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MALAY CULTURAL IDENTITIES: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This paper traverses readings on Malay cultural identities. While previous research on Malay cultural identities has presented a broad overview, this paper attempts to frame this discussion based on elite constructions and socio-cultural worldviews of the Malay world. It proposes to be a start to exploring what is distinctive and worthwhile about Malay cultural identities.

Keywords: Malay cultural identities, Elite construction, *Adat*, Socio-cultural worldviews.

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Contribution/ Originality

This article revisits readings that renew and strengthen Malay cultural identities by making connections of the past and present, in the midst of globalization, pressing economical changes, and changing cultural realities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion that identity is deeply inherent in the cultural make-ups of Malays is arguably the most fundamental aspect of the national culture. It is nothing surprising that the tropes of culture and identity establish such an important part of Malay literary studies. Some of the earliest illustrations of what is now considered our national literature document the experiences of newly arrived traders, and the few hundred years of Malaysian literature, whose literary works are full of readings that, in a way or another, show the arrival of people from other soil and the many ways they attempt to live in the soil of Malaya or what is now known as Malaysia. However, as Shamsul (2004), Andaya (2002) and Maznah (2011) have noted, the earliest writing on what being Malay means for Malay cultural identity reflects a tension between homogeneity and diversity.

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Even in the late eighteenth century, when all people of nations in question were from Sriwijaya, Malacca, and later were Chinese, Javanese, Bugis-Makasar, Balinese, Madurese, Arab, and finally Malay, sociologists did not agree on whether this society was one united people (Reid, 1997; Andaya, 1998; Shamsul, 2004). They wondered whether these were people descended from the same nations, speaking the same language, proclaiming the same religion, and attached to specific principles of culture. That these contradictories remain at the heart of some of our Malaysian scholarship and popular reflections of Malay cultural identity signifies not only the unsolvability of this conundrum, but more central is the relationship of these peoples and the elaboration of Malay which is not always clear-cut.

Having sketched this conundrum, this paper provides insights into Malay cultural identities. It begins by describing the earliest attempts at defining Malay cultural identities from the perspective of elite constructions. It further explores the concept using glimpses of socio-cultural worldviews of Malayness. This approach we must nevertheless concede, skirts some arguments, but hopefully allow for a more focused discussion.

2. MALAY CULTURAL IDENTITIES: ELITE CONSTRUCTIONS

We argue that the understanding of Malayness follows a differentiation concept; a concept that we have drawn from the notorious saying of, *Takkan Melayu Hilang di Dunia* (Never shall the Malays cease to be) (Farish, 2010) and “Malays: the sons of the soil.” Although these two sayings have their implications in the broad political sense where they mean priority and to certain extent superiority, a careful reading of them also suggests assertions to differentiate and distance Malayness from other social class and ethnicities. For instance, if one were to substitute Malays in the “Never shall the Malays cease to be” with “Chinese” or “Indians,” Chineseness or Indianeness would have been pushed to the center and vice versa. All we are positing is that the notion of differentiation here is the distinction made through pushing ancestral culture and heritage to mainstream Malayness. This approach of differentiation can be likened to “politics of recognition,” made famous in the field of multiculturalism (Taylor, 1992; Raihanah, 2008; Raihanah, 2009).

Firstly, in Abdullah Ahmad Badawi’s concept of *Islam Hadhari*, the push of cultural agency is overt, suggesting a differentiation in terms of personality, education, and societal positions. Specifically, *Islam Hadhari* follows that “...Malays must be a people who are respected, highly educated, skilled...become Malays of strong character, enlightened Malays, skilled Malays, successful Malays...we must win the war.” Note the use of “war” in the chant above; while one reading of it encourages victory in socio-economic survival, another reading of it differentiates Malay-Muslim solely as the main entity of agency, focusing on Malay subjects as the cultural nucleus of the chant. Put together with the Constitution of Malaysia, we can find similarities.

