

## ETHICS AND AESTHETICS IN THE SOCIOCULTURAL ASPECTS OF BRUNAI PEOPLE

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**ABSTRACT:** Observation was conducted on ethics and aesthetics in the sociocultural aspects of Brunai people. Activities involved in the observation include visiting the State Museum of Brunai, scrutinizing the design of local residences, and analyzing the academic life of Brunai people. The objective of this research is to provide description about ethics and aesthetics in the sociocultural aspects of Brunai people. Method of research is qualitative descriptive. Local residents were observed and then invited for interview. Information regarding the topics of research were collected from the officials of two higher education institutions in Brunai, namely *Universitas Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA)* and *Kolej Universiti Perguruan Ugama Seri Begawan (KUPUSB)*. Discussion on the topics was held by the author with the linguistic academicians in the State University of Malang. Data analysis involves stages consisting of sorting, verification, tabulation, interpretation, and conclusion. The product of this research is the description about ethics and aesthetics in the sociocultural aspects of Brunai people. Some results were obtained. It was found that ethics and aesthetics in the sociocultural aspects of Brunai people are rooted genetically from Malay ethnic culture, which is mainly characterized by aristocracy. Sociocultural life pattern of Brunai people is spiritually oriented to Islam religion. The mix of Malay genetic factor and Islam spirituality has shaped sociocultural mentality of Brunai people, which manifests in their preferences for spirituality, regularity, and self-reliance. Those preferences are components that make up Brunai's national identity.

Keywords: ethics, aesthetics, sociocultural, Malay, people.

### I. BACKGROUND

Sociocultural mentality of certain community can be recognized from sociocultural expressions used by the members of that community. Ethics and aesthetics are two conditions involved in sociocultural expression.

Moreover, sociocultural life of a community always grows in quite complex way. Genetic line and ideology are not only underlaying the establishment of a state but also influencing the sociocultural life of the people in that state. Review on sociocultural mentality of a community often involve considerations about ethics, ideology and nationalism (Ali-Fauzi, 2013). Ethnic-based genetic highly contributes to sociocultural mentality. Anthony Reid was one of well known authors on this matter. He reviewed local identity, nationalism, and history of certain communities, including those in Southeast Asia (Reid, 2004). His works on the origin of ethnical states in Southeast Asia were unique and distinguished from others through his focus on individuals with strong orientation to spirituality (Setiawan & Risnandar, 2018). Robby Hidajat, the author and researcher in this context, took initiative to review the role of ethics and aesthetics in the sociocultural life in ethnical states, and then used this as the topic of research. Both ethics and aesthetics are local-based and represent dynamic spirits that corroborate national identity. Speaking of Brunai, ethics find its usefulness in communication and interaction of individuals in community, while the manifestation of aesthetics can be found in traditional weaving works (Haji, 2005).

The topic was chosen by Robby Hidajat after taking some issues into consideration as research background. *First issue* is that, as researcher, he assumed that the rise of ethnical states is preceded by conditions related with ethics and aesthetics, and this is rarely discussed in previous publications. In this research, he provides deep review on social ethics construction. For instance, it is said that social ethics have great contribution to the establishment of nationalism and national identity. This statement supports the position of Ben Anderson, especially on Anderson's writing about Soekarno, the first president of the Republic of Indonesia. Symbolical expression of ethics and aesthetics during Soekarno administration can be found in

National Monument (*Monas*) and Welcome Statue. Soekarno often personified himself as *Gatotkaca*, a character of Indian epoch, but he used it in Indonesian version. His predisposition on art had contributed to the art development in Indonesia, and therefore, people regarded Soekarno as the pioneer of Indonesian art (Darmawan, T, 2004). Ethics and aesthetics are not influencing ethnical people in partial way, but rather simultaneously. All social phenomena comprise ethics and aesthetics, and these phenomena affect the life of the state and people within it dynamically through certain space and time. Sociocultural aspects that grow in a community always have social orientation, and sometimes, this orientation is focused on ethnical genetics to justify the existence of ethnicity. For example, Hitler proclaimed Arian race, a race where he origins from, as the most superior ethnic and he built such social sentiment from his hatred to the absolute dominance of the Jew (Drabkin, 2002). The development of a state and people within it cannot be separated from the history of state origin, the creation of environment for the citizens, and the social orientation of the people. A community emerges from a historical dynamic. Some members of community act as the agents of change who are very influencing to the rise or succession of power, which during transition, they usually get position as policy maker. Higher education institutions are built to shape sociocultural mentality of a community. In European states, in the beginning, higher education is aimed to produce graduates with competencies in policy making, social structure, and social manners, and most of these graduates are elegant nobilities. That is why aristocratic life is quite prominent in Europe (Risman, interview on 5 December 2019).

