

THE WRITING IN THE WALL: HISTORICAL THOUGHT  
IN AN EPIC TRADITION\*

James T. Siegel

The Atjehnese had a strong epic tradition till the end of the nineteenth century. Today, epics may still be heard in the countryside and, in fact, are still composed, though none produced in the twentieth century has ever become popular. Atjehnese epics were always written, though they were recited and apparently never read to oneself. In this paper I want to explore the question of the status of writing and voice in one epic in particular, the "Hikajat Pòtjoet Moehamat," which describes a civil war that took place about 1735 and was composed about twenty-five years later.<sup>1</sup> Dealing with this question will allow us to ask another: why is it that Atjehnese epics were always set in verse when they were recorded in writing? I hope, by answering these questions, to clarify the basis of Atjehnese historical thought.

Let us begin in epic fashion *in medias res* with a few passages that treat Atjehnese graphic representation. By one definition of writing, these signs representing ideas, though not script in the narrowest sense, can be considered writing. In one passage, images of flowers are linked with death after the most prominent warrior of the story, named Béntara Keumangan, has been killed. His body has been returned from the battlefield to his mother's house. The house is described this way: "The corpse arrived and was laid out. The [interior] walls were taken away [so that] tiers of carved flowers were visible [on the outer walls] and heaps of dried ones. / Carved flowers were visible interlaced with one another, as was the [cloud] motive. / One was amazed at the figures on the walls. / Here and there the moon had been copied and the scorpion constellation was stamped through the wall."<sup>2</sup>

In another place in the epic, flowers without fragrance refer to death. When Pòtjoet Moehamat early in the story travels about to recruit troops, people respond favorably: "They looked [at the prince] and felt a most delicious sensation. / The hearts of the people fell to him. It was more delicious than coconut pudding."<sup>3</sup> The prince,

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<sup>1</sup>C. Snouck Hurgronje, *The Achehnese* (Leiden: Brill, 1906), 2, pp. 88-90. All citations from the epic are from the manuscript in the University Library at Leiden, Codex Ordenensis 8669d, romanized by H. J. Damsté.

<sup>2</sup>Lines 2211-15.

<sup>3</sup>Lines 431-32.

however, threatens them with the loss of "delicious sensation" when he tells them, "I am a young man, in the care of you who are here, / Like a flower in the midst of blossoming, its fragrance nearly gone, about to fade. / My intention is for you to carry this flower to the grave."<sup>4</sup>

The scorpion is pictured on the wall because the constellation of that name, in conjunction with the moon, is used to measure time. Here it also suggests death since it is poisonous. There may be another more tenuous connection with death. The particular mourning ceremony performed for Béntara is called *phō*. *Phō* also means a certain small crab with sharp pincers that moves quickly and lives underground. One can thus trace reference to death from the scorpion to the crab and from the crab to the funeral ceremony.

As Atjehnese houses are loosely held together with pegs, it is not unusual for the interior walls of the house to be removed for the mourning ceremony, thus opening the view onto the carvings on the outer walls, a feature of many Atjehnese houses. It is unusual, however, that the epic should take notice of these representations; all the more so since, when they have been described, the next line reads, "After that fine curtains were hung across the ceiling and the walls. / After that relatives arrived. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Though the figures on the walls refer to death, their place in the scene of mourning, which continues with the line just quoted, is not obvious, since they are hidden from view. The description continues with the last line quoted:

After that relatives arrived, encircling the coffin.  
Some embraced [him], some kissed [him].  
The kin wept till some were out of their senses and seemed to have  
gone mad.  
Some struck themselves, banging their heads against the pillars.  
Some banged themselves against the doorposts, banging their earrings  
and breaking off their jewels.  
Some banged their armbands as they swayed, the spikes breaking off  
and falling out as they shuddered.  
The Ceylonese agates, the jewels set in alloy dropped out.  
They struck themselves with their fists as their arms descended, but  
they paid no heed.  
Those from the side of the leader . . . said ceaselessly to  
themselves,  
"Even the great tree has fallen. Now he is powerless as never  
before."  
Half of them wailed and half struck themselves as they danced for  
the dead one. Their hair flew as they swung around the coffin.<sup>6</sup>

As the mourners swirl about, they lament that the great warrior is dead. The thought of his death is at the same time the remembrance of him alive: "Now he is powerless as never before." The centrifugal swinging of the mourners threatens to remove them from the disturbing presence of the corpse altogether. The mourning ceremony (*phō*) itself, as it was at one time performed in Atjeh, could also turn the dancers away from the corpse. Women, as they danced around the coffin, would repeatedly lift one leg and recite love poems, presumably to the

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<sup>4</sup>Lines 441-43.

<sup>5</sup>Lines 2216-17.

<sup>6</sup>Lines 2217-27.

corpse. But they would also give betelnut to men they fancied.<sup>7</sup> In the epic, however, we see none of this, since the house itself, as the mourners ricochet off it, brings them back to the dead body.

It is the walls of representations that prevent the dancers from forgetting the warrior. The carvings on the wall are not reliefs but, rather, perforations extending through the planks. The empty space of the walls is a means of designating something that is not there. The carvings are thus analogous to the body of the warrior which, because it is lifeless, designates what is no longer present. Yet since the carvings are screened off, it is neither their reference to death nor their analogy to the corpse that returns the mourners to the dead body. Rather they are a concealed framework which encloses the mourners in the same space as the corpse. It is not the sense of the carvings but the structure of hollow representations, the wall itself, that keeps the mourners in proximity to the remains they otherwise might put out of mind.

Another description of these walls is given earlier in the epic when a messenger brings a letter to Béntara from Prince Moehamat:

First he entered a dead-end path which wound and turned through shade  
And then he entered the yard to the guest chambers of Toean Béntara.  
He saw that the place was beautiful; it looked to him like a king's  
palace.

