

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ETHICS OF *HIKAYAT SERI RAMA: THE MALAY RAMAYANA*

(*Pengantar Etika Hikayat Seri Rama: Ramayana Versi Melayu*)

Harry Aveling

harry.aveling@monash.edu

Monash and La Trobe Universities.

To cite this article (*Rujukan artikel ini*): Aveling, H. (2022). An introduction to the ethics of *Hikayat Seri Rama: The Malay Ramayana*. *Malay Literature*, 35(2), 155-172. [http://doi.org.10.37052/ml35\(2\)no1](http://doi.org.10.37052/ml35(2)no1)

| | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|----------|---------------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------|---|------------|
| Received: Peroleh: | 5/7/2022 | Revised: Semakan | 11/8/2022 | Accepted: Terima: | 30/8/2022 | Published online: Terbit dalam talian: | 31/10/2022 |
|-----------------------|----------|---------------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------|---|------------|

Abstract

The Malay *Hikayat Seri Rama* (*HSR*) represents a Hindu legend that was heavily Islamicized in its final Malay form (as presented to Oxford University in 1633). This paper seeks to discern the ethical values of *HSR*. These values are included in sentences spoken by the narrator, and in sentences spoken by the characters themselves. The values are described in single words (just, brave, generous, etc.), phrases, and occasionally whole paragraphs. The values are related to the administration of the state and to the maintenance of an army. They are particularly male values. It is suggested that the source of these values lies in the Arabic-Persian wisdom tradition, as particularly represented in Malay by *Taj al-Salatin*, a work from the same time and place as *HSR* (Aceh, North Sumatera, in the early 17th century). A brief glance of several Indian business websites related to the contemporary relevance of Valmiki's Ramayana reveals a series of manipulative selfish propositions. The paper concludes by emphasizing on the contemporary importance of individual responsibility, such as justice, fairness, awareness, thoroughness, compassion, and maintaining "a good name".

Keywords: *Hikayat Seri Rama*, justice, honesty, Rama, Rawana, *Taj al-Salatin*

Abstrak

Hikayat Seri Rama (HSR) *Melayu mementaskan legenda Hindu yang sangat dipengaruhi oleh agama Islam dalam versi terakhir (naskhah yang dianugerahkan kepada Universiti Oxford pada tahun 1633). Makalah ini membahaskan nilai-nilai etika dalam HSR. Nilai-nilai ini disebut dalam kalimat ucapan pencerita dan ucapan watak-watak hikayat. Seringkali nilai-nilai ini sederhana sekali – satu patah perkataan sahaja (adil, ikhlas, berani, dsb.), jarang sampai suatu perenggan. Nilai-nilai tersebut membicarakan cara memimpin negeri dan tentera yang berkaitan. Nilai-nilai ini sesuai dengan dunia lelaki. Kemungkinan nilai-nilai kerajaan ini berasal daripada tradisi akhlak Arab-Parsi, khas yang dibentangkan oleh Taj al-Salatin, yang dihimpun di tempat yang sama pada waktu yang sama dengan HSR (Aceh, Sumatera Utara, abad ke-17). Makalah ini membicarakan kerelevanan nilai HSR pada masa kini. Beberapa laman web perniagaan India menjelaskan penekanan sikap menangani orang lain berdasarkan Ramayana Valmiki. Sebagai penutup, makalah ini mengungkapkan kepentingan kontemporari tanggungjawab seseorang individu seperti keadilan, kesaksamaan, kesedaran, sikap berhati-hati, kasih sayang dan memelihara nama baik.*

Kata kunci: Hikayat Seri Rama, *adil, ikhlas, Rama, Rawana, Taj al-Salatin*

INTRODUCTION

The Indian author Tulsidas (c. 1554 – 1623) asserts in his Hindi-language *Ramayana*:

For the sake of his worshippers Rama, the Blessed Lord, assumed the form of a king and played his most holy part as an ordinary man. Just as an actor plays upon the stage in various disguises, exhibiting characters appropriate to his dreams, but himself remains the same, so too ...does Raghupati act his part, deluding the demons but gladdening the faithful. (Hill, 1971:465)

Lord Rama does indeed assume many forms in the “three hundred” and more retellings (Ramanujan, 1991) of the *Ramayana* that are found within India and abroad. There are English translations of many of these different

versions of the *Ramayana*, including several from Southeast Asia—such as Thailand (Olsson, 1968), Laos (Sahai, 1996), Burma (Toru, 2000), and Java (Robson, 2015) — but only recently of the Malay *Hikayat Seri Rama* (henceforth *HSR*), or *Hikayat Seri Rama: The Malay Ramayana* (Aveling, 2020). In these translations, Rama is shaped not only by the language into which he is retold, but also by the culture and religion that accompany that second language. In the Lao *Phra Lak Phra Ram*, for example, Rama is a bodhisattva, or a future Buddha, and lives by those values. Vimalasuri's Prakrit *Paumaciri* similarly places the epic within a Jain framework, strongly denouncing the “absurdity and lies” allegedly promoting violence that are found in Valmiki's version (Saran & Khanna, 2004:7).

