

A GENERAL THEORY OF THE MALAY *AKAL BUDI*

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Abstract: What does it mean to be a Malay? Or rather what is ‘malayness’ of a Malay? Apart from the physiological aspect that could be clearly observed, it is the cognitive, affective and spiritual aspect that warrants further examination. While being a Malay certainly hinges on a necessary spatio-temporal existence, there should be some commonalities of being a Malay that satisfy the sufficient requirements of more than being human; the Malay conscientiousness for instance. In this paper, the author examines the Malay *Akal Budi* in light of the human hierarchy of existence and levels of reality of the cosmos. A general theory of the Malay *Akal Budi* is formulated towards the end.

Keywords: Malay, *Akal*, *Budi*, reality, values

INTRODUCTION

The word ‘Malay’ refers to a particular exclusive small group of ethnicity in Indonesia unlike in Malaysia whereby the word is very inclusive because it includes Javanese, Bugis, Mendalaing, Minangkabaus, Acehnese, Sayyids and Gujeratis. The list, however, is not exhaustive. For the purpose of this paper, the author is referring to the inclusive usage.

Cosmologically speaking, Malays espoused more of Buddhists doctrines instead of Hindus before they subscribe to some Islamic cosmological doctrines.

Parameswara, the first Malay King, hailed from the Kingdom of Srivijaya in the 14th century (Ahmad 1984 & Shellabear 1975), a Buddhist’s Mahayana Kingdom unlike the Hindus of Majapahit at Java. When the Kingdom of Malacca was founded, it was largely an extension of Srivijaya. In their metaphysics, they believe and adhere strongly in some basic Buddhists’ concepts. These concepts include *Dewa Raja*, *Boddhisatva*, *Budi*, *Dhatu*, *Dharma* and *Bakhti* (Mitchell 1971).

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DIMENSIONS OF AKAL BUDI

Fundamentally Buddhists believe in at least three levels of reality: the material world, subtle world and spiritual world. *Budi* represents the most esoteric sense of the self, which is spiritual. *Budi* is not the good, rather the goodness of the goodself, the unconscious of the conscious so to speak. *Budi* is materially represented at every levels of reality. At the material physical level, it is *budi-pekerti* which is behavior manifest. At a more subtle level, it is the precursor of language, the *budi-bicara*. *Bicara* means ‘speaking’, *budi-bicara* means ‘pertimbangan’ or innate judgement. It represents the connection between the spirit and the physical mouth, or more precisely our ability to communicate orally. It is impossible to utter anything in the absence of *budi*. Obviously a dead man has no *budi*, even though he still has his mouth so to speak.

With the advent of Islamic cosmology, the concept of *Budi* is partly integrated into the doctrine of *akal* (Arabic ‘*aql*’), resulting in *akal budi*. In the Malay cosmology, the *akal* traditionally refer more to the soul than the spirit, in particular the rational soul (Samian 2015), as opposed to the vegetative and mineral soul. In the more classical sense, ‘*aql*’ refers to the intellect, not the Cartesian mind (*res cogitans*); our spiritual ability to make judgement more so than our emotion or imagination.

The traditional Malay neither over emphasizes nor reduces human existence simply to matter. All of his phases of existence - as an individual, a family member, a neighbor, a member of the society, a citizen of his country, a denizen of the world - needs emotional security. In order to achieve *nirvana*, bliss, ‘*ananda*’, or perfect happiness requires *akal budi*. The primordial *akal budi* is total submission to The Divine, The Good, because all of the other forms of existence, be it artifacts, plants, animals, planets, theories, and dreams are spatial and temporal. If he loves his family too much, he will suffer upon its loss. If his happiness is directly proportional to his savings, he will be threatened when it depreciates in value because of the decrease in interest rate or rising inflation. A physically healthy traditional Malay, in spite of his wonderful health, might still be unsecured if he is not emotionally secured. In order for him to be secured, he has to be *akalbudi*-ly secured.

Even if the traditional Malay is emotionally and physically good, he might still think (*akal*) that he is not good enough because of the

ephemeral ‘emotional attachment’ and the ‘temporal’ physical needs. Put simply, it is impossible for a Malay to be fully happy if *akalbudi*-ly he is not happy - we are influenced by what we think, namely, the effect (not so much the primacy) of mind (*akal*) over matter (*badan/jasad*).

