

# Strengthening Islamic Cultural Heritage of the Malays in Malaysia in the Post Global Society

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## *Abstract*

*Malay and Islamic religion has exist long ago in the Malaysian soil, bringing about the Malay Islamic arts and culture. The Malay Islamic Arts and Culture has been the epitome of a Malays in Malaysia. Recently, the wave of globalization has transformed some Malay Islamic Arts and Culture to be less significance in the daily life of a Malay Moslem. The role of Malay Islamic Arts and culture is slowly becoming alien to the heart of Malay Moslems.*

*Many factors has contributed to the phenomenon of less popularity in the Malay Islamic Arts and Culture. The Malays themselves have succumbed to many western influences brought by the introduction of technologies and education. Adopting and practicing modern living with many constraints such as time, monetary and space has led many Malay Moslem to slowly forget their precious gem- The Malay Islamic Arts and Culture.*

*This paper highlights the variety of Malay Islamic arts and culture practice as rituals by Malays in Malaysia. It will also discussed the factors contributing to the dying of these arts and culture as well as recommending some suggestions in curbing the ever disturbing scenarios of Malay Islamic Arts and Culture.*

## 1.0 Introduction

Malaysia is a Moslem country with vast cultural heritage especially Islamic Heritage. Islamic way of life is practice in every aspects of their life. Its culture and arts are resemblance of Islamic way of life be it in the form of rituals or artefacts.

However, due to the modern global influences, many of the Islamic Malay cultural heritage has slowly lose its place in the society. Many Islamic related Malay rituals and arts has shy away due to the lack of understanding and appreciation by the Moslem Malays of as well as the aging activists

Rituals such as *Berzanji*, *Hadrah*, preparing *As-syura* porridge and wedding ceremony is now fading away and becoming alien to the Malays. The main factors that have contributed to the declining popularity of these Malay Islamic culture and arts are simply being the ignorance and less appreciative to those arts.

As a strategy to revive the practice of Malay Islamic art and culture in Malaysia, the government need to propagate the awareness and understanding of the beauty of Islamic Malay cultural heritage by the Malay in Malaysia. The rich heritage of the Malay should be relearn and practice although the pressure of modernization is bugging most Malays.

The fact that Malay and Islam is synonymous wherever they might be still hold water in Malaysia. Malays would never eat pork and always look for halal meat as well as never forget the month of Ramadan. What lingers in the mind of every Moslem Malay in their living is about Islam way of living such as halal food, praying time, fasting, Eid, Haj and etc. As such, Islam way of life is still strong in the heart and belief of Malays though they are feeling the prick of modern wave with all kind of influences such as internet, television, video games and many more

## 2.0 The Basic Islamic Teaching that hold Malays to Islam

Some basic teaching which Malays are still clinging strongly to are as follows;

- a. In general, the concept of “Hablullah” (حبل الله) is held and practice dearly by most Malays in Malaysia. As what mentions by Allah in the Holy Quran:

ضُرِبَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الذَّلِيلَةُ أَيْنَ مَا تُثَقِفُوا إِلَّا بِحَبْلٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَحَبْلٍ مِّنَ النَّاسِ  
 وَبَاءٌ وَبِغْضَبٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَضُرِبَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الْمَسْكَنَةُ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ  
 كَانُوا يَكْفُرُونَ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَيَقْتُلُونَ الْأَنْبِيَاءَ بِغَيْرِ حَقِّ ذَٰلِكَ بِمَا  
 عَصَوْا وَكَانُوا يَعْتَدُونَ

*("They have put under humiliation (by Allah) wherever they are overtaken, except for a covenant from Allah and a rope from the Muslims. And they have drawn upon themselves anger from Allah and have been put under destitution. That is because they disbelieved in the verses of Allah and killed the prophet without right. This because they disobeyed and (habitually) transgressed": Ali Imran, 3:112. )*

The importance of relationship both towards Allah and towards the human kind is the heart of all the Malay Islamic culture and activities so as every ritual will get the blessing from Allah as well keeping a harmonious relationship with our neighbours and people within our community.

