THE EPIC OF HANG TUAH: AN INTRODUCTION*

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The Hikayat Hang Tuah, the Epic of Hang Tuah is the great narrative of the Malay Archipelago and has always inspired strong passions in its readers and audiences. The protagonist, Hang Tuah, is the nonpareil of culture heroes. Over the centuries he has helped Malays, Malaysians, Indonesians, Singaporeans, Southern Thais and Bruneians to define their social and moral ideals and given them pride in their national identity.

For many generations he has been the model for old and young alike. Young boys playing at sword or keris fighting called themselves Hang Tuah, Hang Jebat, Hang Kasturi, Hang Lekir, and Hang Lekiu. While the older men and women would debate his role in Malaccan history.

In short, while Hang Tuah has been present in the minds of the Malays for at least the last six centuries, he is still very much alive there today, as their symbol of self-sacrifice, achievement, patriotism and, not least, as the foremost symbol of their survival.

Various artistic genres have attempted to re-interpret and re-invent this epic over at least the last hundred years. The Hikayat Hang Tuah, in full or in part, has been recast as movies, short stories or novels, comics, plays, musicals, stories, novels and poems. Now a discourse concerning his role in history, his duel and eventually the slaying of his comrade who was revenging his ‘death’ often reappears in the papers and on cyber pages.

* This essay is excerpted from a manuscript of the translation of the Hikayat Hang Tuah, to be published in the earlier half of 2008, by the Malaysian National Institute of Translation.
In Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and (Southern) Thailand, the *Hikayat* is regarded one of their greatest literary gems. Its episodes touch on all these countries and their relationships, and the work transcends national boundaries and interests. Many Southeast Asians still deeply believe in the validity of his sacrifice and absolute loyalty and that he is their hero, their symbol, the epitome of what is possible when dedication is coupled with 'ilmu' knowledge and industry.

Renewed passion for him and what he means surges to the surface when Malays feel threatened in one way or another – militarily or even economically. The *Hikayat* was compared with *Odysseus* or the *Iliad* of the Greeks by Kassim Ahmad, as all the three seem to be alive and well and are still very close to the hearts of their readers.

Iskandar (1995) deduces that because one of its manuscripts was seen by Valentijn, the missionary-scholar, before he was asked to return to Batavia in 1712, the *Hikayat* was written down by the end of the seventeenth century' at the latest. Braginsky (1990:403) suggests that it could have been written in Johor, the state which was successor to Melaka, between 1688 and 1710.

It is now more than forty years since the first publication of an edition of *Hikayat Hang Tuah* by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, in 1964, a work based on the MS 28a (c. 1860), owned by the Dewan Bahasa, transliterated and edited by Kassim Ahmad. It is among a few of famous and revered *hikayats* still circulating in Malaysia in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This particular manuscript was owned by Tengku Ibrahim, a Kelantan aristocrat. When Kassim was transliterating it, the two other manuscripts now in the possession of National Library of Malaysia (MSS 1658 and MSS 1713) had not yet been acquired.

Besides Malaysia itself, most of the manuscripts of the *Hikayat* are to be found in Europe or Indonesia. Apart from the Kuala Lumpur manuscripts, there are more than twenty kept in various libraries in Leiden, Jakarta, Terengganu, Singapore, London, Cambridge, and Manchester (Sutrisno, 1983: 56 – 60). The majority of these manuscripts, which were written in Jawi or Arabic-Malay script, were collected during the colonial period by British and Dutch colonial officials and scholars from different parts of the Malay world. The copies originated from various states: Kedah, Penang, Perak, Kelantan, Melaka, Riau, Lingga and Batavia. (Salleh Yaapar: forthcoming 2008).

Kassim Ahmad acknowledges that, in comparison with other *hikayat* manuscripts, the particular one which he used for transliteration is quite a recent copy. The oldest are to be found in the University of Leiden Library, Cod. Or. 1762, dated Rabi‘al-awwal 1172 (1758). The next one, KL 4, (from the Klinkert collection) was copied in 1864 – 67.

As Kassim pointed out in his introduction, the Dewan Bahasa manuscript is less than perfect, presenting quite a few problems caused
by scribal errors, unintelligible words, the length of the work itself. Kassim used three other published versions as guides and comparisons, including Shellabear’s edition of 1908, published by the Malaya Publishing House, Singapore, the 1956 Balai Pustaka edition, the 1960 Jambatan and Gunung Agung Jawi edition. He has also referred to the University of Leiden Library manuscript Cod. Or. 1762.

In Jakarta there are also two copies, one MI 207, which was copied from a Riau copy, and the other MI 572, is from the Von de Wall collection, and copied in Melaka, 1277 H, i.e. 1861. Singapore also has two, nos. 23 and 24, in its Raffles Collection.