Secondly, the Constitution primarily establishes Malays as one who speaks Malay, whose religion is Islam and whose allegiance is to the Supreme King of Malaysia, established according

to the specification spelled out in Article 60. It is this notion of being Malay and putting Islam to the center of discussion enhances the idea of differentiation. Although one reading of *Islam Hadhari* and Constitution in defining Malay cultural identities may be advantageous, another reading permeates that cultural identities are defined by ethnicity and religion. By making Malayness distinct from others in *Islam Hadhari* and Constitution, we read that they accord Malayness to a position; a differential position of the Malays as the first settlers. That being said, *Islam Hadhari* and the Constitution reflect the following two points concerning Malay cultural identity. Firstly, although one reading of *Islam Hadhari* above reflects the continuous struggle of the Malays to be God-fearing citizens as well as becoming successful Malays, another side of the reading also suggests that Malay subjectivities exist on a spectrum so that the more one participates in one (Islam), the less he or she can participate in the other (Buddha or Hindu, for example). Or in other words, *Islam Hadhari* suggests that Malays should live by a template-successful, strong, and skilled in order to win the battle against 'people of other cultures,' fitting into our argument on the differentiating strategy of the elites on Malayness. This contention is in tandem with the fact that if "someone who is born Malay, but refuses to practice Islam and Malay customs will encounter problems in being accepted as a Malay" (Mutalib, 1993). This point is further explored by another concept of differentiation, that of the National Economic Policy (NEP) (Economic Planning Unit, 2013).

We begin firstly by understanding the nature of the NEP before understanding arguments against the NEP on the grounds of Malay subjectivities. This way, we can differentiate and bridge understanding of what we know of the NEP and what implications it provides for our consciousness on Malay cultural identity.

Firstly, the NEP is set up to reduce the gap of poverty irrespective of race and restructure society to correct economic inequity for greater education and functions to achieve national unity (Gomez, 2013). By assuming that the Malays are at a socio-economically disadvantaged position, providing "...specially designed rules and arrangements, whereby the involvement and participation of Bumiputeras (Malays) are assisted and facilitated over a period" (Economic Planning Unit, 2013), many objectives of the NEP have been met. The NEP is shown to have reduced poverty levels among Malays, recording an "impressive improvement" (Gomez, 2013). In addition, Gomez (2013) adds, "Corporate equity owned by individual Bumiputeras and trust agencies in 1990 amounted to 19 per cent..." (9). In other words, NEP has helped boost the economic status of the Malays so Malays can benefit from the expansion of cultural and educational benefits such as study-abroad program and the development of The Institute for Strategic and International Studies (ISIS). Through the NEP, the culture of business among Malays has witnessed increased privatization, bridging the gap of poverty and suggesting positive outcomes. However, read differently, the NEP also has some fissures. Closer scrutiny of the NEP highlights the ruptures between cultural power and policy (Gomez and Jomo, 1999), 'urban dystopia' as a result of NEP (Maznah, 2013), failure of the NEP to challenge the poverty

landscape of *Orang Asli* (indigenous people of Malaysia) (Idrus, 2013), and the complexities of NEP to resolve issues of indigenouness in Sabah and Sarawak under the term *Bumiputera* (Zawawi, 2013).

We argue that another rupture of the NEP concerns Malay cultural identity. We view that the trajectory of equal progress (as proposed by the NEP) does not mean assimilation, but rather an entity of differentiation. While the successful Malays in this discourse largely depend on his or her ability to fit the ideals of *Bangsa Melayu*, *Bumiputera*, *Islam Hadhari*, *Melayu Baru*, and *1Malaysia*, the NEP paves ways for the Malays to separate themselves from “other” social class and ethnicities. Mahathir (1970) has succinctly narrated that the NEP has given such differential treatments for Malays when he argued,

These few Malays...have waxed rich not because of themselves but because of the policy of a Government supported by a huge majority of poor Malays. It would seem that the efforts of the poor Malays have gone to enrich a select few of their own people. The poor Malays themselves have not gained one iota...Because of their position, these people can have access not only to various business set-ups in this country, but also to various Government departments... (44).

He is concerned that because of the help rendered by the NEP, some Malays have differentiated themselves using the governmental instrument as a means to an end through understanding money culture and who is related to whom. In turn, these Malays benefiting from NEP seem to have distanced themselves from other poor Malays due to their socio-economic positions. Thus, in order to improve socio-cultural nuances of the Malays, the NEP has become a pervasive feature of the Malay culture.

