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What is Indonesian philosophy?

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For over two centuries, Western scholars have studied Indonesian wisdom traditions without ever catching a glimpse of Indonesian philosophy itself. They documented the Buginese, Batak, Minangkabau, and Balinese philosophies but made no effort to integrate them into a national tradition, much as historians speak of German, Indian, and Chinese philosophy. It's now high time that these diverse philosophies were integrated into an overarching one called "Indonesian philosophy".

Some readers may be surprised to learn that this philosophy includes elements of Indian, Persian, Arab, and Western descent. Indonesian philosophers welcomed and assimilated most of these foreign influences, which shouldn't surprise us since ours is a richly pluralistic culture.

Indonesia's philosophical tradition is grounded in the stories of its ancestors known as the *leluhur* ('virtuous ones') and the *nenek-moyang* ('clever grandmothers'). We may judge from the earliest records that the *leluhur* understood reality as the unity of composite parts. The habit had not yet formed of separating the signifier from what it signifies, to use Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's terms.[1] The concept and the reality to which it referred were as one.

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This explains the likely intent behind a 45,000-year-old painting discovered in South Sulawesi in 2017. The painting of a warty pig (*Sus celebensis*) with an arrow through its heart suggests that the artist may have treated the pig as literally real. That is, the painter was not expressing a wish that they would succeed in killing the beast in a future hunt. To this ancestor's mind, the drawing actually created the reality it drew. The drawn pig was truly dead, in other words, because their ink had killed it. In Saussure's terms, the signifier was equal to the signified. The ancestors painted their bodies red for similar reasons, believing that the colour red meant blood and that blood meant life.

The wisdom of the ancestors was also expressed in their metaphysical theories of the universe, traces of which survive three thousand years on. In parts of Indonesia, stone axes used for religious rites were believed to harbour spirits. In Java, for instance, souls were thought to inhabit stone ornaments. In the Mentawai Islands on West Sumatra, the *leluhur* believed that everything—not only living beings but objects like stones, trees, rivers, and stars—possessed a soul. The soul was a brother, a shadow, a counterpart to everything that existed in the world. It was an independent entity, quite capable of detaching itself from its physical half. When a soul left its body, it could travel far and meet other souls along the way, later filling in the owner about its adventures. It could even go wandering while a person was awake. The Mentawai people thought that, when a person was moody, it meant that their soul was encountering difficulties. These worldviews infuse the concepts of soul in Indonesia's indigenous cultures. What the Batak refer to as *tondi*, the Minangkabau as *sumange*, the Torajan as *tanoana*, and the Nias people as *noso* contains such ideas.

Early Indonesian philosophers developed concepts of life and death as inter-penetrating realms, an idea found in other Indo-Pacific traditions. The ancients taught that there were two worlds: those of the living and the dead. We know of this from their paintings on bronze Pejeng drums created in Bali from the 2nd century CE. A ship, not meant for sailing, often adorned these drums. Like the ferry that escorts dead souls across the river Styx in Greek myth-

ology, this ship carried the souls of the departed from our world to that of the dead. This boat is also an architectural motif in some Indonesian homes. On Savu Island, one such house has both a bow and a stern. The image of the dead travelling by ship is found among the Dayak and Lampong people, while the Torajan call a coffin a *prau*, or boat.

These philosophical foundations of early Indonesian societies prepared them to assimilate the systems of new Chinese, Indian, and Persian arrivals. Indian migrants came to Indonesia from around 320 BCE, bringing sophisticated philosophical ideas with them. Hinduism and Buddhism proved as attractive to our ancestors as they remain today.

Early Indonesian philosophers conceived of our universe as filled with spirits. They knew that dead ancestors also became spirits, that these resided in things, that there were two worlds. Each of these beliefs was sharpened by the growing influence of Indian philosophy. Hindus often re-named and gave material forms to what the ancestors had spiritualised. What ancient Indonesians saw as spirits, Hindus personified as gods (*deva*), goddesses (*devi*), and manifestations of Brahman. Indonesians' sacred pyramids were given new names. Their life- and death-worlds were now associated with Shiva and Kali, representing the infinite spiritual and the finite natural worlds. The main concept that ancient Indonesians lacked was that of the supreme spirit that Hindus called Brahman or 'the One'.

