

## AMIR HAMZAH, THE ALL TOO HUMAN HERO<sup>1</sup>

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In a well-known fragment of the *Sejarah Melayu*, it is told that the Malaccan warriors, in anticipation of a Portuguese attack on their town, held a wake and wanted to spend their time in a useful manner. I will quote here from Winstedt's translation:

It was night and all the captains and young men were on guard in the palace hall. And the young men said: 'Of what use is it for us to sit here in silence? It would be better for us to read some story of battle so that we might benefit from it.' 'You are right', said Tun Muhammad the Camel. 'Tun Indra Sagara had better go and ask for the story of Muhammad Hanafiah, saying that perhaps we may derive advantage from it, as the Franks will attack tomorrow.' Then Tun Indra Sagara went into the presence of Sultan Ahmad and submitted their remarks to his Highness. And Sultan Ahmad gave him the romance of Amir Hamza, saying, 'Tell them, I'd give them the story of Muhammad Hanafiah but I fear they'll not be as brave as he; if they are like Amir Hamzah it will do, so I give them the story of Hamzah.' Tun Indra Sagara came out carrying the story of Hamzah and told them all Sultan Ahmad had said, and they were silent, not answering a word. Then Tun Isak said to Tun Idra Sagara, 'Tell his highness that he is mistaken. His highness must be like Muhammad Hanafiah and we like the captains of Banjar.'<sup>2</sup> Tun Indra Sagara submitted Tun Isak's remark to Sultan Ahmad, who smiled and answered, 'He is right.' And he gave him the story of Muhammad Hanafiah too (Winstedt 1958:73).

Umar Junus considers the behaviour of the Malaccan warriors as stupid: instead of preparing themselves properly for the coming Portuguese attack, they just read stories. The result was the fall of Malacca. So,

reading *hikayat* was totally in vain (Umar Junus 1984:57-58). Umar Junus judgement reflects the viewpoint of a modern, rational reader. I think that most probably *hikayat perang* were read to get in the right belligerent mood for the coming fight. De Josselin de Jong even suggests that the recitation of the stories may have been a rite of literary magic: the warriors hoped that they would acquire the supernatural force and courage of the legendary Islamic heroes whose exploits were recited (De Josselin de Jong 1964:237).

Although this enigmatic passage has provoked quite a lot of scholarly comments, it seems to me that at least one basic question has remained unanswered so far, i.e.: Why was Muhammad Hanafiah considered braver than Amir Hamzah? And, closely connected with this, why did the Malaccan captains and young men reject the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah*?

At a first glance, the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* does comprise more heroic fights, and is in this respect, at least quantitatively, superior to the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah* (Brakel 1975:11). Brakel approvingly quotes Wilkinson who remarked:

We can also see in the opinion ascribed to this ancient ruler of Malacca the traces of a view which is very commonly held among the pedant-ridden Malays of the present day - the view that the merits of a work depend entirely upon the subject with which it deals ... Muhammad, "the son of the Hanafite woman" (and of the Caliph Ali), was a Shiite hero-saint; Hamza, though subsequently identified with an uncle of the Prophet, was a Parthian warrior who only owed his fame to the stories written about him. To read a biography of Muhammad Hanafiah is therefore thought highly commendable: to read about Hamza is allowable, to read stories about local heroes like Raja Donan would be looked upon by many Malays as mere waste of time (Wilkinson as quoted in Brakel 1975:11).

Leaving aside the question whether the romance of Hamzah actually may have begun with the adventures of his ninth century namesake, which is a

time-honoured but unsubstantiated hypothesis (cf. Pritchett 1991:3), I don't know if the Malaccans of the *Sejarah Melayu* were equally "pedant-ridden" as the Malays apparently were in the days of Wilkinson, but even then, this does not answer the question why Muhammad Hanafiah was perceived as braver than Amir Hamzah.

