

Lecturer's Contribution

Connecting the dots: The case of foreshadow and meaning in pantun

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Introduction

Pantun was primarily expressed in oral form. With the advent of printing presses in the late 19th century, compilations of pantuns in numerous dialects of the language have been published. Its creative verse format has captured the imagination of people and scholars within and outside the local region where it has originated. It is regarded indigenous and distinctive, and a microcosm of Malay life, ideas, and aesthetics. According to Muhammad (2006), the Malay intellect, wisdom, and beautiful shades of meaning and expression are found in pantuns more than anywhere else.

The Malay pantun consists of two parts: the *pembayang* (prefatory statement) and the *maksud or isi* (meaning or message). In good pantuns, both parts are not arbitrary; they are connected and intertwined based on Oriental philosophy in general and Malay philosophy in particular (Tran, 2013). Take for instance of a famous pantun known by many:

*Pisang emas bawa berlayar,
masak sebiji di atas peti,
hutang emas boleh dibayar,
hutang budi dibawa mati.*

Literal translation:

(Sail away with a bunch of bananas
One ripe fruit remains on the box
Debts of money we can repay
Debts of kindness we take to the grave)

(Translated by Merican, 2014)

The used of metaphors in Pantun

Elements in poetry writing typically touch on aspects of thought expression based on current social and political realities. Pantun, which is a type of poetry, has a style of language and symbols in accordance with the norms, culture and values of society. The poems carry a variety of themes, questions and messages that typically revolve around nature, youthful romance, experience, morals and education. In general, poetry writing will involve the use of certain characteristics of literary writing to express an idea, event, concept, lesson, example and so on. Among them are symbolisms that are usually present in the form of metaphors, similes, personifications and others.

Metaphor, can generally be defined as the use of words that express a meaning other than the usual or actual meaning, and the word is presented as a comparison or allusion, and can give an emotional effect to the listener or reader who is activated based on their imagination- respectively. According to Newmark (1981: 85), the creation of poetry requires a touch of creative language and imaginative thinking. Often an image used as a comparative agent in a metaphorical expression has a strong bond with culture. Thus, in many contexts, the meaning of a metaphor must be referred to the speaker of the language. This suggests that metaphors allow for an understanding of a variety of cultural and emotional values as well as societal perspectives. Metaphor specifically means using something that has properties that are almost identical to something to be expressed as an abstract comparison to convey the real meaning (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

The construction of the symbols in a *pembayang* of a Pantun

Poems have certain rules such as the number of lines and syllables. Pantun usually consists of eight to twelve syllables in each line (Asmah Haji Omar, 2008: 176). This indicates that the choice of words used must be accurate and the language is compact. A poem is judged not only by the accuracy of its meaning but also on the beauty of the sound and the image it carries. The beauty of the sound of this language is called tempo, rhyme or tone that can beautify the poem. Take note the symbols used as a comparison of behaviour in the Malay verses below:

Sungai Kantan bertembok batu,
Tempat orang membuat perahu;
Ayam jantan memang begitu,
Pandai berkokok bertelur tak tahu.

(Kurik kundi merah saga: Kumpulan pantun lisan, 2015)

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The natural behaviour of the rooster is used as a comparison tool in the above verse. The meaning of the poem is clear in the last line of the verse, which means 'a person who is only good at speaking or theorising without doing any reforms'. Going back to the hint of the meaning of the old Malay pantun which is the theme of this writing, that is, *pisang emas dibawa belayar, masak sebiji di atas peti*, the selection of *pisang emas* is seen not just to match the rhyme and syllables of the poem. To find out why the *pisang emas* is a symbol of the meaning of the pantun, a study on the food of the Malay community in the past is presented as follows.



Rice or paddy is a grain from the east introduced by the Arabs to Andalus. Paddy, known as *aruz* in Arabic, was said to be planted in the middle of the 10th century. Paddy is grown on the banks of the Andalus river due to the factors of seed sowing, fertilisation and irrigation. Paddy is grown in hot or tropical humid areas with heavy rainfall and water is always suitable for paddy roots, according to Eiashah and Roziah (2012). The spread of Islam in the Malay Peninsula is believed to have begun in the 7th century. This view is based on the possibility of Islam being spread by traders and missionaries from West Asia to China. Another way was via the emergence of several Islamic kingdoms in Pasai and Perlak in the vicinity of the Straits of Malacca in the 13th century. According to Marco Polo's notes, Islam had spread to the Malay peninsula before the 15th century. By the end of the 15th century, Islam had strengthened its position in the Malay peninsula, Sumatra, the northern part of Java, Brunei and North Borneo. Islam also penetrated Maluku and Sulu.



