

GIFT-GIVING AND OVERLORDSHIP: THE IDEOLOGICAL BASIS OF SOCIAL EXCHANGE IN TRADITIONAL MALAY SOCIETY

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Pemberian dan pertukaran hadiah antara pemerintah dan rakyat adalah satu aktiviti yang mencirikan sistem pentadbiran tradisional di Asia Tenggara. Ahli-ahli sejarah yang tertarik dengan amalan ini telah menjelaskan fenomena tersebut dari segi hubungan fungsional antara sistem ekonomi dan hegemoni politik. Dalam artikel ini, dengan berpanduan hujah-hujah Marcell Mauss tentang peranan unsur-unsur subjektif mengasaskan amalan pertukaran hadiah, penulis cuba menghuraikan asas falsafah dan isu-isu moral yang menggerakkan pertukaran sosial di antara raja-raja Melayu dan rakyat mereka. Berdasarkan analisis tekstual Sejarah Melayu, penulis menyarankan bahawa prinsip organisasi yang menjalinkan raja-raja Melayu dan rakyat mereka ke dalam satu jaringan pertukaran ialah pertimbangan mereka kepada soal maruah dan mertabat yang dilambangkan dalam konsep "nama".

Gift-giving between an overlord and his subjects was known to characterize traditional Southeast Asian administrative systems. Historians attracted by the practice explain its significance in terms of the functional inter-dependence between the economic system and political hegemony. In this article guided by Marcell Mauss arguments about the subjective elements that underlie gift-giving, the writer examines the philosophical basis and moral issues that regulate the exchange relationships between the Malay ruler and his subjects. Based on a textual analysis of the Sejarah Melayu, the writer argues that the organizational principle that motivated the Malay ruler and the subject class to perpetuate the social exchange between them was their mutual concern for honour and status, a theme encapsulated in the concept nama.

I

Historical evidence about early Southeast Asian administrative systems suggests that a negotiation between a ruler and his subjects often preceded the acceptance of an overlordship. In fact, in his study of the development of the economic and administrative structures of early Indonesian societies, Van Naerssen (1977) points out that an overlord who desired to establish a *kraton* organization¹ needed only to negotiate with the local chiefs, known invariably as *patih*, *raka*, *datu*, and *pamegat* into exchanging the rights to exact dues and labour that the latter wielded over the villagers for royal favours which normally took the forms of wealth, honour and posts in the court.² Such transactions in traditional times were regulated by institutions like the *gwrya haji* and *gawai haji* which enabled an overlord to effectively utilize dues and the labour force of his subjects. In addition there was the *anugraha* institution by means of which royal endowments were made to deserving chiefs and villagers. Van Naerssen also notes two related phenomena associated with the transactions. One is what he considers as the "game of generosity" that the overlord and the chiefs continually indulged in so as to ensure allegiance and

loyalty from each other (1977:78). The other is the "potlatch" qualities of gift-giving ceremonies. These he argues, function to further legitimize the overlord's claim of suzerainty and political domination in the region especially when faced with rivalry and competition from other overlords (1977:41).

Based on his study of the dynamics of overlordship in traditional Indonesian societies, Van Naerssen is led to conclude most aptly that gift-giving formed an integral part of overlordship as well as a source from which the essence of overlordship could be extracted. Although Van Naerssen makes an important observation concerning the inter-relatedness of the ritual of gift-giving and overlordship, he does not analyse the significance of the institution in cultural terms. Instead he views it as a cultural item that helped elaborate the functional interdependence between an economic system and political hegemony. This is partly due to the historical perspective that Van Naerssen adopts which does not give analytical priority to the cultural dimension of gift-giving. As such he fails to consider the subjective elements or the non-rational and non-material factors that contribute as significantly as the people's economic and political needs in initiating and subsequently regulating the exchange relations between an overlord and his subjects.

The role of non-material elements in social exchange is initially observed by social anthropologists. In his study of the Kula Ring i.e. an exchange system unique to the Trobriand Islanders, Malinowski (1922) claimed that the Kula was not merely an economic exchange network. Owing to the predominance of the exchange of two articles -- armlets and necklaces -- Malinowski suggests that the Kula be viewed also as a symbolic exchange. The armlets and necklaces which moved to and fro in the opposite direction, possess some symbolic significance to the Trobrianders while the ceremonial exchanges of these elements serve to cement the relationships between individuals and groups who participate in the Kula Ring.