- b. With regards to the Malay art and cultures especially Malay Traditional performing arts, the fundamental concept of of Islamic Teaching adopted by Malays are as follows:
  - i. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "Allah is beautiful and He loves beauty." [*Sahih Muslim* (911)]
 

Our faith in Allah's beauty has triggered them to create those Malay performances which is not against Allah words so as to make them closer to Allah through certain rituals such as Nasyid, Marhaban and many more. However, the degree of those practices should not be against the teaching of Islam such as halal and haram doings as described below.
  - ii. Imam Al Ghazali mentions that hukum for listening to songs and music is Harus and can change to become haram. Hence, it is permitted to practiced performing arts as long as it is not betraying the Islamic teaching. However, in line with the Islamic teaching it is then not advisable for women to be involved in the scene of songs and dances since their voices and movements are bound to seduce the listeners and viewers which can lead to Haram.

Therefore, In Malay Islamic Art and culture, although the main aim is to trigger close relationship with Allah and the human kind, it is still bound to the Halal and Haram huKum that have been fixed by Islamic Teaching.

### 3.0 What is Heritage

Heritage In general is defined as valuables that are passed from our ancestors to us ( new generation) which includes these elements:

- Culture
- Artifacts
- Norms
- Values
- Buildings
- Arts
- Customs
- Nature- forest, flora, fauna, river, sea and the environment

Wikipedia.com (retrieved on the 16<sup>th</sup> October 2007, classifies heritage as follows:

- Cultural heritage. It includes arts, way of life, values, norms etc
- Natural heritage. It includes elements of environment such as flora, fauna, water, air and etc.
- Physical heritage. It includes building and artifacts which can be physically and visually observed

Malaysian National Heritage Act (2005) on the other hand defines heritage item as any National Heritage, Heritage site, Heritage object or Underwater Cultural Heritage as listed in the register of the act. The Malaysian National Heritage Act 2005 is an act to provide for the conservation and preservation of national heritage, natural heritage, tangible and intangible cultural heritage, underwater cultural heritage, treasure trove and for related matters. It received royal assent on 30 December 2005 and was published in the gazette on 31 December 2005. The National Heritage Act came into effect on 1 March 2006. Other classification of Heritage includes Tangible and Intangible Heritage.

#### 4.0 Classification of Malay Traditional Performing Arts

Rahmah and Wan Abdul Kadir (1997) classify arts by its category of work specification and product produced. Their classification are as listed below:

- Music- traditional music
- Dances- court and folk dances
- Folk games- such as kite flying
- Folk songs- lullaby, poetry reciting and others
- Malay Theatre
- Malay Martial arts

All the above mentioned Malay Performing Arts Heritage in many ways embed and contains some elements of Islamic Religious values such as *Mantras* that praise Allah the creator, prophet Mohamad and other prophets. Malay music such as *gambus and kompong* originates from the land of Arabia and its neighbours.

#### 4.0 A look into Malay Islamic performing arts in Malaysia

There are a variety of Malay Islamic Performing arts practice in Malaysia. Many a times, these Malay Islamic Performing arts spread sparsely to even the Southern Thai. This is due to the fact that the Malays are the most dominant ethnic in Southern Thailand. Below are some types of Traditional Malay Performing Arts which can be classified as Islamic, namely:

- Nasyid
- Hadrah
- Dikir Laba
- Dikir Barat
- Berzanji/ Marhaban
- Rebana Kercing

Detail descriptions of these arts are as follows:

##### A. Nasyid

Nasyid is normally a form of group singing comprising of minimum two members. In some rare cases, it can also be solo singing. Nasyid is characterized as follows:

- Nasyid is similar to choir group in the western arts.
- Nasyid is the most popular form of performing arts amongs Malay Moslem in Malaysia since long ago, aimed at spreading dakwah on Islam.
- Many groups devoted themselves to nasyid in Malaysia, to name some popular groups are Rabbani, Raihan, Sofwan, In-Team, Hijjaz, and Brothers
- Most nasyid are performed by male performer although there exist some female lead singer.
- Female nasyid from Singapore which are well known in the seventies are Almizan and Aljawaher
- Nasyid is used as a way of educating the community towards Islam as well as an interesting approach for the learning of religion.

## B. Hadrah

This is a popular dance in the northern states of Perlis and Kedah. It started in Arabia and was brought to Malaya via India. The dance is mainly performed by men. The unique and sometimes slightly disturbing feature of this dance is some of the performers play the role of women and it has become associated with transvestite performers. Perhaps the reason for using transvestites is due to the fact that it is prohibited for women to dance in front of a public.

Traditionally, this performance is an ensemble of thirteen drums each of a different size and resonance provides the music accompaniment.

