

Willem van der Molen

The textual tradition of the Ramayana in Java. Tracing an unknown line of transmission.

Lecture at ILCAA, 13 October 2011.

Summary.

Old Javanese is the name of the language used in writings of pre-Muslim Java. The period during which these writings were produced in Java covers about seven centuries, from 800 to 1500 A.D. In Bali the Old Javanese idiom continued to be used to create new writings also after 1500, even up to the present.

Java went through a period of major changes around 1500, including a shift of religious outlook and the replacement of old centres of political power by new ones. This led to circumstances which were unfavourable for the transmission of texts belonging to a bygone era. Manuscripts of old texts produced at Javanese courts in the 18th century show that the gap with the past at that time had become unsurpassable: not only was the number of old texts that had survived the vicissitudes of time extremely small but also the language and prosody of these texts was no longer sufficiently understood.

This was not the end of it, however. In addition to new copies of the old texts that are of little help for our knowledge of the old literature new works in Modern Javanese were created in the 18th and following centuries based on those old texts but adapted to the literary requirements of the new time. Thus the old tales lived on in new shapes.

For the old texts, however, we have to turn to Bali. During a time of Javanese overlordship, in the 14th and 15th centuries, the Balinese had become acquainted with Javanese literature. When the Javanese left, their literature stayed. This was the situation when in the turmoil of the 16th and 17th centuries Java lost its old literature: Bali remained Hindu and for the Balinese the old literature remained meaningful. It was in such an atmosphere that scribes in Bali continued to produce good copies, during many centuries. Scholarly editions of Old Javanese texts therefore rely almost exclusively on Balinese manuscripts.

While the events that took place in Java around 1500 generally spoken severed Javanese society from its past, the effects were unevenly distributed in time and place over the island, leaving some pockets of pre-Islamic customs and beliefs relatively untouched for sometimes quite a long time.

On one of these pockets we have a report of the early 19th century, informing us that the last local Hindu priest in that area died only a few decades before, in the second half of the 18th century. This is the area around Mounts Merapi and Merbabu, north of Yogyakarta and Solo. According to the report that priest had been in the possession of some odd 400 manuscripts, which at his death were entrusted to his son and at the death of his son to his grandson. The son had converted to Islam; neither the son nor the grandson had access to the contents of the manuscripts anymore. The manuscripts were bought from the grandson and are now in the National Library of Indonesia in Jakarta.

After having been quietly stored in Jakarta for almost one and a half century in the 1980s the Merapi Merbabu Collection was remembered again and research started, resulting in a catalogue of the collection, in addition to studies of some of the texts. Quite a few of the texts in the collection appear to be in Old Javanese.

The presence of Old Javanese texts in the Merapi Merbabu Collection raises the question how these relate to the established traditions of Bali and Central Java. In order to answer this question and similar

questions the texts of the Merapi Merbabu should first be made available for research. The aim of my stay at TUFS is to prepare an edition of one of the texts in the collection, i.e. the Old Javanese Ramayana. The collection contains only one copy. It will be published together with a translation and commentary into English.