Researchers nowadays tend to dismiss Malinowski's subsequent assertion that it is the psychological needs of the people that govern all social exchanges. Despite that, present day scholarship still owes Malinowski for providing a conceptual base for an exchange perspective which recognizes the importance of "... emergent cultural and structural forces on exchange relations" (Turner 1981:208). One of the pioneers of this perspective whose interpretation of the phenomenon we will rely upon to a certain extent in this paper, is Marcell Mauss.³ In his analysis of the forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies, Mauss (1967) states that an exchange usually works within a system of obligatory expectations and inevitably involves a movement of items to and fro between individuals and groups. In the exchange process, Mauss continues, three major activities are bound to take place. They are giving, receiving and repaying. Mauss also points out that there is something other than utility reasons that cause goods to circulate between groups. Embedded in gift-giving he continues, are notions of values, individual interests as well as questions of morality. These elements he believes, need to be investigated into for us to fully comprehend why a thing given must be accepted and a return gift made. Further the items presented as gifts are often believed by society members to possess spiritual virtues and in them Mauss claims reside the force

that activates and regulates an exchange network (1967:8-12). Actually the "force" compelling reciprocity that Mauss is referring to is society or the group. Exchange transactions as is generally known, are conducted in accordance with the group's norms and rules. In the end, these transactions once institutionalised help create and reinforce the group's morality.

Mauss' observations suggest that there is need for us to consider the moral issues that underlie and govern the apparent politico-economic transactions that featured in Southeast Asian overlords. In other words, it is not sufficient for us to merely identify the economic and material determinants of the earlier mentioned institutions like the *gwrya haji*, *gawai haji* and the *anugraha*; it is also imperative that we examine the cultural principles unique to the society concerned which while regulating an exchange network also reveals the ethos and moral character of the society concerned.

The above observation considered, this paper will analyse the specifically cultural aspect of the exchange relations in traditional Malay society. It will examine the structure of the exchange relations triggered by the establishment of the Malacca Sultanate, the nature of royal gifts and the ideological basis that justifies and regulates the reciprocal ties between the Malay ruling elite and the masses. The discussion will be based on a textual analysis of the *Sejarah Melayu* or the Malay Annals, a fifteenth century text, alleged to have been compiled by a Malaccan court official, Tun Sri Lanang.

II

The Malaccan kingship established in the fifteenth century appears to be of Srivijayan origin (Wolters 1970:77-107). Although the institution had been modified by Islamising influences, the Malay Annals supply ample evidence of the setting up of a court culture in Malacca that bore resemblance to the ones that came into being in seventh century Indonesia and that showed marked Indian influences. Thus it is not surprising if the political and administrative systems of Malacca reflected certain Hindu-Buddhist rather than Islamic religio-political concerns.

According to the Malay Annals, kingship was instituted in the Malay world when Sri Tri Buana (elsewhere known as Sang Sapurba), an overlord and the ancestor of the Malay rulers, decided to make a covenant with Demang Lebar Daun, a local chief. It was this covenant which became the foundation of later social exchanges between the Malay *raja* and the *rakyat*. Story had it that Sri Tri Buana desired Princess Wan Sendari, the daughter of Demang Lebar Daun. The chief fearing that his daughter like the other brides of the *raja* too would be struck with the fatal disease *chloasma*, insisted that the ruler made a covenant or *wa'ad* with him. In the text, Demang Lebar Daun was found saying to Sri Tri Buana the following:

"If your Highness avails himself of your humble servant's daughter, she will assuredly be stricken with *chloasma*. But if Your Highness desires your humble servant's daughter then must your majesty make a covenant with your humble servant, whereupon your humble servant offer her for your majesty's acceptance." (It

was Demang Lebar Daun who was the author the expression "Your Majesty" [*Yang Di Pertuan*] and "your humble servant" [*patik*]. And Sri Tri Buana asked, "What is this undertaking [*yang dikehendaki*] that you have of me?" Demang Lebar Daun answered, "The descendants of your humble servant shall be the subjects of your majesty's throne but they must be well treated [*hendaklah diperbaiki*] by your descendants. If they offend they shall not, however grave be their offence, be disgraced [*difadiahkan*] or reviled [*dinista*] with evil words: if their offence is grave let them be put to death, if that is in accordance with Muhammadan law."

