Article

Asian Linguistic Anthropology
2022, 4(3): 26-40

DOI: 10.47298/jala.v4-i3-a2
Jala.pub

Symbolisation in Ancient Tales: A Special Reference to the Malay Text Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa

Asmah Haji Omar
University of Malaya, Malaysia

Abstract

Symbolisation can be interpreted as expressing what is real, not in terms of the actual thing that it is, but that which is represented in other forms. A narrative or a story that is in the mind of the writer or the storyteller is still in the form of ideas or concepts. It becomes a message when it is expressed in an organised form in the language medium that we call text. It is the text that forms the symbol to the story. In Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign, the story is the signifié or the signified, nd the text is the signifiant or the signifier. Language is an abstract and conventional symbol in the life of human beings. At the same time, there are non-language forms of symbols that have been identified as icons and indices, in particular by Charles Saunders Peirce with his theory of semiotics.

This paper presents an interpretation of an ancient text, a composite of narratives of the founding of Kedah (which today is a sultanate in the north-western part of the Malay Peninsula) circa 3000 B.C.E., until the arrival of Islam circa 10th century C.E. Originally an oral tradition, the text was given a written form in the mid-18th century, using the Jawi (Malayised Arabic) script of the time. It was only in 1970 that the Jawi manuscript was transliterated using the Roman alphabet.

Interpretation of the text goes through various layers of symbols, beginning with symbols in their Jawi script, and identifying words in their various forms. Making sense of linguistic elements suggests taking into account their usage within the text itself, as well as information from historical texts (in co-texts), and findings of research by relevant disciplines, specifically archaeology, geology dan geography.

Keywords: *Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Jawi Script, semiotics, linguistic anthropology, Malay world*

Introduction

Symbolisation can be interpreted as expressing what is real, not in terms of the actual thing that it is, but that which is represented in other forms. A narrative or a story that is in the mind of the writer or the storyteller is still in the form of ideas or concepts. It becomes a message when it is expressed in language, when it is placed in an organised form in the language medium that we call 'text.' It is the text that forms the symbol of the story. In Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign, the story is the signifié or the signified, and the text is the signifiant or the signifier. Language is an abstract and conventional symbol in the life of human beings. At the same time, there are non-language forms of symbols that have been identified as icons and indices, in particular by Charles Saunders Peirce, with his theory of semiotics.

This paper presents an interpretation of an ancient text, a composite of narratives of the founding of Kedah (which today is a sultanate in the north-western part of the Malay Peninsula) circa 3000 B.C.E., until the arrival of Islam circa in the 10th century C.E. Originally an oral tradition, the text was given a written form in mid-18th century, using the Jawi (Malayised Arabic) script of the time. It was only in 1970 that the Jawi manuscript was transliterated using the Roman alphabet (the Rumi script). In line with Saussure's theory of the sign as I mention above, I shall begin with the signified, that is the story that is told in the Hikayat, prior to moving later to the signifier.

The Story in the Hikayat Merong Mahawanga

The word Hikayat in the title of the text is an Arabic loan which signifies 'story.' In Malay, it does not mean any story, but that of a specific literary genre, which may be said to be equivalent to the romance as a genre in English classical literature. This story, henceforth referred to as Hikayat, is a collection of narratives of ancient Kedah, which had been handed down from generation to generation. These oral narratives were first assembled in written form, on the order of Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Mu'azzam Zainal Azilin Shah ibnu Sultan Abdullah Muzalfal

Shah, who ruled Kedah from 1710 C.E. to 1762. The person who put the narratives together in the genre of the Hikayat using the Jawi system of writing, refers to himself only as 'Fakir' (an Arabic loan), which literally means 'a poor man,' but this poor man really did a fine job.

The story is about the opening of Kedah, by a protagonist from the western hemispehere. This protagonist, Merong Mahawangsa, arrived in Kedah some 5,000 years ago, i, e., 3000 B.C.E. There were already inhabitants there, comprising Malays, Gergasi, and the Aborigines. Each group had its own chief as leader of community, and there was no common chief for them all.

