

Understanding My Own Culture

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Introduction

My name is Nor Laila Binti Hassan. The story of my Malays culture begins from 19th century, whereby my ancestor who is of a Siamese ethnic came from Siam or now known as Thailand to settle down in Kedah (one of the state in North Malaysia) and married one of the locals. During that time Kedah was started to be influenced by Islamic religion and my ancestors with all their descendants were all Muslims. They were known among the villagers as to come from a religious family. My great grandfather is what they called as the learned elders' a.k.a *Tok Guru*. *Tok Guru's* task is to spread the teachings of Islam and everyone in the village really respected him. His name is Tuan Haji Yaacob bin Sibar. He had a daughter and a son. His daughter's name was Aminah and his son's name was Mohamad Zain. My family root started when one of Aminah's sons i.e- Hassan married with his cousin i.e Mohamed Zain's daughter by the name of Latifah and both of them are my beloved parents. Normally, old folks at the material time prefer inter-related marriage for their children in order to preserve the dignity and the wealth of a family from leaking to the outsiders.

During that time, Islam influences almost every aspects of life among the Malays and is the foundation for Malay cultural solidarity inclusive of the practice of polygamous marriage. Some of the villagers prefer to marry off their daughters to a *Tok Guru* as either the second or third wife as they believed that the *Tok Guru* will guide their daughter well. I still remembered when my late father *Allahyarham Ustadz Hassan Bin Mohamed Yasin* still alive, he told me that my grandfather had four wives and my grandmother was his second wife. He also said that my grandfather was also known as *Tok Guru* and migrated to Mecca to deepen his knowledge and died there. During the demise of my grandfather, my grandmother was still his wife whereas all the other wives had either been divorced or predeceased my grandfather. On my mother side, she had four siblings and she was the only daughter in the family. My mother is a very intelligent person and good with memories and numbers. However being a girl she had only been allowed to finish her school up to standard six because my grandmother believed that high learning opportunity should not be given to a girl. Malay's mothers also prefer their son to further their studies into higher level of education. My late father was given the opportunity to study in Mecca specifically in Arabic or Quran Language. This shows that the discrimination of gender was also dominant among the Malay's family in terms of learning opportunity.

My parent had been married for 49 years and they have been blessed with six children, three boys and three girls. I am their fifth children and I have been taught or educated about my own Malay cultures, by my parents, family, and grandparents and also from my Malay friends. These peoples actually influenced me on how I view the world and relates with others at home and at the workplace. I am 34 years old now and I consider some of the values and ethics that my parent taught me or descended to me are very much valuable and important and insya Allah I will try to pass the same values to my children. Therefore, in this essay I will like to talk more about the Malays culture and values which we practice in our daily life.

Symbol in Malays Culture



*I*n Malays culture the traditional Malay manner of dressing is dictated by the Islamic dress code, and therefore tends to be conservative, especially with the revival of interest in Islam. The Malay formal dress for men is the *Baju Melayu*. This is a loose, long-sleeved shirt (baju) worn over a pair of trousers (seluar) of matching material and colour, or sometimes over a kain sarung, a wrap-around skirt. During Hari Raya, my husband usually wore this when he went for Hari Raya prayer.

Another traditional and popular costume for women is the *Baju Kurung*. This comprises a loose tunic (baju) worn over a long skirt (sarung). The baju kurung set may be made of any material at all, including batik, songket material or silk, and various styles have been developed in different states. More sombre colours are used for



certain occasions and a white baju kurung suit is normally worn when attending funerals as a sign of respect. Together with the baju and the sarung, there may also be a shawl, (selendang) to cover the head. With the rise in Islamic consciousness, Malay women these days wear another mandatory piece of clothing--the tudung or selendang. This is a scarf covering the head, the ears, the neck and the bosom. Various styles of tudung have been developed and some were made quite attractive with the addition of beads and so on. Tudung are worn with Malay dress or even with jeans and trousers.