The drummers and dancers sit upstage with the dancers sitting either at stage left or right or in front of the drummers.

The drummers and male dancers wear the normal 'baju Melayu' consisting of a headgear, long-sleeved Malay shirt and trousers and a 'samping', while the transvestite dancers wear 'baju kebaya', which is a long blouse and a sarung.

Like most Malay dances, the Hadrah dance movements can be divided into sitting, kneeling and standing movements.

*Hadrah* is a type of drum ensemble used primarily as accompaniment to Islamic religious praise singing. It consists of [frame drums](#) and a [gong](#). 8 to 10 [rebana](#) are used with one *gendang peningkah*, the main difference between the two being the absence of jingles in

the [gendang](#). A specific repertoire of rhythmic patterns, different from those of the [kompang](#), is played to accompany the singing of texts ([Matusky 1994](#)) which may be in Urdu, Arabic or Malay ([Mohd. Ghouse 1992](#)).

In the middle eastern countries, Hadrah refers to a group of dhikr ceremony ("presence", referring not to God's presence but to that of the spirit of the Prophet Muhammad and to the awareness of each participant). The hadrah marks the climax of the Sufi's gathering regardless of any teaching or formal structure. Musically this structure includes several secular Arab genres and can last for hours. The hadrah section consists of the ostinato-like repetition of the name of God over which the soloist performs a richly ornamented song. Often the climax is reached through cries of "Allah! Allah!" or "Hu Hu" ("He! He!"), with the participants bending forward while exhaling and stand straight while inhaling. The articulation of the name of God progresses as follows, with upward beams indicating inhalation and downward beams indicating exhalation. The hadrah is directed by a shaykh of the tariqa or one of his representatives; monitoring the intensity, depth and duration of the phases of the hadrah, the shaykh aims to draw the circle into deep awareness of God. Dhikr ceremonies may have a ritually determined length or may last as long as the shaykh deems his murids require.

#### c. Dikir Barat

Dikir Barat is form of group chanting, consisting of not less than 20 members, with a lead singer and a second singer. Dikir comes from the word Zikir and Barat connotes the southern region of Thailand which is commonly referred to by most Kelantanese.

Dikir Barat is most popular in Kelantan, Malaysia and Southern Thailand. The performance has now been improvised to include modern lyrics and rhythm. Songs and lyrics of Dikir Barat are written with the aim to give awareness to listeners and viewers on the importance of perpetuating good values. Motives of lyrics could be on religious issues such as preaching others to do good deeds – pray, fasting and performing Haj

Dikir Barat also has connection with "Dikir Laba" or known as "Dikir Punjab". "Dikir Punjab" is play in Punjab language (Hindustan) or in Arabic language and has a very close connection with "Qawwali". "Qawwali" is a very popular culture among Indian. However, the lyrics of Dikir Barat can be very nasty and obscene which has place it as a popular form of Malay culture.

#### d. Dikir Laba

Dikir Laba is similar to dikir barat in its structure of performance except that it is performed in circle. It is a

smaller version of Dikir Barat with limited number of group members. It is performed in a circle where the players are seated by facing to each other. In Dikir Laba, the members of the group will sing a song and try to follow the rhythms by moving/ swaying their body together with some simple hand movement. They must raise their voice very loud so as to get the chorus heard by the viewers.

e. Berzanji and Marhaban

Berzanji and Marhaban is a form of chanting using religious wording performed in group of not less than 10 person. The members are either male or female which chant the stories of Islam, prophet and his qualities

Old text in Malay and Arabic are used to relay the message of religion to the masses.

f. The Rebana Kercing

The Rebana Kercing is a traditional performing arts, originated from the Middle East that stresses on music, singing and dancing. It settled in Kampong Laut Kelantan and has since become the popular culture of the community. The Rebana kercing involves dancing and music as well as singing which is close to Nasyid.

No acting is involved in this performance. This performance involves 10 to 30 dancers with 10 Rebana music players. The movements and steps of the dancer is according to the tempo of the Rebana, dancing in a step of 4, moving forward and backward, followed concurrently with the chanting of religious lyrics.

## 5.0 A look into Malay Islamic Rituals in Malaysia

Numerous Malay Islamic rituals are performed daily in the life of Muslims in Malaysia. Some of the rituals performed are as follows:

- Bercukur (shaving babies hair)
- Aqiqah (feast to pronounce new born babies)
- Khatan



- Asyura ( celebrating the coming of Awal muharam)
- Maulud nabi
- Eids ( fitr and adha)

Below are the description of the above rituals.

a. Bercukur

Bercukur is a ritual performed by Malays to celebrate the coming of newly born babies. This rituals involved the shaving of hairs of the newly born babies.