In the Malay *HSR*, Rama's identity takes yet another form, that of Islam. In this paper, I want to analyse and describe the ethical values of the Malay *HSR*. The original paper was prepared for a conference on the *Ramayana* held in India; at the conference organisers' request, I conclude with a few remarks on the possible contemporary relevance of the *HSR*.

HISTORICAL SETTING

The use of Sanskrit for royal inscriptions (*prasasti*) and fine literature (*kavya*) became widespread in Southeast Asia from the 4th century CE onwards. The first use of indigenous languages for these same purposes only came a few centuries later with a Khmer inscription from 611, written in a Southern Indian script. Inscriptions in Old Malay date from 684 and in Old Javanese from 732. It is impossible to imagine the Indian heritage in the Southeast Asian archipelago without thinking of the *Ramayana* as being a part of it. However, the only transcription of *HSR* we now have is a far later work— from some time in the 16th century CE. It is not a direct translation of any of the major Indian texts. To be sure, a manuscript does not show the whole tradition. Dating is difficult because, in many ways, a manuscript was more like an oral script. Previously, it would in all likelihood have been read aloud to an audience in court, with musical accompaniment, and embroidered in the telling. It would have drawn on a common knowledge of the broad story, widespread shadow theatre performances, and a series of other pre-existing texts in Indian languages and in Malay, which are alluded to throughout the work. These practices may have gone on for many centuries.

Hindu culture in Southeast Asia began to fade after 1300 CE with the coming of Islam to the region. *HSR* was apparently composed (or, more likely, revised for the last time) shortly after the historical transition had been made in society from Hinduism to Islam. In this version, Rama is the grandson of the Muslim prophet, Adam through his father, and of Vishnu through his mother.

Transcribed into Arabic script, there are several linguistic terms that indicate a strong Muslim influence. The term *hikayat* in the title is Arabic and describes various forms of narrative texts, ranging from the highly imaginative to the historical. Significantly, the phrase *Dewata Mulia Raya* (translated here as “God, All-Glorious and All-Mighty”) is used throughout, in place of the names of the Hindu Triad and the more conventional Muslim *Allah Subhanahu wa Ta’ala* (translated as “Almighty and Worshipful Allah”). This suggests that the change in religious belief was not yet complete. However, the gods (*dewa*) are little more than heavenly spirits, or “demi-gods” at best. To emphasize the Muslim surveillance of the renewed reproduction of the text, the Prophet Adam is introduced at the very beginning of the work to counsel Rawana and help him gain his kingdoms, and is mentioned at regular intervals thereafter. Due to the regular mention of Adam and his sacred hill (Adam’s Peak), it is possible that one of the sources of the tale was in Sri Lanka, where Adam was supposed by Muslims to have set foot on earth after his banishment from paradise.

As a consequence of this syncretism, the British scholar Sir Richard Winstedt (1961:37) has described *HSR* as apparently having been “written down for a Muslim court, like that of Malacca (1400-1535), which was still conservative enough to like the old tales of the Hindu period, provided they were presented in a form which Muslim pundits could condone”. The earliest manuscript we have of *HSR* was presented to the Bodleian Library, Oxford, in 1633, by Archbishop Laud, the Chancellor of the university.

A ROYAL AUDIENCE

Hikayat Seri Rama is fundamentally about kings and kingdoms—whether they be humans, monkeys, or *raksasa*. It is a man’s world, in which power must be constantly asserted and proven (Aveling, 2020:13). Rawana taunts Rama and Laksamana by saying “a man who wants to be a man...

should be strong and brave in the presence of other men”²¹ (*HSR*, 1964:89; *MR*, 2020:109).

The overall plot is completely familiar. In the simplest of terms, princess Sita is kidnapped by Maharaja Rawana, and her husband, Maharaja Seri Rama, must fight to win her back, aided by the monkey Hanuman. Rama and Rawana’s and the many other kingdoms may (or may not) be identical with some actual medieval Malay kingdoms. The tale throughout is directed at a male audience that is royal. As a symbol of the king’s centrality, the capital is built around the royal palace. The state extends from there as far as his authority allows. His queens may have smaller palaces nearby; they are attended by their serving maids and seem to have a largely decorative role (Aveling, 2020:13). Women are objects that may be easily replaced or given away (Aveling, 2020:13). They can provoke displays of manliness—by Rama and his son Tabalawi, in particular—but the men also know that they are “only women” and that there are more important things in the world to be concerned with (Aveling, 2020). Lesser kings, who are often a potential threat to the central maharaja, may be sent away to rule distant parts of the kingdom. Ultimately, the king’s rule is despotic and the greatest crime against him is disobedience (Aveling, 2020:12).

