CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of Study

Marriage is the biggest event in a Malay man's or woman's life. Although close family's friends still arrange marriages, the couple involved must give their full consent. In Singapore's context, men are expected to be married by the age of twenty-five to twenty-eight, while women are usually a few years younger.[1] This is not mandatory but more of a normal customary practice. Under the law of Muslim marriages, couples should be of the age of 21 but the age of 16 is

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[1]Countries and their Cultures, Malays, http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Japan-to-Mali/Malays.html, accessed on 29/11/2011

allowed with consent of the parents present. Marriage of a bride under 16 require special licensing.[2]

In short, Malay weddings are grand affairs where the couples are treated as royalty. Wedding ceremonies are usually spread out over several days. They begin with the *Henna-staining* ceremony, followed by the '*Nikah*' ceremony and eventually '*Bersanding'*, which is the actual wedding day.

In this study of Malay culture and traditions, in particular that of Singaporean Malays, the focus is on the practices performed in conjuction with the wedding ceremony – beliefs, values, concepts which are based on the roots of its origin. The main reason for this research is that over time certain traditions are being performed without ever knowing their significances, values or even purposes. The norm is that people would usually follow or adapt the practices without question. Reason being that it is a tradition brought down from ancestors, the elderly community and respected people.

Hence, this subject matter is chosen due to its importance and interest. Many researchers have done cultural research or analysis, each with a spectrum of different objectives. One important aspect of this study is to have an objective analysis of such cultural practices and to ask the question as to whether it is in line (conformity) with the Islamic rulings as a Muslim or otherwise. On the other hand, it is interesting enough to discover the depths and insights of these practices. Reasons for doing so is to verify their origins and heritage and the causes of their present existence. Seemingly, they inherit the possibility of

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[2]Matrimonial law of Singapore, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matrimonial_law_of_Singapore, accessed on 30/5/2012

similarities with other cultures of different localities but of similar origins, for instance cultural practices and traditions in Indonesia or Malaysia. In conjuction to that, the writer would like to find out if there are efforts being made to preserve such culture and traditions for the benefit of future generations.

The existence and practices of Malay culture and traditions seen at common weddings may come as a surprise to some, considering that Singapore is being reputated as amongst one of the developed, metropolitan countries in the world today. Oblivious to some, demography of the population shows approximately 74.1 percent of the population is ethnic Chinese, 13.4 percent ethnic Malay, and 9.2 percent ethnic Indian, while 3.3 percent comprises other ethnic races like Arabians, Armeneans and Europeans. Nearly all ethnic Malays are Muslims and most ethnic Indians are Hindus. The ethnic Chinese population is divided among Buddhists, Taoists and Christians, or is agnostics or atheists.[3]

The Singapore Malays (*Orang Melayu Singapura*) are defined by the Singaporean government as the "Malay Race" in a broader and antiquated concept, rather than modern-day Malay ethnic group. Although Malays have inhabited the area that is now Singapore since the 17th century, most of the Malays in Singapore today are immigrants from Indonesia and Malaysia since 1945 and their descendants.[4]

According to this data, presumably Malays are the second majority in terms of population and consequently play a major role in the development and enhancement of the national cultural heritage. Historically, the Malays originated from the composition of the various Malay ethnic population like the

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[3]Malays in Singapore, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malays_in_Singapore, accessed on 9/12/2011
[4]*Ibid*

Javanese, Bugis, Boyanese, Banjarese and other minority groups. So arising from this, comes the question of whether the Malays are 'forced' to uphold their culture and traditions in order to maintain the country's reputation of being a multiracial and multicultural society.

Another intriguing aspect of cultural study is the question of one's culture itself. An expert in this field says – "The influence of culture is not one's choice, but somewhat 'given' or 'inherited'. This means that a person is automatically brought up in a certain kind of environment with a certain kind of culture. Of course no one is to be blamed by such 'coincidences' because it is in a way 'inherited'. Consequently, one does not need to be overly proud of one's cultural inheritance to the point that he feels uncomfortable by others of different cultural background and therefore reacts basing on his own beliefs."[5]

Presently the local Malay wedding culture can be seen combined with many different attributes of other cultures and traditions. So this entails a wide variety of speculation and guesses in terms of their definite origins and reasons for their existence. Some of the other cultures found in a typical Malay wedding are like the *kuda kepang* act (mainly of Javanese attribute), a one time dinner reception, disc jockey or photography session before the actual wedding (western culture), the *Banghra* dance troupe (Indian and Pakistani attribute), karaoke service (Japanese culture), *merisik* and *berinai* (Malaccan culture) and others.. Hence, ultimately this combination of different attributes and cultures creates ambiguity in defining the actual Malay culture.

