

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS IN AMERICAN MIND AND IN JAVANESE THOUGHT*

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I. Introduction

Every individual and in a larger issue its society has a concept of happiness and has a way to pursue it. This essay tries to bring out some of these concepts and its pursuits as seen in two different societies, namely American and Javanese. The discussion is more of a vision on the theme rather than a comparative study. The essay falls into two sections: the first describes some important facts about American pursuits of happiness and the second discusses the pursuit of happiness in one small part of the Javanese thoughts or *Kejawen*, namely Soerjomentaram's philosophy of *Ngelmu Beja*.

2. Pursuit of Happiness in America Life

American pursuit of happiness falls into two categories, first the religious hope and second the secular dreams. From the time of the first settlers through the colonial time, the revolution, the civil war, up to the modern time the Americans have a dream in pursuing happiness which is often called the American Dream. They seek for freedom to embrace any religion and belief without any oppression, freedom to express their ideals and thought and freedom from poverty and suppression.

2.1 Religious Pursuit of Happiness

The first American religious pursuit of happiness can be traced back to the Pilgrim and the Puritan, the first settlers in New England. They were a group of Protestants who were hunted and persecuted in England and had to seek refuge in Leiden, Holland around 1608 – 1610. When they learned of a New World where they could be free from persecution, they embarked on the legendary May Flower and reached New England and survived to build a *city upon a hill*. When John Winthrop and his followers dreamt of a *city upon a hill*, a "model" for Christian community, he envisioned a group of men and women working together for the common good. Their chief motto was *to work to Glorify God*. Ideally, it was to be a community of love, all made equal by their devotion to God who designed men's life and who was present in every human event and that He rewarded good and punished bad. It had to be a stable community where each member knew his or her obligations in the social structure and accepted God's disposition of good and where no authorities could meddle with their worshipping God, so that spiritual happiness can be achieved (Baym, 1989: 7-8). The dream of religious freedom where the government or any other kind of authorities could not meddle with their belief was realized

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in the “separation of the state and religion” policy. It guaranteed American people to embrace any religious or belief without being restricted by the government. This policy asserted that the government should not dictate or influence how people embrace religion and what particular religion should or should not be practiced in society.

2.2 Secular Pursuit of Happiness

As mentioned above there are at least two kinds of secular happiness that the Americans had been pursuing. First they believe that happiness can be achieved by acquiring the freedom of thought and equality in rights and second by achieving the dreams of a better life with wealth and being freed from poverty.

2.2.1 Freedom of Thought

Thomas Jefferson with the other *founding fathers* of America formulated in the Declaration of Independence the people’s quest for liberty to obtain natural rights, freedom of thought and freedom to choose who should govern them.

We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed;... as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness (Baym, 1989: 640).

It took more than two hundred years for the Americans to achieve this dream absolutely. Up to the 1960s the black American still experienced segregation and racial discrimination. Nonetheless, the Civil Rights movement from 1950s-1960s had brought tremendous freedom for the blacks

to be more or less equal to other Americans. This movement is often referred to as the second American revolution: the struggle for racial equality ragged on the streets, courts, schools and churches all over the Southern states of America which was felt throughout the country. Black people protested, demonstrated, being beaten and put in jail in their effort to challenge the racist system and to change history. They struggled for equality from the schoolroom to the courtroom as they rejected the existing system of “separate but equal” education. History noted that in 1957 nine black teenagers dared to integrate Little Rock’s Central High school in Arkansas. In 1962, James Meredith enrolled at the University of Mississippi as the first black student in a white university. From then on, students, parents, and lawyers unite to guarantee a better education and a better future for black children. Though there is still discontent here and there it can be said that Americans have achieved their pursuit of freedom of thought.

2.2.2 Freedom from Poverty

Now we come to the second pursuit of secular happiness, the dream of wealth and success. Benjamin Franklin, another America’s Founding Father was the first to formulate how to be rich with his essay *The Way to Wealth* written in 1757. In this essay a fictitious literary figure called Poor Richard was Franklin’s mouthpiece to advice people how to behave if they want to obtain wealth. Franklin through Poor Richard pointed out four main actions to achieve happiness through wealth, namely *industry, frugality, prudence* and *prayer*. The first, *industry* means hard working, and if one is industrious one never starves as Poor Richard says: *at the workingman’s house hunger looks in, but dares not enter so be ashamed to catch yourself idle as God helps them that help themselves*. Then *plow deep and you shall have corn to sell and keep* (Baym, 1989: 361-362). The second, *frugality* means spending out one’s money wisely. If one would make