The roof was thatched; there were eight pillars, while the walls were  
covered with Chinese paint.

There was a glass window as large as a serving tray, *toean*.  
When he had taken in the whole apartment, [the messenger] was  
dumbfounded for a moment.<sup>8</sup>

The unusual features of the house are the paint and the glass window, both of which were rarely found in Atjeh. The carvings in the other description would have been fully visible from the outside since they would have been perforations in the walls. In the messenger's view they are replaced by the paint which seems, if not to cover them, at least to distract attention from them. Windows in Atjehese houses are ordinarily without glass and are rectangular. This one is described as like a serving tray, which is always round. The word for serving tray is *taba'*, which is close to *taba*. *Taba* means to haggle or bargain, which is what the messenger is about to do with Béntara; it also means "to be afraid of," which is his attitude toward Béntara. *Taba* refers as well to a well-known *surah* of the Koran which is recited to purify graves. The opening stanza of the *surah* reads in part:

Thou canst see no fault in the Beneficent One's creation;  
Then look again: Canst thou see any rifts?  
Then look again and yet again, thy sight will return unto thee  
weakened and made dim.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Snouck Hurgronje, *The Achehnese*, 2, p. 424 n. 1, where the ceremony is called *muphō*, *moe-* or *mu-* being a prefix. See Djajadiningrat, *Woordenboek*, under *phō*, I.

<sup>8</sup>Lines 643-47.

<sup>9</sup>Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (New York: New American Library, 1953), 67:3-4.

The messenger sees perfection ("it looked like a king's palace") and his eyes see "no rifts." The perforations of the wall are obscured from his view. The Arberry translation of the surah reads "thy gaze returns to thee dazzled" while the messenger is "dumbfounded."<sup>10</sup> The description of the house does not include the door, nor does the window itself serve as an opening. Rather, since it was unusual for windows to be covered by anything but movable shutters, the glass (a word which in Atjehnese also means mirror) is part of a continuous outward aspect. The house to the messenger is an unbroken surface in which there are no fissures and, in particular, there are no carvings.

The perfection of the house is linked to its exposure. The walls are hidden from the mourners, but they come completely into view at a single moment to the messenger who comes to them from a shaded, winding path. Unlike the mourners, he is only momentarily dumbfounded. His gaze "returns to him weakened," which means he feels that there is more there than he sees; that the openings are filled in. By contrast, the mourners, located between the corpse and the concealed walls, feel only an absence.

The sight of the house from the outside initiates a series of episodes in which several figures try to get Béntara to accept Prince Moehamat's letter by diverting him not from what it might contain but from its character as script. Béntara's acceptance of this letter is a necessary step in persuading him to join the prince's forces. I want to argue here that the letter functions like the carved wall of the house; that it is attractive when its character as script is obscured, repellent when it is glimpsed as writing. We shall have to place the letter in the context of the story to see this.

As the epic opens the land is at peace, though there are two kings. One occupies the palace and the other has established himself nearby. The first lines of the epic tell of the younger brother of one king, the Prince (Põtjoet) Moehamat, arising from his deliberations with the leaders of his party as "He wished to see a secret revealed by a dream."<sup>11</sup> In his dream he sees the trees on the highest slopes of the mountain which is often taken as a symbol of Atjeh, "their tops . . . bowed, their roots twisted."<sup>12</sup> He carries his interpretation of the dream to his brothers, saying: "I saw the palace turned into jungle, I saw the square turned into forests. / I saw Atjeh as exceedingly handsome. Two kings rule. / One of them, our brother, rules from the palace. . . . / Outside there is Djeumalōj Alam of Gampōng Djawa who rules the kingdom. / That is what I cannot accept."<sup>13</sup> His brother the king, however, justifies his lack of opposition to Djeumalōj Alam by saying that it was their father's dying wish that they not oppose the second king but rather marry his daughters. Prince Moehamat denies that these words are valid.

The first half of the epic shows Prince Moehamat spreading his message of the "shame" of "one land but two kings." People respond not to his message, however, but to the sound of his voice. As he travels through the land gathering forces for battle, he repeats himself,

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<sup>10</sup>A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1955), 2, 67:4.

<sup>11</sup>Line 5.      <sup>12</sup>Line 8.      <sup>13</sup>Lines 24-28.

saying: "Atjeh is one land with two kings" and that such a land cannot stand.<sup>14</sup> "The world is upside down now; crocodiles sit in the ditches. / The sea is without waves but the salt marshes are turbulent. / Even the [venomous] *birang* snake is without poison." He therefore asks people to aid him in making war on Gampōng Djawa.<sup>15</sup> They do so eagerly; not because of what he says, however, but because of the sound of his voice. As the epic has it, the prince says, "What the ears hear is discordant."<sup>16</sup> However, the response of his audience is to feel "at peace." "Because his voice was rich and sweet, their souls felt wholly at peace."<sup>17</sup> The prince's words have an effect contrary to their meaning, making people feel restful and content when he speaks of war and chaos.

The epic states that without the help of Béntara, the warrior whose funeral we have just described, the prince's party can not win. Béntara, however, is allied with the other king, Djeumalōj Alam. When he is approached, he refuses to change sides, for he is highly indebted to Djeumalōj Alam. There is a catalog of his indebtedness that is recited not only by him but also by his mother and by Djeumalōj Alam. Djeumalōj Alam sheltered Béntara from vengeance at one point; the queen nursed him after he had been wounded; the king had given him money, the standard, ornaments, and whatever else he had asked for. Béntara therefore can not turn his back on him. We learn that Béntara has actually performed many services for the king, but none of these are thought of as a *quid pro quo*. Indeed, Béntara's debt is not considered repayable. Giving and receiving in the epic are not economic transactions, but rather the means by which relationships are established. Béntara, we learn, is an orphan. Because of what the king has done for him, he considers the king his father, and the king considers him his son. We never learn of his natural father; but this is not an issue, since the only paternity that matters is that established by giving.

