

PRESERVING THE IRON CRAFTSMANSHIP IN PEKAN DARAT BASED ON THEORY OF MALAKAH BY IBN KHALDUN¹

*(Pelestarian Pertukangan Besi di Pekan Darat Berdasarkan Teori
Malakah Ibnu Khadun)*

Suhaila Abdullah
aila@usm.my

Philosophy and Civilization Section,
School of Humanities,
Universiti Sains Malaysia,
11800 USM,
Penang, Malaysia
Tel.: +604 6533888 ext.:5172.

Abstract

This paper examines the situation in Pekan Darat with regards to the local knowledge of the skilled blacksmiths. It also discusses the efforts that need to be carried out towards the preservation of the local knowledge based on the theory of malakah by Ibn Khaldun; a famous figure and renowned scholar in the field of civilization through his monumental work entitled *Muqaddimah*. This research uses content analysis approach and investigates the data based on the available literatures. The findings show that training the younger generation to master the skills of the iron craftsmanship, entrepreneurial creativity, and marketing knowledge are among the efforts that can be taken to preserve the local wisdom of the Malay heritage.

Keywords: Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, iron craftsmanship, the concept of malakah, local knowledge, heritage, Pekan Darat.

Abstrak

Makalah ini meneliti ilmu kearifan tempatan yang dimiliki golongan “pandai besi” di Pekan Darat. Penulisan ini juga turut membincangkan tentang usaha yang perlu

dilakukan ke arah melestarikan warisan ilmu kearifan Melayu ini berdasarkan teori malakah oleh Ibn Khaldun, seorang tokoh tersohor dalam bidang ketamadunan melalui tulisan monumentalnya yang bertajuk Muqaddimah. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan analisis kandungan berdasarkan penulisan yang ada. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa antara usaha untuk memelihara dan melestarikan warisan kebijaksanaan dan kearifan tempatan warisan Melayu adalah dengan melatih generasi muda agar menguasai ilmu dan kemahiran dalam seni pertukangan besi di samping mereka juga perlu dilatih dengan ilmu pengetahuan keusahawanan dan kreativiti pemasaran barangan.

Kata kunci: Ibn Khaldun, Muqaddimah, seni pertukangan besi, konsep malakah, kearifan tempatan, warisan, Pekan Darat

INTRODUCTION

Pekan Darat situated in Butterworth, Seberang Perai (formerly known as Province Wellesley) which was a well-known place for having skilled and remarkable blacksmiths known as “Pandai Besi”. This area was a famous place where people across the Malay Peninsular used to order and buy iron products and utensils. Furthermore, Pekan Darat used to be a center for producing apparatus and instruments in support of war during the seventeenth century. When the war had ended, the blacksmiths in the area started to earn money for their survival by creating and selling tools for daily use and kitchen utensils. However, the local knowledge and heritage, which were once prevailed in the community as one of their unique heritages, is now becoming unpopular. This is due to a lack of interest to learn and inherit the skill and knowledge of iron craftsmanship heritage among the younger generation in the community. Besides, the local iron production is also facing challenges of artifacts from factories as well as imported products.

Among the scholars who have discussed in details about the importance of preserving the local heritage and skill was Ibn Khaldun with a full name, Abu Zayd Abd al-Rahman Ibn Muhammad Ibn Khaldun al-Hadrami (1332-1406M). He is a well-known scholar who has extensively contributed in the field of philosophy, sociology, history and civilization. Thus, he is universally recognized as the father of sociology and history. He is best known for his book entitled *al-Muqaddimah* (Muhammad Abdullah Enan, 1941; Allen James Fromherz, 2012). Arnold Toynbee mentions, “He (Ibn Khaldun) has conceived and formulated a philosophy of history, which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever been created by any mind in any time and place” (Toynbee, 1956:372).

The main theme of Ibn Khaldun's monumental work, *Muqaddimah* was to identify the facts that contributed to the advancement of human civilization. In this book, he also discussed about the creation of crafts, which occurred when people reached the level of civilized life. Ibn Khaldun's thought about the theory of *malakah* was in acquiring high skills in the fine art of craft and displaying man's unique creativity since ancient times.

Therefore, this article will discuss about the concept of knowledge and skills (*malakah*) in the field of metal craftsmanship as expressed by Ibn Khaldun in his book *al-Muqaddimah* in the Malay community in Pekan Darat, North of Seberang Perai, Penang, Malaysia. The heritage of iron craftsmanship in this area needs to be preserved as they have a unique characteristic and significant value, especially in traditional Malay local heritage. There were skilled blacksmiths in this place, who were highly recognized and respected in the past for their talented and distinctive creations of iron products. Nevertheless, as time passes, some old and competent blacksmiths passed away, and their knowledge and skill disappeared along with them. If this situation continues without preserving their experiences, we will lose a valuable heritage, and it will be a real detrimental to the sustainability of Malay crafts and civilization. Thus, the effort in upholding the Malay local knowledge and heritage of iron craftsmanship in Pekan Darat is very crucial and necessary.

