

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE TALETELLERS IN MALAY SOCIETY: THE *PENGLIPUR LARA* OF BATU PAHAT¹

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Introduction

“In a piece of literature, there are several concepts and words flowing under the page of the work or in the voice of the *penglipur lara* who is passionately intensifying the scene. Everything is actually present, albeit unaware or partially aware.” (Muhammad Salleh 2006, 13)

The passage above by Muhammad Haji Salleh subtly expresses the equally subtle role of *penglipur lara*, or taletellers, as educators, entertainers, and instructors. Whether the medium is literature or oral narration, *penglipur lara* must master their trade in order to be able to deliver their intended message to their audience. This is no different in the Batu Pahat district in the state of Johor, Malaysia. They have a perfect command of local lore, or *lokawidya*, as we will explain below. Throughout this article it will be shown that they have taken on the role of educators, entertainers, and comforters in the community.

The aim of this article is not to analyse or to give a deeper insight into the subtle workings of the *penglipur lara*'s art, but rather to give some examples that showcase the versatility of their performances, the context in which

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they occur, and to briefly describe their role in the Malay society of Batu Pahat. The examples were all gathered across the district during the final months of 2004 and the starting months of 2005. The data consists of four recordings, in turn consisting of two performances and two interviews. Mr. Ali Badron Bin Haji Sabor was the main participating *penglipur lara*, who shared his knowledge during and after his performances.

However, before we delve into a reported description of what a *penglipur lara* is and does, we need to address the term *lokawidya*, which we introduced above. As such, the first part of this article serves to elaborate on Van Engelenhoven's (2015) *lokawidya*-framework and the second part of this article serves as a preliminary application to showcase some performances by a specialized *penglipur lara*. As such, the second part is an example of the versatility of *lokawidya* in Malaysia, and is meant to spark a Malay-oriented interest in this topic.

Folklore versus *lokawidya*

In his 2015 article, Van Engelenhoven describes the development and the mostly British-German academic history behind the term “folklore”, and its Europe-centred use throughout the ages. In doing so, he explains that the term “folklore” was used to study local practices of loose communities across Europe around the turn of the 18th Century; these studies were largely focused on collecting and connecting knowledge and stories of local communities across pre-nation state Europe. Folklore, as such, was used to build a budding sense of nationalism. The body of collected works from lower class societies, ranging from stories (e.g., the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* by the brothers Grimm) to poetry to songs, was diverse in nature but connected through cultural similarities.

Although the term “folklore” was developed mid-19th century as the study of common cultural practices of regular people and boosts a sense of unison and nationalism, folkloristics developed over time as the study of tangible and intangible cultural heritages as practiced by regular people, ranging from weaving practices to the performance of epics. After elaborating on the development of the term “folklore” in its European context, Van Engelenhoven (2015) also goes over the use of the term in regards to European folkloristics centred in Indonesia and the Malay world as an academic field of study, as well as the attitudes of European scholars during years of folkloristic research focused on Malay culture.

Historically, European academics have struggled to understand Malay culture and practices in spite of the years gone by. Although Van Engelenhoven's article focuses on the treatment of Indonesia under the colonial rule of the Dutch, the statement that Humanities research aimed at South-East Asia was rooted in European commercial and political pragmatics rings true for Malaysia as well. As such, the history of folkloristics in the Malay world comes with a heavy backpack of colonialism, the attitudes indicative of such, and a lack of understanding of what the term *folklor* "folklore" actually means in the Malay language.

Wan Abdul Kadir (1993, 28-29) states that Malay people have a strong and historically shared culture that can be traced back for thousands of years. Similarly, this is also noted by Van Engelenhoven (2015), who writes:

"Ethnolinguistic diversity and the geographic spread of the population implies that it is impossible to create a single term which covers all cultural expressions found in this country. Cultural diversity is a hallmark of Southeast Asia, as stated in the well-known Malay proverb *lain padang lain belalang, lain lubuk lain ikannya* "other fields with other grasshoppers, other ponds with other fish." "

This notably shared but massively diverse number of cultural practices appears to be quite similar to the situation in which the term "folklore" first developed in Europe. However, as shown above, the term "folklore" as well as its Malay and Indonesian translation *folklor* carry values and associations that are perhaps unsuitable to Malay contexts. In order to loosen the grip of history and to boost a Malay understanding of the broad field of folklore, Van Engelenhoven (2015) proposes for scholars of Malay and Indonesian culture - especially those from Malaysia and Indonesia themselves - to use a term more suitable for Malay practices: rather than *folklor* "folklore", he proposes to use *lokawidya* "local lore".

