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The Concept of al-Fitrah: Its realization in the Malaysian Public Service to Raise the Organization's Performance

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Abstract

The paper examines the nature of morality as an innate property existing in human through the concept of al-fitrah. Al-fitrah is associated with self-knowledge which, as mentioned in al-hadith "He who knows himself, he will know the Lord." Human is created in the image of God makes him strive for ideal Forms. The purpose of this study is to connect the concept of al-fitrah and public organization's performances. The study is important because the moral crisis caused by human ignorance about their original and true nature. This ignorance causes moral crisis that affects the sustainability of economic development due to higher cost and unnecessary expenditure. The unnecessary cost could be used to implement other projects instead, that will increase the well being of the society. This is where the relevancy study of al-fitrah comes and its implications to moral judgment.

Keywords: al-fitrah; human nature; organization's performance; sustainability; moral judgment; spiritual exercise

1. INTRODUCTION

Moral is critical to the civilization of a nation and state. It is fundamental for a sustainable development. Without morality, humanity is in danger of losing its future due to unsustainability issues touching upon socio-economic, environmental and values dimension of life (Azizan, 2013). This paper examines how *al-fitrah* and its connection to morality can be used to uncover and manifest the excellence of personality traits among the Malaysian civil servants.

2. BACKGROUND

Recognizing the important role taken by civil servants to the progress of the country, various efforts have been undertaken by the government to improve the morality of Malaysian civil servants. The very serious efforts are producing book of Excellent Service Guide with motto "Berkhidmat Untuk Negara"¹ (1979), the implementation of punch card (1981), the "Bersih, Cekap dan Amanah"² campaign (1982), Look East Policy (1982), "Kepimpinan Melalui

¹ To serve the country.

² Clean, efficient, and trustworthy.

Teladan”³ (1983), Dasar Penerapan Nilai-nilai Islam⁴ (1985), “Budaya Kerja Cemerlang⁵ (1989), Declaration of Assets (1993), National Integrity Plan (2004), Total Quality Management (1992) and strengthening the anti-corruption agency to be more independent and transparent.

The purpose of these initiatives is to improve the quality of public service delivery in order to fulfill public needs and expectations. Improving the quality of service delivery can be achieved through the practice of excellent work culture that is free from any elements of fraud and negligence at work, as well as boost the spirit of the civil servants to perform their work to the highest standard. Policies and goals of government programs will fail in the absence of public servants morality.

Many allocations were spent to train civil servants so that they can deliver services more efficiently and effectively. The policy of public sector training stipulated that one percent of every ministry’s emolument must be allocated for training and development purposes. In the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP), developing human resources started to become more significant as compared to previous five years development plans. For example in the 9MP itself, two thrusts directly related to human capacity were pointed, i.e. to raise the capacity for knowledge and innovation and to nurture a 'first class mentality'; and to strengthen institutional and implementation capacity. Both thrusts are related to the human role in the nation development.

However, despite the concerted efforts to strengthen morality in Malaysian civil service, there are still room for improvement. Corruption perception index cannot be improved to a level that can be proud of (see Table I). There are still complaints about dissatisfaction on the services received like delays in processing applications, unfair actions, enforcement issues and the lack of friendly customer services that tarnish the image and performance of government services.

³ Leadership by example.

⁴ The policy of implementing Islamic values.

⁵ Excellent work culture.

**Table 1: TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL
CORRUPTION PERCEPTION INDEX**

COUNTRY	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Malaysia	5.0	5.1	5.1	4.5	4.4	4.3
Singapura	9.4	9.3	9.2	9.2	9.3	9.2
Thailand	3.6	3.3	3.5	3.4	3.5	3.4
Indonesia	2.4	2.3	2.6	2.8	2.8	3.0
Filipina	2.5	2.5	2.3	2.4	2.4	2.6
Brunei	-	-	-	5.5	5.5	5.2
Timor Leste	2.6	2.6	2.2	2.2	2.5	3.0
Hong Kong	8.3	8.3	8.1	8.2	8.4	8.4
Denmark	9.5	9.4	9.3	9.3	9.3	9.4
Finland	9.6	9.4	9.0	8.9	9.2	9.4

Source: Transparency International, 2012

These weaknesses need to be addressed not only for the economic sustainability but also to increase it to the higher standard through reducing and avoiding the unnecessary waste as well as increasing the efficiency of utilizing available resources. Should the resources to be used in optimal way, more government projects and programs can be implemented. Effectiveness is seen through reducing number of complaints, improving satisfactions and increasing social harmony in the society as a whole.

