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Rijali's quest. Experiences of a refugee in the colonial East Indies

Hans Hägerdal

Introduction

Refugees escaping intolerable conditions – be it warfare, natural disasters, or desperate poverty – are found in almost every human society for which we have historical records. In most cases the myriads of men and women who left their homes for a more tolerable life are anonymous to us. In the age before journalism and television, the incentive to document the experiences of the uprooted was sporadic, especially when it came to migrants outside the European sphere. Traces of historical migrations of the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania can be found in an array of oral traditions, chronicles, documents, and archaeological vestiges. Not least, Southeast Asia is a historical region that has experienced a huge number of migrations over time, from prehistorical tribal movements to the modern plight of Sino-Vietnamese and Rohingya refugees.¹

In this essay I will put attention to a remarkable text that has often escaped the attention of historians of maritime Southeast Asia, for several reasons. The manuscript was not published until lately, and then only in a Dutch translation.² It may also have remained in the background of the scholarly awareness due to the enormous number of colonial records that tell of the same events.³ The *Hikayat Tanah Hitu* (The Story of the Land of Hitu) was authored some time before 1653 by the learned imam Rijali alias Sifarijali (c. 1590-after 1657). A native of Ambon, an island in eastern Indonesia, he wrote the piece after devastating colonial warfare had forced him to flee to the important

¹ Briefly see Andaya and Andaya, *A History of Early Modern Southeast Asia, 1400-1830*, 4, 27-8, 240-1, 286.

² Ridjali, *Historie van Hitu*, with Malay text and parallel Dutch translation. The work is available in two manuscripts (Cod. Or. 5448 and Cod. Or. 8756) in Leiden University Library. Manusama, *Hikayat Tanah Hitu*, 4-9. A summary is found in Valentijn, *Oud en nieuw oost-Indien*, Vol. II, part 2, 1-14.

³ Cf. the condescending view quoted in Manusama, *Hikayat Tanah Hitu*, 2.

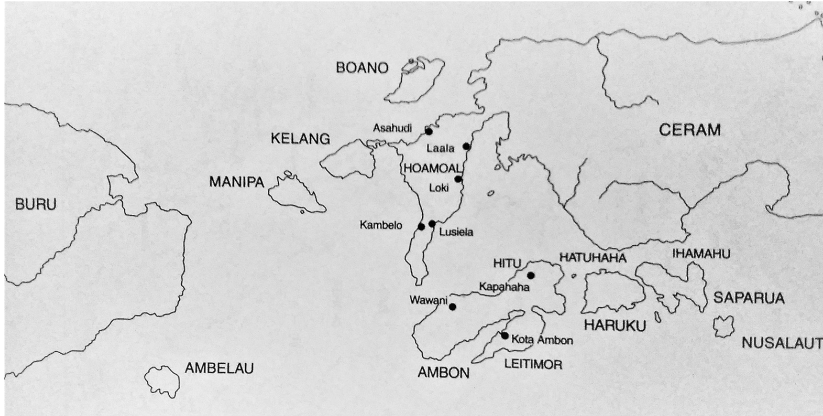
emporium Makassar on Sulawesi. The *Hikayat*, written in Malay using the Arabic-derived Jawi script, is almost unique in its geographical context. No other native chronicle preceding the nineteenth century is known from the insular world known as the Spice Islands or Moluccas, despite their economic importance over the centuries, as center of the trade in clove and nutmeg and their contacts with the outside world. Moreover, it presents a remarkable case of the workings and consequences of European colonialism, seen from the angle of a local witness in the center of the events. Finally, the chronicle concludes with an autobiographical account of escape from the mayhem created by Dutch colonial intrusion in the 1640s. Autobiographies are preciously rare in pre-modern Southeast Asia. As a counter-narrative to European sources, the *Hikayat Tanah Hitu* is therefore well worth a study. In the following I will, first, put the chronicle and its author into context, and second, discuss the trauma experienced by Rijali due to his loss of home and his quest for safety and cultural solidarity.