Béntara's answer to the prince's invitation to change sides is, "All that I have received, how can I forget it now?" a line that he frequently repeats. This line must be taken at face value. It is impossible for Béntara to forget what he has received even should he so wish. Indeed, at certain points the catalog of his indebtedness is recited simply as a statement of fact--that it is impossible to forget --and at others as a plea as well--that he, Béntara, would like to change sides, but finds it not possible to forget. That Béntara "cannot forget" means that he has registered what he received, what was done for him, in such a way that it leads back to previous gifts and finally to their source. It is on this basis that Djeumalōj Alam, the giver, is Béntara's "father." Each gift suggests the next and, taken together in the catalog of indebtedness, they trace the history of Djeumalōj Alam and Béntara as source and receiver, a relationship which is encapsulated as that between "father" and "son."

The issue of forgetting of allegiances is always posed against script. In the example we have already given, the mourners come up against a structure of representations and are thrown back to Béntara's

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<sup>14</sup>Line 32 is the first time this line is recited. It is repeated several times thereafter.

<sup>15</sup>Lines 1124-26.

<sup>16</sup>Line 588.

<sup>17</sup>Line 597.

corpse. The mourners are Béntara's kinsmen. He was their champion, protector, and focus of the large group of relatives to which they belong. When the mourners see Béntara's corpse they are reminded of their affiliations as members of his kindred. The question of Béntara's own allegiances is elicited in analogous fashion. When Prince Moehamat wants to win Béntara's allegiance, he sends him a letter. We have already described the scene as the messenger brings that letter to Béntara's house. It continues with the meeting of Béntara and the messenger. The messenger induces Béntara to make a long description of trade and politics on the West Coast of Atjeh. The messenger is described as "very artful; he had a lot of small talk at his command. / When he came to a tree first he pruned off the branches. / The elders of that day were that artful, deeply learned, discerning and skilled in deliberations. The letter was still in his hand as he chatted of other things with Toeán Béntara." Béntara's response, when the letter is brought up, is not to ask what it says but who it is from. When the messenger has given him the Prince's genealogy, Béntara replies, "It is improper for me to have anything to do with this Moehamat; I am protected by [Djeumalōj Alam]. / There in Atjeh he may be a man, but in Pidië there are other dragons. . . ." <sup>18</sup> "I cannot receive that letter. . . . From the time of our ancestors we have been leaders, one after the other. Now comes a letter from someone higher than the king. / I will not receive that letter. The rules are not in play; they are inverted." <sup>19</sup> It is not what the letter might say that Béntara finds objectionable but that it is sent by Moehamat. Like the wall, it is not what is represented that makes him repeat what he "cannot forget," his allegiance to the other king, but the presence of the letter. Set against this is the messenger's diversionary tactic, which obscures the letter, still held in his hand.

Béntara summons his followers and is about to prepare to fight rather than accept the letter when one of his advisers tells him "not to go too far" or he will "regret it later." <sup>20</sup> The letter could be either "venom" or "medicine." Béntara accepts this advice though not for what it says. Nothing in the contents of the letter could change the identity of the sender. If the letter is a profession of love, as it is, and thus "medicine," it could only turn him away from his proper allegiance and thus be also "poison." Rather, Béntara agrees to have the letter read because, as the adviser speaks, his voice is said to be "richer than water buffalo milk, sweeter than sago palm sap. / He advised and taught in a voice more delicious than coconut pudding." <sup>21</sup> It is the "deliciousness" of this voice and not the argument it carries that Béntara finds compelling. Béntara agrees to have the letter read and sends for a religious scholar, apparently the nearest literate person.

Béntara tells the scholar that the letter contains "the shapes [or appearance] of words and meanings." <sup>22</sup> The scholar in return tells Béntara to "listen to a story of basic truths" which consist of such statements as "has one's finger ever poked [one's own] eye out? Without lips, the teeth are visible" and conclude with "Without you, son, the land is lost." <sup>23</sup> Snouck Hurgronje said of this passage that it "commences by propounding a number of abstruse and somewhat indistinct

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<sup>18</sup>Line 821.

<sup>19</sup>Lines 835-38.

<sup>20</sup>Lines 904 and 912.

<sup>21</sup>Lines 901-2.

<sup>22</sup>Line 989.

<sup>23</sup>Lines 996 through 1000.

precepts, the connection of which with the matter in hand is by no means clear,"<sup>24</sup> and he was correct. But the point of the statements is their irrelevance. What we hear is "flattery," the divergence of attention from what is meaningful. The second meaning of "to flatter" in Atjehnese is "to caress," and this is also apropos. The words of the scholar, like those of the adviser before him, seem to caress the warrior. With the sense drained from them, they are only sounds or sensations which have a pleasing effect.

When the scholar finally does read the letter he chants it aloud. We are told that "He grasped everything in the letter, the delicious and the disagreeable. / He said nothing of the disagreeable, reciting only the delicious. / He understood the appearances and meanings of it completely; [but] when he finished reading aloud they were no longer clear [or visible]."<sup>25</sup> It is not evident in the edition cited whether the scholar actually does not read aloud the parts that are "disagreeable" or whether these sections are simply covered over by the sounds of the chant, chanting being the usual manner of reading aloud. In another version, however, the letter is quoted and turns out to be nothing but pleasantries.<sup>26</sup> What is obscured in the chanting is not the sense of the letter alone, then, but the "appearance of words and meanings," the apprehension of it as a set of signs that might have meaning. The important distinction is not between the meaning of the letter and the meaning of the chant, but between the "shapes [or appearances] of words and meanings" of the letter and the sound of the chant. As is made evident, Béntara does not understand what has been chanted. He says, "Have you finished the letter? What is the meaning of the king's words?"<sup>27</sup>

The scholar replies that it is "fitting" and that Béntara can "receive" it.<sup>28</sup> This duplicates the initial encounter of the scholar and Béntara, when a string of the scholar's well-sounding but meaningless words are brought to an end with the assurance of their acceptability. Here, the word for "fitting" or "proper" is *keundng*, meaning also "mellifluous," "striking," "well-rhymed," and "rhythmically right."

