



Unraveling Seaspaces: Decoding Environmental Knowledge in a Classical Malay Literary Corpus

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ABSTRACT

This study approaches Classical Malay literature from an environmental perspective, focusing on diverging contexts and meanings across different spatial categories in the portrayal of the sea. Our primary data source was the Classical Malay literary corpus of the Malay Concordance Project. By employing a mixed-methods approach, combining distant reading techniques with thorough close reading, we were able to analyze a more extensive selection of texts compared to previous studies. As a result of this approach, we introduce three nuanced seaspaces, each symbolizing distinct spatial dimensions of the sea and connected to different symbols, contexts, and motifs. These seaspaces encompass (1) the sea's mystic underwaters, (2) its human-centered shore, and (3) its connective midst. Through these seaspaces, we aim to demonstrate the sea's wide range of meanings in Classical Malay literature, all of which are rooted in its heterogenous and multidimensional space. We consider these seaspaces to represent maritime environmental knowledge encoded and concealed in the large body of Malay literature which this study attempts to decode.

Keywords: *sea, environmental knowledge, Classical Malay, corpus, concordance analysis*

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural and social studies frequently overlook environmental or ecological considerations. This is despite the fact that culture only emerges through humans' continuous interaction with their environment. Thus, to re-emphasize the significance of the environment as part of cultural development, we must incorporate an ecological perspective as an integral part of cultural research [1, pp. 25–26]. Accordingly, this study attempts to scrutinize how Classical Malay literature represents the environment, particularly the sea.

The strong connection between culture and the sea has been explored in numerous studies about the “Sea of Malayu” i.e., “a network of communities that developed a common cultural idiom visible in the [...] artifacts they left behind, as well as in the shared values that enabled any of its members to move comfortably from one area in its unified world to another” [2, p. 56]. As Malay literature is not limited to ethnic Malays only [3], we avoid using the term “Malay” as an ethnic category. Thus, we do not claim to examine the environmental knowledge solely of ethnic Malays; instead, we focus on the environmental knowledge decoded in Classical Malay literary texts as one of the cultural artifacts left behind by the network of maritime communities along the coasts of the Sea of Malayu.

Studies on Classical Malay literature have approached the environmental dimension of the sea from various perspectives. First, Winstedt explored how Malay folk verse portrays the sea as a part of nature in general [4]. Furthermore, Braginsky demonstrated how the sea holds symbolic significance for Malays in constructing their lives [5]. More recently, some studies have referred to Malay literature as a source of knowledge about nature that can be applied for practical purposes, such as in disaster mitigation [6][7]. However, all these studies fall under the discipline of philology, the main focus of which is to deal with manuscripts as objects themselves. This paradigm is aligned with the philological studies on Classical Malay literature undertaken by Western researchers in the 19th century that tended to study texts by collecting, cataloging, summarizing, and only briefly describing them [8, p. 5] In contrast, our research

approaches Malay literature from an ecological perspective, wherein a text cannot be separated from the environmental context in which it originated.

Another distinguishing factor of this study is its specific focus on the sea. In contrast to previous studies that have taken the idea of Malay literature as maritime literature for granted, this research adopts a more considered approach by attempting to clarify exactly what is meant by “maritime” and by exploring how the sea—an entity composed of several dimensions, each of which is associated with different meanings—is represented.

Finally, as Classical Malay literature encompasses a wide and varied range of works and genres, it is important to address how we approach our object of inquiry. To cover this vast area, we relied on the Malay Concordance Project [9], a tool that allowed us, first, to define what has traditionally been considered to be Classical Malay literature and, second, to search a collection of Classical Malay literary works for the keyword “laut” (or “sea” in English). To analyze the resulting data, we employed a mixed-methods approach that integrated distant and close reading techniques into our analytical procedure.

2. OBJECTIVES

The objective of this article is to group spatial categories of the sea into different seaspaces that “frame and constrain perception, engagement, and use of seas” [10]. By doing so, we seek to demonstrate the semantic range of the concept of the “sea” in Classical Malay literature and problematize one-dimensional interpretations that are formed by only emphasizing particular spatial aspects of the sea.