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his hard work a success one has to save the money they got as Poor Richard says: if *you would be wealthy think of saving as well as of getting*. He advised people not to indulge in extravagances, eating and dressing more than necessary, for Poor Richard says *beware of little expenses; a small leak will sink a great ship*, and also according to him one should not give parties too often because *fools make feasts and wise men eat them*. (Baym, 1989: 364). The third, *prudence* means the effort to manage one's property wisely and cautiously. Bad management will surely lead to bankruptcy and you will lose all the wealth you acquired. The fourth, Franklin through Poor Richard advised people to always remember that the wealth you obtained is of God's Grace. Thus prayer is the most important thing of all the four actions. Benjamin Franklin concludes his essay again quoting Richard with: "Reader, if thou wilt do the same, thy profit will be as great as mine" (Baym, 1989: 367). This essay written in 1757 is still read by high school students and is still influential in American people's behaviors in achieving their secular happiness.

Another American pursuit of secular happiness lies in the quest of freedom from hunger and poverty. "To live a better life" is the magic word of many immigrants from all over the world to venture to move to America. From the colonial time to the 20th century there came different people from Europe, Asia and Africa with different culture and outlook of life, but they had one aim in common which was to have a better life materially. The motto "from rags to riches" seemed to spur their spirit and enthusiasm in achieving wealth. There are many success stories of this "rags to riches" dream. One of them is the success story of an Indonesian family who happened to win a green card lottery from the American government. Winning a green card means that the family can move and live in America and has the rights of an American citizen except to vote in any government elections. The regulation is that the family has to have a thousand

dollars and a family sponsor in the U.S.A. This Indonesian family which consisted of a father who was a driver at a Japanese company, a mother, and two junior high school boys regarded this lottery as a dream come true. It opened up a wonderful opportunity for their sons. With his driver salary he would never be able to give his sons the highest education in Indonesia. He had heard about America as the land of opportunity, so he sold all his possession and moved to America. The family spoke only broken English, had no family or connection in the states except one name of a church member in D.C. who gave his name as sponsor. The first months were a struggle for them but gradually with the salary of a janitor and a baby sitter, the family could rent a decent dwelling and the children went to school almost free of charge. In ten years they could afford to buy their own apartment and a car, and could send the eldest boy to M.I.T and the younger boy to Harvard. The boys had their own cars bought from their own salary working as cash registers in supermarket after school hours. The father proudly announced that if you work hard and save your earnings you can achieve success in America and obtained the happiness you pursued (Sadeli, 1998).

3. The Pursuit of Happiness in Javanese Life

Indonesia consists of more than three hundreds islands with three hundreds different ethnic groups. Before becoming one nation "Indonesia" the various ethnic was each a nation by itself. For example in Java there were Javanese and Sundanese nations, in Sumatra there were Aceh, Batak and Minangkabau nations, in Sulawesi Bugis, Toraja and Makasar. The oldest, largest, and most prominent group was the Javanese, the people from Java. One of the reasons of the Javanese being prominent in Indonesia is perhaps that the Javanese has a strong belief or philosophy; it has been very influential that for several decades people has tried to make

government acknowledge it as the sixth religion. Though the philosophy is still intact, it has never been acknowledged as a religion. The philosophy is called *Kejawen*, which means the thought and way of life of the Javanese. As the Javanese merging slowly into Indonesians and younger generation think more of being an Indonesian than of a Javanese, the *Kejawen* values and visions faces conflicting ideas with materialistic norms in the “modern” Indonesian life. The quotation below is a conversation between Javanese young entrepreneurs’ ages between 29 – 40 in a party in 1997.

- A : Hey, do you remember Tono the ever crying boy next door? He’s a successful businessman now. He looks very happy!
- B : You call him successful? I know him, he just got a Toyota Van no Mercedes nor BMW, how could you call him a success!

To these younger generations of Indonesian the pursuit of happiness is identical with the pursuit of worldly success. This country is still developing, so material gain is essential to achieve happiness. To have a Toyota van is a necessity but if you have a BMW, a Volvo, an Audi, than one is made, and one is entitled to be happy. This vision of materialistic success conflicts with the old Indonesian values especially that of the Javanese. In the old vision people’s happiness depends on how they live, not what they possess.

