

# ADMINISTRATIVE ETHICS IN NOORDIN HASSAN'S *SIRIH BERTEPUK PINANG MENARI AND MANA SETANGGINYA?*

*(Etika Pentadbiran dalam Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari dan  
Mana Setangginya? Noordin Hassan)*

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## Abstract

Sasterawan Negara Dato' (Dr.) Noordin Hassan's apprehension about the abuse of power can be seen in all his plays and noticeably so in his plays *Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari* (1992) and *Mana Setangginya?* (1999). While *Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari* is more Malay, *Mana Setangginya?* has a more global and universal message. The first layer of Noordin's plays will offer a chance to look for the main message of the play or to find significance in the main storyline or in other devices. As Noordin says in *Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari*, "If what is stated is impossible, then one should search for what is hidden". The administrative ethics that Noordin propagates is the "hidden" and major statement behind the comedy, romance and splendour of both plays.

Keywords: administrative ethics, governance, Noordin Hassan, hidden

### **Abstrak**

*Kebimbangan Sasterawan Negara Dato' (Dr.) Noordin Hassan's tentang penyalahgunaan kuasa boleh dilihat dalam semua drama beliau, lebih lagi dalam drama-drama Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari (1992) and Mana Setangginya? (1999). Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari tampak kemelayuannya, manakala Mana Setangginya? mengandungi mesej yang lebih global dan universal. Lapisan pertama drama-drama Noordin akan menawarkan penyelidik peluang untuk mencari penyata utama drama atau mencari kesignifikanannya dalam jalan cerita utama; atau kelihatannya sebegini rupa. Seperti apa yang dikatakan oleh Noordin dalam Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari, "Kalau mustahil apa dikata, carilah pula apa tersirat." Isu etika pentadbiran dan tadbir urus adalah pernyataan utama Noordin yang "tersirat" di sebalik komedi, cinta dan keindahan kedua-dua drama.*

*Kata kunci: administrative ethics, governance, Noordin Hassan, tersirat*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the beginning of theatre, administrative ethics has been a popular theme in plays where leaders are being disparaged. The question of administrative ethics, especially where rulers and politics are concerned, is a sensitive issue. Thus, it is well disguised through comedy or other more conspicuous issues of love, humanism and spiritual ethics; these are also directly connected to administrative ethics and good governance. Noordin Hassan is best known for coating the message in his plays through several devices. While *Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari* delivers the message of administrative ethics through the guise of comedy and romance, *Mana Setangginya?* takes the approach of religious historical events that are timeless. Both are discussed based on Islamic values.

### **Concept of Administrative Ethics**

So important is the role of the ruler as an administrator that al-Ghazālī says, "The Sultān is God's shadow on earth" (Bagley, 1964:45) second in rank only to the Holy Prophets and associates the importance of religious rulers for, "Monarchy and religion are like brothers" (Bagley, 1964:59) that "The Apostle declared that the man dearest to God the All-high is the just Sultān ..." (Bagley, 1964:14). He cites the Holy Prophet that:

On the day of resurrection no protector and no shelter will remain except the protection and shelter of God the True, the All-high ... (and) [In this] protection will be seven persons"...the highest being "the just Sultān."

(Bagley, 1964:14)

El-Awa also cites the hadīth that the reward for just rulers is when he is placed "... foremost among the seven whom Allah will cover with His protection on the Day when there will be no protection but His" (Ahmad Naji, 1980:99-100). According to Bagley, a ruler is "...predestined, by God, and that the ruler will be accountable for it to God on Judgement Day" (Bagley, 1964:xxxix). Yet al-Ghazālī reminds through the sayings of the Holy Prophet that, "The harshest torment on the Day of Resurrection will be for the unjust sultān" (Bagley, 1964:15). Like al-Ghazālī, El-Awa cites the Qur'an as the major source of the legislation of Islam, "Of the Islamic constitutional principles, that of al-Shura (The Counsel) is considered to be one of the most important" (Ahmad Naji, 1980:86).