Malays also prefer to wear sarong which for men they called it as *kain pelekat* whereas for women it is called as *kain batik*. I still remembered last month I did a circumcision ceremony for my elder son. He was just eight years old and he actually volunteered to do this. He said the reason he wants to do this because he wants to be in the front row of *saf* when he performs his prayer in the mosque together with others as once a children is circumcised, he is deemed to be as an adult and entitled to some of adult privileges. After the circumcision ceremony, I remembered he had to wear *kain pelekat* for two weeks because he was not able to wear pant. Other symbol that shows of our Malay identity is the symbol of Sultan which is the symbol of our King, Mosque as the symbol of our religion and Halal as the symbol of our trademark for selection of foods that we can eat.

Rituals in Malays Culture

Some of Malays rituals are Hari Raya Puasa and Hari Raya Haji. Hari Raya Puasa signifies the end of the fasting season of Ramadan which usually consists of a month. The celebration is determined by sighting of the crescent (*rukyah*) or by calculation methodology (*hisab*). This is the most significant celebration for the Malays. Malays starts the day by congregating in the mosques early in the morning to perform Hari Raya Puasa prayers followed by visits to the



graves of the departed while Hari Raya Haji was celebrated on the tenth day of the last month of the Muslim calendar. This is an occasion celebrated marking the conclusion of the annual Haj - the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, when the pilgrims are given the title of Haji for men and Hajjah for women. Thanksgiving prayers are offered in the mosques. An animal is sacrificed whose meat was distributed among the relatives and the poor as a symbol for sharing.

Malays rituals not only celebrate Hari Raya but we also have others feasts such as wedding ceremony, *Kenduri Kesyukuran*, *Kenduri Tahlil* and *Kenduri Aqiqah*. For example, a Malay wedding is usually performed when either one or both spouses are Malay. Malay weddings are grand affairs where the couple is treated as royalty. The traditional wedding ceremony is in two parts. The first part is the *akad nikah* (marriage contract), which is the legal and religious part of the wedding. The second part is the *bersanding* (enthronement), which is a family



celebration. It is usual for the two parts to be celebrated over two days. However, it is becoming common now for there to be a gap between the two (2) parts of the wedding, during which the couple are legally and contractually married, but postponed the ceremony for an elaborate *bersanding*.

Role model in Malays Culture

Malays normally choose parents or elders as their role model. For example my role model is not someone who is famous or historic. Actually, my role model is my late father *Ustadz Hassan Bin Mohamed Yasin*. I am very close with my father. He was like my mentor, listener and advisor to me. Even though, he was an *Ustadz* or religious teacher but he never force his values on something that I don't want to do. He let me learn through my experience what is good or bad for me and guided me throughout the way. He was very generous and he always helped anybody who seeks for his helps. Even he was willing to raise and support a few of my cousins who are orphans starting from their early years until they finished their studies. He did this not for any repayment but because of his concern, responsibility and sincerity to them. Even when he died, his life is taken by Allah slowly and easily and he was buried on Friday morning which among Muslims it is deemed as good omen. I am proud with him and I hope that I can become generous and kind like him.

Values in Malays Culture - (8 Cultural Dimensions)

1. Harmony

Harmony is trying to create peace in resolution of conflicts, willing to sacrifice for others, dislike hostility and confrontation. Malays families normally try to avoid situation that create conflicts. This situation is evident when my father passed away and all his properties are being divided among his wife and all his children in the manner as our father wanted. As children we simply followed what our father has willed on us because we want to prevent disagreement, preserve harmony in the family and honouring his last wishes. Even, in a working environment I try to preserve harmony by remain quiet when there is misunderstanding or arguments occurred with my co- workers. However this attitude gives a negative consequence by keeping my frustration to me and it is not good. But since I am a very patient person and always believed in Allah I will try to control my feeling from doing something brazen or stupid. Sometimes I



prefer to become middleperson to solve any misunderstanding or arguments between co-workers.

