EXPRESSING ISLAM: A STUDY OF THE
BAYT AL-QUR’AN & MUSEUM ISTIQLAL INDONESIA
AND THE ISLAMIC ARTS MUSEUM MALAYSIA

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Summary

National and state-sanctioned museums are authoritative public sites for exposition on subjects deemed important in national identity-building. Far from being neutral spaces of learning where visitors arrive at their own conclusions after viewing the exhibitions, museums are social institutions that selectively use objects and narratives to influence their visitors into behaving and responding to exhibitions in manners deemed desirable. Such socializing imperatives affect the shaping of any museum’s galleries. In Southeast Asian countries with significant Muslim populations, several national and private museums grapple to create authentic representations of Islam within the discourse of “national culture”. Such attempts often reveal tensions between the museum’s representations and the reality of the modern and often ethnically and religiously plural societies. My thesis examines how the Bayt Al-Qur’an & Istiqlal Museum Indonesia (BQMI) and the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM) attempt to define the role that Islam plays in the creation of their respective national identities.

The BQMI and IAMM can be seen as public institutions which emerged from a national landscape of increasingly religion-directed cultural policies that was influenced by what appeared to be a worldwide revival of Islamic values since the 1970s. Seminal events in the larger Muslim world, including the Palestinian conflict, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the invasion of Afghanistan, occurred against an international backdrop of Cold War politics. The rhetoric of international diplomacy during this period was resoundingly ideological as it pitted the Soviet communist bloc
against the liberal democracies of Western economies. Islam seemed to provide an alternative rubric to the two secular political ideologies and many countries experienced a resurgence of “Islam-consciousness” amongst their Muslim communities.

The political leaders of Indonesia and Malaysia have, at different points of their countries’ histories, restricted and encouraged expressions of Islam in their respective public spheres. Between the late 1980s and 1990s, then-Indonesian President Suharto and his Malaysian counterpart, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, supported policies that increasingly led to the Islamization of the two countries, both in terms of the “greening” of state bureaucratic and military apparatus as well as the implementation of Islamic practices in the respective public realms.

Nonetheless, the terms “Islamic culture” and “Islamic art” are problematic and begs the question of whether they can be used as universalistic terms that can describe the myriad Muslim communities through history. Especially, when one considers the ancient Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of Southeast Asia and the continued presence of pre-Islamic traditions and practices in Southeast Asian societies, the re-imagination of Indonesia and Malaysia as “pristine” Muslim communities becomes fraught with tensions. The religious fault line is compounded by ethnic plurality and the complexities of majority-minority politics. The Javanese-Muslims of Indonesia and the Malay-Muslims of Malaysia exercise political and cultural hegemony over the religious and ethnic minorities in their countries. Often times, under the pretext of
national unity or other higher national interests, the political and civil liberties of ethnic and religious minorities are curtailed. Hence, state-sanctioned representations of the imagined national community are highly controlled images that include some groups while excluding others.
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Introduction

According to a definition provided by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a museum is,

a non-profit making, permanent institutions in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyments, material evidence of man and his environment.¹

An earlier definition by Douglas Allan states that a museum “in its simplest form” was a building “to house collections of objects for inspection, study and enjoyment”.² Museums come in all shapes and sizes and the earliest public museums emerged from the stately collections of royal houses in Europe in the 18th Century as well as the private collections of wealthy (and sometimes eccentric) individuals who assembled cabinets of curios and art works out of a sense of antiquity, scientific enquiry or outright exotica.³ My thesis examines a certain type of museum – the “specialized” museum that deals in depth with a specific subject matter, such as archaeology or religion or the political history of a country. In particular, I am examining the specialized “Islamic museum” which was either established or supported by state authorities and the role it plays in the transmission of certain values and knowledge to shape a sense of national culture and identity.

National and state-sanctioned museums as we know them today are public sites for the exposition on subjects deemed historically important in national identity-building. Through their collections, displays and even their very buildings, museums have the ability to confer knowledge and mediate many of society's basic understanding of the world around it, including how it views itself.4 Far from being neutral spaces of learning where visitors “draw their own conclusions” after viewing the numerous artefacts on display, museums are social institutions that selectively use objects and narratives to influence their visitors and socialize them into behaving and responding to the exhibitions in manners deemed desirable.5 At the same time, museums themselves are shaped by some agenda or other and more often than not, must adhere to and disseminate whatever values that are considered important that its local communities (or foreign visitors) should learn about its history or the larger world.

These concerns affect the shaping of any museum’s galleries especially when they aim to represent something as ephemeral yet loaded with meaning as “national culture”. In Southeast Asia where polyglots of ethnic communities co-exist within arbitrary state boundaries, a number of national and private museums (especially in countries with significant Muslim populations) grapple to create what can be accepted as “authentic” representations of Islam within the discourse of “national culture”.

My thesis is centred on how museums are employed in the nation-building campaign through the objectification and exhibition of what can be termed as “expressions of a national culture”. The collection of objects that are seen to represent the nation’s collective culture, or “tangible heritage” even, is consumed by the public in the belief that they will internalize the experience as part of a citizen’s national identity. In particular, I examine how two specific museums in Indonesia and Malaysia define and manage the role that Islam plays in the creation of their respective national identities through their collections and museum activities.

This staging of Islam in the two museums is for both domestic and foreign consumption. Despite claims to the universality of the Islamic faith, the curatorial approaches of the Bayt al-Qur’an and Museum Istiqlal (BQMI) and the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia (IAMM) lead me to believe that there is a strong desire in both national governments to define an Islam which is to some degree unique to the Southeast Asian region and autonomous from the traditions of the Semitic-Persian “heartlands” of the Nile and Oxus regions. At the same time, there is much care taken to represent the region’s uniqueness as on par with earlier Arabian traditions.

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7 Marshall G. S. Hodgson, The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 4. Hodgson insists on using precise terminology to differentiate between the study of “Islam” (the religion) and “Muslims” (the community of the faithful). He further argues that the term “Islamic” to describe civilizational aspects of Muslim societies is especially problematic. Instead, Hodgson suggests the term “Islamicate” to accommodate the different “Islamic cultures” that flourished across the Darul Islam. An extended discussion of Hodgson’s ideas on Islamicate civilisations will follow below. Despite some resistance to the term as being too idiosyncratic, whenever possible, I adopt his terminology in my essay to highlight the variegated nature of Muslim societies globally and the resulting myriad cultures of Islam.
Given the state-building preoccupations of nationalist governments, it is necessary for us to look beyond the objects to examine the narratives that accompany the museums’ collection/exhibitions even as the objects serve as corroborative elements in the very narrative. There are always inherent difficulties that curatorial teams face in visually recreating any kind of narrative, especially one that pertains to describing something as complex as a “civilization” given material constraints and competing intellectual and ideological or political paradigms. Hooper-Greenhill speaks of “objects as ideas” and Stone discusses the ways in which archaeology has helped present the past as “public heritage” whilst preserving the physicality of said heritage. Nonetheless, objects do not contain any essential meaning inherently and are subject to the context of its use and surroundings. Hence one must always be wary when artefacts are removed from their original historical, social and epistemological contexts, and then displayed in museums to support a coherent “national narrative” that state authorities (or their champions) prefer.

In that regard, I will be addressing how the museums have organized their collections in order to, as Stephen Bann puts it, “view the past” and the impact these objects have on museum visitors when visual representations and narrative modes intersect at various points. “Viewing the past” can never be a truly objective activity, Bann argues, as the viewer’s eyes are inevitably influenced by his or her culture’s

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attitudes towards history. Such cultural attitudes about the past also affect how one values the objects left behind (or discovered) from that past. In my two case studies, I examine how the objects exhibited are used to stretch the concepts of “Islam” as a socio-cultural phenomenon, and a dynamically-evolving world religion, as well as to expand the geographical and cultural borders of “Islamic civilization” to include Southeast Asia, traditionally considered as at the peripheries of the Muslim world.

As the political, intellectual and artistic protagonists in Indonesia and Malaysia are engaged in exercises of ordering the past in response to present circumstances, I argue that the popularity of the BQMI (in its time) and the IAMM are, on the one hand, a reflection of the increasing awareness of Islam and pride of Muslims in the historical achievements of Islamicate civilization. This appreciation for Islam’s “golden age” accompanied a worldwide Islamic resurgence that began in the 1970s. On the other hand, the establishment of the BQMI in Jakarta in 1997 and the IAMM in Kuala Lumpur in 1999 could be considered part of larger institutional responses to the increasing Islamization of Malaysian/Indonesian society that gained momentum in the 1980s and was well institutionalized by the late 1990s.

Museums as an Extension of Indonesian and Malaysian National Policy

I will further argue that the two museums not only manifest the cultural hegemony of the state elites as the dominant and jealous producer of national and “Islamic culture”, they also reflect the international aspirations of the respective

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Suharto and Mahathir governments to augment the profile of their country in the larger “Islamic world”. In this respect, the cultural and other institutional expressions of Islam in these two countries make up part of Indonesia and Malaysia’s foreign policy since the 1990s, especially in their interactions with other Muslim countries. Moreover, the collection and activities of the IAMM are not only in tandem with a larger process of Islamization of Malaysian society, they also reflect an attempt to expand the discourse on Islamicate civilization and Islamicate culture in these countries, which are traditionally perceived as peripheral to the Islamicate heartlands of the Arabian Peninsula due to Islam’s relatively recent arrival in Southeast Asia from around the 12th Century.\(^\text{12}\)

Arguably, despite the IAMM being a private museum, part of its mission is also to serve as an institution of Islamicate knowledge and cultural production. The IAMM’s establishment was also strongly supported by then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed and is generally seen as a testament to his aim to project present-day Malaysia – and its Muslim majority – as a worthy modern successor to a global Islamicate civilization as well as an authoritative definer of Islamicate culture.

In Indonesia’s case, despite the similarities it shares with Malaysia in terms of a dominant Malay ethnic group and a largely Sunni-Islam religious culture, the formal role that Islam plays in state-building in Indonesia is much more ambiguous. For instance, even though Indonesia is home to the world’s largest population of Muslims and despite there being a historically influential Islamic intellectual bloc operating

within its relatively more liberal democratic system, “political Islam” was not a conspicuous force during Sukarno’s administration even though he accommodated some Islamic elements in the constitution. Further, Islam was forcibly de-politicized and steered into the realm of “culture” in the New Order period by Suharto so that the secular nationalist ideology of *Pancasila* would be preserved. The state encouraged pursuits of cultural expressions of Islam as culture was deemed to be a safer outlet for Islamic expression and these expressions reinforced the nationalist philosophy of “unity in diversity”. In practice, Suharto’s regime accommodated a spectrum of Islams coloured by earlier beliefs or tribal traditions.\(^{13}\)

However, Suharto’s attitude towards Islam changed in the late 1980s and he became more closely associated with Islamists groups and Muslim public intellectuals. The BQMI was a cultural project overseen by Suharto’s wife, Siti Hartinah (better known to Indonesians as Ibu Tien Suharto), during the Suhartos’ very public return to observing the Islamic faith in the 1990s. That the BQMI stands out as a giant monument in the miniaturized environs of Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (TMII) implies the centrality of the Quran as the unifying force in Indonesian Islam. At the same time, the distinctly nationalist context of the 1991 Festival Istiqlal (which originated the idea for the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal) and the deliberate process of creating an elaborately illuminated reproduction of a “national” Qur’an, attest to the conviction of Indonesian leaders that “Islamic civilization” is diverse and able to accommodate myriad identities beyond those formed in the Arabian heartlands of Islam.

Ironically, the BQMI’s presentation of Islam as the paramount religious element in Indonesian national identity mutes the various indigenous responses towards Islam over the history of Indonesia as the new faith steadily spread across the main islands of Sumatra and Java and further eastwards from the 12th Century. Ricklefs’ insightful analysis of the divergent responses of different sectors of 19th Century Javanese society to Islam reveal that its influence in determining Javanese identity was far from an accepted fact as late as the 1930s.\textsuperscript{14}

Some anti-colonialists were able to harness Islam as a rallying symbol against Dutch rule. However, the majority of Muslim Javanese, including its \textit{prijayi} elites, rejected the totalitarian nature of 19th Century reformist Islam in favour of maintaining the “mystic synthesis” between Islamic commitment and Javanese character that was prevalent from the 14th to 18th century.\textsuperscript{15} In contrast to the deep-rooted Islamic past that the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal alluded to, a return to earlier classical Javanese-Hindu-Buddhist beliefs and even Christianity emerged as viable alternatives for the religious component of Javanese identity during that turbulent period.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{The Complexities of Putting Islam on Display}

As museums position themselves as not only surveyors, but also purveyors of the past, I will examine the narratives that each museum has chosen to foreground the objects in their collections in the museums’ respective interpretation of “Islamic

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 251.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., pp. 103-125.
civilization” – itself a contested term. That the museums are able to construct their desired narratives in the first instance, demonstrates that things do not possess any inherent essential meanings but rather are made meaningful through specific contexts at specific points in time. These contexts are in turn, as Foucault argues, affected by power relations in society as well as the privileged episteme, or structures of knowledge, of the time. Hence the past becomes objectified and the ‘reality’ of the past is experienced by present visitors through the tangible materiality of objects.

Through the acquisitions, displays, exhibitions, programmes and publications of the BQMI and the IAMM, the history of an “Islamic civilization” is recreated (to various success) as a glorious and continuous spectacle of fine craftsmanship across space and time. These artefacts are presented as a common pusaka – preserved and displayed for the benefit of the nation. At the same time, the objects that pertain to Malay/ Malay Archipelago-Islamicate art or material culture, are situated as part of a larger corpus of a global Islamicate material culture and artistic sensibilities. Such an ordering of indigenous Islamicate objects implies that there are common principles and an aesthetic that underpin the creation of Islamicate material culture and art. I will shortly discuss some of the problems that such an assumption creates. I will also elaborate on how scholars in the study of Islamicate civilization such as Marshall Hodgson and Bernard Lewis have found strategies to discuss the diversity of “Islamic

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17 As mentioned earlier, I favour Marshall Hodgson’s terminology of “Islamicate” rather than simply “Islamic” even though there are criticisms of the term being idiosyncratic. Simply because “Islamicate” avoids the conflation of the religion of Islam and Muslims with the conditions of a complex plural society living under Islamic government and/or norms. The term also better describes the discrete Muslim societies that have existed through history.
civilization” while Islamicate art experts the likes of Oleg Grabar, David Bloom and Sheila Blair, discuss the elusiveness of defining “Islamic art” in absolute terms.

“Islamic Culture”, “Islamicate” Material Cultures and “Islamic Art”: Issues of Terminology

Verily, Allah is beautiful and He loves beauty.20

There are several complexities involved when objects in the two museums’ collections are used to represent both the artistic genius and the religious piety of the nation. Before we can even discuss the aesthetics that underpin the practice of “Islamic art”, the most immediate problem we face is defining what is “Islamic” or Marshall Hodgson’s term, “Islamicate” culture. Especially in a museum, objects that represent Islam as both a “living” religion and historical phenomenon are far removed from their original contexts. Such a setting necessitates a discussion on what is meant by “Islamicate material culture” and “Islamicate art” such that these displayed objects are authentic examples of them.

There is also a need to establish the extent to which museums and heritage institutions can comfortably use objects made by Muslims or which are culturally or aesthetically informed by Islam as a metonymy for particular contemporary visions in “Islam” or in the recreation of Islam’s history. Other than the complications of cultural and historical “authenticity”, the issue of “inclusivity” and “who belongs” are raised in defining the historical civilization of Muslims.

20 M. A. J. Beg, Wisdom of Islamic Civilisation, (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1980), p. 48. The statement is from a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad which has presumably informed a sense of Muslim aesthetics.
The Complexities of Defining an “Islamic Civilization”

Hodgson argues that the two terms “Islamic civilization” and “Islamic art” are problematic. This is because, whether or not one realises it, Western-centric conceptualisations of “civilisation” and “art” are applied to the historical development of Islam as a world religion. Examining historical Islamicate societies as a “civilization” raises several important methodological concerns. For instance, Chakrabarty argues that social-science terms and frameworks such as “socialism”, “democracy”, “class” and even “religion” which have been used to examine non-Western societies, are not neutral ontological categories but are shaped by occurrences in European history and were society-specific in its analysis.21 A term like “civilization” is itself a Western-centric construct that emerged in the 19th Century from the analyses of classical Europe.

More significantly, in the name of the universal social sciences, these categories of rationality and scientific study of both history and society, continue to be propagated by institutions such as universities, public libraries and museums – institutions that are very much rooted in Western epistemological traditions. Chakrabarty argues that these traditional social science categories might even be inadequate frameworks to study non-Western societies.22 Given that Islam was conceptualized as a religion with principles, laws, symbols and rituals which were particular to the experiences of the Prophet Muhammad and the Quraysh and Medinan

22 Ibid. p. 88.
societies of 7th Century Arabia, it raises issues of how to conduct a comprehensive study of the development of a religious community which was not organised along more-familiar modern Western sociological norms and political frameworks.

Furthermore, Islamic governance is traditionally not confined to the private sphere. While it is also true of liberal Christian governments to influence public order through policies that reflect their interpretation of biblical literature, arguably, the individual experience of the faith is never meant to dominate the communal experience of Islam. Rather it is “the community of the faithful” – the spiritual ummah who is able to recite the Quran in one common language, observe the obligations of fasting and charity as exemplified by Prophet Muhammad, and ultimately, a community of believers who face the same direction of the Ka’bah in prayer, observing a unified set of ritual poses and recitations. In this set of seemingly unchanging practices and rituals, a universal Islamic tradition is established and perpetuated across time and space.

Despite the obvious variations in the practice of Islam, the objects in BQMI and IAMM relating to these practices convey familiarity to the Muslim visitor as they resonate with at least some of his or her experiences of Islam. “Heritage objects” (benda kuno or benda tradisi) such as prayer mats, Qur’ans, white uncut ihram cloths for the hajj, pieces of the black velvet-gold embroidered covering of the Ka’bah, a recreated prayer hall in a mosque with the mihrab and minbar, all speak to different memories of the Muslim visitor, regardless of his or her ethnic or national
background. Thus, the heterogeneity of Islam need not mean an absence of shared traditions because there is arguably “an underlying unity that informs all of these Islams”.  

Hence, a discussion of what constitutes an Islamicate “nation” or “civilization” would have to separate the development of Islam’s history on the Arabian Peninsula and that of its diverse Muslim communities using terms that are specific to their experiences. A study of the history, politics, experience and practice of Islam by Muslims globally should not, for the sake of convenience of understanding or theoretical models, uncritically employ categories such as “civilization” as a universal socio-scientific category. Such a framework might unwittingly subject Islam, as both a historical and sociological phenomenon, to a hidden narrative of “modernity” which the chronology of European history adheres to. One would then be tempted to view the material culture produced by the various Islamicate societies as the “development” of an artistic “tradition” that has Islamic themes as its organising compass, rather than local responses to a global religious phenomenon.

Given that the term “Islamic art” is of recent coinage, there would also be a tendency to compare examples of Islamicate art, architecture, calligraphy and decorative arts to similarly named religious art such as “Christian” or “Buddhist” art, which are conventionally understood as referring specifically to forms of religious

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This is not the same as saying that Islamicate art is ‘more special’ compared to other kinds of religious art. Rather, a direct comparison is not the best approach to describe Islamicate (or other forms of religious) material culture and its products because Islamicate art, just like other types of religious art, is “the fruit of constant dialog between the new belief system and pre-existing indigenous traditions.”

To clarify, I am not suggesting that one abandons all conventional theoretical frameworks of approaching Islam as a civilization. As Chakrabarty argues, these frameworks have become “indispensable” to the study of societies. Rather, I am saying that Islamicate societies should also be analysed from the perspective of their own historians and contemporary intellectuals. Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406 A.D.) coined the term “umran” in his book Al-Muqaddimah li-Kitab al-‘ibar in the 14th century to describe what we conventionally call “civilization”. He argued that a “civilized society” possessed a number of characteristics:

[It] has a Higher form of Religion, a well-organized State, a system of law, City-life, a developed system of writing (Script), and distinctive forms of art and architecture.

While Ibn Khaldun’s conceptualization bears some similarities with later

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26 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, p. 6.
European anthropological theories, what is more significant is that we have to frame Ibn Khaldun’s writings against his medieval environment when Islam had established itself as a religion on the Arabian Peninsula and Mamluk Egypt, and the Turks had built an Islamicate empire that reached the southern ends of the Mediterranean and captured Constantinople in 1453.29

Among the Muslim scholars of the 20th Century, Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh expressed his view on civilisations in the *Tafsir of al-Qur’an* that all civilisations (*madaniyyat*) were established on the foundation of religion.30 Following Ibn Khaldun’s criteria, ‘Abduh argued that the ancient Greeks, Chaldeans, and Egyptians all based their civilisations on religious foundations.31 Yet another Muslim scholar, Muhammad Asad described Islamicate civilisation as an “ideological civilisation” which has the Qur’an as its source as well as its “only justification”.32 He argued that Islamicate civilisation was “essentially intellectual” in its driving force and that it grew out of the broad, circumscribed code of individual and social behaviour, of the *Shari’ah*.33 Islam had “nothing to do with the concepts of race or nation, and so lacks the cement of racial consciousness which was the cardinal factor in all other civilisations”.34

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These Islamic scholars, respectively were a North African intellectual writing in the 14th Century; a 19th Century Egyptian Muslim reformist; and an Austrian Jew journalist who converted to Islam in the early 20th century; and they wrote prolifically on the natural sciences, Qur’anic exegeses as well as issues facing the Muslim societies of their times. While They later influenced the thinking of contemporary Muslim intellectuals such as Pakistani Fazlur Rahman, who in turn, taught the likes of prominent Indonesian scholar Nurcholish Madjid who challenged the feasibility of an Islamic state of Indonesia and was a peer to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, whose “Islamization of knowledge” campaign became the intellectual force driving the student dakwah movement in Malaysia in the 1990s.

These Islamic intellectuals all had different and sometimes opposing ideas on what political Islam and Islamic society meant and the role of Islam in the modern and increasingly interconnected world. These ideas reflect the depth of debate on Islam and the breadth of Muslim experiences, as well as the ongoing exchange of ideas amongst global Muslim communities. Hence, the concept of a global ummah or community of believers, which is supposed to transcend racial and cultural boundaries, is an important perception of how Muslims all over the world are connected to one another, even when there are real differences and oftentimes, contradictions in the manner in which these Islams are lived. These various factors to delineate what Muslims thinkers considered were fundamental criteria in establishing a civilisation would also inform an assessment of the traditions associated with an Islamic aesthetic. In relation to Islamicate art, it is the “universalist” approach that sees all the arts produced by Muslims everywhere as “reflecting the universal verities
of Islam, just as God’s ineffable unity encompasses the infinite diversity of His creation”.  

“Islamic” versus “Islamicate”

The need for precise terminology and parameters with which to examine Islam is demonstrated with great earnest in Hodgson’s voluminous writings and he calls for a rigorous theoretical framework in which to understand Islam as a world religion. However, even as it spread across the globe, Islam is very much associated with Arab culture. Hodgson asserted that 19th Century Western scholarship was obsessed over the “Mediterranean (and hence largely Arab) Islamdom, as nearest to Europe and most involved in its history”.  

Hodgson also cautioned that there is an incommensurability of meanings that emerges if scholars identify “Islamic culture” as a “culture appearing in the Arabic language” because it results in the treatment of all pre-Islamic Arabian elements (i.e. those found on the Arabian Peninsula) as “native to Islamic culture” while Syriac, Persian or Greek cultural elements appear as “foreign imports into Muslim Arab life”. Moreover, he claims that the terms “Islam” and “Islamic” have been used “too casually” in modern scholarship with regard to “religion and for the overall society and culture associated historically with the religion” as the “society and culture called

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35 Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art”, p. 158.
37 Ibid., pp. 143
38 Ibid., pp. 40-41.
‘Islamic’ in the second sense are not necessarily ‘Islamic’ in the first”. Hence Hodgson warns against using the terms interchangeably to refer to Islam’s various social institutions as a means to connect disparate practices specific to a particular time, space and society in the experience of Islam.39

Hodgson’s exhortations to render the ethnography of Islam more transparent when one examines Islam as a faith, is important to understanding how a tradition of “Islamic aesthetics” could have been invented and how historians and those concerned with “art” ethnographically, can begin to distinguish between elements of faith and those that have been mediated by culture, though it would be an understandably complex enterprise to undertake. Hodgson sees some merit in Bernard Lewis’ suggestion that the adjective “Islamic” be used in the “cultural sense” and the adjective “Muslim” in the “religious sense”. Hodgson further offered new terms to describe Islam as a historical and sociological phenomenon. “Islamdom”, for instance, would denote not just an area of Islamic rule per se but also a “complex of social relations” (Hodgson’s emphases) and is a better term than “Muslim lands” as “Islamdom” would be “clearly collective” and analogous to “Christendom”.

Moreover, as Hodgson saw culture as a kind of tangent which moved further and further away from religion proper, he proposed the term “Islamicate” to refer to the cultural traditions of successive Islamicate dynasties – a culture that has “centred around a lettered tradition”.40 With such terminology in place, “Islamicate cultural

39 Ibid., p. 57.
40 Ibid. p. 58.
traditions” (and not “Islamic culture” per se) are more accurately historicised. Though Hodgson’s terminology is considered to be idiosyncratic by most other scholars of Islam in world history, the discussion above demonstrates that the study of Islam as a “civilization” is not only complicated by the conflation of religion with history, but has to also take into account the different experiences of culturally-diverse Muslims as they melded their religious identity with pre-existing cultural systems in their environments.

The Elusive Nature of “Islamic Art”

As both the BQMI and IAMM use Islamicate art as an approach to discussing Islamicate culture and civilization, the issue then becomes how one makes sense of “art” in Islamicate culture and how far can the term “Islamic art” be expanded to include all the material culture produced by different Muslim communities across time and space. The problem is compounded by the use of “Islamic art” as a collective term referring to various forms of material culture produced in Muslim-populated countries. This is because the term was coined in 19th Century Europe rather than by the Muslim societies that produced the material culture.

There is extensive literature on “Orientalism” and “oriental art” and Europe’s fascination with the arts of Islamicate lands heightened during the period of European colonialism. The British Museum and British Library had amassed a “superb and encyclopaedic collection of Islamic art by the end of the nineteenth century”. 41

modern study of “Islamic art” brought together several European intellectual traditions, including the history of (European) art, ancient Near Eastern languages and antiquities as well as Orientalism.\(^{42}\) Such a tendency to view much of Islamicate material culture indiscriminately as a monolithic tradition again raises the suspicion that there might be a universalising aesthetic informed by Western traditions that not only elevates an object from mere functionality to that which gives pleasure in its viewing, but which might also assume a developmental linearity in the chronology of Islamicate art when it might not be true in all cases.

In this regard, Oleg Grabar acknowledges that “early Islamic art” raises a number of “abstract questions about the nature of artistic creativity and aesthetic sensibility which transcend the exact time and place of its growth”.\(^{43}\) Perhaps more radically than Hodgson, Grabar argues that “Islamic” does not refer to the art of a particular religion because apparently “a vast proportion of the monuments have little if anything to do with the faith of Islam”.\(^{44}\) He notes the “very uncertainty and incompleteness” of Islamicate art is because they do not always fit neatly in conventional aesthetic categories that are understood by Western traditions.

While Grabar agrees to some extent with George Marcais’ claim that there was a certain “personality of Islamic art” which differentiated the objects of

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\(^{42}\)Ibid., p. 154.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., p. xvi.
Islamicate art from masterpieces of other artistic traditions “almost automatically”,\textsuperscript{45} Grabar argues that,

even if [Islamic art] exists at all”, the “most important point is that ‘Islamic’ in the expression ‘Islamic art’ is not comparable to Christian’ or ‘Buddhist in ‘Christian art’ or ‘Buddhist art’.

Rather, he asserts that the term “Islamic” would be more comparable to “Gothic” or “Baroque” and would suggest a “more or less successful cultural moment in a long history of native traditions”. “Islamic” in this usage would be “like a special overlay” which acted like “a deforming or refracting prism which transformed, at times temporarily and imperfectly, at other times permanently, some local energies or traditions”.\textsuperscript{46} That the expert on “Islamic art” could argue that there might not be such universal category of Islamicate art but rather a series of indigenous traditions interacting with Islam, complicates the concept of a corpus of Islamicate art in the BQMI and IAMM.