As the first Muslim ruler, the Holy Prophet's manners of administration are cited in the hadīth. It has been narrated that on the authority of Ibn Umar the Holy Prophet SAW had said:

Beware, every one of you is a shepherd and everyone is answerable with regard to his flock. The Caliph is a shepherd over the people and shall be questioned about his subjects.<sup>1</sup>

In his *Naīfāt al-Mulūk* (Bagley, 1964) al-Ghazālī chose to use anecdotes, analogies, traditions (hadīth) and aphorisms that contain examples and counsel for rulers while laying down the ten principles of the creed, which are also the roots of faith. In tracing the advice or counsels to rulers or "mirrors for princes" in Arabic and Persian literature, Nik Roskiman finds that the style of counselling came in several forms like epistles and belle-letters, political testaments, poetry, fables and stories of the Holy Prophet and his companions and stories from the Qur'an (Nik Roskiman, 2003:16-18).<sup>2</sup>

Ethics deals with primary issues of practical decision making, and its major concerns include the nature of ultimate value and the criteria by which human decisions and actions can be judged right or wrong. Izutsu asserts that in Islam morality had "... developed exclusively within its eschatological framework ..." whereby "... the ultimate destiny of man depend[s] on what he does in the present world." According to him:

God is of an ethical nature and acts upon man in an ethical way carries the grave implication that man on his part, is expected to respond in an ethical way.

(2004:18)

## **ADMINISTRATIVE ETHICS IN *SIRIH BERTEPUK PINANG MENARI***

*Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari* was first staged from 17th until 21st June 1992 by the National Cultural Complex to commemorate the birthday on the official date of His Highness Seri Paduka Baginda Yang diPertuan Agong Sultan Azlan Shah at MATIC, Kuala Lumpur.<sup>3</sup> It was later directed by Noordin and staged from 7th till 10th September 1992 at Dewan Sri Pinang, Penang.

When the curtain opens into the first scene in *Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari* (SBPM), Sultan Idris Bestari talks of his intention to travel and in his absence, his son, Zahiruddin Shah shall rule and poses a question to his son and heir, Zahiruddin on how he would “structure the administration of the country” (Noordin, 1992: 5). Already Noordin forewarns the manner of governance, the issue of administrative ethics. As the matter of administration concerns a Muslim state, here the role of the ruler and the manner of ruling is Islamic.

Noordin makes Sultan Idris teach his son Zahiruddin in a manner similar to that of al-Ghazālī, using allusions, aphorisms and allegories. For example, before he leaves Sultan Idris Bestari tells his son, Zahiruddin Shah, to relate the story he had told him the night before, to the people who serve with the government (Noordin, 1992:6). This is the story of a caliph who would not use oil belonging to the people to light lamps when discussing family matters. The exemplary administrative quality of the first Caliph, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who never spent a penny from the public funds (Bagley, 1964: xlii) is only one example which has earned ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb the title of “the Discerning”. To Zahiruddin, his father’s stories are examples and advice, too much of which have confused him (Noordin, 1992:8). Noordin has used this anecdote to symbolize an Islamic code of conduct required in a ruler, but it has failed to raise understanding in Zahiruddin.

No sooner does he assume the control of Indera Mahkota, Zahiruddin shows how important indeed and how dangerous is his position as the ruler of Indera Mahkota when he sends the Wazir Tua<sup>4</sup> home, a faithful advisor of Sultan Idris, and puts in his place a crony. Bagley says that, “Wazīrs were pillars of the civilian bureaucracy in medieval Muslim states (which) goes

back to the ‘Abbāsīd times’ (Bagley, 1964:xlvi). On the need for a wazīr, according to al- Ghazālī, “... a king will be successful with the help of a virtuous, worthy and competent minister; because no king can reign without a minister” (Bagley, 1964:106).

Zahiruddin makes his own decision, without consulting the old vizier or the dignitaries of the court (Datuk Wira and Datuk Ariff) who his father has left to guide him in executing his administrative duties. His conduct in sending Wazir Tua home is unjust and in a manner most unbecoming of a Muslim ruler; he dismisses the old man without reason and rather harshly. The Wazir Muda<sup>5</sup> enters and goads Zahiruddin with gold, glittering and shining everywhere and within his reach if he so desires (Noordin, 1992: 10-11). Zahiruddin succumbs and makes him plan the adornment of the palace to flaunt to a friend who will be visiting in a month. According to Maulana Ashraf, when pride and pomp take over it destroys *mu’âshrat* (social etiquette) as man desires to be superior to others. When this happens, he is not sympathetic nor is he just towards others (Maulana Ashraf, 2003:17).

