

A DISCOURSE ON THE MALAY CULTURAL IDENTITY WITHIN THE MALAYSIAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The Malays are the main ethnic group of Malaysia, representing 50.4% of the total population and 63.1% of the population distribution in Peninsular Malaysia. They are among the identified bumiputera, together with the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and indigenous groups in Sarawak and Sabah. This discourse study relates to the cultural identity of the Malays and investigates their ethics and values from social constructionist approaches. Cultural identity includes the cultural background, religion/spirituality and socialisation. This research concurs with other studies that the Malay culture was characterised by a mix of animism, Hinduism and Buddhism, although the Malays have been identified with Islam as their religion. There are still remnants of animistic and Hinduistic beliefs and practices in the Malay Muslim life, especially in the practice of adat. While adat is a cultural and legally-defined element of the Malays in identity, the foundation of Malay ethics and value system is budi-Islam, adab and akhlak.

Keywords: Malays, Malaysia, culture, identity, ethics, values

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian population is comprised of three major ethnic groups—the *bumiputera* (i.e., Malays and indigenous peoples), Chinese and Indian. These groups make up the total population by the proportions of 69.3%, 22.8% and 6.9%, respectively (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2019). The Malays are the predominant group

among the *bumiputera* and are mostly found in Peninsular Malaysia. Cumulatively, they are also referred to as the “son of the soil” (Milner 2011) together with the *orang asli* in Peninsular Malaysia as well as other indigenous ethnic groups such as Bidayuh, Kenyah, Kayan, Iban and Kelabit in Sarawak and the Murut, Kadazan/Dusun in Sabah.

Among the *bumiputera*, the Malay ethnic group may be regarded as the most progressive as they assume prominent political and administrative roles in the public sector, apart from critical positions in society as educators and professionals, not to mention, as successful entrepreneurs in the private sector (Khalidah 2019). However, socioeconomically, as an ethnic group, the Malays have always been the poorest compared with the Chinese and Indians since the 1957 Malayan independence. Latest statistics reveal that the Malays represent 50.4% of the total population of Malaysia (World Population Review n.d.) and 63.1% of the population distribution in Peninsular Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2020). They are therefore the nation’s majority population with political dominance.

Article 160 (Clause 2) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution legally defines a Malay as someone born to a Malaysian citizen who professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language, adheres to Malay customs and is domiciled in Malaysia or Singapore.

This interdisciplinary social science article will discursively deliberate on the Malay identity in Malaysia, an Islamic nation, from socio-historical and cultural dimensions and examines the values and ethics of the Malays. This study follows the social-constructionist approach to define the Malay cultural and ethical/value systems from ethical lenses. It therefore links culture with society, while attempting to define the base or foundation of Malay culture and ethical system in Malaysia. As the implicit and explicit standards of culture (Shaw 2008, 12) is one of the factors determining ethics, the study explores the origin and characteristics/personality traits of the Malays from socio-historical contexts with highlights on the factors that may have influenced their values during the pre-colonial and post-colonial periods, and to some extent till the present time. This study will hence not delve into the colonial period that has significantly impacted the Malay culture as well as the bureaucratic government machinery and administrative systems till today.

To elaborate further for clarity, the pre-colonial period was before the coming of the Portuguese, Dutch and British to the Malay Peninsula, namely, a period that was clearly defined as the Malay World, incorporating among others, the civilisations during the Sri Vijaya Empire and Melayu (i.e., Modern Jambi) Kingdom. The

colonial period was marked by the Portuguese conquest of Melaka, followed by the Dutch and finally, the British colonisation of the Malay Peninsula in the 18th century through signing of treaties with the Malay *sultan*¹, taking over the administration and development while relegating the Malay rulers to govern the Malay customs and religion. The post-colonial period generally covers the period from 1957 to the present. This period may also be specifically classified into four sub-periods: (1) Post-independence, 1957–1969; (2) the New Economic Policy era, 1970–1989; (3) the Reformation era, 1990–2009; and (4) the Transformation era, 2010 till the present. For further details, readers may refer to Abdul Rahman (1996) and the Malaysia plans.

Throughout this study, the terms Malay or Malays, Malay ethnic or Malay community/society refer to the Malay indigenous group among many other ethnic groups in Malaysia. These terms will be used to reflect the Malays as an object or identity to be studied in this research. Identity here refers to the sense of being which constitutes the individual or group sense of self (Noraslinda 2010).

This social science research, as an interdisciplinary discourse, integrates Malay history, culture and ethics disciplines (Islamic ethics included), in an attempt to frame the Malay culture and ethical/value system in Malaysia. The author hopes that this discourse will answer several contemporary socio-political issues on the definition of a Malay in Malaysia, although human rights principles are hotly debated in geopolitics through social media and other internet platforms. While conducting this study, among others, it is the author's aim to clarify on important aspects related to the Malays in Malaysia, so that the facts are effectively communicated to all Malaysians, in order to strengthen racial unity within a multicultural society, enhance sense of respect for diversities and promote nation building at large. This discourse will transparently investigate and highlight the arguments from legal perspectives to define a Malay in Malaysia; the majority population of Peninsular Malaysia and the main *bumiputera* group of Malaysia.

