

Syair Alif Ba Ta: The Poet and His Mission

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ABSTRAK

Syair Alif Ba Ta terdiri daripada 72 rangkap yang ditulis dalam huruf Jawi dan Roman, sebelah menyebelah. Dalam puisi ini, penulis yang tidak dikenali namanya, telah memulakan setiap rangkap syair dengan kata yang bermula dengan huruf A. Seperti penulis lain semasa, beliau mengatakan dia seorang petualang yang tidak mempunyai harta. Namun, beliau sedar bahawa ilmu yang berguna harus dikembangkan. Beliau memuji Allah dan mengingatkan pembaca bahawa Allah telah menganugerahi kita fikiran yang seharusnya digunakan dengan bijak. Berbekalkan ilmu, kita tidak mudah tertipu. Secara umum, syair ini mudah difahami.

Kata kunci: Budi bahasa, nasihat, ilmu, Malay language

ABSTRACT

Syair Alif Ba Ta comprises of 72 verses in Jawi and Romanized scripts, side by side. In this work, the unknown writer used the letter A to begin the first word in each verse. As the other writer then, he referred to himself as a poor vagabond with nothing to call his own. But, he was aware that useful knowledge should be spread. He cited praises to God and reminded the readers that God has given us a mind that should be used intelligently. With knowledge, one cannot be easily fooled. Generally the syair makes good reading and understanding.

Key words: good characters, advice, knowledge, bahasa Melayu

INTRODUCTION

A text may not have only one 'real' meaning, but that does not suggest that anything goes and that any interpretation of a text or work of art is as good as any other (Berger 1995: 25).

The above approach is applicable in analysing the *Syair Alif Ba Ta* in which poet is anonymous. The text which was written in the Jawi and Romanised scripts had been clearly written and such a highly organized manner that one can presume that the poet was an expert in the field of writing. He was such an

apt and meticulous person that he wrote both the Jawi and Romanized scripts side by side.

The *syair* comprises of 72 verses, with two types of scripts written side by side: the Jawi scripts on the left, whilst the Romanized script on the right (Figure 1). The spelling used in the Romanized script indicates that the *syair* was written during the Dutch rule in Indonesia. The spelling used is the old Indonesian spelling, e.g *itu* had been spelt as *itoe*. This is further supported by the fact that it had been written in 1893 when A.L. Hasfeit was the Resident Adminstrator in Riau. This means that the *syair* was written not during the life-time of Raja Ali Haji, i.e. between the years 1809 and 1870, but it was written 29 years after his death. Despite after 29 years' lapse of time, the *syair* was still a popular form of poetry that became vehicle of channelling words of advice. This form of poetry is maintained until this day and it is most evident in the lyrics of a present-day song entitled *Joget Manusia Moden* (Dance of the Modern Man) sung by Ramli Sarip and Khatijah Ibrahim, although its traditional structure is somehow questionable.

Pernah aku berangan-angan menjadi orang kaya,
 Punya harta, merata-rata sebuah dunia,
 London, Paris dan Amerika tempatku bercanda,
 Pergi ke mana aku suka, pakai apa saja, hidup dalam bahagia.

Translation

I once dreamed of becoming a rich man,
 With wealth scattered all over the land,
 London, Paris, America my playing wonderland,
 Go anywhere I wish, wear anything I please, happiness without an end.

FORMATION OF THE SYAIR

There are a few opinions regarding the origins of the *syair*, namely:

1. It originated from the Arabia-Persia region.
2. Although it originated from the Arabia-Persia region, the form is a creation of the Malays themselves.
3. It had existed in Malacca since the 15th century.
4. It was also written by Hamzah Fansuri (Syed Naguib Al-Attas 1970) and later on became popular.

