

## THE CONCEPT OF BUDI IN THE MALAY-SPEAKING WORLD: A STRUCTURALIST VIEW OF SITTI NURBAYA

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**Abstract.** The word Budi is a well-known term in the Malay-speaking world and has numerous meanings. In this article, the authors describe the term Budi and its use. The authors argue that Budi stands for a whole concept and is closely related to the Malay worldview. A structuralist research method was used to detect specific patterns. In their analysis, the researchers considered the ideas of Claude Levi-Strauss and Ferdinand Saussure. The researchers analyzed an ‘ideal’ personality that is mentioned in the literature. The authors looked into the novel ‘Sitti Nurbaya’ and illustrated the concept of Budi. It was detected that Sitti Nurbaya personifies in many ways the element of Budi and is a kind of ideal. On the other side, many despicable character traits could be found in the character of Datuk Meringgih. The authors concluded that Budi is an idea that includes a lot of praiseworthy character traits of the people in the Malay-speaking world.

**Keywords:** *Budi, Malay culture, Sitti Nurbaya, structuralism*

### Introduction

Talking about a culture is fascinating, and there are numerous books about various cultures. The Malay culture is no exception. Travelers, politicians, and social scientists were fascinated by Malay culture and began to analyze it. In this article, the researchers intend to describe and analyze a concept, namely the concept of Budi. In many books about Malay culture, the idea of Budi is described. It is inherent in Malay culture and closely related to the Malay worldview. However, it is not easy to get a ‘concrete’ understanding as many authors seem to understand it differently. What appears to be clear is that it is related to the idea of Malayness. From a religious understanding, it is associated with a good character, and also, many proverbs mention the concept of Budi.

There are different approaches how to get an understanding of a culture. In anthropology, for example, Ruth Benedict’s work assumed that patterns prevail in one culture. She published a book about Japan in which she outlined specific patterns (Benedict, 2005). For instance, she mentioned that self-discipline is a notable feature in Japanese Culture. Other researchers also had fascinating approaches to understand culture and religion. Izutsu (2002) had a semantic concept that is relevant for this research. He chose specific terms and described those words that could have a special meaning but are not that easy to grasp. For example, the word Iman is related to ‘Islamic belief,’ but what is the exact meaning of that term? The Islamic scholars have different opinions. Some stated that the belief is in the heart, while others stressed that it also comprises actions (like praying or fasting). Another concept that should be mentioned on how to come close to understanding culture was the semiotic concept of Barthes and Lavers (1972). They looked at signs and how these signs could represent

the culture. For example, they looked at a steak and how far it contains elements of French culture. All these theoretical approaches are helpful and will be considered.

The researchers decided to apply a structuralist approach. The reason is that it seems to be promising to understand the concept of Budi. Consequently, the researchers described a literary character (Sitti Nurbaya) that comes close to the ideas of Budi. By describing its features, it is expected in helping to understand Budi.

Budi is a central concept in Malay culture, and it can be found in popular media like telenovelas, but it is also a major concept that determines how to behave in an ideal way. The researchers intend to show that the whole idea is essential for understanding the culture in the Malay-speaking world.

### ***Research objectives***

The concept of Budi and the terminology is often used in the Malay-speaking world. The hypothesis of the researchers is that Budi reflects a notion that is part of the Malaysian worldview. Many intellectuals likely have a different view on defining this term, but this is no problem as it reveals ideas and the inner-Malay discussions regarding their perception of the world. Therefore, the objectives are: (1) to describe the different meanings of the term Budi; and (2) to analyze its concept in a structuralist way.