The Hikayat opens with *garuda*, a mythical bird, receiving news from another bird, the *jentayu*, also a mythical bird, of the impending marriage of the princess of China to the prince of Rome. The news greatly disturbed the garuda, who went to see King Solomon to obtain permission to prevent the marriage at all costs. The King was displeased with garuda but said that he could do so at his own peril. The bird flew to China and carried off the princess, together with her two ladies-in-waiting, and kept them in a cave on Langkawi Island, at the entrance to the Straits of Melaka.

Another bird, the *rajawali* (a kind of eagle with colourful feathers) informed the garuda of a fleet from Rome that had already set sail, taking the Roman prince to China for the wedding. Garuda lay in wait for the fleet, and when they arrived at the Bay of Bengal, began attacking the boats, and continued the onslaught until they reached the Langkawi Sea, at which time, all the boats including the one carrying the prince were destroyed. But the boat carrying *Merong Mahawangsa,* a high official in the court of Rome, was saved as it became separated from the others when stopping for fresh water along the way. Unknown to the garuda, by clinging to a piece of wood the prince did not drown and was saved by ladies in-waiting of the princess. The ladies hid him from the garuda in another cave. Meanwhile the garuda flew off to report to King Solomon of his so-called victory. King Solomon ordered genies to visit Langkawi to confirm garuda's claim of success. In moments, the genies returned with a trunk, and out of the trunk came the prince, the princess, and the two ladies-in-waiting. Garuda accepted his failure and exiled himseld outside the planet Earth. The four so-called 'prisoners' were placed back in the trunk and were flown off to China by the genies.

Merong Mahawangsa, his wife, and those in his boat, all continued their journey and landed on the coast of Kedah, which today is known as Kuala Merbok (the estuary of the Merbok River). He was accepted as ruler by the Gergasi and the Malays, following which, he built a *kota* which in the Kedah dialect means an enclosure, surrounding his palace as well as space for people to build their homes and carry on with their business – a forerunner of today's town centre. Such enclosures became part of the Kedah landscape, and were created from rows of trees, palm trees, or bamboo, whichever was available at the site. Another feature of the kota was that it was well-drained. At times when the kota far from a river or the sea, a canal or tributary had to be built linking the place to this large body of water. As the place did not have a name, Merong Mahawangsa named his new country Langkasuka (roughly meaning 'good place to live in').

When his only son was old enough to be king, Merong Mahawangsa and his wife returned to Rome. His parting wish was that every new king had to build his own kota, a way of making use of idle land in the kingdom, and this was fulfilled by his descendants. A second wish was that his son should expand the land of the kingdom by sending his children to the north-west, south-east, and east, but to leave one to be king of Langkasuka. So we get the story of Merong Mahawangsa's three granchildren becoming rulers of three new regions: The eldest grandson became ruler in the north-west in a place called Siam Lancang; the second became ruler in the region which is now North Perak (a neighburing state of Kedah); and the third, a girl, became queen of Patani. The youngest stayed back to become the third king of Langkasuka. Before leaving for Rome, Merong Mahawangsa renamed Langkasuka as Kedah Zamin Tauran (literally 'Kedah until a distant future'); in this name is the earliest occurrence of the word Kedah.

All goings in in the kingdom went well until the fifth-generation ruler, who fed on human blood and liver, and was chased out of his kingdom. He is better known as 'the king with a fang' (or the Malay term *Raja Besiung*), where the growth of his fangs was consequent to his cannibalism. The king ran away, and hid in the jungle, in a place now known as Baling, where he removed his fang and discarded it, and wandered around as a commoner. He came to a farm with a hill paddy and beetle leaves, at which place he was hired by the owners to work. He married their daughter who bore him a son. On the order of his queen, the people in Kedah, continued to search for him, and finally located him at the beetle leaf farm. Yet, again, he managed to escape into the clusters of bamboos in the jungle, but this time, was never again found. Much later, news came to the queen that her husband had produced a son with his commoner wife. The queen had the son and the mother brought to the palace, where, and at which time, the son, who was already a young man, was crowned as the sixth ruler of Kedah. It was during the reign of this king that Islam came to Kedah, brought by a Muslim missionary from Yaman who changed the name of the kingdom to Kedah Darulaman (Kedah, the Abode of Peace), a name which has lasted until today. The story ends with the opening of more 'kota' in Kedah, with development spawning northwards, to areas including the island of Langkawi.