On the other hand, Blair and Bloom argue that because of the density of artistic objects produced in Muslim communities throughout history, Islamicate art could either only be painted in broad strokes, so that the universalism of Islam is highlighted, or a narrower definition of Islamicate art must be created instead. This tighter definition would be to specify the categories of regions, dynasties, patrons, media and cross-cultural pollination to better classify and make sense of all the objects produced in or for Muslim communities.\textsuperscript{47} In either case, what is highlighted

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 1.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p. 2
\textsuperscript{47} Blair and Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art”, pp. 158-171.
is the search for links and arguments to connect disparate Islamicate societies across time and space through their material cultures. In Chapters III and IV, it will become clear that the two museums have preferred Blair and Bloom’s definition of “broad strokes” of Islamicate art in the curation of their respective collections while displaying the long histories of various indigenous material culture production.

Hence, the distinction between what constitutes “Muslim themes” in an artistic production during an Islamic period of rule is more complex than what is usually displayed in the Islamicate art and material collections of various museums. It is especially the case with the IAMM collection. The curators of the museum have included the art of “the Malay world” as part of the larger body of Islamicate art ostensibly because of shared characteristics inherent in the objects that tied them to those that had been produced in earlier Islamicate dynastic periods.

While the argument is valid for artefacts such as mushaf Qur’ans and calligraphic art, it is harder to justify the silverware and metalwork of Malay royalty as coming from the same tradition as bronzeware from Seljuk Persia, or gold threaded songket textiles to Ottoman-period carpet weave. Nonetheless, if Islam acted like the refractive prism that Grabar mentions, it could then be argued that as long as these objects were produced by Muslims for Muslims, traded or exchanged between Muslims, or found in Muslim homes and mosques, then there is an inherent quality about the object that can make it “Islamic art”, or at least, “Islamicate” material culture. As the curator of a successful exhibition of Islamicate art in Indonesia argued
when he included a gold-inlaid ritual spear with a blade in the form of a Hindu-Buddhist Naga with an Islamic charm text at its base,

Islamic art is everywhere, including in Egypt, Iraq, Iran, the Iberian Peninsula, and in India, is the fruit of constant dialog between the new belief system and pre-existing indigenous traditions. Southeast Asia is therefore no different in that, Islam engaged existing art traditions, which were then rearticulated in the context of the new beliefs.\textsuperscript{48}

Grabar also takes on the issue of the span of Islamicate art, specifically the start and end periods of the perceived tradition. Given that one can only seriously begin talking about Islamicate art and material culture after the Prophet Muhammad established the first Muslim community in Madina in A. D. 622, the “absolute time”\textsuperscript{49} to mark the beginning seems obvious. However, Grabar argues that this \textit{post quem} date is “not a very meaningful one for the arts”. Instead, a more appropriate absolute date would be that of the conquest of a given region by Islam, which in turn would result in “in a curiously curved date which would begin in 634 when the first Syrian villages were taken over by Muslim Arabs and would end in the early sixteenth century when the Mughal emperors consolidated into one entity the many sultanates of India.”\textsuperscript{50} However, based on this argument, the material culture and art of Muslim Southeast Asia has no place in the traditional corpus of Islamicate art. In order to transform both pre-Islamic Malay art and Islamicate-Malay art from the 13th Century onwards into part of an older tradition of “Islamic art”, the curators have had to rely

\textsuperscript{48} James Bennett, as quoted in Coffey, “Crescent Moon: Islamic Art and Civilisation in Southeast Asia, at the Art Gallery of South Australia”, p. 300.

\textsuperscript{49} Grabar, \textit{The Formation of Islamic Art}, p. 6. In considering artistic and cultural change, Grabar argues that we have to take into account what he terms “absolute” and “relative” time. “Absolute time” is the centuries, decades, or even years after which Islamicate art was possible and probably existed and which could generally be defined with some degree of precision through historical events or through particularly important monuments. In contrast, “relative time” is defined by a moment when a culture as a whole has accepted and is transformed by changes which in themselves might be dated precisely.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 7.
on Western formulations of art and art history.

Despite Grabar’s differentiating the historical and spatial contexts in the study of Islamicate art, he unfortunately draws a boundary that excludes a discussion of the material culture that is produced by Muslim Southeast Asia. Even when he entertains the possibility of extending the timeline of Islamicate art into the 19th Century, it is only with reference to certain parts of Africa.\textsuperscript{51} The chronology of Islamicate art that begins during the age of the Caliphate on the Arabian Peninsula (c. 632 A.D.) as the “early Islamic period”, and spans North Africa, Central Asia, Southern Spain and usually ends in Mughal India in the “late Islamic period”, has become the accepted convention in periodizing Islamicate art in museums.\textsuperscript{52}

Such a “genealogy” of Islamicate art has resulted in a conflation of geographical distance, cultures and the compressing of time in favour of a narrative of continuity of Islamicate “traditions” limited to the region between the Oxus and Nile rivers. This is a shortcoming in Grabar’s heuristics because the geographical boundary has historically left out the period of material culture and art production in Southeast Asian communities which have been influenced by Islam as a faith when Islam arrived in the Indonesian Archipelago with the Muslim merchants from India and Yemen from as early as since about the 11th century.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., p. 8
\textsuperscript{52} The museum catalogues of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1971 (\textit{The Islamic World}) and the British Museum in 1991 [in RobertIrwin’s \textit{Islamic Art} (London: Laurence King, 1997)] both end the discussion of Islamicate art with Mughal India in reference to their Islamicate art collections.
\textsuperscript{53} G. W. J. Drewes, “New Light on the Coming of Islam to Indonesia” (The Hague: Koninglijk Instituut Voor Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde, 1968), as printed in Ahmad Ibrahim, Sharon Siddique
Given this tendency to exclude or marginalise the material culture of Muslim Southeast Asia in global discussions and presentations of Islamicate art, I argue that at the primary level, the objects related to Islamic art and material culture have been appropriated by BQMI and IAMM to “reveal” the respective Indonesian Muslim nation and Malaysian Muslim nation that lies as a cultural bedrock beneath the surface of a secular and culturally plural society. This narrative about the nature of the nation is conveyed by the privileging of some objects over others and thus unequal representation of its different constituent groups. The BQMI and IAMM hence act as state-endorsed repositories of the images and heritage objects of the nation.

At a secondary, but no less important level, these museums also seek to expand the traditional geographic and artistic boundaries of the Darul Islam by positioning Southeast Asia as part of an enlarged “Islamdom” of art-producing Muslims, using the evidence of the region’s rich material culture and archeological objects that pertain to indigenous practices of Islam. The BQMI and IAMM in this case are assertions of the “Islamic” over other elements of defining the Indonesian and Malaysian nations as well as embodiments of the countries’ attempts in the last thirty years to expand their influence in the creation of a “global” Islamicate culture.

Thus by examining the considerations behind the narratives that each museum has chosen to foreground their collections and activities, one will hopefully gain insight into the ways in which national governments (or intellectual and cultural elites) fashion their desired imagined communities. That the museums have the ability to construct their desired narratives in the first instance, demonstrates

conclusively that, regardless of their origins and materiality, things do not possess any inherent essential meanings but rather are *made meaningful* through specific contexts at specific points in time. These contexts are in turn, as Foucault argues, affected by power relations in society as well as the privileged *episteme*, or structures of knowledge, of the time.\textsuperscript{54} Hence the past becomes objectified and the “reality” of the past becomes “within reach” as it can be experienced by present visitors through the tangible materiality of objects.

Through the acquisitions, displays, exhibitions, activities and publications of the BQMI and the IAMM, the history of the nation is re-imagined as an “Islamicate nation”. Additionally, the Malaysian-Muslim and Indonesian-Muslim nation each contributes to a glorious and continuous tradition of fine and valuable objects. The history of Islamicate material culture the aesthetic philosophy of “Islamic art”, and ultimately, the national cultural heritage then become fixed in, as suggested by Hooper-Greenhill, an “ethos of obviousness”\textsuperscript{55}. Significantly, the authority of the museums as respective guardians of Islamicate “heritage” is also legitimimized.

Nonetheless, even as these museums seek to legitimize their authority as respective guardians of indigenous and/or global Islamicate “heritage”, the museum visitor should be aware that the objects and representations are selected and edited excerpts from the past. The creative hand (and political objectives) of the curator determines what one sees in the galleries and also heavily influences how one interprets the displayed objects.

\textsuperscript{54} Foucault, *The Order of Things*, pp. 191-192.
\textsuperscript{55} Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, p. 5.
Contesting the Representations in Museums

Indeed, the museums’ curatorial approaches do not go unchallenged. Just as sectors of traditionalist Javanese Muslims disagreed with the Islamic reformist movements that emerged from Wahabi-ruled Makkah of the 19th Century, Islamicate culture experts and Muslim public intellectuals who are at odds with state-sponsored definitions of Islam are critical of the intellectual-artistic discourse presented in state-sanctioned museums. This group is also wary of the power politics behind the actions and policies of the respective Suharto and UMNO regimes. Further, given the ethnic and cultural plurality in the two countries’ societies, the Islamicate heritage displayed in the BQMI and IAMM as the national culture and heritage of the people, alienates non-Muslims, non-Malays, non-Javanese citizens alike, as their cultures and religions are marginalized by the dominant religio-cultural ideology.

Ultimately, what I am investigating is the museum as a contested site of cultural and aesthetic expressions of Islam and the potential of museums in advancing the educational and cultural aspect of inclusive nation building. In this regard, the BQMI and IAMM are important cultural institutions due to the educating mission that they profess as well as the different forms of “capital” that their visitors can accrue from successive visits.\textsuperscript{56} The tendency of the “museum gaze” to render contextualised artefacts as objective truth is likely to reinforce the dominant group’s cultural hegemony over the country’s minority constituents. Arguably, the marginalization of non-Muslims in the re-imagination of an Islamicate-Indonesian and Islamicate-

Malaysian past results in the absence of non-Muslim material culture within the museum. These voids are apparently justified by the narrow definitions of Islamicate material culture and “art” that the museums have adopted. Neither the BQMI nor the IAMM make any reference to the presence of non-Muslims extant in the societies that produced what is accepted today as “Islamic art”.

The internalisation of the knowledge that the two museums produce, is likely to shape (even if indirectly) public culture in Indonesia and Malaysia in the long term. In the mind’s eye of both the majority and minority groups, the political, socio-economic and cultural norms of Islam become an organising principle in public life. Compounded by other domestic economic, political and social policies that discriminate against non-Muslims/non-Malays/non-Javanese citizens, the sum effect is that minority religious and/or cultural groups are excluded from, or at best marginalised, in the public representation of the state’s cultural identity. Such an exclusion of a significant portion of the citizenry (55% of 238 million in Indonesia and 35% of 28 million in Malaysia)\(^57\) in a multiracial society where religion is tightly entwined with race, adds yet another fault line in the already fissure-riddled foundations of majority-minority relations in these two countries.

Naysayers would argue that the BQMI and IAMM are specialized museums that cater to a specific audience and it is to the “national” museums that one should look to fairly assess some of the cultural representations pursued by the Indonesian and Malaysian states respectively. This is because the majority of national museums

\(^{57}\) Figures are based on the 2000 population census of Indonesia and Malaysia respectively.
usually address representations of “the nation” overtly and it is arguably possible to discern the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion in the conceptualization of the specific nation. However, given the closer associations these national museums have with Indonesia’s and Malaysia’s erstwhile colonial rulers, the Museum Nasional Indonesia and Muzium Negara raise more problematic relationships between representations of the nation based on western secular traditions and local Islamicate ones.

The national museums of both Indonesia and Malaysia were first established by the Dutch and British colonialists respectively as ethnographic collections – a way of gathering information on the colonies and peoples they ruled. Hence, this initial rendering of the respective peoples, flora and fauna living in the environs of the Netherlands East Indies and Malay Protectorates were drawn (in some cases literally) through the eyes of colonial administrators and foreign adventurers. The Enlightenment philosophy that lay behind the collections was based on the superiority of Western science and technology. Hence the collections were mostly ethnographic to ‘fix’ the then unknown colonies in the colonial imagination.

Though these ethnographic collections were later transformed into objects of national historical significance with independence from colonial rule, in effect, the Indonesian and Malaysian “nation” as respectively exhibited in the permanent exhibitions of Museum Nasional and Muzium Negara, are generally curated as ones which evolved from idyllic primitive, even pre-historic pasts, into modern nations of reflective and progress-driven peoples. The curation of the “national” museums of the two countries do not provide adequate, if any, representational space for Islam
because their respective collections were now focused on narrating the arduous road towards achieving national independence set against an overarching ideology of secular nationalism.

Comparing the Socio-cultural Politics Surrounding the BQMI and IAMM

In that respect, it makes good sense to compare the BQMI and IAMM with each other, as they provide an alternative image of the Indonesian and Malaysian nations from the ones that were fashioned by their erstwhile colonial masters. Indeed, the respective collections of the BQMI and IAMM can be seen as indigenously-produced knowledge about Islam and local Islamicate culture. The objects on display in each museum celebrate the ingenuity and craftsmanship of indigenously-produced material culture, informed in its creation by the Islamic faith – even when some of them have only tenuous links to Islam.  

Ultimately, one must not forget that this contemporary re-imagination of an Indonesian-Muslim and Malaysian-Muslim nation is an ongoing enterprise which is self-conscious, dynamic, and open to contestations from all sides. The recasting of the two countries’ national images as Muslim (if not formally Islamic) entities, are also built on earlier debates on the nature of the “Indonesian” and “Malay” nation and the role which Islam plays in each society. In the case of Indonesia, the need to define Islam’s role in Indonesian society grew urgent in the 1950s and 1960s as Muslim intellectuals and Islamist political parties called for the restitution of the state’s

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commitment to developing an Islamic state of Indonesia to the National Constitution which Soekarno had earlier promised the Islamist resistance fighters after World War II. Later, after the bloody coup of 1965-66, Suharto’s sustained suppression of local Islamist political parties ensured that any Islamist aspirations were expressed in state-sanctioned terms. Hence, in that period and up to the mid 1980s, Islam found more freedom in cultural expressions such as the literary, visual and performance arts. The BQMI emerged from the successful run of the Festival Istiqlal held in Jakarta in 1991, an international festival that showcased Indonesian art and cultural performances that were “inspired by Islam” (seni Indonesia yang bernafaskan Islam).

In Malaysia on the other hand, the paramount status of Islam and Malay sovereignty were protected by the British during their colonial administration and continued in the successor state of the Federation of Malaya (and later, Malaysia). Nonetheless, “Islamization” of the Malaysian bureaucracy and the bureaucratization of Islam into various executive, legislative and advisory bodies increased throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s under Mahathir’s Wawasan 2020 campaign. Hence, besides an educational institution that aims to discuss and define Islamicate material culture and Islamicate arts for public consumption, the IAMM, it could also be argued, reflects Malay-Muslim cultural hegemony of Malaysia’s multi-cultural society. The IAMM and BQMI are also good examples to examine the development of Islamic modernity by comparing how Islamic intellectual thought has responded to threats from an authoritarian state which also has assimilated Islamic thought into its national policies and fashions itself as a champion of Muslim values.

60 George, “Designs on Indonesia’s Muslim Communities”, pp. 694-695.
Museums, as part of the heritage and tourism industries, are also able to speak to both domestic and international audiences and shape their attitudes towards the subject matter on display. As their primary mission is to enlighten visitors on the subject of a religion – an important marker of personal and social identity in Indonesia and Malaysia – the BQMI and the IAMM are important players in shaping the collective cultural norms of their citizens. Beyond the personal experience, the BQMI and IAMM have the capacity to influence how Indonesians and Malaysians view the past of their country as an Islamicate region and their people as a united Muslim ummah. It can also colour their imagination of the countries’ future trajectories – including as part of a global Islamicate network of Muslim countries interacting with non-Muslim countries that have historical links to them.

Last, but not in the least, formulations of “a modern Muslim democracy”, which both Indonesia and Malaysia claim to be, are also much-influenced by intellectual and artistic discourses within and outside the Muslim world. Such formulations, despite their claims to a “new epistemology” or a theologically informed governance, still include much of historically Western conceptualizations of the nation, political governance, archeology and art. Chakrabarty has argued that such framings of sociological and anthropological knowledge are “inevitable” because they have become institutionalized as academic disciplines and entrenched as analytical tools for examining human societies, despite their Eurocentric orientation. Thus, one of the tensions that arises, especially given the ethnic, religious and cultural diversity of the two countries, is whether the Indonesian-Muslim or the Malaysian-Muslim nation – the ummah – in Islamic terminology, is a viable socio-political construct

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61 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, pp. 29-42.
which can serve as a real alternative to Western, predominantly secular conceptualizations of the nation-state.

An approach that combines museology with history, anthropology, material culture studies and technology in the study of museum and heritage institutions is still more a novelty than the norm in academia despite the advocates of “total history” the likes of the Annales school historians such as Fernand Braudel, Pierre Goubert and Roger Chartier. There is a need to sustain a multi-disciplinary approach in examining museum collections as these institutions inevitably create selective representations by what objects they choose to display as artefacts and the narrative modes that accompany them. It is especially so with state-sanctioned museums such as the BQMI and IAMM, where the narratives are more politically-charged. The challenge lies in whether the countries’ definitions of the Muslim nation are sufficiently legitimate to appease those who desire an Islamist “tone” of government, yet flexible and creative enough to include non-Muslim and other minorities without sacrificing their rights as fellow citizens.

Due to the space constraints of the M.A. thesis, I have chosen to discuss only the permanent galleries of the BQMI and the IAMM and only briefly mention temporary exhibitions that are immediately relevant to discussing the idea of an “Islamic nation”. There is scope for deeper and multi-disciplinary examinations of the impact that the museum and heritage industry have on shaping a collective cultural identity. Hence, I hope that my study will contribute in some small way to understanding the potency of museums as a social institution and to be aware of its
shortcomings as an authoritative space for creating (or re-creating) representations of the nation.
Chapter I

Public Piety:

Increased Islamization of Indonesia and Malaysia’s Public Spheres

The BQMI and IAMM could be seen as cultural productions that emerged within a national landscape of increasingly religion-directed cultural policies. Some of these policies were partly influenced by what was seemingly a worldwide revival of Islamic values since the late 1960s, through the 1970s and appeared to reach its peak by the late 1980s. By the mid-1970s, no doubt helped by key global events in Muslim-majority countries, Islamic revivalism found widespread resonance in Indonesian and Malaysian Muslim societies. Muslims in these countries, just as those in the Middle East were experiencing a heightened consciousness of their Muslim identity in an increasingly globalized and secularized world. Islam appeared to be a viable alternative to the superpower politics of the Cold War as well as an antidote to the abortive promises of secular ethnic nationalism. Nonetheless, while Islamic practices became increasingly entrenched in the public spheres of Indonesia during Suharto’s New Order rule and Mahathir’s Malaysia in the 1980s, different motivations lied at the heart of the change in the cultural politics and cultural policies of the two countries.

Stauth’s analysis of the process of Islamization in the respective societies of Indonesia and Malaysia in the post-colonial period is particularly informative. Rather than the usual discussion of a group’s search for self identity through religion, he views Islamization in Southeast Asia as “both fact and event” – on the one hand, a
historical religious phenomenon that started with Muslim traders in the 13th Century, and on the other hand, an unfinished project of cultural transformation of Muslim Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{62} In the latter case, Stauth argues that the Islamic resurgence occurring in Muslim communities globally since the 1970s was no less than an attempt at civilizational change.

In contrast, Liow argues that even though external influences weighed heavily in the reconfiguration of Islam’s role in Indonesia and Malaysia, key domestic developments that unfolded during the 1970s and 1980s also shaped the process of Islamization of their respective public spheres.\textsuperscript{63} In Indonesia, Suharto’s determination to cling on to his waning power saw him courting Islamist elements to check the military’s traditional political influence and Suharto gave in to several Islamist demands for a bigger role for Islam in Indonesian society. The challenge from opposition Islamist party Parti Agama Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) saw the incumbent UMNO government alternately using co-opting and coercive measures to counter the former’s appeal. Simply put, both the Indonesian and Malaysian governments began to adopt “an Islamic facade” during this period of Islamic revivalism.\textsuperscript{64}

In the case of Muslim Southeast Asia, I would like to suggest that it is less important to determine whether external or domestic factors were the more crucial

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p. ii.
element in this second wave of global Islamic resurgence. Rather, the different views show that the movement of ideas and information, especially in the age of around-the-clock and aggressive media news network coverage, were moving in multi-directional flows. Not only was Muslim Southeast Asia informed by intellectual developments and political events in the Middle Eastern heartlands of Islamdom, the intellectual debates going on in Indonesia as the world’s largest Muslim population and Malaysia’s good standing in international diplomacy as well as its economic prosperity, gave these two Southeast Asian countries considerable clout in global Muslim affairs.

One needs to bear in mind the history of Islamic intellectual discourse in Southeast Asia to understand the inspirations behind Islam as a tool to effect societal change. Contemporary Islamic intellectuals, including the likes of Fazlur Rahman, Ismail Raji al-Faruqi and Syed Naquib Muhammad al-Attas, have all, in their turn, argued the logic as well as the urgency to “Islamize” modernity. In such an enterprise, Islam is located within the discourse of modernity, in contrast to the conventionally antithetical position Islam plays to Western modernization and Western intellectual frameworks of societal development. “Islamic sociology” and even “Islamic anthropology” could hence be understood as a “holistic” outlook that revolves around social cohesion and scriptural accommodation, compared to the modern Western tradition of creating dichotomies of analysis based on social differentiation.65 Hence Islamic modernity goes beyond reforming Islamic philosophy and jurisprudence to

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65Ibid., pp. 13-14.
also encompass epistemologies of scientific and technological knowledge so that Islam continues to bear relevance in modern nation-state politics.\textsuperscript{66}

\textit{Islamic Resurgence in Indonesia}

In Indonesia, the Islamic “resurgence” in Indonesian public life since the mid-1980s was arguably a rerouting of political expressions of Islam which the New Order regime had suppressed, to “cultural” expressions of Islam which were deemed less threatening to the regime. In the late 1980s, Suharto himself appeared to have become more Islamized. He took on a personal religious instructor and started to learn how to read the Qur’an and memorized key verses to show his scriptural literacy. He also cultivated closer associations with the Islamists in his government and publicly supported the establishment of the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI).\textsuperscript{67} The most evocative image of a pious Suharto was his performance of the hajj with his family in 1990 and the adoption of his new status of piety as Haji Muhammad Suharto.

On the surface, it appeared as if Suharto was finally acknowledging and reflecting the Islamized sentiments of the Indonesian public. The BQMI, a state project overseen by Ibu Tien Suharto, emerged out of the overwhelming popularity of the Istiqlal cultural festivals and the commissioning of the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal (which the BQMI now houses). Towering over the miniaturised environs of Taman


Mini Indonesia Indah (TMII), the BQMI is supposed to reflect a grand narrative of the richness of Indonesian material culture that was “inspired by Islam” (*seni bernafaskan Islam*) and propagate not just an “Islamic aesthetic” but also the idea that the Indonesian public is an art-producing people.68 Islam was also now framed by the Indonesian government as a rhetorical medium for modernization.69 In that sense, the Mushaf Istiqlal and the BQMI can be seen as part of respective nation-building cultural projects that attempt to accommodate the religious aspirations of the Muslim-majority group while ensuring that the state maintains its authority in defining “Indonesian Islam”.

*Globalization, the Emerging Muslim Middle Class and the “Commodification” of Islam*

The resounding success of Festival Istiqlal I (1991) and II (1995) and the initial popularity of BQMI with Indonesians can also be seen as part of a national Muslim community’s response to the modernization and economic prosperity of the country. Fealy discusses the emergence of an increasingly affluent Muslim middle-class in Indonesia (as well as Malaysia) that has the inclination and material resources to express their Muslim identity. The “marketization” of Indonesian Islam is driven by an upwardly mobile urban middle-class who seeks answers and direction in religion under the relentless pressures and anxieties of modern urban living. Hence many of the products and services emphasise personal convenience, accessibility and

68 George, “Designs on Indonesia’s Muslim Communities”, p. 704.
immediacy.\textsuperscript{70} SMS services like celebrity preacher Yusuf Mansur’s \textit{Kun Fayaakun} (‘Be! And It is.’) that provides reassuring Qur’anic verse and romantic advice for marital bliss by Arifin Ilham meets the very modernist demands of Muslims who have become entrenched in a capitalist mode of consumption. The dominance of pluralist patterns of Islamic consumption in Indonesia accords with trends in other rapidly modernizing and Islamizing societies.

This new Muslim identity is ‘modern’, multicultural and pluralist.\textsuperscript{71} Fealy’s analysis of the socio-economic, political and cultural factors that are driving the commodification of Islam puts a very post-modern spin to the concept of creating one’s religious identity. Set against a background of globalization and modernization pressures, religious identities have become destabilised and have resulted in the search for moral certainty among urban middle-class Muslims, not just in Indonesia but also in other Muslim societies across the world. The appeal of traditionalism, manifested as a set of enduring Muslim “values” had become greater as an ethical or moral compass to navigate the fast currents of an increasingly competitive and rapidly modernizing global economy.\textsuperscript{72} Much of the new Islamic consumption is focused on the individual as active consumer rather than on the traditional institutional channels for religious learning, guidance and identity formation.

Fealy further argues that this commodification is producing a spectrum of Islamic expressions that is more variegated and segmented but also more subject to

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., pp. 32-36.
\textsuperscript{72} Nasr, \textit{Forces of Fortune}, pp. 183-184.
rapid change. This selective consumption of ‘Islamic products’ by Muslims of different stripes from an expanding spiritual marketplace is a paradigmatic change from the settled patterns of behaviour of their parents and grandparents. The Islamic products run the gamut from banking, insurance, share-trading and pawn-broking to medical treatments, mobile phone services, tourism and hospitality, multi-level marketing, pilgrimages and self-development courses. All these products and services (as well as their service providers) are keen to get a slice of the ‘holy’ pie to meet the demands of a more self-consciously Muslim consumer.

Meulemann, on the other hand, credits the more confident tone in the articulation of Muslim identity to the forces of globalization, whose technological advances and increasing integration of national economies have connected Muslims in Southeast Asia to other Muslim communities globally. Globalization has also reconnected earlier ties that Indonesia and Malaysia have with Makkah, the Hijaz and other important centres of Islamic knowledge and Islamicate cultural production such as Islamabad and Istanbul. Extrapolating from Meulemann, Nasr is convinced Islam itself, has become at once, the medium through which governments of Muslim majority countries push for modernization – and a complex variable in their quest to achieve a “sustainable balance between Islam and modernity”.

Thus, one could argue that Suharto was aware of the changing attitudes of the Indonesian public in favour of articulating a more pronounced Islamic identity. With

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73 Ibid., p. 4.
74 Ibid., p. 16.
76 Nasr, Forces of Fortune, pp. 142 and 190.
his offerings of ICMI, the “greening” of the Indonesian defence forces with the appointment of more Muslim generals, as well as Festival Istiqlal I and II Islamicate culture fairs and the BQMI, Suharto appeared to have abandoned his Javanist backers as he attempted to ride the tide of Islamization that was once again rising in Indonesian society.

Nonetheless, there were several complex challenges that affected (and in some cases, still affect) the BQMI’s curators ability to authoritatively articulate this notion of an Indonesian Islamicate art-producing community. Foremost amongst these challenges is the cultural diversity of Indonesia’s ethnic communities spread across the archipelago. Further, the attitudes of 20th Century Indonesia’s Muslim communities towards Islam and Muslim identity span a wide range – a continuation of the divergence in Muslim piety among the Javanese seen a century earlier. At one end of the spectrum were the more accommodative Islam of Nadhlatul Ulama (NU) traditionalists and abangan Muslims who Geertz had argued in his still influential writings of Islam on Java, were nominal Muslims still tied to animist (Javanese: kejawen) beliefs and Hindu-Buddhist practices. At the other end stood the orthodox santri Muslims who observed Islamic rituals and scriptural injunctions along with reformist-minded Muhammadiyah “modernists” whose interpretations of Muslim piety adhered rigidly to literal readings of the Qur’an and hadith.