Manuscripts of the *hikayat* are generally quite consistent in their story-line, and differences appear only in the wording of sentences and the arrangement of words – simply in linguistic details. Otherwise the story-line is maintained.

Outside the Malaysian area, the work was first published in 1939 by Balai Pustaka, Jakarta, while in 1960 Jambatan and Gunung Agung published a Jawi edition.

Salleh Yaapar (forthcoming 2008) points out that besides two excerpts in a *Bloemlezing*, Vol. 1, there is also a text in Roman script published in 1893 under the title of *Hikajat Hang Toewah*, transliterated from Jawi by R. Brons Middel and printed by Brill, Leiden.

**A Historical Background**

The beginnings of Melaka are to be found in legend and have been incorporated in the *Sulalat al-Salatin* (*Malay Annals*), in which it was recast as the King of Bentan who ordered his Bendahara (Prime Minister, Vizier) to find a location for a new state. They found an auspicious site, marked by an extraordinary incident in which a gallant albino mouse deer attacked their hunting dog, and kicked it into the water. In the middle of the ‘island’ grew a ‘Melaka’ tree – which later was also taken to be the name of the new negeri.

The founding of Melaka is believed to have taken place under the aegis of Parameswara, a Prince of Palembang (Srivijaya), who left his negeri to escape the invading Majapahit army, between 1379 and 1400.

Melaka is situated in a prime strategic location – on the Melaka River, with the whole Peninsula as its hinterland, and on the Straits of Melaka, which has been the trade route between the Middle East, Europe and India and China in the east since time immemorial. Its natural harbour and a population composed of various peoples from the other Islands, essentially the Javanese, Sumatrans and Buginese, conspired to make it an attractive commercial, cosmopolitan city. With the coming of Indians, Arabs and Chinese who chose to settle there,
attracted by its potential it drew other traders, and hence quickly became an indispensable port at which to do commerce. Commercial success inexorably courted political and territorial power. It traded products from all over the Archipelago, especially gold, spices, rattan, fragrant woods and other forest products. Spices from the Archipelago found a lucrative trade in Europe.

Melaka’s territories extended to Johor-Riau, in the south, Pahang (Inderapura of the Hikayat) and Terengganu in the east, and to Selangor in the north. Siak and Kampar in Sumatra also became its colonies.

Its relationship with China and the Indian states was strong, and as a consequence it attracted growing numbers of traders from all around the known world.

The Sulalat al-salatin does not confine itself to political relationships, but also devotes considerable attention to significant marital alliances between Melaka and the royal families of these two great countries – between Melaka princes and Indian and Chinese royal maidens.

Seven sultans ruled Melaka, beginning with its founder Parameswara, who converted to Islam in 1414 and assumed the title of Sultan Iskandar Shah (circa 1390 – 1424). He was succeeded by Seri Maharaja (1424 –1444), Abu Shahid Shah (1444 – 1445), Muzaffar Shah (1445 – 1456), Mansur Shah (1456 – 1477) and Alauddin Riayat Shah (1477 – 1488) and finally Mahmud Shah (1488 – 1511, in Melaka) later to reign in also Johor and Kampar till 1528).

Though Melaka rose to greatness, insidious cracks in its palace of power caused by the different factions of its elite undermined its glory.

Inevitably such a rich port had rivals across the Straits and throughout the Southeast Asian region. Siam has been at war with the Malays for many decades and had attacked Melaka at least three times. The great Majapahit empire was able to tolerate neither Srivijaya in Sumatra nor its scion in Melaka on the Peninsula, but as its own strength was sapped, Melaka grew stronger.

The last king, Mahmud, saw the initial arrival of the Portuguese, who were duly repelled and driven away in its port. The respite was brief as in 1511, a larger fleet returned and bombarded the fortress and city. Melaka fell, the Sultan and his court fled to Johor and then to Bentan and Kampar. The sultanate had lasted for about 120 years and was succeeded by Acheh.

The Story

As does the Malay Annals, Sulalat al-Salatin, the Hikayat also traces the roots of the royal dynasty of Palembang to celestial kings, the well-spring of the genealogies of Malay rulers.
This line is continued by the marriage of the scion of the king of 
keinderaan, the celestial state, Sang Sapurba, with the beautiful earthly 
princess, daughter of a great king, Ratna Kemala Pelinggam, whose son 
moved a maiden born of the froth spewed forth by a holy cow. They 
were crowned king and queen of Bukit Seguntang and their children 
were destined to become the kings in the Archipelago. After establishing 
himself in Bukit Siguntang (Palembang), one of their sons became the 
King of Bentan, an island in the eastern Riau Archipelago.