Zahiruddin Shah starts his first day as a sultan by commanding the two court dignitaries, Datuk Wira and Datuk Ariff, to “persuade” the populace to sell their gold at low price. Obviously, Zahiruddin is not sympathetic towards his subjects nor is he just. As Zahiruddin and Wazir Muda leave, Datuk Arif comments on the difference between Zahiruddin’s extravagance and Sultan Idris’ advice on moderation. More than that, as a Muslim, Zahiruddin is an *al-Musrifūn* (those who waste by extravagance) while the Qur’an encourages Man to follow the middle course, to practise moderation.<sup>6</sup>

Using the metaphor of the ants, Sultan Idris earlier warns Zahiruddin that subjects can be powerful, reminding them of how these “ants” had saved the palace by killing the “snakes” within. The allegory of ants is found in the Qur’an as explained by Abdullah:

The ant, to outward appearance, is a very small and humble creature. In the great pomp and circumstances of the world ... may be neglected or even trampled on by a people who mean her no harm. Yet, by her wisdom, she carries on her own life within her own sphere ... and makes a useful contribution to the economy of the world. So there is room for the humblest people in the world. The counterpart to the position of the humble ant is the position of a great king ...<sup>7</sup>

Noordin uses the symbol of the ant to accord the importance of subjects as support to a system important to rulers and therefore should not be neglected.

In Indera Mahkota, Wazir Muda informs Zahiruddin that the fastest means of acquiring gold would be to wed Puteri Kamaliah. Elaborate and wasteful arrangements are made to cater to Zahiruddin's pride and an entourage is sent with a marriage proposal to Langkapura. Should the proposal be rejected, gold has to be sent to compensate for the refusal and Langkapura has to solve the riddle of "sirih bertepuk pinang menari" (beetle leaves clap the areca nut dances), failing which Langkapura will be attacked. Bagley elaborates that, "Among desirable qualities in wazīrs, much importance is given to skill in diplomacy and in avoiding war ... the worst wazīr is one who whets the king's appetite for war" (Bagley, 1964:xlvi). Unfortunately, Wazir Muda does not quench this appetite, seeing gold as the ultimate prize.

In Langkapura the search for the meaning of "sirih bertepuk pinang menari" worries Puteri Kamaliah. When Puteri Kamaliah decides that accepting the proposal would save Langkapura, Yatim (Inang's husband) advises that a life of quality is better than a long life and honour is more valuable than gold. As in another play, "Cindai" (Edisi Khas Sasterawan Negara, 2002), Noordin brings up the Malay legend of Tun Fatimah; here he questions if marriage to the sultan was a sacrifice on Tun Fatimah's part. Yatim advises Puteri Kamaliah by telling her, "When I do not know how to solve a problem, I offer two rakats prayers to ask for guidance" (Noordin, 1992:31).

Zahiruddin makes drastic changes in his palace; he wants the royal gardens to be filled with rare flowers, to be extended to the riverbank, to build a lake that contains perfumed blue water. A traditional dance is interrupted as he also makes changes in the type of entertainment offered. To make matters worse, he humiliates the old court dignitaries, Datuk Arif and Datuk Wira, by forcing them to dance, a most unbecoming act of a ruler. Datuk Wira is upset and wants to resign, but he is stopped by Datuk Arif who worries what the populace and their successors would say about their cowardly behaviour.

In her bedchamber, Puteri Kamaliah dreams she is being wooed by *Djin Afrit Atas Angin*<sup>8</sup> but when she refuses, he turns half her body into stone. She hears a voice that tells her, "Recite in the name of your God the Merciful, the Compassionate who created all creatures. Recite and your God is All-merciful. He teaches man knowledge not known. Ask Him for guidance."<sup>9</sup> The "voice" then invites her to Tanjung Jambu Mawar. Here Noordin uses the bangsawan dream device again. Based on the report by Abu Huraira, the Holy Prophet SAW said:

The truest vision will be of one who is himself the most truthful in speech, for the vision of a Muslim is the forty-fifth part of Prophecy, and dreams are

of three types: One good dream which is a sort of good tidings from Allah; the evil dream which causes pain is from the satan; and the third one is a suggestion from one's own mind.

(Muslim)

On the first category Siddiqui elaborates that it cannot be denied that the "... unconscious and the subconscious mind of the noble man is dominated by noble longings and desires ..." and in the case of Tengku Puteri Kamaliah, the dream she receives is a "... suggestion from the Divine" (Siddiqui, footnote 1617).