Over centuries of gradually integrating foreign philosophies and religions into their own, Indonesian thinkers conceived of the unity of all religious truths. The *leluhurs*' highest intellectual and spiritual achievement was to approach Hinduism and Buddhism as one synthetic whole. The 8th century king Vishnu, for example, was typical of this cultural integration as a devout Buddhist monarch who gave himself a Hindu god's name. Similarly, the 10th century Buddhist writer Sambhara Surya Warama praised the Hindu king Mpu Sindok in his sacred literature. Meanwhile, the *Negarakertagama*, a 14th century Javanese epic poem by Mpu Prapanca, blends elements of Shaivism and Buddhism. The *Kakawin Sutasoma*, written by the 15th century poet Mpu Tantular, also integrates both traditions:

It is said that the well-known Buddha and Shiva are two different substances,	*Rwâneka dhâtu winuwus Buddha Wiswa,*
They are indeed different, yet how is it possible to recognise their difference in a glance,	*Bhinnêki rakwa ring apan kena parwanosen,*
Since the truth of Jina (Buddha) and of Shiva is one,	*Mangka ng Jinatwa kalawan Siwatatwa tunggal,*
They are indeed different, but they are of the same kind, as there is no duality in Truth.	*Bhinnêka tunggal ika tan hana dharma mangrwa.*[2]

Indonesian culture learned much from Indian civilisation, not least the *kavya*, a Sanskrit tradition that influenced the above Old Javanese *kakawin* poem's form. Their authors typically believed that their poetry was inspired directly by the gods, who they believed could live inside their poems as in temples. So, they prayed to the Indian *devas* Vishnu, Shiva, Kama, Ratih, and Sarasvati before writing their beautiful verse. Little wonder, then, that these should be so divine.

As Indonesians wove newer philosophies into their indigenous worldviews, it became harder to resist the charms of Indian philosophy in particular. Indeed, the latter was so successful that, when a wave of Islamic philosophy swept across Indonesia in the 15th century, only the mystical school of Sufism found widespread acceptance among Indonesians—so much did it resemble Indian spirituality. The *Wali Songo*, nine revered saints who introduced Islam to Indonesia, taught a similar monism to that of Indian philosophy using different terms. The poet Ki Ageng Pengging, a

Buddha and Islam are never different. Their forms are two, their names but one.	*Agama Buda Islami* *Karonina nora béda* *Warna roro asmané* *mung sawiji.*[4]

student of Syekh Siti Jenar's Sufistic monism,[3] puts it beautifully:

As with Indian philosophy, Indonesians only took from Islamic civilisations those features which fit in with indigenous thought. They were guided by their faculty of *budi*, which I analyse below.

These virtuous first Indonesian philosophers, the *leluhur*, remained a guiding light in our culture until certain critics scorned them. This began with 19th century Wahhabi-inspired Muslim reformers who criticised the traditional wisdom of the ancestors, known as their *adat*. Their divisive teachings sought to degrade the foundations of Indonesia's indigenous civilisation, inspiring future generations to sacrifice their culture in exchange for the false promise of a Middle Eastern paradise.

The Wahhabi critique of Indonesian philosophy would be repeated, maybe more successfully, in a later wave of rational philosophy originating in Western Europe.

As we saw, the Indonesian philosophical tradition is marked by a powerful integrative impulse. The Indonesian thinker is not beholden to the dichotomy between reason and sense perception typical of Western philosophy, which thinkers including Frithjof Schuon regretted.[5] This is reflected in our language.

Indonesian features the unique word *budi* that integrates both faculties. The *Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language* defines *budi* as an 'inner faculty which integrates reasoning and feeling to distinguish between good and evil.'[6] The cultural products of *budi* are called *kebudayaan*.[7] In Indonesian, this word contains the concepts of science, spirituality, religion, philosophy, and technology and refers to *budi*'s manifestation in the external world.

The Indonesian philosopher who first popularised this concept, Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, argued that *budi* could be translated into German as *Geist*. But it didn't correspond, in his view, to the cognate English word "mind". The difference between both words lies in the relation of mind to culture. The English "mind", Sutan thought, had nothing to do with culture, while the German *Geist* did. This was why the human sciences in Germany could be called either *Geisteswissenschaften* ('the sciences of the spirit') or *Kulturwissenschaften* ('the sciences of culture').[8]

Budi was impossible to translate into English, he argued, because the word "mind" had a cognitive character with no reference to culture. It was cut off from the faculties of intuition, feeling and imagination produced by religious, creative, and artistic activities. For Sutan, the concept of *budi*, which he opposed to base instinct, was the 'characteristic [trait] of the human psyche'.[9] Sutan was dissatisfied with the English language's inability to accurately convey this Indonesian word, but he went no further in explaining why he thought this was the case.