Most, if not all Malaysian Malays will claim that Islam is their religion. Considering the above fact, this discourse will also be a source of reference for the younger generations' character building since it highlights the features and characteristics of a Malay in identity, being Muslims in faith, while westernisation, liberalisation and universalisation continue to be intensely promoted in the globalisation era, challenging local cultures and traditions (Mohd. Abbas 2011a; Peow 2011; Khalidah 2019).

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Research on the Malays is diverse in the last decades. Several sociocultural and business ethics studies related to the Malays have been undertaken to highlight their values from various perspectives including culture, religion and business acumen (cf. Wan Norhasniah and Ong 2013; Wan Norhasniah 2011; Suryani, Marlyna and Noraini 2012; Muhammad 2009; Faizah 2008; Rahayu 2012; Zawawi 2008). Detailed contemporary studies have also been conducted to develop family well-being indicators and an Islamic framework to relate values with social problems in Malaysia, (i.e., implying the study is on the Malays) by applying quantitative research methodologies (cf. Noraini et al. 2014; Mohamed Aslam et al. 2001).

In addition, there has been a proliferation of academic works that seek to examine the history of “Malay identity” in the last few decades (Syed Muhd. Khairudin 2009). From the highly influential writings of Shamsul (1999; 2004) and Ariffin (1993) to the more recent and insightful collection of articles, postgraduate research and publications by the National University of Singapore academics (cf. Noorainn 2009; Noraslinda 2010), Malay identity will persist as a topic of scholarly interest and debate for many years to come; more so in the competitive global world, facilitated by information and communications technology (ICT). Globalisation has driven new ideologies such as universal pluralism and human rights, which have somewhat influenced national and cultural identities (Khalidah, Zulkufly and Lau 2018; Khalidah 2019; Mohd. Abbas 2011a).

Numerous studies have also been placed on the structuring effects of colonial discourses and policies upon the indigenous conceptions of Malay identity (Syed Husin 2008b; Shamsul 1996). In addition, discourses on Malay nationalism have been extensively investigated especially from political dimensions (cf. Roff 1967; Firdaus 1985; Ariffin 1993; Milner 1994).

However, as much as these are significant contributions to Malay discourses in outlining the changes taking place in their identity formation with capitalistic features (Shaharuddin 1988; Mahathir 1986) and globalisation shaping their minds and worldview (Mohd. Abbas 2011a; Khalidah 2019), limited studies have been initiated to examine Malay ethics and values within the context of Islam, their religion (Khalidah 2019). Moreover, the Malay identity in Malaysia within a multicultural Malaysian society is often challenged nowadays by socioeconomic and geopolitical factors, including globalisation which support among others, capitalist, human rights and universal pluralism ideologies (Khalidah, Zulkufly and Lau 2018; Khalidah 2019).

This interdisciplinary research investigates as a discourse the Malay origin, values and ethics to further define their cultural identity. Although this study will not cover Western/colonial influence on the Malay culture, (much as it recognises that British colonisation and westernisation/modernism may have to some significant extent influenced the Malay culture), it will create awareness and added understanding among the younger generations on the Malay identity within a global era supporting universalisation, liberalisation and westernisation that may challenge local cultures and traditions (Mohd. Abbas 2011a; Peow 2011). As a contribution, this study will form a base or foundation of the Malay cultural and ethical systems as it traces (1) their (Malay) origin, (2) cultural evolution/transformation, and (3) identity, being the main *bumiputera* group of Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study applies discourse analysis as a research technique. It also utilises library as well as online resources that are readily available on Malay studies to develop the discourse through textual analysis. Discourse analysis is the most commonly used approach within social constructionism (Phillips and Jorgenson 2002). The term “discourse” originates from a Medieval Latin word *discursus*, which means “to run to and fro” or “to run different ways.” Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries (n.d.) simply defines discourse as written or spoken communication or debate. Stubbs (1983) further defines it as a study that is concerned with language use beyond the boundaries of a sentence or utterance, inter-relationships between language and society which are concerned with the interactive or dialogue properties of everyday communication. Phillips and Jorgensen (2002), from a social constructionist perspective provide a broad definition of discourse as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)”. Therefore, a discourse is further described as a form of social action that plays a part in producing the social world – including knowledge, identities and social relations that maintain specific social patterns.

Discourse approaches are most often descriptive, interpretative and explanatory (Fairclough 1995; 2003). Analysis is often based on the author(s)’ perceptions and interpretations from his/her/their breadth and depth of cognitive knowledge and a whole range of situational factors, including the author’s belief system and the professional community to which the author belongs to (Snape and Spencer 2003). The researcher is therefore an instrument/tool in the discourse analysis, as he/she assumes the participant-researcher relationship, analysing dynamically within societal contexts from multidisciplinary approaches (Van Dijk 1998; 2009).

In this study, the author has played her participant-researcher role to describe, analyse and interpret the Malay cultural identity within the diverse Malaysian society based on texts and online resources.

THE MALAY ETHNIC GROUP IN IDENTITY: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The migration of the Malays from Southern China to the Malayan Peninsula happened a long time ago; estimated at 2500 to 1500 BC and their longest presence in the Malay Peninsular justifies the fact that they are the *bumiputera* community (Hirschman 1975, 115; Aida 2008), besides other indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak. Although their ancestors originated from Southern China, they sailed to Malaya through Indo-China, Siam (presently Thailand) and Indonesia and resplendently established their own identity and culture as Malays.

