

## Review of “Siri Sembang Munsyi: Peribahasa”

<b>Title</b>	Siri Sembang Munsyi: Peribahasa
<b>Authors</b>	Mohamed Naim Daipi
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It has been some time since the last book-length publication on Malay proverbs with visual-spatial illustrations appeared in the market. We acknowledge the groundbreaking effort of Kit Lee, who published a collection of 100 Malay proverbs with illustrations and English explications in 2001. The latest entry in the library catalogue of National University of Singapore, on the other hand, is the “Kamus Istimewa Peribahasa Melayu”, dated 2004, which is originally a 1991 publication. The present collection of Malay proverbs, arranged and presented with illustrations, is relevant for maintaining an elaborate command of one’s heritage, or foreign language. The organizer of this Malay publication, Mohamed Naim, specifies his intent in the preface by stating that the collection is to facilitate the understanding of Malay proverbs easily for learners and teachers. He also voices his concern about the lack of attention paid to the use of Malay proverbs and hopes that Malay learners would use proverbs when writing their Malay compositions (p. ix).

The main body of the proverb collection contains four subsections, which divide into four alphabetical segments, namely proverbs A to E; proverbs F to J; proverbs K to O; and proverbs P to Y. The number of proverbs presented for each segment is as follows:

**Table 1. Malay proverbs in Mohamed Naim (2018)**

<i>Segment in Peribahasa</i>	<i>Number of Malay proverbs</i>
Proverbs A to E	100
Proverbs F to J	36
Proverbs K to O	48
Proverbs P to Y	55
Total	239

The presentation of a proverb on every page follows a unilateral format that begins with the proverb in focus, accompanied by an explanation of its meaning and completed with a paragraph. Each paragraph covers the relevance of the proverb in describing a situation, and occasionally, the rationale for the selection of certain objects as the idiomatic reference points. Additionally, there are three visual-spatial components at the bottom of each page providing a rich supplement of multi-modal facilitation to appreciate the Malay proverb. The readers will find a set of colorful Malay

the main idea of the comics. Complementing the comic depiction, in a separate light blue background, is a *pantun*. Every proverb is incorporated as part of the message into the *pantun*, a typical Malay quatrain of rhyming phrases (see Muhammad Haji Salleh, 2018).

In comparison, the number of Malay proverbs in this collection is less than one fifth of the proverbs recorded in “Kamus Istimewa Peribahasa Melayu” (Abdullah Hussain, 1991/2004). Hussain’s Malay proverbs collection (2004) has the exact content and presentational style of the proverbs collection published in 1991. The collection under review offers a creative improvement to Hussain (1991/2004) in terms of layout and pedagogical acumen, not least because the presentation of the proverbs is complete with a multimodal design offering a reader-friendly display. Each comic strip, in different color tones, complements the print content. The inclusion of visual components by Mo-hamed Naim in this collection is in line with the current learning behavior (see Sew, 2017), not least because the visual component initiates a focus point and secures a locus of contemplation from the readers, who are well-attuned to digitized materials.

The caricatures in the comics come in the forms of animals, cultural artefacts, insects, landscapes, royalties, village folks, and youngsters conceived as assemblages of proverbial meanings. A catch phrase, or monologue in the blurb explicates the stationary comic strip (see below). Consequently, the blurb offers a clever tagline to derive a quick recognition for each schematic depiction. In contrast, there is not a single illustration in Hussain’s collections, which are chockfull with Malay proverbs followed by their respective explanations. Despite the multimodal support, undergraduates and secondary learners may not have the required knowledge to grasp the meanings of specific proverbs.

A young reader has to be equipped with cultural background to make the relevant association in a specific proverbial comprehension. For example, the Malay proverb that says *kasihkan padi, buangkan rumput* [lit. “if love the paddy, weed the grass”] (p. 156) has an illustration of a man donning a Malay *songkok* (a roundish velvet hat for Malay males) offering a remark to a female caricature dressed in a long gown. The blurb contains the monologue, “*Betul, saya belum pasang nombor dua!* [“It’s true that I have not obtained a number two!”]”. Understanding the remark requires specific social cultural knowledge about marriage and infidelity, especially in unpacking the connotative meaning of *nombor dua* (number two), which, in Malay, is more than a numerical reference on the reader’s part. Such socio-cultural knowledge gap between the learner and the proverb may find resolution with the assistance of a foreign language teacher. Chinese learners of Malay will benefit from the Mandarin phrase, *xiao san* (lit. “little three, or mistress”), which is the social cultural equivalent of *nombor dua* in Malay.

