

**THE MYTH OF MATERIAL SUCCESS
AS REFLECTED IN SAM WALTON: MADE IN AMERICA-MY STORY**

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ABSTRACT

American myth of material success had been orchestrated five basic beliefs that were reflected in Sam Walton's biography, *Sam Walton: Made in America-My Story*. Those beliefs were: 1) Having a strong will to be successful man in America, Sam Walton was aware that the American democracy allowed its citizens to rise above any limitation in which they may have been born; 2) Then, he rose up from his limitation by hard work. His hard work successfully brought him to the riches and physical comforts; 3) He believed that those rewards came to those who were deserving of them (virtuous); 4) He also believed that those rewards came to those who had the drive and ambition to attain them. Therefore, he was optimistic to attain success in America; 5) Hard work to attain success made Sam Walton a lucky man who received good luck in his life. As a result, his dream of being a successful man in America came true.

Keywords: the myth of material success, American dream, hard work.

A. Introduction

America is a dream land for everyone who wants to live successfully. Every American citizen has desire to be successful because they believe that success will give happiness in their life. They work very hard because they believe that by working hard they will reach success. For most of Americans, success itself means material success, such as owning well-known brand of cars, owning nice and big house in elite area, luxurious jewellery, having big salary, having much money, and so on. As it is written in *Popular culture: An Introduction Text*:

they worked hard, rose through the ranks, and were rewarded by fame and or fortune. And that is the American myth of success. With hard work comes achievement, and with achievements comes the material comforts of the American Dream and sometimes even great riches and a place in history. (Nachbar and Lause, 1992: 135)

From the statement above, it can be seen that by hard working people will reach good fortune and fame and result in wealth. For Americans, being wealthy means holding the power, status, and respect. Those are what the people dream in their life. These rewards come to those who deserve them, who have the drive and ambition to attain them.

One of popular successful businessman in America is Sam Walton. He was included in *Time Magazine's* list of 100 most influential people of the 20th Century. He was honored for all his pioneering efforts in retail in March 1992, when he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President George H. W. Bush. *Forbes* magazine ranked Sam Walton as the richest man in the United States. In 1992 he wrote his biography entitled *Sam Walton: Made in America-My Story*. It reveals his true story of a poor town boy who became the richest businessman in America.

According to Abram, a biography is recognized as a literary work because it is regarded as a piece of documentary evidences which is believed to be product of the author's perception, thought, and feeling. Abram in *the Mirror and the Lamp* states that "A work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling and embodying the combined product of a poet's perception, thought, and feeling" (Abrams, 1975: 23).

Sam Walton worked very hard to reach American dream and finally he attained success in his life. He communicated the inspiration, heart, virtues, and optimism that drove him to reach his dream. He grew up and everyone could see how determined he was to succeed and as time passed he went from a poor town boy to the richest man in the world.

In America, beliefs and values that exist in the society cannot be separated from the existence of myth because myth is the foundation for the development of the beliefs and values in the society. Considering that the Sam Walton's biography is about how hard Sam Walton's struggle, ambition, success, wealth, virtues, and popularity, the clearest aspect of popular culture contained in Sam Walton's biography is about American myth of material success. Therefore, it will be very interesting to dig up further the American myth of material success as reflected in Sam Walton's biography, *Sam Walton: Made in America, My Story*.

B. Research Method

1. Data Collection

The data are stated in the form of words or sentences. The source of data that was employed in this research was Sam Walton's biography, *Sam Walton: Made in America, My Story*. It was written by Sam Walton and John Huey in 1992 and was published in New York by Dobleday.

The main source of data of this research were taken from Sam Walton's statements that expressed his ideas, opinions, feelings, thoughts, and his struggle from he was poor boy until he became a successful business and the richest man in America. While the supporting data were taken from other sources like books, essays, websites, articles, etc. which could support the analysis.

Collecting and analyzing data were done by the researcher at the same time. As stated in *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif* written by H.B. Sutopo: "...dalam penelitian kualitatif proses analisis sudah harus dilakukan pada bersamaan dengan pengumpulan data. Bilamana hal itu tidak dilakukan maka akibatnya peneliti akan banyak menghadapi kesulitan karena banyaknya data yang berupa deskripsi kalimat" (Sutopo, 2002:97).