The next morning Ihsan, a fisherman, tells his friend, Man, that he had a dream that he met a princess and recalls that he invited her to Tanjung Jambu Mawar, only he does not know the place either and wishes to seek it. Seemingly side-tracking Noordin talks about the loss of heritage when changes are made, as the names of places that have been changed with the coming of foreigners. This concern, which is particular to Noordin, is seen in Sultan Idris' explanation that the place they were in was originally called Tanjung Jambu Mawar. But "Foreigners came and changed the name to Tanjung Chali" (Noordin, 1992:68). The coming of foreigners is seen earlier when Zahiruddin replaces the "old" with the "new" viziers, symbolizing change in styles of administration as the "new" is more inclined towards materialism. In wanting to replace court dances, Zahiruddin is getting rid of tradition. What is new is not necessarily better.

When Tengku Puteri asks permission to leave the palace and the Queen questions the validity of the dream, Yatim asserts the rank of rulers when he says:

Begging your highness, your daughter's dream is the dream of royalty. Would the night dare to tease, your highness. The dream must be meaningful, because the princess is a princess.

Puteri Kamaliah leaves with Inang and Yatim, disguised as travelling performers. As street performers Noordin uses yet another "play within a play" as Puteri Kamaliah and Yatim act in a sketch where the proud Bangsawan hero, Husaini (played by Yatim) is fooled by a prima donna and owner of a Bangsawan troupe, Sarajatul Ikhlas (played by Puteri Kamaliah), when she pretends to be an old woman asking Husaini for a job and he sends her away. As Sarajatul Ikhlas, she offers Husaini a job in her company and auditions him. They act a story of a cowardly king who refuses to go to war. Here

Noordin raises the issue of character. On defining false and real virtues in man's character, Miskawayh says, "... the man who acts like the courageous, but is not himself courageous" is daunted by danger (Zurayk, 1968:99). This "play within a play" is the sub-text that reflects of the character of Zahiruddin Shah who appears courageous through his pomp and pride but is really a weak character. Gender does not determine the wisdom of rulers. In an earlier scene Sultan Idris advises the Penari Dabus not to worry that Langkapura does not have an heir, as he has seen women who are:

Astute, clever and knowledgeable in the system of government. More than the king. In yet another country, although there is a king, the ruler is actually the queen.

(Noordin, 1992:19)

On personality, Ansari says, "... anyone who honestly comes forward to lead the Muslims to the goal prescribed for them in the Qur'an should possess a personality refulgent in its spiritual, moral and intellectual dimensions" (Ansari, 2001:311-2). Noordin seems to echo al-Attas, in that Malays like Zahiruddin Shah<sup>10</sup> have lost their *adab* or "... discipline – the discipline of body, mind and soul," says al-Attas who concludes that, "Loss of *adab* implies loss of justice" (al-Attas, 1984:99). Al-Attas proceeds to expound that the loss of *adab* results in:

The rise of leaders who are not qualified for valid leadership of the Muslim community, who does not possess the high moral, intellectual and spiritual standards required for Islamic leadership.

(al-Attas, 1984:100)

On the issue of administrative ethics, Noordin stands up to the fact that the Qur'an is itself a balance. Without proper knowledge and understanding of the divine law, a sultan is not qualified to rule as he or she is answerable to Allah SWT for the way he has administered his state. The worse fault of the ruler is to be pompous. While ridiculing Zahiruddin, Noordin balances and exaggerates his extravagance with the modesty of his father, Sultan Idris. The throne is a symbol of honour which must be respected by the ruler who sits on it. The solution that he suggests for rulers is the divine law, administrative ethics as has been revealed in the Qur'an and practiced by Prophet Muhammad SAW.



Although the balance is physically used as a measuring tool, metaphorically al-Ghazālī explains it as a balance for thought and spiritual balance (Brewster, 1978:12). He says that although "... the balance of the Qur'an for knowledge is spiritual ..." it is linked to the material or visible world (1978:13). He adds that:

If you were able to see the comparison between the sensibilia and the intelligibilia you would also have opened to you the gate of comparison between the present world of sight and the world of the future, which is unseen.

(Brewster, 1978:51)

As Zahiruddin is not able to find that balance between the "sensibilia" and the "intelligibilia" he is, "... deprived of the several lights of the Qur'an and its teaching, and of its knowledge has but attained the husk" (*ibid.*); he lacks the "ummatic balance". This confirms the hollowness of Zahiruddin when the answer to the riddle posed by his father, Sultan Idris, is simply, "People usually take betel leaves with areca nuts" (Noordin, 1992:78). In his autobiography Noordin reminds that, "It is most important that the harmony of *Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari* in life cannot be denied" (Noordin, 1996:23).