3. THEORETICAL REVIEW

The environment should not be viewed merely as a background or stage on which culture is performed [11]; rather, it should be treated as an integral element in the formation of culture itself. Equally, culture plays a pivotal role in the formation of perceptions of and knowledge about the environment [11]. This interplay results in an inseparable and continuous interaction [1, p. 25] that takes various forms, one of which is the process of representing the relationship between culture and the environment in literature [11].

Indeed, literary works have the power to effectively portray the environment, as documented by multiple studies with varying scopes and approaches. Adding to this strand of research, this study explores how the sea is depicted and thought about in works of Malay literature.

A number of studies have already explored the relationship between the sea and Malay society. For instance, Boomgaard et al., in their edited volume entitled *A World of Water: Rain, Rivers and Seas in Southeast Asian History* [8], argue that despite Southeast Asia’s abundant supplies of water, which make it the richest source of metaphor for all aspects of people’s lives, “In the study of Southeast Asia, there has always been a strong emphasis on everything terrestrial with a concomitant neglect of aquatic aspects” [8, p. 1]. With this in mind, the book addresses water culture in Southeast Asia, with some papers focusing specifically on the sea.

Andaya, in his paper entitled “The Sea of Malayu: An Ocean Perspective of Malay History” [2, p. 2], builds on Boomgaard’s ideas by emphasizing that the Malays, an ethnic group that developed along the straits of Malacca, were “shaped by their orientation to the sea” [2, p. 22]. Being a maritime community, the sea played a central role in their lives. Indeed, in its omnipresence, the sea was considered a medium of ambiguity that could both give life and take it away [8]. This ambiguity demonstrates the variety of meanings associated with this vast and semantically rich space. This semantic richness is further exemplified by distinctions made between various seas and the demarcation of seas from oceans based on the infusion of local cultural interpretations [12]. For example, the Balinese people, as studied by Polunin [13], maintain a considerable distance from the sea because they consider it to be an impure place in comparison to mountains; the Javanese view the sea as an otherworldly realm that is beyond human control; and the Bajo tribe, as documented by Stacey [14], consider the sea to be their ancestral home and the spiritual center of their lives.

Several subsequent studies have looked at the representation of the sea in Malay literary works specifically. According to Braginsky [15], literature serves as perhaps the most valuable repository of Malay culture, affording a glimpse into how the Malay people perceive nature and the sea. One of the pioneers who researched how the sea is depicted in Malay literary works was Winsdtedt, with his paper “Nature in Malay Literature and Folk Verse” [4]. Moreover, the symbolic value of the sea as a metaphor was investigated by Denys Lombard [16] and Maier [17], while Braginsky [5] explored how the act of traveling across the sea represents the cycle of human life in *Syair Perahu*. Furthermore, the sea’s role in trading activities is elaborated upon in the writings of Reid [18][19] and Andaya and Andaya [20]. Finally, more contemporary studies, such as those conducted by Syaifuddin [6], Hussain [7], and Manguin [21], explore the far more explicit and pragmatic references to the sea in Malay literary works.

Notably, the studies cited above have limitations in terms of their material and formal scope, which this research attempts to address. Indeed, previous studies have been limited by their small sample size, qualitative approach, and narrow focus on only a few Malay literary works. By contrast, this research employs a mixed-methods approach to comb through a much larger corpus of Malay literary works, allowing for a more comprehensive and in-depth examination of the topic. Our methodological aim is to decode the underlying knowledge of the sea that might elude many readers. This involves not only analyzing individual texts, as previous studies have done, but also identifying patterns and themes that emerge across the entire corpus.

Moreover, previous studies formally focused on the sea as a homogeneous spatial entity that is connected to other natural elements. This research departs from this view, positing instead that the sea is a heterogeneous spatial entity comprising diverging sea spaces [22]. Thus, we argue that in the literature of maritime communities developed along the shores of the Sea of Malaya [2], there are nuances and shades of meaning across different seas.

4. METHODS

The term “decoding,” as indicated in the title of this study, is not simply used as a fashionable synonym for “analyzing.” Instead, it describes the systematic analytical approach employed in this study to integrate quantitative methods into a qualitative inductive analysis of a corpus of Classical Malay literary texts [23]. In other words, it involved a simultaneous application of extensive and intensive reading [15]. This approach comprised two main steps. The first of these involved distant reading of the extensive collection of texts to identify structural patterns. More specifically, we relied on a concordance, which is essentially “a collection of the occurrences of a word-form, each in its own textual environment” [24, p. 32].

