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Malay Myths and Legends

JAN KNAPPERT



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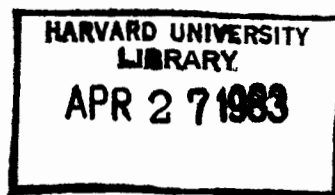
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thrown up into the air. They all came crashing down on the earth, then disappeared into it.

While travelling one day the prophet Ibrahim found a pleasant place for meditation. He thought to himself: if this place had any water I could perform my prayers here. Suddenly he saw a snake who pushed her tail into the ground and at once water welled up. Ibrahim, the Friend of God performed his prayers and pursued his journey. He met a man who was his colleague, the prophet Hud, (but Ibrahim did not know this) who invited him for a meal. Ibrahim saw nothing but desert, but Hud knelt down in prayer and a cloth descended from Heaven with the most delicious dishes on it. When they had finished eating, the cloth rose up again and disappeared. They travelled on together and came to a cave on the seashore where there lived a dangerous tiger. It came out running in their direction, roaring loudly as soon as it saw them, but suddenly it recognised Ibrahim, the Friend of God, and it bent its head and licked his feet.

After this the two prophets walked on over the waves of the sea, in animated conversation. The sea did not want to drown them. They came to an island where Hud lived. There was nothing there except a stick, a mat and a bowl. Hud took the stick and pushed it into a solid granite rock. It went in as easily as a finger pushed into a heap of flour. At once the stick sprouted four branches, each branch produced fruits of a different kind: dates, grapes, raisins and figs.

Ibrahim now understood that he had been proud when feeling satisfied at the appearance of water for his prayers. To Hud he said:

“Will you pray for me that God forgives my sin?”

Hud answered:

“I would, but my own prayer to God was never heard. I begged God that I might be allowed to meet the prophet Ibrahim.”

Then the latter made himself known and so did Hud. The two prophets embraced as the dearest of friends.

YUSUP

The history of Nabi Yusup, the prophet Joseph in the Islamic tradition, follows fairly closely the Biblical tale. It is incredibly popular in all the Islamic lands, especially in Indonesia, and there are several versions of it extant in Malay, both in prose and in verse. It is a tale of misery brought upon an innocent youth by evil men, including his own brothers. Yet by God's guidance he rises to become prime minister and eventually king of Egypt. Yusup was more handsome than any other man who ever lived on Earth. God made a tree grow in Yakub's garden and each time a son was born to the patriarch there sprouted a new branch on the tree, which he eventually cut off and gave to the son for whom it had grown, as a staff. For Yusup, however, a topaz staff descended from Heaven.

When the brothers brought Yakub the news that Yusup had been devoured by a tiger he insisted on seeing the tiger. They had to go out and catch it. When it was brought before the prophet Yakub he asked it:

“Did you eat my son, Yusup?”

By God's will the tiger suddenly had the gift of speech and said:

“Prophet of God, by God's decree we tigers are not allowed to eat the meat of prophets.”

Yakub was punished by God, for once he had refused to give a piece of meat from a newly-slaughtered goat to a beggar. That is why God took away Yusup. Being sold by his brothers, Yusup was forced to go to Egypt. When one of the slave drivers beat him, thunder and lightning descended from the sky, so they left him in peace. In Egypt, Yusup was carried across the Nile by the king of the fishes called Daluj. He was sold for his weight in gold (asking price) but he proved to be heavier than all the gold of Egypt, until he threw his ring on which was written the secret name of God, on the other scale.

The rest of the legend is similar to the Biblical tradition, until the time when Yusup became viceroy of Egypt. Potifar died an old man and left behind his wife, Zuleika, who was

still a virgin. She still loved Yusup and he agreed to marry her, although she had once betrayed him. She became his humble and devoted wife and gave him two sons, Efraim and Nabil. Happy ending.

3. Al-Iskandar, the Greatest King since Solomon

According to the Islamic tradition, Alexander the Great, whom the Malays call Iskandar, was a just king, a prince of the faithful, whom the wise prophet Kidir (Al-Khizr or Al-Khidr) taught and accompanied. Strange characters both of them, stranger still that they should meet in myth. Alexander is mentioned in the Koran as the Horned One, and it is a matter of course that he was a Muslim, following the lore of Ibrahim, Abraham, the father of Ismail.

It goes without saying that he could not have conquered so many lands if that had not been God's wish. Thus, it is said, God had decided that Iskandar would conquer and rule all the countries of the earth, and still die as a young man, so that all men should and shall learn from his fate that even the mightiest emperor on earth was powerless against the angel of Death. He fought many battles but no weapon ever hit him. He died one fine day on his bed because his last hour had struck.

Al-Khidr whom the Malays call Kidir is an even more mysterious character. Some scholars identify him with Adonis, the eternally young shepherd with whom the moon goddess fell in love. He was the god of vegetation. Other scholars recognise in him Elijah, the prophet whom God received in Heaven while he was alive. Thus he was immortal.

Since Al-Iskandar was given all the lands of the earth to conquer, he is remembered in the myths of all the Islamic peoples. He is well-known in West Africa, in Ethiopia and in India. His legend also travelled to Southeast Asia, even if he himself did not. It is even thought by some, and it can be read in the chronicles, that Alexander the Great is the forefather of at least one illustrious dynasty of Malay

sultans.

The Persian tradition-makers may have found it hard to accept that their country was overrun by a mere Greek. So, it was agreed that he was really the scion of the Persian king, Bahman. The Malay tradition conforms to this and so we learn from the *Hikayat Iskandar* that the history begins when Philippos was king of Makadunia (Macedonia) and Rum, i.e. Asia Minor. In Arabic script his name reads Filifus and in the Persian tradition this was misread as Failakus. The Malay Romance of Alexander calls him Kilas. He was severely defeated by Darab, the king of Ajam (Iran). He had to pay a heavy tribute: a hundred golden eggs and a hundred silver eggs, every year. Darab had heard of the beauty of King Kilas' daughter and wanted to marry her. Luka, chief minister of King Kilas, brought Darab a portrait of the girl and the Shah was so impassioned that he ordered Luka to bring the princess herself.

The princess Sofia, daughter of the Greek king, thus travelled to Iran and was ceremonially joined to the Shah in holy matrimony. Alas, the passion and the marriage lasted only one night. The Shah detected an odour in his queen which he found intolerable. He sent her home. The wise vizier, Luka, however, pretended to Sofia that her father felt so saddened by the absence of his beloved daughter that he had asked the Shah to send her back to Greece. There she settled back in her old home and in due course of time gave birth to a son whom she called Al-Iskandar which means "the one that cures body odour". Prince Iskandar grew up and was taught by the sage Aristotalis who lived in Setambul (or Konstantia in the Persian tradition, i.e. Byzantium). Of course, he learnt the Koran by heart and even Aristotalis would have had to admit, had he lived that long, that the Koran was superior to his logic in wisdom and vision. When King Kilas died, Iskandar, his grandson, was acclaimed as king of Makadunia, Rum and Yunan, which is Ionia or Greece.

In the meantime, King Darab of Iran decided to marry his old sweetheart Sudagin, daughter of his old mentor in