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MALAY CULTURE

by

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INTRODUCTION

In view of the Dewan's interest in the promotion of the National Language, its relationship with the other aspects of society cannot be ignored, in particular with the culture that gave birth to it. The interdependence between language and culture is such that we cannot understand the one by ignoring the other. This being the case the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka has included in its orbit of interest the study of Malay Culture as a widening of the linguistic field.

In order to reach as many readers as possible it is desirable that the content appears in two languages, Malay and English. For the Malay version the Jawi script is used as those who are conversant with Rumi read either English or Jawi whereas the Jawi readers are not always familiar with English or Rumi.

The Dewan is preparing more publications of this nature in the very near future.

Director.

DEWAN BAHASA DAN PUSTAKA.



MALAY CULTURE

The subject of my talk is about the Malay Culture. In order to proceed further it is most appropriate for us to describe first the meaning of the two words 'Malay' and 'Culture'.

Let me start with the word culture. The word culture, in its scientific connotations as applied by the social sciences refers to what an eminent cultural anthropologist Tylor, describes as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as member of society'.⁽¹⁾

More than 160 definitions of culture are known but they all agree that culture is something that one learns and acquire, that it allows man to adapt himself to natural and social environment, that it is greatly variable, that it is expressed through institutions, forms of thought and material objects as in works of art or buildings and technical constructions. Thus culture is a way of living, or a mode of ordering life as expressed by a particular collectivity of man living in society. It is the totality of our customs, beliefs, art, educational aims, music, economic organizations together with the modes of expression of these various aspects of social life. As such culture is thus the content of our life as a member of a particular society. Thus a Malay, being part of his society, lives within the world of the Malay Culture. His culture has a certain type of music, for instance the joget. His culture also provides a type of expression for this music, the instruments, arrangement of the tones, the purpose, in this case to accompany a dance, etc., etc.

The same could be said in other aspects of social life. There is the marriage institution. It is the culture that presents the

(1) M. J. Herskovits, *Cultural Anthropology*, A. A. Knopf, N.Y., 1955 Quoted in page 306.

aims and the rules and regulations concerning marriage. Thus we see the different systems of marriage in different cultures. Not only subjects like marriage and dancing, but everything else is culturally conditioned. The dress, the manner of cooking and eating, the funeral, the way of mourning as well as courtship, etc., etc., are all bound to our culture. The realm of culture goes even deeper than this. It penetrates into our emotional and psychological world too. For instance, if a husband and a wife quarrel the way they react to this quarrel is also culturally influenced. It is almost impossible to find, for instance, in many other societies a husband who quarrelled with his wife and thereafter abstained from speaking to her for several weeks while living under the same roof, eating at the same table, and possibly sleeping in the same room. It happens here in Malaya. This of course does not mean that I am judging whether it is good or bad to react to a quarrel by suspending speech communication with each other.

Now that we have a more or less clear idea of what a culture is, let us attempt to know what Malay culture is. I shall not describe the outward forms of cultural expressions such as the manner of dancing the joget, the bersanding ceremony, the funeral, etc., etc., of which many of us are already familiar. I shall only dwell with certain traits found in the Malay Culture. As the province of culture is so wide it is impossible to deal with it exhaustively and extensively. Before we start this permit me to limit my topic to the present Malay culture. By this I mean the culture developed by the Malays in Pasai, North Sumatra, in the 13th century, Malacca in the 15th century and onwards right to our time. The date line 13th century is however not a rigid demarcation. It serves only as the starting point to trace the growth of the modern Malay nation for our present conception of a Malay had its earliest known origin in the North Sumatran states of Perak and Pasai in the 13th century although it is certainly true that the Malay culture dates back to far remoter times. The Malay Kingdom of Seriwijaya had its birth in the 7th century. The Buddhist Pilgrim I Tsing (692 A.D.) noted some observations regarding the Empire of Seriwijaya.