Hang Mahmud and Dang Merdu, the parents of Hang Tuah, our 
hero, lived on the Sungai Duyung, the Dugong River, possibly on the 
island of Lingga, a southern Riau island. Just as their son was about 
to be born, his father dreamt that the light of the moon cast its gentle, 
translucent rays on him. Encouraged by these portentous signs, they 
moved to Bentan where there was already an established kingdom, and 
where Mahmud presumed he would easily be able to earn a living.

It is from here, at the age of ten, that Hang Tuah and his four friends 
Jebat, Kasturi, Lekir and Lekiu, sailed a small sampan north to Singapura. 
On the way they were pursued by pirates, but by resorting to a 
clever strategy were able to defeat them. On another occasion, Hang 
Tuah killed an amok and later, together with his comrades, they slew 
another four who were intent on harming the Bendahara. News of 
both these exploits reached the ears of the new Sultan, who asked the 
Bendahara to enlist them as pages at his court.

The five comrades arrived at the time in which the kingdom was 
still in its pristine stage – still struggling to establish a stable court and 
state, and finding international commerce to boost its economy.

Once again in the company of his four friends, Tuah studied martial 
and magic arts with Aria Putra, a renowned guru.

Tuah was described as a master of twelve languages at yet an 
early age, as the author of the Hikayat prepares him to be the hero of 
a maritime nation strategically located on the international trade route 
through the Straits of Melaka.

As the king was in search of a more strategic place for a kingdom 
on the Peninsula, an expedition, which later found an auspicious place 
where a mouse deer was able to confront and defeat a hunting dog not 
far from a ‘Melaka’ tree, was dispatched. A palace was erected and 
a fortress was duly built around it. With an excellent location, Melaka 
quickly developed into a thriving state and port.

The story jumps fast forward to the time when Hang Tuah, now a 
young man and favourite of the Sultan, was sent to Majapahit, perhaps 
the greatest Southeast Asian empire at that time, to be the representative 
of the sultan in asking for the hand in marriage of the Betara’s daughter, 
Raden Galuh Cendera Kirana. His courage, discipline and also exquisitely 
refined decorum were all soon put to the test – and he survived all his
trials with flying colours. When he again returned to Majapahit escorting
the King for the marriage ceremonies, the challenges were more severe
and quite implacable. He and his comrades were attacked, *amoks*
were set upon them and they were deceived in numerous ways. Yet
they prevailed.

Even amidst the great uproar and gaiety of the festivities, they were
able to escape into the mountains to study with Sang Persata Nala, who
was widely renowned for his mastery of the martial and magical arts.

It was also during this trip to Majapahit that Hang Tuah was able to
defeat a knight-errant, Tameng Sari, dispatched by Patih Gajah Mada
to slay him, and was eventually endowed with the latter’s magical *keris*
by the Betara.

On their return to Melaka plots were hatched in the palace by jealous
officials (as Hang Tuah was becoming too much a favourite of the King).
Headed by Patih Kerma Wijaya, the exiled minister from Lasem, Java,
they reported to the King that they had sighted Hang Tuah speaking
to the king’s favourite concubine, with implicit nuances of an affair – a
treasonous act in this palace of the god-king.

Incensed with anger and disappointment, and without any prior
investigation into the accusation, the King ordered the Bendahara
to ‘rid’ Melaka of Hang Tuah, in other words to execute him. But the
Bendahara was a wise minister, who could see through the plot, and
therefore asked that the accused be allowed to travel to Inderapura
and find a refuge there. This he did, only to plan some way to regain
his king’s trust. Through an admixture of guile and love potions, he was
able to bring the beautiful Tun Teja back for his King, and was soon
returned to the latter’s favour and trust.

Again the jealous officials hatched another plot – also amorous in
nature – once again averring they had witnessed Hang Tuah having
an affair with a lady of the palace.

Again he was sentenced to death. This time the Bendahara hid him
in his own orchard, far from the eyes of the Melakans. Hang Jebat was
appointed in his place, and soon also became a favourite of the King.
In the meantime, Jebat took this opportunity not simply to enhance his
own prestige but also to avenge Tuah’s ‘death’.

He seized the palace and with it the maids-in-waiting, among them
favourites of the King. In the Malay feudal palace this was, without
doubt, an act of high treason.

The King decided to leave the tainted palace. He was besmirched
with shame and dishonors, regretting that he had executed Hang Tuah
without prior investigation into the dastardly accusation of the jealous
officials – the Bendahara again came to the rescue, to reveal that he
has not executed Tuah but had kept him in the upper reaches of the
Melaka River. So Hang Tuah was recalled to rid Melaka of Jebat, who
even though he was his great comrade and friend, was now in Hang Tuah’s eyes a treasonous one. This is the giddy and tragic climax of the story.