The term *lokawidya* is a compound of the Sanskrit terms *loka* "place" and *widya* "knowledge" or "wisdom", which he saw as an acceptable rendition of the English term "lore".² Tadmor (2009) reports that 2/3rd of the vocabulary in Indonesian already consists of borrowings, and that Sanskrit is a popular language used for neologisms in particular. As such, Van Engelenhoven (2015) states that the use of a Sanskrit neologism would not be out of place, and that it would suit the academic need for a more appropriate term to describe folkloristic phenomena in the Malay-speaking world.

² See also the Introduction to this volume.

Van Engelenhoven continues his new classification by further dividing *lokawidya* “local lore” into three more specific fields of cultural practices: *lokabudaya* “local culture”, *lokaprata* “local customs”, and *lokaswara* “local oral traditions”. The *lokawidya*-framework in Figure 11-1 below is taken directly from the article, but demonstrates the unification of these concepts into the term *lokawidya*.

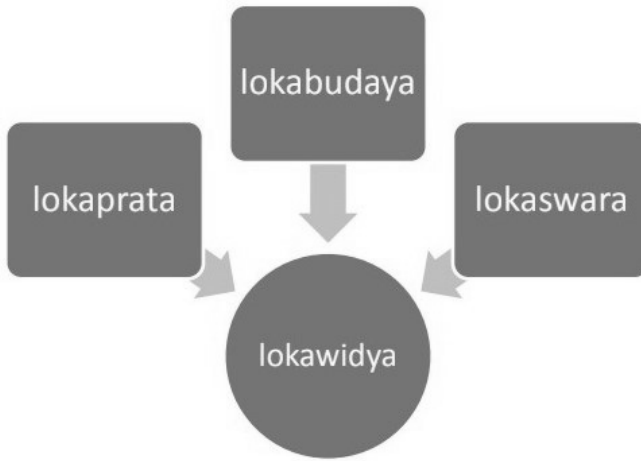


Figure 11-1: the *lokawidya*-framework

In turn, the field of *lokaswara* “local oral traditions” can be further divided into four more subsets: *lokakata* “local stories”, *lokagita* “local songs”, *lokakawya* “local poetry”, and *lokamanca* “local theatre”. The *lokaswara*-framework in Figure 11-2 below is also taken directly from Van Engelenhoven (2015), and shows the unification of different practices into *lokaswara*.

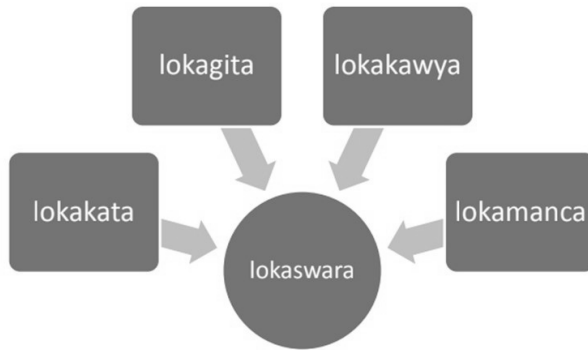


Figure 11-2: the *lokaswara*-framework

As they are, each in turn, broad fields of study all by themselves, all of these subsets can be found across Malaysia and Indonesia; as such, they are also to be found in the repertoire of the Batu Pahat *penglipur lara*. The data for this paper was gathered through a qualitative method based on content analysis; the data itself was gathered during fieldwork at Batu Pahat, running from 2004 to 2005.