### ***Literature review***

The literature review is useful as it helps to get close to an understanding of the term Budi by considering different approaches. Some researchers looked into its concept from a religious perspective, while others looked into it from the viewpoint of Malay literature. The term Budi has several meanings (refer to the topic of ‘towards an understanding of the term Budi’). Therefore, it makes sense to consider this in the literature review. One meaning is that it is closely connected to akal (intellect) and wisdom (Za’ba, 2020). Wisdom and intellect can be expressed in poems (pantun). A good overview of such knowledge is the collection of poems and their explanations by Hamid (2011). A typical example should be mentioned here (*Table 1*):

***Table 1. A Malay poem.***

Malay poem	Translation
<p><i>Angin barat gelombang barat Barat ditiup si angin timur Tidak dirintang muatan sarat Alamat laut tempat berkubur</i></p>	<p>West wind west wave blown over by east wind undisturbed by the heavy burden eventually lies on the seabed</p>

*Source: Hamid (2011).*

In *Table 1*, a typical natural phenomenon is described. There are waves from the west and wind from the east. Furthermore, the goods might not be tied properly, which could be dangerous and result in death. This typical poem shows the wisdom of experience, and people can benefit from it. Writing such poetry is still highly popular, and there was even an art exhibition about the aesthetics of such form of poetry (National Art Gallery, 2009). However, not only poems show traditional wisdom. The Malay culture is often using proverbs. Fanany and Fanany (2003) wrote a fascinating book and analyzed Malay proverbs from different angles. Lim (2003) investigated how

the Malays derived their understanding and emotions from proverbs. Proverbs are still widespread and are taught in school and by parents.

Another aspect of Budi is related to character. Authors like Hamka (2019) and Za'ba (2020) stressed the importance of a good character for society. Here the term Budi relates to the word pekerti (character) and refers to a good or noble character. Both authors emphasize that there is a close similarity to the Arabic term akhlak, which refers to Islamic moral principles. Za'ba wrote in the introduction to the book *Asuhan Budi* that he wants to look at Islamic sciences from another point, namely from the topic of a noble character (Za'ba, 2020). This course of action is an Islamic approach because there is a famous narration (hadith) of Prophet Muhammad in which he stated that he was sent to perfect good character (Sunnah Official Portal, 2022). This narration shows the importance of akhlak, and by looking at the biography of Prophet Muhammad, it can be seen that there were methods on how to encourage the people to improve their character. For example, he told beneficial stories or lived in an exemplary way.

The term Budi is used in connection with other terms, and therefore various authors focus on different terms like the intellect (akal). Samian (2015) stressed that Akal Budi is the kernel and the other elements like Budi Bahasa or Budi Baik encircle it (Samian, 2015). Samian's article is remarkable as he shows the interdependency of the different terms related to Budi. Another fascinating article was written by Sarudin et al. (2019) as it maps the Malay intellect by considering traditional forms of literature and their metaphorical language.

The Malay-speaking world stresses the necessity of being polite. Therefore, the way of communication is essential. Ramli (2013) explained it in a fascinating way. She focused on the politeness of language (Budi Bahasa) and mentioned that some certain dos and don'ts prescribe social interaction. There is a differentiation between refined (halus) and rough (rough) behavior. For example, there are specific ways how to address a person. For many people of the Malay-speaking world, the idea of proper behavior is well-known, so it is not surprising that Budi is also thematized in the film industry (Fadzal and Dalal, 2018) and literature (Othman et al., 2015).

A recent article was published by Ali (2022). She stresses that Budi is a crucial part of Malay culture and its identity. It is noteworthy that she compares Islamic values and values that are inherent in the concept of Budi. These values are similar but not the same. For example, Budi includes cultural values.

## Materials and Methods

The researchers intend to look into the concept of Budi in a structuralist way. After reviewing the literature, it became evident that no research about Budi integrated a structuralist methodology. However, structuralism is a broad term that comprises different approaches. In the field of anthropology, Claude Levi-Strauss is the foremost representative of structuralism. Therefore, the researchers decided to follow his approach. He outlined three 'layers' in science that are 'below' surface and help to analyze the world. These three layers are geology, psychoanalysis, and Marxism (Deliege and Scott, 2004). In a similar way, a structuralist view discovers thought patterns that cannot be seen right away. The researchers assume that the concept of Budi within Malay culture will uncover structures that are not visible at first glance.