Hamzah Fansuri is regarded as the pioneer of Malay Syair, but is often debateable. Syed Naquib Al-Attas (1971) once made a statement that Hamzah

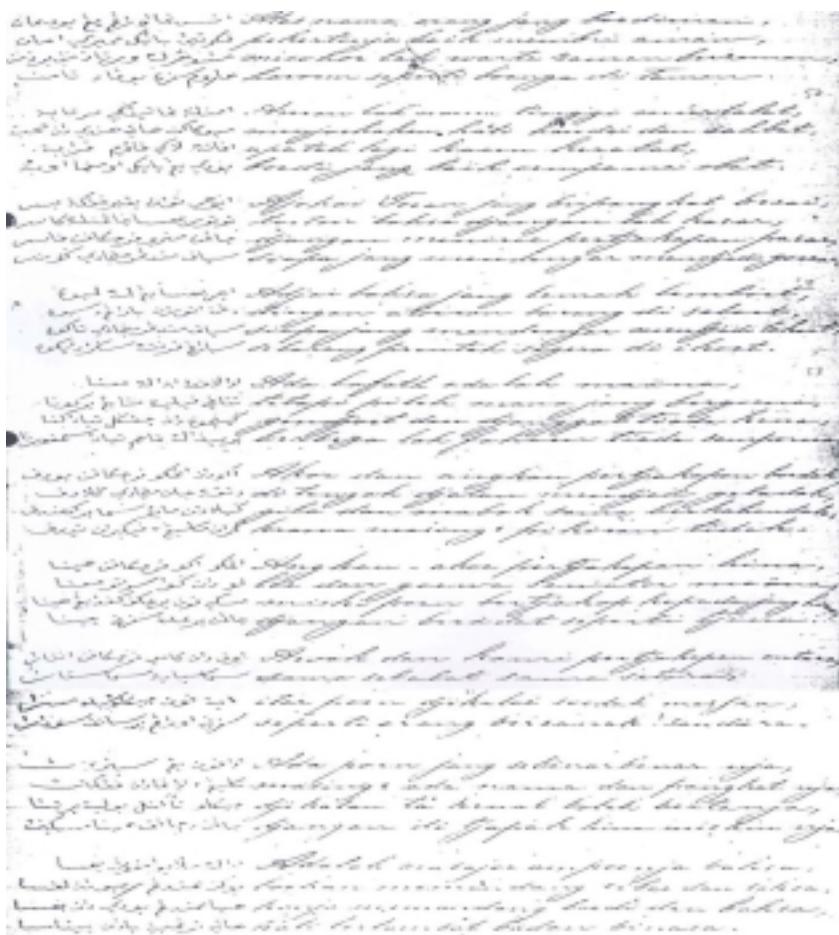


FIGURE 1. Example of the *syair* written side by side: the Jawi scripts on the left, whilst the Romanized script on the right

wrote his *syair* based on his vast knowledge of the Arab-Parsi poetry. The term *syair* was coined by him who aware of the form of the *shi'r* in the Arab-Persian language. These differences in opinion had been put forth by scholars such as Hooykaas (1950), Teeuw (1966) and Sweeney (1971). But, most important is the fact that *syair* had been used as a medium for expressing ideas and stories. This is because *syair* has certain characteristics that attract poets to utilise this form of poetry.

1. It is made up of 4 lines.
2. It is categorised as a word verse.
3. The rhyming scheme ends with a, a, a, a.
4. All the four lines constitute one idea.
5. Every line has a pause which is marked by a comma, like in *pantun*.
6. Every line of syair is followed by subsequent verses which together form the complete message intended by writer.

Because composing a syair only requires the last sound of each line to rhyme, it is not surprising to find that even children can compose syair for their games. For example:

Tak mahu sudah,	You refuse – no worry,
Kau kawin dengan Bedah,	To Bedah you will be married,
Kau beranak anak gajah,	You will baby an elephant,
Tempat kau di Kedah.	Kedah is where you'll be.

