

THE PERSON AND RELIGIOUS POETRY IN MALAY

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Abstract

Accepting that there is a close connection between religion and poetry, the paper focuses on the person that is presented in poetry in Malay in response to the Divine. The concept of “the person” used contains three elements: (a) the human identity – our common physiological and psychological qualities; (b) the social identity – arising from our membership in the various groups that make up our particular society; and, (c) the self – the unique personal sense of who I am. It argues that the person in Malay religious poetry is largely a “social identity” the self surrendered to God through membership in the Muslim community.

Keywords: religious poetry, person, human identity, social identity, the individual self

Surah al-'Araf, verse 172, of the Quran states:

When the Lord drew forth
From the children of Adam –
From their loins –
Their descendants and made them
Testify concerning themselves (saying):
“Am I not your Lord
(Who cherishes and sustains you)?”
They said: “Yea!
We do testify!”

(Translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1990)

INTRODUCTION

The American philosopher George Santayana (1863-1952) has suggested that there is a close connection between religion and poetry. The scriptures of many religious traditions are, of course, supreme works of poetry in their own particular languages. Santayana suggests that both religion and poetry move in dimensions that are beyond our everyday reality but immeasurably enrich our lives. Religious traditions deal with “higher and more practical themes”, in a literal way that claims to be true. Poetry adds “a pure value to existence, the value of a liberal imaginative exercise” (Santayana, 1982:11). The statement from the Quran, which is of course poetic in its form, insists that the purpose of human existence is very clear: the “debt of creation” requires mankind to live as the servant of God and as His custodian of the earth, following His laws and obeying His commandments in an orderly and devout manner (Mohd. Affandi, 2008:59). We are made to enter into respectful dialogue with the Divine.

In this paper, I am interested in the person that is presented in poetry, particularly poetry in Malay, in response to God. There are many ways of conceptualising the person. One way is to see the body as an individual entity, containing three interdependent centres of energy within the soul: the *nafs*, the physical and selfish self; the *qalb*, the heart or intelligent self; and the *ruh*, or intuitional self (Shahidullah, 1993:61). Another approach places the individual within a wider context. The Filipina author, Thelma Kintanar (1998:4) sees the identity of the individual in Southeast Asia as conceptually comprised of three layers: (a) “the human identity” – our common physiological and psychological qualities; (b) “the social identity” – arising from our membership in the various groups that make up our particular society; and, (c) “the self” – the unique personal sense of who I am. The human identity relates to the body and the *nafs*; the self to the *qalb* and the *ruh*; the social identity to the person as a part of a wider community, both human and spiritual.

I will argue that the person in Malay religious poetry is largely, but not always, a “social identity”, achieved through faith and a greater or lesser submission of “the unique personal sense of who I am”, the self, the heart and the spirit, to God through membership in the Muslim community and its hierarchical way of life. In this way, the Malay author, even the “modern” author, escapes “that agonizing sense of doubt, that questioning and criticism of the bases of social life, and the analysis and presentation of the predicaments of individuals, out of which Western literature is made” (Johns, 1979:31).

Let us begin at the beginning, with the first, and still arguably the greatest, of all Malay religious poets.

HAMZAH FANSURI

As his name suggests, Hamzah Fansuri was probably born in Barus, a town on the west coast of Sumatra that was famous for its production of camphor, during the latter part of the sixteenth century. Although he had undertaken the pilgrimage to Mecca and no doubt studied there, his crucial religious experience occurred in *Shahr-i Nawi*, or Ayuthia, the capital of Thailand, founded in 1350. As he has written:

*Hamzah nin asalnya Fansuri,
Mendapat Wujud di tanah Shahrnawi.*

(Hamzah who originated from Fansuri,
Received illumination in the land of Shahrnawi).

