SINGAPORE MALAY IDENTITY: A STUDY OF DOMINANT PERCEPTIONS OF ISLAM IN POST-INDEPENDENCE SINGAPORE

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY

This thesis is a study of the Singapore Malay community. It examines issues of identity pertaining to the Singapore Malay community with a focus on self perception as a group and how they are in turn viewed and understood by the rest of the Singaporean communities particularly that of the ruling elites. An exploration of this sense of understanding of being Malay and also recognised as Malay is important given the context in which the Singapore Malay community is residing in, namely as a minority group in a country that is largely predominantly Chinese but yet having the tenets of multi-ethnicity, multi racialism and multi-religiosity as the fundamentals of the structure and governance of the Singapore society. With this reality, it is significant to examine how the Singapore Malays identify themselves as a community and how they navigate their identity as Malay in the context of this pluralism.

The experiences of Singapore after its independence in 1965 without doubt, will have borne a tremendous influence in the life of its populace, and will thus have to be considered when we examine the development of identification and also the process of identity formulation among the Singapore Malays. While the impact of local context in the process of identity formation of the Singapore Malays is pertinent, geo-politics of the region is no less significant. It is therefore also critical that we examine the impact of Singapore's position in the presence of other Malays in neighbouring countries who are a majority. The fact that Singapore is surrounded by a largely Malay populated neighbouring countries, the closest of which is Malaysia, has implications on the way the Malays in Singapore are perceived and understood by the non-Malays, and also how they are managed within a non-Malay landscape like

Singapore. This element of a regional Malay majority also influences how the Singapore Malays identify themselves and how the non-Malays view their Malay counterparts in their home country. In exploring issues of identity and identity formation of the Singapore Malays, this particular element will have to be factored in.

This study primarily explores the expression and understanding of Malay identity as viewed by the elite, namely the Malay elite. For the non-Malay elite, the focus will be on the ruling or national leadership in Singapore. A study of the perception and understanding of the elite is pertinent because of the influence they exercise in various social domains, be it political, religious, academic, and even in the professional fields. As elite, they also have the capacity to influence the type of values and value system in the community and how they are concretised and embraced by society.   They also have the capacity to determine what is rejected or assimilated into the society's consciousness. As the leading sociologist, Karl Mannheim explained:

> *"It is not men in general who think, or even isolated individuals who do the thinking, but men in certain groups who have developed a particular style of thought in an endless series of responses to certain typical situations characterising their common position...these persons bound together into groups, strive in accordance with the character and position of the groups to which they belong to change the surrounding world of nature and society or attempt to maintain it in a given condition."* [1]

Hence, it is only apt that an understanding of the viewpoints and expression of identity among the elite be examined. In so doing, we shall also be looking at how their understanding of Malay identity and what it means to be Malay in Singapore, has impacted how they shape and determine problems within the Malay community, and their responses and solutions to problems that directly involve issues of identity.

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[1] Karl Mannhiem, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, p.3. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1936.

A study of perception and understanding of Malay identity involves examining the basic ingredients of that identity. These are language, culture and religion. As religion is a major element integral to Malay culture and tradition, the understanding and perception of how Islam is woven into Malay identity and its impact will form the central theme of this thesis. While this study also identifies and discusses the impact of other socio-historical factors that shape the experiences and realities of Singapore Malays, how these affect perception and understanding of the core identifier of Malay identity namely Islam, and how religion is appropriated to confront the challenges, will also be discussed.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

This thesis attempts to examine dominant perceptions of the contemporary elite within the Malay Muslim community of Singapore on the question of Malay cultural identity. In this dissertation, the term elite is used to refer to not only the dominant Malay political leaders, but also those who enjoy position of leadership within their own fields. They include journalists, academics, religious scholars and teachers. Although the latter are not part of the ruling political elite, their values and ideas are influential with the Malays, and may be given recognition by the political elite. What the elite as a whole deem to be integral elements of the identity of Singapore Malays constitute the major thrust of the study. In this respect, the Islamic component of that identity forms the particular focus of attention. How Islam is conceived, articulated and appropriated by these significant social groups in response to the major problems and challenges confronting the community since independence, is one of the major themes that will be explored. This thesis will also identify and analyze specific socio-historical factors that have strongly conditioned the identity formation of Singapore Malays. These include significant historical experiences, ideology and demands of economic development that have impacted upon the identity of the Malays from the feudal period through colonialism and to the present.

When we speak of cultural identity, we are essentially referring to the sense of being or that which constitutes the individual or group sense of self. But what exactly does a group's identity comprise of and what are the conditions that shape and condition a group's identity? Is identity based on primordial or core values inherent within a group that is fixed and determinable and also distinguishable from others, or

is it conditioned by specific socio-historical and political circumstances? Is there a dialectic at play in which the primordial or core values of a group which constitute its identity change in response to circumstances affecting the groups, hence identity is constructed and reconstructed to suit the circumstances? Is it even possible to speak of the identity of a community or group when the community itself is neither a homogenous nor harmonious whole?[2]

This thesis seeks less to define what comprise Malay cultural identity but more how it is understood by the community's elite. It is important to recognize that a community is never homogenous but comprises different competing and conflicting social groups, each with its own beliefs, attitudes, ideas orientations, class affiliation and many other distinguishing markers. As Alatas asserts, *"It has long been recognized by social scientists that we should not view society as an overall equilibrium, an overall harmonious integration. In every society, there are elements of conflict and strain. There is the process of differentiation in the values system of society. The dominant and subjugated classes do not entirely share a common value system."*[3]   Chandra Muzaffar also argued that any society including Malay society, would at any given time generate and manifest different ideas, beliefs and attitudes hence there will always be differing values in the society.[4]

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[2] Joel S. Kahn, "Subalternity and the Construction of Malay Identity," in *Modernity and Identity: Asian Illustrations*, edited by Alberto Gomes. La Trobe University Press, 1994. See also writings of anthropologists like Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartman, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World.* Thousand Oaks, Pine ForgePress, 1988.   They are among a group of anthropologist that had written on the dialectics of identity.

[3] *S*yed Husein Alatas, *Modernization and Social Change: Studies in Modernisation, Religion, Social Change and Development in Southeast Asia* p.102. Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1972.

[4] Chandra Muzzafar quoted Wertheim as saying: *That no human society is a completely integrated entity. In any community, there are hidden overt forms of protest against the prevalent hierarchical*

The focus on the elite definition and understanding of Malay identity is based on the sociological insight of various scholars who uphold the view that generally it is the elite or power holders within the political and other allied spheres of activity who determine or condition the thought of the people and are able to exert influence over the community largely due to its position at the apex.[5] They are the social group that yields control and influence over the masses. Their influence is further facilitated by the masses willingness to acknowledge and recognize the power of the elite including its ideas and beliefs.[6]

The idea of the elite playing a vital role in determining or conditioning ideas has been heavily analysed by the renowned sociologist, Karl Mannheim. In his *Sociology of Culture*,[7] Mannheim analysed the relationship between ideas of the dominant group

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structure. In general a more or less dominant set of common values can be discerned – else the society would not have sufficient cohesive power to subsist. But beneath the dominant theme, there always exist different set of values which are, to a certain degree, adhered to among certain social groups and which function as a kind of counterpoint to the leading melody." Chandra Muzaffar, *Some Dominant Concepts and Dissenting Ideas on Malay Rule and Malay Society from the Malacca to the Colonial and Merdeka Periods*. PhD thesis, University of Singapore, 1977.

[5] Ibid. According to Chandra Muzaffar, dominant concepts resides with the ruling class primarily because of its control over 'the means of material production', the ability to 'regulate the production and distribution of ideas'...which is at the root of the ruling class strengths. He quoted Marx as saying: *"the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production so that thereby, general speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas . . . in so far as they rule as a class and determine the extent of an epoch ... their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch."*

[6] Ibid. This view, according to Chandra Muzaffar, was aptly noted by the renowned fourteenth century scholar, Ibn Khaldun, when he said, *"the ruler dominates those under him. His subjects imitate him because they see perfection in him, exactly as children imitate their parents, or students their teachers."*

[7] Although Karl Mannheim, a leading sociologist of early 20th century, was more known for his contribution in the study of sociology of knowledge, his study on the sociology of culture is just as important, and cannot be ignored. Karl Mannheim, *Essays on Sociology Of Culture*. Routledge and Paul, London, 1956.

and how they shape and determine the culture of society. Arising from the position of power, the dominant group wields dominance over concepts, ideas, consciousness and understanding of the community. In this way, the dominant group plays an important role in shaping and formulating the sense of identity of a community. Although underlying tensions may occur within the community due to the presence of other social groups, for example when these groups disagree with the public or accepted versions of the community's identity as it is not fully in sync with the identity that is attested to by the different social groups,[8] the views and perceptions of the elite have an impact on the way the people identify themselves as a community. This does not mean that dominant ideas of the group on identity are uncontested by other social groups within the community. Challenges and conflicts between the dominant group versus other social groups on the meaning of the group's identity exist and this could create tension and potentially cause a rift within the community. However, the dynamics of group thought and their interaction will not be the major focus of this thesis.

It is pertinent to note that while the elite uphold certain fundamental elements of Malay identity in common, the elite perceptions of what these mean are neither homogenous nor static. They evolve in relation to socio-political factors that continually impact upon the community. It is also pertinent to point out that the idea that the elite have regarding its identity cannot be equated with Malay identity as such. At best, they reflect the thought of the specific group within the community

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[8] For example, the idea of the Malay new rich has been put through contestation - there is the academic version of what it means to be a new rich versus the popular understanding accepted by the masses. Shamsul A.B, "From Orang Kaya Baru to Melayu Baru: Cultural Construction of the New Rich", in Michel Pinches, *Culture and Privilege in Capitalist Asia.* Routledge, London, 1999.

which may or may not mirror its identity.

The question of the group's identity and how it is relevant to the community has long engaged the attention of the Singapore Malay elite not in abstract, but in response to the problems and challenges confronting the community. Indeed questions bearing on the identity of the Malays predated independence but persisted in the context of changing socio-political conditions that impacted upon the community after separation from Malaysia in 1965. In the new socio-political context of a newly independent nation state, the articulation of what it means to be a Singapore Malay is exacerbated by the problems and challenges induced by social change, the result of extensive development and industrialisation that Singapore has embarked upon since its independence. Geopolitics within the region has also played a role in the identity formation of the Malays of Singapore. Singapore's ideology of survival has also had repercussions on how the Singapore Malays' strong cultural ties with Malays in the region have been perceived. This has impacted upon the Malays' political consciousness and identity as Singaporeans.[9]

While there are numerous studies that indirectly bear on the issue of Malay identity, few delve into the question directly. Much of the numerous literature on Singapore Malays in the period after independence focused on the community's socio-economic challenges and problems, although they indirectly bear upon aspects relating to Malay identity. Examples of these works include the study by Lily Zubaidah, which analyses the problems of under-development of the Singapore

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[9] Often the comparisons are in terms of educational achievements, economic success and political freedom. For example, see article *Our Malays are Happier than Yours*. Economist, Vol 358, Issue 8207, Mar 2003.

Malays in the socio-educational domain.[10]   This work examines to some extent perceptions of Malay identity and values, and their implications on the socio-economic problems of the Malays. Similarly, Tania Li's work on the state of the Singapore Malay community post-1965 reflected upon presumptions that ascribed the problem of the relatively poorer socio-economic status of the Malays to its identity and values embraced by the community.[11]

Little systematic research has been done that can shed light on the analysis of problems of identity and identity formation as perceived and experienced by Singapore Malays themselves, in particular that which involve perceptions of various elite within the community - elite whose views have an impact on the way the Malays see themselves. Studies specific to Singapore Malay identity are largely contained in academic exercises by students at the undergraduate and graduate level. These studies however tend to be more focused on the problem of identity of specific groups within the Singapore Malay community such as Malay youths' identification of themselves.[12] Other studies within this category examine identity of specific components of ethnic groups within the community such as Arab women and how

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[10]   Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*. Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1998.

[11] Tania Li, *Malays in Singapore: Culture, Economy and Ideology.* Oxford University Press, New York 1989. There are also other works that looks at Malay identity, and they include works by Lai Ah Heng, *Meanings of Multiethnicity: A Case Study of Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Singap*ore. Oxford University Press, New York, 1995, and Judith Nagata, "What is a Malay? Situational Selections of Ethnic Identity in a Plural Society," in Ahmad Ibrahim, Sharon Siddique, Yasmin Hussain (ed.) *Readings of Islam in Southeast Asia*, 1975.

[12] Mazreeta Sirat, *Malay Youths in Singapore and their Perception of Being Malay.*   National University of Singapore, 1996.

they navigate their sense of identity in the context of Singapore.[13] Overall, there has been insufficient attention given to analysing problems of identity and identity formation,[14] and this is where thsi thesis, hopefully, is able to provide a modest scholarly contribution.

In recent years there have been several new undertaking and writings on Malay society that attempts to provide insights into their identity. Such scholarship posed questions like who the Malays are and whether it is plausible to speak of a Malay identity. Among those who had written extensively on Malay community is Anthony Milner, whose study *The Malays*, examined various groups of Malay communities over many centuries, and how Malay identity has developed.[15] To Milner, being Malay means *"...different things in different places, and at different times,"*[16] and that Malay identity has *"...entailed a fusion of Western notion of ethnicity and older, local 'Malay' concepts of community."*[17] In other words, the formulation of Malay identity is a construct that is based on the changing circumstances surrounding the Malay communities, and that there are differences in the meaning of Malay identity in the

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[13] Nargis Mohamad Talib, *Arab Women in Singapore: Ethnic Consciousness and Boundary Maintenance*. National University of Singapore, 1999.

[14] Haji Maaruf Salleh, former President of Majlis Ugama Islam (MUIS) acknowledged the fact that there has been limited attempt at examining the issue of Malay identity.   According to him *"...belum banyak kajian dibuat mengenainya [identiti masyarakat Melayu Singapura], proses membuat kajian identity masyarakat itu sendiri mempunyai banyak cabaran ..."* Translated it means *"...there has not been many research done on it [identity of Singapore Malays], process of researching into this topic of a community's identity possess a lot of challenges..."*   Berita Harian, *Nilai Identiti Melayu dari Mardan ke Nonoi*, 17 Apr 2006.

[15] In his study, *The Malays*, Milner looked at different communities where the term Malay had been used to identify the communities, for example, Malays of Patani (South Thailand), Malays in Eastern Sumatra, Malays in Northeast Sumatra or Riau regions and Malays on the Peninsula. Anthony Milner, *The Malays.* Wiley-Blackwell Publication, Oxford, 2008.

[16] Ibid, p.xi.

[17] Ibid.

different communities identified as Malay.   Within this tradition are also those studies which assert that Malay as a group does not exist, and that Malay identity is not based on the group's inherent cultural values and traditions, and that Malay identity is a construct of the British colonialists.[18]

These writings are not specific to Singapore Malays and are not focussed on how the Malays themselves view their identity through what they write and articulate. In addition, some of the ideas within such writings have been subject to conceptual limitations. As Shaharuddin Maaruf remarked: "*it is difficult to comprehend that the Malay society does not have its own sense of identity that is autonomous, strong and unique...able to evolve, develop, mature, rejuvenate and able to determine its fate and history.*"[19] He went on to further state that the post-colonial writers' assertion that Malay identity is the construct of colonial powers does not make sense in view of the fact that the indigenous Malays had been the ones to rise up in nationalistic spirit against the British colonialists to eventually attain independence. If Malay identity had been a British construct, they would not have created an identity that gave the indigenous Malays the spirit to go against the British colonialists and demand independence for their homeland.[20]

An understanding of Malay identity from the view of its own elite will provide for a richer analysis and discussion of the meaning of Malay identity and what it means to be known as Malay. This is where this thesis hopes to provide a significant

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[18] See the compilation of writings on Malay identity by Western scholars in Timothy P.Barnard, ed., *Malay Identity Across Boundaries.* Singapore University Press, Singapore, 2004.

[19] Berita Harian *"Bila Jati Diri Dipersoal,"* 9 Oct 2004.   This is an excerpt of the seminar paper presented by Shaharuddin Maaruf, at the Congress of Malay Culture at Johor Bahru, 10-13 Sep 2004.

[20] Ibid.

contribution. It will also throw light on how the elite define what it deem as relevant to its group identity. These issues and concerns based on "internal" perceptions of the Malay elite provide a rich corpus in understanding the meaning of being Malay. The significance of this study is exacerbated by the fact that much of existing studies on Malay culture, beliefs and values that directly bear upon the question of their identity have been dominated by colonialist bureaucrat-scholars. The works of Raffles, Wilkinson, Winstedt, Swettenham and many others are part of the body of scholarship on the Malays and its society which have generally been acknowledged as pioneering and important contributors to Malay studies. This is in consideration that colonial scholarships gave detailed accounts and descriptions of the Malays and their way of life.

To give its due, colonial scholarship without doubt, provides many valuable information regarding Malay culture and institutions. As noted by Shaharuddin Maaruf in one of his writings:

> *"...colonial writings on the Malays. They had left us valuable descriptions of culture and institutions of pre-colonial days to be sure for contemporary researches. We would be poorer academically or intellectually speaking without the records left behind by the colonials. In all objectivity, we can even say that they left us more records of the pre-colonial culture and society than the indigenous elite themselves."[21]*

While we acknowledge the contributions of colonial scholarship, we have to be mindful and recognise that this form of scholarship lodged within the context of imperialism, is not unfettered by the strong influence of *Orientalism*. This legacy has given rise to the dominant and deeply entrenched perception of inferiority of the Malays. As discussed by Edward Said, *Orientalism* is primarily about the notion that

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[21] Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Possibilities for Alternative Discourses in Southeast Asia: Ideology and the Caricature of Culture,* pp.4-5. National University of Singapore, 2002.

the West have with regards to the East or *Orientalist*. It is a style of thought or perception that shows how the Westerners view and perceive the *Orient* i.e. Others, and in the process, this becomes a means for the Westerners to define itself vis a vis the *Orient*. In the words of Edward Said *"...Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient."*[22]

    Orientalist discourse is distinguished by salient traits and characteristics. One of these is stereotyping and caricatures in which bias and prejudice in describing the *Orient* is rampant. A most common theme in *Orientalist* literature is the assertion that the *Oriental* is a group of '*lazy native*'. In so doing, the Westerners essentialized the indigenous natives through these stereotypes and myth of indolence, dependent on the colonial powers and needing the colonial powers to guide them in their daily lives.[23] *Orientalist* thinking is also distinguished by ahistorical perspective, and where there is a general disregard of the notion that society goes through changes over the years, and that a society, its customs, traditions and way of life, is never static and fixed. Unfortunately, ahistorical perspective is what has been adopted so much so that it colours the understanding, perceiving and defining of the *Orient*. To the *Orientalist*, Western is superior, while *Orient* is inferior. This mental model and perspective in turn resulted in selective selection of issues and perspectives regarding the *Orient* because of the need to ensure dominance of the West, in short certain subjects regarding the *Orient* were examined and others marginalised. Hence what had been normally discussed regarding the *Orient* is very much shaped by the

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[22] Edward Said, *Orientalism,* p.3. Vintage Books, New York, 1978.

[23] Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*. Frank Cass, London, 1977.

primary motivation to depict the inadequacies of the native while showcasing the superiority of the Westerners/colonizers.

The *Orientalist* mode of thinking has shaped the colonial discourse on the Malay society, and in these Western colonialists' writings regarding the Malay society and the Malay people, there occurred a fair share of stereotypes and generalisations. The Malays have generally been singularly portrayed as a group of people that is lazy, extravagant, easily provoked, lacking discipline, preoccupied with non-productive pursuits, basically possessing many unflattering attributes. Frank Swettenham, for example, in his writing *The Real Malay* described the Malays as an extravagant group of people, fond of borrowing money and lazy. [24] He also portrayed the Malays as a group of people that is meek, and that they needed as much help as possible from the more superior colonialists. The colonialists in the Malay world hence saw their arrival as bringing the Malays and Malay society out of the dark ages into civilisation. As noted by a Malay scholar:

> *"To achieve the aim of justifying colonialism, colonial works are replete with the direct contrast between Malay rule of the past to the colonial era. Driven by the ideological need to deny legitimacy to the past while conferring it upon itself, colonial style of thought presents the contrast as basically that of emerging from the Dark Ages of the past to the dawning of enlightenment, thanks to the civilising function of Western rule."*[25]

Colonial writings on the Malays also showed a failure to recognise that Malay society has its own form of culture and worldview shaped by its past and experiences, and that the Malay world is not a cultural vacuum before their arrival as the colonial

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[24] Frank Swettenham, *The Real Malay*. John Lane, London, 1901. Statements of Malay negativity are also seen in other types of writings like travelogues including official records.

[25] Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Possibilities for Alternative Discourses in Southeast Asia: Ideology and the Caricature of Culture*, p.6.

powers.

A prominent Malay thinker, Syed Hussein Alatas has argued against the colonial perceptions of the natives in his work *The Myth of the Lazy Native*.[26] He argued that the dominant image and representation of the natives as an inferior group of people is primarily a function of the ideology of colonial capitalism that attempts to subdue the natives and justify European intervention. More importantly, the analysis of the natives has not been grounded in sound theoretical frameworks. Alatas stated:

> *"The negative image of the people subjugated by Western colonial powers, which dominated the colonial ideology, was drawn on the basis of cursory observations, sometimes with strong built-in prejudices, or misunderstandings and faulty methodologies. The general negative image was not the result of scholarship. Those who proclaimed the people of the area indolent, dull, treacherous, and childish, were generally not scholars. They were monks, civil servants, planters, sailors, popular travel writers and tourists. They generated the image of the natives. Subsequently a few scholars became influenced..."[27]*

He went on to explain that in the portrayal of the Malay natives, the same limitations also occurred. He maintained that the *'foreign portrayal of the Malay character has exclusively emphasised traits which were considered negative by the* observer. *Judged by modern scientific standard, the portrayal is unsound and naive. It reveals the observer more than the observed. The method and basic assumptions employed in the study were crude and amateurish. The study of Malay character was not that of disciplines relevant to it...the key disciplines in national character such as history, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and sociology, have never been applied by the scholar administrators and travellers. Their conclusions on Malay character do not qualify*

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[26] Alatas gave an in-depth analysis of the limitations of the colonial portrayal of the Malays, with many examples illustrating the myth of such colonial precepts. Among the traits he debunked is that of 'indolence' which has regularly portrayed in colonial scholarship. For more details, refer to Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*.

[27] Ibid, p.112.

as scientific hypotheses."[28]

Despite the limitations of colonial scholarship, it is this particular form of scholarship that has been dominating the field of Malay studies including the study of Malay culture and Malay identity. In fact, the thinking, motifs and ideas of colonial writers are regularly viewed with reverence and are so dominant that views postulated by the colonial writers invade perceptions and understanding of Malay society, and also issues affecting the Malays such as its values and worldview, its culture and way of life. The grip of colonial thought and ideas as espoused in the colonial literature is so strong that these ideas and thoughts are often reflected in contemporary writings regarding the Malays until today, albeit in disguised or new forms. In fact, the conception and understanding of Malays as lazy, spendthrift, fatalistic, predisposed towards fun and entertainment and so on continue to be crafted and shaped in academic writings and elsewhere. For example, Za'ba, in his attempt to analyse the state of Malay poverty in the early 1920s, explained that the backwardness of the Malays are caused by negative values and attributes present amongst the Malays.[29] As he asserted:

> *"We Malays are generally a poverty stricken people. That is the clearest and most thought-provoking character of our race and a deficiency which makes us lose out, or at least stay backward, in the march for progress. Poor in terms of education and training, poor in terms of money, poor in desire and ambition, poor in brain power and poor in that quality of high and honourable character – no wonder we are mired down and backward in the road forward.*[30]

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[28] Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, p.114-115.

[29] Za'ba is regarded as one of the most prominent Malay thinkers and reformers by many Malays. In 1927, he published an article *The Poverty of the Malays* which is an attempt to reflect on the reasons why the Malays are not in a favourable situation vis a vis the non-Malays, amidst the background of the new capitalism brought in the 1920s. Za'ba, *The Poverty of the Malays*. Longman, Corren, London, 1959.

[30] Ibid, pp. 10-11.

To Za'ba, the Malays are lazy and lacking in values like perseverance, self-reliance, sense of responsibility, sense of duty, punctuality, industry, self-sacrifice and other positive traits. He articulated that success could only be achieved through positive behaviour like hard work, commitment and diligence, while laziness and indolence and other negative attributes predominant in the Malay psyche would only lead them to failures.[31]

Such negative perception regarding the Malays has also been echoed in post-independence elite thinking, such as *Revolusi Mental* and *Dilemma Melayu* written by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad. These two books articulated that the Malays possessed no rational thought, initiative and commitment, and that the Malays lacked self-confidence coupled with the inability to take risks.[32] In *Dilemma Melayu*, Mahathir even went as far as to explain his thinking that the Malay weaknesses are linked to hereditary influences. As stated by him: *"Hereditary factors do play an important part in the development of race...it is obvious that traits of a father would be passed down to the child, likewise, racial traits would be passed down from one generation to the next."* [33] There are similarly many other writings repeating the prejudicial views and perceptions of colonial thoughts, which to a large

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[31] It is noteworthy to state here that there is another dimension of Za'ba's writings, namely a biased and prejudiced look at the Malay society. Za'ba had seen nothing positive with respect to the Malay's way of life, its society and culture, and instead blamed the Malays for their backwardness and neglect, without taking into consideration the social, political and economic environment surrounding the Malays. It is not within the objective of this thesis to analyse the biases and prejudices of Za'ba, nevertheless a detailed analysis of Za'ba's ideas could be found in Shaharuddin Maaruf's book, *Malay Ideas on Development: From Feudal Lord to Capitalist.* Times Book International, Singapore,1988.

[32] Mahathir Mohamad, *Dilema Melayu.* Times Book International, Singapore, 1982.

[33] This is a translation of an extract from the book *Dilema Melayu*: *"Faktor-faktor keturunan memainkan peranan yang penting dalam perkembangan sesuatu kaum. . . agak ternyata kalau ciri ciri dari bapa diperturunkan kepada anaknya, maka ciri-ciri kaum semestinya diturunkan dari satu generasi ke satu generasi yang lain."* Ibid, p.19.

extent, showed that such views have seeped in and influenced the thinking of Malay elite. According to Shaharuddin Maaruf, the presence of such views has lead to the emergence of a sense of sense of inferiority in everyday Malay life.

> *"...the presence of a negative Malay image had evolved a peculiar style of thought and lingo. Thus, there emerged phrases and words like 'janji Melayu' (failure to keep to a promise made), 'time Melayu' (failure to adhere to the time agreed upon). Now the process has been simplified, with expressions like 'orang Melayuu...!' or simply with a sigh of 'Melayuu...!, where often these expressions are spoken with feelings of condescension and derision." [34]*

Given the pervasive influence of colonial stereotypes and prejudice, consciously or unconsciously, there is a need to carefully evaluate and analyse the thinking and understanding of Malay society. In the words of Syed Hussein Alatas, who asserted that there should be a consciousness of the grip of colonial thought on the way we think, particularly in scholarship regarding the Malays:

> *"...uncritical transmission of thought [which] can be regarded as unconscious continuation of colonialism, not in the political sense but in the cultural sense..the forces which has released and nurtured in the course of centuries are still actively moving..."[35]*

In light of the limitations of such dominant literature on the Malays, it is all the more important to review the understanding of Malay society, one that is not blinded by impressions and prejudices of past colonial writers.

An examination on the Singapore Malay identity will hopefully provide an opportunity for the community to have a better understanding of itself and how it fits into the larger Singapore society. This is particularly important when we take into

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[34] This is a translation of an extract of a seminar paper presented by Shaharuddin Maaruf, at the Congress of Malay Culture at Johor Bahru, 10-13 Sep 2004: " . . . *acuan Melayu aib telah mengevolusikan satu gaya pemikiran dan bahasanya yang tersendiri. Maka lahirlah ungkapan-ungkapan seperti 'janji Melayu' (tidak menepati janji), 'time Melayu' (tidak menepati masa). Kini proses itu telah dipermudah dengan ungkapan 'orang Melayuu...! atau memadai dengan keluhan 'Melayuu...!' sahaja yang diucapkan dengan unsur-unsur mencela, menghina, mencemuh, sikap sinis atau menyindir buat menyampaikan penilaian negatif itu*. Berita Harian, *"Tempelan Sifat Negatif Pada Masyarakat Melayu"*, 18 Sep 2004.

consideration that the Singapore Malays as one of the communities in Singapore do not live in isolation. On a daily basis, they live and interact with other communities within Singapore. How the Malays identify and define themselves as a group will inevitably have an impact on the other Singapore communities. Further, as Singapore develops and the world environment becomes more challenging, it is all the more critical for the different groups in Singapore to be able to interact and live alongside one another in peace and harmony. For the Malays in particular, a better understanding of their sense of identity and how they fit into the Singapore society can more effectively assist them in navigating and steering their lives within a multiracial country like Singapore.

An in-depth examination of dominant views of identity is also significant when we take into consideration geopolitics and concerns of safety and security of Singapore. While the Singapore Malays may be a minority in the country, the reality is that it is surrounded by a largely Malay dominated neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Indonesia.   Experiences have shown that the neighbouring Malays have always been interested in knowing what is happening in Singapore, especially among the local Singapore Malays. This 'relationship' affects the understanding of the Singapore Malay identity, particularly by the non-Malay elite. A clearer understanding of the identity of Singaporean Malays can forge better understanding on self perception of the Malay elites about themselves.

This sense of association, perceived or real, with the larger Malay community becomes even more prominent following the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks on

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[35] Syed Hussein Alatas, "Some Fundamental Problems of Colonialism", *Eastern World*, p.9. Nov 1956.

the United States, the post-September 11th aggression by Muslim groups, and more importantly local events involving a group of *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI) followers who had intended to blow up American facilities based in Singapore. These events catapulted the Islamic religion and Islamic identity to the forefront, and the Singapore Malays being Muslims have to contend with the issues of their religion and identity as Malay and Muslim, including their relationship with the rest of the Muslims, viz. the *Ummah*. A good grasp of what it means to be a Singapore Malay is therefore critically needed to provide an objective and accurate understanding of the community.

Having an accurate grasp of Malay identity is also important in helping to examine dominant perceptions that Malay cultural values are the cause and key contributors to the socio-economic problems prevailing in the community. This is particularly relevant in the case of Singapore Malays where like the rest of the Singapore communities, they have to keep up with the challenge of surviving in a country where economic growth and success is considered the key factor for survival. How the Malays manage in the context of these socio-economic challenges will have an impact on how they are viewed and identified.[36] The need to examine this issue more closely is vital as they bear repercussions on the image and understanding of the Malay community and also on resolutions to problems afflicting the community.

In carrying out my analysis and study of this thesis, I am very much guided by

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[36] The grounding for Singapore is capitalist development. The legitimation of the state was cast in economic terms, in turn resulting in competition and desire to obtain advantages in material consumption among the Singaporean populace. Chua Beng Huat, "Racial Singaporeans", in Joel. S. Kahn, *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand*, pp.31-33. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1998.

some insights put forth by Karl Mannheim through his studies like *Sociology of Knowledge,* and also *Sociology of Culture*. His study of *Sociology of Knowledge*[37] in particular gives us a systematic way of how to study and analyse ideas, that is, how men think and what influences their thinking process. His study showed that the style of thought is more than an individual thinking, viz. it is also an articulation of the group's thought. Men's ideas are thus a reflection of the ideas and opinions of his social group.

Mannheim also articulated that ideas are rooted in a particular historical and social context, that is, ideas are governed by both the social conditions and environment surrounding man both in the past and present. Hence man and his group will pick and choose those ideas that are valid and critical to them, though at times the choice of selection is unconsciously guided by the innate understanding of what's best for the group.[38] Manheim's idea on *the style of thought or basic intention* has been aptly summarized by Shaharuddin Maaruf as follows*:*

> *"...each discernible style of thought would have its own social groups as its' bearers each having its own vested interests, and which in turn would determine the radius of the group's ideas. At the same time, the group's ideas are co-ordinated by the basic intention of either opposing or justifying a particular social order as dictated by the groups' interests. The groups' interest would thus determine what ideas it would admit into its consciousness or reject. This would in turn similarly influence the group's angle of vision, statement of problems and its overall development or blocking of ideas. As a result, it is by no accident that a particular group 'discovers' a certain perspectives while failing to grasp or understand other perspectives or point of views.*[39]

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[37] In Malay studies, insights of Mannheim's discussion on sociology of knowledge can be seen in various works of scholars, notably in the writings of Syed Hussein Alatas, *Modernisation and Social Change,*, Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Malay Ideas and Development: From Feudal Lord to Capitalist,* and Tham Seong Chee, *Malays and Modernisation, A Sociological Interpretation.* Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983.

[38] For detailed information on sociology of knowledge, see Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*.

[39] Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Possibilities for Alternative Discourses in Southeast Asia Ideology and the Caricature of Culture,* p.1.

Also, as mentioned in the early part of this Chapter, through his study of *Sociology of Culture*, Mannheim has expounded on the importance of dominant group within the community. Dominant group, typically the elite, plays a vital role in the community for they are the ones that have the ability and influence to articulate positions, viewpoints and ideas of the community including the understanding of its identity. They are also in the position to define and guide the community. As Mannheim has aptly stated in his study of *Sociology of Culture*, the elite are *"...that group in society (the intelligentsia) whose special function is collectively to produce, analyse and explain systems of beliefs [for the society]."*[40] The ideas of the dominant group therefore reflect the positions of the community, and in the context of this thesis, a closer examination of how the elite, both within the Singapore Malay community and outside it, perceive and express Malay identity, will allow us to better understand the meaning of Malay as identified and understood by the Malay community as a whole. Also, as the influence of the dominant group will also be felt in the type of issues that the Malay community is concerned with, this thesis will similarly examine dominant issues and ideas that have emerged within the Malay community, relating to this study of Singapore Malay identity.

In looking at the articulation of Malay identity put forth by the elite, I shall be examining how their expressions and understanding of identity are shaped by specific interests, experiences and understandings affecting them, such as the socio-economic

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[40] Karl Mannheim, *Sociology of Culture*, p. xvii. The importance of leadership is also recognized by the Singapore Malay society, and as aptly summarized by the current Minister in Charge of Muslim Affairs, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim: *"You get a good leader, you will get good results and vice versa . . . The challenge for us is always related to leadership because the type of leadership we have will make the difference in our society."* Berita Minggu, *"Berangan Lihat Pemimpim Berwibawa,"* 18 July 2004.

experiences and also historical past. These experiences will also affect the way problems are defined and how they respond to these challenges. In the context of the Singapore Malays, the nature of the elite is one where there is a diverse group of leadership with each group exerting its own form of influence on the society. Despite this diversity, the Malay elite are brought together through a common objective of improving and developing the Malay community, evident by the raison d'être of the different organisations present within the community. More significantly, the Malay elite showed similar understanding of ideas and concerns facing the Malay community, and also reflect a similarity on how they approach and respond to challenges faced by the community. To a large extent, the consciousness governing the Malay elite definition of ideas is rooted in the same milieu of experiences and interests.

One of the groups to exert leadership influence within the Singapore Malay community is the Malay members of the dominant political party in Singapore, the People Action Party (PAP). These Malay PAP leaders can be considered as the political elite within Malay society.[41] As representatives of the Malay community, they are expected to guide and lead the Malay community. At the same time, because they are part of the national party, they have to represent their constituencies alongside the other political leaders in Singapore and present a nationally oriented

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[41] As early as the party's inception, there had always been Malay members in PAP. Among the Malay PAP leaders were Othman Wok, Ya'acob Mohd and A. Rahim Ishak who each assumed Minister of State roles. A few others were Parliamentary Secretaries, e.g. Buang Omar Junid. For more details, see Ismail Kassim, *Problems of Elite Cohesion: A Perspective from a Minority Community.* Singapore University Press, 1974.

role and outlook.[42] In short, the Malay PAP leaders perform dual function.[43] This duality however can limit the depth of this group's articulation of Malay interest, and more importantly, influence this group's thinking and expression of problems face by the Malay society and the solutions to these problems. This is particularly since the Malay PAP leaders are expected to take into account the needs of the larger Singaporean communities and the overall national interests of the country, not just the Malay community.

Besides the political elite in the form of the Malay PAP leaders, there are also the elite who are members of Malay socio-civic organisations. Among the organisations is MENDAKI, an organisation formed in 1981 with the support of the ruling government. The primary objective of MENDAKI at the point of its formation was to enhance the academic performance of the Malay students, so as to improve the long term prospects of the Malays as a whole."[44] MENDAKI has over the years been true to this primary objective, though through the years it has generally expanded its function and scope of activities so as to become a viable platform for Malay progress and development. Besides MENDAKI, there is also the Association of Muslim Professional (AMP), formed in the 1990s, by a group of Malay professionals who felt

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[42] For more details on the roles of the Malay Members of Parliament, read Wan Husin Zohri, *The Singapore Malays: The Dilemma of Development*, pp. 60-61. Singapore Malay Teacher's Union, 1990.

[43] This duality is very much recognized by the current group of Malay Members of Parliament. Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, the current Malay Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs made this remark during an election rally in 2006: "*Kumpulan PAP Melayu adalah satu kumpulan yang rencam dan kuat. Mereka boleh mengutarakan huraian-huraian bagi masalah-masalah masyarakat dan negara – dua dalam satu".* Translated: The Malay Members of Parliament is a group that is strong and capable. They can think of solutions to problems faced by both the Malay community and the nation – two in one. See Berita Harian, *"AP Melayu PAP pikul peranan dua dalam satu,"* 4 May 2006.

[44] Chua Beng Huat, "Racial Singaporean: Absence after the Hyphen", in Joel. S. Kahn, *Southeast Asian Identities*.

that Malay professionals should play a more active role in Malay society.[45] AMP similarly sees itself performing the role of helping the Malay community attain progress and improvements in the socio-economic areas including education. Other than MENDAKI and AMP, there are also many other Malay organisations with purely social orientations, like JAMIYAH, an organisation that provides services in the areas of welfare and homes for the aged, homeless and orphans as well as PERTAPIS, another non-profit organisation that performs similar welfare-related services as well as being involved in the education of Malay students through the provision of tuition services for them. As these leaders have close interactions with the Malay society through the implementation of their initiatives that benefitted the Malays directly, for example, through their welfare oriented activities and many others, they exert as much influence as the Malay political elite.

The third source of leadership comes from the religious community. One source of religious leadership, albeit performing more of an administrative function, is the Islamic Religious Council, MUIS.   MUIS is formed in 1968 following the implementation of the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA), and following its inception, MUIS has taken on the role as administrator of Islamic affairs in Singapore. MUIS mission is to lead in Islamic matters and guide in the building of a Muslim Community of Excellence serving the well-being of the community and nation. Throughout the years, MUIS has positioned itself as playing an important

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[45] The formation of AMP could largely be said to be a bold move by the group of Malay professionals who wanted to 'break away from the norm of waiting upon the government to take initiative', and who wanted to see Malay individuals who are highly qualified and competent but not politicians, play a part in propelling the community towards greater achievements. See Gillian Koh & Ooi Giok Ling, *State Society Relations in Singapore.* Institute of Policy Studies, Oxford University Press, 2000.

role in the Islamic development of the Malay community, by providing guidance to the Muslims through its numerous Islamic policies. The other source of religious elite comes from the religious teachers and preachers, who are often seen as the guardians of religious teachings and theology. Often this is the group of people that are educated in Islamic affairs, either in the *madrasahs* (local religious schools), or in overseas Islamic institutions of higher learning. In terms of an organised group, there is the religious organisation, *Persatuan Ulama dan Guru Guru Agama*, PERGAS. PERGAS is founded in 1957 with the objective of raising the quality of moral life in Singapore and by providing capable Islamic religious teachers. The Islamic religious teachers are an important group within the Malay Muslim community as they are perceived and identified as the Malay community's guide, advisor and leader in matters relating to Islam.

In addition to the above types of elite within the Malay society, there are also the journalists, academics and teachers who are influential in their own right and have specific views and opinions on diverse areas affecting the Malay community, evident by the many publications put forth by this group. Similarly, those from the arts and literary world like theatre activist and journalists also provide some form of leadership within Malay society, for they exert influence in their own areas of work and what they say, advocate and behave does influence the perceptions and thinking of the Malay society.[46]

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[46] To name a few of such persons are individuals like Iskandar Jalil, a potter, Dr Masuri S.N., a writer, Haji Hamid Ahmad, an actor and theatre activist, and Haji Muhd Arif Mohd, linguist and culturalist. Each of these individual exerts influence in their chosen fields. This thesis unfortunately will not be giving primary focus to the views and opinions of this circle in view of resource constrains. This however does not imply that this group's presence and influence is insignificant. An examination of this circle's influence can possibly be a stand alone examination, in a future work.

Lastly, with regards to the leadership outside the Malay society, I am primarily referring to the national political elite, viz. the elite from the ruling political party, PAP. By virtue of the fact that the PAP leadership is the defacto ruling political power in Singapore, their views and understanding of Malay community, Malay issues and problems, to an extent, influence the perception and understanding of Malay identity. It is therefore necessary to examine the thinking of this group of political elite.

In terms of the chapters' structure, as far as possible, each chapter revolves around specific themes, but underlying these themes is the significance of Islam in impacting the understanding of Malay identity and responses towards challenges faced by the community. In chapter two, for example, the theme is about Malay self perception of their identity and the major ingredients of identity in their expression and understanding. In this chapter, we shall see how the basic attributes of Malay identity, including Islamic religion, has become the form of expression of Malay identity for the Singapore Malay community. Chapter three analyses the role of the Islamic religion and explores how Islam has impacted and influenced the identity of the Malay. This chapter will also discuss the type of Islamic orientation present within the community. In chapter four we examine the influence and experiences in nation building and how the shared goal of excellence and success in Singapore has impacted the identity formulation of the Singapore Malays. This chapter will also attempt to discuss the realities of the Singapore Malay community, and how they impact upon desired Malay identity of excellence and progress. Chapter five moves on to examine the challenges of national integration and the need to be part of

mainstream Singapore, and how these issues particularly those that are centred around religion, have impacted the expression of Malay identity. Chapter six explores the viewpoints and understanding of Singapore Malay identity in the current global context of extremism and terrorism.

In writing this thesis, I have utilised various sources of information, which include primary materials like ministerial statements and speeches, policy statements by leaders as well as articles published in newspapers. In terms of secondary materials, I referred to academic writings of both Malay and non-Malay writers. As far as possible I have tried to synthesise the primary and secondary materials so as to provide a cogent and rational analysis of the areas of discussion outlined in these chapters. In the final analysis, the objective of writing this thesis is to analyse and examine the perceptions of Malay identity - how the identity has been understood by both the Malays and to some extent non-Malays and how this identity has affected the course of Malay actions and responses to issues and challenges confronting them. It is my genuine hope that in writing this thesis, I have contributed to some extent towards the study and understanding of the Singapore Malay identity.

CHAPTER TWO: ATTRIBUTES OF SINGAPORE MALAY IDENTITY

This chapter explores how the Singapore Malay elite explicate the basic sense of self and identity as Malay for the community. In so doing, it shall be shown that the expression of Malay identity is anchored on the basic attributes of what it means to be Malay. However, before moving on to the chapter proper, it is useful to articulate a brief sketch of the Singapore Malay community so as to give us a contextual framework when we discuss and explore issues relating to the identity of the Singapore Malays.

Overview of the Singapore Malay Community

Ninth August 1965 saw the emergence of an independent state of Singapore after many long years of colonial rule. Independent Singapore emerged as a country made up of diverse groups of people each coming from different backgrounds. The Malays could be considered to be the natives of the country, having stayed and existed in Singapore as far back as before 1300 AD following the founding of a settlement known as *Singapura* by a Sumatran royal prince.[1] This settlement subsequently became a flourishing centre particularly during much of the fourteenth century with its Malay inhabitants and ruling houses having ties with other royal and well known empires like that of *Majapahit*.[2] With the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819,

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[1] The traditional account regarding the founding of Singapura by the royal prince is contained in the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals). Sejarah Melayu depicted the Malaccan Sultanate and chronicled more than 600 years of Malay sultanate history. It was said to be written sometime in the 14th century and its contents reflected the beliefs, ethics and morals of the ruling class. See ed. W.G Shallabear, *Sejarah Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur, 1975.

[2] Shahrom Ahmat, "The Singapore Malay Community" in *Journal of the Historical Society*. McGraw-Hill Far Eastern Publishers Pte Ltd, Singapore, 1971.

who had successfully negotiated an agreement with the Malay ruling house under the leadership of the *Temenggong*, the island of *Singapura* (subsequently known as Singapore), became a flourishing trading port of the British colonialist. By 1901, Singapore had become a densely populated island when compared to the time when Raffles first set foot on the island. At the point of Raffles' arrival, there were only a handful of inhabitants namely the *Temenggong* followers and Malay and Chinese fishermen. Singapore's population by this time also rose to almost 229,000 and the composition of the Malay populace by then included the Malays from Malay Archipelago such as those from the nearby Riau Islands, Malacca, Penang, Johore, as well as migrants from Java, Sumatra and other parts of the Indonesian archipelago.[3] There was also substantial number of Arabs and Indian Muslims mainly of Malabari descent who were attracted by the trading success in Singapore and the opportunities available.[4] In fact, the arrival of these foreign Arab and Indian Muslims led to intermarriages with local Malays and in some instances, the Chinese.[5]

Between 1819 and the middle of the nineteenth century, the Malays was the largest ethnic group in Singapore.[6] However the number of Chinese migrants

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[3] According to Tania Li, the term Malay is used to refer to the broad census category where people indigenous to the Southeast Asian area tended to adopt the 'Malay' label for census purposes after migration to Singapore. There is thus different sub-groups in the label 'Malay'. Among the sub-group is the indigenous Malays from the Malay Archipelago e.g. those from Johor, Riau Archipelago. The other sub-group is those from the Indonesian archipelago like the Javanese and Baweanese. Tania Li, *Malays in Singapore: Culture, Economy and Ideology*, pp. 93-94.

[4] According to Roff, there was a total of 23,060 peninsular Malays, 12,335 other Malay natives from the Archipelago, almost a thousand Arabs and about 600 Jawi Peranakans in Singapore in 1901. William R.Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 33. University of Malaya Press, Singapore, 1967.

[5] Ibid, p. 33.

