CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

This book has investigated a number of important issues relating to illustrated Malay magic and divination manuscripts from the late eighteenth up to the early twentieth century. Apart from highlighting examples that are unknown and are discussed here for the first time, it is hoped that this research has contributed to increasing our knowledge and understanding of the artistic and textual aspects of the Malay manuscript tradition, as well as that of the Malay magical and divinatory practices.

As laid out in the Introduction, the questions posed relate to a number of points, in particular on the type of images and texts that the manuscripts contain together with their sources, iconography, style and relationship to other media, as well as issues surrounding the production, function and consumption of the manuscripts. The preceding chapters have explored these issues using a large number of examples as well as focusing on specific manuscripts and texts. From those discussions a number of important conclusions can be drawn.

To begin with, in terms of the format and materials used, magic and divination manuscripts are not much different to Malay manuscripts of other textual genres. This can be seen for instance in the predominant use of European paper, as well as in the relative lack of documentary evidence such as colophons and seals. These aspects indicate that magic and divination are to be considered part of the wider Malay textual tradition.

With regard to the contents however, the magic and divination manuscripts differ markedly from the other textual genres in that they are idiosyncratic, with no two copies being the same. A study of the contents has highlighted the great variety of magical and divinatory techniques that are found in the manuscripts, demonstrating a rich and complex tradition. Furthermore, many of the techniques and images described within the manuscripts are shared with other societies, both Islamic and non-Islamic, not only within Southeast Asia but also the wider world. This demonstrates that the literary and artistic tradition of Malay magic and divination did not exist in isolation but was part of an extensive and long-running transmission of ideas and knowledge between many cultures. For instance the Malay version of the Rotating *Nāga* can be seen to be part of an architectural tradition that is distributed across much of Southeast Asia, South Asia and East Asia. The spread-eagled squatting human figure has similarly been discussed in the context of an ancient and widespread iconography.

Closely related to the above point is the fact that the techniques described in the texts and their accompanying images are derived from a wide range of sources. Although tracing the history and evolution of the texts and images is still a difficult task due to the lack of early evidence, there are indications that the Malay magic and divination tradition has a long history, incorporating influences not only from an indigenous Southeast Asian tradition, but also from South Asia, China and the wider Islamic world. For instance talismanic designs such as Solomon's ring and the *angka sangga Siti Fatimah* are pre-Islamic in origin, but the *budūḥ* magic squares are derived from the Islamic tradition. At the same time the Chinese twelve-year animal zodiac is also the basis for a number of divinatory techniques.

Another important theme that has been highlighted is how these disparate influences co-existed alongside each other. For example, in the manuscripts images of the lion appear in both a calligraphic form that has been derived from the Islamic tradition, as well as in a fantastical version taken from local Southeast Asian iconography. At the same time, it must be emphasised that these various elements have often been reinterpreted and adapted to fit into the Malay tradition. For

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instance there is a strong possibility that the *Ketika Lima* table is a local derivation of the planetary hours concept, while the *budūḥ* magic square is employed in indigenous house-building rituals. Additionally, the employment of stories from the *Mahābhārata* and the usage of local shadow play (*wayang*) imagery in the pictorial *fālnāma*, as well as the appearance of Chinese dragons in the South Asian-derived technique of the Rotating *Nāga*, similarly demonstrate how foreign influences have been reconstructed into a new paradigm.

A similar eclecticism is also seen in terms of the artistic styles of the images contained in the manuscripts. In general, illustrations of living beings, objects and buildings are highly stylised, schematic and two-dimensional with a lack of depth and shading, a common trait found in Malay manuscript painting of other textual genres such as literary and devotional works. It is as yet difficult to pinpoint specific regional styles or schools, although a few connections have been uncovered, such as between two manuscripts containing a similarly-shaped diagram of the *Angka Tiga*. Additionally the close relationship between the images in the magic and divination manuscripts with those of other media and art forms is another common theme that runs throughout. Apart from the use of motifs commonly found in Malay woodwork, metalwork and textiles, within the manuscripts there is also a prominence of iconography and artistic styles associated with shadow play puppets and classical dance-dramas. All these connections demonstrate a shared artistic vocabulary within the Malay visual arts. The introduction of Western media has further enhanced the Malay artistic tradition by bringing in new techniques and styles, resulting in figures that are more naturalistic and lifelike.

This melting-pot approach demonstrates the adaptability of the Malay magic and divination tradition of mixing numerous influences. At the same time it also highlights a tension between pre-Islamic and Islamic elements, which is a common theme not only in the field of magic and divination but also in other aspects of Malay culture such as the theatre. It must be remembered that when these manuscripts were produced, the Malays (and much of maritime Southeast Asia) have been Muslim for hundreds of years. Furthermore, the format and contents of early Malay manuscripts show that the Islamic magic and divination tradition has been a major part of Malay society since at least the sixteenth century. Yet there is still a strong maintenance of pre-Islamic traditions. An 'Islamic prohibition' of depicting living beings is often cited to explain the lack of figural images in Malay art, but the depiction of humans, spirits and animals in the manuscripts demonstrate the continuing importance of these figures in Malay culture.