THE THEORY OF *MALAKAH* IN IBN KHALDUN'S PERSPECTIVES

Ibn Khaldun was the father of sociology who began discussing the sociological and societal issues related to human civilization (Fuad Baali, 2006:55-57; Fuad Baali, 1997; Mahmud 'Abd al-Maula, 1988:35). He coined a concept of *umran* in his theory and divided it into two: the first one is the *umran badawi* theory that is based on simple life and the latter is *umran hadhari*, which refers to urban life.

Robert Simon (2002) viewed that the theories of *umran badawi* and *umran hadhari* are an appropriate outline of the important and basic theory for the study of human civilization. Starting with the theory of *umran badawi*, which is characterized by a simple life, human civilization started to grow until it reaches the level of *umran hadhari* as the emergence of a system of orderly government and administration, leading towards the development of production, consumption and distribution of goods and crafts (Robert Simon, 2002:127 & 134).

Ibn Khaldun in his book *Muqaddimah*, explained that the crafts practiced by the human species are numerous since several labors are continually available in civilization. Some of the crafts are necessary and occupy a noble position as they provide essential tools for agriculture, tailoring, carpentry, weaving and so forth

(Ibn Khaldun, 1967:319). Further, according to him, the two oldest of all crafts are architecture and agriculture as both provide shelter and food, the main factors in perfecting human life, since man cannot exist without shelter and food (Ibn Khaldun, 1967:319).

Malakah (skills) concept was highlighted and discussed by Ibn Khaldun on the wisdom of local knowledge about the specific skills, which gained a widespread recognition among analysts of his works. He used this concept in explaining the process of preparing the workforce and also in the educational process in general. Ibn Khaldun termed the skills and knowledge of local wisdom as *malakah*. In this case, Charles Issawi explains, “Ibn Khaldun’s psychology of education is built upon the notion of aptitude or skill (*malakah*)” (Charles Issawi, 1987:17; Muhammad Bilmazuqiyyah, 1989:117).

The term *malakah* is originally an Arabic word and means the one who is embedded in the nature of the human’s self (*sifatunrasikhatun fi al-nafs*) or a specific sense of readiness to accept a particular job skill (Ibn Khaldun, 2000:319; Ibrahim Mustafa, *et al.*, p. 886; Michelle Zakariya, 1986:26 & 28). This term which means the skills, was used by Ibn Khaldun to refer to various aspects of life, covering the human physical and spiritual aspects. Among them are faith skills (*malakahimaniyyah*), spiritual skills (*malakahruhiyyah*) knowledge skills (*malakahilmiiyyah*), and language skills (*malakahlisaniyyah*) (Ibn Khaldun, 2000; Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady, 2008:22 & 23; Muhammad Eid, 1979). In fact, there are places where Ibn Khaldun used the term to indicate the purpose or nature of leadership talent (Rosenthal, 1958:383).

Ibn Khaldun tried to choose the most appropriate word to describe the concept of knowledge and skills. In this case, he stated that “*malakah* is knowledge” since the meaning of the term skill or wisdom articulated by him, relates to a habit or custom (*malakah*), which involved actions and thoughts (Ibn Khaldun, 2000:342). Thus, according to him, work performed that resulted from a recurring basis will be firmly embedded (in the mind) (Ibn Khaldun, 1994:68).

Clearly, Ibn Khaldun endeavored to connect the concept of skill with the term *malakah*. He further explained that *malakah* had two important features. Firstly, it involved physical activity and secondly, it was an action, which had turned into a habit or custom and blended in one’s mind as a result of training process and repeated acts (Ibn Khaldun, 2000; Muhammad Eid, 1979: 33). Therefore, it can be concluded that the term *malakah* means skill, which has turned into a habit of an individual and caused by the specific training that is repeatedly done.

THE IMPORTANCE OF *MALAKAH* THEORY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CIVILIZATION

In his discourse, Ibn Khaldun explained that there is a close relationship between the development of civilization with the progress within the area of skills, living culture, political stability, and economic activity in a society. When all the basic needs and necessities have been met, skills and knowledge in the community will then emerge and spread. This is to meet the needs of the community, which begin to develop something of high value (Ibn Khaldun, 1994:69, Ahmad Subhi Mansur, 1998:216).

In Ibn Khaldun's theory on the development of civilization, the role of crafts and sciences is important in the self-realization of man and his life socialization. He viewed that the crafts and sciences are the result of man's ability to think, through which he is distinguished from the animals. Indeed, crafts and sciences come after the necessities such as his desire for food and shelter. Thus, the susceptibility of the crafts to refinement and the quality of the purpose they are to serve in view of the demands made by luxury and wealth they correspond to the civilization of a given country (Robert Simon, 2002:176).

