

ABSTRACT

TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE: THE FLEETING WORLD OF DAPUNTA HYANG JAYANASA

By Zai Kuning

Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge

Created in collaboration with Mohamad Riduan (Singapore)

Presented by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

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Notice:

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Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge is an exhibition by artist, Zai Kuning (Singapore).

It was exhibited at the Esplanade Concourse, from 15 Jan – 19 Apr 2015

Transmission of Knowledge:

The fleeting world of Dapunta Hyang Jayanasa

Abstract

The Melayu world is said to be divided in two periods. For this reason, scholars often say that the history of the Malay people is like a jigsaw puzzle, and that there are so many missing parts that it is nearly impossible to see the larger picture.

The 13th century saw the beginning of the Islamisation of the Malay archipelago. Since then, the Malays have always been associated with Islam, so much so that the minority who continue to practise their ancestral beliefs as animists are discriminated against and denied. I learnt about this when I painfully witnessed the struggle of the *orang laut* (“sea gypsies”) on the Batam and Bintan islands, and the disappearance of the ancient Malay opera Mak Yong from Mantang Island. The *orang laut* are shunned by the mainstream Malay and the language and expressions used in Mak Yong Melayu have become too ancient to be understood. I have made films about these two marginalised groups.¹

During my interaction with these two groups over the last two decades, I was led to think about the Melayu World before Islamisation, before the well-documented history of the last king of Singapore, Parameswara, who adopted Islam as his religion and took on the Muslim name, Iskandar Shah (1344-141).

Delving into the history of the pre-Islamic Melayu world, I discovered the empire of Srivijaya (7th - 13th century), which began with a wealthy, ambitious and visionary Malay king, Dapunta Hyang Jayanasa, who aspired to conquer Southeast Asia. It is said that King Dapunta, with 20,000 men, began his conquest in year 684 to acquire wealth, power and ‘magic power’ in a journey called Siddhayatra. In time, the Straits of Malacca, the Sunda Straits, the South China Sea, the Java Sea and the Karimata Straits all came under his control. This part of Malay history is now largely forgotten by the Malay people and remains debatable among scholars.

¹ The film 'RIAU' featuring the Orang Laut is a permanent collection of Fukuoka Museum and Singapore Art Museum.

The almost mythical accounts of Dapunta and his conquest were fascinating to me. How many ships did they build to carry 20,000 men? How big would these ships have been? How did they navigate the complicated and often treacherous geography of a region containing thousands of islands? How could this piece of history vanish and become completely forgotten? I began to wonder and imagine a 7th century Malay Buddhist/animistic world where ships were vessels seeking power, fortune and magic power, each vessel both a house of knowledge and a dungeon of death and torture.

Under the auspices of National Arts Council Creation Fund, I was able to contemplate upon the world of Dapunta Hyang for three years. The first resultant installation was featured in my solo exhibition at Ota Fine Arts, while the second was shown in the Institute of Contemporary Arts (Singapore). The third, a work created upon invitation by Esplanade, was further developed by looking deeply into the structure of warring ships in this region. I chose my own ancestry - Bugis of Makkasar - as the Bugis warlords were one of the most sophisticated ship builders, conquering and establishing political dominance over the Johor Empire in the 16th century. The Phinisi boat which combines the design of a fishing boat with that of a warring ship is the inspiration for this installation.

Description on materials used

In the past, Singapore did not lack a supply of raw materials due to its role as a port. I grew up in a village where we could easily grab materials from the land with which to patch our houses. However, economic development has caused the trading of raw materials to dwindle and has forcefully ushered people into small, confined living spaces. Unlike artists in Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia where natural materials are abundant artists in Singapore find it nearly impossible to work with them due to their high cost and a lack of space. Hence most artists and students alike obtain our materials from craft shops. It is a tough and challenging time to be an artist in Singapore thinking about making big sculptures.

For this work, I chose rattan because of its flexibility, the childhood memories it evokes

and its symbolism as a tool of threat and power. Compared to bamboo, rattan is less stubborn when it comes to bending yet it is extremely resistant to breakage. One can use rattan as a rope or as a stick. I find rattan's quality of tenacity very admirable and would like to discover more about it.

People of earlier generations would remember rattan as a material used to make woven baskets and furniture. However, rattan gradually gained notoriety for its use as canes with which parents disciplined disobedient children. During my time, the rattan cane was never far from me at home or at school. It is, for me, a symbol of power, and threat.

The ship itself is not only a vessel of conquest, but living quarters. I always imagine what Dapunta and his men brought in their ship. Surely, besides their desire to conquest, they also brought with them knowledge, and inevitably, death. The red waxed thread used represents life lines. The use of stones is based on an ancient technique of balancing a big ship with a heavy load, providing counter balance against the force of the wind hitting the ship sideways, a brilliant design which symbolises how one needs to be still in order to stay afloat in the chaos of movement.

A last and most baffling question remains: how did such an important part of history become obsolete and forgotten? I found poignancy in representing this with the ship dragging onto pillars of books, each a vessel of the transmission of knowledge.