[6] Khoo Kay Kim, Elinah Abdullah and Wan Meng Hao, ed. *Malay Muslims in Singapore: Selected Readings in History, 1819-1965*, pp.xvii-xviii. Pelanduk Publications, AMP, 2006.

exponentially increased so much so that by the end of the nineteenth century, the migrant Chinese had rapidly overtaken the Malays and became a numerical majority in Singapore.[7] Not only were the Chinese the majority ethnic group, they were also economically dominant with many attaining success as traders and entrepreneurs, so much so there existed a popular stereotype that *"the immigrant who arrived from Hong Kong or the South China with nothing but a sleeping mat, a pair of shorts and a singlet, and within a few years, as the result of incomparable industry, became landowner and millionaire."*[8]

The situation of the Malays, on the other hand, was the reverse. Most found employment in menial jobs like gardeners, drivers, watchmen, office boys, house servants or policemen.[9] A handful became employees of government institutions like the Public Works and Utilities.[10] Some made a living as small shopkeepers in Malay areas of city, street hawkers while others took up roles like mosque officials or religious teachers.[11] Despite the economic lag when compared to the Chinese in Singapore, the Malays as a group thrived on the island and very much plugged into the larger Malay community within the Archipelago. This was made possible by the free access of movements of Malays from the Malay Peninsula and Indonesian Archipelago to Singapore, so much so that Singapore became the focus for *"cultural*

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[7] Lai Ah Heng, *Meanings of Multiethnicity: A Case Study of Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Singapore,* p.16.

[8] William R.Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 34.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Tania Li, *Malays in Singapore: Culture, Economy and Ideology*, p.95.

[11] William R.Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 35.

and economic energies of the Malaysian world (namely the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago), which existed alongside but in many ways separate from the world created by the West [in Singapore]."[12] As a scholar stated:

> *"Singapore in the nineteenth century may be likened to Malacca in the fifteenth in its role as metropolis for an area that embraced the whole Malay Peninsula and Archipelago, from Kedah and Acheh to Celebes. Island trade by Malaysians and Arabs, Indonesia migration to the peninsula, and the pilgrimage to Mecca with its subsidiary activities of Islamic teaching and publication brought together in Singapore a great variety of Malaysian and Muslim peoples from differing social and economic backgrounds, but sharing a lingua franca and important elements of a common culture, and often freed from the hampering restrains of traditional social systems."[13]*

Singapore was thus right in the middle of the Malay world and became the centre for Malay culture and cultural activities.[14] Also, by the nineteenth century, Singapore took on the role of literary and publication centre for the Malay world, a role that was given further impetus with the growing use of lithograph and printing press. In fact, a number of hand lithograph presses were established in Singapore in the latter part of the century, mostly owned by the *Jawi Peranakans*.[15] Through these efforts, there emerged growing body of religious and secular writings in the Malay language, together with a number of writings in regional languages and Arabic. Singapore's lithographers also produced other literary materials in the Malay language, ranging from old and new translations of legends of classical romances, traditional folk tales, poetries and current events. Singapore also became a centre for the study of Malay linguistics, and in 1888, the first Malay cultural welfare association called the Society

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[12] William R.Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 32.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Kay Kim, Elinah Abdullah and Wan Meng Hao, ed. *Malay Muslims in Singapore: Selected Readings in History, 1819-1965*, pp.xvii-xviii.

[15] The *Jawi Peranakans* is the group of locally born Indian Muslims in Singapore, out of inter-marriages of Malay women and Indian Muslim traders, merchants and settlers, mostly of Malabari descent. William R.Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 44.

for the Learning and Teaching of Linguistic Knowledge was formed. This association was dedicated to determining Malay equivalents for English terms in the field of administration and government.[16]

Through all these activities, the Malays in Singapore became closely connected to the Malay world, and were able to establish interactions and relationships with Malays from Malay Peninsula and elsewhere in the surrounding region. This shared cultural and social experience in turn created a sense of oneness among the Malays populace including those residing in Singapore.[17] This sense of solidarity became further heightened through the Islamic religion, and as Islamic believers, the Singapore Malays saw themselves as part of a larger group of Muslim community, the *Ummah*. Alongside the rest of the Malays, the Singapore Malays shared the same consciousness as a community of Malay and Muslims.

Such feelings of shared belonging with the rest of the Malay Muslims in the Archipelago became more heightened when in 1963 the Federation of Malaya was formed – a merger of the Malay Peninsula and Singapore. This merger of the Malay Peninsula and Singapore created more opportunities for the Singapore Malays to be in closer relationship with Malays in the Malay Peninsula. It also gave the Singapore Malays the benefit of being a majority in a country in which Malay leaders maintained political dominance. Being part of the Federation of Malaya, the Malays were assured of a privileged position. This is aptly acknowledged by a writer when he stated the following:

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[16] William R.Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 47.

[17] Khoo Kay Kim, Elinah Abdullah and Wan Meng Hao, ed. *Malay Muslims in Singapore: Selected Readings in History, 1819-1965*, pp. xxii.

"The island of Singapore is historically, militarily, politically, socially and economically very much part of the Malayan mainland...peninsular Malays have always regarded the island [Singapore] as part of their Malay realm. Since the second World War, Malaya and Singapore have become militarily a single defence community...politically, UMNO, the MNP, the MCP and the MIC were from the beginning pan-Malayan parties, and almost every ambitious Malayan and Singaporean political party after them has followed or aspired to this pan-Malayan pattern. Socially, the bulk of Singaporeans...regard themselves as the kith and kin of those of their racial stock across the Causeway. This ethnic sense of social community was probably reciprocated by the majority of those on the mainland...and up to the time of Malayan independence, there were a great many government departments whose jurisdiction were pan-Malayan."[18]

On Ninth August 1965 Singapore was expelled from the Federation of Malaya and declared an independent country. With Singapore's independence, the Chinese became the majority in the country while the largely Chinese dominated People's Action Party (PAP) became the government of this newly independent Singapore. In a blink of an eye, the tides turned against the Singapore Malays. From a privileged position of a majority in the Federation of Malaya, the Malays became a minority in a country predominantly populated by the Chinese. In addition, the Singapore Malays also had to contend with changes in the basic tenets of governance and principles. The notion of a privileged class or group that had preferential treatment, which was the policy of the governing elite in the Federation of Malaya, was discarded by the new Singapore leadership under the aegis of PAP. In its place, the Singapore leadership supported the principle of equal opportunity for all Singaporeans. Meritocracy became the key tenet in the governance of Singapore, and this principle applies to all of Singapore populace, including the Malays.

The Malays in Singapore also found themselves having to navigate through the many challenges facing the newly independent country particularly challenges in the economic arena. From the beginning of its emergence as an independent country,

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[18] Mohamed Noordin Sopiee, *From Malayan Union to Singapore Separation: Political Unification in the Malaysian Region, 1945-65*, p.91. University of Malaya, 1974.

Singapore's survival depends on its ability to succeed economically, which in turn resulted in the Singapore leadership grounding the new independent state in a capitalist development model. Grounding Singapore in such an economic model was critical because Singapore does not have natural resources that it could turn to in order to survive. To ensure its survival, Singapore had to be a viable outward looking economy that is based largely on import-export oriented focus. The legitimisation of Singapore from its infancy stage of independence is economic development, and all its citizens from the majority Chinese to minority Malays, Indians and others, are expected to be onboard this goal of economic development and success. Not only are the inhabitants of Singapore expected to work hard to contribute to the economic success of the country, they also have to find ways to allow them to reap the benefits from the available economic opportunities. As aptly remarked by a writer:

> *"Politics [in Singapore] was reduced to economics. Political problems ultimately mean the problem of how we make a living, how we can give everyone a fair and equal chance to study and work and have a full life". The "survival" of the new nation, defined in economic terms, in turn came to be entwined with the problems of how individual citizens "make a living". National economic growth and improvement of the population's material life became both the rational basis for organising the new nation and the criteria by which the performance of the regime was to be defined, assessed and legitimated. Sharing in this material progress became the entitlement of citizenship."*[19]

From independence in 1965 until today, Singapore has undergone many changes, and as the country develops, its populace too undergoes similar changes and challenges. The Malays of Singapore are inadvertently affected as it is one of the communities in the country, and they too have had gone through myriad changes in the course of its lifespan as part of Singapore. It will thus not be a surprise to see the Singapore Malays until today continually undergoing changes as part of a

progressively developing country. In light of both these past experiences and new challenges faced by the community, how would we then identify a Singapore Malay? The next segments shall explore this.

The Meaning of Being Malay in Singapore
(a) Articulation of an Identity

As mentioned in the first part of this Chapter, the Malays in Singapore have similar background as other Malays in the Malay world and share similar aspects of history, culture, traditions including religion. This in turn has given a semblance of commonality in the expression and understanding of Malay identity. Yet, while the closest neighbour to Singapore have included the definition of Malays as a *"group people who speak the Malay language, profess the Islamic religion, and conform to Malay customs and traditions"* in its constitution[20], the situation is not the same for the Singapore Malays. The only reference to 'Malay' in the Constitution of Singapore is that the *"Malays...are the indigenous people of Singapore..."*[21] There is no explanation on the attributes or traits that makes up Malay in the Singapore Constitution. It was only in 1988 that there was an attempt to provide a more defined explanation of the meaning Malay following the articulation made by the Select Committee.[22] However, the attributes of what it means to be Malay in Singapore was

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[19] Chua Beng Huat, "Racial Singaporeans: Absence after the Hyphen", in Joel. S. Kahn, *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand*, p.31.

[20] Shamsul A.B, "A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of Malayness in Malaysia Reconsidered", p. 357, *in Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 32(3), Oct 2001.

[21] Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, 152(2), p.64.

[22] In 1988, in preparation for the introduction of the Group Representative Constituencies (GRC) System in Singapore's political process, the Select Committee was formed to study and assess the

not specifically articulated and defined by the Select Committee. What was stated by

the Committee was the following:

> *"a person belonging to the Malay society should be any person, whether of the Malay race or otherwise, who considers himself to be a member of the Malay society and who is generally accepted as a member of the Malay society by that society".*[23]

This definition of Malay in the Select Committee presumes an element of self-

identification to Malay identity namely a Malay person must consider himself as

Malay, and also a social dimension in that the Malay must be accepted by the Malay

community.   Apart from this self identity and social dimension of community

acceptance, the Select Committee did not specify the criteria and attributes of Malay

that can be used as the means for an individual to identify himself as Malay. This

was because the Committee believed that the only valid way to define an ethnic group

is through self-definition.   The following statement found in the Select Committee

Report reflected this view:

> *"The Select Committee also accept the submission that sociologically, the only valid way to define an ethnic group is self-definition. It is necessary to consider what the people in the group define themselves to be. A person belonging to the Malay community must think of himself as a Malay, and must be acceptable to the Malay community. Therefore the legislation should not lay down prescriptive criteria as to who does or does not belong to the Malay community, but should define a mechanism to let the community decide for itself."* [24]

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views of Singaporeans who had submitted written representations regarding the Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Bill [Bill No. 23/87] and the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore (Amendment No. 2) Bill [Bill No. 24/87].   The key amendment in the Bills was the inclusion of the GRCs system of election. Under the proposed GRC system of election, minority groups in Singapore will be guaranteed a representation in Parliament, by virtue that there will be one candidate from the minority group in the GRC group constituency. Thus, for a 'Malay' to be nominated as a candidate of the GRC, the individual has to fulfil the definition of 'Malay' articulated in the Report of the Select Committee. The Select Committee was made up of members of the governing elite, comprising non-Malays and Malay leaders, and a couple of leaders outside the governing elite.

[23] Report of the Select Committee.

[24] Ibid. See also Morton A. Kaplan, *Alienation and Identification,* p. 160. New York Free Press, 1976. He stated that an individual needs a sense of identity and identification that involve a sense of membership, in a species, a nation or family.

In short, the Select Committee believed that it was to the benefit of the Malays to establish and define on their own who is a Malay instead of an external body providing a legal definition of the characteristics and attributes of Malay identity.

The Select Committee's stand of not articulating the definition and meaning of Malay identity has its strengths. Since a group's identity is part of the group's consciousness, it is acceptable that the group's identity will be understood by all within that group, either implicitly or explicitly, and that the group has some form of common understanding of what is basic to the group's identity. Indeed, prior to the Select Committee report of 1988, the Singapore Malays has long existed as part of a group, and possess an understanding of what it means to be Malay and a part of a group known as Malay community. It can be expected that the Malays in Singapore intuitively know who they are – their culture, their way of life, their beliefs, values as well as their religion, and that these aspects of their life are what makes them distinctive from other social groups in the country.

Yet, the legalistic definition of a Malay articulated by the Select Committee in 1988, created a situation where the Singapore Malays had to expressively articulate the meaning of Malay as understood by the Malay community and at the same time acceptable by others outside of the community. It was in light of this need that the Malay community had to consciously put forth an expression of being Malay in Singapore, and articulate the traits of Malay. This became an endeavour that the elite, as the dominant group within the Malay community, had to grapple with. In the attempt to articulate the meaning and understanding of Malay for the community, the elite intuitively turned to the community's culture as the source for an expression of

Malay identity.[25] By culture, I am making reference to the body of knowledge, practices and experiences of an ethnic group, which includes customs, traditions, language, religion and even values embraced by the community. As noted by a scholar, the culture of any given society forms a stable core in the society's make-up, and that it plays an influential role in shaping the worldview of the society as well as provides it with the basis to adapt and respond to the many challenges faced by the society. Most importantly, it "*provides a given people a sense of identity and belonging which marks them as a distinct group from other people and which defines a common destiny for members of the group concerned.*"[26] Hence, the Malays of Singapore would have its own sense of understanding and consciousness of what it means to be Malay as encompassed in its culture, and it is these cultural traits that distinguish them as a group distinct from others.

A Singapore Malay is therefore distinguished as one who speaks the Malay language, accepts and practices the Malay customs, traditions and values which have been shaped by the Islamic religion. It is apt for the Malay elite to turn to these basic attributes of Malay identity because these are the core elements that provide the Singapore Malays with shared sentiments and understanding resulting in an exclusive sense of identity and belonging as a community.[27] More importantly, these are

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[25] As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Malay elite though diverse in nature, share a commonality in terms of the objective to propel the Malay community to progress and also understanding of issues and concerns affecting the Malay community, and solutions to address these concerns.

[26] Shaharuddin Maaruf, "Some Theoretical Problems Concerning Tradition and Modernisation Among the Malays in Southeast Asia", p.243, in Yong Mun Cheong (ed.) *Asian Traditions and Modernisations, Perspectives from Singapore*, Times Academic Press, Singapore, 1997.

[27] Lai Ah Heng, *Meanings of Multi-Ethnicity: A Case Study of Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Southeast Asia*, pp. 7-8.

attributes of Malay identity that provide the Malays with powerful *"symbolic and cognitive capacities for behaviour – in short, of being, behaving and belonging."*[28] These basic traits of identity that the Malay elite turned to in their attempts to define the meaning of Malay identity for the Singapore Malay community are attributes that are identifiable among other Malay groups outside Singapore.[29] It is generally understood that when a person is identified and recognised as Malay, he is a Malay language speaker, practices Malay customs and traditions, and follower of the Islamic religion.[30]

It is not surprising that the Singapore Malay elite have this shared consciousness of the core traits of Malay identity despite the fact that the Singapore Malay community is living and operating in a predominantly non-Malay country. As mentioned earlier, the Singapore Malays is part of the larger Malay Archipelago and hence would share the same historical experiences throughout the centuries. Even today, events affecting Malays all around the Archipelago impact upon Singapore Malays. The ties between Malays in Singapore and Malays in the larger Malay Archipelago, to a large extent, are ties that are based on shared religion that have

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[28] Lai Ah Heng, *Meanings of Multi-Ethnicity: A Case Study of Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Southeast Asia*, pp. 7-8.

[29] According to Lian Kwen Fee, the Malay World as it is understood today comprises peninsular Malaysia, east coast of Sumatra, the west and southwest coast of Borneo and the Riau Archipelago. Lian Kwen Fee, "The Construction of Malay Identity Across Nations, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia," p.852, in *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science, Vol. 25, No.2, 1997*.

[30] Ibid, p.852. In Malaysia the Malays are typically understood in this light especially given the fact that these identifiers were included in the Malaysia Constitution. In the case of Indonesia, the government's assimilationist approach in its governance of the diverse ethnic groups in the country, had allowed each ethnic group to remain undisturbed hence allowing them to largely define their own meaning of identity. Consciousness of one's tradition should continue to be a key component of identity, and for the Indonesia Malays, this consciousness should largely be the same as that of the other Malays in the Malay world.

influenced the understanding of Malay consciousness, including its identity. As observed by a contemporary Malay writer:

> *"...the Malays of Singapore share a 'myth' of common descent, elements of a shared tradition, a historical association with a particular region or territory, and a linguistic affinity with the more than 200 million indigenous inhabitants in the Malay Archipelago (commonly referred to as 'Nusantara' or 'Alam Melayu' [Malay World] by Malays)...Singapore Malays saw their community as a microcosm of the surrounding 'Nusantara'...modern Malaysia and Singapore have historically evolved from a Malay polity..."*[31]

In short, the expression of Malay identity as expressed by the Malay elite is one that is steeped in the core identifiers of Malay language, customs and traditions and Islamic religion. This is the identity that is embraced and accepted by the Singapore Malay community. The quote below written in the Malay newspaper by a journalist in one of his column, aptly described the understanding of what it means to be Malay in Singapore:

> *"The Singapore Malays are Malays because of three key traits, entrenched in their hearts and soul, namely: First, they are Malays because they speak the Malay language. Second, they are Malays because of their Malay culture. Third, they are Malays because they are Muslims.*[32]

(b) Promoting an Identity

While it is clear that the articulation of Malay identity in Singapore has taken on the form of the three identifiers of language, customs and religion, it is useful to examine how these identifiers have been promoted to the wider audience, be it to the

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[31] Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*, p.15.

[32] Berita Harian, "*Setakat Mana Melayunya Kita*", 10 Jun 2004. The writer of this particular article in the Malay newspaper, Berita Harian, viz. Mohd Raman Daud, is one of the many writers and columnists that wrote regular commentaries and features in the Malay paper. These journalists are leaders in their own right, having the capacity to exert influence on the thinking and attitudes of the larger Malay society via their commentaries and articles in the newspapers. Through their articles and commentaries on the notion and ideas of 'Malay' identity, these media leaders reinforced further the expression of 'Malay' identity as being defined by the three character traits of language, culture and religion.

Malay populace or to the non-Malays, over the course of the years. Indeed, the Malay elite in Singapore has made conscious efforts to promote the consciousness of the three identifiers, and to show that the expression of Malay identity is one that is anchored on the core identifiers of Malay language, customs and traditionsand and Islamic religion. Over the years, they have supported and encouraged numerous activities to iterate these basic identifiers of Malay identity in Singapore.

For example, to promote the Malay language and create greater awareness about the language, a bi-yearly Malay Language Cultural Month or *Bulan Bahasa Melayu* were put in place. Throughout this entire month, many activities promoting the Malay Language were organised. For example, language forums, debates and poetry-reading sessions were held, while prominent Malay writer were honoured for their contributions in Malay literary. The Malay Cultural Month is therefore used as a means to showcase the Malay language. In addition, the Malay Language Month is used as a means to also remind the Malay community of the importance of habitually using the Malay language especially as the Malay language is one of the attributes of Malay identity. This was cogently articulated by a member of the Malay political elite in one of his speeches when he remarked that: *"...the identity of Singapore Malays should be strengthened through upholding one of the pillars of our culture – viz. Malay Language."* [33]

In fact, the importance of Malay language has been regularly iterated by the Malay elite. By and large, what the Malay elite promoted is the usefulness of the

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[33] Translated by the quote made by Hawazi Daipi, currently the Senior Parliamentary Secretary (Education and Manpower): *"Jati diri kita sebagai Melayu Singapura harus dikukuhkan melalui tunjang budaya kita – bahasa".* Berita Harian, *Bahasa Melayu Tetap Penting Bagi Singapura,* 3 Jul 2004.

Malay language, a language that the Malays should be proud of. The Malay elite sees itself playing a critical role in promoting the Malay language and ensuring that it continues to be a lingua franca for the Malays. Hence, this has become a key message that the elite sees as important to be put across to the Malay community particularly with a dwindling interest in the Malay language. While the standard of written and oral examinations for the Malay language among Malay students has generally not declined, there has been an observable trend of Malay youths preferring to speak English instead of the Malay language. In the 2010 Census Survey, it was noted that the proportion of Malays speaking the Malay language has declined, from 91.6 percent in 2000 to 82.7 percent in 2010.[34] On the other hand, the percentage of Malay families speaking English at home has increased significantly, an increase that more than doubled to 17 percent.[35] It is expected that more and more Malay families will prefer to use English to communicate and while this is a good development because it is important that the Malays have a good grasp of the English language in view of its growing importance in society, there is a fear that the lack of interest in Malay Language will result in the erosion of a key identifier of the Malay identity.

To combat the decline in usage of Malay Language, new recent initiatives are being looked into by Majlis Bahasa Melayu (Malay Language Council) primarily in how the Malay language is being taught in schools. This is in line with the recommendations made by the Committee set up by the Ministry of Education recently in 2010 to study the ways in which second languages are taught in the

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[34] The Straits Times, *"Census Survey"*, 15 Jan 2011.

[35] Ibid. The percentage of Malays speaking English at home was 7.9% in 2000, compared to 17% in 2010.

schools. In term of past efforts, Majlis Pusat (the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organisations) for example organised a language programme in collaboration with Gapena (Collaboration of Malaysian Writers) in 2004. This programme was intended to enhance the use of the Malay language both in Singapore and Malaysia. There was also the formation of exchange programmes on Malay language and literature for the youths in Singapore and Malaysia.[36] Such activities put in place by Majlis Pusat acted as another avenue of sustaining the usage of the Malay language among the Singapore Malays.[37]

To promote the expression of Malay identity as being linked to the identifier of Malay customs and traditions, many cultural activities have also been organised. For example, during Racial Harmony Day, some schools took the opportunity to showcase Malay customs and traditions to their students. The schools undertook this exhibition on Malay customs and traditions because they wanted to give the students a better understanding of Malay society. Numerous activities were lined up for students, among them the showcasing of games commonly seen as traditional games of the Malays, such as *batu serembat*, *gasing* and *congkak*. Besides games, the students were also treated to exhibitions on Malay customs and traditions, among them the Malay wedding ceremony. Admittedly, the customs and traditions of a society is far wider than such simple representation of activities and games as that shown in the Malay Cultural Day held in schools. As explained by a Malay scholar:

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[36] Berita Harian, "*Usaha Perkukuh Tutur Bahasa, Amalan Budaya*", 25 Jun 2004.

[37] The campaign to promote the use of Malay Language could in fact be seen as early as the 1980s. In August 1982, the Malay Language Committee organised a massive Speak Malay campaign to try and encourage the continued use of the Malay Language. During this campaign, the organisers tried to promote the Malay Language by holding quizzes, forums, debates and essay contests. The Straits Times, "*Drive to Revive Interest of Malays in their Mother Tongue*", 9 May 1982.

"Tradition refers to cultural or value systems which have been influential in moulding or shaping the world-view of a given people for a significant period in their cultural history. These cultural or value systems represent the stable core which provides the basis for the society's responses to contemporary and future challenges. It is by means of such traditions that a society moves or advances in time, all the while adjusting, adapting, assimilating new elements and discarding old ones, and simultaneously retaining and maintaining continuity with the basic or fundamental elements of the cultural heritage of the past. In this sense, it is tradition which provides a given people a sense of identity and belonging which marks them out as a distinct group from other people and which defines a common destiny for members of the group concerned."[38]

The tradition of the Malays is therefore far more than what the schools have been depicting as part of Malay Cultural Day activities. Nevertheless, considering the age group of the audience and the context in which such activities are organised, the initiative undertaken by the schools to showcase Malay culture and traditions through games and exhibitions, is still an effective way of encouraging non-Malay students to be more aware of Malay customs and traditions.

To further increase the awareness of Malay customs and traditions, the Malay Heritage Centre was established in late 2004. This project was supported by various groups within the Malay community, as the Heritage Centre is intended to be a showcase of the traditions and customs of the Malays.[39] The Heritage Centre is sited at the 160 year old Istana Kampong Glam and houses a museum where artefacts and exhibits on Malay traditions and customs were showcased. Cultural performances and demonstrations of Malay arts and crafts are also organised at the Heritage Centre.

These are examples of the type of activities that have been organised in an attempt to promote the essence of Malay identity among the Singapore Malays, and such activities indeed have gone a long way to showcase the core attributes of Malay

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[38] Shaharuddin Maaruf, "Some Theoretical Problems Concerning Tradition and Modernisation Among the Malays of Southeast Asia", p. 35, in Yong Mun Cheong, edited. *Asian Traditions and Modernisation*: *Perspectives from Singapore*.

identity. Having said that, it should nevertheless be recognised that the sense of Malay identity is intrinsic to the Malays, and that even without these public displays of the identifiers of identity, the Singapore Malays as a whole, would already be fully aware of what it means to be Malay. Just as the Malays are intrinsically aware of the two identifiers of their identity, namely Malay language, culture and tradition, they too are similarly aware of the third identifier of their identity, the Islamic religion, and its importance to the identity of Malay. This is to be expected given the importance of Islam in Malay life. Islam governs all aspects of Malay lives from religious rituals and beliefs, to individual ethic as well as social relations, and this fact is recognised and acknowledged by all within the Malay community including the Malay leaders. As acknowledged by a prominent member of the Malay political elite:

> *"Islamic values will continue to underpin the Malay-Muslim society...and that Islam is such an intrinsic part of the Malay-Muslim psyche that it is automatically reflected in everything that a Muslim does."*[40]

The acceptance of Islam as a key identity marker for the Malays has been articulated in the recommendations made to the Select Committee when the Committee was deliberating on the definition of Malay. In the original report made to the Select Committee, there was a recommendation by the Malay representatives that in order for a person to qualify as a member of the Malay Society, he should also be a Muslim. In fact, a group of the Malay political elite was found to have stood up in Parliament asking that Islam be officially included as one of the identifiers of

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[39] Examples of the members are Zainul Abidin Rashid (former Senior Minister of State), Maarof Salleh (President of Muis), society leaders like Sumardi Ali, academics like Sharon Siddique, Shaharuddin Maaruf, journalist and writers etc.

[40] The Straits Times, *"Islam Will Still Play Big Role in the Future"*, 15 Nov 1999. Mr Abdullah during the Convention of Knowledge Based Economy held in 1999, made this statement. Mr Abdullah was at this period of time, the Minister in Charge of Muslim Affairs.

Malay identity, since Islam is recognised as an important element of being 'Malay'. According to these elite:

> *"Islam should have been included as a prerequisite to membership in the Malay community. The feeling of virtually everyone in Singapore – [be it] Malay or non-Malay – is that to be a Malay is to be a Muslim; that the Malay community is, to all intents and purposes, a Muslim community. This synonymity is widely accepted. Of course, a Malay is still ethnically a Malay, even if he is not Muslim. But this is not the same as being accepted as a member of the Singapore Malay community. In any case, a non-Muslim Malay will not consider himself a member of this community and involve himself with the community even if his ethnicity is not in question. But if acceptance by the Malay community is the criterion for membership in that community – as opposed to merely being an ethnic Malay"– then adherence to Islam is a crucial factor in the definition of membership. This is the sentiment of the Malay community here."*[41]

Thus, to the Malay elite, for a person to qualify as a member of the Malay society he has to be a Muslim. This particular understanding of Islam as intrinsic to the Malay identity is also reflected in several other representations put forward to the Select Committee.[42]

However, the request that Islam be officially included in the Select Committee's definition of 'Malay' was rejected by the Committee. As asserted by the Committee:

> *"...Singapore is a democratic secular state, and as the Constitution recognises the right of individuals to profess any religion of their choice, it is neither prudent nor appropriate for legislation to prescribe that a Malay must also be a Muslim. . . It will set an invidious and dangerous precedent to have in our laws a provision to single out a particular religion for special treatment."*[43]

The rejection to include Islam in the legalistic definition of Malay was also because

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[41] The Malay Members of Parliament (MP) who supported the inclusion of Islam as an identifier of Malay identity were Mr Abdullah Tarmugi, (former Minister in charge of Muslim Affairs), Mr Sidek bin Saniff (former MP for Kolam Ayer), Mr Yatiman bin Yusof (former MP for Kampong Kembangan), Mr Zulkifli bin Mohammed (former MP for Eunos), Mr Abas bin Abu Amin (former MP for Pasir Panjang), Mr Ibrahim bin Othman (former MP for Tanah Merah), Mr Othman bin Haron Eusofe (former MP for Geylang Serai) and Mr Wan Husin bin Zohri (former MP for Kg Ubi). See the *Report of Select Committee*, C46

[42] The representations were made by Mr Harun bin Ghani, Mr Abdul Halim Kader, Mr Nasser Kamaruddin, Mr Mohd Maidin Packer Mohd, Mr Abdul Majid bin Abdul Rahim, Mr Abdul Aziz bin Abu Talib, Mr Mohamed bin Siraj, Mr Abdullah Nasir, Mr Miffah bin Susope, Mr Ruhazat Adnan, Mr Salim Osman, Mr Borhan Saini, Mr Abdul Rahman Rais and Mr Osman Haroon. Details of their representations can be found in the *Report of Select Committee, section C.*

[43] Ibid, p.x.

the Select Committee did not wish to outline prescriptive criteria in the definition of Malay, and including Islam would mean the Committee prescribing the defining traits of Malay identity.

Although the request to officially include Islam as a criteria for the definition of Malay identity in Singapore was not acceded to, the strong representations put forth by the Malay leaders on behalf of the Malay community that Islam be incorporated as a marker of the Malay identity, highlight that the Islamic religion is recognised and acknowledged as an important attribute of the Singapore Malay identity. That is, the Singapore Malay elite admits and accepts that Islam is a core trait of the Malay identity. This view is reflected in the understanding of the Malays generally. In fact, anyone who considers himself Malay and a part of the Malay society will express Malay identity in terms of its Islamic religion, which is precisely the experience of the Singapore Malays.

For example, in a report published in The Straits Times in Dec 1999 on the understanding of Singaporeans on its racial identity, one of the Malays interviewed by Berita Harian was quoted to have said the following:

> *"Even if I was given another chance, I'd choose to remain a Malay. I was born a Muslim and I cannot imagine myself being anything else. My religion has a huge influence on me. To me, being Malay is synonymous with being Muslim. Treating all Muslims as part of the family is the reason behind why Malays are so united...these values bind us together."*[44]

The responses given by Malay families towards a survey conducted by the Association of Muslim Professional (AMP) in 1999 also reflected the prevalence of how Singapore Malays regard Islam as a central feature of their life. The survey findings showed that:

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[44] The Straits Times, *"Proud to be Malay",* 17 Dec 1999.

> *"The Malay Muslim society showed a deep consciousness towards Islam and used Islam as the guide and basis for their daily life. Apart from being guided by Islam in their personal life and relationship with family and office colleagues, a majority also placed importance to the provision of Islamic studies for their children."*[45]

A similar sentiment was echoed by another Singapore Malay who was interviewed and asked about his identity as Malay, in which he articulated:

> *"...As long as the person speaks the Malay language, practices Malay culture and accepts Islam as his religion, he is already considered a Malay. Therefore, Arab, Indian, Chinese etc. becomes Malay if they accept these 3 identifying traits".*[46]

These are some of the anecdotal illustrations of sentiments of being Malay in Singapore which reflect that Islam prevails heavily in the expression and understanding of being a Singapore Malay, and that Islam is accepted as an important identity marker that distinguishes the Singapore Malays as a group. An academic from the National University of Singapore, during a discussion session between the university and Young AMP has also remarked that Islam is becoming very much synonymous with the Singapore Malay society and that Islam plays a critical part in the formulation of Malay identity.[47] In fact, the 2010 Census Survey reflected that 98.7% of Singapore Malays embraced Islam as their religion.

Indeed, the acceptance of Islam as an identifying trait of what it means to be known as a Singapore Malay is not surprising given the influence of Islam in Malay

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[45] Translated from the excerpt: *"Masyarakat Melayu/Islam menampilkan kesedaran tinggi tentang Islam dan bersandarkan unsur-unsur keislaman dalam kehidupan seharian. Selain menitikberatkan tatasusila Islam dalam kebersihan peribadi dan hubungan dengan keluarga dan rakan sekerja, sebilangan besar tidak melupakan tanggungjawab melengkapi anak dengan pengetahuan agama."* Berita Harian *"Kajian Keluarga Melayu 1999 Kendalian AMP,"* 31 Oct 2002.

[46] Translated from the excerpt: *"Asalkan saja seseorang itu berbahasa Melayu, berbudaya Melayu dan beragama Islam, beliau sudah dikira Melayu. Jadi, Arab, India, Cina dan sebagainya menjadi Melayu apabila sudah menerima tiga ciri tadi."* Berita Harian, *"Melayu Tetap Melayu Walau Apa Pengaruh Budaya,"*. Article written by journalist and commentator, Mohd Raman Daud.

[47] The remarks were made by Syed Farid Alatas, Head of Malay Studies Department, National University of Singapore. Berita Harian, *"Islam kini Semakin Sinonim dengan Masyarakat Melayu"*, 13 Mar 2008.

life. It even influences developmental initiatives and rhetoric for Malay success and progress.[48] In fact, the linkage between Islam and Malay identity is not confined to the Malay community, it is also widely accepted throughout Singapore. As a result, the moment the other communities talk about Singapore Malay, they immediately identify Malay as being a Muslim.

Through this chapter we have seen how the Singapore Malays formulated the expression of its Malay identity. At its core, Malay in Singapore is understood in terms of the basic identifiers or basic attributes of what is means to be Malay, namely the Malay language, Malay culture and tradition, and Islamic religion, and of which Islam is an important attribute of Malay identity. This particular form of identity however is not unique to the Singapore Malays since it is the general understanding of being Malay, accepted and recognised by Malays in the Malay world. The Singapore Malays by accepting this form of expression of Malay identity has shown that the shared sense of history, culture, tradition and religion are integral cultural elements that bind them in common with other Malays in the region.

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[48] Examples are the Vision 2010 put forth by the Association of Muslim Professionals where it was stated that the "Malay Community of the 21st century must be religiously profound in addition to being culturally vibrant."   The importance of Islam in the identity of the Malays was also seen in the formulation of the image of a 'New Malay'.

CHAPTER 3: ISLAM AND SINGAPORE MALAY IDENTITY

This chapter seeks to explore more in-depth the role of religion in the expression of Singapore Malay identity, and how it has been appropriated, experienced and understood by the Singapore Malays, viz. the religious orientation of the Singapore Malays. By orientation I am referring to the set of ideas, attitudes or preferences that shape a certain outlook or value system.[1]

Islam and the Malays

According to Max Weber:

> *"...there is no human society [that existed] without [believing in] something which modern social scientists would classify as religion. Every society possessed some conceptions of a supernatural order, of spirits, of gods or impersonal forces, which are different from and in some sense superior to those forces conceived as governing ordinary natural events, and whose nature and activities somehow give meaning to the unusual, the frustrating and the rationally impenetrable aspects of experience."[2]*

Religion therefore is a critical component of society. In the case of the Malays, the Islamic religion is an integral part of the culture and heritage of the Malay community. It can thus be said that the tradition of the Malays, viz. their cultural and value system, at its core, is Islamic in nature. This is to be expected since Islam is all embracing and its teachings encompass every aspect of life in terms of broad principles and guidelines.[3] As iterated by Syed Hussein Alatas:

> *"Islam, as a comprehensive system of life encompasses various aspects, such as religious rituals, relationship between man, economy, administration, science and knowledge, family life, political systems and structures, attitudes and behaviour towards non-*

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[1] Azhar Ibrahim, in his Master thesis, gave an in-depth explanation about the formulation of orientations or mode of thinking. Azhar Ibrahim, *The Understanding of Islam as Reflected in Classical Malay Text*. National University of Singapore, 2002.

[2] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, pp.3-4. Methuen & Co Ltd, London, 1965.

[3] The Islamic values, ideals and code of conduct are all stated in the 'Al-Quran', which contains the verbal revelations of God revealed through the Prophet Muhammad. Al-Quran is THE guide for the living, providing guidance to Islamic believers on how to conduct themselves in their everyday life and in preparation for the beyond. Muhammad Zafrulla Khan, *The Quran*. Curzon Press, 1981.

Another scholar also opined that *"the cumulative institutionalisation of Islamic values and practices in Malay life is the single most important influence on the development of Malay culture."*[5] In fact, it is generally recognised that *"many Islamic values had been integrated and assimilated into the way of life of the Malays, so much so that it became very easy for them to adhere to Islamic practices, and for the majority, Islam is a central part of the tradition of the Malays*."[6]

Indeed, Islam is a major influence in Malay society and its culture. Historically, Islamic guidelines and principles have provided the Malay society with a worldview and philosophy of life that was in contrast to the dominant value system of the feudal period.[7] A dominant concept in Malay feudalism that conflicted with the values espoused by Islam is unflinching obedience and loyalty to the ruler. Feudal

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[4] This is a translation of the excerpt: "Islam, sebagai sistem hidup yang luas, meliputi lapangan ibadat, lapangan budi pekerti, lapangan pergaulan sesama manusia, lapangan ekonomi, lapangan pertadbiran, lapangan sains, lapangan ilmu pengetahuan, lapangan rumahtangga, lapangan peperangan, sususan politik masyarakat, sikap-sikap terhadap mereka yang tak beragama Islam, sikap kita terhadap segala mahkluk Tuhan seperti binatang dan sebagainya." Syed Hussein Alatas, *Kita Dengan Islam: Tumbuh Tiada Berbuah*, pp.38-39. Pustaka Nasional, Singapore, 1979,

[5] Tham Seong Chee, *Religion and Modernisation: A Study of Changing Rituals among Singapore's Chinese, Malays and Indians*, p.3. Graham Brash, Singapore, 1986.

[6] Mohd Fitri Abdul Rahman and Zainul Abidin Hassan, "Nilai-Nilai Islam dalam Budaya Melayu", *Dewan Budaya*, Jan 1995.

[7] Malay feudalism is an important historical period in Malay history, because apart from showcasing the type of social, political and economic order of Malay society, it also shows the kind of values and value system that operated during this period. As explained by a Malay scholar regarding Malay feudalism: *"[Malay] feudalism refers to a social, political and economic order, as well as a method of government. It is characterised by a big gulf between the subjects and the ruling class in the economic, political and social fields. The order is dominated by aristocratic groups who control large self-sufficient estates cultivated by the peasants, who receive in return strips of land for their own use. The chiefs have a right over the unpaid labour and services of his dependants. At the apex of the system is the sultan (ruler), who is virtually above the law and enjoys tremendous judicial, economic and political power. In the feudal system, the warrior class enjoys high status and considerable power. The feudal order lacks functional division and is usually weak in terms of centralisation of power and administration."* Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Malay Ideas on Development: From Feudal Lord to Capitalist*, pp iv-v.

worldview, orientations and values continue to influence Malay society right up to present times, albeit in different forms and guides. One scholar explicated that the continuity of feudal orientations persists because of the general absence of radical restructuring and change in Malay society.[8] Rightly, throughout the history of the Malay society, there was no major upheaval or destruction that drastically impacted the Malay way of life, and forced a restructuring of the community. Even the coming of colonialism did not create drastic impact, and in fact the Malays were able to exist and live their lives very much in the same manner as the pre-colonial days. The lack of experience of any momentous and revolutionary events that could have contributed to severance of their cultural roots, revise their value systems and ethics as well as the need to adapt to new environment including new political and economic ethos, has thus made it possible for feudal values and orientations to continue to influence modern day Malay society. Shaharuddin Maaruf maintained that what happened in the case of the Malays was an "*evolutionary type of cultural and social change which is more favourable towards the survival of tradition and the consciousness of it. Historical and cultural continuities are strong and their roots are deeply entrenched in the past.*"[9]

At this juncture, it is useful to elucidate the orientation existing in the feudal Malay society, clearly reflected in numerous classical texts depicting stories of the

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[8] Shaharuddin Maaruf, *The Concept of a Hero in Malay Society.* Singapore, Eastern University Press, 1984. Alatas also shared the same view, see Syed Hussein Alatas, *Modernization and Social Change: Studies in Modernisation, Religion, Social Change and Development in Southeast Asia.*

[9]Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Some Theoretical Problems Concerning Tradition and Modernisation Among the Malays of Southeast Asia*, p. 253.

Malay ruling elite.[10] As depicted in chronicles like those found in *Sejarah Melayu*[11],

feudal orientation promoted values like servility to the rulers and absolute submission

to the power of the rulers which was underpinned by the concept of blind loyalty.

Authoritarian tendencies prevailed, evident by the power of the ruling class to

subjugate Malay subjects and oppress them in any manner they desired.[12] There was

also lack of respect for human personality and positive individualism.

The feudal conception of man that showed an exemplary fidelity and devotion of

a subject to his ruler is best exemplified in the story of the well-known Malay warrior,

Hang Tuah. In the chronicle *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, it was reflected how Hang Tuah

was a courageous warrior who valiantly protected his ruler even if his life was

endangered or if the act was against religious and humanitarian norms. For example,

when he was sentenced to death by his revered ruler, he did not try to explain his

innocence to the King although he knew that he was unjustly accused. Instead, he

willingly accepted his ruler's dictate and the death sentence and proclaimed that

"...he has no intention of going against his master...[and to] make haste in carrying

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[10] It is necessary to note here that while the ideas and values reflected in the classical texts and chronicles regarding the Malay ruling class depicts the values and beliefs of the ruling class, these values, beliefs and way of thinking impact the whole of the Malay feudal society. In this respect, the view of Shaharuddin Maaruf is apt: *"Malay literary works...cannot be considered merely a collection of stories, mere caprices of the imagination of writers. They are imbued with social and cultural meanings . . .contained the various of Malay cultural history, recording the trends and values which had contributed to the shaping of Malay culture, thought and consciousness..."* Shaharuddin Maaruf, "Malay Literature as Social History", in E.Thumboo (ed), *Perceiving Other World*, p.333. Times Academic Press, 1991.

[11] According to Shaharuddin: *"On its own terms, Sejarah Melayu remains a valuable socio-historical or socio-cultural document if appropriate scholarly demands and expectations are placed on it. As social history documenting cultural forms...the virtues of Sejarah Melayu lie precisely in its careful portrayals of beliefs, ethics and morals..."* Shaharuddin Maaruf, *To Err is Inhuman and to Punish Divine: A Study on the Religious Orientation of the Malays*, p.2. Occasional Paper Series, Departmet of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, 2002.

out the command of the honourable master." [13]   Other examples showing his absolute loyalty at the expense of right and wrong included how he fought against his good friend Hang Jebat in defence of the ruler, although he knew that Hang Jebat's act of treachery was only to take revenge against a ruler who was unjust and cruel. Similarly, when Hang Jebat went on a killing spree before the duel, Hang Tuah did not stop the bloodbath, despite the death of many innocents.[14]   To Hang Tuah, what mattered most was the life of his ruler and the throne.

Other feudal values as reflected in the courtly chronicles were values that tolerated sensate indulgences and values that overemphasized on wealth, grandeur and opulence.[15]   This is coupled with indulgence in pompous and sensual activities evident by the rulers' desires of concubines to the extent that the desired females are forcefully brought to them.[16]   There was also an emphasis on indulgence in non-productive activities for example the Malay rulers indulged themselves in opium smoking, gambling, cock-fighting and entertainment.   While the ruling class remained idle, the subject class *(rakyat)* bore the brunt of labour and provided

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[12] This feudal psychology has resulted in many unjust actions by the Sultan, for example the numerous forced acts of the Malay subjects having to give up their beautiful wives and daughters to the rulers as their concubines. Shaharuddin Maaruf, *The Concept of a Hero in Malay Society*.

[13] Shaharuddin Maaruf, *The Concept of a Hero in Malay Society*, pp.35-36.

[14] Kassim Ahmad, ed. *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, p.393. Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1994.

[15] This could be seen in many accounts of Malay elite. For example, in *Sejarah Melayu* the wealth and grandeur of the Malay ruler Iskandar Dzul-Karnain was depicted through a vivid description of his wedding where it was documented that *"…gold, silver, gems and previous stones over every kind was strewn at the feet of Raja Iskandar until they stood before him in heaps. He also presented ornaments of rich distinction to the nobles, father in law and his wife."* Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Malay Ideas on Development: From Feudal Lord to Capitalist*, p.2.

[16] An example is the kidnapping of Tun Teja by Hang Nadim, who wanted to win the favour of the ruler. Upon his act, he was honored by the ruler with a robe equal to the ruler's own, and gold, silver and treasures. Ibid, p.12.

resources to the ruling elite through the system of forced labour *(kerah)*. Hence, it was the *rakyat* that toiled in the fields and went out to sea while the elite benefitted through the *rakyat's* efforts as what the *rakyat* have produced and caught had to be given to the ruling elite as tithe.[17]

The above are examples of feudal orientation dominant in the life of Malay feudal society, which to a large extent, has played a significant role in limiting the development of the Malay society, as aptly reflected upon by Abdullah Munshi. In his reflections of Malay poverty and backwardness during the nineteenth century, Abdullah expressed that the root of the Malay problem rested with the leadership of the feudal elite, the kind of value-system they promoted, and the social order they established.[18] The feudal system however was contested by another value system one that is represented by the Islamic religion.

Shaharuddin Maaruf pointed out that Islam contested Malay feudal structure and provided an alternate value orientation for the Malay society. According to him:

> "*In the cultural history of the Malays and development of Malay thought, ideas and worldview have not been wholly monopolised by feudal psychology and orientations. For many decades and even before the colonising Westerners began to spread their power and influence, feudal psychology and orientations have had to compete with another system of thought and value orientation, that is, Malay humanism...while feudal values are anchored in the concept and belief of ruler-mythical elements, Malay humanism shifted its value orientation to one basic foundation, of which its values are autonomous, independent and universal. This proved to be a major shift in paradigm and way of thinking that led to shaping a value system that is solid, complete, holistic and independent. This radical paradigm shift is always contained in the words and verses of honour to Allah . . ."* [19]

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[17] Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Concept of a Hero in Malay Society*, pp.27-29.

[18] Abdullah Munshi, *Kesah Pelayaran Abdullah*. Singapore: Malaysia Publication Limited, 1965.