And the king replied, "I agree to give the undertaking for which you ask: but I in my turn require an undertaking [*janji*] from you, sir." And when Demang Lebar Daun asked what the undertaking was, the king answered, "that your descendants shall never for the rest of time be disloyal [*derhaka*] to my descendants, even if my descendants oppress them and behave evilly [*zalim dan jahat pekertinya*] whereupon both of them took a solemn oath [*bersumpah-sumpahan*] to the effect that whoever departed from the terms of the pact, let his house be overturned by Almighty God so that its roofs be laid on the ground and its pillars be inverted" (Brown 1970:16; Sitomurang and Teeuw 1952:26).

This episode clearly shows that the overlord and the local chief were involved in a special negotiation. What the former was seeking for was a marriage alliance with the latter. Before agreeing to that, the local chief insisted that they made a covenant to honour each other's needs and rights. Insofar as Demang Lebar Daun was concerned, marriage alliance with an overlord like Sri Tri Buana implied political subordination on his part, his family, kinsmen and fellow villagers. So in anticipation of the inevitable i.e. political domination by Sri Tri Buana while at the same time hoping to benefit from the situation, Demang Lebar Daun felt it imperative not only to safeguard his social and political rights but also to formalize the relationship by means of a covenant. Basically what Sri Tri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun pledged to each other in the covenant were good treatment and loyalty respectively.

The "undertaking" referred to in the covenant and that was required of Sri Tri Buana, actually was the creation of a just and prosperous state (*negeri*) where an individual's social and economic well being would be looked after. This being the ruler's responsibility, which incidentally was then regarded as an immense one to bear, it was only fair that the overlord requested Demang Lebar Daun and his descendants to be obedient and loyal to him and his descendants. The fact that the chief agreed to abide by the terms of the agreement regardless whether the ruler was cruel or not suggested that in traditional times a kingship (*kerajaan*) i.e. the state of having a king or *raja* was a highly desired social order. In order for such a state of affairs to come into being and perpetuated, oppressive tendencies on the part of the ruler and disobedient behaviour on the part of the masses had to be avoided. Hence the pledge.

It is interesting to note that even though Malays had accepted Islam, they continued to attach a great deal of significance to the *raja* as an organizer of human affairs. This particular belief had its roots in the "doctrine of the divinity of kings" which was embedded in Malay society due to the process of Indianization. The Malay variant of this doctrine incorporated the notion of a spiritual power (*daulat*) believed to be concentrated in the person of a charismatic monarch. This power was regarded essential for the well being of other individuals and groups. Malays further believed that the spiritual power located in the ruler could flow out of its fountainhead and diffuse into the rest of society. Ordinary people could partake of this "divine energy" by drawing close to its source, in this case, the ruler.

To return to the covenant between Sri Tri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun, it would not be too far fetched if we say that similar beliefs and philosophical considerations influenced both parties to enter into a symbiotic relationship with each other. In order for his *daulat* to be recognized and his moral superiority reaffirmed, Sri Tri Buana needed to increase the number of his followers and expand his territory. To ensure his own and his people's material and spiritual well being, Demang Lebar Daun chose to associate with the bearer of *daulat*, Sri Tri Buana. Obviously Demang Lebar Daun was not the only chief who made the pact with an overlord out of his own volition. To further illustrate that a kingship was the most desired form of political system, the Malay Annals tells us how the other two brothers of the ruler were invited (*dijemput*) by the people of Andalas and Tanjung Pura to be crowned rulers of the countries of Minangkabau and Tanjung Pura (Brown 1970:15). Elsewhere in the same text, we are told that the same concern prompted Bendahara Paduka Raja to advise his protege to be part of the royal entourage. If his protege failed to "obtain office at court" (*berkerja raja*), the Bendahara said that it was better for him to "go dwell in the forest for shoots and leaves make a good enough meal for a man with a small appetite" (Brown 1970:11).