The focus of the king’s daily activity is the audience hall, where he meets with his officials and decides on policy. In the audience hall, he is accompanied by prime minister (*perdana menteri*), minor kings (*raja-raja*), warriors (*hulubalang*), ministers (*menteri*), astrologers (*ahli nujum*), and textual experts (*sasterawan*), all seated in their proper rows in front of him. Conscripted citizens (*rakyat*, referring to the people) make up the bulk of the army, but are not present in the court. Musicians play both at court and in battles. Heralds (*sida*) carry the king’s messages to those around him and, on occasion, to other kings and their courts. Other officials at court are members of the noble and warrior castes. Ascetics, entitled “Maharishi” or “Bagavan,” represent professional religious practitioners and they are still Indian in outlook. Merchants exist at the edge of this introverted world. Beyond this visible world are: the seven layers of the heavens, inhabited by demi-gods and *apsara*; the seven subterranean layers, inhabited by genies and demons; and seven layers in the ocean (Aveling, 2020:12).

THE VIRTUES OF RAMA

In keeping with the original epic, we might expect Rama to be the most virtuous character, even if he is no longer a god, and this turns out to be the case in Malay. Scanning through the text, we find ethical statements, such as the following, spoken by Rama. The comments are made to his brothers, who beseech him to take back the rule of Lankapuri after the death of Dasarata:

The kingdom is a gift from my father. Whoever he wanted to have it, should rule over his domain. We will never prosper if we transgress his commands. The world is impermanent. **It is good to have a good name**, live **justly** and be able to **discern between virtue and vice**. My younger brothers, **be diligent** as you rule over the state, and **always love your subjects, especially those who have been hurt**. **Do good to those who build the city walls and the weapon makers**. **Speak respectfully** to the older prime ministers and merchants. **Honour the upright** and **obey even those who are evil**. Kings should **keep a careful watch on evil ministers**. Pay heed to what I say, do as I tell you, and you will lead happy, peaceful lives. Have plenty of generals to keep the land safe. The kingdom was given to you and it is still yours. Remember **to honour the good names of your parents**. **Never live with a bad name.**² (*HSR*, 1964:111-112; *MR*, 2020:130)³

The words in bold show ethical values and are spoken by Rama, in general and about another character, his father (characters seldom speak about themselves). The values are simply named, with their meaning apparently being self-evident. The *hikayat* concludes with this assessment of Rama's life as king, spoken by the narrator:

This is the chronicle of Seri Rama, a **brave, powerful and devout** king, who had no equal at his time. His kingdom was **generous** and his law was **just**, his children and descendants ruled in this manner and will do so until the day of judgment.

This concludes the story of Seri Rama, a **brave and heroic** king, unequalled in all the world. His greatness was a gift from God, who wants his servants to be happy and free from danger. God, All-Glorious and All-Mighty, generously gives us many gifts. When you read this *hikayat*, I ask you not to be too harsh. Mankind is full of mistakes

and prone to forgetfulness. There is only One who never makes any mistakes. (*HSR*, 1964:298; *MR*, 2020:286-287)⁴

Rama is a great king because he is brave, devout, generous, and just—these are the moral qualities that marked his life as king. These qualities are not to be analysed or usually explained. They are nouns that incorporate the related actions. Primarily, they are to be named and lived.

OTHER VIRTUOUS KINGS

Other kings are measured by these same single-word standards. Rama's father Dasarata is praised by Rama's enemy Rawana as “a **noble, generous and rich** king ... **brave and heroic** ... truly ascetic”⁵ (*HSR*, 1964:62; *MR*, 2020:86). Sometimes, a single word suffices; at other times, these extend into fuller phrases. In this case, the judgement is made by the narrator: King Badanul was “a **very just** king and no one could find any fault with the way he ruled. ...As long as [Badanul] held the throne **no one was cheated or cheated anyone else...**He **examined everything** that happened in his domain very carefully and **administered the true law properly**”⁶ (*HSR*, 1964:5; *MR*, 2020:32).

THE VIRTUES OF RAWANA

The *HSR* is, in the first place, the story of Maharaja Rawana and not of Rama. The text begins with a recognition of the widespread fame of the *Ramayana* throughout South and Southeast Asia. It says: “This is a very beautiful *hikayat*, famous, told above the winds and below the winds...”⁷ (*HSR*, 1964:1; *MR*, 2020:27). The winds are the winds of the monsoon seasons, so the story is “famous above the equator and below it.” Readers who only know the Sanskrit work may then be rather surprised when the Introduction continues: “It tells about Maharaja Rawana who had ten heads and twenty arms. He was a great king and he gained four realms by the grace of Allah Ta'ala, Almighty God. One kingdom was in the world, the second was in the sky in heaven, the third was under the ground and the fourth kingdom was beneath the sea”⁸ (*HSR*, 1964:1; *MR*, 2020:27).