In addition, Brakel suggests that the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah* in contrast to the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* is "permeated with an admittedly not quite orthodox Muslim piety" (read: Shi'ism), and therefore that by "courage" (*berani*) a concept similar to *sekti* is meant, "which the H.M.H. would then emanate to a high degree" (Brakel 1975:11). This does not give an answer to our question either. Furthermore, in my opinion, it is not very convincing. The *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* was, just like the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah*, translated from a Persian source. It is quite likely that early versions of the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* were likewise "permeated with an admittedly not quite orthodox Muslim piety".<sup>3</sup> The fact that the hero is identified with Muhammad's uncle may perhaps have appealed to the pious orthodox (cf. Lang and Meredith-Owens 1959:472), but it should be remembered that for Shi'a the death of Hamzah at the battle of Uhud is important as an analogue of the tragedy of Karbala, because it involved the brutal death of a beloved member of the Prophet's family who died while fighting for Islam and whose body was mutilated by the enemy (Schubel 1993:82-83). The act of desecration was performed by none other than Yazid's grandmother, thereby, in a way, foreshadowing the wicked role her grandson Yazid would play in the struggle against Husain (about Shi'itic elements in traditional Malay literature, see Wieringa 1996).

Koster and Maier (1985:452) have characterized the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* as a more profitable and the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah* as a more soothing text. According to them the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah*

tells about the exploits of the great warrior and champion of Islam, Hamzah Ibn Abd al-Mutalib, a nephew [sic] of the Prophet, many of which exploits are in fact derived from the biography of another Hamzah, namely Hamzah Ibn Abdullah, a Persian warrior who became famous as a leader of holy wars against the Hindus in India. Although

without any doubt also concerned with a Muslim hero, it is full of love adventures and gallant quests in faraway lands (Koster and Maier 1985:452).

The *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah*, on the other hand, is

the story of that Shiite paragon of martiality and heroism for the cause of the True Faith, Muhammad Hanafiah. This pious legendary story tells how Muhammad Hanafiah, the son of Caliph Ali by a Hanafite woman, fights the Umayyads, who have usurped the caliphate and at whose hands his two half-brothers and the Prophet's grandsons, Hasan and Husain, have suffered a martyr's death (Koster and Maier 1985:451-452).

I think Koster and Maier have pointed in the right direction for an understanding of the difference between the two texts. The *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah* is, so it seems, only concerned with fighting for the right cause. In the words of one modern scholar, it "is a test of any reader's stamina with its disheartening theme of defeat after defeat, and its endless accounts of cruelty, deceit, killing and mutilation" (Jones 1980:122). Its hero does not waste time with "love adventures and gallant quests in far-away lands".

The *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah* is divided into two parts. The first part is the story of the *maqtal* of Husain. Muhammad Hanafiah is hardly mentioned herein. Only towards the end of the first part, on the tenth of Muharram when Husain is waging a losing battle, Husain remembers his half-brother Muhammad Hanafiah in Buniara and sends him a letter in which he asks him to take revenge for his death (Brakel 1977: 39-40). As Umni Salamah later explains to Zainal Abidin, the Prophet had said that Muhammad Hanafiah was destined to fight after the death of his two half-brothers for thirty years against their enemies and to kill many of them. At first Fatimah had opposed to the name Muhammad for the son of a concubine as being too great an honour, but when she learned that this child would one day take revenge for the death of her two sons, she always loved him (Brakel 1976:49).

The second part, the story of Muhmaad Hanafiah proper, then, is about the revenge. When Muhammad Hanafiah has read the letter of his half-brother, he is at first deeply distressed, but when he has come to his senses, he addresses his troops as follows: 'Let us not rest until we have killed Yazid's followers!' (Brakel 1977: 51). From then on, Muhammad Hanafiah is totally absorbed in the implementation of this plan. Needless to say, Muhammad Hanafiah, of course, succeeds. Interestingly, at one point of the story, Muhammad Hanafiah, for a change, is not fighting. In Madinah he takes the government of the city firmly in hand and has dilapidated mosques and fortifications repaired. Apparently, lest he should forget his task, one night he has a dream in which the Prophet calls upon him to take vengeance for Hasan and Husain. Upon awakening, he relates the dream to his brothers and followers, who declare themselves willing to stake their lives for this purpose. To be certain, they visit the Prophet's tomb where they hear a voice and once more Muhammad Hanafiah is called upon to take revenge (Brakel 1977:64). Apart from this 'lapse', Muhammad Hanafiah's life is totally devoted to one single purpose: revenge.