3. HUMAN ROLE

Man is the center of everything. In other word, in every **handmaid organization**, organization is a collection of man as **a group of people working in specific area, performing specific duties and responsibilities with specific objectives and goals is the main locus.**⁶ Human being is responsible in creating ethos in the organization where he or she has the ability to choose and to determine the form of morality within the organization. Personal morality is not enough if it is not supported by a specific system that complements the development of the organizational morality. Morality is not determined by the system but the man who created the system and used it to create specific form of morality within the organization. The system is created to help people and organization to achieve specific objectives as part and parcel in moral development. Its effectiveness and efficiency are very much determined by those people who are creating and

⁶ My understanding of organization is “a group of people working in specific area, performing specific duties and responsibilities with specific objectives and goals.”

implementing the system. If they manipulate the system, the ultimate goal of the implementation which assisted by technology will not be realized and in worst scenario bring losses to the organization and the country as a whole. The best system yet implemented by **toxicated man**⁷ will never achieve the desired results. On the other hand, moderate system implemented by the excellent man has the chance to achieve good results. **The best option is the best system and executed by the best people, and not by the worst people.**

4. HUMAN AND ORGANIZATIONAL

As have been mentioned earlier, man-made organization which includes public service must have specific system⁸ which governs people within the organization to achieve desired results. These include developing human capacity in upgrading values within the organization through training and development, controlling management through capacity building or any other management method that ultimately create moral people within the organization.

In spite of various activities and programs have been implemented in order to unveil the public servants' potential morality, there are still numbers of misconduct and dissatisfaction among public servants. What's wrong? What's happened to the activities and programs within the system? Is it because of lack of understanding on human nature and its moral aspect? Or is it because the content of the programmes based on compartment understanding of human nature? Or is it maybe some other factors that are overlooked by the implementer.

Definition of al-Fitrah

Al-fitrah mentioned 20 times in the al-Qur'an.⁹ However, 'fitrah' form only appears once:

"So set thou thy face steadily and truly to the Faith: (establish) Allah's handiwork according to the pattern on which He has made mankind: no change (let there be) in the work (wrought) by Allah: that is the standard Religion: but most among mankind understand not" (Qur'an, 30:30).

It was popularized by the al-hadith:

"Every infant is born according to the *fitrah*, then both his parents make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian."¹⁰

The word *al-fitrah* is an Arabic term *fa ta ra*, etymologically means *khalq Allah* (God's creation), created, clave, split, slit, rent or cracked it (Mohamed, 1998). In technical terms, it refers to monotheism (al-Ghazali, 1988 & 2000); as well as knowledge; morality; beauty; and creativity (Mutahhari, 2008 & 2011). As for Chittick & Murata (1994), *al-fitrah* refers to 'original human nature'. The closest English equivalent of the word is human nature.

⁷ By toxicated man, I mean man that has internal attitude problem with corrupted mind in its epistemology. Toxicated man implies toxicated organization.

⁸ By system, I mean a systemic understanding of tools and methodology of human life.

⁹ Muhammad Fu'ad 'Abd al-Baqi, *Al-Mu'jam al-Mufahras li Alfaz al-Qur'an al-Karim* (al-Qahirah: Dar al-Kutub al-Mis'riyyah, 1364H), p. 663-664.

¹⁰ *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith no. 36, Book 46, <http://sunnah.com/muslim/46/36>.

Al-fitrah crowned human being as a noble creature as created by God with special attributes as a special place within the creations. It exists in every single spirit of human being and cannot be removed by created beings. **Morality which is *al-fitrah* in nature is embodied in human nature which inclined towards virtues. This innate pulse causes the feeling of guilty and groaning whenever wrong thing is committed.** The Qur'an called this *al-nafs al-lawwama*¹¹ (censure self) and *al-nafs al-muthmainnah*¹² (tranquil self) as opposed to *al-nafs al-ammarah bi'l-su'*¹³ (incite to evil self). **This knowledge – *al-hikmah* – is obtained through reflection and contemplation, leading man to know himself**, that he was created out of something, and the cosmos was create out of nothing (*ex-nihilo*). From this man knows that his life is not in vain, with the highest purpose and full of happiness (Maslow, 1964 & 1971). Moral problems occur when people are unaware and unconscious of the fact that the absence of morality leads to self-oblivion. **Morality according to *al-fitrah* perspective is not a choice because to act against morality will resulted negative consequences to the doer.** In fact as a rational being, one can do or act contradictory to *al-fitrah* but it is not the best and the wise choice.

All five dimensions of *al-fitrah* mentioned by al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and Mutahhari (d. 1979) are very significant and important to be inculcated in public service. Those dimensions enabled public servants to transmigrate their mind and reason into a state of consciousness so that their characters, attitudes and morals will be manifested within organization. Through love and understanding the relationship between the Creator, the nature and man makes live of human beings harmonized. Individuo-globalism for example sees a strong inter-relationship between personal well-being and a care for the whole cosmos mutually reinforce each other (Benthall, 2008).