[19] Translated from the excerpt: " *Dalam sejarah kebudayaan Melayu dan pemikiran Melayu, dunia idea-idea tidaklah keseluruhannya dimonopoli oleh gaya pemikiran feudal. Sejak berabad-abad yang silam dan lama sebelum penjajahan Barat menebarkan kekuasaan dan pengaruhnya, pemikiran dan jiwa feudal terpaksa bersaing dan juga digugat oleh satu lagi gaya pemikiran, yakni kemanusian Melayu . . . manakala nilai-nilai feudal berpaksi kepada fahaman dewa-raja, kemanusian Melayu mengalih dan memalingkan kesedarannya kepada satu asas, punca dan kayu ukur nilai-nilai yang berbeza sekali, yang berasingan, berautonomi, mutlak dan bersifat sejagat. Ini merupakan satu*

Indeed, Islamic values conflicted with feudal values. For example, the value of power as understood in Islam, articulates that Man has the power to decide and dictate what he should and could do, and that he alone is responsible for his actions, hence it is Man himself that can decide or influence his fate and determine his life. [20] This belief in Man and the idea that Man is the maker of his own destiny, possessing self-esteem and pride, competed with feudal orientation where individualism and respect of human personality are not valued. Islam hence gave the common Malay subjects the value of personal autonomy and personal responsibility, and accorded to them the power to assume responsibility for their actions and the freedom to determine and shape their lives, in contrast to the feudal value of complete servility to the ruling class.

More significantly, Islam provides guiding philosophy and precepts on leadership. In Islam, a heavy obligation is placed upon leaders to uphold justice, equality and welfare of followers. Leaders are expected to act as protectors and guardians of the rights of the people. This value orientation is in direct conflict with feudal orientation where the Malay feudal elite often than not, are absolute monarchs who were above the law. It has been argued that Islamic guidelines and law curbed the excesses and immorality of the Malay rulers who would otherwise be more severe had they not been guided by these Islamic principles of governance. According to Noor Aisha:

lonjakan paradigm yang radikal, yang membentuk dan mencorakkan keperibadian yang jitu, yang lengkap, menyeluruh dan berjiwa bebas. Lonjakan paradigma yang bersifat radikal malah revolusi ini selalunya terkandung dalam puji-pujian kepada Allah." Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Menyingkap Abdi Menggilap Peribadi*, p.50. National University of Singapore, 2006.

[20] MM Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, p.159. Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 1989.

"Islam had strongly contended against the unfettered power of Malay rulers. It introduced the rule of law and established that rulers like their subjects, are bound by law, irrespective of their status in society. Islam also defined Malay rulers' duties and liabilities towards their subjects in no uncertain terms. It further allowed the subjects rights, which the ruler must ensure.[21]

There are written illustrations embedded within various Malay chronicles including *Sejarah Melayu* and *Hikayat Hang Tuah* that showed the influence of Islam in Malay society, and which in turn supported the assertion that Islam checked some of the excesses present during the feudal period. The most intrusive source revealing the deep influence of Islam was in the text *Taj Us-Salatin*. In essence, this text propounded Islamic principles and guidelines as the foundation of leadership and that the Malay ruling class should be guided by these principles in the administration of their kingdom. Also, Islamic guidelines became an ideal standard of rule of the Malay feudal leaders, even if these ideals are not fully practiced. This is evident in deathbed testaments of many of the feudal ruling elite, where many of them reminded their successors to observe Islamic values like upholding justice for the *rakyat* and addressing their plight if they are victimised, ensure harmony and peace in the states and many other positive leadership roles as per encouraged in Islam.[22]

These ideals that the ruling elite proclaimed to be important unfortunately, is in direct contrast to the reality of how Islam has been realised in feudal society. The

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[21] This was articulated in the study of Malay adat laws by Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman. According to her, there are many examples in the *Sejarah Melayu* to show that Islam had seeped into the consciousness of the Malay rulers and that Islam had restrained the power and excesses of the Malay rulers. For more detailed description, see Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, *Colonial Image of Malay Adat Laws: A Critical Appraisal of Studies on Adat Laws in the Malay Peninsula during the Colonial Era and Some Continuities*. Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2006.

[22] According to Azhar Ibrahim, there are many examples of deathbed testaments in the chronicles which taken literally, showed that the elite is in harmony with the ideals expected of a leader in Islam, which contradicts the reality between the actual practice and the ideals propagated by the rulers. Azhar Ibrahim, *The Understanding of Islam as Reflected in Classical Malay Texts*, pp. 48-49.

type of religious orientation that existed during the feudal period, according to Shaharuddin Maaruf, contained the following traits:

> *"(a) strong influences of occasionalism, with the fusion of religion and magical beliefs, (b) coloured by ideology of the ruling class with vested interest, (c) dualistic in orientation, with its antagonistic anti-thesis of this world and thereafter, (d) pre-occupied with temptations of the flesh and the sins of carnal desire, (e) authoritarian in nature, associating its notion of sinning with divine retribution, (f) more affective than intellectual in nature, (g) greater emphasis on the ritual and external symbols rather than the intellectual and philosophical side of Islam, and (h) lacked emphasis on individualism, humanism and the ideal of the human personality."*[23]

Notwithstanding the type of religious orientation present during the feudal period, overall Islam has provided the Malays with another value orientation contesting feudal values, and which has been able to permeate every aspect of Malay life and culture. As emphasised by a writer, Islam has been a potent force in Malay feudal society:

> *"...as far as the basic tenets of Islam were concerned, the impact of Islamic ideology had been felt in the royal courts as well as in the villages ... literature about statecraft or doctrinal discussions on points of theology would principally belong to the courtly circles, while popular religious literature and the romances would inevitably find their way to the masses. The point to be made is that the scholarly tradition of Islam was nurtured within the precincts of the royal courts or if there was no royal patronage, there would have been schools established by scholars of repute and to these scholars the aspiring young students would flock to study religious knowledge.*[24]

Over the years, Islam continues to be a dominant influence in Malay life, including its identity formulation. The next section examines the Islamic influence on the identity of the Singapore Malay community.

Singapore Malay Muslim Identity

As reflected, Islam has strongly influenced the Malay life and society, hence, it

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[23] Shaharuddin Maaruf, *To Err is Inhuman and to Punish Divine: A Study of the Religious Orientation of the Malays*, p. 22.

[24] Mohd Taib Osman, "Islamisation of the Malays: A Transformation of Culture", in *Readings on Islam in Southeast Asia,* ISEAS, 1985, pp.45-46.

factors significantly in the expression and identity of being Malay. Beyond this acknowledgement of Islam as an identifier of Singapore Malay identity, it is pertinent to examine and reflect on the type of Islamic identity that has emerged within the Singapore Malay society, basically, to understand the religious orientation. This is critical because the type of religious orientation embraced by the Malay elite conditions the nature and characteristics of Islamic identity within the Singapore Malay community. This in turn influences how the community respond to issues and problems confronting it.[25]

It is generally accepted that the broad guidelines and principles of Islam if applied correctly in the Malay community will benefit the community tremendously, particularly as Islam possesses many positive values that can aid the Malay community in achieving excellence and progress. However the extent of how far such values can aid in facilitating the process towards progress and development is dependent on how these values are interpreted and applied in society. It is the individuals who subscribe to religious values and ideals who are the ultimate arbiters of the meaning and significance of these ideas and values, and also the dominant type of religious orientation that is present within the society.[26] At the same time, the

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[25] Shaharuddin Maaruf's thinking is relevant here. According to him: "*Understanding the religious orientation of the Malays helps us to understand the religious issues of today. It is religious orientation which conditions religious sensitivity and the sense of issues. Understanding the nature of the religious orientation should also include inquiry into the conditioning of such religious orientation. Such an approach will overcome the inadequacy of seeing religious issues merely as a reflection of certain intellectual or theological viewpoint.*" Shaharuddin Maaruf, *To Err Is Inhuman and to Punish Divine: A Study of the Religious Orientation of the Malays*, p.1.

[26] Javaid Saeed, *Islam and Modernisation,* p. 26. Shaharuddin Maaruf has also aptly observed that: "*Religion can be a major force in ensuring the survival and the well-being of a multi-religious society. This is however subject to various social conditions and social factors. Very often the virtues and wisdom of religion are not fully reaped by man and society due to the fact that the social conditions are not conducive to the development of proper understanding of religion.*" Shaharuddin Maaruf,

guidance from the elite in interpreting and adapting Islamic precepts and principles are just as important since they provide the leadership to the community.

The body of religious elite that provide leadership in matters pertaining to religious belief and practices is known as the *ulama*.[27] They are revered by the Malays for their *"devotion, concern for Muslim solidarity and propagation of the virtues of Islamic teachings and values."*[28] They are also looked upon as the spiritual and intellectual custodians of Islam, and the ones to define problems affecting the community that fall within the ambit of religion, and to also provide solutions based on what they deem as Islamic law. In short, they are the ones that the Muslims will turn to, and often, these *ulama* provide *fatwa* (religious rulings)[29] on modern problems and issues confronting the community. The main occupation of these *ulama* is as religious teachers, while some serve as religious officials in mosques and religious bureaucracy. Some of them are also involved in businesses related to practice of religion like *haj* and *umrah* pilgrimages as well as *halal* food and other consumer products.[30]

The *ulama* in Singapore is far from homogenous as it comprise different groups

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"Negative Attitudes Towards Religion", in *One God Many Paths: Essays on the Social Relevance of Religion in Malaysia*, p. 52. Kuala Lumpur: Aliran Publication, 1980.

[27] According to Noor Aisha, in any society, there will emerge a group of select individuals to provide guidance and leadership in matters relating to religion, and as there is no clergy in Islam, this role is performed by the *ulama*. Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore", p.248, in Lai Ah Heng, ed., *Religious Diversity in Singapore.* Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore, 2008.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Although fatwas, unlike law, are not binding, they nevertheless influence thinking, behavior and attitude of individuals. Ibid.

[30] Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore", p.248

and individuals, possessing different religious orientation, theological interpretations and religious opinions.[31]   However, despite these differences, the *ulama* are characterised by a commonality, namely they propagate *"a largely similar and continuous corpus of religious knowledge which includes theology, law, metaphysics and history...their style of learning is characterised by the passing or transmission of knowledge through repetition, memorization and access to texts through commentaries...they are not sufficiently exposed to or have sufficient grounding in modern knowledge which is predominantly a Western product...knowledge of modern world is derived essentially from the works by Muslim themselves...they rely heavily on translation works from Arabic or from books written in Malay."*[32]   In short, the *ulama* subscribe to similar religious orientation, and it is this type of orientation that largely influences the thinking of the Malay community and its identity as Muslim.

The type of religious orientation that is present in modern society of today, according to Shaharuddin Maaruf, is one that reveals continuities with characteristics of religious orientation present in the Malay feudal past. As he explicates:

> *"....the religious orientation of the Malays is characteristic of a traditional and agricultural society. It bears the imprints of a pre-industrial and non-capitalistic ethos. And yet the religious orientation has survived and continued in contemporary Southeast Asia, which is industrialising, urbanizing and changing into an industrial mass-society."*[33]

What this means is that the type of religious orientation dominant in the past continues to survive in modern Malay society

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[31] Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore", p.248.

[32] Ibid, p.249.

[33] Shaharuddin Maaruf, *To Err Is Inhuman and to Punish Divine*, p.23.   Azhar Ibrahim also viewed the religious orientation of the Malays as religious traditionalism in a contemporary Malay society, in line with Robert Towler's assertion that traditionalism "cherishes the tradition it has received. It may be simply appreciative wishing to affirm all it has known or defending belligerently its security." Azhar Ibrahim, *The Understanding of Islam as Reflected in Classical Malay Text*, pp.10-12.

One of the continued influences of religious orientation of Malay feudalism is the belief in magical orientation infused with Islamic precepts. As explained in the Malay chronicles, the feudal elite were obsessed with mysticism, miracles and fantastical happenings.[34] For example, the conversion of the elite to Islam occurred through claims of miracles, not spiritual or intellectual discovery.[35] Similarly the type of religious leaders that were sought after and revered by the feudal elite were those deemed as holy due to their supernatural powers and magic which were equated with spiritual might and piety endowed by God.[36]

The manifestation of this type of religious orientation in modern Malay society can be seen through the continuation of the practices of invoking collective representations in which religion is woven into.[37] Alatas defined collective representation as *'concepts or ideas formed concerning objects or events which differ from those derived from ordinary empirical experience without any magico-religious*

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[34] Historically, the introduction of the Islamic religion to the Malay society took place within an existing culture filled with tradition of beliefs in mysticism, magical happenings and folklore. The Islam that came to the shores of the Malay society had the flexible ability to be immersed and syncretised with the local pre-Islamic beliefs and notions. As a result, the feudal Malay society was able to retain its elements of magic, mysticism and folk beliefs alongside Islamic practices. In addition, the early propagators of Islam tended to bring with them their own popular and magical beliefs and practices, then spreading these as representing Islamic culture. Therefore there occurred an assimilation of the Islamic culture brought by the missionaries with the local Malay beliefs and practice, in turn creating a form of Islam that contains elements which strictly speaking stand outside Islamic teachings. Mohd Taib Osman, "Islamisation of the Malays: A Transformation of Culture," in Ahmad Ibrahim, Sharon Siddique, Yasmin Hussain, *Readings of Islam in Southeast Asia*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1985.

[35] An example is the conversion of Raja Kechil Besar of Malacca to Islam, who experienced a revelation and miraculous dream where he was visited by the Prophet Muhamad and asked to recite the profession of the Islamic faith. For more example so fantastical stories of the rulers' conversion, refer to Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Malay Ideas on Development,* pp. 25-26.

[36] See texts like Sejarah Melayu, Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai etc.

[37] Tham Seong Chee, *Religion and Modernisation*, pp.67-68.

or occult admixture.'[38] A common example within modern Malay society is that of magical healing, which is practiced by a number of prominent religious elite. They diagnose illnesses including spirit interference using verses from the Koran and other religious sources. On other occasions, they are found to use holy water to treat illnesses. These practices reflects continuities with those resorted to by Malay medicinal man *Tok Pawang or Dukon who* were often called upon to assist in providing remedies for possession by spirits, and other illnesses of sorts.[39] There is no hesitation on the part of the Malays to call upon the help of these healers, because their magical practices are deemed consistent with Islam. Indeed the line between magic and religion through these practices are often blurred. As one scholar has aptly noted:

> *"...the use of Islamic practices including the appropriate reciting of relevant verses from the Koran during the observance of non-Islamic rituals is frequently done to enhance the efficacy of the rituals or to provide them with an Islamic justification."*[40]

This form of magical religious healing is so valued by the Malay community today that a famed healer and exorcist, Ustaz Haron Din, set up a clinic in Selangor, known as *Darussyifa,* to provide better service to his clients including a large proportion of Malays from Singapore. The immense support to such magical healing has in turn led to the establishment of a similar clinic in Singapore, called the *Darul*

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[38] Syed Hussein Alatas, *Modernisation and Social Change*, p.54.

[39] The Straits Times, *"Bomoh with the Limo",* dated 16 Feb 2003. This article pointed that the belief in black magic cures still existed within the Malay society, even in Singapore. As quoted by Datuk Kelana, a modern day bomoh in Malaysia, *"[Datuk Kelana] showed letters of thanks from two Singaporeans who overcame business and personal problems after receiving his help, including a special ointment."* The belief in spirit world is so predominant so much so that more than 300,000 people turned up at the Malaysian national Museum's Exploring Ghosts: Mystery and Culture Exhibition in 2002.

[40] Tham Seong Chee, *Religion and Modernisation*, pp.68-69.

Ilaaj, set up by a local religious teacher.[41] This development clearly reflects an assimilation of magic and healing with religious beliefs, a practice that remains rampant within the Malay community.

Another aspect of the belief in magical orientation in Islam is the obsession with *jinns*. While it cannot be denied that the Quran do make several references to *jinns* although the exact nature of *jinns* is not clearly explained, what has happened is that there occurred tremendous pre-occupation with the subject of *jinns*, one that has permeated the thoughts of the religious elite of today, evident by the considerable amount of writings on this topic. In the writings on *jinns,* the religious preachers argue that belief in *jinns* is part of religious faith (*iman*), and that the Quran speaks about *jinns*, hence Muslims should believe in *jinns* as the words of Quran is the truth. This infusion of *jinns* with the tenets in Islam has facilitated the preachers to garner followers and believers. The interest in *jinns* has become so pervasive among the Singapore Malay community, that religious preachers deemed as experts in this subject matter, are often invited to Singapore for numerous public seminars and talks on *jinns* and exorcism.[42]

The above reflects the presence of a religious orientation that is steeped in magical beliefs, which as mentioned, bears continuity with the type of religious belief present in the Malay feudal era. Unfortunately, such an orientation is not conducive to modern society, in that it prevents the Malays from effectively being able to

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[41] For more details regarding the two healers and their clinics, refer to Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, *The Magical Religious Orientation of the Malays: A Contemporary Preliminary Survey*, pp.12-13. National University of Singapore, 2009.

[42] Ibid, pp.4-5.

analyse and address problems and issues faced in modern contemporary life objectively. Attributing medical problems, for instance to *jinns* or other types of spirits, deter the Malays from seeking scientific medical attention. Likewise, *jinns* and spirits have also been seen as the cause of physical, mental and even family problems.[43] Such an orientation hinders the development of a rational, objective and scientific outlook in life, and the solving of practical problems faced by the community.[44] More importantly, such mode of thinking has been lashed at for impeding the development of a scientific orientation to life which impairs modernisation. Alatas rightly pointed out that such collective representation is one major factor that hinders the birth and development of a scientific outlook towards solving practical problems in life. Scientific outlook requires strong grasp of the laws of causation and this is not made possible if the belief in magical acts remains within the community's thinking. Presence of magic confused the unexplained with the inexplicable and employs arbitrary logic, after-the-fact reasoning and relies on anecdotal evidences instead of proven scientific evidences.[45] It is therefore critical to discourage such an orientation because its continued presence impedes the development of a modern scientific outlook within the Malay society. It also prevents the emergence of new types of knowledge or social planning based on scientific understanding and religious philosophy in response to new conditions and challenges facing the society.

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[43] Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, *The Magical Religious Orientation of the Malays: A Contemporary Preliminary Survey*, pp.4-5

[44] Syed Hussein Alatas, *Modernisation and Social Change*, p.55.

[45] Ibid.

The hindrance to the presence of a rational and scientific outlook in life is also linked to the presence of a *"general attitude of ambivalence and at times, scepticism towards reasons...[acting] as a tool for understanding and applying religious teachings,"*[46] within the religious domain. The fear is that reason can be used for negative, harmful or destructive purposes, and given the possibility for man to abuse reason, it is therefore best for reason to be selectively used. The role and purpose of reasons is thus undermined and restrict the ability of a Muslim to better understand his religion. More importantly, doubts upon reason can create unquestioning loyalty to authority, irrationality and fanaticism. Again, this is reminiscent of the past religious orientation where Islam is approached not from an intellectual perspective. As Shaharuddin Maaruf maintained:

> *"It is reason which seeks to apply religion in a historical context taking into consideration various actual demands and concrete problems. Without the use of reason, man would be limiting his wisdom and application of religion. When religion is kept out of many important areas of life, through abandonment of reason, the vacuum is quickly filled by other types of thinking inimical to unity and harmony. It is due to the failure of man to effectively incorporate religious values and thinking into his social organisation and institution that the field is left open to philosophies conducive to violence and radicalism. When religion fails to influence society in its social life, individualism, nihilism, relativism and unbridled materialism will take root. Without the influence of religion, man's mental equilibrium is upset and he is quick to transfer his loyalties to destructive forces in society."*[47]

Another trait of the religious orientation present in the Malay community today is one that places greater emphasis on rituals and external symbols, and where the concern is for personal salvation, to live a proper and blessed life in accordance with the requirements of Islam. Such an understanding of religion, to a large extent, is a remnant of a feudalistic approach towards religion with its fixation on rituals. This understanding is continuously perpetuated in the teachings of Islam where the *ulama*

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[46] Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore", p.256.

gave focus and emphasis on the importance of ritualistic aspects of religion in their sermons and teachings, at the expense of other ethical aspects of Islamic religion. As religious leaders within the Malay community, their continued preoccupation with ritualistic aspects of Islam perpetuated this orientation within the community, while reducing the relevance of religious values to contemporary modern problems and issues. This trend is a common development among the *ulama,* as observed by an academic:

> *"...there are religious teachers who gave little emphasis on educating and exposing the Malays to other Islamic isues [except for the ritualistic practices]...There are also those who like to highlight the glorious past of the Islamic civilisation but failed to link it to current context."[48]*

While religious consciousness pertaining to daily religious practices and observances in daily lives is necessary in a believer's attempt in living a proper and blessed life in accordance with religious requirements in Islam, the problem lies in the over-emphasis on ritualistic aspects of religion at the expense of consideration for other pressing problems confronting the community that could be addressed using religious values in concrete terms. A religious orientation that emphasizes only on religious rituals and personal salvation will result in a conscribing the influence of Islam and the failure to apply philosophical, ethical and moral values relevant to human life. It will also result in its believers believing that *"...merely by means of certain rituals, changes and formulas God would be pleased with him and therefore he would be spared God's wrath."* It also *"...clouds proper understanding and*

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[47] Shaharuddin Maaruf, "Negative Attitudes Towards Religion", p. 52.

[48] Translated from the a talk delivered by Chandra Muzaffar, a Malaysian academic where he stated that ".... *ada sebahagian ulama kita yang kurang memberi pendidikan dan pendedahan kepada isu Islam lain [kecuali isu-isu ibadat]... Ada juga yang gemar menceritakan masa lampau kegemilangan*

appreciation of universal aspects in the teachings of various religions (like Islam)...by

believing God's favour can be won merely by observing rituals, many have excluded

the necessity of good work and righteous deeds in their life." [49]

The negative implications of this type of religious orientation mentioned above,

viz. one that has an influence of magical beliefs and also that is more concerned with

rituals and external symbols, have on occasions been questioned by members of

religious establishment such as MUIS. The current President of MUIS, Alami Musa,

for example has cautioned against the preoccupation of magical beliefs, and had

asked that such topics be removed from religious preaching. As stated by him.

> *"A number of the religious leaders seemed to be showing a keen interest to lecture on*
> *topics relating to the supernatural occurrences, including black magic. This has to be*
> *stopped. This is because such topics, though popular, are not helping to enhance the*
> *society's religious understanding and knowledge.*[50]

Similarly, the former President of MUIS, Haji Maaruf Salleh, has also

commented that *"...we are seeing increased interest among the Malays to be more*

faithful to the Islamic religion, by attending more religious functions and activities, or

attending religious classes on improving the ritualistic aspects of the religion..." [51]

Islam tanpa mengkaitkan dengan hakikat masyarakat Islam hari ini.   Berita Minggu, *"Islam tidak terbatas pada ibadat saja"*, 12 May 2004.

[49] Shaharuddin Maaruf "Negative Attitudes Towards Religion", pp. 54-56.

[50] Translated from the excerpt: "*Kecenderungan sesetengah penceramah memberi tumpuan kepada isu-isu alam ghaib, termasuk ilmu hitam, azimat dan tangkal harus diubah. Ini kerana topik sedemikian, meskipun popular, tidak membantu mutu pemikiran agama masyarakat.*" Mr Alami made this remarks during the mosque convention at Orchid Country Club in mid 2006. See also Berita Harian*, "Garis Pandu Topic Ceramah bagi Masjid,"* 14 August 2006.

[51] Translated from the excerpt: "*Kita melihat kecendurangan yang bertambah di kalangan masyarakat kita untuk lebih kembali kepada Islam dengan menghadiri majlis-majlis baca Yassin, bermarhaban, berselawat dan sebagainya, ataupun unsur-unsur memelihara kemurnian seperti kursus-kursus menghalusi solat dan sebagainya".* Berita Minggu, *"Tak Semuanya Betul Dalam Agama Kita,"* 20 Oct 2002.   Other academics like Dr Chandra Muzaffar, Dr Farid Al-Attas, as well as officials like Indonesian ulama, Haji Hashim Muzadi and Pakistan Minister of Home Affairs, Dr Mahmood Ahmad Ghaizi have also echoed the views that many Muslim societies tended to focus on ritualistic aspects of

To him, this attitude showed a lack of inclination to move away from the ritualistic aspects of religion. This is compounded by the fact that a fair proportion of Islamic religious teachers in Singapore are not equipped to teach religious teachings that focus on the moral, ethical and philosophical aspects of Islam and how these values can be applied to daily life. To him, a holistic understanding of Islamic religion among the Singapore Malays is still at a nascent stage, and that more should be done to help the Malays cultivate a better understanding of Islam particularly on the philosophical, ethical and moral aspects of Islamic teachings.[52]

Admittedly, over the past years, MUIS has attempted to promote a more balanced understanding of Islam. For example, religious teachers have been encouraged to teach religion in ways that will facilitate relevance to the problems of life. To achieve this, a structured syllabus in the teaching of religious education at mosques was introduced by MUIS in 2004. This syllabus was introduced with the intention of providing appropriate themes and teaching contents to guide the religious teachers.[53] There were also guidelines on appropriate topics to be delivered by religious leaders in their seminars and forums including the Friday sermons.[54] There have thus been some efforts made to move the Singapore Malays away from a

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Islamic religion, and ignore the rest of what Islam is all about. These viewpoints are expressed in numerous articles published in Berita Harian.

[52] Speech by Haji Maarof Salleh published in Berita Minggu, 20 Oct 2002.

[53] Berita Harian, *"Muslim Baik Turut Peka dengan Isu Semasa,"* 18 Apr 2004, article based on an interview with Uztaz Fatris Bakaram, who has recently assumed the position of Mufti.

[54] Among the messages regularly exhorted during Friday sermons were those reminding the Malays to refrain from unproductive behaviours in Islam e.g. over-spending, excessive entertaining etc. In addition, religious leaders were also reminded not to focus on unIslamic practices in Islam during their talks, e.g. topics on supernatural occurrences including black magic as such topics do not enhance the Malay society's understanding and knowledge of Islam. See Berita Harian, *"Garis Pandu Topic Ceramah bagi Masjid,"* 14 August 2006.

preoccupation in religious rituals and practices. The Malays are encouraged to understand that religion is not merely confined to the performance of rituals and that the Islamic religion equally affirms that it is important for man to take care off and assist in the well being of himself and that of his community.[55] More importantly, there must be a balanced emphasis between rituals and other aspects of Islam, and this has in fact been expounded upon by a prominent Malay scholar sometime back:

> *"What is needed to be disseminated is not just the matters of faith and spirituality of the Muslims, but the issues of poverty, corruption, suppression, invasion of morality and others which are really sucking the blood of Muslims."[56]*

This view was similarly echoed by a MUIS official who stated that:

> *"The true meaning of a good Muslim is one where he is able to face the life challenges, and not merely be concerned with his personal relationship with God, or with his ritualistic practices. In fact, a Muslim cannot be labelled as a good Muslim if he focused primarily on the religious rituals, and not be concerned about the happenings around him."[57]*

Such views however are marginal to dominant messages conveyed through sermons and religious publications that are widely disseminated. To a large extent, dominant religious discourse is not characterized by the critiques above.[58] Hence, while MUIS may have put in place initiatives to promote a religious orientation that is more aligned with concrete problems of individuals' lives, the religious discourse and orientation is still largely dominated by preoccupation with rituals at the expense of social philosophy.

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[55] Syed Sheikh Alhady, *Agama Islam dan Akal*, p.14. Kota Bahru, Percetakan Pustaka Dian, 1965.

[56] Syed Hussein Alatas, *Islam dan Sosialisma*, p.31. Pulau Pinang, Seruan Masa, 1976.

[57] Translated from the excerpt*: "Pengertian sebenar seorang Muslim yang baik ialah Muslim yang dapat mengharungi cabaran kehidupan, bukan setakat menjaga hubungannya dengan Tuhan, atau hanya melakukan ibadat sahaja. Malah seorang Muslim tidak layak dikatakan Muslim yang baik jika dia hanya menjaga ibadahnya saja tetapi tidak ambil peduli perkara yang berlaku di sekelilingya."* Berita Harian, *"Muslim Baik Turut Peka Dengan Isu Semasa,"* 18 Apr 2004.

[58] The roles of the religious elite have been explained in details in the first part of this chapter.

The religious orientation adopted by the *ulama* can be said to be one that is steeped in traditionalism.[59] Traditionalism has affected development of Muslim societies. A prominent Muslim reformer, Shakib Arsalan in his work *Our Decline and Its Causes* has critiqued this mode of thinking by declaring that the dogma that religious traditions inherited from the scholars of the past are irrefutable, binding, absolute and hence to be guarded and preserved, weakens intellectual reasoning and endeavour.[60] He expressed the view that religious traditionalists who insist on retaining such hackneyed conventions arising from their blind dogmatism to past traditions, are the ones who obstruct suitable reforms for the improvements of the society's well-being. Due to their failure to adapt Islamic teachings to the demands of the modern world, they reduced the Islamic religion to one of other-worldly occupations. At the same time, their unquestioning acceptance of religious traditions prevents them from distinguishing and understanding that ideas or teachings are the products of specific socio-historical epochs and their underlying universal moral and ethical principles, and that what has worked in the past, may not be suitable for modern times.[61] To Arsalan, these traditionalists are thus the ones responsible for the poverty and indigence of the Muslims.

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[59] Shaharuddin Maaruf, "Negative Attitudes Towards Religion", p.52.

[60] Shakib Arsalan, *Our Decline and Its Causes*. Lahore, Ashraf Press, 1944.

[61] Mannheim's thinking is apt in this particular instance. He reminded of the importance to move away from static mode of thought, and of the danger that this posed in that it arrest the creative contribution of every epoch. According to Manheim: *" an ontology hand down through tradition obstruct new developments, especially in the basic modes of thinking, and as the particularity of the conventional theoretical frameworks remains unquestioned, we will remain in the toils of a static mode of thought which is inadequate to our present stage of historical and intellectual development. What is needed, therefore, is a continual readiness to recognise that every point of view is particular to certain definite situation and to find out through analysis what this particularity consists."* Manheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, pp. 78-80.

The aversion to reason that underlies traditionalism can give rise to certain negative consequences which impedes the significance of religion. A Malay scholar for instance pointed out the dangers of this attitude as having the effect as follows:

> *"...weakening the influence of religion in the life of man. To begin with, it denies religious exhortations for man to use his intelligence as far as possible to improve his life, as well as to understand religion and God better. Secondly, when the rational aspects of religion are underplayed and weakened, the door to fanaticism, prejudice, bias, irrationality and dogmatism is opened . . . whenever new interpretations are given to religious principles in the light of recent knowledge and discoveries, they meet with opposition which relies solely on the ground that reason cannot be applied to religion."[62]*

The scholar further cautioned that even if there is a group of elite that seeks to *"bring more and more areas of life under the influence of religion through the use of reason, a great many would oppose it*.[63]

This aversion to reason in understanding religion is an orientation that is pervasive, and has become a style of thinking and belief that can be said to characterise the dominant *ulama*. The predominance of a traditionalist orientation in Islam is reflected in the way the *ulama* respond to issues and problems affecting community in modern contemporary times. In the Singapore's context, this can be seen in their responses to modern problems like that of organ donation. The issue of organ donation has confronted the Singapore Malay community for about two decades prior to the Muslims being finally included in the Human Organ Transplantation Act (HOTA) during which time the community had been under constant national limelight.[64] The issue of organ donation first occurred in the early 1970s when MUIS issued a *fatwa* that forbade the Muslims from donating the organs

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[62] Shaharuddin Maaruf, "Negative Attitudes Towards Religion," pp.56-57.

[63] Ibid.

of the dead to the living. The *fatwa* was issued based on religious interpretation of bodily resurrection of the dead on the Day of Judgement whereby all body parts will be questioned on their actions.[65] Hence, removing body parts means that man will be physically incomplete in the life thereafter. Thus organ donation is against Islam. In support of the *fatwa*, scriptural injunctions which concluded that *"there is no clear text or evidence which allows for donations [of organ]"* were put forth by MUIS and the religious elite.[66]

In the late 1980s, a second *fatwa* was issued allowing organ donations like kidney transplant, on the grounds of necessity *(darurah)* as a life-saving measure. However the fatwa did not revaluate or revise the grounds of the earlier fatwa which prohibited organ donation. This second *fatwa* however is still subject to the consent of the donor's potential beneficiaries *(waris),* a religious requirement that must be adhered to by all Muslims. In 2004, another revision to the *fatwa* relating to organ donation took place. This time round, if a person wanted to pledge his organs for transplant, he no longer needed the consent of the *waris*. The latest revision took place in mid 2007, in which because of the reason of necessity (darura), Muslims could donate their organs. This *fatwa* revision has led to the automatic inclusion of all Muslims in HOTA in August 2008, unless they decide to exercise their option to

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[64] HOTA was introduced in 1987 and allows for the organs (kidney, liver, heart and cornea) of Singapore citizens and Permanent Residents, 21 years and above and of sound mind, to be donated in the event of death. The Muslims were included in HOTA in August 2008.

[65] Syed Hussein Alatas, *Biarkan Buta*. Pustaka Nasional, Singapore, 1974.

[66] Other Quranic injuctions that was quoted to support the fatwa included" "And not make your own hands contribute to (your) destruction. (Quran 2:195) and "The body and all its parts are the trust of Allan to a man. Every one of it will be questioned in the judgement day. This is based on God's words: Every act of hearing or seeing, or of (feeling in) the heart, will be enquired into." (17:36). Ibid, p.10.

opt-out of this mandatory legal provision.

The numerous revisions to the *fatwa* on organ donations suggest a more forward looking view towards the interpretation and application of religious injunctions to address a modern problem. However, a closer look at the problem of organ donations reflects that external pressures has factored significantly in the revisions to the *fatwa*, culminating in the latest one in which Muslims are automatically included in HOTA. The key pressure is the presence of large number of kidney patients among the Singapore Malay community, who are not on the priority list for organ donations since they are not organ donors themselves, and hence not part of HOTA. The latest *fatwa* allowing the Muslims to be organ donors and hence automatically included in HOTA, facilitated Muslims who are kidney patients to have the opportunity to be organ recipients.[67] Hence the concept of exigencies (or *darura*) made it possible for the Malays as Muslims to be organ donors, and which is clearly articulated as the basis for the latest revision in the *fatwa*.

In putting forth exigencies (*darura*) as the basis for the revisions to the *fatwa* including the last revision, the *ulama* failed to address the understanding of the first *fatwa*, viz. the religious interpretation that organs of the dead should remain with the dead. Throughout the various revisions, this persistent failure to unravel the basis of the first *fatwa* remains. As Noor Aisha stated, the revisions to the *fatwa* did not "*abrogate the underlying theological arguments that form the basis for the first fatwa. This means that the rationale which sanctioned prohibition in the first fatwa*

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[67] Prior to the recent HOTA revision, Muslim patients do not receive immediate kidney or organ transplants as they are not organ donors under HOTA. With the revision, Muslim patients now enjoy equal priority as the other races for organ transplants. See The Straits Times, "*Organ donation law will include Muslims*", Aug 2007.

remains unchanged."[68] In an information leaflet explaining organ donations in Islam, it was stated that "*human beings have been entrusted to take care of their bodies. Thus we are required to use our body well and not inflict harm upon it...nevertheless, our organs can be used to save human lives, especially when no longer used...in fact, by donating our organs to those in need, our organs continue to function, although in someone else's body. This does not contradict that our bodies belong to Allah s.w.t.*"[69] The last statement, in itself, reflects that the premise of the human body belonging to God still remains as the basic understanding regarding human bodies in Islam. That is, all organs of man constitute responsibility from God and they cannot be given away unless under exigent circumstances.

As mentioned, when the first *fatwa* was introduced, there has been lengthy explanation about why organ donation is not permissible in Islam, and about the fact that the human body belongs to God. There was careful and selective construction of specific sources of religious traditions, where inferences from certain selected sources of the Quran, *hadith* and *fiqh*, were made to support the various arguments against the donation of Man's organ for transplant purposes. Donating one's organ is deemed as violating the trust given by God to mankind.[70] When the revisions to the *fatwa* took place, there was limited discussion about the issue of organ donation, beyond the arguments of exigencies (or *darura*). In short, there was a lack of religious reinterpretations on the basis of principles that could effectively reason away the first

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[68] Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore", p.252.

[69] MUIS, *Organ Transplant in Islam*, p.58. Singapore, 2004.

[70] Syed Hussein Alatas, *Biarkan Buta*, pp.10-14.

fatwa and its fundamental premise. The lack of substantial efforts in this aspect could be attributed to the fact that among the *ulama*, there is no clear support over the permissibility of organ donations.[71] The major factor that explains the problem is the tendency to cling to selected traditions derived from the past on the issue of human body and God, as embodied in the first *fatwa*. The outcome is a limitation in revaluation of religious teachings based on contemporary condition of life.

The requirement of the consent of *waris* in the second *fatwa* is yet another manifestation of traditionalism. It reveals an attitude that is ambivalent of individual judgement based on altruism and moral values as prescribed in Islam. Islam respects and upholds human personality and empowers man with the power and authority to make decisions subject to fundamental humanitarian principles. Yet the insistence that the *waris* has the overriding right to determine the individual's act towards organ donation, and the application of the role of the *waris* in organ donations is reflective of traditionalism.[72] Although by the latest *fatwa*, the issue of *waris* no longer exists, this does not negate the fact that traditionalism governs the consciousness, and hence reactions, of the *ulama.*

To a large extent, the presence of traditionalism as a form of religious orientation has made it difficult for the Malay community to adjust effectively to the demands of modern society. The way the organ donation issue has played out over the years has inevitably affected the image of Islam and the Malay Muslim community in

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[71] Uztaz Hasbi Mohamad Hasan, President of PERGAS, had remarked that among the religious teachers there are those who opposed organ donations. Berita Harian "*Asatizah Pergas akan bantu tingkat kesedaran,*" 28 Jul 2007.

[72] Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore", p.253.

Singapore. It reduces the Malay Muslim community to being a passive community in Singapore, that of receivers of organs but not donors. It also tarnishes the image of Islam as a religion that does not cherish essential humanitarian values and modern science that is beneficial to man.[73] The identity of the Singapore Malay Muslim has thus been seen as one that is of exclusive and not integrated with the multi-cultural and multi-racial society of Singapore. While the rest of the communities do not have problems with the issue, the Malay Muslims are deemed to be less supportive of organ donation in the spirit of humanitarianism.

Another illustration of how traditionalist orientation has affected the Malay Muslims response towards modern science is that of stem cell research. Basically, arising from the request by the Singapore Bioethics Advisory Committee, MUIS issued a *fatwa* allowing the use of human embryonic cells not more than two weeks old for the purposes of research. The basis and justifications of this fatwa was that a foetus less than four months old, whether existing inside or outside the womb, has not begun 'life' though it survives in specific stage of physical growth.[74] This is based on the past juristic opinion and tradition that conveyed the various stages of man's creation, which is man is created in stages, first, in the womb of the mother for forty days, consecutively developing into a clot of blood in the next forty days, then a piece of flesh at the end of the same period. Upon the 120th day, the foetus is granted a soul.[75] With this understanding, the religious elite thus indicated that it was

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[73] Syed Hussein Alatas, *Biarkan Buta*, pp.10-14.

[74] MUIS Fatwa, as stated in Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore", p.253.

[75] Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore, p.252.

permissible to carry out stem cell research on human embryos.

This *fatwa* according to Noor *Aisha "...positively sanctions the human embryonic stem research for Muslims for a period that far exceeds what many other religious, secular or humanistic groups would permit, that is, not more than fourteen days, not to mention those who completely denounce such research on the grounds that life begins at the point of fertilisation. This means that while others would completely object to, or exercise an extremely cautious attitude towards a novel experimental research, the reasoning exemplified by the Fatwa Committee goes well beyond generally accepted limitations."* [76] In short, the response of the *ulama* in this instance again reveals traits of traditionalism, in that past theological and juristic opinions have been adopted wholesale to a modern problem without adequate considerations to its ramifications. It also showed an oblivious disregard of contemporary ethical problems and dilemmas in the discourse of human embryonic stem cells confronting modern man.

The traditionalist mode of thinking is also reflected in the manner in which Islamic teachings are being taught in the *madrasah*. The *madrasah* as the traditional religious schools for the Muslims has been the main source of religious education for the Malay community.[77] According to Sa'eda Buang *'...the madrasah has been*

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[76] Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore, p.254.

[77] Religious education for the Malays including Singapore Malays started off in the form of traditional Koranic schools where students were taught how to read the verses from the Koran. This was subsequently followed by the establishment of Madrasahs that provided for religious education integrated with modern secular knowledge. The very first Madrasah was established in Singapore in 1907 and saw students from all over the Malay Peninsula and Singapore. Right up to the 1960s, it was recorded that there were at least 50 Madrasahs in Singapore. Mukhlis Abu Bakar, "Between State Interests and Citizen Rights: Whither the Madrasahs?", pp.32-34, in Noor Aisha and Lai Ah Heng, *Secularism and Spirituality. Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore*. Institute of Policy Studies, Jan 2006.

understood as a religious school or religious educational institution, be it at the preparatory (kindergarten) stage, primary, secondary or post-secondary levels. it has therefore been expected to offer a curriculum which focuses on religious subjects to stay true to its sanctity as a religious institution."[78] Indeed, the majority of *ulama* obtained their religious training in the *madrasah.*

A closer examination of the way religion is taught in the *madrasah* reveals a form of teaching that is governed by a traditionalist mode of thinking. Essentially, the *"religious curricula follows a juristic methodology that has remained virtually unchanged since medieval times, and where religious knowledge is accepted as revealed and unchallengeable."*[79] Such a traditionalistic emphasis of Islamic education in turn has put forth an idealisation of the 'perfectness' of the *madrasah* education where the *"comprehensiveness of the educational practices of past epochs and its integrated outlook which is perceived to be absent in modern day secular schools,"* are fully found in the *madrasah.*[80] Another prevalent feature of the teaching in *madrasah* is that of rote learning and memorisation. In fact, this ability to memorise is an expectation put on the students where they are generally expected to be able to memorise and recite the various verses in the *Koran* [Holy Book],[81] in short, *"the pedagogical aspect of curriculum had been reduced to the level of*

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[78] Sa'eda Buang, "Religious Education as Locus of Curriculum: A Brief Inquiry into Madrasah Curriculum in Singapore", p. 342. Lai Ah Heng, ed., *Religious Diversity in Singapore.* Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore, 2008.

[79] Mukhlis Abu Bakar, "Between State Interests and Citizen Rights: Whither the Madrasahs?" p.31.

[80] Azhar Ibrahim, "An Evaluation of Madrasah Education: Perspectives and Lessons from the Experiences of Some Muslim Societies", p.94, in Noor Aisha and Lai Ah Heng, *Secularism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore*.

[81] Ibid.

memorization and blind acceptance."[82]

It is necessary to recognise that a traditionalistic emphasis in *madrasah* education, if left unchecked, would have profound consequences on the overall development of the Muslim community. Traditionalism not only undermines the "*cultivation of creativity, democratic ideals, civic consciousness, multiculturacialism and critical thinking*",[83] more importantly it *"undermines the aims of modern education which is not to mould man in abstract but for life in a social world that is constantly changing."*[84] A teaching methodology that places absolute certainty in past doctrines and teachings without opportunities for critical analysis and questioning stifles the analytical skills and reasoning capabilities of students. Such overemphasis on a continuity of the past religious traditions curtails the ability to understand how Islamic concepts and guidelines can be applied in modern times and environment. This in turn lead to a narrow understanding of Islam where the focus is primarily on otherworldliness, not so much of one's social responsibilities and rights within the ambit of Islam. As iterated by Noor Aisha:

> *"In terms of curriculum, the madrasah generally do not teach Muslim philosophy. Moreover, attention is given to teaching students numerous rituals and aspects of mysticism at the expense of social philosophy and their relevance to the creation of awareness of problems in society."*[85]

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[82] Sa'eda Buang, "Religious Education as Locus of Curriculum: A Brief Inquiry into Madrasah Curriculum in Singapore", p. 344.

[83] Azhar Ibrahim, "An Evaluation of Madrasah Education: Perspectives and Lessons from the Experiences of Some Muslim Societies", p.94.

[84] Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman "The Aims of Madrasah Education in Singapore: Problems and Perceptions," p. 74, in Noor Aisha and Lai Ah Heng, *Securalism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore.*

[85] Ibid, p. 73.

The presence of traditionalist traits in *madrasah* education, in short, will hinder the development of a *"progressive religious elite that is able to reflect independently about the problems that confront contemporary society."*[86]

Sa'eda Buang, in her analysis of the *madrasah* curriculum, stated that there has been a change in the curriculum in the recent years, where the curriculum of the full time madrasahs *"has been reformulated to inject dynamism into them and to be responsive to larger economic and socio-political transformations."*[87] She went on to explain that these changes in the *madrasahs* are guided by the vision to produce excellent students in accordance witho Islamic perspectives, and hence the *"madrasah's philosophy of education underscores the premier position of rationality and therefore ijthihad (the use of one's independent reasoning on a point of law not explicitly covered by the Quran or the sunna) in its curriculum design."*[88] The *madrasah* curriculum today, according to Sa'eda Buang, *"is a far cry from the classical curriculum of the earlier madrasahs. Religious elitism is redefined and expanded to include not only religious scholars, but also any professional who is well versed in Islam, and hence able to implement ijtihad in religious matters."*[89]

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[86] Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman "The Aims of Madrasah Education in Singapore: Problems and Perceptions, p.74. There are other examples of how the ulama has influenced and shaped thinking and responses to modern problems, for example, issues of livelihood, finance, wealth distribution of the deceased etc. Discussion of these other issues would require thorough analysis, which is not possible to be carried out in this thesis due to word count constrains. They could possibly be taken up as separate analysis and discussions in the future.

[87] Sa'eda Buang, "Religious Education as Locus of Curriculum: A Brief Inquiry into Madrasah Curriculum in Singapore," p. 352.

[88] Ibid, p. 353.

[89] Ibid.

While it is encouraging to see changes in the *madrasah* curriculum, to an extent, the changes are motivated by external pressures. In recent years, there has been a rising sentiment among the larger Singapore populace and the ruling elite that the *madrasah* education is not able to equip young Malays with modern skills and knowledge. There is the perception that the Malays schooled in the *madrasahs* will not be able to *"integrate successfully into the social and economic system, learn to cooperate and compete as part of the Singaporean team, think critically, or be discerning about ideas and people."*[90] As a result, there have been calls for a change to take place in the *madrasah* education, which culminated in the introduction of the Compulsory Education in Singapore in 2003, where *madrasah* students at the primary level, are expected to sit for the PSLE. To meet this requirement, the *madrasahs* had to introduce secular subjects like English, Mathematics and Science, in addition to the religious curriculum.[91] Likewise, the *madrasahs* also began to emphasize the use of English as the medium of instruction, so as to improve the students' command of the language.

In fact, the introduction of the Compulsory Education has put immense pressure on the *madrasah*, because they are given eight years from 2003, to achieve the minimum passing standard in the core subjects of English, Mathematics and Science. If they fail to meet the passing standards, they would not be able to teach these secular subjects in the *madrasah* at the primary level, and all *madrasah* students would be expected to attend compulsory school in the national schools for the

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[90] Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman "The Aims of Madrasah Education in Singapore: Problems and Perceptions," p.76.

