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The origin of the Malay Sjaïr

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THE ORIGIN OF THE MALAY SJA^cIR

A. Teeuw's article on the Malay *sja^cir* in this Journal Vol. 122 (1966) p. 429 ff. brought me a welcome confirmation of a hypothesis put forward in a lecture I gave for the students of Malay at the École des Langues Orientales Vivantes in Paris in 1952. My arguments for ascribing the origin of the *sja^cir* to Hamzah Fansuri were mainly the same as those adduced by Teeuw: the fact that no *sja^cir* can be dated before Hamzah; the absence of the *sja^cir* from other Indonesian languages, with the exception of the Javanese *singir* that is obviously derived from it; the fact that in the first part of the 17th century Hamzah's poems were not called *sja^cir* but *rubā^ci* and thus considered as an adaptation of a Persian verse form; finally, Valentijn's remark on Hamzah, which I interpreted in the same manner as Teeuw did.

In my lecture I stressed the fact that Hamzah's verse, whilst following the Persian scheme of four line stanzas rhyming *aaaa*, are truly Malay in their rhythm. This is the rhythm of the Malay *pantun* and the Middle-Malay *andai-andai*, literary forms that have a wide distribution in Indonesia. I found a parallel in the work of Sanusi Pane and Amir Hamzah, in whose sonnets many lines have the rhythm of the *pantun*. As a striking contrast to Hamzah Fansuri's genius I cited some wooden translations of Persian *rubā^ci* made by the author of the *Tād̲j as-Salāṭīn*, one with the rhyme *aaba*:

Budi sungguh jang menundjuk insan
Insan itulah jang budiman.
Haiwanlah orang jang tiada berbudi
Rupanja insan dan adanja haiwan,

i.e.: Reason is the mark of man
Man is a reasonable being
A man without reason is an animal
He may seem human but he is a beast

Another one, with the rhyme *aaaa*, is:

Barangsiapa jang mengenal tjintamu
Lihat daripadanja peri duniamu
Dunialah kamu dari alpamu
Tiada kenal Tuhan dari butamu,

i.e.: He who knows your longing
 sees in it your worldly frivolity.
 You are frivolous because of your negligence
 Because of your blindness you do not know the Lord.

Raniri was a fierce opponent of Hamzah Fansuri's theology but in the matter of verse form he learned something from him. When he had to produce a few rubā'ī in the part of his Bustān as-Salāṭīn that deals with the *ars amandi* he wrote such stanzas as:

Nisa itu upama buah pedendang
 Rupanja permai pada memandang
 Beberapa petenah daripadanja datang
 Rasanja pahit bukan kepalang,

i.e.: Woman is as a *pedendang*¹ fruit
 She is beautiful to look at
 But all kinds of misfortune come from her
 She has an utterly bitter taste.

This, about 40 years after the Tād̲j as-Salāṭīn, does not show much progress in poetical thought, but in form it has already reached the smoothness of the classical Malay sja'ir.

Between my lecture and Teeuw's article the same hypothesis on the origin of the Malay sja'ir was also proposed in an unpublished thesis by Syed Naguib al-Attas of the University of Malaya. It seems to me that only the finding of an undoubtedly pre-Hamzah sja'ir could still demolish it.

Here, however, another difficulty arises. We do not know when exactly Hamzah lived. In a recent article² Syed Naguib al-Attas has placed Hamzah's lifetime in the period preceding and during the reign of Sultan 'Alā'uddīn Ri'ājat Sjah of Atjeh (1588-1604), because the *Ikat-ikatan 'ilmu'l-nisā'* (or *Bahr al-nisā'*) is dedicated to the Sultan. There is, however, no reason to assume that Hamzah was the author of this poem, though it is in Doorenbos's edition of his works. This edition does not only contain verse by Hamzah but also some by other authors mentioned by name (Ḥasan Faṣṣūrī, 'Abdul Djamāl), and a few anonymous poems. *Bahr al-nisā'* is found in three manuscripts³; none of these mentions the name of its author. Therefore, if Hamzah really created the Malay sja'ir and an anonymous poem in sja'ir style was composed during the reign of Sultan 'Alā'uddīn Ri'ājat Sjah, we can only conclude that Hamzah lived at a still earlier date.

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¹ *buah pedendang*, a kind of inedible cucumber.

² 'New Light on the Life of Hamzah Faṣṣūrī', JMBRAS vol. XL (1967), pt. 1, pp. 42-51.

³ Leiden Or. 2016 and 5635; London SOAS 41755.