

## **Javanese Script as Cultural Artifact: Historical Background**

Stuart Robson

Monash University

### **Abstract**

The Javanese language has been preserved in a written form for many centuries, and the writing system (script) used has corresponded to cultural influences in Java, the main one being the Indian-derived form known as *aksara Jawa*. This was the vehicle for the production of literary works in Old, Middle and Modern Javanese.

For the Hindu-Buddhist period, these literary works themselves contain evidence of a degree of literacy in Javanese society, in the form of letters exchanges by the characters in stories (including women) and the activities of poets and scholars.

Evidence of literary activity in Java comes in the form of large numbers of manuscripts, the majority of which date from the sixteenth century onwards. These were produced in a series of centres, culminating in the princely courts of Central Java. Regarding the 'technology' of writing, in contrast to earlier times, when palm-leaf was used, we now see the use of indigenous paper (*dluwang*) and quantities of imported European paper. The availability of this latter material was instrumental in facilitating the development of literature. Paper was only manufactured in the Indies much later.

In the nineteenth century there was another kind of 'revolution' – from hand-written book to the printed book. The printing of Javanese required the production of Javanese typefaces. Here a number of Europeans were the ones who took the initiative: they were mainly missionaries. It was some time, however, before a satisfactory shape was found for the letters. Credit for this goes to Professor Taco Roorda and the typefoundry of the Enschede company in Haarlem, the Netherlands.

From the early twentieth century there was a shift away from the use of Javanese script to the use of romanisation. It seems that the reasons for this were mainly practical – the cost – rather than any attempt to undermine indigenous culture. It is also claimed that Javanese script was banned during the Japanese occupation. The fate of Javanese script in the post-colonial era still has to be described.

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