This contribution is written in the spirit of the *lokawidya* theory as introduced by Van Engelenhoven (2015). Since it is written in English we will adhere as much as possible to terminology that is customary in English. The reader is reminded, however, that a term like “lore” or “oral tradition” here relates to their Malay interpretation rather than to the English dictionary definitions. This study aims to briefly give local examples that fit the *lokawidya*-framework and secondly, to unravel the role of the taleteller across various *lokawidya*-fields of the Malay community in Batu Pahat.

The Batu Pahat district

The district of Batu Pahat is the fourth-largest district of the Johor state, and is situated on its west coast. It is situated at the coastal beach facing the Strait of Malacca, and is neighboured by the districts of Muar, Segamat, Kluang, and Pontian. Batu Pahat itself is further divided into fourteen factions, which are defined by groupings of villages that are situated closely to one another. These villages are under the leadership of local village chiefs.

Batu Pahat already occurs in the Malay Annals. This major Malay historiographic manuscript relays the Siamese attacks on Malacca during

the reign of Sultan Muzaffar Syah in the 16th Century CE. Its name translates in English as “Chisel Stone” or “Chiselled Stone” and refers to the historical event of Siamese forces constructing a well at Minyak Beku Beach.

*Telah sudah lengkap, maka
Bendahara Paduka Raja pun
pergilah mengeluari Siam itu,
bersama-sama dengan Seri Bija
Diraja dengan segala hulubalang
banyak.
Maka Siam pun hamper ke Batu
Pahat. ... “Adapun perigi di Batu
Pahat. Orang Siamlah membuat
dia.”
(Sejarah Melayu 1997, 72).*

“Being complete already,
His Majesty the Grand Vizier
left Siam,
together with His Excellency the
Chamberlain and all the warlords.

And Siam approached Chisel Stone.
... ‘There is a well at Chisel Stone.
The Siamese made it.’”

Historically, Batu Pahat had a densely distributed population, with residential houses all along the right and left sides of the main road (Matlob 1992, 2). During the 19th Century CE there were already dense settlements in the Batu Pahat area. This is reflected in Malay historical documentation, which recorded that “one would not need to bring fire to light the way if one were to sail from Malacca to Batu Pahat during the night”, simply due to the number of houses in this area, which would light up the residential areas (Mohd Ahmad Pawazi 1972; Matlob 1992). Historically, the Buginese people have long since kept their livelihoods close to the coastal beach, while the Malays from Malacca lived in Minyak Beku, Tanjung Labuh, and Senggarang. In the year of 1873, the town of Bandar Penggaram was built, and residents from differing cultural groups and backgrounds began to settle under a united body of leadership. In the year 1880, different ethnic groups in Batu Pahat, notably Chinese, Javanese, Buginese, and Malays arranged their own settlements close-by as well.

Penglipur lara, soothers of sorrow

Traditional *penglipur lara* are professional entertainers that could be described as a “healer of a heart that is sad” (Noriah Taslim, 1993: 146). Maxwell (1886) translated the term *penglipur lara* as “soother of cares”, whereas later scholars like Braginsky (2004, 73) would translate it as “comforter of sorrow”. Ismail Hamid (1987, 33) explains that the term *lara* implies “sadness of the heart” and the term *penglipur* implies “the antidote” to that pain. The antidote to sorrow thus is the entertainment of what *penglipur lara* are recognised providers of (Mustafa Mohd. Isa 1984, 11).

In short, *penglipur lara* perform oral stories, jokes, and songs, through which they lift the spirits of those with heavy hearts.

As *penglipur lara* educate communities on their local histories, they are generally considered educators alongside being comforters and entertainers. Consequently, they are also expected to elucidate on the Islamic faith. Nordin (2015, 140) explains that education falls under the Islamic practice of discourse and thus is a product of Muslim faith. As such, *penglipur lara* are therefore to be active practitioners of Muslim faith as well.

According to *penglipur lara* Ali Badron Bin Haji Sador, or Ali Badron for short, the role of his profession was of much importance especially back during the days when entertainment and mass-communication were more scarce to the general public. He considers *penglipur lara* to be of profound importance for both the maintenance and dissemination of cultural knowledge, that is: Malay *lokawidya*.