The reading of the letter does not precede the question of its acceptability. Rather, reading the letter, which in the Atjehnese notion means chanting it, is the acceptance of the letter. When the sounds of the chant have obscured the "appearances of words and meanings" on the page, the letter is "fitting," "proper," "acceptable," and "mellifluous," all of which are designated by the same word in Atjehnese. When the letter was earlier rejected it was because of its sender's identity and not simply because it exists as a set of representations. In this respect it is apparently not quite parallel to the wall which, merely by its existence, throws the mourners back to the corpse. However, the identity of the sender is requested in response to the letter, not to the message, and when the sound of the

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<sup>24</sup>Snouck Hurgronje, *The Achehnese*, 3, p. 94.

<sup>25</sup>Lines 1015-16.

<sup>26</sup>Anzib (copyist), *Hikajat Potjut Muhammed* (Banda Atjeh: Lembaga Kebudayaan Atjeh, 1963), p. 64.

<sup>27</sup>Line 1023.      <sup>28</sup>Line 1026.

chant obscures the script the identity of the sender is no longer significant. Even though it is never denied that Prince Moehamat sent the letter, that fact no longer matters once the letter is read. Béntara has "forgotten" who Prince Moehamat is. "Põtjoet Moehamat" is thus a name which means not "the brother of the rival king," but the script itself. Béntara has also forgotten his prior allegiance, everything he earlier could not forget. The disappearance of the script means he is no longer thrown back to what previously could not be forgotten. When script is read in Atjehnese fashion, what was full of gaps and repellent becomes continuous and attractive.

The reading of the letter does not complete the change of allegiance, however. Béntara still must meet with the prince. The prince asks Béntara to change sides. He refuses, however, and recites again the list of his indebtedness to the other king. But when Prince Moehamat acknowledges the claims of Djeumalōj Alam ("Do not forget Djeumalōj Alam, as he is a descendant of the Prophet all of whom must be honored")<sup>29</sup> and adds that of his own side ("But as custom makes me ashamed, I would not be able to look him in the eye"),<sup>30</sup> Béntara changes sides. By pointing to the legitimacy of Djeumalōj Alam, Prince Moehamat has established the validity of two fathers, two sources or origins. He asks now, not for Béntara to change sides, but to "stand in the middle," saying "Cherish both our sides. As on this side, so on that side. Stand in the middle and fend off both sides."<sup>31</sup> At that point Béntara finds the prince's words "caressing" or "flattering."<sup>32</sup> Again the physicality of the word is intended; between two sides, words are no longer anchored in the context of Atjehnese ideas of signification. They are, rather, free-floating, and important not for what they "mean" but for their sounds. Béntara is said to be "dazed" or "stupefied," as language has changed its character.

The speech of Põtjoet Moehamat, however, hides its own implications. The consequences of standing on both sides is the denial of obligations. The prince, by asking Béntara to "stand on both sides," asks him to "forget all that he has received." The effectiveness of his words does not depend on their argument, which Béntara has already found to be unpersuasive. It is, rather, the marginalizing of their sense in favor of their sound that results in his change of allegiance. Béntara's response to the prince does not touch on the meaning of the prince's words but only on the effect of seeing and hearing him:

The heart of Pangoelèë Beundaròë fell; the son of the king was a most appealing figure.

He saw how handsome he was, how generous and obliging.

His eyebrows curved like the new moon; he was young, well formed and brave.

He saw the shining expression of his face; each word tasted like coconut pudding.

He saw that his manners were refined, that he was a true noble.

He heard his voice, rich and sweet, and his soul was wholly at peace.<sup>33</sup>

As the house appears to the messenger, so the prince appears to Béntara as unbroken surfaces. The word that means "appealing" for

<sup>29</sup>Lines 1176-77.

<sup>30</sup>Line 1178.

<sup>31</sup>Lines 1179-80.

<sup>32</sup>Line 1181.

<sup>33</sup>Lines 1213-18.

instance, refers only to expression and appearances. It is not his face but the "expression" of his face, its appearance, that "glitters," in the same way that the window of the house might reflect light. The perfection of the prince consists of his "polish" or "refinement," which is something seen. The openings in the face--the prince's eyes, mouth and nose--are not mentioned. His only feature is his eyebrows which, "like the day old moon" are only a luminous line that enclose no opening.

It is misleading, however, to speak of the prince as "surface," as though there were something behind the surface. Béntara, like the messenger before the house, seems to see more than he can comprehend. The prince is no longer a figure whose shape is indicated by its surfaces, but a series of fragments. He is dissolved into his own appearances, the culmination of which is the sound of his voice, which makes Béntara feel "wholly at peace." The prince thus continues the series of characters that began with the messenger, the voices of whom are increasingly effective in masking the script of the letter.

It seems, therefore, as though the prince only resembles one side of the house. But if we turn back to earlier episodes, it is as though we have moved back inside the house. When, early in the epic, the prince has challenged his brother, the king, to contend with his rival Djeumalōj Alam, his brother prepares a force to subdue the prince himself. The troops leave the palace noisily:

Spears and lances bristled as his majesty left with the instruments  
of war.

A quarter of the soldiers had blunderbusses.

They fired salvos that sounded like the popping of rice kernels to  
announce the king's departure.

They beat gongs and *keudangdi*, shouting and crying in the confusion.

The English fenced while the French fought with knives.

The Malabaris played with swords and danced.

His highness left the palace bringing his three standards with him.