This is the story of Maharaja Rawana and not of Rama. The first part of the whole text tells the story of Rawana as a faithful servant of God. The second part presents him as Rama's enemy, breaking his promise to serve

Allah by kidnapping Sita. Both parts present a consistent ideal pattern of kingly virtue that is wider than any one ruler.

The chronicle immediately tells of how Rawana received these four kingdoms through an act of asceticism—tying himself to a framework of poles and hanging upside down over a fire all night. As a reward for this self-punishment, Rawana meets with the Prophet Adam, who has been expelled from paradise and is strolling through the world. Adam promises to take Rawana’s request to Almighty God, if he can “rule your kingdoms well and wisely administer the law for the sake of Allah *subhanahu wata’ala*, All Mighty and Praiseworthy Allah”⁹ (*HSR*, 1964:2; *MR*, 2020:29). This is the contract around which the book revolves. Raja Shaksha of Indera Puri Negara confirms this when he says to Rawana: “I have heard that when you asked the Prophet Adam *alaihis-salam* (peace be upon him) to beseech God, All-glorious and All Mighty, to grant you four kingdoms, one promise was required of you.”¹⁰ The promise was that he would rule justly all the days of his life (*HSR*, 1964:55; *MR*, 2020:78).¹¹ Apart from his infatuation with Sita Dewi, that is precisely what Rawana does. As king, Rawana is encouraged “to examine everything that you are obliged to decide upon very carefully,”¹² and, in this case, he does not do so.

Initially, Maharaja Rawana fulfils all these conditions. His kingdom is glorious and his reputation is impeccable:

Maharaja Rawana established a state around Serandib Mountain. It was very beautiful in appearance. The whole earth was covered with gems, coconut palms, and layered with gold. The main animals in the forest were the elephants. Nine precious jewels filled the seas, the reefs were made of pearls, and the trees in the ocean were made of marble, the fish were made of ambergris. Maharaja Rawana named the state Langkapuri. Langkapuri was very stable because Maharaja Rawana was a great king, very **rich**, and very **just**.

Truly, because of his generosity, all the kings of the world made themselves subject to his law. No one could disobey his words and his will. **He called the good “good” and the evil he condemned as evil.** Even his son would not have been forgiven had he disobeyed him. Thus Maharaja Rawana ruled **justly** and **compassionately**. (*HSR*, 1964:4-5; *MR*, 2020:31)¹³

The ethical features of this passage match those of Rama: As king, Rawana is just, careful to examine the details of each case, maintain a good name, be truthful, keep a well-equipped army, and have compassion on his subjects. There are not two standards—a high one for Rama and a lesser one for mere mortals, monkeys, and *raksasa*. All are equal in the way they must lead their royal lives according to the same rules.

A FULLER CODE

On rare occasions, the keywords of the morality can also be expanded to form comparatively longer statements. Significantly, pragmatic reasons are then given for the desirability of these qualities:

Firstly, the king should be **learned**, so that he can distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong.

Secondly, he should be a **mature** person, virtuous, compassionate towards all his subjects.

Thirdly, he should be **handsome**, because he represents the Deity, All-Glorious and Almighty. He should be better than all his people and **give gifts** to all his subjects, great and small, and **greet everyone with a pleasant expression**. Then his reputation as a king will be perfect.

Fourthly, he should be **braver** than his enemies so that he can shame all the other kings.¹⁴

Fifth, he should be good at weaponry.

Sixth, he should be **generous**, act **justly** towards the rich and the poor, and **respect the generals** so that his name as king is perfect.

Seventh, he should be **awake** more than he is asleep, because that is what the law says. This seventh interior quality will dispose him favourably towards holy men who are always awake because he represents the Deity, All-Glorious and Almighty. He should be better than all his people and give gifts to all his subjects, great and small, this will dispose him favourably towards holy men who are always awake. (*HSR*, 1964:8; *MR*, 2020:34)¹⁵

HSR emphasizes practical ethical values and provides pragmatic reasons for them when challenged to do so. It does not deal with abstract theories such as definition of ethical behaviour, in the same way as, for example, Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* does. Little attention is paid to such subjects as human nature and the capacity to do good, the nature of good and evil, motivations for moral action, the underlying principles governing moral and immoral acts, deciding who is obliged to adhere to the moral code and who is exempted from it, and the implications of either adhering to the moral code or violating it. The code relies on the king's role in his kingdom. It is told for men of action and not theologians. In a traditional militarized society, words meant exactly what they said.