Ambon and the spice trade

Ambon is a relatively small island in the Indonesian province Maluku (Moluccas), encompassing no more than 743 square kilometers. In older European writings it is often called Amboina. It consists of two peninsulas, the larger Hitu and the smaller Leitimor, connected through a narrow isthmus. Despite its modest size, it has held a central position in the region for many centuries due to a good harbour, a dense population, and the production of cloves which generated huge profits on the early-modern world market. Unlike the societies in Java, Bali, Siam, Vietnam etc. the local economy was not based on wet rice fields, but rather sago (starch extracted from the sago palm), fishing and trade in spices. Ambon had a socio-political division in genealogically defined groups on three levels, namely *aman* (tribal bond), *uku* (tribe) and *ruma tau* (patrilineal clan) which made for a highly decentralized society.⁴ With the development of long-distance trade in Asian coastlands in the fifteenth century, the Spice Islands grew in importance and received cultural influxes from China, Java, and the Malay World. Islam made inroads in the late fifteenth

⁴ Keuning, *Ambonese, Portuguese and Dutchmen*, 365; Knaap, *Kruidnagelen en Christenen*, 9-11.

century as members of the local elites accepted the creed, partly mixing it with the old beliefs in the spirit world.⁵



Map 1. Ambon and surrounding islands. Adapted from Knaap, *Kora-kora en kruitdamp*, x.

On the eve of European contact, the northern islands in the region, the original “Maluku” in the local geographical perception, were dominated by four sultanates called Ternate, Tidore, Jailolo and Bacan. Of these, Ternate was the most powerful, although its sultan did not rule over a bureaucratized state but rather headed a network of dependencies and alliances.⁶ Other centers were Ambon and the nutmeg-exporting Banda Islands a little bit further to the south. Ambon and several other island societies entailed a ritual-social dualism with a division in two bonds called Ulisiwa and Ulilima which were frequently on hostile terms with each other.

The *Hikayat Tanah Hitu* relates in some detail how various clans arrive in Hitu from Ceram, Java, Halmahera and Gorom, and agree to form a noble republic of sorts. The world of the *Hikayat* is very much a men’s world; women only flit across the scene as marriage objects, but are functional in binding the clans together. Four lords called *perdana* are to govern Hitu with the same prerogatives. They subsequently befriend the Muslim rulers of Ternate, and a formal alliance is concluded in the sixteenth century. The arrangement defies

⁵ Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, Volume 2, 800-2, 809, 815.

⁶ Andaya, *The world of Maluku*.

Western notions of state power: Hitu is nominally incorporated in the sultan's formal governance structure as one of the *soa* (settlement units) but is in fact left entirely autonomous.⁷ It is rather a partnership to secure the trade routes. Much later, a sort of chief executive called Kapitan Hitu, is appointed to represent the entire Hituese federation. His title is actually Portuguese (*capitão*), pointing at early influences from the world beyond the seas.

At this stage the Europeans had indeed entered the scene. The inflated prices that cloves, nutmeg, pepper, and cinnamon fetched on the European and Asian markets made access to the Spice Islands a priority for seafaring enterprises. As early as 1512 the Portuguese showed up in the Moluccas, followed by the Spanish in 1521. The various stages of colonial exploitation are eloquently described by the *Hikayat*: at first the curious and friendly communication, then atrocious behaviour by the whites – plundering and rioting – that sours the relationship, and finally an all-out war between the combatants. For the pious imam Rijali the religious factor is important here: the wars that the Hituese wage with the Portuguese are depicted as “holy wars” and the adversaries are “accursed infidels”. The strongly Catholic identity of the ill-mannered white strangers gives the struggle a particularly intense aspect in a region where Christianity had until recently been entirely unknown safe passages in the Qur'an. Despite all efforts, the Portuguese cannot be expelled since they bond with certain villages on Ambon. Rijali's account can be compared with Portuguese chronicles which confirm the outlines of the conflict and excel in heroizing the white soldiers and missionaries. Although Rijali does not explicitly say so, many Ambonese were converted to Christianity in these years, and the religious divide largely overlapped with the ritual Ulisiwa-Ulilima duality.⁸