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[5]Andre Ata Ujan, *Multikulturalisme: Belajar Hidup Bersama dalam Perbedaan* (Jakarta, PT Indeks, 2009), 34

The main body of this study will be allocated to the descriptive review of the actual activities or rituals performed in the process of a Malay wedding ceremony. The said review will be limited to all the commonly performed rites conducted over a few days before the big day itself right up to the the actual wedding day. This limitation is necessary in order to conduct a credible empirical study and thus obtaining results. By doing a focused case study as such, the problem inherited will eventually manifest itself and in the long run, will be made known to the masses. More importantly, there is always the possibility of discovering other aspects of the culture where they are transcribed as traditions which are '*abnormal*' and are usually not acceptable to the mainstream society. It is with these '*cultural abnormalities'* or some might call them phenomenon; that will then make the research an eye-opener and worth the time and effort looking into.

It is also important (in the field of cultural studies) to note that culture and its context is very wide. Culture itself may include every aspect of a person's life. So cultural study is a discipline which is sometimes called 'gullible' because all aspects of that person are virtually claimed by the said discipline. Nevertheless, it does not mean that this form of study can be termed as a 'trash can' even though it claims almost everything. Culture is a chosen life phenomena, irrespective of whether it is a good or a bad choice culture. Basically there are good or positive culture and bad or negative culture. And good or bad culture will exist as long as human exists.[6]

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[6]Endraswara Suwardi, *Metodologi Penelitian Kebudayaan* (Yogykarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 2006), 8

The other important component of this study is the perspectives from Islamic theories on the subject of wedding ceremonies. This includes formal text (*Al-Quran and Al-Hadits*) and opinions from Islamic jurists and scholars in general. Acknowledging the fact that even Islamic jurisprudence (the product of Islamic law) or opinions (*fatwas*) on certain issues may vary due to certain valid reasons and technicalities, the most pragmatic assumption or reasoning which has the majority consensus amongst Islamic jurists will be used as a basis for theoretical application in this study. Reasons for differences in opinion, as mentioned earlier may be of reasons such as locality, time zone, geographical differences and different methods of interpretation and understanding of scriptures or religious texts.

In the local context of Singapore, Islamic scholars and intellectuals have had their views and given opinions on this issue. But the fact that Singapore being a secularized country and fundamentally based on common law system of rule , their opinions or even formal *fatwas* remain no more than 'moral guidance'. This view was given by the High Justice of Singapore, Chan Sek Keong in the Court of Appeal when he was residing a case of wealth distribution amongst Muslims.[7] On the issue of *fatwas*, Dr Ya'cob Ibrahim (Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs), made a statement saying that the Fatwa Committee of Singapore would continue to develop *fatwas* that are beneficial to the community, to provide guidance and clarity on complex issues.[8]

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[7]Hukum Mahkamah Sivil Singapore Mengatasi Fatwa, http://remgold.blogspot.com/2010/04/hukum-mahkamah-sivil-singapore html (refers to a case of selling property after the death of either spouse and the percentage of distribution), accessed on 29/11/2011
[8]http://www.singaporehalaldirectory.com/Singlenews.aspx?DirID=106&rec_code=418112, accessed on 20/12/2011

Most importantly, religion and culture play an important role in the Malay society in Singapore. This is inevitable and it transpires in almost every aspect of their lives, especially so in social events like wedding ceremonies. Subconsciously it forms and represents the basis of community and reflects the ideals of the Malay society. In other words no matter how we see it, cultural matrix will still be present behind the veneer of Islamic consciousness.

B. Problem Statement

Based on the factors outlined above, the problems to be studied can be summarized as follows :

1. How do the Singapore Malay community at present perform or hold their wedding culture and traditions? What are the reasons for doing them?

2. Considering the fact that majority of ethnic Malays are Muslims, how does a practising Muslim view such practices?

C. Scope & Limitation

In order to have a focused deliberation of findings from this research, the writer formulates basic parameters to base this study on. They are:

1. Working towards a definite description of what is involved in such ceremonies or practises and the idealogy which it is based on. The fine line is not to indulge in cross-cultural examination or comparitive boundaries which will make the framework of study limitless and

difficult to conceptualize.

2. To cross-examine the actual practises which is permissible according to Islamic principles in conjunction with wedding ceremonies.

D. Research Objectives

By analyzing factors which contribute to the culture and traditions being practised, the main objectives are as follows :

1. To find out how a Malay wedding ceremony is actually performed, in terms of their culture and tradtitions and why do the Malay community uphold it.

2. Parallel to that, the main purpose is not to sum up certain prognosis on the behaviour or culture of the Malay community - which is about to change or not, but rather to have a clear definition of what is permissible and what is not in the eyes of a practising Muslim.