Using the Malay Concordance Project¹[9], we conducted a comprehensive search for all occurrences and textual environments of the Malay word for sea (“laut”). The resulting data comprised 1,082 textual passages across 138 different Classical Malay texts.² Subsequently, by employing concordance analysis, we organized these passages according to their spatial references to the sea, referring to several locative pronouns (“di”, “ke”, “tengah”, “dalam”, and “tepi laut”).

In the second analytical step, referred to as close reading, we read through all 1,082 textual passages and selected representative examples for each spatial category. Whenever specific motifs were identified, we examined a text beyond the frame of the limited passage. After this selection process, our data comprised several passages from 10 different texts (see Table 1), which we compared by examining their contexts and the nuances in the portrayals of the sea within each spatial category.

Table 1. Material according to the Malay Concordance Project after the selection process

Title	Year	Link
Hikayat Bayan Budiman	1371	https://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/Bayan_bib.html
Hikayat Aceh	~1625	https://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/Aceh_bib.html
Sejarah Melayu	~1625	https://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/SM_bib.html
Hikayat Tanah Hitu	~1650	https://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/Hitu_bib.html
Hikayat Patani	1730	https://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/Pat_bib.html
Syair Siti Zubaidah Perang Cina	? ~1800	https://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/Zub_bib.html
Syair Lampung Karam	1883/84	https://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/LKrm_bib.html
Silsilah Perak	~1826	https://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/Perak_bib.html
Hikayat Marakarma (Si Miskin)	1855	https://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/Misk_bib.html
Hikayat Seri Kelantan	1914	https://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/SKel_bib.html

Source: [<https://mcp.anu.edu.au/>]

¹<https://mcp.anu.edu.au/>

²A list of texts present in the Malay Concordance Project can be accessed through the following link: <https://mcp.anu.edu.au/Q/texts.html>

To summarize, our approach combined a distant perspective, which enabled us to identify structural patterns, with an in-depth examination of specific texts. In other words, “[t]he distant view, a structural overview, highlight[ed] certain patterns, and zooming allow[ed] the close reading of individual passages” [25]. By doing this, we were able to compare and contrast the representation of different spatial categories of the sea across a large volume of textual data.

5. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

This section begins with the finding that in half of all the passages (556 out of 1,082 passages) within the texts, the sea is referred to using a locative phrase. This finding suggests that in the corpus, the sea is often described as a specific location, as opposed to being portrayed as an active agent (e.g., “The sea washed the ship onto the shore”). This means that in all these 556 passages the precise spatial dimension of the sea is specified using prepositions like *on* (di), *to* (ke), *inside* (dalam), *at the coast of* (tepi), and *amidst* (tengah) the sea. While *on* and *to* the sea indicate relatively general locative dimensions that have a broad range of contexts and meanings, *inside*, *at the coast of*, and *amidst* the sea are spatially more specific. They each refer to a distinct dimension within the multidimensional space occupied by the sea. In geometric terms, these three dimensions represent essential spatial forms [26]. First, *inside* the sea refers to the body of seaspaces that represents its uncharted depths, which is only limitedly accessible to humans. Second, the *coast* embodies the boundary of seaspaces which delimits its far-reaching spatial extent across three dimensions. Third, *amidst* the sea indicates the surface that bounds the vastness of the sea’s underwaters. Being highly significant but heterogeneous spaces for human life and culture, each is associated with diverse meanings across the texts. Thus, in the following discussion of our findings, we will focus on these three spatial dimensions and present representative portrayals of each seaspaces across the analyzed material.

5.1. The Mystic Underwaters

In contrast to firm land, the space occupied by the sea is highly dynamic, stretching across all three dimensions [22]. Being limited by their physiological needs, humans only have limited access to the depths of the sea. Accordingly, *inside the sea* (dalam laut), as represented in our material, primarily signifies the boundaries of human existence, encompassing motifs related to death and spirits. Thus, this seascape is associated with highly symbolic meanings that extend beyond ordinary connotations. An important aspect, in this regard, is the motif of a beautiful young woman inhabiting the depths of the sea, which appears in the texts Hikayat Bayan Budiman [27] and Silsilah Perak [28]. Our focus, in this context, lies not on the way in which this character is embedded into the stories but rather on how this motif indicates meanings that are associated with this seascape.