The doctrine of the *Wahdat al-Wujud* school principally derives from Muhyi'ddin Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240 CE) and can be summarised in two short but profound statements: the world is the theatre of God's omnipresence, displayed though the various grades of being; mankind's primary purpose is to discover the Divine within the surrendered human heart. Hamzah expressed his belief in a new poetic form, called *syair* (from the Arabic *shi'r*, poetry, although the parallels are not very close), poems comprised of four line verses, each verse carrying a single rhyme. Hamzah is credited with 32 *syair* that are clearly his, three more that may not be, and three prose works. The thirty-two poems range in length from 13 to 21 verses.

The second poem in a recent collection (Drewes and Brakel, 1986: 46), may serve as a sample of his work; it illustrates Hamzah's teachings, as well as his heavy use of Arabic words and quotations, and his poetic form:

*Sabda rasul Allah: Man 'arafa nafsahu
Bahawasanya mengenal akan Rabbahu
Jika sungguh engkau 'abdahu
Jangan kaucari illa wajhahu*

*Wajah Allah itulah yang asal kata
Pada wujudmu lengkap sekalian rata
Jika anggamu menjadi mata
Mangkanya dapat pandangmu nyata*

*Dirimu itu seperti zilal
Jangan kaupandang pada waham dan khayal
Jika pandangmu itu pada rupa jamal
Engkaulah da'im beroleh wisal*

*Mutu qabla an tamutu
Supaya engkau sampai kepada Ya man Huwa
A-lastu bi-rabbikum dan qalu bala
Di sana da'im jangan kausahwa*

*Setelah mati hamba yang da'if
Lenyaplah rupa sekalian khatif
Wasillah iya dengan Yang Latif
Ila abad al-abad menjadi syarif ...*

(God's prophet said: "Whoever knows himself
Knows his Lord" (Traditional hadith saying)
So if you are His true servant
Do not look for anything but His face.

God's face is the source of the word
It is complete within your being
If your body becomes your eye
You will see everything clearly

You are like a shadow
Pay no attention to fancies and imaginings
If you gaze on the beautiful form
You will gain eternal union)

"Die before you die" (Traditional hadith saying)
And you will reach Him, the Only One
"Am I not your Lord?" and "they answered, Yes, we testify" (*Surah
al-Araf* 7:17)
That is something you must perpetually remember

After the wretched servant dies
All coarse form vanishes
He will unite with the Gracious One
"For all eternity" he will receive a high place ...

(Translated by Drewes and Brakel)

Hamzah's verse was savagely attacked, and indeed burned, by his enemies. Nevertheless, it is clear from this single extract that Hamzah's main concern, through his shaping of the Muslim poetic discourse, was the extinction of his individual personality through the submergence of the self in the Divine ("Die before you die ..."). The person is a subject, a slave, of God, a future subject of heaven, already united with Him, but still gazing separately upon His face. The word "I", in fact, does not appear here at all.

AMIR HAMZAH AND CHAIRIL ANWAR

Such a union as described by Hamzah Fansuri is, of course, not easy but it is never marked by the doubt and resistance that one finds in western metaphysical poetry—nor even in some modern Indonesian poets.

Note the anger, struggle and bitter resignation that characterises "Padamu Jua", To You Again, by Amir Hamzah (1911-1946):

*Habis kikis
Segala cintaku hilang terbang
Pulang kembali aku padamu
Seperti dahulu*

*Kaulah kandil kemerlap
Pelita jendela di malam gelap
Melambai pulang perlahan
Sabar, setia selalu*

*Satu kasihku
Aku manusia
Rindu rasa
Hanya kata merangkai hati*

*Di mana engkau
Rupa tiada
Suara sayup
Hanya kata merangkai hati*

*Engkau cemburu
Engkau ganas
Mangsa aku dalam cakarmu
Bertukar tangkap dengan lepas*

*Nanar aku, gila sasaran
Sayang berulang padamu jua*

*Engkau pelik menarik ingin
Serupa dara di balik tirai*

*Kasihmu sunyi
Menunggu seorang diri
Lalu waktu – bukan giliranku
Mati hari – bukan kawanku.*

(Lost, purged
All my love gone, flown away.
I return to you
As before

You are a flickering candle
A light in a window on a dark night
Waving me home, slowly
Faithfully, always patiently

You are One
I am a man
I want to feel
I want to touch

Where are You
I can't see
Only a barely audible voice
Words shaping my heart

You are jealous
You are cruel
I am prey in Your claws
Alternately caught and released

I am dazed, crazed
Love returns to You again
You are a beautiful jewel
A maid hiding behind a curtain

Yours is a solitary love
Waiting alone
Time passes – it is not my turn
Day dies – not my friend.)