### ADMINISTRATIVE ETHICS IN *MANA SETANGGINYA?*

*Mana Setangginya?* was to have been staged to officially open Istana Budaya as the new National Theatre complex by former Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad at its present site at Jalan Pekeliling Istana Budaya, Kuala Lumpur on 31st August 1999 under the direction of Rahim Razali. This production was cancelled and was staged ten years later at Istana Budaya from the 13th to 21st June 2009 directed by Zaifri Husin.

The issue of administrative ethics in this play is closely related to spiritual ethics and covers a span of several hundred years but does not have a specific time frame. Noordin has extracted incidents from the Bible and the Qur'an which are sometimes linked to stories from a certain period and yet not related to the characters. The fact that he mentions specifically that he does not use Malaysian elements goes to show the universality of the message of the play which he refers to as "global". Yet he adds, "Actually there is a specific perspective for Malaysians to look at images of themselves; especially the Malays." What Noordin saying is that the play works as a mirror to portray the image of what is happening in the world as also in Malaysia. There are no physical images of Malaysia but the most powerful message is man's

disregard for what is prohibited and the punishment is similar to the story of Sodom<sup>11</sup> and Gomorrah, which is the period of Lût (a.s.). However, the misdemeanour in the play that is similar to the transgression of the Sabbath is Jewish.

In *Mana Setangginya?* the main antagonist is Uzza whose name is also the name of one of “The three principal idols of Pagan Arab Idolatry”<sup>12</sup> (the other two being Lat and Manat) the false goddesses. The name characterizes the ruler of the City of Gemilang (Glorious City). He is described as “very tall” (Noordin, 1999:29). He is foreign and symbolizes the “foreign power”<sup>13</sup> (Nordin, 1999:18) that brings a new teaching that makes the rules on how people can live, transgress all God’s laws from fishing on the Sabbath to eating pork, eating fish without fins and scales, to same sex marriage (1999:36). The villagers who follow them are promised a free lifestyle and wealth. To his strong supporter, Hawar, he is so powerful that, “... not one power, in the sky, on the earth, even typhoons of fire,” can shake them as long as they are protected by Uzza (1999: 29). The coming of foreigners is seen earlier in SBPM, where the styles of administration of the “new” and “foreign” are inclined towards materialism. Perhaps the best symbol of the foreign intervention of Uzza is the giant eel he rears in the pond under his palace. Chevalier and Gheerbrant say that the aquatic symbol of the eel in ancient Egypt, Japan and Irish mythology is positive as a combination of the universal symbol of water and serpents (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1996: 337). According to Abdullah the fish symbolizes:

... the fruit of secular knowledge, which merges itself in divine knowledge at the point where human intelligence is ready for the junction of the two.

(Abdullah, 1946:747)

But he explains that this “... merger of secular knowledge does not in itself produce divine knowledge” (*ibid*).

Conversely, the eel is representative of the character associated to it like the fish as seen in another of Noordin’s play, *Cindai* (Noordin, 2002). As much as the ugly, black fish symbolizes the dark side of Pak Ku, the eel represents the evil of Uzza who feeds the eel the blood of the people. When the eel breaks out from its pond and destroys both Uzza and Hawar, it represents the evil that Uzza breeds as the evil within them that kills both these characters in the last scene, as man’s tragic end is undeniably man’s own doing. As asserted in the Qur’an:

O men, your insolence is only against yourselves; enjoyment of this present life, then unto Us you shall return.

(*Surah Yunus* 10:23)

The main protagonist is called Iriam which sounds like Maryam, a woman whose conception of Isa a.s. was but God's will (The Qur'an, *Surah Maryam* 19:9). Ibra tells his people that his daughter, Iriam, dreamt that they are allowed to catch fish anytime except on Saturdays. When he says that, "This day is for us to fulfil our religious obligations," Hawar protests, as her dream is not beneficial. Iriam's visions are allegorically linked to the signs of Allah SWT with only one message of the One God. "Besides the gift of the faculties, Man has been shown the way by means of revelation, through men of the highest spiritual standing," notes Abdullah (1946:1655: Footnote 5833). Puteri Kamaliah's (SBPM) dream is not as clear as Iriam's.