The first thing we note is that this mystical female figure seems to possess nonhuman characteristics, as implied by her ability to occupy the sea’s depths, a space typically restricted to marine life. However, in both texts, this mystical woman marries the king, indicating her capacity to exist in both the underwater and terrestrial realms. Through this ability to cross the boundary that regular humans can only pass temporarily, this figure serves as a mediator between the human and nonhuman, the living and the dead, and the overworld and underworld, which brings to mind the myth of Nyai Rara Kidul. As has been previously argued, the underwater, being the abode of demons, is closely associated with the underworld. However, at the same time, it is also connected to fertility and life-giving abilities [29]. This ambivalence, as represented in this motif of a female figure occupying the depths of the sea, underscores the underwater’s conflicting meanings.

Another aspect closely related to this ambivalence is the motif of death, drowning, and suicide. In Hikayat Marakarma [30][31, p. 155], the sea is featured in various contexts, including the punishment of being thrown into the sea and the act of throwing oneself into the sea to commit suicide. Even though the characters survive these incidents, this motif demonstrates the relationship between the underwater and death. It underscores the sea’s dangers from the perspective of maritime communities like the Malays, whose lives were intimately connected with the sea. Thus, the earlier-discussed mystical and symbolic connotations of the sea naturally arise from the risks it poses to humans in close spatial proximity to it. Seen through this lens, the sea is a place where people vanish. Consequently, such events give rise to mystical and underworldly notions about this seascape among those left behind.

In summary, this dimension of the sea is packed with symbolic meaning that cannot be limited to a homogenous motif. The material we analyzed is only a small but representative share that contains depictions of the sea’s underwaters. Nevertheless, the motifs we identified tend to be echoed in other representations of the sea throughout the corpus that revolve around similar themes.

5.2. *The Human-centered Shore*

To understand seaspace, it is necessary to understand its boundaries. By representing the transition between sea and land, one of these lines that bounds seaspace is the shore (*tepi laut*). A feature that distinguishes the shore from other seaspaces is that it has the potential to become a continual human habitat. Thus, humans who are settling along the shoreline are not only shaped by their connection to the sea but, at the same time, entangled with land culture [8, p. 2]. Especially for maritime communities such as the Malays, the shore has been an essential environmental part of their lives [2, p. 22][32, p. 11]. In this context, the shore primarily represents a space of human habitation, brimming with human significance. The representations of the shore in our material often accentuate human characteristics, reflecting this human-centered dimension of the shoreline.

The Hikayat Aceh [33][31, p. 317] and Syair Lampung Karam [34] both mention large settlements situated on the shore. Despite the considerable time gap between the production of these two texts, both emphasize that the shoreline was considered a place where people established communities. Of particular note is the passage in the Hikayat Aceh, which reveals interesting spatial indications. It describes the shore settlement as being under the rule of Aceh, implying a hierarchy in which the hinterland is superior to the shore. It is important to note that hinterland, in this context, does not imply land that is far from the shore. Instead, it represents the coastal area that is located adjacent to the shore. Thus, we distinguish between shore and coast (i.e., the former being a precise boundary between land and water at a fine local scale and the latter a much wider strip of coastal land located further away from the shoreline) [26]. This fine differentiation in the passage of the Hikayat Aceh indicates nuances in perception towards seaspace: shores and coasts are different spatial concepts associated with different meanings. For cultures formed in actual hinterlands far from the shore, this distinction may not be common knowledge. However, for maritime communities as represented in this text, this spatial awareness appears to be incorporated into their common understanding of the environment.

Another motif that emphasizes the human-centered meaning of the shore is the activity of hunting, which is an essential practice of human civilization. The Hikayat Patani [35] and the Silsilah Perak [28] both recount a tale of a king who goes hunting on the seashore when a white mousedeer attacks one of his dogs. The king then chooses this exact spot as the location for his new settlement. A strikingly similar story is also told in the Sejarah Melayu [36][37]. All these tales point to an archetype of founding legends for coastal settlements along the shorelines of the Sea of Malaya. They demonstrate the entanglements of the seashore and human civilization, living space, and the act of settling down in Classical Malay literature. In summary, the notion of the shoreline in Malay literature—indicating the precise boundary between water and land—is associated with notions of human life. It represents a seaspace that, in contrast to other seaspaces, is perceived as a human habitat.

