



CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Processes Of A Malay Wedding

In 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. The excitement begins normally three days before the wedding. On this day, the bride-to-be shows off her trousseau, changing five to six times throughout the day, as a sign of good luck. Her friends and relatives are invited to view her wardrobe. A day after this, the wedding ceremony proper starts with the *henna-staining*. During this ceremony, yellowish oil, extracted from *henna* leaves is applied

on the fingertips of the couple by friends and relatives. It announces their forthcoming unity.¹

The details and descriptions of these processes are discussed in this chapter with excerpts from actual field interviews used as a basis of information and credibility.

1. Engagement

Before the actual wedding proper, there is the engagement ritual or some might call it a 'promise to marry' ritual. It is better known as *bertunang* by the locals. This happens normally 1 or 2 years before the couple actually gets married. Representatives from both families come to meet at a specific time and place (normally at the bride-to-be's house) where they will convene to come to an agreement on the specific terms and conditions of the anticipated marriage. This includes the cost of dowry and wedding expenditure to be given, date of actual solemnization and wedding and other minor details. Often the wedding is held on one convenient weekend so as to accommodate relatives who live far away and to reduce costs. Mdm Sulehah commented on this :

Biasanya kita mulakan dengan datang merisik dari pihak laki-laki untuk tentukan waktu pertunangan, perkawinan dan untuk tetapkan majlis perkawinan dan harga hantaran dan yang lain-lain. Sudah sampai hari pertunangan itu, orang kita tetapkan juga, jangka waktu pertunangan dan syarat-syarat lain. Ini semacam perjanjian dengan pihak perempuan, kalau ada perubahan atau kalau dibatalkan atau kalau ada tuh yang terus langsung dengan nikah.²

Mdm Sulehah stresses here, the importance of having such a ritual as it serves as a pact between the two parties involved. It also shows the importance

¹<http://www.themuslimweekly.com>, accessed on 5/12/2011

²Mdm Sulehah, *Interview* (Tampines, 20 January 2012)

of having all the conditions laid out in advance prior to any shortcomings that might occur within the stipulated time before the actual marriage.

Norashikin & Syazana gave their views on this :

*To me, our culture and tradition is very rich. Ni pun sekarang dah dikurangkan. Kalau nak ikutkan last time lagi banyak dia punya processes, dia punya adat yang kita dah buang ataupun dah terlalu leceh. Macam dulu ada merisik dulu, baru meminang baru tunang. Macam sekarang dah cut short. Ada orang meminang dan terus tunang, tak ada merisik. Kita punya culture dah tukar pasal pemodenan.*³

The informants noted that there have been a lot of changes in terms of this engagement ritual. *Merisik* (solicitation for marriage) is normally undertaken by family members or relatives and is done discreetly, a few months or years before the parties or families involved come together in the pre-wedding meeting to discuss the details for the engagement ceremony. According to the interviewees, much of this is outdone and has given way to simplicity and in lieu of modernisation. Since nowadays, couples get to know each other without any family intervention or recommendation, they would rather get engaged without the *merisik* formalities and get married soonest possible.

A ‘promise to marry’ has no legal recognition in Islam, whereas on the fulfillment of promise in general, the Quran lays great emphasis on this issue. A compromise between the two is reflected in the statutory provisions related to engagement or ‘*khitbah*’ in some Muslim countries like Brunei, Iraq, Syria and others. The law in these countries makes it clear that engagement or any

³Norashikin & Syazana, *Interview* (Bedok, 23 January 2012)

other formality short of *nikah* – like recitation of *fatihah* – will not constitute a marriage.⁴

2. Henna-staining Ceremony

The wedding ceremony proper starts with the henna-staining ceremony three days before the actual wedding. This is also called the *berinai* ceremony and during this ceremony, yellowish oil, extracted from henna leaves is applied on the fingertips and feet of the couple by friends and relatives. Some may include all the family members as it is a way of announcing their forthcoming unity as husband and wife and the joining of the two families in kinship.

