

MALAY SOCIO-RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND RITUALS

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Religious tenets and principles of Islam are expressed in various practices and rituals among Malays. While the basic principle and practices as instructed by the Quran and the prophetic traditions remain Islamic, there are elaborations which may be defined as Malay cultural additions. Much of the elaborations, however, do not modify the fundamental Islamic religious ideas. Only the external aspects, such as the locations, dress and certain details are culturally determined. These aspects will be the focus of the paper.

The most fundamental practices are the performance of four of the "Pillars of Islam": sembahyang (prayer), puasa (fasting), zakat and fitrah (giving tithe and alms), and naik haji ke Makkah (pilgrimage to Mecca). The other pillar is a doctrinal attestation of faith in the unity of God and the prophethood of Muhammad (dua Kalimah Syahadat). Malays follow the Shafie madhab in their doctrinal practices. What would be stressed here is the cultural dimension of such practices rather than the religious interpretation. It is the cultural dimensions that reflect the specifically Malay cultural expressions of fundamental religious tenets.

Malays observe all the basic tenets of Islam. Liturgica prayers are performed five times daily, fasting undertaken thirty days a year, fitrah (alms) given once a year individual, zakat (tithe) on income and production, and the pilgrimage carried out once in a lifetime. The degree of observance depends on the understanding of elaborate religious teachings, perception of the merits of observance and the depth of conviction. It must be remembered that Islam equally stresses this-worldly blessings as well as other-worldly salvation. In both domains there are no concrete physical rewards except for the promise of pahala (divine merits) and the eventual usherance into heaven (syurga). Elaborate forms of ritual and practices are geared to achieve this ultimate bliss.

The perception of the need for divine merits varies directly with the depth of conviction, knowledge and age. The assumption is of course that the aged need more divine rewards than the young who still have time to live and to repent. Thus, most attendants at the mosque are the elderlies and the aged. Recent religious revivalism, however, has attracted the young to attend daily prayers in the mosque and smaller prayer houses (surau).

For those with a deep conviction of the truth and piety, religious rituals are usually performed fully and consistently, especially the daily prayers.

The most important rite is the daily worship (solat, sembahyang). A Muslim worship lasts for about ten to fifteen minutes depending very much on the length of supplicatory prayers (doa) uttered at the end of each worship. Structurally, a worship (sembahyang) rite is composed of several sections and movements. Each section is called a rakaat. To begin with, there is a series of identifiable body movements which are followed or preceded by certain utterances of prayer, invocation or supplication. In the final part, there is normally a recitation of doa (supplication) to request God for safety, security, blessing, protection or fulfilment of hopes. For the purpose of worship a Malay may perform it either singly or in group in his house or at the mosque (mesjid) or a smaller prayer house (surau). In the house, the performance may be done by the family as a group with the husband/father as the leader (imam). At the mesjid or surau there would be a regular imam to lead the worship. At the appointed time a caller to prayer (muazzin or bilal) would say the azan in a loud voice, normally with an amplifier for the villagers to hear.

Normally, Malays would be properly dressed, adorning the Malay baju (a sort of round-neck jacket) and a sarong with a kopiah head dress. Many would also adorn the haj white cap especially if they have gone to Makkah.

Villagers would arrive at the mesjid or surau on foot, bicycle or motorcycle. The usual time for congregation at the mesjid would be in the early evening worship (maghrib) or night worship (isha). The hour separating the two worship normally would be filled with Quranic reading, religious lecture or group prayers such as zikir and doa.

On certain calendrical occasions, such as during the fasting months, the night prayers will be followed by the highly commendable (sunat) worship – the terawih. This prayer is

fairly lengthy and may take more than an hour. At the end of the rite, the congregationists would be served with light supper of cakes, fried noodles, rice and hot drinks.

The act of public congregation, either daily or weekly, integrate Malays as a community of believers. One of the most important group worship is the Friday service (sembahyang Jumaat). Malays does not reserve Friday as a Sabbath, and every adult is enjoined to attend Friday prayer. Thus it is seldom that people stop their daily work on Fridays and therefore Friday cannot be equated with the Christian's Sunday or the Jewish Saturday. The Friday congregation lasts for over an hour and thereafter everyone returns to work.

