

Mantra, Mufti and Healing In Perlis: An Analysis of *Guideline for Incantations*

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Abstract

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For generations, mantras or incantations have been an important form of local knowledge underpinning the craft of traditional Malay healers in the state of Perlis, in Malaysia. However the scenario has since changed partly due to the flourishing of the *al-Islah al-Islamiyyah* or Islamic Reformism since a century ago. Islamic Reformism has since emerged as the religion of the state as well as the core of administration of Islamic affairs, including the Mufti Department of Perlis. With respect to mantras in healing practices, official state guideline based on the tenets of Islamic Reformism were issued by the Mufti Department of Perlis in 2014, titled *Guideline for Incantations*. In a nutshell, this guideline enjoins Muslims of the state to refrain from unislamic elements in practising mantras. This paper attempts to discuss the response of Mufti Department of Perlis towards the use of mantras in healing through its *Guideline for Incantations*. Although this official guideline has been widely circulated, the Perlis Mufti Department is adopting an evolutionary approach, creating public awareness mainly through education and gentle persuasion, whereas policing and law reinforcement is less preferred.

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1. Introduction

Although Islam is at present the one and only religion of the Malays within the Malay-speaking region of the Malay peninsula including Perlis, a look at history reveals that a mixture of beliefs, thoughts and spiritually curative concepts operated at different times (Werner, 2002). This is evidenced in the use of jampian or mantra employed by the traditional Malay healer. However the ancient arts are not being practiced as openly and vigorously as they used to be. The tide of modernization, together with the spread of al-Islah al-Islamiyyah or Islamic Reformism in Perlis, has reduced traditional Malay healing to its present modest state. This paper attempts to discuss the response of the Perlis Mufti Department as the vanguard of Islamic Reformism towards the activities of traditional Malay healers, particularly the use of mantra or incantations, through its Guideline for Incantations.

2. Mantras in Traditional Malay Healing Practices in Perlis

As evident in numerous local folklore, Malay healers have apparently existed in Perlis since ‘the creation of the world’ (Othman & Rahmat, 1996). As the core of their theory of well-being, Othman (1993) noted that Malay healers generally believe that the human body consists of four vital elements namely *tanah* (earth), *angin* (air/wind), *api* (fire) and *air* (water) (Othman, 1993). Emanating from these four elements, the healers’ perception of treatment as well as prescription of medicine is shaped.

Another method of treatment in Malay traditional healing is the spiritual treatment. Of all the physical methods the healer may apply as the situation demands, a significant characteristic among the Malays is that diseases are generally believed to have been caused by the presence of noxious spirits in the body. Sometimes, the sick person is believed to be under attack by malignant familiar spirits sent by an evil-doer who harbours some grudge or bears him ill-will. The spiritual treatment in such cases involves *do’a* (Islamic prayers), *tangkal* (talisman), *azimat* (amulet), *wafak* (talismanic diagram) and even performing the ritual of *menurun* (séance).

However the most frequently applied approach in spiritual treatment is the reciting of specific mantras. Daud (2004) documented a Malay healer from Chuping, Perlis for example has used this following mantra to safeguard six patients (Daud, 2004):

‘Assalamualaikum (Peace be upon you)

Aku minta ampun pada Tuhan (I seek forgiveness from God)

Aku minta berkat pada Nabi (I seek blessings from the Prophet)

Aku minta tabik keramat awliya’ wali Allah (I seek magical salute from saints of Allah)

Yang gang tanah (The protector of soil)

Yang api angin bon tahtera (Of fire, wind *bon tahtera*)

Rasa jagalah kami (Feel us and protect us)

Kalau enam orang ini (for these six persons)

Jangan bagi cacat cedera (Let neither disabilities nor injuries struck)

Malam ini hingga cukup jam’ (For tonight until the hour is ripe)

From the comprehensive spectrum of healing, the spiritual treatment also constitutes mystical cures for the betterment of one's family, economic achievements and political ambitions. Hence, members of the public flock to Malay traditional healers for spiritual advice and to receive their magical formulas comprising of mantras and/or amulets. For example, to subjugate a fraudulent lover or husband embroiled in an extra-marital affair, Daud (2004) added that a women healer from Batas Lintang in Simpang Empat, Perlis prescribed the following mantra to wives and girlfriends (Daud, 2004):

'Tertutup Allah (Closed by Allah)

Terkunci Muhammad (Locked by Prophet Muhammad)

Tertutup terkunci, terbuka jangan (Closed, locked, do not ever open)