*Second issue* is that Brunei is one state in Southeast Asia that does not fall into a trap of globalization that seduces it to become metropolist state. There is a fear that modernization will diminish the authority of Sultanate (Talib, 2013). Such inspiration might be coming from Soekarno, the first president of the Republic of Indonesia. He forbid the play of western musics in Indonesia from 1950 to 1966 by intention to protect ethnical culture assets of Indonesia (Pertiwi, 2014). There always should be a policy to conserve the internal strength of a state in order to strengthen its national identity.

All issues above give motivation to Robby Hidajat to review sociocultural aspects of Brunei people. He followed up this motivation by visiting the State Museum of Brunei in December 2019. This Museum is actually a private museum of the King (Sultan). He studied documents about Brunei people. Besides scrutinizing documents, he also observed the residences of local people. He found that Brunei people are reclusive and rarely found crowding in public spaces. All houses are served by air conditioning system, and that is why the occupants prefer staying at home to hanging around outside. Moreover, academic life of Brunei people is greatly affected by Islam spirituality because Islam religion is used as the instrument to shape their personality. They believe that the sociocultural life of Brunei people can be made stronger only by educating the youths with Islam spirituality. Even, higher education students are educated in Islamic way. They hope that Brunei national identity will not fade easily when higher education graduates must build international cooperation with other countries.

Brunai and Indonesia have made cooperation in academic context. Two higher education institutions in Brunei, namely *Universitas Islam Sultan Sharif Ali* (UNISSA) and *Kolej Universiti Perguruan Ugama Seri Begawan* (KUPU SB), have developed agreements on some programs with State University of Malang, Indonesia. The programs are mostly about the development of science and the teaching of Islam spirituality. State University of Malang might not be the only higher education institution in Indonesia solicited by Brunei for cooperation. Despite this fact, the cooperation represents a vital decision made by Brunei to introduce its national identity to the neighbour countries.

## II. METHOD

The approach of research is direct observation. This method is usually used to understand the life of a community by getting along with individuals and identifying artifacts, visual expression, social posture, and environmental condition of the community (Anderson, 2010). Data were collected through some instruments. The author observed few local residents and then made appointment with them for interview. Further information were obtained from private conversation held by the author with the officials of two higher education institutions in Brunei, namely *Universitas Islam Sultan Sharif Ali* (UNISSA) and *Kolej Universiti Perguruan Ugama Seri Begawan* (KUPU SB). The perspective of Indonesian regarding the topic of research was gotten by the author after making discussion on the topic with the linguistic academicians in the State University of Malang. Data analysis process was using verbal description, and this involves stages beginning with sorting, continued to verification, tabulation, and interpretation, and ended with conclusion.

## III. ANALYSIS AND RESULT

### A. Analysis

Brunai is a sovereign state in the north part of Kalimantan Island. It is a small state with an area more or less the same as a small city. Public spaces in Brunei cities are free of the crowd. The environment of residences is mostly clean. Roads are not so full of cars. Few cars might still be passing by but they do not show

the impression of being busy. Even, motorcycles are rarely seen. Offices and stores do not compete in height. Mosques are constructed in grandiose but very few individuals do praying there. Sidewalks are not crowded by pedestrians who walk to school or workplace. Shaded atmosphere of the sidewalks calms the heart of those who pass over it. Brunai has been blessed with high rainfall but not torrential. Rains can arrive at any time, including in dry season.

Moreover, Brunai is also multi ethnics. There are seven ethnics living in this state. One of them is *Kedayan* or *Kadayan*, which is an ethnic of land or hinterland people. Kedayan is the mix of Indonesian Javanese and Brunaian Malay. Although they are not the only ethnic in the state, they do have large contribution, either physically or visually, to the prosperity of the Sultanate of Brunai Darussalam. Individuals of this ethnic are known for their manufacture of work instruments, their design of dwellings and praying houses, and their creation of artistic things and functional handicrafts. Brunai does not impassion technological domination. Every corner of Brunai cities is not adorned with banners, posters and videotrons.