In general, structures that can be carved out consist of dichotomies. Claude Levi-Strauss and other famous structuralists showed that binary pairs of oppositions are often

part of the culture. One famous assumption in the 1970s was that women are most likely connected to the element of nature in many cultures while men are connected to culture (Ortner, 1974).

Nowadays, structuralism is not widespread anymore. There are many reasons for that. One of the reasons is that in the 1980s and 1990s, a period appeared that deconstructed knowledge. One of the criticisms was that anthropologists talk about others and interpret their culture without letting them express their point of view. Another issue was that Claude Levi-Strauss himself published the books *Structural Anthropology 1* and *Structural Anthropology 2*, but he did not publish a book with the title *Structural Anthropology 3*. Instead of that, he called the book: *The View from Afar* (Levi-Strauss, 1985). This fact could be a hint that Claude Levi-Strauss saw the end of structuralism himself. Other critics assume that the structuralists interpret too much (King and Wilder, 2020). All these critics have their points that must be respected. However, does it mean that a researcher cannot use structuralist methods anymore? Amborn (1992), for example, wrote that structuralism could inspire others and serve as a stimulus for other researchers. One of the main objectives is to offer another perspective on the topic of the concept of Budi. Therefore, the researchers do not think that structuralism is outdated. On the contrary, they assume that structuralism can help in the understanding of the concept of Budi.

The word Budi is a term that evokes thinking in the mind of the person who hears it. It is useful to look at the idea of Ferdinand Saussure (2001). He differentiates that the sign consists of two parts, namely the signifier and the signified. A word can be considered as a sign, and when someone utters a word, then the ideal 'prototype' of that word comes up in mind. For instance, someone utters the word 'cat'. In such a case, the picture of a 'cat' appears in mind. The word 'cat' is a signifier of the prototypic picture of the 'cat' (the signified). The first 'problem' is that the term Budi is abstract and evokes many ideas and concepts in the person who listens to that word.

After we realize that Budi is an abstract term, it is necessary to look at another feature of a sign. Such a sign does not appear alone without cultural context (Leach, 1978). For the research, it meant to look at the cultural context too. Consequently, the researchers read the books of the major exponents of Budi in Malay culture and read the way how they understand this term. In the structuralist approach, the text can be read either in a synchronic or diachronic way. In a diachronic reading, the reader reads the text from beginning to end, while in a synchronic understanding, the reader stops at a particular moment and looks at what happens at that specific moment.

The research steps were as follows: First, the researchers collected publications and noted how the different authors defined or described Budi. Consequently, the researchers got a list of values. After that, the researchers looked at the words that are mentioned in connection with the idea of Budi. Second, it was intended to view a more concrete example. Therefore, the researchers chose a literary character that is popular in the Malay-speaking world. It is well-known that Sitti Nurbaya is an influential novel, and the character of the main persons might illustrate the concept of Budi. The last step consisted of coming close to an understanding by using the idea of Ferdinand Saussure.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Towards an understanding of the term Budi***

For the research, it is essential to find out ‘what’ precisely should be analyzed. Therefore, it is inevitable to come to a definition of the term Budi. The first step is to look at the dictionary of Dewan Bahasa (Pusat Rujukan Persuratan Melayu, 2021). The dictionary gives a variety of meanings: 1) It means akal (intellect) and kebijaksanaan (wisdom), 2) It is connected with the word pekerti (character), so if we talk about Budi Pekerti, then this term refers to a refined character, 3) the term Budi, refers to a good characteristic (sifat baik), and 4) it refers to language and the way a person speaks, this means in a well-mannered way.

Some authors like Za’ba (2020) or Hamka (2019) focus on good character and equate Budi Pekerti with the Islamic concept of akhlak. Interestingly, Za’ba shows that the term Budi Pekerti is interconnected with religious understanding. In a structuralist way, it looks like in *Table 2*.

