

# Assessing the Epic Status of the Brunei Malay *Sya'ir Awang Simawan*: Place Names and Toponyms

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An unpublished and relatively unstudied epic, such as the Brunei Malay poem the *Sya'ir Awang Simawan*, presents numerous problems and opportunities for a greater understanding of Brunei and Borneo history, of Malay literature, and Austronesian languages and cultures. A first question is: Is the text a true epic, in the Parry-Lord-Foley tradition? While direct evidence that the text is indeed a true epic is not available, a methodology has been developed which allows a conclusion to be drawn that it probably was a true epic, passed down from generation to generation orally. The text came under chirographic control (Sweeney 1987), probably at some time in the early to mid 20th century. A more vexing question is: How can the numerous versions of the text, all of which are different from each other, be managed in any serious study? One interesting feature of the text, in all versions seen, is the linear order of the content, which represents a grand history of Brunei. Because the text is an epic poem, the highly structured nature of the verses aids greatly in constructing a collation of the different versions. The key feature to identifying the linear order of the different versions is the presence of around 500 different place names in the text. These place names are treated as "fixed point markers" which allow the identification of "cognate verses" in the different versions of the text, and guide the construction of the collation. The place names are often combined with about 50 different "specifiers" to create an even larger number of toponyms, which vary in the different versions and appear to be kinds of poetic variation added in performance by different poets. The total number of toponyms (consisting of specifier[s] + place name) is at least 700. (An "unspecified" place name is treated as having a "zero" specifier.) Toponyms in the *Sya'ir Awang Simawan* vary from the very well known 'Country of Java' (*Nagri > Jawa*) to the very obscure name of the eponymous hero's 'toilet ditch' (*Parit Jamban*), known only to cognoscenti in Brunei. While the toponyms vary across the six versions of the text, the variation is commonly in which specific specifier is used with a place name. It is the recurrence of these place names across the different versions which allows the conclusion to be drawn that the *Sya'ir Awang Simawan* is a true oral epic.