By pushing the NEP in 1970, we also argue that the discussion surrounding Malay cultural subjectivities must also be accompanied by the notion of differentiation through the reinforcement of Malays' exclusive position and its (socio-economic) hierarchy. This observation of the impact of economic forces on Malay cultural identity supports Zainal Kling (1995) contention where he points out, “ rising income level” influence the hierarchical “ Malay tradition and religious beliefs” (65). Thus, this agenda of the NEP, differentiates a Malay from Malay business class (Crouch, 1993). By displaying both sides of the NEP, we show that the forces such as the elite construction define and redefine Malay cultural identities through the concept of “us” versus “them.”

Despite the notion of differentiation in pushing Malay cultural agency to the center of the nation-state, one must also observe that not all chants by the elites on Malayness concern differentiation. Assimilation is another path that Malayness has been (re)delineated. *Bangsa Melayu*, *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian Race/Vision 2020) or *Melayu Baru* (The New Malay) and *1Malaysia* can be illustrations of assimilation. *Bangsa Melayu*, made famous by Abdullah Munshi in his writing- *Hikayat Abdullah*, for example, imagines that *Bangsa Melayu* is of multilayered identities; those that subscribe to “religious (Muslim), ethnic and cultural metissage” (Nagata, 1974; Reid, 1997; Shamsul, 2004; Maznah, 2011). Similarly, “*Bangsa Malaysia*” (Malaysian

Race/Vision 2020) or "*Melayu Baru*" (The New Malay) views assimilation irrespective of races. *Malaysia*, in another case, views pertinent intersection between Malay identity and globalization. With an emphasis in localization, *Malaysia* gives ways for glocalization (Najib, 2013).

3. MALAY CULTURAL IDENTITIES: SOCIO-CULTURAL WORLDVIEWS

In her book, Andaya (2002) has argued that *adat* can be traced as far as the seventeenth centuries. Zainal (1989/1990) has pointed out that *adat* represents the "collective mind of the Malay peoples." Because there has been an establishment of the Islamic law and tradition, (the shari'a), the Arabic word, *adat* has been used for the legal codes. However, one may also argue that there are different frames of customs and contents within the construct of *adat*. Wilder (1982), for example, has argued that Malays are "united by a 'secret code,' that of 'adat' or custom" (115). Or in Mohamad Aris (1977) Othman's words, Malay "customs and cultural paraphernalia can serve as a basis of identity." In another illustration, *Taj us-Salatin*, has shown that the *adat* of calling the prayer (azan) to a right ear of a baby and the recitation of prayer (*iqamah*) to the left ear are all derived from Islamic codes (Andaya, 2002). The practice of circumcision, another case in point, has become an important milestone among Malays, indicating the rite of passage (Andaya, 2002; Milner, 2008). But the precise nature of *adat* is unknown as it is highly dependent upon contexts and time. Regardless, the subsequent introductions of *adat* were soon continued with persons considered knowledgeable in Islamic faith. Milner (2008) has noted such dissemination of *adat* is through the rulers or kings who were termed "Helper of the World and of the Religion." It is within this timeframe that Islam may have spread in Melaka, Minangkabau or Java through classes and marriage (Andaya, 2002). Part of this move is to ensure new converts between new Muslims. Moreover, the legal system began to side with Muslims, and Melaka itself has emerged as the praxis on which Islamic scholarship is based, with court and schools. As these historical points begin to show, *adat* has been around for decades and influenced the Malay minds. *Adat*, as reiterated, emerges in different customs.

Firstly, *adat* has long been influenced by Hindu customs. The wedding act of "bersanding", an occasion where the bride and groom sit on a dais has been portrayed as essentially a Malay custom, has been associated with Hinduism. (Nagata, 1974; Karim, 1992; Peletz, 1997). The distinguished titles such as "Dato" has been linked to documentation of Srivijaya and is a result of scholarly debate, suggesting " 'province,' 'empire,' 'kingdom,' 'royal centers' " (De Casparis, 1956; Kulke, 1993a; Kulke, 1993b). A glimpse at the current trajectory of Srivijaya suggests that the word, "Maharaja" has been derived into Malay *adat*. What these accounts continue to reveal is that the architecture of Malay *adat* has been engineered in such a way that Malay *adat* is borrowed from many of Hindu values. The Malay *adat*, as some say, is also useful to prove allegiance to the king and prescribe personal appearance.