Nevertheless, subsequent contact between the Malays in the Malayan Peninsula (currently referred to as Peninsular Malaysia) and other ethnic groups were observed through religious missionaries and trade relations. Since the coming of the first Indian, Chinese and Arab ships prior to 1000 AD and later the Portuguese envoys in 1511, the Malays have always been exposed to a multitude of external influences in their political, economic and cultural practices (Aida 2008). As socialisation process is one of the significant environmental factors shaping ethical values (Shaw 2008; Khalidah, Rohani and Mashitah 2012), these backgrounds indeed imply that a myriad of sociocultural factors have contributed to the shaping of Malay identity and values they hold.

Historically, the traditional Malay society was feudal in nature, and in its structure of social stratification, this community was largely linked with the mode of production (Syed Husin 2008b, 9). The traditional Malays were mainly agriculturalists (particularly rice farming and fishing), although some primitive forms of tin mining were also practised (Syed Husin 2008b, 7). Farming does not lead to the establishment of large communities (Mahathir 1970, 35). Thus, the Malays tend to live in small villages or individual farms that support subsistence agriculture. The feudal structure of the Malay society was also not static (Syed Husin 2008b, 9). The glorious days of the Melaka Empire saw them as powerful and integrated, where the structure could be represented by a pyramid with the *sultan* at the top, the common people at the bottom and the major and minor chiefs in the middle, serving as political administrators, regulators and mediators. However, with the fall of Melaka to the Portuguese in 1511 right up

to the 19th century before the British rule, the feudal structure disintegrated with dispersal of power among rulers, each of them forming various apexes of a small series of pyramids (ibid.).

Nevertheless, as an ethnic group, they were equally adventurous. Historically, the Malays were competent boatmen, seafarers and craftsmen specialising in metallurgy. The Malays are/were not only found in Malaysia. They also live in Indonesia, Brunei and southern parts of the Philippines. Many also settled in Singapore, Southern Thailand and Cambodia. Some even migrated from South-East Asia to South Africa, Australia and Great Britain (Muhammad 2009, 52).

The rise of the Malays, as reflected by the Sri Vijaya Empire, Melayu Kingdom and Melaka Empire saw them as effective leaders, administrators and traders driving their social institutions and forming kingdoms with might, power and glory (Khalidah 2020). The Melaka Empire was founded in 1400 AD. Being an entrepot, it is the theatre of global trading, forming interactions with other civilisations. Through these exchanges, representatives of all the civilisations of Asia entered into contact with the Malay society. They left a part of themselves, as can be seen in the great stylistic diversity of the religious and commercial artefacts which have been found in the area (Hergoualc'h 2001).

Relating to religion and beliefs, the Proto-Malays practised animism, a common feature of the indigenous groups of Malaysia till today. Under the Sri Vijayan Empire (inclusive of the Malay Archipelago), Hinduism and Buddhism were the religions of the society then (Muhammad 2009; Khalidah 2019). The glorious Melaka empire adopted Islam as the religion of the people and took a stronghold as the main religion during the Melaka sultanate.

Interestingly, Islam actually came even earlier to the Malayan Peninsula particularly in the early 7th century (Arnold 1997; Gladney 1987) through the Arab merchants. With Islam, the Malay ethnic group had been introduced to the concept of monotheism and became conscious of the Islamic worldview and ethical system within the animistic and “mixed” (such as Hinduistic and Buddhist beliefs) cultural features.

A review of socio-historical factors suggests that although Islam is well understood as the religion of the Malay ethnic group, different religious influences have also been observed; shaping the Malay culture and values (Muhammad 2009, 54; Winstedt 1992). Malay civilisation had gone through various stages of beliefs, beginning with primitive animism, followed by Hinduism and Buddhism. “All

these differences have, either directly or indirectly, influenced how they (i.e., the Malays) perceive the creation of the world, natural phenomena, creation of man, issues in mind and body or the concept of the soul” (Lim 2003).

Placing in context of the Malay culture, directly or indirectly, cross-cultural influences are bound to emerge within the Malay community. As much as they embrace Islam as a religion, Malay civilisation is pluralistic in nature. Through the interactions with other civilisations especially along the Straits of Malacca, the Malays have reconstructed, reinvented and redefined their parameters of identity and culture. This was much influenced by the strategic geographical location of the Straits of Malacca which acted as the main contributor to the enriched Malay culture and civilisation, including the “indianisation” of the Malay culture (Winstedt 1961; Muhammad 2009; Khalidah 2019). Quoting from Winstedt (1961, 3), “even before the 4th century, Malaya had been visited by Indian traders. In the later years, they were followed by the Brahmins and the monks. It was here that the Indian religions made contact with the animistic Malay pagans.”

Hence, it is unsurprising that Ahmad Murad (2006), strongly viewed that “there is not so much the Malay ‘mind’ as a category – there is *budi* – as embodying a network of Malay thought operating within the Malay *weltanschauung* (i.e., worldview). There is not one mind, but many minds and rationalities.” Aptly, the Malay identity and culture have absorbed other civilisations, with Islam being the most significant and the most internalised influence as the predominant religion of the Malays.

