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## A Preliminary Study on Axiology in the Malaysian Islamic Visual Art

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**Abstract-** The visual art should aim at the good (ma'aruf) things, lawful and moral. The soul of art must be lean towards the nature of human beings. This is because the freedom of soul in designing the art is very much related with the purity of its nature awarded by the Almighty, Allah S.W.T. Basically, art and intelligent in terms of its function are quite similar, in which the inclination is in the acknowledge and the relation with the universe, Godhead, spiritual as well as the physical world. Thus, the realization of the greatness of God and the uniqueness of His creation. Despite the pressures of modernization, this study refers to the fact that Islam is synonymous regardless of place and time, which indirectly strengthen the facts that every Muslim art should be view as an Islamic way of life.

**Keywords:** *malaysian, islamic, visual art, way of life.*

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# A Preliminary Study on Axiology in the Malaysian Islamic Visual Art

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Art is the power to feel, realize and virtually live the supernatural experiences. It is also beautiful in its natural way and to express the unexplained complex feeling but lively phenomena like love, agony, loneliness, pain and life itself.

In the book by Qardhawi (1995)<sup>1</sup> entitled 'The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam: Al-Halal Wal Haram Fillslam' which discussed the concept of *Halal* (legitimacy) and *Haram* (prohibition) in Islam, the Prophet Muhammad said (as narrated by Muslim),

The most severely punished among people (on the Day of Resurrection) will be those who try to create something similar to what Allah has created.

In Qardhawi's summary, Imam Thabari stated in the Hadith that people who creates something to be worship besides Allah and he or she realizes it but still does it intentionally; he or she is considered *kufr* (denial). However, if it is done accidentally, then it is sinful.

Islam literally means submission, purity, obedience and peace. While technically Islam means a way or rules of life which designed the human life who believe in five pillars of Islam (*Rukun Islam*) which proclaim that there is no God except Allah and

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Muhammad (PBUH) is God's Messenger, perform ritual prayer five times a day, fasting during the blessed month of *Ramadhan*, to pay *Zakat* which means giving alms to the poor and needy and lastly to perform pilgrimage (Hajj) to Makkah at least once in a lifetime if he/she has all the ability to do so.

In Islam there are three basic elements, which are Belief (*Aqidah*), Rules (*Syariah*) and Ethics (*Adab*) in which the meaning and interpretation are based on the *Al Quran* and *Al Hadith*.

By this, any form of art can be view as Islamic art as long as its content is align to the thoughts and teachings of Islam. These artworks must be produce by Muslims. A Muslim artist should base and refer to both *Al-Quran* and *Al-Hadith* in the effort to develop artwork.

## II. BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Art is considers as the product of creative human activity in which materials are shaped or selected to convey an idea, emotion or visually interesting form. Art itself refers to the use of creative skill and imagination to produce beautiful, work such as painting or sculptures produced by the skill.<sup>2</sup>

In the art making process (1998)<sup>3</sup>, subject, form and content are the ingredients in producing a work of art. Subjects concern persons, objects or themes. A subject also refers to a particular agreement of the art elements. Form, is commonly understood as the use of the elements in constructing an artwork. Meanwhile, contents can be referring to as a statement, expression or mood, read into the emotional or intellectual message of an artwork. It also refers to the sensory, subjective, psychological or emotional properties felt in a piece of art.

In understanding an artwork, we have to realize the existence of two major aspects that are "formalistic" and "iconography", or in the other words, "form" and "content". The characteristics of formalistic aspect include the elements like color, tone, lines, shapes, forms, levels, space, rhythms, and movements and so on. The ability in analyzing these characteristic of formalistic aspect will make us look closer with the question of iconography in the particular artwork.

<sup>1</sup> Yusuf Al-Qardhawi. Translated by: Kamal El-Helbawy, M. Moinuddin Siddiqui and Syed Shukry. 1995. *The Lawful and The Prohibited in Islam (Al-Halal wal Haram fil Islam)*. Islamic Book Trust: Kuala Lumpur. pg 109

<sup>2</sup> Robert Allent & Andrew Delahunty. 2002. *Oxford Students Dictionary* (Eds). pg 52.

