Magical Discourse, Moral Boundaries, and the Mapping of Interrelations in the Riau Archipelago

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This paper will explore the relation between moralities, the discourse on spirit possession, and the management of hierarchical boundaries among the Melayu of the Riau Archipelago. After presenting the core ideas of my theoretical framework, I will present a brief account of the local signification of Melayuness, both historically and in the light of the recent political development. Subsequently, I will examine the popular discourse on magical interference and zones of protection. I will then illustrate with case studies, how crossing hierarchical boundaries can have a dramatic impact on the well-being of individuals. I will conclude by discussing the management of boundaries and the mapping of inter-locality relations.

The core concept of Melayu cultural knowledge in relation to well-being is the semangat. Every human, every animal, every single object is the sheath of a distinct semangat, and the loss of the latter can be extremely harmful to persons and things alike (De Danaan 1984:152). Personal well-being is thus entirely dependent upon the strength of the semangat which, in turn, is connected to the other semangat present in the social environment. The strength, or weakness, of someone’s semangat therefore relies as well on the conditions of the semangat of the other constituents in his/her social setting. This comprises, for example — the physical space, such as territory and habitation — and social agents — such as family members, community members and local spirits.

Taking the principle of the semangat as a point of departure, I will examine in this article how Melayu construe personal suffering; how the pattern of interdependent semangat — which I refer to as bonding nucleus — continually emerges from the popular discourse, with or without explicit reference to the mystical idiom. The basic structure of the bonding nucleus is shaped by the moral frame of behaviour which instructs the people of the rules of relations between individuals, between groups as well as between the human and spirit world. This moral frame is openly articulated by the concept of adapt, which used to define and circumscribe the moral pre-eminence of the sultanates in the course of Melayu history.
Another important concept of the traditional Melayu system of interrelation is the hati, which can be translated as the centre of socio-cultural intelligence with a particular emphasis on interpersonal relations. People who are said to have a hati baik, or hati bersih (good or clean heart) will not do anything to upset the stability of the social network. I think that this statement is important for it can serve to differentiate from the English expression “to have a good heart” — which is the common translation used by Melayu themselves — and rhetorically, comes from the Anglo notion of the person, and marks his individuality (Wierzbicka 1991). Hati is always turned towards the community to which the individual belongs; for example, it is irrelevant to qualify someone’s hati as good because he/she is generous with an outside group (which is often viewed with suspicion). Every transgression of the socio-cultural codes has something to do with the hati since it interferes with the local rules of personal interaction in two ways: it creates a disturbance that not only affects the transgressor him/herself, but mobilizes members of the social network who have to find grounds for negotiation, and it has the potentiality of weakening the transgressor’s semangat and gives malevolent spirits an easy opportunity to penetrate the circle via the offender’s body.

Moral boundaries surface constantly in the popular discourse, intermingling with references to particular identities of belonging, such as national, religious, ethnic or hierarchical. Although the pattern I wish to explore concerns relations with transmigrant groups as well, in this paper I will focus on the mapping of interpersonal relations between groups whose members identify themselves as Melayu and that are placed by the Melayu aristocrats at different positions in the Orang Laut-Melayu continuum.

The mapping of interrelations should be understood as part of what Taussig refers to as the “implicit social knowledge” in which the sensitivity to envy plays a central part:

This sensitivity is not merely a foundation of what we might call shamanic discourse, organizing a sense of the real and of personhood; it can also be thought of as a sort of sixth-sense or antenna of what I call “implicit social knowledge” slipping in and out of consciousness as a constantly charged scanner of the obtuse as well as the obvious features of social relatedness. Acquired through practices rather than through conscious learning, like one’s native tongue, implicit social knowledge can be thought of as one of the dominant faculties of what it takes to be a social being. (Taussig 1987:393)

The sensitivity to envy is a dynamic process that constantly reinforces the need to publicly acknowledge the bonding structure already in place; to recognize its ongoing validity, even if the “envious others” have to be improvised. It also serves to validate what Strathern calls the “local construction of the person”, which implies the embodiment of the meanings,