The economic activities of the Malay community at that time were of a simple form of subsistence, based on paddy cultivation and fishing activities. There is no surplus use of land, if the total population grows then more land will be opened up for paddy cultivation. Before the 15th century, paddy was grown dry through the farm method (shifting cultivation). Wet paddy cultivation techniques were introduced to the northern region of the Malay peninsula from Siam in the 15th century. This technique spread slowly to other areas in the Malay peninsula over the next four centuries, states Uqbah, Nordin and Ahmad Ali (2015). To obtain an excessive source of food, the Malay community raised chickens and ducks, planted fruits in orchards such as bananas, sugarcane, tapioca, coconut and betel nut. This coincides with the Chinese record, where in 1419, there were Malays who planted sugarcane, *cempedak*, banana, pumpkin, onion, ginger, watermelon and others.

If the history of the introduction of paddy cultivation as a staple food of the archipelago community and the spread of Islam by sea is taken into account, the conclusion that can be linked is that the science of navigation was introduced first compared to paddy cultivation. Of course at the same time the spread of Islam by Arab merchants took place, most likely rice was also brought along but it happened after the 15th century. Based on Chinese records, bananas were already grown by the Malays in the 13th century. Therefore, it can be said that bananas were one of the staple foods of the Malays at that time. No wonder Malay sailors in the past brought *pisang emas* as a supply in their voyages.

The construction of the *maksud* of the Pantun

Since the whole meaning of the verse is a verse of instruction or advice and does not imply the meaning of conflict or forgiveness then the voyage in pantun may be a voyage intended for security surveillance, visiting colonies, return visits, trade and so on, which are appropriate to the culture, food and geographical environment at that time. In the second line the *peti* (or crate) in *masak sebiji di atas peti*, is used as a symbol. The object of the *peti* is used of course to fit the rhythm of the pantun, *dibawa mati*. Most likely the *peti* brought along on the voyage was made of wood. As is well known, the tropical climate of the Malay peninsula (at the time the poem was composed) supplied various types of wood for use, including in the construction of sampans, boats and even larger ships. Wood such as cengal, meranti, keruing, balsa, ramin, mahogany and lime are among the examples of logs that are known and can be found here. Wooden crates are commonly used to store goods and food due to its durable nature and protects the contents of the crate from damage, maintains shape, prevents leakage and theft.

In short, the symbol of the *pisang emas* and the *peti* are used because it is close to the soul of the consumer at the time the verse is recited. If not, then the two objects will not be used as symbols of verses because as mentioned earlier, verses are created by using symbols that are in accordance with the norms, culture and values of a society.

Connecting the *pembayang* with the *maksud*

First line: *Pisang emas dibawa belayar* (Sail away with a bunch of bananas) - The traditional Malay society is involved in marine-based activities that require sailing such as fishing and trading. On top of that, rivers and oceans are also used as the main communication system to travel from one place to another. In general, sailing activities, especially that of trading, require a relatively long period of time. This is because in ancient times, boats could only sail based on the wind because there was no advanced equipment

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and technology to store and cook food on board. A relatively long period of sailing time certainly requires relatively durable food. Therefore, a type of banana, especially *pisang emas* are suitable to carry as they can supply energy quickly and continuously to the crew and are suitable to be eaten raw. In addition, it is a fruit that will ripen little by little rather than as a whole bunch. Thus, this allows it to be eaten and stored for a long time.

Second line: *Masak sebiji di atas peti* (One ripe fruit remains on the box) - The bananas are placed on top of the crate to speed up the ripening process. Placing them in a closed area would not supply good air circulation and make them easily damaged. It is also placed on a crate to allow visibility of the crew members to consume them.

Third line: *Hutang emas boleh dibayar* (Debts of money we can repay) - Gold was and still is one of the most precious metals and in some places in the past it was used as currency. *Emas* can be a symbolic item for anything that is of value. Thus whoever owes money or any valuable items must pay back what he/she owes.

Fourth line: *Hutang budi dibawa mati* (Debts of kindness we take to the grave) - However, the debt of kindness or *budi* is something that cannot be paid back and one carries to death. In the Malay community, the debt of gratitude cannot be matched or valued by valuable goods. For instance, if a person has been kind to another, then it will still be remembered even if the person has died. Such is the attitude of the Malay community which is so humble and concerned with manners and decency. In other words, the pantun purports the fact that a person who has good morals is better off than a person who is wealthy.

Conclusion

Understanding the connectivity between the *pembayang* and *maksud* can enhance one's world-view. With its inscription in the List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity category by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has proven that this art form needs to be protected, preserved and passed on for the generations to come.

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