According to Ibn Khaldun, craft is defined as a skill (*malakah*) as in the Aristotelian sense of *techne*, which is acquired through repetition of an exemplary model act until the practice of a particular act becomes ingrained in the practitioner. Mastering in a particular craft starts with the simple and elementary knowledge and graduated on a scale of complexity. The more accomplished a civilization, the more ample are the qualitative and quantitative crafts. The accomplishment in the crafts indirectly has a strong relation with the duration and rootedness of civilization in a city. Ibn Khaldun mentioned an example of Tunis and Andalusia where the duration of civilization has led to the perfection of crafts due to the constancy of its repetition over centuries (Ibn Khaldun, 2000; Aziz al-Azmeh, 1982:99).

Ibn Khaldun also stressed that the knowledge and skills in a community will grow and reach to maturity in a society where members reside permanently at one place for a long time. For a skill to become an integral part of a society, it should be carried out repeatedly and practiced by several generations. After passing a few decades, the skills will then be embedded in the society. Therefore, in order to achieve all these it requires a society to inhabit a particular area or place for a long period of time (Ibn Khaldun, 1994:114).

In this case, Ibn Khaldun categorically put education and learning tradition among the crafts that possessed by urban community, which should be preserved and maintained. He pointed out that this tradition has to be handed down from one generation to the next through a process called *sanad* which means "learned

through continuity.” Further, he stressed that it is important to ensure the continuity in educational training and scientific tradition in the society so that the civilization can be preserved and strengthened. The new generation has to inherit the qualities of their earlier generation, and they should attempt to maintain, protect and preserve their civilized achievements. This endeavor must be carried out by handing over knowledge of the earlier generation through a strong scientific and educational training to ensure that its continuity is preserved. This effort depends very much on some other supporting factors, including political stability, creativity, advancement of knowledge and science and so forth (Ibn Khaldun, 2000:342; Zaid Ahmad, in Massimo Campanini (ed.), 2006:116-118).

Nevertheless, Ibn Khaldun also noted that not all civilizations were capable of achieving such levels. In general, people are not able to maintain the level of expertise and skills when their civilizations start to decline. Therefore, the decline in civilization is a key factor in the decline of the skills and expertise within a community. Additionally, he stated that knowledge of a craft can be good only when it is needed and when there is a huge demand for it. If the situation in a city suffering from weakness and fatigue become apparent as a result of the decline of civilization and population, the affluence of the city is reduced; experts in a particular field can no longer guarantee their livelihoods. When there is no one who inherits the skills it will cause the crafts institutions to disappear. This will affect the sculptors, goldsmiths, artisans, copiers, and other members who fill the needs of luxury living. The crafts knowledge will continue to decline as the city experiences a decline (Ibn Khaldun, 1994:72).

HISTORY OF THE BLACKSMITH CARPENTRY SKILLS IN MALAY CIVILIZATION

In the case of the Malay civilization, historically, the art and usage of metal such as iron, silver and gold was said to be the result from the influence of Hindu culture that merged with Siamese art. That particular art was brought into Malaya through Thai traders, to the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia, including Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah and Penang. In the past, Pattani province, especially the southern part of Thailand was well known as a major center for manufacturing metal products. As a result from the history, today we can see a lot of metal art in northern states of Peninsular Malaysia, which produces many metal items such as iron, silver and gold crafts. In addition, there are some views that the art of creativity that flourished in the Malay Peninsula were originated from Srivijaya (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 2010).

Earlier, Malays only used metal as a currency, but over time, they have been manipulating metal to be used as kitchen equipments and also weapons. Moreover, metal is used to make items related to the rites and customs of the Malay community. Thus, metal art is growing in tandem with the development of other industries, including gold, copper and iron. Art of sculpting on metal equipment produced by Malay craftsmen and can be seen from the creation of traditional weapons, household appliances, jewelers and other goods (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 2010). Therefore, Malay community has become well known for iron craftsmanship and quality steel products that have commercial value (Rizal Othman, 2006).

Furthermore, using iron encourages local craftsmen to produce items that have a variety of applications. The strength and creativity of the blacksmiths have been proven through the techniques of making traditional handicrafts such as forging techniques and fine engraving to produce weapons like daggers. Craftsmen's creativity in producing an outstanding iron design with attractive motif has been able to highlight the unique craft and heritage of Malay identity. Produced goods highlight the skills and capabilities of the local blacksmiths in creating the form, motif or pattern that reflects harmony and discipline in human civilization. Some of the examples of craft heritage and goods made of metal are the betel-leaf box, incense containers, dagger, spear, knife, machete, incisors, rubber tapping knife and many others.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND HERITAGE AMONG BLACKSMITHS IN NORTH SEBERANG PERAI

Malay local art and wisdom can be seen from the production of items created by the community that lived within the vicinity of the Malay World. Based on the field of anthropology, the Malay Archipelago region includes Madagascar in the west down to the east of Taiwan and from Indo China to the north and creeping up to the region of the Indonesian Archipelago in the south. The entire areas have the same cultural similarities from the aspects of language, tools, beliefs, social structure and also similar physical properties (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 2010:xvii; Mohd Taib Osman in Safiah Nik Abdul Karim (ed.), 1984:241).

