The Origin of Prince Mangkunagara I’s Appellation as the Catcher of Souls

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Abstract

Prince Mangkunagara I of Surakarta (1726–1795), also known as Mas Said, was one of the most flamboyant figures of eighteenth-century Java. After his death he acquired the appellation Sambĕr Nyawa, meaning ‘catcher of souls’ or ‘snatcher of souls’, but the origin of this name has not previously been clear. A reference in his autobiographical account of the war years of 1742–1757, the Sĕrat Babad Pakunĕgaran (British Library Add. MS 12318), however, makes clear that this appellation does not derive—as one might imagine—from some spiritually interpreted episode in his life, but rather was of more mundane origin.

Keywords

Mangkunagara I – Sambĕr Nyawa – Sĕrat Babad Pakunĕgaran – Java

Prince Mangkunagara I of Surakarta (1726–1795)—also known during his early years as Mas Said—was one of the most flamboyant figures of eighteenth-century Java. From his early teenage years he was a rebel fighter, and by the age of 20 or so he was one of the most accomplished military commanders in Java, then in the midst of a 17-year-long civil war. From the Chinese War (1740–1743), through ongoing princely rebellions that merged into the Third Javanese War of Succession (1746–1757) to the final appeasement of Mangkunagara I himself

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by the ceding of a senior principality in Surakarta, Java was in near-permanent turmoil. During this time, the court of Kartasura fell to rebels and was burned and plundered, first by them and then a second time by the Madurese forces that expelled them; the new court of Surakarta was founded and nearly fell to enemy forces on more than one occasion; Prince Mangkubumi became a king in 1749 and founded the Sultanate of Yogyakarta six years later; that court also came close to being burned by Mangkunagara I; and the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC, Dutch East India Company) was brought to the point of exhaustion, nearly defeated in 1752, and set more firmly on the road to bankruptcy.

Mangkunagara I—the subject of my own current research—played a prominent role in these conflicts. He was not just a guerilla fighter. At times Mangkunagara I’s forces were small and he was on the run from pursuing enemies, but at others he commanded large bodies of troops—infantry, cavalry, and artillery—in regular formations, which marched to battle to the sound of drum and gamélan and the thunder of cannon and crack of musket fire, and gained significant victories. Throughout the rest of his life, he remained a major player in Central Javanese affairs, regarded by the VOC’s Europeans and his Javanese contemporaries alike with a combination of fear and respect. The VOC Governor of Java’s Northeast Coast, Nicolaas Hartingh, wrote in 1761 that Mangkunagara was small in stature but that ‘fire and vivacity radiate[d] from his eyes’ (Ricklefs 1974:90–1)

But there has long been a mystery in my mind. Mangkunagara I is often referred to in Java with the appellation Sambĕr Nyawa. This is not, as far as I am aware, a term used during his lifetime. I have wondered where this came from and what it tells us.

Sambĕr is a word with a range of meanings and derivations. Gericke and Roorda (1901, 1:870–1) give examples and definitions, starting from sambĕr as a ‘landing net with long handle’ (also the definition in Van Albada and Pigeaud 2007:896) through such other definitions as particular species of flies, to derived forms such as anyambĕri ‘to take or pick up (opnemen) (something or someone) in flight’, and—a meaning evidently that will prove relevant to our case—‘to capture with a flourish or stroke’. The first edition of that dictionary, published in 1847, sometimes contains meanings that are relevant to eighteenth-century usages but were left out of the 1901 edition. There (Gericke and Roorda 1847:368) we find sambĕr defined as ‘a rapid flight (or escape)’, and nyambĕr as ‘to fly rapidly through the air like a bird or lightning; to fly at something to grab it’; nyambĕri is again defined as ‘to take or pick up (opnemen) something in flight’. Robson and Wibisono (2002:645) offer sambĕr as ‘to strike’, nyambĕr as ‘to strike swiftly, swoop down and seize’, and so on. Nyawa means
'soul' or 'spirit', the essential life force within the living. So, at some obvious risk of oversimplification, let us take Sambĕr Nyawa to mean a 'catcher or snatcher of souls', perhaps in the form of something like a 'landing net with long handle'.

I had imagined that some dramatic episode in Mangkunagara i's life might have given rise to the appellation Sambĕr Nyawa. Had he perhaps saved many people—that is, caught or snatched many souls in flight—from some catastrophe, or perhaps captured and killed many fleeing souls, I wondered? But an invaluable primary source has now shown that the reality is rather more mundane.

An indispensable source for Mangkunagara i's years as a warrior is British Library Add. MS 12318, which bears the title Sĕrat Babad Pakunĕgaran (Ricklefs, Voorhoeve and Gallop 2014:50, 260). The MS opens with the statement that the work was written in Surakarta (spelled Salakarta, the form used throughout this MS) in the month Ruwah, the year Wawu, with the sĕngkala (chronogram) buta wiwat turongga ngrat (that is, AJ 1705), on the occasion of the 55th tingalan (birthday) of Mangkunagara i. The date converts to the period 14 August–12 September 1779. The Balai Pustaka edition of the Babad Tanah Jawi (Bale Pustaka 1939–1941, XXI:28–9) says that Mangkunagara i was born on Sunday-Lĕgi, 4 Ruwah, wuku Warigagung, Jimakir [AJ 1650], a date that is correct in all particulars and equivalent to 7 April 1726. Since these two sources are in general agreement, we may take it that the 55th tingalan also fell on 4 Ruwah in AJ 1705, equivalent to 17 August 1779.1

At the end, Add. MS 12318 concludes with the words, ingkang murwa carita, Kangjĕng Pangeran Dipati, ingkang saking lalana andon ayuda (Sĕrat Babad Pakunĕgaran, f. 418r., Canto 91 (Sinom): 'the author of this story is Pangeran Dipati [Mangkunagara i], back from his travels during his time at war').