When he reached the height of the market of Lam Lhōng gongs were  
beaten in the guardhouse.<sup>34</sup>

When the king meets the prince, he cites his father's testament that they not fight Djeumalōj Alam but rather marry his daughters. In response, the prince associates their father's words with an intermediary or go-between. This makes them no longer the command of a father to a son in the single line of source and registration we have spoken of, but rather places them in the space where words are "mere words" or "lies," because they are aimless, coming from no place in particular and going nowhere and therefore without authority. The king then claims the authority of a father for himself because he raised the prince after their father died. The prince refutes this saying that he gave him nothing. He does not mean that he received nothing from his brother, but rather that his brother was not the valid source; that it "all came from God." Despite his numerous troops, the king retreats when his brother, who has dismissed even his two servants, pulls out his dagger. The king flees back to the palace, shuts it up, and stays there for most of the remainder of the epic.

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<sup>34</sup>Lines 147-54.

The king, confronting his brother, tries to bring him into line by establishing the prince's allegiances. The prince refutes his arguments. The truth of his refutation, however, cannot account for Moehamat's routing of his brother whose troops so vastly outnumber him. The source of the prince's power in this episode is, rather, the amulets he wears. Here is the way he is described when he hears the din of the king's troops leaving the palace:

He pulled on a shirt and put two *djoesan* talismans on his head.  
He wore two *birang* snake amulets and a baby dragon around his neck.<sup>35</sup>

Djoesan amulets are wrapped up pieces of paper on which words from each of the thirty divisions of the Koran are written. The words themselves are unreadable, first, because they are only fragments of passages, each word standing for whole sections of the Koran, and, second, because, like the carvings of the house, they are hidden from view. The *naga* amulet is described by Van Ronkel as consisting of the figure of a dragon and instructions on figuring auspicious places and times.<sup>36</sup> After this, however, is "a series of fragments of expressions and disjointed letters out of which no words are capable of being formed."<sup>37</sup> This amulet, then, is also partly sheer "appearance of words and meanings," or writing. The *naga*, however, has another meaning. There are two plants used as medicine (one particularly useful for wounds) which are named after it.<sup>38</sup> This is important when taken in conjunction with the remaining amulet, the *birang* snake. The *birang* is a sea snake noted for its venom and which, when transformed into iron, becomes an amulet which confers invulnerability. The amulets, then, are writing, and like the letter are both medicine and poison.

The king and the headman come up against the prince, who is invulnerable because of his amulets. It is against this wall of script that, like Béntara when confronted with the letter, they are forced to summon up their lines of allegiances. Like the wall of the house, it is not what the amulets say but their existence alone which throws men back to what they would like to forget but cannot: (the invalidity of) their identities. The prince, then, is like the walls of the house. From one side, he is unbroken surface culminating in continuous sound. From the other, he is script or representation, important not for what it says but because it throws adversaries back to what it is that they cannot forget.

Prince Moehamat, then, appears to be a figure who controls two varieties of writing, or two relationships to it. On the one hand, as the bearer of amulets, he forces people to flee. On the other, through his voice, he is able to make people accept writing. As such, he seems

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<sup>35</sup>Lines 157-59.

<sup>36</sup>Ph. S. van Ronkel, "Een Talisman uit Atjeh," *De Indische Gids*, 37, 1 (1915), pp. 478-87.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>One is the fern *ba' sisé' naga* whose "naga scale-like leaves" are used as medicine for wounds; the other is the *ba' tjoela naga* whose long leaves are said to resemble naga heads. Djajadiningrat, *Woordenboek*, under *naga*.

to manifest the power of the sultanate, or of Atjeh itself, creating and expressing the power of its unity. However, there is a point at which this control slips away from him.

In the first half of the epic, we have seen that the prince recruits people by the sound of his voice. He asks them to join him in battle, and he tells them that Atjeh is already in chaos, though at that moment such is not the case. When his forces finally engage those of the rival king in battle, however, he flees. The scene of battle has made the sense of Põtjoet Moehamat's words evident--the battle he had pictured as occurring has come to pass.

Through this episode we are shown that Põtjoet Moehamat participates in the same nexus of appropriation as do his subjects. They make the prince's words their "own" by marginalizing what he says in favor of the sounds of his voice. So, too, the words of the prince are his "own," not when their sense is fully present to him through the sound of his voice, but when the sound of his voice is all he hears. His voice overrides the sense of the battle he calls for in addressing his followers, but when the sense of his words becomes manifest he is terrified, not by the facts of the situation, but rather because his words are no longer under his control. They have returned not as "his," i.e., as sounds, but as an aspect of events external to him.

The "objectification" of his words, however, is not a simple manifestation of their "sense" in the battle scene. The prince initially refuses to think of the battle as "sense." When the battle becomes fierce, his troops are frightened and say, "It is an accusation from the Lord Allah! Let that not come to be!" "We are attacking a descendant of the Prophet, a pious man, grandson of the Prophet."<sup>39</sup> However, Põtjoet Moehamat will not accept this understanding. His refusal to listen is a refusal to accept any interpretation at all. He says in reply, "Let no one whosoever be arrogant, let no one say too much";<sup>40</sup> that is, let no one place any construction on the events.

Only after his followers return to battle does the prince become frightened, yet it is not the fierceness of the battle that dismays him. Earlier it is reported that a great many soldiers were being killed. ("They could not stand in the ploughed-up earth. Wherever they heard a shot there was destruction.")<sup>41</sup> Despite this, the prince rallies his followers. Seeing the slain men has not frightened the prince up till now. It is the sight of the guns themselves that frightens him, and then only well after they have caused much destruction. Only when the guns form an impenetrable wall is he thrown back to the sight of the corpses and is terrified. "There were a great many guns. It seemed to him that he could not withstand them."<sup>42</sup> The word that means "withstand" also means "to penetrate," "to go beyond," "to transgress." Only then, in the next line, does "Prince Moehamat look to his followers and see that many of his comrades had been killed";<sup>43</sup> and only then does he retreat because "there were a great many guns. He could not withstand [or penetrate] them."