(Translated by Aveling)

The human identity (*nafs*), hurt and frustrated, is very much in evidence throughout this poem. The God is a cruel and jealous God (compare Exodus 19:5), who has destroyed Amir Hamzah's earthly love for a particular woman, forced him to come back to Himself, yet still remains an Absent God who refuses to reveal Himself. A focus on the individual self creates a distance (for the *qalb* and *ruh*) from the Divine.

This same sense of distance based on conflict remains in "Di Mesjid", At the Mosque, by Chairil Anwar (1922-1949):

*Kuseru saja Dia
Sehingga datang juga*

Kami pun bermuka-muka

*Seterusnya Ia bernyala-nyala dalam dada
Segala daya memadamkannya.*

Bersimpah peluh diri yang tak bisa diperkuda

*Ini ruang
Gelanggang kami berperang*

*Binasa-membinasa
Satu menista lain gila*

(I shouted at Him
Until He came

We met face to face
Since then He's burned in my breast
I've struggled with all my strength to extinguish Him
My body, which won't give in, is soaked with sweat

Here, this very space
Is where we fight

Destroying each other
One hurling insults, the other gone mad)

(Translated by Burton Raffel)

Raffel's translation presents some alternative perspectives on the poem. I would read this as a single event, a meeting of one man and God, in a mosque. Raffel introduces a much broader temporal sense ("Since then")

and a much narrower sense of place – “this very space ... where we fight” – is arguably within the human heart (*qalb*). In either case, it is unclear who exactly is “hurling insults” and who the other one is, the who has “gone mad”. The logic of the poem dictates, however, that one is Chairil Anwar, the other is God. There are again two distinct, and antagonistic centres of consciousness at work in this poem.

KEMALA

I will now pursue my argument by discussion of just three of the many Malay poets who are relevant to this theme. The first of these is Kemala, Ahmad Kamal Abdullah (born 1941). Kemala has noted that his own poetry “*membawakan nada religius dan ada yang menganggap sebagai sufistik*”, carries a religious tone and there are those who regard it as sufistic (Kemala, 2012:xv). In the introduction to *Mim* (Kemala, 2001:xi), Mana Sikana argues in a straightforward manner:

Dalam menghasilkan puisi Islam selalu orang terdorong untuk menjadikannya sebagai puisi dakwah, tetapi tidak demikian halnya dengan Kemala. Justeru itu puisinya tidak terbawa-bawa ke arah pengambilan subjek-subjek Islam secara mentah yang menjadikan keras dan pedas. Kemala lebih suka bersahaja dan membiarkan amanatnya terbungkus dalam jalinan tekstur puisinya.

(When writing Muslim poetry, people are usually driven to make it into a dogmatic, fundamentalist verse, but this is not the case with Kemala. Precisely because of that, his poetry does not drift along, taking raw Islamic subjects and treating them in a harsh and violent manner. Instead Kemala prefers to remain simple and to wrap his messages in a fine woven poetic texture.)

The poetic texture gives Kemala’s poetry a richness that is often far from simple, because of its range of unusual vocabulary and high aesthetic qualities. This is evident in the opening of one of Kemala’s early mature works, “Meditasi” (1972):

*subuh julai
dalam dakapan perawan suci
suatu kilau, suatu imbasan
titis titis air memecah sepi ...
kerinduan yang bangun menegurmu
hadir diri
ini milikmu di pentas waktu*

*menjelmakan setia
melahirkan cinta
kembali ia
si anak hilang
menemui diri di siang bersilang ...*

(July dawn
in the chaste embrace
of light, epiphany
silence broken by tears
desire
forms
my single possession
incarnate
as love

he returns
the prodigal son
meeting himself in the fretwork of dawn ...)