Iriam's husband and Hawar's son, Juda, can be associated with Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus who betrayed him. The betrayal of Jesus is found in several chapters of the Bible.<sup>14</sup> Like Judas, Juda's betrayal of the people of the Cape Setanggi, his wife, Iriam is because of money. According to the Bible, Judas' was not tempted by the priests and magistrates but approached them on his own accord. As Uzza describes Juda, he is a sly and smooth spy (Noordin, 1999:31). Apart from spying he also persuades the villagers to join Hawar by using "... religion that terrifies them, use slander and raise the feeling of hate ..." after which he tempts them with money (Noordin, 1999:4). His character is worsened from the fact that the people of Cape Setanggi truly trust him and look up to him. However, in punishment for his sin, even Iriam cannot save him. All she can do is to give him an oar, which symbolizes the equipment to use in rowing back to the right path.

The sets which Noordin suggests are on one side the lowlands of a fishing village called the Province of Cape Setanggi and on the other side is a city on the hills called City of Gemilang. Nielsen *et al.* (1988) say that Nebuchadnezzar ruled from 605-562 B.C. built a "City of Splendour" and "erected a seven-story ziggurat which was about three hundred feet high, similar to the set for City of Gemilang as suggested by Noordin. Although translated as "glorious" the use of the word "gemilang" can be associated with slogans found in Malaysia, like "Jalur Gemilang" of the Malaysian flag which resembles the American flag. The issue of the similarity of the flag was brought up by Noordin in *Anak Tanjung* (Noordin, 1993) where the British flag, the Japanese flag, again the British flag and finally after

Independence, Md. Nor Boustead and Chot Squire raise the Malaysian flag that resembles a “foreign” flag, suggesting the foreign influence through the national symbol of the flag.

As mentioned above, “God is of an ethical nature and acts upon man in an ethical way carries the grave implication that man on his part, is expected to respond in an ethical way” (Izutsu, 2004:18). But the Jews were inclined to listen to falsehood (*Surah al-Mâ'idah* 5:44) which made it easy for Silbi (Iblis spelt backwards) and Uzza to thrive. The Children of Israel were warned twice, as stated in the Qur'an, “And We decreed for the Children of Israel in the Book” (*Surah al-Isrâ'* 17:4). As Abdullah explains “twice could mean during the destruction of “... the Temple of the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.” and “Jerusalem by Titus in A.D. 70” (Abdullah, 1946:694: footnote 2175). In other parts of the world there were destruction, as the Indus civilization was destroyed with floods between 1900 and 1600 B.C. and “some of the Indus cities came to an end in slaughter and conflagration” (Nielsen *et al.*, 1998:117). Others were the unjust ‘Ad people, with their prophet Hūd, were destroyed “by a terrible blast of wind” (Abdullah, 1946:358) then later, the Thamud people, “the successors to the culture and civilization of the ‘Ad people” (Abdullah, 1946:360) who were destroyed by an earthquake as “the advance of material civilization” made them godless and arrogant. Noordin has taken the punishment of the most powerful ancient civilizations for their sins as the exemplar that he promises in his Foreword (Noordin, 1999:3).

The story of Lût a.s. is found in several surahs.<sup>15</sup> According to Abdullah, the biblical story of Lot was edited, “... freed from some shameful features which are a blot on the biblical narrative” (1946:363) as he cites Genesis: 30-36, perhaps as their sins are so despicable. But this has not been concealed to man, as stated in the Qur'an:

And Lût, when he said to his people, ‘What, do you commit such indecency as never any being in all the world committed before you?

(*Surah al-A'râf* 7:80)

Abdullah cites the story of the people of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah “... which were destroyed for their unspeakable sins ...” from the same source (1946: 363: footnote 1049).

This is a relatively short story but the moral implications and applications are staggering and relevant then, as indeed they are now. Transgressing<sup>16</sup> on

the matter of fishing on the Jewish Sabbath, which is Saturday, is not the only thing they did. As Abdullah says, "Fishing, like every other activity, was prohibited to Israel on the Sabbath day" (1946:391: footnote 1137:).<sup>17</sup>

As a ruler Uzza has led the people to the most abominable things. On the night of celebration in City of Gemilang, Juda's betrayal is seen as he accepts Uzza's daughter, Naomi, as his wife. His own father, Hawar, is to be married to his lover, a young man from abroad. Second, The Minister of Procreation is to marry three young virgins all at the same time. And the third, an old Priest finally will marry a dancer he has desired for a long time (Noordin, 1999:31). As if that is not bad enough, Juda agrees to allow Uzza to "taste the salt" of Iriam when he thinks about the benefits he will get when he takes over the City of Gemilang (1999:35).