[91] Mukhlis Abu Bakar, "Between State Interests and Citizen Rights: Whither the Madrasahs?," p.39.

duration of their primary schooling, viz. viz. Primary 1 to 6.[92] Thus, it could be said that the curriculum changes in the *madrasah* are motivated by external factors, rather than an internal trigger for change that arise from a change in consciousness of the undesirability of a *madrasah* system that is steeped in traditionalism.

Throughout our discussion, we have seen the importance of *ulama*, viz. religious elite in the manifestation of the type of religious orientation within the Malay Muslim community in Singapore, which affects not just their perception in life, but also their identity as a Muslim.   In recent times, there has emerged a new breed of religious leaders, which according to Noor Aisha, is still dominated by traditionalism but assume expertise of both Islam and modern knowledge. This group of religious elite occupy themselves in issues and problems of the modern world and its impact on Malay society. Included in this group are academics, graduate students, journalists, activists who are products of Western-styled universities where they pursue Western disciplines and Islamic studies.[93] The presence of this new breed of elite has the effect of 'modernising' traditionalism, in that the thoughts of traditionalism are imposed onto modern topics like economic systems, Islamic banking and investment, Islamic government and politics and even concepts like secularism.

For instance, there is the tendency to refer to the past for solutions to modern problems, though this is camouflaged through the use of labels and terminologies found in modern systems and concepts. More importantly, these labels and terminologies are interwoven into the construction of Islamic past to demonstrate that

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[92] Mukhlis Abu Bakar, "Between State Interests and Citizen Rights: Whither the Madrasahs?", p.39.

[93] Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore", pp.260-261.

not only were these concepts, principles or knowledge present in the past, they are also more superior than present. A good example is the exhortation that an Islamic state had emerged in the era of the Prophet Muhammad, which is governed by a comprehensive system of laws and many other matters pertaining to government and politics.[94] As Noor Aisha maintained:

> *"...the overriding intention is to show that these laws and institutions are superior to existing ones based on Western model in terms of their humanitarian ideals and values. That the West is seen to be a latecomer to arbitration or mediation in the settlement of disputes and that the principles underlying the United Nations Charter, for instance, have been predated by the principles found in the Medina 'Constitution', . . . this group also dabbles in Islamizing knowledge, economics and systems [and] their writings deal with issues which they maintain have been spearheaded and worked out clearly and comprehensively 1,400 years ago. These include the question of price determination, principles underlying insurance (takaful) and contract, the concepts of productivity and value add, research and development, and as a recent addition to this long list of economic themes, globalisation."[95]*

Given their familiarity with Western thought and modern knowledge, this group of religious elite is beginning to be viewed as the *"beacon for guidance on issues on Islam and the modern world"* despite their thoughts being a variant of traditionalism.[96] This proves to be problematic when the thinking of this group of elite encroaches upon the Singapore Muslims position in Singapore. In the writings of these elite, there have been instances where *"issues of Muslims residing in non-Muslim countries, holding positions in non-Islamic government and working with a non-pious government"* were touched upon, in which illustrations of how Muslims of the past have had similar experiences and that Muslims in Singapore should similarly be able to adapt as what the past Muslims had done. They also delve into juristic

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[94] Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore", pp.260-261.

[95] Ibid.

[96] These elite write and deliver lectures on modern themes unlike the old traditionalist group, and they have often been invited to speak at forums, workshops and lectures organized by various Malay-Muslims organizations.

classifications of countries found in the tenth century or earlier period of Islamic history, namely *Darul Islam*, *Darul Harbi* (territory of war or inhabited by non-Muslims and governed by those who have declared war on the Muslim) and *Darul Aman* (territory with peace accord with an Islamic state).[97] In articulating these issues, the elite shows that it is removed from current realities, especially the fact that the Malay Muslims in Singapore has always been accepting of the sovereignty of the country, its government and law as part of the citizenry of the country. More importantly, the presence of this interpretation creates confusion in the minds of the Malay Muslims as it posits that the 'glorious' historical past is relevant in the way the Muslims shape, evaluate and relate to the countries they reside in.[98]

This glorification of the golden past with all its ideal institution is an aspect of utopian thinking, though this style of thought is accompanied by political or activist struggle where there is an intention towards the destruction and subsequent transformation of a society.[99] In the case of the new religious elite in Singapore, they generally do not display desires to wrest political control and are instead content to

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[97] Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore, p.262.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Shaharuddin Maaruf explains that the concept of utopian thinking "*reflects the insights that in political struggle, certain oppressed groups are intellectually so strongly interested in the destruction and transformation of a given condition of society that they unwittingly see only those elements in the situation which tend to negate it. Their thinking is incapable of correctly diagnosing an existing condition of society. They are not at all concerned with what really exists; rather in their thinking they already seek to change the situation that exists. Their thought is never a diagnosis of the situation; it can be used only as a direction for action. In the utopian mentality, the collective consciousness, guided by wishful representation and the will to action, hides certain aspects of reality. It turns its back on everything which would shake its belief or paralyse its desire to change things.*" Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Religion and Utopian Thinking Among the Muslims of Southeast Asia.* Paper presented at 4th Asean Inter-University Seminar on Social Development, 16-18 June, 1999, Prince Songkhla University, Pattani, Thailand.

confine their influence in the traditional religious instructions of the state.[100] What is interesting though is that while they are content with the current environment as long as Muslims can practice their faith in a multi-racial and multi-religious country like Singapore without compromising the fundamental tenets of Islam, they nevertheless have put forth a theological justification for exemption *(rukshah).* What this means is that since the Malay Muslim community in Singapore is residing in a country that is not ideal to allowing totality in the practice of Islam (i.e. non-Islamic country), nonetheless, the Muslims are to accept the status quo and remain where they are.

This interpretation once again, creates confusion in the minds of the Malay Muslims because it implies that ideally there is a better place for the Malay Muslims as advocated in Islam, that is, an Islamic state governed by Islamic ideals, principles and governance. Yet because Singapore as a state allows for the Muslims to practice their beliefs in peace, it is permissible for the Malay Muslims to maintain status quo.[101] By inference, it posits that should a less than ideal situation takes place in Singapore, the Malay Muslims have recourse to seek the Islamic state. The presence of such an interpretation is not only confusing, but also alarming as it sows the seeds for the possibility of disharmony and conflict within a multi-cultural and multi-religious society like Singapore.

In conclusion, Islam has been an influential factor in Malay life and continues to remain so today. In fact, Malay identity at its core is Islamic in nature. However, beyond this basic identification as a Muslim, the way Islam has been appropriated,

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[100] For more detailed explanation on the apolitical stand of the religious elite, refer to Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore".

[101] Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore", p. 264-264.

experienced and understood reveals an orientation that is characterised by traits which can impede Muslims' adjustment to the challenges of a modern and complex society. The dominant Islamic orientation of today not only impacts the way the Singapore Malay community responds to and understand problems confronting it also conditions the type of identity of the Malay Muslims. Islam being a significant attribute of Malay identity has a critical function to play in providing Muslims with ethical values and principles necessary for life. The Malay community has to be able to effectively harness and appropriate the religion so as to allow it to meet their needs. As expressed by Za'ba:

> *"it is the nature of things that religion should develop with man's progress, and adjustment to many things have to be made ...it is hoped that our religious leaders will be able to work out a form of adjustment in our religion [which] is not only satisfying to the conscience but also meets the demands of changed conditions around us."*[102]

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[102] Za'ba, "The Malays and Religion" in Khoo Kay Khim ed. *Tamadun Islam di Malaysia,* p.112. Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Sejarah Malaysia, 1980.

CHAPTER FOUR: SINGAPORE MALAY IDENTITY AMIDST NATION STATE BUILDING

In the earlier chapter, we have examined the fundamental expression of Singapore Malay identity, one that is anchored on the core attributes of Malay language, Malay culture and tradition, and Islamic religion. This chapter looks at another dimension of Singapore Malay identity, namely the consciousness, aspirations and ideals of the community as encapsulated in the ideas of its elite within the context of nation building. It also examines how Islam is interwoven into the ideals of excellence and success that have conditioned the expression and understanding of what it means to be a Singapore Malay and how it is appropriated to deal with the problems confronting the community by the elite will also be discussed.

Challenges of Nation State and Nation Building

(a) *Singapore's Need to Survive*

From the time of Singapore's independence in August 1965 it had to grapple with the need for survival, primary of which is economic survival. Singapore is a country that is not only devoid of natural resources but also has a small domestic market. Hence to ensure that upon its independence it is able to stand on its own and be financially stable and viable, Singapore embarked on a capitalist development mode that proved to be its engine of success. From 1965 to 1978, Singapore embarked on what could be termed as the export oriented industrialisation phase. This newly independent country opened its economy to foreign investors so as to provide for the inflow of capital and economic development. At the same time Singapore also worked hard to establish a strong foundation in terms of infrastructure and also labour management. During the period 1979 to 1985, Singapore entered a new phase of

economic strategy that could largely be termed as industrial restructuring. This was the period in which Singapore further build upon the foundation of labour management and infrastructure that it had developed, and sought to further develop its labour and manpower capacities while at the same time promoting automation. Over the next ten years from 1986 to 1997 Singapore entered a new phase of economic strategy, namely that of economic diversification where it began to establish economic niches in other areas, instead of just relying on manufacturing. From 1998 onwards, Singapore moved full fledge into a knowledge based economy as by then, it realised that the dynamics of global business and economics had changed tremendously, and that to ensure continued survival of the country, Singapore had to embrace and adapt to a knowledge based economy. Through these economic measures starting from 1965 right up to today, the country experienced dramatic economic expansion which is unprecedented considering Singapore's small size and lack of natural resources.[1]

With rapid economic expansion, the Singapore populace enjoyed abundance of resources and material wealth, ability to enjoy new technologies, access to better opportunities like better education and better job and more importantly, social mobility. In fact, in the context of Singapore, prestige, status and achievements are important identifiers of the identity of a Singaporean. The distinction of one person and the next has been reduced to a quantitative difference of being more or less than

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[1] As it stands, Singapore is one of the most impressive economic success stories and had triumphed against the odds of being a small country that has no natural resources, limited in physical size, and yet becoming a very successful economy. It has been enjoying high levels of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since it's independence, and it has been become a key financial centre in the Asian region. In the words of a writer: *"The island's impressive economic credentials are a source of national pride to Singaporeans..."* Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community,* p. 1.

the 'Other', and where everyone is caught up in the same battle of competition and shared the same striving for success and achievements.[2] This is aptly reflected in a Singaporean's ability to afford private cars, private housing, including the performance of members of ones' households in academic life, working life and others. As aptly described by a writer, "...*[these achievement*s] *have become the anxieties that define the everyday life of majority of those who live on the island [Singapore]*."[3]

Indeed, these indicators of success or failures are so prevalent that it in turn created a sense of competitiveness so much so that identity formation of individual Singaporeans are linked to failures and successes and where there were *"...self justification for those who are successful, and self-depreciation for those who are not."*[4] Such mindset can prove to be problematic to Singapore's stability, in that Singapore is fundamentally a multi-racial country where there exists differing racial groups living in the country; there are the majority Chinese, and the minority Malays who is by far the biggest minority group compared to the other minorities like the Indians and Eurasians. Due to this diversity, the stability of Singapore as a country therefore depends very much on the ability of the diverse communities to exist alongside each other in a harmonious environment. This is echoed by a writer who remarked that:

> *"The much vaunted success of Singapore (meaning again primarily in terms of economic growth rates and the translation of these into the provision of physical infrastructure) actually rests on sociological foundations, and is potentially fragile not only because of the*

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[2] Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, pp. 67-77, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1990.

[3] Chua Beng Huat, "Racial Singaporean"*,* pp. 31-33.

[4] Ibid.

volatilities of the world economy and the regional geo-political situation, but also because of the underlying fragility of this ethnically based social structure."[5]

Hence, a sense of competitiveness encapsulated in the notions of successes and failure of one versus the other, is a mindset that is not conducive to racial harmony as it can nurture feelings of discontentment. The potentiality for discontentment can be further compounded by comparative analysis of one ethnic group versus the other. That is, when one ethnic group is perceived as being the main beneficiary of the successes of the country evident by the group's immense achievements in varying fields like education, work and many others, the rest of the ethnic communities will inevitably compare their own successes vis a vis that ethnic group that is perceived to be more successful. This tendency to compare an ethnic group socio-economic achievement with other ethnic groups is a common phenomenon among multiethnic communities. As observed by one writer:

> *"As long as a community is aware of the prosperity of another community in a society, they will remain discontented and feel relatively deprived until they have caught up with the reference group...the feeling of relative deprivation can be intensified when expectations are heightened under conditions like robust economic environment and rises in social mobility rates without any appreciable improvement in the relative position of the marginal community..."[6]*

In short, while Singapore's ideology of national survival was largely economics in nature, the benefits and successes attained from the economic achievements have the potential to destroy the social fabric of Singapore's multiracial and multiethnic communities. Maintenance of the social and racial harmony in Singapore is thus a key challenge of nation state and nation building which the country has to grapple with on a daily basis, primarily because social harmony and cooperation among its

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[5] John Clammer, *Race and State in Independent Singapore, 1965 – 1990: The Cultural Politics of Pluralism in a Multiethnic society*, p.2, Ashgate Publishing Pte Ltd, England, 1999.

[6] W.G Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice,* pp.19-197. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1966.

multiethnic populace is the key in ensuring its continued success as a stable, well organised and economically vibrant country.[7]

<div style="text-align:center">(b) Socio-Economic State of the Singapore Malay Community</div>

As one of the communities in Singapore, the Singapore Malays have always been mindful that they must be on the bandwagon of economic progress and development and that their community has to be a successful one, else they will be sidelined and not able to reap the benefits of a vibrant and successful Singapore. Also, cast against the backdrop where economic growth, progress and material wealth are measures of successes and failures, the Singapore Malays, both as individuals and as a community similarly adopt the belief that successes in life mean being economically successful. Hence, the notions of hard work and the need to attain progress and success became critical facets of their lives in the country, so much so that this ideal of success and progress became a recurring sense of understanding of what it means to be a Singapore Malay.

However, before we move on to analyse this perception of Singapore Malay identity – one that is imbued with the ideals of success and excellence, it is necessary to examine the impact of economic and social changes that Singapore had gone through over the past 40 odd years since independence on the Singapore Malay community. An understanding of the socio-economic state of the Singapore Malay community will allow us to better appreciate the context for why the Singapore Malays endeavoured to establish an identity of progressive and developed group of

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[7] The need for continued racial harmony was brought to light during the National Day Rally speech 2009, where a large part of the speech focused on race and religion and the intricate relationships among the ethnic groups in Singapore. See National Day Rally speech, 2009.

people.

How the Malays are fairing in Singapore has always been a topic of interest among the ruling political elite of the country. On many occasions, the ruling elite (predominantly made up of the largest ethnic group in Singapore, viz. the Chinese) will take the opportunity to share and highlight its' perceptions and understanding of the state of development of the Malay community. For instance, when the former Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, was invited to attend an event organised by the Malay Muslim Organisations as a tribute to his ten years of leadership in Singapore, he took the opportunity to share his opinions about the Malay community, specifically their progress and development over the years. As articulated by him:

> *"I want to use this occasion to focus on your achievements in the last ten years. In the last century, we [Singapore] were one of the few countries that made solid progress. One major reason for our success was because every community in Singapore progressed, not just an anointed few. Without this shared progress and prosperity, it would have been difficult to maintain harmony among the different races. And without racial harmony, we would not have stability and achieved so much in so short at time...the Malay community has made significant progress over the years...and has kept up progress with the other communities.*[8]

This speech highlighted that the Malay community in Singapore has achieved considerable achievements from the time of Singapore's independence until present days, and as what the former Prime Minister had said, the Singapore Malays should be proud of the achievements that the community had accomplished throughout the years.

Several years later during a National Day speech in 2005, the current Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, similarly articulated and acknowledged that

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[8] Goh Chok Tong, *Progress of the Malay Community in Singapore Since 1990,* 21 January 2001.

Singapore Malays have made significant progress over the years.   As declared by him in his speech:

> *"I am pleased to know that each year, the Malay society is progressing...The Malays has achieved substantial achievements...You are moving towards reaching your target of 90% of the cohort of Malay students attaining post-secondary education. As it is, right now, there are Malay students who have gone into the fields of life-sciences and multi-media. Lots more Malays have become successful and confident professionals and executives."* [9]

The comments made by these key leaders of Singapore has alluded to the fact that the Singapore Malays as a community has been improving and developing in various areas of life from the time of Singapore's independence up till today. However, the socio-economic reality facing the Malay community is that it remains a community that is beset with a sense of underachievement particularly in key areas of education, income and occupation. The national statistics for example, continue to show that the Singapore Malays occupy a lower socio-economic status. Not only that, it is also reflected that the Malay community is not doing as well in the educational field. In a recent report published by the Ministry of Education regarding the educational progress of the various groups in Singapore, it showed that the percentage of Malay students attaining 3 'O' level and 5 'O' level passes has decreased when compared with past years, viz. from 86.6 and 59.4 percent to 85.6 and 59.3 percent respectively.[10]   Another significant development highlighted in the 2009 report was that the Malay students are the weakest in Mathematics, with only

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[9] This is a translation of an extract of the 2005 National Day Rally speech printed in Berita Harian: *"Saya gembira kerana setiap tahun masyarakat Melayu bertambah maju. . Masyarakat Melayu telah mencapai kemajuan besar. Anda sedang menuju ke arah mencapai matlamat 90 peratus kohort pelajar Melayu sampai ke posmenengah . . . Sekarang pun sudah ramai anak Melayu mempelajari sains hayat dan multi-media. Kian ramai menjadi karyawan dan eksekutif yang berkeyakinan dan Berjaya".* Berita Harian, '*Manfaatkan peluang untuk lebih maju,*' 22 August 2005.

[10] Berita Harian, *"Pergiat Usaha Bantu Pelajar Melayu ke Posmenengah",* 23 Dec 2009.   This article is based on the 2009 report compiled by the Ministry of Education which looked at various educational achievements of the different groups in Singapore.

56.3 percent passing this subject at the Primary Six examination, which is the lowest over a period of ten years.[11] The report also highlighted that the percentage of Singapore Malays obtaining post-secondary education was still relatively low, viz. only 85 percent of Malay students moved on to pursue post-secondary education compared to 95 percent of Chinese students and 89 percent of Indian students. Coupled with this, is also the increasing number of school-drop outs particularly among the younger generation of Malays. A Malay political leader noted the following:

> *"Each year, around 400 to 500 Malay Muslim students dropped out of primary and secondary schools. This group of Malay Muslim students require our attention because if they are not given the support and assistance, they would eventually become burdens."*[12]

The impact of a lower education achievements is that it will make it more difficult for the Malays to secure good jobs that pays well enough to support life in a country like Singapore. The difficulty in securing good jobs will be more felt among the older Malay populace, majority of whom are either unskilled, or have low levels of education and skill sets. Worst, this is the group of people that will be most vulnerable in economic downturn, as they would be the first to be retrenched and let go by their employers, and this has been the trend since early 2009, where a large majority of workers laid off are the Malays.[13] Also, the number of Malay workers seeking assistance for new jobs following retrenchments has been on the rise in the recent economic turmoil experienced by Singapore. Majority of those who sought

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[11] Berita Harian, *"Pergiat Usaha Bantu Pelajar Melayu ke Posmenengah",* 23 Dec 2009.

[12] Speech by Minister in Charge of Muslim Affair, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, during the Hari Raya Gathering in 2004. See Berita Harian, '*Sampai Masanya Masyarakat Melayu/Islam Kita Berusaha Berdikari*,' 20 Nov 2004.

[13] Berita Harian, "*Ramai Melayu Minta Bantuan Kerja*", 11 Apr 2009.

help are those with low education and limited skills set.[14]   As aptly noted by the

Minister in Charge of Muslim Affairs, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim:

> *"Today, for example, we have seen the impact of structural unemployment on our Malay society. Many who have been retrenched find difficulties in getting new jobs in our country. This is because the requisite skills needed for the new jobs are not the type of skills that our Malay workers have. Our workers today must undergo job training and retraining. They must be prepared to adapt to the fast changing work environment. All of us, young or old, must be committed to life-long learning...."*[15]

Besides the above two concerns, the Malay community is also beset by social

ills, which unfortunately, are not simple and easily resolved. The social problems

afflicting the Malays are fundamental issues that affect the society, and require

extensive work before it can be effectively eliminated. One of the critical problems

plaguing the Malay community is that of drug abuse. In fact, this is one of the most

persistent problems that the society has been grappling with for many years, and

which has eaten up a huge portion of the society's time and money in trying to

resolve it.[16] For example, at the Singapore drug rehabilitation centres, Malay drug

abusers are the largest group incarcerated. By the 1990s, Malays accounted for fifty

four-percent of cases admitted to the rehabilitation centres, and sixty percent of first

timers were the Malays.[17] In 1995, about three thousand Malays were arrested for

drug abuse, and the numbers of Malay drug abusers continued to persistently be on

the high end. Although ten years later, the number of arrested drug abusers had

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[14] Berita Harian, "*Ramai Melayu Minta Bantuan Kerja"*, 11 Apr 2009.

[15] Berita Harian, '*Sampai Masanya Masyarakat Melayu/Islam Kita Berusaha Berdikari,*' 20 Nov 2004.

[16] The most well-known activist that has spent considerable part of his life fighting drug abuse among Malays was Mr Harun Ghani. For a detailed read on Mr Harun's efforts and contributions in stemming drug abuse among the Malay society, read *Of Heroes and Heroins* published by Harun Ghani Education Fund, 2007.

[17] Goh Chok Tong, "The Malays in Singapore: Progress and Challenges", p.22. *Speeches,* 1995, Vol 19, No.5.

dwindled to a much smaller number and remain relatively so till today, the fact remains that drug abuse continues to be a social ailment among Malay society. It is a social ailment as the impact of drug abuse is pervasive, in that it not only affects the drug abusers' physical and mental conditions, it also affects their families. Many Malay families experienced economic loss once the family breadwinners became embroiled in drug habits and arrested due to such drug abuse. Often, the families left behind found difficulties in supporting themselves financially, especially if the drug abuser is the main income earner in the family. Unfortunately, these families found it difficult to survive on their own because they were often not able to find jobs because of low level of education. Apart from the financial hardships, these families also experienced trauma and stigmatism of having drug addicts in the family.

The implication of drug abuse is not only felt by the families of these drug abusers, but also felt by the drug abusers themselves, especially those who are rehabilitated and released. For this group of ex-drug addicts, they faced problems assimilating back to society and finding jobs. Coupled with the stigma of being an ex-drug abuser as well as faced with the influence of former friends, these ex-drug abusers often find themselves being brought back to the same drug habit. The most recent development is that of a large number of Malay ex-drug abusers misusing *Subutex*, a medication that is used to treat heroin addicts. Instead of curing themselves of their drug habit, these Malay ex-drug abusers became addicted to *Subutex* thus creating another form of drug-abuse among the Malay society.[18]   In

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[18] Berita Harian, '*Perang Dadah Yang Belum Bernoktah*,' 21 Feb 2007.

short, drug abuse continues to be a consistent social problem that the Malay society has to grapple with. In the words of a leading political leader in Singapore:

> "*Efforts to rid drug abuse among society will not stop although this problem . . . that had afflicted the Malay society sometime back, had managed to be solved effectively [today]....*"[19]

For every drug abuser present in Malay society therein lies the story of struggle of an individual and his families in coping with the complexities and challenges of keeping up with the demands and needs of society and that of an increasingly globalised knowledge based economy.

Another social concern facing the Malay community is the prevalence of weak family units, the result of issues like teen marriages and divorces. The number of teenage marriages and divorcees among these teenagers is relatively high when compared to the other ethnic groups. As acknowledged by a Malay political elite, Abdullah Tarmugi, at the launching of Healthy Marriage Programme in February 2002:

> "*The Statistics on Marriage and Divorces 2000 showed that the proportion of Muslim marriages involving a teenager is at least four times higher than that of civil marriages registered in the Woman's Charter. In 2000, about 16 percent of brides and 4 percent of grooms registered with ROMM were aged 20 years and below. The corresponding figures under civil marriages were about 4 percent and 1 percent respectively...the statistics also show a higher percentage of Muslim divorcees among those who marry in their teens. 22 percent of Muslim female divorcees and 5 percent of Muslim male divorcees were under 20 years old when they married. The corresponding figures for civil cases were 13 percent for female divorcees and 2 percent for male divorcees.*"[20]

This problem was again highlighted as a major problem facing the Malay community when the Prime Minister, in 2004, noted that the number of teenage marriages among the Malay community is higher compared to the other races, i.e. 18% of teen

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[19] Berita Harian, *'Perang Terhadap Dadah Tiada Akhirnya,'* 2 Mar 2007.

[20] Abdullah Tarmugi, "Avoid Teen Marriages," *Speeches,* Vol 26, No.1.

marriages are among Malay couples compared to 9% for Indians and 3% for Chinese.[21]

Teenage marriages are often beset with problems, and have been perceived as the factor for *"dysfunctional families prone to instability and divorce, unemployment, low family income, premature school drop-out and a host of other adversities inimical to the well-being of the family and larger society."*[22] According to Noor Aisha, the characteristics bearing on the socio-economic status of these young couples prior to their marriages are often closely intertwined with the problems these couples encounter during their marriage. Often, financial issue becomes a key problem faced by these young couples, and combined with their socio-economic status before their marriage and their lack of education and skills it proved difficult for these young parents to support their family.[23]

The problem of this group of young Malays became even more compounded when shortly after their marriage, they divorced. The multiple problems confronting young families captured in the following newspaper report regarding the plight of a young Malay woman who got married in her early 20s and was subsequently divorced is by no means an isolated case:

> *"Rashidah 20 insisted on marrying Rahim, who is a year younger after a four-month courtship. Now, 27 and with three young children – aged six, five and nine months – she is full of regrets...the family lives on the $800 a month salary she took home as a production operator..."My first child is going to primary school and we can't go on like this...I*

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[21] As quoted by Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman in her article "Teenage Marriage in the Malay/Muslim Community of Singapore: Problems, Perceptions and Programmes", in *Asian Journal of Social Science,* Vol. 37, No 5 (2009).

[22] Ibid, p.740.

[23] Ibid, pp.749-751. The plight of the young families was clearly reflected in their interview responses. Majority highlighted that money is a long standing problem with their family.

regretted having married young." [24]

The experience of the above mentioned young divorcee is a common experience shared by such young single parents. Besides financial difficulties, these young single parents also found difficulties in managing their children and providing a stable family environment for their children. Often, it proved difficult for these single parents to balance their roles as the sole breadwinners and homemaker, in addition to being the mother and father to their children, especially if they have young children. The failure to strike a good balance in these multiple roles would potentially cause rifts and problems with their children and family life. As remarked by a leading political leader:

> *"...They (the children) are not given guidance by the parents...have lots of children but no stable income. As such, they start off in a live that is full of hardship..."* [25]

Not only that, these divorces also have a long-lasting and adverse impact on the couple and especially the children, and have the potential to significantly influence the make-up and state of development of the next generation. Indeed, it is the next generation that is often an important component of society that has to be nurtured and cultivated properly so that they can become productive members of the society, yet the many problems faced by the Malay families are curtailing this development. As acknowledged by a Malay leader:

> *"Research has shown that the destructive cycle of teenage pregnancy leading to divorce can potentially affect the next generation. Compared with children from intact families, children of divorced parents tend to marry earlier, have a greater tendency to cohabit, are less educated, hold more lenient attitudes toward divorce, andreport more problematic interpersonal behaviours"* [26]

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[24] The Sunday Times, *"Most Muslim Teen Marriages End in 5 Years,'* 3 Mar 2002.

[25] Berita Minggu, *'Perlu Kekang Lingkaran Kemiskinan,'* 24 Nov 2003.

[26] Abdullah Tarmugi, "Avoid Teen Marriages," *Speeches*, Vol 26, No.1

The above are some examples of the current realities facing the Singapore Malay community.[27] What is clear is that the realities of the Malay community is one where it is beset with diverse socio-economic problems which have the strong potentiality to hamper the Malay community from being able to fully grasp available opportunities, and more significantly hamper its pursuit towards an identity of excellence. Given this reality of socio-economic problems facing the Malay community, what then are the reactions and responses of the community leaders and how do these responses relate to the sense of identity and meaning of being Malay in Singapore. In particular, how is Islam perceived and appropriated by them in dealing with these problems.

Responses of the Malay Community and Its Leaders

(a)   Creating an Identity of Success and Excellence

The key idea that has always occupied the minds of the Malay elite is the desire to see the Singapore Malay community become a progressive, developed and successful community. This is despite the socio-economic state of the Malay community, one that is filled with social ills and challenges and which potentially has a significant impact on the realisation of the ideals of success and excellence. This vision and ideal of an excellent and progressive Malay community is not surprising considering the context in which Singapore Malays have had to operate over the years. As indicated in the first part of this chapter, Singapore is a country that is anchored on economic success and for the Singapore Malays, it means that in order to

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[27] Other examples of social problems faced by the Malay community which is not mentioned in depth here are such as issue of teenage sexuality and unwanted pregnancy among unwed teens which is against the tenets of Islamic religion where premarital sex is frowned upon and gangsterism among Malay youths.

survive in Singapore, they have to constantly be good in their work, their study and their life, in order to reap the benefits of the economic success of the country. Guided by the goals of achievements, development and success, the Malay community and its leadership, from the political elite to leaders from the various socio-economic organisations, have thus pursued a vision of ensuring that Singapore Malay community succeed in becoming a developed, progressive and successful community.

In order to bring to fruition this desired outcome, the Malay elite over the years have consciously attempted to explore and examine the various issues faced by the Malay community, and find solutions and implement strategies to help the Malay community. Throughout the years the Malay leadership have been organising conventions and seminars to discuss issues relating to the Malay community. In fact as early as the 1970s a big scale seminar was organised to address the issue of Malays' underdevelopment. The seminar was titled *Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore* and organised by Malay leaders from the Community Study Centre and the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organisation. The objective of the seminar as explained by the organisers is to *"identify, frankly, in the spirit of goodwill, the various problems – educational, economic and social – faced by Singapore Malays..."* [28] Besides identifying the problems of the Malays, this seminar also had the objective of establishing solutions and strategies to alleviate the problems identified. In short, this seminar was seen as the panacea to help the Malays resolve the tangles that they were faced with at that point in time, and which were seen as derailing the Malays from progressing.

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[28] Sharom Ahmat and James Wong, *Report on the Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore*, p.1. Eurasia Presss, Singapore, 1971.

Many other similar seminars and conventions have been held over the years. Among them are the MENDAKI Congress in 1982, the Singapore Malay-Muslim Economic Congress (KEMAS) in 1985 and the Singapore Malay-Muslim Development Congress in 1989. In 1990, a National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professional with the theme of *Malay Muslims in the 21st Century: Prospects, Challenges and Directions* was organised, and it was geared towards analysing the problems facing the Malay community. Likewise in 2003 the Malay political elite supported by other leaders from the various Malay/Muslim organisations organised a Leadership Forum to discuss various strategies that could be carried out by the Malay leaders to aid the Malay community in its continued success and development.[29] In recent years, the Malay elite have also been heavily involved in the Community Leadership Forum, a session involving numerous Malay elite in a discussion and debate about problems and challenges faced by the Malay community.[30]

Throughout these various seminars and conventions the objective has always been to discuss and address the developmental needs of the Malays, as well as seek ways to further improve the community's development and progress, in short, how to help the Singapore Malays be better, be more successful, more developed, progressive and able to compete in Singapore. One of the most commonly talked about topics in these seminars and discussion is education, ranging from impressing upon the Malay participants of the importance of education for the Malays, to how to

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[29] Berita Harian, "*Calon Panel Visi Dikenalpasti Dulu*," 23 Sep 2002.

[30] Berita Harian, "*Pemimpim Komited Capai Visi Masyarakat Cemerlang,*" 1 Dec 2008.

further bolster the educational achievements of the Singapore Malays. As one, the Malay elite always see education as the key success factor and vehicle to be used by the Malay community to aid in its advancement and success. As one writer cogently stated: *"[Singapore] Muslims attach a high premium to education and regard education as the most important factor in their life's pursuit."*[31]

In fact, this belief in the importance of education has been highlighted as early as the 1970s. During the seminar on Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore, it was publicly acknowledged by attendees of the seminar that education is important. As stated by one of the seminar participant whose views below have similarly been echoed by other participants of the seminar:

> *"...education is an important aspect of national development and for the Malays to fit into this national development, it had to attain the skills and capital, . . . [and] if education is the ladder which leads to progress and has been and is being regarded by non-Malays as such, then education should be regarded by the Malays as a magic wand."*[32]

The importance of education continues to dominate the thinking of the Malay community particularly its elite. For instance, during the 1st National Convention organised by the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), a total of two strategies and four recommendations were mapped out to help the Malay community achieve educational success. Similarly in late 1990s, at the point when Singapore was moving towards knowledge based economy, the Malay leaders noted that the changed environment has made it critical for the Malay community to be able to fit into the knowledge-based economy, and be attuned to the demands of the new

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[31] Husin Mutalib, Husin Mutalib, "Dilemmas of a Minority Community in a Secular, Modern City-State: The Case of Singapore Muslims", in the *Fount Journal*, Issue No.1, 2000, p.65. JBW Printers, Singapore.

[32] Sharom Ahmat and James Wong, *Report on the Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore*, May 1971.

environment. To achieve this, the Malays thus have to continue to pursue an education and more importantly, to undergo skills upgrade. In fact, in 1999, a convention addressing this particular issue of how the Malays could fit into a knowledge-based economy through education and skills upgrade was organised.[33] Also, during the 2003 Leadership Forum, one of the major areas identified by the Malay political elite and the other Malay leaders was once again education, in this instance, the re-education and retraining of Malay workers with new skills-set and higher education for purposes of continued employability.[34] Education and employability also remained to be key focus areas articulated during the Community Leadership Forum in 2008.

Throughout all these conventions, and also in all the other discussions that had taken place on the issue of Malay development, there is a common rhetoric that kept being repeated year after year. That is, the assertion that the Singapore Malays should change their attitude, their mindset and their way of doing this, in short their values, if they wished to progress, develop economically and not lag behind the rest of the Singapore community. Hence, the numerous calls for the Malays to be less complacent, less idle, and less easily satisfied with what they have, and that the Malays should embrace values like hard work, dedication and perseverance. A former Malay Minister in the 1970s for example, had argued that Malay parents did not encourage or assist their children in their education and that they displayed an old-fashioned attitude, viz. '*sikap kolot*' that prevents their children from

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[33] The Straits Times, "*Big Meet for Malay-Muslims*", 22 May 1999.

[34] The Straits Times, "*Malay-Muslims #1 in giving back to community*", 12 Oct 2003.

understanding the criticality and importance of good education in Singapore.[35] Similarly, other Malay elite put the blame on Malay parents for not placing enough emphasis on their children education.[36] In the words of a former Malay political elite who succinctly articulated what the elite believed should be done if the Malays intended to succeed in Singapore:

> *"...my formula for [Malay] success, after good leadership, is the following: first hard work, second hard work and third hard work ... there is no substitute for hard work."[37]*

While the Malay elite today may have recognised that there are other considerations for lack of success within the Malay community, for example, structural limitations confronting Malay families who are simply ill-equipped, not to mention, being financially strapped that impedes them from doing well economically, the basic philosophy underpinning the elite' thinking is still the belief that the Malays do not have what it takes to succeed. This explains why in most of the reports that highlight success stories of Malay individuals (for example Malay students who did well in schools) in the local Malay media, values and attributes like hard work, diligence, commitment to their studies are constantly reiterated. In fact, on occasions where the Malay elite discussed the impact of the recent economic downturn on the Singapore Malay community, they would not hesitate to remind Malay families to manage their finances carefully and to pay special attention to their children's education. They are also constantly reminded of the importance of providing parental

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[35] Berita Harian, *"Othman Wok seru Melayu jangan berfikiran lapuk",* 13 Dec 1971.

[36] Lily Zubaidah, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*, p. 215. She quoted that former Malay political elite like Ahmad Mattar and Abdullah Tarmugi as having such perceptions that the educational malaise of the Malays is due to negligent Malay parents and families.

[37] Articulated by former Malay political elite, Sidek Saniff quoted in Wan Husin Zohri, *The Singapore Malays: The Dilemma of Development,*p.vii.

supervision over their children's education, encourage their children to remain in school and more importantly, to study harder.[38] These reiterations strongly suggest that for the Malay elite the problem of the Malay's socio-economic lag is intertwined with the lack of hard work in all areas of life which impede the Malays' ability to succeed. Hence, the Malays, be they students or workers should endeavour to work harder, be more diligent, more committed and so on. Attempts at identifying other factors that contribute to Malay weakness, and finding solutions to resolve these other factors were often downplayed or not scrutinised as closely as should be.

The question is why does this portrayal of the Malays as a group of people that needed to work harder, study better and move away from '*the lethargy and inertia that characterised the Malay society*',[39] takes place. It is a perception that is not flattering to the image of the Singapore Malay community, and leads to the emergence of an understanding bearing on the identity of Singapore Malays as a community that is lacking in values critical for progress and require continuous reminders and prodding to be imbued with these values to achieve success in life. More significantly, such views affect the formulation of solutions to the problems faced by the Malay community, and reinforce the notion that the socio-economic backwardness of the Malays is due to traits integral to its identity, such as lazy, indulgent, weak, lacking motivation and other defects. Subscribing to such a view deflects from the examination of other relevant factors that hamper socio-economic

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[38] Berita Harian, *"Melayu Digesa Pastikan Anak Terus Bersekolah,"* 27 May 2009.

[39] Abdullah Tarmugi, *Development of the Malay Society in Singapore: Prospects and Problems in Malay Studies*, Department of Malay Studies, Occasional Paper Series, 1992/1993. National University of Singapore.

development of the community particularly structural or class problems as well as institutional limitations confronting a specific segment of the community

Lily Zubaidah, in her analysis of the Singapore Malay marginality in Singapore, maintained that such thinking is ideological and reflects the influence of the cultural deficit thesis. As she had explicated: *"the cultural deficit thesis has provided a convenient explanation for the continued socio-economic marginalisation of the Malay community in Singapore,...[and that] it provided the government with the rationale for adopting a minimalist approach towards Malay marginality."*[40] She also highlighted that the promotion of positive cultural Chinese values like diligence, discipline, industry, achievement oriented, and communitarianism by the Singapore political elite, and the fact that the political leaders had attributed the economic success of Singapore to the positive Confucianist values of the Chinese and East Asians, had *"served to strengthen the portrayal of the dynamic Confucian island precariously located in a poorer, less diligent and potentially hostile Malay region."*[41]

The implication of a cultural deficit thesis analysis is that it painted the entire community as being inferior, without values or attributes that are positive and could help the community develop. It is thus an attitudinal problem viz. the community does not possess any positive attributes in its culture that can be a boost to the community's progress, and that the problem cuts across the entire community. In alluding that the political elite in Singapore adopted the cultural deficit thesis, Lily

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[40] Lily Zubaidah, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*, p.250.

[41] Ibid.

Zubaidah, indirectly conveys that the leadership has accepted that there are no redeeming qualities in the culture of the Malay society. According to Lily Zubaidah, this portrayal of weakness and inferiority has become a dominant portrayal of the Singapore Malay community, and is one which has permeated even sections of the Malay middle and professional classes. In her words:

> *"The ideology of Malay cultural inferiority has also been uncritically endorsed by sections of the Malay middle and professional class. Having attained high educational credentials, material success and social mobility, the meritocratic discourse advocated by the PAP leadership serves to flatter their achievements and accords them the esteemed status as role models of exceptional qualities. Their socio-economic distance from the general Malay community places them in a position of double alienation. This profound level of alienation has rendered the Malay middle class socially vulnerable and susceptible towards uncritically accepting the cultural deficit thesis which gratifies their ego for having extricated themselves from the negative cultural attributes afflicting the Malay community."*[42]

This thesis is not unique and not confined to the discourse on the Malays of Singapore per se. It is commonly employed by ruling groups to account for marginality of the specifically less privileged in various societies. As Lily Zubaidah further asserted:

> *"...the ready acceptance of Malay cultural inferiority by Malays and non-Malays from the post-colonial era was given an added boost by the promotion of cultural deficit explanations by Western writers and academics. They asserted that the persisting socio-economic marginality of certain ethnic communities such as African-Americans stemmed from their inept cultural values and attitudes. Such communities were supposed to be afflicted with negative characteristics such as inertia, complacency, unstable family units, prone towards seeking immediate gratification, and a failure to seize available opportunities...The cultural deficit thesis is thus very much based on a discourse that racializes poverty and social inequality. The discourse allows socially marginal ethnic communities to be projected as being undeserving of assistance, lazy, dull, and suffering from an identity crisis. . ."*[43]

To an extent, this dominant portrayal of the Singapore Malays occurs because of the acceptance, consciously or unconsciously, of ideological perceptions of Malay inferiority and weakness and the prevalence of negative traits. It is a perception that

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[42] Lily Zubaidah, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community,* p. 242.

[43] Ibid, p. 251.

has a long history and which are easily found in varied literature and discourses regarding the Malays. As mentioned in chapter one, the common historical sources of records that allude to the negativity of the Malays can be found in records left behind by the colonialists where descriptions of the Malays and the community stated in these colonial records and writings often bordered on negative stereotypes and caricatures. It is such perceptions that continue to invade the minds of Malay thinkers, scholars and leaders right up till today, evident in various writings that show strands of colonial thoughts and ideas like Malays being lazy, fatalistic, spendthrift, predisposed towards fun and entertainment, easily contented, lacking drive to higher achievement absence of rational thought, initiative, commitment and self-confidence coupled with the inability to take risks, and many others. Such prejudicial viewpoints regarding the Malays has solely put the blame of socio-economic failures and backwardness on the Malays, viz. the Malay himself is the main cause of his own backwardness and failure. However, such portrayals of the Malays suffer major limitations. It fails to take into consideration a diversity of socio-historical and political factors impacting the problems confronting the community. This thwarts an objective and more comprehensive understanding of the impediments impeding their development within a longer term perspective.

In terms of the milieu surrounding the Malays, it is important to recognise that the problems affecting the Malays have had a long history. Historically, the Malays have long resided in an environment where the structure of society is primarily feudalistic in nature. As had been mentioned in the earlier chapters, feudalism is a type of social, political and economic order of Malay society with its attendant values

and ideology. Malay feudalism is characterised by dominant values and value system which had direct repercussions on the progress of the Malay masses.[44] It has been asserted that a community cannot hope to develop and progress if it does not establish a foundation and philosophy of life based on appropriate and suitable values which could help it navigate through processes of change and development.[45] A progressive social philosophy is the cornerstone of social, political and economic development of that community. When the philosophy of the community does not match the requisite values needed for progress and development, this would adversely affect all areas of life eventually causing backwardness and decline. In the words of Jamaludin Afghani, a Muslim philosopher:

> *"it is philosophy that makes man understandable to man, explains human nobility and shows man the proper road. The first defect appearing in any nation that is headed towards decline is the philosophic spirit, and after that, deficiencies spread into other sciences, arts and associations."* [46]

One of the major problems of Malay feudalism was the lack of a strong humanitarian and intellectual culture that was critical to the development of the community.[47] For intellectual culture to be firmly rooted within the society, the leadership of the society must support the development of such an intellectual

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[44] Shaharuddin Maaruf, *The Concept of a Hero in Malay Society*, p.1.

[45] Javaid Saeed, in his analysis of the role of Islam in the modernisation process of Pakistan Egypt and Turkey, also alluded to the belief that transformation of individuals in society, adopting the right values, are crucial for the modernisation of any society. See Javaid Saeed, *Islam and Modernisation: A Comparative Analysis of Pakistan, Egypt and Turkey*, Praeger Publisher, US, 1994.

[46] Shaharuddin Maaruf, *The Concept of a Hero in Malay Society*, p. 5.

[47] Intellectuals fulfil a vital role in society, in that they provide leadership in the realm of knowledge and thinking on various problems that confronts the society. The intellectuals would be the ones who explain the problems to society and helped in finding solutions to them. They would also be the ones to produce ideas and spread them to other members of the society. It is their leadership in critical thinking and efforts to debunk existing truths that make them such a valued member of society. For a detailed analysis of the study of intellectuals, refer to Syed Hussein Alatas, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies,* p. 8. Frank Cass, London, 1977.

culture.[48]   In the case of the Malay society during the feudal period, such a functioning group of intellectuals exhibiting the values of rational thinking, independent mindset and judgement unfortunately did not develop because the Malay ruling class failed to promote and support such a tradition.

For example, feudal Malay leaders instead of promoting knowledge, critical and rational thinking, supported values which were incompatible with the cultivation of the intellectual spirit and critical thinking. This was aptly noted by Abdullah Munshi's during his travels to the Malay states in the nineteenth century, where he saw innumerable number of Malays who did not know how read and write, and that majority were only able to recite the Al-Quran without understanding its meaning. What was more deplorable was the poor condition of the mosques where religious studies were taught. Those in power did not attempt to build a strong foundation in learning, hence negating the development of a strong educational and intellectual tradition within the Malay society.[49]

Abdullah's reflections in the nineteenth century regarding the abject state of education reflected continuities of a longer period of educational neglect that was depicted in various Malay historical texts or *Hikayat* centuries earlier. These texts extolled extensively the ruling elite's wealth, conquests, indulgences in excesses, grandeur and opulence, and their preoccupation with activities like opium smoking, gambling, cock-fighting and entertainment. There was little mention of the feudal

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[48] Syed Hussein Alatas, *"Intellectuals"*, in *Suara Merdeka*, Vol 10. No. 2, London, 1959, pp. 4-6. See also article by Daniel Regan, "*At the Crossroads of Civilization: The Cultural Orientations of Malaysian Intellectuals"*, in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Sep 1980, Vol 11, Issue 2.

[49] For a more in-depth read of the findings made by Abdullah, read Abdullah Munshi, *Kesah Pelayaran Abdullah*.

elite playing an active role in promoting the community's educational progress.