In line with Ismail Hamid's (1987) description of *penglipur lara* above, Mr. Ali Badron also mentions that their service was most needed when a village community would do heavy communal work for an oncoming ceremonial gathering. In essence, a village leader would ask a *penglipur lara* to boost the energy of the working people, and to elevate their exhaustion during and after the work. On special occasions also female jokers may perform during heavy communal work. However, only men can become a *penglipur lara*. For professional taleteller performances are a means of sustenance, whereas for amateur taletellers it is just a kind of pastime.

Penglipur lara in the Batu Pahat district

In the 1960s, about 50 *penglipur lara* were actively involved in the Malay communities in Batu Pahat. The characteristics of these taletellers discussed in this article are all based on the recollection of as well as on the performances by *penglipur lara* Ali Badron. The main community event at which these performances were recorded was the preparation of an oncoming wedding gathering. Before getting into a brief description of two specific performances, a recital, and a historical storytelling performance, we need to concisely discuss some of the professional features with which the audience assessed the quality of the *penglipur lara*.

The taletellers of Batu Pahat often perform in the local Johor Riau dialect, which makes the performances easily accessible for large and local audiences. *Penglipur lara* must be genuine masters of the language that are

capable of captivating their audience with their linguistic aesthetics. Aside from being able to narrate local stories, they must be skilful poets capable of ad-hoc reciting mantras, *pantun* quatrains³ and two-lined *karmina* poems, and accompany their performances with body movements and facial expressions. Although oftentimes seated, taletellers also pace around and perform *silat*, the local martial arts. The performance of their tales is considered just as important as the content of the tales themselves.

Although the facial expressions of a taleteller are often captivating, there are many instances in which the audience cannot see the face of a performer. Some *penglipur lara* wear masks that depict the face of the story's hero or antagonist. These masks help the taleteller to captivate the audience and keep its attention. The *penglipur lara* might also wear attention-grabbing clothing. Usually, these garments are beautiful *layang* shirts or loose robes that flow and bustle at the performer's movements on stage (*Ensiklopedia Sejarah Kebudayaan Melayu* 1999, 1811).

Although *penglipur lara* usually perform one-man shows, they are sometimes accompanied by a musical group. The most common instruments used are lutes, guitars of any kind, and drums of different sizes. Even so, it is also not uncommon that they themselves provide musical accompaniment. The musical part of the performance plays a significant role in galvanising the narrative, and serves to further impress the watching crowds.

The role of the *penglipur lara* in the Malay culture of Batu Pahat

Mr. Ali Badron (2004a) mentioned that, in the past, popular *penglipur lara* would mostly be invited to ceremonial events, like weddings, the ritual of a baby's first touch of ground, the ear piercing ritual and circumcisions. These activities would mostly be held around night time, and are expressions of Malay culture, which provides the context for the performance.

At Batu Pahat, a large ceremonial wedding usually takes place during four days and three nights. The length of this important gathering requires the involvement of the entire community, which needs to take care of many arrangements. These preparations may take several days and nights - and this is when the *penglipur lara* is to enter the scene. According to Mr. Ali Badron, the presence of one or more *penglipur lara* or female jokers is to elevate the exhaustion that arises from the work, to boost the communal

³ See also Chapter Three.

spirit, and to energise the workers during breaks. In turn, this means that the *penglipur lara* himself has an exhaustive schedule as well.

From 9:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m., he is to entertain an audience consisting of children. His performances are age-appropriate, and are usually local stories filled with amusing lessons - again, tapping into the role of a *penglipur lara* as an educator first and foremost. Some classic tales – “The Devouring Rock”, “Si Tanggang”, “Dance of the Three Stars” and “The Seven-Headed Dragon” are staple during these performances.

From around 11:00 p.m. to 12:00 p.m. the audience of children is replaced by an audience of teenagers. Up until 2:00 a.m., the *penglipur lara* is tasked with entertaining them with age-appropriate tales like the story of the duel of Tuah and Jebat, or historical romances such as Laila Majnun and Sultan Mahmud Mangkat Dijulang. The *penglipur lara* is responsible for the content of his performance, and as such, imparting community values onto his younger audience.