What makes *budi* untranslatable into English, in my view, is the sharp distinction which this language draws between mind and culture. This distinction spawned a series of unending, abstract philosophical speculation in the West that never needed to result in concrete things, which is at odds with Indonesian thought. *Budi* is always indivisible and concrete. In the English-speaking tradition, the concept of mind is narrowly related to cognition and thinking. But beyond thought, culture is about the overall human capacity to reason, feel, imagine, create, even dream a new world.

Budi's integrative character aided Indonesian culture in unifying disparate philosophies. As a result, Indonesians don't draw sharp distinctions between philosophy, religion, science, and art. Nor has their culture been rocked by either hardline materialism or idealism. Indonesian sciences and philosophy are as deeply affected by æsthetics as are its religions and art. Because *budi* combines thinking and feeling into one integrated process, the famous Borobudur Temple, mystical literature, dances, sculptures, music, and architecture are as beautiful as Indonesian philosophy.

Indonesian culture shows this motif time and again. For example, the Islamic-inspired Javanese literary form of *serats* combines poetics with philosophising. So do the Javanese *kakawin* poems mentioned earlier, which draw on both Hinduism and Buddhism. Or take the examples of Hamzah Al-Fansuri, who expressed his Sufistic faith in Malay poems called *syairs*, while King Visnu of the Sailendra Dynasty built the Borobudur Temple to worship his holy ancestors. The poetry of Indonesia's traditional societies, which contain some of the first-known forms of cosmology and cos-

mogony, are as perfectly rational as the modern essay form. And its early oral mythologies are as beautiful, reasonable, and awe-inspiring as ancient Greek ones. Traditional *pantuns* poems mix beauty and wisdom as well as Homer, but unite them in a single idea.

Budi epistemology balances a thinker's mind and senses, the ideal and material worlds, unlike European philosophy's compartmentalisation of the modern mind. The Indonesian thinker is unafflicted by the war of all against all that has raged in the West between rationalism, empiricism, idealism, and materialism. This attitude even extends into classical Indonesian literature. Writers known as *pujangga* were poet-philosophers, but it was philosophy that always gave 'the legitimising stamp', as Subagio Sastrowardoyo writes.[10] Modern Indonesian literature is also notably philosophical.[11]

To be clear, *budi* epistemology has not gone unchallenged in the history of Indonesian philosophy. In the early 1900s, the philosophical movement of Islamic modernism condemned feeling and its manifestation in culture as idle fantasies (*takhayyul*) and superstition (*khurafât*).[12] It's unclear what they saw in Indonesian culture warranting this, but the rationalism of Dutch thinkers was a likely influence. This was when Indonesian thinkers began accepting the supremacy of reason over feeling.

In the 1920s, philosopher and politician Tan Malaka also condemned feeling and advocated the primacy of reason and logic. Tan thought a conceptual 'steel wall between the past and the future' should be built to prevent returning to the old ways. Rational thought was the 'peak of human civilisation' and the way of the future. Only it could bridle our 'illusory imagination' and find the long-yearned-for truth.[13]

This very debate played out in the Investigating Committee for Preparatory Work for Independence, an organisation set up in the dying days of Japanese occupation in 1945. In one of its sessions, the poet and politician Mohammad Yamin succeeded in establishing rationalism's dominance over feeling, which he called 'irrationalism' and 'pre-modern logic'. Yamin argued his case so strongly that rationalism, which he called by the harmless name of 'wisdom' (*kebijaksanaan*), was later accepted as a core principle of

Indonesia's state philosophy of Pancasila. It is found in the fourth *sila* which begins, '*Kerakyatan yang dipimpin oleh hikmat kebijaksanaan*…' This is often rendered as 'democracy guided by inner wisdom', but the word *kebijaksanaan* is in fact Yamin's own translation of the concept of rationalism.[14]

So it was that Western epistemology's arid rational thought began replacing *budi*, the beating heart of Indonesian philosophy. From the 1940s, philosophy came to be understood as chiefly an act of reason, including in Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana's metaphysics. He argued that we should philosophise independently of all beliefs, creeds, even science. In philosophy, 'there is nothing holy, nothing sacred, nothing forbidden, nothing tabooed, everything is brought into the examining field of thought.'[15]

Probably no idea was as revolutionary in Indonesian thought as Nurcholish Madjid's method of rational secularism. Though Madjid never claimed to be promoting secularism, it certainly fed on his ideas. In so sharply distinguishing between the divine and the profane, he succeeded in dichotomising religion and culture, once closely interwoven. He hoped to build a new positivist culture thereby, one cut off from Indonesia's spiritual roots.[16] These ideas fell on the sympathetic ears of Western-educated secularists and the Berkeley Mafia, technocrats so called for their influence over Indonesian President Suharto's New Order administration.[17]