To the Malay Moslem, the hair of newly born is considered as impurities and it is therefore sunat to shave the hair. A Feast is organized and the ritual begins in the morning after Subuh Prayer by passing the babies in circles while reciting the selawat to the prophet. Verses sangs were “Salallah ala muhammad, salallah ala wassalam..... In a few lines praising the prophet In a very sad but promising melody. The babies *mouth were then broken* ( sort of sweetening it) by using dates, sugar, rock sugar, salt and asam gelugor ( sour fruit). Normally, the imam or the most pious person in the village or in the family will be given the responsibility to perform the mouth breaking with the hope that the baby will follow the good behaviour and path of piety of imams. A small feast will be offered to the visitors and some door gifts in the form of potpourri ( bunga rampai) wrapped in net would be given out to the invitees.

b. Aqiqah

Aqiqah is a compulsory for all Moslem to perform to signify the birth of a new born babies. It can be done right after the babies are born or perhaps a few years later. However it is an obligation which any Moslem must performed. The ritual is perform by slaughtering a goat to thank Allah for the newly born babies

This ritual is a must and it is performed to purify the babies from all evil forces that might be burgeoning the babies. This ritual is the Sunnah of the prophet. A small feast

would be held, similarly With some door gifts given away. To some people, sometimes aqiqah were held in conjunction with bercukur

c. Khatan

Berkhatan is basically the ritual of circumcision to mark the adulthood period of a boy. This ritual is only performed for boys by ripping off extra skin of the male secret organ. The rituals is normally performed by a shaman in the old days. Recently, it is performed by medical doctors with modern techniques such as clamping. This ritual is done as part of cleansing the body in Islam. In the old days, a small feast is held in conjunction with the Berkhatan with some gifts received from relatives. Relatives gather to witness the circumcision as well as offering them moral support. It is normally a family affair which encourage family to take part collectively. During the ritual, Saffron glutinous rice and the Bunga Telor ( Gifts) would be prepared to give away to the visitors.

In this modern days, no feast is held and it is done in a simplistic manner that can be considered as a very personal and individuals matters which is no longer of a family concern.

d. Kahwin

Marriage ceremony is normally a sacred event which is very strictly religious matters. It involved the Imam and the Wali as well as the family members. A big feast will be held to inform the public that one is already wed. The choice of bride or bridegroom lies on the individuals. However the ideal criteria relay by the Prophet is the standard used by most parents in choosing their daughter/ son in law to be. However in this modern day, marriage are done in Hotels in a very western manner and the Islamic Choice of son/ daughter in law has slowly diminished. This is due to the making of choice through love as the main criteria in getting a partner. The criteria of possessing deep and wide religious knowledge and iman, good lineage, good appearance and wealth are no longer a priority in choosing the bride/groom to be. Cases of runaway marriage and divorce are also on the rise in Malaysia nowadays. Most probably, the rise of these adverse cases is due to the simplistic approach in choosing a partner for a family institution.

e. As-syura

As-syura is a common ritual, still widely relevant to most Kampung people in Malaysia. However, As-syura is slowly losing its role in big cities such as Kuala Lumpur.

Currently, most young Malays are not sure of what As-syura is all about and the benefits of performing this ritual.

As-syura is performed in commemoration with the coming of the Islamic New year in the Islamic Calendar. The first month of the Islamic Calendar is called Awal Muharram . The Kelantanese Malay will prepare special porridge made of rice, spices, palm sugar, coconut milk and some corns to mark the coming of Islamic new year. Families, relatives and neighbours gather to joint forces in preparing the as-syura-the sweet porridge. The hot porridge is later let to cool which then turn into soft rice cake. However in the West Coast of Malaysia, the As-syura porridge prepared are more savoury. Since this ritual is performed in group, hence it will facilitates unity among families, relatives and the village community. By the end of the ritual, everyone were given a small portion of the porridge to eat together with their family

f. Maulud Nabi

Maulud Nabi is a celebration of Prophet Mohamed's birthday. It is a month of feast to celebrate the birth of prophet Mohamad. The ritual is expressed by organizing a feast, inviting relatives and neighbours to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet. During the feast, a session of selawat is performed while potpourri were given as gift. However, this rituals is getting less popular now, especially in big cities.

g. Eids

There are two celebrations of Eid in the Moslem countries throughout the world which Malaysian still practice. Eidul- Fitri is a celebration to mark the end of fasting month, Ramadan and the beginning of Syawal. This celebration in Malaysia takes a duration of a month. This one month of feast is observed by visiting the homes of our relatives, family members and friends. In Malaysia especially in the west coast, this practice is called Open House. Lots and lots of food and new clothing are prepared for this feast which sometimes can be considered as a waste.