This leads to a consideration of the deeper meaning behind the images, i.e. why certain motifs and iconographic conventions were particularly prominent and continued to be so. This is an issue that is important in the study of Malay visual art in general, but it is often difficult to investigate as in many cases the meanings are not always clear and often forgotten. Nevertheless we can attempt to uncover the significance behind some of the images contained in the magic and divination manuscripts. For instance it could be argued that representations of power and rank lie behind the iconographic conventions used in the depiction of anthropomorphic beings, such as in the squatting spread-eagled posture and the employment of royal costumes. Additionally the ubiquity of illustrations of birds and the *nāga* serpent reflects the Southeast Asian cosmology of the upperworld and underworld. Apart from images of living beings, the importance of pre-Islamic beliefs and concepts is also reflected in the illustrations of objects, decorative motifs and diagrams. The importance of the *keris* in Malay society is demonstrated by the many drawings aimed to help the reader understand their *pamor* designs, while the appearance of the eight-petalled lotus in manuscript illumination shows a continuing regard for this motif as the Hindu-Buddhist symbol of purity and beauty. The use of tables and compass roses helps to visualise the placement of supernatural beings in the Malay cosmology across both time and space.

Yet despite the prominence of pre-Islamic beliefs, at the same time it must be emphasised that the character of many of the images and texts contained in the manuscripts is still strongly Islamic. This is not only in terms of incorporating magical and divinatory techniques from other parts of the Islamic world, but also by the continuous appeal to God and His intercessors, as well as in the prominent use of the Qur'an in various incantations, talismanic designs and divinatory diagrams. This tension between the notion of what is Islamic and non-Islamic also leads to a discussion of the individuals behind the production and consumption of the manuscripts. While it may be assumed that the compilers, owners and users of the manuscripts are professional magicians (*bomoh*/*pawang*), as shown in the preceding chapters members of the Islamic religious milieu also use and own such items. As we have seen, there are a number of examples whereby the owners and compilers of the manuscripts include muezzins of mosques and scholars of religious schools. It is important also to emphasise that the contents of the books compiled or owned by these individuals sometimes include material that are destructive and would seem at odds with Islamic teachings, such as with the use of effigies in harming others. All of this shows an acceptance (or at least tolerance) amongst the Islamic milieu up to the early twentieth century of practices that are normally considered 'non-Islamic'. This is in direct contrast to the situation among Malay society within the present-day, where there is an increase in 'Islamic' healing which discards and prohibits elements and practices traditionally connected with Malay magic and divination such as the use of images.

The manuscripts are therefore not only an important resource for a study of Malay visual art and magical and divinatory practices, but also for an understanding of the production and consumption of Malay manuscripts in general. The private and personal nature of their contents means that the manuscripts are different to Malay manuscripts of other textual genres such as poetry, literary and devotional works which are often recited aloud in public. Yet at the same time the widespread usage of magic and divination means that the manuscripts are found among all levels of Malay society, enabling a comparative study of their usage between various social groups. There is not a great deal of difference between manuscripts compiled and owned by magicians, members of the religious milieu and royalty, although those belonging to the latter group are occasionally more heavily illuminated. However there are two groups in which there are distinct differences in manuscript production and consumption. There is a lack of authorship and ownership by women, which could be explained by lower levels of literacy and greater restrictions in access to wider sources of knowledge, although it is very likely that female involvement is underplayed among the surviving evidence. Another group of manuscripts in which there is a clear demarcation of patronage and usage includes those that were commissioned by European patrons for scientific interest. These are typically denoted by their usually clean and neat condition.

Studies on specific manuscripts also help provide an insight into the social aspects of Malay society during this period. An investigation into the contents of a manuscript helps to reveal the types of issues that were of significance to its owner and user, and research conducted on selected examples has found that the main concerns are usually to do with healing and personal relationships. Additionally, a study into the history of a manuscript also sheds light on the interpersonal relationships between the individuals involved in the production and consumption of the manuscript.

These interpersonal relationships that lie behind the production of manuscripts however were changed with the advent of printing, when the texts became more commercialised and had a wider diffusion. Yet the survival of the magic and divination manuscript tradition in current times demonstrates the continuing role they play in the relationship between a teacher and student. It also highlights the fact that although the tradition is an

ancient one, it has been able to adapt to a new environment and is constantly evolving.

In conclusion, illustrated Malay magic and divination manuscripts offer a rich source of knowledge on the Malay artistic and intellectual history prior to the early twentieth century. They are an integral part of the study of Malay culture especially with regard to the visual arts, the manuscript tradition, and magic and divination practices within an interdisciplinary arena that includes studies on texts and images as well as the cultural contacts between the Malay area with the rest of Southeast Asia and the wider world.