<sup>3</sup> Ocvirk, Otto G., Stinson, Robert E., Wingg, Philip R., Bone, Robert O., Cayton, David L.. 1998. *Art Fundamental*. p. 9-16.

Normally, iconography involves questions regarding literature, sociology, psychology, history, belief and others.

Tolstoy (1896)<sup>4</sup> stated that art as a method of communication, which transfers the emotional sense of an artist. In addition, Read (1959)<sup>5</sup> defines art as an attempt to create pleasant forms. The pleasant form shall be seen as a form of that captures and frames beauty.

Art is a discipline, which combine studies on of philosophy, aesthetic, cultural science, sociology, psychology, dissemination, anthropology, comparative study and history of art. From the aspect of element of art, the art origin, art development, art creation, art appreciation, art propaganda, all formulates that art is an idea for the future trends in which it engenders changes and development in human art.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of Contemporary Malaysian art, the deficiency in the development of art has always been related to the religions and cultural background. T.K. Sabapathy in the opinion that:

The absence of tradition in visual and 3-D art before the 20th century can be considered because of its Islamic background and due to its strong bonding with its tradition of craft culture. Islamic tradition that rejects the depiction of iconography has validates the common historical practice that is the depiction of symbols in craft tradition. Even though this situation has guaranteed and maintained the existence of sophisticated handicraft culture, it however does not promote a tradition of painting and sculpture.<sup>7</sup>

Ismail R. al-Faruqi and Lois Lamya 'al-Faruqi (1985)<sup>8</sup> defined Islamic art as a manifestation of suitable aesthetic value because it relate to the knowledge about Islam based from *Al Quran*. In other words, any message in Islamic art must be based on knowledge contains in *Al Quran*.

Robert Irwin (1982)<sup>9</sup> mentioned that Islamic art as an Islamic cultural art and it is not only art relating to the Islam as a religion. Moreover, Islamic art is not art for any particular age, place, individuals, neither style nor movements.

The suggestion made by Syed Ahmad Jamal and seconded by D'zulHaimi (2001)<sup>10</sup>, suggests that Islamic art is form by two words, "Islam" and "Art". He

defined Islamic art as a piece of artwork that reflects the advancements of Islam or an advance art object which accepted by Islam.

Osman Bakar (1995)<sup>11</sup> said Islamic art in actual fact refers to Islamic manifestation and therefore whenever we talked about Islamic manifestation in art, we actually refer to Islamic art. Hence, any form of artwork can be seen as Islamic art as long as its contents are in line with the thinking and teaching of Islam. This artworks must be presented by Muslims and the Muslim artist must base and refer to both *Al Quran* and *Al Hadith* in creating and developing artworks.

### III. CHALLENGES IN MALAYSIAN VISUAL ART

Historically, the earliest paintings found in Malaysia were in various caves such as Niah Cave in Sarawak; Batu Putih Cave at Kodiang, Kedah; Tambun Cave in Perak and Batu Cincin Cave at Hulu Kelantan. It is believed that all those paintings have been painted by the caveman during the Stone Age. There were many tools used in the paintings, among them were charcoal, hematite and manganese oxide. Most of the motives or subject of the paintings were much related to the their daily life activities and living objects of its time such as hunting scenes, hunted animals likes barking-deer, deer, image of boat, hut and hunting tools.<sup>12</sup>

The development of art in Malaysia can be see through phases, involving such as drawing, painting, printing and sculpture. Malaysian artist used these areas as platform to express their feeling and emotions for the audience.

Generally, there are three main factors, which have influenced the development of the early modern art in Malaysia. First, there is the British colonization. Second, is the immigration of "trade nation" and third, the education status. Painting in Modern art was considered as a different piece of artwork as compared to any other conventional art which are more traditional. They are more individualistic in the sense that it reflecting more about the artist than the manifestation of value as a whole in any society.<sup>13</sup>

The visual art in Malaysia or more accurately in the Malay Peninsula Malaysia began in 1930's with the invention of painting by Yong Mun Seng, Abdullah Ariff and others. Malaysian artists in the earlier years are free from any restriction but in actual they are exposed towards any Western tradition, which came from works of world renown artists. The exposure was restricted are

<sup>4</sup>Tolstoy. 1896. Translated by Aylmer Maude. 1900. *What Is Art?*. Hackett Pub Co Inc; Reprint of original Am. Edtn.edition.