Iron craftsmanship in Haji Murshid Street, Pekan Darat in northern part of Seberang Perai, is the heritage of Malay civilization and demonstrates the local wisdom of a diligent and intelligent community. They are the highly respected and great blacksmiths. Their prowess to forge iron and steel in producing equipments has been passed down for hundreds of years. Enterprises in making metal equipments in this village have been carried out on a large scale since 1841 by the residents of this

area. They are the traditional Malay entrepreneurs who were famous in Penang and also in Peninsular Malaysia as the “skilled blacksmith” since the pre-independence period.

For these reasons, Haji Murshid Street, at Benuan Village, was known as a village of “Pandai Besi” which means “Skilled Blacksmiths”. The village is now located in Pekan Darat, North Seberang Perai, Penang. The term “Benuan” comes from the word “bandana”, which means a prisoner. During the colonial period, this area was very near to the British headquarters at Butterworth Air Base. They brought many Indian prisoners and confined them in this area, which was located not far from their base. As a result, the site is referred to as “Benuan Village”.

Most of the residents in this village are said to come from Pattani, Thailand. They migrated to Kedah and served as blacksmiths to the king of Kedah. When Siam invaded Kedah in 1821, many of the royal blacksmiths fled to Seberang Perai to find protection and shelter (Mohd Isa Othman, 1999). Some of them came to this area and set up new settlements. When they settled in this village, they continued to own the skill and carried out iron craftsmanship.

Hence, steel workshops have been built in the village for making iron crafts. Among the earliest blacksmith in the village was Tok Salle or Tok Salleh from Pattani, Thailand, who previously settled in Kedah (Rizal Othman, 2006). Evidently, he served as the royal blacksmith for the Sultan of Kedah. When Siam invaded Kedah in 1821, he fled and settled in Pekan Darat, North of Seberang Perai. He and his wife seemed to be the earliest individuals from Pattani, Thailand, who settled within the area in Haji Murshid Street. He continued his work in steel craftsmanship in this village. Tok Salle’s offspring and descendants have been growing within the area until it is said that most of the residents in the village are the descendants of Tok Salle. Up to this day, they are all still working on their iron craftsmanship heritage. Presently, there are some skilled blacksmiths, who have workshops in Haji Murshid Street, in Benuan Village, and they are the seventh generation of the descendants of Tok Salle. As such, it can be estimated that iron craftsmanship in Haji Murshid Street has been inherited for hundreds of years. During its heyday, the village was full of steel workshops, which were around more than 20 workshops. In addition, it is noted that if anyone walks through this area, people will be able to hear the noise of the iron workshops all the time from morning until night.

Haji Abdul Rahim bin Hussin, a 63-year-old man is one of the famous blacksmiths who has over 40 years of experience in steel craftsmanship in Haji Murshid Street. He had a metal workshop with several assistants. Iron craftsmanship gave huge returns to him and his father until he could afford to buy a few acres of paddy land. However, due to aging, he is no longer active in iron casting job. Sadly, his experiences and

craftsmanship are not inherited by anyone because nowadays young generation is not interested to inherit this local wisdom.

Apart from him, Mr. Majid is also one of the famous blacksmiths in Haji Murshid Street. He has worked on iron craftsmanship for nearly 30 years. There is a metal workshop built next to his house. The newspaper, *Harian Metro*, published an article about Mr. Majid as an operator in an iron workshop in 2004, and a television program crew came over to Mr. Majid's place to make a recording about the iron industry in the village. Now, he is old and unfortunately suffers from a vision problem. As a result, he no longer forges iron. In his youth, he learned to forge iron just via his observation during a period that he worked as an assistant to senior blacksmiths; for instance, as a helper in an iron workshop owned by Haji Abdul Rahim Hussin. This is where he gained experience through unofficial training and by observing the work of the skilled blacksmith in this area.

As such, it can be said that most of the village blacksmiths acquired informal training through practical work as an assistant in iron workshops. Iron carpentry workshops also conducted in this area and included delicate, intricate and meticulous carvings, especially those related to hone decorative items. Meanwhile, manufacture of huge or rough tools does not require great prudence and care in its process in comparison to the production of carved items. Manufacturing gross merchandise for daily use is also not complicated as most of the items are huge and do not contain



Figure 1 The inside view of one of the iron workshops in Pekan Darat.

subtle patterns that require care and diligence of the engraver. Various types of knives, betel-leaf box, dagger, spear, machete, incisors and rubber tapping knife are among the said items.