77 See Ricklefs, Polarizing Javanese Society, pp. 30-54.
78 Clifford Geertz, “The Religion of Java” (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1964), as quoted in Ricklefs, Polarizing Javanese Society, pp. 85-87. Geertz has been criticized over his categorization of santri, abangan and prijai as deep-rooted and fixed variants in Javanese Muslim society when in fact, there were no references to the abangan variant prior to the mid-19th Century and the religious element of Javanese Muslim identity was more fluid in reality. While there are errors in his analysis of the prijai variant, ‘abangan’ and ‘santri’ (or ‘putihan’ in Ricklefs’ terminology) remain useful terms to discuss the two largest groups in Indonesian Muslim society.
In recent years, that spectrum has extended to include radical Islamist organizations such as Hizbut Tahrir and even militant groups such as the Laskar Jihad and Jemaah Islamiya (JI) that condone violent acts in the defence of Islam. Such a historically diverse array of “Islams” practiced in Indonesia which includes Sufi mystics and charismatic kyai where some Islams conflicted with others, and the long-standing presence of Hindu-Buddhists, Christians, *kejawen* animists, hermits and other non-Muslims in its midst, raise questions on the authenticity of any representation that claims to present a unified expression of national or even Indonesian Islamicate culture.

Secondly, there has been a historical resistance to state-defined formulations of Islamic identity in Indonesia. Earlier state “betrayals” of Muslims – such as the exclusion of the Jakarta Charter from the national constitution in 1945, and Suharto’s suppression of Islamist political organization during the New Order regime, undermined any Islamist political alternative for Indonesia. The memory of Suharto’s many political intrigues and power plays also raised suspicions of Suharto’s true political intent behind his courting of Islamic intellectuals and technocrats as well as the public expression of his Muslim identity in the last twelve years of his administration.

BQMI and other state institutions’ efficacy in shaping Indonesian Islamicate culture in the 1990s were seen as compromised by Suharto’s patronage. Even the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals or ICMI (*Ikatan Cendikiawan Muslim Se-Indonesia*), where respected Muslim intellectual Nurcholish Madjid was based, was boycotted by NU leader Abdurrahman Wahid because it was seen as a political
ploy to co-opt the Muslim vote and shore up Suharto’s waning influence. Further, despite the co-option of respected Indonesian Muslim artists and cultural leaders in the successful Festival Istiqqlal projects of 1991 and 1995 (which engendered the idea for establishing the BQMI), and the initial popularity of the museum with Indonesians, BQMI’s “voice” has lost some of its authority since its patron’s oust from political leadership in 1998. While intellectual debates over the nature of Indonesian Islam continue unabated in the country, the decline of the BQMI as an authoritative cultural institution shaping Indonesian attitudes towards Islam has implications not just domestically for Indonesian Muslims. BQMI’s decline has also hampers Indonesian-Islamicate contributions to global civilizational Islamicate culture and art.

_Festival Istiqqlal I and II and the Mushaf Al- Qur’an Istiqqlal_

The BQMI was established out of the resounding success of the two Festival Istiqqlal cultural events held in 1991 and 1995, which also marked the start and the completion of the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqqlal project. The first of its kind ever held in Indonesia, the momentum from the two cultural festivals that purportedly showcased the material objects and art of Indonesian Islamicate culture, led to calls for an Islamicate-themed museum that would serve as a permanent display of traditional as well as contemporary objects pertaining to “Islamic culture” and “Islamic heritage” from across the Indonesian archipelago.79

Further, the initiators behind Istiqlal I and II, who are also BQMI’s founders, had envisioned their work as an attempt to “contribute to the self-awareness and self-confidence required of Muslims” in light of the global Islamic resurgence and economic rise of many professedly Muslim countries since the mid-1980s. Yustiono claims that there was tangible government support for promoting Islamicate culture, as shown by the Festival Istiqlal and Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal project.

The establishment of other Islamic public institutions such as ICMI and Mualamat Bank Indonesia (BMI), was “proof of the disappearance of government suspicion of Muslims” and “the building up of their future as an integrated part of the Indonesian nation” after decades of being politically suppressed under the New Order regime. Suharto’s enthusiastic endorsement of these “cultural expressions of Islam” included penning the first letter ‘ا’ of the Basmallah (invocation of Allah’s majesty and mercy) of the first passage Surah Al-Fatihah (“The Opening” in the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal as well as encouraging the staging of the two international Islamicate cultural festivals, Festival Istiqlal I and II. His wife, Tien Suharto, made a gift (wakaf) of 2 hectares of land in Taman Mini Indonesia Indah for the building of BQMI.

The Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal was ostensibly a cultural project undertaken by Dr Abdul Djalil Pirous and a team of six publicly-recognised Indonesian artists and designers whose individual works were, by their own admission, greatly inspired by Islam. Pirous himself was amongst Indonesia’s most distinguished and celebrated painters, a pioneer in contemporary Indonesian Muslim art best known for his style of

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combining Qur’anic calligraphy with modernist abstract aesthetics. He was also the former Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts and Design at the Bandung Institute of Technology.  

Pirous had also gained international prominence having once been invited by King Hussein of Jordan to help in the restoration of mosques there and was the designated Southeast Asian curator for an exhibition of contemporary Muslim art at the 1997 Venice Biennale, a notable appointment by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and the Rockefeller Foundation. According to Kenneth George, who observed the planning of Istiqlal II in 1995, Pirous and his Bandung Institute colleagues had “first envisioned the mushaf project as part of an Islamicate arts festival they were planning to hold in October 1991 at Jakarta’s Istiqlal Mosque, in conjunction with Visit Indonesia Year events.” The initial planning stages saw the involvement of a number of ministries – namely, the Ministers of Tourism, of Religion and of Education and Culture. Both the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal and the Festival Istiqlal projects came under the patronage of Suharto and Pontjo Sutowo, a Jakarta businessman.

“Istiqlal” in Arabic means “independence” and it was the name bestowed both upon Indonesia’s largest and grandest mosque, the Islamicate cultural festivals as well as the mushaf Al-Qur’an project that was supposed to reflect the dynamism and strength of the modern Indonesian Muslim nation, free from foreign control. It is hard to ignore the irony of the event’s theme as President Suharto took such a keen interest in the affairs of the Istiqlal Festival Foundation (Yayasan Festival Istiqlal) that he was

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82 George. “Designs on Indonesia’s Muslim Communities”, p. 701.
83 Ibid., p. 708.
84 Ibid., p. 701.
adamant on having the final word on the festival’s publicity campaign. Suharto rejected promotional materials in Bahasa Indonesia and English that proclaimed Festival Istiqlal as a “Festival of Islamic Art in Indonesia”, insisting instead that they read a “Festival of Indonesian Culture Inspired by Islam” (my own emphases) or *Pesta Kebudayaan Indonesia yang Bernafaskan Islam*.  

Effectively, the acquiescence to Suharto’s demands (in exchange for his continued endorsement of the mushaf project and festival) checked whatever lofty ambitions that Pirous and his team had in promoting a universal Islamicate art or aesthetic per se and reaffirmed the state philosophy that Islam (and all other religions) was subordinate to an inherently secular Indonesian national culture. Suharto’s success in “reworking the discourse” of Istiqlal I also reveals how jealously he guarded control over the image of the “Indonesian nation” that was projected to its domestic public as well as internationally.  

It also undermines the argument for a universal Muslim *ummah* and reaffirms the pluralism of Islam instead. For the most of his government, Suharto insisted on “localizing” Islam – both domestically as “Indonesian” Islam unique to the nation’s history and to downplay international “Muslim causes” as an internal issue that Indonesia should avoid getting involved in. This was done to check any internationalist pretensions on the part of Indonesian Muslims, especially when they were not endorsed by the state.

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85 Ibid., p. 702.
86 Ibid., p. 702.
Islamic Art as Representations of Muslim Nations

While any vision of an Islamic state of Indonesia was systematically suppressed, the Indonesia that was supposedly revealed by the illuminated pages of the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal was a Muslim nation that was both “united and peaceful in its ethnic plurality” as well as aware of the spiritual potential of ‘art’. In particular, the art of mushaf writing was championed as “an expression of the most authentic and original Islamic art, one of the Sufistic manifestations of the realization of the law of God (al-Shari’ah) through the spiritual way (al-Tariqah), and whose goal is to reach the Truth (al-Haqiqah)”.

Writing out the verses of the Qur’an in “a correct and beautiful way” (i.e. Arabic calligraphy), is agreed to be itself an act of devotion. Such devotional calligraphy has its roots in Islam’s first Caliphate, when the intellectual and spiritual demands to guard the integrity of the Word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, was the committing of the revelations (wahyu) to carefully-wrought script by Muhammad’s his closest followers.

Publications by Pirous and his team of designers, and notably articles by Mahmud Buchari (who was himself the Planning Coordinator of Istiqlal I and part of the Curatorial Board of the BQMI), extrapolated on the long history of Qur’anic illumination since it first emerged in the tenth century and how the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal was created in the same tradition. Just as importantly, the publications and

89 Mahmud Buchari, Indonesia’s Istiqlal Mushaf: Rediscovering the Traditions of Islamic Sacred Art, (Jakarta: Yayasan Festival Istiqlal, 1995), p. 4.
90 Ibid., p. 5.
91 See Ghanêm Kaddûri Al Ahmad, The Scripts of the Koran – A Linguistic and Historical study, (Baghdad: Publisher Unknown, 1982). Mahmud Buchari, “The Mushaf of Al-Qur’an at Istiqlal”, Art and the Islamic World, No 21, (Spring 1992), pp. 43-45, and “Female Calligraphers in the Service of
articles also stressed how Indonesian Muslim artists were also part of an illustrious group of expert Qur’anic calligraphers and inspired illuminators throughout Islam’s history, the likes of Ibn Muqlah, Ibn al Bawwab and Yaqut al-Musta’simi. As a work of art, the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal was a tangible and beautiful means to reveal “both the nation and the sacred” and its completion in August 1995 was timed to coincide with the fiftieth year of Indonesia’s Independence.

Indeed, Istiqlal II’s organizers remarked that the purpose of the festival was to show “how Islamic arts had a unifying function in integrating the different ethnic groups of the Indonesian nation, thus creating a cohesive national identity”. Further, at the international level, Istiqlal II aimed to show “how Islamic art and culture has helped Indonesia in the conduct of its international relations”. Coinciding with the fiftieth year of Indonesian independence, advances in national development, as well as the upward trajectory of Indonesia’s economy since the early 1980s, the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal, the Istiqlal Mosque (where the festival was held) being the biggest mosque in Southeast Asia, and the increasing prominence of Muslim personalities in Indonesia’s public sphere, all gave the impression that Indonesia was in the middle of a state-sponsored Islamic renaissance and finally living up to its potential of being the world’s biggest modern Islamic democracy.

Suharto’s public support for this Islamic cultural project (as well as his recent

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92 Mahmud Buchari, Indonesia’s Istiqlal Mushaf: Rediscovering the Traditions of Islamic Sacred Art, p. 5.
93 George. “Designs on Indonesia’s Muslim Communities”, p. 703.
95 Mahmud Buchari, “Indonesia’s Plans for Istiqlal II”, p. 62.
return to personally observing the faith since 1990) was seen by Islamist groups and several political observers as a reaffirmation of the reconciliation between Islam and the state. More sceptical observers dubbed the development a “honeymoon” period between Suharto and conservative Muslims.  

The promotion of these cultural expressions of Islam as well as the establishment of other public Islamic intellectual, social and economic institutions since the mid-1980s, can be seen as an attempt by Suharto to manage the impact of the current wave of Islamic revivalism amongst the Indonesian public as well as to court the ever-present indigenous Islamist forces latent in Indonesia’s socio-political milieu. While Suharto had backed Javanist/labangan and military elements since the establishment of the new Order, during the decade prior to his oust from power, Suharto had slowly but surely lost his sway with the military faction in his regime, which was then led by Christians such as ABRI Commander and former Defence Minister, Leonardus Benjamin Moerdani. The fallout with his generals coincided with Suharto’s courting of Islamist groups and saw the co-opting of moderate yet devout Muslims such as Dr B. J. Habibie into government.

There is some discussion by both political analysts and diplomatic officials on Suharto’s public return to his Islamic roots and much speculation on his sincerity in re-asserting his Muslim identity given his uncompromising suppression of overtly

97 In the 1970s and 1980s, Suharto had deliberately appointed a number of Christians into the military and government leadership positions as a counter-weight to Islamist pressures and political activity. See Jacques Bertrand, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
Islamic symbolism and political activity in Indonesia’s public spaces in the not so distant past. What is undeniable is that by the 1990s, politicians, intellectuals with Islamist pedigree, charismatic religious teachers, Islamist groups and even artists with strong Islamist inspiration gained prominence and tacit patronage from Suharto in his bid to ameliorate his waning political power. Hence, as much as the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istimulal, Festival Istimulal I and II and the BQMI are projects of cultural production and reflected popular desire for a religiously-infused national cultural identity, the three entities were also part of the calculated political moves of an authoritarian president to maintain his leadership as well as his secular-grounded Pancasila legacy.

Nonetheless, the celebration of a national Islamicate culture also suggests an increasing confidence by Indonesia’s Muslims in interpreting the religious canon and how the Islamic faith is expressed in indigenous terms and contexts. Though Pirous admitted that the inspiration for the Bayt Al-Qur’an first came in 1982, after the Bahraini government who bought his calligraphy piece, “Doa Lima” (Five Prayers) shared with him their plans to build the world’s inaugural Bayt Al-Qur’an, he was heartened that a piece of Indonesian Islamicate art was deemed not just aesthetically pleasing, but also of equal value enough to be sought by Arab Muslims (albeit Bahraini), whose culture is still generally considered to be from Islamdom’s heartlands.

Thus, Festival Istiqlal I and II, the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal as well as BQMI were also very deliberate and overt constructions by Indonesia’s political, intellectual and artistic elites to form not only a national cultural identity but also to define which individual ethnic cultures were culturally significant to the Indonesian Islamicate nation. Similar to the miniature traditional houses in Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, the Mushaf Istiqlal along with the other provincial mushafs, represented only “legitimate ethnic cultures” as identified and promoted by the state. The privileging of the dominant Javanese and other pribumi ethnic groups have come at the expense of minority Muslim communities as well as non-Muslims, especially the ethnic Chinese community who were either practising Buddhism and Taoism or were Christians or Catholics. Interestingly, even representations of Chinese-Muslim culture have been excluded from the re-imagination of Indonesia as a Muslim nation.100

Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia

Significantly, though for different reasons, the process of Islamizing Indonesian and Malaysian societies involves the state playing a substantive role as an intrusive authority that modulates the presence of Islam in the public sphere. Lewis, a well-respected scholar of Islam, has claimed that the idea of “din wa dawla” (“religion and state”) governs Muslim understanding of religion in the public sphere and that it was “entirely different” from that of the post-Enlightenment West or liberal

Christianity. However, Hefner asserts that such a regard for religion’s power to influence public order is neither unique to Islam nor does it exclude the various interpretations and combinations of *din wa dawla.* In the case of Malaysia, Islamization is “a concerted government programme of co-opting and sponsoring Islamic intellectuals from a strong socio-religious movement of anti-establishment groups into recently-founded state educational and cultural institutions.”

There are historical pressures behind the state’s attitudes and approach to accommodating Islam in the formation of the Malay nation-state. Due to erstwhile open immigration policy during British colonial administration, Malay-Muslims only constitute a slight majority of Malaysia’s multiethnic and multicultural population (approximately 66.7% according to the 2000 Census). However, because the symbols of Malay sovereignty were kept intact and Malays accorded privileged status as the natives of the land, the Malay elites were able to define the social and religious norms of Malayan (and later Malaysian) polity for the larger part. The Sultanate system, though diminished in real executive power, still purveyed over religious matters of the Malays, i.e. Islamic affairs.

In the end, Islam was incorporated into the administrative and legalistic framework of the Malay states and two parallel juristic systems – one secular, based on Western law and the other religious, based on the Shari’ah – were formalized even before Malayan independence. On their part, the British colonial administration was also careful to keep up the appearances of indirect rule. The legacy of British political

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collaboration with the Malay Sultans, the accommodation of traditional symbols of Malay sovereignty as well as dual legal and jurist systems have had a lasting impact on contemporary Malaysian politics and inter-ethnic relations.

**Islam and “Ketuanan Melayu” in Ethnically Plural Malaysia**

Hence, in a country where ethnicity and religion are tightly woven historically, the issue of Malay sovereignty and the primacy of Malay rights came to a head after the British failed to secure comprehensive citizenship rights for Chinese and Indian Malayans in the abortive Malayan Union experiment between 1946 and 1948. The perceived threat to “ketuanan Melayu” (Malay supremacy) directly led to the formation of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in 1946 whose defining platform was the protection of Malay rights and privileges. This political mobilization along ethnic lines in turn spurred Chinese and Indian activists to create similarly communal interest-based political parties of their own, though all parties also professed to promoting inter-racial harmony.

Religious affiliations served as additional markers to differentiate one ethnic group from another. The newly-minted Malayan Federation was thus primed to adopt a socio-political approach that conflated ethnicity and religion, especially with the formation of the Alliance Party in 1951, a power-sharing national coalition of UMNO, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC). The understanding then was that UMNO would be the leading partner in the
communally-oriented partnership. The power-sharing dynamics were renewed with Barisan Nasional (BN) succeeding the dissolved Alliance in 1973.

While UMNO’s political foundations rest on its championing of Malay issues and upholding the principle of “ketuanan Melayu”, the very definition of “Malay” demands the belief and practice of Islam as part of Malay ethnic identity. However, due to Islam’s claim to universality of worship and equality of men, one’s Muslim identity is expected to supersede both his national and ethnic ones. Historically, to limit the permeability of Malay ethnic identity, the terms “Melayu jati” and “bumiputera” were coined in the 1920s and 1930s, to distinguish Malay Muslims from Indian and Chinese Muslims. The secured primacy of Malay sovereignty and the successful implementation of Malay as the national language in pluralist Malaysia reduced the ethno-political differences between Malaysian Muslims.

However, the issue of Muslim non-Malays and the “muallaf” or saudara baru (Muslim convert), continue to make a Malaysian Islamic discourse that includes its different ethnic components equally at the political level, problematic. The religious discourse appears unable to separate itself from ethnic proclivities. Hence, in the definition of Malay status, Islam has historically played a pivotal role, sometimes relaxing, sometimes tightening the ethnic boundary.

Since Malaysia’s independence, that the Sultans and their appointed ulama in the respective state religious councils have jealously guard their own preserve against

105 Ibid., p. vi.
any perceived encroachment by the federal BN (read UMNO) government. This has led to a seemingly paradoxical situation where Islam, “is [not only] the membrane which keeps the Malays and non-Malays apart… [it] is also a source of internal fragmentation among the Malays”. The pronounced and rigidly strong identification of Islam with Malay ethnicity is such that it complicates the relationship of Malay-Muslims with both non-Muslims and non-Malay Muslims alike within its national boundaries.

Nagata views the categorical distinction as a “retreat into ethnic particularism” even though Malaysia professed to the universalism of Muslim brotherhood. Given Malaysia’s colonial experience, Hussin Mutalib frames the contradictions in UMNO’s formulation of Islam and Malay ethnicity as a dialectical relationship between Islam and nationalism. In contrast, Liow regards UMNO’s inconsistencies in its Islamization programme as opportunistic responses to PAS challenge to UMNO’s Malay-Muslim mandate which in turn escalates the “Islamization race” in Malaysia’s civil sphere.

While it is nothing new for national governments as well as other political aspirants to use religious symbols to legitimate their platforms, Malaysia’s peculiarity lies in how both the incumbent government and its main political rivals engage in frequent mud-slinging and besting campaigns that challenge the other’s Islamic credentials and at the same time assert the authenticity of their own reading of

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106 Ibid., pp. xiii-xvi.
religious tenets. In both cases, Islamic modes and metaphors are invoked to each party's own political advantage.

Moreover, despite, or even because of the Islamic component inherent in UMNO's political constitution, its traditional commitment to a secular nationalism causes UMNO to jealously guard its position as the paramount party to define the parameters of Islamic discourse in Malaysia against what it claims to be "deviant teachings" or Islam's "extremist" strains. Interestingly, rather than the repressive measures that Suharto employed against Islamist parties in Indonesia, the response of the UMNO government to political opposition from Islamists has been to co-opt the Islamist agenda to a significant degree and to express national policies in religious idioms and metaphors. Religious issues, already formalized as part of the constitution and legal system, were further politicized. Especially since Mahathir Mohamed's appointment as Prime Minister in 1981, there was increased proliferation of Islamic practices in the civil sphere to justify both the state's developmental programmes as well as to blunt challenges to UMNO's Islamic credentials.

110 See Joseph C. Liow, Piety and Politics (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 49-50. Based on its own definitions, Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) has identified and documented 98 "deviant" strains of Islam in the country, of which 25 are still active and have adherents. The Sky Kingdom cult of Hulu Besut, Trengganu and the Al Arqam movement are among the prominent groups banned as deviants. Wahhabi Islam adherents are monitored closely by JAKIM arguably because unlike the moderation of Malaysia's Sunni mainstream, Wahabism practices could encourage religious extremism.

111 Hussin Mutaib, Islam in Malaysia, pp. 17-22.
Mahathir’s assumption of the prime ministerial office in 1981 marked in earnest the conscious Islamization of Malaysia’s bureaucracy following the policy of “Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Islam” (the inculcation of Islamic values) to create a Muslim work ethic that would spearhead Malaysia’s modernization into the twenty-first century. This drive included policy declarations to revise the national legal system as well as remodel Malaysia’s economic system to align them more closely with Islamic principles. Malaysians also noticed a sharp rise of Islamic-content programmes played over the state’s Radio and Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) media channels in the same period.

Islamization extended into Malaysia’s cultural politics to shape the country’s national cultural identity, despite the ethnic and religious plurality of the country. Inevitably, state policies to manage the public sphere intruded upon the private one. Islamization policies, despite them being ostensibly directed at Muslims, affected non-Muslims just as much, if not worse, than Muslims, especially when they infringed upon non-Muslims’ freedom to practise their faith.

Throughout the 1980s, Mahathir’s government oversaw the establishment of Islamic economic institutions, tertiary education and think-tanks in a move Stauth has described as “the socialisation and the institutionalisation of Islam” in Malaysia’s

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112 Liow, Piety and Politics, pp. 46-47.
public sphere. National economic institutions such as the Islamic Bank, the Islamic Economic Foundation as well as *Tabung Haji* which managed the collective savings of Malaysian Muslims for the performance of the holy pilgrimage to Makkah, gave the impression that Malaysia was indeed gradually developing the institutional frameworks for a modern Islamic country.

The opening of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in 1983 had both symbolic and functional value, following the move to make “religious knowledge” an examinable subject in the national school curriculum and the establishment of the Islamic Teachers Training College in 1982. Not only did IIUM strive to re-invigorate the historical education links between the Malay Peninsula and Cairo, it presented an internationalist face and agenda with its co-sponsorship by the Organisation of Islamic Conferences (OIC). In the same manner, the IAMM, with its galleries of Islamicate material culture, strives to present an internationalist face of Islam, with Malaysia confidently sitting on the international panel of experts on Islamicate knowledge and culture. As Othman Yatim from the University of Malaya asserts in a discussion of what constituted “Islamic art”, “Malays will continue to uphold and promote the culture of art, only as long as it remains in harmony with Islam”.

This socialization policy of embedding Islam into the socio-political infrastructure of Malaysia continued into Mahathir’s *Wawasan 2020* (Vision of 2020) campaign that he launched in 1991 in which he insisted that Malaysia’s economic

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115 Liow, *Piety and Politics*, pp. 54.
development and material progress must not be at the expense of moral values and the “hereafter”.\textsuperscript{117} Beyond mere rhetoric, the proliferation of Islam was presented as a vehicle for the modernization and economic advancement of Malaysian society. Mahathir’s long tenure no doubt, facilitated the bureaucratization of Islam in Malaysia.

The 1990s saw the elevation of Pusat Islam from a \textit{dakwah} agency within the prime minister’s office to a full-fledged Department of Islamic Development in Malaysia, better known as JAKIM (\textit{Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia}), with a \textit{dakwah} foundation in its name and the mandate to coordinate all \textit{dakwah} activities in the country.\textsuperscript{118} Joseph Liow also argues that the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM) was established in 1992 (led by then Deputy PM Anwar Ibrahim) with the explicit purpose to “propagate ‘progressive’ Islamic views congruent with UMNO’s version of ‘modern’ Islam”.\textsuperscript{119} In fact, Mahathir reportedly remarked with confidence that if Prophet Muhammad was to appear in Malaysia, he would fully approve of what he saw.\textsuperscript{120}

\begin{quote}
The Student Dakwah Movement and the Discourse of “Islamic modernity”
\end{quote}

A discussion of “Islamic modernity” in the Malaysian context also has to take into account the role of the student \textit{dakwah} movement of the 1980s. The student

\begin{footnotes}
\item[117] Hussin Mutalib, \textit{Islam in Malaysia}, p. x.
\item[118] Liow, \textit{Piety and Politics}, p. 48.
\item[119] Ibid., p. 52.
\end{footnotes}
dakwah movement was partly due to a youthful response to seminal events happening in the larger Muslim world, and also due to them being encouraged by Mahathir’s call for a more conscientious observation of Islamic tenets at the work place and in public life. It marked the increasing Islamization of Malaysia’s cultural and political landscape that was already firmly rooted in conflating religion with ethnicity.

Various global developments in other Muslim countries of that period and especially the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had a profound effect on the imagination of Muslims worldwide. The successful installation of an Islamic state in Iran had also struck a chord with the new Malay-Muslim middle class in Malaysia, who, against the backdrop of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) of which Malaysia was a member, were in search of cultural emancipation from the Westernised cultural orientation inherited from the colonial vision of Malaysia. Ironically, this emerging group of “Islam-conscious” young adults were very much the product of UMNO’s policy of awarding the majority of government scholarships to Malay-Muslim students to pursue tertiary education both at home and internationally as well as heavy investment in Islamic education under the New Economic Policy (NEP) through which UMNO tried to address the economic disparity between the major races.  

Apart from historical education links to the Middle East which saw Malaysian students renewing ties with alumni in Islamic universities such as Al-Azhar in Cairo and the Shari’a College in Jordan (which was later incorporated into the University of Jordan), they formed new Muslim Students Associations and Islamic Representative

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121 Hussin Mutalib, *Islam in Malaysia*, p. 44.
Councils in North American, European, Australian and even North African universities. The activities of many of these student movements were usually underwritten by well-organised and generous Muslim social networks and Islamic charities.\(^{122}\) Generally, these students were exposed to wider issues and dimensions of Islam and were tuned in to Muslim world affairs.\(^{123}\) Muslim student activists lent their voices to comment and debate the state of global Islamic affairs and the apparent plight of many Muslim societies.

Locally, the *dakwah* student movement coalesced around the *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (ABIM) as a vociferous critic of the UMNO government, protesting UMNO’s agricultural policies in rural Malaysia on the one hand, and questioning UMNO’s commitment to developing Islamic principles of good governance, on the other. Under the charismatic leadership of Anwar Ibrahim, himself with a strong Islamist background, ABIM solidified its credentials as a youthful and dynamic Islamic group and saw itself as a modernizing Islamist force which could ostensibly shape Malaysia’s national character.

Un fortunately, the tone of Malaysia’s *dakwah* movement also bore a strong mark of cultural xenophobia which was directed both inwards at Pre-Islamic, Hindu-Buddhist culture and rituals in Malay society as well as outwards against an allegedly aggressive and morally-bankrupt “Western culture”.\(^{124}\) In the first instance, *dakwah* Malays insisted on arguments of the ‘debt’ that Malay civilization owed to Islam because Islam had introduced a script for Malay language (Jawi) as well as new ideas.

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\(^{122}\) Ibid., p. 44.
\(^{123}\) Ibid., pp. 28-29.
in religion, philosophy and literature that had no Malay precedent. In turn, the Jawi script led to the establishment of a rich Malay literary tradition that by Munshi Abdullah’s time in the early nineteenth century, this literary and religious synthesis of Malay was “the only version of the language formally taught and largely as the medium of religious instruction rather than for its own sake”. The argument goes as far as to claim that Islam greatly facilitated the “export” of Malay beyond the region to the extent that Malay (in the form of the Jawi script) became the second largest “Muslim” language in the Middle East.