As they duelled, as brothers and friends and both knowing their duty towards their king and their comrades, they spoke, discussed and argued. In his mind Tuah knew he had to kill Jebat, but Jebat also knew that he would never be killed as long as he had the Tameng Sari keris in his possession, presented to him after Hang Tuah was sentenced. Therefore, to acquire the keris, Hang Tuah had to deceive him, stealing it in less than a gentlemanly way. With the keris in his possession, he wounded Jebat but left him to bleed to death, and while his life – blood seeped away he killed thousands of people to take vengeance against the Sultan and his fate.

At this climax of the story is still the split soul of the Malay – who must choose between the steadfast, loyal seeker after justice and the rebel in the cause of justice. In one view, both of them merely represent the two sides of the Malay personality and character – both the loyal servant and the rebel.

After Jebat’s tragic death, Melaka stabilized. Traders and scholars from all around the world thronged its port. Missions from other courts were received. In order to reciprocate the diplomatic protocol, Hang Tuah was appointed a roving diplomat to the courts of the Keling and China.

In what may be considered its second part, the hikayat enters into a sober and mature phase. Melaka and Hang Tuah were not the youthful state or warrior that they once had been, but were now able to look farther a field, as the state had become a significant power in the area and wanted to pioneer relationships with the great powers of the lands above the winds, Rome/Constantinople, Egypt and the Holy Land.

Duels recede into the background as new diplomatic relationships were established. The Melakans were confident of their abilities and proud of their negeri. They believed in themselves and their achievements in trade and governance.

On his many journeys, Hang Tuah and his deputies proudly carried their recipes and delicacies to serve their guests in lands as far-away as Egypt.

In his new guise, Hang Tuah led missions to Majapahit, Keling, China, Ceylon, Brunei, Acheh, Egypt and Rome/Byzantium to trade, his task to establish relationships between Melaka and these states. On a few occasions he, or other representatives of the Sultan, bought gems and elephants to reflect its prosperity and finally, of necessity, purchased weapons from Rome/Byzantium, as Melaka was being threatened by an invasion by the Portuguese.

His was a long journey, a search to find the meaning and significance
of Melaka in the world. Tuah discovered himself as the diplomat par excellence and also found new recognition for his country.

A journey initially to purchase weapons was also a journey of the soul—as he and his comrades visited the Muslim holy places and shrines in Jeddah, Mecca and Medina. This is a more spiritual and quieter path taken by the narrative, after its graphic depictions of noisy wars to win power and influence.

On his return to Melaka, the Portuguese threat finally took concrete shape as a real invasion. Hang Tuah was now quite old and ailing, but yet he was still able to make a last stand for his Melaka and defeated the covetous foreigners.

Not long thereafter the King abdicated his throne in favour of his daughter, and devoted himself to the pious and stoical life of a dervish; Hang Tuah followed his footsteps. When the Portuguese attacked a second time, Hang Tuah was no longer in Melaka to defend it. It fell and the dynasty was exiled to Johor, and then to Kampar.

Farish Noor (2006) suggests that most Malaysians and nationalists merely read the descriptions of conquests in the first part but do not proceed to delve deeper into the second, where the worldly achievements of the first are deconstructed by the author and the hero himself. From the unquestioning servant who surrender himself in total loyalty to his king, Hang Tuah is transformed into the wise elder and the selfless seeker after the true and essential meaning of life. This part is the culmination of the meaning of a life of one extraordinary servant who lived his very life for the country but was now old and nearing death. However, this quieter, wise face of the coin is often forgotten by readers; indeed, unfortunately now no longer even the first part is read much; the films or plays often taking its place.

After that Hang Tuah was no longer heard of, but it is believed that he has not died but has became the chief of the Aslian (native) peoples in Perak.

The Work

By any standard the Hikayat Hang Tuah is a work of genius. Though a large part of the epic itself is formulaic in its structure, language, movement and description, there are also several parts where the author's/compiler's brilliance shines through wonderfully. Some of the descriptions of places and costumes, the stunning realistic love scene in Inderapura, the duels in Majapahit (in a time when the magical prowess of princes and supernatural powers of the gods predominated and formulaic description of characters and their emotions are given centre stage) are a great pioneering exploration into the new space of the Malay narrative and the real fruit of the literary talent of the author/compiler. Characters
as the protagonist, Hang Tuah, his comrade and later adversary, Hang Jebat, the Inderapura princess, Tun Teja, the Javanese princess and consort of the Sultan, Raden Galuh Cendra Kirana, the Brunei Prince, are convincingly original, and are often uniquely idiosyncratic in their actions and pronouncements.

Descriptive details imbue them with the glitter of originality, something we really savour in this wonderful work.