The Bendahara's injunction to his protege implied that the court was the most appropriate place to improve one's fortunes. It stood for refinement and power. The jungle (*hutan*) on the other hand signified an untamed world, primitiveness and hence powerlessness. For those who were ambitious and motivated, serving in the royal entourage first as a maid (*dayang*), warrior (*pahlawan*) or as a palace guard (*hulubalang*) offered ample opportunities to further improve their positions in the social hierarchy. A job or a post in the ruler's court in those times implied a movement up the social hierarchy, i.e. from being a nobody to being a somebody, from being an uncouth to a cultured individual, from being a powerless peasant to being a powerful monarch, if fate so desired. These facts about kingship considered, it is much easier for us to understand why Demang Lebar Daun submitted himself to Sri Tri Buana.

An interesting aspect of the covenant worth considering is the act of oath taking. The oath undertaken by both parties involved invoking a curse on themselves for departing from the terms of the agreement. The curse according to the story would come in the form of a calamity like being struck by lightning or finding one's house turned upside down. A sanction imposed by fellow friends on an individual who breached the agreement to honour each

other's rights and needs could also be regarded as an indirect manifestation of the curse. This was illustrated by the experience of Hang Kasturi when he committed treason against Sultan Mansur Shah. The warrior was told that because of his act he could not expect any one to be loyal to him, a traitor (*tiada siapa bersetia dengan engkau orang derhaka*). Similarly when Raja Mohammad wronged a subject, the people did not rise against him as this was part of the agreement. Instead they said, "But as for having the prince [Raja Mohammad] as our master - never". The two episodes clearly demonstrate that the "curse" pronounced in the earlier mentioned covenant could take many forms. In the case of Hang Kasturi for instance, his reluctance to offer the ruler obedience robbed him the chance of having a body of loyal retainers and in the case of the Malay prince, Raja Mohammad, a kingdom.

According to Hall, the oath symbolized one's allegiance to the ruler (1976:60) but in the context of the covenant made by Sri Tri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun, it may be taken to signify a commitment by both parties to honour the intangible items they pledged to each other, i.e. benevolence on the part of the ruler and loyalty on the part of the subjects. The curse pronounced in relation to the covenant does not explicitly promise such rewards as the secret formula of final liberation or *tantramala* but a similar notion I believe, underlies the obligatory expectations that the pact sets in motion. With respect to this the Malay Annals states that if a ruler could ensure peace (*keamanan*), justice (*keadilan*) and prosperity (*kemakmuran*), he would be "joined with the Prophet of God like two jewels in one ring" and "some day in the world to come [he] may be taken into God's loving care for all eternity" and be granted "the blessing (*berkat*) which should be his as a ruler (Brown 1970: 117). These "rewards" that await a just ruler, in other words imply possible changes in the moral status of a monarch and place higher up in the social and sacral hierarchies. Aside from that a ruler who was rewarded with the *tantramala* would generate a certain power or charisma that would draw other rulers into vassalage (Brown 1970: 49). Of this the Malay Annals offers Sultan Mohammad's reign as an example. According to the text.

"Throughout his long reign Sultan Muhammad showed a high degree of justice in his treatment of this subjects, and Melaka became a great city. Strangers flocked thither and its territory stretched westwards And from below the wind to above the Melaka became famous as a very great city, so much so that princes from all countries came to present themselves before Sultan Muhammad Shah, who treated them with due respect bestowing upon them robes of honour of the highest distinction together with rich presents of jewels, gold and silver."

Furthermore, though the *raja* appeared to hold the key to the secret formula of final liberation, it was obvious he could not acquire the desired state of affairs and dramatize his own worth all by himself. In the first place, for him to be a *raja*, a position that promised the spiritual bliss he coveted, there must exist the *rakyat* class. The spiritual bliss associated with the attainment of the *tantramala*, was something that the overlord could achieve with the help of these people especially if they were obedient. Aside from that, the experience

was also something that had to be shared with the *rakyat* provided the ruler and the people he dominated honoured the moral autonomy of each other which incidentally remained intact despite the covenant.