The set structure of the syair made the writer of *Alif Ba Ta* felt that it was the most suitable medium to express his ideas. The letter Alif is used to show its singleness and the first in the Jawi alphabets. Alif is also connected to God as the *Al Khaliq*, the creator. In this syair, the writer used the letter A to begin the first word in each verse. Could this be the reason why he used letter Alif as the title of this syair?

INTRODUCTION OF THE SYAIR

Verses 1 – 5 are merely introduction to the writer's intentions, in humble expression such as in verse 1 :

1. Awal syair Alif Ba Ta,
Dikarangkan oleh fakir yang lata,
Menghiburkan hati sangat bercinta,
Miskin tidak menaruh harta.

Translation

1. As the beginning of Alif Ba Ta,
Written by a poor vagabond no better,
To entertain is the main factor,
Nothing to call my own doesn't matter.

The writer's humble stance is often encountered at the introductions of classical literary works. The writer never feels that he is most brilliant so as to be

able to produce such work. What is most important is that his work is appreciated by the public. This was the main factor why *Sejarah Melayu* was written, solely with the hope that the descendants of the Malay race would recognise their roots and feel proud of their heritage.

That I had requested the Prime Minister to record the procedures and ceremonies of the Maly Rulers so that they will be herd by our children and those after us and that every word be understood. So that they will bebenefit from it (*Sejarah Melayu*, edition Shellabear: 1977: 3).

It was the same factor that moved the writer of *Alif Ba Ta*. He was most concerned that his vision was known by his readers, even though he was still unsure if his writing was right or not, as in the verse:

2. Ada pun terkarang syair,
Hamba duduk seorang berfikir,
Jangan sia-sia duduk membazir,
Bolehlah dibaca orang yang mahir.
3. Adalah karangan bukan cerita,
Boleh dibuat cermin mata,
Jikalau datang hati bercinta,
Bacalah tuan supaya nyata.
4. Apa yang tersebut Alif dimulakan,
Di bawah ini hamba huraikan,
Entahlah ya entahlah bukan,
Jikalau salah tuan maafkan.

Translation

2. As to why the syair I'm writing,
While I sit alone and thinking,
Time that I should not be wasting,
Something to be read by those thinking.
3. A story it's not- just a fiction,
Thay may be used on reflection,
Should you develop any affection,
Do read on for satisfaction.
4. Alif unfolds what I have to say,
As we go along if I may,
I may be aye it may be nay,
For my mistakes-your forgiveness I pray.

Such uncertainty made the writer assume the position of a person who was not very knowledgeable. Perhaps by assuming such a stance, the writer can be excused should there be oppositions to his views. However, there were classical Malay work in which the writer took pride in his ancestry, as in *Sejarah Melayu*.

...setelah fakir mendengar demikian, jadi beratlah atas anggota fakir Allazi murakkabun ‘ala jahili ‘ala jahil-Tuan Muhammad namanya, Tun Sri lanang Timang-timangan, Paduka Raja gelarnya, Bendahara anak orang Kaya paduka Raja, cucu Bendahara Sri Maharaja, cicit bendahara Tuan Narawangsa, piut Bendahara Sri Maharaja, Anak Sri Nara Diraja Tun Ali, anak baginda Mani Purindam Qaddasallahu Sirrahum, Melayu bangsanya dari Bukit Seguntang Maha Miru Malakat, negerinya Batu Sawar Darul Salam (*Sejarah Melayu*, edisi Shellabear 1977: 2).

Translation

...after hearing that, it became heavy upon the person who is indeed very ignorant with the name Tun Muhammad, nicknamed Tun Sri Lanang, titled Paduka Raja, Prime Minister and son of the rich Paduka Raja, grandson of prime Minister Sri Maharaja, great-grandson of Prime Minister Tun Narawangsa, great-great Tun Ali, son of His Highness Mani Purindam Qaddallahu Sirrahum, of the Malay race from Bukit Seguntang Maha Miru Malakat, the state of Batu Sawar Darus Salam.

