

Unity and Social Cohesion in Malay Akal Budi

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Abstract: Malay wisdom, by and large, is circumscribed in the traditional aphorisms. While being a Malay certainly hinges on a necessary spatio-temporal existence, there should be some commonalities in being a Malay that satisfy the sufficient requirements of more than being human: the Malay Akal Budi or conscientiousness, for instance. In this paper, the author examines some aphorisms, which points to the holistic unity, harmony and social cohesion underlying their conscientiousness and he argues for their importance in shaping a more humanistic philosophy in tandem with the Malay traditional belief and wisdom.

Keywords: Malay, aphorisms, unity, wisdom

INTRODUCTION

According to the traditional Malays, man is at the center of the Universe, the vicegerent of The Divine. He is but the guardian of nature because man is a creation of The Divine whose purpose of existence in this world is to become an ‘integrated, complete man’. According to the traditional proverbs reflecting the Malay Akal Budi, the Malay virtuos is one who embraces the view that:

Dalam bidal terkandung akal, dalam ibarat terkandung nasihat, dalam pepatah terkandung amanah

(The intellect is in the proverb, the advice is in the parable, and the trust is in the aphorism)

Bila mendengar orang berbidal, pergunakan hati panjangkan akal.

(When listening to the proverb, listen with your heart, widen your horizon)

The following exposition is about the local traditional wisdom (*kearifan lokal*) of the Malay World (Rashid Manggis & Radjo Penghoeloe 1971). Akal Budi is the *hati kecil*, the kernel of the heart,

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the seat of intention (*niat*). The Malay Akal Budi is the middle way, between the emotion and the mind, affective and cognitive, and has some commonalities with the doctrine of the mean or the middle path, yet exists within the holistic concept of Divine Unity, which permeates the various levels of reality- the material, subtle and spiritual realm.

UNITY

The values of unity and transcendence are evident in the Malays' outlook of nature. Nature and its phenomena is nothing but the manifestation of God's initial creative act that is verbal. But God creative act is also continuous. It is not the Cartesian world view where God stops to intervene after the initial act of creation. God's continuous act of creation, however, does not mean that there is no 'glimpse of permanence' in nature. The terrestrial environment has not changed in its general features. The moon still sets and rises the same way as it did since time immemorial. The men of today are basically physiologically the same as the men of old. The natural form still reproduces itself with the same pattern. The repetition of the qualitative 'generation and corruption' of nature brought forth the appearance of unity, eternity and harmony:

Sekali air bergedang, sekali tebing beranjak,
(Everytime the water rises, everytime the bank budes)

Sekali air bah, sekali pantai berubah
(Everytime the water flooded, everytime the beach changes)

Hujan panas mainan hari, susah senang mainan hidup
(Rain and shine are a game of a day, difficult and easy is a game of life)

When men study and contemplate the seemingly permanent features of nature, man can explain and predict. There are universal law of nature for man to understand for societal unity and well-being:

Kalau takut dilanda ombak, jangan berumah ditepi pantai
(If you're afraid of the waves, don't build your house at the beach)

Pusaka bergilir, zaman beredar
(Leadership takes turns, time passes)

The laws of nature which in reality are "the laws of The Divine" have different "degrees of fundamentality and universality"; and to the traditional Malays warrant examination is possible because of the appearance of harmony and cosmological unity.

The affinity between nature, the created, and The Divine who is the Creator, points also to the element of sacredness of nature (Endah Sandy & Herawati Harun 1996). Accordingly to the Malays, the study of nature through contemplation and action ought to be done within the parameters of sacred values.

According to the Malays too, sight and hearing are two of the most important sense perceptions for gathering data for contemplative inquiry in so far as observation is concerned. Both are integrated “in the heart, which is the seat of intelligence” rather than the mind:

Ilmu di dada, Berhambakan tangan, Bersaksikan mata, Berhakimkan hati.

(Knowledge is in the breast, Servitude is with the hand, Witnessing is with the eye, and Judging is with the heart)

Data are procured both by means of the ears and the eyes. Evidence that is seen has more empirical importance than those that are heard. Yet from another perspective, hearing surpasses seeing because even though we cannot see The Divine, by way of our ears we can hear His words.

In light of the above examples, the Malays’ method of arriving at a theory certainly involves intense analysis and synthesis, reflecting to the ‘rigor’ of a serious inquiry, before integrating the particulars (the theories discovered) into the Universal, all divided knowledge into the unitive knowledge, which contains in principle the science of all things:

Membilang dari Esa, mengaji dari Alif.

(Counting begins from Unity, Reading begins from A)

It is interesting to note that whenever a theory discovers an ‘irregularity’ of nature, it points not so much to its falsity but more so to the truth of Divine Wisdom, i.e. ‘relational Unity’ in such a way that imperfection and perfection are a unified whole.

Tiada mawar yang tidak berduri,

(There is no rose which does not have thorns)

Tiada gading yang tidak retak,

(There is no ivory which does not have inclusions)

Tiada laut yang tiada berombak,

(There is no sea which does not have waves)

Tiada buluh yang tiada berbuku.

(There is no bamboo which does not have buds)

HARMONY

The traditional Malay believes that there is unity and harmony in the structure of the universe and its constituents, human society included. What is meant by 'harmony' is that there is uniformity, in every genus and species of nature. Thus:

Di dalam hutan banyak teladan, di dalam laut banyaklah contoh,
(In the forest many parables, in the sea many examples)
Yang musim berbatas-batas, yang cuaca berhingga-hingga,
(The seasons finitely interlapse, the weather finitely changes)
Yang rupanya boleh dilihat, yang perisanya boleh dirasa,
(The form could be seen, the flavor could be taste)

It is interesting to note that some aspects of the Malays' view concerning the harmonious regularity of genera and species is shared by others, particularly the followers of Pythagoras. However we claim that the traditional Malay certainly was not a Pythagorean. It is true that Pythagoras made statements similar to the one below such as the statement by Nicomachus of Gerasa (1953) who wrote that:

All that has by nature and with systematic method been arranged in the Universe seems both in part and as a whole to have been determined and ordered in accordance with number, by the forethought and mind of Him that created all things; for the pattern was fixed, like a preliminary sketch, by the domination of number pre-existing in the mind of the world creating God, number conceptual only and immaterial in every way, so that with reference to it, as to an artistic plan, should be created all these things, times, motions, the heavens, the stars, all sorts of revolutions.

The belief that the society has a unified structure is also imbedded in the Malays' concept of man. Man is created with the potential ability to study and understand nature because he is a microcosm. An important aspect concerning his potential capability is his capacity to comprehend similarities and differences so much so that he believes everything around him is countable. Man is endowed with that innate skill ever since he is born and those who develop the skill will know how to be just. For example:

Pantang menimbang berat sebelah, pantang mengukur tak sama panjang, pantang menyukat tak sama penuh

(Never ever weight unjustly, Never ever measure unequally, Never ever cheat with the measuring cup)

Membagi sama banyak, mengurang sama luak

(Divide equally, Reduce equally)

Berladang menghabis musim, berniaga menghabis masa

(Do the farm to spend the season, Do the business to spend the time)

Ilmu ditimba sepanjang masa

(Seek knowledge all the time)

The traditional Malay claims that the numerical properties of all sensible objects follow a certain unified pattern. A number is always present in every sensible object. They invariably bear numerical aspects. Each species has a distinct 'number-formation'. In other words, the presence of numbers is in an orderly fashion; numbers do not simply present. Thus:

Seukur peluh dengan upahnya, sebanding kenyang dengan laparnya.

(The wage equals the sweat, the food equals the hunger)

Yang sejengkal takkan jadi sehasta, yang sehasta takkan jadi sedepa,

Yang secupak takkan jadi segantang.

(The finger span will never equal the elbow span, the elbow span will never equal the fathom, The cylindrical measuring cup will never equal the sack)

Since numbers are fundamental in the Malays' view of the unified cosmos, society included, they play a significant role in their concept concerning the harmonious structure of man, his society and the universe:

Nan Maha Kuasa menjadikan segalo dua,

(God the omnipotence creates everything in pairs)

partama ateh bawah, kedua langik jo bumi,

(the first above and below, the second heavens and the earth)

ketiga bulan jo matahari, keempat lautan daratan,

(the third the moon and the sun, the fourth the sea and the land)

kalimo siang dan malam, ka anam laki-laki jo padusi,

(the fifth day and night, the sixth man and women)

ketujuh tinggi dan rendah, ke lapan hino je mulio,

(the seventh tall and short, the eighth disgrace and dignity)

kesembilan kayo dan miskin, kesepuluh sorga dan norako.

(the ninth rich and poor, the tenth heaven and hell)

Therefore those who want to study the structure of the universe should first familiarize themselves with knowledge:

Apabila hendak menjadi orang, ilmu di dada janganlah kurang.

(If you want to be somebody, Knowledge in the breast should not be fragmentary)

Thus far we have examined the Malays' belief in the unified structure of the universe. The laws of nature are simple but nature is not. It is just not the properties of this world which define this construction; it is also this construction that defines the properties of the world (Madjo Indo 1990). A measuring rod is 'accurate' and a clock is 'precise' only if the measurements of these instruments satisfy the unified axioms of 'social mechanics', for a lack of better word.

History is not so much about story and events. The underlying assumptions are truths (such as two points determine a line or things equal to the same things are equal to one another) and societal knowledge is constructed based upon these truths, the aforementioned *adat nan sebenor adat* (the real natural law):

nan tak lapuik dek hujan,

(Will never ever become moldy under the rain)

nan tak lekang dek panas,

(Will never ever chapped under the sun)

jika di asak indak layue,

(Will not wilt if pressed)

jika dibubuik indak mati.

(Will not die if cobbled)

In other words, if one proceeds systematically, one can arrive at truth. It is instructive and interesting too, to quote Aquinas (1952) who states:

Plato said that unity must come before multitude; and Aristotle said that "whatever is greatest in being and greatest in truth, is the cause of every being and of every truth," just as "whatever is the greatest in heat is the cause of all heat".

In similar vein, their "societal principles" are chain of harmonious self-evident truths because it is "the greater truth" that is the cause of the "great truth":

Nan di sabuik bana adalah: Pertama jujur, Kadua luruiuh, Katigo meletakkan sesuatu di tampeknya.

(What is said of truth is that: first is honesty, second is straightforwardness, third is to put a thing at its natural place)

CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussions show that the Malays firmly believe in the unified structure of the universe, society included. The Akal Budi Melayu is a regulative principle in the Malay cosmology. It points to the position of man as at the circumference of the *creatio-matrix* of which the Logos plays an integral part (Tymieniecka 2008). The fundamental nature of order pervading the cosmos such as unity, harmony and uniformity is pervasive. The external world which is the world of multiplicity appears in all variety of forms. Yet through wisdom, the eye of the heart so to speak, one could find the common factors underlying the multiplicity into a unified whole.

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