E. Significance of Study

1. Theoretically, it is to have a better understanding of cultural practices in Singapore, in particular the culture and traditions of Malay weddings. This includes the analysis of such practices and the development of knowledge with regards to Islamic law (Syaria). Henceforth, with such understanding, hopefully this research will be a 'stepping stone' and paves the way for future studies of such kind done in Singapore.

2. Conclusive findings from this research will be used as a solid basis of argument and deliberation of facts in the case of confrontation with

scepticism and denile. This is particularly subjected to mainstream Singapore Malays who are generally educated people but are seemingly quite 'blunt' with regards to culture and traditions. As such, they become general 'followers', not really looking deep enough into their own roots.

F. Definition of Key Terms

The meanings of certain key terms or words are explained here exclusively, so as to arrive at a better understanding of their usage in the chapters that follow :

Culture : The term 'culture' has two principal usages;[9]

1. It can refer to the products of high civilization – such as literature, art and philosophy, hence its frequent use is to describe highly educated person (a cultured person);

2. It is used by anthropologists and other students of man to describe the distinctive characteristics of human history and existence, namely the creation of ideas, customs and material objects, all of which tend to accumulate and therefore provide an ever-more-complex adaptation to the natural environment.

In the first usage the existence or possession of culture distinguishes between civilized and uncivilized, educated and uneducated; in the second, the term distinguishes between humans and other animal species.

Tradition (as explained in the Longman Dictionary);[10]

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[9]John W. Bennett, *Encyclopedia International*, Vol. 5 (New York: Grolier Incorporated, 1974), 358

1. Belief, custom, or way of doing something that has existed for a long time.

   eg. Indian spiritual traditions/a family tradition

2. A group's or society's beliefs, customs or ways of things in general.

   eg. The country has a long tradition of accepting refugees.

3. To leave the same features as something that has been made or done in the past.

   eg. His latest movie is in the tradition of 1950's horror movies.

4. A way of thinking about something, especially a religion, or a group of people who think in this way.

   eg. They come from very different Christian traditions.

G. Previous Research

One similar study about cultural weddings was done by Koentjaraningrat in his book entitled '*Manusia Dan Kebudayaan Di Indonesia*'[11] (Man and Culture in Indonesia). In the eighth chapter of his book, he describes the wedding culture of the people in Flores.

Flores is an Island found amongst the many islands in the province of East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. In a village called *Manggarai*, when a couple is found to be dating and has intentions of marriage, the man's family will go the woman's side of the family, to solicit (*cangkang*) for marriage. Hence, the woman's family will normally asks for a very high and expensive dowry (*paca)* in exchange for the woman's hand in

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[10]Stephen Bullon, *Longman Advanced American Dictionary* (England: Pearson Education Limited, 2007), 1688

[11] Koentjaraningrat, *Manusia Dan Kebudayaan Di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Djambatan 2007), 195

marriage. This comprises of money, gifts and even cows and horses. And eventually, the woman's family will also bear expensive gifts for the man's side of the family. Thus, by virtue of marriage, the bride will be called '*anak nona*' while the bridegroom will be called *'anak wina'*.

The author in this research used 'Developmental Research Method' and deduced a theory about the wedding culture in *Manggarai*, Flores. The main findings manifest effects arising from present traditions practised in the research location. It seems that the livelihood of the mainstream society is embossed with cultural beliefs such that it becomes a part of their everyday lives. In short, the research focuses on what is meant to them to have such practices and what it will bring them in the future.

In comparison to the former, this study does not go into the boundaries of developmental research where it anaylizes the effect of culture and tradition of a certain community's livelihood. But rather it is to find out empirically the reasons, perceptions and beliefs of the local Malays for practising their present wedding culture and traditions.

Another interesting research about cultural weddings was done by Miss Suharti from the faculty of Syaria, State Islamic Universtiy, Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang.[12] This research was completed in the year 2008 entitled *"Tradisi Kaboro Co'i Pada Perkawinan Masyarakat Bima Perspektif Urf" (Studi Femonologis Pada Masyarakat Kecamatan Monta Kabupaten Bima)*

Basically, it explains the customs and traditions that is being practised for the past few generations by the people of Bima, with respects to holding a

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[12]Suharti, *Tradisi Kaboro Co'I Pada Perkawinan Masyarakat Bima Perspektif Urf - Studi Femonologis Pada Masyarakat Kecamatan Monta Kabupaten Bima* (Faculty of Syari'ah, UIN Malang, 2008)

wedding ceremony. In her findings, the writer goes on to explain why the people uphold such practices and what it means to them in terms of values and beliefs as a community.