The first step, the researcher started reading the source of data, Sam Walton's biography, *Sam Walton: Made in America, My Story* by Sam Walton and John Huey, published by Dobleday in New York in 1992 repeatedly and carefully in order to have deeper understanding and to find out a common issue that was reflected in this biography. The second step was analyzing data by taking notes of the main data related to the issue and finding and analyzing other resources considered as supporting data. The last step was drawing conclusion.

2. Analysis

Success in America is associated with the realization of the American Dream component. Marsden argued that the lavish array of material objects, which are the components of the American Dream (Marsden in Nachbar and Lause, 1992: 135). Materialistic view of life which is defined as a view that measures everything based on physical appearance, such as big and

luxurious house, expensive car, luxurious jewelers, and so on, motivate the Americans to get what they want in anyway. Both materialism concept and materialistic view of life is strongly influence the Americans to ignore their norms and values in achieving their material comforts.

The American people regard money as the most important thing in their life. In their mind, material is the most invisible thing to get happiness. As a result, twentieth century American success mythology fragments into a series of mythological which define riches as a satisfaction of psychological rather than material needs.

As stated in the book of *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, from the beginnings through the early twentieth century, the American myth of success has been orchestrated around five basic beliefs which have served as recurring motifs: 1) American democracy allows its citizens to rise above any limitations into which they may have been born; 2) hard work brings riches and physical comforts; 3) these rewards come to those who are deserving of them (virtuous) and who; 4) have the drive and ambition to attain them plus; 5) a modicum of good luck (Marsden in Nachbar and Lause, 1992: 144). Those five basic beliefs will be discussed as follows:

a. American democracy allows its citizens to rise above any limitations into which they may have been born

This first belief of the American myth of material success actually inspires those who may have been born in limitation to rise above their life and decide independently what kind of man they want to be. Since in the Declaration of Independence is stated that “all men are created equal”, all American citizens have a deep faith that all citizens have equal value in certain innate rights, such as life, liberty, and the pursuit happiness. They have innate right to decide and to do everything for their own life and their own destinies. Thus they independently make up their own minds about whatever their dreams in the future.

Living in limitation is a common phenomenon in America because not all Americans are born and live in prosperous life. There are some of them live in the limitation. Sam Walton was one of them who lived in limitation. This part discusses about how Sam Walton aware of his limitation, how he tried to rise above his limitation, and how his limitation could not be his adverse circumstance to keep attaining many achievements at school and college.

The Great Depression in 1930s was a pretty hard time for Americans. Mass unemployment was the common phenomenon and the biggest problem of the nation. Many people lived in the limitation and they had to be able to keep on their life during that time. The real phenomenon was experienced by Sam Walton and his family. As stated in his biography, *Sam Walton: Made in America-My Story*, during his childhood, Sam Walton and his family often lacked of food because his parents often did not have enough money for buying some food. A portrait of his limitation can be seen in the following sentence: “One day Dad traded his wristwatch for a hog, so we would have food on the table” (Walton and Huey, 199: 3).

The limitation teaches people to be strong to face any problems in his life. Their condition enforces them to be creative in the ways of earning money. This phenomenon was experienced by Sam Walton. As stated in Sam Walton’s biography, *Sam Walton: Made in America-My Story*: “I started selling magazine subscriptions, probably as young as seven or eight years old, and I had paper routes from the seventh grade all the way through college. I raised and sold rabbits and pigeons too, nothing unusual for country boys of that era“(Walton and Huey, 1992: 4). It is clear that because of his limitation, Sam Walton was forced to learn from a very early age. He thought that it was important for him to help providing for his family to be a contributor rather than just a taker in his family. He helped his family earning money by himself and be an

independent kid. He learned about how to get his hands on a dollar and what he just did actually was worth thing for his future life.

b. Hard work brings riches and physical comforts.

This second recurring motif in the myth of material success is actually interrelated with the first motif. It means that everyone who wants to be successful in America have to experience the second recurring motif in the myth of material success. It is hard work. People have to work hard to rise above any limitation which they may have been born and to reach their dreams. By hard working, it will bring them into riches and physical comforts. Thus the harder they work the more money they will get. This subchapter discusses about how hard Sam Walton started and worked in retailing business; and as the result he attained success in America and owned riches and physical comforts.

