

## INDONESIA

COLLINS, WILLIAM A. *The Guritan of Radin Suane: A Study of the Besemah Oral Epic from South Sumatra*. Bibliotheca Indonesica 28. Leiden: KITLV Press, 1998. vii + 548 pages. Glossary, appendix, bibliography, indexes, (principal narrative formulas and topics). Paper NLG 90; ISBN 90-6718-115-3.

This bulky book is the fruit of William A. Collins's research on the Besemah in South Sumatra carried out over three decades. He stayed in the society the first time for two years (1971–1973), during which time he had a chance to record a rendering of a folk epic. After he completed his dissertation, *Besemah Concepts: A Study of the Culture of a People of South Sumatra*, in 1979, he wished to publish the text of a performance that depicts the Besemah's worldview: namely, *The Guritan of Radin Suane*, as it was sung by an old bard named Cik Ait. Collins's rich knowledge of all aspects of the Besemah, and especially those aspects that are of ethnographic significance, is displayed in his commentary for the transcribed text, which reads like an encyclopedia.

The 548-page book consists of four parts. The first part is the introduction, which describes the circumstances in which the *guritan* was collected, the singer Cik Ait and his performance, and the *guritan* in contemporary Besemah. The technical notes for transcription are also explained in the introduction. The second part of the book gives a structural analysis of the *guritan*. The third part includes the text and translation, which take up about half of the book. The fourth part is a commentary of over 170 pages in length. He adds a glossary, which was edited on the basis of O. L. Helfrich's studies published between 1894 and 1933, as well as indexes that refer to the narrative formulas and topics in the commentary.

*The Guritan of Radin Suane* is a story concerning "a prince who cannot complete his quest without the help of his magically powerful younger brother." The recitation of this *guritan* took two nights.

Above all else, this book is important because it gives a fully recorded and complete rendering of an oral tradition in Besemah, a little-known South Sumatran-Malay language. The preservation of this otherwise disappearing oral tradition will be useful for comparative purposes to specialists in languages and literatures. The copious annotations on details in the commentary part of the book will be useful for anthropologists also. However, Collins, I think, tried to do too much with his commentary, and, as a result, he provides less than a completely coherent account and discussion. If his interpretations were restricted to only ethnographic and anthropological matters, the book would have caused less confusion, and his intriguing question of "the difference between the Besemah world depicted in the story and the Besemah with which I was actually acquainted" may have been addressed more clearly. The annotations cover too wide a range of studies such as geography, ethnology, and literature. The result is that they provide less satisfactory understandings of the Besemah for specialists. The contents of a commentary are usually different from that of a glossary, which usually denotes the meaning of the word to help readers to understand the text. Some comments, however, show only the meaning of the word such as in canto 2, lines 14–15 where Collins gives "*banjaran* (lined up in rows or files)." His glossary is also not primarily for the reader's convenience as is evident in Collins's statement that his intention for the glossary was "mainly listing the problems I encountered with the language of the *guritan*."

Collins says that he, at Cik Ait's request (398), played the end of the first night's recording to the bard himself and to the audience at the beginning of the second night, "so that Cik Ait could take up singing just where he had stopped." This seems to be an unusual approach for an anthropologist, and it may have been excessive intervention by the outside observer.

Since he mentions in the second part of his structural analysis that some parts of the second night's performance sounded odd because of many omissions in the story, I wonder if the author may not have been too anxious to collect a complete text.

For me as someone with an interest in Malay literature, Collins leaves many questions unanswered. For instance, he does not explain the meaning of the name of the protagonist, "Radin Suane." Radin seems to be identical with the Javanese title for aristocrat (*raden*) but the meaning of the word *suane* is unclear. It is customary when interpreting a text to consider the meaning of the name of the protagonist and other characters. One important question is, What is *guritan*? The word *gurit* comes from Javanese or Sundanese literature and should refer to a poetical word composition. Collins's research on *guritan* as a literary genre was not done seriously enough in order to allow him to discuss it as being embedded in the Malay literary tradition. The relationship of this text with other Malay literary genres such as *syair* and *hiḱayat* is unclear in his introduction. At the very least, I think it is necessary to refer the recent contributions made by specialists of Malay literature such as H. M. J. MAIER (1988), G. L. KOSTER (1997), and Will DERKS (1994). An especially good reference worthy of comment is Derks's book on Malay oral tradition, *The Feast of Storytelling*, which deals with the oral tradition of the areas neighboring the Malay world. It is a pity that Collins does not refer to such works to interpret his excellent text, since I suspect that he really tried to take a literary approach as well as an anthropological one. For instance, his discussion of the so-called "narrative formulas" such as the "laughter formula" (canto 86, lines 4–5) or the "many people formula" (canto 28, lines 32–33) in the text remains unsatisfactory. This lack is felt even more because, although he adds an index of the principal narrative formulas as an appendix, he does not propose an analysis of such formulas at all. I am also disappointed that the wording and its effect for the text and its performance is not discussed anywhere even though they are quite interesting as literary devices.

Finally, it seems that the Besemah community has been influenced by the Javanese culture for a long time and the text contains many Javanese words and elements. However, in his interpretation, the historical account of Javanese influence in the Besemah community is limited. The help of a Javanese linguist does not seem to be enough to interpret these Javanese words and elements properly.

Despite the inadequacies mentioned, this book provides an excellent documentation of a vanishing oral tradition. As such it is a welcome addition to the series of *Biblioteca Indonesica* from KITLV (Royal Institute of Linguistics and Anthropology), which strives to publish critical editions of texts in various Indonesian languages, together with translations and commentaries in English.

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