However, more than the narrative language (which often follows a set style, except for the opportunities provided by the commoner-protagonist and the strong-minded princess of Pahang and so forth), it is the idea and description of the culture hero of a cosmopolitan state on the edge of the Straits of Melaka, who was open to opportunities offered by a wider world, which pinpoints his relevance not only for the audience in the Archipelago but also those from other islands and states beyond the region. For Hang Tuah is not a hero bound by the borders of Melaka alone. He was the international knight and diplomat renowned throughout sprawling Insular Southeast Asia and Asia in general.

In the spatial conception of his prowess, the author has shown him as a much respected statesman and knight in various countries of Southeast Asia and Asia, and later also farther a field in the Middle East and the Byzantium, the outpost of ‘Rome’.

He was conceived as a hero for the multicultural state and world, which was Melaka, mastering twelve languages in all when he was yet a young man, and also conversant with the governance and rituals and ceremonies of the different courts in these lands. He was so adept at the traditional courts that whenever he came to present himself, the kings and their ministers took an immediate liking to him and his ways.

The values which he held high are even now quite universal. He was generous, kind, selfless, decorous, of a pleasing humility (except in duels and in the defense of his king and country), loyal to king (and country), often beyond the call of duty. However, Hang Tuah was no god, and as a hero was not a perfect human being, especially from our twenty-first century perspective. He was too loyal, sometimes even forgetting to share out the responsibilities of leadership among his comrades, even though he could call upon them to assist him. But lest we forget, he never lived in the twenty-first century.

His great deference for all kinds of knowledge – the martial, practical as well as the spiritual, mark him off from other literary heroes in the language. Hang Tuah is a secular hero, worldly, serving the interests of his king and country. However, when his time came, he did not cling on to power or influence. As age caught up with him, he gave up everything to become a dervish, finally to disappear into the forests.

His deeds, actions, generosity and sacrifice touched numerous people – not only the Raja, but also the nobles, the traders, the scholars, gurus,
the lower-ranking officials and the poor, the Melakans, Inderapurans, Terengganuans, Javanese, the Bruneians and the Bentan people.

All these values endear him, then and now, to readers throughout the whole of the Archipelago.

I am not an apologist for Hang Tuah, the feudal hero and knight, who was conversant only with an inflexible code of service to his King; one which goes against our sense of justice today. We have a right to side with Hang Jebat, which I too have also done in my papers and poems.

But, to be fair to the full text, a close reading of the *Hikayat* and a comparison with another such feudal code as *bushido* – during an age when kings were divine rulers, and oftentimes very cruel – tells us that this was the dominant system and was the reality of life in the fifteenth century. Hang Tuah was an upholder of that system, he believed in it wholeheartedly.

Besides the slaying of his own comrade who initially rebelled to avenge his supposed execution, he has numerous attractive and universal qualities. Among them are selflessness, kindness, a respect for other people’s languages and cultures, a multicultural view of the world, a noble sense of refined decorum which made him a favourite with kings and ministers, a sense of leadership and a respect for all kinds of learning.

Without doubt, Hang Tuah is the most controversial of Malay/Malaysian heroes, who has found various interpretations across the centuries of Malaysian history. For a decade or two (1970s and 1980s), he was almost the villain when studies and the times tended to give centre stage to the rebel Jebat, in an age when feudalism and colonialism had a stranglehold on the country, and there was fear that their prolonged grip over the people would stunt the rise of the new Malaysian individual and democratic ideals.

**The Language**

The language of the *hikayat* is a formalized one, a special medium created for literary narration. It is therefore more of a stylized language – and is found in many *hikayats*, though some of the local historical works also employ a similar style.

Malay literature has an oral heart and voice, its stories are usually narrated or spoken by a good reader who performs what he reads to his audience. This language illustrates a certain aesthetic, of harmony, of repetitive description, especially in stock phrases, embellished with *pantun* verses, particularly in the love scenes.

It is certainly an earlier from of Malay which may even be called classical. However, classical Malay is not easy to date or define as the
texts which we have inherited are themselves copies of earlier ones, sometimes supplied with linguistic decorum or links to the times of the copyists or the patrons who have asked that the hikayat be copied.

This language contains a substantial number of words originating from the Sanskrit, most probably not newly borrowed but had been in currency for quite a number of decades or even centuries. These words describe offices, names of rajas, islands, places, religious acts and concepts.

Although the story was written at the time at which Islam had come to the Archipelago, Arabic was not yet a dominant influence. However, with the passage of time and in certain more recent copies, copyists have added Islamic salutations and other literary embellishments. The full mention of the name of Allah subhanahu wataala, and tentative promises, Insya-Allah (God-willing), beginning a text or chapter with Bismillah and such phrases were common. The rituals of including the words like Wabihi nastaina billahi and ending a text with wallahu alam bissawab illustrate how Islam has become a dominant part of these more recent texts as the religion has exerted greater influence among the writers and copyists.