2. Shame

In Malay society, it is always despicable for couples to engage in sexual activities outside marriage. If they are caught, they will be compelled to marry with or without their families' consent. The Malay parents will theoretically disown their children who bring shame to the family by their act of sexual misbehaviour. Such misbehaviour by the children is expressed in a saying, "*menconteng arang ke muka ibu bapa*" (to scribble charcoal on the parents' faces). As a result of which, the family will be in disgrace. It is even worse if an unmarried girl ever gets pregnant for her sexual misconduct as her pregnancy could never be kept away or hidden from public knowledge. In my family, to act in righteous behaviour and to preserve the dignity of a family is very important whereby my mother always remind me during my early years when separated with the family to uphold my family's dignity. And she always advised me to be cautious of my actions and behaviours since my father is an *Ustadz* or religious teacher in the society. Maybe this is the main reason why I was married off early by my father ie upon completion of my tertiary level of study as precaution from any immoral conducts and to avoid any bad talks about his daughter by the society.



3. Relationship

Relationship means being friendly and try to build rapport and personal touch with people around you. Malays culture is also well known for their kindness and hospitalities to relatives, neighbours and friends. For example, in my family, my mother is the most friendly and easy to talk to among us and to the extent even there is guests coming by or dropping by our house in the middle of the night she would entertain them with smiling face and even offered foods and shelter to make them feel comfortable. Malays believe that if somebody comes to our house we should welcome them with open arms because the said visit will actually brings prosperity and wealth into our home. Even, during fasting month of Ramadan, my mother will cook extra dishes and then she will distribute some of dishes to be shared among our neighbours. This attitude was in practice since I was little kid



and until now adopted by me in terms of dealing with my neighbours even though I live in a city.

4. Hierarchy

Hierarchy here means respect for elders. In our Malays culture we were taught to respect our parents, aunts and uncles by showing the right body language. The right attitude here such as while shook hands, we were also to kiss their hands as a sign of respect. The grip of hands is gentler and the shaking less vigorous than in the Western



style. Additionally, when a younger person shakes hands with an elder, be it a parent, a teacher or someone else, the younger person also bows down during the handshake, and kisses the upper side of the right hand of the older person. During occasions such as Hari Raya the younger persons in a family may also go down on to the knees and then carry out this handshake as just described. This, however, happens only when the elders are seated and another example

is while walking in front of them we have to bend our shoulders a little bit as a sign of respect. I remembered when I was small I usually run blatantly and without any manners in front of my uncles and aunts and at the same time my mother will pinch my ear for doing it.

5. High Context Culture

Another value that Malays family practice is we tend not to hurt other people's feeling by discreet in our advice. This value is part of a high context culture when dealing with other people. For example, when we have conversation with other people and that people is say or doing something which is unacceptable, we tend to advise that person indirectly in public as not to cause any embarrassment or shame to him. We also tend to give positive comments to other people in order to proactive them even though it is not true what we are saying. Maybe one of the reason for this is we want to avoid disharmony in the relationship. Furthermore, the attitudes of collectivism among us also promote the attitude of taking care of each other as it encourages us to practices high context culture.

6. Collectivism



Collectivism means doing something in group. Malays, normally feel more comfortable doing things together or in *Jammah*. In my family, we strongly believe in enhancing family ties and we always have spirits of working together as family members. For example when there are feasts to be held in the family, our family will



work together or *bergotong-royong* in ensuring that the feast is going smoothly. This situation always happen in feasts such as *kenduri kahwin*, *kenduri doa selamat* and *kenduri tahlil*. I remembered during my wedding ceremony all my relatives worked together to ensure that the ceremony was conducted well from the beginning until the end. The spirit still continues in

my cousin's wedding and other feasts that related with family ties. Another example in my family is when we got married and have our own life; we will make sure that we buy our matrimonial house nearby our parent's house. This is because we believed that it is better to buy house near to our relatives compared to our office as if there is emergency situation we can rely on our parent, siblings and relatives for helps. This shows that in collectivism, taking care and concern for each other is very important.

