

Funeral Management in the Malay World: Local Knowledge and Practices

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ABSTRACT

Local knowledge is basically a set of information, guidance and knowledge inherited from generation to generation. It is a survival strategy and it reflects the uniqueness of a nation. Local knowledge is an element that emerges due to the reaction of the Malays with their environment. It is indeed a survival instrument that benefits the entire community. This study aims to assess the practice of local knowledge in Islamic funeral management that has been practiced in the Malay community. Among the local knowledge that exists in the Malay funeral practice are as the usage of 'kemeyan', 'sintok', 'bidara' leaves, scissors, incisors, rose water, 'cerana' and camphor. This is a qualitative study that employs library research and interviews as research instruments. Library research is done by collecting data on previous studies pertaining to local knowledge from print media like journals, books and conference papers. Selected respondents are interviewed to generate their perspectives about ideas, opinions and experiences pertaining to research topic. Text study is used to critically examine any related writings carried out by Islamic scholars regarding the Malay funeral practices. This study provides new values to the body of knowledge, especially in funeral practices among the Malays. It also attempts to highlight the function of 'kemeyan', 'sintok', 'bidara' leaves, scissors, incisors, rose water, 'cendana' and camphor as the elements of local knowledge in the Malay world.

KEYWORDS: Funeral Management, Malay World, Local Knowledge.

BASIC CONCEPT OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

The definition of local knowledge varies among scholars. In [15] for example defines local knowledge as the unique knowledge of society formed from daily practice and culture. This unique knowledge is being referred to by local community to make a decision in their daily lives in many fields that also include the daily practice in agriculture, health, food, education, environmental issues and management of their resources [33]. Local knowledge is also influenced by internal creativity and interaction with the environment. Some examples of local wisdom are like folklores, local songs, proverbs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, laws, customs, languages and agriculture practices [15]. Meanwhile, in [21] refers local knowledge to the understanding of philosophy, skills and practices which develop as a result of reaction and interaction with the local environment. Some scholars define local knowledge as the ability to dominate the local knowledge and understand its philosophy and function [24]. In [29] defines about local knowledge as follows:

"Local knowledge is not meant local genius or domestic intelligence which often used by Western scholars. The word "arif" means being wise as based on critical thinking. It is often used to symbolize the wisdom of someone who reached the 'maqam al-Arifin'. Among them, a person who is knowledgeable should be based on the correct path and sources that there is no element of doubt and suspicion. If such knowledge is not true or based on doubt, it will degrade earlier knowledge and can lead to confusion".

In conclusion, local knowledge is a series of information, guidance, knowledge passed down from generation to the next generation as a life strategy that reflects the uniqueness of their daily practice and culture. Local knowledge is the result of the community's reaction to the environment as a survival and it benefits the entire community.

FUNERAL MANAGEMENT

In Arabic, a Muslim corpse is known as 'janazah'. 'Janazah' is defined as a person who is dead [9] and the word is derived from 'Janz' which means something closed [11]. Arabic language expert such as al-Fayrusabadi also said that the word means something that remains closed and protected. It is derived from a series of conjugations; Janaza-yajnizu-janazatan wa jinazatan [10]. 'Janazah' is also defined as a person who is dead and loses his life in the world [19]. 'Janazah' is also called by the local people as 'al-mayyit' which is derived from Arabic word [5, 17]. The term 'mayyit' is also widely used in the Malay language such as 'rumah mayat' (mortuary), 'kereta mayat' (funeral car) and 'biskut mayat' ('a type of biscuit served on the day of the funeral). There is a difference between the word 'janazah' and the word 'mayyit'. The word 'Janazah' is usually used before the process of wearing simple plain burial cloth (the kafan). Once the corpse is enshrouded or wrapped in that simple plain cloth (the kafan), it is known as a mayyit [8].

Funeral management in Malaysia is defined as the whole process to handle someone who is dead according to the Islamic law and local customs. It is a combination of the basic responsibilities in Islam and operated in accordance with the traditions and elements of local nature. All the principles and conditions from the Islamic jurisprudence are to be met by the 'pengurus jenazah' (the person who manages the funeral management). 'Kemeyan', 'sintok', 'bidara' leaves, scissors, incisors, rose water, 'cerana' and camphor are used as the elements of local knowledge in the Malay world [22].