(Translated by Aveling, 1986)

Despite the reference to “the prodigal son” (see Luke, 15:11-24 and the poem of the same name by Sitor Situmorang), this is neither Christian nor Islamic poetry.

That fullness of religious language and reference is overwhelmingly evident in the title poem of the volume *‘Ayn* (1983), which begins:

*I
Kalbuku
di depan Hira’
Kutemui labah-labah
binasa mata lahir oleh jaring halus batini
siapa membantah bijaksana-Ku
di sini bermukim al-Amin
sebesar mana cintamu as-Siddik?
Dan gema hijrah menggamit.*

*Jalan ke Masjidil Aqsa
Madinah munawwarah membelai
Kelip mata degupan tamsil*

*mimpi benar Kekasih
kilat kilau pintu langit
tabir jatuh
di pertemuan abadi.
Di Sidratul muntaha
bertamu dan bertemu ...*

(I
My mind in awe
before the cave of Hira'
covered with cobwebs,
eyes destroyed by needles of inner light,
but who could argue with My wisdom?
The Prophet, the Faithful One, dwelt here,
as did as-Siddiq who loved him greatly.
The echoes of the Prophet's departure still ring in the street.

I pass to the al-Aqsa Mosque,
Madinah, City of Light, caresses me
I am stunned by the throbbing melody,
my Beloved's true dream
lightning flashes at the gateway of heaven
The curtain covers the Ka'abah
The pinnacle of the seventh heaven
Point of eternal meeting.
The visitor arrives and is received.)

(Translated Aveling, 1991).

The second part deals with the Prophet's wife, Asiah; part three with the woman mystic, Rabiah al-Adawiyah; four with the seven sleepers of Ephesus; five with the prophets Abraham and Moses; six with an unnamed poet; seven with Gabriel, Adam and Eve; eight with Siti Hajar, Abraham's wife Hagar; and nine with the prophet Jonah. The poem concludes:

*Cicipilah tamsil
Dan bacalah Kesopanan-Ku.*

(Savour this parable
and read therein My Graciousness.)

This is not an easy parable to savour. I remember asking many years ago: "Where is Hira'?" What happened there? Who is as-Sidik? Asiah? Al-

Adawiyah? What happened at al-Aqsa and how did Muhammad “pass” there? When is “You” God? When is “I”? What are the theological arguments that sustain the conclusion? Which theological constructions about the relationships of God and mankind will be acceptable and which will cause outrage. And so on.” (Aveling, 1988:221) They are not, however, difficult parables for Muslims, those who share Kemala’s social identity (Kintanar’s second dimension of the person). There is an individual self here, observing, commenting and drawing conclusions, but it is not a private centre of awareness. It is the pious man, a highly developed member of the Muslim community, surrendered to God. It models itself on the likes of the great philosopher al-Farabi (c.870-950), “*individu dan cendekia ... pemimpin unggul/moralnya unggul ... cintanya kreatif ... pemimpin utama, futuristic, bersih dan kenal / nilai luhur*”, scholar and individual ... a unique leader/ following a single morality ... his love is creative ... an outstanding leader, future oriented, pure, yet still aware/ of traditional values” (“Cinta al-Farabi”, Kemala, 2012:169 and 2010:64). In so doing, any sense of individuality is transcended.

ABDUL GHAFAR IBRAHIM

It should now be clear that there are a number of major dimensions to the expression of the Islamic personality in the poetic discourse of both Hamzah Fansuri and Kemala. These are formed through:

- (1) references to Muslim religious practices: private and communal prayer; reading the Koran; the pilgrimage to the Holy Land;
- (2) references to Muslim theological ideas: the greatness of God; the creation of mankind; the world as a system of signs; the harshness of life in the world; the comfort of prayer; the need for a religious community of fellow believers;
- (3) references to named historical figures, from the Quran and Muslim tradition, especially the Prophet Muhammad SAW, his Companions, the various other prophets, and some major (sufi) poets and intellectuals;
- (4) and, finally, brief references to the poet’s own experience, sometimes covert and sometimes openly marked by the use of his own name. (Aveling, 1988:218-19).