The *akal budi* points to an interesting aspect of Tymieniecka’s *imaginatio creatrix* (Tymieniecka 2008); it is a ‘creative’ source of the microcosm that regulates decisions and choices, including axiological problems and solutions. Instead of ‘*aql* (the intellect) becoming as ‘the fountainhead’ and the nexus of the internal senses, the various faculties, the ‘*aql* has to be paired with *budi* in the Malay cosmology in spite of it claiming to be heavily influenced by the doctrine of traditional philosophers including Avicenna, Sadra, Averroes and Ibn ‘Arabi.

Central to these traditional philosophers is their conception of the intellect (‘*aql*) and The Divine. All of them view the sensible and intelligible objects as related to The Divine in a manner corresponding to their modes of existence. God is the center for all cosmological objects there is (Nasr 1976).

In point of fact, it is their notion of God which dominates their conceptions of the cosmos. According to all of them, by contemplating the cosmos on the way of the intellect (‘*aql*), one should in the end know more about God. The total worthiness of philosophers corresponds to the extent that their philosophizing can bring them closer to God, to the degrees that it can improve their piety.

They would agree very much that to know the essence of God is beyond human capability. In like manner, they would share the same belief that God is both the ‘most’ and the ‘more’. For an example, they would agree to the statement that God is both ‘greater’ and ‘the greatest’. He is the greatest of all and yet He is definitely greater than whatever list of Divine Qualities that they can think of. The intellect (‘*aql*) is certainly one of His creation that make ‘thinking’ possible.

The concept of ‘*aql* (intellect) espoused by the aforementioned traditional philosophers has several dimensions of spiritual reality which is not shared by the Malay concept of *Akal Budi* because the latter is more related to the affective domain. Now *Akal Budi* is more subtle, more real than *cita rasa* (mind/sensation), i.e., closer to the spiritual world and yet not exactly the same as the intellect (‘*aql*). *Akal Budi* is the ‘*hati kecil*’, the kernel of the heart. *Hati kecil* is the seat of intention (*niyyah*), which is apart from ‘thinking’. There are many

traditional proverbs which relate to *hati*, more so than *citarasa*. For instance *baik hati* (good hearted), *kecil hati* (displeased), *dari mata turun ke hati* (from the eyes descending to the heart), *busuk hati* (evil heart), *hati-hati* (really focus), *makan hati* (disappointed), *hati binatang* (the heart of an animal), *jauh hati* (felt small), *sampai hati* (has the heart to oppress), *tidak berhati perut* (inconsiderate heart), *hati setan* (heart of the devil), *kuat hati* (very determined), *terang hati* (enlightened heart), and *buta hati* (blind heart) (Effendy 1989). Therefore we can gauge that the heart is the seat of most subtle essence, the *akal budi*, that acts before action, whether the action is *citarasa* (mind/sensation) or *tingkahlaku* (physical action, psychomotor).

The *Akal Budi* then, in the Malay cosmology, is very much integrated with the Logos if we want to relate it to the spiritual dimension. It is the Logos that creates the *budi bicara* and *budi pekerti*, resulting in the *orang budiman* (Malay virtuoso). Malay virtuous lies in actualizing his *akal budi* in such a way that the offshoot is the generic *budi baik*, ‘the good’ or ‘kebaikan’. *Budi baik* is the exoteric reverberation of Maha Baik, or The Good, The Divine.

Accordingly we have the figurative concentric circles at the microcosm level, the nexus of *akal budi* of the Malay gentlemen. The *Akal Budi* is the kernel with the *budi bicara* (emotional assessment), *budi bahasa* (language skills), *budi pekerti* (ethical actions) and *budi baik* (noble servitude) or *bakti* (acts of devotion) as the corresponding layers circumscribing it.

The Malay *akal budi* is the middle way, between the emotion and the mind, affective and cognitive, which strikes a chord with the Buddhist’s middle path and has some commonalities with the doctrine of the mean and the Aristotelian Nicomachean ethics. What is the middle path is defined *akal budi*-ly, i.e., it is the individual himself that knows the moral location of the middle course for him, as defined relatively of ‘how much is too much’ to a person compared to another.

Interestingly, fear is a part of *budi*, because it is a subset of emotion. Fear is not images, ideas or judgment. That fear is a kind of sensation, feeling, is self-evident because we always talk about being ‘afraid or feeling fearful’ and it is impossible for us to imagine something fearful that cannot be felt. Now the feeling of fear is totally different from ideas, image or judgment. Feeling hungry is the consciousness of being hungry and cannot be confused with ideas about food or the judgment (*akal*) that our bodies are lacking calories. ‘Fear’ is an awareness

which is neither cognitive nor part of the intellect. It is not physiological too, that is, it is not part of our physique. It is a kind of feeling that is shared as part of the functional *akal budi*. It is one thing to ‘know’ (*akal*) the amount of calories that we are lacking and it is another thing to fear of the implications of malnutrition. Since ‘fear’ is an element of the *budi* aspect of the traditional Malay existence, and not so much of his cognitive and physical aspect, fear is no less real. ‘Knowing’ is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of servitude (*bhakti*). If we are fearful of doing something, we won’t have the desire (also part of *budi*) to do it for it although we know about it because ‘for a thing unknown there is no desire’.