By listing out his ancestry, the writer only intended to show that he was no ordinary person and that he had close connections with the royalties. Consciously, he was proving his responsibility in his work. In this context, the writer positioned himself as a third party who cast aside his personal interests for the sake of his work. Here is a similarity with the writer of *Alif Ba Ta*, though hiding his ancestral lineage, the readers can ultimately make an inference that he was a person who was sensitive to the struggle of his people. In his *syair*, the writer placed much emphasis advising his people to be more cautious in dealing with daily life.

The writer's humbleness is evident when he referred to himself as a poor vagabond with nothing to call his own. Traditional writers often depicted themselves as being poor and this is exemplified by the writer of *Sejarah Melayu* itself. Indirectly, the writer of *Alif Ba Ta* was influenced by the ‘vogue’ notion that traditional writing was common property they inherited, wrote and heard from the past. Poverty is often associated with materialism. On the other hand, these writers were rich with conscience and knowledge that could be broadcast. The writer was aware that useful knowledge should be spread and not to be concealed and confined to himself only to be used as a means to build his ego and to belittle everyone else.

GODLINESS

The writer's awareness of his subject matter is very evident in the first four verses and he proceeded with its connection to the concept of godliness as is evident in verses 6-10

6. Alif itu huruf yang tunggal,
Selamanya ia berdiri kekal,
Huruf yang lain tiada boleh membatal,
Alif juga yang memberi afdhal.
7. Alif berupa angka satu,
Sekalian huruf ia membantu,
Jikalau tiada Alif sekutu,
Sekalian diperbuat tiada tentu.
8. Alif itu huruf pertama,
Huruf yang lain tiada sama,
Allah Taala disebut nama,
Alif juga awal menjelma.
9. Awal Alif menyebut Tuhan,
Huruf yang lain bersalah-salahan,
Allah kurniakan mudah-mudahan,
Fikir dan Akal jangan berjauhan.
10. Habis ini tersebut itu,
Dari huruf Alif karangan tentu,
Jikalau datang berhati mutu,
Bacalah tuan satu persatu.

Translation

6. Alif is alone letter,
It will remain forever,
No letter can erase it ever,
Alif also connotes things better.
7. Alif looks like the number one,
Helping other letters like the shining sun,
Without Alif together in the run,
Nothing can ever get done.

8. Alif is the first alphabet,
Other letters are differently set,
Allah Almighty as the name is said,
Alif is there first as you've bet.
9. Alif comes first when mentioning the Creator,
It can't be done by any other letter,
Hopefully Allah will bless us better,
With good mind and thoughts that to go together.
10. There is all that is to say,
About Alif that forms this essay,
Have an interest if you may,
Read it with care is all I pray.

The connection between Man and God is not very clear in the Javanese alphabets, as in the concept of *Pamoring Kawula lan Gusti*. The work referred to is a part of the Javanese spiritual concepts which stresses on the harmony and balance in the relationship between Man as slave and God as Creator, the vertical relationship being that with God whilst the horizontal relationship is that between the individual (ego) and the rest of the world including other fellow human. Nevertheless, the writer of this *syair* was able to show that Alif is the first alphabet in the Jawi script that a Muslim uses to relate the connection with God. This is directly connected to the words Alif and Allah themselves.

The traditional approach employed by the writer is also obvious as see in verses 6 – 10 whereby he cited praises to God and reminded the readers that God has given us a mind that should be used intelligently when he wrote “*Hopefully Allah will bless us better, with good mind and thoughts that go together*”. Indirectly, the writer tried to convey his message, a message that could only be understood by readers who exercise thinking. After verse 10, the reader will be taken by surprise that the following verses no longer connect man to God, but to the Dutch Resident that was ruling Riau at that time, i.e. the year 1893, as seen in verses 11 – 24.

11. A. L. Van Hasfeit Sri Paduka,
Residen Riau ini ketika,
28 Juni Arbaa hari yang ketiga,
Tahun 1800 sembilan puluh tiga.
12. Alif bermula nama Yang Di Pertuan,
Seri Paduka pangkat bangsawan,
Firasatnya baik sukar dilawan,
Memerintah negeri sangat ketahuan.