We have enough clues now to understand the function of this morality better. In the first place, the morality is intended to form a monarch who can maintain a peaceful and prosperous kingdom. In civic terms, it recognizes that in this kingdom, there is a major gap between the ruler and his subjects, which allows for complementary roles. Their duty is to obey him. His is to rule. He can best rule when he is just, compassionate, and fair. To do these things, he must continuously examine everything that happens around him. This will protect him from betrayal at the hands of others. There is nothing devious about this ethics (unlike that of Machiavelli); it encourages honesty, fairness, and a high degree of sensitivity to other people.

There is more, nevertheless. In military terms, the words also position the ruler as the head of the army and is responsible for success on the battlefield. The second half of the king's duties relates to military matters; the king must maintain a well-equipped and well-trained army. Otherwise, the results will not be simply politically dangerous, but in fact inhumane. This is explained in the following story:

There was a Moorish king called Maharaja Abdul Muluk. He taught all his children: "Oh my children, don't be like that stupid buffalo. In the olden days, many kings liked to fight wars even before they secured their kingdoms, had adequate stocks of weapons and other equipment. Their generals were **not always just** and **did not always care for the common people**. They **fought all their enemies** and if they lost, they **did not readily accept** defeat and **say that it was the will of God**, All-Glorious and All-Mighty. In this way, people talked about them and mocked them, saying that they had acted like that stupid buffalo. They raped their subjects and the leaders of their armies. They raped other kings.

If there were no kings, they pillaged the countries they were attacking. Few of them were ever very happy.¹⁶ (*HSR*, 1964:96; *MR*, 2020:116)

The opposite condition is also discussed:

The only happy king is one who leads a **virtuous life**, wanting **to be perfect in this world**. He **never neglects his nation and his subjects**, not even for a single day. Then his kingdom will always be secure. He can pass it on to his grandchildren, not like that stupid bull. He will continue to live if he is brave and virtuous. But he should never want to be the commander of his own army: that only leads to trouble. He will regret that decision. His name will be wasted, his country destroyed, his people plunged into chaos, his descendants will live in chaos and never be heard of again. My message to my children is that you should **always consult with other people** in everything you do. Then your actions will be perfect in this world and the next.¹⁷ (*HSR*, 1964:96; *MR*, 2020:116)

In full, this ethics is not only about how to rule one's kingdom, but in fact is also about how to preserve it from the greedy hands of other kings, internal and external to his state.

ISLAM

There are various possible Muslim Malay sources for this semiotic network. For the devout Muslim, it may be enough to believe in the tenets of the Quran. Two important verses are to be found in Surah *al-Baqarah*, and *an-Nahl*:

Righteousness does not consist in whether you face towards the East or the West. The righteous man is he who believes in God and in the Last day, in the angels and the Book and the prophets, who, though he loves it dearly, gives away his wealth to kinsfolk, to orphans, and for the redemption of captives, who is true to his promise and steadfast in trial and adversity, and in times of war. Such are the true believers, such are the God fearing. (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:177)

God enjoins justice, kindness and charity to one's kindred, and forbids

lewdness, reprehensible conduct and oppression. He admonished you so that you may take heed. (*An-Nahl*, 16:90)

The later verse contains the keywords *adil* and *ihsan*, which take a high priority in virtually all of the quotations drawn from *HSR* above. A further source is the moral codes in the “wisdom tradition” of Arabic and Persian literature. These are shaped by the teachings of Muhammad, the Quran, the precedents of Islamic jurists, pre- and post-Islamic Arabic and Persian warrior legends, and Greek ideas. The tradition is presented in Malay through the manuals *Taj al Salatin* [*The Mirror of Kings*] (1603) and *Bustanu Salatin* [*Garden of Kings*] (1633). *Taj al Salatin* was popular in Aceh at the time of the final copying of *HSR*. It relies both on direct advice and illustrative stories. Written by scholars, the advice quotes the Quran to underline the importance of the primary virtues of justice and compassion. The stories it tells emphasize on the necessity for the king to remain in his kingdom, not actually fight in wars and not travel, even to Mecca. By taking care of pious and learned persons and his generals, the king can encourage the wellbeing and stability of his kingdom.

Taj al Salatin describes the qualities of a good king in a way that is close to *HSR*:

First, he must be of a mature and discerning mind, able to tell right from wrong; second, he must be knowledgeable; third, he must choose his ministers from persons of an astute and discerning mind; fourth, he must be able to inspire loyalty and admiration in others; fifth, he must be generous; sixth, he must always remember those who have served him well; seventh he must be courageous; eight, he must be moderate as regards the amount of food, drink and sleep he requires; ninth, he should spend only a minimum amount of time in the company of women; and tenth, he must be a man. (Liaw, 2011:330)

We may conclude that the *Taj al Salatin* teaches what *HSR* teaches: A wise and ascetic king who is surrounded by clever counsellors and commands a strong army will surely create a peaceful and prosperous kingdom. The wisdom of *HSR* is the wisdom of Islam and finds its basis in the Quran and Muslim civilisation.