**Table 2.** A structuralist understanding of Za’ba’s concept of Budi.

Elements that belong to Budi	Versus	Elements that are not part of Budi
Akal (intellect) is connected to Agama (religion). The religion contains the belief in God and the Last day. Good behavior		Hawa nafsu (lust), stupidity  Evil Behavior

*Table 2* shows that akal is the primary characteristic of a human being. If a person has intellect, then he or she will know that there is God and the Last Day. Consequently, the person will show suitable behavior. The intellect might be stimulated by proverbs containing sayings or poems transmitted for many generations. A person can refer to a proverb, and this stimulates his or her behavior. Some of these proverbs are directly referred to Budi, for example, the following saying in *Table 3*.

**Table 3.** A proverb about Budi.

A proverb in the Malay language	English translation
<i>Hancur badan dikandung tanah, Budi baik terkenang jua</i>	Bodies will eventually rot, nevertheless Budi will always remain.

Source: Jagokata Official Portal (2021).

The proverb in *Table 3* encourages people to behave in a good way to be remembered, even after passing away. It is also noteworthy to mention that the term Budi is often mentioned in combination with other words, like some examples in *Table 4*.

**Table 4.** Word combinations of the term Budi.

Word combinations	Translation
<i>Budi pekerti</i>	Character
<i>Budi bahasa</i>	Courtesy
<i>Balas budi</i>	Returning a favor
<i>Hutang budi</i>	Debt a gratitude
<i>Akal budi</i>	Intellect

Table 4 shows that Budi can be a concept. It can stand for the character itself. However, it can also lead to action. If someone has done a favor, they can expect that the counterpart will return the favor as it is considered that the person now has some 'debts'. In the Islamic sense, this idea might be problematic as it seems to contradict the idea of doing something in a sincere way (*ikhlas*). If someone would only act in a good way, then this is because he or she wants that the other is 'in debt' or due to themselves is 'in debt'. This idea could contradict the Islamic ideal that the believer acts in a good way because of Allah. Nonetheless, the concept of Budi shows that there is an element of reciprocity. Person A acts in a well-mannered way, and person B must act in a similar way. This example shows that Budi stands for something good. The word itself resembles the term Bodi, which is used for a tree under which Buddha sat (*Za'ba*, 2020). The next topic will mention a concrete example that will illustrate the meaning of Budi.

### *The example of Sitti Nurbaya*

Many literary and historical examples could stand for the concept of Budi. A good example could be Hang Tuah, who obeys the king. However, the researchers want to show the idea of Budi in the novel *Sitti Nurbaya*. This novel was written at the beginning of the 20th century by Marah Rusli. There are movies and even telenovelas about that story, and one of the reasons might be that *Sitti Nurbaya* personifies the concept of Budi.

*Sitti Nurbaya* is a teenage girl who attends school. She is the daughter of Baginda Sulaiman. She is humble and shows a noble character, and she likes the teenager Samsulbahri. The other major person of the story is Datuk Meringgih, who opposes the concept of Budi. He is exceptionally stingy and unscrupulous. He is surrounded by some 'fighters' who help him do evil acts so that he can be a successful businessman. He sabotaged the business of Baginda Sulaiman. The gangsters of Datuk Meringgih set the shops of Baginda Sulaiman on fire, and destroyed his boats and his plantations. Baginda Sulaiman had to borrow money from Datuk Meringgih. One day, he saw the young girl *Sitti Nurbaya* and decided to marry her. He knew that Baginda Sulaiman would never agree to such a marriage, but he had debts, and Datuk Meringgih proposed that he would remit the debts if he could marry *Sitti Nurbaya*. Baginda Sulaiman was in a very precarious situation. *Sitti Nurbaya* realized the difficulty, and even though she liked the boy Samsulbahri, she agreed and married the old man Datuk Meringgih. Her life became miserable and ended in a tragic death.