5. THE MANIFESTATION OF AL-FITRAH AMONG CIVIL SERVANTS

There are two important points directly related to the ability of public servants to deliver services efficiently and effectively. First is the moral strength, as prime defense to avoid any involvement in toxicated practices and irregularities while on duty, and secondly, to avoid negligence due to carelessness while delivering services. Both of them, if they are not managed properly, will bring negative consequences to the country that will tarnish the whole system of administration in the country.

How *al-fitrah* can prevent all those negative attributes among civil servants and to improve their morality? In reality, there is a consensus on the importance of morality in life and its supremacy in upholding it. However, when it is tested, majority failed to demonstrate the idea. In other words, morality is sacrificed whenever facing personal interest. It means *al-fitrah* which intrinsically embedded within human being has been superseded and filled with artificial attributes.

Now question is how are we going uplift *al-fitrah* that has been ignored and superseded by all unnecessary attributes within public service?

¹¹ Qur'an al-Fajr (89): 27-28.

¹² Qur'an al-Qiyamah (75): 2.

¹³ Qur'an Yusuf (12): 53.

i) Contemplation through Reason and Heart

Man is a rational being. To animate man means to give a specific meaning and understanding of human life. This could be done through contemplation on three cardinal aspects that include (a) contemplating on one-self; (b) contemplating on nature; (c) contemplating on the idea of God. Contemplation itself is an attribute of the intellect that becomes a principle of dichotomy between man and animal.

a) Contemplating on one-self¹⁴

By contemplating on one-self, I mean asking three important questions that include from where one came from?; where are we now?; and where we are going? These three questions must be understood and embodied as principle of life. Therefore, in all training and development and courses, these three questions should be a basic framework of delivery. It is incumbent upon public servant to associate in their daily life with these tripartite questions particularly at work within organization.

b) Contemplating on nature

Human cannot be separated with nature. We can take nature as a lesson. Our understanding about the nature should be used to relate and understand ourself and as well as to understand and achieve our role in this temporal world.

c) Contemplating on the idea of God

Contemplating on the idea of God is the effect of existent of God. It is a part and parcel of contemplating one self as manifested in al-Hadith: "Whoever knows himself, will know their Lord."¹⁵ Evaluating and justifying the notion of God is very significant. It gives specific purpose in life which public servant can demonstrates within their work station.

Reason and heart is paramount to actualize the *al-fitrah* because the death of reason and heart implies the death of man. Therefore, the essence of human is his/her reason and heart. Its essence can only be capitalized if it is applied consciously in daily life and transformed into practice. Knowledge without practice is vain.

ii) God Consciousness

James (2008) and Fatimah (2008) proposed that man couldn't be separated from religious activities. Religious activities have positive effects on physical and mental health. Hence people are becoming attracted to religion (Berger, 1999). Rejection of religion will result in pseudo-religion, religion is replaced with 'spiritual' word. In this context, Benthall (2008) called it parareligions, Fromm named it *necrophilia*. Rejection of religion will result to man find other things that can fulfill their devotion. This explains the act of worshipping false gods, wealth, persons and so forth. This shows that religion can be a good binder to morality. However it does not mean that morality is only meaningful if supported by religion, but religion provides the motivation to live morally. To strengthen morality, man must return to religion, or choose a religion that can meet their nature. Rejecting religion will not solve the moral issue. Religion provides guidance and role models.

¹⁴ "Know thyself." This sentence is associated to Socrates. See <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0208:book%3D4:chapter%3D2:section%#d24>.

¹⁵ Imam al-Ghazali, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, trans., Claud Field (1910).

If God's presence can be felt, the *ihsan*¹⁶ act will be manifested through doing job to the best quality. *Ihsan* itself is due to the tendency of human nature to perfection and beauty. When this tendency is manifested, negligence can be avoided. Thus religion and morality are not only separated as shown by the concept of *ihsan*, but reinforce each other. While religion orders good deeds, *ihsan* is how the work is done in excellence. Thus religion is not just a theory, but practice. Those who live without morality are in fact have no religion.

iii) Spiritual Exercises

What should be done to preserve *al-fitrah*? If a human being cannot be separated from God or religion, how is it possible to feel the presence of God in life and work? This can be done by doing spiritual exercises¹⁷ (*riyadah*) through performing acts of worship prescribed by the religion.¹⁸ Morality and religious commitment that is designed, performed, nurtured through spiritual exercise can sharpen the doer's moral judgment to choose between sin and salvation, ignorance and wisdom, or suffering and bliss (Stalnaker, 2006). Although virtues are embodied in human nature as I explained through the concept of *al-fitrah*, but it is not suffice. It should be supported by religion. Tendency to morality exist inside human but should be strengthened and sustained by religious teachings, particularly the aspects of worship.