A BRIEF NOTE ON THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF *HSR*

This paper was originally prepared for a conference on the *Ramayana* held at the Indira Gandhi Tribal University in Madhya Pradesh, India. The organisers of the conference asked for some consideration to be shown for the contemporary relevance of the *Ramayana*, including the *Malay Ramayana*.

I find this a difficult question. The literary historian is responsible for analysing the texts thoroughly and accurately. After this, it is interesting but not customary to relate the text to other issues in the modern world. A search of contemporary Indian websites will find such “relevances” of the *Ramayana* to modern business practices as these:

Seven hooks from the *Ramayana* to vitalize business:

- Prioritize your brand name
- Limit powers and manage stakeholders
- Choose your alliances wisely
- Create clear vision with in-depth analysis
- Seek experts’ assistance
- Keep your team motivated
- Compete in a fair game

(Kaur, 2021)

Building leadership skills – lessons from the *Ramayana*:

- Provide a concrete example to followers;
- Believe in the ability of subordinates to achieve an aim and encourage them to do so;
- Treat all people equally;
- Stand courageously in the face of general adversity;
- Stand for morality but do not engage in judgmental posturing;
- Consult subordinates on important matters and allow them to give their opinions freely;
- Follow a code of ethics and be ready to sacrifice to follow it.

(Somraj, 2016)

Great ethical lessons to learn from the *Ramayana*:

- Family is important
- Be careful of temptation
- Follow instructions, don’t alter your plans arbitrarily

- Ram Setu showed that even the smallest animal matters
- Respect your enemy

(Pandey, 2020)

These “ethical principles” strike me as being what Indians would call *jugaad*, or cynical “quick fixes,” in personnel management, that do not require personal change. Within a Muslim framework, the Muslim scholar might argue, as Hammudah Abdalati does, for more demanding interior attitudes that require constant awareness and submission to God. Thus Hammudah writes:

God is the Creator and Source of all goodness, truth and beauty. (2) Man is a responsible, dignified and honorable agent of his Creator. (3) God has put everything in the heavens and the earth in the service of mankind. (4) By His Mercy and Wisdom, God does not expect the impossible from man or hold him accountable for anything beyond his power. Nor does God forbid man to enjoy the good things of life. (5) Moderation, practicality and balance are guarantees of high integrity and sound morality. (6) All things are permissible in principle except what is singled out as obligatory, which must be observed, and what is singled out as forbidden, which must be avoided. (7) Man’s ultimate responsibility is to God and his highest goal is the pleasure of his Creator. (Hammudah, 1978:8)

Unfortunately, Hammudah still does not give details of how to live a moral life.

CONCLUSION

In defining these ethical criteria within a Malay context, the *HSR* suggests that the keywords to remember are: Justice (*adil*), fairness (*ihsan*), willingness to learn (*belajar*), thoroughness in examining situations (*periksa yang benar-benar*), be compassionate (*pemurah*) and always maintain a good public reputation (*nama yang baik*). These are Malay Muslim ethical values. It is also important that we should be humble and accept that: “Clear Mankind is full of mistakes and prone to forgetfulness. There is only One who never makes any mistakes ...” (Aveling 220:287). The *Hikayat Seri Rama* is far from being a Hindu

text; it is deeply marked by Muslim values of how to live a virtuous life. Perhaps we can share these discussions with the theologians after all.