Eid – adha on the other hand is a celebration to mark the pilgrimage act of Haj to the Holy city of Mecca, Valley of Arafah and Mina. It is held in the month of Zulhijjah by perfoming the slaughtering of Qorban from goat or cow. Normally, the Qorban of a cow is shared for 7 portion to a cow. This ibadah is considered as a must to all affordable Moslem for once in the entire life. It is performed to commemorate the happening of Prophet Ibrahim and his son.

## 6.0 Why Malay Islamic performing arts and ritual are no longer popular?

The reasons that have contributed to the declining popularity of the Malay Islamic performing arts and ritual can be deliberated as follows:

- Substantial understanding of Islamic fundamental concept such as Islam is the way of life is no longer the essence of one's life
- Islam is regarded as unproportionately related to ethnicity, hence spurring the need to segregate religion and ethnic factor.
- Globalisation brings about Influence of modern teaching and western culture to the Moslem Malay community, observing the fading of religious values, which is substitute by universal values
- New life style propagates individualism, less caring society and less religious frills life
- New way of thinking such as liberalism, and westernization of ideas and values
- New perspectives of Islamic ideology- such as *Wahabbi* which denies *Bidaah* in their daily activities
- High cost of living which do not allow people to think beyond *Ringgit and Sen*
- Emergence of new forms of dakwah – through the internet/ Handphone etc.has bring positive impact in dakwah such as simplifying of dakwah activities, accessibilities to religious teaching and ilmu. However, negative implication of new technologies is also observed such as the widespread of new form is Islamic teaching such as tarekat and so on.
- More educated Malay Moslems embrace more western values in life, be it in parenting, clothing and food.
- Declining believe on community and family values. Malaysian society became more individualistic and segregated. On the other hand, family size is getting smaller, social life became more exclusive and elite which triggers selfishness and arrogant behavior. The power of team work has become isolated and group oriented activities became less favourable. In short the ukhwah among community is slowly falling apart, hence portraying the ummah as a distorted picture of the modern Islamic society
- The perception of Malays that performing arts is not in line with Islamic teaching is on the rise. ( yet things can be sorted out)

- The lack of knowledge of younger generation on Malay Islamic Heritage had blinded them from visioning the benefits of performing certain rituals to the propagation of Islam.

## 7.0 What to do/ suggestion?

Below are some suggestions which the author would be very inclined to put forward:

- Malay muslim should realise that these rituals are not against islam- even if there are some bidaah, it can be aligned and adjusted to the Islamic teaching
- Malay art is not just propagating good deed but also bring unity among muslim
- The younger generation should be given awareness so that their faith in god could be strengthen through this religious yet racial activities
- Government through their agencies should promote and encourage the Malays to keep to their heritage that are not against the teaching of Islam
- Programs on the Revival of Malay Islamic Heritage should be underlined and executed
- Funds should be allocated to those Malay Islamic Heritage Programs
- Cultivation of understanding and Appreciation of Malay Islamic Heritage should start from primary schools so that strong foundation can be formed.

## 8.0 Conclusions

Despite the down turn in the practice of Malay Islamic arts and culture, the world is still observing the good points of some rituals and art through studies and seminars. This seminar should be seen as a platform to enhance, facilitates the continuity of Malay Islamic Arts and Culture in Malaysia.

Malay and Islam is inevitably important in ensuring the continuity of Malaysia as an Islamic Nation. Without religion, the Malays will have no place in this globe.

Hence, revitalizing and reviving the dying Malay Islamic arts and culture is extremely crucial in ensuring that the next modern generation shall not lose their heritage which is a proud symbol of their religion and ethnicity.

As Moslem, the author suggest that if Allah is beauty and Loves Beauty, arts and culture are there asa mean for us, his servant to worship the greatness and beauty of our creator , the almighty, ALLAH.

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