Besides borrowings from the Sanskrit, those from Arabic and Islam are also quite abundant. Nevertheless, a reader will also find Javanese and Siamese words and phrases, as though to highlight the writer's/compiled's knowledge of Javanese and Siamese to underscore Hang Tuah’s multi-cultural and cosmopolitan world. We find Javanese phrases and idioms strewn over the episodes in which Hang Tuah was in Majapahit. In Patani, the titles of palace officials or dignitaries were retained in their original Thai language form.

The hikayat also contains several archaic words no longer in use. Some are even unrecognizable and consequently unrecorded in dictionaries. In such cases I have tried to compare as many versions as possible to help decipher their meanings. (For specific problems of culturally specific words and issues please refer to the accompanying essay on the translation of the Hikayat and the Notes).

History of the Hikayat

This is a narrative of a hero of fourteenth and fifteenth century Melaka. Hang Tuah was recognized and mentioned as a historical individual in the definitive Sulalat al-Salatin. Hang Tuah’s Melaka was described from its beginnings after Hang Tuah had moved to Bentan with his family, and later followed their king to the new negeri discovered by ascertaining its auspicious qualities in a place marked by the Melaka tree. The end of the story is distinguished by its fall.
Consequently, the *Hikayat* describes the state at the height of its glory; and therefore must have been written after the fall of Melaka. Stories about the exploits of Hang Tuah, real and imaginary, must have abounded before and after 1511, though perhaps in less exaggerated forms and words. Incidentally, there are still some being told today. Climbing up Mount Ledang, the sacred, mystical hill of Melaka once, being led through the forest paths by a guide, I was told that from time to time a man dressed in royal yellow could be seen saying his prayers – this apparition was Hang Tuah. In Melaka itself it is possible to hear other stories of this culture hero, not old ones, but those with new branches and interpretations.

Many of the members of the Aslian communities of the Peninsula believe that they are the descendants of Hang Tuah, who was recorded as not having died but having become a chief to the tribes in the hinterland in the *Hikayat*. Many of the warriors who accompanied Hang Tuah on his maritime journeys/epic voyages to the East and to the West were Orang Laut (also known as Sea Gypsies) chiefs, and Hang Tuah himself had lived among them, even if he did not have Orang Laut blood flowing in his veins.

In Palembang, in Sumatra, a cemetery was alleged to have contained Hang Tuah’s bones (though this claim does not even try to refer to the story itself). My guess is that these stories had been flying around for many decades before and after the fall of Melaka, but were later collated. The central character was imbued with the qualities of a superman or culture hero, and finally rearranged, recomposed and recreated in a written form by one single author. That author is anonymous, but in this tradition it did not matter so much who wrote it, but what mattered was what benefits it would bring its audience. In such a society many would have known the scribe or the writer, though he has not appended his name at the beginning or in the colophon.

It is also interesting to note that while some of the stories may have come from the oral sources, others might have come from written ones, especially those such as the *Sulalat al-Salatin*, which T. Iskandar (1995:302) shows, has a close intertextual relationship (as nineteen out of the twenty-eight chapters of of the *Hikayat* have similar elements taken from either *Sulalat-al Salatin /Sejarah Melayu*, or *Hikayat Inderapura* and such Achehnese sources as *Hikayat Meukuta Alam* and al-Raniri’s *Bustanul Salatin*). The description of the King of Rome in this last work was most probably the model for the episode in the *Hikayat* (Imran Teuku Abdullah, in Iskandar: 1995: 305), thus showing how the various works of the time have played a part in the final version of the *Hikayat*.

As it was an extraordinarily popular narrative, it was copied in various parts of the Archipelago. Rajas, aristocrats and sultans wanted personal copies, so too did some of the wealthy merchants. Hence
copies of copies can now be found from the various states of Malaysia, from Kelantan (for example, this is used by Kassim Ahmad for his transliteration), from Daik (KL 4.), from Riau and even one from Melaka, by an author who claimed to have been a distant relative of Hang Tuah himself (Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia, mss. 1658).

However, while it would put to rest many of the issues which still abound if the author’s name were mentioned, unfortunately, even in the earliest mention of the work in 1726 by Valentijn, the author’s or copyist name’s identity was not provided.

Our attempt to trace the history of the *hikayat* must take special account of the events narrated in the last pages of the work. This is the attack of the Portuguese on Melaka (in 1511) and 130 years after that, in the year 1641, the victory of the Johorians and Dutch over the Portuguese. The gap in between has not been filled as the protagonist had left the negeri, and the author wanted to note the eventual defeat of the Portuguese. It may also have been possible that earlier version ended with the fall of Melaka, and a short note of a historical and not a fictional nature of about two pages has been added at the end of the hikayat to say that this invader was also finally driven out of Melaka.