Except in major towns, Malay mesjid are traditionally of timber construction with heavy wood as the main structure. In interior village mesjid are built with the floor on the ground, but in the coastal villages mesjid are built on stilts about five feet above the ground. Nowadays most mesjid are constructed out of concrete and cement with the governments financing their construction. Concrete mesjid are usually on ground level with a general Malay architectural design. Modern urban mesjid, however, would incorporate the traditional Islamic design with the great kubah or dome as the main roof. Malay traditional design would incorporate a pyramidal roof type in line with its wooden structure.

A village mesjid is fairly small, about 20 metres square and built entirely by villagers. With wooden posts and floor, and usually of corrugated iron roof, a mesjid is a conspicuous structure in a Malay community. The centre of the floor space is covered by a pyramid-like roof. Its steep rise is the most conspicuous design in a Malay village, distinguishing it from all other structures. The rest of the roof slopes gradually covering the four sides of the mesjid. The front part of the floor is partitioned by a full wall to make a verandah of about one-fifth of the whole floor area, leaving the rest of the floor a large empty hall with only very few other fittings necessary for a congregation. Three sides of the wall are constructed with windows to allow light and air to enter easily making an airy and bright hall. The exterior wall of the verandah is only about 0.5 meter high making the verandah an almost open area.

At the middle of the rear wall is the mihrab (niche) about six feet wide where the Imam leads the prayer. On the right hand side of the mihrab is a mimbar (pulpit) where the khatib (sermon reader) reads his khutbah (sermon). The mihrab is constructed to face Mecca, the proper direction of prayer (kiblat).

In any congregation the members sit on the mat covered floor overlain with parallel rows (saf) of white cotton cloth, each at an interval of a sitting distance and all face the pulpit. Thus the congregationists sit on the mat and place their forehead in prostration (sujud) on the cotton cloth. For the Imam a proper prayer mat (sajadah) is provided. Most mesjid nowadays are equipped with carpet to cover the floor and electronic amplifiers ensure the azan, the khutbah and prayers are clearly heard by the congregationists.

Daily worships and Friday service are almost routine in their performance. The occasional prayers marking the annual festival after fasting – the id fitrah and the id haji – are the more colorful worships. Congregationists would dress up in their best baju (jacket), seluar (trousers) and gold thread samping (sarong) to congregate in the early morning for the worship. After prayer, it would be time for the celebration.

Fasting (puasa) is the next most important tenet in Islam and is taken seriously by the Malays. Most people fast during the whole of Ramadhan. Fasting demands a strict discipline of the body and mind. It prohibits the partaking of food or drink from sunrise to sunset. It demands abstention from sexual relationships during the day, looking at sensual or sex-arousing sights, and refraining from putting anything into any open cavity of the body such as the mouth, nostrils, ears or anus.

The fasting month is a period of reduced occupational activity: there is clear evidence of recession in work. Most people prefer to concentrate learning religious matters by reading the Quran or doing worship in the mosque to fill the hours of waiting to break the fast in the evening. At home, women prepare tasty cakes and other delicious food to break the fast in the evening. Neighbors or kinsmen usually exchange food for breaking the fast. In most townships, however, fasting month saw the growth of numerous food and cake stalls to cater for the needs of consumers. Around late afternoon, just after office hours, buyers would be flocking them for their evening fast-breaking session.

The signal for fast-breaking is the call to prayer at the mosque and heard over the radio. In the village the mosque drum is beaten to inform the public. The Malays believe that it is commendable to break the fast with ripe fruit, especially tamar (dates) which was the fruit

used by the Prophet. In some areas, children would shout jubilantly sungke, sungke! (break fast, break fast!), once they hear the drum beat.

Food for breaking the fast can be light or heavy depending on a family's food habits. Some people take cakes and drink a little, followed by a heavier meal of rice. Others just eat cakes and postpone the rice until after the evening prayer. However, others may take rice meal before going to the mosque or surau for the night worship to be followed by the commendable sembahyang terawih (a prayer held specifically in the evenings of the fasting month). After prayer, there would be 'tadarus' or the recital of the Quran by expert readers. Individual neighbors would serve cakes or rice as supper for the late night reciters in the mosque.

About ten days before the end of fasting, until the early morning prior to the festival and morning prayer (hari raya), alms (fitrah) are paid to the religious leaders or state appointed collectors (amil). This is obligatory for all Muslims and a father /husband is responsible for such payments for all his dependents.

