

Mystic Numbers in *Sejarah Melayu*

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ABSTRAK

Spekulasi dan kepercayaan terhadap nombor-nombor yang dianggap 'ajaib' (mistik) telah wujud sejak di zaman silam dan merupakan sesuatu yang universal. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti beberapa nombor yang dianggap 'ajaib' yang terdapat dalam buku Sejarah Melayu. Juga percubaan akan dibuat untuk membincangkan kepentingan nombor-nombor ini di dalam Sejarah Melayu serta kemungkinannya kepercayaan ini boleh mempengaruhi persepsi dan pemahaman seseorang terhadap sekitaran di sekelilingnya.

ABSTRACT

Speculations on, and belief in, the mystic properties of numbers are ancient and apparently universal. This paper, in addition to highlighting the presence of mystic numbers in Sejarah Melayu, attempts to discuss their significance in this text and the possible implications of the belief in mystic numbers in shaping an individual's perception and description of reality.

MYSTIC NUMBERS IN *SEJARAH MELAYU*

*Sejarah Melayu*¹ occupies a central place in the Malay world. This is not surprising considering that this work, written at the turn of the fifteenth century, is regarded as the earliest coherent historical document of the region.² Quite significantly, however, *Sejarah Melayu* is more than just an historical document. Describing its richness, Wilkinson has been quoted as saying that the *Malay Annals* 'give us a lifelike picture of the times, reflect the mentality of the Malays and explain to us the working of Malacca government. They are the best record we have.'³ *Sejarah Melayu* has, therefore, generated a lot of interest, and has become a subject of much discussion and contention among scholars and the general public.⁴

The significance of mystic numbers in *Sejarah Melayu* and, by extension, in Malay culture seems to have escaped the focus of many discussions I have managed to see so far.⁵ This paper sets out to highlight the presence of mystic numbers in *Sejarah Melayu* as one element of the legendary aspects of this important narrative. It is hoped that this modest attempt may encourage scholars to make further inquiries into this question.

Speculations on, and belief in, the mystic properties of numbers are ancient and apparently universal. The idea of mystic numbers refers to a widespread conviction that certain numbers and their multiples have mysterious powers to influence events in a negative or positive way. The *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* says that it was Pythagoras who popularized the theoretical basis for much of this belief:

According to his theory *numbers* contained the element of all things, of the natural and spiritual worlds and of the sciences. The real numerals of the universe are the primaries one to ten and in their combination the reason of all else can be found.

Likewise, Plato is said to have 'regarded number as the essence of harmony, and harmony as the basis of the cosmos and of man, asserting that the movements of harmony "are of the same kind as the regular revolutions of our soul". Recent studies have shown that the belief in the magical properties of numbers is still very much alive today.⁶ Different societies attach mystic or sacred qualities to different sets of numbers. In the United States, for example, the most widespread mystic numbers appear to be numbers three, four and five.⁷

Available evidence seems to indicate that in *Sejarah Melayu* numbers seven and forty stand out as mystic numbers, irrespective of their mystic status in Malay culture. An abbreviated account of the places where numbers forty and seven have been used in *Sejarah Melayu* is reproduced here below:

NUMBER FORTY

- (1) PP. 15-16 Whenever Sri Tri Buana slept with a princess the princess got chloasma. This had happened to thirty nine princesses. The problem was resolved when he slept with the fortieth princess (the daughter of Demang Lebar Daun).
- (2) P. 17 Wedding festivities were celebrated for forty days and forty nights.
- (3) P. 42 heralds who were to stand on the steps leading up to the throne were forty on either side.
- (4) P. 62 Sultan Muzaffar Shah had reigned for forty years.
- (5) P. 67 Sultan Mansur Shah chose out to accompany him forty young nobles together with forty of his warriors.
- (6) P. 68 Forty creeses were given to the Raja of Malaka's suite. These were first given to the forty followers of the Raja of Daha... all forty of them were stolen.

- (7) P. 71 Thereupon he ordered that there should be feasting for forty days and forty nights.
- (8) P. 78 The cross-bars were forty in number and all of them were gilded.
- (9) P. 100 Buru at that time had a fleet of forty ships.
- (10) P. 130 Patch Adam's men fought with them until all forty of them were slain.
- (11) P. 133 He wanted forty varieties of cloth and four lengths of each variety, and each length had to have forty varieties of floral motif.
- (12) P. 141 A fleet of forty sail was accordingly made ready without a moment's delay and Sultan Abdul Jamal himself set out in pursuit of Hang Nadim.
- (13) P. 162 A fleet consisting of three carracks, eight galeasses, four long galleys and fifteen foysts. There were thus forty (sic) craft in all. (Actually $3 + 8 + 4 + 15 = 30$).
- (14) P. 175 And when he was forty days old Sultan Ala'ud-din was named by Sultan Ahmad Mahmud Shah as his successor on the throne.
- (15) P. 166 Those who were appointed to go were forty ministers of state.
- (16) P. 182 For his royal daughter in her home in Haru he provided a company of young nobles, forty men and forty women.
- (17) P. 195 (He ordered) the fleet to consist of three galeasses, two long galleys, ten foysts and twenty-five brigantines. (The total is forty).