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF ISLAMIC FUNERAL MANAGEMENT IN MALAYSIA

From the interviews, it is found that 'pengurus jenazah' usually uses several sources of knowledge in managing the funeral management. Firstly, they refer to the texts related to death and illness from the Quran. The verses in the Quran are used as 'ruqyah' and 'du'a' in dying stages and to motivate them. The verses of the Quran are also used as alternatives for 'ruqyah' to eliminate the practices of Malay magic or 'jampi serapah' which are connected with the 'syaitan' and the evil spirits [22]. Secondly, 'pengurus jenazah' also refers to al-Sunnah as the next source of Islamic law. For example, he/she uses certain ingredients such as camphor and 'bidara' leaves as proposed by 'Sunnah' in the process of bathing the 'janazah'. This tradition is based on 'hadith sahih' in Sahih Bukhari and Muslim. He/she also uses various hadiths such as Hadith Hasan and 'da'if' mainly on practices involving talkin, tahlil etc. Meanwhile, 'pengurus jenazah' who uses 'salafi's trend' will refer to Ahkam al-Janaiz wa Bidauha written by [8] and Fiqh Sunnah written by [23, 31].

COMPONENTS OF THE MALAY FUNERAL

The Muslim Malay community is very particular pertaining to funeral management. They associate themselves with Islamic rituals starting from the dying stage until after the janazah is laid to rest. The process of Malay funeral is categorised into two components. The first component is when someone is dying and secondly is the funeral management after someone's death. The first component describes the practice of the Malays especially when someone is dying and this includes the first signs of death, the reading of quranic verses such as Yasin or al-Ra'du, the recitation of 'kalimah syahadah' and the giving of drops of water into the mouth of the dying person using cotton. The second component is the management after the death of the person that includes closing the janazah's eyes, cleaning dirt and faecal filths, oiling his joints, tying the mouth with a piece of fabric, bathing the 'janazah', performing ablution for 'janazah', janazah praying process, burial process and reciting tahlil and talkin [12].

The Dying Moment

Among the things that are observed when patients are dying are the early signs of death. These signs are known based on the personal experience of 'pengurus jenazah'. However, these are not mandatory signs and there is no evidence from the scientific aspect pertaining to this phenomenon so far. This is stated by a 'pengurus jenazah' in his book:

"The early signs of this death is the author's personal observations of patients who had arranged and visited all the funeral arrangements. Therefore, these are not mandatory signs that should be followed. They are just for additional knowledge and also a backup to those who face this situation"[12].

Among the signs narrated during the interview are like straightened legs that slide forward, dropping nose, intermediate loose in joints, tongue-tied and losing appetite, does not recognise close family members, too thirsty

and is always asking for water, no reciprocal breathing, uneven breathing in the abdomen and chest, a sound like snoring (ghargharah) in the throat and the back of the throat [12]. Usually in the Malay world, if there are signs of early death, a number of management bodies will lay him on his right side and his head will be faced towards towards Qiblat. A number of 'pengurus janazah' interviewed also stated that a patient who is dying lies in supine position and lifts his head slightly facing Mecca. In the Malay Archipelago, the normal practice is that Yasin will be read when the dying person or the 'janazah' is in the house and when visiting the graveyard. A small number of 'pengurus janazah' read surah al-Ra'du when a patient is dying [13]. They will also whisper softly and slowly the verse La ila ha illa Allah in the dying patient's ear. If this is not possible, they would whisper the word of Allah. This process is known as 'mengucap' [30].

After Death Management

After Death Management is categorized into several sections such as the early stage of death management, bathing, enshrouding, praying and the burial for the janazah.