The guns, by their impenetrability, throw the prince back to the chaos he had falsely claimed already existed but which now has come to

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<sup>39</sup>Lines 1974-75.

<sup>40</sup>Line 1976.

<sup>41</sup>Line 1970.

<sup>42</sup>Line 1981.

<sup>43</sup>Line 1982.

pass. The claim, when Pòtjoet Moehamat made it, had no significance; no one even responded to the assertion, much less was convinced by it. When it becomes true, however, his voice, which appeared to himself and his followers as sheer sound, has been revised to become, in retrospect, sensible. He then flees.

The prince returns to battle only after Béntara, pointing out to him the shame of flight, tells him that the battle was not foreseen: "There has never been a battle like this, prince. . . . If this had been foreseen, nothing could have made me come."<sup>44</sup> But he also asks why the prince urged the troops into battle if he was not prepared to die.<sup>45</sup> In these words, Béntara makes the battle comparable to others (fiercer) and gives only conventional connections to the prince's words.

When Béntara or the prince's other followers are captivated by the delicious sensation of the prince's words, his figure disappears. He is at these moments identical to his language and, it seems, constituted by the sound of his voice. What is different from our own notions of the constitution of the self in the voice is that there is no question of inner and outer. He broadcasts himself to his followers. There is no body left which is the authentic source of his sounds. His voice is "delicious" because he-or-it enters fully into his followers.

There is no room in such a notion of voice for a conception of "sense" of which sound is a means for broadcasting or a product of the self. When the "sense" of the prince's words becomes evident, it revises his voice by giving significance to what earlier had not registered. The "sense" of his words dilutes the fullness or deliciousness of the sound of his voice. When sense appears he is less than fully there. The "sense" that emerges when sound fails in the epic is always the death of the self. When the prince flees it is because he sees his words manifested. His "voice" at that point is no longer sound but is itself graphic and visual. Where there had been no exterior before, but only the dissolution of the form of the prince into the signifiers of himself, there is now an expression of himself not identical to himself but "outside" him. The appearance of his words as "sense" as well as "sound" has thereby cut across the distinction of *writing*, the alien, repellent, and graphic, and *voice*, the appropriating, seducing, and phonic, which the prince seemed to control.

What seem to remain are the impenetrable walls. The corpse inside the house walls drives the mourners to frenzy. The same walls, however, contain that frenzy, preventing it from becoming licentiousness and from spreading outside the house. A wall by itself could do this without the curious display of graphic representations the epic emphasizes. That the wall is a wall of writing is explained by the interest the epic has in maintaining the distinction of voice and writing which, up till the time of battle, Prince Moehamat seems to control. This is a distinction that might seem threatened by the possibility of reading in Atjehese fashion. Reading script by converting it into the sounds of the voice meant defusing the danger of script by making it one's

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<sup>44</sup>Lines 1998-99. This is not part of the edition of the text published by Guru Anzib; Anzib Lamnjong, *Hikajat Potjut Muhammad* (Banda Atjeh: Lembaga Kebudayaan Atjeh, 1964).

<sup>45</sup>Line 1994.

own. Yet it might be thought that the very connection thus formed between them could establish an equivalence of the two. The alterity of writing is shown in the epic through the funeral scene which makes graphic representation not into an equivalent of the voice but an unavoidable barrier. It was an alterity which had to be confronted but which voice could appropriate. The representations on the wall, by becoming a barrier to the contagion of the corpse, at the same time become opposable to voice and, as they initiate reading, absorbable by it. The alterity of writing is thus vulnerable at the moment in which it is perceived.

Seeing this, we can see as well why the representations had to be veiled. Were the corpse visible through the openings, it might be confused with the representations of death. The "inside" would thus have become the "outside" in a move equivalent to the fleeing of the prince from the sight of his own words. And we can understand as well why the prince's talismans were, in different ways, unreadable. The talismans were a barrier which shielded Prince Moehamat from his opponents. It is not what they meant that gave them their power. In so far as they had meaning, they were formulae which were easily known. It is, rather, their character as script, as sheer alterity, that was the source of their potency. The effectiveness of this barrier rested on the inability of the prince's opponents to neutralize script by reading it. The prince's control thus depended on the illegibility of the script retaining its function as barrier and boundary.

Since Atjehnese reading cannot be equated with understanding it is not surprising that the power of script in the epic does not rest on what it "says." Its power stemmed from the contagion it threatened should it be penetrated. Yet when the messenger is dazzled by Béntara's house and the episodes of reading are thus initiated, there is no corpse in the house; Béntara, moreover, is still alive. Nor do we know of any corpse behind the talismans. One can only understand this by thinking that illegible script institutes the apprehension that behind it there "is" something, either venom or medicine, which one must recoil from or make one's own. To think that writing was illegible in Atjeh was not possible unless one at the same time posited not a possible meaning one wanted to know, but an "inside" which made writing alterior. The scene of Béntara's funeral is one image of what this inside might be. (What is "behind" writing in the epic is always fictional, moreover. When the mourners are thrown back to their prime ally, he is not there.)

The wall of guns seems to stand still. When guns in Atjeh fire, they are not said to "speak" as in English but to *lheuëh*, a word that also means that no oath has been fulfilled, that a dream has come true, that a deed has been accomplished. Guns go off, then, as dreams come true; they manifest something and thus claim to escape representation. The "sense" of the prince's words is exterior to himself. But when it seems to appear as something that the guns force him to face up to, it appears as well as the effect of the guns. When this is so, conventional meanings are restored: the scene of battle is only a scene of battle and not the voice as writing. When, with the aid of Béntara's words to the prince, this has been established, the wall is no longer impenetrable. Returning to battle, Béntara and the prince storm through the guns to penetrate the forts.