General appearance of Brunai people leans on naval and agrarian characteristics. Most of Brunai citizens acquire their income from catching fishes and planting crops. Although the livelihood products come and go smoothly, the people do not intend to manage them as mass commodities. Even, those who live by the coast or at hinterland do not make fishing or planting as their livelihood because Brunai indigenes get subsidy from the Royal. Thing that must be noted is that Brunai is not prominent in naval and agrarian cultures, and even, its economical and political standings are weak compared to other states in Southeast Asia. Despite this weakness, health service is delivered free of charge. Every mother can give birth to child without thinking the cost. Government subsidy covers the cost of not only birthing but also post-birthing, including the cost of milks and medicines.

Some Brunaians live by the sea but their naval characteristic is not well known because they do not rely on sea for their livelihood. Naval characteristic is not cultural expression of Brunai people. It seems that hinterland culture is more dominating than the sea, and it might be related with the presence of Dayak ethnic. The dwellings of coastal people are called *Kampung Ayir* (water village). The design of coastal dwellings is mostly stilt house, which is supported by crossbars embedded to the beach. Sociocultural life of coastal dwellers is greatly affected by environmental change. In the beginning, *Kampung Ayir* community got their livelihood from fishing, making handicrafts, and trade (Gin, 2015). In the other corner of Brunai, there is a concrete steel bridge with high soaring mast. The appearance of the bridge is sturdy and gigantic, which possibly represents the root of ethnic-based culture that props up the glory of Brunai Sultanate. It is just like the stylization of *lingga* and *yoni* that make up National Monument (*Monas*) in Indonesia, which symbolizes the strong pillar for the advancement of Indonesia people (Wahyuningtyas, 2012).

Aristocracy has protected Brunai people since for long. This protection is etched visually on the images (art works) stored in the State Museum of Brunai (*Museum of Brunai Royal Instrumentations*). This museum is located in the middle of Brunai capital, *Bandar Sri Begawan*. The title of Sultan is *Paduka Seri Baginda Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah*, and the royal instruments ever used by him are kept within the museum.

Indeed, the museum is a symbol of aristocratic magnificency, which adores loyalty, obedience, and submission of the people to the King. Therefore, Sultan is the only orientation of homage because Sultan is the custodian of national morality and the maker of policy for the favor of the people. Royal artifacts are neatly organized in the museum, and they include royal stretcher (*shoulder cart*) lifted by hundreds of guard miniatures, golden throne decorated by symbolical golden animal statues, royal daggers, diamond ornamented crowns, soldier costumes, war equipments, and a pair of golden cannons. Certain section of museum displays royal yellow umbrellas. Yellow refers to royal color, while umbrellas symbolize the King's protection for the people. International cooperation made by Brunai with other states in the world is a symbolical manifestation of social ethics professed by Brunai people, and this manifestation has implication to Brunaian artistical perspective. Souvenirs received by Sultan from leaders of the other states in the world are the symbolical token of appreciation to Sultan's admiration to the artistic works of the givers, and this appreciation will place Sultan in the hierarchy of homage and friendship. Social ethics conducted by Sultan with other states give moral strength to Brunai people, which at least make them to be seen by the world as prestigious community. The collection of instruments in the museum is organized constructively with Sultan heirlooms to be put in the highest order. Every section of the museum comprises collection of instruments that are related one another in the constellation of Sultan power. Doors in each section are designed in such a way that visitors can always see the formation of royal stretcher lifted by armed guards. This design depicts an impression that ethnical kingdom is the anvil of genetical power. Sultan is believed as the highest orientation of homage and the protector of the people. Sultan is also viewed as a supreme leader (*khalifah*) who gives the people an orientation for ethical and aesthetical examples. Manner and wisdom are personal attributes that people emulate most frequently from their King.

Brunai culture is dominated by a strong Malay aristocratic style. Architects accommodate this domination in the design when they build offices, royal palace, and mosque. These three buildings become the prominent marker of Brunai aristocracy. Sociocultural life is oriented towards Sultan as the supreme religion leader. His position as *khalifah* confirms his parallelism to other Sultans in Indonesia, where the presence of Sultanate is substantiated by architectural symbol. Aristocratic buildings are always magnificent, tall, and spacious, and the roofing is usually topped with the golden vault. The yard around the buildings is often planted with greeneries. The vault itself is one of house elements that represents both spiritual power and spiritual obsession of many religious states, which are usually used to convince people to develop spiritual posture. Abutment masts that support the Bridge of *Kampung Ayir* are also topped with golden vault, and the bridge stands firmly as the background of the village. This design symbolizes the power of Sultan in bridging the interests of government and people to make all of them living in welfare and prosperity. The direct proof of this symbolization is that it is so much difficult to find beggars, street musicians, and even illegal parkers wandering on the streets of Brunai. It is believed that the uncovering of social identity of the lowest class can make visitors to convince that there are poor families in Brunai.