In line with that reasoning, the cultural scene on a number of university campuses across the country began to debate the role that literature and the arts played in an environment where Islam would be the organizing principle of society. Malay literary circles began to promote literature that was infused with religious themes and the search for spiritual enlightenment through Islam. Art and culture, it was argued, could not selfishly be created or consumed for its own sake, operating in an unchecked liberal public sphere. Art and culture should also be used as vehicles to demonstrate the majesty of Allah and the wider spiritual message of Islam. Ultimately, art and culture’s true value would serve as an active medium for the realization of Islamic values and worldview.

125 Munsyi Abdullah, (aka Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir) wrote the *Hikayat Abdullah* (Abdullah’s Story) between 1840-43 and his accounts on everyday happenings in Malaya were published in 1849. The *Hikayat Abdullah* was a seminal work as it was the first ever publication on Malaya by a local. The book was also significant in that it was written in vernacular Malay rather than courtly language. The popularity of the *Hikayat* as well as Munsyi’s renown as an interpreter, scribe and religious teacher has earned him the title of “the father of Modern Malay Literature”.


127 Ibid., p. 63.

IHAM’s architecture, permanent collection, temporary exhibitions, publications and public educational programmes are carefully choreographed in such a manner that one aspect of representation complements the other and reinforces the sacredness of its *dakwah* purpose. Significantly, traditional Malay cultural performances such as *joget ronggeng, dondang sayang* (due to liberal interaction between the sexes) and *tarian kuda kepang* because of its Hindu origins and trance-inducing qualities, came under pressure of being banned for their “un-Islamic” aspects.\(^{129}\) This is in strong contrast to the celebration of performance cultures performed at Indonesia’s Festival Istiqal events, where dancing and physical movement, were considered to augment the spiritual connection of *dhikir Allah*.

In the second instance, the vilification of Western societies extended to the questioning of the value of a “morally-neutral” western science and education by Muslim students across a number of Malaysian university campuses. In its place *dakwah* students proposed the value of “inspirational” knowledge (*wahyu*) based on the argument that all knowledge comes from God. Those in the middle ground argued that scientific advancements such as genetics and atomic theory have roots in the Qur’an.\(^{130}\) Thus, at a macro-cultural level, the *dakwah* movement’s growing disdain for western frameworks of knowledge and western sciences assumptions of universalism can be read as an “Islamic counterculture” that expresses its disenchantment with the of Western technology and modernity. However, there is a slippage in the message of Islamic alternity as the IAMM still relies on Western


\(^{130}\) Ibid., p. 64.
conceptualisations of art and museum culture in realizing the institution as well as its parameters of Islamicate art.

*Islam’s Position in Malaysian Society*

Unlike in Indonesia, Islam’s position as the official religion of Malaysia was already safeguarded in the State Constitution. Thus the expression of Islam is the 1980s was articulated as the rejection of the perceived secularist policies pursued by the Barisan Nasional government, disillusionment with Westernization as well as a rejection of materialism. The intensification of Islamization in Malaysian society also extended into a critique of Western conceptualizations of sociological phenomena. In Malaysia it appears to be a case of social and cultural reconstruction of Malaysian society at the national level through the penetration of Islam in social institutions, the economy and education.

The “Islamization of knowledge” was passionately advocated by Syed Naquib al-Attas, a prominent Muslim philosopher, and one of the founders of the University of Malaysia and the Islamic University. His philosophy and pedagogical approach was stark in its clarity – Islam was a totalizing force that would guide the individual’s mind, body and soul in ordering his or her spiritual and physical environments, and the effects of which would benefit both the individual and collective, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. At the height of the campaign, Malay-Muslims were exhorted to

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question Western frameworks of sociological analysis and the objectivity of science. Arguably, rather than the inner modernization of Islam to respond to modernity, Naquib’s Islamization of knowledge implied that modern reality had to fit immutable principles of Islam because the conceptualizations of modernity were flawed by the dichotomies of Western academic traditions.\textsuperscript{132}

The grassroots phenomenon, which spiritedly discussed the role that Islam should play in nation-building, soon seeped into institutional thinking as student leaders the likes of Anwar Ibrahim, Fadzil Noor, Abdul Hadi Awang and Nasharuddin Mat Isa embarked on political, public service or academic careers. Mahathir’s policy of “Islamizing the bureaucracy” moved in tandem with the general Muslim public sentiment of the period. As more Malay-Muslim graduates joined the ranks of the bureaucracy, professions, school and university faculty and administrators and think-tanks, they were increasingly in positions to influence policy and shape public discourse in the 1980s and 1990s.

However, as Malaysia gained prosperity from its expanding economy, its government now had to find ways to maintain ever higher levels of economic growth. Critics of Mahathir’s “Islamic modernism” argue that the notions of Islamic modernization and an Islamic “work ethic” have become ideological vehicles that the state used to instil industry discipline, encourage high levels of productivity and its cursory attempt to combat corruption.\textsuperscript{133} Nasr describes UMNO’s success in co-opting the outward symbols and ritual practices of Islam and wrestling the

\textsuperscript{132} See Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, \textit{The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization} (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1998).

\textsuperscript{133} Hussin Mutalib, \textit{Islam in Malaysia}, pp. 128-130.
fundamentalist mandate from Islamist parties as “a feat of genius”. Thus, even though a number of Mahathir’s cultural policies in the 1980s and 1990s addressed issues of Malay-Islamic cultural identity, they were also tied to Malaysia’s economic development. In that regard, one could argue that the IAMM’s mission is less about challenging traditional Arab dominance in defining global Islamicate culture, and more about prescribing the type of Muslim a Malaysian should aspire to be.

*Islam in Malaysia’s foreign policy*

Hence, the proliferation of Islamic principles in the Malaysian economy leading to the establishment of “Islamic banking”, the founding of the International Islamic University as well as the IAMM as part of a Malaysian project of alternative modernity. Mahathir’s refusal to defer to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) requirements for international rescue packages and the imposition of capital restraints instead during the 1998 Asian Currency crisis, could also be understood as part of the rejection of a Western-dominated world order. In that regard, when one examines the impact of Islam on culturally diverse modern societies, it might be useful to consider Stauth’s two modes of framing Islam in the modern world of cultures: 1) An ideologized Islam which serves as a “self-affirmation of cultural reconstruction” in terms of it being a counterstrategy to secular, non-believing practice; and 2) the inner modernization of Islamic principles and visions to be a strategy of “modulation of Islam into the new framework of a global civilization”.  

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In Malaysia’s case, the latter mode is the more likely scenario. Mahathir’s *Wawasan 2020* is a glossy rhetoric of modernizing Islamic tenets to fit contemporary times. Moreover, unlike the legacy of debate left by public intellectuals such as Nurcholish Madjid, Abdurrahman Wahid and even B.J. Habibie, there is a dearth of vigorous philosophical discussion on Islam and the nature and direction of “Islamic modernity” by Malaysian intellectuals and *ulama* alike – most so-called religious reforms are driven by the state rather than as feedback from public debate. Perhaps due to the Islamization process as largely been state-driven, Islam has not been perceived as a threat to Malaysia’s national modernity. Instead Islam is considered “an integral tool in constructing modern nationhood and Malay identity”.

The Islamization of Malaysia’s public sphere is also projected outwards beyond the country’s geographical boundaries in such a way that, notwithstanding its plural society, Malaysia presents an image of itself as an Islamic country. The identification with other Muslim countries began during Tunku Abdul Rahman’s premiership (1957-69) as both ideological and cultural ballast to Communism which was encroaching upon the Southeast Asian region at the time. Despite Tunku’s avowed commitment to a secular Malaysia and his fear that its non-Muslim citizens would “drown” if Malaysia became an Islamic state, Malaysia continued to cultivate a “special relationship” with other Muslim nations in the Middle East and Africa.

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Islamic solidarity served as a sort of counterweight to relations with the West, as second-generation leadership within UMNO (the likes of Dr Mahathir Mohammed and Datuk Hitam Musa) became critical of Malaysia’s “colonially-mired” policies.\footnote{Shanti Nair, \textit{Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy} (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 56-58.} To signal this new emphasis in foreign policy as well as to bolster UMNO’s Islamic credentials, Malaysia played host to important international Islamic conferences in 1959, 1964 and 1969 – the latest being the World Muslim Congress, a government-level international Islamic conference which was the first of its kind.\footnote{Ibid., p. 59.} After declaring Islam as the official religion of the country in 1960, Malaysia’s ascendance as a modern and internationally significant Muslim country was solidified when Tunku was nominated as Secretary General of the OIC in 1971.\footnote{Ibid., p. 60.}

Given the domestic instability caused by the May 1969 ethnic riots, Tunku’s successor, Tun Abdul Razak, took a more pragmatic approach towards Islamic solidarity in Malaysia’s foreign affairs. Rather than mere political rhetoric, he encouraged the OIC to seize the opportunity to promote Islam “as a religion of modernization and progress” and to play a complementary role to other fora of international cooperation. Tun Razak also called for greater economic and technical cooperation with the oil-rich Middle East countries, better use of the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) as well as reforming Islamic education systems.

The New Economic Policy promises made economic growth a national priority and the Middle East oil boom became an important source of loans and
potential investments.\textsuperscript{141} The volume of bilateral trade with Middle Eastern countries quadrupled between 1969 (RM172 million) and 1974 (RM654 million) and a suite of bilateral technical, scientific and cultural agreements were made during Tun Razak’s term.\textsuperscript{142} Until today, Malaysia has strong economic links and economic cooperation with Middle Eastern and the Arabian Gulf countries.

With regard to Muslim “causes”, Malaysian commitment to international Islamic solidarity was most consistent in its support of the Palestinians in the latter’s conflict with Israel. From Tunku Abdul Rahman’s thirteen-year administration to Hussein Onn’s three, Malaysia condemned Israeli aggression that led to the exodus of Palestinians from their homes following the establishment of Israel in 1948. Malaysia was one of the first Asian states to allow the Al-Fatah movement facilities and it remains strongly pro-Arab in its foreign policy stand on the Middle East.\textsuperscript{143} Despite the complex nature of the issue, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict continues to be perceived by the majority of the Malaysian public as a religious conflict, and successive Malaysian governments have responded to populist sentiment as such.

Arguably, pan-Islamic sentiment intensified during Mahathir’s government as Malaysia asserted its leadership role in the OIC and other international Islamic organizations. Mahathir himself did not shy away from criticising the West for their two-faced foreign policy in the Middle East, regularly imposing sanctions on Iran and Syria while mollycoddling Israel. Malaysia also sent peacekeeping forces and aid

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., pp. 61-62.
\textsuperscript{142} Johan Saravanamuttu, \textit{The Dilemma of Independence: Two Decades of Malaysia’s Foreign Policy} (Penang: Universiti Sain Malaysia, 1983), as cited in Shanti Nair, \textit{Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy}, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{143} See Nair, \textit{Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy}, p. 59 and p. 85.
during the Bosnian-Serbian ethnic conflict in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{144} In Chapter IV, I will comment on the IAMM’s permanent exhibition of Palestine’s political history. The presence of a fractious international political issue in the IAMM demonstrates how a museum can never be fully autonomous from the larger political leanings of its patrons nor the political demands of its visitors.

\textit{Islamization and its Impact on Non-Muslim Malaysians}

Coupled with UMNO’s longstanding contest with Islam-centred political rivals such as Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) and pressure from Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) during the same period, the result was an increasingly pronounced presence of Islamic values pursued in the public sphere as well as an increasingly pervasive culture of Islamic images, texts, songs and narratives across Malaysian multimedia channels.\textsuperscript{145}. There were intermittent reassurances from Mahathir and his deputies that “the inculcation of Islamic values in government and civic society was not the same as the implementation of Islamic laws”. Nonetheless, the Islamization of Malaysia’s public spaces usually came at the expense of its non-Muslim minorities.\textsuperscript{146}

As Islamic values were increasingly being promoted as the norms for the country, many non-Muslims felt their civil liberties and especially religious freedoms

\textsuperscript{144} A peacekeeping contingent known as MALBATT Command (Malaysia Battalion) was sent initially under the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) from 1993–1995 with deployments at Konjic, Jablanica and Pazarić in Hadžići. Following the Dayton Agreement, forces were redeployed as MALCON Command (Malaysia Contingent) under the NATO led Implementation Force (IFOR) in Operation Joint Endeavor with deployments at Livno, Glamoč and Kupres. MALCON further participated as part of the NATO led Stabilisation Force (SFOR) until 1998. Up to 8,000 troops were eventually deployed in this theater of operations.


were being encroached upon. Anecdotal evidence abound and include instances when non-Muslim couples being harassed by the moral police for holding hands or kissing in public, the prohibition on the sale of pork in wet markets and the extreme difficulty to get licenses to operate non-Muslim places of worship. Given the marginalization of non-Muslim cultural and religious expressions in Malaysia’s public sphere and the ambivalent attitudes towards non-Malay muallafs, the IAMM’s function as a “temple of art” appears insufficient as an educational institution that can foster an acceptable definition of a national cultural identity that is inclusive and equally represents all Malaysians.

147 See Hussin Mutalib, Islam in Malaysia.
Chapter II

Objectifying the Past:

The Representational Power of Things and “Popular Islam”

As authoritative cultural and educational institutions, museums wield great power in shaping national identities. Their collections contribute greatly to the imagining of a community of people about themselves (and oft times of others as well). Museums also orientate outsiders and guide them on how to view and respond to the objects on display. In this regard, I argue that both the BQMI and the IAMM are sites that “speak” about Islam as an integral part of Indonesian and Malaysian national identity. The histories of the BQMI and the Iamm affirm contemporary understandings and scholarship that museums are far from neutral spaces where visitors learn objectively about the past or a people’s ethnography. Through a number of their practices, museums reveal themselves as vested social institutions that aim to influence their visitors’ understanding of the displayed subject.

Museum Collections and Meaning-making

Museums are complex sites that stand at the intersection between academic scholarship, political agendas, display techniques and technological innovations –

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even memory. Contemporary literature on the role of museums in society and the varying impact they have on people of different socio-economic backgrounds, stress the nexus between power and discipline, as well as the transformative power of museums. Objects in museums cannot speak for themselves but are things which are “spoken about” because they are usually displayed outside of their original contexts, and oftentimes they are re-organised as exhibits according to some present objective. Some museums involve the people or cultures that they are speaking about, to avoid accusations of putting on an inauthentic display.

Curators, the experts who determine the meanings of these preserved objects, can usually exercise a high degree of autonomy in deciding what becomes part of the museum collection, which objects go on display and most importantly, how objects are displayed. However, curators also work under pressures from museum boards or even the general public, who feel that museums, because of the authority that they have in producing knowledge about the past, should serve “higher national interests”. In both museums of history and art museums, the “museum effect” that objects are subject to, also helps visitors re-experience the history and craftsmanship of the exhibited object. The “museum effect” is arguably “an apparatus of power”

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151 See Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge (London and New York: Routledge, 1992). Hooper-Greenhill’s analyses of the different types of museums and their collections draw deeply from Foucault’s arguments on the hegemonic power of state institutions to compel and socialize individuals to behave in accordance with a prescribed set of norms.


sheathed in a velvet glove because the authority of the museum as a temple of knowledge lends a cloak of legitimacy to these displayed objects which already stand as seemingly neutral evidence of past reality.\textsuperscript{154}

State-sanctioned museums are thus never neutral spaces that simply display historical objects that narrate a past reality. Indeed, the messages they convey about their subjects are too important to allow visitors to learn “by chance”. This is especially significant when the message is related to knowledge about the “nation”. The objects in a museum’s collection will be carefully selected, categorized, labelled and displayed such that each of them will play role in affirming a particular narrative of the nation’s past and its people. Thus, objects in any museum collection tend to have “a mendacious quality”\textsuperscript{155} because they have been organized and exhibited in such a way that some of its elements are highlighted while others are downplayed.\textsuperscript{156} The representation of the imagined national community is therefore a controlled image that includes some groups while excluding others.

The practice that archaeological objects can also stand as a metonymy for a “civilisation” or “nation”, comes from the thinking that “objects are ideas”\textsuperscript{157} and that as exhibits, they can be staged as “a performance”.\textsuperscript{158} Their meanings are then (re)inscribed and (re)contextualised by the curator in relation to the present.\textsuperscript{159} By examining the provenance of key objects within a museum’s collection, or the

\textsuperscript{154}Ibid., p. 3 and pp. 13-14.
\textsuperscript{156}Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (eds.), “Introduction” of Exhibiting Cultures, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{157}Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{159}Ibid., pp. 191-196.
“cultural biography of things” as it is termed in anthropology, one can study museum collections “through the trajectories of specific items and the relationships they form with people and other objects”.\(^{160}\) Similar to the “social scientific” philosophy of the second-generation *Annales* School historians such as Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff, this multi-disciplinary approach towards studying material culture allows for the convergence of interests of both historians and anthropologists to create “a set of common, as opposed to complementary, goals: the development of dynamic models that combine system with process in long-term patterns of socio-cultural change”.\(^{161}\)

While this method might not be perfect since the two disciplines also have differences in emphasis, such a cross-disciplinary approach would address the complexities of modern nation-state life. Other writers have argued that the very building in which the museum is housed affects the communication of the collection’s philosophy. Oftentimes, the museum building is an artefact itself. Its architecture and how a museum *should* look, has often been a source of conflict between the building’s designer, the collection’s patrons and even the general public.\(^{162}\)

Museum collections and educational programmes can also be tools to legitimize the political authority or cultural hegemony of one group over others. Museums assert their influence on how visitors view the past through the themes they

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\(^{162}\) Forgan, “Building the Museum: Knowledge, Conflict and the Power of Place”, *Isis*, No. 96, 2005, pp. 574-576. The initial protests to I.M. Pei’s glass pyramids at the Louvre are a classic example of the debate that surrounds how a museum should look.
use to organise their collections.\textsuperscript{163} The most obvious way that a museum can legitimise a particular narrative of the past, is by arranging the objects in a way that singularly and collectively, the objects strengthen the themes that run through the national narrative. Such is the case with national history museums of most erstwhile colonies, including Malaysia’s Muzium Negara and Indonesia’s Museum Nasional. In a similar manner to BQMI and IAMM, other kinds of national museums and heritage sites in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia and Brunei reflect their histories and rich material culture not simply for the sake of preserving antiquated objects but also to legitimise present political authority.

National history museums which chronicle social conditions under colonial rule and subsequent struggles towards modern nationhood constantly reinforce a narrative of loyalty towards the country using objects that resonate with visitors’ memories. As the BQMI and IAMM put “Islam” on display and discuss the role of Islam in each country’s national culture, it is imperative that we scrutinise and debate their representations of the religion, especially in the context of multi-cultural and multi-religious society. Both museums have the ability to shape how visitors imagine Islam and mediate responses to competing notions of Islamicate culture, society, religion, art and values.

Several studies have examined how museums, as repositories of history and memory, as well as educational institutions, have contributed to the shaping of the

\textsuperscript{163} Stephen Bann, \textit{The Inventions of History: Essays on the Representation of the Past} (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1990), p. 34.
national citizenry. In the case of Indonesia and Malaysia, the respective collections
of the BQMI and IAMM are not only a means of educating visitors about Islam, but a
potential extension of nation-building and national identity creation. Clifford argues
that ethnographic museums, as well as heritage and indigenous cultural centres, “both
play and subvert” the dominant Western-tradition defined “art-culture game”. This is
so because the narratives staged in these institutions are also negotiated (my
emphasis) “paths through modernity” and mediating the unrelenting forces of the
market economy, technological advances and the ever-looming spectre of the nation-
state. The curatorial approach at the IAMM has attempted to navigate these
treacherous waters with some degree of success. Nonetheless, even though the BQMI
and IAMM could argue that they are “specialized museums” (museum khusus),
there is an urgency for these museums to create an inclusive image of the nation. Due
to the state ethos of multiculturalism in Malaysia, and Indonesia’s “unity in diversity”,
their multi-ethnic citizens expect their cultural identities to be reflected in the national
polity as well.

Nonetheless, because of majority-minority politics, and political and socio-
-economic policies that historically have favoured certain ethnic and/or religious
groups while discriminating against others, some ethnic cultural groups are

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164 See Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and Education: Purpose, Pedagogy, Performance (London
and New York: Routledge, 2007), Flora E.S. Kaplan (ed.) Museums and the Making of ”Ourselves”: The
Role of Objects in National Identity and Peter Vergo (ed.), The New Museology (London: Reaktion
165 James Clifford, Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (Cambridge, Mass:
166 Uka Tjandrasasmita, “Peren Bayt Al-Qur’an & Museum Istiqlal bagi Pembangunan Bangsa
Indonesia” in Suhuf: Jurnal Kajian Al-Qur’an dan Kebudayaan, Vol.1, No.1 (Jakarta: Lajnah
marginalised or even “erased” from the state-endorsed “face” of the nation.\textsuperscript{167} The story of the unified multicultural nation, as displayed in these museums, become contested narratives of unequal representation. In the IAMM, the art of the Malay world serves for the Islamicate material culture heritage of Malaysia over that of other non-Malay Muslim groups. In the BQMI, the material culture of Chinese Indonesians, even Muslim Chinese, are not represented as an indigenous part of the Indonesian Islamicate nation.

The political histories of Southeast Asian countries are replete with government campaigns that have strived to create a sense of unified national identity amongst such diverse ethnic populations. Whether in the form of nationally standardized education, military conscription or even forced resettlement, the success of these respective state-initiated campaigns has been mixed and directly related to the level of resistance from the group that has been targeted for assimilation. Malaysia and Indonesia, just like its other Southeast Asian neighbours who have become more stable and affluent nation-states in the late twentieth century, have been able to turn their attention towards a development of the cultural aspects of citizenship. In this regard, a considerable amount of money and resources have been spent to develop grand concert halls, public libraries and art galleries that reinforce the various forms of cultural capital of the emerging middle-classes who patronise them.\textsuperscript{168}

\textsuperscript{167} See Ariel Heryanto, “Ethnic Identities and Erasure; Chinese Indonesians in Public Culture”, in Joel Kahn, \textit{Southeast Asian Identities; Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand}, pp. 95-114.

At the same time, “national” and ethnographic museums inherited from former colonial rulers are revamped to serve nation-building purposes. These cultural institutions are made easily accessible to the general public and serve as overt marks of educated, liberally-minded and civilised nation-states.169 The BQMI and IAMM are part of this cultural landscape of the modern Southeast Asian city where local elites systematically produce knowledge about the “nation” from the “top-down” and could be seen as extending national Islamic education by employing a Western tradition of museum education to create “modern Muslims”.170

_Museums and the Modernised, Economically Prosperous Country_

Further, I argue that the two museums reflect the increasing confidence of both Indonesia and Malaysia in their international standing as former colonies which have successfully modernised, as well as their international diplomacy, especially in relation to other Muslim states. As generally stable Muslim-dominant “democracies”, Indonesia and Malaysia have contributed to the stability of Southeast Asia as a whole, especially when Suharto initiated the move for closer regional cooperation which ultimately led to the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

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169 See Flora E.S. Kaplan (ed.), *Museums and the Making of "Ourselves": The Role of Objects in National Identity*. A good number of “national” museums in Southeast Asia were established by British, French and Dutch colonialists who directly governed these areas from the mid-eighteenth century until the end of World War II. The colonial museums were essentially ethnographic inventories that housed specimens of local flora and fauna as well as the cultural curiosities of the indigenous peoples they ruled. With independence, Southeast Asian countries which inherited these collections respectively used them to create their desired national histories and support various other nation-building programmes.

170 See Robert W. Hefner (ed.), *Making Modern Muslims: The Politics of Islamic Education in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009) for a collection of essays that examine the ways which Islamic school systems in various Southeast Asian countries attempt to address the pressures of modernization while striving to deliver the theological mission of Islamic education.
in 1967 with the initial signatories of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. The declaration of closer regional economic and cultural cooperation was soon followed by the signing of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in 1971, better known as the Kuala Lumpur Declaration, which asserted the freedom of the region “from any manner of interference by outside Powers” during the super-power politics of the Cold War era.\footnote{171}

Indonesia and Malaysia’s rapid economic development and prosperity as well as their strategic geo-political value during that period, also gave their elder statesmen clout in the international fora to pursue a more internationalist agenda and a course independent of the major Western powers, especially in relation to the Middle East. Both countries also pursued an increased presence in the international Muslim bloc of countries from the mid-1970s. Suharto and successive Malaysian prime ministers since Tunku Abdul Rahman were vocal participants in international Islamic fora such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the World Islamic Economic Forum (WIEF). Both countries have also used their good offices and their reputation as “moderate” Muslim countries to mediate in diplomatically-sensitive issues involving minority Muslim communities in non-Muslim states.\footnote{172}

As I have argued in Chapter I, Indonesia and Malaysia’s increasing international confidence coincided with major developments in the larger Muslim world in the 1970s, including the rise of Middle East oil power during the Cold War

\footnote{171 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) official homepage, \url{http://www.aseansec.org/11833.htm}. Accessed Nov 16, 2010.}
\footnote{172 See Anak Agung Banyu Perwita, \textit{Indonesia and the Muslim World: Islam and secularism in the Foreign Policy of Soeharto and Beyond} and Nair, \textit{Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy}, pp. 55-73.}
and the Islamic revolution in Iran. Such events gave the impression that there was a
global Islamic renaissance. The Islamic religious revival was also felt by Indonesia
and Malaysia’s Muslim-majority societies, and calls grew for greater reference to
Islam in the development of the country, the establishment of more public institutions
and the institutionalisation of Islamic practices.¹⁷³

In Indonesia, it rekindled a vigorous debate over the nature of the Indonesian
state that began in earnest after WWII as indigenous Islamist freedom fighters had
contributed significantly to win the war of occupation against the Dutch.¹⁷⁴ In
Malaysia, the Islamic resurgence was cleverly harnessed by the United Malays
Nationalist Organisation (UMNO) in the 1970s and saw the gradual Islamization of
Malaysian bureaucracy, especially during Mahathir’s premiership. Intellectually and
culturally, there was increasing scepticism of contemporary “Western-model” of
modernity and a renewed search for a “Muslim” identity as a counterforce to the ills
of modern living. Rather than relying on Western philosophy and intellectual
frameworks, public debate raged over the representation of non-Western cultures and
knowledge as lesser “others”, there was renewed interest in studying Islamic scholars
and philosophers and Islamic history as well as the arts, literature and cultures of
Islamicate heartlands.¹⁷⁵ The result of the popular calls for the proliferation of Islamic
images, texts, songs, narratives, objects and even moral order, has resulted in the
“greening” of the public spheres in both Indonesia and Malaysia with the unfortunate

¹⁷³ See Nagata, The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam” and Fealy, “Consuming Islam”, in G. Fealy and
¹⁷⁴ See Thomas Gibson, Islamic Narrative and Authority in Southeast Asia from the 16th to 21st
Century (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and R. Michael Feener, Muslim Legal Thought in
Modern Indonesia.
result of a decline for tolerance of non-Islamic alternatives.\textsuperscript{176}

Just as importantly, there seemed to be a collective desire to establish Indonesia and Malaysia’s place in the seemingly reinvigorated Muslim world. While they varied in degree, the Indonesian and Malaysian responses to a novel occurrence in the form of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, was super-imposed onto a past “golden age” of Islam that was playing out again in the present. Just as Sahlins argued that the coincidental arrival and subsequent actions of Captain Cook and his ill-fated crew in Hawaii were seen initially by the indigenous tribe as the return of the god O Lono to fulfil the people’s history and renew the fecundity of the islands’ soil,\textsuperscript{177} so too did many Muslims in these two countries believed that the major political and social happenings in professedly Islamic countries as well as increased Western interest in Islamic political philosophy and “civilisation” since the late-1970s, showed the superiority of Islam as a faith and an alternative world view.\textsuperscript{178}

The BQMI and IAMM form part of the cultural landscape of increasing confidence of Indonesian and Malaysian Muslims in expressing their Muslim identity in the public realm. As authoritative institutions on the subject of the country’s past, each object in the collection of each museum, stands as physical testimony of the richness of the people’s historical past and as well as the craftsmanship of traditional

\textsuperscript{176} Liow, \textit{Piety and Politics}, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{178} See Meuleman, \textit{Islam in the era of globalization}. 
material culture.\textsuperscript{179} That is why there are many specimens of any one particular object displayed in a museum.

