

## THE WISDOM OF THE COASTAL MALAY MYTHS IN NORTH SUMATERA

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DOI: 10.24815/.v1i1.14521

### Abstract

This paper examines traditions in the form of Malay Myth in North Sumatra. In Malay society, especially for the coastal Malay society, the terms of mythology has the value of local wisdom or local genius. The importance of myths in people's lives, in literature, and the inheritance of oral traditions is the urgency of this paper. This study used sociocultural and ethnographic approaches with application to field research with several stages ranging from collecting data from both literature studies and field interactions, interviews, discussions, analysis, and socialization. The result shows that the coastal Malay society still keep the oral tradition of myths for generations. It was found that there are several kinds of myths in the coastal society in North Sumatera. They are called *pantang larang* (abstinence myth), marriage myth, children's myth, and ghost myth. All of the myths are usually used for education, religiosity and also to keep the good behavior of coastal Malay society from curse and bad destiny so they should obey the myths.

**Keywords:** Myth, Malay society, local wisdom, literature, North Sumatera.

### 1. Introduction

Basically, a story cannot be released from a society, both the society in the story and the society supporting the story. The story is always conveyed from one person to another as a form of conveying knowledge. The story spreads and then becomes public trust. In fact, the story can be a story that goes on, from generation to generation, past over several generations. In academic, the story is usually referred to as folklore. In this paper, a certain kind of folklore is being discussed; it is myths.

According to Webster's Third New International Unabridged Dictionary (1981), myth is "a story that is usually of unknown origin and at least partially traditional, that ostensibly

relates historical events usually of such character as to serve to explain some practice, belief, institution, or natural phenomenon, and that is especially associated with religious rites and beliefs”.

North Sumatra Province which has 25 districts and 8 cities certainly has a lot of folklore spreads among the society. One tribe that believes in myths is the Malay, especially coastal Malays society. The coastal Malays in this paper are people who live near the coast. In North Sumatra, the areas adjacent to the coast are very closely related to Malays society, especially in the area of Batubara and Serdang Bedagai regency, where this research was carried out.

Most myths in this areas circulating through generations and derivatives. In the coastal Malay society, some myths are still circulating event though there are many of them are no longer told to the current generation because of technological advances and the lack of interest by younger generation to search about folklore circulating around them.

Indeed, folklore has a strong educational function and value of local wisdom in building society. In the ancient times, myths were created to be a safeguard toward people’s behavior and also to avoid any danger that might come. Hence, this paper is the results of gathering myths that still exist in coastal Malay communities in North Sumatra. The collected myths were analyzed to be disseminated to the today society to preserve the myths themselves. Thus, the function of myth can be presented in this modern era and a society who increasingly abandoning traditional values that have a positive impact to the society.

## **2. Literature Review**

This paper is the result of field research in a number of places in North Sumatra which are indicated to be occupied by coastal Malay society. The hypotheses of this paper is that the coastal Malay society at present still use myths as an education for their children and inheritance.

However, as a literature review, there are several publications that discuss the myths of both studies in terms of myths and Malay. First, a publication on Malay and Chinese myths in Malaysia (Zakaria, et al., 2016). The results showed that Malay and Chinese myths have similarities in story elements and their usage as stories that are believed to be sacred in the thinking and culture of their society. Second, the myth found in Malay literary works in Hang Tuah (Santosa, 2014). He analyzed the intrinsic elements and the function of myths which resulted in the conclusion that Hang Tuah had the ideology of heroic loyalty of Malayness which could be a form of national character: willing to sacrifice and be strong in defending the sovereign rights of the country. Third, the myth associated with the preservation of Baluran and Gilimanuk protected forests in Bali (Manuaba, et al., 2012). As a result, there are still myths that people believe to preserve forests such as the Mbah Cungkring myth, the Bang Temple myth, and the myth of Bakungan Temple, Tirta Segara Rupek Temple, Pura Dang Kahyangan Dwijendra, and Jayaprana.

From some of the literature reviews above, there are no publications and writings that discuss Malay myths, especially coastal Malays in North Sumatra. Thus, this paper intends to fill in this gap.

## **3. Research Method**

Research method used in this paper was a field research method. According to Bailey (1994) field study is a term that is often used with the term of ethnographic study (ethnographic study or ethnography). In the specifications of this study, the myths found in

the society then emphasized on the function of social myths, how far the myths affected the Malays so that the myths moved the Malays into daily social actions to form the social functions. The social function intended is to develop communal integrity, a tool of social control, to integrate shared forces that are divided for social solidarity, group identity and communal harmonization (Hasanuddin, 2010). The function implies that every society needs the myths that can support creativity in living together.