Another aspect of Malay history that is often overlooked in understanding socio-economic problems of the Malays is the influence of colonialism on Malay society. One of the most significant colonial influences is in the realm of education. During the long phase of colonialism, the Malays were deliberately deprived of modern education - the British colonial powers was not willing to introduce modern education that would encourage the development of critical spirit and learning. Hence, although the British colonial powers introduced education for the Malay masses and established schools, the type of education provided was geared primarily to basic education emphasising the 3Rs of reading, writing and counting. This was clearly reflected in the remark of a British Director of Education in 1920 when he said:

> *"The aim of the government is not to turn out a few educated youths nor a number of less educated boys, rather it is to improve the bulk of the people and make the son of fishermen or peasant a more intelligent fisherman or peasant that his father, and a man whose education will enable him to understand how his lot in life fits with the scheme of life around him."*[50]

The vernacular education introduced by the British therefore lacked the intellectual content needed to stimulate an intellectual tradition in Malay society, and this type of education was supported by the Malay ruling elite, who like the British colonial leaders did not see a need for the Malays to be equipped with education beyond the basic 3Rs of reading, writing and counting. As a class, the Malay elite upheld colonial policy against over-educating the Malay masses, which they too viewed as a threat to their position. This is aptly illustrated in the arguments of Raja Chulan in the Federal Council where he stated that over-education of the Malay masses was detrimental to society since it will encourage the Malays to have aspirations beyond

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[50] Shaharudin Maaruf, *Malay Ideas on Development*, pp.35-36.

working on their land.[51]

Thus, under colonialism, the Malays continued to remain a community that is locked in traditional state of living and not plugged into the developing capitalist state of the colonial powers. Hence existing structures and ways of doing things within the Malay society in addition to its values and worldview remained intact despite the flourishing of western capitalistic economy, the emergence of new rule of law and order, and new ways of doing things. Malays are deliberately made to retain in their traditional occupations as fishermen and also as farmers where they were expected to *"...grow food for the new and fast expanding cities under the impetus of colonial capitalism."*[52] On the other hand, the colonialists and immigrant population actively took part in the mercantile and capitalist economic pursuit in the cities.

Although the Malay royalty no doubt benefited from the system, the condition of the Malay masses declined. Through their alliances with the British, the Malay royalty could be said to be better off compared to before. British rule brought peace and stability to the Malay ruling houses unlike hitherto where they were burdened with wars and fears of dethronement. This in turn resulted in prosperity for the Malay states as its revenue increased. Although the power of the Malay elite was contained under British colonialism, they were in turn awarded fine salaries and palaces as well as modern education.[53] However unlike their counterparts in India and Philippines

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[51] Shaharudin Maaruf, *Malay Ideas on Development*, p.36.

[52] Ibid, p. 32.

[53]Shaharuddin Maaruf, "Some Theoretical Problems Concerning Tradition and Modernisation Among the Malays of Southeast Asia" in Yong Mun Cheong, *Asian Traditions and Modernisation: Perspectives from Singapore*, p. 253.

who were similarly schooled abroad, the experience of being overseas did not have a profound effect on the intellectual consciousness of the Malay elite. Instead of developing a "*creative intellectual process of discovering the best of their heritage while selectively assimilating the best elements of Western civilisation that can strengthen their society*", the Malay elite continued with the state of life under colonial rule.[54]

Hence, at the point of independence of Singapore, the Malay community was a minority group that was economically weak compared to the rest of the Singapore communities, who in the first place already had a first hand experience of being part of an economic system and structures that was capitalistic in nature under the British colonial rule.[55] In the words of a Malay political elite in the early days of Singapore's independence:

> *"The Malays today, consequent upon Singapore's separation from Malaysia, were placed in a dilemma of being in a minority, relatively poor and backward ... under the circumstances, we must try to understand deeply and with the utmost sympathy this enigmatic frame of mind the Malays are in for no fault of their own. It is important that we find a long-term solution to this problem of theirs, of being isolated so to speak, in their own home country..."[56]*

Indeed, the Malays were not equipped to manage effectively particularly when Singapore's growth focussed tremendously on economic pursuits and success in education. As a group, the Malays found that they were unable to participate actively or catch up with the rest of the communities. For example, the basic skills of reading, writing and counting did not give the Malays significant head-start to be able to be

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[54] Shaharudin Maaruf, *Malay Ideas on Development*, pp.38-40.

[55] Lily Zubaidah in her book had strongly articulated that the Malay community had always been at the socio-economic, educational and political margins of society since the colonial rule right up to independent Singapore. For more details, see Lily Zubaidah, *The Singapore Malay Dilemma. The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*.

[56] Ismail Kassim, *Problem of Elite Cohesion*: *A Perspective from a Minority Community* p. 40.

part of a capitalist economy. Also many more Malays were schooled in religious schools or Malay-medium school, instead of the mainstream vernacular schools.[57] For those Malays who saw the importance of mainstream vernacular education, and want their children to be more equipped in order to succeed in independent Singapore, they were hindered from achieving this goal as they were not able to afford the high cost of education. For those who remained in Malay medium school, the standard of education is relatively low due to lack of good schools, qualified teachers, technical text-books and other facilities.[58] As a result, the Malays remained mired in the problem of lack of educational development.

Despite the presence of such socio-economic challenges, the prejudicial viewpoints regarding the Malays, viz. the Malays himself is the cause of his own backwardness remains lodged in the minds of the Malay elite.[59] Such perceptions of Malay inferiority and weakness, to an extent, have coloured the elite' problems resolution and influences the types of initiatives and strategies put in place to address problems faced by the Malay community. In short, while there could be other considerations that has led to the current state of affairs within the Malay community and why the Malays remain one step behind the rest of the Singapore communities, and which requires a much closer look and analysis, the dominant view that the socio-economic backwardness of the Malays is the result of the Malay's inferiority, prevails

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[57] Ismail Kassim, *Problem of Elite Cohesion*: *A Perspective from a Minority Community*, pp. 31-32.

[58] Ibid p.32.

[59] While this thesis focused primarily on the elite understanding of Malay identity and issues surrounding the Malay community, it is to be noted that Malays in general, to a large extent, have similar perceptions of Malay inferiority. This can be seen via statements made by Malays published in the Berita Harian.

in the thinking of the Malay leadership, and influences the analysis and solutions that have been or need to be put in place.

One example is the resolution towards Malay underachievement in education. To combat the rising trend of Malay's failure in educational achievements, the ruling government facilitated the formation of a Malay self-help organisation, MENDAKI in the mid 1980s. MENDAKI's mandate was to improve the educational performance of the Malay community. This had the effect of treating the problem of educational performance as a community issue to be resolved by MENDAKI, and MENDAKI has immediately set out to achieve this by making available affordable remedial classes for the community. It was generally believed that this additional academic help through MENDAKI's tuition scheme provides a cheap and affordable means for the Malay students who are unable to cope with the schools' demands and expectations. By the mid 1990s, as many as 45,000 Malay students attended the weekend tuition classes provided by MENDAKI. In addition to MENDAKI, other organisations like AMP and Taman Bacaan also began implementing their own tuition centres and also making available other forms of academic self help for Malay students.

Role models of successful Malays who have had good education and who had succeeded in attaining a high level of education are regularly showcased. The Malay newspapers for example, would often carry stories of Malays who had done significantly well in key examinations in Singapore such as the first Malay student who became the top Singapore student in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). Through all this the Malay leaders showed that education is the key to helping the Malays succeed and that the Singapore Malay community had established

incremental achievements over the years.[60]

While improvements in education may have been achieved, there is a lack of clarity as to whether the academic successes achieved by the Malays is a true reflection of the achievements of these self-help groups primarily MENDAKI or one that centred around the more well off Malay families.   According to Lily Zubaidah, while it could not be denied that the Malay community had made achievements in education through the efforts of MENDAKI and the other Malay organisations, the provision of such academic assistance was unfortunately only readily available to the Malay middle classes.[61]   As articulated by her:

> *"Without doubt, the community has made educational progress in terms of the higher aggregate levels of passes in critical examinations since MENDAKI's establishment... [however] Malays remain intractably behind the Indian and Chinese communities. In terms of successes in narrowing the educational gap with the non-Malay community, MENDAKI has failed to live up to this central concern of the community. Furthermore its programmes and initiative are generally perceived not to be effectively catering to the Malay masses but instead benefitting Malays and Muslims from the middle classes."[62]*

She went on to further state that the sentiments that MENDAKI was more focussed on the middle income Malay students were substantiated by opinions expressed by participants of the 1989 MENDAKI congress.   According to her:

> *"They expressed the concern that it was largely the well education middle class Malays who had the financial resources to send their children to MENDAKI's tuition classes and that MENDAKI bursaries and awards accorded to the 'meritorious' were largely given to the latter, leaving the Malay masses relatively unaffected by MENDAKI's initiatives."[63]*

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[60] See reports like those produced by AMP, MENDAKI and other organizations as well as articles in the newspapers. Among the written materials on Malay achievements are *Tanahairku, Singapore Malay/Muslims, 1991-1996*, and *Progress of the Malay Community in Singapore since 1980*.

[61] Lily Zubaidah, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*, p.12

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid, pp. 213-215.

As mentioned in the earlier part of the chapter, the realities of the Malay community is such that there were many instances of broken families that were often saddled with numerous problems, and such families first and foremost require help on fundamental aspects that relates to day to day living like finances, before they can even adequately be prepared to tackle the problem of educational limitation of their children. Besides financial constrains, the parents of such low income families more often than not are lowly educated and thus not in the best position to act as good role models for their children, or play a significant part in motivating their children in their studies.[64] In situations where the family is a single income family, it is even more difficult for the parent who is busy with earning a livelihood to have close parental supervision of their children, and this in itself is a derailer of academic success.[65] In short, socio-economic standing does play a part in determining academic achievements, and often the more socially privileged has the means to make full use of the resources available to them, and in the process, achieve substantial academic achievements.[66]

Yet, in the elite analysis of the educational problems among the Malay community, it could be seen that they have adopted the position that the Malay students' weakness in studies was because they were not academically inclined, and do not have the appropriate values to excel in their studies. With this in mind, it was believed that the Malay students primarily needed to be given additional academic

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[64] Berita Minggu, *"Perlu Kekang Lingkaran Kemiskinan,"* 24 Nov 2003.

[65] Berita Harian, *"Melayu Digesa Pastikan Anak Terus Bersekolah,"* 27 May 2009.

[66] Myrna Blake, *The Underclass in the Malay Muslim community*, Report of Research and Action Project, 1990.

assistance, hence the strategy adopted, as shared earlier, was in the form of provision of tutoring to the Malay students.   Also, to motivate the Malays to do even better and have the desire to succeed, religion or religious values are constantly emphasised. MENDAKI's official motto is iqrak which means Read, directly sourced from the Koran.   While the use of religious values to promote learning is not an issue, the general lack of abstraction of the problem of education beyond a matter for the community, limits the thinking behind the analysis of this under-development in education.

Overall, the strategies adopted by the Malay elite more significantly showed an approach of tackling the problems of low educational achievements as a community issue, rather than as a national problem affecting those within similar socio-economic strata irrespective of ethnicity.   In doing this, the Malay elite reduces the problem of education to a Malay problem that requires a Malay community's intervention, viz. self help group rather than acknowledging it as a national concern.   In turn, they are reinforcing the cultural deficit thesis, which, as Lily Zubaidah asserts, helps to *"locate the source of the problem firmly within the marginal ethnic community, and disentangles the significance of structural, institutional and historical factors in contributing to the community's poverty...this logic absolves the state from actively assisting the disadvantaged communities.."*[67]   In adopting this approach, the

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[67] Lily Zubaidah, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community*, p.251.

structural dimension of the problem affecting others within the same socio- economic strata is not sufficiently explored.[68]

Another example to illustrate how the attitude or values of the community are viewed as the basic cause of social ills afflicting the Malay community is that of teen marriages. According to Noor Aisha, '*the dominant understanding of Malay teenage marriage suggest that it is conditioned by personal responsibility and attitudinal defect...elite within the Malay community...lament that such marriages are closely related to sexual promiscuity and undesirable lifestyle.*'[69] Yet the profile of the respondents that form that basis of her study reveal that the phenomenon is largely confined those within the lower socio-economic status of the Malay community. This is the group of teenagers who have low education, low earning power, comes from a family that is socially and economically disadvantaged which compounds the problems associated with their teen marriages.[70] The interpretation of the problem from the viewpoint of values has compounded the problem. It has had the effect of implementing policies and programmes that seek to address the problems within a religious dimension. While there is no doubt that religious values can play a role in the value sphere in alleviating social problems, the understanding of what aspects of religious teachings are essential to this particular problem as well as overlooking

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[68] It was only in recent times that there were some attempts to focus on financial difficulties of Malay families as hindrances in the children's education. See Berita Harian, *"Tiga Strategi Kurangi Kadar Keciciran di Sekolah"*, 8 Mar 2007, and *"Kerjasama bantu hantar anak ke pra-sekolah"*, 8 Mar 2007.

[69] Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, "Teenage Marriage in the Malay/Muslim Community of Singapore: Problems, Perceptions and Programmes", pp. 739-740.

[70] Ibid. In her study of teen marriages, Noor Aisha had interviewed many young couples, and the responses of these couples led her to conclude that the teen marriage is a class problem, that afflicts the low income families that are characteristically faced with problems like drug addiction, incarceration,

concrete measures to deal with issues confronting young families have prevented the Malay elite from effectively dealing with the problem in a more holistic manner and implementing measures more relevant to their needs and problems.

The major solutions put forth by the Malay leaders is doubtful in its effectiveness in curbing the problem of teen marriages since an adequate understanding of the factors that led to teen marriages, are not fully understood in first place. An example is the implementation of lessons on Islam to young Malay couples as a preparation before their marriage. In these classes, the young Malay couples are "...*taught basic religious knowledge such as the fundamental pillars of Islam, the articles of faith, issues of sin and reward in the afterlife. Legalistic prescriptions on the rights and obligations of spouses within what is perceived as Islamic law on marriage are also transmitted.*"[71] The thinking behind such religious classes is that teenage marriage is the result of lack of *"knowledge of Islam, iman (faith) and moral failure"*.[72] Given this dominant perception, the solutions put forth by the Malay leadership was therefore guided by this perception, without recognising that the problem is largely confined to those within the lower socio-economic status of the Malay community many of whom are aware of the fundamental values prescribed by the religion.

(b) Vision of Community of Excellence

As indicated in the earlier part of this chapter, the political elite in Singapore

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low education, instability. Youngsters from this family background are also the ones that are involved in premarital sex, resulting in unwanted pregnancies, and hence marriages.

[71] Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, "Teenage Marriage in the Malay/Muslim Community of Singapore: Problems, Perceptions and Programmes", pp. 752-753.

[72] Ibid, pp. 739-740.

have always been mindful of the state of development of the Malay community. There have been many statements put forth by the political elite reflecting about how the Malays are fairing and how they have progressed. For example, the improvement in Malays' education has always been lauded by the ruling leadership in Singapore, as reflected in the statement made by the former Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Tony Tan in 2001:

> *"...the educational profile of the Malay-Muslim community had shown great improvements, more than half of the community aged 15 years old and above now have secondary education or higher, nine out of ten students who sat for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) had qualified and succeeded in completing secondary education, hence increasing the number of Malay-Muslim entering the polytechnics and universities and today, one third of the cohort of schoolchildren entering Primary One, managed to enter polytechnic and university.*"[73]

The former Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Goh Chok Tong, also acknowledged this fact. As highlighted by him:

> *"My officials have prepared a paper on the progress made by the Malay community in education, occupation, income and quality of life. I will highlight some of the findings...in the area of education, the Malays have attained a high level of literacy.   In fact, the achievements in literacy surpass the national average. The Malay community has [also] improved its education profile...The proportion of Malay Singaporeans holding higher level and skilled jobs has increased over the years...The median monthly income of resident Malay workers...and median household income has also risen...many Malay households have upgraded to better housing...In summary, the study shows objectively the significant progress that the Malay community has made. It is doing well, if not better, compared to others in the region, and also elsewhere...You can be proud of what you have accomplished. I congratulate you.*[74]

The comments made by the political leaders of Singapore alluded to the fact that the Singapore Malays have been showing significant improvements and development in various areas of life from the time of Singapore's independence up till today, and that without doubt the Singapore Malays had come a long way throughout the years.

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[73] Translated from the Dr Tony's Tan Speech, *"Membaiki lagi mutu pencapaian,"* Berita Harian, 18 August 2001.

[74] Goh Chok Tong*, Progress of the Malay Community in Singapore Since 1990,* 21 January 2001.

Generally the Malay elite are trapped in the perception that Malay socio-economic lag lies in the lack of awareness and internalisation of their cultural values, invariably provided by Islam. This dominant perspective overrides the need to take into effective consideration imbalances and its impact on a specific segment of the community namely those within the lower socio-economic strata and the extent to which their problems occur within the same group across ethnic lines. Hence, the attempts of the Malay leadership to promote the development of the Malay community centres largely on selecting and promoting what they perceive as positive attributes and values within the Malay culture that can be used to boost the community's development. These positive values that are deemed relevant and useful to strengthen the community are drawn from the important identifier of Malay identity, namely the Islamic religion. While it is undoubted that Islam is integral to Malay identity, perceiving the problem predominantly as one that can be resolved through appropriating Islamic values has the effect of reducing the problem to one of lack of positive values per se.

For example, in the recent years, as part of the continuous efforts to steer the Malay community towards progress and development, the Malay elite has put forth the vision of a 'Community of Excellence'. This ideal requires the Malays to *"...doing our best...maximising our potential..."*[75], and also to be *"...open-minded and forward looking, understand their current situation and the world around them, have a thirst for knowledge, able to use modern knowledge and technology in order to build up a more vibrant and successful Islamic society, and always striving to*

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[75] Yaacob Ibrahim, *"The Malay Muslims Community in Singapore – Bridging gaps and widening options (are we boat builders?)",* Department of Malay Studies seminar, 18 Apr 2004.

upgrade themselves."[76]   Anchoring this vision of 'Community of Excellence' is the expectation that the Malays embrace a new type of attitude, captured in the spirit of identity of *Melayu Baru* (or New Malay).   This typology of New Malay took the spotlight in 2002 when the Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, spoke about this during a talk at the National University of Singapore.   In his talk, he stated the following:

> *"The French author of the famous book, the Little Prince, Antoinne de Saint-Exupery once said: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to go to the forest to gather wood, saw it and nail the planks together. Instead, teach them the desire for the sea.".   So do we want our [Malay] community to become boat builders? I don't think so.   If I am allowed a bit of plagiarism, then my call to our [Malay] community would be: If you want our community to do well in school and in life, teach them the desire to learn, to tackle challenges and to achieve.*"[77]

In short, the Malays are expected to continually seek to excel and demand higher standards in the ways things are done, and that they should become self-reliant, independent, confident, and able to stand on their own.[78] They should also embrace the notion that "...*everyone [the Malays] believed that the community can achieve anything it sets out to do...*"[79] As further articulated by the Minister:

> *" The New Malay not only have to identify the problem that affects us [Malay society], but to also understand the causes of the problem and its effects.   He will analyse this problem and examine it from all angles, both within and outside the society's influence.   He may feel embarrassed when examining the matter but never ashamed of his own society.   There is no need for him to feel ashamed of his society, but shame is to be felt when there is no intellectual effort to analyse problems and find solutions to them.   Nevertheless, what is clearly associated with the New Malay is his independent thinking and ability to response rationally to his environment."*[80]

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[76] Yaacob Ibrahim, "*The Malay Muslims Community in Singapore – Bridging gaps and widening options (are we boat builders?)",* Deparment of Malay Studies seminar, 18 Apr 2004.

[77] The Straits Times, "*New Malays can step up pace to excellence"*, 19 Apr 2002.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Translated from the following excerpt: *"Melayu Baru bukan hanya perlu mengenal pasti masalah yang menjejas kita, tetapi untuk memahami kuasa yang membentuk masalah itu dan bagaimana mereka beroperasi.   Beliau akan menganalisa masalah kita dan mengupas faktor yang*

The New Malay consciousness and orientation is expected to encourage the Malays to be creative, confident, self-reliant, analytical and independent, and it is expected to be an orientation and way of thinking that will help the Singapore Malays overcome the challenges of the new economy as Singapore prosper and develop in the new millennium. This particular orientation and the values it promotes are values that situates within the broad guidelines and principles of Islam and one that is a core part of Malay life and its culture. Indeed, Islam possess many positive values that can aid the Malay society in achieving excellence and progress, and if applied correctly would benefit the Malay society tremendously, and this has been aptly stated by the Minister in his call for the Malay community to embrace the vision of 'Community of Excellence'. According to him:

> *"Being open-minded, forward looking and constantly thirsty for knowledge. . . that is the definition of progressive society . . . the question is whether the above characteristics [of progressive society] in line with Islamic religion? Of course it is compatible, as Islam encourages rational thought and behaviour. It also encourages its believers to constantly strive to achieve solutions to the challenge and problems they faced."* [81]

The call for the use of Islam in the aid of progress and development of the Malay community has been similarly made in the past. In fact, the pursuit towards economic success and material gains are seen as being in line with the Islamic religion, since Islam does not discourage its' followers from seeking to better themselves economically. This attempt to use religious values as bulwark for development is not novel. Za'ba for instance has expressed that Islam encourages its followers to

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menyebabkannya, dari dalam dan luar masyarakat. Beliau mungkin akan berasa malu apabila meneliti sesuatu masalah itu, tetapi beliau tidak malu dengan masyarakatnya. Kita perlu rasa malu hanya apabila tiada usaha intelektual diambil untuk menganalisa masalah itu dan mengenal pasti program untuk mengatasinya. Namun, apa yang mungkin berkait rapat dengan Melayu Baru ini ialah pemikirannya yang berdikari, dan berupaya untuk memberi respon rasional mengenai keadaan sekililing." The Straits Times, "*New Malays can step up pace to excellence*", 19 Apr 2002.

[81] Special interview with Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, see Berita Minggu, 2 May 2004.

achieve economic success. The Malays should embrace positive values in Islam like hard work, enterprising spirit and diligence. Za'ba also further stated that *'...there is no rule whatsoever [in Islam] which says that we have to limit or restrain ourselves from acquiring deeper and wider knowledge than the people of the past, in addition, modern man can acquire many other forms of knowledge not known to men before.'*[82] Another thinker, Syed Sheik Alhady known for his work *'Ugama Islam and Akal'* also wrote that Islam can be a means to aid the Malays along the path of worldly asceticism and progress on earth, hence there is no conflict for the Malays to be economically motivated and capitalistic minded because Islam "*...absolutely does not forbid man [to] champion his self-interest or that of his community. To the contrary, it encourages Muslim to do so.*"[83] Similarly, a local academic has also stated that "*...the value of working hard, must be taught to our young [Malays] not only because situation around them requires them to...Rather they must also realise that hard work is part of their identity as a Muslim.*"[84]

It cannot be denied that that to a large extent, the Islamic religion can be a very useful value system to motivate and spur the Malay community to excellence. Islam contained many positive values capable of laying the foundations to propel progress and development within the Malay community, particularly since Islam promoted a rational outlook towards life, and together with its emphasis on value like pursuit of knowledge and excellence. Islam is therefore a major cultural value system which the

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[82] As quoted in Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Malay Ideas on Development*, pp. 86-88.

[83] As quoted in Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Malay Ideas on Development*, p. 71.

[84] Mukhlis Abu Bakar, "Going Back to Our Roots*," Karyawan*, Sep-Nov 1997.

leadership evidently draws upon in its efforts to spur the Malays to strive for success and through the objective of the Community of Excellence, supported by a new form of identity, viz. New Malay or *Melayu Baru.* However it is evident that this focus on values at the expense of other factors does not depart from the perspective of the dominant discourse on the "Malay problem". It reduces issues affecting them to a problem of values or the lack of it.[85]

Overall, the expression of *Melayu Baru* as a form of identity for the Singapore Malays is seen as embodying identity that will provide the Malay community with the capacity to succeed in the new world economy. It is underlined by the belief that by imbibing values of excellence, independence and self-reliance embodied in the *Melayu Baru*, Singapore Malays will be ensured of tremendous success in their chosen fields.[86] To the Minister, those Malays who have succeeded exhibited the values of *Melayu Baru* – they were resilient, dedicated and never losing track of their confidence and capabilities. He made these remarks regarding those individuals lauded as showcasing the identity of *Melayu Baru:*

> *"All these individuals achieved their goals through their thinking and idea, and by doing the necessary work. They are the best model for our society . . . We should support and encourage this desire to excel, to rely on oneself, to be independent and succeed on our own accord."*[87]

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[85] As mentioned, thinkers like Syed Sheik Alhady had also viewed values in Islam as values that would propel the community forward. His analysis of how the values of Islam can contribute to society was conditioned by the milieu at that juncture, that of capitalism, viz. capitalistic values like rationalism, individualism and so on are values that are present in Islam and should be adopted by the community to propel a change in its approach and thinking. See Shaharuddin Maaruf, *Malay Ideas on Development*, pp. 62-65.

[86] Among those that were identified included an architect and a financial analyst with multi-national companies as well as the Head of the World's Scouts. Berita Harian, "*Model contoh bagi Melayu"*, 19 April 2002.

[87] Ibid.

Through this sense of excellence and doing our best as encapsulated in the notion of *Melayu Baru*, it is believed that the Malay community would then be able to become a *Community of Excellence*, and achieve more progress and development in the coming years.

The idea of *Melayu Baru* has been articulated earlier in the 1990s. During this period, the then Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Muhammed also spoke about a new type of Malay for Malaysia, viz. the *Melayu Baru*. According to him, a Malay who is identified as *Melayu Baru* has gone through a mental revolution and cultural transformation and possessed a culture suited to modern period, in addition to being capable of meeting challenges, compete without assistance, learned, knowledgeable and competent.[88] He also saw *Melayu Baru* as being an important player in the future history of the Malay society for they would be the ones to carry the 'Malay banner' into the next century – skilled, competent and able to compete with the best in Malaysia and the world.

In the ideal of *Melayu Baru* put forth by these two political leaders, it is seen as the solution to the under-development of the Malays. That is, in diagnosing the problems of Malay underdevelopment, the cause is viewed to be the lack of suitable values necessary for progress and development. Hence, in the minds of these leaders, the Malays needed to adopt what they deem as appropriate values from the cultural resource of the Malays provided by Islam. But in doing this, the problem of Malay underdevelopment is once again confined to the issue of values, or lack therefore, instead of understanding the problem as something more, for example looking at the

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[88] Tan Sri Muhamad bin Haji Muhamad Taib, *The New Malay,* p.16. Visage Communication, Petaling Jaya (1996).

structural impediments which could not be resolved by merely inculcating values at the personal level.

Indeed, the meaning of *Melayu Baru* as defined by the Malay elite differs radically from the concept as explicated by a prominent intellectual Syed Hussein Alatas. For Alatas, the New Malay or *Melayu Baru* is about one's mindset or the awareness of the individual to achieve all that is positive in life and beneficial for both men and society. As stated by him:

> " [New Malay] does not mean new in terms of age. We do not mean to say that a 'New Malay' is a young Malay. It is not a generation concept but a typology. It has nothing to do with age groups but with types of personality. We call it new simply because more and more of such types are emerging at this time and more people are aware of it. This mentality, however, had existed in the past. There were such personalities who possessed this type of mentality but it was not pervasive and did not dominate Malay society then."[89]

Hence, universal values that have proven to be significant contributors to a society's pursuit towards progress, for example rational thinking, independence, self-reliance, perseverance, commitment, pursuit towards excellence are critical values in the embodiment of *Melayu Baru*. To Alatas, these are values that should govern the outlook and philosophy in life, and that it should consistently influence and act as a compass in all aspects of Malay life, and most importantly, these values are steeped in the Islamic religion.[90] Overall, Alatas' perception of *Melayu Baru* is based on the value of progress in a more genuine sense, viz. man unfettered by irrational dogma, superstitions, myths and who is directed by a universal humanitarian philosophy. The

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[89] Syed Hussein Alatas, *The New Malay: His Role and Future*, p.7. Occasional Paper Series, No. 2-96, Association of Muslim Professional, 1994.

[90] Ibid. Alatas also gave a detailed analysis of this state of consciousness and desire to do what is good, which he termed *'Cita Sempurna.'* According to him: "*Cita sempurna it adalah satu pandangan hidup yang menyeluruh bertujuan untuk mencapai masyarakat sempurna. Cita itu juga mengalakkan usaha yang hebat bagi menjayakannya.*" Translated this means: Cita sempurna is a point of view that is holistic that is geared towards achieving excellent community. Syed Hussein Alatas, *Cita Sempurna Warisan Sejarah*, p.1. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2000.

conception of *Melayu Baru* put forth by Alatas is therefore motivated by a philosophy of progress of man.

While Alatas sees *Melayu Baru* as a holistic state of consciousness and being, the identity of *Melayu Baru* put forth by the Malay elite showed more focus towards using the positive attributes and values to achieving specific developments, for example in the areas of education and economic success, and for this group of new Malays to act as the catalyst towards the pursuit of excellence within the community. As Dr Yaacob expressed:

> *"a new group of Malays that* is *analytical and independent of mind, and capable of responding rationally to surrounding events*, and *"[one] that aspired to be a good student, worker and neighbour, in the context of a multiracial society*", is needed to push the community towards excellence."* [91]

The ideal of *Melayu Baru* when it was put forth by the Minister was generally well received by the rest of the Malay elite, evident by the many positives responses. In general the Malay elite did not offer any alternative ideas to the concept of Malay identity encapsulated by the notion of *Melayu Baru* and were prepared to support the vision of '*Community of Excellence'.* Organisations like MENDAKI and MUIS also supported the vision of '*Community of Excellence'*, and the typology of the identity of *Melayu Baru*. MENDAKI for instance, indicated that it would work harder to improve the various programmes and initiatives that they have been running.[92] Likewise, MUIS stated that it would start to draw out an action plan to improve religious education and activities currently provided by MUIS, so that they could imbibe the traits of excellence in the students. Indeed, the promises of new initiatives put forth by the Malay organisations were very much in tandem with the Minister's

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[91] Today, *"New Malay Singaporean*", 19 April 2002.

belief that the vision of excellence was an important component for the Malays in their aim to move forward and to progress. The emphasis on values was not unaccompanied by a determination to improve existing institutions. As the Minister remarked:

> *"Every community needs institutions, which they can be proud of. If the institutions are strong, robust, and demonstrate a degree of excellence, then invariably the community will respond accordingly...The key idea here is that strong institutions inspire excellence. Our Syariah Court and Registry of Muslim Marriages have developed a reputation that has attracted attention around the region. We should be proud of this. We need more of such institutions. There is therefore an urgent need to strengthen our existing institutions such as MUIS, Mendaki, our mosques, madrasahs, Malay/ Muslim organisations, our media and Malay grassroot bodies."*[93]

To support the orientation of *Melayu Baru*, institutions like MENDAKI and MUIS has been challenged to move beyond their current activities to experiment and provide new services that would add further value to their current works. MENDAKI for example was asked to move beyond providing tuition classes, and to instead focus on other educational issues like helping Malay student master both science and mathematics.[94] MUIS similarly was asked to provide avenues for the Malay society to link up and obtain information regarding new Islamic issues and developments happening around the world.[95] In this manner, MUIS could guide the Malays to better understand how their Islamic faith is compatible with the demands of a modern and developed world.

While there was support to the call to build up the different institutions within the Malay community, the actual efforts to detail out and implement institutional building

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[92] Berita Harian, *"Badan Melayu sedia terap pembaharuan,"* 20 Apr 2002.

[93] Speech by Dr Yacob Ibrahim reproduced in Berita Harian *"The Malay Muslims Community in Singapore – Bridging gaps and widening options (are we boat builders?")* 18 Apr 2004.

[94] The Straits Times, *"New Malays can step up pace to excellence,"* 19 Apr 2002.

[95] Berita Harian, *"Badan Melayu sedia terap pembaharuan."* 20 Apr 2002.

strategies was not as readily available. In fact, the focus towards achieving the vision of *'Community of Excellence'* hinged on the presence of values and attributes deemed important to the building of this vision, and the presence of the identity of *Melayu Baru* that are expected to propel the Malay community towards this vision of '*Community of Excellence'*. Even the MUIS articulation of the ten attributes that would propel the Malay community towards progress, embodies what are seen as values that will help ensure that the Malay community are able to achieve the vision of *'Community of Excellence'.*[96]

The vision of '*Community of Excellence'*, though put forth by the Malay leaders for the Malay community, is an initiative that has been very supported by the non-Malay ruling elite. Hence in 2002 National Day rally, Goh Chok Tong, the then Prime Minister declared *"...I fully support Yaacob Ibrahim's vision of a community of excellence for our Malays."* [97] He further urged the Malays to support this vision of '*Community Excellence'* and to give their fullest commitment to turn this vision into a reality. The message put across to the Malays was that it was not an impossibility for the Malay community to become a model community that is progressive and constantly working towards achieving progress and development, particularly in the

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[96] The ten attributes are: (1) Holds strongly to Islamic principles while adapting itself to changing context, (2) Appreciates Islamic civilisation and history and has good understanding of contemporary issues, (3) Appreciates other civilisations and is self-confident to interact and learn from other communities, (4) Morally and spiritually strong to be on top of the challenges of modern society, (5) Progressive, practices Islam beyond forms/rituals and ride the modernisation wave, (6) Well adjusted as contributing members of a multi-religious society and secular state, (7) Inclusive and practices pluralism, without contradicting Islam, (8) Believes that good Muslims are also good citizens, (9) Be a blessing to all and promotes universal principles and values, and (10) Be a model and inspiration to all. See MUIS, *Risalah for Building a Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence*. See MUIS publication, Ten Attributes, 2006.

[97] The Straits Times, *"The path to excellence"*, 20 Aug 2002.

fields of economy, education, and life-long learning.[98] As a further support to this vision, in September 2002, during a dialogue session with the Malay/Muslim leadership, the ruling elite proposed the formation of a committee to look into the implementation of the vision of '*Community of Excellence*' and the then Prime Minister himself indicated an interest to be the adviser in this committee.[99] As remarked by those attended the session:

> *"PM had made this suggestion because he wanted to see the vision of Community of Excellence proposed by Dr Yaacob becomes a reality... PM also agreed to be an advisor or patron as part of his commitment to this committee. . .* "[100]

The ruling elite support towards helping the Malay community realise this vision of '*Community of Excellence*' continued even after the change of Prime Minister and its team. The new team made the commitment to support the Malay community's efforts towards achieving more progress and development, and this support was evident by the new Prime Minister's speech, Lee Hsien Loong at a gathering organised by the Malay community to celebrate his appointment as Prime Minister:

> *"I intend to strengthen Mr Goh's efforts and continue with his approach. In this way, the Malay society and Singapore will continue to succeed and progress. . . One of the efforts made by Mr Goh was his involvement in the Leadership Forum. Last year, the Malay leadership came together to discuss and come up with action plans and strategies to allow them to establish their vision of 'Community of Excellence' . . . since then, you have launched several activities relating to education, youth and jobs . . . The government will continue to give full support to all your efforts . . . we will share the data that we have – ranging from examination statistics, social trends, economic indicators and jobs analysis."*
> [101]

The Prime Minister also expressed that apart from continuing to work closely with

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[98] Berita Harian, "*Bersama bina masyarakat cemerlang"*, 20 Aug 2002.

[99] Berita Harian, "*Calon panel visi dikenal pasti dulu",* 23 Sep 2002

[100] This is a translation of a comments made by participants in Malay. See Berita Harian, "*PM Saran panel jayakan visi Melayu Cemerlang"*, 21 Sep 2002.

[101] This is a translation of the speech by PM Lee, reproduced in Malay in Berita Harian. See *Berita Harian, "Bersama jayakan impian"*, 9 Sep 2004.

the Malays, he would also focus his energies on four key areas, namely strengthening the relationship between the Malays and government, getting the involvement of successful Malays to further build up the community, nurturing of young generation and strengthening the inter-racial and multicultural relationship between all the different groups in Singapore.[102]   As iterated by him in his speech;

> " I believe that you [the Malays] can achieve even more successes. Let's work together to build a Malay community and a Singapore that is more advance and successful." [103]

To a large extent, the Malay community is able to identify with the vision of *'Community of Excellence'* and the new consciousness and orientation encapsulated in the ideal of *Melayu Baru*, because these are ideals of progress and development that have always been articulated for the Singapore Malay community. The Malay elite have continually attempted to do much to push forward the community, and as acknowledged by the Prime Minister during the 2004 National Day Rally:

> *"In the many dialogue sessions on sensitive issues, the leaders of the Malay society had expressed their opinions and showed their concerns openly without fear. They expressed that they want the Malays to be a progressive society...the key to this achievement is the efforts made by the Malay parents, and the society's efforts in the educational arena. The initiatives made by organisations like Mendaki, Jamiyah, Pertapis, AMP, 4PM dan PPIS also helped the weaker Malay students and their families. On the whole, the Malay society had achieved immense success*." [104]

However, despite these efforts by the Malay elite, problems persisted in achieving the ideal of '*Community of Excellence'*. The following remarks of the Minister in 2004 illustrate this concern:

> *"Even though we have achieved much, we have to be aware of the various trends emerging that would have an impact on our society if we fail to act fast and with commitment. For example, today we are seeing the effects of structural unemployment on our society. Many Malays have been retrenched and yet they are not able to get new jobs...our Malay workers*

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[102] Berita Harian, "*PM Lee mahu bantu Melayu jadi cemerlang,*" 5 Sep 2004.

[103] Ibid.

[104] PM Lee's National Day 2004 Rally Speech reproduced in Berita Harian, *"Bersama bentuk Melayu berjaya," 23 Aug 2004.*

need to undergo retraining. We need to be able to accommodate the changing work environment...[we also] have to face the problems of youth and social issues. Every year, around 400 to 500 Malay/Muslim students dropped out of primary and secondary school...these groups are susceptible to drug abuse and youth delinquency...among them also will be those who will get married and get divorced more than once..." [105]

To what extent are these problems intertwined with institutional and structural limitations affecting a segment of the Malay community has not received as much attention as the reiteration of values in the attempts by the elite to overcome the problems. In fact, the identity of *Melayu Baru* and its traits of confidence, rationality, independent minded and creativity is being seen as the basis of identity that should be embraced and adopted by Singapore Malays. To the Malay leaders, this new consciousness and orientation will help the Malay community achieve its goal of '*Community of Excellence'* and obtain progress and development, and hence such values critically need to be adopted by the Malay community.

As for the Malay community in Singapore, the fact that they have managed to achieve a degree of progress and development since Singapore's independence, does indicate that the values and ideals of *Melayu Baru* are not entirely absent. Positive values like hard work, perseverance, commitment and desire to succeed will have to be present among the Singapore Malays, otherwise how could the Singapore Malay community managed to bring itself up to level of progress and development that it has achieved as at today. It can thus be surmised that the orientation of *Melayu Baru* has

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[105] Translated from the speech by Dr Yaacob Ibrahim during the Hari Raya gathering of leaders on 20 Nov 2004, reproduced in Berita Harian: *"Walaupun terdapat banyak pencapaian dalam lingkungan masyarakat kita, kita harus sedar tentang trend-trend yang timbul yang boleh memberi kesan besar terhadap masyarakat kita jika kita tidak bertindak cepat dan dengan komitmen. Hari ini, misalnya, kita telah melihat kesan pengangguran struktural dalam masyarakat kita. Ramai yang telah dibuang kerja gagal mendapat pekerjaan baru...pekerja kita perlu menjalani peningkatan kemahiran. Kita mesti bersedia menyesuaikan diri dengan sekitaran kerja yang berubah-ubah...[kita juga] hadapi isu-isu belia dan masalah sosial. Setiap tahun, sekitar 400 hingga 500 pelajar Melayu/Islam keciciran sekolah rendah dan menengah...kumpulan ini mudah menjadi mangsa penyalahgunaan dadah dan*

not been totally absent among Singaporean Malays, especially when we take into consideration that these universal are part of the Islamic orientation. The Malays, being Muslims, would have embraced this consciousness and practised, in one form or the other, these universal values.

Nonetheless, it is timely that the traits encapsulated in the *Melayu Baru* identity put forth by the Malay elite are surfaced at this juncture where the Malays are faced with global challenges and different environment. However, while the Malay community attempts to achieve the ideal of *Melayu Baru* that will aid them in achieving their vision of *'Community of Excellence'*, there is a need to be aware of the structural limitations faced by the Singapore Malays: primarily the extent of opportunities available to them, and whether there exist suitable environment to allow them to harness these opportunities effectively. Hence while it is timely that the ideal of *Melayu Baru* and its orientation of rationality, universality, commitment, hard work, perseverance is surfaced to aid the Singapore Malays in their pursuit towards achieving excellence and progress particularly in confronting the challenges of today and in the future, however the success of the Singapore Malays is not dependent solely on new orientation and value system. Rather there also needs to be sufficient institutional and structural reforms to help the Malays overcome the challenges they face as a community. This aspect, together with the embracing of the consciousness of *Melayu Baru*, will ultimately lead to the emergence of a Singapore Malay community that is successful, progressive and fulfilling the vision of '*Community of Excellence'*.

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kenakalan remaja . . . di kalangan mereka yang berumah tangga bercerai, berkahwin lagi dan bercerai."

In conclusion, this chapter has sought to analyse the meaning of the ideals of success and progress as depicted in the thought of the Malay elite of Singapore. While the need for progress and development has formed significant expressions of what it means to be a Singapore Malay, what these entail in the perceptions of the Singapore Malay leadership is the thrust of the chapter. The chapter argues that perceptions of the elite on the problems of socio-economic lag of the community have been conditioned largely by the culturalist perspective. The limitations and ideological underpinnings of this perspective were discussed. The chapter also maintains that the persistence of the perspective in developing Malay progress is evident in the concepts of *'Community of Excellence'* and *Melayu Baru*. The extent to which they are able to provide a credible basis for Malays to forge an identity relevant to the challenges within their socio-economic milieu was also explored.

CHAPTER FIVE: MALAY IDENTITY AND CHALLENGES OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION

In a span of a brief 40 odd years since independence in August 1965, Singapore has proven itself to be a successful and vibrant country that has achieved an immensely successful economic transformation, a transformation that is staggering considering that at the point of independence, Singapore was a society faced with uncertainties and fear of survival bearing heavily on the minds of its leaders. While economic development was a top priority at the point of independence, there was also the concurrent need to bring about a cohesive Singapore society. This proved to be a particularly important task considering Singapore's immigrant population, one that was diverse in nature and oriented *"less to Singapore, and [more] to their homelands of China, India and emerging Malaya."*[1]

Indeed, over the years there have been consistent attempts by Singapore's ruling elite to define and realise a national identity, and to establish some form of common ground for Singapore's diverse population. These experiences towards achieving national identity, integration and social cohesion condition how Singapore's leader, both Malays and non-Malays, perceive and understand Malay identity. It is therefore necessary for us to explore and examine these issues in our study of Singapore Malay identity. However, before we proceed with this undertaking, let us first take a look at the experiences of Singapore in its endeavour to create its national identity, achieve social cohesion and establish a common space for its populace.

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[1] Chua Beng Huat, "Racial Singaporean: Absence after the Hyphen", in Joel. S. Kahn, *Southeast Asian Identities,* p.29.

The Construction of National Identity

Prior to 1965, the idea of Singapore as an independent political entity was largely not considered a possibility until Singapore's eviction from the Federation of Malaysia on ninth August 1965. The separation of Singapore from Malaysia had resulted in tremendous challenges for the Singapore government, the foremost of which is the economic survival of a new independent country that has no natural resources of her own and that would have to be largely based on an export-oriented economy. At the same time, there was also an urgent need to pull the diverse ethnic groups together into a common goal and destiny as part of a cohesive independent country. This was a particularly difficult task because of the diversity in the make-up of the people the result of a largely immigrant population. There was the dominant Chinese, approximately making up around 75% of Singapore's populace, followed by the indigenous Malays of approximately 15%, the Indians at less than 10% as well as the small group of Eurasians.[2] What is more disconcerting is that this ethnic diversity corresponded to differences in socio- economic status. At the point of Singapore's independence, the Chinese were economically dominant forming the bulk of the upper and middle class, the Indians also enjoyed socio-economic influence relative to the Malays who formed the lower occupational and income strata.

The differentiated economic status among the diverse groups in Singapore has created a sense of wariness and insecurity that exists till today. This is primarily because Singapore is situated among a Malay Muslim majority Southeast Asian region, and to have a predominant affluent Chinese in Singapore while the Malays are

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[2] Sharon Siddique, "The Phenomenology of Ethnicity: A Singapore Case Study", in *Sojourn*, vol 5, no.1, Feb 1990, p.36. ISEAS, 1990.

at the lower end of the spectrum proves to be a factor that the Singapore government is always mindful and cautious about with a view of ensuring political stability and social cohesion in Singapore. Furthermore, the neighbouring Malay dominated countries have also regularly shown an interest in the position of the Malays in Singapore, especially what they see as unfair treatment of the Singapore Malays versus the majority Chinese in the country. At times the involvement from these neighbouring countries are manifested in the form of comments or editorials in their local newspapers on issues perceived as detrimental to the Singapore Malays, and which, indirectly, may have triggered certain uneasiness in Singapore especially among the political elite who are consistently wary of factors that could create tensions between the racial groups in the country. For example in 2000 following the publication of a report by AMP regarding the Singapore Malay community progress, there were interests among the Malaysian side regarding the marginalisation of the Singapore Malays. To counter the concerns raised by the Malaysians, the ruling elite had to iterate the message that the Singapore Malays had made significant progress and attain significant achievements in areas like education, occupation, income and so on. In fact, according to a writer, '*the [Singapore] government made longitudinal comparisons and contrasted Singapore Malays' achievements with that of Malaysian Malays to show that Malays have been developing well and not lagging behind.*'[3] This problem of the socio-economic position of the Malays on social cohesion faced by Singapore's ruling leadership is succinctly summarised by a writer as follows:

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[3] Suriani Suratman, *Problematic Singapore Malays: The Making of a Portrayal,* pp. 16-17. Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, 2004. This article was based on a paper presented for International Symposium on Thinking Malayness organised by Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, June 2004.

> *"The social imbalances between the Malays and the other ethnic groups therefore could not be ignored. Aware that opposing political parties would use communal issues pertaining to Malays in Singapore, the Singapore government was constantly reiterating it's recognition of the special position of the Malays and its commitment to overcome this imbalance."[4]*

The diversity of ethnic groups in Singapore also proves to be a stumbling block in Singapore's attempts at creating a sense of a nation and national interest, not to mention getting these diverse groups to imagine that they share a common faith and destiny in the country.[5] Also, as the populace in Singapore is largely an immigrant one, Singapore does not have indigenous traditions and customs that are common among the ethnic groups which can be used as the basis for national identity.[6] This lack of cultural basis that would bind its citizens has been aptly noted by a scholar who stated that:

> *"If bonds of solidarity among citizens of modern nation-states were built on the 'universalisation of a shared civilisation of ethnic tradition in the minds of equal and autonomous individuals as a condition for its continued survival', then nations like Singapore [with a largely immigrant population] have an endemic problem of finding a 'common bond' to bind its population to a sense of shared identity and destiny. Alternatively put, there are serious obstacles to formulating the cultural 'substance' that may lead materiality to the 'imagined' community called a nation."[7]*

In the process of *"selecting the values that would express the Singapore identity, the choice has fallen on what would appear to be non-ideological, pragmatic*

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[4] Suriani Suratman, *Problematic Singapore Malays: The Making of a Portrayal*, p.3.

