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Buddhi: A Legacy from the Hindu-Buddhist Past in Contemporary Malaysia: Budi

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Abstract

The 'BUDI – Extension of Tradition' art exhibition was organised in conjunction with the Ipoh International Art Festival in 2021 by the Perak State's cultural agency, People of Remarkable Talents (PORT). Carried out from 10 to 26 December 2021, this exhibition was anchored on the theme of budi (Malay), derived from the Sanskrit word Buddhi. The collective works of this exhibition were from 50 local and international artists that comprised other activities such as workshops, dance performances, music, and cultural activities besides the artworks on display. This exhibition brought forth a collection of artworks (sculptures, visual artworks, installation art, video art, lightbox photography, among others) that were somewhat crucial at the time, as the world was recovering from the pandemic. This is such that the concept of budi, which relates to being aware, awake, humble, etc., was necessary, if not vital, in overcoming and persevering through the challenging times of the pandemic. The exhibition received positive responses from the public as it was one of the early exhibitions that were open to the public for free, as Malaysia came out of a lockdown. This review was initially written as a piece of entry for the exhibition catalogue, which did not come into realisation. Changes and amendments have been made to suit the writing of the current time.

Keywords Budi; Malaysian contemporary Art; Extension of tradition; Ipoh International Art Festival 2021

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A Review of the Budi – Extension of Tradition Exhibition (2021)

The ‘BUDI – Extension of Tradition’ Exhibition couldn’t have been staged at a much more profound time back in 2021. The two years (from 2019 to 2021) have been ‘theatrical’ in the local socio-political scene as the country witnessed the change of premiership (Shukry & Azmi, 2021) for the third time. In addition to that, as the world was gripped by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was divulged as Malaysia too experienced several waves of its calamity (“Malaysia Health Experts Warn of Possible Fourth Covid-19 Wave after Melaka Elections,” 2021). Taking a much broader view, such a situation was not only confined to Malaysia; it seemed various regions in the world were struggling with various problems and disasters—political, environmental, social, etc. Every time one thought that their situation experienced was severe, deeper reflection would register graver and more dreadful situations elsewhere. As stated, the word budi (BUDI-Expanding Traditions, 2021) (in the Malay language) is derived from buddhi of Sanskrit origin. This would not be surprising due to the influence of the Indic legacy (Goddard, 2000, 85) on the Southeast Asian region at the beginning of the last millennium, before the arrival of Islam in this region between the 13th and 14th centuries (Ahmad Zakaria & Abdul Latif, 2008, 12). Fitzgerald (2017) elaborates on the concept of buddhi originating from Sanskrit literature as:

Signifying fundamentally “awareness (of something),” the word “buddhi” is shown to refer often to a being’s persisting capacity or faculty of awareness (“attentiveness, mind, intelligence,” etc.) and also, often, to the content of being’s awareness (“idea, notion, thought, disposition, resolution,” etc.). (p. 669)

Before the arrival of Islam, the people who lived in what is now Malaysia developed animistic beliefs and practices, which transformed and changed over time. The beliefs and practices evolved with the influence of Hinduism and Buddhism and further developed with the adoption of Islam, which led to the selective incorporation or rejection of Hindu-Buddhist ideologies as noted by Yousof (2010, 1). As with many cultural practices and spiritual beliefs that have been adapted and localised in the Malay cultural context, the concept of budi/Buddhi is no exception. Unlike its Indian philosophical concept quoted above, the concept of budi can be related to a variety of nuances (Kim-Hui, 2003, 31) that have been embedded in the daily lives of the Malays in particular. Besides the philosophical connotation of budi to intellect, the concept of budi (Kim-Hui, 2003, 31) also extends itself to values and behaviour that are reflected in the daily lives of the Malays. The latter connotation of budi can be related to analogies practiced by the Malays, such as budi pekerti, budi bahasa, hati budi, and budi bicara, among many others, that somewhat govern the way one interacts and socialises in the Malay socio-cultural setting context. Taking into account the former connotation of budi to signify awareness and intellect as quoted prior, it comes unsurprising that the philosophy of budi would become vital in forming the behaviour and cultural norms/traditions. This comes as a consequent, as one needs to be aware of/awake

intellectually in order to know, comprehend, and analyse of one's position in the larger scheme of things. Only then, upon becoming aware of one's position and environment, can one further communicate and operate in a way that would result in bringing greater good. This is only permissible if one is conscious and observant of a particular context or surrounding that one has been placed in. As this exhibition is anchored on the theme of budi—one that guides behaviour, and the other the practice of behaviour—a few artworks will be discussed on the conceptual nuances of budi in the Malay socio-cultural context.