Comparing the two heroes, Amir Hamzah is the more 'conventional' and the more 'human', of the two. Hooykaas (1937:146) has called him a 'Muslim knight without fear or reproach', but at least at one occasion Hamzah is fearful: once he has a quarrel with his 'alter ego' Umar Umaiyyah (Amar bin Ummayyah) and hits his friend seven times with his whip. Outraged, Umar Umaiyyah vows revenge and deserts to the enemy. Thereupon Hamzah cannot sleep anymore. For fear of Umar Umaiyyah, he tries to stay awake, continually on his guard. After seven days and seven nights, he falls asleep after all. Umar Umaiyyah ties Hamzah to a tree, but in the end the peace is restored (Van Ronkel 1985:154-155; A. Samad Ahmad 1987:536-538).

Lyons (1995:103) has characterized the Hamzah of the Arabian version as a "conventional hero", who "experiences the conventional heroic eclipses". In his discussion of the Javanese version, Pigeaud (1950:238) has put Hamzah on a par with Radèn Panji, Arjuna or Rama. In other words: Hamzah is interchangeable with any other traditional hero. Pigeaud (1950:238) comments: 'The family-likeness of Radèn Panji, Arjuna, Rama and Amir Hamzah is not surprising if one comes to think

of it. Chivalry, martiality and amorousness are the characteristics of the hero of any romantic tales East and West”.

I think Amir Hamzah may be called a ladies’ man: he easily falls in love and has many love affairs. His relationships with women are, however, not uncomplicated and are the cause of his “conventional heroic eclipses”. In her analysis of an Urdu version of the Hamzah romance, Pritchett (1991:44) rightly observes that “Hamzah is an innocent victim of fate: he is simply destined to have trouble with women, in life as in death”. In her (abbreviated) translation, Pritchett, therefore, chose to concentrate on the episodes in the text about Hamzah and women (cf. Pritchett 1991:46).

I think that Pritchett’s observation also applies to the Malay version of the Hamzah romance. A crucial passage, in this respect, is the moment when Amir Hamzah finds out that his favourite wife and true love Princess Mihr Nigar (in A. Samad Ahmad 1987 she is called Mihran Negara) is dead. He faints, and after he has regained consciousness, he is like a madman, laughing and weeping at the same time. The Princess is buried and Amir Hamzah sleeps besides her grave. In a dream he sees the prophet Ibrahim who gives him this counsel.<sup>4</sup>

“Don’t be too sad, for you are my descendant. Don’t make a fool of yourself: if God the Exalted keeps you alive, He will certainly give you several women like Princess Mihr Nigar”.

*“Adapun engkau ini janganlah terlalu berdukacita, kerana engkau daripada anak cucuku. Janganlah engkau menggilakan dirimu: jika engkau lagi dihidupkan Allah taala, nescaya beberapa perempuan dianugerahkan Allah taala akan engkau seperti Puteri Mihran Negara itu: (A. Samad Ahmad 1987:406).*

After twenty days Amir Hamzah regains consciousness and describes to his friends all what he has seen in the dream. He sends them all away, and when they have all left, he has his head shaved. Continually he sweeps out and cares for his wife’s tomb. At night he sleeps at the head of her tomb.

This fragment shows Amir Hamzah at one of his weakest moments. In an Arabic version his army even disperse in disgust at his treatment of his dead wife and his trusted warriors don't want to be present as he keeps his vigil by her grave (Lyons 1995:103).

Amir Hamzah's enemies take advantage of his vulnerability by kidnapping and torturing him. He finally escapes, but only by help of a woman(!), Princess Afzun, the sister of his enemy Karun Zanggi. In a dream the prophet Ibrahim had Islamized her and had said:

"Oh my grandchild, go and free Hamzah, and take him as your husband: God (Praise be to Him the Exalted) will give you a son by Hamzah.

*"Hei cucuku, pergilah engkau lepaskan Hamzah itu, ambil dia akan suamimu; bahawa Allah subhanahu wa taala akan menganugerahkan akan dikau anak laki-laki dengan Hamzah itu"* (A. Samad Ahmad 1987:413).