NOTES

- ¹ *Jikalau ia sungguh kepada sama-sama laki-laki ia hendak menunjukkan gagahnya dan beraninya maka gagah namanya.*
- ² *...Negeri itu anugerah ayahanda, pada bicara hamba, barang siapa yang dianugerahkan ayahanda ia juga baik kerajaan, jikalau kita lalu titah ayahanda tiada akan kita beroleh kebajikan, karena alam dunia ini tida kekal pada seorang jua pun demikian nama yang baik dan berbuat adil dan membicarakan baik dan jahat. Ada pun adinda jangan lupa lalai dalam kerajaan dan jangan tiada mengasehi segala rakyat yang teraniaya dan mengasehi segala hamba dan berbuat kota dan senjata dan jangan tiada saudara hamba berbicara dengan segala perdana menteri dan biaperi yang tua-tua budi bicaranya yang baik turut yang jahat taruh pada hati, apabila menteri yang kata hamba ini, jangan tiada diturut supaya saudara hamba sentosa dan sukacita dan hulubalang perbanyak supaya negeri tua hamba kekal karena negeri itu sudahlah dahulu anugerah akan adinda sekarang pun adindalah yang empunya dia. Yang kata hamba ini turut agar supaya jangan binasa nama orang tua-tua, baik mati dengan nama yang baik dan jangan hidup nama yang jahat.*
- ³ References to quotations begin with reference to the Malay text (*HSR*) and are followed by reference to the English translation (*MR*).
- ⁴ *Inilah hikayat Seri Rama raja yang perkasa dan sakti dan pertapa, sudah itu lagi tiada ada berlawan dalam dunia ini pada masa itu. Syahadan dengan murah tangannya dan hukumnya pun terlalu adil datang kepada anak cucunya kerajaan dalam dunia datang kepada hari kiamat.
Demikianlah kisah Seri Rama raja yang pahlawan tiada berlawan pada segala akan dunia ini. Demikianlah kebesarannya dianugerakan Dewata akan hambanya yang berbahagia itu dengan tiada diperolehkan apa bahayanya. Maka dianugerakan Dewara Mulia Raya dengan mudahnya, Adapun barang siapa membaca hikayat ini jangan di'aibkan karena manusia itu penuh dengan khilafnya dan lalai melainkan ia juah yang tiada khilaf. (*HSR*,1964:298; *MR*, 2020:286-7).*
- ⁵ *"Engkau raja bangsawan lagi hartawan lagi dermawan lagi pahlawan lagi raja indera pertapa"*
- ⁶ *Tatkala Badanul kerajan yang diturutnya adil, dan tiadalah lagi disalahinya. Selama Badanul kerajan seorang pun tiada teraniaya dan menganyai, dan seorang pun dalam negeri Indera Puri Nagara tiada dukacita. Jika ada pun orang duka sebab kematian keluarganya juga. Demikianlah kebesarannya tatkala Badanul kerajaan itu terlalu sekali ia periksa negerinya dihukumkannya dengan hukum yang sebenarnya.*
- ⁷ *Ini hikayat yang terlalu indah-indah termasyur diperkatakan orang di atas angin dan di bawah angin nyata kepada segala sastera.*
- ⁸ *Perkataan Maharaja Rawana yang sepuluh kepalanya dan dua puluh tangannya. Raja itu terlalu besar ia beroleh kerajaannya, empat tempat negeri dianugerahkan Allah Ta'ala. Suatu kerajaan dalam dunia, kedua kerajaan kepada inderan pada udara, ketiga tempat kerajaan dalam bumi keempat kerajaan di dalam Laut.*

- ⁹ *Jikalau dapat engkau baik-baik kerajaanmu itu dan ingat-ingat engkau menghukum karena Alah Subhanahu-wata'ala*
- ¹⁰ *Hamba dengar tatkala Nabi Adam mohonkan anugerah kerajaan empat pekara pada Dewata Mulia Raya, akan tuan hamba dengan suatu janji tuan hamba...*
- ¹¹ *Demikianlah hamba dengar hendaklah tuan hamba berbuat adil dan ingat-ingat tuan*
- ¹² *Periksa benar-benar dan jangan engkau binasakan hati rakyatmu dan teguh-teguh negerimu dengan kelengkapan dan segala senjatamu.*
- ¹³ *Maka Bukit Serandib itu pun diperbuat Maharaja Rawana akan negeri terlalu indah-indah sekali rupanya; tanahnya sekalian berisi permata, akan kayu-kayunya nyior; dan keemasan, binatang dalam hutan itu gajah, akan isi laut itu permata sembilan, bagi karangan-karangannya Mutiara dan kayu-kayannya dalam laut itu pualam, ikannya dalam itu ambar. Maka negeri itu dinamai Maharaja Rawana Langkapuri. Syahadan dengan murahnyanya, barang ada segala raja-raja dalam dunia itu, sakalian dalam hukumnya tiada dapat melalui katanya dan kehendaknya yang baik diperbaikinya, yang jahat diperjahatinya. Jikalau anaknya sakali pun tiadalah diampuninya lagi, demikianlah hukum Maharaja Rawana dengan adilnya dan murahnyanya,*
- ¹⁴ *Shame is the opposite of having a good public reputation (a good name). It is a morality defined by the assessment of oneself by other persons and not by internal feelings of guilt based on the transgression of absolute moral rules. Slander and gossip are obviously constant and potentially threatening social behaviours in a shame-based culture.*
- ¹⁵ *Pertama raja itu hendak berilmu membezakan baik dan jahat, benar dan salah. Kedua perkara hendak akil baligh, budiman, mengasehi segala rakyatnya. Ketiga perkara hendak baik rupa karena raja akan ganti Dewata Mulia Raya, hendaklah baik daripada segala rakyatnya sakalian dan memberi anugerah akan segala rakyatnya kecil besar dan tegor sapanya dengan manis mukanya maka sempurna namanya raja. Keempat perkara hendak berani daripada segala lawan supaya dimalui segala raja-raja lain. Kelima perkara hendaklah dermawan lagi adil akan segala orang kaya-kaya dan miskin, dan mengasih hulubalang supaya sempurna namanya raja. Ketujuh perkara hendak banyak juga daripada tidur, kerana kata hukum, tujuh perkara rahasia membukakan dirinya pada segala orang pertapa yang sedia kala jaga. In a similar way, Hikayat Nur Muhammad lists seven qualities given to the Prophet at the beginning of time: knowledge, gentleness, thought, patience, intelligence, blessing, and light (Djamaris, 1983:72).*
- ¹⁶ *Maka ada seorang raja Maharaja Maghrib Abdul Muluk namanya. Maka ia mengajarkan segala anak-anaknya "Hai kamu sekalian jangan kamu mengikut pekerti kerbau ahmak itu. Adapun akan segala raja-raja yang dahulu kala barangkali ia akan perang hendaklah ia dahulu meneguhkan negerinya dan kelengkapannya dan senjatanya dan hulubalangnya dan mengasehi segala rakyatnya dan adilnya dan perkasa akan segala bala tentaranya. Sudah itu maka ia alah sekali pun tiada lagi sesalnya sudahlah dengan hukum Dewata Mulia Raya Namanya agar supaya ia jangan dikata orang dan dicela orang jangan seperti kerbau ahmak itu kerana yang digagahkannya itu rakyatnya dan hulubalangnya raja juga digagahkannya, apabila tiada rajanya binasalah negerinya kerana yang berbahagia itu tiada banyak hanya seorang juga itulah segala raja-raja hendak dengan budi bicara agar supaya ia sempurna dalam dunia, sehari pun jangan alpa negerinya dan rakyatnya.*