The greatness of blacksmiths in forging a variety of equipment that has high artistic value qualifies them to be called the “skilled blacksmiths” or “the master” in Javanese (Norhayati Abu Bakar, 1995; Rizal Othman, 2006). Among the eminent figures in manufacturing iron in Haji Murshid Street is Mr. Md Taib bin Saad (died in 1990) and Haji Salleh bin Tahir. These two are the highly skilled individuals in the art of carving steel appliances. In addition to iron artisan skills, there are also shamans, which are often referred to by the local community. “Water trough” or “penyepuh water” was used to soak the hot iron and believed to cure certain diseases primarily associated to evil spirits. Therefore, this water sometimes became a demand among the local Malay shaman. These cases coincided with the views of Syed Ahmad Jamal, who opined that the Malays eventually believe that certain artistic objects are said to have magical powers (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 2010).

Normally, in the iron workshop, there are some tools to forge iron, which can be found in the iron smelting furnace area. For example, the “anvil” is an object where iron was hit onto. Blower or foxes serve to channel the wind blows to stoke



Figure 2 Rubber tapping knives produced by the blacksmiths in Pekan Darat.



Figure 3 “Penyepuh” water.

the kitchen’s flames (Sheppard M., 1980). A place to fill water for soaking is also available nearby the iron furnace and anvil. Furthermore, the art of carpentry is undertaken to make the handle for knives and many others. Labor to sharpen the metal item is also needed to hone and sharpen the knives and other equipment.

Based on custom, the owner of the workshop who reads the spells will perform a simple ceremony and mantras prior to the opening of the workshop at dawn because they believe every iron workshop in the area has its own guardian. This practice is



Figure 4 The anvil used by the blacksmith in making iron equipment.

inherited from their ancestors who were blacksmiths from Thailand and were famed for handling of such rituals and beliefs.

During a time when the rubber production increased in Malaysia, there was a high demand for rubber tapping knives. Thus, the blacksmiths worked day and night to fulfill the demand. They were successful in securing a lucrative income and some of them could afford to buy a Raleigh bicycle, which served as an indication of their fine financial status.

IRON FORGING PROCESS

Around the 1960s, iron crafts in Haji Murshid Street reached its heyday. There were more than twenty workshops for steel enterprises that operated day and night. Before starting work in the morning, the owner of the workshop was doing a small ceremony to honor the spirit and shopkeepers. When there was a new workshop to be opened, a shaman would perform a ritual known as the “sintok lemon” and “tepfung tawar”. Saffron rice and betel leaves would be placed on the stove or furnace to burn the iron and also on the anvil.

To start forging iron, metal should be burned and crushed in a row before it can be cut. After that, the steel will be cut to desired size. Next, the steel is heated again and hammered repeatedly. The work is done on an ongoing basis until a shape of pointy blade begins to form and until the tool is filed and completed. This is done to hone the process of smoothing and sharpening iron tools or weapons that are being produced. Gilding process will be carried out immediately after the iron was forged and was completely shaped. Then, the tools should be repeatedly immersed horizontally into a plate containing water.

The next morning before proceeding with the iron forged work, a blacksmith will clean up all the waste of the burning iron. Waste iron, which is known as “rust” is usually removed and placed at a corner near the furnace area. Normally, the rust becomes a demand among traditional healers, they either obtained it for free or with a small charge from the owner of the workshop.

CREATION OF IRON GOODS BY THE SKILLED BLACKSMITHS

Malay cultural tradition does not assert any form of distinction between decorative art items and items in everyday use. Hence, there is art everywhere, including in daily use goods, weapons or other equipment (Syed Ahmad Jamal, 2010: xv). The art in Malay civilization is manifested through the appreciation of nature and the natural

environment in the Malay World. In this case, beauty in art is something that can be seen from the nature of the perfection of its creation (Beg, MAJ, 1977). The evidence can be witnessed among the blacksmiths in Haji Murshid Street, Pekan Darat. There were a variety of tools in the form of either fine arts or art equipment for daily use, which are full of creativity and meticulously produced by the blacksmiths in Haji Murshid Street, Pekan Darat. Concerning this case, Ibn Khaldun in his *Muqaddimah* stated, “the crafts and sciences are the result of men suggested ability to think” (Ibn Khaldun, 1967:314). He also viewed that crafts are usually rooted in a city only when sedentary culture is strongly rooted and of long duration. Hence, “all crafts are customs and colors of civilization” (Ibn Khaldun, 1967:315). The statement of Ibn Khaldun is very much relevant to the real situation that prevailed in the blacksmith area in Pekan Darat.