From 2:00 a.m. to 5:00 a.m., once the teenage audience has been sufficiently entertained, the *penglipur lara* continues to entertain a mostly adult audience. This is the moment when erotic elements and adult topics become part of the performance. Below is an example of a joke with erotic elements, which was told only in front of an adult audience.

*Bolehkah penyu bertelur
atas tebing di celah batu?*

*Bolehkah abang menumpang tidur
antara puting dengannya susu?*

(Ali Badron Sabor 2005)

“Can turtles hatch eggs
on a bank in between rocks?

Can I fall asleep
in between a nipple and its breast?”

Aside from tales and jokes, the *penglipur lara* also accompanies communal practices. One such practice is the trampling of rice paddies after the Maghrib prayers. During this practice, the community engages in a singing tradition called *nyanyian berahoi* “singing *ahoi*”. This custom is considered a game between men and women of any age, although it is mostly performed by young bachelors and bachelorettes. *Nyanyian berahoi* is a community event at which bachelors and bachelorettes meet and check out the availability of future spouses. As such, this game serves to increase social relations and emphasises the community’s social values.

Below is a transcribed outtake of an *Ahoi*-singing game. “A” is sung by male participants, while “B” is the response by female participants.

- | | |
|---|--|
| A: <i>Hisap rokok tembakau Cina.</i> | A: "Smoking Chinese tobacco cigarettes." |
| B: <i>Acuk ahoi, ahoi.</i> | B: "Acuk ahoi, ahoi." |
| <i>Acuk ahoi, ahoi.</i> | Acuk ahoi, ahoi." |
| A: <i>Wahai cik adik saya bertanya:</i> | A: "Hey little missy I do ask:" |
| B: <i>Acuk ahoi, ahoi.</i> | B: "Acuk ahoi, ahoi." |
| <i>Acuk ahoi, ahoi.</i> | Acuk ahoi, ahoi." |
| A: <i>Cik adik sudahkah mempunya?</i> | A: "Do you have a boyfriend?" |
| B: <i>Acuk ahoi, ahoi.</i> | B: "Acuk ahoi, ahoi." |
| <i>Acuk ahoi, ahoi.</i> | Acuk ahoi, ahoi." |
- (Ali Badron Sabor 2004c)

During this singing game, eligible bachelors and bachelorettes exchange quatrains, and although the participants are not necessarily skilled in poetry, the singing serves to make merry during the work. *Penglipur lara* and female jokers are usually present during this game as well. *Penglipur lara* usually sing along, although they do not participate in the game itself.

***Lokakata* "local stories" of origin**

Above, we very briefly touched upon the role of *penglipur lara* as comforters and entertainers. This leaves their third role – the one of educator – yet untouched. The example down below is a transcription of a part of a performance by Mr. Ali Badron, in which he narrates a local tale. The story recalls the history of Bandar Penggaram as a strategic settlement in the 15th century, and tells of the time in which the Batu Pahat area was a focal point of economic, political, and social growth. Consider the following transcription:

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Setelah ditinjau di celah bakau,</i> | "After checking among the mangroves, |
| <i>Setelah dilihat di hujung teluk,</i> | After seeing at the tip of the bay, |
| <i>Pasirnya landau, airnya jernih.</i> | The sand was moist, the water clear. |
| <i>Ikannya banyak, badannya</i> | The fish were many, their bodies |
| <i>bergolek.</i> | galore. |
| <i>Maka, molek benarlah kita</i> | So, truly beautiful we |
| <i>menurunkan layar sepekan dua.</i> | lowered the sail for a week or two. |
| <i>Barang sehari dua kita</i> | Goods we piled up for a day or two, |
| <i>menggal,</i> | |
| <i>Mana yang tiris menyambung,</i> | Mending the ones leaking, the ones |
| <i>mana yang patah,</i> | broken. |
| <i>Menambah mana yang habis.</i> | Adding the ones used up. |
| <i>Berguru mana yang sempat,</i> | Studying wherever possible. |
| <i>Itulah muafakat diambil sudah.</i> | Thus they settled an agreement. |
| <i>Setelah mustaed semua</i> | After all quartermasters agreed, |
| <i>muafakat,</i> | |