The place named 'Rome' in the story is not the Rome of Italy. In the Hikayat, it is taken to be Byzantium, which is now Istanbul, and is thus part of the Middle East. Stories in the Malay hikayat appear to have narratives from this part of the world.

The English translation of the title of this narrative is The Kedah Annals. Compared with The Malay Annals (*Sejarah Melayu*) which is highly appraised by historians and those specialised in classical Malay literature, this Kedah Hikayat has been said to have no value at all. British scholars of history and their Malaysian students have grounded their opinion on the myths and folktales in the Hikayat. Richard Winstedt's evaluation of the text given below is a sample of such opinion.

Winstedt denied the Hikayat any claim of truth. He presented it as a farrago of folktales, largely irrelevant for historical research, and also did think it not worth a historical reading. Furthermore, Maier (1985, p. 2) describes Winstedt's perspective, putting it as that, "It was a boring and silly text, like almost all texts of the Malay heritage with which the British had become familiar."

James Low, another British scholar, was of the few who had something positive to say about the Hikayat. Writing in 1849, he accepted the claims that the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa made for presenting the history of Kedah: By way of careful induction, observation and consideration he came to the conclusion that the main points of the narrative correspond with historical reality. (Maier, Ibid.).

Indeed, there are realities in the story. The emergence and materialization of these realities dened on the ways in which we interpret the symbolisms in the text. Geologists and geographers note that the description of the geomorphology of Kedah in the text is correct. The beginning of the story refers to the period at which the hills which at the present time are dotted along the coast of Kedah, were still islands. They became part of the mainland about 5,000 years ago, i.e. circa 3,000 B.C.E. The highest, the Gunung Jerai, also known as the Kedah Peak, is approximately 7,000 feet in height.

Myths and folktales are generally taken as products of the imagination, and as such, nothing is real in them. Stories such as the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa cannot all be products of the imgination. The geomorpholgy of Kedah could not have been created by the writer of the manuscript with such accuracy. He must have heard from the old folks of the time how the hills that he was seeing were once islands, and this bit of narrative must have originated several generations prior to that time by those who observed the phenomenon. Applying semiotic theory, it is possible to expose realities behind the screens of the prevalent symbols and metaphors.

The Text

Now I come to the text which constitutes the overall symbol of the story. Halliday of the Firthian or London School of Linguistics, defined 'text' as:

> language events observed as spoken, or as codified in writing, any corpus of which used as material for linguistic description is a text.
>
> (Halliday 1961, p. 243)

In the early days of its production, the manscript in the Jawi script was copied and re-copied manually. Some remained with Malay families, some were taken to England by the British during their rule in Malaya, and was deposited in museums and archives there. Very few Malays knew of the existence of the manuscript, or even heard of the existence of the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa. What they knew were certain narratives of events which they found later to be part of a well-composed story. Such narratives were handed down, thanks to the story tellers, from generation to generation. The events, generally recited by these story tellers, were of the kidnapping of the princess of China by the bird garuda, and of Raja Besiung (the king with a fang)

Story tellers in those days were illiterate, although they could read the Quran which is written in the script the same as that which the Malays had taken to end their illiteracy. This situation confirms my belief that tales in the Hikayat were handed down through the oral tradition. The two narratives mentioned are the most exciting and easy to remember, and the listeners were more often than not mostly children. After reading the written story, I found that there were certain parts of the narratives that occurred in the story tellers' version but that did not appear in the manuscript. For example, the part in the narrative where the Raja Besiung pulled out his fang and threw it high such that it landed in a place relatively far from where he stood is absent in the written texts (Jawi and Rumi), but this absence does not detract from the story line. Its presence in the story tellers' tale is the fact that it explains how two places obtained their names: One is *Baling* ('throwing high up'), and is the name of a district as well as its town centre in the south-eastern part of Kedah where the king is said to have pulled out the fang so that no one recognised him. The other is *Siong* ('fang' or 'sharp tooth'), and is now part of the district of Baling.

