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O31 - The Living Literature – Towards a Pedagogy of the Sky through Malay Proverbs and Idioms

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Malay peribahasa and idioms involving bintang and bulan rarely agree on what the sky is for. In one register, it is mirror: bagai bulan dipagar bintang, (like the moon fenced round by stars), lent to a face of unmatched beauty. In a second, the sky is not borrowed but worn — bintang hati, (the star of one's heart), naming the person loved most, the star not compared to a life but standing in for it. In a third, rarer register, the sky is simply named with care: bintang timur (one bright object given several precise names) — barat, johar, kejora, pagi, zuhrah — depending on when and where it was watched. This paper reads these three registers not as separate curiosities but as one layered relationship with the sky, coexisting inside a single body of language. Each register implies a different intensity and purpose of looking: the sky glanced at for likeness, the sky trusted as destiny, the sky observed closely enough to require precision.

The Malay language carries this layering because it was never confined to one nation — it became the lingua franca of the maritime Southeast Asian world, shaped across centuries of trade, migration, and exchange between coast and coast. Its proverbs and idioms compress observation, ethics, and belief into forms short enough to survive being spoken rather than written, passed down across generations who may never have shared a single teacher or text. This paper takes its bearing, in part, from Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III's own regard for Malay as a language of poetry and cultural depth — the conviction that a language capable of carrying feeling with such precision is also capable of carrying knowledge, and that neither use diminishes the other. Wawasan 2035 calls Bruneians to become an educated, resilient people, rooted in identity that never had to choose between the traditional and the forward-looking. To read the sky through Malay proverbs and idioms is to answer that call in kind — proof that language itself can be a vessel for progress, carrying inherited knowledge forward rather than setting it aside.

The inquiry sits within The Living Literature, an ongoing research methodology developed by The Curious Playgrounds treating Southeast Asian intangible heritage as living knowledge to be reactivated rather than archived. Each cycle of the project anchors on a single element and moves through investigation, translation, and activation, arriving at a creative output built for the continuity of heritage and culture rather than its preservation alone. This cycle is undertaken in collaboration with the Brunei Astronomical Society, keeping the sky-reading answerable to astronomical practice as much as to cultural research.

A wider illustrated compendium on Malay language and astronomy grows from this cycle — its translation phase, and a public-facing work rather than an academic one. Where peribahasa already live in daily speech, classrooms, and family memory but are rarely read for the sky-knowledge folded inside them, the compendium aims to make that folded knowledge visible, pairing each proverb with illustration that holds both its human meaning and the observation underneath it. For Malay-speaking communities, it offers a way back into language already known, seen freshly. For astronomy educators and planetarium practitioners across the region, it offers culturally-rooted material for outreach that doesn't need to import metaphor from elsewhere to make the sky feel close to home. And for the wider documentation of Malay heritage, it argues for proverb's continued relevance as a living record of observation.

This paper marks the beginning of a collaboration with the Brunei Astronomical Society on the wider compendium. Ahead of the conference, we will carry out workshops in Brunei testing the three-register framework in practice, and this oral presentation will share those findings alongside the research, explorations and illustrations developed so far. Following the conference, the work will continue — feeding directly into the compendium and into an illustrated book intended for use as educational material for the Brunei Astronomical Society and as content for future tourism and outreach events in Brunei.

Beyond Brunei, this framework is offered as something the wider region can easily take up and adapt to its own languages, in the hope that it can help others not only appreciate their own culture and heritage, but arrive at a quieter gratitude — for a sky and a universe that has always belonged to everyone equally. The paper closes by asking what astronomy education might gain from a public willing to hold the sky the way this language always has.

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