13. Aturan perintah dengan sempurna,
Oleh Seri Paduka yang bijaksana,
Di Tanjung Pinang diam di istana,
Selalu melawat ke sini sana.
14. Antero tempat habis dikomosi,
Di dalam Riau ampunya Residensi,
Laut dan Darat apa yang berisi,
Faedah mencari keuntungan bersiri.
15. Akhtiarnya banyak Seri Paduka Residen,
Tambahhan usaha dengannya rajin,
Di dalam dienst Seri Paduka Gavermin,
Sekalian pekerjaannya sangat yakin.
16. Ahli sungguh Tuan Van Hasfeit,
Patutlah ia orang berasal,
Banyak pengetahuan dengan berakal,
Apa pekerjaannya semua berpasal.
17. Afdal sungguh menjadi raja,
Aturan perintah bagai dipuja,
Anak negeri semuanya manja,
Apatah lagi yang menjabat kerja.
18. Alat bahasanya Seri Paduka,
Bersabda dengan bermanis muka,
Semuanya orang berhati suka,
Takut dan gentar ada belaka.
19. Alat santun ada padanya,
Meninggikan darjat nama pangkatnya,
Istimewa pula perangai tabiatnya,
Memberi gemar sahabat handainya.
20. Atas ehwal Seri Paduka,
Tidaklah dapat hamba hendak reka,
Jikalau tersalah janganlah murka,
Mintak ampun sepanjang ketika.
21. Allah Rahim hamba pohonkan,
Doa hamba harap kabulkan,
Seri Paduka residen disejahterakan,
Usia dan umurnya barang dilanjutkan.

22. Anak isteri demikian juga,
Serta sekalian kaum keluarga,
Senantiasa dalam bersuka,
Janganlah kiranya mendapat duka.
23. Amin mengucap syukur hambamu tuan,
Selamat sejahtera mudah-mudahan,
Sepanjang umur dalam kelimpahan,
Sihat dan afiat dengan kemudahan.
24. Antara yang lain pulak disebutti,
Mensajakkan syair tidak seperti,
Bukan ada nasihat yang dituruti,
Hanyalah yang terbit daripada hati.

Translation

11. L Van Hasfeit His Excellency,
Resident of Riau it was he,
Wednesday 28 June the third day be,
The year 1800 and ninety-three.
12. Life begins the name of the man,
His Excellency's the rank of this nobleman,
His vision so clear unmatched in the land,
Ruling the country with an able hand.
13. A land governed with excellence,
By His excellency the Resident,
At Tanjung Pinang is his Residence,
Visiting the regions he does often.
14. All nooks in the country are commissioned,
In Riau thre is a Resident,
On land and in sea nothing is abandoned,
Continuing prosperity is most evident.
15. Arduous efforts by His Excellency the Resident,
Added by the conscience to be diligent,
Carrying the office of the goverment,
Administering with confidence and commitment.

16. And Van Hasfeit is truly an able man,
His special position anyone can understand,
The wealth of knowledge of this intelligent man,
There must be a purpose for every job he sent.
17. An honour indeed to be a king,
Whose goverment everyone is praising,
A comforable life everyone's enjoying,
And more so those with titles holding.
18. A man with manners most refined,
Speaking with charm you'll always find,
Everyone is happy but bear in mind,
The fear that keeps lingering behind.
19. Always refined with kind disposition,
Upholding the dignity of his position,
A special trait worthy of mention,
Is his popularity among all relation.
20. As to the decription of the Resident,
There is nothing more to be written,
Don't be angry if I've mistaken,
For evermore I beg your pardon.
21. Allah's blessings are all I'm seeking,
May all my prayers He'll be fulfilling,
That His Excellency will continue living,
A good and long life with all His blessing.
22. Also for his wife and chlidren,
And not forgetting all relation,
Always remain in a happy position,
Protected from all evil creation.
23. Amen- the prayers are said,
Peace and happiness have been prayed,
May long life and good health be laid,
For His Excellency in the years ahead.
24. As for other things that I have to say,
In this humble little essay,
It's not an advice to guide your way,
Just a sincere expression if I may.

