

The Symbol of Animals in Malay Proverbs

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Abstract

Proverb is an important component in the traditional Malay poetry which shapes Malay courtesy and values that have become part of their everyday lives. Malay proverbs stem from the Malay minds which are adequately sensitive to the surroundings, including the flora and fauna. This explains why animal antics and behavior are interpreted in proverbs comparatively with human attitude. Animal-related proverbs can be found in almost all cultures. The Malay's life experiences with these animals have given a broad scope of knowledge on the habit and behavior of the animals. This is why human attitude and behavior are inseparable from those of the animals. Thus, these animals are depicted with various symbols representing their physical characteristics and behavior signified figuratively and compared with those of human. This paper will discuss the symbol of animals in Malay proverbs.

Keywords: Proverb, animal, symbol, symbolism, behavior

Introduction

There are so many interesting things surrounding Malay proverbs. The image of the universe contained in the proverbs had inspired the society in the past to create proverbs. This shows that human life in the past was very closely linked with the universe. In fact, the universe functions to fill their needs in life. The universe serves as a mirror to human life and it becomes an invaluable teacher. An insight and observation on these animals will bring out some invaluable knowledge. The forests that are home to thousands of species of plants, animals, and birds and they have become part of the knowledge gathered from the lives of individuals and the wealth of experiences of the society.

The diversity of the animal characteristics has some similarities with human character and behavior. Thus, animals in proverbs represent various symbols. Animal symbols can be divided into several types symbols based on the frequency of using animal symbols contained in proverbs. Signs and symbols function in naming or labeling an object. In fact, there exist various symbols that represent an object because of the existence of thousands of symbols in this world. This elaboration will show how the application of the semiotic theory can explain about the animal symbols in Malay proverbs based on the high frequency or popularity. What is going to be unraveled is how the Malay society associates the choice of animals with the meaning intended for the proverbs. In the context of this study, only the use of symbols will further be discussed.

Elephant As A Symbol of Power

In the culture of the Malay society, big-sized animals, with extraordinary physical strength, which are fierce and ferocious are signified as someone who has power. Malays see these animals as a symbol of strength or mystic based on the animals' characteristics- these include elephants, dragons and *garuda*.

For example, *garuda* is believed to be a very big bird and if it attacks, it can destruct the whole country. Its power has made this animal feared, dreaded and should the privilege is lost, then the people would rise to fight and they will not be respected anymore. Therefore, in Malay proverbs, animals with such strength are drawn in comparison and associated with human behavior among which are elephant, tiger, lion, eagle, dragon and *garuda*.

However in this study, the writer only discusses the notion of symbols which are marks based on the shared convention, rules and agreement. For instance, for Indonesian people, the *garuda* has a symbol with various meanings, some of which include strength and greatness. The different backgrounds of culture among the societies are the reason for some people to see the *garuda* as a common eagle. Nonetheless, there are animals that are universally accepted as powerful, such as the elephant and tiger.

Elephant is the biggest land mammal in the world. Its scientific name is *Elephas maximus*. This animal is believed of have been around for a long time. It is also believed that the elephant species had started to expand millions of years ago since the era of Oligocene in Africa up until now, when this animal can be found in several places in the world. The weight of an adult elephant can reach more than 6000kg. The female elephant has a rather long gestational period which is 18 to 22 months. Its lifespan can reach 60 to 80 years (Ahmad:2004). Elephants are easy to recognize as they have a trunk, big ears and a pair of ivory. They are wild animals in forests but due to human intelligence, they are kept to perform heavy tasks.