According to Ustazah Farhana :

*Culture yang masih diikuti masyarakat kita adalah, malam berinai – pengantin akan memakai inai beserta ahli keluarganya dan juga bacaan marhaban atau berzanji dan juga khatam al-Quran. Tujuan ini semua ialah untuk memberi keberkahan untuk pegantin.*⁵

The informant reaffirmed that this tradition of *berinai* (henna-staining) is still being practised alongside with other rituals like the *marhaban* or *berzanji* (songs and verses of praises) and *khatam al-Quran* (recitation of the Quran). All these are done with the hope that the marriage will be showered with blessings and it's a way to show joy and gratefulness. Madam Juliana remarked :

*Kalau ikut orang-orang dulu, tradisi seperti berinai dan tepung tawar, hanya tradisi tapi..... what is it for actually?.....Kita mesti pahami apa yang kita buat,.....so it's a thin line ah between budaya dan agama.*⁶

The informant believes that this ritual (*berinai*) is just a traditional practice and doesn't serve any important function to anyone who is getting

⁴Tahir Mahmood, *Personal law in Islamic Countries, History, Text and Comparative Analysis* (New Delhi: Academy of Law and Religion, 1987), 269

⁵Ustazah Farhana, *Interview* (Bedok, 13 February 2012)

⁶Mdm Juliana, *Interview* (Pasir Ris, 17 February 1012)

married. It is only done in the olden days where people were generally less educated and did not really understand why they did certain things and what were its cultural or traditional significance. She emphasizes on the importance of knowing the difference between tradition and religion and that one has to understand the concept of what he is practising.

The actual origin of this ritual is from the Arabs. It is decorating the hands and feet with henna (a ritual known as the '*Laylat al-Henna*' or "henna night" or "night of henna") a few days before being wed. That evening, other members of the bride's family and guests also place henna on their own hands. This ritual is practised in the United Arab Emirates. As for the Arabs in Dubai, after the negotiating families have proceeded with the '*al-Akhd*' (a marriage contract agreement), the bride goes through the ritual of a "bridal shower" known as '*Laylat al-Henna*', the henna tattooing of the bride's hands and feet, a service signifying attractiveness, fortune and healthiness.⁷

3. Religious Solemnization

Marriage is a contract, and the *akad nikah* or religious solemnization effectively forges the union. Religious solemnization of the marriage takes place on the wedding eve. Known as the *nikah ceremony rite*, it is required by both the Islamic law and the civic law to legalise a Malay wedding.

The solemnization is normally presided by a *kadhi*, a religious official of the Syariah Court. In the olden days, it was customary for the bride's biological father to perform this function. The *akad nikah* ceremony is in effect a verbal contract between the bride's father or his representative

⁷Islamic Marital Practices, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_marital_practices, accessed on 21/4/2012

(in this case the *kadhi*) and the groom. A small sum of money called the ‘*mas kahwin*’ or ‘*mahr*’ (in Singapore, it is S\$100 as of 2007) seals the contract.

The dialogue is as follows, and must be articulated clearly as to be heard by two witnesses :

Kadhi : “*I marry thee to (so-and-so) with the mas kahwin of S\$100*”

Groom : “*I accept this marriage with (so-and-so) with the mas kahwin of S\$100*”

The simplicity of this ritual belies the tremendous responsibilities of the groom to care for his bride, and this is reinforced in a brief lecture on marriage and its responsibilities delivered later by the *kadhi*. The groom is also reminded that, should he fail to provide both spiritual and physical sustenance for his wife, the marriage may be dissolved if a complaint is made to the Syariah Court.

One needs to distinguish between *mas kahwin* and *hantaran* (dowry). The small sum of *mas kahwin* is to ensure that even poor people could marry, for marriage is encouraged for all healthy Muslims. The *hantaran*, on the other hand, is more customary and may reach thousands of dollars. Often, the *hantaran* takes the form of both cash and jewelry or clothing and expensive gifts. Mr Faisal commented on this :

*Trend sekarang lebih menonjolkan (ada tendency) harga hantaran, kalau boleh waktu perwakilan tuh atau ijab kabul, harga hantaran mesti nak declare....sampai ada yang tak puas hati bila hantaran tak declare.....sudah jadi Singapore Malay society punya trend. Zaman kita dulu, cuma declare mas kawin saja,.....I think that is more important.*⁸

⁸Mr Faisal, *Interview* (Joo Chiat Place, 31 January 2012)

The informant gave his view on this uprising phenomenon. It seems that in general, Malays are more concerned on the price tagged on the *hantaran* or dowry at the time of solemnization. According to him, the trend is that the dowry or wedding expenditure has to be made known to the masses and it constitutes a kind of prestige as to who has the claim of giving or getting the highest dowry in town.

