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The spherical mandala in Javanese thought

Abstract

Extract:

In Javanese tradition there is a spherical mandala which involves Chandra (Moon), Surya (Sun), Kartika (Star), Bumi (Earth), Geni (Fire), Banyu (Water), Maruto (Wind) and Samudra (the Ocean). The meaning of this mandala, the Hasta Brata, is that we are all monarchs, and have to live according to these eight principles. One cannot be emphasised over another; all need to be blended harmoniously.

Keywords

Javanese tradition, Hasta Brata, enlightenment, spherical mandala

The Spherical Mandala in Javanese Thought

by M. S. A. Sastroamidjojo*

In Javanese tradition there is a spherical mandala which involves Chandra (the Moon), Surya (the Sun), Kartika (the Star), Bumi (the Earth), Geni (Fire), Banyu (Water), Maruto (the Wind) and Samudra (the Ocean). It is an eight-fold symmetry and is called *Hasta* (eight) *Brata* (the way to behave) in the Javanese puppet play. The puppet play itself is called the *Mahkuto Rama* (Rama's Crown). The story goes as follows:

When King Rama died there was a rumour that his *Mahkuto* (crown) which had eight jewels had disappeared. So everyone was trying to find the *Mahkuto* with those eight jewels of great value. No one had any success. Among the diggers was Arjuna (one of the five Pandawa brothers in the Hindu epic, the *Mahabarata*). Frustrated, he went to his guru and asked if he could be shown by paranormal means how and where to find the *Mahkuto*. His guru just laughed and said there was no such thing. It was all symbolic. The eight jewels represented the eight ways to behave, which any worthy ruler had to follow to be a real leader of the people. The eight ways of enlightened conduct are symbolised by:

1. Chandra, the Moon

Be like a moon to the people, giving light (guidance) in time of darkness (trouble).

2. Surya, the Sun

Be just. As the sun gives light and energy to rich and poor alike, so you must dispense justice to the people, without discrimination.

3. Kartika, the Star

The star is the symbol of God, from which everything comes and to which everything returns. So you must know where you stand and not think you are God.

4. Bumi, the Earth

The Earth is the symbol of patience. It is trod upon by all but endures everything. So you need to be patient with the people and endure their abuse and bad habits.

5. Geni, Fire

Fire is the symbol of thoroughness. Once you have made a decision, you have to go through with it. As our friends the Taoists say: sit, walk, but don't wobble.¹

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¹ The Taoists, too, have an eightfold 'bagua' mandala. It comprises eight combinations of three whole or broken lines used for guidance through divination. See the *I Ching*, the classical Chinese *Book of Changes*.

6. Banyu, Water

Without water, pure and clean, no plant can flourish. So you must not be corrupt but act in the interests of the people.

7. Maruto, the Wind

The wind symbolises democracy. Just as the wind blows everywhere, so you must mix with all manner of people - from royalty to common people and beggars. Like the wind, you can penetrate everywhere, obtain knowledge and spread it far and wide.

8. Samudra, the Ocean.

The ocean is the symbol of creativity. So many things are born in the sea. You not only have to be creative but you must educate others so that they can become creative too.

The meaning of this mandala, the *Hasta Brata*, is that we are all monarchs, and have to live according to these eight principles. One cannot be emphasised over another; all need to be blended harmoniously. If you only want to use the Kartika symbol, you become a religious fanatic, or by thinking too much of God you end up a recluse. If you think only about Bumi, you may become too passive. Think too much of fire and you neglect water. You must balance everything in yourself, your family and your wider political life. The eight archetypes drawn from nature - moon, sun, stars, earth, fire, water, wind and ocean - are meant to guide our behaviour. The spherical mandala is our universe, environmental and moral.

It should also be noted with regard to the cultural background of the *Hasta Brata* that a Javanese king has the title of *pendito-ratu* (priest-king); in the *wayang* puppet play he is personified by Yudistira, the eldest of the five Pandawa brothers. The idea of a 'priest-king', little by little, becomes 'god-like human being'. This, in turn, changes progressively to 'god-like', and finally to 'godhead' or 'dewa'. The implication here is that a raja (king) or sultan is, in essence, a god-on-earth. Once a year the present Sultan of Yogyakarta has to go to the Southern Beach (Parang Tritis) and offer flowers and other ritual items to the *Kanjeng-Ratu-Kidul*, Queen of the Southern Seas. The people in Yogyakarta find it natural to think of him as the husband of the Queen of the Southern Seas. This attitude is not confined to Yogyakarta and its Sultan.

A belief in the mystical properties of rulers, of course, has its dark side. If the so-called god-king does not 'deliver', doubts are sown which, in due course, become explosive. The way to behave - Rama's crown - is again lost. It is well to remember that we are all potentially kings or queens in moral terms, and have to live according to the eightfold symmetry of proper conduct. *The observer is the observed*. The spherical mandala is the world, which is subject to our constructive - or destructive - outlook.