In the IAMM, the thematic approach of a number of its galleries, i.e. the armoury and weapons gallery, the jewelry gallery and the textiles gallery, transforms singular objects into replications of each form. Reproductions of similar styles, symbols and functions all contribute to establishing a “tradition” of material cultural production of the sort that Hobsbawm mentions.\textsuperscript{180} In some cases, the material quality of the object is fine enough to be considered “art” and transcends mere functionality to ascend into the realm of non-economic value.\textsuperscript{181} The copies of finely-wrought Qur’ans from the different regions of Indonesia (as well as Qur’ans from China, Africa and the Malay Archipelago) displayed in BQMI as “mushaf art” fall in that category.

The invariance of the Qur’anic text, which is the common element in each mushaf regardless of the regional patterns and symbols illuminating its pages— from the organization of each juz\textsuperscript{182}, surah (chapter), waqaf (punctuation) and even the number of lines on each page – further grounds mushaf art as a “universal” Islamic art tradition. In this manner, and continually reinforced by the narratives of the designers of the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal and BQMI’s curators, the myriad cultures and ethnic groups of Indonesia are objectified in the very things and buildings that they produce.

\textsuperscript{179} Alper, “A Way of Seeing”, in Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (eds.), Exhibiting Cultures, pp. 25-32.
\textsuperscript{182} A juz is a section of the Qur’an that can be read each night of the Muslim month of Ramadan.
Kenneth George argues that collectively, these symbols, patterns and architecture from Indonesia’s disparate ethnic groups are taken to represent the artistic nucleus of an Indonesian nation,\textsuperscript{183} in which Islam has not only been a guiding principle, but whose material and cultural abundance have also inspired indigenous expressions of Islam which are distinct from the faith’s historical Arabian heartlands. I will discuss further in Chapter III, how the Mushaf Istiqlal has been used as a representation of Muslim Indonesia and the inherent problems in creating an inclusive representation of national identity.

One could consider Bann’s formulation of museums as narrated and edited spaces in which history and geography can be “stretched”, to examine how the BQMI and IAMM have expanded the histories of their respective countries. Through the manner objects are displayed as well as the narrative modes of the explicatory texts accompanying them, both museums lay claim to an Islamic past that has purportedly benefitted the nation.\textsuperscript{184} Hence I argue that the collections of the two museums are not objective displays of different types of “Islamicate art”. Instead, there is an unmistakable ideological imperative embedded in the exhibits.

Further, the dovetailing of beautiful art objects with the consumerist culture of an expanding Indonesian and Malaysian middle-class facilitates the dissemination of the idea of a tangible and glorious Islamicate culture that can be relived through the senses of sight, sound, touch, taste, and in the case of the contemporary art pieces in

\textsuperscript{183} See Nicholas Thomas, “Appropriation/Appreciation: Settler Modernism in Australia and New Zealand”, in Fred R. Myers (ed.), \textit{The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture} (Santa Fe: School Of American Research Press, 2001), pp. 139-165 for a similar discussion of how indigenous motifs have been used to create a national settler art in Australia and New Zealand.

\textsuperscript{184} See Stephen Bann, \textit{The Inventions of History}, pp. 130-133.
BQMI, even owned. Weintraub talks about the creation of a kind of “popular Islam” that is mass produced, mass-mediated, more urban and cosmopolitan as well as globalized.185 On the surface, it appears as if the two museums attempt to both reflect and shape at least the artistic elements of “popular Islam”. However, because there is a diversity of Muslim experiences as well as a wide spectrum of Muslim identities, there are sometimes slippages between the plural realities and communities of Islam and what is represented in the BQMI and the IAMM.

**Popular Responses to the BQMI and IAMM**

Not everyone agrees with the way the BQMI and the IAMM have been curated. In the case of the BQMI, the static displays of the mushaf Al-Qur’an and ethnographic material have been criticized by various parties for being uninspired and not in accordance with current museum standards. At its worse, the curation of the Bayt Al-Qur’an has been described as ‘passive’, (Mal. *pasif*) or even ‘lifeless’ (Mal. *mati*). Criticisms run the gamut from the lack of thought to the way the Qur’ans are displayed, the lack of “animation” (i.e. multimedia to enhance the visitor’s understanding/experience of the gallery), little information on the objects’ provenance or significance, the poor state of preservation and conservation of the artefacts given the humidity of the BQMI’s tropical surroundings and even the insufficient level of security of its galleries from theft and vandalism.186 Further, despite the regular publications by the BQMI’s co-manager, the Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Quran, the BQMI has been chided for a lack of sustained museum programming to attract

more visitors. Despite the popularity of competitive Qur’anic recitals amongst Indonesian Muslims, the BQMI has yet to organize such a programme to enhance its profile on the local Islamicate cultural scene.

It is a similar case with the IAMM, even though it has received more bouquets than bricks. To its credit, the publications arm of the IAMM has produced quality exhibition catalogues to accompany both its permanent collection as well as each temporary exhibition it has staged. Its programmes also strive to complement the themes addressed in its galleries. For instance, an art programme targeted at children had them selecting their favourite object in the IAMM and then reproducing it in a painting. Programmes for adults include both artistic workshops such as calligraphy as well as the broadcasting of Qur’anic recitals during the month of Ramadhan. Of significance are the prizes that the IAMM awards for participation in some of its programmes. The most recent which generated some excitement was one which offered a prize of an umrah (minor pilgrimage) to Makkah when visitors to its temporary exhibition, “En Route to Mecca: Pilgrims’ Voices throughout the Centuries” which ran from October 2009 to January 2010, participated in a contest sharing their thoughts on the hajj experience.

The first gripe that most local visitors (and potential visitors) claim is that entrance fees to the IAMM are too expensive. Fixed at RM10 for adults, RM5 for students and senior citizens and no charge for children under 6 years of age (RM12 and RM6 when Special Galleries are opened), it costs more than Muzium Negara’s
flat rate of RM2 with free entry for students in uniform and children under 12 years old. The resistance to paying these higher charges show that visitors expect museums (even private ones), in their role as public institutions for education and recreation, to make visiting it affordable for the masses. At a time when an assortment of ‘Islamic consumer products’ are available on the market, the IAMM’s popularity is subject to the same forces of demand and supply that other Islam-related goods and services are.

Interestingly, the oft-cited criticism the IAMM receives is that some visitors feel that it is “not international enough”. Though each display is accompanied by both English and Malay information panels, some visitors have remarked that the IAMM should take into account Arabic-speakers as well and provide sufficient text and signs for this group of visitors. Another feedback from visitors is for the IAMM to take a more active role in discussing political events in Islamic world affairs through displays in the museum. In Chapter IV, I show how the museum responded to calls for a representation of the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

From the examples above, one can see how the representations displayed by the two museums become part of a larger struggle of popular culture to determine what counts as “Islam” in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia. This mass mediation of “compromise, negotiation as well as resistance” is constantly at play and serves as a dynamic mechanism to check state hegemony in imposing fixed narratives about

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187 Rosma Wati, Senior Curator, IAMM. Personal Communication, 9 December 2009.
Islam and/or Muslim society.\textsuperscript{188}

In Chapters III and IV, I examine the architectural and curatorial strategies that the BQMI and IAMM respectively deploy to portray its interpretation of Islam, both as a “living’ religion”\textsuperscript{189} and as an important identity marker for the Muslim-majority populations of the nation. The museums’ curatorial approaches are of political significance in light of competing definitions of Islamic behavior and Muslim piety between the state, traditional and progressive ulama, Islamist political parties, as well as individual beliefs and practices of lay Muslims in both these countries. Adding to the volatile mix are the complexities of multi-cultural living with non-Muslims.

I argue that the approach of each museum was shaped not only by the philosophies and artistic vision of its respective curatorial teams, but also by the national political agendas of Suharto’s New Order regime and the Barisan Nasional of which UMNO is the leading partner. Both domestic and foreign policy considerations of the Suharto and Mahathir governments since the mid-1980s have found their way into the direction of the heritage and cultural preservation policies and have resulted in museums and heritage sites becoming an extension of nation-building and national identity creation.

These concerns have directly led to the establishment of the BQMI in 1997 and IAMM in 1999 and continue, in varying degrees to affect the shaping of the two museums’ collections and exhibitions. Malaysia’s UMNO government and the New

\textsuperscript{188} Weintraub, “Introduction: The Study of Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia”, p. 2.

Order regime, strived to define the role of Islam in its modern, ethnically and religiously plural state in the face of challenges from Islamist elements while maintaining a secular and nationalist public space. Inevitably, however, the museological result is that the “Islam” that is portrayed and displayed in BQMI is a selective mosaic of Indonesian Muslims and the experience of Islam and Islamicate heritage in the Indonesian archipelago.

Thus even though its founders describe the BQMI as “a mirror [for Indonesians] to see themselves”, it is akin to the magic mirror in the fairytale of Snow White as it only reflects what its creators want to see of the Indonesian nation. In the case of IAMM, it is an ambitious attempt to not only consolidate the authority of the ruling UMNO party as the guardians of Islamicate culture and Malay-Islamicate material heritage, but also to institute Islamicate art as a worthy equal to established Western art traditions.

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Chapter III

Revealing the Sacred and the Nation: A Study of the BQMI

The BQMI is actually made up of two museums located on the same premises near the main entrance of Taman Mini Indonesia Indah (TMII) in East Jakarta. The Bayt Al-Qur’an and Museum Istiqal collections are jointly managed by the Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur’an (Committee for the Standardization of Reproductions of the Qur’an) and Badan Litbang dan Diklat Agama (Agency for Islamic Research, Development and Training) under the offices of the Ministry of Religion). While the Bayt- Al-Qur’an and Museum Istiqal together house objects pertaining to Islamicate culture, the two museums are conceptually distinct.

According to its Curatorial Board, the Bayt Al-Qur’an (House of Al-Qur’an) is meant only for Qur’anic related materials, such as Qur’anic knowledge, calligraphy and manuscripts, as well as research. On the other hand, Museum Istiqal displays “the products of human interpretations of the Qur’an in society” and that the “application of the Qur’an in human society ultimately results in the flourishing of Islamic culture”.191 At the time of its establishment in 1995, the Bayt Al-Qur’an was also considered the world’s biggest museum that displayed the art and history of the Qur’an with its closest counterpart in Bahrain.192

The Bayt Al-Qur’an displays an extensive collection of different kinds of

illuminated copies of the Qur’an or mushaf Al-Qur’an\textsuperscript{193} that have been produced by the different pesantren (Jav. traditional religious school) or religious teachers (Ar. ustaz, Jav. kyai) from as early as the late 16th Century.\textsuperscript{194} It also displays a small collection of contemporary Qur’an-related publications such as translations, instructional software on how to recite the Qur’an properly as well as children’s Qur’an recital and activity books.\textsuperscript{195}

The Bayt Al-Qur’an has in storage and limited display a collection of rare kitab kuning (Mal. yellow books) which are tracts or pamphlets of religious instruction drawn up by local Muslim teachers and missionaries as well as a few specimens of Qur’anic writing on wood in Javanese script in the traditional form of wooden slates (koprak).\textsuperscript{196} The centrepiece of the Bayt Al-Qur’an is the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal Indonesia. Presented by its creators as a “distinctly national Qur’an”, the illuminated borders of its pages showcase the apparently distinct decorative arts of Indonesia’s diverse ethnic groups, and thus, also evoking the variegated nature of Indonesia’s Islamicate culture.\textsuperscript{197}

\textsuperscript{193} Illuminated Qur’ans are reproductions of the Qur’an which have elaborately decorated bindings and covers as well as pages. These decorations are usually repeated patterns inspired by natural motifs and are usually abstractions of undulating vines, leaves and flowers. Sini-calligraphy Qur’ans, which are Qur’ans produced in China, usually also include clouds as decorative elements.

\textsuperscript{194} Mahmud Buchari, “Calligraphy Blooms: Indonesia’s Istiqlal Mushaf” p. 54.

\textsuperscript{195} These objects, strictly speaking, are not artefacts. However, they are displayed in the Bayt Al-Qur’an to demonstrate the ongoing work done by the Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur’an, a department within the Ministry of Religion, which edits and approves all forms of Qur’an related publications in Indonesia.

\textsuperscript{196} Sadly, these historically important texts that can shed light on how Islam spread and developed indigenously in the Indonesian Archipelago are not kept in the best of conditions. See Jonathan Zilberg, “The Museum Istiqlal: The Case of an Indonesian Islamic Museum”, a paper presented at The Third International Conference of the Inclusive Museum, Yidiz Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey, June 28-July 2, 2010.

\textsuperscript{197} George. “Designs on Indonesia’s Muslim Communities”, p. 704. See Figure 3.1.
Fig. 3.1 Pages from the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal with illuminations representing regional symbols

To overcome the difficulty of determining the cultural distinctions between one ethnic group and the other, especially when they overlapped within the same province, the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal team creatively re-drew the strict provincial administrative and ethnic lines that criss-crosses Indonesia. To create this national Qur’an, Indonesia was re-cast as a Muslim nation “with forty-two Muslim cultures and design areas”.198 The re-imagination of Indonesia as a Muslim entity included provinces and territories such as North Bali, Irian Jaya and East Timor (now West Papua and independent Timor Leste respectively) that would not usually be considered culturally Muslim areas because of the predominance of Hindus and Christians living in those parts.199

Both the Bayt Al-Qur’an and the Museum Istiqlal were established out of the resounding success of the two “Festival Istiqlal” events held in 1991 and 1995, which also marked the start and the completion of the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal project. The unexpected popularity of the two cultural festivals that purportedly showcased Indonesian Islamicate culture, led to calls for an Islamicate-themed museum that would serve as a permanent display of traditional as well as contemporary objects pertaining to “Islamic culture” and “Islamic heritage” (benda-benda warisan budaya

198 Ibid., pp. 704-705. See Appendix, Table 1. “Sequential List of the 42 Muslim Culture and Design Regions, for Inclusion in the Al-Qur’an Mushaf Istiqlal, Istiqlal Foundation, April 1994.”
199 Ibid., pp. 704-705.
Islam) from across the Indonesian archipelago.\textsuperscript{200}

Despite the museum being described as having Islam as its guiding principle (\textit{museum bernuansa ke-Islaman}), from its very inception, the BQMI was very clear in that the objects it was conserving and displaying were not just “old things” (\textit{benda kuno}) but rather Indonesia’s extensive contributions to a “global Islamic heritage” (\textit{khazanah ke-Islaman dunia}).\textsuperscript{201} Further, BQMI’s founders, who also were the initiators behind Festival Istiqlal I and II, had envisioned their work as an attempt to “contribute to the self-awareness and self-confidence required of Muslims” in light of the global Islamic resurgence and economic rise of many professedly Muslim countries since the mid-1980s. Uka Tjandrasasmita saw the BQMI as a medium for building “a national character” (\textit{media pembinaan keperibadian bangsa}).\textsuperscript{202}

Historically, Indonesians make up amongst the highest number of pilgrims to Makkah and there continues to be a substantial Javanese community residing in the Hijaz. The increasing affluence of Indonesia’s Muslim middle-class, which expanded with Indonesia’s oil boom and general economic prosperity during the New Order period, saw increasing numbers of Indonesians able to go on more religious pilgrimages – both domestically to the shrines of Muslim saints across the archipelago, and in fulfilling the fifth obligation of the \textit{Rukun Islam} (the five pillars of Islam) – to travel to Makkah to perform the pilgrimage alongside Muslims from all over the world. Purportedly, it was on Ibu Tien’s suggestion that a particular prayer

\textsuperscript{200} Author Unknown, “Museum Istiqlal dan Bayt al-Qur’an: Hadiah untuk Indonesia dan Dunia”, pp. 49-50.
\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., p. 49.
\textsuperscript{202} Tjandrasasmita. “Peren Bayt Al-Qur’an & Museum Istiqlal bagi Pembangunan Bangsa Indonesia”, p. 165.
be inscribed prominently on BQMI’s façade so that Muslim pilgrims on their way to perform the *hajj* would be able to read it as their planes flew past from the Halim Perdanakusuma Terminal. In addition, the Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Qur’an, which co-manages the BQMI, has itself published ten volumes of commentaries on the Qur’an (Ar. *tafsir Al-Qur’an*) by 2008, thus being an active producer of a fundamental aspect of Islamic knowledge production.

![Fig. 3.2. Frontal view of BQMI with Qur’anic verse inscribed on the wall of the main building](image)

Hence, the BQMI when examined together with the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal and Festival Istiqlal I and II, could be seen as first, an extended campaign of forging a distinct *Indonesian* Islamicate culture that is both locally honoured and internationally acknowledged as an important part of a larger global Islamicate heritage. In this regard, Islamicate calligraphy and the art of mushaf writing and illumination have been enthusiastically promoted as Indonesia’s concerted efforts to reinvigorate “an important Islamicate art form that was supposedly close to being forgotten”.

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203 Author Unknown, “Wajah Islam yang Pantas Dilirik”, p. 51. See Figure 3.2
205 Mahmud Buchari, “Calligraphy Blooms”, p. 54.
The Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal is the centrepiece in a collection of thirty mushafs created by notable indigenous clerics and Muslim rulers in the last 400 years of the archipelago’s history. Even before the Mushaf Al-Quran Istiqlal was created as an emblem of the imagined united Muslim nation of Indonesia, the Mushaf Pusaka of the National Palace (1950, Figure 3.3) and Mushaf Wonosobo (1992, Figure 3.4) had already existed as emblems of Muslim Indonesia. At the two Istiqlal festivals and later in the BQMI, the mushafs created by Syekh Abdul Wahab from Aceh (undated), Syekh Nawawi al Bantani from Banten (undated), and Prince Diponegoro of Yogyakarta (undated) were displayed along with other mushafs created between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, as archaeological proof of “Indonesian” participation in this sacred art form. However, these mushafs were more parochial in their provenance and did not attempt to include the plethora of ethnic traits from across the Indonesian peoples in the designing of the respective mushaf al-Qur’an. To boost its claims that Indonesia was keeping the art of mushaf writing alive at a time when its popularity was “in a decline” in the rest of the Muslim world, over the years, the BQMI added the Mushaf Wonosobo (1992), one of the biggest mushafs in the collection, Mushaf Sundawi (1997), Mushaf at-Tin (1999, a gift from Suharto’s family), Mushaf Jakarta (undated) and the Mushaf Kalimantan Barat (undated) to its mushaf al-Qur’an collection.
The founding fathers of the BQMI also exhorted the Indonesian Muslim community to come forward and donate family heirloom Qur’ans and other such heritage objects that were “inspired by Islam”. The BQMI was presented to the public as a both a gift to Indonesians as well as a collective responsibility of Indonesians to preserve their indigenous Islamicate culture. Pirous asserted that preserving this local Islamicate heritage would protect Indonesians from being buffeted by the cross-currents of “global culture” and that the BQMI would be a “mirror in which Indonesians could see our own reflections” (arena tempat kita mencermin diri).

Pirous’ assertions not only assume the familiar indigenous-culture-as-ballast-against-foreign elements rhetoric, they also makes claims of a unified indigenous Islamicate culture amongst Indonesia’s almost 200 million Muslims from two hundred ethnic groups speaking different dialects and spread over more than thirteen

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206 Adimas Bayumurti, Corporate Communications and Collections personnel, BQMI. Personal communication, 29 May 2010.
207 Author Unknown, “Prof AD Pirous: ‘Tempat Kita Bercermin Diri’”, p. 53.
thousand islands across the archipelago. In the introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*, Hobsbawm talks about “tradition” in human societies and how it is distinct from “custom” which is also practised in many “traditional” societies. That distinction is “invariance”. While custom does not preclude degrees of innovation and change, Hobsbawm argues that tradition “fixes” and formalizes a certain practice or ritual and asserts the continuity of that practice from the past to the current times.

In effect, what the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal team has done is to invent a new tradition of collective art-production for the Indonesian nation. By harking back to the long history of mushaf art since the Abbasid period in Iraq and associating the work of individual Javanese, Acehnese, Bantenese, and other indigenous Qur’an scribes with famous scribes from the heartlands of the Muslim world, Pirous and his team re-established a seemingly unbroken link to the past – as well as to a time and place in the Arabian heartlands that were quite different from archipelagic Indonesia in the 1990s.

Hence, by using the text of the Qur’an, believed by all pious Muslims to be the Word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in Arabic script, the Indonesian Muslim community was embodied in a sacred object accepted as authentic and infallible by all Muslims throughout history. Adhering to conventions of established Arabic calligraphic styles, and working with respected local ulama to standardise the

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211 Ibid., p. 2.
reading of the Qur’anic text for the entire country,\textsuperscript{212} the Indonesian Muslim artists have maintained the religious sanctity of the Mushaf Istiqlal and manoeuvred around the complex intellectual and artistic debates surrounding the notion of “Islamic art”.\textsuperscript{213} By disciplining the differences and tensions of Islamic plurality and individual Muslim experiences, the creators of Mushaf Istiqlal hoped to establish a firmer foothold in the larger corpus of art and material culture produced in historically Islamicate lands.

The completion of the Mushaf Istiqlal, filled with symbols and patterns apparently distilled from the arches of 	extit{rumah adat}, textiles, batiks, furniture, ornaments and even weapons of the Muslim peoples from the forty-two “Muslim Culture and Design Regions”, objectified in the form of a sacred book, an imagined community of 	extit{Nusantara Muslim} (Archipelago Muslims). Hence the Indonesian Muslim ummah is objectified – each cultural group is represented by a physical “artistic” feature assigned to it by the professional artists and cultural elites in collaboration with the state. Thanks to the magic of the whole-is-larger-than-the-sum-of-its-parts alchemy (and infused by the spirit of Islam), each Indonesian Muslim becomes part of a larger art-producing national community who collectively has created “a new expression of the tradition of Islamic sacred art”.\textsuperscript{214} Every Indonesian

\textsuperscript{212} The Mushaf Standar Indonesia, which took ten years to complete (1974-1984), sets the standard textual framework for all copies of the Al-Quran published in Indonesia. According to Kenneth George, , Qur’anic experts and ulama from both the Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf Al-Quran, and the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Council of Ulama) were consulted during the making of Mushaf Istiqlal. It was they who had determined what was acceptable to the Indonesian Muslim public in terms of “proper” page layout and the placement of verse and recitation markers and had objected to “innovations”, even when presented with mushaf examples from elsewhere in the Muslim world.

\textsuperscript{213} As discussed in the Introduction, there continues to be a spirited discussion on what constitutes “Islamic art”, especially since the earliest use of the term came into fashion in Europe during the 19th Century amongst enthusiasts of the “Orient” and the “Far East”. See Oleg Grabar, \textit{The Formation of Islamic Art} and “Reflections on the Study of Islamic Art”, \textit{Muqarnas}, Vol. 1, 1983, pp. 1-4.

\textsuperscript{214} Mahmud Buchari, “Calligraphy Blooms”, p. 54.
Muslim was supposedly accorded “a representational space” within the pages of the Mushaf Istiqlal and thus stood as a sign of national inclusiveness.\textsuperscript{215}

In this re-imagined and materially tangible Indonesia, the Indonesian \textit{umma}h was “united and peaceful in its ethnic plurality”. The problems of ethnic, tribal and linguistic associations and more violent histories amongst a number of ethnic groups were subsumed under the banner of unified Islam whereby everyone adhered to uniform Islamic principles, spoke (and supposedly understood) the classical Arabic language of the Qur’an as well as subscribed to the same Islamic philosophy. At Festival Istiqlal II in 1995, which articulated a more internationalist outlook, Suharto marked the completion of the national icon by signing on the opening pages of the Mushaf Istiqlal which included the declaration that he was presenting the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal to “the Indonesian People and the global Muslim \textit{umma}h” and also a prayer that “all Muslims constantly strengthen one’s Faith and Fidelity to Him and that Allah, the Glorious and the Exalted, will grant Prosperity and Wisdom (Guidance) to (every Muslim).”\textsuperscript{216}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Suharto’s dedication page in the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{215} George, “Designs on Indonesia’s Muslim Communities”, p. 705.

\textsuperscript{216} “Agar kita senantiasa meningkatkan Iman dan Taqwa kepada-Nya; Semoga Allah Subhanahu Wata’ala memberi taufik dan Hidayah-Nya kepada kita.” See Figure 3.5.
However, the unequal representation of Indonesia’s Muslim communities in the Mushaf Istiqqlal as seen through its designers privileging of majority ethnic groups’ cultural patterns in the Mushaf Istiqqlal’s illuminations, demonstrate that only officially-constructed national and local cultures are encouraged in the public sphere for local and international consumption.\textsuperscript{217} In such a context, one would soon realise that the apparent ethnic diversity of Indonesia is carefully managed. By and large, representations of Indonesia’s ethnic diversity in the Indonesian public sphere privilege pribumi ethnic groups, while they usually exclude the country’s ethnic Chinese population.

Despite the existence of Chinese Muslims in Indonesian society and their historical role in spreading Islam in Indonesia, they are not represented in the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqqlal, ostensibly because the ethnic group does not neatly fall into a specific “Muslim Cultural and Design region”. However, due to the persisting perception that the ethnic Chinese were foreign elements within local Indonesian society, decades of state discrimination of and aggressive assimilation policies towards Indonesians of Chinese descent, resulted in public expressions of Chinese culture being considerably limited during Suharto’s government.\textsuperscript{218}

Interestingly, while conversion to Islam by Chinese individuals is perceived by the Indonesian majority as a very “noble act of assimilation and nationalism”, Heryanto claims that there have been “serious attempts to repress any historical evidence suggesting the pioneering work of ethnic Chinese in spreading Islam on the

\textsuperscript{217}Heryanto, “Ethnic Identities and Erasure; Chinese Indonesians in Public Culture”, in Joel Kahn, *Southeast Asian Identities; Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand*, pp. 100-103.

\textsuperscript{218}Bertrand, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia*, pp. 65-67.
archipelago”. In this case, becoming Muslim did not dispel suspicions about the loyalty of Chinese Indonesians to the Indonesian nation, and ethnic Chinese culture is still considered alien to the amalgam of “indigenous” cultures that make up the “national culture” of Indonesia.\textsuperscript{219} Thus, the exclusion of ethnic Chinese Muslims from the representational space of the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqal and the absence of Sini-calligraphy examples amongst the mushaf collection of the BQMI undermines the idea of national inclusiveness in the imagination of Indonesia’s Muslim community.

\textit{The Museum Istiqal Collection}

The BQMI opened in 1997 with pomp, buoyed by the overwhelming success of Festival Istiqal I and II and the seemingly enthusiastic patronage of an erstwhile opponent to overt expressions of Islam in Indonesia’s public space. The BQMI was considered such a cultural achievement for Indonesia that in 1997 US President Bill Clinton was taken on a visit to the museum by then Minister for Religion Dr Tarmizi Taher. On average, the BQMI is said to receive three thousand visitors a month with the numbers peaking at five thousand during school and national holidays.\textsuperscript{220}

The Bayt Al-Qur’an collection showcases the various types of mushafs both

\textsuperscript{220} Ida, Visitor Services, Personal Communication, BQMI, 29 May 2010. Though Ida sounded enthusiastic about the visitor numbers, she admitted that the majority of visitors were student or tour group excursions from across the country. Generally, an annual visitor-ship of 40 000 is small given Indonesia’s 300 million population. Despite the BQMI waiving the separate entrance fees it charges on top of the TMII entrance fees, it does not appear to have attracted high numbers of visitors on a regular basis compared to the other TMII attractions.

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antique and contemporary, Qur’anic manuscripts and accompanying text panels explain the art of mushaf writing and the editing and publication processes of each locally-published Al-Quran. The Museum Istiqlal collection on the other hand, spans an entire body of material artefacts “inspired by Islam” that have been produced by Indonesians. The collection encompasses religious treatises and manuscripts from all corners of the archipelago, architectural features and models of regional mosques, “archaeological objects” (benda arkeologis), “heritage objects” (benda tradisi) and contemporary visual arts (seni rupa kontemporer) (Figures 3.6 and 3.7).