A culture, like plants and animals, is also subject to evolution and development. As it is with all cases of evolution it is not always easy and possible to reconstruct the past history of its subjects, its growth and development, its changing nature, the particular experiences it went through, its origin or diffusion, etc., etc. As far as the remote history of Malay culture is concerned this has become even more difficult because of the fact that it was interwoven with other historical factors. The most important of these is the arrival of the various cultural streams which touched the mainspring of Malay culture thus enriching it but not necessarily making its history easier to comprehend. We have, for instance, archaeological remnants of Buddhist and Hindu origin found in Malaya and also literary and mythological elements found in the Malay culture, later to be added by a similar contribution from Islam. Since these have been more or less interwoven with the pre-Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic contributions, it becomes a problem to find out what was the Malay culture before the first contact and acculturation took place with another civilization. But if we push back our historical time scale even further before the coming of Buddhism other problems emerged and another significance arise as to the meaning of the word Malay. At this point of course Malay culture is not what we know it to be now. The Malay culture of Pasai in the 13th century is not the same as the one of Seriwijaya in the 7th century. Similarly the one of Seriwijaya in the 7th century is most likely not the same as that of Langkasuka centuries earlier.

Through some Chinese records covering the period between the 3rd and 8th century we learn something about the manner of burial and some other aspects of life in a state believed to be in the Malay Peninsula before the foundation of Seriwijaya, possibly Langkasuka about which very little is known at present. The little we know is sufficient to make us believe that the Malays then were not the same in their social and spiritual orientation of life as those in the succeeding centuries to come. If we go further to the prehistorical period then it becomes even more obscure.

Apart from this there is something else we have to bear in mind as regards the problem. This term Malay culture is not a

racial concept. As Bradell observes, 'There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as the Malay race; there are the Malay people, the Malay culture and the Malay language, etc.'⁽²⁾

Thus tracing the anthropological history of the races that had dwelled in Malaya is not the same as following the history of Malay culture, because these are two different things. For instance the Muslim Aryans of Pakistan and India are of the same racial stock as their Hindu counterpart. But culturally they belong to two different types.

Materials for the study of Malayan history before the period of Western colonization are comparatively speaking, very scanty. Thus many vital problems remains unsolved. Historical and linguistic clues have pointed out the origin of the Malays to the area containing Champa, Cochin-China and Cambodia.⁽³⁾ But from this point to Pasai in the 13th century the identity of Malay culture has changed tremendously.

What interest us here are the following problems.

a. What is known of the achievements of the Malays before they entered into cultural interaction with China and India and also the rest of the world? Perhaps at this stage we could use the term Malayo-Polynesian as they inhabited a definite geographical area with definite cultural traits.

b. What has changed and what has remained permanent during the course of centuries of evolution?

c. What is the path of this evolution and what are the contemporaneous events of significance to this process.

d. What is now the identity of the Malay Culture?

(2) Roland Bradell, *An Introduction to the study of Ancient Times in the Malay Peninsula and the Straits of Malacca*; page 75 Oct. 1935 JRASMB Vol. XIII, part II.

(3) H. Kern, *Verspreide Geschriften*, Vol. 6; page 120 M. Nijhoff, The Hague. 1917.

e. How did it assert its identity and in what form?

In our endeavour to understand these problems and to find their solutions we must continuously be rechecking the materials and the methodology we employ. The reconstruction of history, however partial it may be, is like the portrayal of a scenery. Very much depends on the skill of the painter and the instruments he uses.

Returning to the problems cited above, already something is known, though very little, about the subjects in question.

Pre-historical research into the matter has thrown a little light on the life of the Malaysian people before the coming of the Hindus from the North. In Java itself it was suggested that the Hindus came to the island around the first century A.D.⁽⁴⁾

Before the Hindus arrived there was already a type of community inhabiting the island characterized by the following:

1. It was sedentary and not nomadic.
2. The wet cultivation of rice was practised, together with a kind of irrigation, which denotes the attainment of a degree of social organization which cannot be classified as primitive.
3. There was the knowledge of navigation and some astronomy, to the extent that it could bring them to Madagascar.
4. The use of metals, bronze, copper, iron and gold, were not unknown to them. Probably domesticated buffaloes and cows too.⁽⁵⁾

(4) W. F. Stutterheim, *Het Hinduisms in de Archipel*, page 19, Wolters Djakarta-Groningen, 1952.

(5) N. J. Krom, *Hindoe—Javaansche Geschiedenis*, page 54, M. Nijhoff, The Hague, 1931.

5. The dead was discovered to be buried in graves composed of stones, and there was apparently the cult of ancestor worship to be found.
6. The group life was characterized by the spirit of mutual help and the sense of communal solidarity seemed to be found.
7. Apart from the above, according to Professor Kern, the Malayo-Polynesian people possessed also a kind of calendar.⁽³⁾
8. They also have their own way of measuring.
9. The technical skill of the Malayo-Polynesian people was proved by the existence of boats which they used in their inter-island voyages.