A new stage opens with the abrupt arrival of the Dutch in 1599. Being a Protestant seafaring nation in violent opposition to the Spanish Empire (to which Portugal belonged at this moment), the Dutch were soon to organize themselves into the United East India Company (VOC) that strove to control the trade routes in much of maritime Asia.⁹ In the *Hikayat*, the newcomers at first seem to offer the promise of ordered conditions. As the VOC expels the Portuguese from their fortress in 1605, the leaders of Hitu hesitantly accept that the Dutch take over the Portuguese stronghold, the present Ambon City on the Leitimor

⁷ Ridjali, *Historie van Hitu*, 105.

⁸ Aritonang and Steenbrink, *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*, 35-49.

⁹ Emmer and Gommans, *The Dutch Overseas Empire, 1600-1800*, 17-22.

Peninsula. A lengthy passage of the *Hikayat* interestingly describes how the Dutch and Hituese engage in long deliberations about the spice prices. Another passage details a kind of tourist trip to India undertaken by the grandee Mihir-jiguna on a VOC ship in 1622-23, in the company of the author Rijali.¹⁰

Dark clouds gathering

However, as Rijali observes the Ambonese soon discover the darker side of the European presence. They witness how the VOC cruelly suppresses the nearby Banda Islands (1621) and kills off English rivals accused of intriguing (1623). Their “way of acting was wrong” as they build lodges and fortresses where they are not supposed to and send ships to subordinate recalcitrant islands in the neighbourhood. After 1623, “the disputes increased greatly due to the commerce; hence, Kimelaha Luhu, Kimelaha Leliato and all in the land of Ambon waged war; only Hitu did not do so. Both Muslims and Christians fought each other, won victories, suffered defeats, and so it went on.”¹¹

Things turn really serious when Kakiali, holder of the Kapitan Hitu title and cousin of Rijali, visits the important Muslim trading entrepôt Makassar, a serious contender of the Dutch ambition to keep the spice trade under VOC control at any cost. Someone – Rijali does not say whom – accuses Kakiali of trying to instigate the ruler of the seaborne Makassar empire to attack the Dutch and thus break the alliance.¹² Shortly after this, a peace meeting with the Dutch governor of Ambon ends with Kakiali being treacherously imprisoned, and a threatening message is dispatched to the various chiefs (*orangkayas*): “...the land of Hitu and Holland are as man and wife. When the wife errs, the husband chastises her.”¹³ The Hituese are not persuaded, and a complicated series of conflicts start in 1634. Although Kakialai is released three years later, Hituese discontent with the monopolistic VOC leads to the outbreak of fresh violence in the coming years.

There is no room here to describe the details of the notorious Ambon Wars which lasted until the late 1650s and brought ruin and devastation to much of

¹⁰ Ridjali, *Historie van Hitu*, 155-61.

¹¹ Ridjali, *Historie van Hitu*, 161. All translations from Rijali's text are by the present author.

¹² From Dutch sources, it appears the accuser was Kayoan, the *perdana* of the Tanihitumesen lineage; see Rumphius, *De Ambonsche historie*, 107.

¹³ Ridjali, *Historie van Hitu*, 171.

the Central Moluccas.¹⁴ Suffice to say that the VOC eventually secured control over the production and sale of cloves, while effectively reducing the Moluccas to the economic backwater it has remained ever since. Cloves could only be grown under tight colonial control in Ambon and the small surrounding islands Haruku, Saparua and Nusalaut.¹⁵ What interests us here is the perspectives of the struggle taken by Rijali. His account of shifting alliances and battles, which is somewhat confusing to the outsider due to the multitude of names and chiefly titles, points at the vulnerability of societies with a low level of state integration who tried to confront efficacious colonial organizations. First, there is always split and division within the own ranks. Rijali likes to think that the old Ulisiwa-Ulilima division can be replaced by a united Muslim-led front against the covetous Christian Dutch, but not even the individual settlements are able to put up such a front:

Of the land of Hitu, the settlements Hila and Hitulama – others I do not mention – together with the chief of Bulan and the chief of Tanihitumesen, sided with the Dutch. Concerning the settlement Hitu at Wawani, the settlements Asilulu, Alang, and Liliboi – others I do not mention – they waged war against the Dutch together with Kapitan Hitu, Patih Tuban, Tubanbesi, and the champion and hero Kimelaha Luhu. They beat each other and attacked each other as if there was no end of the holy war in Ambon.¹⁶

Second, the alliances are shifting and unstable. The VOC has a contract with Hitu, but the Sultan of Ternate still has a kind of suzerainty over the Ambon Quarter and is in turn closely allied to the Dutch. Another player is Makassar, an expansionist commercial realm that vainly sends fleets to Ambon to help up the positions of its coreligionists. Moreover, the Hituese have crisscrossing bonds with nearby islands, especially Ceram to the north. In this volatile world, European colonialism has plenty of opportunity to fish in troubled water. Although the *Hikayat Tanah Hitu* is written in a rather matter-of-fact style, Rijali's bitterness about the inability and even unwillingness of the Muslims to stem the tide of colonialism (in his term, the infidels) is apparent.

¹⁴ Knaap, *Kora-kora en kruitdamp*, 269-72.

¹⁵ Knaap, *Kruidnagelen en Christenen*, 30.

¹⁶ Ridjali, *Historie van Hitu*, 185.

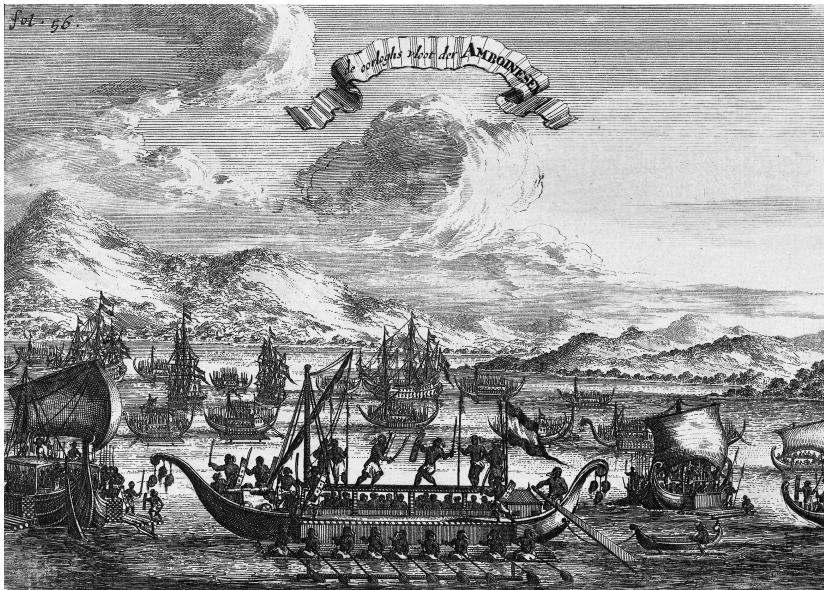


Image 1. A fleet of European and Ambonese ships, illustration from Wouther Schouten's travel account, 1676. Source: Creative Commons.

The tale of a refugee

The last pages of Rijali's account is a tale of misery and treason. By 1643 the principal grandee of Hitu, the redoubtable Kakiali, is beleaguered by the VOC in the hill settlement Wawani when two Spaniards join his camp and win everyone's trust – the Netherlands and Spain are enemies at the time. However, they turn out to be traitors; one night they break into the house of Kakiali and stab him fatally.¹⁷ Shortly afterwards, the village is stormed by VOC forces, assisted by some locals. The survivors, including Rijali himself, manage to flee into the wilderness of the hilly interior. The last leaders of the resistance face bleak prospects: if they stay in the wilderness their followers will drop out, and if they approach a village, their presence will be notified by the Dutch. Eventually the hitherto neutral chief Telukibesi, lord of the village Kapahaha, agrees to assist the party. After some further setbacks, the insurgent chiefs realize the poor chances of continuing the war, especially since most of their Makassarese