In Malay legends, the elephant has a very special position. In *Hikayat Merong Maha Wangsa*, Kedah aristocrats had to seek assistance from the King of Siam to find a replacement for the King of Kedah (*Raja Bersiung*) who was in exile. As Raja Bersiung did not have any heir, the King of Siam had helped by sending a white elephant to find the future King of Kedah. The King of Siam stated that if the white elephant stopped in front of someone, that person was going to take the throne and rule Kedah. Finally, the white elephant stopped in front of a farmer's house, and in front of a boy. It turned out that Raja Bersiung had been married to the farmer's daughter and she gave birth to a baby boy. (Noorhasnah Adam:2011). It was clear that the boy was the legal heir of the Kedah throne. In *Hikayat Raja-raja Pasai*, there was a story of a prince found on a mystical elephant. The elephant in this story is a symbol of greatness and nobility when the generations of the King are associated with animals that are regarded as magical and mystical. This image reflects the mentality of the society and the element of animism Hinduism that had been embedded people's lives before the emergence of Islam in the Malay world (Noraina Dani:2005; A. L. Samian:2015).

Elephant is evaluated in terms of its size which covers the aspect of status/position/wealth/strength as well as the things that happen in the society. Based on these positive traits, this animal symbolizes power possessed by leaders, kings and dignitaries. 'Power' according to the 4th Edition *Kamus Dewan* (2010), means an influence or charisma that one possesses because of his or her position (status and so on). There are many Malay proverbs which reflect elephants as a symbol of power. The following is several examples of proverbs which illustrate the elephant as a symbol of power.

Proverbs	Meaning
<i>Bagai gajah masuk kampung, jikalau pohon tak tumbang, rumput layu juga</i>	When dignitaries come for a visit, people will be in a difficult situation
<i>Gajah turun di tengah rumah</i>	Suffering from hardship when one receive a dignitary as a guest
<i>Gajah putih</i>	Something expensive but pointless
<i>Seperti gajah rompong belalai</i>	A powerless king

Other than that, the proverb *bagai gajah masuk kampung, jikalau pohon tak tumbang rumput layu juga* explains that when dignitaries come to the village for a visit, the people will be in trouble. The symbol of elephant in this proverb represents the idea that one who has an important position is normally associated with being a leader. Analogically, the big-sized elephant will certainly cause a commotion, like hitting the trees if it enters a village. It will walk and eat the leaves which are its natural food and break the twigs and branches. If this elephant passes by a wide area, its footsteps will affect the grass to the point that the grass will wither. The use of the elephant as a symbol of power equates one's behavior that leaves a great impact when one passes by an area.

Next, the proverb *seperti gajah rompong belalai* created, means a King that has lost his power. The symbol of strength of an elephant rests on its trunk that functions like a hand. The trunk is used to pull the trees, bring food and water to its mouth, lift wood and smell. Elephants are able to suck in the water in to its mouth, drink it and pour the water all over its body using the trunk. When the trunk becomes malfunctioned, or severed, the elephant can no longer do anything, and this the symbol of strength on the elephant is lost. This resembles the losing power of the King in ruling his country. Kings who have lost their power are regarded as dummies since the actual ruling power is in the hands of other parties.

In the Malay society, elephant is thought of as a very powerful animal representing power, influence, highly-positioned, greatness, wealth and luxury. By logic, any big things would connote strength and this would be an advantage. In Malay proverbs, there are a lot of proverbs which explain more about kings and their people and the life at the time. Kings and dignitaries have a very strong influence in a country. In the traditional Malay feudalistic social hierarchy, it was divided into the ruling and the ruled. The ruling group comprises of kings, classes of dignitaries, and aristocrats. Those who were ruled comprises of common people and slaves. The apex of a government in the Malay culture is the King. The Malay social hierarchy with the king at the top is highly important in the Malay value system.

The formation of this proverb carries the closest analogy to the lives of the Malay society. The Malay society really believes in the power, greatness and sovereignty of a King. The symbol of an elephant is easy to understand and easy to be interpreted in the mind. This shows that the symbol of an elephant as the symbol of power can be grasped based on the shared agreement among the whole Malay community, so the symbol becomes universal. Thus, the relationship is arbitrary and based on the convention of the society.