In the production of various items for daily use, there was a manifestation taken from the art of appreciation of nature in the crafts. It included style, nature, patterns, symbolism, color and so forth. Most of the produced goods were household tools and kitchen instruments such as coconut grater, incisors, various types of knives, including sharp knives, slaughter knives, machetes, beaten pepper, chopper, etc. Additionally, the village blacksmiths were capable of making weapons such as a spear, dagger, sword, and many others as well as tools used to do a certain specific task such as rubber tapper’s knives, points to hoe and many others (Rizal Othman, 2006). In this



Figure 5 Knife hilt and sheath produced by the blacksmiths in Pekan Darat.

regard, Ibn Khaldun's viewed that "crafts can be improved and increased only when many people demand them" (Ibn Khaldun, 1967, p. 316).

In addition to the forging skills in making iron tools, blacksmiths at Haji Murshid Street were also highly skilled in making the knife hilt and sheath decorated with carvings. Among the upstream blade, are the attractive bird head, hooves and many other designs. To make the inside of the sheath knife, the blacksmiths will engrave the wood carefully and efficiently in the form of the blade so that it is not too tight or loose. This evidence clearly demonstrates the skills of the blacksmiths in the area (Rizal Othman, 2006).

PRESERVING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE OF IRON CRAFTSMANSHIP BASED ON *MALAKAH* THEORY

Based on Ibn Khaldun's theory in his book *al-Muqaddimah*, it can be said that the skills are powerful weapons in order to achieve a better life and become more affluent. In connection with these facts, knowledge is achieved through repetitive action until it becomes a skill, which is so unique and special that it is rarely owned by other human beings.

Crafts require knowledge and thought and are complex in comparison to agriculture (Aziz al-Azmeh, 1982:97). According to Ibn Khaldun, the crafts require teachers even though some crafts are simple and others are composite. The ordinary crafts must be learned first because they are used as necessities and are always having a large demand. The perfection in the skill of making crafts can be achieved in the course of time and generations. Thus, a certain amount of time is required in learning the crafts. (Ibn Khaldun, 1967:314)

Therefore, the importance of the knowledge and skills in manufacturing iron objects can be stressed by Ibn Khaldun's idea that any high skills possessed by someone will become extinct if the skills are not supported by a strong demand from the community. Finally, the skills will no longer be inherited by the next generation and will eventually disappear. This is the real phenomenon experienced by the blacksmith community in Pekan Darat. Nowadays, the younger generations no longer want to inherit the knowledge and heritage of the iron craft skills. Currently, there are less than five workshops still in operation whereas the rests are now closed and abandoned. It is not a surprise if one day all the workshops just become stores without any knocking and welding sounds, and all the skills possessed by the old generation will become extinct through time.

This situation was mentioned by Ibn Khaldun in his *Muqaddimah*, stating, “crafts can be improved when they are needed, and if they are in demand with many people” (Ibn Khaldun, 1967:317). If there is no demand, the master of a particular craft will no longer be assured of making a living from it; thus, the institutions of the crafts will gradually disappear when he dies and leaves no successor (Ibn Khaldun, 1967: 317). Moreover, Ibn Khaldun declared, “if a particular craft is in demand and there are buyers for it, then the craft corresponds with the type of goods, which is in great demand and can be imported for sale” (Ibn Khaldun, 1967:316). Accordingly, the quality and quantity of crafts are very much dependent on the demand, with the consequence that civilizations on the wane are characterized by the diminution of their crafts (Aziz al-Azmeh, 1982:99, Ahmad Subhi Mansur, 1998:217)

Among the challenges faced by many entrepreneurs in Pekan Darat is the lack of young people who want to inherit the knowledge of iron craft. Therefore, most of the workshops are now closed and the remaining five workshops which still exist today are operating in a dilapidated condition. The unfavorable condition and exhaustive working environment along with old machinery and equipment have kept the younger generation from venturing into this job, as they prefer to work in the nearby factories. In addition, slow attitudes of some entrepreneurs for completing the customer’s orders have also resulted in a reduced demand for goods and giving a bad image to this industry.

In accordance with the above matter, it appears that the major challenges faced by the steel industry in Pekan Darat revolve around uninterested younger generation, and also the problem with capital funding and outdated equipment and machineries. These challenges are similar to those frequently mentioned in any studies on traditional crafts. (Ahmad Tajuddin Ali and Hassan Abdul Rahman, 1990; Jamaluddin Sulaiman, 1990). Although there is a high demand for common tools such as rubber tapping knife, butcher knife, machete, incisors and other equipment, but large-scale production to supply the market cannot be provided due to lack of workers and funding.

