

Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas, *Eh! Wat yu talking?: Chronicles of Malay humour*, Petaling Jaya, Selangor: MPH Group, 2008. Pp. 114 + vi, ISBN 978-983-3698-44-8

Humor is used to remedy tension in traditional Malay life. With rising food prices, banking giants warped in financial crisis, disgruntled citizens hatching destructive schemes to make a statement, the time seems ripe for some traditional Malay humor. The Malay humor gathered in this book is delivered by the author through the characters of Pak Pandir and others.

Since time immemorial, *Cerita Pak Pandir*, literally ‘The Story of Mr. Moronic’ has been a definitive part of traditional Malay folk literature (Although Pak Him and Pak Sago used in some of the narrations in this book are not part of traditional Malay literature). *Cerita Pak Pandir* as a subgenre of Malay literature chronicles various light-hearted anecdotes through the caricatures of Pak Pandir as either a wise, silly, or foolhardy character. The narrations served to entertain the Malay listeners in the past, who either toiled the field from dawn to dusk or had to conquer the sea and jungle for a living.

This book, first published in June 2007, is the outcome of the author’s threats to his friends, who found the jokes amusing. Reproduced here are 79 short narrations, which form a mixture of old and new humor. The narrations range in length from one half to two and a half pages of A-5 paper. Original chatty verbal exchanges characteristic of Pak Pandir are mixed with late modern scenarios embodying the *do what I say but not what I do* sort of anecdotes. Although the name Pak Pandir may not be synonymous with ‘comedy icon’ amongst Malay youths, the fifth printing of this book suggests that there is a strong following of Pak Pandir, the ‘funny’ Malay senior. As a first time musician in the 35th story, Pak Pandir’s played the same note by repeatedly plucking on the string of the gambus. Upon being scolded by the irritated audience for not letting go of it, Pak Pandir replied (p. 42):

“Those so-called musicians you speak of move their fingers about because they are looking for this very note. I on the other hand, found it on my first attempt.”

Strange as it may sound, I could appreciate this narration from watching the American film *August Rush*, in which the child prodigy August played the guitar more-or-less on the same spots horizontally to an enthralled audience.

Definitely, there is wisdom in not going against something that is beyond your capacity from Pak Pandir’s reply on the demise of his buffalo to the tiger (p. 43):

“Well, my buffalo is already dead and nothing can be done about that...As for the tiger, running uphill on a full stomach is punishment enough.”

In the 55th story, we are told that God comes in many forms in times of need. To believe circumstances would change on their own, as in the case of the character in the story, is impractical if not downright foolish. The stubborn, God-fearing Pak Sago, who drowned in the heavy rain because he only believed in God and refused other forms of aid (albeit sent by God, p. 75), was eventually chided by God when he arrived in heaven. (Why Pak Sago loathed death since he was going to heaven is puzzling, though.)

It was related that a family could not get along happily in the story, *The Cramped House* (p. 77-79). Pak Pandir became a clever neighbor, who solved the living problem for this household of seven. In order to make them realize the fortune of having a roof over their heads Pak Pandir suggested that the owner send the six chickens, buffalo and three goats that belonged to the owner into the house in separate consultations. After such experiences, the family members appreciated the space they owned and loved each other happily ever after. This anecdote serves as good learning for late modern children behaving in a selfish or self-centered way. No amount

of advice is enough without experiential learning, with cultural intelligence, to cherish each other as a family in the living space called home.

The Friday Sermon is the second to the last narrative in the book. Tasked to deliver the Friday sermon in the mosque, Pak Pandir managed to skirt his problem on three successive Fridays. He first avoided the duty by asking if the audience knew what he would want to preach. Upon receiving a negative reply Pak Pandir left them as it was pointless for him to address an ignorant audience. On the second occasion Pak Pandir left the audience, who were affirmative about what he should disclose. This time, he saw no reason to educate a well informed audience. As to how Pak Pandir managed to escape from his duty on the third occasion interested readers should read the book themselves.

Not all the narration is funny, especially when the traditional moral appreciation mixes with the obsessions of late modernity. The 63rd narrative, concerning botox injections and cosmetic adornment that should be prohibited but look good on the preacher's wife, is a mundane example of a modern yawn. Furthermore, little modesty could be attributed to the narrative, *Be Modest, Please* (p. 89-90), as the narrative invokes mild sexual connotation.

It must be said that the book was never intended as an inspiration for academic wisdom. The book is written as light hearted reading for like minded persons, although valuable cultural intelligence is demonstrated in the narratives. (English-speaking) Malay parents who wish their English-speaking children to know some traditional Malay literature or see a window to the simple religious life will find the publication a valuable supplement. This volume appeals to those interested in cultural intelligence reminiscent of traditional Malay life.

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