Our short survey of the different manuscripts first takes us to Leiden, where the earliest known manuscript (Cod. Or. 1762) of the *hikayat* was copied in 1758 at Kuala Kebah, as Kassim notes, about two and a half centuries after the invasion by the Portuguese. In his *Bloemlezing uit Maleische Geschriften*, (an anthology of excerpts from Malay literature), G.K. Niemann is of the opinion that this manuscript is only a copy of another which was composed of two parts, the first was copied in Riau from a manuscript from Melaka, and the second written in Lingga, to the south of Bentan and Penyengat.

T.Iskandar (1999) notes that Leiden University Library has the Cod. Or. 1762 manuscript; its date of the completion of the copying by Abdul-Latif at the command of Tuan a.l.w.ng Sulaiman of Tanah Kuala K.m.i.h. was Rabi’ul-awl 1172/1758. The second manuscript is Cod. Or. 6883; the date of the completion of copying is 2nd Ramadhan 1310/1893. This version ends with the exchange of Bangkahulu and Singapura by the British and Dutch, covering a greater time period than most versions. And a *Syair Hang Tuah*, a poem about the hero is appended, although it is truncated.

From the Klinkert Collection, KL 4 consists of two volumes – a Vol 1. was copied for Klinkert by a clerk in Riau, and Vol. II in Lingga – between 1864 – 1867. The first volume ends with at the climactic rise of the story with Hang Jebat’s rebellion and the King’s subsequent remorse. In the second volume the continuation of the story is drawn to the very end. Here the copyist (unnamed) notes that he completed his task on 5th Jamadil-akhir (without year) at Kampung Putus (Lingga); the owner
was Encik Hussin ibn Abdul Manan of Kampung Bandar Penyengat. No further information is available as the end papers are missing (T. Iskandar, 1999:703).

A few manuscripts of the *Hikayat* are now kept in England. At the British Library, there is Add. 12384, which Niemann points out is the same version of *Hang Tuah* RAS Raffles Malay 1. This was copied in Kedah and purchased from Crawford in 1842. Interestingly, in the John Rylands in Manchester there is another manuscript, Malay 11, considered to be quite early by Ricklefs and Verhoeve (1977: 131), who deduced that it was finished probably late seventeenth or early eighteenth century to judge from the watermarks. As its front leaves are damaged and soiled, its general condition does not help either in ascertaining the date of composition or the copying. It was acquired much later, in 1926.

In the Cambridge University Library a copy, Or. 85, was dated 1877 in Colombo, Sri Lanka, by its owner. In the Royal Asiatic Society, London, Raffles Malay 1 is known to have been written on English paper, Whatman 1801, but without any dates to help us with its real date (of copying). It is part of the Raffles Collection, 1830.

From the Maxwell bequest, 1898, we have Maxwell 77 and 78; the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* was copied in two volumes, dated 1310/1892, and Maxwell was noted as the owner.

Still in London, in SOAS, the University of London, there is yet another copy, also in two volumes, MS 2883 a & b. This is the product of a later copying and dated 1889. A note informs us that it is a copy of a manuscript owned by Hashim, a Malay writer in the Resident Councilor’s Office, Pulau Pinang. It is dated 1890.

The second SOAS manuscript, MS 37076, is also quite recent, dated Melaka, 1882.

In Malaysia itself, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka owns two volumes of the same manuscript: the MS 28, and MS 28(a), used by Kassim Ahmad as the basis for his transcription.

In Muzium Terengganu, manuscripts 82.328 and 82.338, being the two parts of the *Hikayat*, were copied about thirty years earlier, on 14th. Zulhijjah 1374 (3 Ogos 1855). This work was done by Syed Mahathir bin Syed Muhammad al-Idrus, while 83.10 offers no further information.

Finally Universiti Malaya owns another, MS 23. It has not been described earlier, and therefore not much information may be offered for the present. A brief inspection shows that it is written in a good clear script, on a European folio paper and is still in a good condition, though its professional binding has worked loose. The text is complete, beginning with: *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim*, and ending with "*Tiadalah hamba mau beristeri lagi. Demikianlah perintah Hikayat Hang Tuah ini. Tamat.*"
No information about its date of copying and copyist is offered. There is though an undated and unintelligible signature beside the colophon, which does not seem to be in the same hand as the text but is quite different and separate, possibly that of the owner of the copy.

The National Library of Malaysia has acquired two manuscripts of the epic: MSS 1658 and MSS 1713. Of the former Muhammad Haji Salleh (2000:105 – 107) described it as being written on a ledger book, with ordinary paper, in one single hand. However what is quite special is that on the first page is the claim that the *Hikayat* was authored by Tun Kulah/Kola (k.w.l.h), a distant cousin/relative of Laksamana Hang Tuah himself, before he (Tun Kulah) died fighting the Portuguese and was buried in Duyung. ‘The age of this composition is 400 years old.’

