

Answering Nature's Call

- Geographic Literacy and Muslim Youths

By
Mubd Zaki Jalil

In a youth seminar conducted by Darul Arqam Singapore late last year, a simple questionnaire on basic geographic knowledge was administered to study the geographic awareness of the participants. Unfortunately, the results showed a poor level of simple geographic knowledge amongst Muslim youths.

This is not surprising, considering that the National Geographic-Roper Global Geographic Literacy Survey 2002, a similar but more comprehensive survey conducted in nine countries, suggests that most young people struggled with basic geographic facts.

This is alarming particularly in Singapore. With the Internet and good quality programmes from cable television, our nation has never been more able to assess and analyse geographic information. Despite the tremendous ease that can enhance global awareness and geographic understanding, most Singapore youths seem to possess very little awareness of the geographic context of global events and phenomenon.

Is Geographic Literacy Important?

One of the major trends over the last two decades has been globalisation. Amongst many other things, this means that better communications technology have allowed us access to real-time news. To the geographic illiterates, global events are imagined without proper contextualisation. With under-developed mental schema of the diverse conditions of physical human conditions, implications to serious situations are either not detected, not accorded the proper degree of seriousness or even made confusing.

It is worse when the whole world is imagined within the confines of one's life. Judgments needed to make sense of important historic or current events elsewhere cannot be made with an egocentric yardstick that was formed under totally different social, cultural, economic and environmental conditions.

For example, one cannot fully understand the problems of Indonesia if the fact that the country comprises more than 17,000 islands escapes his imagination. Only 18 per cent of the participants interviewed knew this.

Those who are not aware of the planet's different landscapes will not be aware of positive potential usage of natural environments and more importantly, their limitations. Therefore, a community made up of individuals who have low geographic literacy lacks vital information to make rational decisions. Its insensitivity to differences inhibits the much desired pluralism and is a fertile ground to breed fear, and therefore hate of the Other.

Lessons from the Past

Like many other areas that contemporary Muslims can seek to improve, it is always useful to look into past Islamic intellectual traditions for inspirational models, not to romanticise but to spur Muslims into continuing some of these positive past endeavours. To briefly mention names and their contributions in just a few lines would be great injustice. Hence, it is my hope that the reader can frequent the libraries and tread the information highway to embark on an in-depth research about these personalities.

One of the few rarely mentioned was Ibn Fadlan, a Muslim chronicler who was sent by his Caliph to the King of the Bulgars of the Middle Volga around 921CE. Keeping an account of his journeys, Ibn Fadlan's writings became of great value to the study of history. The same Ibn Fadlan was said to have inspired the movie 'The 13th Warrior' starring Antonio Banderas.

Like Ibn Fadlan, Ibn Jubayr too travelled to many places recording his observations pertaining to the conditions of the people of the different places he visited. So too did Ibn Battuta, who travelled from Morocco to the Maldives, China and even the island of Java. Others include Al Muqaddasi, Al Ya'qubi, Ibn Khurdadhbih, Yaqut al-Hamawi, Abu Al-Faraj and many more.

Modern Times

The fact that these Muslims spent a considerable amount of time travelling the world, braving unknown dangers in unfamiliar lands, facing uncertainties, just to study the life and culture in what was then places away from the centres of civilisation, must be appreciated by contemporary Muslims.

Although obtaining such information now is only a mouse click away, the results of the survey suggest a certain lack of interest in knowing where places are. Even though one of the more recent instalments of the popular television series 'Survivor' was filmed in the Marquesas, only 11 per cent of the respondents knew where these islands are located suggesting that even popular culture has failed to enhance their curiosity.

If the Marquesas is a long distance away, consider this – only 32 per cent of the respondents can name all 10 ASEAN countries. Such aloofness cannot be healthy in a rapidly globalising world. As distances shrink with the advancement of transportation and communications technology, the world is fast becoming a complex community of different cultures and people that would have otherwise been separated by great distances a long time ago.

With this in mind, it is important that Muslim youths understand other people, other lands and as well as their own. They must be able to infer from detectable similarities and differences in the context and limitations of the natural environment that these inferences are made about the problems and issues that might exist.

Only when youths can do this and be aware of the planets' physical and cultural locations like their geographical distribution, and most importantly, the natural and social mechanisms and spatial arrangements, can Muslims positively contribute to the society.

Muslim Youths Alienated?

How can the Singapore Muslim society expect its youths to solve problems when they are not even aware that such problems exist in the first place? If they are not aware of children suffering from malnutrition problems in Indonesia (only 25 per cent answered correctly when asked to estimate the percentage of children in Indonesia suffering from malnutrition), then at the very least, they should be aware of their own domestic problems. Unfortunately, less than half (42 per cent) knew the main reason for why Muslim marriages fail in Singapore.

