

Traditional Malay Literature and the Generation of Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the functions of traditional Malay literature as a platform for generating knowledge to contribute towards human civilisation and fulfil his/her responsibility as Allah's representative on earth. The traditional Malay literature is rich in knowledge of various types. Consistent with the goal to produce a perfect human, knowledge is important to produce individuals who successfully achieve real perfection either spiritually or physically. Data studied involves a multiple genre of traditional Malay literature produced or copied from the 15th to 19th century including *Sejarah Melayu (Sulalatus Salatin)*, *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, *Syair Perang Siak*, *Syair Perang Mengkasar*, *Hukum Kanun Melaka*, *Taj al-Salatin*, *Bustan al-Salatin*, *Sirat al-Mustaqim*, *Sabil al-Muhtadin*, *Syair Perahu*, *Syair Dagang*, *Surat al-Anbiya*, *Hikayat Abu Syahmah* and *Hikayat Ibrahim ibn Adham*. In establishing the functions of traditional Malay literature as a platform for generating knowledge, this study applies Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas's (2001) framework on *adab*. The study demonstrates that traditional Malay literature has played an important role of generating knowledge towards producing a noble, well-balanced individual, spiritually and physically, in this world and the hereafter. Traditional Malay literature is apparently conceived by its readership as providing enlightening principles in seeking a guided relationship both with their Creator (*hablumminaLLah*) and fellow human beings (*hablumminannas*) as well as explicating the divine purposes of every living human being in this world to become His vicegerent and servant. Knowledge contained in this traditional literary text could

produce a perfect human being that has the ability to fulfil his obligations as Allah's representative on earth and His righteous slaves.

Keywords: traditional Malay literature, knowledge generation, knowledge, science, perfect human, *hablumminaLLah*, *hablumminannas*, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is one of the key concepts underpinning the Islamic civilisation and thus gives Islam a special appearance and place (Rosenthal, 1970/1993, p. xii). No other religion or institution gives as much importance to knowledge as the religion of Islam (al-Attas, 1995, pp. 14-18). The close relationship between knowledge and Islam has been clearly stated in the Quran and Sunnah.

This can be seen when the root word *'ilm* ('knowledge' in Arabic) has been mentioned about 750 times in the Quran. This number makes up about one per cent of the whole vocabulary of the Quran (Rosenthal, 1970/1993, pp. 18-19). In fact, the Quran also includes nearly 800 sentences referring to knowledge (al-Attas, 1977, p. 57). Furthermore, the emphasis on reading as the most important asset in the pursuit of knowledge and recognition of God as the ultimate source of human knowledge can be seen since the first revelation to Prophet Muhammad:

Read! (O Muhammad) in the name of your Lord, Who has created (all that exists); He has created man from a clot (of congealed blood); Read! And your Lord is the Most Gracious; Who has taught man by means of the pen [and the art of writing]; He has taught man what he did not know (Quran 96: 1-5, Tafsir pimpinan ar-Rahman kepada pengertian al-Quran).

The Prophet also never tired of urging Muslims to seek knowledge (al-Attas, 2001, p. 49). This is emphasised by Allah through the Prophet's hadiths that oblige Muslims to seek knowledge. *Seeking knowledge* is an obligation of *every Muslim* man and woman. The Prophet said in an authentic narration (hadeeth): "*Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim*", "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave" and "Go in quest of *knowledge even unto China*" (al-Attas, 2001, pp. 48-50).

Aims to restore mankind to its original state (*fitrah*) and thus producing a perfect human being (*insan al-kamil*), knowledge discloses depth of meaning and uses, covering all aspects of Muslim life intellectually, religiously, and politically. Knowledge is a tool to guide people to the right path and to boost his capacity as the caliph and his duties as a slave for fostering this world.

The importance of knowledge has also been stressed in traditional Malay literature. Knowledge acquisition has become the core and major activity of the Malay writers to cater to the needs of its audience. This is important because knowledge and thought reflects the strength of pride, modesty and character of a nation and its intellect (al-Attas, 1977). The injection of knowledge in literary works gives audiences the opportunity to discover and develop them in various aspects of life in realising the perfect human nature. The works produced not only focused on the aesthetic aspects, but also emphasizes the didactic aspect. Therefore, as a beautiful and worthwhile

work, literature becomes an effective tool to establish a personal higher level journey to become humans who are righteous and consequently reach the stage of a perfect human being (Ungku Maimunah, 2007, pp. 16-17).

THE CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SYED MUHAMMAD NAQUIB AL-ATTAS

According to Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, knowledge (*'ilm*) is both the arrival of meaning in the soul as well as the soul's arrival at meaning (Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, 1995, p. 14). It's a process which allows a man to know the unknown. Knowledge requires confidence. This confidence is the belief that is strong, fixed and immutable. This belief is not a blind belief but confidence in the truth. It eradicates ignorance, doubt, suspicion, or confusion (Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, 2001, p. 50). True knowledge is then knowledge that recognises the limit of truth in its every object (al-Attas, 1995, p. 14).

The main goal of knowledge in Islam is to restore mankind to his original state (*fitrah*) and subsequently gives birth to a perfect man (*insan al-kamil*). In the process of realising this *insan al-kamil*, the right science, good behaviour (civilised) and fair consideration would be required. Thus, knowledge is strongly associated with the element of life, religions, cultures and civilisations.

Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas classifies knowledge into two categories known as *fardu ain* and *fardu kifayah*. Both of these categories are fair and have a

perfect union (al-Attas, 1977, p. 59). They need and complement each other. A close linkage between both knowledge is shown in Figure 1.

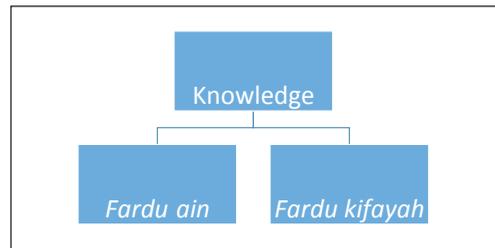


Figure 1. Categories of knowledge

The *fardu ain* knowledge, also known as the science of illumination (*ma'rifah*), is given directly by God as a gift to His servants. In the context of the Prophet Muhammad, this kind of knowledge is given directly by God in the form of revelation (Quran) and Sunnah as understood and practised. This *ma'rifah* of the Prophet is considered as the supreme science and serve as a reference and guide for all the events concerning a Muslim (Wan Mohd Nor, 2005, p. 94). The knowledge acquired by man in the form of revelation and the Sunnah are careful observation by the heart; inspired, enlightened, unveiling and *musyahadah* as well as the power of dialectic movement (al-Attas, 1977, pp. 60-68; 2001, pp. 57 & 93). Only people who worship with courtesy (sincerely for the sake of His good pleasure) and adopt the sanctity of life will be blessed by Allah SWT who knows the needs of humans and the completeness of the human soul (al-Attas, 1977, p. 60). The role of science reveals the secrets of essence and existence, describing the relationship

with God and explains the actual meaning and purpose of human life in the universe. Therefore, as a guide and counsellor to the right path, studying the *fardu ain* knowledge is compulsory and duty of every Muslim and a base prior to the acquisition of knowledge.

Knowledge can also be reached by its own through an observation, research and study. Also known as *fardu kifayah* knowledge, it's related to physics and objects associated with it, which can be achieved through the use of intellectual and physical resources. In this respect, this kind of knowledge is closely related to earthly life and become a tool of human life, interacts and adapt to the environment (al-Attas, 1977, pp. 59 & 62; 2005, p. 95). In contrast with the *fardu ain* knowledge which is compulsory for every individual Muslim, the *fardu kifayah* knowledge is only mandatory for some Muslims depending on his or her needs and requirements of the times. However, this knowledge must be guided by the *fardu ain* knowledge so that the *fardu kifayah* knowledge do not confuse humans and trap them in an atmosphere that is full of confusion in finding the meaning of life (al-Attas, 2001, p. 60; 2005, p. 95).

KNOWLEDGE OF *FARDU AIN* IN THE TRADITIONAL MALAY LITERATURE

The spread of Islam to the Malay world has changed the philosophy of life in society from animist-Hindu-Buddhist centric to one which is Islamic based (al-Attas, 1990, p. 48). It is based on self-awareness among the community about the

realities of human existence in this world as *Abdullah* (servant of God) and *Khalifatullah* (representative or vicegerent of Allah on earth). Thus, they begin to realise their duties and responsibilities in relationships among creatures and devote themselves to the Divine and to achieve the standard of a perfect human being (*insan kamil* or *insan adabi*) (Braginsky, 1993, 1998).

This change or transformation can be seen in the 15th century literature which became the highlight of the spread of Islam. Literature is not only a means of propaganda to spread Islam but also a platform for the efficient functioning of civilised human beings and elevate human nature to a higher level (al-Attas, 2001; Ungku Maimunah, 2007). The knowledge that is the basis of formation of the *insan adabi* is an important element contained in literary works.

In line with its emergence in the early Islamic period, literary works produced during this period are laden with knowledge on Islam. Such content is categorised as the *fardu ain* knowledge by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas. With the aim to get closer to the Creator, the display of Islamic religious knowledge is delivered either directly or indirectly. The works of traditional Malay literature describing directly on knowledge about Islam comprises the work of *sastera kitab* (religious literary). This genre discusses the basic teachings of Islam such as the science of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology and Sufism. Meanwhile, indirect exposure to Islamic teachings has been in the form of a narrative through historiography, *hikayat* and the literature

of law and state administration as well as the stories of the prophets and leaders of Islam. The scope of the content does not deviate from the range of the science of jurisprudence, theology and Sufism.

Fiqh

Fiqh or the science of jurisprudence is a field of knowledge in Islamic law that specifically debates the question of laws governing the various aspects of human life, whether personal lives, society and man's relationship with his Creator. *Fiqh* deals with the observance of rituals, morals and social legislation in Islam. This field of knowledge interprets the questions of worship (*ibadah*) which is compulsory for Muslims and the right and perfect method of its implementation. In addition, *fiqh* also discusses the question of *munakahat* (marriages), *muamalat* (matters related to trade and civil) and *jinayat* (criminal liability) (Harun et al., 2006, pp. 443-446).

The traditional Malay literature also discusses directly the science of jurisprudence, especially in the genre of *sastera kitab*. *Sirat al-Mustaqim* by Nuruddin al-Raniri is among the earliest writings that discuss the science of jurisprudence in the Malay world. This book describes the laws of the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence. Among the issues discussed in the *Sirat al-Mustaqim* is discussion on the purification, prayer, charity, fasting, pilgrimage, hunting and haram-halal food law (Tjokrowinoto, 1964, pp. 130-144; Harun et al., 2006, pp. 443-445).

Views about the *fiqh* were infused in legal literature genre, for example, the *Hukum Kanun Melaka* (Laws of Melaka). Most of the 44 clauses of the law in this work comprises Islamic law. Clauses 25 to 29 and clauses 34 to 40 *Hukum Kanun Melaka* elaborate on the question of Islamic jurisprudence such as *munakahat*, *muamalat* and *jinayat* (Liaw, 1976, p. 9; Harun et al., 2006, pp. 527-528):

- Fasal 25: Menyatakan Hukum Orang Berwali dan Akad Nikah
- Fasal 26: Hukum Saksi Nikah
- Fasal 27: Hukum Khiyar
- Fasal 28: Hukum Talak
- Fasal 29: Hukum Orang Berniaga
- Fasal 34: Hukum Amanat
- Fasal 35: Hukum Ikrar
- Fasal 36: Hukum Murtad
- Fasal 37: Hukum Saksi
- Fasal 38: Hukum Menuntut dan yang Dituntut
- Fasal 39: Hukum Bunuh-membunuh
- Fasal 40: Hukum Zina

In addition, the stories of the prophets and leaders of Islam genre also indirectly spoke of *fiqh*. This can be seen for example in the text *Hikayat Abu Syamah*. The story is trying to show firmness and justice of a ruler Caliph Umar in implementing Islamic law, even against his own flesh and blood. As a government that is fair, Umar punished his biological child who drank alcohol and

committed adultery, offences based on the Sharia law.

Tauhid

Tauhid discusses the concept of God in Islam that touches on belief, faith and trust that God is one. In addition to questions of substance pertaining to God, the science of monotheism also describes the attributes of God and must be known by every Muslim (Harun et al., 2006, p. 455). Also known as theology, the science of monotheism attempts to disassemble the concept of God and faith, Qadak and Qadr, the afterlife, heaven and hell and man's relationship with his Creator.

The question of the science of monotheism also appears in the works of traditional Malay literature either directly or indirectly. In the genre of historiography, for example, questions of *tauhid* is said to have been discussed in court, particularly among the Malay rulers who are interested in Islamic thought. For example, *Sulalatus Salatin* (Malay Annals) reported on Sultan Mansur Shah who was particularly interested in the question of faith. He who has concerns regarding the question of whether the contents of Heaven and Hell will remain forever in heaven or hell or otherwise asks that problem to be answered by Pasai *ulama* named Makhdum Mua (Abdul Samad, 1997, pp. 158-160). So is the case with Sultan Mahmud Shah, who also has questions related to the science of monotheism. He wanted to know why those who say that God has made and provide sustenance in eternity, is considered by Islamic law as an infidel.

The Sultan has submitted the issue to Pasai and was answered by an *ulama* named Tun Hasan (Abdul Samad, 1997, pp. 247-249).

In addition, the question of faith is also expressed in the works of the state administration. This can be seen in works such as *Taj al-Salatin and Bustan al-Salatin*. For example, part of the contents of the *Taj al-Salatin* discusses the question of knowing oneself and God, and the purpose behind the creation of *death* and life. *Bustan al-Salatin* also discussed the science of monotheism in respect of the creation of the Heavens and the Earth, the Preserved Tablet (*Loh Mahfuz*), the Pen (*Kalam*), the Throne (*'Arasy*), the Footstool (*Kursi*) and the history of the Prophets (Harun et al., 2006, pp. 551-555; Jelani, 2009, pp. 138-139).

The discussion on the prophet is also contained in the works of traditional Malay literature. This can be seen in the text of *Qisas al-Anbiya*, which describes the struggle of the prophets to spread the word of Allah SWT. The struggle to spread the message of monotheism since the time of Adam till Prophet Muhammad is not only worthy of emulation but it should be planted in the hearts as part of the pillars of Muslim faith.

Sufism (Tasawuf)

Tasawuf or Sufism is a branch of Islamic knowledge which emphasises on the spiritual development of the Muslim. Sufism centres on believe in God and getting closer to Him. This field of knowledge emphasises the feelings of love for God and the convergence of worshipping Him

with the goal of achieving spiritual dignity through stages called tareqat, ma'rifat and haqiqat (Harun et al., 2006, pp. 467-468).

Questions related to the science of Sufism are also included in the work of traditional Malay literature. This can be seen in the *Hikayat Sultan Ibrahim ibn Adham* which is based on the story of one of the most famous and prominent early ascetic Sufi saints. This *Hikayat* emphasises the importance of human spirituality and piety to Allah SWT. Wealth and worldly pleasures are known to distract people's attention from Allah SWT but, the characters of Sultan Ibrahim ibn Adham and his son are exemplary in willing to come down from the throne solely to serve Allah SWT (Mohd Yusof 1989, pp. 1-26).

Apart from prose, works of poetry in traditional Malay literature also highlights the questions of Sufism. Various works of syair were produced to spread the teachings of Sufism that developed in the Malay world since the 16th century. These include poems from Hamzah Fansuri, an influential *ulama* in Aceh. For example, his poem *Syair Perahu* describes the man as a symbol of a boat sailing on the sea of life towards the final goal, namely the afterlife. Similarly, the poem *Syair Dagang* likens human life in the world as a stranger who wants to return to his country of origin in the afterlife (Harun et al., 2006, pp. 492-493).

KNOWLEDGE OF *FARDU KIFAYAH* IN THE TRADITIONAL MALAY LITERATURE

Literary creation is the result of the use of language as a means of delivery, whether

in writing or orally, with artistic value and the aim of providing guidance and teaching (Ismail, 1974; Teeuw, 1984; Siti Hawa, 2002 & Harun et al., 2006). In terms of *adab*, the guidelines and teaching are knowledge that could produce the perfect human being spiritually and physically. The perfect human being is also able to live his or her life in this world and the hereafter perfectly. Hence, knowledge acquired by a perfect human being is not only limited to *ukhrawi* (hereafter) but also worldly knowledge that can be used as a means of life in this world. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas categorises this type of knowledge as *fardu kifayah*.

In achieving a balance between life here and hereafter, the works of traditional Malay literature not only discusses about how to get closer to the Creator but also on matters of human relations in this world. Aspects such as administration, social and community as well as history will be discussed in traditional Malay literary genres in the following section. .

Administration

Man is born in this world with the responsibility of being the vicegerent of Allah. As Allah's representative on earth, man has been given a mandate and duty to maintain, manage and govern from this nature at its best (Quran 33: 72, *Tafsir pimpinan ar-Rahman kepada pengertian al-Quran*). This responsibility distinguishes human beings from animals and other beings and reflects his advantages and dignity. Thus every human is responsible to control the

environmental information and unlock the secrets of the universe so that he can or she can prosper in the universe as well as get closer to God.

Traditional Malay literature contains knowledge that motivates people to carry out their duties as Allah's representative to govern the universe. This can be seen especially in the works of the state administration (*sastera ketatanegaraan*). This "Mirror for Princes" serves as a guide to the king to govern a nation or government. For example, *Taj al-Salatin*, features various guides to be a government that is just. For example, in Chapter 5 (The Greatness of the King), Chapter 6 (How to Implement Justice), Chapter 7 (The Characters of the Just Kings), Chapter 8 (The Just Non-Muslim Kings), Chapter 9 (The Unjust Kings), Chapter 10 (The Task of the Adviser of the King) and Chapter 13 (The Features of the Court Officials). Guidance to perform the duties as the government is also contained in the *Bustan al-Salatin* as in Book 3 (The Story of Just Kings and Wise Minister), Book 4 (The Story of the Pious Kings and Pious Saints of God) and Book 5 (The Story of the Oppressive Kings and Unjust Viziers Who Committed Treason Against Their Kings) (Harun et al., 2006, pp. 551-556; Jelani, 2009, pp. 47-54).

Social/Community

Efforts to become a perfect human being require one to balance his relationship with God and his fellow human beings. Hence, man should ensure that all aspects of his life have rules to maintain harmony and

sustainability. To ensure this harmony and sustainability, every man must know his rights, obligations and responsibilities in maintaining relationships between them and the others as well as the Creator.

The social aspect is also emphasised in the works of traditional Malay literature. As a knowledge that can be used as a guide to mankind to live here and hereafter, traditional Malay literature displays social and community issues involving the relationship between husband and wife, parents, government-people and so on.

For example, *Hikayat Darmata'siah* and *Hikayat Ali Bad Shah* tell the story of the wife who obeys her husband and performs good deeds in her life. Her steadfastness and fidelity to husband as well as devotion to Allah SWT despite living in misery were finally rewarded when she received protection from Allah SWT (Mohd Yusof, 1989, pp. 74-82; Shaiful Bahri, 2006, pp. 1-61).

In addition, social and community issues are also featured in literary works such as *Taj al-Salatin*. For example, Chapter 20 deals with the relationship between the Muslims and their king while Chapter 21 unravels the relationship between the people who didn't trust their king. Chapter 14 discusses ways to educate children as guidance for the parents (Harun et al., 2006, pp. 551-553).

History

History is important as a source of reference for the present and the next generation. In the corpus of traditional Malay literature,

there is a genre called literary history or historiography. The main function of historiography is to explain the history of a city-state by displaying the origin of the king and his family and all events related to the kingdom. The text aims to provide lessons and benefit the people who lived then, not only in terms of information about ancient society with the various values and rules but also on a variety of experiences that have undergone (Harun et al., 2006, pp. 325-326).

History in the works of traditional Malay literature became good model and example to the audience. If there are elements of imperfection, it acts as an example to be avoided, while a good example is to be emulated for self-improvement. In other words, literature serves to enhance the quality of perfection which is divine in nature, thus, producing a perfect human being (Shafie, 1996, pp. 121–122).

Sulalatus Salatin (Sejarah Melayu) for example, chronicles the development of the Malacca sultanate starting from the era of its establishment and development until the time of its fall. This work emphasises that the justice and wisdom of a ruler plays an important role in ensuring the continuity of the greatness of the kingdom. The loss of these elements trigger the deterioration of the government. Feelings of envy, treason, bribery, provocations and insubordination were the factors that destroyed the life of the government (Abdul Samad, 1997, pp. 1-330).

Meanwhile, *Hikayat Raja Pasai* depicts the development and the decline of the Pasai kingdom. This work highlights that the

tyranny of a ruler become the turning point of the fall of Pasai government. Pasai was destroyed because of the cruelty of its king, Sultan Ahmad, not only to his citizens but also to his own sons (Jones, 1999).

The question of history is not only shown through the work of prose but also poetry. However, narratives in the form of a historical writing poetry are highly selective and focused on some important events only. This can be seen in works such as *Syair Perang Siak* and *Syair Perang Mengkasar*. *Syair Perang Siak* as an example tells the story of Siak war which occurs between the months of April to June 1761. While *Syair Perang Mengkasar* is a story of a war fought with the Dutch as witnessed by the author, Encik Amin. The exposure of patriotism and the spirit against the invaders appear in both of these works as an example to the audience.

CONCLUSION

Knowledge is a basic element in the hierarchy of the insan adabi. The traditional Malay literature is rich in various forms of knowledge. Consistent with the goal to produce good human manners, this knowledge is needed to create beings who achieve ultimate perfection spiritually and physically. Literary work containing introductory sciences are based on Al-Quran and Sunnah and aimed at uncovering the secrets of Being and Existence. They describe the relationship with God and explain the meaning and purpose of human life in the world. Literary works which contain science based knowledge are closely

associated with earthly life and become a tool for human to live, interact and adapt to the environment.

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