These are some of the traits characterizing more or less the nature of society in which the Malayo-Polynesian people lived before the arrival of Hindu cultural influence, more than 2,000 years ago.

b. We now come to our next item in the list of inquiry. What has changed and what has remained permanent in the course of this process of development? As our knowledge of the pre-Hindu inhabitants of Sumatra, Java and the Malay Archipelago is still inadequate and scattered in pieces here and there, it is as pointed out before, very difficult to have a sufficiently clear picture of what was going on at that time. The same could be said after the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism but the fog was less dense and it enables us to discern slightly more visible some of the events enacted in the stage of history. It becomes even more clear regarding the Islamic period, and still more concerning the period of Western colonialism, in this case its Dutch and British variant.

In postulating the object of our inquiry it is implicit that we believe in a certain continuity in the process of cultural changes.

(3) See Kern, page 24.

A reputed scholar in South-East Asia cultural history, Quaritch Wales, attempted to trace the development of this continuity with reference to art. His conclusions are enlightening and his approach and methodology breaths a sound and scientific atmosphere.⁽⁵⁾

Of course this continuity could be broken off or interfered with. From the evidence we have now it is safe to conclude that there is still a continuity in some areas of the cultural life taken in the widest sense of the word. For instance there are some aspects of padi planting which we could safely believe as possessing a continuity back at the pre-historical period by which I mean to the time when history was not consciously recorded. Some scholars have suggested a similar continuity as regards certain form of superstition and animistic beliefs. The same could be said concerning the art of boat building in some parts of East Indonesia. So is also the case with music, plays, dress, etc., etc. On the deeper level of life we have the continuity of attitude and orientation. Religion for instance has always played a central and supreme role in the life of the people which we now called Malays and Indonesians and their forefathers. In the cultural evolution of this people there is thus an unbroken continuity of an attitude towards life firmly grounded on religion. The religion has changed but not the religiosity. It is beyond my scope to present the existing amount of ethnological materials in support of the idea of continuity in the evolution of the Malay culture and its Malayo-Polynesian parentage. This is a field of research which has not been sufficiently exploited in particular with reference to the Malay Peninsula.

The reputed Dutch scholar, B. Schrieke, complained strongly against the fragmentary manner in which Javanese history has been written, because this blurred the perception of continuity in the historical process. His objections as regards the subject could very well be applied to the way the history of Malaya is written.

After presenting his first objection Schrieke points out the other one which is of interest to us. He writes, "A second

(5) See his 'Making of Greater India', Bernard Quaritch, London 1951.

objection to the fragmentary study of Javanese history is that by treating a given period, and especially the Hindu-Javanese, as an isolated unit, without linking it to prehistory and the history of later times—this as a result of the scarcity of sources and the nature of those that are available, and partly also of the academic training and predilections of the historians themselves—one runs the risk of arousing the impression that before the Hindu-Javanese period there was a vacuum, which was then filled by elements of Indian culture. Under such circumstances it is possible for the reader to overlook the facts that the basis on which such alien influences made themselves felt was a Javanese society of long standing, and that Javanese society continued on its way through history after Hindu-Javanese period had come to an end. The spell under which the reader is in this manner brought, is then rendered all the more potent, if, as has been particularly the case with the history of art, schemata which have grown out of the nineteenth-century Western doctrine of evolution and have been applied successfully elsewhere are used to explain phenomena occurring in this period of Javanese history in an attempt to distinguish between a rise, a florescence, and a decline".⁽⁶⁾

In Javanese history, some factors of continuity in the culture have been brought to light, ranging from expressions of art to psychological attitudes. We are convinced that similar results could be expected from the study of Malay culture provided that we employ the proper methodology.

As I said before, we are still in the preliminary stage in quest of continuity, implying also what remains in the changes. We could not put forward an adequate list of items. We have mentioned religiosity and a religion-centred outlook on life. We could also mention the assimilative tendency of the Malay culture, in particular the present one. If we go back to Malacca in the 15th century we could notice that the Malay culture has already performed the role of assimilation and transformation into a new combination of various cultural items and trends from different civilizations. The idea of a Malayan nation, although not in the

(6) B. Schrieke, *Indonesian Sociological Studies*, Part II, page 99, Van Hoeve, The Hague 1957.

same wordings, has its birthplace in Malacca and Pasai in the 13th and 14th century. Malay Culture has been the nucleus of something wide and universal ever since the emergence of Pasai and Malacca. This is the case too in the 7th century. This can thus be regarded as one of the permanent factors of Malay culture which make up one of its traits of identity. Furthermore racial intermixture characterizing modern Malay society has enhanced this assimilative tendency.