Data collection in the field was carried out by observation, interview, recount and documentation also collect the information from coastal Malay society such as Malays leaders, traditional and cultural figures, surrounding society randomly selected from children, adults, and parents or married people. This is to know where the folklore is still circulating well in the society. The collected data then analyzed to find the values and local wisdom in it.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The results and discussion from coastal Malay society in North Sumatra, as has been done in this research, such as in Batubara, Serdang Bedagai, Langkat Regency, consists of two things, the first is to explain the myths that circulate in coastal Malay society; and second, the local wisdom of the myths.

##### 4.1 Coastal Malay Myths

The myths that circulate in coastal Malay society in North Sumatra are myths they believe brought by their ancestors. However, at this time, only a few people know about the myths in circulation. When the research was conducted, only old people who were mostly aware about the myths that once existed. They said that nowadays myths are no longer relevant to young people. The technology is increasingly developing, causing people's thinking to shift from the traditional to the modern modes. People who believe in the existence of magical powers turn into believing in rationality and present-day technology.

Some coastal Malay society, especially those closer to the coastal areas, still believe in myths and still tell the children or the younger generation as learning materials. The popular myths in the coastal areas by Malays are abstinence<sup>1</sup> myths and ghost myths.

##### 4.1.1 "Pantang Larang" (abstinence myths)

The word "Pantang Larang" is already familiar to Malay people, especially in North Sumatra. "Pantang Larang" is a myth that Malay people believe related to the teachings of social behavior in the form of prohibitions on what not to do because it is believed to have a bad impact if the prohibition is violated.

The function of the myths in coastal Malay society always have the literal definition according to the statement. Here, the abstinence myths is divided by genre and age: children, adolescents, adults, and married parents. Here some of the abstinence myths that have been collected from coastal Malay society in Batubara and Langkat:

- Children who are still girls are prohibited from eating at the door. This will result in the difficulty of getting a mate for the girl.

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<sup>1</sup> In Indonesian, it is called "Pantang Larang". I only use the term 'abstinence' in English.

- Do not take a shower when nightfall. This will cause people who violate to be possessed by demon spirits. In addition, the society also believes that many wild animals will roam when it is violated.
- For pregnant women, it is forbidden to kill an animal. This applies also to the husband of the pregnant. If this is violated, something bad will happen to them or the baby in the mother's womb.
- Someone is prohibited from sitting on a pillow. If this is violated, there will be a boil disease in the area of the body that occupies the pillow.
- It is forbid to sweep on Friday nights. If this is violated, the person's sustenance will be hampered. However, if it is already done, the garbage that is swept away is simply placed behind the door or in the corner. The next day, the garbage can be disposed during the day.
- Do not ask for debt when eating. This will cause sustenance to move to other people.
- It is forbidden to borrow money on Friday night until the Friday prayer is finished.
- Do not cut nails at night. This will cause short age to the persons who forbid it.

These myths are still trusted by Malay society to this day. Their belief in the myth is not only among parents, but also for children, adolescents, adults, to parents (who are married). They believe that by following the abstinence tradition, the public will be protected from disaster. Therefore, most coastal Malay society still carry out what is stated in these myths.

#### 4.1.2 Ghost myth

Ghost myth is a term that we use to deduce the coastal Malay people's beliefs about magical elements related to "spirits" or creatures that cannot be seen with the naked eye. They believe that there are supernatural beings who live side by side with humans. Some of them believe that these ghosts can bring disaster. While others believe that the ghost can give them something they ask for.

For example, there are stories of supernatural or ghost creatures in coastal Malay communities in the Mata Pao village area, Serdang Bedagai. The myth that they believed is the appearance of the white horse and its voice which is still often heard by the local. The horse is named after the horse's sacred ("*keramat kuda*"). Furthermore, there is a myth that if someone passes from the area and throws some coins, they will be safe on the way to the destination and their sustenance will be smooth. In addition, this sacred horse has its own building site so many people believe that if someone asks for something on the site, then their wishes will come true.

Most coastal Malays believe that if there is a large banyan tree, there is a ghost who keeps it from being cut down. Some people said that they had seen a very large creature around the banyan tree. The ghost is usually called *Gondoruwo*.

The next ghost myth is when someone passes a lonely road or it is believed to be a vulnerable place, especially at night, they usually say a word "*tabik datuk*". They say that word so they should not be disturbed by the ghosts around or not in contact with these subtle spirits. If it happened, the person will suffer from fever for some time.

There is a myth near Kelang beach, Serdang Bedagai, a well called by the people with "*Sumur Tua*" (old well). The Malay believes that the well came from a past sheikh who dug a well on the beach. Usually, the water near the beach is always has a brackish taste. But not from the well. People even believe that the well can cure a person's illness.