Thus the MS is clearly of Mangkunagarian origin, its content evidently originated from Mangkunagara i himself (although perhaps versified into its final form by professional scribes), and it was written during his lifetime. Although the MS is dated 1779, the comment at the end suggests that it may have been originally compiled in 1757, just after Mangkunagara i settled in Surakarta, when he was freshly ‘back from his travels during his time at war’.

This is also consistent with an English note on the MS, which reads ‘History of the wars and rebellions of Mangkubumi [sic] written under his own superintendence and taken from the original manuscript’. Now it is clear that ‘Mangkubumi’ is a mistake for ‘Mangkunagara’, even though Mangkubumi also

1 These date conversions rest upon the valuable Takwim published as a CD-ROM in Proudfoot 2006. Anyone unfamiliar with this tool should promptly become familiar with it.
plays a large role in the work. And it is clear that this is not a copy but rather the original ms. I was misled by that note when first cataloguing the British Library Javanese Collection, believing that Add. MS 12318 was indeed a copy, and that another ms, Add. 12283, was the original. Another look was all that was needed to realize that the relationship was the other way around, so this was corrected when the 'addenda et corrigenda' to the catalogue were published in 1982 (now republished in Ricklefs, Voorhoeve and Gallop 2014:260). I suspect that John Crawfurd borrowed a copy of the work from the Mangkunagaran (Add. 12318), had a copy made (Add. 12283), and then failed to return the original.

Thus we may accept that this was a ms authored by Mangkunagara I himself, and then perhaps versified professionally ‘under the superintendence’ of himself. He was, as well as a warrior, a political heavyweight, and (as the babad repeatedly emphasizes) a great lover of women, also a connoisseur of Javanese arts and a writer himself, so there is nothing hard to believe about him being the intellectual source of this work. It is not impossible, in fact, that he did the versification himself as well. As far as I am aware, the Sĕrat Babad Pakunĕgaran is the earliest autobiographical work known in Javanese. Certainly in several respects it is unlike many other babad, being rich in personal details and character sketches of others, amply supplied with dates in some parts (a rare thing for this genre), and providing sometimes lengthy inner soliloquies on the part of the prince himself. It seems highly accurate when set beside published Dutch sources (although I still have much work to do in unpublished materials), and full of details of events which the Dutch had no possibility of knowing about (despite spies and informants operating on all sides). This is a major work in Javanese verse and no small undertaking for a historian, being 418 ff. (that is, 836 pp.) long, covering the war years from the fall of Kartasura in 1742 to 1757.

The Sĕrat Babad Pakunĕgaran offers a solution to the Sambĕr Nyawa mystery. On f. 231v, we are in the last month of 1750, in the midst of fighting between Mangkunagara I’s troops and the forces of the VOC and the Surakarta kraton. As battle threatened at Gondhang (there are multiple Gondhangs across Central and East Java, but this was near Surakarta), we read the following:

47 Nanging kang mantri lĕbĕt mung Kwandasa
lan wong kapĕdhak ngampil
samya mu[ng]geng kuda
tĕngah-tĕngah pĕrnahnnya
bandera wulung kakasih
pun Sambĕr Nyawa
ciri wulan aputih

But of the inner mantri, there were only the Kwandasa [a troop company], and the young fighters who carried regalia, all mounted on horses; in the very centre was their place. The blue-black flag named the Sambĕr Nyawa, characterized by a white moon:
So it appears that *Sambĕr Nyawa* was the name of Mangkunagara I’s battle-banner: blue-black in colour, adorned with a white (almost certainly crescent) moon, and no doubt a powerful object. Naming flags is nothing unusual: witness ‘Old Glory’ in the USA, the ‘Union Jack’ in the UK, the *Tricoleur* in France, or *Sang Merah Putih* in Indonesia. But in Javanese culture there was more to the matter than patriotic nicknames. Weapons, saddles, items of clothing, books, and other objects could be regarded as spiritually powerful—as some sort of living things—which had their own personalities, had to be treated in respectful ways, and carried personal names. The most revered of these—the holy royal heirlooms (*pusaka*) of the *kraton*—included some that could only be seen or touched by certain persons who had the spiritual standing to control the otherwise dangerous powers that were believed to inhere in these objects.

Mangkunagara I’s personal battle-banner *Sambĕr Nyawa*—the catcher or snatcher of souls—was no doubt such a thing of power, but evidently was not of the status of a *pusaka*, for *pusaka* were usually given the title of *Kyai* or *Nyai*. We may imagine it waving over the thick smoke and thunderous noise of eighteenth-century battle, perhaps catching the departing souls that flew above the bloody chaos *en route* to their final resting places. Waving from its long staff, the banner *Sambĕr Nyawa* was indeed like a ‘landing net with long handle’, and both friend and foe would have known that below that banner the formidable warrior Mangkunagara I was to be found, with ‘fire and vivacity’ radiating from his eyes.

Then the banner’s name became attached, in later times, to the person of Mangkunagara I himself, evidently after his death. It was common for kings and aristocrats to be given posthumous apppellations—*Sultan Sĕpuh* (the old Sultan), *Seda Nglawiyan* (he who died at Lawiyan), and *Seda Kapal* (he who died on a ship) are examples. So, presumably after Mangkunagara I’s death, when his successor took the name Mangkunagara (II) and an appropriate posthumous apppellation for the principality’s founder was needed, the choice fell upon the name of his battle-banner. Thus, we may assume, did Mangkunagara I in death become the catcher of souls.
References