The original manuscript is in the Jawi script, a syllabary sytem of writing which does not need a vowel symbol to form a syllable. Its transliterated version, which was first published by the University of Malaya Press in 1970, uses the Roman or Rumi alphabet, a system of writing which requires vowel symbols to form syllables (Siti Hawa 1970). Halliday, in his textual theory, notes that the text must have a substance; his definition of 'substance' of text is the "material of language" which enables one to hear the text i.e. the sound images, or see and read it, i.e. the graphics. Without the material of language, there is no text (Halliday 1979). Such ideology can suggest that the Hikayat in its two graphic forms have two different materials, the syllabary and the alphabetic materials, when employing different ways of arranging phonological and graphemic symbols to form words. Mistakes can be made in the transliteration, which may lead to a misinterpretation of the sense of the word, and which usually leads to misinterpretation of signs (symbols, icons, indices) in the narratives. There have been publications on certain aspects of the Hikayat, but the studies are grounded in the Rumi version of writing. Some transliterations do not make sense, and one must go to the Jawi version to find the word intended by the writer.

The text of the Hikayat makes use of the variety of Malay, which I call 'general Malay,' that is, the variety understood by speakers of all dialects. The story of Kedah written by a speaker of this dialect cannot be said to be free of dialectal elements. The transliterator of this text was a Kedah speaker. She herself did not find it easy to make sense of the written symbols in the Jawi script (personal communication). The Rumi version of 1970 uses the spelling system of the time, yet a new spelling system was implemented in 1972, which is also used in Indonesia, Brunei, and Singapore. So, the reprinted text (1998) is in the new and current spelling system. In this version there are words that have been modified either to suit the spelling system or the standard morphology of present-day Malay. Such modifications may or may not change the sense of the word or the phrase, but either way, they blur the history of the development of the system of the linguistic element concerned.

The Theory

The first theory of the sign that linguists usually develop familiarity with is the one introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure in the late 19th century, and is expounded in his posthumous work, Course in Modern Linguistics. Saussure's theory concentrates on one type of sign, and that is language. According to Saussure:

> [The sign is] the union of meanings and sound images, in which both parts are psychological.
>
> (Saussure, 1960, p. 15)

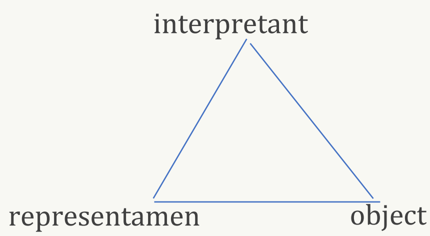
The union is shown in the following schema:

Signified (what is in the mind) - 'the story'

Signifier (sound images) - 'the text'

Linguistic signs in Saussure's theory are tangible, largely owing to the fact that they can be produced in written forms which are known as materials of language, in Halliday's theory. Such signs include those used by deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, and so on, but according to Saussure these other signs should be studied under semiology, which Saussure defines as "a science that studies the life of signs within society" (Ibid., p. 16). Here, semiology brings together language and non-language symbols. Semiology, or semiotics as it is known today, has been useful in the interpretation of symbols in many aspects of life, and not just language, as evident in the works of philosophers and linguists in many parts of the world.