Siribèë//parang/oereuëng/meuladang;//teubèë//bandoem/djiboih/rata//

1000 machetes men cut down sugar cane all setdown all or flat//<sup>49</sup>

Here we have the same shift in subject. In the first section of the line, the emphasis is on the machetes: "/Men with / a thousand machetes cut / it / down"; in the second, on the sugar cane: "The sugar cane was leveled." To combine the two and say "A thousand machetes leveled the sugar cane" is to ignore the doubling of "sugar cane" and "all" as well as the two verbs. The effect of following the Atjehnese closely is to move from one phrase to the next, shifting the emphasis without necessarily integrating the meanings. Again it is the very closeness of meaning of the two phrases that creates the problem. What we have is not an elaboration of meanings but the replacement of one by the next.

The internal rhyme, normally occurring between the fourth and sixth feet, divides the line in a way that is not coterminous with the division into two units of meaning. Furthermore, the final syllables of each line rhyme, and this particular rhyme is invariant throughout. The rhyme pattern thus forms a sequence of its own, divorced, in effect, from the words in which it is rooted.

Epics are always chanted. There are two chant melodies, each of which covers about two-and-a-half lines. Like the internal rhyme, the chant melody breaks up units of meaning, often beginning in the middle of a sentence and ending in the midst of another sentence. The juxtaposition of prosodic elements and narrative is furthered by the tempi. Each melody can be performed in either fast or slow tempo. Quick, exciting scenes, however, are likely to be sung in slow tempo.

The prosodic features thus work to break up meanings, rather than to synthesize them. This tendency is furthered by much of the imagery of the epic. For instance, when Prince Moehamat's forces have collected and are about to move back to Atjeh, these lines occur:

When they stood together in the estuary it was blackened with their  
*nala*-stalk [-like] masts.

Their rigging, moreover, was [like] thick-growing jungle.<sup>50</sup>

At first this looks like confused imagery. *Nala*, to which the masts are likened, is a grain. We thus have the jungle (rigging) crawling over stalks of grain. Clearly we are not supposed to put the two images together, but rather move between them. There is still another interesting feature of this structure. The sentence seems intended to convey both the numerousness of the ships and their power. Yet at best these two ideas are distributed between the two images. Stalks of grain convey a sense of number, but compared to masts they are weak. If we try to hold the relation of masts to grainstalks constant, to see the latter as an expression of the former, the figure is without potency; in fact, it contradicts the power that the image of the masts alone would convey. Rather than stabilize the relation of the two we must move between them.

<sup>49</sup>Line 1635. This line is unusual in not following the internal rhyme scheme described below.

<sup>50</sup>Lines 1838-39.

Another example of this kind of structure occurs when Prince Moe-hamat's army is described. On two occasions, once when Béntara first comes to meet him and once before they set off for battle, this line occurs:

The *rotan*-shafted lances so clashed it seemed as though someone had spread out a woven mat that one could sit on.<sup>51</sup>

The spread-out mat is an emblem of hospitality and thus contrary to the notion of violence and force that the description of the army itself would convey. The contradiction of meanings in these examples is too pronounced not to be intentional. The effect is the same that we have seen in the structure of the poetic line and in the representation of events. It is not the connection between linguistic units that is important, but the establishment of purely linguistic differences between which the listener can only move without imposing a synthesis. One thinks of Prince Moehamat's impossible advice to Béntara to honor both kings, thus establishing the (in)validity of both sides, the effect of which is to move him from one to the next.

Singers make their own interpolations during recitations. Sometimes, though infrequently, this is a matter of substituting one or two words for those of the original. The usual deviations, however, have nothing to do with the story. Once, for instance, as they were nearing a pause, the chief reciter asked for coffee in the rhythm of the epic, while his assistant kept on singing. Another time the assistant sang the word "awoke" with great gusto, and the chief reciter turned and looked at him with a long, pained expression. The performers usually sing with the left hand cupped over the left ear. During one passage one performer moved his trunk in time to the rhythm, meanwhile jostling the other with his elbow. Once when the pressure lantern needed pumping, he stopped singing altogether and stared at it while the other singer continued the epic. During a particularly sad passage, the chief performer pretended to weep. The audience thought that all of these asides were very funny.

Though it may seem that the performers burlesque the epic, in reality this is not so. They and the audience believe that the events actually occurred and, for instance, will discuss the location of the graves of certain mythological figures, never expressing any doubt about the truth of the stories in which they appear. The interpolations of the singers are like rhythm, melody, tempo, and rhyme. They are not only discoordinate with the action portrayed; they actually draw away from it to establish a sequence other than the movement of the story. The laughter of the audience is not a comment on the events of the epic, but a nonironic response to the opening in the narrative that the interpolation has caused. These interpolations allow the audience to follow one more sequence which is practically devoid of substance.

The laughter of the audience marks the "deliciousness" of listening. The same word (*mangat*) that Béntara and others use to describe the words of Pòtjoet Moehamat is used by members of the audience to express their feelings about epics. It is difficult to get people to comment on the events of the epic. This is not because they are

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<sup>51</sup>Line 1081.

unfamiliar with them (though younger people tend to be) but because they find questions about the narrative irrelevant. Those closest to me during my research in Atjeh often said that I would get nowhere asking such questions, but must rather pay attention to the "language," "sounds," and recitation.

The eagerness of the audience to shunt the story aside and to listen only for what is "delicious" gives us another clue as to which words are "delicious." The audience, which wanders in and out, is occasionally caught up by something and listens intently. These are the moments when they sense the "deliciousness" of the sounds, and the story has been forgotten. These are also the moments when they are most at one with the chanters, for the relationship between them is not based on a shared interpretation of the story but rather on a shared desire to push aside the story and to attend instead to the running-on of associations of sound images and the nonsemantic features of language.

