

Budi as the Malay Mind

Research >
Southeast Asia

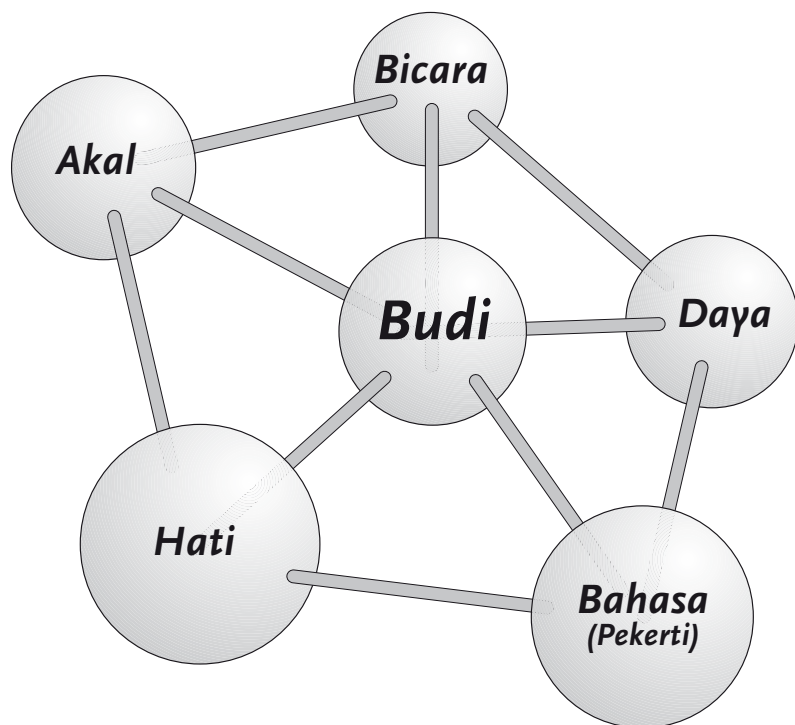
The word 'budi' originated from the Sanskrit word 'buddhi', which means wisdom, understanding, or intellect. A *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* defines the meaning of *buddhi* as 'the power of forming and retaining conceptions and general notions, intelligence, reason, intellect, mind, discernment, judgment...' (Monier-Williams 1956:733). However, once this word was accepted as part of the Malay vocabulary, its meaning was extended to cover ethics as well as intellect and reason, in order to accommodate the culture and thinking of the Malays.

By Lim Kim-Hui

Budi now carries many nuances of meanings in the Malay world view and plays a pivotal role in every aspect of Malay life. It can mean intellect, as shown by the phrase *akal budi*, meaning 'common sense' or 'healthy mind'. It can also carry the meaning of kindness or virtue, as shown in the last two lines of the famous *pantun*: *Pisang emas bawa belayar/ masak sebiji di atas peti/ hutang emas dapat dibayar/ hutang budi dibawa mati* ('Sail away with a bunch of bananas/ one ripe fruit remains on the box/ Debts of money we can repay/ Debts of kindness, we take to the grave' (Sim 1987:30)). Commonly, however, it can be denoted as 'moral behaviour' or 'moral character/action', like *budi pekerti*. It can also be understood as 'discretion' or 'good judgement with flexibility', when used in conjunction with *akal* (mind) and *hati* (feelings) and as reflected in *budi bicara*. *Budi* should also contribute to the practical aspect, in the form of *budi daya*. Overall, when we deal with the mind of the Malay, it is the 'budi and its networks' that determine their thinking (judgement), their moral attitudes, their goodness, and how an argument should be presented. Pure *budi* can be led astray if not guided by the ethical aspect of *budi*. It should be noted that *budi* can also mean *akal* (mind) (*dl arti kecerdikan menipu atau tipu daya*) (*Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* 1991:150), as in *bermain budi*, 'to deceive' by using the intelligence of mind, which is rather rhetorical in terms of argumentation. Rhetorical, in this context, refers to the common and popular meaning of rhetoric, which is normally considered as empty and abstract, flowery without content. The Malay mind develops through a spectrum of *akal budi* and *hati-budi*, which encompass 'mind-emotion-moral-goodness-practicality' in their scales of decision-making. A wise person, *budiman*, should be thoughtful, considerate (*berhati perut*, literally means 'has liver and stomach', normally means 'not cruel in decision'), and of good conduct, and his decision should be an enlightened and practical one that helps society towards prosperity. In order to understand the Malays' thinking and their argumentation, we should, therefore, bear in mind that their purpose of argumentation is to ultimately search for truth, goodness, and beauty.

The goodness of the good

In order to resolve conflicts between various civilizations and tolerate the differences that arise in this cultural and political setting, the Malay-Indonesian world has indeed tried to synthesize various positive values (*akal budi*, *hati budi*, *budi pekerti* etc.), these values later being crystalized into a greater molecular ideal of *budi* (fig. 1). At this stage, we can perhaps call the Malay philosophy eclecticism. *Budi*, to the Malay mind, is not an atomistic component but rather a molecule. It can be



Molecularization of the Budi

observed but cannot be fully broken down, as these components are always interconnected and intertwined, even if we were to present them in a scientific laboratory under the study of logical or emotional chemistry. This molecule of *budi* and the concept of *budiman* (wise person/sage) reminded me of what we can see in the *Confucian Analects* as interpreted by Fung Yu-lan (1976:42-43), in which Confucius sometimes used the word *jen* (*ren* in Pinyin, normally translated as 'human-heartedness') not only to denote a special kind of virtue, but also to denote all the virtues in combination, so that the term 'man with *jen*' becomes synonymous with the man with all-round virtues. It is in this sense we can see that *budiman* is the man with all-round *budi* (virtue) or, as I have coined it, 'budi and its networks'. If *jen* can be translated as 'perfect virtue' in such contexts, then the Malay *budi* can be constructed in the same manner as 'perfect virtue' of the Malays.