¹⁷ Dutch sources speak about one single traitor; see Rumphius, *De Ambonsche historie*, 220-1.

helpers have sailed home to Sulawesi. “Then the chiefs went to the governor and brought 3,000 Reals [a Spanish coin] as an honorarium, to ask for forgiveness for us. The governor took the Reals but did not forgive these people.”¹⁸

This perfidious act is followed by a general summon of the Hituese chiefs: whoever fails to report is the enemy of the Company. All the villages submit apart from a single one, Kapahaha, whose lord Telukibesi finally decides to brave the Europeans and gathers the insurgents in his elevated and inaccessible settlement. 300 fighters partly armed with muskets beat off successive attacks by the Dutch army and proudly decline the offers by other Ambonese chiefs to broker peace.

Then, abruptly, frustration sets in. The Sultan of Ternate, Hamza (r. 1627-1648) is still seen as a revered central figure, embodying the hope that things might be set in order again. But his hands are tied by the Europeans. The insurgents send message to the ruler: “What will happen to us? Since all the settlements in the land of Ambon are on the Dutch side, we are the only settlement that fights the Dutch. Do Your Majesty wish that we fight or make peace? Let us know what Your royal wish is.”¹⁹ The sultan does not care to send a reply, but when the envoy of the insurgents meets with the royal governor (*perdana kimelaha*) in the Ambon Quarter, the governor brusquely orders his execution. “When the chiefs in the settlement Kapahaha heard this, they were greatly astonished and taken aback by the act of the *perdana kimelaha*. The chiefs said: ‘Our hope lay with the treaty with His Majesty the Sultan that had been ratified through the word of God in the settlement Hitu. What should we expect when there is no statement? What should we expect when a statement does arrive?’ Then as a trial from God, sickness and lack of foodstuff afflicted the settlement.”²⁰ The sorry end of Ambonese independence unfolds in July 1646 and is vividly depicted by Rijali, who fatalistically regards it as the will of the Almighty:

[A] foreigner leapt over to the Dutch. He showed the way for the Dutch. In the middle of the night, they climbed up, and the settlement was defeated according to the will of the supreme God. The inhabitants fled in all directions, everyone tried to reach safety. Some died on the way;

¹⁸ Ridjali, *Historie van Hitu*, 197.

¹⁹ Ridjali, *Historie van Hitu*, 203.

²⁰ Ibid.

some died under the trees, unable to run any further since they were starved. Some sought refuge in the forest, others in caves; wherever they ended up, they died at that place. A part went to the settlement Mamala, a part to the settlement Hitulama, and still another part to Hila. Some went to the settlement Tial and chief Patih Tuban went to the settlement Wai. They were all delivered to the governor.²¹

The heroic Telukibesi fares similarly. He manages to slip out and navigate a small craft to the nearby island Haruku where he tries to enlist the assistance from the locals, but they turn against him and try to capture him. Telukibesi escapes back to Hitu where some locals hand him over to the Dutch authorities, who are not in a merciful mood. He is executed, while a number of captured Hituese are sent into exile. The proud Hituese tradition of independence gives way to despair where people of the same faith and ethnicity betray each other due to fear of the new colonial masters. Only a few persons refuse to give up, including Rijali himself, here called Sifarijali, who describes his flight in third person:

I now tell of Sifarijali. I do not detail his miseries or the misdeeds to which he was subjected, but only tell how he ran through forests and fields, uphill, downhill ... At sunset he went to the coast to hide, since people were searching in the forest in daytime. Therefore, he hid close to the shore. At sunset he came out and wandered through forests and fields. He met a servant of the chief Patih Tuban, Sarasara Tahakehena, and they walked along the road together. A bit further uphill they heard a dog barking in the forest. A moment later the dog came running with his Dutch master. Since the last hour of Sifarijali and Sarasara Tahakehena had not yet arrived, the dog did not take notice and the Dutchman also did not say a word. They looked at each other and moved away. Some distance further on they once again saw the enemy, but they hid, and the enemy did not take them.²²