Fox As A Symbol of Evil

Evil is often associated with a bad behavior in terms of idiosyncrasies, actions even words. Bad behavior contains elements of betrayal, abuse, destruction, cruelty, oppression, naughtiness and many others. In Malay proverbs, animals with these characteristics have become metaphors and comparison with human traits. Something will become easier to reflect on the behavior of animals that can be the example to serve as lessons to humans. Additionally, the animals are common and their behavior is easily attached to the mind and easily translated by the human brain as something bad and evil. Among the animals that are often symbolized as evil include rat, snake, crocodile, squirrel, fox and leeches.

Fox is a wild animal that feeds off chicken. It looks like a cat but its body is slightly big and it is active at night (KDE4:2010). This animal is a type of mammal, a land carnivore, which lives in the forest and near villages. There are several types of fox, namely *musang jebat*, *musang kesturi*, *musang tenggalung*, *musang lamri*, *musang akar*, *musang pulut* and many others. *Musang pulut* is also called *musang pandan* as it has a very nice smell like the pandanus leaf produced by a gland at its genitalia. This animal is grey, with oval-like stripes in black, right to the tail. This fox lives in wooden nest (Jasmi Abdul:2008). The difference between *musang pulut* and *musang jebat* is that the body is bigger and it has a pungent smell like the smell of *jebat*. *Musang jebat* can be found in rubber plantations or the outskirts of villages.

A fox symbolizes someone who cannot be trusted and it represents the trait of evil. It will go out looking for food at night and it likes to eat fowls or chicken. Malay villagers normally will keep some chicken to earn a living. During the day, the chicken will be let out free, to roam around and find their own food but at night, they will be confined in their hut or coop and it will be properly locked. This is to prevent the chicken from being stolen by the enemy. Fox is a traditional enemy for villagers who keep chickens in their yards. If not prevented, the fox will roam freely and feed off the chicken. This animal will try to avoid meeting or being caught by humans.

In the Malay culture, the fox is a symbol of a bad animal as it likes to steal or take away livestock, sleek in catching its prey and is very smart in planning his actions. Foxes are not like other animals which are wild and fierce and attack humans, but its cunning nature makes it hunted by man. According to Che Abdulah and Saiful Bahri (2011), the size of a fox is medium and its habitat is by the forests, bushes close to people's homes so it is easier for this animal to sneak into the area and catch its prey. Then, it is also easy for a fox to escape, disappear and hide. Its ability to steal, sneak in and out and hide and its camouflaging really resemble those of humans. They also maintained that the close relationship between humans and animals have brought in a lot of experiences that are gradually captured in proverbs- the negative, bad attitude of people like stealing or hiding the evil deeds, and acting like they are nice and good so much so that no one doubts them.

In proverbs related to the fox, they revolve around human's bad deeds and idiosyncrasies. Thus, the Malays have included all forms of evil or bad deeds by using the fox as the corresponding symbol, as established below:

Proverb	Meaning
<i>Tidak memperlampang kandang musang, mempersempit kandang ayam</i>	Protecting a very dangerous person more than a person who is having difficulties
<i>Jika memelihara ayam, musang jangan dijinakkan, setidak-tidaknya bertempiaran kelak</i>	The difficulty that may arise if we are kind to people who have bad intention
<i>Musang terjun, lantai terjungkit</i>	Signs (proof) about the evil that has been committed
<i>Musang berbulu ayam</i>	Bad people pretending to be good people

The elderly always reminds us that *tidak memperlampang kandang musang, mempersempit kandang ayam* meaning, be careful of protecting very dangerous people rather than protecting people in need or in hardship. The stable is a fenced area for animals, which keeps them safe, especially at night. If the pen or the dock is not very spacious, it is easy to assume that the chicken will not be comfortable as they have to fight for space and the dock would be crowded, and vice versa. This gives us an idea that a fox has a wild life and it is free to find food that stays outside the pen or dock because it will enable the fox to catch them. The same goes with the proverb *jika memelihara ayam, musang jangan dijinakkan, setidak-tidaknya bertempiaran kelak* illustratign the troule we will get into if we make friends or be nice with bad people. Bad people will cause problems to people who want to help them, and they will not even remember and appreciate the help. In this proverb, the fox as a symbol refers to an object which then creates a new perspective. The negative characteristics of a fox make it a comparative symbol with the ill intention and bad behavior of human being.