After the Chief Priest is tied, Noordin's stage direction is, "On the cyclorama red clouds are "angry"" (1999:33). The colour red is the symbol of dazzling power, anger and also a warning, as, "Below the green of the Earth's surface and the blackness of the soil, lies this redness, pre-eminently holy and secret," say Chevalier and Gheerbrant.<sup>18</sup> This is a most appropriate expression of the colour, as it warns of the forthcoming disaster to befall the transgressors of the City of Gemilang.

The moon frequently featured in Noordin's plays, as a reflection of God's light, and consequently the universal symbol of the light, is seen in *Jangan Bunuh Rama-rama* when, like Orang Betapa, Iriam asks Mira, "Who is this light for?"<sup>19</sup> Irma then quotes part of a poem by Rabindranath Tagore taken from *Gitanjali*,<sup>20</sup> where she explains that:

There are some whose houses are constantly dark. Others whose hearts are constantly dark. This light has made me leave the palace that was most dark.

(Noordin, 1999:13)

These lines from the Prologue foreshadow the darkness of the hearts of the administrators of City of Gemilang, as Abdullah best describes them as:

Those veiled by Pure Darkness are such as atheists, or such as take something else, which is not God, for God. For example, they take Nature of Self for God.

(Abdullah, 1946:923)

The title of the play is about the myrrh or incense or frankincense. The Malays have perhaps inherited the use of incense from the early Hindu

influence in Malaya. Used in rituals, the incense represented the link between the “higher world” and the “lower world” of the dual Malay cosmology. The incense which rises is to appease the “higher world” before starting work or a performance.

In this play, the myrrh that grows in Cape Setanggi not only scents the air but scents the soul. The myrrh has special properties from its shoot to its root, says Ibra (Noordin, 1999:16). Uzza gets angry when the question is asked by the Priest why the stolen myrrh planted in the City of Gemilang loses its scent (Noordin, 1999:33). The answer to the question is in the lyrics of the song which opens Scene One, “When asked where the myrrh lies, tap the chest there it rests.” Burkhardt says that the chest that harbours the heart is:

...the very center of our psycho-physical being, as the meeting place of soul and mind, or, more precisely, as the focal point where the mind, which in itself is all knowledge or light, is reflected in the mirror of the soul.

(Austin, 1980:xi)

The scent of the myrrh represents the essence of God. When the people of Cape Setanggi plant the trees, the scent which represents the essence of God is present in the air. When both the faculties of thought and feel meet at the chest then both the mind and the soul are in unison, which means that these people understand and recognize this essence, which has scented their souls, signifying that the light of knowledge has entered their souls. On the other hand, the citizens of City of Gemilang have had their hearts darkened with the wealth and power offered by Uzza, so dark that they purposely transgress the commands of God and have gone over the limit of disobedience as their hearts are veiled by pure darkness. To camouflage this darkness the exterior false light is used to “sparkle” the city.

Majesty, order, beauty, are shown in all God’s creation, but especially in the heaven (and) God’s care for man and his well-being are shown in what he has provided on the earth. As the villagers use all the properties of the tree, Noordin is saying that the people in this village are advised to look down to earth to seek the root of their origin, as a source of food, herbs and for man to use and pay attention to. But if not attended to, it is as if man does not attend to his own nor do they obey God’s laws. As stated in the Qur’an on the story of Saba, when the people transgressed, “...in exchange for their two gardens, two gardens bearing bitter produce ...” (*Surah Saba* 34:16). Thus, when the transgressors plant the trees, they not only do not scent the

air, but the earth is revolted by the misdemeanors. The following lines from the Qur'an best describe the disgust that earth feels about their behavior:

When the earth is shaken with a mighty shaking and earth brings forth her burdens.

(*Surah al-Zalzalah* 99:1-2).