<sup>5</sup>Herbert R. 1959. *The Meaning of Art*, New York: Pinguin Book.pg. 1.

<sup>6</sup>DzulHaimi Md. Zain. 2001. *Seni Islam* (Ed.4). Kuala Lumpur: Hans Press Sdn. Bhd.

<sup>7</sup>MuliyadiMahmod. 2001. *Modern Art Malaysia*. Malaysia. Utusan publication & Distributors SdnBhd

<sup>8</sup>Ismail R., Lois lamya'al- Faruqi. 1985. *The Cultural Atlas of Islami*.New York: Macmillan Publishing.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Irwin. 1982. *Islamic Art*.London: Laurence King Publishing.

<sup>10</sup>DzulHaimi Md. Zain. 2001. *Seni Islam* (Ed.4). Kuala Lumpur: Hans Press Sdn. Bhd.

<sup>11</sup>Osman Bakar. 1995. "Kesenian Islam" in *Kesenian Islam - Suatu Perspektif Malaysia*, Exhibition catalog .Kuala Lumpur; Balai Seni Lukis Negara.

<sup>12</sup>Mohd Johari Ab. Hamid. 2006. *Asas Seni Visual*. Perak: Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris.pg153

<sup>13</sup>MuliyadiMahamood. 2001. *Seni Lukisa Moden Malaysia - Era Perintis hingga Era Pluralis (1930-1990)*.Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications.

only within fellow artists and their own colleague's artworks.<sup>14</sup>

The National Art Gallery established in 1958 by Malaysia. It showed a real support from government in the effort to promote local artists and to mark the declaration of independence.<sup>15</sup> There were various style of artwork since 1950's up to 1960's, from Realist to Impressionist work, from Expressionist to Abstract Expressionist movement. All these works are from the result of influences and exposure received by the Malaysian artists.<sup>16</sup>

These style, were developed by group of artists who tried to identify themselves identity and they are loosely related. Their artworks indirectly show their personality value of the nation from sociological, cultural, and religions believers. Their works can be considered as an extended reaction towards the National Culture policy introduced by the government in the 70s.<sup>17</sup>

In producing artworks, the artists tend to get closer to the subjects related to the situation or events occurred in the country. In other words, they try to approach the in subjects that relate to the local myth and legend, per sue the discussion about cosmological identity, culture inheritance, political issues, situation in Islamic context, the extension of calligraphy art, the physical features of substance, current values and traditions, also any other options of interesting subjects.

The writing by Rogayah Estar (2010)<sup>18</sup> on the National Cultural Policy explained that the execution of the Policy is tough in terms of accomplishing its objective. Most Malaysian is a quite sensitive of their ethnic group and believers. Furthermore, there are problems due to the rapid development in socio-economic and politic, which resulted from open and free relations with foreign affairs. The acceptance of foreign value of an influential system and system among small groups of people had resulted dispute in the value system and education, which hindered the development of nationalism and Malaysian national identity. Nevertheless, Dr Tan Chee Beng, speech had said that even though the establishment of National Cultural Policy is not fully accomplished but, on the whole the basic aims and objectives of the Policy has shown positive impact and success which can be proud of.

The most essential things here, whether traditional or modern art, it should not go against the

fundamental faith and divine character in the respective religion. In fact, it must shine the positive identity of each group of race. The variety of custom, tradition and religions in a multi-racial setting of Malaysia, which existed peacefully since long time, must be well preserved.

#### IV. THE AXIOLOGY: ISLAMIC AND MALAYSIAN

Axiology derived from the word *axios* which comes from Yunani language means value and *logos* which means theory. Therefore, axiology is a theory about value.<sup>19</sup>

According to Sun Myung Moon (2003)<sup>20</sup> Axiology is the theory that generally deals with the values of trueness, beauty and goodness and serves as a basis for the three particular theories of education, art, and ethics. In conclusion, to make possible a future society based on a culture of Heart (realizing the values of trueness, beauty, and goodness centering on Heart), a unified culture with a new view of values is a real necessity.