Tertutup hawa nafsu engkau (Let your lust be closed)

Pada sifat perempuan lain (Towards the attributes of other women)

Terpukau hawa nafsu engkau (Let your lust bedazzled)

Mari kepada wujud aku yang satu' (Come only to the my existence alone)

Hence spiritual treatment by mantras is sometimes considered as more essential than its physical counterpart as the mystical or supernatural world is believed to be closely involved with one's well-being. The world-view related to the traditional Malay healer places emphasises not on the technical or practical skills, but more on the mystical ability. Therefore the healer or *bomoh* as the expert in curative techniques, has to rely not only on his knowledge in potent herbs but also on his ability to deal with the supernatural due to his *ilmu batin* (inner or esoteric knowledge).

Nowadays there has been an obvious revival of local knowledge in the use of local herbs, either as supplements for general health or for their therapeutic values, or as alternative medicine. When more research and pharmacological studies have been conducted, and scientific methods of production are applied to Malay traditional medicine, its future and usefulness as complimentary medicine will definitely be enhanced. This also guarantees that the decline of the role of mantras and the diminution of their importance will not persist in future.

3. The Mufti Department of Perlis and the Influence of Islamic Reformism

The term 'mufti' refers to a Muslim scholar in the discipline Islamic Law qualified to give authoritative legal opinions known as *fatwa*. In the Malaysian context, Shuaib (2001) defines *fatwas* are religious statements issued by a mufti which are subsequently published, gazetted and disseminated among the general public (Shuaib, 2001). All fourteen states of Malaysia have their own state mufti acknowledged to issue *fatwas* for their respective states. Thus every gazetted state *fatwa* of a state mufti is a part of the Islamic Law binding all Muslims residing in the state.

Being a sovereign state in the federation of Malaysia, the history of the Mufti in Perlis began since 1843 where Perlis emerged as an independent principality ruled by the royal house of Jamalullail. To advise and aid His Royal Highnesses the *Rajas* of Perlis in Islamic legal matters, learned persons in Islamic Law were appointed as officers in the Perlis royal court. Instead of *mufti*, such persons were firstly referred to as *Kadi Besar* (Grand *Qadi* or State Shariah Judge) whose responsibilities include the issuance of *fatwas*. The first *Kadi Besar* of Perlis was Sayyid Muhammad al-Haddad followed by Haji

Muhammad Haji ‘Abdul Latif as the second *Kadi Besar*. The third holder of the *Kadi Besar* office was Haji Muhammad Nor Haji Muhammad.

Haji Muhammad Nor Haji Muhammad is also considered the first *Mufti Kerajaan* or Perlis State Mufti serving from 1920 until 1941 (Abdullah, 2010). He was succeeded by Haji Ismail Haji Ibrahim who held the office from 1941 to 1945, then Syekh Mahmood Mat Saman (1945-1970), Haji Salleh Othman (1970-1971), Haji Abdul Rahman Ismail (1971-1984) and Dato’ Alim Panglima Mat Jahya Hussin (1984-2006). From November 2006 onwards, Perlis has been fortunate to be the first Malaysian state to engage scholars with doctorate degrees as the State Mufti. Thus Dato’ Arif Perkasa Dr. Mohd. Asri Zainul Abidin became the seventh State Mufti until November 2008. Beginning from 27th January 2009 until 31st December 2014, Dato’ Murshid DiRaja Dr. Juanda Jaya continued the duties as the eighth State Mufti of Perlis. For the second time, Dato’ Arif Perkasa Dr. Mohd. Asri Zainul Abidin was reappointed by royal decree to assume the office of Perlis State Mufti beginning from 2nd February 2015 until the present.

Since 1996, the Office of the Perlis Mufti has been upgraded to the Mufti Department of Perlis with the State Mufti as the head of department. The Mufti Department holds the responsibility as the highest Islamic Advisor for His Royal Highness the *Raja* of Perlis, the Perlis State Government, the *Majlis Agama Islam dan Adat Istiadat Melayu Perlis* (Perlis Council of Islamic Affairs and Malay Customs) and the *Jabatan Hal Ehwal Agama Islam Perlis* (Perlis Department of Islamic Affairs). The Department also acts as the secretariat for the *Majlis Fatwa Perlis* (Perlis *Fatwa* Council) chaired by the State Mufti. The *fatwas* of the Perlis *Fatwa* Council must be endorsed by the Perlis Council of Islamic Affairs and Malay Customs and then obtain royal blessings from His Royal Highness the *Raja* of Perlis before they can be gazetted as the state’s Islamic Law.