Though, there were certain parties that promised and expressed willingness to help the iron entrepreneurs, the promise is never fulfilled. The problem of capital funding and lack of technological advancement in the steel enterprises in Pekan Darat cannot be overcome if there is no full commitment from the entrepreneurs themselves, the government agencies and other institutions related to it. Therefore, using modern equipment can be channeled through assistance of the parties that are concerned to help the iron workshop operators in Haji Murshid Street. In this way, iron craft production can be doubled, and experts can promote their products in a wider scope. Training centers for the future generations need to be created so

that they will in turn act as a marketing center for the goods to be produced. This should allow the iron workshop operators to expand the markets for their products and accordingly, open up more job opportunities if the demand for goods and iron equipment increases.

Besides that, in order to preserve the local knowledge and skill of the blacksmiths in Pekan Darat, this study suggests a new branding and promotion of the steel products since this is the local heritage that made Pekan Darat a famous place in the past. The authorities, particularly the Malaysian Handicraft Corporation, Majlis Amanah Rakyat Malaysia (MARA) and related agencies must assist the active entrepreneurs and help them to commercialize their products. It is recommended that the produced metal equipment in this area are to be branded by the name of “Pekan Darat” as a unique brand in order to return the history and nostalgia of the industry that have once thrived there. Production of iron equipment must be diversified and not only focuses on knife, incisors and rubber trapper’s knives. Another metal equipment such as hoes, spurs, coconuts chop, axe, machete, sickle blades and so on should also be encouraged. In the production of all these equipment, the quality should be given top priority so that the buyers will feel “worthwhile” to purchase the steel appliances with the brand “Pekan Darat” due to its quality and durability.

CONCLUSION

Referring back to the ideas and views of Ibn Khaldun, it is clearly proven that the matters relating to the needs of a larger market and demands are very important to guarantee the survival of the art of carpentry and steel enterprises in Haji Murshid Street, Pekan Darat. If there is no demand, there is no effort to produce it. If this situation is allowed to continue, it will make the rich heritage of iron craftsmanship be lost after the death of their great and skilled blacksmiths. This will become a huge loss if it occurs to the local heritage of iron craftsmanship in Haji Murshid Street, Pekan Darat, which has been known for its famous qualified blacksmiths.

The high-value skills and local wisdom of older blacksmiths in Haji Murshid Street need to be transferred to the next generation. In this case, the younger generations should be awakened to learn this unique local knowledge of Malay heritage passionately. Utilizing modern equipment and techniques to create iron products are required to attract the attention of newer generation to get involved in this craft industry for keeping heritage. The weak conditions of the iron workshops and traditional tools, which are outdated, have made the younger generation feel less interested to venture into the iron crafts industries. In this case, Ibn Khaldun mentioned in his *Muqaddimah* that dexterity in skills or craftsmanship is not

necessarily inherited but can be mastered by those who have strong interest and persevere in its training (needs reference).

Indeed, iron craftsmanship heritage which was the community's pride in the past needs to be rehabilitated and preserved. Therefore, proactive steps must be taken to rescue and retain the remaining workers and employers in the area to benefit both the iron craftsmanship heritage and the local communities. Despite the fact that the area is just a small site which may be modest in appearance, it is still worthy of conservation and can attract visitors to come and experience making of local crafts. Besides, it will provide socio-economic advantages for the local communities and transferring knowledge of the past to future generations.

Therefore, efforts to address these problems and commercialization of products need to be improved. Further, certain measures to preserve the heritage of iron craftsmanship and its sustainability should be seriously considered and pursued. Related parties can give a new ray of hope to the enterprise and heritage of craftsmanship in Pekan Darat. It is hoped that the Malay heritage and skills, which have high artistic values will be no longer considered as a non-competitive industry that will dampen and become extinct in the near future. Moreover, it is aspired that this research regarding the manifestations of Ibn Khaldun's ideas about the effort to preserve the local knowledge and heritage of the Malay community in Pekan Darat will bring a fruitful outcome.

May this writing pave the way for more researchers, either theoretically or empirically to preserve the local knowledge and heritage of the Malay community in Pekan Darat that possessed a valuable skill and experience in iron craftsmanship. This article believes that the investigation on this issue is worth the trouble if we would like to understand the situation and factors that caused the changes and challenges in the iron craftsmanship in that specific community and how it had once shaped the economy and the society of that particular area.

NOTE

1. This paper was presented at the Seminar Warisan Nusantara dan Bicara Kraf Universiti Malaysia Sabah, by Suhaila Abdullah, Mohd Nizam Sahad & Associate Professor Dr Che Zarrina Sa'ari, on 2011.