In how far is the story of *Sitti Nurbaya* related to the concept of Budi? The following points should illustrate that:

- (a) *Sitti Nurbaya* uses her intellect (*akal*). She likes Samsulbahri, but she sees the miserable situation of her father and decides to marry Datuk Meringgih;
- (b) By marrying Datuk Meringgih, she returns the favor (*balas budi*) to her father. Baginda Sulaiman lives alone and takes care of her education. He does not follow the restrictions that were imposed by tradition. On the contrary, he decided to let his daughter study in a government school. *Sitti Nurbaya* felt that she had some debts (*hutang budi*) that she wanted to 'repay'; and
- (c) *Sitti Nurbaya* has a good character (*budi pekerti*). She is patient, modest, and humble.

By looking at the points, it becomes clear that Sitti Nurbaya behaves in an appropriate way. However, there was one inappropriate incident. After she was married, she still had contact with Samsulbahri, and when this was discovered, Datuk Meringgih decided to poison her. Here it can be said that she did not follow a proper Islamic way. The author Marah Rusli wanted to express the dangers of the Western school system. But apart from this incident, Sitti Nurbaya personifies the concept of Budi.

***Budi as sign***

Ferdinand Saussure (2001) explained in his book the sign. A sign consists of two parts: the signifier and the signified. In our case, it is the word Budi. If someone mentions the word Budi, some thoughts might come up in mind. In this case, it is an abstract term. Therefore, the term might be seen in contrast to terms with similar meanings. In other words, it is possible to understand a concept by looking at its opposites and excluding traits that are not subsumed under this category.

In the novel Sitti Nurbaya, the character of Datuk Meringgih shows characteristics opposed to Budi. He behaves in a way that is forbidden by religion by destroying the property of Baginda Sulaiman. He is very stingy and does not respect traditional leaders. Moreover, in one part of the novel it is said that he has no Budi (Rusli, 2008). It is possible to look at the binary oppositions that appear if we look at the idea of Budi. It will be similar to the concept of Za’ba. However, it will contain more dichotomies.

In *Table 6*, the values of Budi can be seen by opposing it to values that are not part of it. Furthermore, it can be said that Budi contains elements that are important for maintaining harmony and stability. If there is mutual respect, then the way of living together is ‘easy’. It must also be mentioned that Budi seems to be more general and not only limited to Islam. It is a way of life that is an ‘opposite pole’ to a selfish lifestyle. In Budi, the idea of a harmonious living together is inherent. In the novel Sitti Nurbaya this can be seen in the behavior of Datuk Meringgih. He acts without scruples, and his main driving force is his hawa nafsu, and he wants to get as much profit as possible. Consequently, chaos appeared in the story, and many people pass away.

***Table 6. The values of Budi and its opposites.***

Elements of Budi	Elements opposed to Budi
Akal	No intellect, follow emotions
Good appropriate language (budi bahasa)	Foul language, no respect
Good character	Bad character
Good religious behavior that avoid forbidden things	Bad behavior that includes sins
Sympathy	No sympathy
Respect	No respect
Humble	Arrogant

**Conclusion**

Budi is a term that cannot be understood simply as it includes a whole concept. It represents character traits that are considered to be good. Furthermore, it stands for being a person who follows the specific region’s traditions in the Malay-speaking world. It stresses the praiseworthy character traits. Somehow, these features seem universal, but there is a regional nuance. The way how this knowledge is transmitted is

culture-specific. Some proverbs and sayings teach the children how to behave in an ideal way. Moreover, these proverbs stress the importance of the Malay language.

Society emphasizes good behavior and etiquette. The way how to behave is taught to children. The children learn to respect the elders, they learn not to exploit others and similar values. Therefore, it is a crucial cultural pattern in the Malay-speaking world. The structuralist perspective also stressed the elements that are explicitly not considered to belong to the idea of Budi. If a person wants to understand a feature, then it might be useful to know what part opposes it. Budi is an abstract concept, and there might be different regional differences. Nevertheless, there are significant features that cover the whole region. A structuralist viewpoint can disclose that.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest with any parties involved with the study.

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