THE MALAY RACE AS DEFINED IN THE MALAYSIAN FEDERAL CONSTITUTION

To reiterate the earlier stated definition, Article 160 (Clause 2) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution legally defines a Malay as someone born to a Malaysian citizen who professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language, adheres to Malay customs and is domiciled in Malaysia or Singapore. Indeed, “the Malays are among the few people whose race is legally defined” (Mahathir 2008) due to their political dominance in Malaysia (Milner 2011, 2; Siddique 1981, 77).

The Malays embrace Islam as their religion and are always associated with their faith and beliefs in Islamic principles (Hussin 1993; Singh 2001; Muhammad 2009). In fact, Article 11 (Clause 4) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution does not allow others to induce Malays to leave Islam. The consequences are serious when

a Malay leaves his religion even of his own volition (Syed Husin 2008a). Malay citizens who convert out of Islam are no longer considered Malay under the law. Consequently, the *bumiputera* privileges afforded to Malays under Article 153 of the Constitution are forfeited for such converts.

The inclusion of religion in the constitutional definition of a Malay in Malaysia therefore differs from the views of Malay activists who virtually regard the whole population of Indonesia (at least to the Western part of Papua) and most of the people of Philippines as Malays (Milner 2011, 1). Due to the Islamic requirement to define a Malay in Malaysia, this evidently excludes the vast majority of Filipinos – some of whom continue to express a strong “Malay consciousness” (Salazar 1998; Milner 2011, 2). It is clear that they cannot be legally regarded as Malays in accordance to the Malaysian Federal Constitution since they are Christians. Interestingly, although the Malaysian Federal Constitution includes those residing in Singapore as Malays, it has been found that certain Singaporean Malays as well as the Christian Batak from Sumatra are non-Muslims. While in Malaysia, Islamic religion is a requirement to define a Malay, adherence to Islam has not been a criterion for being “Malay” in the Singapore census process (Lily Zubaidah 1998, 81; Milner 2011, 1); a contrast with the practice in Malaysia.

Aptly, these contrasts are due to different sets of laws and legislations of nations. Alternatively, this may be suggestive that Singapore and Indonesia fully support human rights principles as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) that freedom of religion is a general right. In Malaysia, the Federal Constitution is still the highest level of law although Malaysia supports human rights principles. Furthermore, Islam is the official religion of Malaysia as gazetted in the Federal Constitution. Hence, the Federal Constitution provisions will override human rights principles if they conflict with the said laws, not to mention the *syariah* laws and principles themselves.

Compared with other ethnic groups, the Malays in Malaysia have always been linked with Islam as their religion. Islam, derived from the word *salema* promotes peace, purity, submission and obedience to Allah the Almighty. As Muslims and Islamic believers, they are expected to religiously adhere to the five fundamental Islamic pillars, the six principles of *iman* (i.e., a quranic term for faith) and develop the noble value of *takwa* (i.e., piety; God-consciousness or fear of God); a foundation to Islamic ethics (Green 2008; Khalidah, Rohani and Mashitah 2012).

Muslims are also taught to internalise and practise *ihsan* (benevolence; being kind and helpful), a value deeply associated with compassion, justice and rights. As Muslims and believers of Islam, the Malays are expected to enculturate the

Islamic worldview principles that set the foundation of the Islamic ethical system, i.e., *tauhid* (monotheism or unity of God), *takwa* (God-consciousness or piety), *khalifah* (vicegerent or leader) and *'abd* (servant) of Allah SWT (Syed Othman and Aidit 1994; Khalidah, Rohani and Mashitah 2014; Khalidah 2019).

Aptly, there is a highly significant connection between the Malay ethnic group and Islam (Hussin 1993; Muhammad 2009). As religion is inclusive in cultural contexts and dimensions, this highly significant connection implicates the centrality and dominance of Islam in the Malay culture. Islam, therefore, should in principle shape the consciousness of ethics and integrity of the Malay Muslims in Malaysia.

THE MALAY CULTURE IN CONCEPTS AND NARRATIVES

Every society has its unique cultural features. Culture, a broad terminology, is a set of norms, values and beliefs of a particular group or community (Hofstede 1980) and from Western perspectives, it covers a wide spectrum of one's life; from religion to rituals as well as language and ethnic group membership (Suryani, Marlyna and Noraini 2012) including ideas, morality and lifestyles (Eberle 1992). It is the "programming of the mind that differentiates one group from another group."

Culture certainly links with a group's or society's civilisation. To recall, the Malay civilisation had gone through various stages of beliefs, beginning with primitive animism, followed by Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam (Winstedt 1992; Lim 2003; Syed Husin 2008b, 57; Muhammad 2009, 54; Milner 2011, 11; Muhaimin 2010; Wan Norhasniah 2011). An in-depth analysis reveals that there are three main elements of the Malay culture: *adat*, Malay language and Islam (Muhammad 2009). *Adat* in other words, the Malay custom or Malay customary law is a word borrowed from the Arabic terminology that brings the meaning for right conduct (Buxbaum 1968) as well as ritual in its linguistic form (Wan Norhasniah 2011). Referring to Britannica (n.d.) and Encyclopedia.com (n.d.), *adat* means custom, customary law, customary behaviour, proper behaviour and courtesy. The Federal Constitution's mention of "Malay custom," (i.e., *adat*), is frequently portrayed as integral to "being Malay", (Milner 2011, 4), apart from their mother tongue, Malay language and Islam as a religion (Collin 1998).