[5] The ideas of nation state and its accompanying notion of national identity were part of 19th century European history which has been transported by the colonial powers to its colonies. Hence, upon the independence of these Western colonies, many of the indigenous elite took upon themselves to create the sense of nation and national identity in their newly independent country, and this sense of a nation state was created either via regressive mode of identification, i.e. the leaders look back to the past cultural and political tradition of the locals before colonialism, or via a progressive mode, where the leaders discard its past as they are deemed as detrimental to progress and development. Chan Heng Chee and Evers, Hans-Dieter, "National Identity and Nation Building in Singapore", in *Studies in ASEAN Sociology*, Singapore, 1978, pp.116-117.

[6] Chua Beng Huat, "Racial Singaporean: Absence after the Hyphen", p.30.

[7] Ibid, p.28.

values."[8]   What has therefore occurred is the creation of a national identity based on pragmatic values that supports the critical need of economic survival of the country. This means transforming the Singapore's populace into a "*tightly organised and highly disciplined citizenry all puling in the same direction with a sense of public spiritedness and self-sacrifice in the national interest.*"[9]   In short, it is critical that the diverse Singapore populace come together as one group in order to achieve economic survival and ensure the country's development, and as Singapore has adopted a capitalist oriented economy, all the more critical that its people pull together to contribute to the economy.   By appealing to this need for economic success and sustenance, the Singapore leadership has thus created a sense of national identity that is synonymous with economic success, where Singaporeans achieved a *'sense of pride of achievements contributing to a positive self image'*.[10]

Another consideration that has largely engaged the minds of Singapore's ruling elite in its attempts at creating a national identity and achieving social cohesion is the need to ensure that the Singapore's populace put state interest above ethnic and religious interest.   Sectarian divisions along ethnic-religious lines are not tolerated. To nullify sectarian tendencies, Singapore's leadership has adopted the values of multiracialism and meritocracy.   Multiracialism acknowledges social heterogeneity of populace composed of separate and distinct ethnic groups.   However in the case of Singapore, multiracialism has given rise to the '*tendency to de-emphasise the*

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[8] Chan and Evers, "National Identity and Nation Building in Singapore", p. 22.

[9] Ibid, pp. 4-5.

[10] Ibid, p. 34.

heterogeneous character of each race, in favour of a more simplified, multiracial CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) quadratomy."[11]   Hence, multiracialism in Singapore involves tolerance towards the different ethnic groups, essentialised by the CMIO categories.   This means accepting the cultural differences, as well as the differing religious practices among the various groups without discriminating against any particular group.   Each ethnic group will be accorded equality before the law and equal opportunity for progress and advancement.[12]   The latter is underpinned by the tenet of meritocracy where "*each citizen's social and economic circumstances are...determined by a combination of his/her industry and natural endowment and no other cause.*"[13]   In short, the ideology of meritocracy is based on the presumption that the success or failure of each individual from the various ethnic groups is very much dependent on the individuals' own efforts.

To further ensure that the differing ethnic groups recognise and accept a collective identity as Singaporeans, the ruling elite in the late 1980s formulated several core shared values underpinning the Singaporean identity.   These shared values are: (a) nation before community and society above self, (b) upholding the family as the basic unit for society, (c) regard and community support for the individual, (d) resolving issues through consensus instead of contention, and (e)

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[11] Sharon Siddique "The Phenomenology of Ethnicity: A Singapore Case Study", p.36.   Chua Beng Huat also agreed on this point.   According to him: *"In Singapore, what has come to be called "multiracialism" functions effectively as a means of disempowerment because it erases the grounds upon which a racial group may make claims on behalf of its own interests without ostensibly violating the idea of group equality that is the foundation of multiracialism itself"*.   Chua Beng Huat, "Racial Singaporean: Absence after the Hyphen", p.36.

[12] Chan and Evers, "National Identity and Nation Building in Singapore", p.123.

[13] Chua Beng Huat, "Racial Singaporean: Absence after the Hyphen", p.32.

religious and racial tolerance and harmony.[14]   All this was done in the attempt to promote a shared sense of belonging, and create a common understanding of what it means to be Singaporeans.

Singapore has indeed achieved tremendous economic success throughout the past few decades, and this sense of economic achievement has become the fundamental basis of the sense of belonging to the state. The majority of Singaporeans believe in this shared goal of economic progress and development and many do see this as the defining characteristic of what it means to be a Singaporean. The value of meritocracy is also very much seen as another key tenet to being a Singaporean, because it provides each individual an opportunity to succeed based on individual merit, without being hindered by his/her ethnic background.[15]   Likewise, the tenet of multiracialism remains intact and is accepted as an important factor that allows each ethnic group the space to practice their traditions, customs and religion. This in turn provides for the existence of stability in a country that is ethnically diverse, while allowing for the emergence of a cohesive Singaporean society that makes room for ethnicity and ethnic identity.[16]

It is within this over-arching framework of a national identity and the need for all ethnic groups to regard themselves as being a part of Singapore, that the process of formulating a Singapore Malay identity has taken place. This need to be constantly recognised and accepted as part of Singapore with its ideals of meritocracy and

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[14] Chua Beng Huat, "Racial Singaporean: Absence after the Hyphen", p.32. See also The Straits Times, *Allowing for Ethnic Diversity Boosts National Identity*, 18 June, 2002.

[15] The Sraits Times, *Allowing for Ethnic Diversity Boosts National Identity*, 18 June, 2002.

[16] Ibid.

multiracialism, multiculturalism and multi-religiosity, inevitably affects the Singapore Malay community's expression of their identity as Malays of Singapore, and how the non-Malays view them. The next section seeks to examine how these challenges of integrating and being part of Singapore has impacted the expression and understanding of the Malay identity.

Challenges of National Integration in the Formulation of Singapore Malay Identity

The Malays as part of Singapore are expected to play a role in the nation building of the country just like the rest of the other ethnic groups in the country. Indeed, the Malays have always desired to be key partners in Singapore's pursuit towards progress and development. As noted by a scholar:

> *"From the many seminars and discussions that have been held about Muslims (most of who are from the Malay ethnic group) in Singapore within the last decade or so, it is clear to all and sundry that...despite being a minority community... [the Malays] desire to be integral partners in the Republic's nation-building process. Like other citizen's too, they aspire to progress and share the broad goals of this city state, viz. a 'city of excellence' where citizens lead fulfilling lives and regard Singapore their home."[17]*

Being part of the larger Singapore society, the Malays have consciously imbued the sense of national identity that is synonymous with economic success proving that they are keen, willing and able to integrate and share the common basis of what it means to be citizens of Singapore.[18] Although the Malays are as occupied as the rest of the ethnic groups in the pursuit of economic success, the community like the others remain rooted in their identity and continue to grapple with accommodating and adjusting it to the demands of changing socio-economic conditions. Malays leaders

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[17] Husin Mutalib, "Dilemmas of a Minority Community in a Secular, Modern City-State: The Case of Singapore Muslims", in the *Fount Journal*, Issue No.1, 2000, p. 65. JBW Printers, Singapore, 2000.

[18] Refer to Chapter Two for a more detailed examination of the impact of the pursuit towards economic success and progress towards Malay identity.

have consistently shown tremendous zeal to maintain their identity as Malays while emphasising the goals of a common or national consciousness as Singaporeans. However, concerns have been raised among the non-Malay elite pertaining to Singapore Malays' capacity to be fully integrated into the Singapore society. This fear may be induced by the common religious and cultural ties with others in the region exacerbated by geopolitics. It has prompted an academic to assert that this *"predisposition [towards maintaining a Malay identity] make them [the Malays] the targets of suspicion in the state's national integration agenda."*[19]

One of the areas in which doubts has been cast towards the Malays is with regards to the issue of loyalty to the state. Loyalty to the state is considered an important value underpinning the sense of consciousness of being part of Singapore, and this has been clearly captured in one of the shared values viz. nation before community. This shared value implies that all Singaporeans, regardless of the ethnic and racial groups are expected to be loyal to Singapore, and be there to protect and safeguard its sovereignty and interests. Unfortunately, the issue of Malays' loyalty to Singapore has reared its heads over various periods evident by portrayals and impressions of Singapore Malays as having doubtful loyalty to Singapore.[20]

This particular issue of doubtful loyalty first came about in the 1970s following the issue of National Service conscription. As early as 1969, there emerged this sense of unease among the Malay community over what was perceived as discrimination of

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[19] Husin Mutalib, "Dilemmas of a Minority Community in a Secular, Modern City-State: The Case of Singapore Muslims", p.66.

[20] Suriani Suratman, *Problematic Singapore Malays – The Making of a portrayal*, p.1. Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, 2004.

Malay youths in Singapore's National Service policy. For example, the Malay leaders noted that the number of Malays being called up for full time National Service was very small, while those who eventually served National Service were discriminated against in terms of their appointment and promotions. It was also noted that existing Malay army officers had been transferred to non-sensitive administrative posts.[21] These issues led to awareness among the Malay community that there seemed to be something amiss. After all, National Service duty was mandatory for Singapore's male youths where they would be put through relevant training in the defence of the country. Yet, the number of Malay youths being asked to undergo such training in the 1970s was very small. What is more, Malays who were not called up for National Service found it difficult to get employment because most employers were reluctant to employ youths who did not serve National Service.[22] This particular situation in turn resulted in a perceived sense of discrimination among the Malays exacerbated by perceptions that others have pertaining to their loyalty to the country. Though there was limited articulation and discussions about these concerns among official circles during the 1970s, it cannot be ignored that this question of Malay community's loyalty to Singapore, has taken root among the minds of the Malays, and also among the non-Malays.[23]

It was therefore not surprising to see the Malays once again, in the 1980s becoming extremely concerned over the portrayal of their doubtful loyalty following

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[21] Ismail Kassim, *Problems of Elite Cohesion: A Perspective from a Minority Community*, p.58.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

remarks made by Singapore's leadership over Malays' position and roles in the armed forces. What was publicly articulated at this point of time was that the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) had to avoid placing the Singapore Malay Muslims in key positions in SAF, because it needed to prevent the Singapore Malays from being placed in a position where their emotions for the nation, Singapore, will be in conflict with their religion.[24] The fact that the Singapore Malays are also Muslims and that Islam is an intrinsic part of the Malay identity, has created a sense of wariness among the non-Malays in Singapore. By virtue of their religion, the Malays were believed to be put in a position of potential conflict between loyalty to the state and common bond with aggressors who are Muslims.

This perception, according to the ruling elite, should be looked at closely by the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), because Singapore as a country needed to be sure that it could depend wholeheartedly on its soldiers. In short, the Singapore's defence team needed to have soldiers who "*have no qualms about what they are fighting for.*"[25] Singapore's army leadership therefore could not and should not be putting any soldiers in a position where "*he feels he is not fighting a just cause, and perhaps worse, his side is not the right side...*"[26] The concerns of religion and its impact on the Singapore Malays has thus led to a very cautious approach in the recruitment and placement of Malays in the key defence teams of Singapore throughout the years.[27]

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[24] The Straits Times, "*Debate on Malays in SAF A Definite Plus*", 8 Mar 1987. This remark was made by Lee Hsien Loong who was at that point of time the Second Defence Minister (Services).

[25] The Straits Times, *"More Malays in Armed Forces Now*", 9 Mar 1987.

[26] Ibid.

[27] To combat the perceptions that there was no Malay involvement in SAF, the Singapore leadership explained that by the 1980s, there are more Malays being recruited into SAF, with a number being

In short, since the Malay identity is tied to the religious identity (of Islam), Singapore Malays, by virtue of this identity, is viewed suspiciously by the non-Malays.

The policy underlying restrictions of appointments of Malay Muslims in strategic positions in the defence and security of Singapore was once again brought to the fore in late 1990s. This is aptly illustrated in the response that the former Minister Mentor, made to a question posed by students attending the Singapore 21 Forum on whether certain instinctive emotional bonds among the ethnic groups could be overcome so that Singapore could become truly a nation.[28] The response put forth was that the Muslim's religious belief can put the Malays in a position of conflict with the interests of the nation. This view was again iterated during a dialogue session with Malay Muslim community leaders in 2001, when it was expressed that *"it is difficult matter to put a Malay Muslim of deeply religious family background in charge of a machine gun as he may face conflict of loyalties which should never have to be asked of anyone...for nearly every job, a person's race and religion are irrelevant. But in the security services, because of our current context, we cannot ignore race and religion in deciding suitability."*[29]

These perspectives underlie the understanding that there exists tension between what is viewed as state or national identity versus group identity, which in the case of the Malays, is an identity where the core identifiers includes a strong sense of Islamic

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assigned to Battalion Commandos. In addition, since Mar 1985, all eligible male Malay Muslim youths have been called up for National Service, unlike the early days where only selected male Malays were called up. The Straits Times, *"Frank Debate on Roles of Malays in SAF"*, 15 Apr 1987.

[28] This was mentioned in Noor Aisha's article *Issues on Islam and the Muslims In Singapore Post 9/11: An Analysis of Dominant Perspective*, p.7. National University of Singapore, 2009.

[29] Lee Kuan Yew, *Loyalty and the SAF*. Speech at Dialogue Session with AMP and Majlis Pusat, Parliament House Auditorium, Singapore, 3 Mar 2001.

identification. To the non-Malays particularly the ruling elite, the Singapore Malays'

loyalty to the state is questionable when they are faced with enemies that have the

same ethnic and religious background as them. This perspective reveals a strong

presumption that primordial bonds especially forged by religion, Islam, can override

loyalty to nation and state, and that irrespective of the plurality and diversity of the

Muslim communities and the consideration and motives of the enemies', the bond of

Islam is strong and unbroken.

Another factor underlying this perception that the Malays in Singapore will not

be loyal to the state when confronted by known enemies is the close ties that the

Malays have with other Malays from surrounding Southeast Asian region,

particularly those from neighbouring country Malaysia. In short, in times of trouble

in Singapore, the ruling elite assume that the Singapore Malays will not take up arms

and defend the country, and that the Malays will highly likely allow its group's

identity to determine its course of actions and behaviour.

This perception that the ruling elite possess towards the Singapore Malays, to an

extent, is not without reason. It has to be acknowledged that there is a *"psychological*

umbilical cord that binds [the] Malays to their ethno-religious brethren in this part of

the Malay Muslim World of Southeast Asia," which is to be expected since the

Singapore Malays do share a common history and cultural ties with the rest of the

Malays as part of the Malay world.[30] The ties between the Singapore Malays and the

Malay world are ties that emerged from shared historical experiences and religion.

The extremely close proximity of Singapore to the Malay dominated Malaysian

hinterland further made possible this close affinity. This closeness, in turn, added to the ruling elite fears of Singapore Malays' non-loyalty to the State.[31]

At the same time, the ruling elite in Singapore is also influenced by the past experiences of Singapore, for example the break-out of racial riots in Singapore that spilled over from racial tensions in neighbouring Malaysia.   These events are not only reminders of the fragility of the racial relationships among the ethnic communities in Singapore, but also highlighted the point that what happens in the neighbouring Malay-dominated Malaysia, to an extent, will influence the relationships among the ethnic groups in Singapore and also the views and feelings of the Singapore Malays and non-Malays alike.[32]

The concern of Malay loyalty was once again brought to the forefront when the Malay Muslim community displayed a very strong reaction to the visit made by the Israeli President, Chaim Herzog, to Singapore on 18th November 1986. According to Singapore's ruling elite, the strong negative reaction from the Malay community acted as *"a reminder that in certain circumstances the Malay Singaporeans reacted as Malay/Muslim than as a Singaporean."*[33] At the point of the Israeli President's visit to Singapore, there was a growing dissatisfaction among the Malay Muslims throughout the various parts of the world over Israeli's aggressive policies against the Palestinians, many of whom are also Christians. Hence when Singapore hosted the

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[30] Husin Mutalib, "Dilemmas of a Minority Community in a Secular, Modern City-State: The Case of Singapore Muslims", p.68.

[31] Ibid.

[32] The Straits Times, *"1969: Spillover of Malaysia Riots Killed Four,"*4 Jun 1987.

[33] The Straits Times, *"I hope so, but we ought to have a fallback position: PM",* 15 Dec 1986.

President's visit, the Malay Muslims in Singapore became unhappy and agitated with the decision made by the ruling elite to host Mr Mubarak. In fact, some quarters of the Singapore Malay Muslims overtly showed their unhappiness. For example the Singapore Malay National Organisation, an opposition political party in Singapore, openly demonstrated their dissatisfaction with Singapore's decision. Other Malay organisations voiced their unhappiness through letters to the Government's Feedback Unit and the Muslim Religious Council, MUIS, with one of the organisations even calling upon MUIS to take a firmer stand against the visit.[34]

The reactions of the Singapore Malays in turn triggered a questioning of their loyalty to Singapore. In fact, the Singapore ruling elite in the aftermath of the visit, posed the question as to whether in times of crisis would all Singaporeans including the Malay Muslims rally as one to defend the country. While the Singapore ruling elite shared that it was hopeful that Singaporeans would come together as one, nevertheless, in their pragmatic way, the leadership also shared that the Singapore government would need to have a "*fallback position and quickly fill up all the missing hearts if some go missing.*"[35] The outcome of the poll taken just after the Israeli President's visit further solidified the Singapore's ruling elite perceptions regarding

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[34] The Straits Times, "*Our Feelings Over Herzog Visit Not Sign of Loyalty,*" 17 Jan 1987. Other Malay organizations in Singapore similarly had strong reactions. Majlis Pusat, for instance, described the visit as an example of Government insensitivity to the feelings of the Malay Muslims in Singapore. Other bodies like the Singapore Chamber of Commerce and Jamiyah similarly asked that the Singapore government consider whether the visit would be really useful to Singapore especially given that the other ASEAN countries like Malaysia and Indonesia were unhappy with the visit.

[35] As articulated by the former Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, in the aftermath of the Israeli President's visit. The Straits Times, *"I Hope so, but We Ought to Have a Fallback Position,"* 15 Dec 1986. See also *Far Eastern Economic Review Asia*, 1998 Yearbook, p. 222.

the stiffening of attitudes of the Singapore Malays.[36] Prior to the visit by the Israeli President, 51 percent of the Muslim respondents in a private poll taken between 8th November and 11th November 1986 said that they were not against the visit. However in the second poll after the visit (taken between 19th November and 26th November), the figure of Singapore Malays who were not against the visit dropped to 29 percent, a drop of 22 percentage points. [37]

In short, the Herzog visit propelled the Singapore's ruling elite' concern about the Singapore Malays' response in times of events that impact Islam and the global Muslim communities, once again bringing forth questions of Malay loyalty towards Singapore.[38] In this particular case, the ruling elite noted that the Singapore Malays alongside the rest of the Muslim community viewed the aggressions of Israeli as an affront to the Muslim world, thereby resulting to the intense reaction among the Singapore Malays against anything to do with Israel.

The Malay community, on the other hand, saw their reactions towards the Herzog visit as simply an expression of their feedback and views over the visit, and also reflections of their dissatisfaction over Israel's aggressive policy over Muslims and others in the Middle East. It was an expression of humanitarianism towards the suffering of fellow Muslims, and not a representation of Malays' disloyalty to

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[36] The Straits Times, *"I Hope so, but We Ought to Have a Fallback Position*," 15 Dec 1986.

[37] Ibid.

[38] The aggression of Israel over Gaza in early 2009 is another example of how the Malay Muslims is affected by what happens to the global Muslim world. The anxiety and fears for the Muslims in Gaza are valid because of the deaths of many innocent victims particularly children, and many Muslims including Singapore Malay Muslims are disturbed by what is seen as inhumane treatments towards innocents. The Singapore Malays as part of the global Muslim world are similarly affected by the recent situation and their sympathies towards their Muslim brethrens in Gaza, is therefore natural and not unwarranted. Berita Harian, *"Khutbah Jumaat Gesa Tamatkan Keganasan"*, 10 Jan 2009.

Singapore. The counter-reaction of the non-Muslim communities and the ruling elite' perception which included questions of disloyalty to the country was therefore surprising to the Malay Muslim community.[39] To the Singapore Malays, the embracing of their cultural values which included their adherence to the requirements of the Islamic religion is part of what it means to be Malay. This sense of identity as Malay can coexist alongside their identification as citizens of a modern and forward looking country like Singapore. The Singapore Malays do not see a problem in "...*having a triple, inter-dependent identity: a Singaporean, Malay and a Muslim, all at the same time.*"[40] To them, this triple identity is part and parcel of their identity as an ethnic group and also as citizens of a country. More importantly, being Malay and Muslims and being closely linked to the Malay and Islamic world, will not affect their sense of loyalty towards the state. In short, the religious identity of the Singapore Malays need not be at odds with the duty to the nation.[41]

Generally, the Malays do not see any problem in recognising themselves as Singaporeans and a loyal subject of the country. Furthermore, they have accepted that the foundation of Singapore is that of a secular state, and while they are guided by Islam in their everyday life, being an Islamic follower and embracing Islamic identity, will not jeopardise their position as part of Singapore and its society.[42] In short, while the non-Malays including the country's ruling elite may view issues of ethnicity and especially religion as potential causes for Malay disloyalty towards

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[39] The Straits Times "*Our Feelings Over Herzog Visit Not Sign of Disloyalty*", 17 Jan 1987.

[40] Husin Mutalib, "Dilemmas of a Minority Community in a Secular, Modern City-State: The Case of Singapore Muslims", p.67.

[41] The Straits Times *"Religious loyalty need not be at odds with duty to the nation*", 18 Jan 1982.

Singapore, to the Singapore Malays themselves, there is no conflict in them being a Malay and Muslim, and also being a Singaporean.

Despite these sentiments expressed by the Malays, this perceived sense of Malay doubtful loyalty is a pervasive perception among the non-Malays particularly among the ruling elite, reflected through the many statements and responses towards what is perceived as the rise of Malay ethnic and religious identity. Overall, there is this strong presumption and understanding that regardless of the position taken by the Malays, such as they are loyal to the state and that they have no problem having a Malay Muslim identity and also an identity as Singapore citizens, the perceptions of the non-Malays as reflected by the ruling elite, is that the Malays will still react instinctively and will put their group identity, that as Malay and also a Muslim, in the forefront of their responses. This perception that the Malays are divided in their loyalty and that their identity as Malay and Muslim takes precedence has led to rising sentiments that the Singapore Malays are not fully absorbed and integrated into the mainstream of life in the country. This in turn has affected the way the ruling elite respond and react to issues governing the Malay community, particularly on issues that relate to national integration and social cohesion in the country.

The rising trend of global Islamic resurgence that can be traced back to the 1980s further added to the concerns of the Singapore Malays' isolation from mainstream life in Singapore. Views expressed to the effect that they are aloof, not integrated into community activities at grassroots level, and lack of participation in areas of national life in the country, have been alluded to. For example, in the late 1980s, there was a concern by the ruling government that the Singapore Malays were keeping to

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[42] The Straits Times, "*Muslims here accept secular society foundation,*" Apr 1986.

themselves in housing estates, and that '*this trend cannot be encouraged in order to ensure unity among ethnic groups'.*[43] This sense of the Malays not being part of national life further came to the government's attention when the results of the 1988 general election indicated that the support from the Malays had decreased significantly. This, in turn, raised further doubt about the Malays position in the country, which was clearly articulated in the National Day rally speech where it was stated that *"...being part of the mainstream really boiled down to the question of one's feelings and emotions as Singaporeans, not the amount of money or status which one has. In your heart, you must feel you are a Singaporean."* [44] By this statement, the implication is that the ruling elite viewed that the Singapore Malays are not yet in the national mainstream and that they are also not emotionally grounded as Singapore citizens.

The Malays' increased involvement in mosque activities and other religious based institutions over the years, similarly led to a perception of an increased religiosity among the Malay. The ruling elite perceived that the Malays are becoming stricter in their way of life and following closely Islamic guidelines, reflected in their observance of food restrictions and other taboos, dress and lifestyle. All this are viewed as factors causing the segregation of the Malay community, and prevented them from fostering greater interactions with the non-Malay communities. The increasing assertion of the Islamic sense of identity has therefore led to an even greater sense of wariness regarding the Malay's position, and it is generally viewed

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[43] Berita Harian, *"Kelompok Kaum Wujud di Estet Perumahan,"* 7 Jan 1989.

[44] The Straits Times, *"Malays will be in the national mainstream in one generation,"* 18 Aug 1987.

that such assertions of Malay Muslim identity is contrary to the state's intent that its citizens' *"adopt mainstream national values, and perspectives in their life pursuits."*[45] This sense of wariness towards the Singapore Malay community and the belief in their inability to be fully integrated to Singapore, has once again taken centrestage with the recent publication of the former Minister Mentor's book *"Hard Truths: To Keep Singapore Going."*[46] This book cited similar concerns like those raised in the past about the Malays' inability to be fully absorbed and integrated to Singapore, which is the result of rising religiosity. In short, the Singapore Malays being Muslims are distinct and separate.[47]

The belief in the Islamic community, *Ummah,* a global community of Muslims, has also been viewed by the ruling elite as a potential source of discord for the sense of loyalty to Singapore. It is believed that the *Ummah* will govern the behaviours of Muslims all around the world, and hence in situations where Islam is involved, there is always this possibility that the Singapore Malays will choose their religion, Islam, over their loyalty to their home country, Singapore. This perspective implies the homogeneity of the Muslims as a community and negates the presence of differences of opinions, ideologies, worldview, politics and vested interest that affects the community. It also overlooks internal dynamics and plurality of a community, and fails to recognise that within the Muslim community or *Ummah*, there exists

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[45] Husin Mutalib, "Dilemmas of a Minority Community in a Secular, Modern City-State: The Case of Singapore Muslims", p.67.

[46] Lee Kuan Yew, *Hard Truths To Keep Singapore Going*. Straits Times Press, Singapore, 2011.

[47] Examples like Malays being too concerned over their choice of food making it difficult for them to freely mingle and interact with non-Malay Muslims, as well as becoming too involved in religious activities and hence more involved in mosques, are cited as examples of Malay exclusivity. Ibid.

contesting groups influenced by its own motivations, interest and agendas, and that the Singapore Malays as part of the Muslim community thus have to be discerning in accepting and knowing what is appropriate according to Islamic teachings.

Despite this, the non-Muslims Singaporeans including the ruling elite continue to adhere to the notion of the *Ummah* as a common thread that binds the Malay Muslims to one another. This belief in the influence of the *Ummah* in governing the behaviours of the Singapore Malay Muslims, for example, is reflected in the perception of a political elite over the issue of how the Malay press handled the massacres of the Chinese in Indonesia in 1998. He highlighted that while the Chinese press gave full coverage to the gruesome massacres in Indonesia the Malay press was awkward and played down the racial aspects, hinting at a sense of identification between Singapore Malays and their non-Chinese Indonesian counterparts. As for the strong reaction of the overseas Chinese over the massacres, he maintained that the reaction of the overseas Chinese was a natural display of human emotion and a humanitarian reaction against oppression.[48]

In expressing that humanitarianism is the reason for why overseas Chinese reacted strongly against the happenings in Indonesia, this political elite overlooks the fact that this concern on grounds of humanitarianism has also been the grounds for why the Malay Muslims were against the visit by the Israelis President in the late 1980s. Yet, this understanding that the Singapore Malay reactions over the Herzog visit has been due to humanitarian grounds has little bearing on the perspectives of

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[48] The comments were made by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, George Yeo, and cited in Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, *Issues on Islam and the Muslims in Singapore Post 9/11: An Analysis of Dominant Perspective*, p.4. National University of Singapore, 2009.

the ruling elite when confronted with issues relating to the Malay Muslims in Singapore. Overall, there exists this tension between the state viz. ruling elite (in turn the non-Malay populace) and the identity of the Singapore Malays as Malay and Muslim, and this tension is aptly noted by a scholar who maintains that:

> *"...while the Muslims [in Singapore] do not see any contradiction in being a Singaporean with a Muslim orientation, the statements and policies of the government, however indicate, that it has had some difficulties to countenance such a Muslim aspiration and worldview."[49]*

In response to the perceptions and wariness among the non-Malays, particularly the ruling political elite, towards their position and loyalty to the country, the Singapore Malays guided by the Malay elite, reacted in a manner where they became very upfront with regards to their sense of loyalty. The constant articulation of Malay loyalty is reflected in many examples. One example is the Malay elite response to the ruling elite explanation regarding the lack of involvement of Malays in the Armed Forces. Following the explanation of the ruling elite, the Malay elite, as one, verbally expressed that the Singapore Malays are loyal to Singapore. *Majlis Pusat*, for instance came out and articulated the following statement: *"Malays' loyalty to Singapore should never be in doubt. Singapore is our country. We have nowhere else to go, and it is now up to others to accept this reality."* [50] Similar iterations of Malay loyalty and commitment to Singapore were also made by the rest of the Malay elite, and overall, there was a call for the ruling elite in Singapore to trust and accept that the Singapore Malays, like every other Singapore citizens, is part of Singapore and belongs to the country. This sense of belonging, according to the Malay elite,

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[49] Husin Mutalib, "Dilemmas of a Minority Community in a Secular, Modern City-State: The Case of Singapore Muslims", p.67.

[50] Majlis Pusat was one of the more influential social-civic organisations in the 1970s. See The Straits Times, *"Majlis Pusat: Do Not Distort Position of Malays in Singapore,"* Mar 1987.

will occur as the Singapore Malays, just like the rest of the citizens in the country, has a stake in the country, and that being able to be involved in the country's defence will further propel their sense of belonging.[51]

In essence, the statements and assertions made by the Malay elite when the issue of Malays' limited inclusion in the armed forces occurred are intended to show that the Malays without doubt, are loyal to the country notwithstanding their identity as Malay and Muslim. Yet, in so doing, the Malay elite to an extent, has perpetuated the perceptions and sentiments of the ruling elite, viz. the Singapore Malays' loyalty are questionable, which in the first place, has never taken place and should not even be questioned at all. The constant iteration of Malay loyalty has the unintended effect of ensuring that the question of Malay disloyalty continues to linger in the minds of the ruling elite.

Similarly, to negate the perception of a lack of Malay participation in grassroots activities, and that the Malays are not serious in integrating in mainstream life, the Malay elite quickly enjoined the Malays to be more active and to volunteer more of their time to such organisations and institutions so as to reach out to the wider Singapore community. Indeed, over the years, there has been significant effort on the parts of the Singapore Malay community to be more involved in mainstream activities, while maintaining its Malay identity. [52] It can be said that the Malay community, as a whole, has been conscious about their place in Singapore, and that as part of a multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-religious society, the community

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[51] The Straits Times, *"Malay MPs Give their Vocal Best on Issue of Malays in the SAF,"* Apr 1987.

[52] See articles like The Straits Times, *Muslims go all out to mix with others* , 10 Oct 2002. The Straits Times, Bonding a vital part of Malays' success, 19 Oct 2002.

understand that it has to be able to balance its identity as Malay and Muslim with the demands of being part of the Singapore populace.

Hence, it is not surprising that the Malay community overall, has made many efforts to be integrated and be part of the Singapore community. It is therefore understandable that the Malay community have had such a strong reaction to the recent articulations made by the former Minister Mentor regarding the limited integration of the Singapore Malays to Singapore. The Malay community, led by its Malay elite, by and large disagreed with the views that it is difficult for the Malays to integrate, and be part of the Singapore communities. To many, the Singapore Malays are integrated and able to reside harmoniously with the non-Malay communities in Singapore. More significantly, the Malays believed that their religion, Islam, does not hinder them from being a good Singaporean. This has been aptly articulated by MUIS who stated that integration is accepted and recognised as an important tenet in the growth and development of a country, and that the Malays as part of multi-cultural and multi-racial Singapore, constantly plays its part in ensuring that this is achieved. In fact, it is within Islamic teachings that its followers work towards integrating and being part of society.[53] This belief is also echoed by other Malay organisations and many cited the numerous efforts and initiatives put in place that engenders active involvement in mainstream activities.[54]

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[53] Berita Harian, *MUIS: "Integrasi Sejajar Dengan Islam, diterima Muslim Singapura"*, 28 Jan 2011.

[54] MENDAKI, for example, cited examples of its collaboration with non-Malay organisations in its socio-economic initiatives. AMP and PPIS also cited similar activities and initiatives. In short, through all these initiatives and activities, the Malay community is actively working and collaborating with non-Malay Singaporeans. Berita Harian, "*Badan Melayu/Islam Hargai Penjelasan dan Jaminan PM Lee",* 1 February 2011.

Although the sentiments of the former Minister Mentor has been explained as personal opinions derived from his past experiences and that the ruling elite, by and large, is not in tandem with his views[55], the fact is that the sentiments that have been articulated, reflect a persistent continuation of wariness about the Malays, particularly the fears of Islamic religiosity clouding the Malays' ability to promote and protect social cohesion in Singapore. As a respected leader and prominent member of the political elite, the former Minister Mentor's views and perceptions do bear significant weight, which may potentially cause distrust and dissension among the Singapore communities, and this is something that the Prime Minister wants Singapore to be mindful off. While he admitted that religion is an important part of Malay identity and that the Malays' are now more religiously inclined, this is a global phenomenon that affects not just the Malay community, but also other communities where there are more fervent religious believers. This development, however, should not disrupt the efforts towards maintaining social cohesion and integration, particularly in a country that is as diverse as Singapore.[56]

The latest development in Singapore showcases the fragility of social cohesion and national integration, and that the Singapore Malays in shaping its identity, is constantly influenced by such developments. Such developments also affect the way the Malay elite formulate their responses towards challenges to the Malay identity. As mentioned, to combat the perception of the Malay community's lack of integration

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[55] Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong acknowledged that the Malay community, has over the years, been making laudable efforts in integrating with other communities in Singapore, and that he believed that the Malay community recognised the importance of being part of Singapore, and socially cohesive with the rest of the communities. Berita Harian, "*PM: Pendirian Pemerintah tak Sama MM Lee*", 31 January 2011.

[56] Berita Harian, "*PM: Pendirian Pemerintah tak Sama MM Lee*", 31 January 2011.

and involvement in mainstream, the Malay elite had constantly attempted to increase Malays' involvement in mainstream activities. While such efforts have helped to increase Malays' involvement in different activities, and subsequently are able to be cited as examples of integration to refute the recent sentiments of non-integration, these acts unfortunately supported the assertions of the ruling elite that the Malays are not integrating fully in mainstream life, and that in order to be fully seen as a Singaporean, more Malays need to participate in mainstream activities and not confined themselves primarily to religious or ethnically inclined activities.

This reaction of the Malay elite, according to a scholar, Syed Hussein Alatas, is not reflective of the true situation because the *"...Malays had, for generation, been in the national mainstream, otherwise they wouldn't be where they are today."* [57] He further stated that the Malays' limitations were in specific areas, like that of economic mainstream such as banking and finance, but this lack should not be seen as if the Malay community were living on the fringe of the society. He thus was of the view that while there were areas in which the Malays were behind the rest of the Singapore communities, overall the Malays had always been part of Singapore, and had always been loyal subjects of the country, and fully trying to integrate and carry on life as a Singaporean.[58] Another scholar opined that the Malay community need not feel apologetic for being a good Muslim and that *'Muslims sticking strictly to the rules of Islam must never feel that they have to apologise for doing so, and non-Muslims should not punish them to be less devout because of fear that they may religious*

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[57] The Straits Times, "*Malays Have Always Been in Mainstream,*" Jul 1987.

[58] Ibid.

extremists.'[59] In short, being a good Muslim does not equate to being a bad Singaporean.

Despite the sentiments among the Malay community that they can go about maintaining their identity as Malay while being Singaporean, it is a fact that the perceived tension between state identity and ethnic identity remains a constant, and this is a fact that the Singapore ruling elite has always been mindful off. This perception has been exacerbated by incidences involving Muslims bearing on integration. One of the more recent examples is in the controversy surrounding the right of the Malay Muslims to wear the *tudung* (Muslim headscarves) that took place in 2002. The incident revolved around four Malay families who insisted that their seven year old daughters be allowed to wear the *tudung* to their primary school. This was despite the presence of a rule stipulating that the wearing of *tudung* or other symbolic religious articles are not permissible in secular schools in Singapore. The parents of these four girls however were adamant that their daughters be allowed to wear the *tudung* because they believed that the wearing of the *tudung* is a religious obligation, which their daughters should adhere to.   Although they recognised that the Singapore's education system disallow *tudung* wearing in schools, in their perspective, they were simply trying to fulfil their religious obligations as a Muslim, and that they should not have to choose education over their religious obligations – in short, Singapore should allow them to practice their religion and at the same time, provide their children the opportunity to receive a good education.   In the words of

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[59] As mentioned by Syed Farid Alatas during a talk organised by the Inter-Racial Confidence Circle, 27 Oct 2002. See The Straits Times, "*Don't Apologise for Being Devout, says don*", Straits Times, 28 Oct 2002.

one of the girl's father, *"I value education as much as they [the rest of Singapore] do. But my religion is important to me as education. Why do I have to choose between them?"*[60]

The *tudung* incident highlights the presence of differing views within the Malay Muslim community regarding the interpretation and practice of Islam, and that conflict, between the demands of everyday living and requirements in Islam can occur, depending on the understanding and interpretations of its believers. In the case of these four Malay families, they interpreted the religious obligation of *tudung* wearing as one that is applicable to their daughters from a young age, and also at all times. Their religious understanding also governs their behaviour such that they are prepared to go against set rules and guidelines within society. In so doing, they adopted to put forth their assertions of religiosity strongly, illustrated in their demands that their daughters be allowed to wear the *tudung* even though this is disallowed in schools.

Although it involved a small group of Muslims, the confrontational stance it adopted resulted in strong reactions from the non-Muslim communities including the ruling elite. It was generally perceived as reflection of the existence of religious fundamentalism and radicalisation of the Malays in Singapore and an example of an assertion of identity that posed a challenge to racial harmony and social cohesion. As opined in a media report, this one single act of the girls wearing *tudung* to schools

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[60] Seth Mydan *"Singapore School Dress Code Alienates Muslims"*, New York Times, 27 Feb 2002.

was portrayed by the media as *"the most potent act of civil disobedience...which has hardly been seen in years [in Singapore]."*[61]

The concern of the ruling elite over the impact of this *tudung* controversy on racial harmony and social cohesion in Singapore was clearly articulated during a dialogue session at the MENDAKI Club in 2002, where the former Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, iterated the following:

> *"...they [the girls and families] should understand that Singapore's leaders were trying to build a harmonious multi-racial, multi-religious society by maximising what is called 'common space'. Schools make up this common space . . . when religious studies were introduced in schools in the 1980s, the Government found that they encouraged segregation of students along religious lines. The moral of the lesson? Singapore has been functioning this way for many many years. Students don't wear headscarf in school. It has worked, I think better don't change it."[62]*

The *tudung* issue also generated dissenting comments from within the Malay community, largely from a small group of Malays active in cyberspace. This group of Malay individuals had its own website, Fateha.com, which acted as an outlet for its members, and also non-members alike, to voice their opinions and concerns on both local and international matters, particularly on socio-political issues.   It also provided the online community with a source of additional news information culled from internal newspapers, magazines and wire sources.[63] What sets this website apart was the tone and language of its commentaries and postings. Often the postings were blunt with little mincing of words regardless whether the targets were local politicians, foreign powers or even the local newspapers.[64]   Fateha.com, hence

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[61] Seth Mydan *"Singapore School Dress Code Alienates Muslims"*, New York Times, 27 Feb 2002.

[62] The Straits Times, *"PM Firm on Tudung Issue"*, 3 Feb 2002.

[63] The Straits Times, "*Fateha Who? Muslim Group Draws Fire"*, 22 Jan 2002.

[64] Ibid.

became a *"sintercom of the local Muslim community – a magnet for the young and restless who are plugged into the Internet world, critical of government policies and wanting the government to change, but not so critical as to want to change the government."*[65]

During the *tudung* incident there were many web postings and commentaries on the 'no- tudung' ruling with its then leader, Zulfikar being the most vocal in questioning this ban. As expressed by him:

> *"The only way to achieve harmony is to respect each other and each other's customs. When you deny the rights of one group to practice their religion, you harden the distrust."* [66]

He also argued that the government's refusal to allow Muslim girls to wear the *tudung* in national schools is an act of forcing them to go against the requirement of Islam. Zulfikar's cry of government's intolerance to the rights of the Malays to practice their Islamic religion was not dampened by his departure from *Fateha*. He continued to champion the *tudung* issue as avidly as he had done before. This was reflected by his action of taking the issue to Malaysia where he spoke about the ban to a number of Islamic groups and stated that that the ban on the *tudung* was by no means confined to primary schools in Singapore, and in fact, the Singapore's ruling elite had enforced this ban for many years. When interviewed by the media as to why he brought the *tudung* issue outside of Singapore, he explained that the *tudung* issue is an Islamic one and therefore need not be confined locally to Singapore. He stated further that:

> *"This is not about politics. This is about religion. I am doing this for the Muslim community in Singapore. In Islam, if you see something is wrong, you have an obligation to stop it with your mouth, your hands, and your head or with an action. If you see*

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[65] The Straits Times, *"Fateha Who? Muslim Group Draws Fire"*, 22 Jan 2002.

[66] Seth Mydan *"Singapore School Dress Code Alienates Muslims,"* New York Times, 27 Feb 2002.

something wrong and do not do anything about it, you are only showing the lowest level of faith."[67]

Generally the Malay elite in Singapore criticised the positions taken by the Fateha.com group, in particular that of Zulfikar's act to support to the four families' confrontational stance and defiance of the school rules. In contrast to the confrontational approach, the Malay elite took the stance that it was necessary for the Malay community to engage in a dialogue and discussion regarding all matters including those surrounding the practice of the Islamic religion. As expressed by the Malay Members of Parliament, *"the issue of female Muslim students wearing head scarves in national schools must be approached carefully balancing community concerns against national interests."* [68] They also went on to state that:

> *"The negotiation for space between a community and the Government has to take place as part of a gradual process... Religious freedom has to be guided by a greater need for integration and racial and religious understanding and tolerance."*[69]

The stand taken by the Malay elite regarding the *tudung* problem showed that they were very much guided by the objective to maintain religious and racial harmony in Singapore, and the need to balance the religious needs of the Malays with that of the larger Singapore community. Their firm stand on the '*no-tudung*' policy in schools reflected that they recognised the importance of maintaining the neutrality of the 'common space' in schools and ensuring that the students are able to continue with their education without being side-tracked by racial and religious tensions. The comments made by the then Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs, Abdullah Tarmugi exemplified the leadership's position:

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[67] Streats, *"Zulfikar takes tudung issue across the causeway,"* Feb 2002.

[68] The Sunday Times, *"Malay MPs call for careful approach to tudung issue,"* 27 Jan 2002.

"No one was stopping Muslim girls from wearing the 'hijab' (viz. head scarf) outside school hours. So really, we're talking about that period of school, secular school at that. If you look at it from that perspective, you can see how we've tried to balance these needs and the greater good of society." [70]

Another Malay elite, during an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation on 8 Feb 2002 stated that:

"*Sikhs can wear turbans in national schools because of a colonial legacy that is one of the historical anomalies of a young nation. Anomalies also exist in the Muslim community. Muslim civil servants, for example, get time off for Friday prayers because of the Government's respect for Islam. Such anomalies have not dampened integration and should not be changed . . . . If we allow one community to express that identity [now], then other communities will also ask for it, and we will heighten the differences… As the Prime Minister said, this policy is not hard and fast. It will change with time as we begin to understand better how we can bring the different communities together at a very young age. Changes cannot be made overnight. It's a matter of how best the communities begin to accept each other and integrate harmoniously.*"[71]

In essence, the reaction of the Malay elite to the *tudung* issue has been to adopt a peaceful approach rather than a confrontational one. In doing so, the Malay elite are reasserting the identity of the Malays as a group of people who are able to balance their religious lifestyle with the demands of a modern Singapore society. However, the fundamental fact that Singaporean Muslims differed on the issue even based on theological interpretations of Islamic guideline with regards to the *tudung* has not been dealt in substantial depth by the Malay elite. For example, the Malay elite failed to highlight that the majority of Muslims who believed in wearing the *tudung,* had all along been acceptable of the school policy on uniform. That is, unlike the four Malay families and its small group of supporters, the majority of the Singapore Malays are able to express their identity as a Malay and Muslim, while honouring the rules

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[69] The Sunday Times, *"Malay MPs call for careful approach to tudung issue,"* 27 Jan 2002.

[70] Ibid.

[71] The Straits Times, "*Common uniform policy strengthens national unity,*" 9 Feb 2002. This statement was made by Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, the current Minister in Charge of Muslim Affairs.

underlying this national institution. Failure to put forth this alternative view lends credence to the perception that Islamic position on this issue is absolute and homogenous. It also creates a missed opportunity to iterate the fact that religion can be appropriated by groups to suit their needs, for example, politically motivated groups using religion to promote their cause, and that one could not simplistically concludes that religious precepts sanction politicisation and radicalism. Instead, diversities in opinions and actions should be accounted for.[72] This failure for clearer explanations has thus perpetuated the dominant perception among the non-Malays in Singapore that Islam is a hindrance in the integration of the Malay Muslims into Singapore. To an extent, the recent sentiments about Malays, Islam and integration, can be said to have been facilitated by the failure of the Malay community, particularly its elite, to engage in open dialogues and discussions about the Malay community - its identity as Malay and Muslim, with sensitive issues like social cohesion, national integration, and racial harmony.