5.3. *The Connective Midst*

Between the shore and the underwater, the sea encompasses a third spatial category that allows people to travel from one shore to another: the sea's surface or the midst of the sea (*tengah laut*). This seaspace indicates movement and mobility between different places. The motif of traveling is represented in the Hikayat Seri Kelantan [38] and the Hikayat Tanah Hitu [39][40], both of which explicitly mention the itinerary of a journey by naming a sequence of different places. These references to place names imply the movement from one settlement to another, made possible by the sea's role as a connecting medium. In this sense, the sea represents an infrastructure that is used to navigate vehicles from one point to another. Beside this practical meaning, the portrayal of the sea in the Hikayat Tanah Hitu also implies a symbolic meaning in which an illness-plagued prince is brought to the midst of the sea to leave behind the impermanent world (“*negeri fanah*”) and enter the eternal world (“*negeri baqa*”). In this context, the sea becomes a connector not only between shores but also between different worlds. As the sea's surface covers its deep underwaters, both the midst and the depths of the sea are symbolically closely related. Therefore, the mystical meaning of the sea's surface is tied to the sea's depths, which indicate similar mystical tendencies. These similarities show that there is no clear distinction between the three seaspaces we have highlighted. Rather, they represent nuanced categories with fluid boundaries. In this sense, while being associated with worldly meanings as a conduit for movement across physical places, the midst of the sea can equally represent mobility between supraphysical places closely connected to the mystical depths below its surface.

Mobility, in regard to the sea's surface, invariably implies a movement away from the human-centered shore toward a realm that is governed by nature. Thus, it signifies a departure from civilization and all terrestrial attributes. In the Syair Siti Zubaidah Perang Cina [41][31, pp. 575–577], this remoteness is portrayed as a total disconnection from the mainland, rendering the senses incapable of detecting any trace of civilization. Indeed, in the midst of the sea, no mainland, islands, or forests are visible. There is nothing but the sky and water. In this absence of human influence, the ship described in the text is sailing from “humanic” to “natural” space.

The Syair2 Karangan Abdullah [42] also portrays this remoteness but does so through sound instead of sight. The text makes reference to a loud noise (the source of which is irrelevant in this context) that is so loud it can be heard as far as the midst of the sea. Thus, the distance and remoteness of the sea's midst are expressed indirectly without describing its vastness per se. Moreover, the text does not mention any actor being present to hear the sound, which further strengthens the impression of remoteness. Overall, then, this figurative formulation reveals the portrayal of the sea's vast surface as a realm of remoteness of an uncivilized natural space.

6. CONCLUSION

By using a corpus-based approach to study the representation of the sea in Classical Malay literature, we have uncovered three distinct yet interconnected seaspaces, each characterized by a set of symbolic meanings. Across a range of texts, we decoded various nuances, leanings, and tendencies in the depiction of the sea represented by (i) the mystic underwaters (associated with motifs of non-human existence and death), (ii) the human-centered shore (implying living space), and (iii) the midst of the sea (representing a bridge between different shores and worlds). These seaspaces collectively represent the multidimensional nature of the sea's space and demonstrate its wide range of associated meanings. Drawing from our theoretical framework, we propose that these underlying spatial distinctions offer insights into the environmental knowledge embedded in Classical Malay literature, shaped by centuries of coexistence between maritime communities and their natural surroundings.

While our corpus-based approach allowed for a comparative analysis that revealed nuanced interpretations of the sea across multiple texts, it should be acknowledged that it also comes with certain limitations. For instance, this method focused on the comparison of motifs in the representation of the sea throughout the corpus, which made it challenging to consider the broader historical background that may have influenced individual texts we examined. We justify this shortcoming by referring to the assumption that enabled the Malay Concordance Project to be considered a coherent collection of Classical Malay texts sharing historical and cultural similarities [9]. Nevertheless, a suggestion for further research would be to explore the intertextual and historical ties between the different depictions of the sea that we have highlighted in this study.

7. COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

This article is free from any conflict of interest regarding the data collection, analysis, and the publication process itself.

8. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Leon Woltermann: research design, data collection, analysis, writing

Ramayda Akmal: analysis, writing

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