Noordin ends the play by making the audience visualize the kind of punishment people in the past went through. Yet man wishes to transgress, man wishes to forget, man prefers the material gains. This was seen earlier when the ensemble opens the play by singing, "Man at a high level was created, never at the lower level be returned." Mira ends the play by reminding the readers the same. Here, Noordin is again referring to *Surah al-Tin*, which he has used clearly in *Cindai*. In *Mana Setanggihnya?* Noordin demonstrates the depths of the fall of man no matter how powerful he thinks he is as in the case of Uzza.

Noordin has written this play as a reminder of the wrath of God which can befall transgressors, seen in the past, is happening in the present, and he fears will continue to happen in the future, all over the world. The struggle for power and wealth seems larger than the struggle for God's blessing and the desire for the myrrh to fill the air and chest. In *Mana Setanggihnya?* the issue is on a global level, as administrative ethics applies to all administrators, not restricted Islamic states; a humanistic leader is to deal with fairness to the people anywhere and anytime. As Noordin reminds leaders through the dialogue of Iriam, "We should learn from what has happened in the past, how one commune broke the command of God, and they were turned to monkeys" (Noordin, 1999:21). This is abstracted from the Qur'an:

And well you know there were those among you that transgressed the Sabbath, and We said to them, "Be you apes, miserably slinking!"

(*Surah al-Baqarah* 2:65)

## CONCLUSION

On the issue of administrative ethics, Noordin stands up to the fact that the Qur'an is itself an epitome of balance. Without proper knowledge and understanding of the divine law, a sultan is not qualified to rule as he or she is answerable to Allah SWT for the way he has administered his state. The worse fault of the ruler is to be pompous. While ridiculing Zahiruddin,

Noordin balances and exaggerates his extravagance with the modesty of his father, Sultan Idris. The arrogance of Uzza does not go unpunished. The throne is a symbol of honour which must be respected by the ruler who sits on it. As Austin says:

The Koran places the prophets outside history, within the framework of the Unitarian message of Islam; it speaks in both general and universal terms.

(1980:vii)

Noordin shows his respect for the old system of leadership and in the power of the sultans, are evident in this play; but only if they are wise and fair. This respect extends to the wisdom of human beings, male or female, which expands to a more universal representation of humanism. Overall, his respect lies in the teachings found in the Qur'an which is accessible to all, men and women, fisherman and princess, subjects and rulers. Noordin does not disregard the wisdom of Sultan Idris as a ruler and ordinary "ants" like Ihsan and Yatim. True knowledge and wisdom is available in the Qur'an for those who care to read, understand and be guided by it.

Noordin Hassan addresses the "lukewarm" attitude which poses as the problem of the contemporary man; the modern man with no spiritual depths that can easily be tempted by immoral rulers, whereby his level of desires and aspirations are limited to the material world that inevitably lead us back to the lack of administrative ethics. The solution that Noordin suggests for rulers is the Divine Law as has been revealed in the Qur'an and practiced by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

## NOTES

- 1 'Abdul Hamid Siddiqui, *Sahih Muslim*, Chapter DCCLVIII, 1225.
- 2 Also see, Muhammad ibn Zafar al-Siqilli, "Sulwan Al-Muta' fi 'Udwan al-Atba'.
- 3 Directed by Rohani Md. Yousoff.
- 4 Wazir Tua: Old Vizier.
- 5 Wazir Muda: Young Vizier.
- 6 *Surah al-Isrâ'* 17:26.
- 7 Abdullah Yusuf Ali, footnote no. 3258-9.
- 8 *Djin Afrit Atas Angin: The Jinni Above the Wind*
- 9 Translation of *Surah al-Alaq*.
- 10 Another such character who is unable to lead is Sabur Shah in *Anak Tanjung*.
- 11 Sodomy: *fāhishah*. See *Sirah al-Shu'arā'* 26: 165,166



- 12 Abdullah Yusuf Ali, footnote no. 3095, 1445.
- 13 Foreign power: kuasa dari luar.
- 14 See: Mark, Mathew, Luke.
- 15 See Surah vi: 86; vii 80-84; xi: 77-83; xv: 57-77; xxi: 74-75; xxvi: 160-175; xxvi: .54-58; xxix: 26, 28-35; xxxvii: 133-138; li: 31-37; liv: 33-39.
- 16 Transgress: Arabic root word is Ya'dūna.
- 17 In reference to Surah al-Kahf: 61.
- 18 Chevalier and Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 793.
- 19 Noordin Hassan, Mana Setanginya?, 12.
- 20 Tagore, Gitanjali, poem no. 64.

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