Another example illustrating the perception that the Singapore Malays are not able to be part of the mainstream and integrate into the Singapore landscape, is seen in the reactions over the *madrasah* system of education in Singapore. As mentioned in chapter three, the *madrasah* is an important part of the religious landscape in Singapore as it provides the community with a place for the learning of Islamic religion. Unlike the modern secular schools, i.e. national schools in Singapore, the

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[72] Noor Aisha also stated that there is failure to significantly address issues that occurred as a result of the tudung incident, for example, there is no attempt to deal with the argument that acceptance and tolerance for diversity begins in school, it deflects the question of how clothes one wear impedes negatively on common space etc. For more details, refer to Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, *Issues on Islam and the Muslims in Singapore Post 9/11: An Analysis of Dominant Perspective*. National University of Singapore, 2009.

madrasahs' main thrust is Islamic education and its educational system is aimed at *'socialising students into Islam.'*[73] Hence, although its curriculum included general academic subjects like those taught in the Singapore national schools such as Mathematics and English, the concentration on these subjects are significantly lesser compared to the Islamic subjects.[74]

A comparison of student enrolment in the full time *madrasah* versus the national schools would show that the numbers of Malays being enrolled in the *madrasah* is still significantly lesser than those studying in the national schools. Nonetheless a smaller number of students' enrolment does not infer that there is no room for *madrasah's* education in the lives of the Singapore Malays. In fact, interest in religious education among the Singapore Malays has never waned, and being schooled in *madrasah* is recognised as the means to provide young Malays with a foundation in religious knowledge.

More significantly, *madrasah* often acts as the training ground for those who want to embark on a religious profession. Many of the *asatizah* (religious teachers) and religious scholars in Singapore are first trained in *madrasah* before moving on to Islamic universities in the Arab countries. Following the shift in the socio-cultural and religious life of the Singapore Malays in the recent years, more and more Malay families started seeing the *madrasah* as an alternative form of education for the younger generation of Malay Muslims. Indeed, as early as the mid 1980s, a larger number of Malay families started sending their children to the *madrasah,* an

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[73] Mukhlis Abu Bakar, "Between State Interests and Citizen Rights: Whither the Madrasahs?", p.31.

[74] Azhar Ibrahim, "An Evaluation of Madrasah Education: Perspectives and Lessons from the Experiences of Some Muslim Societies", p.93.

indication of the resurgence of *madrasah* education in Singapore.[75] There are many reasons for why Malay families send their children to *madrasah*. Among the reasons is the desire to see their children become religious scholars or teachers, while others want their children to have a balanced education in the sphere of religion and secular subjects. There are also other families who want their children to have the freedom to practice their religious obligations like performing the prayers as well as to practice a particular code of modesty as required in Islam, and the *madrasah* are seen as being able to provide this freedom to their children.[76]

Whatever the reasons, the resurgence of interests in *madrasah* education occurred at the same time where there is an increasing trend towards Islamic revivalism as well as the scare towards secularism. As noted by a scholar:

> *"The phenomenon of revivalism manifested itself, among other ways, in proliferation of Muslim academics who questioned the basis of Western knowledge as secular and who attempted to integrate knowledge based on an "Islamic perspective." They constituted part of the wider ideological movement against Westernisation, secularism and science in the name of Islamic religion. The religious elite's constant emphasis through the media and sermons that knowledge of Islam is the only way to ensure morality of Muslim youths and to insulate them from the negative consequences of social ills, such as delinquency, teenage pregnancies, drug additions and other decadent lifestyles, may have also influenced more parents into believing that madrasah education can provide their children with a strong religious foundation to counter the negative influences, at the same time provide them with skills and knowledge for the economy."[77]*

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[75] In 1986, there were 135 Primary 1 pupils enrolled in the various *madrasahs* and by 1994, there was almost 400 students registered for Primary 1. Also, the total number of student population in 2001 more than doubled the population of 2,000 in 1991. Mukhlis Abu Bakar, "Between State Interests and Citizen Rights: Whither the Madrasahs?", p.35.

[76] Ibid, p.39.

[77] Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman "The Aims of Madrasah Education in Singapore: Problems and Perceptions," p. 66.

This increasing popularity of the *madrasah* among the Singapore Malays has unwittingly brought the *madrasah* under the scrutiny of the ruling elite.[78]   The concerns that the ruling elite have with this resurgence of *madrasah's* education is closely intertwined with the issue of national integration. To the ruling elite, it is critical that all the communities in Singapore have an understanding of the common goals and objectives of the country and worked hand in hand towards achieving these goals and objectives. One of the ways towards integrating the Malays into the mainstream and encouraging closer interactions with the other races is through a national school education.   The ruling elite believed that national schools are the building block towards national integration as this is where young Singaporeans of all races learned to interact with one another and start to build up relationships and understanding of one another.   The Singapore Malays by favouring *madrasah* education and not national schools hence is putting forth the message that they wish to be exclusive and not interested to be part of the national integration process of Singapore.   The homogenous environment in the *madrasah* is seen as further perpetuating exclusiveness as most of the students of *madrasah* are typically of the same race and religion.

The other concern that the ruling elite have with regards to *madrasah* education is related to the educational curricula of the *madrasah.* The *madrasah* are seen as not being able to equip the younger generation of Malays with adequate skills and

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[78] The ruling leadership had raised concerns over the madrasah education on several occasions and in following the government's concern, Mendaki did a study to assess the reasons for the greater enrolment in madrasahs and also the career paths of madrasah students. Throughout 1999, the issue of madrasah were raised in various discussions by senior political leaders.   See Husin Mutalib, "Dilemmas of a Minority Community in a Secular, Modern City-State: The Case of Singapore Muslims", p.74.

abilities to participate fully into the demands of a Singapore society and the world economic situation. The concern of ruling elite towards the *madrasah* education is succinctly summarised as follows:

> *"As an alternative education system within the educational landscape of Singapore, the madrasah is perceived as not being in sync with the demands of a modern society undergoing radical and rapid economic and social transformation. While globalisation and economic restructuring has given rise to serious reflections on and changes to the general aims and conditions of national education [in Singapore], the madrasah, existing apart from mainstream national education, is perceived to be isolated from these broad currents of educational thinking and reform that put a high premium on knowledge, skill and talent."[79]*

There is also this fear among the ruling elite that the young Malays who are part of the *madrasah* system, will not be able to keep pace with the development of the rest of the youths in the national schools. This fear is further compounded by the large number of school drop-outs from the *madrasahs.* An average of 40 to 65 percent of *madrasah* students did not make it to Secondary 4, and without the requisite secondary education, former *madrasah* students found difficulties in entering workforce given their lack of skills and abilities. At the same time, former *madrasah* students who wish to continue their studies in the national schools such as the technical institutions in Singapore, also face difficulties in doing so because they did not have the necessary requisites to enter these technical institutions in

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[79] Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Lai Ah Heng, *Securalism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore*, p.1.

Singapore.[80]   Hence, the opportunity for them to attain vocational skills which will allow them to be equipped for blue-collar jobs is closed off, in turn preventing them from being able to compete effectively in the job market.

There have been attempts to try and turn the *madrasahs* into a more effective school that will support national integration. As defined by the ruling elite, the Malay elite particularly the religious elite worked towards establishing a *madrasah* school system that provides a dual educational system, namely religious and secular education. For example, in the blueprint of National Madrasah Education System, it has been categorically stated that national education will be part of the new curriculum for all *madrasahs*. National Education is an important component in national schools aimed at inculcating a sense of oneness and shared belonging as Singaporeans. In articulating that National Education will be part of the *madrasah's* schooling system, the message put forth is that *madrasah* students will similarly be aligned with the national school going children in having a strong sense of national identity and social responsibility.[81]   The contents of the textbooks used in the *madrasah* also portrayed the multi ethnicity and religiosity facets of Singapore. Also, as mentioned in chapter three, several other changes to the *madrasahs'* curriculum had taken place, in response to the national directive put in place in 2003. In more recent years, to further ensure that the *madrasah* are able to continue to remain in existence, a Joint Madrasah System was mooted in late 2007 with implementation in

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[80] Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Lai Ah Heng, *Securalism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore*, p.1.

[81] Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman "The Aims of Madrasah Education in Singapore: Problems and Perceptions," p. 74.

2009. Under this system the *madrasah* will have its own specialisation in subject contents, while allowing them to focus on either primary or secondary education.[82] Through this initiative, the *madrasahs* hoped to show that its educational system is comparable to the secular schools, and that its students had the benefits of a balanced education that provides them not only with secular knowledge, but more importantly with religious knowledge.

Overall, the religious elite in *madrasah* are fully supportive of the initiatives to revamp the *madrasah* curriculum to include more secular subjects, and as a show of their support and willingness to be integrated with the national schools, the *madrasah* officials sought training by the Ministry of Education on the pedagogy and philosophy of teachings. This is intended to ensure that the teachers in *madrasah* are as well trained as the national school teachers, and follow the same pedagogical techniques and approaches as the mainstream teachers. This acts as a guarantee that the experience of the Malay Muslims students in *madrasah,* to a large extent, will be similar to that experienced by the Malay Muslims and non-Malays in the national schools.[83]

Therefore in response to the non-Muslim concerns about the *madrasah* system, there is now greater effort to include national curriculum and secular subjects into the *madrasah.* Unfortunately, in doing this, there is the possibility of the *madrasah* failing to adequately fulfil its basic objective as *madrasah* schools, namely to produce

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[82] In the first phase of the Joint Madrasah System (JMS), three madrasahs are involved, viz. Madrasah Al-Irsyad, Aljunied and Al-Arabiah. Al-Irsyad will focus on primary education, Aljunied will focus on Islamic education at the secondary level, while Al-Arabiah will focus on secular education at the academic level. See Berita Harian, *"Pendidikan Madrasah Diselaras"*, 27 Oct 2007.

[83] Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman "The Aims of Madrasah Education in Singapore: Problems and Perceptions," p. 83.

Muslim religious teachers/scholars whose presence is to guide the community in the domain of religion. Integrating the *madrasah* into mainstream education system dilutes the focus of religious education from the madrasah, and more pertinently places an added burden on the students who had to tackle both Islamic and secular subjects. This may eventually lead to an outcome where the *madrasah* students are not able to adequately excel in their studies, be it the religious education or the secular education.

This chapter has attempted to show that Singapore Malays are not isolated from the process and conditions of identity formation within the larger socio-economic context in which they exist. Their cultural identity provides the anchorage for direction in the midst of rapid social change and economic development that has characterised modern Singapore. However, an integral aspect of their identity, Islam and how it is practised has remained under critical spotlight in the discourse on the Malays and national integration. While geo-politics predating independence has conditioned the concern, a segment of Muslims' response to change in the midst of the emergence of religious resurgence since the 1980s has exacerbated it. Muslims' religiosity as manifested by various religious practices, the *tudung* in school incident as well as demand for madrasah education have been problematised as manifestations of the problems of integration and social cohesion conditioned by the Malay identity. How the Malays themselves perceive their identity and the extent of conflict with being Singaporean has also been examined. This chapter also reveals that while attempting to resolve problems of perception centring on Malay identity and national integration, Malay elite themselves are not unfettered by the same understanding.

CHAPTER SIX: ISLAM AND MALAY MUSLIM IDENTITY POST SEPTEMBER 11TH

This chapter seeks to examine the understanding and perception of the ruling elite towards the Islamic element of Malay identity, that is, how they view Muslim identity particularly after September 11th 2001. It also seeks to analyse Singapore's Malay Muslim elite' understanding of their identity as revealed in their response to the discourse. This particular topic warrants an examination on its own because of the immense writings and reactions pertaining to Malay/Islamic identity that has occurred after September 11th.

Post 9/11 discourse on the Malays and Islam reveals an overriding tendency to view Islam as inextricably intertwined with the problems of radicalism, terrorism and all other negative-isms that border on violence. Following the September 11th incident, Islam has became the major consideration in the many discussions regarding terrorism. This has exacerbated problems of perception of the Malay identity and its impact on social cohesion and national integration. This particular perception that the problems of terrorism and violence is a problem conditioned by interpretations of Islam has influenced the thought of the non-Malays in Singapore, in turn impacting upon how identification of Malays as Singaporeans are viewed, as well as the type of strategies and measures that have been adopted to maintain the stability of this multi-religious and multi-cultural nation state. However, before we move on to examine the impact of September 11 and its aftermath on the understanding and perceptions of Malay Muslim identity in Singapore it would be useful for us to have an overview of the event that shook the United States of America and the world.

September 11th Attack

On September 11th 2001, the United States of America suddenly found itself under attack following the crashing of hijacked aeroplanes into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon which resulted in the loss of thousand of lives. This attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon was shocking and unexpected as it has never been seen to be possible that the world superpower, the United States of America, could be the target of such a devastating tragedy. Even more shocking was the discovery that the attacks have been masterminded by a group of Muslims who were a part of a terrorist global Muslim organisation known as Al-Qaeda.

The attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon, is indeed a historical event as it affected not just the United States, but also had widespread ramifications all over the world including the Muslim communities. For the non-Muslims especially those residing in the Western countries, many began to fear the threat of terrorist attacks conducted by Muslims.[1] There emerged the belief that the act was conditioned by Muslims' hatred for the non-Muslims particularly the Americans. In fact, in the aftermath of September 11, the question *of "Why do they [Muslims] hate us?"* was raised over and over again, especially following the depth of hatred shown and expressed by Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda followers, along with scenes of Arabs celebrating in the streets in the aftermath of the terror attacks.[2] There was

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[1] Bernard T.Adeney-Risakotta, 'Understanding the Challenge of Political Islam', in *Trends in Southeast Asia: Perspectives on Doctrinal and Strategic Implications of Global Islam*, Dec 2003, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

[2] John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2002.

basically an overwhelming fear and paranoia towards Islam, its resurgence and association with terrorism.

Although the attacks that took place in September 11th were carried out by a group of Muslim that belongs to a particular Muslim organisation that have its own political agenda and interests, this act of aggression has justified the view that Islam, or more specifically a particular theological construction of the religion justified violence and terror as an expression of belief. September 11th has also thrown light on the divide among the Muslims, viz. those who support aggression and force versus those who abhors these acts. As one writer aptly articulated:

> *"[September 11]...had dramatically altered the political environment in the Muslim world...the divide has sharpened between the West, its secular values and institutions and the world of militant Islam...and within the Muslim world, between moderates and radicals."*[3]

What is more significant is that, out of the September 11th incident there emerged an increasing interest in Islam. In fact, the post September 11th era witnessed a greater interest about Islam sparking numerous writings ranging from an analysis of the link between Islam, terrorism and radicalism, to critical discussions on ideas and views about the Islamic religion, in addition to the numerous attempts to have a better understanding of Islam and the Muslim communities around the world.[4] Through all these varied attempts towards understanding and learning more about Islam, the dominant perception that has emerged is that terrorism and aggression is inextricably

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[3] Angel M. Rabasa, Political Islam in Southeast Asia: Moderates, Radicals and Terrorists, Oxford University Press, 2003, p.1.

[4] Farid Alatas, "Islam and the West after September 11, 2001," in *Islam and the West, Conflict and Dialogue: September 11th and Beyond*, edited by Stephanie Rupp. Singapore: University Scholars Programme, National University of Singapore, 2002.

linked to Islam, and that Islam is the cause of violence and terror. In short, the teachings of Islam can be interpreted for aggression and violence.

This form of understanding thrust the Islamic religion under spotlight and downplays political and ideological factors that could shed light on the problem of terrorism and aggression. By this approach, Islam is essentialised as a "*discreet entity, a coherent and closed set of beliefs, values and anthropological patterns embodied in a common society, history and territory*."[5] Islam is also seen as the single major force that shapes Muslims' attitudes, sentiments, values and orientation, and also their relations and sentiments for members, within and outside their Islamic community. In short, Islam is reductively presumed as the key motive that conditions Muslims' thoughts and actions and is the factor accorded an overriding significance in explaining their problems and drawbacks.[6]

The discussions surrounding Islam post September 11th also put forth the fear of the *Ummah,* the notion of a global community of believers in Islam that is presumed to be strongly bonded to one another by a common faith, viz. Islamic religion, that in turn helps to facilitate support for the global terrorism against the West and its allies. This perception of the *Ummah* and the danger of such a global community of Muslims exists in many of the writings and discussions on Islam and terrorism, and this perception is further compounded by the objective of radicals like those led by Osama bin Laden to topple the United States' influence in the Middle East and to establish new governments everywhere to carry out the brand of Islam that the

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[5] Oliver Roy, *Globalised Islam*, p.9. London: Hurst, 2004.

[6] Ibid, pp. 9-17.

terrorists promotes. As mentioned in earlier chapters, this perspective has its limitations in that it assumes that the Muslim community is homogenous, and that there does not exist differences of opinions, ideologies, worldview, politics and vested interest within the Muslim community. Also, this perspective overlooks internal dynamics and plurality of the community, and fails to recognise that the Muslim community just like any other community is characterised by contesting groups, influenced by its own motivations, interest and agendas. Thus, in the case of terrorism and its accompanying violence, while the Muslims may well feel for their fellow Muslims threatened by war or faced with injustices, it does not mean that these sentiments are governed solely by their same religious beliefs. Rather there are other myriad considerations and principles that shape their decision, which are not exclusive to them as Muslims, such as the loss of innocent human lives.

There have been several studies on the phenomenon of terrorism that provides an alternative understanding to the persistent viewpoint which reduces Islam as the crux of the problem. Among the works are by scholars like Mamdani who submits that modern terrorism is born out of political encounter that emerged from the late cold war, and that although modern terrorism harness aspects of Muslim tradition, it is a modern political movement at the hands of a modern power. As Mamdani argued:

> *"...the terrorist wing in radical political Islam, did not emerge from conservative, religious currents, but on the contrary, from a secular intelligentsia. In other words, its preoccupation is this worldly, it is about power in this world. To take only the most obvious example: I am not aware of anyone who thinks of bin laden as a theologian: he is a political strategist and is conceived of precisely in such terms. Of course, part of his strategy is employing a particular language through which he addresses specific audiences."*[7]

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[7] Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the Roots of Terror*. New York, Three Leaves Press, 2004.

There are similarly other works by notable academics that strongly caution against the pervasiveness of the dominant perception on terrorism as a problem in Islam, and which also dismissed the perspective that makes Islam the issue. These works provided insights into the complex diversity of radical groups, in terms of their beliefs, orientations, mode of operations and also the factors that condition the phenomenon.[8] All these works counter the dominant thinking that Islam is the cause of terrorism and aggression.

Nonetheless, the fear of Islam and the threat of violence linked to the religion continue to influence perceptions regarding terrorism and its causes. In fact, this dominant understanding has resulted in the Western powers led by the United States of America to embark on a concerted effort to fight against the Islamic terror threats. Immediately after the September 11th attacks, America took aggressive actions against Afghanistan, believed to be instrumental in harbouring and shielding the Muslim terrorist group, Al-Qaeda, particularly its top leadership. The American-led coalition attack on Afghanistan marked the beginning of war on terrorism with the United States playing a major role in weeding out and removing terrorist networks in the country. Although many innocent lives were lost and injured during the American-led war on Afghanistan, the armed forces continued with their aggression

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[8] For example, Sageman in his study noted that perpetrators of terrorism are often second or third generation migrant groups that did not belong to a neighbourhood or the community they are residing in. Often, they are cultural outcasts living in the margins of society, either in their home country or host country, and that their experience in Islamisation is in small cell of uprooted fellows. Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks.* Philadephia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. Other works that provided alternative views to the dominant discourse on terrorism includes: Abou Zahab, Mariam and Olivier Roy *Islamist Networks: An Afghan-Pakistan Connection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World.* New York: Vintage Books, 1997. Edward W. Said, *The Clash of Ignorance*. The Nation, 22 Oct 2001.

because they fervently believed that the Al-Qaeda terror networks were strongly embedded in this country, and force was the only way to remove these Muslim terrorists.

The invasion of Afghanistan was subsequently followed by an invasion of Iraq – a country that the Americans believed to harbour weapons of mass destruction in aid of terrorist activities. Again, this action led to loss of many innocent lives and even when weapons of mass destruction were not found in Iraq, the American-led armed forces continued with their armed action. In fact, to further justify the invasion of Iraq, the "*Bush administration boldly declared that the US-led invasion and toppling of Saddam Hussein were intended to bring democracy to Iraq as part of a broader policy of promoting democracy in the Middle East*."[9]

These strong aggressive actions against Muslim countries, while seen by the dominant groups in the West as a necessity in the attempt to protect the world from the threat of global Islamic terror, resulted in negative reactions among Muslim communities around the world. It gave rise to the general feeling among Muslims that "*all the powers of the modern world are arrayed and mobilized to destroy Islam throughout the world*".[10] This sentiment among the Muslims is aptly summarised by a writer as follows:

> "*After the attacks on Afghanistan...there seems to be a sound basis for that belief [of destruction of Muslim world by Western countries]. The war on terrorism is perceived by many Muslims as a war on Islam throughout the world. It is not only a threat to Muslims because of increase surveillance, discrimination, bigotry and sometimes even physical attacks, but it is a war on a way of life that includes the massive domination of information in the information age by the powers of global capitalism. The powers that want to reduce everything to economic growth and prosperity and manipulate all of us [Muslims] to live in*

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[9] John L. Esposito, *'It's the Policy, Stupid,'* p.5. *Harvard International Review*, August 2006.

[10] Ibid, p.24.

accordance with the demands of the market place and of consumerism." [11]

In fact, many Muslim communities around the world including those in the Southeast Asian region like Indonesia and Malaysia carried out demonstrations and street protests opposing the American-led invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Even Muslim minorities in Thailand undertook some form of action against the US, such as boycotting of American fast-food outlets.[12] These actions among the Muslims in turn fuelled the perception of Islam as an aggressive religion, where its followers were willing and able to take to the streets. Not only that, the reactions also showed that the idea of the *Ummah* is well and alive within the Muslim community, and that this common bond among the Muslims is a sustaining force for the aggression and violence in Islam and acted as a support base for terrorism undertaken in the name of Islam.

In the face of such international developments and perceptions involving Islam, as well as the presence of numerous writings and articulations regarding Islam, what is the impact of these global developments on the Singapore Malay Muslim community, as well as the non-Malays in Singapore? This shall be examined in the next sections.

Impact of Global Terror on Singapore

Although the events of September 11th and its aftermath took place outside Singapore, the Muslims in Singapore unfortunately became the target of national

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[11] Bernard T.Adeney-Risakotta, '*Understanding the Challenge of Political Islam'*, p. 25.

[12] Yang Razali Kassim, "The Relationship Between Singapore's Muslim Community and International Events, " in *Trends in Southeast Asia: Islam in Southeast Asia – Analysing Recent Developments*, Jan 2002, No.1, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

attention. This is to some extent unavoidable given that Singapore Muslims are not divorced and insulated from global events affecting other Muslims. As explained by a writer, Muslims in general will always be plugged into events and incidences affecting other Muslim communities around the world, as well as other global events affecting humanity. According to him:

> *"Globalisation of communications, technology and travel has heightened a new consciousness of the transnational identity and interconnectedness... that follows events across the Muslim world on a daily, even hourly basis. Most Muslims are not secular; they do self-consciously identify themselves as Muslims. They celebrate or bemoan the successes and failures of Muslim struggles for self-determination, freedom from oppression, and economic development across the world, as well as of militant jihads, holy and unholy wars."[13]*

Hence, whatever happened to other Muslim communities around the world, the rest of the Muslims will similarly feel and be involved somewhat, and the Muslims in Singapore are similarly as plugged into the Islamic world as the rest of the Muslim community. As acknowledged by a leading member of the Singapore governing elite regarding the shared connectedness with the world:

> *"It's a very inter-related world. Events far-away can affect us. This is the World Trade Centre on the other side of the globe. But within minutes, many Singaporeans [including the Malay Muslims] learnt the news and became worried, because they had family or friends in New York"[14]*

Indeed the Malay Muslims in Singapore have been deeply affected by the September 11th incident. Their immediate reaction was one of shock and horror towards the attacks especially the loss of thousand of innocent lives, and many were just as worried as the next person especially as they too could have had family or friends in New York. Likewise when it was discovered that the attacks have been masterminded and executed by Muslims, the Singapore Malays displayed as much

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[13] John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, p. 158.

[14] The Sunday Times, *"This is a test of our social cohesion: BG Lee,"* 22 Sep 2001.

concern as the rest of the world. Generally they found it unbelievable that a group of Muslims carried out such violent acts. Regardless of the reactions of the Singapore Malay community, this discovery unfortunately thrust to the forefront the issue of Islam and Muslim identity, and in the case of Singapore, it also brings to the fore the vulnerability of multiracialism and social cohesion. Hence though the Singapore Malay Muslim community has always been living harmoniously alongside the non-Malays in the country, the attack resurfaced concerns relating to Malay Muslim community's identity and its impact on social cohesion. It also provoked the Malay elite into responding to these concerns and in so doing, revealing how they perceive the essential markers of their identity.

The many discussions regarding Islam and terrorism, and the constant portrayal of the Muslims in a less than favourable light did not help matters.[15] As mentioned earlier, what has been portrayed is that Islam or its interpretation is inextricably linked with violence and aggression, and that the problem of terrorism is a problem of Islam. Terrorism, violence and aggression have thus become an issue of religion, Islam and Muslim identity, and the image of a violent and aggressive Muslims is regularly featured.   All this has inevitably caused the Singapore Malay Muslims to similarly feel the fear of being ostracised and singled out by the non-Muslim communities in Singapore and the dominant ruling party of the country. Additionally, there is also the fear that they, the Singapore Muslims, would also be seen as guilty of the terrorist attacks by virtue of the fact that they too are Muslims

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[15] Hussin Mutalib, 'The Rise of Islamicity and the Perceived Threat of Political Islam,' in *Trends in Southeast Asia: Islam in Southeast Asia – Analysing Recent Developments*, Jan 2002, No.1, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

and of the same religious faith as the suicide bombers of September 11.[16]   The

consistent image e of Muslim religiosity facilitating radicalism and terrorism has thus

had negative implications on the Malay Muslim community in Singapore, specifically

its identity as a community. While the identity understood and acknowledged by the

Malay Muslims is not tied to aggression, this self understanding differed from the

imagination of others tainted by fears of Islam and the perceived potentially

aggressive tendencies of the religion. The result of such imaginings and perception of

Islam and terrorism has created a situation in which the Singapore Malay Muslims

began to feel that they are under siege.

This sense of fear among the Singapore Muslims was illustrated by a member of

the Malay political elite who was quoted as saying that the Muslims might feel that

they are being *"pushed to the wall"* and that they are being blamed for events that

took place outside Singapore.[17]   He highlighted that this negative portrayal of

Muslims was not alleviated by the media's negative images of Muslims in the wake

of September 11th:

> *".. that kind of sentiment, [is] not helped by what is shown in the media. For example, pictures of Muslims on CNN rejoicing, burning effigies and flags, and in the local newspaper, a huge picture of Laskar Jihad, with headbands and Islamic writings on the forehead. Imagine the kind of impact such visuals have on the non-Muslim community. . . it is not helped by government officials or people equating terrorism with Islam and that equation sticks in the mind of non-Muslims. . .*"[18]

The local media, in their coverage of September 11th and its aftermath, has

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[16] Yang Razali Kassim, "The Relationship Between Singapore's Muslim Community and International Events," p.27.

[17] Sentiment echoed by the then Minister in charge of Muslim Affairs, Mr Abdullah Tarmugi during an interview session with Channel NewsAsia immediately after September 11th. See The The Straits Times, "*Singaporeans must stay united in the wake of US attacks: Abdullah,*" 6 Oct 2001.

[18] The Sunday Times, *"Muslims distancing themselves from attacks, says Abdullah*, "7 Oct 2001.

similarly put forth notable observations of fear and unease among the Malay Muslims. For example, in an interview involving a number of Malay Muslims who were asked whether they were now feared and misunderstood, the general response revealed a sense of fear and anxiety among them. This sentiment conveyed in an article in the press was not an isolated one:

> *"Of late . . . [Malays] has felt a creeping sense of alienation. The rubble from the Sept 11 terrorist attacks in the United States has formed a dark, indelible wall of distrust and doubt between the Malay Muslim medical student and his non-Muslim friends. . . . what is left unsaid about this gnawing "difference" is brewing beneath the surface here [in Singapore]."*[19]

Such response was echoed by a community leader when he remarked that:

> *"Muslims are concerned about how non-Muslims see them in the light of the Sept 11 issue. They are concerned whether they'd be seen as affiliated to terrorist or militant groups, and wonder how they can overcome this."*[20]

While the Singapore Malay Muslim community was trying to come to terms with the international event of September 11th and its aftermath, little did they expect the threat of terrorism to come to the shores of Singapore, in the form of a branch of a regional terrorist group, *Jemaah Islamiyah* (J.I), operating in Singapore. The discovery of the J.I and the arrests of Singapore Muslims who are part of this group shocked not only Singaporeans generally, but the Singapore Malay Muslim community particularly. This was reinforced by information that the J.I. is known to have links with the Al-Qaeda organisation which has orchestrated the attacks on the United States on September 11th 2001. The capture of Singapore Muslims who are involved with the J.I. and Al-Qaeda exposed a very real threat to Singapore's national security, particularly when it was discovered that the arrested J.I. members had plans

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[19] The Straits Times , *"Muslims: Are they feared or misunderstood?,"* 6 Apr 2002.

[20] The Sunday Times, *"Muslims must reach out to others,"* 21 Oct 2001.

to bomb certain strategic targets in Singapore that belonged to Western countries.[21]

These arrested Muslim individuals, through their links to JI, have brought the threat

of terrorism to the doorsteps of Singapore, and this point was clearly reflected in the

Internal Security Act (ISA) Advisory Board's report:

First group of 13 Detainees[22]
"...it is clear that all of them were involved in an elaborate conspiracy, initiated and aided by foreign terrorist groups, and with each playing their separate roles here, to gravely undermine the security of Singapore. This plot, if carried out, would certainly have caused loss of lives, physical injury and damage to property. Indeed considering the huge quantity of ammonium nitrate which they intended to acquire, the consequences would have been catastrophic."[23]

Second group of 18 detainees[24]
"...the 18 persons pose an active threat to Singapore's security and their detention is necessary to neutralise their threat and to allow investigations to continue to ferret out all others in the JI and MILF networks."[25]

The J.I episode highlighted the fragilities of Singapore's racial and religious

harmony, and as pointed out in the White Paper report, the acts and intention of

violence perpetrated by the J.I. members *"will inevitably undermine inter-ethnic trust*

and unravel the communal harmony and peace that Singaporeans enjoy today."[26]

It was therefore not surprising that the overriding attention given to the

Singapore Malay Muslim community after the September 11th attack was exacerbated

following the J.I arrests. In fact, the J.I episode further placed the Malays under the

national spotlight. As expressed by a local Malay journalist:

"...the arrests of members of Jemaah Islamiyah...be it directly or indirectly, had negatively

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[21] White Paper, *Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism*, 7 Jan 2003.

[22] Although 15 people were arrested during the first wave of arrests, 2 were released in Jan 02 on Restriction Order, while the rest were detained. Ibid.

[23] Ibid, p.19

[24] Although 21 people were arrested, 3 were released in Sep 2002 on Restriction Order. Ibid, p.19.

[25] Ibid, p.20.

[26] Ibid, p.2.

affected the perceptions and understanding of Islam.   Some viewed Islam with prejudice and irrationality...In Singapore also, Islam and the Muslim community were also dragged into public scrutiny. The words and actions of Muslims attracted attention, and invited evaluation of both the non-Muslim communities, and the Singapore government."[27]

The fear and anxiety felt by the Singapore Malay Muslims was not without cause given concerns among the non-Malays on how the Malay Muslims fitted into the Singapore society post September 11th. To a large number of the non-Malays in Singapore, the September 11th incident has highlighted to them the potential of the Islamic religion in galvanising the Muslims to strike terror into the hearts of non-Muslim communities. It also reinforced that Islam could be politicised and could be a potent force affecting the security and stability of the world. These concerns are further compounded with the discovery of violence planned by Muslims using Islam. In fact, when the J.I. arrests took place in Singapore, many Singaporeans began to fear the prospect of a militant Islamic society emerging in the country.

September 11th and its global aftermath, as well as the local development in Singapore like the J.I situation have thus thrust to the fore once again the vulnerability in Singapore's social cohesion. It has provided reasons and cause for the non-Muslims to be concerned and wary of their fellow Malay Muslims in Singapore, not to mention their fears that the Muslims are now more vocal and will not hesitate to resort to confrontational means to their goals. With respect to the Malay Muslims, it made them very conscious of their place within Singapore, and the

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[27] Translated from the excerpt: *"...penangkapan anggota kumpulan Jemaah Islamiyah dan isu tudung ...memang secara langsung atau tidak, peristiwa dan isu itu menjejas pandangan terhadap Islam. Sebahagian pihak melihat Islam dengan pandangan serong dan sangsi...Di Singapura juga, Islam dan masyarakat Islam terheret di bawah sinar perhatian masyarakat umum. Perkataan dan perbuatan mereka menarik perhatian dan mengundang penilaian masyarakat dan juga pemerintah.* Berita Harian, *'Kita Berperanan sebagai diplomat Islam,'* 6 Apr 2002, article written by journalist, Suhami Mohsen.

more their identity as a Muslim is questioned, the more they feel as if they are under siege. All the uneasiness among the different races in Singapore, and the tension to social cohesion is further compounded by Singapore's support for the war on terror spearheaded by the United States. Singapore was the only state in the Southeast Asian region to do so and hence there emerged the concern of how the Singapore Muslims would react to the support given by its country in the war against terrorism, when the rest of the neighbouring Muslim countries did not. The other concern is fear of reprisals from terrorists groups which lend greater need for scrutiny of the Malay Muslim community in Singapore, especially following the discovery of Malay Muslims involved in the J.I.

An example of how the negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims had influenced the non-Muslims is reflected in The Straits Times through a letter written by a group of ordinary Singapore Chinese housewives staying in HDB estates. They remarked that:

> *"Even though we try not to be biased against them [Muslims], we are still suspicious and guarded. Their inclination to call for "Jihad" at the slightest provocation is keeping everyone on his toes."*[28]

Similarly, another group of non-Muslims who were interviewed by the media reflected the same sentiment of discomfort and unease, aptly expressed in the following comment:

> *"Personally...[we] feel comfortable with the Muslims in our midst although, sometimes...[we] get the sense that they are holding back and not telling how they really feel."*[29]

The interviewees went on to further explain that their feeling of insecurity and

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[28] The Sunday Times, *"Muslims must reach out to others,"* 21 Oct 2001.

[29] The Straits Times, *"Muslims: Are they feared or misunderstood?",* 6 Apr 2002.

uneasiness was also heightened by what they saw as an increase religiosity among the Malays. Adherence to the dress codes, dietary restrictions and prayer times as required by Islam were seen as a mark of the Malay Muslims anti-social insistence of being separate.[30] Likewise, the weekly prayer sessions as well as the communal gatherings within the Malay Muslim society were viewed with suspicion, and a number of the interviewees even indicated fears that these activities could be the breeding grounds for fanatical views.[31] In the words of one of the interviewees, there is this fear of the *"gradual greening of the region, particularly about how that would affect the little red dot [Singapore] in the middle"*.[32] Another non-Malay shared that while *"... Muslims are a minority here [in Singapore], representing 14 per cent of the population,they form a majority in the region, numbering 250 million."*[33] He further added that while "... w*e do not want to talk about this openly. It is highly sensitive. But it's a reality which we must manage all the time*."[34]

The sentiments expressed by the non-Malay populace echoed the concerns of the ruling elite in Singapore (as mentioned in chapter five). Overall, there is the worry that the Malays are separating themselves from the larger Singaporean community.

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[30] The Straits Times, *"Muslims: Are they feared or misunderstood?",* 6 Apr 2002. A recent incident in early 2008 in which school canteen operators were asked to prepare only 'halal' food for the students, once again showed that the dietary restrictions of the Singapore Malay Muslims is seen as separateness of the Malay Muslims and a cause of worry for the non-Muslims. In this latest incident, there were fears of *"Singapore schools and society being Islamised"*, *"...greater visibility of all halal foodcourts [pointing] to the Islamisation of Singapore"*. The Straits Times, *"Faith+Food = Fault Line",* 1 Mar 2008.

[31] The Straits Times, "*Muslims: Are they feared or misunderstood?",* 6 Apr 2002.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

More importantly, the events unfolding in the recent years where the Islamic religion is being inextricably linked to violence and aggression, led to even more pervasive concerns over the increasing religiosity of the Singapore Malays. The worry of how terrorism, and hence Islam can threaten the stability of Singapore, and destroy its social fabric, is aptly represented in the following remarks made by a senior member of the ruling elite:

> *"[Islamic revivalism] . . these are trends bigger than Singapore. We cannot escape them; we have to manage them sensitively and maintain our way of life in Singapore.[35]*

The concerns and unease is even more intense in light of the fact that Singapore is surrounded by Muslim countries within the Southeast Asian region, and that Southeast Asia is not immune to a rising Islamic revivalism and threats. As it is, the non-Malay elite prior to September 11th, had already been having its fair share of unease and concerns with what they perceived as a rising trend of more and more Singapore Muslims becoming more religious, evident in the trend of the Muslim in Singapore being more strict in their dressing, their diet, religious observances, social interactions as well as in the *"vibrancy of religious programmes in mosques (masjids), religious schools (madrasahs) and Islamic organisations"*.[36] Coupled with this was the Singapore Malay Muslims' assertion of maintaining its religious and community identity vis a vis mainstream national identity, evident by the objections by local Muslims to several government policies since the 1990s.[37] This concern was

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[35] The Straits Times , *"This is a test of our social cohesion: BG Lee,"* 22 Sep 2001.

[36] Husin Mutalib, *Islam in Southeast Asia*, p.50. Institute of Southeast Asia, 2008.

[37] Among the policies quoted by Husin were proposal to change some aspects of the Administration of the Muslim Law (AMLA), the proposal for compulsory national education system that were perceived as threatening the future of the Islamic religious schools. Ibid, p.50.

aptly reflected in the observation made by a member of the ruling elite:

> *"In the last three decades, globalisation and developments in the Middle East have generated a rising tide of religious consciousness among Muslims in Southeast Asia. This reflects an intense worldwide Islamic revival, aided by Saudi-funded missionary activities: building mosques and madrasahs (religious schools), and sending ulemas (preachers). Muslims are adhering more strictly to prayer schedules and food restrictions, more Muslim women are covering themselves up and there is less free mingling between the sexes. A national, ethnic identity is being replaced by a broader religious identity. There is greater engagement with issues that affects Muslims elsewhere, notably the Israeli-Palestinian conflict . . ."[38]*

Admittedly there are instances whereby the understanding of global violence and terrorism by Singapore's ruling elite denounced the link between terrorism and Islam. This is illustrated by the former Prime Minister's speech shortly after September 11th, in which he indicated that:

> *" We must not equate Islam with the terrorist acts of Muslims who perpetrate them. We will deal seriously with anyone who tries to exploit the current situation to inflame relations between racial and religious groups."[39]*

Also, when the J.I incident took place, the ruling elite highlighted that those arrested was a small group of Muslims who were influenced by outsiders, and that the group's behaviour had nothing to do with Islam or the Malay Muslim community in Singapore.[40] The ruling elite also took the stand that the arrests should not prevent Singaporeans from carrying on with their lives as usual, and that Singaporeans should not over-react. This was clearly reflected in the response made by the former Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Goh Chok Tong, when interviewed regarding the JI members' arrests. Goh stated that it was necessary that every Singapore citizen does not allow the JI plans to fracture Singapore's multi-racial and multi-religious

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[38] Excerpt of speech by the then DPM of Singapore, Mr Lee Hsien Loong, at the Fortune Global Forum, 2002, cited in *PERGAS: Moderation in Islam*, p.45.

[39] Speech made by the former Prime Minister Mr Goh Chok Tong. See The Straits Times, *"Toughest Challenges Facing Singapore"*, 15 Oct 2001.

[40] The Straits Times, *"Carry on as Usual: PM Goh,"* 13 Jan 2002.

harmony.[41] While admitting that in the aftermath of the JI arrests there would be some suspicion between Muslims and non-Muslims as part of a natural reaction, he indicated that *"it'll be wrong for all of us [Singaporeans] to live in that way."*[42] On another occasion, he spoke of the need for Singaporeans to continue to trust one another and not to allow incidences like the JI arrests to pull the various races in different directions.[43]

Nevertheless, the perception that Islam is at the crux of the problem of terrorism continues to be a significant influence on the ruling elite, and this can be seen their formulation of responses in dealing with the threats of terrorism. This persistent understanding of terrorism as a problem in Islam is reflected in speeches and statements of the Singapore's ruling elite. An example is the assertion made by a key member of the ruling elite, where in reflecting on the problem of terrorism, he implied that this is a battle for the soul of the Muslims:

> *" We [Singapore] have as neighbours over 200 million Muslims in Indonesia and some15 million in Malaysia. At first sight, this is a struggle between extremist radicals in the Muslim world on one side and America, Israel and their Western allies on the other. But look deeper and you will see that at its heart, it is a struggle about what Islam means between the extremist Muslims and the rationalist Muslims, between fundamentalist Muslims and modernist Muslims."[44]*

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[41] The Straits Times, *"Carry on as Usual: PM Goh,"* 13 Jan 2002

[42] Ibid.

[43] The Sunday Times, *"Singapore at risk if races assert separate identities,"* 3 Feb 2002.

[44] The Straits Times, "*What Does the Future Hold?",* 20 Feb 2003. According to Noor Aisha, this statement made by Lee Kuan Yew is another example that reflected the dominant understanding among the political elite of the link between Islam and terrorism, even though they may have declared that the war on terror is not a war against Islam nor is the Muslim community in Singapore in any way associated with the perpetrators of the tragedy that have called for a global war. Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, *Issues on Islam and the Muslims in Singapore Post 9/11: An Analysis of Dominant Perspective*.

The statement made by another ruling elite during the Youth for Peace Interfaith Symposium, further reflects the sentiment that the Islamic religion is linked to terrorism. As articulated by the ruling elite:

> " The interaction between Islam and Christianity over the centuries has been a troubled and difficult one. Memories of the crusades still run deep. Terrorism has complicated matters further. Sept 11 forced religious leaders on both sides to look hard at each other's positions wondering whether any reconciliation is possible."[45]

In short, the ruling elite in Singapore has defined and accepted that the problem of terrorism and aggression particularly after September 11th, is a problem of religious interpretation that is encapsulated in violence. There is also the concern that the Singapore Malay community can be affected by this worldwide development of Islamic terrorism and aggression which is facilitated by the presence of the religious bond among all Muslims. The understanding of the common bond fostered by the *Ummah* is believed to have the effect of creating dilemma among the Malays in Singapore, who being Muslims, will inevitably support other Muslims regardless of the implications on national integration and social cohesion in a multi-cultural and multi-religious country like Singapore. All this has induced and conditioned suspicions between Muslims and non-Muslims in the country which sows the seeds for distrust and apprehension. The observations of a local academic illustrate the point:

> "...the government raised concerns regarding inter-racial and inter-religious ties. While stating "our Malay/Muslim community is made up of good, loyal Singaporeans", the Prime Minister raised the question,"How do we prevent distrust between the different racial and religious communities from arising, should a terrorist act by some Malay/Muslim Singaporeans take place in the future?" The question, recreates the portrayal of Malays' doubtful loyalty. An article on the profile of some of the arrested depicted them as "ordinary Singaporeans" who were "good workers, who were polite, friendly and never got into trouble." This only increases whatever suspicion Singaporeans

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[45] Statement made by Foreign Minister, George Yeo. See The Straits Times, "*Tolerance for Religious Diversity*", 18 Mar 2008.

may have of Malays or Muslims".[46]

Responses of the Singapore Malay Muslim Community

The sentiments being expressed by the non-Malays as reflected clearly by the ruling elite, towards the Malay Muslims, be it directly or indirectly, has inevitably forced the Singapore Malay community to grapple with their identification as a Singapore Malay and also a Muslim in the period after September 11th. In examining the responses of the Singapore Malay community, we shall focus on the expressions of identity articulated by the elite within the Malay Muslim community.

(a) Responses in the Immediate Aftermath of September 11th

In the immediate aftermath of the bombings in the US, the Malay elite strongly condemned the attacks. However, much like their non-Muslims counterparts, their responses were articulated within the similar framework that assigns the problem to an erroneous understanding of Islam. In fact, immediately after the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, several Malay Muslim leaders including the Mufti, the highest religious authority in Singapore [47] consistently reiterated that Islam was against violence, and that Singaporean Muslims in general abhor the act of destruction and the loss of innocent lives.

One week later the Mufti publicly came out with the first authoritative stand of the Malay Muslim community regarding the September 11th incident. Although this statement is not a *fatwa* (religious opinions), nevertheless it serves as a public

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[46] Suriani Suratman, "*Problematic Singapore Malays" – The making of a portrayal*", p.18.

[47] Yang Razali Kassim, "The Relationship Between Singapore's Muslim Community and International Events," in *Trends in Southeast Asia: Islam in Southeast Asia – Analysing Recent Developments*, Jan 2002, No.1, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, p.25.

declaration of Islam's "*abhorrence for violence and the killing of innocent lives*".

The Mufti further declared that Singapore Malay Muslims would not condone terrorism committed anywhere in the world.[48] Putting forth his position with respect to the invasion of Afghanistan by the US-led armed forces in this public statement, he expressed that as Muslims, it was appropriate for the Singapore Malay Muslims to sympathise and be concerned with the plight of the innocent Afghan people. However, the Singapore Malay Muslim community should not be emotionally reactive towards the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. Instead as a community, they should be mindful of the need to remain rational and undertake actions that would help preserve the racial and religious harmony in Singapore.[49] The focus on Islam in the Mufti's speech was also evident in his efforts to explain that the Islamic principle of *jihad* or struggle did not necessarily take on the narrow definition of a holy war but other forms such as humanitarian assistance.[50]

   This position articulated by the Mufti reflects a sense of Malay/Muslim identity conditioned by Islam that is generally supported by the community. The religious elite in Singapore many of whom are members of *PERGAS* (Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association) supported the Mufti's proclamation that non-violence is a fundamental aspect of Islamic teachings. . According to PERGAS:

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[48] Yang Razali Kassim, *"The Relationship Between Singapore's Muslim Community and International Events,"* p.25

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

"Although there is a notion of jihad in Islam with respect to the spread of Islam, the protection of the religion, places of worship, individual and property, it does not contradict the nature of preaching in Islam. This is because jihad is the last resort after all other peaceful actions have been utilised. This fact is exemplified in the manner in which Prophet Muhammad saw. carried out his proselytising. For thirteen years, he carried out his preaching and expansion of religion in a gentle and diplomatic manner. It was only after he kept on being vehemently opposed even after leaving Mecca that he had to resort to jihad in order to ensure that the followers of Islam are able to practice their religion peacefully and safely. [51]*"*

Other religious leaders also adopted the same stance to alleviate the fears of non-Muslims by explaining on the meaning of *Jihad.* As one amongst them articulated:

"The humanitarian aid to Afghan refugees is the jihad or endeavour that we must carry out. We must react wisely. The interpretation of jihad does not mean we have to follow whatever Osama wants us to do. What he says is not a command to all Muslims. There is no war against Islam, and the war is against terrorism affecting Muslims and non-Muslims."[52]

Besides the religious elite, civic and social groups like *TAMAN BACAAN* (Singapore Literary Group) also urged the Singapore Malay Muslim community to act rationally and not let external events affect the racial harmony in Singapore. As articulated by *TAMAN BACAAN*:

"Singaporeans [including Malay Muslims] must remember that common bonds, mutual understanding and respect made it possible for us to live in safe and peaceful haven here [Singapore]. Every citizen must continue to maintain peace and prosperity and the spirit of multiracialism."[53]

Similarly, the Association of Muslim Professionals, AMP, called upon the Singapore Muslim community to adopt a calm and rational approach, and to work alongside the rest of Singapore communities to preserve religious and racial harmony.