From the above writings, it is obvious that the writer is overwhelmed by the Resident's demeanour that he is willing to pray for the good life of the Resident and his family. What the writer had done was common practice among writers of those days whereby they would often idolise the king as the ruler, apart from hoping for the latter's blessings by virtue of the 'special power' that the kings were deemed to have. The writing style of the writer of *Alif Ba Ta* bears similarities to that used by Abdullah Munshi in his book *Hikayat Abdullah*:

And the stature of Raffles as I saw it was of medium build. Neither tall nor short, neither fat nor thin. His forehead was wide, a sign that he was a man with foresight. His head was round, protruding to the front, sign of being perfect and intelligent. His hair was blonde/brown in indicating courage...and when he walked, he seemed to stoop a little (*Hikayat Abdullah, edisi Datuk Besar & Roolvink* 1953: 74).

He was full of praise for Raffles and held the latter in such high esteem to the extent that every facet of Raffles was given fascinating interpretation (*Hikayat Abdullah* 1953: 74). He was so fascinated by Raffles' personality even though the latter obviously had the interest of the colonial masters. The writer of this *syair* shared the same sentiment as Abdullah Munshi.

In the preamble of classical literary works, it was imperative upon the writer to offer praise to God and the king and the same approach was employed by the writer of this *syair*. He was full of praise for A. L. Van Hasfeit, not fault was mentioned. Did he have a special motive for doing so, or was it out of pure sincerity?

ADVICE

Besides singing praises, the *Syair Alif Ba Ta* carries a mission, i.e. advise the readers. Almost 80% of its content are in the form of advice, beginning from verse 25. This is indeed in accordance with the actual function of *syair* as a medium for advice. The advice put forth focuses on the use of one's mind which is evident at the beginning of the *syair*. Among others, the writer expressed:

24. Adapun kita sekalian makhluk,
Mencari fikiran mana yang elok,
Tajamkan akal seperti golok,
Jangan tanjung dikata teluk.

Translation

24. As His creation that are we,
To choose the best opinion as can be,
Sharpen your mind like a knife it will be,
A cape and a bay the difference you'll see.

In the above verse, the writer likens a sharp mind to a knife or other implement used by man. Hence, knife is used to symbolise the mind. There is a Malay saying that ‘If the blunt edge of the machete could be sharpened, what more the mind of Man?’

God has endowed Man with a mind to think intelligently and to use it as a tool in seeking knowledge as in:

25. Ayuhai tuan ayuhai encik,
Cari pengetahuan mana yang baik,
Tuntutlah ilmu mana yang baik,
Walau buruk menjadi molek.

Translation

25. All ye gentlemen and everyone,
Seek the best knowledge under the sun,
Go seek the one you have yet none,
Use it wisely – it can be done.

With knowledge, one cannot be easily fooled and he will be able to tell differences, as the writer said, “A cape and a bay the diffrence you’ll see”. The writer emphasized the importance of knowledge in life and it is in accordance with the Islamic call to seek knomledge even one has to go to China. In this context, the writer was also aware that Islam stresses on knowledge as in the first surah of the Qur'an that was revealed by Allah, *Iqra'* or “Read!”. The writer’s advice becomes more evident in the folowing verses:

28. Apabila orang sempurna akal,
Kehidupannya senang mencari modal,
Kemudian harinya diperbuat bekal,
Tidak janji ia menyesal.
29. Adapun akan orang yang bebal,
Berlainan dengan orang yang berakal,
Sebarang perbuatannya tiada kekal,
Akhirnya dia bersauh tunggal.