In this context, all proverbs refer to the fox as a bad animal, clever at hiding its evilness and can also pose a very dangerous threat. When matched with human behavior, metaphorically, this bad person (who is actually the enemy) is always around and wait for his opportunity to act without anyone else being aware of it, since all his actions tend to be overshadowed, not until the evil deed is out in the open later (Che Abdullah dan Saiful Bahri:2011). In the context of our community today, there are a lot of people out there who are like the fox, when they want to achieve something that they desire. This is epitomized as *musang berbulu ayam*. *Musang berbulu ayam* (Fox with chicken feather) is someone with a bad intention and is disguised as a very good, kind person. The fox is the most cunning creature when it comes to disguising itself. In this process, no one would know or doubt anything until the damage is already done.

Pig As A Symbol of Humiliation

Humiliating traits are synonymous with something that is despicable, dishonorable, ugly, dirty, greedy and bad and it has a low level in terms of rank, position even status. This is represented by an animal with such characteristics, namely the dog and pig.

From the language aspect, the word 'babi' is among the three Malay original vocabulary. It is also named 'khinzir' which is a borrowed word from Arabic, while the piglet is called nangoi. Pig is an animal with a long snout and with a flat nose and is believed to originate from Eurasia. Pig is mammal with a fat body, it is round and heavy, it has short legs, with thick skin and it has a snout (KDE4:2010). The snout is used to scratch the sand and to take off the tree roots. The hairs are coarse and short like the brush hair. Pig is part of the SUIDAE family. The ones kept but humans are believed to come from the wild boar species in Europe. Its scientific name is *Sus scrofa*. Pigs have nails like horses, they have a small tail, a short neck, and a large head. The ones kept by humans, pigs are regarded as a very ugly animal and their blood there are germs, that are dangerous to humans is fed with rubbish which is cooked or leftovers (EP:1990). This is because they eat cereal, vegetables, rubbish, leftover foods, insects, pig carcasses, rats and other small animals. In livestock farms, this animal is fed with rubbish which is cooked and the leftovers.

The pig is also forbidden in Jews, compared to other animal. In the DNA of a pig, the pig genetic structure is closest to that of human compared to other animals among Christian followers. (Rumaizi Ahmad:2013). If we analyze the Malay *world view*, this animal is loathed by the Malays. They see it as a dirty animal and thus, it is disgusting. Even saying its name is something that is thought as disgusting. This animal has become a negative icon in the Malay culture and this is evident in the Malay literature. The use of Malay terms and proverbs which use the symbol of a pig has given a lot of negative connotations on this animal.

Pig eats rubbish and carcasses so its body produces a very revolting smell. A pig can bear 9, 18 or 20 piglets. Its gestation period is around four months, four weeks and four days.

Meanwhile, piglets can become pregnant three or four months after they are born they eat very greedily. They like to eat and sleep. (Mohd. Wahib Abdul Hamid:2013). Pigs are actually the cleverest mammal and they are reported to be smarter and easier to keep than the dogs and cats. All races from all over the world, from centuries ago until today, had regarded pigs as the ugliest and the filthiest animal. They eat carcasses, their own dung and rubbish thrown away by humans. They like dirty places and dislike clean, dry places- this is why their body has this very bad smell. Pigs are a lazy animal and they do not like to work, they cannot stand the sunlight, but they eat very greedily. It likes to eat and sleep. It becomes lazier when it gets older. For the Malays, the word 'babi', when directed at someone, would serve as the most humiliating word if compared to the use of other animals. This is why the word 'babi' is used in words or figuratively used to scold, tell off, insult and even curse other people.