Early Stage of Funeral Management

Upon death, the practice of the Malays is to close janazah's eyes if they were opened and to tie them up to prevent from constant opening. Prayer will be read during this rite and janazah's jaws and chin will be tied with a piece of cloth. Janazah's joints will be massaged and softened with coconut oil, palm oil or olive oil. This oiling process is important to facilitate body management during bathing rite. Frankincense is also lit to remove the smell produced by the janazah. In the Malay practice, medium-weight objects such as scissors and incisors are placed on the janazah's stomach to help ease removal of faeces from the stomach. This will also prevent janazah's stomach from bloating hence hindering it from looking awful [12]. Janazah's clothing is removed by cutting the edges and the body is later covered with a thin cloth like batik or pelikat sarong. The body is not covered with a thick cloth because the trapped odour from the covered body can be very unpleasant. Normally, the Malays have great respect for the janazah. The janazah is placed higher than the floor such as on bed facing the Qiblah [30].

Bathing the Janazah

There are two pillars for bathing the janazah. The first is the 'niat' (intent). Secondly is levelling the entire body of the janazah with water. The process of bathing the janazah in the Malay practice starts with the process of removing faecal dirt and filths found in janazah's body. They are removed using soap and water from sintok roots. This includes a process called 'meruang' or 'meruam' where all faecal dirt like faeces in the body are taken out by massaging the abdomen and the belly several times [12]. After this, 'meruang', washers (pengurus janazah) will say the 'niat' (intention) for janazah bathing. Bathing will start from the top right followed by the left side of the janazah. The last pour for the bathing process will be of 'bidara and camphor water. The ablution will be performed for the janazah after the bath. Some washers (pengurus janazah) will perform ablution for the janazah prior to the bathing rite. After bathing and ablution, the janazah will be dried with clean towels before beginning the shrouding process [32].

Shroud Remains

Shrouding is the wrapping process done for the janazah before burial is done. The minimum size of the shroud is measured by wrapping around the body with a piece of cloth that covers the entire body and head [8]. In the Malay world, the usual shroud for men will be 3 sheets of simple modest cloth and 5 sheets of the same cloth for the women. In some places, the male janazah is shrouded in a robe and turbaned while the female janazah is dressed in 'telekung' [12].

Burial

The minimum depth of burial is simply to cover the stench of bodies and the burial place cannot be dug by animals. The body must also face towards Qiblat. Typically the depth of the grave is as high as the average height. It is compulsory to lay the janazah on his/her right and facing towards Qiblat. If the soil of the grave is hard, the gravediggers will usually build the grave, but if the soil is damp and soggy, the janazah will be buried together with the wooden coffin. After the funeral, talkin will be read on the grave as a warning to those who are still living [12].

ELEMENTS OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE IN FUNERAL MANAGEMENT

Use of Frankincense (Kemenyan)

Frankincense is derived from the sap of styrax trees that have been hurt. Styrax tree is known by the Malay community as 'pokok kemenyan' (incense trees). In Malaysia and Sumatra, incense is obtained from *Styrax benzoin*

tree while in Thailand it is obtained from *Styrax tonkinense* tree [14]. The sap is very fragrant when sprinkled on hot coals [20]. Most Malays use this incense in shamanism like to clean themselves, patients and equipment used for evil purposes. The Malay community also believes that the fragrance from these trees will invite angels and dismiss the interfering evil elements. Some Malays believe that this tree has a mystical element that is its ability to recover even after being repeatedly hurt in the process of taking its sap [6]. In the preparation for the funeral, incense is used to remove any unfavourable smell from the remain [4]. The fragrance of frankincense cannot be replaced with other fragrance because its smoke will fill every inch of the space, hence preventing visitors from inhaling the unattractive smell from the remain. The finding about incense smoke has been proven by two scientific studies. It can treat a variety of physical ailments and is still in the process of in-depth study [27].

Sintok

Sintok is a woody plant that climbs mainly timber trees in the forest. It is also known as 'beluru' among the Malay community. Its scientific name is *Cinnamomum sintoc* bl [26]. In the Malay community, sintok is an herbaceous plant that is very useful. Sintok is one of the components in the preparation of 'pilis'; a treatment to prevent dizziness and getting rid of the 'wind' from the body of new mothers [16]. It is also used by the Malay shamans as a mixture of baths to restore the vitality of someone recovering from a long illness. The Malay community also uses sintok root to restore energy and scent the body of women after their menstruation [25].