We note that eight illustrations in this collection do not contain any blurb with tagline. The comics without any tagline in the collection include the following:

**Table 2. Malay proverbs without tagline in Mohamed Naim (2018)**

<i>Proverb comics without tagline</i>	<i>English meaning (reviewer’s translations)</i>
<i>alim yang fikir akan ilmunya umpama senjata yang berkarat dalam sarungnya</i> (p. 17)	It is a waste for the intellectuals holding the knowledge to himself.
<i>bagai aur dengan tebing</i> (p.25)	Like the bamboo and the riverbank. (a symbiotic relation)
<i>bagai wau melawan angin</i> (p. 40)	Like a kite fighting the wind. (undertaking a difficult task)
<i>binatang tahan palu; manusia tahan kias</i> (p. 82)	Animals work with whacking, humans work with teasing.
<i>hilang adat tegal muafakat</i> (p. 122)	Change in the existing norms is through social consensus.

<i>kalau pandai meniti buih; selamat badan ke seberang</i> (p. 150)	With skills, success follows.
<i>kalau takut dilimbur pasang, jangan berumah di tepi pantai</i> (p. 151)	Those afraid of smoke should not stay in the kitchen.
<i>kayu bengkok masakan lurus bayangnya</i> (p. 158)	A crook will not have a straight shadow.

The depictions without tagline seem to be considered self-explanatory to speakers of Malay as heritage language. If this conjecture is true, it suggests that the target audience for this collection excludes foreign language learners. Nonetheless, it remains a fallacy that heritage speakers would automatically recognize and comprehend the proverbs behind the depictions in question. This is because consulting the collection implies that there is a knowledge gap for the reader due to a limited amount of Malay vocabulary and limitations in decoding Malay syntax. Any sort of learning pointers would be a welcome guide to both heritage and foreign speakers of Malay.

It is laudable that Mohamed Naim completes the elaboration of each Malay proverb with the use of Malay *pantun* as the proverb's ultimate cultural allusion. Here is an example of a Malay proverb, *bagaimana tidak menggigit telunjuk, air hujan turun keruh* incorporated into a Malay *pantun* (p. 44; emphasis and English translation added):

*Biji bijan baik mutunya,  
Dalam sangku sudahlah penuh;  
Air hujan keruh turunnya,  
Kita menunggu berasa jenuh.*

Sesame seeds of great quality,  
Already filled to the bowlful;  
**Alas, the rainfall turned murky;**  
Our wait became a boring woe.

The proverb denotes a corrupt and immoral character despite of his noble ancestry. Interestingly, the behavior of a corrupted noble person has an indirect representation in the *pantun*. By reference to rainfall as its metaphor, the high above locust alludes to the source, thus it is symbolic to good lineage. However, the murky rainwater as a paradoxical outcome gives rise to a puzzling consequence, ironically reflecting the behavior of an undesirable descendant of the aristocrats. The effort presented in this collection underpins an interdependence between Malay proverb and *pantun* in Malay speech. We draw a parallel that the combination of proverbs and poetry may offer a continuum productive for language learning in an advanced curriculum. Along the vein of Malay proverb-*pantun*, expert readers may want to explore the intracultural interdependence in Cantonese, British English, Mandarin, Hokkien, and Japanese, in conjunction with the robust research on sound symbolic associations as an expressive mode relevant to literal and poetic language comprehension (see Ho, 2007; Li, 2007; Matthews & Yip, 1994; Sasamoto & Jackson, 2015; Sew, 2015, 2018).

In short, the publication represents an important tool for teachers in preparing materials for teaching Malay proverbs. In alignment with the current reading tendencies of a digitized audience, the material uses colors, taglines, caricatures and incorporates rhyming Malay oral tradition such as *pantun* to highlight the versatility of Malay proverbs as a communicative-poetic wisdom. The collection is indeed a meticulous language enterprise as it adds value to the topic by demonstrating that the applicability of proverbs is diverse including a venture into critical pedagogy. Furthermore, the readers of this collection will attain a multimodal understanding towards a cross-disciplinary view of Malay proverbs. This collection is a practical tool for learning about Malay proverbs and their intelligent use in daily interaction.

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