The saying *babi jalang* refers to one whose life is disorderly and one who commits adultery. People with this attitude like to change their partners like they change clothes without feeling guilty or sinned for what they have done. Let alone to take the responsibility for his or her actions. This is a very bad attitude whereas the word *jalang* means something that is very bad or improper. The proverb is seen to suit this animal- it has a cold nature, and it is never jealous of its enemy. The male pig will help other male pigs fulfill their sexual instincts and needs, without feeling jealous, without wanting to protect the female pigs from being the sexual target. Pigs can also commit to same-gender sex. This perfectly describes the word *jalang* which is very much condemned in Islam as it gives a great impact.

Being very embarrassed is interpreted in the proverb *muka bagai ditampal kulit babi* and *kepala tersangkut kulit babi*. The face is part of the head. What is on the head would be regarded as very noble and pure because it is on the upper part of the body. In the above proverbs *muka bertampal kulit babi* and *kepala tersangkut kulit babi* it means that something is very embarrassing and even humiliating to someone. It is generally acknowledged that pigs are the dirtiest and ugliest animal. When one is greatly insulted and humiliated, this can destroy one's image and reputation.

Pig is also associated with several diseases in the Malay culture. In Malay proverbs, there are three diseases related to pigs namely *sawan babi*, *gila babi* (types of epilepsy) and *pitam babi*. Mat Saat Baki (1993) stated that epilepsy is often linked with a type of epilepsy named *epilepsi gran mal*. The name is given based on the Malays' observation on the animals they see in their surroundings. Sufferers of this disease will produce some kind of foam in their mouths, they will push through and sound like a pig. Epilepsy can happen at anyplace, anywhere, at unexpected times and the victims will fall to the ground like a pig. They cannot even control their acts of urinating and passing motion. Other than such a lowly labeling on this disease, it equates the status of the individual with that of a pig as his or her behavior during the fit can terribly humiliate him or her. According to Mat Saat, epileptic fit is not as bad as epilepsy. The former is better known as convulsion caused by high fever. If compared with epilepsy, convulsion is not known to be as humiliating. As epileptic sufferers tend to embarrass their families, a lot of parents refuse to send their children to get hospital treatment.

Cow As A Symbol of Stupidity

Stupidity refers to one who finds it hard to understand something, ignorant, dumb and not wanting to accept people's ideas, help and so on. Various animals are associated with stupidity like mules, cows and camels. Animals characterized as stupid is slow, dumb, obedient. The hidden symbol of stupidity refers to a sign that represents something. The animals mentioned below demonstrate the symbol of one's stupidity. Based on the Semiotic theory, the symbol can be localized and universal. The symbol that is characteristically local can refer to the culture of the society itself. Thus, these animals correspond with the symbol of stupidity in the Malay community.

Cow (*boss spp*) is a type of livestock, kept for its milk and meat. Cow-sharing is defined as cows which yield is halved between the owner and the person who works the farm. Meanwhile, dairy cow is the cow kept to get the milk. Back then, when motor vehicle as widely available today was still scarce, cows were used as vehicle to transport humans and goods. The bullock cart was very popular in that era because it signified status and luxury. Logically, cows help human do their work and they become the animal that performs tasks for human. This may explain why the Malay society symbolizes cows negatively. Cows are always depicted as the icon of stupidity.

Often, the phrase *bodoh seperti lembu* refers to one who is stupid in his or her studies or whose brain is considered weak in so many areas. This symbol is very easy to understand and is acceptable by the Malays.