Tefko Saracevic and Paul. B. Kantor (1997)<sup>21</sup>, the theory of value, or axiology, is the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of value and valuation. Philosophers consider value as the worth of something, and the process of valuation as an estimate, appraisal, or measurement of its worth. In their works, worth seems to be an undefined primitive term. They consider that value is related to, but not synonymous with, "good," "desirable," or "worthwhile," and that it can be positive or negative.

According to Md. Nasir (2013)<sup>22</sup>, Axiology is one of philosophical branch, which refers to the value about good and bad, right or wrong, beautiful and ugly. Among the axiology branch is an ethic, which emphasized on reasonable and relevant matters that one should do. Ethic is also focusing on quality of moral and human attitude covering individual, society and life.

Axiology means a theory of value relating to the use of gained knowledge<sup>23</sup>. According to Bramel in Amsal Bakhtiar<sup>24</sup>, axiology divided into three categories.

<sup>19</sup>Amsal Bakhtiar. 2004. *Filsafat Ilmu*. Jakarta: Raja Grafindo Persada. pg 162.

<sup>20</sup>Translation from the Korean original: Claude Perrotet. 2003. *An Introduction to the Thought of Sun Myung Moon: Unification Thought and V.O.C. Theory*. An Abridged Edition. HSA Publications: New York.

<sup>21</sup>Tefko Saracevic and Paul. B. Kantor. 1997. *Studying the Value of Library and Information Services*. Part I. Establishing a Theoretical Framework. *Journal of the American Society For Information Science*. 48(6):527 – 542.

<sup>22</sup>Md. Nasir Bin Ibrahim. 2013. *Falsafah dan Teori dalam Pendidikan Seni Visual*. UPSI: Fakulti Seni, Komputer dan Industri Kreatif. Pg. 4.

<sup>23</sup>Jujun S. Suriasumantri, 2000. *Filsafat Ilmu, Sebuah Pengantar Populer*. Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan. pg 105

<sup>24</sup>Amsal, Bakhtiar. 2004. *Filsafat Ilmu*. Jakarta: Raja Grafindo Persada. pg 163

<sup>14</sup>Ahmad Suhaimi Mohd Noor. 2011. *Sejarah Kesedaran Visual Di Malaysia*. Perak: Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. pg 7-9

<sup>15</sup>Ahmad Suhaimi Mohd Noor. 2011. *Sejarah Kesedaran Visual Di Malaysia*. Perak: Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. pg 176-182

<sup>16</sup>Rasdan Ahmad. Article *Perjalanan Seni Lukis Malaysia*. Utusan Online 30/12/2012.

<sup>17</sup>Ahmad rashidi Hassan. 2012. *Contemporary Islamic Painting in Malaysia 1980 to 2000*. UiTM: UiTM Press.

<sup>18</sup>Yusof Ismail. 2010. *Dasar-dasar Utama Kerajaan Malaysia*. Malaysia: UIA. pg 40

First, moral conduct, which means the act of moral that, produces ethic. Second is aesthetic expression, which refers to beautifulness of expression. Third or final category is socio-political life that produces philosophy in socio-politics.

As soon as Malaysia gained its independence on 31 August 1957, the Federal Constitution of Malaysia has declared Islam as the official religion in Malaysia. However, according to Ahmadrashidi Hassan (2012)<sup>25</sup> most of the art exhibition, which themed based on Islamic Art, only began in 1980s and 1990s.

Islamic art is a part of Islamic culture. The differences between Islamic and non-Islamic arts are its intention, aim and ethical value. The main objection in Islamic art is for the sake of Allah (swt). Unfortunately, Aminah Syed Muhammed (1995)<sup>26</sup> identified some of the basic value taken from the West such as egoistic has been practice by fine art artist that really contradict with the Islamic value. With the egoistics value, the artist is creating works to fulfill himself. In addition, that the fine art artist is a revered being superior to others, allow to be very selfish, even thoroughly antisocial in his behavior and actions, simply because he is an artist.