All of these discourse areas take the poet beyond selfish desires and isolation.

Abdul Ghafar Ibrahim (born 1943) is a less theological author than Kemala. He replaces Kemala's verbal sensuousness with a playful visual quality as a way of extinguishing the self through dialogue with God. This technique begins in his very first volume, *Tan Sri Bulan* (1973: 2), where AGI announced that, in his opinion, a poem consisted of "tri-V: verbal – vocal – visual", explaining: "Verbal ialah isi sajak. Vocal bunyinya. Visual ialah teknik sajak", The verbal is the content of the poem. The vocal is its sound. The visual is the technique of the poem. A poem is intended to be read, heard and seen – and to be understood, so that it can arouse a critical and thoughtful response in the reader.

AGI's best-known poetry is strongly vocal – we can think of "Tak Tun":

tak tun
taktak tak tun taktak tak tun taktak tak tun
taktak tak tun taktak tak tun taktak tak tun ...

and "Dundun Cakcak":

dundun
cakcak
dun
cak
dundun
cakcak
dun ...

In AGI's second collection, *Tak Tun* (1978), these two poems are immediately followed by one entitled "La-ilaha-illallah", where this rhythmical quality edges over into the ritual repetition of *zikir*. The poem describes various things that God is not (an idol, a rock, a fool ...) and concludes with the positive affirmations:

La-ilaha-illallah tuhan maha kaya
La-ilaha-illallah tuhan maha mengetahui
La-ilaha-illallah tuhan maha pengampun
La-ilaha-illallah tuhan maha pengasih
La-ilaha-illallah tuhan maha penyayang
La-ilaha-illallah tuhanmu tuhanmu
La-ilaha-illallah tuhanku tuhanku
La-ilaha-illallah tuhanku esa
La-ilaha-illallah tuhanku ALLAH
La-ilaha-illallah ALLAH-HU AKBAR.

La-ilaha-illallah, There is no God but God ... God is most opulent ... omniscient ... merciful ... compassionate ... most kind ... your God is your God ... my God is my God ... my God is one God ... my God is Allah ... God is Great!

These are communal statements – the “I” and “you” are not significant figures; even “your God” and “my God” are not personal referents but depend on a particular quotation drawn from the Qur’an (*Surah al-Kafirun* 109).

As an artist, a painter, AGI also brings a visual, pictorial quality to his poetry and in the 1980s, he explicitly applied this dimension to Islam. There are seven poems in the section entitled “Tiang”, Pillar, in his retrospective collection *Takkan Hilang/ Never Vanish* (2008). The first poem, which gives the section its name, is itself shaped like a pillar, see Figure 1.

TE
GAK
KAN
TIA
NG
I
MAN.
PA
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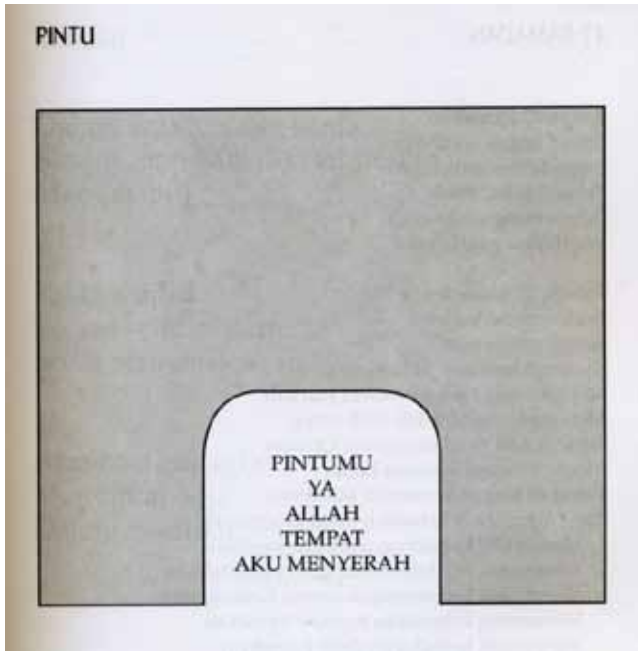
AL