Traditionally the payment is made in the staple food, which in the Malay case is rice, to the amount of one gantang (gallon) of Baghdad (Iraqi gallon). Nowadays most payments are made in cash, fixed by the state which at the moment is at US 1.00 per person. A centralised collection system where several collectors are appointed by the State Religious Council had been established to gather the total collection of every individual.

In the past, the relative isolation and self-contained nature of villages justified the payment of tithe and alms to the village religious teachers and officials. They provided unpaid services to the villages and the community rewarded them by way of tithe.

The same manner of collection is also applied to zakat (religious tithe). Unlike fitrah, which is a tax on the 'person', zakat is fixed at 2.5% (1/40) annually of the total yield of staple food (mainly rice) or cash savings. Livestock reared may be liable to zakat when they reach their nisab (accounting date), which is fixed at three years of age for cattle and buffaloes, and two years for goats. The maximum number of livestock before taxation becomes operable is ten. Since animal husbandary is not widespread such payments are seldom made. On the other hand, rice cultivators pay their annual zakat in kind, but this depends very much on each

year's harvest. Nowadays, the government has already centrally organised the zakat collection at the national religious administrative departments.

Finally, Islam enjoin the pilgrimage to Mecca (naik haji), if affordable, once in a lifetime. The haj takes place on the 9th, 10th and 11th days of the month of Zul-Hijjah, the final month in the Muslim lunar calendar.

For the Malays, to go on pilgrimage is a tremendous tax on their wealth and saving. Despite this, the ability is socially rewarding. A distinct recognition is given in the personal name of Haji-so-and-so when a person returns home. Many would go at a very late age with the wish to die in the sacred land of the Prophet. On returning, Meccan dates, dried fruits and zamzam mineral water are brought home to be tasted by their relatives. Nowadays, pilgrimage is more organised. The central government has set up the Central Pilgrim Management Board where money can be gradually saved or deposited to finance the total cost of the travel and stay in Makkah and Madinah. At present, it amounts to about US 3000 per person per season.

Prospective prior to their intricacies of pilgrims would make elaborate preparations travels. Not only they learn or revise the rituals at home with a teacher but also physically take care of their health. Pilgrim dress (ihram) and other routine clothing would be collected for the month stay in the holy land. Several days before the travel, a kenduri or makan widak – a kind of ritual feast to pray for the safety of pilgrims would be held in his/her house. Neighbours would be invited. Some would ask for forgiveness of past grievances. Others would give small donation or sadaqah for the travel.

On the day of departure the Pilgrim Management Board would centrally organize their flight by the national carrier. The same would be done for their return from Makkah after the haj. On their return pilgrim, now carrying the title haji-so-and-so would be received by relatives at the airport. At home, they would hold another small doa selamat – a small feast – to pray for their safe return. From then on, a haji normally would have to show religious by exemplary life to others in the village.

Conclusion

Islam had totally and completely displaced animism in the Malay belief complex. While animistic practices may still be observed in certain specific situation or in remote rural life, the Islamic religious belief generally constitutes Malay mind. As such, the practices of Islamic tenets closely adhere to the pattern prescribed by the specific school of thought. In the Malay case, it would be the Shafiite School.

While the fundamental or ideology or theology would remain universally Islamic, at the more mundane level of practices and adornment the Malay culture complements the basic Islamic ideas. Culture therefore, complements religious practices at the more empirical level. This is to say that cultural expression of religious ideas takes the form of concrete manifestation in behaviour and physical adornment.

This is, of course, not to deny the reverse possibility of traditional and local Malay ideas cross-fertilizing fundamental Islamic conceptions. In fact, much of the interpretation of fundamental Islamic ideas has to cater for the local environmental conditions of Malay life. As such, religious life has to adapt itself to local demands so that even at the most fundamental cognitive level of the belief domain local interpretations may pervade and prevail. This situation is generally manifested in the emergence of local religious sects which may even run counter to orthodox Islamic interpretation. The emergence and proliferation of such religious movements as "spiritualism" (kebatinan) or mysticism only confirm the dynamic of local genius in adapting Islam to come to terms with local ecology. While this may be branded or pronounced as "sesat" (deviation) by orthodox official religious leadership yet their very existence points to the fertile and dynamic interaction of Islamic divine conception and the proscription of local ecology on the Malay mind. Islam thus provides the normative text for the growth of Malay culture in its own environment.