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Tanah Air: Spirit, Expression, Geography

The spirit of the Tanah Air lingers on. The various themes rendered in my earlier initiatives and writings represent different phases in the narrative. Tanah Air is not some nebulous notion of homeland, fluid, perhaps fleeting. The Tanah Air is a sociological, historical and an intellectual reality, juxtaposed with Alam Melayu. It has its borders...

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The spirit of the Tanah Air lingers on. The various themes rendered in my earlier initiatives and writings represent different phases in the narrative. Tanah Air is not some nebulous notion of homeland, fluid, perhaps fleeting.

The Tanah Air is a sociological, historical and an intellectual reality, juxtaposed with Alam Melayu. It has its borders and its indigeneity – Kewatanan and watan. These may be similar to the jurisprudential notion of the grundnorm, translated into English as ground rules; but not equal to it.

I have been working on the concept and a re-understanding of the Tanah Air, especially with regard to the Tanah Air: Malay Maritime Civilization Project which I convene beginning August 2021 under the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC-IIUM). This is mainly confined to monthly lectures stretching through 2023. This program invites scholars and researchers to articulate on another idea of Malay civilization – centred on the construct of the Tanah Air – looking into episodes and ideas and their interactions and connections over several millennia.

AUTHOR



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The Tanah Air is not an event, nor a cluster nation of states. The Tanah Air captures the a *longue durée* – a perspective on history – including human memory, archaeological records, cosmology, geography, tales, a series of events and ideas that gradually forged into what can be identified as a narrative. And of course, this would include re-narrating such episodes as in the Kedah Tua, the subliminal hikayats, and the Light Letters to mention a few.

The Tanah Air is spirit, expression and geography, narrating the peoples of the Malay Archipelago, representing another perspective, and in many ways, creating retrospective narratives.

The forces that shape and are still shaping the tanah air are multitudinous. It is not so much on Malay history. It is more on the juxtaposition of Malay society forged by those forces – the outcome of civilizational convergence. The Tanah Air is not isolated nor insulated. It is global, cosmopolitan and enlightened when Europe was mired in parochialism, witchcraft and sorcery.

A chronological narrative provides the strength of connectivity and the sense of time, both linear and cyclical.

Narrating the Tanah Air may begin from the “Out of Sunda Theory”, the emergence of Kedah Tua, the Shiva-Buddhist cosmopolis, Malay tales which includes folklores and hikayats such as Merong Mahawangsa, Sejarah Melayu, Hikayat Raja Pasai, Sang Kancil, etc., the Merantau and Malay maritime civilization, the story of Islam and Malay Sultanates, Malay encounters with the West, Malay concepts of time and technology; the arts, architecture, culture; Malay expressions through journalism before World War II; and returning to Malay notions of the past, history and pastness.



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When Jared Diamond published *The World until Yesterday* in 2012, some 11 years ago, he was not writing about the past. He was writing on how moderns see and (should) consume yesterday to break the paradigm of sameness and universality.

His thrust was what constructs us and causes us to be what we are now. It is about how the Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) societies see the world.

WEIRD is one facet of consuming the world. Narrating the Tanah Air involves the consumption of that geographical, metaphysical, cosmological and historical part of that world called by that name. It involves contemporary views of the past – induced mainly from the inside – the ‘I’ in me being the imagination and the construction of that Tanah Air; and intermittently from the outside of that space, mainly coming from Europe and the Atas Angin.

The Tanah Air captures the intersections, connections, continuities and disruptions viz the representations of the Malays. Also the contradictions from the writer both as subject and object of study.

In my school days at Penang Free School in the 1970s, on daily routines walks during recess time along the parameters of the padang under the morning shade of leafy angsanas, and flame of the forest, I remember ruminating with some classmates how far back in time can the Malays be narrated. At that time, our consciousness went back to as far as Melaka. Not very far into time.

But to the Malays in Sumatra, among the Minangkabaus facing the Indian Ocean, the consciousness of time is expansive – cosmological and cultural, and going connecting to the the genesis in Pariangan, that primordial origins of Minangkabau identity and ethnicity. There sits the origins of the adat descending from the majestic Gunung Marapi. Pariangan is on the lower slopes of the volcano.

But notions of time and consciousness of origins are altered by a number of recent events – such as the narrative on the ‘Malay’ DNA and the Sunda Shelf, as well as artifacts found on Kedah Tua. There is also the narrative of Abrahamic origins, and the recent emergence connecting early Malay writing to the Phoenicians.

This demands a timeline from notions of origins, social and cultural formation, evolution and civilization.

That spirit is captured in various forms, Malay tales and writings, pepatah petilih, the pantun, artefacts such as buildings and forms of architecture, batik, bangsawan, wayang kulit and other expressions; persons and personalities – biography and autobiography; climate and weather, topography – the mountains, hills, rivers and straits.

Tanah Air is embedded in that spirit, geography and experience. It is a way of sharing a fascination with the Malay narrative.

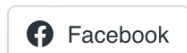
The Tanah Air narrative is not a figment of the imagination. But a rendition from source materials, experience, logic, emotion and time. The Tanah Air is the spirit of the Malay Archipelago. That name, Malay Archipelago is more encompassing than Nusantara.

Tanah Air is Malay exceptionalism – the only society in the world embracing this philosophy, except for the Vietnamese, but on a more limited concept. In late 2021, my lyrics titled “Roh dan Alam” was launched in an album in Pulau Pinang at the SPICE Conventions Centre. “Roh dan Alam” represents the soul of geography, that of the Malay Archipelago – of this rantau, for without the fluidity of movements between and across straits, seas and land, there would not a Tanah Air.

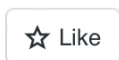
Tanah Air is the unity of land and water. This essay is a response to the modern separation of land from water, an aberration reflected in the new nation states in the post-colonial period.

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