To re-emphasise, all these three features define the Malay ethnic as an identity, not only from cultural perspectives but from a legal definition as stipulated by Article 160 (Clause 2) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution. The Malay culture

rightly symbolises all the social and cultural features that are characteristically or distinctively Malay (Peletz 1987; Muhammad 2009).

Considering the varied socio-historical influences that came during several phases of Malay civilisation, their cultural rituals and practices may not only reflect Islamic teachings but also animistic, Hindu and Buddhist features that may be inconsistent, and to a certain extent, violating Islamic teachings; yet they represent the Malay culture. In addition, due to the various social/mental revolution and cultural transformation experienced by the Malays, these changes had stripped away many feudal values which are still prevalent in other indigenous groups (Milner 2011). The colonial period introduced Western ethics and civilisational values that separate the state (politics) from religion. Although this article will not cover colonial influence on the Malays, it does acknowledge that the Malay *adat*, (which comprises of *adab*, *adat resam* and *adat istiadat*) are being redefined and later reconstructed in the post-colonial period due to colonial influence, especially under the British rule.

This interdisciplinary study's focus, to reiterate, covers the pre-colonial and post-colonial periods; aimed at defining the Malay cultural identity as well as develop their ethical/value system that may include cultural components and elements such as *adat*. Hence, the next sub-section will continue to discursively elaborate on *adat* as a discourse in an attempt to further define the Malay culture and ethical system.

Adat as the Indigenous Core of the Malay Culture: A Perspective

Adat is integral to being a Malay in identity (Milner 2011) and applies to a variety of things that are all connected with proper social behaviour (Buxbaum 1968). It may conceptually be framed into three components or elements such as *adab*, *adat resam* and *adat istiadat*. *Adab* is the value-based character building that relates to *akhlak*, morality and ethics (This will be elaborated in the next sub-section as a discourse). *Adat resam* refers to the daily practices of the Malays in every aspect of life. On the other hand, *adat istiadat* is the customary law, the protocol and the formal rule of the Malay community in specific events, occasions and situations.

At a glance, *adat*, as a central concept, may also be interpretatively related to ethics and morality. However, a pertinent point needs to be highlighted. Although *adat* is a key element of the Malay culture, it is insufficient to give cultural meanings or moral force (Muhammad 2009) as it refers to different meanings and it is the middle of social consensus and moral style (Clifford 1983; Muhammad 2009). *Adat*, as a norm and a living law at a certain time in a certain place, is versatile and adaptable to social needs. As such, it is not suitable for codification (Muhammadrorfee 2013); more so in conceptualising ethics from moral objectivism dimensions.

In addition, while *adat* may well be regarded as customary that is uniquely “Malay”, there are also practices that are esoteric (i.e., connections with the invisibles/spirits) with beliefs in supernatural powers of the *bomoh* (shamans) and *pawang* (shamanic specialists), significance of certain tree trunks, special graves (*keramat*) and so forth (Syed Husin 2008b). These practices relate to the *adat resam* of the Malays in tradition.

The peasant Malays, before the 1957 Malayan independence and until 1970, mostly stayed in the rural areas and mainly practised paddy farming and fishing for livelihoods. They had extensively practised the *adat resam* that conflict with Islamic monotheism and compromise *akidah* (i.e., Islamic religious belief system). For example, the consultation and use of *pawang* and *bomoh* to resolve daily problems, the recitation of *jampi serapah* (mantra) with references to *dewa dewi* (deity), the *puja* (worship) of deadly spirits before the *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) show, the *ulek mayang* dance to appease or invoke the spirits of the sea (so that the sea is calm and fishermen can safely conduct fishing in the waters as a livelihood) and other traditional Malay practices such as *mandi Safar* (a special bath to drive away potential misfortunes for the year); not to mention the visit to the grave of the *keramat* to request for some wishes to be fulfilled. These traditional practices violate the fundamental Islamic principles of *iman* (faith) to develop *takwa* and may be classified as *syirik* (i.e., shirk).

Much as these had remained as features in the “Malay way of life”, the educated modern Malays limitedly apply *adat* compared with the pre-1957 Malay community and of early post-independence periods (the 1960s until 1970). The practice of *adat* as rituals was much criticised by prominent Malay intelligentsia and elites beginning from the 1970s (i.e., the period when Malaysia was industrialising and modernising), including the knowledgeable religious teachers and *dakwah* groups in Malaysia, that followed the strong resurgence of Islam after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The practice of *adat*, especially *adat resam* had been deliberated in multiple publications, including the critical writings of Mahathir (1970) and several articles from renowned Malay scholars in the *Dewan Masyarakat* magazine from the 1970s and 1980s (Khalidah 2019).

Nevertheless, from a broader legal outlook, until today, there are two different systems of *adat* in Malaysia that are still practised by the Malay communities, that is *Adat Temenggong* (Muhammad 2009) and *Adat Papatih*, that is more confined and practised in the state of Negeri Sembilan (cf. Parr and Mackray 1910; Peletz 1987). These two forms of *adat* are the kinship systems found in the Malay society that reflect the non-patriarchal nature of the Malays (i.e., the decision-making process may not necessarily be male-dominant).