Fig. 3.6 and Fig. 3.7. (L-R) Benda Tradisi and the Seni Rupa Kontemporar sections of the MI

The bulk of objects in the MI collection were gathered from the exhibits during Festival Istiqlal I and II, which themselves were donations from prominent and ordinary Indonesians alike, including the Suharto family. The BQMI had also received offers of monetary donations as well as artefacts on extended loan from international sponsors due to the resounding success of Festival Istiqlal I and II. However, Suharto had purportedly decided that the BQMI collections would remain

“Indonesian” in form, content as well as patronage and outreach, and declined these offers from abroad.\textsuperscript{222} Thus, the nationalist orientation of the BQMI cannot be over-emphasized. The BQMI is not only a place where objects of Indonesia’s Islamicate heritage would be protected for posterity – it was also seen to represent Indonesia’s importance as a centre of Islamicate cultural production rather than merely the distinction of being “the Islamic country farthest from the Ka’bah to the east.”\textsuperscript{223}

\textit{Islamic Manuscripts and the Contemporary Qur’anic Calligraphy Section}

When one takes a tour of the main floor of the MI, one would notice that the amount of attention paid to displaying contemporary visual art, such as modern paintings and abstract sculptures, was equal to that paid to archaeological artefacts such as 14th Century Muslim tombstones from Aceh, and heritage objects ranging from pilgrimage souvenirs, batik cloths, \textit{gamelan} musical instruments and medieval weapons from across the archipelago. In the section of the gallery displaying 18th and 19th Century Islamicate manuscripts and contemporary calligraphic works, several wall panels have been set aside to display the calligraphic pieces submitted for a nation-wide Qur’anic calligraphy competition that was held during Festival Istiqlal II. Competition entries were differentiated according to age groups – children, teenagers and an adult-open category – and demonstrated different styles of

\textsuperscript{222} Adimas Bayumurti, BQMI. Personal communication. 29 May 2010.
\textsuperscript{223} Mahmud Buchari, “Indonesia’s Plans for Istiqlal II”, p. 61.
calligraphic script, implying that the contestants had some technical knowledge on the art form. All the pieces looked beautifully executed to the untrained eye (Figure 3.8).

![Fig. 3.8. Calligraphy section of MI](image)

The winners are identified with a picture, their date of birth and the region of birth (Figures 3.9 and 3.10). A series of panels showing examples of different calligraphic styles and some explanatory text are also available for visitors’ perusal. While this section of the gallery is unadorned, it is the most direct extension of the spirit of the Mushaf Istiqlal in creating the image of an art-producing Indonesian Muslim nation. It is also the most inclusive approach to fashioning a new “national” tradition for Indonesian Muslims. While the Mushaf Istiqlal is, for all purposes, the work of a small group of political, intellectual and artistic elites superimposing their own imagined Indonesia on the rest of the national population, the calligraphy competition, open to all levels of Indonesian society, provided the momentum and critical mass for a cultural practice to embed itself into the public imagination.

![Fig. 3.9 and Fig.3.10 (L-R). Winning calligraphy entry and artist’s particulars](image)
More importantly, as the element of competition combined with the notion that reciting and writing Qur’anic verses is also a form of remembrance of Allah (dhikir Allah) and gains His favour,\textsuperscript{224} it pushes the practice to be continually reproduced at quality levels. The lasting impression that this and other Islamic-themed competitions, such as the nationally popular Qur’anic recitals (tilāwat Al-Qur’an) at which Indonesian competitors are amongst the world’s best, leaves, is that all pious Indonesian Muslims are continually involved in various “projects of piety”.\textsuperscript{225}

\textit{The Contemporary Visual Arts Section}

Arguably, the contemporary visual arts exhibits could be considered the highlight of Museum Istiqlal simply because they are situated closer in the present and suggest both a reflective and progressive trajectory of Islam in modern Indonesia. This strand of “Islamic modernism” sits well with the emerging middle-class Indonesian Muslims who want to observe the spiritual tenets and rituals of the faith but are more receptive to the practice of \textit{ijtihad} (interpretation of divine law independent of the four established \textit{mazhab} or Islamic schools of thought) so that their religious observances do not get in the way of the conditions of modern living.\textsuperscript{226}

Many of the temporary exhibitions that the BQMI stages also highlight the

\textsuperscript{224} Mahmud Buchari, “Calligraphy Blooms”, p. 51.

\textsuperscript{225} See Anna M. Gade, \textit{Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, emotion and the recited Qur’an in Indonesia} (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), pp. 19-20 and pp. 48-51, for other forms of Qur’anic practices such as recital and devotional singing that are popular with Indonesian Muslims as acts of pious observances.

dynamism of contemporary Indonesian Islamicate art and showcase the work of established painters and sculptors as well as younger emerging designers. The most recent temporary exhibition, from 22 April - 9 May 2010, displayed a series of commissioned paintings by some of Indonesia’s most renowned artists in memory of the late former President Abdurrahman Wahid (affectionately called Gus Dur), who was known for his strong Islamic credentials, and loved because he advocated an Islam that accommodated traditional Javanese customs and all the peculiarities of being “Indonesian”.

Along the corridors of the contemporary visual arts section, paintings of mythical battles between good and evil (Figure 3.11) vie for attention with abstract art and Arabic calligraphy morphed into musical instruments (Figure 3.12). There are also sculptures inspired by Islamic themes such as the Eternal Paradise and key Qur’anic verses (Figures 3.13 – 3.16), smartly standing on pedestals like prophecies patiently waiting to be realised in the foreseeable future. In fact, the exhibits in the

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227 The irony however was that Abdurrahman Wahid was a vociferous critic of Suharto’s overtures to the Islamists and would have likened BQMI to ICMI in the sense that these institutions were a façade covering Suharto’s power politics.
contemporary visual arts section are so accessible to the visitor that those rich enough and thus inclined, could actually purchase the art pieces from the museum, thus owning a piece of Indonesian Islamicate art to help in their own private *dhikir Allah*.

![Model Sculptures Inspired by Various Qur’anic Verses](image)

**Figs. 3.13-3.16. Model sculptures inspired by various Qur’anic verses**

The other section of note in the Museum Istiqlal is the architecture section. Here, the museum decided on a straightforward approach to interpreting Islamicate architecture by focusing on historically significant and architecturally iconic mosques.
found in the different regions of Indonesia. A total of eleven mosques are featured in this section together with a model of the Pusat Studi Islam (Islamic Studies Centre) in Yogyakarta and Kampung Naga (Dragon Village), in Tasikmalaya, Western Java.  

While most of the text panels explaining the provenance and architectural significance of these mosques are sometimes sketchy, the common threads that run through them are firstly, the genius that inspired the use of local natural resources, such as the hardy teakwood (kayu jati), ironwood (sirap) and bamboo that grow abundantly in Indonesia’s tropical forests; and secondly, the adaptation of the pre-existing Hindu-Buddhist architectural tradition to new Islamic contexts.

In the first case, photographs of Masjid Bayan (Figures 3.17 and 3.18), believed to have been built in the sixteenth century, show a distinctly indigenous building with a double-tiered pitched roof made of ironwood and low bamboo walls. The layout of the floor of the mosque is a simple four-columned space following the style of buildings in Joglo Jawa. The size and shape of the roof or tajug follows the Balinese-style of architecture. A beduk or prayer drum hangs in the corner of the main building “just like in Javanese mosques”. The mosque has only one door similar to the style of a Sasak traditional house, and the mihrab which indicates the direction of the qiblah for prayer, is a low wooden wall embellished with the likeness of a bird – an ornamental style symbolising prosperity.

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228 The eleven mosques featured are Masjid Istiqlal, Jakarta (est. 1978), Masjid Bayan, Lombok (16th Century), Masjid Agung Yogyakarta, Mashid Agung Demak, Central Java, (1506), Masjid Penyengat, Tanjung Pinang (1832), Masjid Syuhada Yogyakarta (1952), Masjid Baiturrahman, Aceh (1614), Masjid Jami’ Sultan Abdurrahman, West Kalimantan (1771), Masjid Sultan Ternate (1606), Masjid Al-Mashun, Medan (1906) and Masjid Yayasan Amal Bakti Muslim Pancasila (1984 ff.).

The text panel accompanying the photographs of Masjid Bayan claims that its architecture is “a blend of Islam and Hinduism, and Java and Bali”. The fact that the syncretic features of the mosque are highlighted, reveals the preference of the BQMI’s curators for the “traditionalist Islam” that is associated with Nadhlatul Ulama (NU) and popular with abangan Muslims. No longer used for communal prayer, the mosque is considered a local shrine and has been marked for conservation.

That the Bayan Mosque has transformed from its original function as a place to worship Allah into a shrine worthy of its own devotees, is something quite unique to the Indonesian practice of Islam. Such veneration for a place draws from a blend of Sufistic elements that “Allah is everywhere and in everything” and indigenous animist beliefs of the inherent energies that emanate from “a sacred place”. This is yet another example of the “mystic synthesis” that Ricklefs attributed to the life-world of Javanese society prior to the mid-19th Century. That the shrine is represented is a nod
to a popular cultural practice performed by a significant proportion of Indonesian Muslims. However, since the mid-19th Century Islamic reformation movement, the practice of shrine veneration has become a highly-contested issue between traditionalist and modernist Islamist groups.

In a similar way, other ancient mosques symbolise the deep-rooted presence of Islam in Indonesian society and how the religion itself adapted to local conditions and its older histories and cultures. Masjid Agung Demak (est. 1506, Figure 3.19), considered to be the oldest mosque in Java,\(^{230}\) clearly features the tiered roof suited to tropical conditions which had existed prior to the arrival of Islam. However, each tier of the *sirap*-thatched roof took on new Islamic meanings – “Islam”, “Iman” (Faith) and “Ikhsan” (sic) (Ar. Ihsan, i.e. Perfection or Excellence). To further imbue the pre-Islamic architecture with new meanings, according to local legend, the mosque was built in just one night, by the *Wali Songo* Muslim mystics credited with spreading Islam across the then-Hindu kingdoms.\(^{231}\) That the seven-tiered roof of Masjid Sultan Ternate (est. 1606, Figure 3.20) symbolized the seven levels of *Syurga*,\(^ {232}\) shows how this Sanskrit word for Heaven was still in popular usage despite the introduction of the Arabic “*Al-Jannah*”.


\(^{231}\) Text Panel, “Masjid Agung Demak”.

\(^{232}\) Ibid.
Masjid Agung Yogyakarta (Figure 3.21) was built to the west of the northern wall alongside the former Hindu kraton Ngayogyakarta in Hadiningrat as an affirmation of the establishment of the new Islamic kingdom.\textsuperscript{233} However, the message that the curatorial team is conveying is that despite the adoption of the new monotheistic religion by the royal family, the kraton was not destroyed, ostensibly because the ruler had decided that the two religions could co-exist in a syncretic manner in the same way that Buddhism, Hinduism and animist practices had for generations before. Similarly, it implied that the Islam that is practiced in contemporary Indonesia was accommodating of traditional practices and co-existed in

\textsuperscript{233} Text Panel, “Masjid Agung Yogyakarta”, BQMI, 29 May 2010.
harmony with other religions. In effect however, such a placid narrative of Islam’s development in Indonesia glosses over the historical contestations since the late 19th Century, between the traditionalist, NU-based Muslims and the strident calls by the reformist Muslims who want stricter adherence to Islamic practices based on Scripture. In the museums, the tensions between traditionalist and more conservative modernist interpretations of Islamic practices are dissolved into a narrative of a continuity of Islamicate traditions.

Thirdly, Museum Istiqlal’s narrative highlight innovations that sea trade and the flow of foreigners brought to the Archipelago since the thirteenth century, including the impact of formal Dutch colonialism from the 19th century. Specifically, the “onion-shaped” dome of West Asian and Persian origins that featured in indigenous mosques, such as Masjid Kesultanan Riau on Pulau Panyengat (est. 1832), Tanjung Pinang with its thirteen domes (Figure 3.22), Masjid Baiturrahman, Aceh (est., 1614, rebuilt 1877) and Masjid Al-Mashun in Medan (est. 1906), were introduced by Dutch architects during the reconstruction phase after their military conquests of various provinces (Figures 3.23 and 3.24). The narrative here shows Islamicate architecture to be dynamic and open to a multitude of external cultural influences which could be harmonized in one structure. Such innovations were supposed to reflect the dynamism of Islamicate culture as well.

While these iconic mosques across Indonesia support the narrative of a creatively expressed yet unified experience of Muslim worship, what goes unmentioned however, are the anti-Islamic tracts that had also emerged in the same

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period in response to the imposition of narrower religious identity of orthodox Muslims. Among the most recognizable texts was the *Babad Kêdhiri* (The Chronicle of Kêdhiri) which asserted that Java was compelled to convert to Islam when Sultan Agung of Demak, the son of Majapahit king, Brawijaya, betrayed his father by attacking his kingdom and forced Brawijaya into exile when he refused to convert to Islam.\(^{235}\) Hence the history of how Islam was once a threat to Javanese identity and cultural heritage (especially among the nobility) is left untold.

Fig. 3.22-3.24 (L-R). Prints of Masjid Panyengat, Masjid Baiturrahman and Masjid Al-Mashun

The “modern” mosques such as Masjid Syuhadah Yogyakarta (est. 1952) and Masjid Istiqlal (est. 1978, Figure. 3.25) – deemed the biggest mosque in Southeast Asia, and which took twenty-three years to complete – are purportedly part of a continuous indigenous enterprise of architectural innovations that are sensitive to their environments and are objectified expressions of Indonesian maturing nationhood. Indeed, in the early months of 1998, 999 mosques dubbed “Masjid Yayasan Amalbakti Muslim Pancasila (YAMP)” (Fig. 3.26) were planned for construction in twenty-six Indonesian provinces.\(^{236}\)

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According to the accompanying text panel, each of these “national mosques” would follow the exact same architectural blueprint. While its three-tiered roof represents the Islamic tenets of “Islam, Iman and Ikhsan” (sic), a hexagon-shaped symbol at the apex of the roof embodies the commitment of all Indonesian Muslims to the state’s Pancasila ideology (“pencerminan dari Muslim Indonesia yang berjiwa Pancasila”). These standardised YAMP mosques with their cookie-cutter architectural features, – even more so than the mushafs from the different regions of Indonesia – are 733 replicas of a “modern” Indonesian Islamicate architectural tradition.

Arguably, the YAMP mosques have even reached beyond traditional Islamicate symbolism and used national, secular symbols in establishing a new Islamicate architectural tradition. Through the reproduction of each YAMP mosque

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237 Text Panel, “Masjid Yayasan Amal Bakti Muslim Pancasila”, BQMI, 29 May 2010. Suharto, as then-President of Indonesia and leader of Indonesia’s Muslims, was credited as the inspiration behind the YAMP, a foundation under his own chairmanship meant to propagate Islam in Indonesia. Every Muslim civil servant was obliged to contribute a small amount of his or her salary to YAMP. The monies were used for scholarships for religious education and maintenance of *ustaz* as well the building of mosques. At the end of 2010, a total of 92 new mosques were built in North, West Sumatera as well as Aceh.
with the image of the Pancasila at the apex of the structure where traditionally a
crescent moon and star would stand, the mosques have subsumed Islam under its
nationalist agenda. By incorporating Islam into the first principle (sila) of the state’s
five-point ideology, the YAMP mosques become the most overt symbols of
Indonesian patriotism. This peculiarity proves that Suharto was still jealously
-guarding the primacy of the Pancasila as the guiding principle of Indonesian society,
notwithstanding his accommodation of Islamist groups and his ‘reconciliation’ with
Islam in his later years.

Conclusions

Despite the slow decline of the BQMI over the years, on the whole, the
collection of objects in the BQMI is focussed towards rendering the past, present and
future of Indonesia into very tangible and familiar things that, in some cases, could
even be owned by Indonesians. Just like the cultural dances and other performance
arts that were staged during Festival Istiqlal I and II, the various objects ranging from
benda pusaka donated by many Indonesian families, the contemporary art pieces
created by both established and budding Indonesian artists, to the stoic mosques
which have witnessed the ebb and tide of their region’s history, continue to perform
their roles in narrating the story of Indonesia’s nationhood.

238 Since the fall of its patron in 1998, the oversight of BQMI has changed hands at least five times.
BQMI suffers from a lack of accountability as well as politicking amongst the departments that manage
its staff and operations. The maintenance of BQMI’s facilities has also fallen prey to the corruption that
is endemic in Indonesia’s bureaucracy. It has resulted in the more fragile of its exhibits, such as the
kitab-kitab kuning, being under real danger of physical degeneration due to the lack of funds for proper
conservation facilities and conservators. The original organizers of Festival Istiqlal I and II and the
Mushaf Istiqlal were so disillusioned with what they saw as the mismanagement of the BQMI, that they
have distanced themselves from the museum.
In that regard, Suharto’s attempts in the 1990s, to reroute Islamist political opposition towards the state by creating and celebrating national cultural expressions of Islam was a success, albeit a short-lived one. The Mushaf Al-Quran Istiqal, the exhibits and cultural performances at Festival Istiqal I and II, and the BQMI collection are examples of religious expressions directed towards realising a nationalist vision. In Indonesia’s case, it could even be argued that the national cultural rhetoric is quite sophisticated: not only is Indonesia Islamic, because Islam has been internalized as part of the paramount tenet of the state’s Pancasila ideology, but Islam is Indonesia\textsuperscript{239} by virtue of Indonesian Muslims forming the world’s largest Muslim population who are collectively making contributions in defining a global Islamicate culture.

\textsuperscript{239} Ali Akbar, Senior Curator, BQMI. Personal communication. 29 May 2010.
Chapter IV

Defining the Treasures of Islamicate Art: A Study of the Iamm

The opening of the Iamm in January 1999 to great fanfare marked the birth of the first public institution in Southeast Asia that dealt exclusively with “Islamic art”. The motivation behind the Iamm was to signal Malaysia’s achievement as an economically successful, technologically-advanced and modern nation-state that still had “Islamic values” as its guiding principle. It now had the economic resources and relative social stability of a developed economy to spend on major “cultural” projects. By the late 1980s, Malaysia also had a critical mass of middle-class Muslim citizens who desired the material and social emblems of capitalist society at the same time they were becoming more overtly pious. Thus at the urging of then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, the Iamm was established with private funding from the Albukhary Foundation.

In 2009, in conjunction with its tenth anniversary and the selection of Kuala Lumpur as an Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO) Capital City of Islamic Culture, the Iamm launched a celebratory exhibition titled “A Decade of Dedication at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia” along with a lavish commemorative book about the museum and its collection as “a lasting testimonial to the Iamm’s role” in introducing visitors to “the countless wonders of Islamic art”. Nonetheless, despite the accolades, the museum reveals a complex set of issues.

regarding the place of Islam in Malaysian public space as well as its influence on the nation-building campaign. This chapter discusses the background to the IAMM’s establishment as well as the mission of the museum.

The Establishment, Vision and Mission of the IAMM

The idea for the IAMM emerged from a meeting between the future director of the IAMM and then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed during which the latter “shared...his vision of establishing a museum of international standards that would achieve worldwide recognition”. Mahathir also expressed a belief that “the Malaysian private sector should be more proactive in the development of such a museum with full support coming from the Malaysian government”. The Albukhary Foundation “without hesitation” undertook the responsibility of building and developing the museum for the government as “a gift to the Malaysian people and as a legacy to future generations”. 241

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The mission of the IAMM as described by its manager and chairman of the Albukhary Foundation, Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Albukhary, is “to collect, preserve, display and educate others on Islamic art and civilisation”. To that extent, the director of the IAMM, Syed Mohamad AlBukhary, embarked on a series of study visits that spanned North America, Europe and the Middle East to meet with museum professionals and study museum structures and management systems of renowned museums, including the Guggenheim Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the USA, the British Museum in London and the Louvre and the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, to get ideas for the initial design and planning of the IAMM.

The result of that international search for an architecture befitting the treasures of the IAMM was a building that is very much based on “modern architectural principles” and finished with details in a range of Islamicate styles rather than replicating a site that is closely associated with the religion. Thus, despite its religious-themed contents, the architecture of the building is executed in such a manner as to convey a “secular” building rather than “an institution of religious dogma”.

According to the IAMM souvenir book, the great front portal or iwan through which visitors walk enter the museum lobby, is associated with the mihrab of a mosque. It has been recreated in abstract form such that,

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242 Ibid., p. 16.
243 Ibid., p. 18. That the IAMM’s founders looked to established museums in the West for inspiration demonstrates how the museum’s foundations are still very much based on Western formulations of the art museum and had in mind a wider and presumably Western-educated audience.
244 Ibid., p. 19.
245 Ibid., p. 25. See Figure 4.1.
a quietly restrained facade for a building devoted to the preservation of Islamic art and culture that is inextricably bound to religion, yet is preserved and presented in an ultimately aesthetic approach that reinforces the museum’s position as a temple of art (my emphasis).  

By the welding together of a contemporary building with distinct styles from different Islamicate periods, the artistic aspects of Islamicate culture are highlighted rather than its religious associations. Significantly, the IAMM does not use architectural features that would overtly showcase a “Malay” aesthetic as is the case with the national museum in Kuala Lumpur, the Muzium Negara, which was built in the 1960s with a different approach to visual culture to reflect its purpose.

The deliberate decision to downplay local style in favour of architectural features that were still easily recognizable by a wider audience as “Islamic”, underscores the museum’s mission of being “international” institution of art rather than a “local” museum with a more parochial approach. In the case of the IAMM, only the main dome of the museum (fashioned after the dome of the Lutfallah Mosque in Isfahan) incorporates the image of small sprays of hibiscus, Malaysia’s national flower into the typical Persian Khati motif of intricate coils repeated all over the

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246 Ibid., p. 25. See Figure 4.2.
turquoise coloured dome to “reinforce the identity of the IAMM as a Malaysian institution”.  

Despite its claims to creating a secular art museum, there are several architectural strategies that the IAMM employs to evoke the sense that the museum is also a sacred space that houses art pertaining to Islamicate “culture” with all its religious associations. The first is the inscription of Qur’anic verses on the rims of domes of the building, including the main one which is inscribed with verse 35 from the Surah An-Nur (Chapter 24) inscribed in white Thuluth script which reads:

Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His light is as if it were a niche wherein is a luminary, the luminary within a crystal; the crystal as if it were a planet glittering like a pearl, lit from a blessed olive tree, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil is almost luminous, though no fire touched it. Light upon light; Allah guides to His light whom he pleases. Allah sets similitude for people, and Allah is all-knowing of all things.  

Hence, the IAMM positions itself as a repository that showcases the magnificence of art forms inspired by the worship of Allah. In turn, the IAMM also attains a level of magnificence and perhaps to a lesser degree, a sense of sacredness as

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247 Ibid., p. 41.
248 Ibid., p. 41. See Figure 4.3.
a preserver of Islam’s material heritage. The fountained gardens that surround the IAMM are reminiscent of “the courtyards of Islamic palaces and imperial grounds”.

As one walks across the immaculately-kept grounds, the well-appointed open galleries, as well as the intimate Middle Eastern-Mediterranean themed restaurant located in the lowest sub-level of the IAMM, one is enveloped in a multi-sensorial “museum experience”. The visitor’s eyes have been sensitised to the beauty of the “Islamic aesthetic”, his ears to the melodic strains of Qur’anic recitals and his tongue has had a taste of traditional cuisine from exotic Muslim regions.

**The Architecture Gallery**

The first gallery the visitor sees when he or she steps out of the elevator is the Architecture Gallery. Nineteen scaled miniature models of mosques “significant to Islamic history” are displayed around a life-sized architectural feature from a Mamluk-period fountain while detailed information panels on the basic features of Islamicate architecture and regional styles adorn the walls. The miniature models of the *Masjid-il Harram* in Makkah where the Ka’bah is situated, the “First” Mosque in Quba’, Prophet Muhammad’s Mosque in Madinah (all three in Saudi Arabia) as well as Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem are explained by their labels as historically and spiritually significant to Muslims.

Subsequent additions and alterations to the original structures over the years

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249 Ibid., p. 44.
are explained in terms of technological innovations to preserve existing material while enhancing the experience of worship within their compounds. The Ibnu Tulun Mosque in Cairo, Egypt, the Great Umayyad Mosque in Syria, the Selimiye Mosque in Turkey, the Bak Shahir Mosque in Pakistan and several lesser known Central Asian mosques are displayed as regional examples of Islamicate architecture whose share basic fundamental structures in their prayer halls but which decorative features reflected local tastes which were not in conflict with Islam.

A miniature model of the Tang Dynasty Mosque in Xian, China, built in 648 AD, is also exhibited to show the diversity of Islamic “practice”, demonstrating how many traditional Chinese elements are retained in the mosque’s architecture such that, other than the Arabic script of “Allah”, “Muhammad” and selected Qur’anic verses, it looked like any other Chinese temple in China. The manner in which the gallery is curated focuses on the technicalities of structure and decorative features of the mosque rather than the builders who built them and the diverse communities of Muslims who worship in these monuments.

Curiously, three Southeast Asian miniature models of mosques in Malaysia and Southern Thailand are displayed apart from the other miniatures. Standing in a row in a corridor that links the Architectural Gallery to the Qur’ans and Manuscripts Gallery, the Kampung Laut Mosque in Kelantan, the Tengkera Mosque in Melaka and the Wadi Hussein Mosque in Pattani, Thailand, are preserved as Southeast Asian examples of Islamicate architecture. The tropical building materials used for the respective mosques are highlighted along with their highly-sloped roofs to counter the heavy tropical rainfall.
The senior curator who guided my group also mentioned that following extant indigenous practice, the entire structure of the Kampung Laut Mosque could be moved and that it had been relocated from an earlier site nearer to the sea. She also informed the group that the Tengkera Mosque, built in Melaka in 1728, had been declared a UNESCO World Heritage site. The architecture of the Wadi Hussein in Pattani, built in 1621, hints at (though never addresses) the historical links that the Malay sultanate had with ancient Siam and Pattani Muslims before the British territorial arrangement that removed the area from Malay sphere of influence.

The thrust of the gallery’s narrative was that there is great diversity in Islamicate material culture and architecture rather than the Islamicate societies who built them. The accompanying text panels on the walls of the Architectural Gallery also emphasises the differences in regional architecture and demonstrate that Islam was accommodative of local cultural influences. Interestingly, a miniature model of the Masjid Agung Demak in central Java, Indonesia, considered as the oldest example of indigenous Islamicate architecture in Southeast Asia, reputedly built in 1401

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251 See Figures 4.4, 4.5 and 4.6. The curator did not mention that Masjid Tengkera’s World Heritage Site status was due to it being within the “core zone” of the Historical City of Melaka which was recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008 together with Georgetown in Penang. The conflation of status was somewhat misleading, in my opinion.
C.E.,\textsuperscript{252} is not displayed. No satisfactory answer was given for this omission, especially given that the Demak Sultanate was the oldest Muslim kingdom in Southeast Asia.

Thus, it opens the suggestion that the IAMM’s main priority is to focus the limelight on distinctly Malay Peninsula examples of Islamicate art and architecture rather than share it with the more complex forms found on the Indonesian archipelago, whose Islamicate material culture has had a longer history of interaction and adaptation of earlier Hindu-Buddhist traditions. The Masjid Agung Demak has been on UNESCO’s World Heritage Tentative List since 1995 and its omission also suggests an unspoken rivalry between Malaysia and Indonesia as both a producer of Islamic knowledge as well as the guardians of the region’s indigenous Islamicate heritage.

In a recessed corner at the back of the gallery, stands a recreated prayer hall cast in soft low lights. Through the spaces created by the geometric patterns on a wooden mashrabayya screen, the visitor’s eye is drawn in by the details in the richly-carpeted room. His eye is directed to a wooden rekhal (Qur’an bookstand) in front of a mihrab which stands for the qiblah in the direction of Makkah. On an adjacent wall, one can see an image of a minbar (a raised platform from where a sermon in a mosque is delivered) while a replica of the minbar from the Jame’ Mosque in Isfahan stands tall in the left-hand corner outside the prayer hall.

\textsuperscript{252} According to the accompanying label of the replica of the Masjid Agung Demak in the Istiqlal Museum, popular legend has it that the mosque was built by the mythical Wali Songo (a band of nine religious mystics credited with spreading Islam across the Indonesian archipelago) in one night.
The installation effectively “expands the ethnographic object” by broadening its boundaries to include more of its original context, albeit with a high degree of staging involved. However, while the architectural beauty of the prayer hall is highlighted for contemplation and appreciation, this staged environment, accompanied by soft strains of a recorded recitation of Qur’anic verses, produces a hyper-real effect that can either engage the visitor further or distance him or her.