The symbol of stupidity refers to the cow's natural characteristics of being tame, kind and loyal without being aggressive and thus, is associated with being stupid. The proverb *bagai lembu yang dicucuk hidung* represents the symbol of stupidity, of a person who follows blindly the wishes or needs of others, or simply called *pak turut*, while other people only manipulate them to get what they want. From their observation and experience on a cow which nose is pierced, it actually functions to make it easier for the cow owner to pull the cow using the rope tied to the piercing wherever it goes. *Keluan* is the rope tied to the piercing of the cow and it functions as a controller or handler. Hence, the proverb *lembu dicucuk hidung*. Other than the term 'lembu' the other name for this animal is *jawi*. *Bagai jawi ditarik keluan* explains about a person who follows blindly and succumbing to orders and commands.

Ant As A Symbol of Hard work

Ant are often associated with hardworking, diligent, highly spirited and others. These traits can be presented through real efforts to produce something better. Hard work will make one creative and innovative in producing something that is of quality and one who is willing to sacrifice his time and energy for beneficial activities. The Malay society epitomizes hard work by relating it with the animal symbol. These animals are ants and bees. Ants are insects included in the class of *Insect* dan *Filum Arthropoda*. This insect is grouped in *Order Hymenoptera* where it has a middle part of the body, which separates the torax and gaster. The characteristics that distinguish ants from other insects is that the antenna looks like a sharp elbow (Maryati Mohamed:1997). Ants are known to inhabit this universe around 80 thousand years ago but only Allah known when this animal really existed. Ants is a form of critters comprising of worker ants, male ants and the Queen ant. They are reported to form the largest population on this earth.

In the context of the Malay society, ant is inextricably linked with the people's lives. The formation of the contextual effect here is built by the consolidation of information. The proverb *ada gula ada semut* means that where it is easy to sustain one's life, that is where there will be a lot of people gathered. The characteristic of an ant which is often found in sweet foods like sugar had contributed to the solidification of information and subsequently the contextual effect. The ant as an object symbolizes the characteristics of hardworking and this is proven by its behavior which is always found looking for food. Other than the contextual effect observed, the effort in processing the information also has a very important role. The words 'ant' and 'sugar' are easy to understand and can be related to the Malay surrounding. The Malay community does not have any problem with these two words. The proverbs *di mana semut mati kalau tidak dalam gula* also *mati semut kerana gula* refer to people who succumb to sweet talks that can later be detrimental to themselves. Sweet talks are like sugar that can make us trust easily and later fool us. Sugar is something sweet, and is very much liked by ants. When finding a lot of sugar, the ants will get around it without realizing that the sweetness can kill them.

In this context, ants are related to working hard and struggling to get something, as in the proverb *bagai semut penghimpun melukut*. *Melukut* is a type of crushed rice that is no longer useful. Ants which find some food will go back and forth until all the food has been transported back to their nest or place. Such hard work without surrendering displays a positive value through the spirit of cooperation, unity and care shown towards one another. This animal is also known as highly initiative, very creative in solving problems and innovative when it comes to achieving a mission. They also have positive attitude and high commitment in bearing the mandate and responsibility. According to Wan Mohd Ruzlan Wan Omar (2013) the ant colony has never had any conflict and crisis although they adopt a caste system, segregated by the Queen and worker ants. We should all learn from the lives of ants which are always working together and very hardworking in finding food for them to continue living. Indeed, ants can be made the guidance and lesson in forming our own lives as they are hardworking, cooperative and they are always helping one another.

Conclusion

Proverbs related to animals reflect the value that exists in the society. Through the comparison with animalistic traits, humans are prone to assess others with constructive criticisms without hurting or humiliating other people. A lot of lessons can be learned behind these animal-oriented proverbs. Proverbs do not have to be literally understood, as the meanings are mostly hidden. This illustrates that the Malays' way of thinking can only be understood after we have successfully understood the implied meaning behind beautifully arranged words.

Indeed, the signs and symbols in Malay proverbs carry multifarious meanings and they require a form of interpretation which shows that Malay people have high level of intellect and manners.

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