The *akal budi* is a manifestation of the macrocosm of The Good. The spirit is the kernel of the macrocosm, circumscribed by the subtle and the material world.

Knowing something is good by the *akal* is necessary but not sufficient condition to do good. It has to be enhanced by the *budi* having no fear of doing good. Doing good to people implies; ‘*Sakik dek awak sakik dek orang; sanang dek awak sanang dek orang; nan elok dek awak katuju dek orang*’ (Hamka 1977), i.e., we wishes for others what we wishes for ourselves.

An *akal budi* which has no fear is reprehensible because it is not aligned with the Buddhists’ doctrine of the middle path. The belief in the middle path in ethics and morals is shared by the Abrahamaic faith and Buddhism as well. It is praiseworthy not to have fear of doing good yet it is blameworthy to have excessive courage to do good. The Malay proverb ‘*buat baik berpada-pada, buat jahat jangan sekali*’ entails the need of doing many kinds of good, thus the ‘*berpada-pada*’. It is *berakal-budi* (wise) to have a limit, a degree, in performing *the same kind* of good act since there is no end in kinds of goodness. Still, there is no middle path in the *intention* of doing all kinds of good, *berakalbudi*. A *budi* of lesser good is still a good act; an act of lesser evil remains an evil act.

It is with *akal budi* that the Malay person can perform or conduct *bakti* (Sanskrit *bakhti*) as in the word *berbakti* (devotional acts of doing good). *Berbakti* must be in the middle path of goodness as in the traditional Malay proverb: *buat baik berpada-pada buat jahat jangan sekali* (do good moderately but never do evil). Interestingly *bhakti* is a movement in Hinduism where by performing goodness, one does not have to be a Brahmin to experience Divine Unity. The Malay axiology of *berbakti* is a remnant of *bhakti*, in the sense that it is a devotional

act. Evidently there is a tinge of Hindu noble values underlining *akal budi*.

Repetition of *bhakti*, *berbakti* or *berbudi*, will result in the personification of *dharmā*, an actualization of a phenomenon of the agent's experience, in the material, subtle and spiritual realm, contra the Cartesian dualism, culminating in the status of the righteous *Buddha-dhatu* (Buddha nature). It is not strange that since the time of Srivijaya kingdom, it is the practice of the royal court to bestow *dhatu*-ship (lordship) to the King's men.

In classical Buddhism, *dharmā* is entwined with *citta* (heart/mind) which shares some commonalities with the Malay word *cita rasa*, intelligible/sensible pair, which is one of the major sources of values in Malay axiology. *Dharma* in the classical Hindu sense is more akin to reality ('what is it' is 'what it is', reality as it really is), *Atman*. This difference in meaning points to the affinity of Malays' religious belief to Buddhism and Hinduism.

Theravada school teaches there is no universal God, no Brahman. The Buddhism that influences the Malay *akal budi* is Mahayana, which produces transition of *Bodddhisatvas* from *Deva raja* (The Deity-King), with the middle path (*akal budi*) rejecting extremes. There is no ultimate reality, neither *Atman* nor *Brahman* but *Bodddhisatva* - the Deity-King as the embodiment of it.

Whereas Hinduism accepts ultimate reality in *Atman* and *Brahman* (ethos of *Menungali kuwala gusti*) with Buddhism denying any of those, the Malay believes The Good is an aspect of The Divine. By and large they believe likewise that the beatific experience of The Good results from holistically intending, feeling, thinking and doing good - all within the sphere of *Akal Budi*, ultimately originating from The Divine.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Malay *Akal Budi* is a regulative principle in the Malay fiber of being; it is an overarching fundamental principle in the Malay persons' matrix of values which guides their propensities in making decisions and choosing behaviors. Interestingly there are tinges of Hindus and Buddhists' cosmological doctrines in it, apart from those of Islam, which shows the continuing influence of these belief systems in the Malay world and civilization. Theoretically speaking then, the Malay *Akal Budi* is infused with some Buddhist, Hindus and

Islamic values. At the very least, it shows the relatedness of a creative overriding principle to ‘the other’ in a constructive way.

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