On the other hand, the supremacy of feeling over reason that some Indonesian philosophers have promoted can lead to a radical sensism: the doctrine that the senses are the only true sources of knowledge. From the 16th to the 20th centuries, a chain of Indonesian thinkers including Ki Ageng Selo, Pakubuwono IV, and Ki Ageng Suryomentaram had adhered to a philosophical position placing feeling (*rasa*) over reason (*akal*). In a similar manner, Ki Ageng Selo, the great ancestor of Javanese kings who established the 8th century Mataram kingdom, wrote:

I really hope, o my grandchildren,	*Poma-poma anak putu mami,*
That you may never boast of reason,	*Aja sira ngêgungakên akal,*
For the man of reason's beauty fades.	*Wong akal ilang baguse.*[18]

This man of reason may have kept their looks had they known that thought without feeling is empty—and vice versa. Since sense and reason share *budi*'s path to the truth, there can be no loss if none's master or serf.

The traditional wisdom of our ancient philosophers has long been a bulwark against Wahhabi- and Western-inspired efforts to divide the Indonesian mind. Their customs and laws, known as *adat*, resemble the philosophers' *sophia perennis*. These *adat* contain the eternal wisdom that *Tuhan*, as the Malay call God, decrees amid the world's flux. Together, the concepts of *budi* and *adat* are the fruit of an Indonesian philosophy rooted in the wisdom of the ancestors and the worship of the gods.

Notes

1 'The content of a word is determined in the final analysis not by what it contains but by what exists outside it.' Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, transl. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), 160.

2 Soewito Santoso (ed.), *Sutasoma: A Study in Old Javanese Wajrayana* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1975), 578.

3 Moelyono Sastronaryatmo (ed.), *Babad Jaka Tingkir: Babad Pajang* (Jakarta: Proyek Penerbitan Buku Sastra Indonesia dan Daerah, Balai Pustaka, 1981), 74.

4 See Ulfa Tursina, Sahid Teguh Widodo, Kundharu Sadhono, 'Syncretism in The Drama Script of Syekh Siti Jenar Written by Martha Vredi Kastam', in eds. Kundharu Sadhono, Deny Tri Ardianto, M. Furqon Hidayatullah, Vita Ratri Cahyani, *Seword Fressh 2019*, Surakarta, Centra Java, Indonesia, 27 April 2019, European Alliance for Innovation, 106.

5 Frithjof Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1995).

6 See '*budi*', in *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, available at: <https://kbbi.web.id/budi>.

7 See '*budaya*', in *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, available at: <https://kbbi.web.id/budaya>.

8 St. Takdir Alisjahbana, *Polemik kebudayaan: Pokok pikiran* (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1977), 6-7.

9 St. Takdir Alisjahbana, *Kebudayaan sebagai perjuangan: Perkenalan dengan pemikiran* (Jakarta: Dian Rakyat, 1988), 84.

10 Subagio Sastrowardoyo, *Sekilas soal sastra dan budaya* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1992), 135.

11 See, *inter alia*, contemporary Indonesian writers including Sutardji Calzoum Bachri, Sapardi Djoko Damono, Linus Suryadi AG, Chairil Anwar, and Sitor Situmorang. In Sastrowardoyo, *Sekilas soal sastra dan budaya*, 137.

12 Deliar Noer, *Aku bagian ummat aku bagian bangsa: Otobiografi* (Bandung: Mizan, 1996), xiii.

13 Tan Malaka, *Gerpolek* (Yogyakarta: Jendela, 2000), 171-172.

14 See *Lembaran Negara Republik Indonesia Tahun 1995*, No. 1 – 88 (Jakarta: Sekretariat Negara Republik Indonesia., 1995), 19-20.

15 Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, *Kalah dan menang fajar menyingsing dibawah mega mendung patahnya pedang Samurai* (Jakarta: Jakarta Dian Rakyat, 1981), 2.

16 Muhammad Kamal Hassan, *Muslim Intellectual Responses to 'New Order' Modernization in Indonesia*, transl. Ahmadie Thaha (Jakarta: Lingkar Studi Indonesia, 1987), 246-247.

17 Hassan, *Muslim Intellectual Responses*, 9-10.

18 Soetardi Soeryohoedoyo, *Pepali Ki Ageng Selo: Puncak-puncak dalam pandangan kesusilaan, kefilsafatan dn ketuhanan dalam kesusastraan Jawa* (Terbitan: Surabaya: Citra Jaya, 1980), 18.