Apart from that, the Mufti Department of Perlis prepares the *Khutbah Jumaat* (Friday Sermon) to be read weekly at all 105 mosques all over Perlis, and observes the astronomical procedures in determining the start of Ramadan as well as the two *Eid* festivals. Advice and guidance is issued by the department to the general public starting by receiving of questions on religious guidance from the masses either via ordinary mail, email, telephone calls or visits to the department’s office. Some questions may even originate from overseas. Starting in February 2015, a consultancy arm of the department named as *Institut Sunnah dan Irshad* (Institute of Prophetic Tradition and Guidance) or abbreviated as *ISNAD*, was established to provide intensive courses and training modules in Islamic understanding. The Mufti Department of Perlis continues to serve the Muslims of Perlis tirelessly through this latest training component, together with research, publication, operation of the department’s web portal and official Facebook page, as well as the maintenance of a public Islamic Library.

How does Islamic Reformism influence the Mufti Department led by the State Mufti of Perlis? The answer is quite straight-forward: all State Mufti of Perlis appointed after the Malayan independence until today have been staunch supporters of Islamic Reformism. Over the centuries the Shafi’i school has been dominant in Perlis. However according to Abdullah (2010), the status of this *mazhab* or school of Islamic jurisprudence, has been challenged by Islamic Reformism (Abdullah, 2010). Although the earliest ideas of *al-Islah al-Islamiyyah* or Islamic Reformism came from Middle East and

Northern Africa, Perlis experienced the wave of *Islah* originating from islands presently known as parts of the Indonesian Republic. Humbly started by a scholar known as Syeikh Hasan Surabaya in the 1920s as a grass-root study circle, Islamic Reformism eventually spread to all walks of Perlis society until it was supported by the Perlis Royal Palace. As concluded by Isa (1987), the *Undang-undang Tubuh Kerajaan Perlis* or Perlis State Constitution legally codified Islamic Reformism named as *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* as the official religion of the state in 1948 (Isa, 1987).

Thus in *fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence, Perlis adheres to the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* (traditions of the Prophet) as highest source of reference in *fiqh*, advocating *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and opposing *taqlid* (blind following). Isa (1987) considered this position as revolutionary, as in the other thirteen states of Malaysia, the Shafi'i school is the dominant official *mazhab* which legally binds every Muslim in the state to follow its rulings (Isa, 1987).

Due to the influence of Islamic Reformism, in matters of '*aqidah* or Islamic creed, the state adheres to the creed of the early Muslims namely the *Sahabah* (Companions of the Prophet) and the *Salaf al-Salih* (Pious Predecessors). Other states in Malaysia hold to the Asha'irah faith partly explained according to ancient Greek logic. In *tasawwuf* or Islamic spirituality, Perlis embraces the spirituality based on *akhlaq* or Islamic morals, without organized mysticism of *tariqah* (Sufi orders). Therefore Perlis is often at the forefront of Islamic reform or *tajdid* in Malaysia, while the State Mufti of Perlis becomes the point-of-reference for religious understanding as well as practices based on Islamic Reformism.

4. Healing By Mantra According to *Guideline for Incantations*

The *Garis Panduan Jampian* or *Guideline for Incantations* was published in 2014 during the tenure of the eighth State Mufti of Perlis, Dato' Murshid DiRaja Dr. Juanda Jaya. A royal forward for the guideline is given by His Royal Highness the Crown Prince of Perlis, Tuanku Syed Faizuddin Putra Ibni Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin Jamalullail, praising the efforts of the Mufti Department for preparing the guideline as an important Islamic creed reference for the Perlis populace. Printed as a 38-page booklet, the content of this guideline is arranged in point form consisting of 11 parts namely Part 1 explaining the definition of mantras, and Part 2 presenting the ruling on mantras. Part 3 categorizes mantras, Part 4 elaborates the guide for mantras, followed by Part 5 focusing on mantra method and selection of verses, while Part 6 enlightens the steps in performing mantras. Giving attention to the healer, Part 7 outlines conditions of the healer and Part 8 lays out the etiquette of the healer. Part 9 explains the features of the sick in order to benefit from the mantras, and lastly Part 10 states the ruling on accepting payment due to mantra and taking it as a source of income (Garis Panduan Jampian, 2014).