Figure 1. Jamil Zakaria, *Mat Bunga*. Source: Author

The concept of budi in one's value or behaviour can be observed in several works in this exhibition. Jamil Zakaria's ("Mat Bunga"), as seen in Figure 01, is a satirical wire mesh of an orangutan look-alike with a stalk of rose in hand and sunglasses. Based on the artist's statement for this particular work, which is based on the Malay idiom "seperti kera mendapat bunga" that translates to a monkey receiving a flower (Zakaria, 2021) to describe someone who takes things for granted or without much further consideration. As such, a further reading or interpretation of this work may suggest an individual who may not be good-looking but behaves and thinks of himself contrarily, hence lacking budi pekerti (good characteristic and mannerism). This can be further explained by that although the individual lacks the awareness or intellectual capability to take into consideration oneself before exhibiting inappropriate behaviour and ill mannerisms that do not reflect the philosophy of budi.

Meanwhile Tengku Sabri's painted wooden sculptures, "Two Students" (Figure 02) and "Guru Descends" (Figure 03), demonstrate the typical scenario that one would expect in an educational setting

(the dialogue between students or the position of an educator), hence budi bicara (mannerism and etiquette). The positioning of the students on the bench and the suspended Guru (Teacher) somewhat descending for a higher positioning provides an interesting reading for these works, especially in a classroom setting. Speaking for myself, when I was in school and even in university for my undergraduate studies, teachers/lecturers were almost worshipped and respected as if my life depended on it. This was such that the knowledge and education process was perceived to be heavily dependent on the teacher or lecturer's role that would further result in the success of their students in the future. However, in current times, such positions and etiquette do not seem any more relevant in today's classroom setting, regardless of whether it is in school or tertiary education. With the advancement of technology and the pandemic flipping the way knowledge is disseminated, teachers/lecturers have somewhat lost their important or sage-like role in 'EDUCATING' students. This comes from my personal experience, being in tertiary education for the past 19 years.



Figure 2. Tengku Sabri, *Two Students*. Source: Author



Figure 3. Tengku Sabri, *Guru Descends*. Source: Author

Raja Shahrman's metal sculpture "Maharajalela" (a person who reigns freely to exert his power such as a king) is supported by a poem to contextualise his work as seen in Figure 04. Here, Raja Shahrman brings out the point of human behaviour that has resulted in war, sufferings, and disasters (Raja Aziddin, 2008). In the artist's statement, which is supported in a Malay poem titled RENTAK Abad ke-21 (The Beat of the 21st Century), the poem describes the atrocities, wars, and the coming to an end of a world-like scenario. It almost describes an apocalyptic world. This is especially true; even in the time of writing back in 2021, we witnessed war, famine, power struggles, pain, and suffering across the world. This situation has only escalated much more in the last four years as we witness the Russia-Ukraine War, the Palestine-Gaza Wars, famine, droughts, natural disasters, and the increased suffering of humans around the globe. Such greed and inhuman behaviour or attitude point towards the idea of a lack of *hati budi* in Malay, which is associated with the heart/feelings. When we analyse the atrocities that we witness around the world, it is vital to note that most occurrences are a result of our very own actions or behaviour. Humans are driven by greed and personal intention or interest, that we lack feelings or awareness for the other, especially those who come from a more underprivileged and poorer situation than those in power. Such a lack of awareness and consideration for those who are in a lesser situation reflects the inadequacy of *budi* or intellect in one's self.



Figure 4. Raja Shahrman, *Maharajalela*. Source: Author.