In my study of the Hikayat, I have chosen the semiotics introduced by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. In the Peircean theory of semiotics, there are arbitrary and non-arbitrary signs. Arbitrary signs are known as symbols, and they are primarily language symbols. Non-arbitrary ones are the icons and the indices. In this theory, the symbol, the icon, and the index, are three modes of the sign; they are known as modes, rather than types, because they are not mutually exclusive (Culler 1983; Merrel 2001). For example, a sign which is an icon in one context can be an index in another (Chandler 2007). In a text, a word which is an abstract symbol with a certain meaning in a particular narrative may also be an index in another narrative. The Peircean semiotic triangle below provides an idea of how signs can be interpreted.



The Peircean semiotic triangle

The sign in this theory is in the representamen; here, both the signifier and the signified in Saussure's theory are placed in this node. The object is the referent, and the interpretant is what one interprets, whether the representamen (the sign) is a symbol, an icon, or an index. Symbols are signs which are conventional; they are not limited to words as they can also be colour, shape, monument, and the like. Icons are copies of reality; the picture or statue of a person, the sign of work of repairing the road etc. are examples of icons. People in themselves are icons when they are 'synonymous' with a certain achievement, idea etc.; for example, Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj is the icon for Malaysia's independence from British rule. The index is an indication or a pointer to what has taken place; the fingerprint is an index that someone had touched the surface, footprints show that there had been people walking at the spot, smoke rising up in the sky indicates that some building may be on fire, and the sound of thunder heralds a heavy rain.

Interpretation of Symbols in the Text of the Hikayat

The text is made up of language symbols as representamen of objects, ideas, events etc. These symbols are in the form of words, and the meanings of these words may be interpreted as symbols, icons, and indices.

Graphic symbols form materials of the language of the text, such that words can be recognised as lexical items comprising words and phrases, and as elements of the sentence; these are all abstract symbols. Hence, the first stage in the interpretation of a text is to be familiar with the systems of writing and spelling, which give substance to the text. The graphics may contain homographs, homonyms, and polysemantic words that should be interpreted in the context of their function in the sentence as well as in the narratives. Failure in the reading of the word in its graphic form leads to a misinterpretation of its meaning, extending to that of the discourse.

Homographs and Homonyms

A homograph is a word which has the same graphic form as another word, that is, the two homographic words are different symbols based on their different significations. Homographs occurring in the Jawi text of the Hikayat seem to be motivated by different vowels embedded in the consonants represented by the same graphics. In simple terms, superficially the words are copies of one another, but differ in their pronunciations which indicate that they are actually different lexical items, each bearing a meaning different from that of the other.

The syllabary system may induce more homographs than the alphabetic one, because the single consonant which stands for a syllable may be pronounced with any vowel in the language concerned, unless the word containing this syllable is interpreted correctly in the context of the discourse. The alphabetic system with obligatory vowels in the formation of syllables provides a means of avoiding homographs, but it cannot escape this mode of representing words when there are homonyms, as in the English noun ‘bear,‘ which refers to the animal ‘bear,’ and the verb ‘bear’ which in general suggests ‘to carry.’ This thus renders a homograph a homonym.

The Kedah dialect has eight vowel phonemes, but the syllabary system taken from Arabic offers only three vowel symbols, as Arabic has only three vowel phonemes. Readers of the text must be aware that a symbol in the Jawi script represents more than one phoneme, as given below:

Vowel symbols/representations in Jawi	Kedah Malay vowel phonemes
i	i, e, ɛ
a	a, ə; ai
u	u, o, ɔ; ui. oi, ɔi

As for the consonants, there are consonant phonemes in Malay which do not have symbols in the Rumi spelling system of the language: These are /p/, /g/, /ŋ/, /ɲ/ and /ʧ/. In the very early days of the adoption of the Arabic script, the Malays used the Arabic symbols that represent the sound with an effect nearest to the phone in their language, such as /p/ in Malay was matched with the symbol for f in Arabic, /g/ with k, /ŋ/ 'ng' with the pharyngeal ع; /ɲ/ 'ny' with n; and /ʧ/ 'ch' with j. This suggests that a graphic symbol in Arabic may stand for two phones in Malay, as given below:

Arabic Symbol	Malay Phone
ف	p, f
ک	k. g
ع	ng, ʻ (Rumi grapheme for ع)
ن	n. ny
ج	j, ch

Over time, the Malays managed to create symbols for these five phonemes. The method was by using the symbols for the corresponding sounds in Arabic by placing dots below, above, or in the 'bowl' of the symbol.