The multi-racial and multi-cultural elements in Malaysia have influenced the artist in producing their artworks. Sulaiman Esa's<sup>27</sup> painting, *Waiting for Godot* (1977) has created a controversy because of his insensitivity act by putting Al-Quranic verse together with image of naked women. The painting represented himself, which is not only shows the crisis of art identity in himself but also depicted the crisis of culture in the country in the year of 1970s especially among the Malay people who are Muslims towards the Western influence.

Islam begin as soon as a Muslim artist recites his creed *La ilahaila Allah* (No God Except Allah), and accept the meaning of the Oneness of God (tawhid) that Allah is the "One" (wahid). Tawhid is a comprehensive concept which not only as a statement by a Muslim about God, but also his/her view on the universe and his/her role in life either as individual or a member of society. Once one recited the creed or Syahadah, one will automatically be responsible to manifest the creed he/she has recited with the fulfillment of knowledge about the vital of life in this world.<sup>28</sup>

Sayyid Qutb (1979)<sup>29</sup> in his view mentioned, the art activity comprehensively is about decorating humanly about the concept and the reaction of the man

himself/herself. It also concerns on the concept of existence and life which flourishing in the man's soul.

Meanwhile, Ismail R. Faruqi (1980)<sup>30</sup> in his opinion stated that unlike other cultures which associates the beautifulness as a luxurious, intrinsic value to gain or satisfy one's self-interest, in contrast Islamic art associates the beautifulness as a value, which entirely depends on the truth of Islam itself.

The value is not only base on the belief solely. The value also has other dimension, which is emotion. The value shows the influential commitment on emotion, which is how one is demonstrating his /her feeling whether love, or hate towards something.

Islam is a religion that rules the relations of man and God, between man and universe based on *Al Quran* and *As Sunnah*. Islam supports every artwork that in line with its teaching, but ban, which goes against. Those artworks is the statement of worldview of life specifically which relevant and coherent with the Islamic values and perspective.

## V. CONCLUSION

Prophet Muhammad (saw) has conveyed Muslim clearly. One of them is *Aqidah* or faith. *Aqidah* has become the main principle in Islamic development.

Art is use as a tool to spread religion and to strengthen assistances and goodness among the society (*ummah*). Through artistic talents, Muslim artists can use various techniques and artworks as the thorough force to remember and praise the greatness of Allah S.W.T. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the artists to translate Islamic ideas into artistic language. According to Islamic perspective, artistic creativity is the urge or force given by Allah S.W.T., which highlights the importance of Allah S.W.T. In addition, art also enhances union or unity. Islamic art does not revolve around individual human but it contains social orientation based on the needs of fellow human beings.

## VI. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In the name of Allah, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful, All the praises and thanks be to Allah. Peace and blessings to the beloved prophet Muhammad PBUH as well as his family, friends, and the rest of followers.

We would like to record our accreditation to all parties involved, either directly or indirectly during the information gathering process. All the information and assistance that have been obtained from all involved parties will be remembered always. Finally, we hope that we will gain blessings from God Almighty and continue to obtain happiness in this world and hereafter, Insha'Allah.

<sup>25</sup> Ahmadrashidi Hassan. 2012. Contemporary Islamic Painting in Malaysia 1980 to 2000. UiTM: UiTM Press.

<sup>26</sup> Aminah Sayyid Muhammed. (2ed) 1995. Islamization of the Visual Arts. Toward Islamization of Disciplines. pg 483-493.

<sup>27</sup> Galeri Petronas. 2001. *Insyirah*. K.L: Galeri Petronas.

<sup>28</sup> DzulHaimi bin MdZain. 2013. "Ta'birandan Penghayatan Seni Islam", in *Taman Nurani, Islamic Impressions in Malaysia Contemporaray Art*. Exhibition Catalog. K.L, Galeri Petronas.

<sup>29</sup> Sayyid Qutb. 1979. *Petunjuk Sepanjang Jalan*. Kuala Lumpur: El/Ikhwan Enterprise. pg 129.

<sup>30</sup> Ismail R. Faruqi. 1980. *Islam and Culture*. Kuala Lumpur: Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia.