

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ADAT PERPATIH

by
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this introduction is to describe the basic philosophy of the socio-cultural organisation of the Negeri Sembilan Malays. The Negeri Sembilan Malays are characterised by a matrilineal custom and descent group organisation which they refer to as **Adat Perpatih**. The Adat Perpatih is found almost exclusively in Negeri Sembilan although there are also groups of people practising Adat Perpatih in Nanning, Melaka, and in enclaves in Lukut, Johor and in Beranang, Selangor. Throughout the other states of Peninsular Malaysia, and among groups of people in the District of Port Dickson, the coastal district of Negeri Sembilan itself, the **Adat Temenggong** is practised. The Adat Temenggong refers to a bilateral form of social organisation in which, in accordance with Islam, emphasis is placed on the male line.

The Malays of Negeri Sembilan, like the Malays of the other states of Malaysia, are Muslims. Traditionally, in Negeri Sembilan, the two spheres, i.e. matrilineal customs or the Adat Perpatih, and the Islamic religious law, or the Syari'at, have been kept, for the most part, separate and distinct in the lives of the people. The Syari'at was followed in those areas in which it did not contravene custom, principally with regard to the laws of marriage and divorce. In certain traditional institutions, the Adat and religion, representing separate aspects of life, were synthesised. The apparent contradictions between the Adat Perpatih and Islam have been culturally resolved.

Adat Perpatih is a way of life which can be best characterised as communal, fairly egalitarian and democratic. As a conceptual system, Adat Perpatih includes both specific rules that reflect and generate the behaviour of its society such as where to live, who has the right to what property, who is responsible for whose children, etc., and also a natural as well as supernatural world and man's place in it. The conceptual and ideological components tend to reinforce each other and each deals with many inter-relating themes.

2. ADAT CATEGORIES

The Adat was based on the precept: **Baik dipakai dek muafakat; buruk dibuang dek rundingan** (if Adat is good, it will be used or practised by consensus, and if it is bad, it will be discarded, after consultation). As a whole, the system can be categorised into four types:

- 1) **Adat nan sebenar adat** (the real Adat)
- 2) **Adat yang teradat** (that which has

become adat over the conscious decision or decree on the part of ancestral culture, heroes or traditional leaders)

- 3) **Adat yang diadatkan** (that which was made adat in the specific past)
- 4) **Adat istiadat** (tradition or habitual customs)

The whole adat system was based on the above stated categories. Of all the categories, most probably the first - **Adat nan sebenar adat** - is unlikely to change. This is due to the fact that it was based on nature. As to the others, they are dynamic in nature, only the flexibility and elasticity differ, one from the other. Philosophically, the Adat itself ascribes to **change**. This can be readily seen from many of its sayings:

Yang buruk dibarui (the old, to be renewed)

Yang usang diganti (the withered, to be replaced)

This saying indicates that if **Adat** is outdated, it has to change to suit with time, space and environment. However, change, if there is, must go through the Muafakat procedure - **Ibu adat muafakat** (the Mother of Adat is consensus agreement). Thus, Adat Perpatih is not a static system. It can, it has and it will change to suit the contemporary values of its society without deviating from its norms and values.

3. WORKING CONCEPTS OF THE ADAT

Over and above the four **Adat** categories stated above, the practice of the **Adat**, irrespective of whether it was social, economic or political, was based on two basic and fundamental codes of ethics. They are the concepts of **Muafakat** (consensual agreement) which was very democratic in nature, and the concept of **Menyeraya, Bekerjasama** and **Gotong Royong** (reciprocal aids, cooperative and group effort respectively). In the people's everyday lives of Adat practices, both concepts are closely related and intertwined.

Concept Of Muafakat

The **Adat** rules that every decision by its practitioners on any matters had to be taken during a **kerapatan** (gathering of all those involved). In the **kerapatan** members would discuss the problems, means and ways to solve the problems and other related matters. The act of problem-solving during the **kerapatan** is termed as **muafakat** (Agreement, a convention or compromise to end any dispute).

Muafakat always preceded any activities amongst the **Adat** people because it is one of the sacrosanct social ideals of the **Adat**. Its importance was clearly stated in many "perbilangan **adat**" (adat sayings, maxims). Some of them are:

Bulat air kerana pembetung
Bulat manusia kerana muafakat.

Penghulu beraja ke muafakat
Muafakat beraja kepada yang benar.

Ibu hukum muafakat
Ibu adat muafakat.

The terms **muafakat** and **bulat** (rounded) in the above maxim denote that all decisions must be reached through **muafakat** and the settlement of a **muafakat** is not by vote of majority but by consensus which is the same as the concept of **syura** in Islam.

Kerapatan

Traditionally, a **kerapatan**, must be attended by all concerned members irrespective of age or sex. With an absentee, the **kerapatan** cannot be held. As such, it is the duty of heads of the matrikin (**kadim, besar** and **buapak**) to see that everybody is present as the saying goes: **Nan jauh di jemputkan, nan dekat di kampungkan, hilang dicari, cicir dipungut** (fetch those who are far away, invite those who are near, find those who are missing, and pick up those who are lost along the way). In short, the **Adat** rules that all members must participate in a **kerapatan**.

Berkampung And Bertimbang Salah

If there are differences amongst **rumpun, ruang, perut** and **suku** members, that could lead to the breaking up of the entire group's solidarity before any activities, **Adat** specifically states that the differences had to be solved through **berkampung** or **perkampungan** (gathering, sometimes used with similar meaning to **kerapatan**) and **adat bertimbang salah** (asking for judgement).

Berkampung differs slightly from **kerapatan**. In **berkampung** only close members are expected to attend, whereas in **kerapatan** only concerned members. Other than that, **kerapatan** is usually used for meeting with high-ranking **Adat** officials, or to discuss important political issues; whereas **berkampung** usually denotes gatherings of local members to discuss social and maybe economic matters, such as marriage preparations, deciding when to start work on the padi-field, etc.

In this gathering, all differences and problems that existed within the group will be solved. It is in this kind of gathering that members who had grievances are able to voice their feelings in front of everybody and seek judgement. This act is

known as **Adat Bertimbang Salah**. This process is used as a way for the **Adat** to curtail divorce in this society. Before **adat bertimbang salah** takes place, a man who is asking for a divorce has to go through a process of reconciliation known as **Bersuarang** (settlement). The purpose of the **berkampung, bertimbang salah** and **bersuarangan** institution is as the **Adat** says: **Yang kusut diselesaikan, yang keruh di jernekan**, which indicates that the **Adat** intends that members live harmoniously as a co-operating unit.

Concept Of Kerjasama And Gotong-Royong

As is **Muafakat, Menyeraya, kerjasama** and **gotong-royong** are also some of the **Adat's** sacrosanct social ideals. The people, similar to people of other matrilineal society, are farmers, either in padi cultivation or orchards. The **Adat** through its "perbilangan" stresses that land should be worked and work should be done through reciprocal aids, cooperative and/or group efforts. Besides that, the **Adat** also states that all members of the society had to do their share. The **Adat** as a dynamic and a functioning system, specifies different types of jobs to society members depending on their abilities, physical and mental conditions. The **Adat** says,

Jika cerdik teman berunding
jika bodoh disuruh arah
tinggi banir rempat berunding
rimbun daun tempat bernaung,
yang buta penyembus lesung
yang patah menunggu jemuran
yang pekak mencucuk meriam
yang berani buat kepala lawan, etc.

(If he is clever, a source to seek advice,
If he is stupid, to be commanded,
canopied tree-trunks provide shelter
luxuriant leaves provide protection
the blind to guard the rice in the sun
the deaf to ignite the cannon
the brave to head the attack, etc.)

Thus in practice, tasks were allocated according to the individual's capabilities. Everyone had his place and was useful in his own way. Even if he should become disabled, he was not cast aside; there was always a way in which he could contribute and keep his self-respect and the respect of his matrilineal group. As such, even before Europeans came up with the theory of division of labour, the **adat**, that had already existed in the 13th century, had already practised it.

The **Adat** also states that failure to put land to use means "**malu**" (ashamed) and creates difficulties, not only to the individual family but also to the **rumpun, ruang, perut** and **suku**, as expressed by the maxim:

Malu tak dapat diagih
Suku tak dapat dianjak

(Shame that cannot be divided
Suku that cannot be changed).

It may be implied that the **Adat** if practised according to the philosophy laid out by various "**perbilangan**" is materialistic in nature. However, the **Adat** does not stress on individual material achievements but achievement as a group. The competition is not between individuals but between matri-unilocal groups. The **Adat** in its true philosophy, in as far as economy is concerned, has made materialism as an ideology and morality. To the **Adat**, materialistic achievement is the basis for status and living with morals. As such it is necessary that each matri-unilocal group, especially the **rumpun** and **ruang** push their members, some to work on the land and a few to go out (**merantau**) and accumulate as much wealth as possible in order to keep the group's status high. To this effect, the **adat** says: **hilang rupa dek penyakit, hilang darjat dek miskin, hilang bangsa dek tak beremas** (lose your appearance or be sickly due to debts, lose your status due to poverty, lose your identity because you have no gold).

The **Adat's** aphorism, clearly and not through symbols, states that a man will lose everything that he cares for if his economic conditions are not favourable. The use of the term "**beremas**" (having gold) instead of **berduit** (having money) or **berberas** (having rice, since rice is the main staple food) or other commodities clearly shows that **Adat** places a high standard on the end produce of individuals. The economic standing of an individual reflects his matri-unilocal group's economic status.

Knowing that not every member of society is capable of achieving such a standard of material achievement, the **Adat** says: **Kalau besar jangan melanda, kalau cerdek jangan menipu**, that is, if one is of high status, do not step on those who are below you and if one is clever, do not be deceitful but share your blessings, as the **Adat** says: **hati kuman sama dicicah, hati gajah sama dilapah**. At the same time, the **Adat** also insists that members, irrespective of their conditions, either physical or mental, must do their share of work in upgrading their status and thus the status of their matri-unilocal groups. To them, the **Adat** says: **Kalau alim minta doanya, kalau rajin minta kerjanya, kalau kaya minta ringgitnya, kalau cerdik kawan berunding**, (the pious, we want his prayer, the industrious, his labour and skills; the rich, we want his gold, the wise, his counsel) and so forth.

4. ORDER OF LIFE OF THE PEOPLE

Order in the **Adat Perpatih** Society is based on four words:

- a) Kata pusaka (inherited word)
- b) Kata dahulu (ancient word)
- c) Kata muafakat (agreed word)
- d) Kata kemudian (rationale word lit: the word which has been thought of afterwards).

All these words can be categorised into two types:

- i) Cupak asli (cupak: scale to measure the value of rice; asli: the original measure).
- ii) Cupak buatan (the amended measure).

The amended measure contains the fundamentals of the **Adat**:

a) **Adat bersandar alur yang patut** (adat is based on multi and proper considerations. This measure should be able to distinguish good from evil. It does this by the standard:

Timbangan nan betul
menurut teraju nan bagatok,
Diukur dengan bungka nan piawai

(A correct scale following the movement of an arrow head along scale line, measured with varified weights)

In other words, the individual is given the right to investigate whether all logical factors and proper considerations have been given to his case in litigation, and whether he, negatively or positively, has been rewarded justly.

The agreed word, showing a set of values, interpret the nature of the measure. In this, every member of society, from the highest to the lowest in rank, has to perform duties according to his position. The woman should be a woman and not behave like a man; but ultimately, according to the **adat**, it is the people who have the sovereignty "to heal", to keep peace and harmony in society. The maxim says:

Kata Undang melimpahkan
Kata Lembaga menyelesaikan
Kata ulama kata hakikat
Kata manti kata menyubung
Kata hulubalang kata mendarah
Kata perempuan kata merendah
Kata orang ramai kata bulat.

(The **Undang's** word is generous,
The word of the chief of clan resolves,
The word of the spiritual teacher is the truth,
The word of the clerk of the court connects (investigates)
The word of the security officer is vigorous,
The word of a woman is gentle,
The word of the people heals).

The rationale word appears to emphasise the prevention of crime by maintaining friendly

relations first among members of the same clan and second between members of different clans. This objective can be reached by maintaining an attitude of hospitality and neighbourliness (**ampai bertarikan**), by sharing of surplus produce for the general welfare of the community (**berlebeh ketengah**), helping each other in time of need (**buruk diperbaiki; lapuk dikajangi; usang diperbarui**), and sharing grief in times of misfortune (**Rusuh berpujuk, Tangis berantokkan**).

This adat is also based on humane considerations and leniency in inflicting punishment. A person who has admitted guilt but is unable to pay the fine may request amnesty or reduction of fine:

**Sekali salah, seribu ampun,
Cupak tidak selamanya penuh keatas
Mengisi penuh-penuh
Meminta kurang-kurang**

(For one guilt, a thousand forgivenesses,
The cupak is not always full to the top,
(If) it is filled fully,
Less (can be) requested).

5. CONCLUSION

From the above brief description, it is clear that the aim of the Adat is Happiness which can be achieved based on the principle: from all, by all. In other definite words, everyone has an obligation and everybody is useful; nobody is useless, as long as they are put into their respective positions according to place, time and environment.

Every member is useful, irrespective of status or position. They must cooperate with one another so that socially they become prosperous and progress with time. To achieve this, the Adat reminds its members that they must act according to their positions in society and be seen as responsible persons.



**Biodata
Of
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