HAM

DU LIL

LAH

In English: “Establish/ the pillar of faith./ Wear/ the jacket/ of faith./ Wrap/ the ring/ of faith/ around/ your finger/ All glory be to God.” The self must be wrapped in a continual and grateful awareness of the Creator.



The next poem, “Pintu”, Door, continues this communal awareness. It presents a gray coloured square, with a space cut out in the middle of the lower part to feature the words, “PINTUMU/ YA/ ALLAH/ TEMPAT/ AKU MENYERAH”. In my translation, I have assumed that the shape is that of the K’abah and translated: “I/ BOW/ TOWARDS/ MECCA” (Aveling, 2008:15).

There are two further poems on the holy month of Ramadan and one on the sacred attributes, mercy and compassion, “Ar-rahman nir Rahim”. None of these poems use the first person pronoun, although this does occur in “Rinduku”, Longing, a poem that is similar to, and very different from, “Padamu Jua”:

*Dalam waktu yang sama
Kewujudan-MU diketahui dan
Mengetahui*

*KAU wujud
Secara sendiri dan
Sedia semenjak azali*

*Aku rasa bahagia
Menyintai-MU
Dalam rinduku.*

(At the same time
I know YOU
And am known

YOU are here
Alone
Perpetually present

I am happy
I love YOU
Even in YOUR absence.)

The “I” exists only in relation to God.

The last poem in this section is shaped like a heart, with the surrounding words: “CINTAKU MENTAATI PERINTAH DAN SURUHAN CINTAMU MEMBERI RAHMAT DAN BELAS KASIHAN”, My love obeys Your orders and commands Your love offers me love and blessing”. Again the drive is to express the longing of a devout Muslim.

We may finally note that, strikingly, AGI adds a new political aspect to the social identity of being a Muslim – an explicit identification of the umah, the Muslim community, with all Muslims everywhere: suffering Muslims in Myanmar (“Perarakan Rohingya”), Bosnia (“Jangan Bunuh Bosnia”), Kosovar (“Kita Menangis Bersama Kosovar”) and Palestine (“Palestin”). The Muslim Revival that began in the Middle East in the early 1970s has clearly had a broadening impact on the understanding of a Malay social identity and thus on Malay Literature as well.

ISA KAMARI

The community matters not the individual. The political dimension which is present in AGI’s latter work also forms an important part of the thinking of the contemporary Singapore author, Isa Kamari (born 1960). In his novels, Isa often deals in an innovative, and undoubtedly controversial, manner with matters related to the Islamic community. *Tawassul* (2002), translated as *Intercession* by Sukmawati Sirat (2008), for example, is based on the extremely original idea that the Muhammad followed by international terrorist

movements is, in fact, an evil clone of the original Prophet. The somewhat autobiographical *Memeluk Gerhana*, (Embracing the Storm) (2007), translated as *A Song of the Wind*, by Sukmawati Sirat and R. Krishnan (2013), and *Duka Tuan Bertakhta* (Sadly You Rule) (2011) translated as *1819* by R. Krishnan (2013) deal respectively with the threat of local Islamic terrorism and the failure of Muslim leadership in Singapore. His most recent work, *Selendang Sukma* (The Soul's Shawl) (2014), is a bold exploration of the relationship between Balinese Hinduism and the original monotheistic Adamic form of Islam.