To further understand the correlation between the guideline and healing by mantra, the following circumstances should be considered:

4.1. Mantra From The Perspective of The Guideline for Incantations

As one of the main aims of Islamic Reformism is to return to the purity of *tawhid* or Islamic Monotheism, it campaigned vigorously against any form of practice or belief that might have contaminated this ideal. Hence in a nutshell, this guideline of the Mufti Department of Perlis enjoins

Muslims of the state to refrain from any unislamic elements in practising mantras. In general, the Garis Panduan Jampian (2014) requires three conditions to be present in order for any mantra to be religiously-correct and permissible (Garis Panduan Jampian, 2014) :

- i. The mantra must be founded on the Qur'an and the Sunnah (Tradition of Prophet Muhammad), invoking Allah's name and/or His divine attributes.
- ii. The mantra must be of intelligible meaning in order to ensure that the mantra is not compromised by *shirik* (polytheism) and *sihir* (sorcery) covered with cryptic character and mysterious words.
- iii. Every use of mantras must be coupled with the firm belief that only Allah heals and mantras do not have any effect by themselves but by the will of Allah.

The three conditions above also demonstrate the effort of this guideline to realign the use of mantra in traditional Malay healing with the conditions of their Islamic counter-part known as the *ruqyah*. Using prayers purely from the Qur'an and the authentic Prophetic tradition, the *al-Islah al-Islamiyyah* version of ruqyah method is meticulously guarded from the infiltration of unislamic elements such as *shirik* (polytheism), *kufir* (disbelief), *ilhad* (atheism), *bid'ah* (religious innovation), *khurafat* (superstitions) and *tahayul* (old wives' tales). This strict measure is also a feature that differentiates the *ruqyah* practitioners from the Islamic Reformism camp, compared to their counterparts from among the *Sufis* (Islamic Mysticism) or Shafi'i traditionalists. Thus mystical charisma and special abilities have given way to religious piety in Islam. This also means a strict observance of ethical conduct is demanded from the *ruqyah* practitioners, for Islam requires not only total submission to Allah as the true path of the believers but also proper conduct towards mankind, Muslims and Non-Muslims alike.

4.2. Discussion

Even though the guideline might be restrictive on the practice of mantra in traditional Malay healing, Islamic-compliant mantras as well as other works from local knowledge of traditional healers have been spared, and in fact encouraged by the guideline. Thus the efforts of traditional healers using purely herbalist method, bone setting, post-child birth confinement, circumcision and other physical treatments are accepted as valid and as a component of Islamic Medicine by the Mufti Department of Perlis via the guideline. However the unislamic celestial dimension of mantras is rejected by the guideline.

Furthermore the advance of modern medicine as well as scientific education has also weakened the attraction of traditional healers and subsequently the relevancy of mantras. Industrialization has brought medical progress even to previously remote areas of Perlis where various medical institutions have mushroomed. Jaspán (1969) examined that the 'defeat' of traditional healers becomes more devastating when age and death catch up with the practitioners (Jaspán, 1969). Therefore with or without the guideline being imposed by the Mufti Department of Perlis, healing by mantra will eventually be another relic of the old days of Perlis.

It is also interesting to note that in combating 'problematic' mantras, the Mufti Department of Perlis has voiced its disapproval while standing firmly on the approach of education and peaceful advocacy

without resorting to violence. In addition, there have been no reported cases in decades either of death threats, witch-hunts, mob violence, injury, death or any harm by the supporters of Islamic Reformism upon sorcerers and deviant traditional healers of Perlis. In the Middle East, North Africa or the Indian subcontinent, the scenario might be different where theological clashes can end with bloodshed. By contrast, the Mufti Department of Perlis particularly and the Islamic Reformism of Perlis generally, have adopted an evolutionary approach towards doubtful mantras in traditional Malay healing. Public awareness is gained mainly through education and gentle persuasion, while policing and law reinforcement via *fatwa* is avoided.

5. Conclusion

The *Garis Panduan Jampian* or *Guideline for Incantations* published in 2014 during the tenure of the eighth State Mufti of Perlis requires three conditions to be present in order for any mantra to be religiously-correct and permissible for Muslims of Perlis. Even though the guideline might be restrictive on the practice of mantras in traditional Malay healing, Islamic-compliant mantras from local knowledge of traditional healers is accepted as valid, given proper acknowledgement as a component of Islamic Medicine, and in fact encouraged by the guideline. It is also interesting to note that in dealing with 'problematic' mantras, the Mufti Department of Perlis voices its disapproval through public education and peaceful advocacy without resorting to violence. For decades, there have been no cases of death threats, witch-hunts, mob violence, injury, death or any harm done by the supporters of the Mufti Department of Perlis upon sorcerers and deviant traditional Malay healers of Perlis.

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