, compared to 64 Europeans and 1609 Malay and Kling Contingent. Such statistic shows the significance of the highly-praised Sikh soldiers who, in having fulfilled the

purpose for their recruitment, were granted their due salary raise (Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements 1855-1941, Vol. 3 1884-1891, 1998, p. 324).

Depicted as Kabul in the verse, this Sikh contingent according to Haji Omar's notes consists of twenty-four soldiers equipped with shotguns who were sent to Serkam under the command of J. B. Alcolm. Although at first they were mainly instructed to scare the villagers by firing into the air (Haji Omar, v. 4 and 7) but they later took to aggression in a retaliation following an ambush by the Serkam rebels which saw Haji Ahmad Gemok shot in the leg (Haji Omar, v. 11) as well as the arrest of Haji Shamsuddin (Haji Omar, v. 4, 5 and 6). With their presence, this isolated case of peasant revolt was easily curbed by the British by way of instilling fear in the hearts and minds of the villagers. By displaying their military strength, they successfully demoralized, dispirited and disintegrated the Serkam folks from waging further revolt, thus effectively forcing them into accepting the enforcement of the new revenue system.

5. Conclusion

Syair Kisah Perang Rokam is a commoner's effort depicting a commoner's struggle to repel the new revenue system imposed by the British in 1887. As a modest creation of poetic-rhymed form of syair with a mere composition of 19 verses and highly influenced by folkloristic features that justified the work is originated from a village milieu, the poem suit the conceptual implication to the conventions Malay syair forms and functions. Though the author identifies himself as Hasin but inconclusively it may turned out to be Hasan or Husin due to slight orthographic irregularity or an error made by later scribe. Despite the depiction of events being more of an entertainment; however, the existence of historical elements reflect the historical consciousness of the author and thus earn itself a generic classification under Malay historiography genre, precisely within the subcategory of historical syair. The composition depicts the villagers' resentment towards the British for the renewed tax scheme which lead to the outbreak of anti-British resistance among the Malay folks of Serkam. Such a fruitless effort did not bear any comfort and benefit accepts that of misery to everyone involved. Furthermore, the incident also created tension, fear, despair, frustration, panic and chaos to their previously calm village livelihood to much of the author's displeasure. Their lukewarm spirit in their struggle against the colonial force was not spared by the author as it was ridiculed in a taunting manner by depicting most of them as local 'clowns'. Thus, the composition no doubt gives a glimpse and reflection of communal history through the eyes of the communal folk.

References

- 'Serkam Suatu Kenangan' (A reminiscence of Serkam). (2005). Unpublished computer printed materials.
- Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1968). *The Origin of the Malay Sha'ir*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Braginsky, V. I. (2014). The Heritage of Traditional Malay Literature. *A Historical Survey of Genres, Writings and Literary Views*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Daillie, F. R. (1988). Alam Pantun Melayu. *Studies on the Malay Pantun*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Harun, M. P. (1989). Puisi Melayu Tradisional. *Satu Pembicaraan Genre dan Fungsi*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Hervey, D. F. A. (1889). Straits Settlements. *Annual Administration Report of Malacca for the Year 1888*. Singapore: Government Printing Office.
- Ismail, H. (1974). *The Study of Traditional Malay Literature with a Selected Bibliography*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Jarman, R. L. (Ed.) (1998). *Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements, 1855-1941*(3), 1884-1891. Bath: Print in Black.
- Muhammad, H. S. (1991). Yang Empunya Cerita. *The mind of the Malay author*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Wahab, M. A. (1964). Kisah keberanian orang2 Serkam Melaka dalam sejarah Perang Rokam. *Dewan Masyarakat*. 2(3), 20-25.
- Winstedt, R. O. (1969). *A History of Classical Malay Literature*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Notes

Note 1. Pantun is highly praised by various scholars such as the likes of Winstedt (1955, p. 3), Daillie (1988, p. 6), and Muhammad (1991, p. 29) due to its beauty, originality and authenticity of local origin.