Adat istiadat is still a feature of the Malay community and predominantly practised at the royal palaces of the Malay state rulers in Malaysia during formal occasions such as the appointment of new rulers (the *sultan*) to the throne, weddings and death ceremonies. More examples of *adat istiadat* is the presentation and exchange of the *tepak sirih*² during a Malay engagement ceremony, the *majlis renjis*³ to bless a newly-wed couple and *mandi bersiram*⁴ for a newly appointed *sultan* and the *permaisuri*.⁵

In addition, there are also *pantun* and *perbilangan* (customary sayings) that politically and socially deal with a wide aspect of the Malay life (Tengku Lukman 2001; Wan Norhasniah 2011). These are commonly classified as *adat* as well, in its aesthetic form.

This discourse has deliberated on *adat* as a fundamental cultural element in defining a Malay in Malaysia, next to Malay language as their mother tongue and Islam as their religion. Along with Islam, Malay *adat* has been given clear recognition by the Constitution. *Adat* is entwined with Islamic law. In some states such as Negeri Sembilan, *adat* displaces the *syariah* in family law matters (Raihana 2007).

Between the three elements of *adat*, *adab* is unique as it is not solitary in its internalisation compared to *adat resam* and *adat istiadat*. Indeed, the concept of *adab* in the Malay society has been assimilated with rooted “religion-based” moral and ethical concepts such as *akhlak*, *budi* and *budi-Islam*.

Akhlak, Adab, Budi and Budi-Islam Within the Malay Culture

Akhlak is an Arabic word with the meaning, to create, to shape and to give form (McDonough 1984; Khalidah, Rohani and Mashitah 2010). *Akhlak*, from an Islamic perspective and in a broad sense, subsumes all actions that are characterised as *amal soleh* (virtuous deed) in the terminology of the Quran. It therefore refers to the practice of virtue, morality and manners in Islamic philosophy. The internalisation of *akhlak* is vital as it serves as a foundation for the preservation of one’s beliefs, values, faith and culture (Khadijah and Habsah 2013). Ibn Miskawayh, a famous ethicist, in his profound book, *Tahdib al-Akhlaq* defines *akhlak* as a “state of the soul which moves it toward action without a need for reflection or deliberation. The first state is natural and is part of one’s disposition. The second state relates to training and habituation. Although *akhlak* may originally be a product of reflection and deliberation, it eventually becomes a character trait.”

Imam al-Ghazali also advocated similar viewpoints. While discussing ethics in *Ihya Ulumuddin*, he defined *akhlak* as a term for a firmly entrenched form in the soul from which actions emanate with ease and facility, without need for reflection or deliberation. In so much as this form of the soul produces beautiful and praiseworthy actions by the measures of reason and the *syariah*, it is called good character and in so much as it produces repugnant actions, it is called bad character.

Al-Ghazali further emphasised that action or behaviour can be analysed from four levels : (i) directed towards God, (ii) fellow human beings, (iii) other members of creation and (iv) one's individual self. While all actions will ultimately relate to the first level (directed towards God), in many ways character traits are far more related to the fourth category (i.e., an individual's strife for purifying the soul from vice and beautifying it with virtue) (Mohamed Aslam et al. 2001).

For Muslims of *iman*, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is the role model for character building. The Quran reveals, "Indeed, you are of lofty character" (al-Qalam: 4) (Quran Reading n.d.). Referring to relevant *hadis* (Prophet Muhammad SAW's traditions), Abu Huraira (ra) narrated that the Prophet said, "I have not been sent as a Messenger, except to perfect character (*akhlak*)." The Prophet also said, "The nearest of you to me on the Day of Judgement will be the one who is best in character" (Sahih Al Bukhari, cited in Al Sheikh Muhammad Jamaluddin 2012). In sum, Islam views ethics as the action of the body and the soul. It therefore deals with character development or *akhlak*. *Akhlak* is hence synonymous with ethics that assesses what is rightful and wrongful from moral perspectives based on objectivistic religious principles (Khalidah, Zulkuffly and Lau 2018; Khalidah 2019).

Adab, on the other hand, is defined as the code of personal conduct, which is expected of an individual in his relationship with others (Tham 1971; Wan Norhasniah 2011). It relates to one's good behaviour and actions while interacting with others. For example, in demonstrating the Malay *adab*, a youngster walking in front of an elderly person is expected to lower his/her body as a sign of respect. Another example of *adab* is that individuals need to listen, be cautious with words and speech and show tolerance towards others irrespective of differences and diversities. In fact, a person is not acting in *adab* if he or she raises his/her voice when communicating with others; especially parents and the elders.

Interestingly, the word *adab* is not fully translatable from Arabic to English (*Adab in Islam* n.d.). It encompasses all the good things a Muslim must do. *Adab* is

natural; it is not really taught, or learnt, but it is naturally developed. Children aptly acquire *adab* from their parents, students from their teachers and the young from the elders.