²¹ Ridjali, *Historie van Hitu*, 203-5. The same story, given from a heroic Dutch perspective, is found in Rumphius, *De Ambonsche historie*, 254-5. A romantic and partly fictionalized account of these events was authored by W.L. Ritter, *Toeloecabesie: Amboina in 1644 (1844)*. Here, the wife of Telukibesi turns out to be the long-lost Eurasian daughter of the attacking Dutch commander Jacob Verheijden. Too late, Verheijden realizes that he has mortally wounded his own child in the final assault.

²² Ridjali, *Historie van Hitu*, 205.

The two men struggle on and finally reach the village Hila. There Rijali is fed by the local imam and meets a few other refugees. Together they acquire a small boat and make it Kelang, an island to the west of Ambon. One of them prefers to go back to Ambon, leaving just three people: “For that reason matters were outrageous for Sifarijali. I cannot describe his sorrow, just that he put his trust in the Holy God.”²³ By chance, he is brought on board a ship that takes him to relative safety in the nearby Buru Island. Two acquaintances of his arrive in Buru as well and give Rijali an update about the sorry state in Ambon. “[W]hen Sifarijali heard this his sorrow increased still. All said: ‘What can be done, it is the will of the Supreme God. We better go in exile in another land, so that we do not have to see or hear about our own land.’ They then took farewell of the *orangkaya kimelaha* and the *kipati* [local lords].”²⁴

The little party traverses the Banda Sea in three days and finally reaches the coast of Sulawesi, a partly Muslim island that is still free from Dutch rule. However, their tribulations are not over. Their coreligionists in the coastal kingdom of Bone are far from trustable:

People from Bone came to ask them: ‘What people are you?’ They replied: ‘We are Ambonese.’ ‘Where are you going?’ ‘We are on our way to Makassar but lack water and provisions. If you have food, we will pay for it.’ The people said: ‘Wait here, tomorrow we will bring food here, and then it is for sale.’ Thus, Sifarijali waited, but in the next morning people arrived armed. They therefore hid in the forest and sent a few persons to call on the [Bone] people in the boat. They said: ‘Come ashore, since we want to buy food.’ Since they were afraid, they dared not go on board. The others did not want to come ashore and sailed away. This happened since it was still not the will of the supreme God [that they would be killed]. During the rest of the journey, they had no foodstuff other than shellfish and *genemu* leaves.²⁵

Their next stop is Buton, an island kingdom close to Sulawesi that is a vassal of Makassar. At last, they experience some kindness and benevolence. The recep-

²³ Ridjali, *Historie van Hitu*, 207.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ridjali, *Historie van Hitu*, 209. *Genemu* or *belinjo* is a tree whose young leaves and seed are edible.

tion is considerably more friendly than in the last place; they are provided with food and clothing and the local elite even offer Rijali and his little party to stay on their island. However, Rijali politely replies that his journey is still not over. The representative of the Makassar ruler then puts them on a ship bound for Makassar. The *Hikayat Tanah Hitu* ends with a note of hope as the author is brought before the two rulers of Makassar.²⁶

At this time His Majesty Sultan Pattingalloang ruled the land of Makassar, and His Majesty Sultan Muhammad Said was elevated to the royal dignity of Sultan of Islam, the shadow of the Prophet in the realm of the believers. Sifarijali made his courtesies before them and told of his miseries to His Majesty the Sultan. Then His Majesty Pattingalloang spoke: 'If I did not care about your fate, it would not be like the Prophet told us, his congregation: the Muslims are brothers'. Then the harbour master presented him with a place to live where he felt at home.