Arabic symbols	Jawi symbols
ف (f)	ڤ (p)
ک (k)	ڬ(g)
ج (j)	چ (ch)
ع (ʕ)	ڠ(ng)
ن (n)	ڽ (ny)

The Terengganu stone inscription dated 1303 C. E., the oldest Malay inscription in the Jawi script, shows that four of the five Malayised graphic symbols had not yet appeared during the period the inscription, a religious text, which was chiselled on the stone. In this inscription, the only new graphic symbol that is Malay is the one for /ɲ/ 'ny,' which was created by placing two more dots to the Arabic symbol for 'n.' (Asmah 2021).

The text of the Hikayat, written in the mid-18th century, shows that all of the five Malayised symbols were already in use in that period, and more so at times alternating with the corresponding Arabic symbols. The products of such alternation are not homographs. They can be taken as different ways of spelling words if the words bear the same meaning. Problems arise when the meanings are different, and this can only be identified in the context that the word is used in the sentence and in the discourse.

An example given here is of a confusion when the sound 'g' takes the symbol for 'k.' The Kedah dialect has the word *sangga* which is only used together with a preceding negative word, tidak, *tak* 'not;' hence *tidak sangga*, or *tak sangga* bearing the meaning 'extremely.' At the same time, there exists a word *sangka* with the meaning 'to suspect.' As such, *tidak sangka* means 'do not suspect.' In the Jawi text of the Hikayat, in certain places, the graphics for *tidak sangga* take the form of *tidak sangka*, whereas the phrase refers to the sound heard while people are fighting with weapons, that is to say, the sound is extremely loud. In the Rumi text, there appears to be a 'faithful transliteration' of the incorrect Jawi graphics, an indication that the context of usage of the phrase which provides its meaning had not been taken into account.

Graphics in Proper and Common Nouns

In adopting the Rumi script for their language, the Malays also adopt the tradition of the writing of proper nouns with uppercase letters and the common nouns with lowercase ones. There is no such 'graphemic etiquette' in the Jawi script. In the text of the Hikayat, the absence of proper-common noun differentiation has caused a misinterpretation, specifically of the naming of ethnic groups, as illustrated below.

The word *gergasi* in Malay folktales refers to the giant or the ogre. The second meaning of the word is 'huge' or 'enormous' in size. With these meanings, the transliteration of this word from Jawi to Rumi occurs in lowercase. However, in the text of the Hikayat, this particular word refers to people of a particular ethnic group. They are described as big-built, and of fair skin. Those in the upper social class bear the title '*Nang*' (pronounced as nung); hence, *Nang Miri*, one of the chieftains in the narrative. They were of a racial group different from the Malays. The two groups lived peacefully together, and more so, there had been intermarriages between the two groups.

Merong Mahawangsa's wife is mentioned in the text as being of the Gergasi race. Here, she is described as a very beautiful and graceful woman, and hence as highly lady like. Mention of these people as ogres, in articles and papers on the Hikayat has not shifted since that time. My interpretation is that these people were from a region in the Middle East or Northern India, as they were able to communicate with Merong Mahawangsa on his arrival in Kedah – an inference that Merong Mahawangsa was able to speak the language of his wife. The description of their skin colour and physique is an index of the fact that they belonged to a race that differed significantly to that of the Malays.