III

The Malay Annals made it obvious that Malacca was not different from other Malay polities in terms of structure and administration. The Malaccan Sultan stood at the apex of a hierarchalized social system. He ruled over a ranked officialdom consisting of *Bendahara*, *Laksamana*, *Syahbandar*, *Temenggung* etc. Since the ruler resided in the coastal area, he was physically removed from the *rakyat* most of whom lived in villages scattered in the hinterland. To assist him control these distant communities, the ruler delegated authority to territorial chiefs, who with the *kuasa* vested in them exercised rights to levy taxes on goods produced in their districts and mobilized the peasant's labour force for their own and the ruler's benefits (see Gullick 1958). This being the socio-political environment Malaccan kingship generated, the exchange network triggered initially by the pact between Sri Tri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun, was not a simple dyadic reciprocal relationships involving only the ruler and the chiefs. The goods transacted too did not consist merely of such abstract things as obedience and fair treatment. From the Malay Annals, we learn that tangible goods too were given away by the Malay ruler to ordinary people, chiefs, warriors and court officials who deserved to be rewarded for their services and show of devotion (*bakti*). These things included items like gold, orchards, weapons, buffaloes and items of attire (*persalinan*) (Brown 1970:120-121). The episode, where the Sultan divorced his wife Tun Kudu so she could be offered to Bendahara Sri Nara Diraja further suggests that women too featured as exchange items in traditional Malay society (Brown 1970:58).

The easiness with which the ruler gave away these items which incidentally had economic and exchange value then, was due to the underlying assumption that a ruler possessed the right to claim ownership to all material resources in the territory he dominated. This right also empowered him to dispose of the resources to whomever he deemed fit. The recipients of the royal gift as was generally known were those people who contributed in one way or another to enhancing the ruler's fame, prestige, position and wealth.

Based on the numerous gift-giving episodes in the Malay Annals, one thing became obvious. That is that a Malay subject preferred gifts in the form of titles and ranks (*pangkat*, *gelaran*) to material wealth. For instance when Sultan Mahmud Shah told his four favourite chiefs to ask anything from him, two of them Sriwa Raja and Tun Omar asked the ruler to bestow upon them (*kurnia duli*) the titles of Master of Elephants and Sea Lord respectively. The sultan did not readily grant them their wishes. The other two chiefs had similar requests in mind but only upon reflecting that their companions were not granted the positions asked, did they ask for gold, cloth, buffaloes etc, which were readily given by the ruler (Brown 1970:120-121).

The question here is why did Malays prefer titles to material goods? The

significance of royal endowments in the form of titles is actually twofold. First, a title signifies one's acceptance into the royal entourage. As Milner says, a title

"... determines where one stands in court, what clothes one wears, what gift one receives and the authority one possesses" (1977:201).

Secondly, titles further differentiate those with power from those without power. Normally, a title denotes an office which grants its owner the right to have access to such things like land, labour, weapons, crops, fruit trees, elephants and the like. Put it another way, a title legitimized one's claim of and control over these essential elements which had economic and exchange value.

Further more, titles were relatively scarce compared to the material goods. Aside from being scarce, they were also "sacred". In traditional times a few cultural devices that attested to the sacred nature of titles included elaborate ceremonies performed occasionally in the Malaccan court for purposes of conferring titles to deserving individuals. Such ceremonies served to show that only the ruler possessed the right and authority to bestow titles. No one else not even an heir apparent had the power to do so. This merely reinforced the belief among the Malay subjects that titles rather than material wealth had divine qualities like their royal donor. Another cultural device which functioned in the same manner as the elaborate gift-giving ceremonies that accompanied the act of title conferment was the terminology used to describe royal donorship. A gift from the ruler including titles was described as an *anugrah* or a *kurniaan*. The first term suggests something gracious intended to provide the receiver immense pleasure while the second, denotes a concession made by some one in authority. As Gonda remarks on the nature of the divine donor, which the Malaccan rulers in the Malay Annals exemplified,

"The frequent preference for epithets which bring out definite aspects of his character ... give full scope for the supposition, not only that giving is so to say an essential trait of their character of part of their function, but also that in many cases their donations are most or less characteristic of their nature." (1965:213)

On the other hand, a thing given by a subordinate to the ruler was described as a *persembahan* meaning a "presentation" or "an offering" made to a superior being. The difference in terminology used to describe gifts from the ruler and the subject class implied that titles as a form of royal gifts or *anugrah*, were distinctive elements that provided their owners real and symbolic power.⁴