From the myths that found on the coastal Malay society in North Sumatra, we can deduce that there are elements of daily life conducted on society also found in their myths especially the abstinence myths which has similarities to Malay society in North Sumatra.

#### 4.2 Local Wisdom of Coastal Malay Myths

From the element of myths, we can see that public trust in myths is always associated with an action and consequences that apply in society. This has its own purpose for people who believe in the myth. The belief in myths provides some values in the form of local wisdom especially in the coastal Malay society.

Local wisdom can be understood as ideas and local knowledge that are wise, full of wisdom, good value, and virtuous that are owned, guided, and carried out by members of their community. The local wisdom is the value of local culture having been applied to wisely manage the community's social order and social life (Sibarani, 2012, pp. 112-213). Thus, myths have good notion and wisdom by people who believe in them. The idea of local wisdom can be divided into two things according to their functions in society, they are education and religion.

##### 4.2.1 Education

The term "education" always relates to teaching and guidance that lead to the character and actions of a person. From the myths that have been described, the myth of coastal Malays provides some education to its society.

First, moral education. From the myths, the community both consciously and unconsciously, gives values of good and bad boundaries regarding actions, attitudes, and obligations that must be carried out by every society. The actions, attitudes, and obligations that are carried out must be accepted by the society so the other society feels comfortable and not threatened by someone's actions. For example, from the abstinence myth that prohibits someone from eating at the door. The belief of the society that the girl who eats at the door, will be difficult to get a mate. If examined further, when a person eats at the door, of course he will prevent the person who will pass through the door because the door is an entrance, not a place to eat. In addition, if it is seen by others, of course others will think that the people who eat at the door are deemed impolite because they show eating activities to people who are outside the door, especially when they eat at the front door of the house. Hence, the society connected the story with the difficulty of getting a mate. Logically, someone must be less happy to see someone sitting and eating at the door of the house.

Second, obedience. People who believe in myths, unconsciously will have an obedience character. Obedience is a behavior to obey and comply with applicable rules. For example, the myth that intends to shape the society obedience can be seen from the myth that prohibits cutting nails at night and the myth that prohibited from sitting on a pillow. These are the most adhered myths for society more than the myth of pregnant women being forbidden to kill animals.

The society's obedient to the myth caused by the consequences it produces. Logically, cutting your nails at night is a dangerous activity because there is not enough light at night so that people who cut their nails will tend to cut their nails or fingers will be injured by nail clippers if they're not be careful. Hence, do not be surprised if one of the consequences of the myth of cutting nails is short life. Furthermore, the person sitting on the pillow is banned, because logically, the pillow is a place for the head when sleeping so the pillow is not a tool used to sit.

Third, politeness. The politeness derived from the ghost myths. The belief of the people in supernatural beings or ghost around the society gives a value of politeness such as saying "*tabik datuk*" (Excuse me, progenitor) on the quiet streets at night. It is a kind of politeness towards "ghost" beings around them.

Furthermore, they also have in abstinence myths as found in Batubara. Prohibitions such as being prohibited from putting the feet above the head, prohibited use a short pants passing their parents, not talking ahead of parents while they have a conversation, not calling names to older people, are forms of politeness which mythically can have a negative impact on the perpetrators. Other myths such as being prohibited from asking for debt when eating and borrowing money on Friday nights are also forms of politeness. It is not polite if someone asks for debt when someone else is eating. Also, it is considered impolite to lend some money on a Friday night because generally every Friday night, Malay people held worship with other people.

#### 4.2.2 Religiosity

The myths also give the religious values in coastal Malay society. Actually, the value of religiosity is a further actualization of educational values. Since the entry of Islam in the archipelago, Malay society has now been identified by Islam. The wisdom in religiosity is things that foster awareness in carrying out worship in religion.

The wisdom of myths for religiosity can be seen from people's belief in the ghost myth. With the existence of ghosts as supernatural beings, as well as in Islam, that the people must believe in the unseen. This has an impact on people's attitudes such as gratitude, patience, compassion and sincerity that is recommended by religious values. People that accepted the myths as a daily activity should be a religious people because they not only applied the wisdom of myths but also obey to their faith in religion.

## 5. Conclusions

Conclusively, the coastal Malay myth in North Sumatra that is still circulating today can be used as a tool to be used as a social rules and unwritten social control. The abstinence myths and the ghost myths provide social functions and local wisdom towards coastal Malay communities in the form of moral education, obedience, politeness and religious values that influence the virtues in actions such as gratitude, patience, compassion, and also sincerity. The myths that still exist in coastal Malay society should be preserved as a legacy of past traditions.

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