Translation

28. A man with a sound mind,
A good life he will find,
To his future it will bind,
Regretful he'll be if he left in behind.

29. As for him whose mind is slow,
 He's apart from the one with mind on the go,
 To everything he does the winds will blow,
 Alas he remains a lonely fellow.

In 1893, the writer was already aware of the importance of knowledge and that it was only with a sound knowledge that a man could improve his status. The *Syair Alif Ba Ta* was written almost 100 years ago and the Malay community had already acknowledged the importance of knowledge then. Even to this day the Malay community still voices the same slogan. Thus, in the national philosophy for education, it is stated that:

...it is continuing effort towards developing the potential of individuals holistically and in an integrated manner so that the end-product will be individuals who are harmoniously balanced intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically based on the belief and obedience to God. This is an effort to produce Malaysians with knowledge, skill, good character, responsibility and ability to support themselves and be able to contribute to the harmony and prosperity of the nation and the country (*National Educational Philosophy* 1988: 6).

The writer was also aware that without good character, a knowledgeable person will not lead a balanced life. Knowledge alone cannot guarantee a life of dignity if there is no emphasis on spiritual development. This is clearly seen in the following:

31. Ada orang sempurna budi,
 Sebarang pekerjaan boleh menjadi,
 Akalnya baik tiada keji,
 Barang ke mana mendapat puji.
-

42. Akhmak itu ertinya malas,
 Boleh juga disebut culas,
 Perangainya orang tiada ikhlas,
 Menjadi pekerjaannya tiada jelas.
-

46. Adapun harta ribu dan laksa,
 Yang telah dikumpulkan sentiasa,
 Sekaliannya itu habis binasa,
 Nama yang baik tinggal sentosa.

47. Ada seperti perbahasan orang,
 Gajah mati meninggalkan tulang,
 Harimau mati meninggalkan belang,
 Manusia mati meninggalkan nama cemerlang.

48. Adalah cemerlang itu seperti cahaya,
Yang menentukan rupanya dia,
Walaupun terbenam di dalam paya,
Tiada suatu memberi bahaya.
49. Atas nama orang yang budiman,
Pekertinya baik memberi aman,
Mashorlah warta zaman berzaman,
Harum seperti bunga di taman.
50. Amanlah nama tinggi mertabat,
Menyukakan hati handai dan sahabat,
Apatah lagi kaum kerabat,
Budi yang baik umpama ubat.

Translation

31. All those good character,
Successful they'll whatever they're after,
With a sound mind they will not falter,
Only praises for their endeavor.
.....
42. “Akhmak” is a word which means lazy,
“Culas” can also a substitude be,
A man without sincerity,
For all he does there's no clarity.
.....
46. A wealth of thousands and more,
Piled up till now from before,
All will vanish for sure,
Only a good name remains for evermore.
47. And there's also the common saying,
The elephant dies-his bones leaving,
The tiger dies-his stripes remaining,
Only the good name of a man will be lingering.
48. And his good deeds are like the light,
That shows his form as bright as daylight,
Though buried in swamp that's dark as the night,
Nothing could ever give hin a fright.

49. As for the man who's always pleasant,
 Kindness he shows to every person,
 His name remembered for generations,
 Like a flower with heavenly fragrance.
50. A name that's held in high esteem,
 Pleasing everyone you can ever dream,
 Specially do those close to him,
 His kindness is medicine to them it seem.

When discussing good character (*budi*), the writer was aware that it was incomplete if no reference was made to the communications aspect (*bahasa*). The communications aspect is not confined only to verbal expression between two individuals or two groups, but it also implies attitude and behaviour. In the *Syair Alif Ba Ta*, the writer also expressed a few verses on this aspect:

51. Ayuhai tuan berpangkat besar,
 Tutur kata janganlah kasar,
 Jangan meniru percakapan pasar,
 Siapa mendengar menjadi gusar.
52. Ajar bahasa yang lemah lembut,
 Dengan aturan barang disebut,
 Siapa mendengar menjadi takut,
 Sebarang perintah segera diikut.
-
54. Engkau dan aku percakapan hina,
 Lu dan gua suatu makna,
 Meski pun bercakap kepada yang hina,
 Jangan beradat seperti Cina.