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[51] Translated from the excerpt of PERGAS article tabled during the PERGAS Convention 2003: *"Walaupun dalam Islam terdapat syariat jihad dalam menyebarkan agama, mempertahankan agama, tempat-tempat suci, harga diri dan harta, ia tidak bertentangan dengan sifat lembut Islam dalam berdakwah. Hal ini kerana jihad hanya dilakukan setelah jalan yang lembut dan baik sudah tidak lagi berguna. Hakikat ini diperkuatkan dengan perjalanan dakwah Rasulullah saw. Selama 13 tahun baginda diperintah agar bersabar dengan dakwah yang lembut. Hanya setelah penentang agama Islam terus mengganggu perjalanan dakwahnya walau beliau telah meninggalkan Makkah, barulah beliau menggunakan jihad bagi memastikan kebebasan dakwah terus wujud."*

[52] The Straits Times, "*Singapore Muslim leaders: This is not a war against Islam,*" 10 Oct 2001.

[53] The Straits Times, "*Keep racial harmony in mind, urges Malay social group,*" 9 Oct 2001.

Political leaders within the Malay community also took on the same position as the rest of the Malay elite. In a joint-statement issued on 2 October 2001, they condemned the terrorist attacks on the United States and asked Singapore Malay Muslims to react calmly and rationally towards the events of September 11th. As expressed by them in their joint-statement:

> *"We suppport the statement by our Mufti, Syed Isa Semait, that our Muslim community here in Singapore abhors violence and the killing of innocent civilians."[54]*

The Malay Muslims in Singapore were also encouraged to take on a measured approach towards the invasion of Afghanistan, even as they were saddened and concerned over the plight of the Muslims in Afghanistan following the US-led attacks on the country. [55] Primarily, they were advised to *"stay calm and reject Osama bin Laden's depiction of the [United States] strikes as a global battle against Islam."*[56] They were also strongly urged to work together with other Singaporeans to provide humanitarian aid to Afghan refugees and all others affected by the US invasion and strikes.[57]

In essence, the reactions of the Singapore Malay Muslim community towards the events of September 11th and the immediate US-led retaliation against Afghanistan, was a rational and humanitarian one. It reflected the values enjoined by the elite namely, rationality, humanity and not blind emotions based on religious belief. As

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[54] The Straits Times, *"Malay MPs Slam Sept 11 Attacks,"* 3 Oct 2001.

[55] Ibid.

[56] The Straits Times, *"Singapore Muslim leaders: This is not a war against Islam,"* 10 Oct 2001.

[57] The Straits Times, *"Singapore Muslim leaders: This is not a war against Islam,"* 10 Oct 2001.

summarised by the media on the Singapore Malay Muslim community's reaction towards the events of September 11th and its aftermath:

> *"They reject the wanton killing of innocent people, which they see as an act not condoned by Islam. But at the same time, they also want to see some moral consistency on the part of the US and its allies in their campaign against terrorism. For instance, terrorism, to the community, must not be defined as if it comes only from the Muslim world. Freedom fighters should also not be confused with terrorists. The label of "state-sponsored terrorism", to them, should also be applied to Israel whose systematic and bloody crushing of the Palestinian struggle for statehood – ignored by the US and the West – has been a sore point in the Muslim world . . . "*[58]

(b) Assertion of a Moderate Muslim Identity

While the collective response of the Singapore Malay Muslim community in the aftermath of September 11th showed a calm and rational outlook with an intense condemnation of terrorist acts and aggressions, the Malay elite also began to be engaged in the process of expressing and articulating a suitable form of Malay/Muslim identity that was compatible with the Singapore context and the larger modern world in which the Malays live. Basically the endeavour is to create a Malay/Muslim identity that is reflective of the community, and also able to meet the expectations of the non-Malay Muslim communities particularly the governing elite in Singapore.

The governing elite in its attempts to protect the social fabric of Singapore, and maintain the harmony and peace among the various races had fallen back on their rhetoric and assertion that they believed the Singapore Malay Muslims are moderate in outlook and that the Singapore Malays abhor violence and condemn the terroristic elements that had seeped into the religion. For example, the governing elite had strongly emphasised that it recognised that:

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[58] Yang Razali Kassim, *"The Relationship Between Singapore's Muslim Community and International Events,"* p.28.

> *"...the vast majority of Southeast Asian Muslims are peaceful and moderate in their beliefs, and that militant Islam is not the natural state of Southeast Asia. . . [Singapore government] have gone beyond security actions and taken pains to explain the problem to the population, so that Singaporean Muslims do not feel that they are all under the cloud of suspicion and the non-Muslims do not treat their Muslim fellow citizens any differently than before."*[59]

In stating that the Muslims by far are peaceful and moderate in its approach in Islam, the ruling elite once again demonstrated the dominant thinking that terrorism is intertwined with the Islamic religion, and that there were features in the Islamic religion that could create violence, terror and immense fear and hatred. Aligned to this close linkage between Islam and terrorism, the ruling elite put forth the notion of moderates and extremists in Islam as it believed that terrorism occurred due to the presence of extremist behaviour and tendencies within the Islamic community and that moderation in Islam was the way to arrest the problem.

This call for moderation is clearly seen in the following remarks made by a senior member of the ruling elite:

> *"But Singapore Muslims, like other Muslims around the world, are caught up in the global resurgence of Islamic fervour. Within the Islamic world, some religious leaders are pushing Muslims down extreme path, while others urge a moderate path. Which path Singapore Muslims choose will have an impact on the cohesion of our country. It will also decide the community's future development – whether the community continues to progress or stagnates."*[60]

The White Paper report on J.I arrest also supported this belief of moderates and extremists in Islam. As stated in the report:

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[59] Excerpt of speech by the then DPM of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, at the Fortune Global Forum, 2002, reproduced in *PERGAS: Moderation in Islam*, *in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore,* p.45. Singapore, 2002.

[60] Excerpt of speech by the then PM of Singapore, Mr Goh Chok Tong at the National Day Rally 2002, reproduced in *PERGAS: Moderation in Islam*, p.52. PERGAS, in its book also provided other quotes of the governing elite that highlighted their belief that moderation is the 'foil to terrorism', and that the 'scenario post 9/11 and the JI arrests catapulted the word 'moderate' as the choice exhortation for Islam and Muslims. See *PERGAS: Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore,* pp. 52-53.

" . . . the vast majority of Muslims are moderate, tolerant and law abiding, and do not support actions of the Muslim militants. Although the local Muslim community has shown a trend of increasing religiosity, it does not support violence and terrorism. Muslim community and religious leaders have come out strongly and unequivocally to condemn the 11 September 2001 attacks and the JI. Singaporeans must remember that the members of JI were a small and isolated groups of misguided Muslims with no support from the [Malay-Muslim] community . . . "[61]

Given this belief of moderates versus extremists, the governing elite took pains to emphasise that Singapore is a multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural and that each of the community in Singapore has a responsibility towards preserving the racial harmony in the country. As a senior member of the governing elite iterated:

"We [Singapore] are a multi-racial society. We are all Singaporeans together, and we must all take a Singaporean perspective . . . If leaders of all ethnic groups send very clear signals on where they stand and what Singapore's interests are, they will help the Government to rally the ground and strengthen our society."[62]

What this meant is that the ruling elite expect the Malay Muslims to effectively scrutinise their own community to weed out the extremists. At the same time, the moderates are expected to stand up and fight the extremist tendencies. This belief in the self-policing of the Malay Muslim community is clearly reflected in many official statements by leading political elite. As the former Prime Minister stated:

"This ideological struggle is far more complex than the struggle against communism because it engages not just reason but religious faith. You and I as non-Muslims have no locus standi to engage in this struggle for the soul of Islam. It is a matter for Muslims to settle among themselves."[63]

Likewise the calls for the Malay Muslims to speak up, is also clearly expressed in sentiments like:

"...The more Muslim voices speak up against the JI group's actions and for moderation

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[61] White Paper, *Jemaah Islamiyah*, pp. 22-23.

[62] The Sunday Times, *"This is a test of our social cohesion: BG Lee,"* 22 Sep 2001.

[63] Goh Chok Tong, *'Beyond Madrid: Winning Against Terrorism'*. Speech to Council on Foreign Relations, Washington DC, 6 May 2004.

and good sense, the broader and stronger the consensus will be."[64]

Moderation, in the eyes of the governing elite and non-Malay populace in Singapore is thus the anti-thesis of extremism and fanaticism in Islam, and that Singapore Malay Muslims should embrace and adopt this identity of 'Moderate Muslims'. If the moderate Muslims did not fight the extremists or remain silent, there will be repercussions in terms of backlash of extremists who will become bolder, be more radical and take the opportunity to dominate the community, while the non-Muslims will question and fear the Muslim community more and come to the conclusion that the Malay Muslim community are radical in nature. It was thus of extreme importance that the Malay Muslims promote moderation, clarify and educate the rest of the Singaporean communities on what Islam is about.

In echoing the calls of the non-Muslims especially that of the ruling government for moderation in Islam as opposed to aggression, the Singapore Malay leadership including the religious leadership similarly called upon the Malay Muslims to 'stand up and speak up'. They iterate the same messages that the Singapore Muslims have to be moderate in their outlook, and that they should strive to achieve harmony and peace, not animosity with mankind, especially their fellow citizens. The overriding concern is that the Muslims in Singapore must articulate an Islam that is relevant and compatible to Singapore's context, one that supports social cohesion and ultimately loyalty to the state of Singapore. As expressed by a Malay Member of Parliament:

> *"Singapore Malay Muslims should be moderate in their outlook, conscious of their situation around them and respond accordingly . . . this does not involve becoming a different people though . . . refers to how they [Malay Muslims] can live in peace with other races in Singapore as well as move forward and progress. . . . we [Malay Muslim*

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[64] Excerpt of speech by the then DPM Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong at the Morgan Stanley Asia Pacific Summit, 2002, reproduced in *PERGAS: Moderation in Islam*, p.53.

community] do not live in a vacuum. The more you understand the reality, the more you are able to fit into it."[65]

By encouraging the identity of 'moderate' Malay Muslims, the Malay leaders has thus articulated the position that although the Singapore Malay Muslims are religious in nature, the community must ensure that they are "moderate" in their outlook, practise tolerance in their pursuit for religious attainment, while being aligned to the preservation of racial and religious harmony in the country. As Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, the Minister in Charge of Muslim Affairs in August 2002 expressed:

> *"We have always expressed a tolerant form of Islam and this is something that we should continue. I think that continuing with this aspect of Islam is becoming critical now given that Singapore is increasingly being exposed to external influences through the Internet, newspapers and television. As such, we have to continuously put forth and articulate the type of Islam that we wish to see in Singapore. I believed that this is becoming very important right now, as there have now existed opposing voices. We cannot allow this opposing voices, though in the minority, to jeopardize and take away our practice of tolerance towards other faiths and beliefs. . . as a moderate Muslim community, Malay Muslims Singaporeans have to continue to seek a balance between the needs of their religion and that of a loyal Singapore citizen."* [66]

Through these responses, the Malay elite collectively gave an indication that it understood and accepted the prevalent notion that the terroristic activities occurring in the world post September 11th is a problem in the interpretation of Islam. More significantly, this call for moderation in Islam downplayed the fact that the aggression and terrorist activities are actually conducted by a group of Muslims that have their own agenda and interests while they proclaimed these aggressive acts in the name of

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[65] The Straits Times, "*Message to Muslims: Be moderate in outlook,*" 17 Dec 2001.

[66] Translated from the excerpt: "*Kita memang senantiasa menganjurkan Islam yang toleran dan ini adalah satu perkara yang perlu kita kekalkan. Saya rasa usaha ini lebih genting sekarang kerana Singapura merupakan masyarakat terbuka. Banyak suara-suara luar yang meresapi minda rakyat – melalui internet, akhbar dan televisyen. Justeru kita perlu terus menonjolkan semula model Islam yang kita mahukan di Singapura. Saya rasa ia penting bukannya kerana model itu telah terhakis tetapi lebih kerana wujudnya suara yang menentang. Kita tidak boleh benarkan suara majoriti ini 'merampas' semangat toleransi Islam yang kita amalkan . . . sebagat masyarakat Islam yang sederhana, rakyat Singapura perlu mengimbangi tuntutan agama dan juga sebagai rakyat Singapura yang setia".* .Berita Harian, *"Tonjolkan semula model Islam toleran,"* 8 Aug 2002.

Islam. In short, by accepting the call for the rise of 'Moderate Muslim' identity, the Singapore Malay leadership supported the belief that practices in Islam can propel its followers toward violence, hence the critical need to distinguish between aggression in Islam preached by a group of Muslim, and moderation in Islam. There is thus limited contribution in analysing and explaining the problem outside this mental framework. There is also a failure to identify and examine closely the groups within the Malay Muslim community that have the propensity towards aggression in the name of Islam. This has thus perpetuated the dominant understanding of Islam post September 11[th,] and in the context of Singapore, how Islam is being appropriated and managed within the context of a multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-religious community. In short, it perpetuated the belief that Islam and Islamic identity can be potentially problematic and may impair social cohesion. The proposed solution hence is to promote the identity of 'Moderate Muslims'.

   While the 'Moderate Muslim' is the identity that has been articulated for the Malay Muslim community in Singapore, unfortunately the meaning of being a moderate is ambigous and confusing. For example, during a dialogue session following the National Day Rally Speech in 2002, one of the issues raised by the Malay Muslim participants was the need to have a better understanding of what it meant being a moderate Muslim, and what it entails.[67]   According to one of the participants:

> *"Many [Malays] are still unclear about the traits of moderate Muslims. Is it the same*
> *as a fundamentalist attitude which means strictly following the requirements of the*
> *Islamic religion, and which have been misinterpreted by the media, particularly*

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[67] Berita Harian*, "Sesi Maklum Balas: Takrifan 'Muslim sederhana' perlu terus dibincang*," 30 Aug 2002.

Western media, as an extremist behaviour?" [68]

Another participant asked whether the Malay Muslim community in Singapore could be allowed to practice their religion freely without being viewed as extremists.[69] This was agreed by another participant who stated the following:

> *"Similar to those who cannot stand the smell of durians, there are also Muslims who may not be comfortable eating or attending functions that have pork meat and alcohol. It is not possible to force people to change their preferences, but it does not mean that the Muslim community in Singapore does not wish to be a part of national integration."*[70]

These questions point to the lack of clarity of 'Moderate Muslim' identity. Generally the leadership within the Malay community have defined moderate Muslim as *"being moderate in outlook, conscious of situation around them and [to] respond accordingly.*[71] Being moderate also required the Singapore Malay Muslims to be able to establish a balance between their religious needs and their responsibilities as part of Singapore society, hence it *"...refers to how they [Malay Muslims] can live in peace with other races in Singapore as well as move forward and progress."* [72] In short a 'Moderate Muslim' is one who is religiously inclined but practise tolerance in his pursuit for religious attainment, while being aligned to the preservation of racial and religious harmony in the country. In the words of the MUIS President regarding the 'Moderate Muslim' identity:

> *"A moderate Islamic community is a group of religious-motivated individuals that believe*

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[68] Translated from the excerpt: *"Ramai yang masih belum jelas tentang takrifan ciri-ciri sikap seorang Muslim sederhana. Apakah is sama dengan sikap fundamentalis yang bermaksud mengikut ajaran sebenar Islam namum disalah tanggap oleh media, khususnya media barat, sebagai ekstremis?"* Berita Harian, *"Sesi Maklum Balas: Takrifan 'Muslim sederhana' perlu terus dibincang,"* 30 Aug 2002.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid.

[71] This was the message put forth by the Minister in charge of Muslim Affairs, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim. See The Straits Times, *"Message to Muslims: Be moderate in outlook,"* 17 Dec 2001.

[72] Ibid.

in the principles of its religion, while at the same time upholding global values, understand and takes into account the need and realities of its surrounding environment in fulfilling their religious obligations. At the same time, they [moderate Muslims] are motivated to continue to contribute to the well-being, peace and harmony of the world.[73]

A senior member of the Malay political elite had this to say regarding moderation in Islam:

> " *We have always expressed a tolerant form of Islam and this is something that we should continue. I think that continuing with this aspect of Islam is becoming critical now given that Singapore is increasingly being exposed to external influences through the Internet, newspapers and television. As such, we have to continuously put forth and articulate the type of Islam that we wish to see in Singapore. I believed that this is becoming very important right now, as there have now existed opposing voices. We cannot allow this opposing voices, though in the minority, to jeopardize and take away our practice of tolerance towards other faiths and beliefs. . . as a moderate Muslim community, Malay Muslims Singaporeans have to continue to seek a balance between the needs of their religion and that of a loyal Singapore citizen.*"[74]

This expression of 'moderate' Muslims has become such an important discussion topic among the religious leaders so much so that a religious leader published a book on the issue of moderate Muslims. The intent of the book, as explained by the religious leader, is to explain the principle and concept of moderation in Islam which could be a guiding force in the lives of Singapore Malay Muslims.[75] As expressed by him:

> *"Islam is an easy religion that practices moderation and gentleness, and that this can be seen*

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[73] Translated from the excerpt: " *Masyarakat Islam sederhana adalah satu kelompok individu beriman yang berpegang teguh kepada dasar keimanan, memperjuangkan nilai sejagat, memahami serta mengambil kira keperluan dan realiti setempat dan semasa di dalam perlaksanaan syariat, di samping bermotivasi untuk terus menyumbang kepada* kesejahteraan dunia". Berita Minggu, '*Alami ketengah ciri Muslim sederhana,*' 14 Sep 2003.

[74] Translated from the excerpt: "*Kita memang senantiasa menganjurkan Islam yang toleran dan ini adalah satu perkara yang perlu kita kekalkan. Saya rasa usaha ini lebih genting sekarang kerana Singapura merupakan masyarakat terbuka. Banyak suara-suara luar yang meresapi minda rakyat – melalui internet, akhbar dan televisyen. Justeru kita perlu terus menonjolkan semula model Islam yang kita mahukan di Singapura. Saya rasa ia penting bukannya kerana model itu telah terhakis tetapi lebih kerana wujudnya suara yang menentang. Kita tidak boleh benarkan suara majoriti ini 'merampas' semangat toleransi Islam yang kita amalkan . . . sebagat masyarakat Islam yang sederhana, rakyat Singapura perlu mengimbangi tuntutan agama dan juga sebagai rakyat Singapura yang setia."* Berita Harian, *"Tonjolkan semula model Islam toleran,"* 8 Aug 2002.

[75]For more details, read Muhammad Haniff Hassan, *Muslim…Moderate…Singaporean.* Perdaus and Al-Khair Management Board, Singapore, 2003.

in many aspects [of Islam] . . . more evident in the manners in which Muslims are advocated to deliver the message of Islam and deal with those who have gone against the law of Islam."[76]

The religious leader, in his writing, went on to further state that the exhortation of good conduct and gentleness in delivering the message of Islam, was definitely at odds with the violent and aggressive manner in which Islam was currently depicted by a group of Islamic followers in the name of Islam. He further expressed that Islam prohibited extremism in all matters, and to prove his point highlighted that the Prophet himself was against extremism evident in the Prophet's exhortation as follows:

> *"Woe to all extremists (he repeated three times)." (Narrated by Muslim). He also said "Religion is very easy and whoever overburdens himself in his religion will not be able to continue in that way. So you should not be extremists, but try to be near to perfection and receive the good tidings that you will be rewarded; and gain strength by worshipping in the mornings, the nights." (Narrated by Al-Bukhari).*[77]

Similarly, PERGAS in 2003 hosted a Convention of *Ulamas* with the theme *Kesederhanaan dari Perspektif Islam* (or Moderation from Islamic Perspective). The Convention was intended to provide a better understanding of the concepts of moderation in Islam as opposed to extremism and extremist behaviour. The papers presented in this proceeding were subsequently published by PERGAS and became the platform for PERGAS's official stand towards the issue of moderate Muslims in Singapore.[78] In their expression of moderate Muslim, PERGAS had summarily explained that moderate Muslims in Singapore should be guided by both the Islamic principles and realities of Singapore's context in managing their life in the country.

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[76] Muhammad Haniff Hassan, *Muslim…Moderate…Singaporean*, p.30.

[77] Ibid.

[78] For more details about the concerns raised in the Convention, read *PERGAS: Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore*, 2002.

As such, being moderate Singapore Malay Muslims meant being able to live harmoniously with the rest of the Singapore society, through respecting the opinions and rights of non-Muslims, upholding peaceful means and supportive of democratic principles and secular nature of Singapore society and most importantly, to reject what is deemed as political Islam.   Having said that, they caveat their call towards moderation by stating that the Malay Muslims have a responsibility towards upholding their religious beliefs, and that while moderation is advocated in Islam, Islamic followers have to be mindful that this moderation is not in conflict with religious precepts.[79] This is best summarised in this statement:

> *"...being moderate is being in the middle of two extreme ends, a position that requires one to balance and even resist the pull of either polarised views...being on a balance is what true Islam is about. While Islam advocates simplicity, it also demands struggle among its followers to test those who are best in their deeds. Piety lies in moderation and not showing off one's prowess..."*[80]

Through these publications the religious elite has put themselves as authoritative figures in the discussions of moderation in Islam and the articulation of a 'Moderate Muslim' identity, and that they should be the ones speaking up to define the meaning of being a moderate Muslim.   PERGAS in particular sees itself as playing this critical role as Islamic leaders of the Malay community, and that maintained that it should be the one to represent *'...the authentic Islam and protects it against onslaught of potent*

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[79] This was a point highlighted in Azhar Ibrahim's analysis of the ideas and thinking of a book written by one of the new religious elite with regards to moderate Muslims. According to him, though it was an admirable effort made to explain the concept of moderation in Islam, it however failed in delineating clearly the difference between moderation and extremism. What's more the book became a reminder to Muslims that while pursuing moderation, nowhere was it stated in Islam that they could compromise their religious conviction, especially when faced with issues that affect the larger society. Azhar Ibrahim "Discourses of Islam in Southeast Asia and the Impact on Singapore Muslim Public", in Lai Ah Heng, ed. *Religious Diversity in Singapore.*

[80] Muhammad Haniff Hassan, *Muslim …Moderate…Singaporean*, p.37.

contemporary challenges."[81] As expressed by them:

> *"Pergas always teaches and explains to the Malay Muslim community the correct principles and teachings of Islam. And the Islamic religion is one that is very different from what is being portrayed by the* extremists. *."*[82]

PERGAS' formulation of moderation in fact contain ideas that can be regarded as extreme although they deem to be the voice of moderate Muslims. As mentioned in the earlier chapter, it was clear from this religious elite perspective that the Singapore Malays are not residing in an environment that was ideal to them since they are living in a non-Muslim country.   Despite this, the Malays can continue to accept the current situation since they currently have the room to practice their religion.   Thus the Malays are encouraged by the religious elite to *"opt for peace and tolerance as the bases of relations with others, as these are the original basis of relationship with non-Muslims in Islamic history."*[83]

Alongside the efforts of the above mentioned religious leaders, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, MUIS, also undertook various measures to promote the identity of moderate Muslims.   For example, MUIS disseminated brochures and leaflets on the Islamic religion to aid in dispelling the misconceptions that non-Muslims have towards Islam.   There were also attempts to streamline what is taught in the religious classes, especially in the mosques, following the perceptions that

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[81] Noor Aisha's analysis of the new Muslims ulamas in Singapore in "The Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore", in Lai Ah Heng, ed. *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, pp.267.

[82] Berita Harian, *"Isu Muslim sederhana: MUIS mula muzakarah dengan badan*, " 20 Aug 2002. According to Noor Aisha, these new breed of *ulamas* portrayed themselves as the custodian of the Islamic religion for Muslims in Singapore, and had on several occasions expressed dissatisfaction with what they perceived as the interference of non-authoritative figures in Islam in matters concerning religion. As stated by her: *"PERGAS stressed that whatever religious rulings concerning the Muslim community should only be made by those qualified in the field".* Ibid.   pp.261-269.

[83] Noor Aisha, "Muslim Religious Elite of Singapore", p 263.

these religious places where gatherings of Muslims frequently takes place, could have the potentiality to propagate deviant and extremist teachings. Thus to ensure that such spaces are not misused, there was a need to ensure the right type of teachings are taught. [84] Likewise, MUIS and PERGAS developed an accreditation system intended to register qualified religious teachers. This system was put in place to ensure that the Malay Muslim community have qualified religious teachers that would be able to teach them the right type of Islam.[85] However, while these procedures have been put in place, the substantive content of the teachings have not been effectively scrutinised.

In addition to organising discussion sessions with other Malay Muslim organisations on how they could help the Singapore Malay Muslim community embrace and adopt the identity of moderate Muslims. Various organisations involved in the discussions basically agreed that it is important that this moderation in Islam be the guiding light for the Muslims. As one organisation had iterated:

> *" . . .we agree that Singapore Malay Muslims is a group of moderates as Islam is a religion that practices moderation in all aspects. . .there is only a small minority of Islamic believers that practices Islamic principles that are not aligned to its teachings. . . these people are influenced by external groups and not because of internal pressures . . . actually there is no radial or extremist ideas in Islam because Islam is both moderate and rational. Islam opposed extremist behaviours."* [86]

Another organisation said the following:

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[84] Berita Harian, *"Tonjolkan semula model Islam toleran,"* 8 Aug 2002.

[85] This initiative was put in place in 2005, and was a part of the slew of initiatives put forth in an attempt to ensure that the right type of Islam is understood by the Singapore Malay Muslims.

[86] Translated from the excerpt: *" . . . kami setuju bahawa Muslim Singapura adalah golongan sederhana kerana Islam sendiri agama yang mengamalkan kesederhanaan dalam semua aspek . . . hanya terdapat segelintir kecil yang mengamalkan nilai Islam yang diputarbelitkan. Mereka ini dipengaruhi kumpulan yang menyeleweng di luar Singapura kerana sikap melampau bukan disebabkan unsur dalaman . . . sebenarnya tiada golongan pelampau atau radikal dalam Islam kerana*

> *"...we have always endeavoured to ensure that extremist values do not exist within the Malay Muslim community in Singapore, and will continue to cooperate with other Islamic bodies to ensure that extremist values do not spread in the community.* "[87]

Another aspect of 'Moderate Muslim' identity that was put forth by the Malay elite is the need and willingness among these moderate Muslims to stand up and be the voice of reason to combat the extremist views that had emerged post September 11[th.]. This call for moderates to stand up, once again showed the acceptance that there is a battle for the soul of Muslims, and that the moderates Muslims should stand up against the aggressive elements of Islam. Therefore, acting upon the cues of the governing elite, the Malay elite laid out the expectations that moderate Muslims should come out and articulate their opinions and beliefs on what Islam expects out of them. As a Malay leader from one of the Malay Muslim socio-civic organisation declared:

> "*Extremist voices and opinions tend to be louder, and often these extremist groups would be seen as putting forth the opinions of others [non-extremists]. Extremist opinions are dangerous because it tended to be based on ignorance or driven by self-interest. It is therefore important for us [moderates] to voice out and expressed our opinions so that we can eliminate the perceptions that the view of the extremists, are the view of the general public [moderates].*"[88]

This sentiment was also echoed by several members of the Malay political elite. In essence, these Malay leaders wanted to see more Malay Muslims in Singapore

standing up and showing a modern and moderate face of Islam. The Singapore

Malays were also reminded not to allow the extreme minority to be more vocal than

the moderate majority, and that it was this extreme minority that could "...*do serious*

damage to the interests of the silent, moderate majority."[89]   This exhortation of

moderates coming forward to express their views against extremism was given more

significance when this topic was raised during the 2002 *Anugerah Jauhari* award

ceremony that were attended by various leadership within the Malay Muslim

community and other communities in Singapore.[90]   The following was expressed

during the ceremony:

> *"We are aware that non-Muslims will blame Islam following the acts of a small group of Muslims. And it is indeed a tragedy if Islam, unintentionally, is being tarnished by its own followers particularly by those that consider themselves as representing Islam, while in reality, they are putting forth a different impression of Islam guided by their beliefs that are both narrow and intolerant.   To prevent this from happening, it is vital that those with moderate viewpoints come forward and express themselves.   It is our responsibility to correct the wrong impression of Islam that is taking place. We cannot remain silent and allow the voices of radicals and extremists to set the tone and agenda for our community . . .Voices of moderate Muslims should be the key player of our society.   I am of the opinion that this is what we need to do. This is also the best way forward for us.   And I sincerely believed that the moderates form the majority of the Malay Muslim community in Singapore."*[91]

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pandangan ekstrem daripada dilihat sebagai pandangan umum." See Berita Harian, *"Akur Muslim sederhana harus bersuara,"* 6 Aug 2002.

[89] Berita Harian, *"Akur Muslim sederhana harus bersuara,"* 6 Aug 2002.

[90] Anugerah Jauhari is an award given out yearly to outstanding Malay Muslim individual that have contributed significantly to the development of the Malay Muslim community.

[91] Translated from the excerpt: *"Kita prihatin bahawa Islam akan disalahkan oleh orang-orang bukan Islam akibat dari tingkah laku dan perbuatan sebahagian kecil saudara seagama kita sendiri. Dan adalah satu tragedi jika Islam, secara tidak disedari, dilukai oleh orang-orang Islam sendiri, terutama mereka yang mendakwa sebagai mewakili Islam, tetapi pada hakikatnya tersalah memaparkan agama itu dengan pemahaman mereka yang sempit dan kaku mengenai Islam, dan sekaligus mencemar imej Islam yang toleran. Bagi mengelakkan ini dari berlaku, amatlah penting bagi mereka yang mempunyai pandangan sederhana untuk tampil ke muka dan bersuara. Kita mempunyai tanggungjawab untuk meletakkan Islam pada perspektif yang betul bagi mengelakkan ia dari terus disalahfahamkan. Kita tidak harus berdiam diri, dan membenarkan suara-suara yang radikal menetapkan nada dan agenda masyarakat kita . . . Suara mereka yang berpandangan sederhanalah yang harus menjadi suara utama dalam masyarakat kita, dan bukan sebaliknya. Saya berpendapat, inilah yang seharusnya kita lakukan. Ini jugalah cara yang betul untuk kita meneruskan langkah. Dan saya percaya, golongan yang berpandangan sederhana ini membentuk kumpulan*

Apart from the above measures to promote a 'Moderate Muslim' identity, there were other efforts put in place by the Malay elite. For example, a Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) was formed by a group of religious leaders with the aim of rehabilitating the minority group of Muslims that has been misled into violence. The primary target of RRG was the arrested JI members, evident by the efforts made by the RRG members to counsel the JI detainees as well as their family members, with the hopes of getting them back on track on the 'right' Islam, one that is moderate in outlook.[92] In more recent years, inter-faith dialogue sessions were organised providing opportunities for the different religious groups in Singapore to have a better understanding of each other's religion including Islam.[93] Through all these efforts, the Malay leadership within the Singapore Malay Muslim community had attempted to navigate through the waters of distrust and concerns regarding the presence of Muslims in Singapore, and create a Muslim identity that was acceptable to the non-Muslims in Singapore.

The above highlighted the many efforts of the Malay elite to define and articulate the meaning of moderate Muslim. However, though there appears to have been a lot of talk on moderate as opposed to extreme Islam/Muslims generated by various groups within the Malay/Muslim community, these articulations are often vague and lack substantive and genuine ideas that can be used as basis for the development of a progressive identity, one that is relevant not only to the context of Singapore but the

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majority di Singapura". Berita Minggu, '*Golongan berpandangan sederhana harus tampil dan bersuara*,' 4 Aug 2002.

[92] Husin Mutalib, *Islam in Southeast Asia*, p. 55.

larger modern world in which the community is a part of. The call for moderation among the Singapore Malays, is actually already a reality, in that the Singapore Malays have always understood and cherish the importance of being moderate given the country they are residing, one that is multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-religious country. In short, the articulation that of the meaning of 'Moderate Muslim' identity becomes unclear, and instead becomes rhetorical as in involves something that already mirrors what the Malays already know and understand. Also, by adhering to the expression of moderate Muslim, the elite has framed the problem within the discourse of terrorism, radicalism and violence in Islam, a perspective that is adhered to by the non-Malay elite. The Malay elite through the acceptance of moderate Muslim identity did not show a questioning of the non-Malay elite perspective, instead reacted to their formulation of the problem of identity of Muslims by accepting the call for moderate Muslims.

This chapter has attempted to outline how the Singapore Malay Muslim community responded to the dominant perception posed to their identity as a Muslim after the event of September 11th 2001. The basic response revealed that the Singapore Malay Muslim leadership like the non-Muslim elite, largely subscribed to the view that radicalism and violence is rooted in theological misinterpretations of Islam and a problematic Muslim religiosity which can impair cohesion and progress. Hence the call for Muslims to imbibe a 'Moderate Muslim' identity, one that opposes violence and radicalism. While the portrayal of this form of Islamic identity is necessary to alleviate the fears and concerns of the non-Muslims including that of the governing elite, the discourse on the moderate Muslim nevertheless suffers from lack

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[93] Husin Mutalib, *Islam in Southeast Asia*, p. 55.

of clarity of principles and substantive conceptualisation based on Islam and universal humanitarian values much needed as basis for the genuine development of a progressive Malay/Muslim identity.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUDING REMARKS

This thesis has examined the meaning of Singapore Malay identity from the perspectives and understanding of the contemporary elite of the Malay community by which are included leaders in various domains not confined to politics. In so doing, this study has portrayed and analyzed their perceptions on what they identify as the essential aspects of Malay cultural identity, and how they perceive these integral elements. Understanding their perception is critical because being the dominant group in the community, their views bear implications on the way the Malay community views itself, and conditions their ability to reacts to challenges, and problems of social change and the demands of modernization confronting the community.

The Islamic component of the Malay identity has been a central theme in the exploration of the dominant perceptions and understanding of the elite on Malay identity. In particular this thesis attempts to examine how Islam has been understood and appropriated by the elite in response to challenges and problems faced by the Malay community since independence. This study has also given particular focus to the particularities of the conditions and context surrounding the Singapore Malay community and the kinds of issues and concerns that have emerged throughout the years which have affected and influenced the formulation of the community's identity. Understanding the local context and circumstances provide a wider backdrop that has conditioned Malay elite perception of Malay identity. It has also allowed for less researched concerns to be explored and discussed. By focusing on the understanding of the Malay identity from the view of its own elite and critical

contributions of indigenous scholarship, this thesis differs from the approach taken by other works which directly or indirectly bear on Malay identity.

This study has reflected that the elite's understanding of self and identity as Malay for the community is anchored on the fundamental attributes of culture, language and religion, as explained in Chapter two. Without exception, Malay elite explicate that being Malay means embracing the Malay culture, speaking Malay language and adopting the Islamic religion. Although Singapore Malays reside in a predominantly non-Malay country, the elite continue to promote the basic identifiers of Malay identity, and through these attempts, reveal that their understanding of the major identifiers of Malay identity is similar to the that which prevail in the larger Malay Archipelago. In short, their views reflect the belief and understanding that there exist a shared sense of history, culture, tradition and religion between the Singapore Malays and other Malays in the region.

Islam is particularly an integral aspect of Malay identity, and its influence has been seen throughout Malay history, from its feudal past to contemporary times. The importance of Islam as a key identifier of Malay identity is strongly recognized by the Singapore Malay elite. However, the elite's perception of Islam raises certain issues which are discussed in Chapter three. The chapter analyses the orientation or understanding of Islam by the elites within the Singapore Malay community. It argues that the understanding of Islam is one grounded in an orientation reminiscent of the past. There are various instances reflecting the continuation of this type of religious orientation, for example the prevalence of the belief in magic and superstitious woven into the religion. Also, the Islam that is understood and practiced

within the Malay community is one that places great emphasis on rituals and external symbols, and where the concern is primarily that of personal salvation, evident in the continued emphasis of these aspects by the religious elite in Singapore. In addition traditionalism as a mode of religious experience is also manifested in the thought of the religious elite. It conditions the selection and preoccupation with issues that include emphasis on the afterlife, dichotomy between the religious and the secular domains, belief in the glory of the Islamic past and over reliance of selective religious traditions of the past which are extended uncritically into modern times.

The type of Islamic orientation that predominates in the perception of the religious elite reflect the presence of traits that do not fully harness the potential of Islam in the development of the community. While Islam contains ethical values and principles that are all encompassing, and can provide the Malays with the ability to effectively navigate its life in modern society, the characteristics of Islamic orientation of its elite may impede the potential. For example, the strong influence of magic woven into religious teaching prevents the emergence of scientific orientation to life with ramifications on the Malays' ability to effectively solve concrete problems rationally. Also, the overemphasis on religious rituals at the expense of social philosophy takes away the ability of the Malays to appreciate Islam fully and understand how Islam can effectively be used to address the various aspects of human life. Equally pertinent is that the teachings of Islam have not been fully viewed as a guide to the philosophical, ethical and moral challenges relevant to human life. Coupled with the dogmatic adherence to Islamic traditions of the past, the little attention is spared for appreciating the problems and challenges of modern

society. More importantly the predominant characteristics of traditionalistic mode of thinking and sense of issues limits intellectual reasoning towards modern challenges and resolution of these problems. The ramifications of this drawback is evident in the elite's responses towards the issue of organ donation as shown in Chapter three. Such response bears implications on the image of Muslims and their identity that strongly reveals traits of exclusivity, anachronism and inability to adapt to the challenges of modernity. In short, the perception suggests that Islam is incompatible with changes and demands of the modern world which is not the case.

Another theme that has been examined in this study of Malay identity is the influence of the socio-economic development of Singapore on the formulation of Malay identity by the elite. This dimension is examined in detail in Chapter four. The chapter shows that the Malay elite since the time of Singapore's independence have constantly been preoccupied with steering the Malay community towards progress and development as this is viewed as the solution for the Singapore Malay community's continued survival in a country that is anchored on economic success. In their attempts towards propelling the Malays towards progress and development, the elite have explicated that the identity of the Malays, that is the cultural values imbued by them, have proven to be the inhibitor of Malay success. Thus, there emerged the consistent rhetoric of the Malays needing to be hard workers, good students and better individuals.

Underpinning the calls of this aspirations for the Malay community is the perception of negative values of the Malays which are impliedly but strongly associated with their socio-economic mire. It reflects the strong notion that the

Malays do not have what it takes to succeed as they are imbued with poor attitudes such as laziness, complacency, lack of motivation and so on. In short, the Malays are lacking in values critical for progress and development. Thus, the thinking of the elite regarding the Singapore Malays' under-development, particularly in the key areas of education and economy, is largely attributed to a problem of cultural values that reside in Malay identity. By focusing on values per se as the cause of Malay under-development, the Malay elite has negated the understanding of other potential causes for Malays under-development, like those attributed to structural impediments and economic limitations of the Malays themselves. It also reflected a lack of understanding of the influence of the socio-historical background of the Malay community from its feudal history to British colonialism.

The focus on values, to a large extent, persists in the elite formulation of responses towards the problem of Malay under-development, encapsulated in their promotion of the identity of *Melayu Baru* and the vision of *Community of Excellence*. The identity of *Melayu Baru* has been put forth by the Malay elite as an ideal identity that the Singapore Malays should seek to aspire for because this particular identity contains values that are critical to success and progress in life. Both the *Melayu Baru* identity and the vision of *Community of Excellence* are underpinned by Islamic values, as there is the inherent belief among the elite that Islam contains positive values that should be emulated by the Malays.

The strategies adopted by the Malay elite show an approach of tackling problems of Malays' under-development simply through that of cultural values, without attempting to solve other factors that hamper socio-economic development of the

community, like that of structural problems as well as institutional limitations confronting specific segments of the community. Also, through adopting strategies that tackle the problem of values per se, the elite are reinforcing the notion that the socio-economic backwardness of the Malays is due to traits integral to its identity, such as laziness, indulgence, weakness, lacking motivation and other defects.

Besides the context of socio-economic development and nation building in Singapore, the process of the identity formulation of the Singapore Malay elite is also influenced by the emphasis on integration and social cohesion of the nation put forth by the nation's political elite. In its ideology of survival, overriding concern has been given to the need to forge social harmony and integration amongst the multi-ethnic, multi racial and multi religious communities in Singapore. In this respect, Islam a major identifier of the Malay identity has been under constant national spotlight. Exacerbated by geo-politics within the region, the Islamic component of Malay identity has inevitably been seen as posing a challenge to the assimilation of the Malays in a multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-religious country like Singapore. In the efforts to address these issues and ensure that Singapore remains a cohesive country, the nation's elite who are predominantly non-Malay, undeniably are cautious of the influence of Islam and how it is practiced, understood and appropriated by the Singapore Malays. In fact, the cautious reaction of the non-Malay elite towards the influence of Islam on the Malay community can be seen throughout the years.

Chapter five analyses this dimension by focusing on issues pertaining to Singapore Malay's loyalty to the state, which is a reflection of the non-Malay elite's insecurity over the Malay community's continued adherence to its core identifier,

Islam. There have also emerged concerns over the Malays' increasing religiosity manifested by various religious practices for example, their active involvement in the mosques, their strict adherence to prayer times and their dietary restrictions, all of which are deemed as conflicting with their ability to integrate. Furthermore, the *tudung* in school saga and the demand for *madrasah* education by certain segments within the Malay Muslim community have also been problematised as manifestations of the problems of integration and social cohesion conditioned by the Malay identity particularly that of its Islamic identity.

The Malay elite, in its attempt to navigate these concerns of social cohesion and national integration, have constantly put forth the perception that the Malays, as a community, is able and always striving towards achieving social harmony among the different communities in Singapore. Malays' participation in community activities and institutions, and their belief in racial harmony are regularly put forth as examples of the community's ability to integrate and socialize in a multi-racial country in Singapore. In short, the Malay elite response showcases the Malay community as an integrated part of Singapore society. Unfortunately, the manner in which the Malay elite address and formulate their responses towards the concerns of social cohesion and national integration, tends to reinforce the non-Malay elite understanding and perceptions of Malay and Muslim identity viz. that there exists problems with Malay identity, specifically that of its Islamic identity which hinders the full integration of the Malays in Singapore. The type of responses put forth by the Malay elite also reflect that they too, are not unfettered by the same understanding as the non-Malay elite.

When September 11th attack occurred, the issue of Malay and Muslim identity was again brought prominently to the forefront. It intensified the fears of Islam and extended Islam's association to aggression and violence. This theme discussed in Chapter six, portrayed the belief among the non-Malays in Singapore that because the Malays are Muslims and their identity as Malays is intertwined with their identity as Muslims, they are influenced by global events affecting the Muslims. The non-Malay elite was particularly concerned about these global developments, a fear compounded by local events triggered by groups using religion. These exacerbated fears of potential threat posed by Islam impede the efforts of social harmony and cohesion in Singapore. Such fears had conditioned repeated calls by the national leaders for Singapore Malays to adopt a moderate Muslim identity. Given that their identification of the problem of radicalism and violence is deemed to be rooted in religion, prescriptions selected and promoted called for the moderate practice of Islam as antithesis to the aggressive potential of the Islamic religion.

The Malay elite in turn responded positively to the call made by the national leaders and made efforts to promote and articulate the identity of moderation among the Singapore Malays. Unfortunately, despite the many talks on the meaning of moderation, the formulation of moderate Muslim remained elusive and unclear, and has not moved beyond the rhetoric of reiterating the belief in peace and tolerance which is already known and understood as essential teachings of Islam to the Singapore Malays who have generally cherished these values. Furthermore, the formulation of the moderate Muslim identity, while intended to give assurance to the non-Malays about the position of the Singapore Malays on the issue of terrorism,

reflected that the Malay elite supported the framing of the problem of terrorism as that which resides in Islam, hence the assertions that Islam is linked to terror and that selective theological interpretations of Islam is at the crux of terrorism. This is manifested in the religious elite response to the issue as embodied in their promotion of the 'Moderate Muslim' identity.[1]

Overall, it cannot be denied that the Singapore Malays is as much a part of Singapore as the rest of the other communities in the country. As aptly acknowledged by the Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong during his 2005 National Day Rally:

> "M*alay Singaporeans share the same concerns as other Singaporeans – upgrading our economy, improving the education system, strengthening our service culture, and building a vibrant global city. This requires the combined effort of the whole nation*"[2]

It is this particular inclusion and acknowledgement of the Malays as a part of the Singapore populace that has played a significant dimension in influencing the process of identity formulation of the Singapore Malay community as experienced and articulated by the Malay elite. The integral elements understood by the Malay elite as basic to the meaning of being Malay, viz. identifiers of Malay language, Malay culture and Islamic religion are woven into this socio-historical milieu. At the same time, this interplay between maintaining the understanding of Malay identity and

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[1] According to a local scholar, there have been occurrences of Malay/Muslim thinkers contributing Islamic reform ideas for the benefit of the Muslim communities, propelled by their deep consciousness of the underdevelopment of the Muslims, and the vital need to adjust to the demands of modern world. Likewise in the case of the Singapore Malay Muslim community, continuous efforts at developing and giving effect to reform ideas can strengthen key Muslim religious institutions in Singapore, and a more thorough thinking and discussion on this recent phenomenon of terrorism and Islam is a good opportunity that should not be wasted. Noor Aisha, *Issues on Islam and the Muslims in Singapore Post 9/11: An Analysis of Dominant Perspective*.

[2] See text of PM Lee's 2005 National Day Rally Speech in Malay at the University Cultural Centre, NUS.

being a part of the Singapore populace has raised complexities in the discourse of Malay identity, as reflected throughout this study. The complexities are further heightened by the Malay elite in their attempts to lead and guide the Malay community in confronting the challenges posed to the community

This thesis has attempted to understand the dominant perceptions of the contemporary elite within the Malay Muslim community of Singapore on the question of Malay cultural identity, and the factors that condition them. It identifies and evaluates the core elements they perceive as integral to Malay identity and how these are understood and appropriated in their response to issues that affect the community after independence. This thesis has also attempted to appraise the extent to which their thoughts bearing upon the Malay identity have helped to community to alleviate problems and challenges confronting it within the multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious society of Singapore

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