

# The Perils of Collective Representation

by

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*"...it is man - his intellect that does everything... Acquisition of modern scientific knowledge itself depends on deep thinking and undaunted mettle. Where these two things are, there all scientific knowledge and modern industries will follow automatically."*

- Shakib Arslan, *Our Decline and Its Causes*.

Modernisation invokes in a community multiple reactions. For the Malays, who form the predominant Muslim representation in Singapore and other part of the Malay Archipelago, collective representation has become an undesirable manifestation.

One way whereby Singaporean Malays have responded to modernisation is through 'collective representation'. Collective representation is a mode of thinking that is present in all societies and cultures. According to Alatas,

Collective representation are concepts or ideas formed concerning objects or events which differ from those derived from ordinary empirical experience without any magical-religious or occult admixture.<sup>1</sup>

Before continuing further, it is important to note its primary characteristics here. Someone subscribing to collective representation will:

**(1)** *Display a collective and thus non-individualistic psychology* (where there is an absence of ideas generated from the Self with thoughts expressed usually recycled from others). This is common to members of any given group who subscribe to the same idea and perceptions. Additionally, these are passed down continuously from one generation to the next.

**(2)** *Hold on to mystical imaginings that do not cater to intellectual needs but reinforce the perceptions and actions imperceptible to the senses.* These fascinations are nevertheless still regarded real.

**(3)** *Show unwillingness in obeying the law of logic exclusively and exhibit a sense of indifference to contradictions.* Even though he is indifferent to contradictions, it does not mean he does not obey the law of logic. For example, a person may have studied science and yet still believe in defying the objectification of nature where objects of nature can morph into something else. For instance, the person will imagine a man to be a man and a stone at the same time. A famous Malay folklore entitled *Puteri Buloh Betung* describes a princess who was cursed into assuming a bamboo form at certain times.

**(4)** *Believe in otherworldly causality.* Cause-and-effect explanations depart from scientific rationality and are based instead on intuition. For example, a person would prefer to believe that an event is caused by spirits and/or *Jinns* rather than find a scientific explanation.

Although collective representation is not prevalent in every individual in the local society, it is not hard to find someone who is unaffected by it. Even books and media display these traits. One recent example can be found in *Berita Harian* (dated 21 Nov 2004) where it is reported that an artist has not been attending shows and concert because of evil-doings (*buatan orang*).<sup>2</sup> One can find many such examples in the newspaper, which clearly indicate that the Malays often relate their lives to the supernatural or mystical doings. Sadly, even some religious elites indulge in this.

In today's contemporary world, there are still members in local Malay community who seeks out blessed water from religious individuals to cure diseases or to stop a baby from crying at night. Very often, these are based on intuitions rather than scientific explanations, a trait redolent of collective representation.

Besides the newspaper, there are also many books and other publications which condone collective representation.<sup>3</sup> In asserting that their stories are true, the masses are thus discouraged from the processes of rational conceptualisation and abstraction. For instance, the television media in Malaysia runs a programme entitled *Misteri Nusantara* which focuses on the supernatural. The programme is laden with elements of collective representation which defies the objectification of nature.<sup>4</sup>

In the long run, the prevalence of collective representation will have an adverse impact on the progress of society. It will be hard to inculcate the love for science, and worse still, appreciate future scientific discoveries. The spirit of inquiry will be much debilitated if such mode of thinking still exists among the Malays. It may also hamper development of individualism and humanism and downplay intellectual analysis and systemisation of thought. It may even be possible that the Malay society remains diffident in embracing modernisation. With regard to the development of the society, it is not collective representation itself but rather the mode of thinking which oppose scientific rationalisation that must be cautioned against. Hence, subscribing to collective representation may cause an individual to response negatively towards modernisation.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas. *Modernisation and Social Change*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1972, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> *Berita Harian*, 23 Oct 2004, 'Too Phat masih berdua,' p. 11: "Ada pula yang mengandaikan Malique terkena penyakit misteri akibat 'guna-guna' " (Trans: "Some have said that Malique was hit by a mysterious illness caused by magic").

<sup>3</sup> Exemplified in an article in *Kisah Benar* (January 2003) entitled '*Kasih Yang Hilang: Nasi Kangkang Yang Dipercayai Masyarakat Melayu Hingga Sekarang*'. The article accuses a women's right activist of using *nasi kangkang* (a black magic practice). Another example would be on an article in *Bicara* (June 2003) entitled '*Pengalaman di Hutan*'. This article describes a man who claims that he has met and communicated with *Orang Bunian* (mystical beings). Yet another example is found in the same issue entitled '*Rawatan Aura Memberikan Hidup Baru Kepada Penghidap Kanser*'. The article describes a clinic that mystically heals cancer (without providing any scientific evidence) which was thought to be caused by *Jin Merah* (Red Genie).

<sup>4</sup> This is considered one of top ten programmes in TV3 with a following of 2,318, 000. The programme covers the weird and mysterious world of magic and mysticism. One example of the non-compliance to the objectification of nature is when a tree is said to encapsulate a spirit (*penunggu*).