A further note says that it is bequeathed to his grandson, Muhammad bin Abdullah in Duyung, Melaka, 1933.

The language of the narrative is not that of the Malay of 400 years ago but clearly the language of the twentieth century, possibly updated by the last copyist. It begins with the usual introduction of the *Hikayat* and ends with the Portuguese sailing to attack Melaka.

The manuscript is undated, though it is said to have been bequeathed to a grandchild in 1933. On another separate sheet of paper a genealogy of Hang Tuah is given. And it is claimed by Muhammad Yaakob, ‘this is the story of our grandfather/ancestor, the Admiral Hang Tuah.’

MSS 1717, on the other hand, was copied in 1865 and was bought from a Kelantanse nobleman. Its hand is professional, and may have been owned by the Kelantan court. However, it is possible to trace two other hands, and therefore at least three scribes were involved in its writing.

The first and last pages are colorfully decorated in blue, green, red and yellow in softer tones. The introduction is in standard phraseology:

*Ini Hikayat Hang Tuah yang amat setiawan pada tuannya dan terlalu sangat berbakti kepada tuannya.*

The last page describes the fall of Melaka and the Malay exodus to Hujung Tanah or Johor. Unfortunately, as the “colophon statement is distinctly absent, as is usual in the tradition of Malay manuscripts writing”, it is as yet undated. Based on the paper used, it is suggested that it is about 200 years old.

In Singapore, there are also two manuscripts, being two parts of *Hikayat Hang Tuah Q 11 – 4A/2B NLS*. These are copies of the manuscript owned by R.J. Wilkinson. The one used by Shellabear to edit his transliteration, is 427 pages long, is bound and was written in the Riqah script. As its introductory and final pages are missing, we are not offered further information of its dates of copying and the name of its copyist.
The text begins from:

[...] Maka Hang Tuah kelima saudara itupun sudah memakai tiga bilah sikir pada seorang [...] 

The final paragraph of the last page reads:

Adapun tatkala berbunyi kaki orang berjalan kembali itu kira-kira tujuh langkah maka datanglah gunung api dua buah terlalu besar dengan hebatnya.

The beginning is several pages into the story of the boys already engaged in their battle with the pirates, and the ending describes Hang Tuah volunteering to be buried in a grave so that he may be able to relay it secrets to his master.

It is now perhaps quite clear how dating the various manuscripts is indeed a central problem with which scholars have to wrestle, and therefore also for the history of the Hikayat itself, as what we now have are often copies of other copies. The practice of noting dates of the copies or original works only became more fashionable much later than the initial composition, namely in the middle and late nineteenth century. In most of the earlier manuscripts no dates were appended, and if there were, some of the colophons and introductory pages are missing or damaged.

But internal evidence from the text, its mention in early lists and also the dates and information tend to point to sometime in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, as Iskandar and Braginsky have concluded.

As we turn to the early printed editions of the epic, we gain more information about the dispersion of the manuscripts in the Malay Peninsula, Singapore and Indonesia, for their prefaces tend to refer to others. For example, Shellabear (1917:i) mentions those owned by the Raja Muda Perak, Raja Abdul Jalil, Wan Muhammad Isa, a minister of Perak, Wan Muhammad Salleh, another official from Perak and also from R.J. Wilkinson and R.N. Bland, and finally from a theatre (rumah penuntunan) in Batavia.

The Jambatan and Gunung Agung (1960) version was based on the Shellabear (1905) and also the Niemann (1906) editions.

Sulastin Sutrisno (1983) and Salleh Yaapar (2008, forthcoming) have discovered that in its printed form in Jawi, it was first published by the Methodist Publishing House, Singapore, in 1908. This was later followed in the romanized version by the Balai Pustaka in 1924 and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, in 1964. Gunung Agung in collaboration with Jambatan printed a Jawi version in 1960.

At times this work has been published in large quantities for schools, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, when it was used as a text for the
Higher School Certificate Literature Examinations. However, with a growing emphasis on the sciences, fewer students choose literature and it is even harder to purchase now. Fortunately, the Yayasan Karyawan published a deluxe edition in 1997, but for the general public it is quite outside their reading list or means.

While there are translations into German and Russian, there has not been any translation into English. This is the first of such attempts. This rendering endeavors to be as loyal as possible to the original text and simultaneously make it readable for readers in the twenty-first century. The advantage of this decision is that it tries to retain the integral quality of its narrative structure, which is heavily oral in its traditions—consequently the formulae, the repetition are retained (as they were necessary to remind us of its oral tradition and practice).

Reference


Farish Noor, Hang Tuah Sucks: Why We Need to Deconstruct our Falwed Heroes. Quoted from http:www.othermalaysia.argfcontentIviewf60f52 quote on 29 December 2006.