Translation

51. A man like you all your power,
 Rudeness should never be with you ever,
 Avoid talking that isn't clever,
 Good relations you might sever.
52. And teach the language that is refined,
 For everything the right word you find,
 Whoever hears will bear in mind,
 To excuse quickly with nothing behind.

53. “Engkau” and “Aku” are crude by nature,
 “Lu” and “Gua” are no good either,
 Though speaking to someone lesser,
 Don’t ape the chinese and their culture.

The Chinese was referred to in this *syair* so that their attitude will not be aped by the Malays. This is in relation to the history of the Chinese migrants in this region. They had come to this region with the purpose of raking in wealth, and there is a lot of historical record to support this:

They sell anything that can tempt the native to buy, manufaturized wares and ready-made clothing, drug, and chemicals for dyeing, and with all sorts of nation. Some come to the market with bags of copper coins to buy the native produce, and some do not appear at all, but wait from the early dawn at convenient crossroads to forestall the market by buying up the articles that are being carried there for sale... (Clive 1975: 363).

Until today, the attitude of the Chinese has been likened to that of the Jews in Medieval Europe, i.e. in making money the ultimate objective in their life. The writer concern was expressed in this *syair* so that the readers could appreciate the writer’s sensitivity towards his people.

CONCLUSION

The *Syair Alif Ba Ta*, in actuality covers some aspects related to the development of the individual, viz. Knowledge, good deeds (*budi*) and good communications (*bahasa*). These three aspects can be simplified as two important prerequisites in any individual, i.e the physical and spiritual factors.

58. Adalah Melayu empunya bahasa,
 Bukan memandang ribu dan laksa,
 Hanya memandang budi dan bahasa,
 Hati terlambat badan binasa.
59. Ampunya bahasa orang Melayu,
 Ibarat seperti daun kayu,
 Ada yang segar ada yang layu,
 Ada yang bagar ada yang bayu.
60. Ada makna sekalian bahasa,
 Percakapan senangi tidak terasa,
 Tetapi bila kurang periksa,
 Tersalah sedikit boleh binasa.

Translation

58. And the Malays it is their culture,
 Thousands and billions are not the measure,
 Only good deeds and manners they treasure,
 When the heart is won nothing's left for sure.
59. As for the culture of the Malay,
 It's like the leaves if I may say,
 Some are healthy while others decay,
 Some are rough while others gently sway.
60. All language bear a meaning,
 Good conversation can never sting,
 But when no care is taken when speaking,
 A slight mistake and you'll be sinking.

In the final verses of the *syair*, it is said that Malay language had been used as the *lingua franca* by a number of races in Riau.

66. Ibarat hendak berjual beli,
 Tawar menawar suku dan tali,
 Bahasa sendiri tidak perduli,
 Bahasa Melayu juga yang ghali.

70. Itu sebab Melayu hairan,
 Holanda, Inggeris, Melayu bertuturan,
 Rupanya dipandang tidak bertukaran,
 Hanya masanya berlainan aturan.

Translation

66. As in the process of selling and buying,
 For every measure you'll be bargaining,
 Their mother tongues will not be sounding,
 Only in Malay will they be speaking.
70. And the Malay is Surprised by the occasion,
 Dutch, English and Malay in conversation,
 The form of which has no alteration,
 Only when time changes the expression.

Generally, the *Syair Alif Ba Ta* makes good reading and understanding even though its content does not live up to its title. The writer of this syair was full of awareness that by using the title as a gimmick, he could attract the attention of the readers who might appreciate his writing. Can the Malays preserve the Malay culture to the extent that it will always be in focus and be discussed from time to time?

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