She frees Amir Hamzah, who takes revenge, and who kills Karun Zanggi when the latter proves to be unwilling to embrace Islam. Then Amir Hamzah marries Princess Afzun, and resumes his former life.

The liberation of Amir Hamzah by Princess Afzun strongly resembles an earlier story in the *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* when Amir Hamzah is kidnapped in Egypt and brought to the island is Zuhrah-Banu (or Zuhir Banun as in A. Samad Ahmad 1987), the daughter of the Egyptian king. In a dream she sees an old man who identifies himself as the prophet Ibrahim. He Islamizes her and orders her to marry Mukbil and to free Hamzah and his comrades (Van Ronkel 1895:128; A. Samad Ahmad 1987:210).

It seems that after his marriage with Princess Afzun, everything is back to normal. However, shortly afterwards, Hamzah is kidnapped again, this time by a Chinese princess, who since childhood has been madly in love with him. She takes him into a cave where she confesses her love to him. Hamzah does not want to know about her as she was family, after all.

Only when Umar Umaiyyah finds him, Hamzah is able to sever the ties (Van Ronkel 1895:148; A. Samad Ahmad 1987:458-462). When Umar Umaiyyah asks him why he had not severed his ties earlier, Hamzah answers:

“Several times I have tried to sever them, but they would not break; now the moment came to sever them”

“Sudah beberapa kali aku kuati hendak kuputuskan, tiada juga ia mahu putus, sekarang telah datanglah pada ketikanya akan putus” (A. Samad Ahmad 1987:462).

Then Hamzah returns with Umar Umaiyyah to his army and

The Commander of the Faithful Hamzah said a thousand thanks to God (Praise be to Him the Exalted). The omnipotent Lord disposes of His servants as He alone sees fit.

*Maka Amirul Mukminin Hamzah pun mengucapkan beribu-beribu syukur kepada Allah subhanahu wa taala. Tuhan yang mahaberkuasa melakukan barang kehendak-Nya atas hamba-Nya* (A. Samad Ahmad 1987:462).

Hamzah's complicated relationships with women would of course warrant a separate study. One could adduce more examples in support of the thesis that Hamzah is a plaything of fate personified in women, but I think that the aforecited fragments are already sufficiently clear.

Hamzah as well as Muhammad Hanafiah are truly Muslim heroes. They are part of a “culture with a religion whose first article of faith is that there is no other god than God, that human beings can never transcend their humanity, and are able to reach salvation not through their own efforts but only by destiny” (Van Buitenen 1988:145). It seems that the ultimate cause of their deaths is due to over-confidence when they try to transcend their humanity.

Hamzah is an 'ordinary' hero with a soft spot for the weaker sex. In this respect, he is a romantic hero like Panji or Arjuna. Muhammad Hanafiah may be said to be an exceptional hero, in that he keeps his attention on his task, not diverted by anything, let alone love affairs.

War presents an ideal opportunity to obtain glory. Fame, "the substitute immortality" (Lyons 1995:59), inspires heroes, who want their actions to be talked about from generation to generation. The quest for a name, for fame, respect and honour, summed up by the concept of *nama*, was a major preoccupation in Malay culture. Not surprisingly, therefore, the battlefield takes pride of place in Malay literature (cf. Wieringa 1997). At the eve of the inevitable fall of Malacca, the Malay warriors knew that a life-or-death struggle with the Portuguese was drawing near. A wide range of *hikayat perang* presented themselves for recitation, but as the battle was certainly to be different from all others, so had to be the exemplary hero.

## NOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Read: "*Buniara*", Muhammad Hanafiah's capital, Brakel 1975:10
- <sup>3</sup> We do not know what versions of the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiah* and *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* were referred to in the *Sejarah Melayu*. In this article the present author has used the modern editions by Brakel 1975 and A. Samad Ahmad 1987, which were perhaps quite different from the texts used by the Malaccan warriors.
- <sup>4</sup> Compare Pritchett (1991: 231-232) where the prophet Ibrahim says: "Oh son, to get yourself in such a bad condition over one woman is very far from wisdom. If you live, you'll get thousands like her, better and higher/ranking women than Mihr Nigar will enter your service".

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