NUMBER SEVEN

- (1) P. 17 Demang Lebar Daun then made preparations for the ceremonial lustration of Sri 'Tri Buana, and he ordered a seven-tiered bathing pavilion to be built with five spires.
- (2) P. 17 The Sri Tri Buana with his bride, Princess Wan Sendarai, were borne in procession seven times round the pavilion.
- (3) P. 22 And he sent envoys to Singapura taking with them as the customary present a wood-shaving seven fathoms long.
- (4) PP.26-27 the Raja of Kalinga commanded that this man should go to Singapura with seven ships If he defeats you, you will pay him as the stakes of the match the contents of these seven ships. But: if you defeat him, you will demand the value of the goods in the seven ships.

- (5) P.54 nor for seven days and seven nights did he allow the royal band to play, as he mourned for the Bendahara.
- (6) P. 64 I myself clung to a plank and was carried out to sea by the current of the waves. I was afloat for seven days and seven nights, without food or drink. In the nick of time I fell in with you who have treated me so kindly.
- (7) P. 65 He then initiated the day and night festivities, seven days and seven nights, for the marriage of Princess Nai Kesuma with the toddy-tapper's son.
- (8) P.77 The palace's roof had seven tiers (? with seven pinnacles).
- (9) P.80 This happened at each of the seven successive gates.
- (10) P.90 The Raja of Balului was called Mejokok and he had married seven sisters, daughters of Keraing Ditandering Jokinak. All seven princesses were consorts of the King.
- (11) P.92 "Do those in heaven abide there for ever? And do those in hell abide there for ever?" Tun Bija Wangsa was to take with him seven tahils of gold dust and two women.
- (12) P.96 "If the Raja of Malaka desire me, let him make for me a bridge of gold and a bridge of silver from Malaka to Gunong Leadang: and for a betrothal gift let there be seven trays of mosquitoes' hearts, seven trays of mites' hearts, a vat of young arecanut water, a vat of tears, a cup of the Raja's blood and a cup of his son's blood. On these conditions I approve the request of the Raja of Malaka."
- (13) P.100 Tradition has it that the Laksamana prostrated himself seven times at the feet of the Bendahara.
- (14) P.101 When Pau Glang had come to the throne he built a city so great that it encompassed seven mountains.
- (15) P.128 Bendahara Sri Maharaja would change his clothes seven times a day.
- (16) P.136 When Sultan Mahmud Shah thus heard of the death of Mahmud Shah, Raja of Pahang, for seven days the royal band was not allowed to play.
- (17) P.137 He then inaugurated the installation festivities that lasted for seven days and seven nights.
- (18) P.165 And when Sultan Ala'u'd-din was seven days old, his father had his head shaved.
- (19) P.181 Seven times a day did Sultan Hussein change his jacket and the sheath of his creese!

I indicated earlier that mystic numbers constitute one element of the legendary aspects of *Sejarah Melayu*. The term legend is used here as defined by Richard M. Dorson who says that to a folklorist:

a legend is a traditional oral narrative regarded as true by its teller and by many members of the society in which it circulates, but containing remarkable or supernatural elements that follow a pattern. The folklorist recognizes these elements as part of the great floating stock of themes and motifs in constant circulation among the peoples of the world.

The above definition is not free from difficulties. For one thing it is not clear whether legendary elements appear "remarkable or supernatural" to the indigenous folk or only to the foreigner. All the same, it would, for example, appear to me remarkable that the problem of princesses being afflicted with chloasma should happily (and politically be resolved only when Sri Tri Buana slept with the fortieth princess. In other cultures it is the seventh son who cures the King's evil. It is also remarkable that in example number nineteen above, Sultan Hussein should change his jacket seven times every day. The difficult problem, however, is to account for the origin or source of this belief.

In his attempt to trace the origin of the widespread belief in Western societies that three is a magic number, E. Tavenner endorses the views of H. Usener before him who speculated that probably their Indo-Germanic ancestors used to count on the joints of one finger and in this way numbers two and three were engraved in their consciousness and hence reflected in their folk-speech, religion, folklore and in their magic. The expression "two is company, three is a crowd" indicates that there was really a time in the past when to the ancients, "three meant an indefinitely large number, beyond the limits of the definite number system". The explanation for the decision of those ancestors to restrict themselves to counting the joints of only one finger when they had in their two hands and two legs a total of twenty fingers or for their decision to regard three and not one or two as a sacred number, is offered by neither Usener nor Tavenner.