Based on the theme of this exhibition, the oeuvre of various artworks highlights the awareness of the artists toward their surroundings-social context, natural environment, human attitude or behaviour, interaction, catastrophes, and even political. To be in a state of awareness or consciousness without having a reaction or provoking thought seems almost unimaginable. If one were to be placed

in a distressed, awkward, or discomforting situation, one surely is to react—whatever that reaction may be! Taking the example of video art by Ezzam Rahman, “You’re just going to stand there and watch me burn?” was discomforting as well as painful to watch (Figure 05). In this video, he stitches the word MINORITY onto his heel as a reaction to the discrimination that one would face due to identity politics/gender normality. This begs the question, how can we create an inclusive, accepting, and equal environment within a society regardless of one’s identity? Such a safe, equal, and inclusive society can only be achieved when members of a particular society are aware, humble, accepting, and open to the diversity that exists among the members of its society, hence reflecting the philosophy of budi. In this particular context, the philosophy of budi is more in line, as stated in the catalogue, “BUDI suggests noble actions, humility and good moral values anchored by a consciousness of and attentiveness to all living beings.” (BUDI-Expanding Traditions, 2021).



Figure 5. Snapshot from Ezzam Rahman’s Video. Source: Author

The Lightbox Photography portrayed images of indigenous people in Malaysia in their tribal clothes carrying out their daily activities as seen in Figures 06 and 07. Such positioning in the context of the images conveys a positive message on the aboriginal people, were a collection of works from several different artists/photographers. Nevertheless, one would need to be conscious and aware of the mistreatment, discrimination, or even prejudice (Ellis-Petersen, 2019b) that some of these indigenous tribes have faced in the name of development and modernisation. One such case involves the Batek tribe in Kelantan in 2019 due to suspected water contamination from a nearby iron ore mine, which resulted in fatalities and declining health of these people. (Ellis-Petersen, 2019a). Most of these indigenous tribes have lived for centuries and relied significantly on the forest for their livelihood. Moreover, based on a report by Amnesty International, the indigenous tribes from the Peninsula, Sabah,

and Sarawak have faced harassment, violence, intimidation, and in some instances have been abused by certain individuals and parties. (Malaysia: Report Details Shocking Abuses against Indigenous Peoples Defending Their Land, 2018). The lack of consciousness and knowledge on the survival of these indigenous tribes by certain parties and individuals has left them unprotected and vulnerable in their own land and surroundings. The lack of awareness and consciousness of the survival of these indigenous tribes by the state authorities and those who are responsible portrays the absence of budi philosophy to take into account the livelihood of these people resulting from the iron ore mining project. To further elaborate, due to the gains (profit) from the mining, it seems those in authority of the land and perhaps those responsible have lost their intellect and awareness to safeguard the indigenous tribe.