However, Syed Muhammad Naquib (2001) relates *adab* with the world of education. Syed Muhammad Naquib (1993) explains that *adab* is a reflection of wisdom and comes from the knowledge of the prophets; not necessarily from the universities. “*Adab* is acting in conformity of the justice; the culmination of all virtues” (Syed Muhammad Naquib 1980). “An educated man is a good man, and by ‘good’ he means a man possessing *adab* in its full inclusive sense. A man of *adab* (*insan adabi*) is defined as the one who is sincerely conscious of his responsibilities towards the true God; who understands and fulfils his obligations to himself and others in his society with justice, and who constantly strives to improve every aspect of himself towards perfection as a man of *adab* [*insan adabi*]” (ibid.).

Interestingly as well, Imam Zakariya al-Anbari once said, “Knowledge without *adab* is like fire without wood and *adab* without knowledge is like spirit without body” (Adab in Islam n.d.). This quote truly highlights that knowledge alone is insufficient to build a sound and balanced Islamic personality. An individual may possess a lot of knowledge but lacks *adab*. Conversely, he or she may have a high level of *adab* but lacks knowledge. Seriously, although knowledge is pertinent, it is *adab* that holds the greater value and importance. Syed Muhammad Naquib (1993), has forthrightly opined that a loss of *adab* will lead to the fall of the Muslim world. In fact, the end result of upholding *akhlak* and internalising *adab* by society members (in this study, the Malays in context) will be a holistic and meaningful achievement of a society’s civilisation at large.

In addition to *akhlak* and *adab*, the Malay culture also emphasises on *budi*. *Budi* literally means “reason, mind, character” in Indonesian and Javanese. It is ultimately from a Sanskrit word, *buddhi* meaning “intellect,” which relates to Buddha/Buddhism (Behind the Name n.d.), that may have been coined as a moral concept during the Hindu/Buddhist phase of the Malay civilisation.

Budi refers to a set of internal values that shapes one’s mentality and personality (Dahlan 1991; Wan Norhasniah 2011; Lim 2003; Mohd. Taib 1989). It is a mindset that guides one’s behaviour and therefore encompasses the Malay way of life. From a communitarian dimension, *budi* is the essence of Malay’s social relationships (Tham 1971). *Budi*, as a Malay cultural conception, is an outcome of thoughts, feelings and emotions that never ceases in searching for positive elements, mutual benefit and peaceful connections in life (Wan Norhasniah 2011).

From these descriptions, *budi* seems to suggest synonymity with ethics too (Syed Husin 2008b). Lim (2003) also shares similar viewpoints. According to him, once *budi* is accepted as part of the Malay vocabulary, its meaning is extended to cover ethics as well as intellect and reason, in order to accommodate the culture and thinking of the Malays.

Recognising *budi* as synonymous with ethics based on the above narratives, Wan (1993) proposed that *budi*-Islam is the central element in the construction of the Malay's cultural and identity formation. Consequently, another prominent Malay scholar, Zainal (1993a) further highlighted that while *budi* is strongly embedded in the Malay culture as a Hindu/Buddhist influence, definitive social values such as compromise, respect, cooperation, tolerance, modesty, forgiveness and patience seem to predominate among Malay Muslims and these values relate to *budi*-Islam (Zainal 1993a; 1993b). Perhaps, *budi*-Islam is synonymous with *akhlak* within the Malay Muslim culture in Malaysia.

It is also apparent that there is a close link between *adab* and *akhlak* (Khalidah 2019). Furthermore, they are intertwined and inseparable from the Islamic perspective. It may be suggestive that *adab* is part of *akhlak* since it relates to one's good behaviour, etiquette and manners while interacting with other people (Khalidah 2019). Nonetheless, in an attempt to literally differentiate between these two concepts, while *akhlak* relates to one's emotions and the activities of the soul, *adab* refers to his or her physical or body actions. Aptly, a good soul will most likely possess good *akhlak* which will be displayed and demonstrated by one's praiseworthy actions or *adab*. As a conclusion, in the Malay ethical system, *budi* is equivalent to ethics and *budi*-Islam is similar to Islamic character/behavioural traits namely, *akhlak*.

Table 1 differentiates the values of *budi*, *budi*-Islam and Islamic religious values at an individual level. These values will also influence one's social relationship with others, not to mention his/her way of life with internalisation. Although these are not exhaustive, Table 1 provides a comparison between the values associated with *budi*, *budi*-Islam and Islam in an attempt to develop and frame the Malay cultural and ethical systems, including values.

Table 1: The distinction between *budi*, *budi*-Islam and Islamic religious values

| <i>Budi</i> values (Dahlan 1991) | <i>Budi</i> -Islam values (Zainal 1993a) | Islamic religious values (Norazzah 2010) |
|---|---|---|
| Generosity | Compromise | <i>Takwa</i> |
| Respect | Tolerance | <i>Syukur</i> (gratitude, being grateful) |
| Sincerity | Modesty | <i>Tawakal</i> (relying on Allah after making own efforts) |
| Righteousness | Forgiveness | <i>Muhasabah</i> (self-evaluation) |
| Discretion | Patience | Justice (' <i>adl</i>) |
| Feeling of shame (i.e., at both individual and collective levels) | | <i>Amar makruf nahi mungkar</i> (promoting good and forbidding evil) |