Words are "merely discordant" when they return the audience to the story. They are "delicious" when they lead away from the narrative to sound. What throws the audience back to the story is not the lack of skill of the reciters or the poor composition of the epic. It is, rather, the presence of the text itself. The written text of the epic is always in front of the singers as they perform, and they turn its pages as they chant. Yet they have the text memorized and do not seem to refer to it. Epics are sometimes performed at ceremonial occasions such as weddings, often because the parents of the bride or groom have at some point made a vow that when their child marries they will have a particular epic recited. The text is the guarantee that what is recited is the epic. It is the origin of the chanters' words and thus threatens an equation of voice and writing. But the chant, like the rhymes, tempi, and melodies of the epic itself, has the effect of masking that origin. The emphasis of prosodic features makes sounds seem to exist independently of the words out of which they are formed. The reciters' chant is like prosody. It is pleasurable to the extent that its beginnings in the "shapes [or appearances] of words and meanings" in the text is concealed.

The attempt to conceal the origin of the voice in writing lets us infer the position of narrative in recitations. When that origin can not be masked, narrative comes to the fore as a function of the text. What is heard comes from the text and not from the singers, who at that point would be marginalized. The attribution of sense to the script rather than to the chanters maintains the distinction of writing and voice, by denying the connection between them, just as does chanting. The narrative which, of course, is nonetheless still apprehended through the medium of the chanters, is not what the script "means" but what is thought of as the illegible text coming into view.

It is not the events pictured in the epic that answer Béntara's question, "All that I have received, how can I forget it now?" It is the epic itself, as a written text posed against its recitation, that furnishes a reply; for when origins have been forgotten there is no longer a question of indebtedness. Snouck Hurgronje noticed the vivid pictorial quality of Atjehnese epics.<sup>52</sup> These are the representations

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<sup>52</sup>Snouck Hurgronje, *The Achehnese*, 2, p. 80.

of Atjehnese history. The events of the past are "unforgettable," which means that the text continually throws listeners back to the narrative. It is the wish of the audience to do away with the mark of their indebtedness. The presumably heedless meetings of Atjehnese verse are directed toward this end.<sup>53</sup> One cannot claim that the audience, which drifts not only out of the performance but also back into it, ever wholly escapes representation. The degree to which their wish to do so is granted, however, can be measured by these facts: by the end of the nineteenth century the "Hikajat Pòtjoet Moehamat" was seldom recited; only two other important epics on historical topics still existed then, though surely there had been many more at one time; nowadays the history of Atjeh is known almost entirely from non-Atjehnese sources.

There is nothing final about this process, however. The epic tradition did not end for reasons internal to it any more than its demise meant the collapse of writing into voice. New epics replaced old ones in a movement which sustained the oppositions. But if the recitation of epics in Atjeh always marginalized narrative, one might ask why narrative remained at all. In the Atjehnese context of recitation, script is to sound much as notes are to singing in music. One might ask why a tradition of wordless music did not develop in Atjeh to replace epics. The narrative to which Atjehnese kept returning cannot be equated with "what happened," even though some of the events described actually occurred. Atjehnese themselves did not distinguish epics on historical topics from those based on mythical themes. (By the end of the nineteenth century, in fact, most epics were of the latter sort.) The narrative is there not because the writing is a means of preserving history Atjehnese want to know about, but because the writing makes the audience think of it. Its function is not to express what is recorded in the script but to image the fiction that illegible writing has something inherent in it, either venom or medicine. The "history" of the Atjehnese is the product of this apprehension. It is a fiction that opens a distinction of voice and script without which the Atjehnese could hum their way through the world.

Or could they? The epic tradition continued despite the forgetting of narrative because Atjehnese not only turned away from writing, but towards it as well. The point of doing so was neither to

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<sup>53</sup>Successful Atjehnese verse is termed *keunòng meupakhō'*. *Keunòng* means "to be struck by," to be affected by something. It also means "coincidence" in words for time, as measured by the coincidence of the scorpion constellation and the moon carved on Béntara's house wall. *Keunòng* also refers to sound, however, when it means "mellifluous," as in the chanting of the letter. Finally, it means "appropriate," "fitting," or "acceptable." This usage occurs in the same episode, first when Béntara refuses the letter, saying it is not "*keunòng*," not "proper" for him to receive it, and later when it is read and the scholar pronounces it "acceptable." Prosody, in its conception, is directed toward bringing delicious sound into being.

One can also see Atjehnese verse, as it were, from the other side of the wall. The word for verse, *pakhō'*, also means "to push against something or someone." With the prefix *meu-*, *pakhō'* means "harmonious," "to make harmonious and well set out," and "to put into verse." But it can also mean "to butt," "to knock," "to stub," and "to bump." Djajadiningrat's dictionary gives as an example, "for instance, [to bump] the head when one walks in the dark." The term thus conceptualizes the accidental or heedless meeting of incongruent objects and is illustrated by the mourners coming up against the house.

preserve nor to learn the content of writing, but to regain something that was lacking. Thus a couple might vow to have an epic recited if their child should recover from an illness in the same gesture that Pô'tjoet Moehamat had a letter sent to recruit Béntara when his help was indispensable. In each case the content of the writing was immaterial; the couple need not have chosen an epic about illness. Rather, having the epic recited, like having the letter recited, offered an opportunity to recover something lacking. Had the prince not sent the letter, there would have been no occasion for his voice to sound in the presence of Béntara; it was a letter sent, ultimately, to himself. The recitation of an epic is not believed to cure illness, but comes to mind when illness is an issue, because it is the opportunity to regain oneself by listening. The double aspect of writing--as medicine *and* venom--is recognized in the epic only as medicine *or* venom. The continuation not of the epic tradition alone but of the tradition of writing depended on alternate and discrete responses to writing, possible only when "and" is not substituted for "or."