In general, most Brunaian live in the urban area. They occupy apartments, which refer to a simple tall building with tiered blocks. Divergent (destructive) social habits, such as scrawling the walls (making graffities) or putting posters on public boards, are hardly coming to the sight. Moreover, they do not wear fashions reflecting metropolist style, which therefore, their urban style is not so conspicuous. The reason is possibly that their sociocultural life is already mature and more established. Houses owned by nobilities and the praying houses are designed as a great construction, and this greatness is intended to be the center point of aesthetical perspective.

Life expression of rural Brunaian is very simple with fashions same as those of common Malayan. They usually live at platform houses made of wood but some of them have changed theirs to stone houses. They do not have much outdoor activities and therefore, their residences often seem desolated. Adult men go to the crop field or ranch, while women, teenagers and children stay at home. Women do household activities such as weaving, housekeeping, and preparing meals.

Moreover, this article also has intention to contribute to the advancement of science. The role of higher education institutions, therefore, is also taken into account by this research. Higher education institutions are used as a place for shaping social ethics and strengthening religiosity. Parallelism between academic science and religiosity is enforced in higher education institutions in Brunai, and these institutions are arranged to produce a community with religion-based intellectuality. Islam religion teachers are academically educated, and there is a consensus among them that Arab language is important part to fertilize the piety to God. This opinion was supported by the officials at *Kolej University Perguruan Ugama Seri Begawan* (KUPU SB). This university was inaugurated on August 2007 by Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah as the fourth university in Brunei Darussalam. It teaches not only Islam subjects but also Arabic and English.

Religiosity is not so obvious among Brunai people because they live in humility. They do not express religiosity through fanatic cults. One reason behind this is that Sultan is revered as a supreme religious leader. Other reason is that Brunai people do not use religious ethics as political expression.

## B. Result

Result of this research is acquired from observation, short interview, literature review, and discussion. Topics that the author focuses on are ethnical genetic, ideology, spirituality and social construction. However, the analysis conducted on these topics is very limited and does not yet cover the deep essence of ethics and aesthetics of Brunai people. Sociocultural construction of ethics and aesthetics professed by Brunai people is comprised of three components, namely (1) *spirituality* (Islam spirituality), (2) *regularity* (well-ordered community), and (3) *self-reliance* (standing alone in developing self-identity).

### 1. Spirituality

Islam is the national religion of Brunai, and Sultan enforces law orientation and social order based on Islam teaching. Sociocultural behavior of Brunai people indicates an existence of mature spiritual comprehension, and this indication is confirmed by the presence of vast and completely equipped praying facilities with well-ordered praying activities. Government officials and even Sultan build mosques as the expression of piety. For reinforcing spirituality, Sultan has given order to build Islam higher educations to teach the pure Islam subjects. The phrase "pure Islam" refers to Islam teachings that hold fast to the Koran and Assunah that underlay the success story of Prophet Muhammad SAW in transforming people in the world.

Sociocultural life of Brunai people is strongly rooted from Malay Peninsula, which is dominated by the presence of Moslems. Therefore, it is not surprising if most Brunaian wear clothes with Malay attributes and also if piety to the God (*Allah*) is general expression of Brunai people. Moreover, schools in Brunai are

required to deliver spiritual education. Islam religion teachers at these schools are mostly graduated from Islam higher education. The quality of teaching on the subjects has been maintained by persuading candidates to take Arabic reading and writing courses, which are offered by the campus. It is hoped that the graduates will have deep understanding on the Koran and be able to practice it in their life.

It is Sultan who gives the example of spiritual piety, and then people use his example as a model of their social attitude. Such arrangement has positive impact on the senses of ethics and aesthetics of Brunai people, and these can be seen through their courtesy in social intercourse and their preferences for environmentally friendly posture and clean environment. For example, Brunaians are not quite fond of extravagant entertainment because it often produces many trashes. Such expression was similar to that of Islam adherents in Java (*santri*), which by Clifford Geertz, they are described as pious people who conduct Islam shariah consistently, which consists of *syahadat* (confessing faith), *sholat* (performing prayer), *puasa* (fasting), *zakat* (paying tithes), and *haji* (pilgrimage to Mecca), and also who conserve Assunnah of Rasulullah (Geertz, 2013:309-323). Indeed, Brunai people seem avoid the sparkling lifestyle. Their daily fashions are simple and dominated by the colors of black, brownish, and the mix of green and blue. Residences indicate the pattern of ethnical rural houses, which is characterized by wide niche for indoor gathering and vault-shaped roofing. As already explained before, vault roofing symbolizes a transcendental orientation. The apex of piety is the submission to God, and this condition is called as bottom-up or vertical relationship. Such symbolization has been brought into the design of nobles' houses, which generally involves ornamentation density, high soaring mast, golden vault, and majestic and shady Islamic carvings.