The normal practice in Indonesia in general is where people regard *mahar* (dowry) and *maskawin* (wedding expenditure) as one and the same object. It is something of value and can be professed in the form of goods or money or even services; something quite rare. As opposed to this, the people in Bima regard *mahar* and *maskawin* as two different entities; the *mahar* is regarded as a 'return of favour' to the bride's family since she will be moving out of her parent's home and is handed over at the solemnization ceremony proper, while *maskawin* is perceived as a gift from the bridegroom's side of the family to be given to the bride.

Henceforth, the process of this tradition starts when a man has intentions of marriage, and then the whole village will 'come to aid' by way of contributing money or gifts or some items of use without any expectation of reconciliation. This concept of working together in collaboration for a mutual cause in helping their fellow villagers proves to be the key ingredient in this qualitative research which was done in a descriptive manner in the said location of Bima.

In contrast to this research done in Bima, this study is done in a more developed country of Singapore where characteristic of individualistic livelihood is more prominent. Even though it is a qualitative research by nature, this research stresses on sosiological and anthropological aspects of culture and traditions presently practised.

H. Structure of Discussion

In this section, the writer gives an overview of the main theme of discussion or a 'big picture' of what is going to be discussed in detail in the next few chapters that follow. From then on, it is elaborated and processed, supported by validated field data and composed systematically into a research report or thesis.

This report basically consists of five main chapters whereby each chapter has its own sub-chapters. In brief, the chapters are as follows :

Introduction - this first chapter primarily describes the background or social setting on which the research is based on. Thereafter, the writer explains the reasons as to why it is taken up as a research title and thus the main idea for doing such a report can be clearly understood from the Problem Statement. Research Objectives and Research Significance are sections which explicitly show the outcome of the research both in theoretical and practical aspects. Review of previous study (study of different wedding cultures) are duly incorporated as a basis of comparison and discussion. In short, this chapter serves as a platform in explaining and elaborating following chapters as well as clarifying the problems at hand thus showing its significance as a research topic.

Review of Related Literature – this chapter involves the study of the problem and object of study, both ontologically and epistemologically. This section is partitioned into sub-chapters (for easy reference), where the writer will be dealing with defining the concepts of Malay wedding cultures and also other definitions related specifically to wedding cultures in Islam. Hence, the basis of

anaylzing each data aquired from field research will be based alongside theories and facts from this chapter as a benchmark.

Research Method – this third chapter serves as a research instrument, with the objective of producing a more systematic and conclusive end result. This chapter is subdivided into different sections, each serving its own purpose.

Primarily, it consists of research location – that is the targeted location, selected to gather all the information related to Malay cultural weddings hence to compile a first-hand account of what is being practised amidst the festivities and traditions of such a socio-cultural event. Apart from that, this section incorporates research design and approach, data consolidation techniques, source of data and data analysis techniques where it is used as a guide to the researcher for anaylsis purposes of all data gathered.

Findings and Discussion - This fourth chapter discusses further than what is outlined in the Background Study or Introduction. Specifically, this part of the study will be a representation of data acquired from field research. The normal practice of a typical Malay wedding in Singapore, starts with the *Henna-staining* ceremony, followed by the '*Nikah*' ceremony and ends with the '*Bersanding'*, which is the actual wedding day. From all this 'action' the writer describes and discusses in detail, all the actual practices and traditions which takes place thereafter, and it is the end product after data has been processed and hence interpreted academically which takes the reader to the next step.

Analysis, discussed material and interpretation of data from different perspectives will be collaborated with the problem issue and results from theoretical findings from chapter II. This means that material which has been

studied ontologically and epistemologically in chapter II is used as a basis of discussion towards data and findings from this chapter.

The reason for doing this is to find the meeting point between field and theoretical research, with regards to the permissibility of such practices from Islamic perspectives and thus arriving at a conclusive solution of which the writer desires. Therefore conceptually, analysis is done by elaborating the data and findings which is in cohesion with the problem being studied.

Consclusion and Suggestions - this last chapter highlights important points that have been discussed and it is not a repetition of previous chapters. The writer also reviews each individual chapter in brief which will ultimately be synchronised with that which has been oulined in the Problem Statement in chapter I. After exhaustive finding, understanding and thus analyzing of data, the main aim here is to give a viable conclusion to the problem at hand so that it can be used as basis for future research of the same academic interest.

The researcher also includes suggestions or recommendations ensuing the problem discussed with the hope to inspire other kind of research related to the subject matter. It is also directed to authorized parties or institutions so that they might have a better understanding of the problem discussed so as to find better ways and more pragmatic solutions in solving it in the near future.