As for the title 'Nang,' to my knowledge, nobody has discusses nor even referred to this, possibl owing to their understanding of the text that these people were ogres. At the time when I was still in primary school in Kedah, there were people with this title living as Malays in Sungai Baru, Jitra, not far from my family home. I came to know them because a lady with this title was a close friend of my mother, and often visited us. Her full name was Nang Liah, and my mother called her Kak Nang (Kak = big sister), and we children called her Mak Nang (Mak = mother). It was very much later that I had an opportunity to read the Hikayat, and in the Rumi version. The title used in the names of the Gergasi made me recall Mak Nang. In addition, her looks, size and skin colour fit the description of the Gergasi given in the Hikayat. Now there are no more Nang in Jitra, Kedah, as they have been assimilated with Malays through intermarriage.

Owing to the extensive amount of textual and extra-textual evidence, the Gergasi in the early history of Kedah were people of a particular ethnic group originally from outside of the Malay Peninsula, perhaps Northern India, and who had come to settle in Kedah. As such, the word is also a symbol for their ethnic group. Following the graphemic etiquette of writing in the Rumi script, the first letter of the word that refers to an ethnic group should be in the uppercase; hence G, in Gergasi. The capital letter functions as an index for the proper noun.

A similar case is in the name of one of the subgroups of the Semang group. The term Orang Asli, as the Malay translation of 'Aborigines' only appeared after 1957 at a time when Malay became the national language of Malaya. Prior to that, neither the Malay nor the English term was used (Carey 1976). The Kedah people used the term Semang ('friend,' 'companion') for all subgroups of the Orang Asli. In the Hikayat, there are four subgroups, one of which is Semang. As such, Semang is both a generic as well as a subgroup label. In the text, the generic name is written with the upper case, and hence, so are three of the four subgroups: Semang, Wila, and Sakai. The fourth is written in the lower case: rakyat bukit (people of the hills). All of the four had their own chiefs with grand titles, beginning with Maharaja (Lord). This clearly suggests that *rakyat bukit* is also an ethnic label; that is, it should then be written as *Rakyat Bukit*.

Capital leters in Rumi texts also rerference the beginning of a paragraph or a new sentence. However, such a pointer as well as punctuation marks are absent in the Jawi system of writing. Hence awareness of the beginning of a paragraph or a new sentence is made through the use of certain words known as punctuation words (Asmah 2019).

Semiotics of Narratives

Symbols, icons, and indices, in words and phrases have been presented in the discussions above. Below are examples of semiotics used in narrating events or episodes in the Hikayat. Narratives in the Hikayat are of two types: the metaphorical, and the non-metaphorical, or rather, the literal ones. The former is generally referred to as 'myths.' The first two examples below are metaphorical narratives, while the last two are non-metaphorical ones.

The Garuda

The garuda is the name of a particular bird that appears only in myths. In these texts, the bird is an icon of power among its kind. The word garuda itself is an arbitrary symbol. No reason is given in the text for the bird's antagonism towards an alliance between China and Rome, yet this antagonism appears to be political. My interpretation is that the garuda is a metaphor, hence a symbol, for the third power in a region which could be situated in Northern India. The index to the geographical position of this power or kingdom is in garuda's activities in the Bay of Bengal down to the entrance of the Straits of Melaka. The disappearance of garuda "from the surface of the earth" would possibly be a metaphor which symbolises a total defeat of this power which is no longer mentioned in the Hikayat. King Solomon, who has a role in this particular episode, is a symbol as well as an icon of wisdom.

The Cannibalistic King

The Batak world in Sumatera was the only place in insular Southeast Asia that is known to practise cannibalism. The only place in Sumatera that is mentioned in this Hikayat is Acheh. The cannibalistic king, the fifth king of the Merong Mahawangsa dynasty, had a mother who was a Gergasi. By inference, he became a cannibal largely owing to the fact that his mother was considered to be an ogre. The second king also had a Gergasi mother, but the king did not become a cannibal. The interpretation to this story is that there was a very wicked king who made life miserable for his people to the extent where he made the effort to kill them, despite the fact that at times they made errors which society in that particular region, at the time, considered insignificant or non-punishable by law.