IV

The final question that concerns us here is what is the main organizational principle in Malay socio-political life which sustained the exchange relationship between the Malay ruler and his *rakyat*? I must say here that one of the observations made by Anthony C. Milner (1983) in his study of Malay political culture contributes a great deal to my formulation of the answer to the above question. Milner in his stimulating study points to "a concern of *raja* and subjects alike for *nama*" as the "genuine dynamic" that motivated

political activities in pre-modern Malay society. Here, Milner presents a very interesting and significant concept which I believe occupies an equally central position in the exchange system that the covenant of Sri Tri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun triggered. The word *nama*.⁵ means "name" but as a concept, it denotes an individual's worth, identity, honour, status, fame, prestige and reputation. When Demang Lebar Daun in the covenant implored that his descendants be not disgraced or reviled with evil words, it was actually his own worth and honour as "moral persons" that he wanted Sri Tri Buana to respect. Also when he urged that his descendants be well treated (and the Malay translation of this is "*hendaklah diperbaiki*"), we can sense that the local chief was asking that not only his own worth but also that of his descendants too be looked after and preferably improved. To this end, titles were extremely useful. A title conferred on an individual helped placed him in the category of distinguished persons or *orang bernama*, which literally meant "people with names".

This however, did not mean that a person was anonymous before he was given a title. On the contrary, because he had his own identity and worth which was encapsulated in his own name, a title was meant to enhance that worth and bring it to public recognition. In other words, the individual became *especially* distinctive.

Similarly, when a Malay subject pledged loyalty to a ruler or a chief, he was but staking his worth, honour and reputation as a member of an ethnic group, the Malays, who were never known to be disloyal and unfaithful to their patron, in this case the *raja*. As stated earlier, an act of treason or *derhaka* not only symbolized a breach of the agreement; it also implied a disregard for the good name of one's forebears. To illustrate the negative attitude the Malays had towards people with rebellious tendencies was the episode in the Malay Annals when Bendahara Sri Maharaja reprimanded his protege, Hassan who intended to rebel against the Sultan. The Bendahari said, "What, Hassan, would you be disloyal to your *raja* and spoil the good name of your forebears (*membinasakan nama orang tua-tua*). It is the custom of the Malays that they shall never be disloyal to their *raja*" (Brown 1970:157).

V

In conclusion, it is obvious that the theme of honour expressed in the concept of *mana*, pervaded the exchange relationships woven between the Malay ruler, the court officials, the local chiefs and the villagers in traditional times. This explains why the Malay subject was averse to *derhaka* acts since they took away something from his own, his parent's and ancestors' *nama*. On the other hand, the Malay was keen to render service to the ruler even though it meant working in the royal household and allowing himself to be exploited in terms of dues and labour since such acts were considered not only as manifestations of his loyalty; they also indicated his concern to improve his *nama*. Similarly, a ruler who could boast having a loyal body of followers who did not complain of maltreatment and who occasionally dispense elephants, land, clothes, *kris* and titles to deserving subjects could be said to be working towards the enhancement of his own and his forebears' *nama*. In short, it is this mutual

concern for *nama* on the part of the Malay *raja* and his *rakyat* alike that sustained and gave the exchange network in traditional times its distinctive features.

NOTES

¹ In his article on 'Khmer 'Hinduism' in the Seventh Century' (1979), O.W. Wolters notes that the Khmer rulers also preferred to make gifts in the form of a wide range of posts in the Khmer court. This observation suggests that royal gifts of this kind were not unique to the Malays and seemed to be a widespread practice in the Southeast Asian region.

² The exchange perspective has been developed further in cultural anthropology by Levi-Strauss and in sociology by Peter Blau and George Homans. For detailed explanation see Turner (1978).

³ For a discussion of the retention of Hindu-Buddhist religious influences in Islamized Malay society see Reid, A. & L. Castles (1975) and Milner (1983).

⁴ Wolters (1976:435) suggests the same thing when he says, 'Gift from above may have been seen as possessing a religious quality from which the recipient was believed to benefit'.

⁵ For additional discussion on the concept of *nama* and other concepts in Malay ethos see Matheson (1979).

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