Rationality should not be worshipped in all dimensions of life. There should be time for rationality, expression of emotion, and the combination of both or more (*budi*). It is the demand of history that these elements (reason, emotion, *budi*) become explicit in certain communities and hidden in others. To conclude that there is only one 'rational' way of resolving disagreement is to totally deny the need for space and time throughout history. The results that I have obtained prove that the strength of the Malay mind lies in the application of *budi*, and as such, that the man of culture should be based on *budi* as well. The highest stage of a man of culture is for him or her to achieve the status of *budiman* or 'the man of *budi*', where the word *budi* should be treated as a synthetic connotation between the acuity of reason and the gentleness of feeling, or what we feel through *hati*.

Dialectical thinking, which puts stress on who will be the champion in the battle of the mind, is not important

in the Malay world and, as such, is not fully developed. It is considered more important to allow various dimensions of the human mind (i.e. reason, emotion) to adjust to the diversification of cultural values and religions. The fact that the dialectical mind is not developed in this part of the world is understandable. Biologically, if certain parts of our human body are not being used, it will be weakened in much the same way our muscles will get smaller and weaker if we do not exercise them.

The non-dialectical aspect of budi

Despite the usefulness of positive *budi* that we have already discussed, we must not forget that *budi* also has its negative dimension. In Malay, *bermain budi* (literally, 'to play with *budi*') means to cheat or to deceive (*menipu* or *tipu-daya*), *memperbudikan* also meaning the same thing (*Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* 1991:150). This negative connotation reminds us that we should not be too extreme in whatever stand we take, as anything that is pushed to

extremity will engender the opposite result: *rendah diri* (humbleness) will become *hina diri* (self-denigration); too much *berbudi* will become what the Malays call *mengada-ngada* (over-acting). As early as 1891 Clifford, in his article 'A New Collection of Malay Proverbs', observed an interesting trend in Malay rhetoric: 'In discussions among Malays, too, it is the man who can quote, and not he who can reason, that bears away the palm' (Clifford 1891:88). Clifford had a point in terms of dialectical argumentation. The Malays must have their reasons as to why they choose not to reason. As usual, reasons demand argumentation in return, which will perhaps bring the two parties (rhetor and opponent) into a state of confrontation. Compared to reason, quotations bring the opponents into a state of agreement, in terms of their cultural memory and the *budi* of their ancestors and cultural wisdom.

Budi is an entity which is non-dialectical and, therefore, hinders the true spirit of dialectical argumentation. It is the lack of dialectical argumentation that distinguishes the Malays from the Greeks. No doubt the application of *budi* in human affairs and human relationships is more humane, as we have seen earlier, but *budi* is something situational. Compared to rationality, which is more confrontational, competitive, forceful, aggressive, and hostile, where attaining 'truth' and 'winning' is the purpose, *budi* encourages the opposite, which is non-confrontational, non-competitive, gentle, friendly, and succumbing (in the sense of giving in or giving way), because its final goal is consensus and compromise. Hence, I believe that it should be our responsibility to have a real understanding of rationality, *budi*, or even emotion, and their employment in our everyday affairs.

The culture of *budi*, as I see it, should be adjustable to two different spheres, viz. rational-public sphere versus emotional-personal sphere. Since the concept of *budi* has taken root as the middle path of argumentation, it is rather hard to fit it into the rational-public sphere, where the purpose of argumentation is the achievement of truth through rational persuasion and the search for knowledge is based on the concept of truth or falsehood, white or black. It cannot accommodate a syn-

thesistic nature of both truth and falsehood, both black and white at the same time, or a positioning between these two polarities, or something which we could call a spectrum of truth. *Budi*, however, is something synthesistic and a-rational, which tends to compromise between both polarities as long as consensus and compromise can be achieved. Nonetheless, there are many realms of human communication which are a-rational. A-rational is used to differentiate it from irrational: whereas something which is non-rational may either be irrational or something that cannot be explained from the perspective of rationality (i.e. a-rational).

In order to handle this irrational sphere, we should not be carried away by pure emotions. The champion of truth through rationality might accuse the Malay *budi* of being two-faced, hypocritical, deceitful, or insincere in telling the truth. This claim is valid in one sense, but in another sense, we perhaps need more philosophical scrutiny and argumentation. For example, in the heat of the moment of a conflict, dialectical forcefulness will bring harm (that is, claim a life), and therefore one should 'lie' in order to preserve harmony. But this 'lie' should be untangled when the heat is over. This is the true spirit of 'budi and its networks'. <

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Dr Lim Kim-Hui is a lecturer at the School of Media and Communication Studies at National University of Malaysia. His research interests include rhetoric, informal logic, philosophy, argumentation studies, and Malay paremiology. limkimhui@yahoo.com