Vastly documented elsewhere (Milner, 2008; Thimm, 2013) *adat* is useful to regulate what to wear and display one's subservience to the ruler. Milner (2008), for example, has noted that the

early Malay sultanates had his followers called their King as the "one who governed on earth in place of God" (140). Historically, dresses and housing regulations were installed during the ruling of Sultan Muhammad Shah in the pre-colonial points in the Malay cultural chronicles (Andaya, 1979). The *aurat* (the nakedness) which includes covering hair and skin is now part of *adat*, thanks to the teaching of Islam in the Malayan soil (Thimm, 2013). This concept of veiling the hair and skin has similar preoccupation to Milner (2008) argument where he points out, "the sumptuary laws- a prominent part of the custom (*adat*) of a polity- determined the type of clothes a person could wear, or the house he or she could live in" (64).

Taib (1974) has suggested that Malay *adat* beliefs and values is a result of the interaction between Islamic tradition with traditional beliefs and scientific inquiry. He also cautions that the readings of these three praxes do not suggest easy understanding, but entail fissures as Malay experiences are intricately woven. In his article, "Malay Behaviors," in "Malay Psychology," Mat Saad (1993) outlines the following beliefs of Malays that blanket Malayness. The Malays, for one, wants to live in harmony (Provencher, 1972). The harmonious lifestyle is so fundamental in that any subjects attempting to disrespect the Malay *adat* akin to "KaumMuda (younger generation)" attacking their "KaumTua (traditional elite)" (Banks, 1976) will be sanctioned. Or in other words, the Malays would keep disagreements to the self, without being direct. Malays hold on to the values of being polite and it is this politeness that sometimes holds them back in various occasions. This politeness translates into a Malay maxim, *biar mati anak jangan mati adat* (let the child die but not the custom) which has been used throughout, suggesting the longevity of *adat* through normalizing in the Malayan/Malaysian context. Moreover, literature on Malay *adat* involves *daulat-derhaka*; two notions concerning the relationship between the ruler and its subjects. Early histories on Malay kings outline many illustrations on sovereignty, bestowed upon by God. In the accounts of Malay-Johor king-ship, for example, the subjects pledge to never display and commit *derhaka* (treason) but request that they should never be "reviled with evil words." (Winstedt, 1928; Brown, 1952). Although *derhaka* can be thought of as the repercussions of negative appropriation of behaviors, the subset of early Malay classical texts share some of supernatural tropes and concerns. Malays are to prove allegiance and loyalty to sultan because he is said to have been sent from heaven. In turn, the relationship between Malay kings and their subjects displays an ideal representation of god and portrayal of *daulat*. *Daulat* is a "supernatural or mystical power to punish those daring to act against the customs and beliefs traditionally associated with Malay life and institutions" (Tham, 1977; Hooker, 2003). In her book, *Modern Malay Literary Culture: A Historical Perspective*, Ungku Maimunah (1987) writes:

It was believed that rulers were vested with divine majesty (*daulat*) and any infringement (*derhaka*) on this *daulat* would result in a *tulah* (retribution). This served to consolidate the ruler's position as one which admitted to challenge the subjects' classes. Therefore obliged to serve their superiors without questions (2 &3).

Ultimately, these two spectrums frame the relationship between the power and the powerless, indicating Malay subjectivities as being hierarchical (Zainal Kling, 1995). Put it differently, there are differentiating levels across Malay social statuses. So what does the notion of *daulat-derhaka* have to do with anything? The first is on culture, shedding light on postcolonial literature where it marks success stories of the kings and their empire, whose expectations on performing duties are to be fulfilled by the kings' subjects. Secondly, it gives an indication that *derhaka* constitutes power; of Malay families, society and their followers, leading a scholar to conceptualize a term- "followership" (Khoo, 2007). Centering around the concept of loyalty without questioning, followership maintains that the Malay subjects reserve his or her thoughts while dealing with persons of higher authority.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has presented readings on the earliest and current attempts in defining Malay subjectivities. Firstly, although far from being the definitive readings, they are relevant in describing Malay cultural identities that include, but are not limited to-*Bangsa Melayu, Bangsa Malaysia, Islam Hadhari, Melayu Baru, 1Malaysia* and *Civic Melayu*. Secondly, the nation-state formulates Malay subjects as defined by constitution. Thirdly, it is also argued that Malayness is nuanced in such a way that it is created to preserve the notion of differentiation with the evidence of the NEP. In addition, this paper has illustrated that Malay *adat*, whose beliefs and values are intermingled with Hinduism and Islam, has its specific values and customs encompassing the concept of *derhaka* and conformation to gender expectations.

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