In preparing the body for funeral, sintok is used for bathing. Sintok functions as our soap and shampoo in the present. When soaked long enough in water and rubbed by hand it produces bubbles. Respondents also share some tips on using sintok in their practices. According to them, sintok will remove faecal dirt in the body, dirt on the nails and enables the body to remain fragrant. Normally, the 'washers' will pour sintok onto the body so that shrouding can be perfectly done later on. Using sintok water also helps tighten the skin and prevent it from smelling fast. Usually, 'washers' also wash their hands with sintok to eliminate all odours and to prevent infections that may occur when bathing the body.

'Bidara' Leaves

'Bidara' or scientifically known as *Ziziphus mauritiana* is a small tree found in the equatorial forests and in dry areas. It bears fruit and the trunk is filled with small spines. The tree has various names such as 'widara' and 'dara' in Indonesia. In Arabic, it is known as 'sidrah' [1, 3]. According to the Sunnah, 'bidara' extract mixed with water (bidara water) is used for several purposes. It is sunnah for a person who embraces Islam to bathe with bidara mixture. It is also sunnah to women who have completed their menstruation to have similar bath. Bathing the deceased with this bidara water to clean the dirt on the body is also considered Sunnah [7]. This practice is based on a hadith by Umm 'Athiyah when the child of the Prophet (pbuh) passed away. He said:

"Bathe him three times or five or seven or more if you see it (better) with water and bidara" (Muttafaqun Alayh).

The respondents interviewed stated that the use of bidara water for the deceased is rather limited especially among the urban communities because it is difficult to find bidara leaves there. Most 'washers' or the immediate adult family members of the deceased who do not use the bidara water replace it with sintok water or rosewater for the last rinse. According to respondents, bathing the body with bidara water is to soften the body of the deceased to facilitate the bathing and shrouding processes. In addition, a number of 'washers' find that using bidara water helps to strengthen the body and prevents the skin from decaying faster. Some respondents also stated that they only 'tabarruk' with the traditions of the Prophet (PBUH) and views from some shafiiyyah scholars like al-Nawawi and al-Ramli.

Rose Water

Rose water is extracted from a mixture of fragrant flowers. In the old Malay medical practice, rose water is used as a remedy to several kinds of eye sores. Apart from that, rose water will also be smeared on the body of new mothers for speedy recovery after childbirth [18]. Rose water is used as perfume for the shroud as it is alcohol free. It is also used as a rinse prior to the rinse that contains camphor and extract of 'bidara' leaves.

Sandalwood Powder/Cendana

Cendana is the yellow colored powder taken from a tree called sandalwood [16]. It is commonly used in the Malay funeral management practice. In the traditional Malay medical practice, cendana is used as the eyeliner to someone who is disturbed or obsessed by the evil spirits. It is also mixed with other applicable ingredients to be rubbed on subject's body as a cure for typhoid fever, as a mixture in the drink for sinusitis patients and others [18].

In funeral management, it is used as a deodorant as a substitute for rose water when bathing the corpse [2]. It is also spread on every layer of the shroud to avoid disturbance of wild animals once the body was buried.

The Camphor

Camphor is obtained from the sap of a tropical tree called Camphor Laurel (*Cinnamomum Camphora*). This sap is taken by heating the stems and leaves to get the oil. In the Malay medical practice, camphor is very synonymous in driving out evil spirits. It is said that the fragrance of camphor can appeal angels to expel any evil elements. In the Malay traditional practice, camphor is also used as an alternative to treat illnesses such as sinusitis, mental illness (nervous breakdown) and poor sight [18]. The Malays conform to the Sunnah as narrated by Bukhari in the chapter relating to janazah in the use of camphor for funeral management. The mixing of water with camphor enables it to strengthen and preserve the dead body [28]. This practice will also slow down the decaying process. Furthermore, the fragrant also helps repel potential organisms from approaching the corpse after burial [31].

CONCLUSION

All in all, the orthodox Malay community is very much focused on the aspects of the natural world surrounding them. They often interact with nature in most aspects of their daily life. The transitory of one generation to the other generation has led to several misunderstandings in matters pertaining to normal practices involving indigenous and local communities. This transitory also causes violation in the functions of such practices. In view to these delusions, writing and reviewing the philosophy behind the practices and customs need to be intensified to provide real perceptions on the customs and practices of the early Malay community specifically in funeral management among the Islamic Malays community.

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