- ¹⁷ *Maka teguh ia kerajaan datang kepada anak cucunya jangan seperti kerbau ahmak itu jikalau perkasanya dan budi bicaranya ia pun tiada mati besarnya pun makin sangat. Hubaya-hubaya akan segala raja-raja jangan jadi kepala perang nescaya sesalnya juga baginya, Namanya pun sia-sialah pun binasa rakyat pun huru-hara anak cucunya pun huru-hara tiada berketahuan lagi. Inilah pesanku.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was first presented as a keynote address to the Ramayana Conference of the Indera Gandhi National Tribal University, Madhya Pradesh, India, 15-16 July 2022. My thanks to the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Languages, Professor Abhilasa Singh, for her kind invitation to speak at this event. My profound thanks too to Ms Nurul Shaheza Zamri of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka for her careful editing of the original manuscript for publication in Malaysia.

REFERENCES

- Aveling, H. (2020). Under the shadow of philology: Some notes on translating *Hikayat Seri Rama* for a modern non-academic audience. *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia*, 3(21). <http://dx.doi.org/10.17510/wacana.v21i3.944>
- Djamaris, E. (1983). *Hikayat Nabi Mikraj, Hikayat Nur Muhammad, dan Hikayat Darma Tasiya*. Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, Projek Penerbitan Buku Sastra Indonesia dan Daerah.
- Hammudah Abdalati. (1978). *Islam in focus*. Amana Publications.
- Hikayat Seri Rama*. (2020). *The Malay Ramayana*, (Harry Aveling, Trans.) Writers Workshop.
- Kaur, T. (2021, November 1). *7 hooks from the Ramayana to vitalize business*. Anscommerce. <https://www.anscommerce.com/blog/7-hooks-from-ramayana-to-vitalize-business/>
- Liaw Yock Fang (2011). *A history of classical Malay Literature*. ISEAS.
- Olsson, R. (1968). *The Ramakien*. Praepittaya.
- Pandey, K. (2020, August 5). *5 great ethical lessons to learn from the Ramayana*. Times Now. <https://www.timesnownews.com/spiritual/religion/article/5-great-ethical-lessons-from-the-ramayana/631962>
- Ramanujan, A.K. (1991). Three hundred *Ramayanas*: Five examples and three thoughts on translation. In Paula Richman (Ed.) *Many Ramayanas: The diversity of narrative tradition in South Asia* (pp. 22-49). University of California Press.

- Robson, S.O. (2015). *The old Javanese Ramayana: A new translation*. Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa.
- Sahai, S. (1996). *The Rama Jataka in Laos*. B. R. Publisher.
- Saran, M. & Khanna, V.C. (2004). *The Ramayana in Indonesia*. Ravi Dayal Publisher.
- Shellabear, W.G. (1964). *Hikayat Seri Rama*. Malaysia Publishing House.
- Somraj, S. N. (2016). A critical analysis of Valmiki Ramayana and its implications to educational leadership. [Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- The Koran*. (1997). (Dawood, N.J., Trans.). Penguin Books.
- Toru, O. (2000). *The Burmese Ramayana*. B. R. Publisher.
- Tulasidasa, G. (1971). *The holy lake of the acts of Rama*. (Hill, D. P., Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- Winsted, R.O. W. (1961). A history of classical Malay Literature, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, XXXI (3).