With respect to imparting knowledge about Islamicate architecture and the significance mosques in Muslim life, it appears that most of the exhibits in this gallery are targeted towards visitors who are unfamiliar with Islamicate architecture. The recreated prayer hall allows non-Muslims a glimpse into the heart of a mosque since convention in Malaysia does not encourage non-Muslims to enter areas of prayer.

Nonetheless, by highlighting the physical beauty and architectural innovations

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254 Jan N. Pieterse, Ethnicities and Global Multiculture: Pants for an Octopus, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers), 2007, pp. 132-153. See Fig. 4.7.
of significant mosques around the world, the IHAM downplays the specific religious function of mosques and focuses instead on presumably universal artistic qualities of the buildings. Hence, it is implied that even a non-Muslim visitor would be able to appreciate the beauty of Islamicate architectural styles since they are predicated on universal laws of architectural science and reflected the local environments in which they were built. Unfortunately, there is little sense of the histories and considerations of the communities that built and lived among these imposing structures.

The Qur’ans and Manuscripts Gallery

The Qur’an and Manuscripts gallery houses displays of beautifully illuminated Qur’ans, produced in different centuries by skilled illuminators in various palaces around the world for respective royal families. These handcrafted illuminated Qur’ans from China, Iran, Ottoman Turkey, Mughal India and the Malay Archipelago were presented as souvenirs to foreign dignitaries. The Qur’ans also show to visitors that the content as well as the arrangement of the Surahs (chapters) in the Qur’an were exactly the same regardless of where it was produced. The variations are in the style of the illuminations, which were influenced by regional tastes and decorative traditions.

To reinforce the primacy of the Qur’an in Islamic practice, a huge piece of an original door panel of the richly embroidered heavy velvet cloth covering the Ka’bah, donated by the Saudi royalty to the Malaysian government in 1964, stands prominently against one wall. The accompanying text explains that the verses
embroidered in heavy gold thread onto the velvet were exactly the same as the ones written in the Qur’an.

One can see clearly here that only well-preserved vellum manuscripts and pristine copies of finely-illuminated Qur’ans are displayed (Fig. 4.8 and 4.9). There are also few examples of Southeast Asian-Islamicate manuscripts. The IAMM’s head curator himself had remarked that Malay copies of the Qur’an were “among the least appreciated of Southeast Asian contributions to Islamic art” because they were plainer to the eye and neither withstood the test of time nor the region’s humid climates due to the use of iron-gall ink which ate through paper.255 Hence, the choice of displaying only mint well-crafted objects highlights the IAMM’s focus on only the “beautiful” in Islamicate art, even when it sometimes undermines its other mission to promote the Islamicate arts of Southeast Asia.

There is also a selection of displayed manuscripts containing “secular subjects” such as the sciences (e.g. astronomy and botany), history and official palace documents and royal genealogies of Mughal and Ottoman royalty. According to a senior curator, the inclusion of such manuscripts, genealogies and official documents is intended “to show visitors, especially non-Muslims, that Arabic script was also used in secular contexts”. In this instance, the curator revealed the museum’s awareness of a non-Muslim audience and the inclusion of these objects were a conscious effort to disabuse visitors, both Muslims and non-Muslims, of preconceived notions of Islam and to “enlighten” them about the diversity of Islamicate civilization and the significance of Arabic script as a medium of learning.

Thus, what the IAMM hoped to impart to the visitor is that the language of the Qur’an is neither a “dead” language nor exclusive to a clerical elite or religious ceremonies, but also a “living” language used in secular public life. However, despite the diversity of objects that is displayed, the collection in the IAMM is less ethnographic and more about exquisite craftsmanship. Hence it only represents a specific (and by and large, elite) section of Islamicate material production.

Befitting the Islamicate convention that considers calligraphy to be the highest form of art, the gallery displays an extensive array of calligraphic objects. There is a wall panel detailing the different styles of Arabic script that are used in classical Arabic calligraphy. The IAMM logo itself is in Arabic and written in the clean, graphic lines of the Kufic script (Fig. 4.10).
The museum also holds calligraphy workshops for beginners and amateurs and they are quite popular with foreign visitors. The calligraphy workshops are a permanent feature in a suite of Islam-related programming geared to visitors and enthusiasts. Educational programmes are also catered for children with a Children’s Library and art education workshop on the premises. In late 2010, in conjunction with the Islamic month of Ramadhan, during which Muslims fast from dawn till sunset, the IAMM (in collaboration with TV9) organised the Tadarus Al-Qur’an where participants recite Qur’anic verses for two hours daily on museum premises. 2010 is the fifth Al-Qur’an recitation organized by the IAMM since the first such event was held back in 2005.256 The event is yet another project of piety meant to shape a cultural norm of Malaysian society.

These museum activities are part of the IAMM’s strategy to engage visitors not only while they are in the galleries but even after the initial museum visit. Part education, part entertainment and always geared towards sensitising the visitor to Islamic principles in art, philosophy and quotidian life, the IAMM’s varied activities, programmes and library facilities (which include a Scholar’s Library for professional research), seek to establish the museum as a prominent producer of knowledge on Islam and Islamicate civilisation, perhaps even an artistic and cultural counterpart to

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the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM), the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM) or even the National Fatwa Council, which has the authority to rule on how Malaysian Muslims conduct their faith.

However, the fervour of the student *dakwah* movement in the 1980s that had called for a greater Islamization and the “purification” of Malay-Muslim culture of its Hindu-Buddhist and folk superstition elements, never quite affected the organization of the IAMM. Despite the majority of its curatorial team being UM graduates in either Islamic or Malay studies, Art History and are also literate in Arabic, the orientation of the AIMM is no different from any respectable art museum found in the West. The head curator is a Londoner who made Malaysia his home in the 1990s. Lucien de Guise has an academic background in Islamic studies and has actively pushed for the IAMM to hold travelling exhibitions on Southeast Asian Islamicate arts abroad.²⁵⁷

Little is known about the IAMM’s benefactor Tan Sri Syed Mokhtar Albukhary other than that he is a committed businessman-philanthropist and well-regarded by Mahathir himself. The Albukhary Foundation has an international presence and is famous for being a generous donor towards social welfare initiatives as well as awarding scholarships to advance the education of disadvantaged Muslims. Founded in 1996, the Albukhary Foundation has underwritten a multitude of scholarships, bursaries and supported both social welfare and intellectual initiatives for a greater understanding of Islam. In January 2011, classes opened at its fully-funded charitable university, the Albukhary International University. The Foundation’s vision of forging “a more equitable and tolerant world through social

²⁵⁷ Rosma Wati, Senior Curator, IAMM. Personal Communication, 9 December 2009.
welfare, education and cultural initiatives that bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots, and between Muslims and non-Muslim worlds” are realized through its philanthropy, the Pusat Ilmu Sharifah Rokiah (Sharifah Rokiah Centre for Knowledge) and the Iamm. 258

*The India, China and Malay World Galleries*

With regard to these three galleries, the Iamm has organised them in such a way as to draw attention to the spread of Islam across the globe. The chronological narrative begins with an “early Islamic period” on the Arabian Peninsula (c. 632 A.D.) and spans a medieval period that saw the establishment of Persian and Central Asian dynasties, which had intense interactions with Europe. The narrative ends with a “late Islamic period” when Islam arrived in China and Southeast Asia around the eleventh to twelfth century.259 The myriad artefacts on display in these three major galleries of the Iamm focus on the artistic developments of each cultural group which has been inspired by Islam.

Similar to the BQMI, the Iamm’s curatorial approach emphasises how Islamicate aesthetics and religious principles interacted and merged with earlier artistic traditions and indigenous cultures in each region to produce local “Islamized” art. However, to a larger extent than the BQMI, the Iamm exhibits Islam in such a

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way that the aesthetic appeal of craftsmanship of each artefact is highlighted over its functional contexts. Three geographically-organised main galleries (the other nine galleries follow a typological theme) reiterate the notion of the craftsmanship of these artefacts as Islam spread outwards from the Arabian Peninsula and was adopted by ethnically and culturally diverse entities including those in Central Asia, India, China and Southeast Asia.

The India Gallery features ornate metalwork from the Mughal period and other fine objects and jewellery that would have been used in palaces or found in the homes of wealthy, prominent Muslims rather than objects used by commoners. Royal genealogies written in Urdu revealing royal lineages that often traced their ancestries back to great religious personalities are also found in this gallery. The strong historical links between China and the Middle East are highlighted by the exhibits in the China Gallery. Displays of fine china represent the thriving trade along the Silk Road route. The cross-cultural decorative styles of the porcelain objects suggest that the wares were produced for both a Chinese and Iranian market.

A 17th Century Chinese-produced Qur’an, bound as thirty separate books, each containing one section or ‘juz’ of the Qur’an serves as an example of the Chinese style of Arabic script called ‘Sini’. Nonetheless, the overall curatorial approach to this gallery does not stray from conventions of displaying objects on this subject. All Qur’ans and manuscripts are described as ‘completed works’ and the focus is on the

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260 This script was written with a Chinese brush as opposed to a pointed reed that was traditionally used in the Middle East. See Figure. 4.11.
perfected object rather than the history or process of putting the mushaf Al-Qur’an together.

Fig. 4.11. Al-Qur’an, China, 17th Century; IAMM’s first acquisition.

The IAMM had in mind a larger Asian audience in its curation of the China Gallery. Mandarin-speaking volunteer docents guide Chinese visitors from China and Taiwan. Chinese Premier Hu Jintao and his entourage visited the IAMM in December 2009 and were very impressed by the fact that the museum had obtained a complete set of the Sini script -Quran and that it was in such good condition.261 An extended display case of Arabic calligraphy exhibits showcased the different styles of Islamic calligraphic art from across the world. One could see (and the explanatory panels stress) that Islamicate art in this category is defined by its Islamic content/subject/themes as the artefacts from China retained Chinese calligraphic and aesthetic styles. Chinese symbolic images such as the lotus, pomegranate and peach are commonly used in Chinese Muslim calligraphic art.

At the same time, the IAMM consciously promotes the material culture of the Malay world as “Islamic”, by showing the impact that the religion has had on the

261 Rosma Wati, Senior Curator, IAMM. Personal Communication, 9 December 2009.
artistic production in the Malay Archipelago in particular and island Southeast Asia in general. The focus of the Malay World gallery is the *keris* display as well as the myriad textiles from the region. The different types of *keris*, all marked by exquisite craftsmanship, holds pride of place in the Malay Gallery as a potent talisman and oft-used symbol of royalty, male virility and most importantly Malay political supremacy *vis-à-vis* other ethnic groups on the peninsula.

Interestingly, the pre-Islamic origins of the *keris* are not mentioned at all and the IAMM has carefully sanitized any elements that might offend contemporary Malaysian Islamic practice, which still tends towards conservative interpretations of Islam. The mystical elements traditionally associated with the *keris* and other types of talismanic objects have been downplayed and in most cases, erased from the object’s provenance. In contrast, wall-to-wall glass cases display series of elaborate *songket*, *batik* and *lima* used for various life occasions such as royal coronations, marriage and death, showing the importance of textiles in the Malay-Muslim societies. Some examples of Southeast Asian fine woodwork and metalwork are displayed as well (Fig. 4.12).

![Wooden doorway, Java, 19th Century](image)
While it might be coincidental, it could be argued that the Malay-Islamicate art displayed in the IAMM celebrates the majesty and opulence of the Malay sultanates through objects of state regalia. Royal seals, *keris* and gold and silver coins minted in the reigning Sultan’s name are prominently displayed alongside finely-wrought royal silverware, admired for their aesthetic beauty as well as their intrinsic value. A chronology of the Malay World Sultanates spanning the Perlak Sultanate in Sumatra (which ended in 1292 C.E.) to the current Johor Sultanate established in 1540 C.E., is also detailed on a wall of the gallery.

One does not find any commoner’s earthenware or trinkets in the galleries of the IAMM. Each artefact displayed has been designed to elicit a sense of awe, aesthetic appreciation, even meditative contemplation, rather than a mere ethnographic panorama. Further in the gallery, a sizeable map on a wall depicting the directions of the monsoon winds illustrate to visitors how traders travelled on sea routes and monsoon winds that linked China, India and southern Arabia to the Malay Archipelago, and hence part of an extended Islamdom. Again, if the intent is to show an ethnographic range of Islamicate material culture, it is at best only of the finest and most ceremonial value, thereby limiting the view that visitors have of Islamicate material cultural production.

In the separation of the galleries by region, it can be argued that the particularities of each artefact are better maintained for the most part. The grouping of the artefacts according to their specific region also allows the visitor to view the similarities of styles or themes within a particular cultural landscape. Hence the visitor becomes sensitised to specific archetypes and styles specific to each region and
historical or dynastic period. Since the three galleries seem to have taken into account both the absolute and relative times of the displayed objects, it could be argued that the visual splendour of Islam has literally been “provincialized” because the particular aesthetic of Mughal India, Qing China and Malay Southeast Asia are kept spatially separate despite Islam being the common thread inspiring each object.

This approach effectively expands the conventional geographical boundaries of “Islamic art” and material culture to include regions and Muslim societies considered to be at the peripheries of the Islamic world. The inclusion of Chinese and Southeast Asian material culture and art inspired by Islam can be seen as the reclamation of these regions’ material and artistic productions from the margins of the Darul Islam. By creating a gallery dedicated solely to the material culture of the “Malay World” and demonstrating historical links between the Malay archipelago and larger Southeast Asia to older Sino-Muslim and Indo-Muslim societies, the curators of the IAMM are attempting to include the Malay and Javanese kingdoms from at least the twelfth century onwards, in an epic narrative of a splendid Islamicate “civilisation”. In this regard, Islamicate art is inclusive and Malay art is “an aspect of Islam’s international heritage” – in some sense “other than and in addition to Islamic art”.

The IAMM positions itself as a repository of material culture that augments

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262 Southeast Asian Islamicate art is rarely included in exhibitions on Islamicate art in both Western and Middle Eastern museums. So far, the most extensive exhibition of Islamicate art in Southeast Asia is “Crescent Moon: Islamic Art & Civilisation in Southeast Asia” in Canberra, curated by the National Gallery of Australia that ran from 24 February to 28 May 2006. See also Bennett, Crescent Moon: Islamic Art & Civilisation in Southeast Asia = Bulan Sabit: Seni dan Peradaban Islam di Asia Tenggara.

263 Othman Yatim as quoted in Coffey, “Crescent Moon: Islamic Art & Civilisation in Southeast Asia, at the Art Gallery of South Australia”, p. 300.
the magnificence of art that has been inspired by the worship of Allah. Given the professional research and world-class conservation facilities that it houses, the IAMM has positioned itself to be an international training and educational institute for the preservation of Islam’s material and cultural heritage.264

One of the questions to be raised here is the extent to which this chronology of Islamicate art is intended to be understood as an uninterrupted development of an “Islamic aesthetic” across time and space in spite of pre-existing Christian (in Byzantine Near East and Spain), Hindu, Buddhist influences and local folk-beliefs (in China and Southeast Asia) which were present in these regions. The keris especially, despite it being the most powerful symbol of authority and mystical power in the Malay world, has Hindu-Buddhist origins, and the keris’ hilt was usually carved to represent the deities from the Hindu pantheon. That the keris gradually lost most of its anthropomorphic designs in favour of more abstract iconoclastic representations, reveals how an Islamic aesthetic was strongly shaping the material culture of the Malay World by the fourteenth century.265

However, the IAMM’s ambivalent treatment of more mystical examples of Islamic artefacts appear to reflect Malaysia’s religious and political elites’ preference for a more orthodox representation of Islam and Islamicate civilisation. In this case, the complexities of the object’s history and symbolic meanings are simply excluded from representation.

264 The IAMM provides training for conservators from the Southeast Asian region, facilitates international internships and invites international scholars to use its museum and library resources. See Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, Vol. 2 (Kuala Lumpur: IAMM, 2009).
Of great significance is how the IAMM’s curatorial approach has expanded the conventional geographical boundaries where “Islamic art” is produced to include regions and Muslim societies at the peripheries of the Islamic world. The inclusion of Chinese and Southeast Asian material culture and art inspired by Islam can be considered as a genuine attempt to present these regions as equally authentic producers of Islamicate art and material culture as the Arabian heartlands (See Fig. 4.13). Similarly, the IAMM consciously promotes the material culture of the Malay world as Islamic, by showing the impact that the religion has on the artistic production in the Malay Archipelago in particular and island Southeast Asia in general.

Another question that the IAMM collection raises is that it appears to privilege the definition of Islamicate art as a body of work that is produced by Muslims globally with the specific aim of venerating Allah. IAMM’s emphasis on art that is produced by Muslims is peculiar, given the existing contentions that suggest both broader interpretations of the art in terms of its form and content, and narrower definitions in terms of the types and period in which Islamicate art was produced.

It also becomes problematic when one considers the tenuous links objects such
as jewellery and finely-wrought silverware have to do with dhikir Allah. De Guise counters this dilemma by arguing that unlike Christian, Buddhist and Hindu art which are rich in religious iconography, Islam has “few objects that are specifically religious”. Hence there is room for more objects to take on a spiritual dimension because Islam does not make sharp distinctions between the sacred and secular.\footnote{Ibid.}

\textit{The Islamicate Jewellery, Textiles, Arms and Armoury and “Lifestyles” Galleries}

These four galleries are situated on the third level of the IAMM. The Islamicate Jewellery Gallery displays the elaborate and magnificent jewellery from different Islamicate societies, the Textiles Gallery showcases the myriad textiles produced in Central Asia, India and Iran. The cross-cultural pollination of techniques and prints is clearly seen on the textiles and would have risen from trading activities and meeting market demands for the latest fashion.\footnote{See also Lucien de Guise, \textit{Beyond Orientalism: How the West was Won over by Islamic Art} (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, 2008). The catalogue was published in conjunction with the 25 July - 25 October 2008 IAMM exhibition of the same name, which displayed artefacts from the IAMM’s collection alongside the works they inspired in the Western world.} The Arms and Armoury Gallery, as the name suggests, details the evolution of weaponry technology through a chronology of significant wars in Islamic history from the 7th to 13th centuries. At the further end of the top floor, there is a section of recreated scenes, a series of \textit{mise-en-scenes} which I have dubbed the “Lifestyles” gallery, of objects as they would have been used in their original contexts and environments. Each display case is
accompanied by a title and narrative explaining the context of the scene and the Muslim region and period where the objects are produced.

Here again, relying on the blurred lines between the sacred and the secular, the IAMM displays the historical and artistic development of crafts in different areas of Muslim life in different Islamicate regions. However, because of the very diversity of styles and types of objects, there is also a slippage when one contemplates the traditional headdress of a central Asian ethnic group, the bejewelled trousseau of a Mughal prince and attempts to look for a common “Islamic” aesthetic that runs through all of them.

“Palestine Remembered”

In a small section at the end of the gallery, just before the elevators, a wall display announcing “Palestine: The Forgotten History and Culture” seems to almost jump out of nowhere and demand one’s attention. Quite apart from the objects of art on display, the Palestine wall (no pun intended) had a timeline of milestones in Palestinian history mounted on it. Beginning in 63 A.D. when Palestine was part of the Roman Empire, it significantly stops at 1948 with the establishment of the state of Israel. The information on the panel reads “1948: Exodus of Palestinians from Israel”, without mentioning the creation of Israel that same year (Fig. 4.14). In between these two end points, the timeline marks “1882-1903: Eastern Europe Jewish immigration”, “1947: United Nations’ General Assembly (UNGA)” where by a two-thirds vote, 56.5% of the territories under the former British Mandate was allocated for the
establishment of a Jewish state, 43% of land to Arab Palestinians and that Jerusalem would be declared an international zone.\textsuperscript{268}

The Palestine permanent exhibit was installed two years ago in 2007. It was set up in response to requests from both local and foreign visitors who suggested that the museum’s educating mission would be more comprehensive if it generated awareness of contemporary issues that affected Muslims. A number of local and foreign visitors felt that the museum should also address “the Palestinian issue” because it should be considered part of a “larger” Islamic history.\textsuperscript{269} Thus it can be seen that despite the complex nature of the issue, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict continues to be perceived by the majority of the Malaysian public (as well as many other casual observers) as religious conflict. In Malaysia, each successive BN-UMNO government and PAS opposition have responded to populist sentiment as such, making declarations of Muslim solidarity whenever the Palestinian territories have come under attack whilst downplaying any belligerent acts by Hamas and other Palestinian individuals.

![Palestine exhibit in the Iamm](image)


\textsuperscript{269} Guided Tour of Iamm, 9 Dec 2009. The curator made no further elaborations. I decided not to point out that Palestine was never an exclusively Muslim entity and neither did the exodus of Palestinians since 1948 affect Muslim Palestinians alone. See Figure 4.14.
Understandably, displaying such an overtly political and sensitive topic in an art museum placed the IAMM in an awkward situation. It is widely known that Malaysia has not shied away from showing its support to the Palestinian cause and it remains strongly pro-Arab in its foreign policy stand on the Middle East. This pan-Islamic solidarity with the plight of the Palestinians intensified during Mahathir’s government as Malaysia asserted its leadership role in the OIC and other international Islamic organizations, Mahathir himself did not shy away from criticising the West for their two-faced foreign policy in the Middle East, demonising Iran whilst mollycoddling Israel.270

The IAMM however, has tried to downplay the tensions and emotions that the subject evokes with its art surroundings while simultaneously downplaying the politically explosive content of the subject. As such, the exhibit includes a section concerning the threat that the Dome of the Rock – a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1967 because of the magnificence of its architecture and its religious significance to Judaism, Christianity and Islam – is under, due to the ongoing hostilities in the region. This awkward instance demonstrates how the curating of the IAMM is not distanced from the larger politics of Malaysia and especially its relations with the wider Muslim world. Similar to the problems of autonomy facing some archaeological museums in Israel that were highlighted by Azoulay,271 the inclusion of the Palestinian exhibit challenges the notion that a museum is free to be an impartial and objective producer of knowledge.

270 See Nair, *Islam in Malaysian Foreign Policy*, p. 59 and p. 85.
In the earlier Architecture Gallery, the Dome of the Rock’s architecture played centre stage and its significance to Islam was secondary. However in both instances when the Dome of the Rock is exhibited, its significance to Jewish history as the site of the Foundation Stone and Second Jewish Temple as well as its importance to Christian history goes unmentioned. Notwithstanding the unpredictability of learning in museums, the museum environment “codifies and conditions the visitor’s expectations” and the way he or she interprets the exhibits. In this instance, the knowledge of the Dome of the Rock and Palestine history that a visitor acquires is likely skewed towards a pro-Palestinian perspective. Visitors who have already formed their own opinions or taken sides on the issue would have their “allegiances” confirmed. Pro-Palestinian/pan-Islamic visitors would have their sentiments reinforced, while pro-Israeli/pan-Jewish visitors would have felt that the exhibition was not a fair representation of Israeli-Jewish history and left thinking that Islam was robbing the Jews of their heritage.

Hence it is not a stretch to suggest that the IAMM collection and activities reflect a larger process of Islamization of Malaysian society that began in earnest in the 1980s and which has become increasingly entrenched in the national culture. The success of many of the IAMM’s exhibitions, especially with international visitors, as well as the encouraging response to its travelling exhibitions, also demonstrates

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272 Within Muslim tradition, The Dome of the Rock, also known Haram al-Sharif or “Noble Sanctuary” is the third most important historical site for Muslims being the site where the Prophet Muhammad was believed to have ascended to Heaven accompanied by the Archangel Gabriel during the night of Isra’ Mi’raj. See Oleg Grabar, The Dome of The Rock (Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).
274 Already, Malaysia and Israel do not have any diplomatic relations with each other. Israelis are also barred from entering the country.
275 As gleaned from visitors’ feedback and comments in the IAMM Visitors’ Guestbook which encourages free responses.
Malaysia’s art and political elites’ efforts to expand the discourse on Islamicate civilization and Islamicate cultures. Paramount to these efforts is the desire to position Malaysia as both an important producer of Islamicate culture and knowledge as well as a trustworthy and competent guardian of an Islamicate world heritage. Further, as I have argued in an earlier chapter, beyond the politics of identity, the IAMM is also a testament to Mahathir’s aim to project present-day Malaysia – with its Muslim majority – as a worthy modern successor of a global Islamicate civilization.
Chapter V

Constructed Revelations: Representing the Nation-state

When something as contentious as the “nation” or “religion” is exhibited in a museum, it is subject to scrutiny and debate as the museum is a public site and has the authority to influence visitors’ perceptions of the subjects on display. Through their collections, display methods, narratives, educational activities and even the buildings themselves, museums have the ability to influence the world around them just as much as they aim to represent aspects of it. The BQMI and the IAMM share a common rhetoric in that they present themselves as both “a gift to the world” and as “a mirror” for indigenous Muslims to view themselves. Thus, the two institutions aim to respectively define Indonesia and Malaysia’s Muslim communities through the various narratives that are woven around their collections.

While their collections generally suggest that the “national” and “universal” Muslim identity is inclusive and cuts across ethnic and regional lines, a closer examination of key objects and curatorial strategies reveal a high degree of selection involved in creating an Islamicate image of Indonesia and Malaysia. For various reasons, in the process of selection, some ethnic groups are promoted as genuine contributors to traditions of local Islamicate art, material culture and cultural production, and others are marginalised.
The BQMI collection, I have argued, ultimately erased Chinese Muslims from the public representations of the Indonesian nation despite a long history of propagating Islam in the archipelago while recasting traditionally non-Muslim areas such as North Bali, Irian Jaya and East Timor as part of an “Indonesian Darul Islam”. The lack of representation of Chinese Muslims in the illumination of the Mushaf Al-Qur’an Istiqlal is compounded by the lack of *benda kuno* belonging to Chinese Muslims or contemporary art produced by this community in the BQMI. The dearth of Chinese Muslim representations reflects the marginalisation of the Chinese ethnic group as a whole in the Indonesian public sphere that began during Dutch colonial rule and intensified under the New Order regime when expressions of Chinese culture were suppressed by the state.

The “cultural subordination” of Chinese-Indonesians lies at odds with public perceptions of the Javanese-Muslim majority that the wealthy Chinese (and usually Christian) as dominating Indonesia’s economy and politically favoured by the Suharto government. It also complicates the notion of a “brotherhood” of Indonesian Muslims and fractures the image of a universal Islamic community when some Muslims are

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277 While Qur’ans with translations in different languages are displayed in the BQMI, these were published outside of Indonesia. A Qur’an from Japan, Taiwan, China and even one published by the Chinese Muslim Association in Egypt are displayed in a section showcasing Qur’ans published in other countries. However, there are no exhibits that pertain to the history or material culture of Chinese Muslims in Indonesia.
278 See Bertrand, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia*. The routine marginalization and differentiation policies applied on Chinese Indonesians began as far back in the Dutch colonial period. Anti-Chinese riots occurred as early as 1912-14 as anti-Chinese riots coincided with the expansion of the Sarekat Islam who was unhappy with the Chinese dominance of the local economy. The emergence of Maoist China after 1949 compounded the tensions between Chinese and *pribumi* (read Javanese) Indonesians who questioned Chinese political loyalties to Indonesia.
excluded from it due to their ethnic identity. In addition, while the presence of more contemporary mushafs and the visual arts section in the BQMI suggest an ongoing dialogue that contemporary Indonesian-Muslim artists have with earlier Indonesian calligraphers, artists and artisans, the museum’s narrative of Indonesian Islamicate art or even Indonesian-Islamicate culture, seems to be self-contained – defined by what could be experienced within the archipelago rather than an earlier Islamicate discourse during the period of Dutch colonialism, that was referencing the larger Muslim world.

The opposite case seems true with the IAMM collection. The museum systematically displays in its galleries *objets d’art* from the different Islamicate dynasties throughout history, apportioning roughly the same amount of space to the “India” and “China” galleries as it does to its “Malay World” gallery. Thus, the IAMM collection more successfully mirrors the state’s rhetoric of a harmonious multi-racial, multi-cultural Malaysian society, albeit one that submits to a Malay-Islamist cultural hegemony. Through the art objects, the IAMM’s curators assert that Chinese, Indian, Malay and Central Asian Muslims have enriched the production of Islamicate art and material culture in the same way that the Arabian, Persian and Turkish Muslims did in their times.