In this way it happened that he left his settlement in a quest for peace since he feared the Dutch. He roamed through the forests, over open terrain, along shores, and over the sea, until he came to the land of Makassar. Thus one finds peace for oneself. Here the story ends.²⁷

Himself an imam, Rijali paints a hopeful image of religious solidarity after all the harrowing experiences of colonial onslaught and internal betrayal in his homeland. The solidarity shown by the two rulers, who have recently sent fleets and men to fight the Europeans in Ambon, is somewhat modest: basically, the imam is assigned a place to stay and seemingly fend for himself in the bustling commercial city Makassar. The learned Pattingalloang also enjoined Rijali to write the *Hikayat Tanah Hitu*, which incidentally could serve as an instrument of Makassarese power ambitions: by showing the old Islamic power of Ternate as subservient to the VOC, and the Makassarese as upright helpers of the Ambonese cause, the text was in effect an argument in the game of power in the waters of eastern Indonesia. In fact, Rijali's story did not end here, and his future career was every bit as dramatic. When new resistance against the

²⁶ Makassar was a twin kingdom governed by the two rulers of Gowa and Tallo'. The one of Tallo', Pattingalloang, was known as a farsighted and forceful leader; see Andaya, *The Heritage of Arung Palakka*, 39-44.

²⁷ Ridjali, *Historie van Hitu*, 211.

VOC broke out in the Moluccas in the 1650s, he sailed over to Seram, north of Ambon, where Makassarese warriors helped the locals against the Dutch. As an Ambonese freedom charter of sorts, he brought along the now-completed *Hikayat Tanah Hitu*.²⁸ Indonesian manuscripts often gained localized prestige as revered heirlooms. When the insurgents were defeated in 1656-58 after severe massacres and devastations, Rijali once again fled to Makassar. Some years later, in 1667, it was the turn of Makassar to be victimized by VOC expansion, marking the high tide of the Dutch overseas empire.²⁹ At least, it seems Rijali was spared this sight as he was apparently dead already. But, as the Dutch writer W.L. Ritter states, “history is silent over his later fate, and it is not known where the soulless remains of Imam Rijali were entrusted to the earth.”³⁰

Concluding remarks

Our author had been a leading figure in Ambon and is of course not ‘typical’ of the countless refugees who escaped war and hardship in the unruly era of early colonialism in Indonesia. As a pious witness to European expansion his story is however interesting as a counter-discourse. The worldview of the *Hikayat Tanah Hitu* is dualistic: the colonial wars are identified as a struggle between Christian Europeans and Muslim non-Europeans. Antagonisms of economics, politics and religion strengthen each other, with severe consequences until present times.³¹ Still, the dualism described by Rijali is only part of the broader picture, since Ambonese society was highly fragmented and based on genealogical groups; his hope of what in effect would be an anti-colonial front is therefore not borne out by the harsh realities of shifting alliances and loyalties. Some aspects are muted in the *Hikayat*: very little is said in the text about local religion, although it existed in the Moluccas until modern times. While the early parts of the texts are legendary, there are hardly any tales about the supernatural. This is unlike many Muslim Indonesian chronicles, where such elements are often embedded in the causality of events. Rather, the will of God in a general sense is constantly bringing history on its course. Even

²⁸ Rumphius, *De Ambonsche historie*, 257-8.

²⁹ Andaya, *The Heritage of Arung Palakka*, 73-99.

³⁰ Ritter, *Toeloeabesi*, 369.

³¹ For the modern legacy of colonialism and religious division in Ambon, see Braithwaite, Braithwaite, Cookson and Dunn, *Anomie and Violence*, 147-242.

the victory of the Dutch and the death of resistance heroes is God's willing for reasons intransigent to the mortal human. At the same time, Rijali's own account increasingly reveals cracks in the dualism. Muslim villages are pressured to extradite insurgents to a hard fate – execution or exile – and the Sultan of Ternate and his accomplices shamefully betray the cause of their coreligionists. The author's deep trauma when faced with the condition of his homeland leads him to the hazardous flight so that he may not “see or hear” of his old home. Mentally, the refuge that Rijali finds in Makassar, however modest, serves as a compensation for his very physical hardships. The solidarity that he believes to have met brings consolation and a ray of hope for the future.

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