## 2. Regularity

In general, Brunai people present their lifestyle as social entity with a regular, neat, and simple inter-individual network. Visual appearance of the urban is also simple with roads neatly ordered, and pavements widely constructed to give safe space for pedestrians. Such systemic traffic model has resemblance to that in Europe, which emphasizes on the creation of a clean and well-ordered system. The expression of aesthetic becomes more realistic in this model.

Not many Brunaians are found walking at noon or afternoon on the pavements. Food merchants are prohibited from opening food stalls at the pavements. They are centralized to a food center where they sell their menus at eateries. This food center is called *Tamu Selera*. Not only domestic visitors come to this food center but also foreigners. Asian tourists love sea food. Few Pakistani and Indian tourists come by the center and they are fond of meat-processed meals. Brunaians usually come with their family, sit at the same table, and enjoy the meals together. They often reserve the place for Friday or Sunday because those days are the vacation day either from school or work.

Cars are orderly parked without having parkers to be paid to arrange them. All public facilities in Brunai have spaces allocated for cars. The exceptional case is in *Kampung Ayir* where car owners do not have a garage because their houses stand above the water. They just park the cars on wide area by the beach.

Parking arrangement in water village differs from that of urban dwellers. They live in simple apartments where parking lots are provided nearby the buildings. Different way of parking the cars is found among local dwellers in suburban. Houses in suburban face one another and usually, the yards of the house are so vast. Despite the far distance of each house, it does not make every house to be far away to reach. Every family strongly holds their privacy. They go outside the house only for important matters. Villagers in Brunai spend their time more in the house while enjoy the coolness of air conditioner. They will go out of the house only when they must work or shop for family necessities in downtown. At least, every family has a car for personal transportation. Surprisingly, they rarely have motorcycle because they believe that only youths or unmarried persons use motorcycle. Most of them feel more convenient riding in a car.

It must be noted that car is not a symbol of wealth, but only used for functionality. The reason is possibly that Brunai is a tropical state with high rainfall throughout a year. If Bandung in Indonesia is known as rainy city, then Brunai can be regarded as rainy state. Car is a basic necessity either for individual or family. Philosophically, there is an opinion that unmarried persons give more concern to their individual matters, but married persons concern more on family matters. Therefore, car is regarded as a sign of sincerity to maintain wholeness and togetherness of the family, as well as to protect each member in the family. Protecting wife and children is the manifestation of household ethics. It may just be a simple idea but it gives anyone a strong reason to affirm that car is not a symbol of prestigious riches but car is needed to protect the family and to develop a warm relationship in the household.

## 3. Self-Reliance

Both migrant and local workers in Brunei have high work spirit. Their income is reflecting what they serve. Protecting the wellbeing of the state, defending the right of citizenship, and acquiring the advancement, are among reasons why Bruneians have strong dedication to work. Contracted workers are treated as the part of Brunei workforce. They are so energetic to produce good performance because they feel comfort at work and satisfied with the income that they can spend to fulfill economic necessities. The best part is that social subsidy given by the state for livelihood fulfillment is quite generous, and it is really helpful to the community members who work at informal sector.

Sultan empowers self-reliance by educating the youths on the importance of mental maturity and spiritual strengthening. This education activity is given through institutions that are spiritually oriented towards pure Islam. The teaching of pure Islam is considered as priority because Sultan is believed to have a genealogical line from Prophet Muhammad SAW. This line makes Sultan to be inaugurated as a symbol of mentality power that represents the self-identity of Brunei people.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Brunei society is conditioned by the mix of genetic, ideology, and spirituality. Political aspect in Brunei is affected by its sociocultural mentality, which makes Bruneians always recognized through their Malayan face and aristocratic lifestyle. All these conditions are grown through three aspects of sociocultural life, namely spirituality, regularity, and self-reliance. These aspects underlay the practice of ethics and aesthetics that give Bruneians the attributes of religiosity, composure, and dynamics.

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