In the Kedah dialect, then, there is an idiom *makan darah* (literally 'eat blood'), which acts as an arbitrary symbol. This symbol refers to someone who has a cruel character. This cruality does not push the person to not to commit acts as heinous as committing a murder, let alone to eat the other person following their death or murder. Rather, the interpretation to this story is that there was a very wicked king who made miserable the lives of all of his people to the extent that he would kill them, even at times when they would commit very small mistakes. His sharp tooth is an index of his cruelty. His wife, the queen, is a symbol of dignity and kindness.

The Expansion of Kedah

This is in the narrative of the three grandchildren of Merong Mahawangsa, who were told to go in three different directions to open new land. The two princes became rulers in the land they opened as there were no rulers there. Indices of their achievements, as it were, can be seen in the extension of the Kedah dialect area from Taiping (in North Perak), right to Southern Thailand. At this time, and hence, in this sense, there were movements of people from Kedah to those places who took with them, in their migration, their Kedah Malay dialect.

The Building of Kota

The *kota* as a word is an arbitrary symbol, but is a non-arbitrary one when it refers to the object, i.e., the built environment surrounding a form of early urbanisation brought over by Merong Mahawangsa from his country of origin. The canals and man-made rivers are indices to the technology that the people of Kedah had thousands of years ago, and this technology had lived on to the 20th century.

Conclusion

The Hikayat tells of the ancient: Peoples, their ways of life, their technology, relationships between ethnic groups, visitations by people from outside of the Malay world, and the geophysical regions that formed the backgrounds to the various types of narratives. Apart from the dating of the geomorphology of the region by geologists and geographers, that of other events has not been confirmed. The semiotics in the narratives give a realistic picture of most of the events taking place in those ancient times.

As shown in the discussion above, the text itself represents a huge language symbol. Within it are numerous symbols of the same category. These symbols signify the presence of non-language symbols, the icons, and the indices, in the various narratives.

By employing the theories and approaches mentioned above, some of the major factors in Kedah history discovered in the text are: (1) the evolution of the geomorphology of Kedah since 5000 years ago (which has been verified by scientists in the field), (2) the identification of ethnic groups living in Kedah in those ancient times and the assimilation of at least one of them with the Malays; (3) the evolution of Kedah from a simple civilisation to urbanisation with the technology that the people had in building kota (urban centre) and man-made rivers that are still seen in Kedah today; (4) the events that led to the spread of the Kedah dialect to North Perak and Southern Thailand; and (5) the fact that the sending of gold and silver flowers as a tribute from the King/Sultan of Kedah to the King of Siam from time immemorial until 1905 began as a tradition of sending gifts from the younger brother, who was king in Kedah, to his elder brother in Southern Thailand, every two years.

References

Asmah, H. O. (2019). *Bahasa Kesusasteraan Klasik Kedah. Cetakan Kedua*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. Cetakan Pertama 1995.

Asmah, H. O. (2021). Za'ba dan Rahsia Ejaan Jawi. Paper presented at the *Symposium on Efficiency in Jawi and Malay Manuscripts on Islam (Kuasai Jawi dan Kuasai Manuskrip Melayu Islam)* on 12th December 2021 (webinar), organised by Kluster Tarbiyah dan Persuratan Islam, Nadwah Imuwan ABIM, and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.

Carey, I. (1976). *Orang Asli: The Aboriginal Tribes of Peninsular Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Chandler, D. (2007). *Semiotics: The Basics*. Oxon: Routledge.

Culler, J. (1983). *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. London, Melbourne, and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1961). Categories of Grammar. *Word*, 17(2), 241-292.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1979). *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.

Maier, H. M. (1985). *Fragments of Reading: The Malay Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*. Amsterdam: Offsetdrukkerij Kanters B.V.

Saussure, F. de. (1960). *Course in General Linguistics*. London: Peter Owen Limited.

Siti Hawa, S. (1970). *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press.

Siti Hawa, S. (1998). *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*. Kuala Lumpur: Yayasan Karyawan and University of Malaya Press.