THE MALAY CULTURAL AND ETHICAL SYSTEMS: A SUMMARY ANALYSIS

The Malay culture and ethics, as a system, encompasses two main components; the first, being the elements that have over time undergone adaptations and transformations. They are normally not principle values. They include customs and rites (Norazit 2001, 87–89) namely *adat* and may be most regarded as the Malay cultural system. The second component is the pattern of characters that has been infused in their life for a long time, which eventually became a tradition. These include customary rules or social norms which contain ethical and moral codes that rely on the core elements of *budi* (Carolina 2001, 13), *budi*-Islam and Islamic religious values. Most traditions and social values remain intact as they are formed based on decency and forbidden acts. This pattern is inclusive of one's strong consciousness and commitment to religion from a moral objectivistic viewpoint (Khalidah, Rohani and Mashitah 2014). They therefore include *adab* and *akhlak*, not to mention Islamic religious values such as *takwa*, *syukur* and so forth. They may be regarded as the Malay value/ethical system.

Adat is a traditional and adaptable element of the Malay cultural system. While noting that *adab* is also recognised as an element of *adat* in the Malay cultural system, *budi*-Islam, *adab* and *akhlak* may be identified as the main features/components of the Malay ethical system, to be conscientiously practised and internalised in the life of a Malay Muslim.

CONCLUSION

This discourse has differentiated between the Malay culture and ethical/value system. It has also highlighted the cultural values of a Malay in identity and traditionally recognised that the Malay culture and value system have significantly been influenced by animistic, Hindu and Buddhist features (Muhammad 2009; Muhaimin 2010; Khalidah 2019; 2020). However, as Islam is their religion, the cultural transformation has also deeply embedded Islamic religious practices and rituals in the life of a traditional Malay Muslim, as a believer of Islamic faith. Although animistic and Hindu features, as reflected in the practice of *adat* have waned over the passage of time, such features may still be identified and practised in the Malay culture till today. *Budi*, *budi-Islam* and Islamic-related values are seen to blend together in the assimilation process while defining the Malay cultural and ethical systems.

Malay identity from cultural and legal definitions is based on *adat*, Malay language and Islam. As long as *adat* does not conflict with Islamic fundamentals and faith (including Islamic monotheism), it may be continued to be practised as a component of the Malay cultural system. As much as the traditional Malay cultural system emphasises *adat*, the foundation of the Malay ethics and value system is *budi-Islam*, *adab* and *akhlak*. *Adab* and *akhlak* are inter-related and inseparable from the Islamic perspective. Since *akhlak* relates to character development and individual behaviour, it is conclusive that *adab* is part of *akhlak*. *Budi* is synonymous with ethics and *budi-Islam* is equivalent to Islamic character/behavioural traits. *Budi-Islam* may be most understood as *akhlak*.

It is remarkable and noteworthy that the Malay ethnic group is rich in cultural values. However, these values are diminishing and challenged by the Western/external influences in their everyday lives. Considering that these influences are felt even stronger nowadays with massive Internet access and ICT advancements, an Islamic culture based on *budi-Islam*, *adab* and *akhlak* needs to be seriously rejuvenated and institutionalised within family units in the modern Malay society, from the realms of the daily life of a true Malay Muslim, upholding *iman* and *takwa* (Khalidah 2019).

By and large, concerted and committed efforts to embed Islamic ethics (spirituality inclusive) among the Malay community, including parents, teachers, employers (public and private) and the government machinery must continue before liberal ideologies and practices become the norms of the Malay youngsters. As ethics begins from home (Shaw 2008; Khalidah, Zulkufly and Lau 2018; Khalidah 2019),

Malay Muslim parents, as the first teachers, have an even bigger role to shape their children with *budi-Islam*, *adab* and *akhlak* as foundations for a rewarding life.

The Malaysian education system has somewhat supported the secular approach in knowledge acquisition process (Khalidah 2019). Seriously, the system needs to integrate ethics and spirituality in all taught courses including science and technology (Khalidah 2019). This is recommended to strengthen ethical consciousness among the younger generations, seen pertinent, as Malaysia strives to be a developed nation while building an ethical society to realise the Vision 2020 and Transformasi Nasional (TN50) aspirations.

As a limitation, this research has only analysed the Malay cultural identity, ethics and value system, as the base or foundation to the Malay ethical system. It has yet to investigate the significant impacts of British colonial influence and other geopolitical factors such as globalisation on Malay identity. Hence, future studies may deliberate on these important aspects to further assess the evolution in Malay identity at the crossroads of globalisation and its sociocultural impacts under the universal pluralism/liberalism agendas/ideologies to create global citizens. Future studies may also further investigate how these factors have contributed to the evolution and character development of the modern millennial Malay Muslims in Malaysia.

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NOTES

1. *Sultan* is a Malay term for ruler of a state.
2. *Tepak sirih* is one of the objects of the Malay cultural heritage that are still being used as a medium during a ceremony among the Malay community including proposing, engagement and marriage, as well as used, in official and royal ceremonies (Siti Hajar 2015).

3. *Majlis renjis* is the sprinkling ceremony of perfumed water for the newly wed's blessings; normally held at a Malay wedding.
4. *Mandi bersiram* is a Malay royal shower or bathing ceremony, usually held prior to one being officially appointed as a state ruler. For example, this is practised in the state of Perak.
5. *Permaisuri* is a Malay term for queen.

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