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Modernity, Islam and Tradition: The Struggle for the Heart and Soul of Art and Culture in Malaysia

By Farish A. Noor

Sitting under the porch of the home of Nik Rashidi, a woodcarver in the small settlement of Pantai Cahaya Bulan, in the northern Malaysian state of Kelantan, I find myself discussing the future of traditional woodcarving and local arts. Nik Rashidi and his elder brother, Nik Rashiddin - now sadly departed - are woodcarvers of the old school. Their outstanding work stands today as the very best in traditional Malay woodcarving and some of their pieces have been given as gifts of state to foreign dignitaries ranging from the President of the United States to the Emperor of Japan. Yet here, in the small village where he lives, Nik Rashidi appears to the onlooker as a humble man, almost poor by the standards of the political and business elite who reside in Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur.

Beneath Nik Rashidi's simple appearance, however, lies a sensitivity and depth of feeling and understanding that truly befits an artist. Like his late brother Nik Rashiddin, he is driven by an obsessive desire to preserve, promote and revitalise an art that is now almost extinct. Like his brother, he is also worried about the forces of rapid modernisation as well as the growing level of religious puritanism and conservatism that is destroying the fabric of the past and society all around. In his words: "The politicians and the religious leaders keep telling us that we must be modern, and be better Muslims as well. But so often all they want is to destroy everything that is old and traditional, and to erase the past. How can we progress to the future if we don't remember what we were before? And how can we be proper Muslims today if we don't even remember our ancestors of the pre-Islamic past?"

Nik Rashidi's concern is very real, for here in the state of Kelantan it is the Islamic opposition party PAS that is in power, and since they came to power in 1990 there has been a sustained campaign to ban all forms of art, culture and entertainment deemed 'un-Islamic' and 'immoral'. This ban was imposed not only on modern forms of popular culture like Western pop music, but also on traditional arts that go back to the pre-Islamic era. As a result traditional cultural practices such as shadow-puppet theatre, the Mak Yong and Manora dances and traditional pastimes like kite-flying have been restricted, if not stopped altogether. Nik is concerned about how all this will affect his own woodcarving, which is based on traditional motifs and patterns that have strong Hindu and Buddhist influences. He is, in fact, struggling at the centre of an ideological battle for the future of Malaysian identity.

A Nation in search of an Identity

Malaysia, like many postcolonial societies of the late 20th century, is currently experiencing a collective identity crisis. The political entity that is known as the Federation of Malaysia today was born in stages: In 1957

independent Malaya was created and in 1963 the federation was expanded to include Singapore as well as the north Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak. (Singapore later pulled out of the federation in 1965).

Independent Malaysia, as it came to be known, was searching for its own sense of identity from the very beginning. For centuries the territory had been home to a variety of different ethnic, cultural and religious communities. From the West came successive waves of Indian culture, that contributed to the Indianisation of the Malay archipelago, the emergence of a number of important Malay-Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms such as Majapahit, Mataram and Srivijaya. From the east came the influence of China, which brought with it distinctive Chinese styles and modes of living that were subsequently blended with local tastes and habits. Both Indian (Hindu, Buddhist) and Chinese (Buddhist, Taoist and Confucianist) cultural influences are evident in Malay art, culture and architecture up to the 19th century – though today the traces of Indian and Chinese influences are being rapidly and deliberately diminished.

Within the Malay archipelago itself the movement of peoples – and the languages, cultures, modes of dress, behaviour and living they brought along – had been the norm for more than two thousand years. Almost all of the kingdoms of maritime Southeast Asia were seafaring kingdoms that were mobile and they survived on trade and constant communication with the outside world.

This process of transcultural and cross-cultural borrowing and adaptation was to last till the early 16th century, until the arrival of Portuguese and Spanish conquistadors brought to an end the maritime economies of the region, and introduced the new concepts of the nation-state, political territories and frontiers. Subsequent waves of modern colonisation introduced other modes of governance, and introduced ideas such as racial and ethnic differences.

The impact of Modernity: Race and Politics

The colonial era left behind lasting traces in terms of a new public mentality that was essentially modern: Ideas such as the nation-state, territorial borders, national sovereignty and racialised identities were introduced to a world that was previously devoid of them. The evolution of modern Malaysian politics reflected these concerns, most notably the politics of race and racialised identities.

By the time Malaysia was created in 1957 (and completed in 1963), the central question as far as the project of nation-building was concerned was what should be the basis of Malaysia's identity? The dominance of the Malay-Muslim community in the country meant that Malaysian identity was modelled on and defined by a Malay-centric view of the world. But at the same time this new understanding of 'Malayness' was one that was racialised, with fixed, absolute and exclusive boundaries. The postcolonial Malaysian state and its elite were less inclined to accept or celebrate the multicultural past of the country, owing to the nature of racialised politics in Malaysia.

From the late 1970s onward Malaysia was also swept by the wave of new currents of political Islam let loose by the Iranian revolution of 1979 and Pakistan's re-invention of itself as an Islamic state the same year. The rise of political Islam in Malaysia further contributed to the narrowing of Malaysian identity along religio-cultural lines. New, more conservative and vocal Islamist groups began to call for the Islamisation of Malaysian society and with that the rejection of the country's pre-Islamic past.

Thus today Malaysian cultural identity is increasingly defined in terms of an understanding of Malay identity that is narrow, puritan, closed and exclusive. Should these trends continue, they will undermine and ultimately diminish the shared cultural heritage of Malaysia and the Malaysian people, whose traditional arts and crafts reflect this shared history when Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism could accommodate each other.

Back at the home of Nik Rashidi, we discuss the future of Malay woodcarving in the age of religious revivalism and rampant consumerism. Nik laments the fact that the Malaysian people no longer appreciate their own traditional art and culture: "We talk about our 'Asian values' and our pride in our past. But where is this appreciation and how is it reflected? Businessmen and the rich elite in the cities just want to buy our woodcarving to decorate their mansions and apartments, while the religious leaders tell us that our carvings are un-Islamic because we still depict images of the Hindu Gods, deities and natural spirits. But our traditional carvings are our only link to the past, with nature around us and the living elements that keeps our art alive: This is our Malay art, because it comes from the land and it breathes the history of our people. If we cut off our links to our ancestors, we would be like a ship without a compass; a people without history."

Biodata:

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