However, though they are present, the representations of Chinese and Indian artistic expressions in the IAMM are arguably state-endorsed ones that use Islam as that “special overlay” that renders Chinese and Indian cultural expressions more acceptable to the Malay-Muslim majority. The inclusiveness of the IAMM collection also belies the historical marginalisation of Chinese and Indians in Malaysian society, first as alien non-*bumiputra* with no ancestral claims to the land, and secondly as
opportunistic capitalists dominating the national economy.\textsuperscript{279} As a point for comparison, while the Muzium Negara contains a permanent gallery devoted to displaying the ethnic and cultural diversity of Malaysia, in recent years, an exhibition titled “The Islamic Frontiers of China” was staged in the Central Hall of the museum.\textsuperscript{280} Other than yet another sign of the proliferation of Islam in the public sphere, the popularity of the exhibition suggests that there might be increasing cultural distance between the Malay-Muslim majority and its non-Malay-Muslim counterparts such that the former is more comfortable assimilating the latter group into an Islamicate framework to “authenticate” them as part of the “national” culture.

Ironically, while Islam acts as a prism through which non-Malay cultures can be accommodated in Malaysia’s public domain, Malay dominance of it also complicates the status of Muslim converts as discussed in Chapter I. As Nagata explained, Islam became the last identity marker separating Malays from other ethnic groups after the institutionalisation of Malay political dominance and Bahasa Melayu as the national language of Malaysia.\textsuperscript{281} Thus, Muslim universality still takes a backseat to Malay ethnic exclusivity. The definitions of “Malay-ness” are alternately tightened and relaxed as barriers to equal political and social representation.

\textit{Curating the Nation-state}

Another element that should be considered with regard to the IAMM is that,
despite its establishment as a privately-run museum, it is very much an institution that
promotes the state’s version of Islamicate history, art and culture over rival definitions
by other non-state actors. One should know that there are other notable Islamicate –
themed museums in Malaysia. Besides Kuala Lumpur, there is a museum about
Islam in Kelantan, a conservative Malay-Muslim area, recognised for its role as an
early centre of Islamic education on the peninsula. Syura Hall itself was formerly the
first school for Islamic education in the Malay states.

The Melaka Islamic Museum (MIM) on the other hand, is located in the
former Melaka Islamic Council Building (Majlis Agama Islam Melaka). Melaka
being the historical seat of royal Malay-Muslim power, the MIM has fashioned itself
as both “a display centre of documents and artefacts pertaining to Islam [and] also to
be a centre for research into the coming of Islam into Melaka and its subsequent
spread to the rest of Malaysia.” The Al-Azim State Mosque in Melaka also houses
a Qur’an Museum similar to the Bayt al-Quran in Jakarta. The museum which
exhibits different types of mushaf Al-Qur’an along with relics and artefacts on the
development of Islam, considers itself a knowledge centre on the Qur’an as well as on
Islamicate arts and heritage, where visitors can learn about the spread of Islam to
various parts of the world.

282 In Selangor, there also exists the Islamic Arts Garden Complex as a centre for Islamicate arts
heritage, calligraphy arts, design of national cultural motifs as well as the “official” centre (Islamic
Tourism Centre) for Al-Quran, hadith and Islamicate arts, and the development of Islamicate art
souvenirs. The complex has gained prominence as a centre for reference for Islamic manuscripts,
colours and designs, including architecture and interior design.
Of significance is that the other three Islamiicate-themed museums in Malaysia are found in Sabah, Sarawak and Penang – states which are traditionally considered non-Malay-Muslim areas. The Sabah Islamic Civilisation Museum was officially opened in April 2002 in a state that is demographically predominantly Chinese, Kadazan-Dusun and other indigenous stock, who practice either Christianity, Buddhism or some form of tribal religion. Malays make up only about 11.5% of Sabahans.285

The museum’s six galleries focus on educating its visitors about “Islamic Civilisation”, “Islam in Nusantara”, “Islam in Malaysia”, “Islam in Sabah”, the history of Prophet Muhammad, as well the five Islamic commandments.286 Given Sabah’s disputed history as a former kingdom of Sulu and hence part of modern day Philippines,287 one could argue that that the establishment of the Islamic Civilisation Museum is an attempt by the Malaysian state to “ground” Sabah’s history and development firmly in the narrative of the Malaysian “nation”.

Similarly, the Sarawak Islamic Museum was established in May 1992 to “present to the people of Sarawak and other visitors of the splendour and the beauty of Islamic Civilization” so that “the public will have greater appreciation and understanding on the contribution of Islam to human civilization”.288 Its seven galleries also mirror its Sabah counterpart with a gallery depicting the spread of Islam

in Sarawak.

Galleries devoted to Islamicate architecture, decorative arts and domestic utensils, music, costumes and personal ornaments and weaponry closely resemble the IAMM with its focus on Islamicate artistic production. As a nod to the museum building’s history as the James Brook Malay College and subsequently as Madrasah Melayu Sarawak, there is a gallery on “Science, Technology, Economics, Education and Literature” that displays objects representing the development of education and technology in Sarawak since the establishment of British presence there.

Last, and by no means least, the Penang Islamic Museum completes the “Islamic Heritage Trail” across the Malay Peninsula. The objectives of the Penang Islamic Museum include enshrining “for posterity, the role and contributions of Malay leaders in the development and propagation of Islam in Pulau Pinang” as well as to preserve “Malay historical heritage” amidst the rapid physical development taking place there. Whether by design or happy accident, the sum effect of all these state-funded and private Islamicate-themed museums reinforce the image (and imagination) of Malaysia as a Muslim nation. It also locates Malaysia as being a significant component of global Islamicate culture.

It seems to be less the case in Indonesia, despite Suharto’s earlier efforts to replicate national mosques across the archipelago. Visitorship has fallen at BQMI even though it no longer charged a separate entrance fee from TMII admission.

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290 Ibid.
Further, Islamicate-themed museums are few in Indonesia and are not as popular with visitors as the country’s other museums and art galleries. The persistence of earlier Hindu-Buddhist cultural arts and monumental architecture remains paramount in the tourist imagination through the hawking of Bali, Yogyakarta and other exotic tourist locales. Indonesia’s Islamicate heritage is downplayed to attract the tourist dollar.

Interestingly though, when current US President Barack Obama’s early childhood in Jakarta was made known and he received a warm reception during his first presidential visit there in November 2010, some rumours began to circulate that he was raised Muslim in Indonesia.\textsuperscript{291} It suggests that even without a sustained state effort to represent Indonesia as a Muslim nation, its international image is still coloured by the fact that 90\% of its population profess to be Muslim.

Hence curating the Indonesian nation is a complex and gargantuan task for any one museum to undertake and perhaps to attempt to do so might not be in the best interest of any party. Forcing a mould over such a multitude of ethnic, cultural and religious variants such as Indonesia will inevitably lead to the glossing over of troublesome contradictions as well as the exclusion of minorities. Ultimately what is then displayed would be a skewed representation of Indonesian reality.

The cue that museum practitioners could take is that more transparency and dialogue are imperative when they seek to represent the history and culture of a group or groups of people within the museum. Curators also need to be careful that they do

not present ‘closed’ definitions of a culture, an art form and especially not religion as it is lived and practised by its adherents because of the extant varied interpretations of individual beliefs and idiosyncratic practices.

*Creating an “Islamic” History*

The concept of an “Islamic Heritage Trail” as a new “tourism product” is fascinating in its own right and deserves its own research. It suffices here to say that similar to the Yayasan Amalbakti Muslim Pancasila (YAMP) mosques that are being built across Indonesia, the IAMM along with the other Islamicate-themed museums mentioned above, are themselves copies of one another as they project the idea of an Islamic Malay past with their collections. Thus, the Islamicate-themed museums themselves become part of an Islamicate tradition for Malaysia.

The presence of such authoritative educational and cultural institutions, of which the IAMM is considered the jewel in the crown, went some way in helping Kuala Lumpur being selected as an Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO) Capital City of Islamic Culture in 2009. Malaysia’s selection coincided with the tenth anniversary of IAMM’s establishment and the museum celebrated the milestone by staging an exhibition titled “A Decade of Dedication at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia” which feted the achievements of the museum in educating the public about the splendour of Islamic art.292

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Collectively, these museums establish a trail of “Islamic heritage” across Malaysia’s geography and history, transforming earlier functions and meanings of the buildings in which they now inhabit – and laying an Islamic patina even over areas which have resisted an “Islamized” identity. The presence of state-funded Islamic museums in Penang, Sabah and Sarawak, which display objects that claim to represent the Islamicate histories of these areas, recalls the way in which the Mushaf Al-Quran Istiqal served as a means to incorporate traditionally non-Muslim areas such as West Papua, Timor Leste and North Bali into an embodiment of a re-imagined “Islamic nation”.

*The Museum as a Contested Space for Discussions of Culture and National Identity*

Increasing numbers of contemporary museums are moving towards staging exhibitions that challenge visitors’ preconceived notions on any given issue. They experiment with the exhibition spaces and stage objects in ways that elicit diverse and sometimes conflicting responses from their viewers. The displayed objects serve as launch-pads to generate further discussion beyond the museum. However, museums, especially those run by or linked to the state, are less likely to be politically-neutral spaces of learning where visitors “draw their own conclusions” about the subject being exhibited. More often than not, these museums must adhere to and disseminate whatever information and values that state authorities or community leaders have deemed important for visitors to learnt.
My examination of the IAMM and its collection reveals that the objects associated with Islamic history and Islamicate art have been organized in such a way that despite the diverse richness of its material culture and the apparent inclusiveness of its representation, the exhibits tend to represent Islam as a monolithic religious culture with universalizing aesthetics and religious practices which appear relatively unchanged over time.

Rather than presenting Islamicate art as the products of parallel and sometimes crisscrossing currents of Islamicate cultures that continually borrow, adapt and rejects elements from their diverse and overlapping cultural and religious environments the IAMM prefers a conservative interpretation of Islamicate art which centres on the “spiritual” basis of its production. No awkward questions are raised about the Malays’ pre-Islamic past – Islam appears to have absorbed and transformed all earlier animist and Hindu-Buddhist practices. Whatever that does not fit into the IAMM’s grand narrative is simply not displayed. In the IAMM, the splendour of modern and traditional architecture harmoniously blended and finely-rendered calligraphy, porcelain, coins and jewellery from various Islamicate civilizations all combine to present a mesmerizing face of Islam to visitors.

Especially in the wake of the New York World Trade Centre attack in 2001, the IAMM’s curators were keen to present the benign face of Islam amidst worldwide news coverage of Islamist terrorists and extremist Muslim clerics. The IAMM has had to reconcile the representation of Islam as a civilization that produced great works of
art and made significant contributions to early scientific knowledge with more recent images of prolonged warfare, and acts of terror and violence of Islam in the international media.

The attempt to address the violent memories associated with Islam especially with regard to warfare, has led to an interesting treatment of the arms and armoury artefacts in the IAMM collection. Artefacts such as swords, daggers, body armour and war banners and other paraphernalia would have their material provenance displayed but rarely the historical context in which they were used. Instead, what visitors see is a timeline that traces the development of Islamicate-styled arms technology, punctuated with important battles in Islamic history displayed on a wall in the Arms and Armoury Gallery. The decorations embellished on the weapon that is brought to the fore and highlighted as “a cultural charm” that is specific to a style.

In this instance, similar to the problems associated with commemorating the French Revolution that Ozouf analyzes, there is a tension between exhibiting such artefacts along the conventional framework of what constitutes a “civilisation” or “art” and avoiding the evocation of memories of violence that accompany such artefacts pertaining to warfare.293

The Muslim *umma* as displayed in the Iamm is a global community of art producers. Differences in religious doctrine and practices are downplayed in order to present a commonality of the experience of Islam amongst believers, especially in the performance of the hajj. In addition, the display of Malay art and material culture as Islamicate art forms have stretched the historical socio-geographical entity of *Dar-al Islam*\(^{294}\) such that it expands the discussion of non-Arabian knowledge and cultural productions about Islam being just as “valuable” and “authentic” as its Arabian origins. Similarly, BQMI’s rendition of Indonesian Islamicate culture and art as representing ‘a Muslim nation’ also transforms its earlier history of more fluid identities as well as the societal tolerance for such ambiguities of self into a narrative of a linear development of Indonesian Islamicate society. An uneasy tension exists in the museum space between celebrating national unity while disciplining the diversity of its constituent parts.

In this regard, one could say that the state’s attempt to “rehabilitate” Malaysia’s place from the periphery of the Islamic world to being recognized as an important centre of Islamicate cultural, artistic and intellectual production has been a success. Not only does such an enterprise consolidate Malaysia’s presence in international Muslim forum, it also increases Malaysia’s stature as a modern country which has managed to harness religious authority to some degree of success and which better serves its nation-building programme. However, in the long term, the IAMM’s permanent collection is likely to “fix” the contributions made by Islamicate

\(^{294}\) While ‘*Dar-al Islam*’ is used conventionally to refer to those lands which were historically under Muslim rule and would be loosely analogous to meaning as ‘Christendom’, Marshall Hodgson argues in *Ventures in Islam* (1961) that strictly speaking, ‘*Dar al-Islam*’ is essentially a juridical and territorial term.
artists firmly in the past of Islam’s “golden age” with little mention of how these artists (through their art) are still contributing to discussions about Islam.295

Unlike the BQMI which showcases the diversity and currency of contemporary Indonesian Islamicate art, there is a conspicuous absence of contemporary examples of Islamicate art, both foreign and indigenous, in the IAMM’s permanent galleries. Its comprehensive collection reinforces the impression of an expansive and majestic history of global Islamicate civilisation but the lack of contemporary art pieces in its permanent exhibition unwittingly suggests that “Islamic art” belongs to the past in much the same way that Renaissance art is a closed corpus of work.

Such a curatorial approach to the objects in the IAMM is likely to situate not just Islamicate art but also other forms of Islamic knowledge in the past rather than ongoing projects that are imperfect, unfinished, dynamic and open to revisions and contemporary imaginations. It seems to be a more forward-looking trajectory for Indonesian Muslims. Contemporary art produced by Indonesian Muslim artists enjoy a widespread following locally and the BQMI has been a supportive convenor of such exhibitions. Such a modern attitude towards Islamicate art and other forms of material cultural as well as intellectual production situates Indonesian Muslims confidently in the present and with an optimistic eye towards the future in terms of maintaining traditions of and creating new forms of indigenous Islamicate art.

295 As permanent collections tend to remain unchanged over an extended period of time, temporary exhibitions are how curators “intervene” in the permanent galleries and present alternative interpretations that are not addressed. For instance the IAMM’s “En Route to Mecca: Pilgrims’ Voices throughout the Centuries” exhibition (22 October 2009 - 23 January 2010) presented the different peoples, both Muslim pilgrims and non-Muslim adventurers, who had experienced Makkah.
Ultimately, the question of “who” is included in the representation of Islamicate traditions or an Islamic nation lies at the heart of the BQMI and IAMM collections and museum activities. The BQMI and IAMM’s respective interpretations of Islam as a historical phenomenon, a prism refracting artistic and architectural production and an actively practised faith are never done in a rarefied manner for esoteric purposes. The collections, exhibitions, outreach activities and publications are organized always with an eye to fashioning the tastes, attitudes and behaviour of their domestic publics such that a national culture can be ultimately realised.

The BQMI and IAMM’s different approaches to exhibiting their respective Islamicate collections bring to mind Sahlins’ argument that not only do cultural structures import historical significance to an event, but culture and cultural contexts themselves are created by the actions of the individuals within a society. These individual (and collective) actions in turn, transforms existing cultural schemes (meanings) and ultimately are “re-valued” with each subsequent action or even in its own reproduction.296 Thus, Islam is such an important identity marker and component of national identity that these two iconic museums were established as mega cultural projects to strengthen national identity by re-imagining the Indonesian and Malaysian nation with Islam as its overarching reference point. To different degrees, Islam itself was also transformed into both a “moral compass” that would ensure the harmony of each country’s multi-ethnic nation and also a “modernizing tool” for their economic and social development.

Nonetheless, the BQMI and IAMM can also complicate the creation of a more

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296 See Sahlins, *Islands of History*..
inclusive national culture, especially when there is a dearth of museums that celebrate the history and the material culture of other faiths. Partly because of the Indonesian and Malaysian governments’ commitment to “multiracialism” and the de jure subordination of religion to the state’s prerogatives, there continues to be tensions in both societies as to the extent to which Islam can play a role in defining the respective national cultures.

Sukarno had courted and then betrayed the Islamists who had fought for Indonesia’s independence from the Dutch after World War II. Later in the New Order era, Suharto jealously guarded the secular and pluralist ethos of the Pancasila against Islamist pressures that were just as passionate to create an Islamic state out of the modern nation-state that emerged after generations of Dutch colonialism. His sensitivity to the increasing religiosity of Indonesians in the 1980s spurred him to channel the Islamic revivalism towards cultural rather than political expressions of Islam in Indonesia’s public sphere. His political manoeuvrings effectively curtailed Islamist political activity but led to stronger cultural assertions by Indonesian Muslims in the country’s public sphere, which in turn encroached upon the rights and liberties of non-Muslims and other ethnic minorities.

Suharto’s oust from power in 1998 and the subsequent merry-go-round of interim and short-lived Presidents, meant that the BQMI lost its most powerful patron. Since then, the BQMI has suffered from numerous departmental changeovers within the Ministry of Religion. It was moved from its original Ditjen Bimas Islam dan Urusan Haji (Directorate-General for the Guidance of Islamic Society and Hajj Affairs) overseers, to the Ditjen Kelembagaan Agama Islam (Directorate-General for

Currently however, it is under the management of the Lajnah Pentashihian Mushaf Al- Qur’an, Badan Litbang, dan Diklat Departemen Agama Republik Indonesia.\textsuperscript{297} The museum is currently in the process of yet another departmental reorganization and there is talk of an increase in museum funding, especially since 2010 has been designated as “Visit Museum Year” in Indonesia.\textsuperscript{298} Nonetheless, the lack of both organizational transparency and permanency has resulted in much bureaucratic and creative inertia which affects the operations and maintenance of the BQMI’s collection and galleries.

In Malaysia, on the other hand, successive UMNO prime ministers saw engagement with the Muslim world as a counterbalancing force to the hegemony of the West and their international diplomacy frameworks. Nonetheless, they were careful not to lose sight of the domestic implications of Malaysia’s associations with international Islamic organisations. Especially during Mahathir’s stewardship, the UMNO government balanced support for international Muslim causes abroad with suppressing the activities of non-state Islamist groups like the Al Arqam movement and Wahabism at home. Further, while Mahathir spearheaded the Islamization of Malaysia’s bureaucracy, facilitated the development of Islamic finance and encouraged Islamic modes of knowledge production in academic and scientific

\textsuperscript{298} Ali Akbar, Senior Curator, BQMI. Personal communication. 29 May 2010.
circles, he was just as zealous at discrediting PAS opposition and other Islamist-credentialed rivals such as Anwar Ibrahim.

State-endorsed cultural expressions of Islam are part of Mahathir’s ambitious “Wawasan 2020” vision for the development of Malaysia into a modern Islamicate country without having it transformed into an Islamic theocratic state. The challenge for Malaysia is that the state has to manage the expectations of its increasingly religious Malay-Muslim majority while ensuring that the (already limited) rights of its minority groups are not even more severely compromised. The Iamm, along with other Islamicate-themed museums in Malaysia, have an important part to play in creating narratives about Malaysian Islam that are inclusive and not unnecessarily diametrically opposed to the belief systems and cultures of its non-Malay/ non-Muslim minorities.

Conclusions

From the perspective of vested political interests, both the BQMI and the IAMM attempt to be authoritative ‘true’ mirrors reflecting the “national heritage” of the majority of its citizens. The museums’ collections also project an image of each country’s “national identity” to international visitors and the domestic public alike. I have argued that in the case of the BQMI, the localized nature of its collection is designed “inwards” and addresses all Indonesian Muslims as a community of art-producing citizens informed by Muslim sensibilities. The BQMI extends the discussion of Islam’s legacy and role in Indonesia through the examination of material
culture produced by the peoples of the Nusantara across time and space. In contrast, the IAMM’s extended collection of objects across the different Islamicate dynastic periods and its well-respected research and conservation facilities attest to its international outlook. Arguably, the IAMM also reflects Malaysia’s internationalist aspirations to be regarded as both an expert guardian of Islamicate material culture heritage as well as an important centre of Islamicate culture. Separately, the BQMI and IAMM have mixed the discourses of art, culture, religion, politics, and history in “specific, hierarchical ways” to evoke a modern, Muslim image of the nation.

Ultimately, given the socio-political circumstances in Indonesia and Malaysia in the last three decades of the twentieth century, the museums’ considerations and the approaches they chose to respond to their environment, go beyond the politics of cultural identity. The BQMI is a project of national unity for Indonesia in the reality of disparate ethnic and religious identities, while the IAMM serves as a showcase of civilizational progress in which Malaysia should be considered not just an important producer of Islamicate culture, but also a model modern Muslim society.

The museum is a contested site of cultural and aesthetic expressions of Islam and bears great significance in advancing the nation-building campaign. In this regard, the BQMI and IAMM are important social institutions due to the educating mission that they profess as well as the different forms of “capital” that their visitors can accrue from successive visits.299 In the process, the state was able to add a layer of religious legitimacy to strengthen its overall authority and keep any religious opposition in check.

The two museums face further challenges to their educating and socialising mission in terms of reaching their intended audiences (e.g. few domestic visitors (vis-à-vis foreign tourists) as well as unpredictable visitor responses to the exhibitions. In the first case, to shape a truly inclusive cultural ethos, the museums have to reach beyond its traditional patronage by a small group of educated middle- and upper-class adults to the bigger working class base and youth. In the second case, I am arguing that despite any underlying state agenda and funding, the museums’ curators cannot remain aloof from the reality and the resultant expectations of its intended audience, especially the latter’s capacity as consumers of knowledge and spectacles.

The museums must go beyond the reach of their galleries in educating and entertaining their visitors. Museum programming, publications, souvenirs, outreach activities and even food increasingly dovetail with museum exhibitions to meet visitors’ demand to be educated, entertained and to consume ‘culture’, whether it be their own or others. The generally favourable reviews that visitors have given the BQMI and IAMM demonstrate how important museums are in knowledge production and how the appropriate curatorial approach and visitor engagement can contribute a more accurate and favourable representation of Islam.

In the final analysis, just as any other modern museums that want to succeed, both the BQMI and IAMM must walk a fine line between education, legitimization, authenticity, entertainment and profitability if they are to be effective and lasting tools.

300 Peter Vergo, “The Reticent Object” in Peter Vergo (ed.), The New Museology, p. 46.
of nation building. This is why the IAMM was able to celebrate its tenth anniversary with great aplomb in 2009, while the BQMI on the other hand, has become a pale shadow of its early grandeur.
**Glossary**

*abangan* (Jav.) A Javanese who is considered a nominal Muslim as he still observes some Hindu-Buddhist rituals

*Basmallah* (Ar.) An invocation of Allah’s majesty and mercy usually recited at the start of a *Surah*

*batik* (Jav.) A type of printed cloth, either drawn or stamped indigenous to Indonesia and Malaysia

*benda kuno* (Mal.) old objects

*benda tradisi* (Mal.) heritage objects

*bumiputera* (Mal.) A political term coined in Malaysia in 1957 to protect the political interests of the Malays to differentiate them from first and second-generation non-Malay immigrants.

*dakwah* (Mal.) To proselytize – from Ar. *da‘a* meaning “to call”

*dhikir Allah* (Ar.) The remembrance of Allah

*dondang sayang* (Mal.) A type of traditional Malay music in which poems are sung

*al-Haqiqah* (Ar.) The Truth

*ihram* (Ar.) The two lengths of white cloth that Muslims wear during the hajj that symbolizes the equality of all Muslims before Allah

*ijtihad* (Ar.) The scholarly interpretation of divine law independent of the four established Islamic schools of thought
**Iman**  (Ar.) Faith

**Istiqlal**  (Ar.) Independence

**Javanist**  (Eng.) A term used by Robert Hefner to describe Javanese Muslims who strongly identify with their earlier Hindu-Buddhist and mystical Javanese beliefs despite professing to be Muslim. Similar to *abangan*.

**Jawi**  (Ar.) The Arabic script that was adopted to put the Malay language into written form.

**joget ronggeng**  (Mal.) A traditional Malay dance with an upbeat tempo.

**juz**  (Ar.) Each section of the Qur’an that can be read during the Muslim month of Ramadhan.

**Ka’bah**  (Ar.) The cuboid structure in Makkah built by the Prophet Abraham in which direction Muslims face in prayer.

**kejawen**  (Jav.) A local spiritualistic system of Indonesia that encompasses all the customs, beliefs and practices of Java and or the Javanese.

**ketuanan Melayu**  (Mal.) Malay supremacy

**kraton**  (Jav.) From “*keratunan*”, meaning the place where the queen or king lives.

**Kun Fayaakun**  (Ar.) “Be! And it is”  (Al-Qur’an, Surah Al-Baqarah, Verse 116-117)

**kyai or kiai**  (Jav.) A term of respect for an expert in Islam or religious teacher in a traditional Islamic school.
madrasah  (Ar.) A modern religious school usually in an urban centre

masjid  (Ar.) mosque

mazhab  (Ar.) A school of thought on Islamic divine law and jurisprudence

Melayu jati  (Mal.) A “true” Malay of local Malay parentage to distinguish from those from mixed unions who observed Malay customs and spoke Malay

mihrab  (Ar.) A semi-circular niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the direction of prayer (qiblah)

minbar  (Ar.) A raised platform from where a sermon in a mosque is delivered

muallaf

or saudara baru  (Ar. and Mal.) A convert to Islam

mushaf  (Ar.) A reproduction of the Qur’an

Pancasila  (Mal.) The five principles of the Indonesian Constitution

pesantren  (Jav.) A traditional Islamic school in Indonesia

pribumi  (Jav.) An indigenous person in Indonesian usage

prijayi  (Jav.) The traditional Javanese nobility and landowners class of pre-colonial Java

pusaka  (Mal.) inheritance

qiblah  (Ar.) The direction of prayer, i.e. the Ka’bah in Makkah

rumah adat  (Mal.) A cultural hall or house
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>santri</td>
<td>(Jav.) Referring to observant Javanese Muslims in the mid-19th Century</td>
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<tr>
<td>al-Shari’ah</td>
<td>(Ar.) The Law of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sheikh or shaykh</td>
<td>(Ar.) An honorific title for a religious leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>songket</td>
<td>(Mal.) A type of cloth with gold or silver thread woven through in decorative patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>surah</td>
<td>(Ar.) A chapter in the Qur’an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tarian kuda kepang</td>
<td>(Jav.) A hypnotic dance that portrays warriors on horses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taqwa</td>
<td>(Ar.) Fidelity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Tariqah</td>
<td>(Ar.) The Spiritual Way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tilāwat Al-Qur’an</td>
<td>(Ar.) A melodious recital of the Qur’an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ulama</td>
<td>(Ar.) plural for alim, meaning “man of knowledge”, usually refers to a body of Muslim scholars trained in Islamic law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ummah</td>
<td>(Ar.) A Muslim community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ustaz</td>
<td>(Ar.) A religious teacher in a madrasah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wahyu</td>
<td>(Ar.) A divine revelation conveyed to the Muslim Prophets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wakaf</td>
<td>(Ar.) A donation, usually of land or property towards a Muslim cause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>waqaf</td>
<td>(Ar.) The grammatical punctuation when reciting the Qur’an</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Table 1. Sequential List of the 42 Muslim Culture and Design Regions for Inclusion in the Al-Qur’an Mustaf Istiqal, Istiqal Festival Foundation, April, 1994

| 2. Deli | 16. South Kalimantan | 30. West Sumatra II |
| 3. West Sumatra I | 17. East Kalimantan | 31. Palembang II |
| 6. Bengkulu | 20. E. Lesser Sundas | 34. Solo |
| 13. East Java I | 27. Irian Jaya | 41. Greater Aceh II |

Courtesy of the Istiqal Festival Foundation.