Our next question, what is the path of the evolution of Malay culture and what are the contemporaneous events of significance to this process? Here also we are confronted with difficulties, due to the event of several cultural trends crossing at different periods and in one way or another touching upon Malay culture, combined with the scantiness of material on this topic. The path of this evolution must certainly follow frequent adjustment and adaptation plus the emergence of novel cultural items. The script for instance was changed with the coming of Islam. We are now witnessing a tendency to change the script again. The present Malay calendar is also a contribution of Islam. Then we have the festivals which are mostly of religious nature. Such items as the scripts, the festivals, the calendar, the manner of burial, have experienced frequent changes from the pre-historical period right up to the present. Apparently it is not the case with for instance the value of close attachment with one's family. These changes were undoubtedly the results of acculturization with stimuli from outside. Attachment to authority appeared to be another trait which has persisted for a long period. Despite frequent instances of warfare and struggle for supremacy between different individual rulers or states, hardly any case is known of a mass uprising against the injustice or tyranny of rulers. The history of Europe, from the days of Ancient Greece, Rome, the Middle Ages, right to our present time, are replete with such instances. It is not the case in Malay history. Thus the evolution of Malay culture has never been effected by a big social upheaval such as the experience of France with the Revolution of 1789. If changes occur, they do so gradually and peacefully. The path of evolution of Malay culture in the past has never been shocked by violent revolutionary changes.

There are of course sufficient known reasons to account for this difference but it is beyond my scope to deal with them.

d. As to the identity of present Malay culture perhaps we could put forward a few salient features. The first feature to note is that Malay culture to-day is woven around the Islamic conception of life, containing particular customs and traditions inherited from the past. As I mentioned before the customs and traditions of the Malays need not be described lengthily here since many of them are already known. I am sure many of us have seen a Malay wedding, a funeral, a circumcision ceremony, a coronation, etc., etc.

e. Regarding the subject of how Malay culture asserted its identity in the past, we are confronted with the same difficulty, scarcity of materials and the neglect of scholars. Remarks after remarks have been made about influences which come from outside upon the Malay culture. A picture was created as if the Malay culture was merely a passive recipient of external contributions. It has been almost forgotten that the culture itself was never a passive reactor to external stimuli. Some Hindu literary and mythological contributions were welcome but not the caste-system. Islam was embraced by the Malays but not the veil used by the Persian and Arabs. A comparative reference to Indonesia would perhaps help us a bit. In the history of Java and Bali we have instances when the indigenous culture maintains its identity throughout and experience a resurgence phenomenon after a period of assimilation. It is not our intention to go into details here.

It is not that Malay culture has no originality or identity of its own. The truth is that sufficient investigation into the matter has not been conducted. At the present moment we have to rely a great deal on analogical references to Indonesia with whom the Malay culture shares the same parentage.

Nevertheless there were already a few discoveries made regarding Malay society in connection with its distinctive contribution towards other societies. Being a maritime people the Malays naturally devoted a great deal of attention to means of trans-

portation on the water. It is believed that certain types of boat which later spread to much wider areas originated from the Malayo-Polynesian area.⁽⁵⁾ I am certain there will be quite a number of other items of similar nature which remains to be discovered by future research.

Malay society has not been a mere recipient of other cultural contributions, as I remarked earlier. We have for instance, another example in the Maritime Code, compiled in the reign of Sultan Mahmud Shah of Malacca. It was an existing maritime code applied throughout Indonesian seas, later modified by Islamic law. A better instance is perhaps the various customs and undang² which the Malays inherited from the past. In this way the identity of Malay culture as a unit, is preserved.

Our last concern here is the prospect of Malay culture in the future. Due to its flexibility, and assimilative spirit, reinforced by the humane and universal outlook of Islam, Malay culture in the future is certainly capable of meeting the requirements of the time, in particular to perform its historic role once again of providing the nucleus for a cultural development embracing the existing trends in Malaya.

(5) See Krom. page 39.