REFERENCES

- Abdul Karim, Nik Safiah, ed., 1984. *Rampaian Pengajian Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Pengajian Melayu, Universiti Malaya.
- Abu Bakar, Norhayati, 1995. *Senjata Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Cita Tinggi.
- Ahmad, Zaid, "Ibn Khaldun's Approach in Civilisational Studies", in Massimo Campanini (ed.) *Studies on Ibn Khaldun- Dirasat an Ibn Khaldun al-Muqaddimah*. Milano, Italy, Polimetrica International Scientific Publisher, pp. 101-22.
- al-Azmeh, Aziz, 1982. *Ibn Khaldun: An Essay in Reinterpretation*. London: Frank Cass and Company Limited.
- al-Maula, Mahmud 'Abd, 1988. *Ibn Khaldun wa Ulum al-Mujtama*. Tunis: al-Dar al-'Arabiyyah li al-Kitab.
- Ali, Ahmad Tajuddin & Hassan Abdul Rahman, "Teknologi untuk Industri Kraftangan: Masalah dan Cabaran" in Seminar Kebangsaan Industri kraftangan organized by Kerajaan Negeri Kedah and Universiti Utara Malaysia on the 20th & 21st August 1990.
- Baali, Fuad, 1997. *Ibn Khaldun wa 'Ilm al-Ijtima' al-Hadith: Dirasahtahliliyyah*. Cyprus, Syria, Beirut: Dar al-Mada li al-Thaqafah wa al-Nasyr.
- Baali, Fuad, 2006. *Ibn Khaldun –Ra'id al-Ulum al-Ijtima'iyah wa al-Insaniyyah?* Damascus, Syria: Dar al-Mada li al-Thaqafah wa al-Nasyr.
- Baharom, Noresah, 1998. *Kamus Dewan*. Edisi ke-3. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Beg, M.A.J., 1977. *Fine Arts in Islamic Civilization*. Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Bilmazuqiyyah, Muhammad, 1989. *Juzur al-Ma'rifahinda Ibn Khaldun*. Matbaah al-Jah al-Jadidah: Dar al-Baidha'.
- Eid, Muhammad Dr., 1979. *al-Malakah al-Lisaniyyah fi Nazr Ibn Khaldun*. al-Qahirah; 'Alam al-Kutub.
- El-Muhammady, Muhammad Uthman, 2008. "Building the human capital in Malayisa in the context ofmalakahin Khaldunian discourse" in Seminar Pembangunan Insan di Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur: Akademi Pengajian Islam Universiti Malaya.
- Enan, Muhammad Abdullah, 1941. *Ibn Khaldun: His life and Work*. (Translated from the Arabic). Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf.
- Fromherz, Allen James, 2012. *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Ibn Khaldun, 1967. *The Muqaddimah: an Introduction to History*. Translated by Franz Rosenthal. London: Routledge& K. Paul.
- Ibn Khaldun, 1994. *Muqaddimah*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa danPustaka.
- Ibn Khaldun, 2000. *Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldun*. Beirut, Lubnan: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah.
- Issawi, Charles Philip, 1987. *An Arab Philosophy of History: Selections from the Prolegomena of Ibn Khaldun of Tunis (1332-1406)*. N.J.: Darwin Press, Princeton.
- Jamal, Syed Ahmad, 2010. *Rupa dan Jiwa*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

- Mansur, Ahmad Subhi, 1998. *Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldun: Dirasatusuliyyahtarikhiyyah*.
Misr: Markaz Ibn Khaldun li al-Dirasat al-Inmaiyyah& Dar al-Amin li al-Nasr wa
al-Tauzi’.
- Othman, Mohd Isa, 1999. *Gerakan Protes dalam Perspektif Sejarah Malaysia*. Kuala
Lumpur: Utusan Publications & Distributors Sdn. Bhd.
- Othman, Rizal, 2006. “*Warisan Seni Pertukangan Besi di Pekan Darat*”. Latihan Ilmiah.
Pusat Pengajian Seni, Pulau Pinang: Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Sheppard, M., 1980. *Mekarnya Seni Pertukangan Malaysia*. Translated by Azah Aziz. Kuala
Lumpur: Eastern Universities Press (M) Sdn. Bhd.
- Simon, Robert, 2002. *Ibn Khaldun: History as Science and the Patrimonial Empire*.
Translated by Klara Pogatsa. Budapest, Hungary: Akademiai Kiado.
- Sulaiman, Jamaludin, 1990. “Industri Kraftangan di Melaka: Prospek dan Masalah” in
Seminar Kebangsaan Industri Kraftangan organized by Kerajaan Negeri Kedah and
Universiti Utara Malaysia on 20th & 21st August 1990.
- Toynbee, Arnold, 1956. *The Study of History*. London, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Zakariya, Michelle Dr., 1986. *al-Malakah al-Lisaniyyah fi Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldun*.
Beirut: al-Muassasah al-Jami’ah li al-Dirasat wa al-Nasyr wa al-Tauzi’.