In late 1920s in Yogyakarta kingdom, a prince called *Soerjomentaram* being fed up with court life left the palace and repudiates his prince-ling. He became a hermit and began teaching the old Javanese belief *Kejawen* throughout central Java. His teaching and philosophical outlook have been enormously influential even at present. In his teaching he did not bring new thoughts but he dug out and brought to life the dormant philosophy that existed in Indonesia which

went back as early as the year 800 AD. Indonesians are proud to inherit solid stone temples spread all over the islands where we can find old values and norms engraved on the walls of the temples. These engravings constitute an eternal source of reference on ancient Indonesian philosophy. At some places the teachings are symbolized in pictures of fables and at another it is written in the forms of riddles or poems in various ancient ethnic scriptures, for instance old Javanese, Balinese and Bugis scripts. Prince *Soerjomentaram* studied these before he began to teach the *Kejawen* philosophy. One of his most influential thoughts is his *Kawruh beja*, the pursuit of happiness, which was translated and edited by R. Imam Moehni into a book entitled *In Wijding tot het Eeuwigdurende Geluk van B.R.M. Soerjomentaram* (1930). On this occasion I will deal with this particular philosophy which has a bearing upon the theme of the pursuit of happiness. *Soerjomentaram* believes that in this mortal world you do not have to wait until the life hereafter to experience hell or heaven, people can live in hell or heaven depending on how he reacts upon life itself. He categorizes certain feelings or behaviors as hellish acts and thoughts. Among others are:

1. *Neraka wedi, getun, sumelang* : the hell of fear, regrets and anxiety
2. *Neraka meri lan pambegan* : the hell of envy, pride, and conceits

3.1. *Neraka Wedi, Getun, Sumelang* (hell of fear, regrets and anxiety)

Anxiety and regrets are two significant aspects of the feeling of suffering. Regrets are fear of what you have done or experienced. Anxiety is the feeling of fear of what is going to be or what you are going to experience. Regrets and anxiety are the cause of sadness, grief, and concern which bring unhappiness. They can drive human beings into bitterness and despair. Meanwhile all human beings have a *karep* (will) of their own.

Only by acknowledging and realizing that the *karep* (will) is always inside oneself, one can be freed from the hell of fear and regret. *Karep* is a Javanese word meaning will, a conscious power to manage and to execute behavior urged by inner strengths. In Javanese the word *karep* covers the acts of desiring, yearning, wishing and planning. One of the most important *karep* is the will to live or to survive. Every human action from the simplest to the most complex derives from one's *karep* to preserve one's existence. Thus one's action is influenced by one's will, the core meaning of life (Moehni, 1930:12).

When one understands and realizes that *karep* never ends one can be free from the hell of fear and regret. As mentioned above, regrets bring sadness connected with things or events that has happened in the past and anxiety brings out fear of what will happen in the future. These two feelings can put one into uneasiness and desperation and finally drive one into a breakdown and depression on losing any hope. Regrets derive from the conviction that one can be lucky or unlucky because of what had happen. The understanding of the fact that one cannot be more unfortunate nor luckier will get one out of the hell of fear and regret. One only has to acknowledge that he has the *karep* to overcome every obstacle. When this happened one will arrive at the heaven of *tatag* (confidence). In this state one will feel brave to face anything or to look at the past, one will not be afraid of what will happen or what the consequence of what had happened so that one can confront anything with confidence. Consequently one achieves self-reliance and can live happily and confidently in any situation, rich or poor, healthy or sick, alone or with family, etc (Moehni, 1930:50).

There are numerous forms of fear: physical, psychological, spiritual, big and small, severe and slight and many more. The hellish experience of fear is rooted in lacks of faith in God as well as the lack of *karep* (will). To conquer fear – any kind of fear – you have to trust in God to believe that everything we do or any difficulty we face God

is always there for us. Fear can blot out any happiness that we might be able to experience. Fear that you might lose your loved ones will hinder you to enjoy happiness of the happy moment you share with each other. Fear that you will not succeed in your project and makes you withdraw before trying it will deprive you from the happiness you feel when you achieved your goal (Soerjomentaram, 1993 : 17).

Soerjomentaram believes that God presides inside every individual human being. He is inside you always, but it does not mean that you are God. He is there in you to guide you and to take care of you. You have to recognize His existence and listen to His guidance. If you believe in this fact you will always have a positive outlook and confident of succeeding in everything you do. If you are pessimistic you show that you ignore God's presence and you will not achieve the happiness you are looking for (Soerjomentaram, 1990: 13).

3.2 *Neraka Meri* (hell of envy), *Neraka Pambegan* (hell of pride and conceit)

If you constantly have a negative outlook of life – living in hell of pessimistic – you will miss the opportunity to success and it might start you to look at other's success and you begin to live in a world of self pity and ended up in the hell of envy. You start comparing yourself with others and envying people who achieve things you coveted. If you live in *neraka meri* (the hell of envy) you always feel you are inferior to others in the matter of *semat* (wealth), *dradjat* (social status), and *kramat* (supernatural power). In this state you begin to develop self-pity and feel ashamed to live among others. On the other hand, if you live in *neraka pambegan* (the hell of pride and conceit) you feel superior than others in the matter of material possession, social status and power. In this position you are never satisfied with what you achieved because you are constantly worried that there will be other people who become more superior than you are. You are never at peace with yourself.