Faith or spirituality can be strengthened through the act of worships - e.g. prayer (*salat*), fasting (*shaum*), pilgrimage (*hajj*), and so forth – as a way of strengthening the soul. *Salat* for example provides preventive effects, the ability to control the self from instinctive desires and gives tranquility (Fatimah & W. Azman, 2009). The al-Qur'an says, "and establish regular Prayer: for Prayer restrains from shameful and unjust deeds; and remembrance Allah is the greatest (thing in life) without doubt."¹⁹ Above all prayer is a tool to remembrance (*al-dikr*) of God and to ensure that connection is preserved, "and keep up prayer for My remembrance."²⁰ *Salat* gives therapy effect from anxiety, "Truly man was created very impatient;- Fretful when evil touches him; And niggardly when good reaches him; Not so those devoted to Prayer;- Those who remain steadfast to their prayer."²¹ *Salat* reminds the direction of life and to be in touch with the transcendence world.

Salat can be seen as a summary of Islamic theory where all the important aspects of Islamic teaching such as punctuality, cleanliness, determination, peace and monotheism are seen. If it is maintained and nurtured, it will affect and attach in the heart and manifested beyond the *salat* and ultimately result in excellent personality.

¹⁶ Arabic word derived from *husn* means "perfection" or "excellence."

¹⁷ By spiritual exercises I mean doing religious duties – incumbent, e.g. *salat*, fasting, *zakat*, *hajj*; as well as supererogatory, e.g. *tilawat*, *dhikr* – to achieve remembrance of God. In order to get that result, the doer should do the worships with contemplative and understanding. Without it, the exercise will not bring spiritual effects that can transform inner self towards human goodness and perfection.

¹⁸ In this paper I referring to Islam.

¹⁹ Qur'an al-Ankabut (29):45.

²⁰ Qur'an Taha (20):14.

²¹ Qur'an Al-Maarij (70): 20-22.

In order to get the best effect from salat, it should be seen beyond mere ritualistic movement, as a form of communication between man and God. It should not be seen as a burden (*taklif*), but as an opportunity to communicate with The Almighty. Otherwise, it brings negative consequence for the spiritual development. In this respect the Qur'an says, "So woe to the worshippers, who are neglectful of their prayers."²² According to Avicenna, ritualistic *'ibadah* (worship) is an exercise to strengthen the focus of the mind.²³ The practice of salat with contemplative will have positive effect to the spiritual development of the doer.

iv) Keeping Away from the opposite of morality

Protecting the self from toxicant actions²⁴ is paramount to maintaining and preserving *al-fitrah*. Toxicant actions not only lead to the shameful (*fasad*) and unjust (*zulm*), but more importantly it veils *al-fitrah* from manifested. **It impure heart, contaminated moral ecology, caused it unable to perform it functions.** Moral agents not only have to refrain from committing toxicant action, but also refraining from action that lead to it. This is because toxicant action can start from an action considered by doer just a small toxicant action, but eventually becomes habitual that is difficult to contain. The Qur'an refers this as *nafs al-ammarah bissu'* (enjoins evil self)²⁵. If this happens, *al-fitrah* that is supposed to contain moral agent from doing things that contradict to morality will not happen. In a worse case, toxicant action will happen naturally, becomes the second nature. At the same time, moral actions that a difficult to manifest, will not occur naturally. This is very dangerous to the organization as a whole. Therefore purification of the soul (*al-tazkiyah al-nafs*) is important to preserve *al-fitrah* and avoiding any unnatural human nature from embodied.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper proposed four ways of preserving and maintaining *al-fitrah* within the member of public civil servant. However unveiling it is not enough because it needs as well to be preserved, maintained and strengthened so that it is always alive and turns into actualization particularly during service delivery. Happiness is attained when moral agent fulfills what has been natured – *al-fitrah* – in him. Unaware of this fact is the source of many toxic practices which preventing an organization from achieving excellence and therefore creates various unsustainable issues.

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²² Qur'an al-Maun (107): 4-5.

²³ Quoted in A.J. Arberry, "On the Prayer," *Avicenna Theology*, (Hyperion: Connecticut, 1979).

²⁴ By toxicated actions, I mean any action that give negative consequences not only to the self but also to others. In religious terms, it is called sin.

²⁵ "... the (human) soul is certainly prone to evil, unless my Lord do bestow His Mercy: but surely my Lord is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful." Qur'an Yusuf (12): 53.

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