Most of American people spend the time for working thus they become workaholic. American citizens use the term workaholic to describe a person addicted to work, one who spends as much time as possible on the job and seems to think of little else. Hard work sometimes makes people have no enough time to take a rest. Their hard workings even make them ignore exhaustion that they feel in their body. Though they get exhaustion, they keep going to enforce themselves to work. The high spirit to work harder and harder was reflected in Sam Walton. He had been working as hard as he ever worked in his life. He was always spirited and he always had lots of energy to reach success. As it is stated in *Sam Walton: Made in America-My Story*, “We did everything. We would wash windows, sweep floors, trim windows. We did all the stockroom work, checked the freight in. Everything it took to run a store. We had to keep expenses to a minimum. That is where it started, years ago. Our money was made by controlling expenses” (Walton and Huey, 1992: 28).

In America, wealth means power, social status, and respect. The more money or wealth that one has, the higher status that one gets. Thus American citizens try hard to make better change for their social status. This phenomenon was experienced by Sam Walton. Working with true dedication, integrity, responsibility and full concentration in running his retailing business made Sam Walton became the richest man in the world who lived in “the world of wealth”. As stated in the following article:

In 1998, Walton was included in *Time Magazine's* list of 100 most influential people of the 20th Century. *Forbes* ranked Sam Walton as the richest man in the United States from 1985 to 1988, ceding the top spot to John Kluge in 1989 when the editors began to credit Walton's fortune jointly to him and his four children-S. Robson "Rob" Walton, John T. Walton, Jim Walton, and Alice Walton (Bill Gates first headed the list in 1992, the year Walton died). The Walton family held 5 spots in the top 10 richest people in the United States until 2005. If alive today, Sam Walton would be the world's wealthiest person, twice as rich as Bill Gates. Walton was also honoured for all his pioneering efforts in retail in March 1992, when he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President George H. W. Bush. (Walton and Huey, 1992: 80).

In America, most of its citizens tend to value everything with material. Since material has double function in the modern era, their hunger in money gave them a predicate of “money lover”. They regarded money as the most important thing in their life. In their mind, material is the most invisible thing to get happiness. They regarded the function of money is a symbol and measurement of one who achieves success. In their mind, money comes to be measured not only for the goods it will buy, but as symbolic evidence of success and thereby of personal worth.

c. These rewards come to those who are deserving of them (virtuous)

Success is not only able to provide someone richness, physical comfort and popularity, but he can also reach high achievements from the community. All those rewards do not come to everybody in America. Those rewards only come to those who are deserving of them (virtuous).

Money is not only regarded as the provider of their happiness, comfort, and luxurious life, but also as the determiner of social status. With money, one can also help others in happiness, kindness, and virtuous. This phenomenon was experienced by Sam Walton. His hard working not only brought him to be rich and enjoy many of pleasure, comfort, and luxurious life, but it also led him to be powerful in America. His wealth became 'his power' to do everything he wanted. He spent 'his power' (wealth) not only for himself and his family but also for many people. He helped many people who needed financial contribution. As stated in *Sam Walton, Made in America-My Story*, Sam Walton gave financial contribution for a lot of educational institutions, church groups and community projects like zoos, libraries, and recreation facilities. He supported hospitals and medical research programs. He funded arts groups and theatre groups and symphonies. He gave to conservation and environmental causes and veterans' group, as well as to economic development groups and free enterprise groups. He supported public schools and private schools. He supported such groups as the Citizens Against Government Waste, Students in Free Enterprise, and the Arkansas Business Council which the society around here insist on calling "The Good Suit Club" (Walton and Huey, 1992: 235).

d. These rewards come to who have the drive and ambition to attain them

One who wants to be successful in America has to experience the fourth basic beliefs of the myth of material success. It is the drive and ambition. One has to be able to set his mind to the drive and ambition to achieve success in America. Sam Walton could set his mind very well to the drive and ambition since he was kid. He always tried to be the best he could at whatever he took on. He had always pursued everything he was interested in with a true passion to win. He had always held the pretty high for himself that he had extremely high personal goals in his life. As stated in his biography, *Sam Walton: Made in America-My Story*, as follows:

I don't know what causes a person to be ambitious, but it is a fact that I have been over blessed with drive and ambition from the time I hit the ground. Our mother was extremely ambitious for her kids. She read a lot and loved education, although she didn't have too much herself. She went to college for a year before she quit to get married, and maybe to compensate for that, she just ordained from the beginning that I would go to college and make something of myself (Walton and Huey, 1992: 11)

It is clear that when Sam Walton felt a certain way, he was relentless. He would just wear you out. He would bring up an idea. His mind worked faster than everybody else. If he got something in his mind that needs to be done, regardless of what might have planned and the new idea takes priority, it would be done soon.

e. A modicum of good luck

As stated in the previous chapter, the last belief which serves as recurring motifs in American myth of success said that success comes to those who deserve a modicum of good luck. The good luck factor is helpful for someone in reaching his success in America. Actually, it actually can not be received by all of the people. It only comes by chance to some of them who work hard. This phenomenon was also experienced in Sam Walton's life. Sam was a hard worker who had a great optimism, drive, ambition, and strong will in reaching his dreams. His efforts made him a lucky man who deserved good luck. As seen in the Sam Walton's biography, *Sam Walton: Made in America-My Story*, one day in 1945, by chance he met Tom Bates, his old friend when they were

kids in Shelbina. They had never met for long years. They met again in St. Lois. At that time Tom was working in the shoe department of Butler Brothers. Tom gave a chance for Sam to own business because Tom thought that Sam was qualified person to have a chance to own retail business. Then he explained to Sam much information about Butler Brothers. Actually, Butler Brothers was a regional retailer with two franchise operations: *Federated Stores*, a chain of small department stores, and *Ben Franklin*, a chain of variety stores, what was called “*five and dimes*” or “*dime store*”. Tom motivated him to take that chance to run business on Butler Brother’s franchise in Newport, Arkansas (Walton and Huey, 1992: 20-21).

From Sam Walton’s biography, *Sam Walton: Made in America-My Story*, it could be seen that the American myth of material success were reflected in Sam Walton’s efforts and strong will in attaining success in America. Those beliefs were: 1) Having a strong will to be successful man in America, Sam Walton was aware that the American democracy allowed its citizens to rise above any limitation in which they may have been born; 2) Then, he rose up from his limitation by hard work. His hard work successfully brought him to the riches and physical comforts; 3) He believed that those rewards came to those who were deserving of them (virtuous); 4) He also believed that those rewards came to those who had the drive and ambition to attain them. Therefore, he was optimistic to attain success in America; 5) Hard work to attain success made Sam Walton a lucky man who received good luck in his life. As a result, his dream of being a successful man in America came true.

C. Conclusion

In America, the meaning of success experiences shift of change. It does not lie on the spiritual matter anymore, but it is based on material achievement. In the Puritan era, people had to work for God. While in the twentieth century, people work for himself. Thus American success is measured with how much material possessions they own.

Through Sam Walton’s biography, *Sam Walton: Made in America-My Story*, it was clear that in the period of free trade where Americans were interested in achieving riches and physical comforts, the American myth of material success became the most influential factor in motivating, supporting, and inspiring American citizens in realizing their dream.

The myth of material success in America which says that hard work will brings someone to a better life and good fortune in shape of wealth, money, fame, and power, has been orchestrated around five basic beliefs which served as recurring motifs in American society. Those five basic beliefs can be seen as follows:

1. The first basic belief is American democracy allows its citizens to rise above any limitation in which they may have been born. Sam Walton was one with his limitation who had strong wish to be successful man in America. Since the Declaration of Independence allowed American citizens to reach their dreams by their own ways, it actually inspires Sam Walton to rise up from his limitation.
2. The second belief is hard work brings riches and physical comforts. Sam Walton was aware that not all people could enjoy and experience all the riches and physical comforts offered in the modern living. Therefore, he had to work hard for his entire his life as he believed that hard work brought riches and physical comforts.
3. The third basic belief is those rewards come to those who are deserving of virtuous. Sam Walton worked hard with virtuous of the community and his associates. As a result he achieved awards from many people.

4. The fourth belief is those rewards come to those who have the drive and ambition to attain them. Sam Walton actually always had the strong will and ambition to achieve success in America.
5. The last basic belief is a modicum of good luck. Sam Walton's hard work to attain success made him a lucky man who by chance received the good luck in his life. As a result, his dream of being a successful man in America came true.

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