Isa made the pilgrimage to Mecca in 2001 and two years later suddenly produced three volumes of poetry, containing 100 poems, on this experience: *Ka'bah: 33 Puisi Tanah Suci* (Ka'bah, 33 poems from the holy land) (2006); *Lorong Wahyu, 33 Puisi Tanah Suci* (Paths of Inspiration: 33 poems from the holy land) (2006); and *Cinta Arafat: 34 Puisi Tanah Suci*, (Love of the Plain of Arafat: 34 Poems from the Holy Land) (2006). As he explains in the essay "Penantian Munajat" (Waiting for Communion with God, unpublished), the poems were written within a period of just two weeks at the instigation of a friend. This overwhelming experience is recorded in the poem "Munajat Rindu";

*dua tahun
kutinggalkan
rumah-Mu
relung kalbuku
Kau lingkari
munajat rindu*

*seruan-Mu
menggabung
rahsia tujuh lapisan
suci hayat insan*

*kesaksian asal
tiupan roh
cipta janin
lahir zuriat
ajal tubuh
barzakh mayat
kebangkitan*

*wajah
menawaf kalbu
di tanah haram Mu
singgah rindu
resah rindu
asyik rindu
sirna rindu
menatap
wajah Mu*

*labbaikallahumma labbaik
labbaika laasyarika lakaabbaik
innalhamda wanikmata
lakawalmulk laasyarikalak*

*munajat rinduku
bertelimpuh
di bawah kursi Mu*

(Cinta Arafah, 2006: 24-26)

*(two years ago
I left
Your house
You surrounded
the chambers of my heart
with the desire
to meet You again*

*Your call
unites
the mystery of the seven layers
with holy human existence*

*the original witness
 the blowing of the spirit
 the creation of the foetus
 the birth of our successors
the death of the body
 the intermediate world
 the resurrection*

*my face
 walking prayerfully
 around the heart
 in Your holy land
 visits longing
 knows restless longing
 enjoys longing
 longs together
 to see
 Your face
 I come to fulfil Your call, Oh God!
 I come in answer to Thee!
 There is none beside Thee, Oh Lord.
 Truly praise and blessings are Thine.
 All kingdoms belong only to Thee.
 There is none beside Thee!*

*my longing for communion
 sits with legs bent back
 before Your throne.*

(Translated by Aveling)

Like Kemala's "Ayn", Isa's "Munajat Rindu" uses very beautiful language, in which the shorter line allows for the fullest emphasis on each word. The beautiful language involves the most intimate emotion of Malay poetry, *rindu* – longing, desire, melancholy; here the heart, *qalb*, conquers the *nafs* and turns it towards God. The sound of the *talbiah* chant ("I come ..."), recited as the pilgrims approach Mecca from Medinah, reminds us of AGI's emphasis on the vocal nature of collective chanting.

"Munajat Rindu" describes the life of the human being in terms of religious stages, from before birth to death and resurrection. In dealing with one of the most important pillars of Islam, depending on one's circumstances, the pilgrimage to Mecca, it merges Kintanar's first two layers of the human and social identity in order to obliterate the third, "the unique personal sense of who I am". The poet is a physical and psychological entity but he is also the pious man of pilgrimage – a lover, servant of God, devout member of the Muslim community at prayer, seeking annihilation before the face of God. There is, thus, also a continuity from Hamzah Fansuri's poem.

CONCLUSION

The topic of how the self, the poet, speaks in the presence of God – and who that self then is – is a complex one. We have barely scratched the surface of this subject and although we have considered four Malay (and two Indonesian) poets, a substantial number, there is much much more that could be said about their many works, and their successes and failures in this area.

The poems I have described are, on the whole, warm and intimate. They treat God as a close friend (“Mu”, a *rakan* or *rafik*). Are they too intimate? Certainly, they are somewhat distant from the awe and fear of the Prophet Muhammad SAW at the beginning of his prophethood, or Old Testament prophet. Isaiah (Esias), who wrote:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his robe filled the temple. Above Him stood the seraphim; each had six wings; with two he covered his face and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said”

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of His glory.”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth ...

(Isaiah, 6:1-7)

But with this epiphany, we have gone beyond poetry into a mystery and it is time to stop.

NOTE

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