Similarly, even if it is forgivable that they are not concerned of global population issues (only 36 per cent could name two countries with a population of more than 1 billion), it is certainly alarming that most are not even conscious of their own population (only 36 per cent knew the total population of Singapore residents). It comes as no surprise then that much can be improved with regard to their understanding of global events. Only 4 per cent of the respondents can name four countries that officially acknowledge the possession of nuclear weapons. Around 32 per cent cannot even name one, while 46 per cent fail to name one African country with a Muslim majority.

What Exactly Is Geography?

There are many definitions of what Geography is. Indeed, it is really a big field of study that often overlaps with other disciplines. Essentially, it studies where things exist or events happen, and why they happen in that particular location. Geography is basically about understanding our world – its places, its people and the interactions between the two.

Even though knowing some basic geographic facts is crucial for one to properly contextualise a particular problem and imagine the issue accurately, Geography is not just about memorizing names of places, mountains and islands. To be aware that such places exist is a good start because it is the first step towards gaining a more in-depth geographic understanding of a specific existence.

The social science of Geography equips its students with the necessary skills to tap into a number of other disciplines, from high-tech Global Positioning Systems (GPS) to the anthropological studies of local culture so that they can analyse issues more thoroughly and coherently. That is perhaps why the study of other social sciences is almost always never complete without a brief explanation of geographic context.

For example, Ibn Khaldun, who has been described many times by many people as the father of many social sciences, spent a significant part of 'The Muqaddimah' explaining the geographic context of civilisations. He gave information about oceans and rivers. He identified the temperate and intemperate zones, regions of abundance and scarcity of food, and more importantly how cultures were formed and influenced by the environment that they were located in.

A geographic study normally takes into account a wide range of concerns, from absolute and relative location of a phenomenon to its natural and cultural context. Indeed, it is a study of the interactions of all the contributing factors present and detectable. When connections are

made in the analysis of such interactions, it is easier to realise that problems are never mono-causal.

Why The Urgency Now?

Though it is easier to blame schools for not putting enough emphasis on the subject as the cause for low geographic literacy, this would prove naive. Policy makers do not make policies in a vacuum, and students do not study in schools that are cut out from the rest of the world. Studies have also shown that formal geography training may not only be the factor.

A study by Judi Winship suggests that ‘informal geographic education’ in its many forms were significant factors.

Informal education includes frequent travel to other places, interaction with people of other nationalities and keeping up with the news. This makes sense. Frequently visiting other places and interacting with people of other nationalities are useful opportunities to disrupt one’s own mental equilibrium. According to Piaget, people have an innate need to understand how the world works. Mental equilibrium happens when the mind finds order, structure and predictability as it interacts with the world.

But the mind is not always in equilibrium. When one interacts with something new, say a new place or person with a different culture, the existing schemes within his mind becomes insufficient to maintain order, structure and predictability. His mind is then forced to take in this new information and make sense of it, either by accommodating it or assimilating it.

Only through these processes can cognitive development of individuals be promoted. Learning more about the world and its many cultures, their strength, needs and weaknesses, their problems and past solutions, can help our youths develop mental maturation and thus break away from authoritarianism, be it religious or otherwise, as well as challenge some popularly accepted axioms.

For example, some within the community subscribe to the utopian notion of a uniform *Ummah* (global Muslim community). They believe that Islam, always imagined as a monolithic entity, has solutions for all problems. But how can the problems of Muslims in Somalia be the same as the problems of Muslims, say in Singapore? Only a geographic literate individual can see immediately the difference in scale, nature and complexities of each location.

Conclusion

Geographic literacy is fast becoming critical in creating youths that can be globally functional. As human population increases, one has to be able to properly imagine the scale of issues and problems that he is inheriting. Not only is it necessary to enable youths to contextualise events, but a correct spatial perspective can help diminish possible impediments to critical and creative solutions.

It is worrying that the youth living in Singapore, immersed in information technology, exposed to the media covering major global events in real time 24 hours a day everyday, in an island that attracts foreigners for both work and leisure, still lacks geographic literacy. It is not because they do not have the means to discover. Perhaps they do not desire to know. It is thus the pedagogical duty of intellectuals and intelligentsias of this community to critically and seriously analyse the problem posed and find possible solutions.

REFERENCES

- 1) Syed Hussein Alatas, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* (London: Frank Cass, 1970)
- 2) Jodi M. Winship, 2004, *Geographic Literacy and World Knowledge among Undergraduate College Students*, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Virginia.
- 3) National Geographic — Roper 2002 Global Geographic Literacy Survey, Prepared by Roper ASW for: National Geographic Education Foundation
- 4) Eggen & Kauchak, 1999, *Educational Psychology: Windows to the classroom*, Fourth edition, Prentice Hall.

[This article was published in *The Muslim Reader* magazine, May-Aug 2005 issue.]