Note 2. See Harun (1989) and Muhammad (1991) for the characteristics and the convention of pantun construction; i.e., number of words per line, 4-6 words; number of syllables per line, 8-12 syllables; end rhyme, a, b, a, b; four lines per verse; and consisting of two sections, *pembayang* (foreshadow) and *makna* (meaning). Therefore, the narrative content or the message of such composition is cramped in the section of *makna*; i.e., the last two lines of the verse only and thus, making a poetic form as the art of word play for the expert and genius.

Note 3. Al-Attas (1968) advocated that Hamzah Fansuri was the originator of the Malay *syair* in his effort to introduce the doctrine of Sufism in the Malay World approximately in mid 16th century Aceh during the reign of Sultan Abdul Kahar.

Note 4. *Syair* is a form of traditional Malay poetry that made up of four-line stanzas or quatrains. The *syair* can be a narrative poem, a didactic poem, or a poem used to convey ideas on religion or philosophy, or even one to describe historical event. Characteristically, *syair* is similar to the convention of pantun construction; i.e., number of words per line, 4-6 words; number of syllables per line, 8-12 syllables; end rhyme, a, a, a, a; four lines per verse; and the whole four lines represents the meaning (*makna*), the narrative content or the message of such composition, further detail, see Harun (1989).

Note 5. *Kitab*, Muslim religious tract which includes subjects such as *fiqh* (Islamic law), *hadith*, theology, *tasawuf* (mysticism) and etc.

Note 6. As the court during the epoch acted as the centre of literary circle, the works created were most likely to be influenced by the rulers as the authors were under the royal patronage.

Note 7. Behrang, a small town situated due north of Tanjung Malim, Perak.

Note 8. Teluk Rubiah, a place situated in Manjung near Lumut in the state of Perak.

Note 9. A team of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka researchers lead by Hassan Ahmad then senior research officer conducted a fieldwork study on the matter in Serkam in February 24-25, 1964 and their finding were published by Abdul (1964).

Note 10. The first full account of the text was first published by Harun (1989, p. 577-579) which are also derived from Haji Omar's version.

Note 11. Alang, is the second sibling of the Malay family packing order.

Note 12. A booklet prepared for the commemoration of the Silver Jubilee anniversary of Haji Omar's passing held on the 12 and 13 November 2005. He was remembered as the founding-father for the establishment of Serkam Umri Prayer Place, a religious school in 1926-1927. The booklet is a compilation of Haji Omar's personal historical writings which were formally written in jawi script edited by the committee members of the Umri Prayer Place. Among others, his writings were 'The history of Serkam Village,' 'The history of Serkam Mosque,' 'The history of Serkam School,' and 'The history of Serkam War' in which was inserted the rhyme form of *Syair Kisah Perang Rokam*.

Note 13. Number in bracket and bold is based on Haji Omar's sequence of verse arrangement.

Note 14. For instance, see the introductory opening of well-known and more established *syair* such as the like of *Syair Perang Mengkasar*, *Syair Perang Siak* and *Syair Sultan Maulana*.

Note 15. Melaka, together with Singapore and Penang were formed as the Straits Settlements by the British after it was exchanged with the Dutch through the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty (London Treaty) in 1824 which formally divided the Malay Archipelago into two spheres of influence, British and Dutch. Later, in 1874, after the Agreement of Pangkor only then that the cession to Britain of Dinding later named Port Weld (including a strip of mainland) in Perak by the 1826 treaty became part of the Straits Settlements.

Note 16. By this system, for instance, for every 10 units of coconut they had to pay a coconut; 10 gantang of paddy, a gantang and a piece for 10 pieces of coconut sweetener as tax.

Note 17. In the Serkam area, the revenue was collected by a Malay police constable name Jamal or Mata-mata Jamal. He then sent all the collection to Ali or normally known as Ali Cukai (Taxation Ali), stationed at the Umbai Police Station cum collection centre before sending it to the authority in Melaka town.

Note 18. Andak is the fifth sibling of the Malay family pecking order.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).