In his famous book *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim argues that 'both in the unconscious and in the conscious numbers stand for people: family situations and relations.' He therefore considers number three as referring to the family of father, mother and child. As for the origin of this belief Bettelheim says:

Three is a mystical and often a holy number, and was so long before the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It is the threesome of snake, Eve, and Adam which, according to the Bible, makes for carnal knowledge. In the unconscious, the number three stands for sex, because each sex has three visible sex characteristics: penis and the two testes in the male; vagina and the two breasts in the female.

It is very difficult to refute or confirm Bettelheim's bold assertions. So long as Bettelheim does not reveal how he managed to discover what is hidden in the unconscious of all human beings, it would appear that he had knowledge from sources which are not accessible to some of us.

On the other hand, Alan Dundes, who has very convincingly demonstrated that American culture is trichotomic, supports Freud's claim that number three is a masculine symbol. He believes, however, that this symbol is probably a manifestation rather than a cause of trichotomy in Western civilization. He nevertheless floats the psychological idea of the male's "pregnancy envy" as the possible source of trichotomy in Western culture:

Only if one were to argue that male as opposed to female thought was trichotomized and that male thought was a compensatory activity for not being able to give birth to children as females do could one make a case for a most hypothetical origin theory. The only child a man produces is a brain child. His intellectual project serves as his "baby". His products bear his stamp, the number three, the mark of masculinity.

The above explanations, which are nothing but speculative guesses, illustrate the difficulty of establishing the origin of the belief in mystic numbers. It is equally difficult to assert with any certainty how, the belief in the mystic properties of numbers forty and seven originated in Malay society. To begin with, the fact that numbers forty and seven do figure rather prominently in *Sejarah Melayu* may not necessarily mean that these two numbers occupy the same status in Malay culture. This can only be established after a well-grounded field research about Malay folk-speech, proverbs, folk-metaphors, linguistic cliches, rituals and ceremonies. Nevertheless, available evidence, insufficient and inconclusive as it is, seems to suggest that in Malay culture numbers forty and seven are mystic.

A careful examination of Prof. Zainal Kling's celebrated work "Magical Practices in a Rural Malay Community in Sarawak" would show that numbers seven and forty do feature in Malay cultural traditions although in magical rites number three seems to figure more prominently. In Prof. Zainal Kling's description of a four-year-old boy who was lost while his father was fishing near Spinang we learn that a *seven* day mortuary rite was performed. On the *fourteenth* day (a multiple of seven) since the son's disappearance, further mortuary rites were carried out, and on the *fortieth* day another funeral ceremony was held.

It would also appear from the customs and traditions of the Malays as described by Alwi bin Sheikh Alhady that numbers three and seven are used more frequently than forty. Number forty is mentioned only with regard to the forty-four day taboo period from the day a baby is born and in

connection with the King installation ceremony in which feasting continues for forty four days and nights. The only clue given by Sheikh Alhady for the possible reasons behind the choice of number three or seven is that an even number is 'believed to bring bad luck'. If this is the case it is difficult to account for the significance of number forty. Likewise, the choice by the Malays of number eight (which is an even number) and its multiple sixteen as a royal mystic number is equally puzzling.

In *Malaysian Worldview* no mention is made about the presence or significance of mystic numbers in Malay culture. However, in his discussion about kingship, Prof. M. Taib Osman does mention in passing that according to Malay legends Sang Sapurba demonstrated his power in an extraordinary way: 'the 33 women (multiple of number three) who slept with him were all afflicted with a skin disease called *kedal*. It was the daughter of the local chief, Demang Lebar Daun, who finally became his spouse'.

In his analysis of Hindu and Islamic elements in the folk-beliefs of the Malay, Prof. M. Taib Osman says that in matters of health 'The Malay *bomoh* has learnt from popular Islamic sources that ailments can be caused by an imbalance of the four elements – fire, air, earth and water in the body, a notion traceable to the ideas borrowed by the Arabs from the Greek'. If we consider number forty as a multiple of four we may conclude that the belief in forty as a mystic number was probably introduced in Malay culture from outside. Ismail Hamid's critical scrutiny of some of the popular beliefs wrongly associated with Islam would seem to support our guess, as the following four examples quoted from his book, *The Malay Islamic Hikayat* show:

1. The Hell called "Hawiyah" is a well whose size is equivalent to the distance of walking for 70,000 years (a multiple of seven).
2. Under the world there is a gigantic bull and the earth is situated upon its horns. The bull possesses *four* horns. Each horn has 70,000 branches (a factor of forty and a multiple of seven).
3. Allah first created *seventy* men to dwell on the earth. After these men reached the age of *seventy thousand years*, all of them died (multiples of seven).
4. Allah had created a gigantic whale 'Nun'. Upon the back of this whale, Allah created a giant bull which holds the earth. Upon the back of the whale, Allah caused grass to grow as food for the bull. The whale lives on *forty* giant fish which it eats daily. The bull has horns which branch off into *four hundred* in number, and the distance from one branch to the other is equal to walking about *four hundred years* (forty and its multiples).