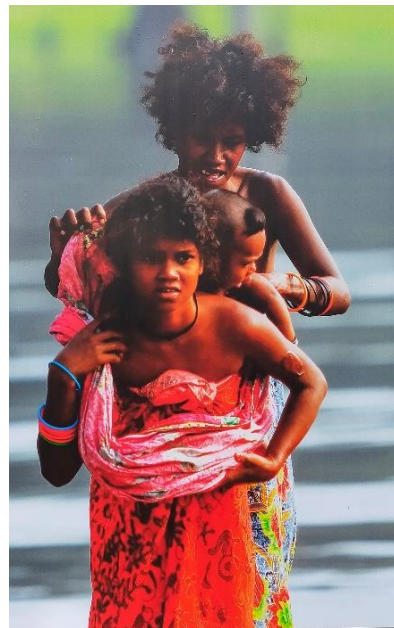


Figure 6. Seth Akmal, *A Jahai Mother and her Children*. Source: Author

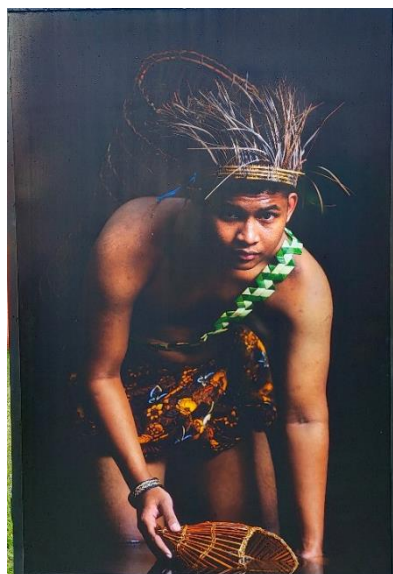


Figure 7. Selindang Sari a/p Seliman, *Mengsat*. Source: Author

Roslisham Ismail's "Langkasuka Cookbook Project" (Figure 08) is a visual compilation of watercolour drawings of a few authentic cuisines from his home state, Kelantan that traces its origin (Ismail, 2013) to this particular maritime kingdom. The area of the Langkasuka kingdom, which covers modern-day Kedah, Kelantan, and Patani, as observed by Miksic and Geok (2017, 286), was believed to have flourished until the 15th C (Gallop, 2005, 113). Miksic and Geok (2017, 285) further established that the earliest evidence of this kingdom is mentioned in the Chinese script History of the Liang in the 7th C. Langkasuka became an important trading location between Chinese merchants and locals as it shortened the sea voyage around the peninsula and avoided pirates (Anwar, 2017). Moreover, Langkasuka was also established as a Buddhist religious centre for Buddhist monks sometime in the late 7th C (Andaya & Andaya, 1982). Roslisham's awareness of the cuisine highlights the historical underpinning of the foods we consume today as a result of this maritime kingdom's significance as a destination in its earlier days. Taking the Nasi Kerabu for instance, which is popularly known as an authentic Kelantanese cuisine, it is widely consumed by Malaysians of various races and cultural backgrounds. Although most Malaysians would identify this as a traditional dish from Kelantan, most of them would neither be aware of its historical connection to the kingdom of Langkasuka nor the significance this kingdom played in the mercantile exchange in the Southeast Asian region.

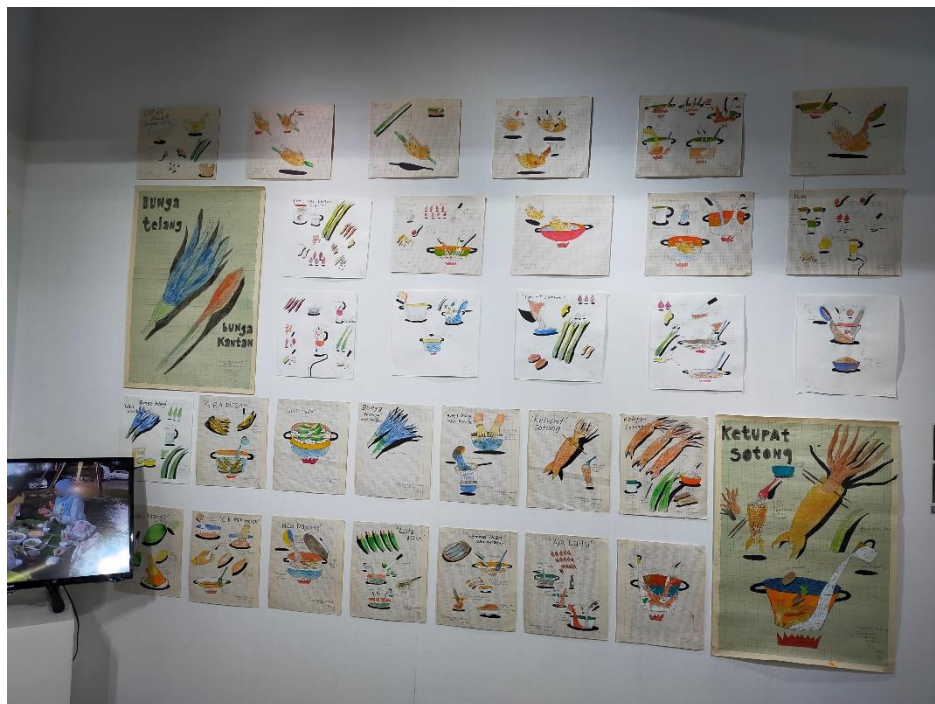


Figure 8. Roslisham Ismail, *Langkasuka Cookbook Project*. Source: Author

Sharmiza's "Silent Army" (Figure 09) assembles into what looks like a QR code where she has positioned miniature toy armies aimed towards the viewer in between the white blocks and black boxes. As Malaysians have been required to install a particular app (My Sejahtera) on their smartphones as a reaction to this pandemic, scanning QR codes (Abu Hassan, 2021) has become the new norm. What is