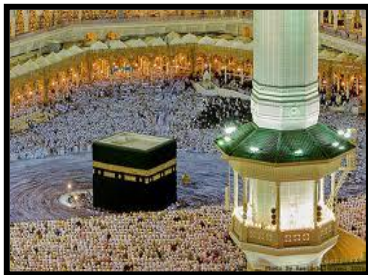
7. Polychronic

Polychronic is whereby Malays practice flexible time in their part of life and solve many things in a short time. Malays normally are not punctual in occasions which involves with working or personal life. For example in my working experience I tend to do my task last minute even though there are deadlines need to be followed. As for my personal life I tend to do many things at one time. Even if I have a conversation with my husband I can actually provide space for my kids to interrupt me. This shows that I am flexible in handling my time.



8. Religious

Religious is a strong hold and faith for Malays community. If you are Malays you are said to be a Muslim. A Muslim normally treats their spiritual beliefs seriously. As Malays we need to understand and practice the 5 pillars in Islam and rules of faith. Our religion also gives influence on how we dress, think and behave. We normally consume halal foods when we eat. We also believe that if we did not be able to achieve what we want, we have to accept the



fact that it is not meant to be or we need to accept the preordained designated by Allah or the *qada* and *qadar*. For example, in the Islamic manner of greeting we usually use “*Assalamu Alaikum*” (Peace be upon you) and immediately we will generally get reply of “*Wa Alaikum Salaam*”, (Upon you too be Peace). Furthermore in the working environment we tend to use words such as “*Insyallah*” which means god willing when we want to promise to do something or “*Alhamdulillah*” which means thank to Allah if He fulfils our request. Since previously I mentioned that my family comes from a very religious family therefore words such as “*Insyallah*” and “*Alhamdulillah*” are commonly used in our daily life.



Challenges that my culture is facing in view of the forces of change

In Malays culture, the challenges that we are facing most of it come from Modernization, Westernization and Globalization.

Modernization

Modernization refers to the transformation of a traditional, feudal society into a progressive, modern one. Sometimes the traditional culture of treating time as flexible has change into treating time as a scarce and finite resource. Malays at work nowadays are becoming more punctual and adhere to schedules and meeting datelines. Traditional thinking of treating time as flexible has been disappearing from their vocabulary in order for them to compete with other western countries. Therefore, their mindset has to be change especially when dealings with work and attitude need to cope with the challenges of modernization that they face.



Westernization

As for westernization, our Malays culture today is more influenced by the Western culture. For example twice in a month, Malays family will eat western foods such as Mac Donalds and Pizza Hut.



When going out they prefer to wear jeans and t-shirt. Young people in Malays family prefer to hear western music compared to traditional local music. Sometimes there is less respect between the young ones with the elders. I remembered my sister said when Hari Raya, her son Aiman preferred to stay at home rather than going back to his village with his family and siblings. This situation shows the diminishing of collectivism in our Malays culture. However, good values brought by western such as personal competitions and achievements in western culture can be adopted by Malays as reference.

Globalization

Another force of changes that Malays culture face is globalization. New ideas, new methods of work and good life and governance are being shared worldwide even in the most isolated places of the globe. It shows that, the globalization really affect the way we communicate. The value of shame or shy in Malays community need to be reduce in order for us to be more competitive in the global market. For example, during my secondary school, I was in a religious boarding school where girl is not encouraged to expose ourselves in the classroom by asking questions unless if we have been invited to do so. However when time goes by and I further my studies to university level the environment is different and competitive whereby you have to become more open, confidence and brave in the classroom and public. If not you will be left out compared to other peoples who come from different ethnic backgrounds or environments. Sometimes we have to be selective and flexible in our culture intelligence so that we can fit into different environments and dealt with different person. People who are culture intelligence and flexible adapting to their current situation tend to be more successful compared to people who are rigid and hard headed.



Conclusion

As for conclusion, Malays young generations today are exposed to the challenges of modernization, westernization and globalization. The impact of these forces will reduce the values and beliefs especially when it comes to the negative impact of Western culture that brought deeper changes on our traditional values and beliefs. It is up to the younger generations whether to adopt or simply rely on the values and beliefs that have been practised by their ancestors before. However, with strong family institutions, enforcement by government and good religion background

younger generations hope to be guided with the right path to change. Like other Malay Muslim we also should be believed that religious is the one that give us the strength and purpose with our life.

KEY ELEMENTS OF MALAY CULTURE



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