Belief in mystic numbers, as the above descriptions which are clearly at variance with the basic sources of Islam illustrate, may severely affect one's objectivity in perceiving and describing reality. In *Sejarah Melayu*, in our example number 13 above with reference to Number Forty the author gives the total of a fleet as forty whereas the total was actually thirty. In view of the predominance of number forty as a mystic number in *Sejarah Melayu*, to explain this discrepancy as merely an inadvertent arithmetical error is to miss the point about the insidious nature of cultural patterning. Deep-seated cultural beliefs tend to mould or at least influence an individual's perception of the world around him. A famous anthology of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), compiled by Imam Nawawi is invariably titled *An Nawawi's Forty Hadith* although in actual fact the collection has forty-two Hadith. It is not a question of oversight, rather in this case mathematical accuracy has consciously been sacrificed for the sake of retaining the "recognised number of Forty" in the title at least.

Likewise, Alan Dundes has demonstrated that the widespread folk-belief in the sacredness of number three in American culture has also crept into many supposedly academic, analytical categories. And according to the earlier referred to *Encyclopedia of Religion* Adolf Hitler's regime was at least the fourth German State historically speaking not the Third Reich as is popularly believed. Here again is an example of how a deep-rooted belief in the mystic properties of number three has overwhelmed and overthrown historical accuracy. The same reference has suggested that the dominance of number seven in the naming of aeroplanes as Boeing 707, 747 and so on does probably, reflect an unconscious attachment to the positive mystic qualities of this number.

The widespread belief in mystic numbers is part of cultural patterning and as such may have far-reaching implications in terms of shaping an individual's perception and description of reality. Any measure of awareness of the various forces at work in this patterning may hopefully enable one to attain a corresponding measure of objectivity in one's understanding of the external world.

CONCLUSION

Belief in the mystic properties of numbers is virtually universal with different cultural groupings adopting more or less different sets of mystic numbers. In *Sejarah Melayu* numbers seven and forty seem to stand out as mystic numbers at least as far as this particular text is concerned. The question as to whether with respect to mystic numbers the *Sejarah Melayu* does significantly reflect the cultural beliefs and practices of the Malays today can only be settled after a comprehensive field research.

Though inconclusive, available evidence at this point seems to strengthen the hypothesis that to the Malays, numbers three, seven and forty are probably mystic.

In this study we have managed to trace neither the origin of this belief nor the rationale behind the choice of numbers seven and forty. There are, however, some clues which seem to indicate that probably the adoption of numbers seven and forty came with the introduction into the Malay society of popular (as opposed to authentic) teachings of Islam from outside.

Whatever its original source, the belief in mystic numbers in any society is part of a large corpus of built-in cultural cognitive categories which are normally and in most cases unconsciously imparted to members of a given society. These built-in cultural categories play an important part in the internal processes and dynamics involved in the shaping of the perceptions, wishes and attitudinal predispositions of human beings, forces which can impair objectivity. In other words, human beings have an amazing capacity to distort observations of social reality to make them conform to their complex multi-dimensional belief configurations.

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NOTES

1. In this paper I have depended on an English translation edited by C.C. Brown, *Sejarah Melayu or Malay Annals* (Kuala Lumpur: OUP, 1970). All page references are to this edition.
2. See for example C. Mary Turnbull, *A Short History of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei* (Singapore: Graham Brash 1981) p. 9.
3. As quoted by R.O. Winstedt, "Malay Chronicles from Sumatra and Malaya" in *Historians of South East Asia* edited by D.G.E. Hall (London: OUP, 1961) p. 26.
4. *Sejarah Melayu* is often discussed or referred to in newspaper articles. Some of the recent ones include A. Kadir Ahmad, "Usah perkecil *Sejarah Melayu*" in *Berita Harian* 28/11/1992 p. 21, M. Jusoff Taib, "Mengapa hina Abdullah Munshi?" in *Berita Harian* 14/12/1992 p.20, Dr Siddiq Fadzil, "Agama dan Kekebalan takhta" in *Berita Minggu* 13/12/1992 p. 11, and Anak Jati Penang, "Let's not go back to the ancient times" in *New Straits Times* 14/12/1992 p. 11.
5. Since I do not as yet have a firm grasp of the Malay Language, this observation refers only to discussions available in English.

6. See for example Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* Vol. 11 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) pp. 13-19.
7. See Alan Dundes, "The Number Three in American Culture" in *Analytic Essays in Folklore* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975) and Robert H. Lowie, "Five as a Mystic Number" in *American Anthropologist* vol. 27 (1925) p. 578.

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