*Berpindahlah semua naik ke
darat,
Sanak saudara serta sahabat.
Dato' Jeragan pindah dahulu,
Kerana dialah jadi penghulu,
Sanak saudara kaumnya tentu.
(Ali Badron Sabor 2004b)*

All moved onto the shore,
Relatives and friends.
Dato' Jeragan moved ahead,
Because he was the chief,
Relatives were his people for sure."

In local lore, the settlement is founded by two siblings who went by the names of Jeragan or Dato' Jeragan, the oldest sibling, and Jenang or Dato' Jenang, the youngest sibling. The example above is about Dato' Jeragan. Before it was known under its present name, which translates in English as "Chisel Stone", Batu Pahat was referred to as *Pulau Kundur* "Wax Gourd Island".

Down below is another transcription of a telling by Mr. Ali Badron, on the founding of Batu Pahat.

*Menerusi pimpinan Dato'
Jeragan,
maka wujudlah negeri Batu
Pahat.
Batu Pahat menjadi semakin
membangun dan maju kerana
kesungguhan dan kerajinan anak-
anak buah Dato' Jeragan serta
adiknya Dato' Jenang.
Pendapatan daripada kegiatan
ekonomi seperti pertanian,
penternakan semakin meningkat,
manakala ramai pedagang
berkunjung ke Batu Pahat untuk
berniaga.
Pada ketika itu, Batu Pahat aman
makmur di bawah pimpinan Dato'
Jeragan dan Dato' Jenang.
(Ali Badron Sabor 2004b)*

"Through the leadership of Dato'
Jeragan,
the state of Batu Pahat came into
existence.
Batu Pahat became more and more
developed and advanced because of
the determination and diligence of the
favorite men of Dato' Jeragan and his
brother Dato' Jenang.
The income from economic activities
such as agriculture and
farming increased [under their rule],
while many traders came
to visit Batu Pahat for
business.
At that time, Batu Pahat was secure
and prosperous under the leaderships
of Dato' Jeragan and Dato' Jenang."

While sailing the estuary of Kundur Beach, the brothers and their followers ran out of the necessary supplies to continue their journey. In order to gather the supply needed, they decided to let go of the anchor, drop the sail, and set foot on Kundur Island.

Upon arrival at the Kundur Beach estuary, the brothers intended to found a settlement, as the area was particularly suitable for agriculture. Dato'

Jeragan built his village at the foothills and Dato' Jenang founded a village on the side of the lake. Dato' Jeragan ordered his followers to cut down the surrounding forest where they successfully developed bountiful farming and fishing economies.

The telling of this particular *lokakata* was accompanied by powerful facial expressions as well as movements made by the *penglipur lara*, in order to emphasise the importance of the story. These storytelling attributes play a role in raising awareness of the cultural and historical identity of the audience.

Conclusion

This article briefly touched upon the roles of the *penglipur lara* of the Batu Pahat district as comforters, entertainers, and educators. Their presence at important *lokabudaya*-events, and their mastery of various local oral traditions like songs, poetry and tale-telling makes them important figures who are not just able to remember, but also to impart several practices of Malay folklore in Batu Pahat society. The masteries of these unique performers are varied and rich in their expressions, and are all aimed at captivating an audience in tiresome times.

Although the descriptions were brief, and the conclusions perhaps a little presumptuous, this article mostly aims to invite future researchers to more closely examine *penglipur lara* through a Malay lens. While the term “folklore” could be used in order to describe the attributes of *penglipur lara*, the uniquely Malay features and the continuing importance of *penglipur lara* in the contemporary societies of the Batu Pahat district invite a modern and a more Malay perspective, which can be found – and perhaps further elaborated upon – through the use of the *lokawidya*-framework.

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