The hell of envy, pride, and conceit can make men get wrong images of insights to the things and events occurring in his surrounding, confused between right and wrong. Consequently those men are capable of committing various careless deeds which make their own and other people's lives hellish. Envy, pride and conceit are inherent in human being, they are turbulent feelings which need to be controlled, otherwise it will bring destructive traits in one's character. The following is a picture of the attitude of a person who is in the hell of envy, pride, and conceit.

"I am striving toward richness and grandeur in any way I can so that I can be successful and no one can degrade me or make a fool of me. I can buy everything with money, material, service, even people's loyalty. I will be above everyone and they will respect me" (Moehni, 1930: 40).

This person is so deep in the *neraka meri* and *pambegan* (envy and conceit) that he confused the meaning of respectability. Furthermore, when a person understand and realize that all men are equal in the eyes of God, they will be free from these hellish feeling and come to the heaven of *tentrem* (at peace with oneself) where he can live feeling satisfied and serene.

When a person acknowledges that every wish or dream which is realized or not realized will only bring a short-term happiness or sadness, he will be absolved from the turbulent feelings and will be at peace with himself. Furthermore, when a person understands and realizes that all men are equal in the eyes of God, they will also be free from these hellish torments and arrived at the heaven of *tentrem* (peace) where he can live feeling satisfied and serene.

According to Soerjomentaram one who still lives in the hell of fear, anxiety, regrets, envy, pride and conceit, has not achieved the state of *tentrem*. He acts and thinks

negatively, always thinking of failure. For example a man who is striving for *semat* (wealth) at this state will think:

I have to get rich and successful so that I will be respected and powerful. But what if I got bankrupt and lose all my wealth, then I will be poor again and insignificant (Moehni, 1930: 43).

So he did not work hard nor save any money and ended up poor. On the other hand, one who can come out from those "hells" and achieve the state of *tentrem* thinks and acts as follow:

I will work hard and save diligently so that I will be rich and successful. If I did not succeed, it would be all right, I would stay poor (Moehni, 1930:44).

Thus he worked hard and save his earnings without the fear of being poor and unsuccessful, knowing that the rank of a rich or a poor man is equal in the eyes of God. In enjoying God's grace and getting rid of all those hellish feelings, he celebrates the joy of happiness, carrying any grief and burden lightly (Moehni, 1930: 42-45).

Soerjomentaram believes that to achieve happiness you have to conquer the hell of envy in your soul. It offers a way out in a simple symbolism of the way you walk. If you walk with your eyes upward to the sky, you might not see a hole on the ground in front of you. If you always look down, you might bump your head on some branches. But if you alternately look straight and down and upward you might reach your destination unharmed. What the symbolism means is that if in your life you only look at how people are more fortunate or successful than you, you might be gripped in the hell of envy. On the other hand, if you always look down on people less fortunate than you are, you will live in the hell of conceit. Thus you are supposed to balance the way you live by thinking that there are other people who are

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less fortunate than you are even though you are surrounded by people who are much more successful than you are. Soerjomentaram believes that life in this world is mortal and happiness or unhappiness is temporal. Once you realize this and succeed in getting rid of those hellish feelings you will achieve the happiness you pursue in this world (Soerjomentaram, 1998: 21). This leads to a Javanese moral value that you have to be content with what God gives you. Older Javanese generation accept this value but younger ones find it old fashioned and is inapplicable for living in a modern world. To achieve happiness you have to grasp any opportunity that comes to you and you have to acquire material gains to be successful and happy. To them the pursuit of happiness is analogous to the pursuit of success materially.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion let me mention the concern of Javanese older generation of what a future Javanese will be. They are afraid that the coming generation will completely ignore the God inside themselves in order to achieve material success. In old Javanese thinking, material gains are mortal, either you can lose it at any time or you can never be satisfied with all you got since the hell of envy will always be there to ensnare you. Some Javanese still hold to the old value that the pursuit of happiness is through conquering and avoiding those hellish acts and feelings so we can achieve heaven on earth or true happiness in life. Meanwhile, it is safe to say that most Americans nowadays have achieved the American dreams or the pursuit of happiness in a certain degree. There is no

oppression in embracing any religious or beliefs, people are free to celebrate their spiritual fulfillment as long as they do not offer public menace. Economically American people are well off compared to other people in the world. Though there are still some dire poverty in some areas such as in the deep country, in the Appalachian and Orzak mountains, as well as in the slum of big cities, there is always opportunity open for them to better their own life. They only have to recognize their forefather's motto that any kind of work is divine.

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