intriguing about this particular work is that beyond the QR codes that are used to monitor one's movement and contact tracing during this pandemic, the soldiers that are 'cleverly' positioned in this maze also reflect how with these apps we have lost our privacy and may be scrutinized constantly with such technologies. More importantly, the work portrays the general public's awareness of such an observation and queries whether a violation of an individual's human rights has transpired. This is such that, with the use of the application, the government was able to track one's movement and the places the particular individual was visiting. Although the argument for the use of the application may be to monitor the spread of COVID-19, nevertheless, it lacks the consideration and attentiveness to protect one's privacy. Hence, the lack of awareness or absence of *budi*. In today's world driven by computers and digital technology, the constant surveillance and intrusion of privacy may have become the new NORM.

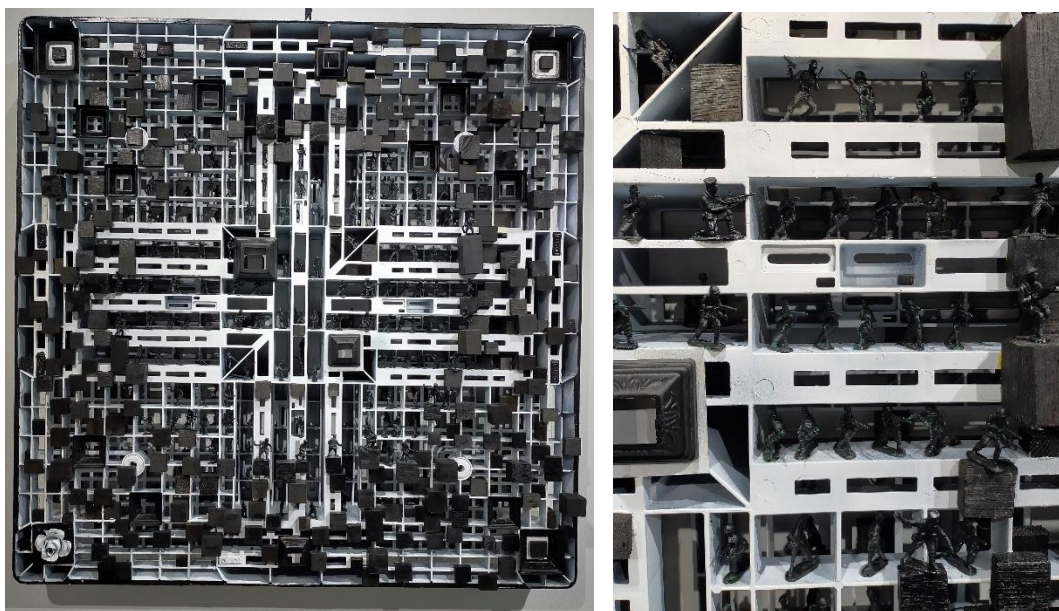


Figure 9. Sharmiza Abu Hassan, Silent Army
(picture on the right shows a close up of the soldiers that make up the QR Code).
Source: Author

A few works of different subject/content were chosen for the writing of this article to provide a variation in the discussion of *buddhi/budi*. This was not to dismiss the lack of content or subject of other works that were not discussed here. As the pandemic escalated throughout the world, walking through the exhibition, which was staged outdoors (back in 2021), brought a sense of relief and excitement after living in a lockdown for close to two years. When this review was initially drafted back in 2021, Malaysia was recovering from the devastating floods in the last 50 years (Nair, 2021). The kind and heartfelt gestures demonstrated by some Malaysians in assisting, supporting, and even rescuing the flood victims in such difficult times and situations provide optimism that the philosophy of *budi* has not been lost yet! To conclude, some of the works in this exhibition exemplify the

philosophy of budi, while some of them show the absence of budi. In my personal opinion, the exhibition as a whole and the works in it had somewhat made me realise the importance of being aware, awake, conscious, and humble in overcoming daily challenges. This is especially true considering the reactions of Malaysians in troubled times, when the philosophy of budi is evident. As Malaysia was coming out from a lockdown and recovering from one of its natural disasters, this exhibition definitely brought forth the philosophy of budi and its significance to mankind in an impactful manner.

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Authors' Bio

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