Whereas according to Islamic rules with respect to a marriage, it is the *mas kawin* that we should be more particular with – making it feasible and affordable so that it would not be a burden to the bridegroom-to-be with good intentions of marriage. Mdm Izan explained further regarding this issue :

Kita lihat juga menjadi culture orang kita, tarukkan harga hantaran yang tinggi berdasarkan pada pendidikan atau kelulusan dan ekonomi anak perempuan yang nak dikawinkan. Ini suatu culture yang 'tak healthy', kerana keadaan macam ini, mereka terpaksa cari wang untuk adakan hantaran yang mahal (kerana ikutkan trend). Sampaikan ada yang berhutang dan 'gamble' kerana terpaksa ikutkan trend atau keadaan ini.....sampai ada tuh yang tak datang dan tundakan majlis.⁹

Mdm Izan expressed similar concerns in her interview. In addition, she gave reasons to the trend of putting a high price on the dowry. According to her, it is based on the education level and factors of economy. This means that the higher the bride's education level, the higher is the dowry and another reason being that prices of commodities and services are forever increasing. According to her, it is not a good culture to adopt since this may result in negative consequences like resorting to gambling and having debts just to raise enough dowry as promised by the bridegroom's family.

⁹Mdm Izan, *Interview* (Joo Chiat Road, 31 January 2012)

Marriage (*nikah*) is considered as an act of worship (*ibadah*). It is virtuous to conduct it in a mosque and keeping the ceremony simple. The marriage ceremony is a social as well as a religious activity. Islam advocates simplicity in ceremonies and celebrations. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) considered simple weddings as the best weddings and this was shown when he married Zainab.

مَا أَوْلَمَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ عَلَى امْرَأَةٍ مِنْ نِسَائِهِ أَكْثَرَ - أَوْ أَفْضَلَ - مِمَّا أَوْلَمَ عَلَى زَيْنَبَ، فَقَالَ ثَابِتُ الْبُنَانِيُّ: بِمَا أَوْلَمَ؟ قَالَ: أَطَعَمَهُمْ خُبْزًا وَلَحْمًا حَتَّى تَرَكَوهُ

“The Prophet did not give a better wedding banquet on the occasion of marrying any of his wives than the one he gave on marrying Zainab. Thâbit al-Bunâniy asked,: With what did he make a feast with? He said : The the banquet was with (consisted of) one sheep, and they ate their fill.”

[Bukhari – Narrated by Anas]¹⁰

The *istiadat hantar belanja* (sending of dowry and gifts) and *upacara akad nikah* (solemnization) often take place at the bride's place. The recent trend, though, is to hold the solemnization in the mosque, as was performed during Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) time. The actual solemnization is usually conducted by the *kadhi* (marriage official) in front of witnesses after both partners are asked separately if they consent to the marriage. Gifts are then exchanged and there may be a recitation of the Quran.

Gifts from the groom are checked to ensure that they are as promised. They will then be displayed in the bridal chamber. Gifts of clothes, toiletries and

¹⁰Muhammad Ibn Ismail al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Narrated by Anas), Vol. 7, Bk 62, No. 97

even prayer mats (to signify their adherence to the religion) are presented in intricate boxes or forms known as *gubahan*.

4. Wedding Day

The wedding day itself is considered an auspicious occasion and is normally held on a Sunday and during months where they coincide with the national school holidays (usually in June, September, November or December). This is to facilitate busy working parents as most adults do not work on Sundays and since their children are having holidays, it makes more sense to hold it on that day.

The celebration on a wedding day or *walîmatul al-urus* as it is called by the locals, starts at 11 am and ends at about 4 o'clock in the evening. Throughout the day, the family members of the bride or bridegroom, especially the parents or elders, will be busy receiving guests and supervising the whole ceremony. The feast is often a noisy, lively and an informal affair. This is further enhanced by the colourful costumes worn by the guests themselves. A Malay band group may be hired to add to the gay atmosphere. Suraidi Sujaie commented on this :

Majlis sekarang (yang baiknya), pada umumnya di Singapura, di waktu pagi, mereka adakan marhaban, doa selamat, khatamul Quran dan sebagainya. Malangnya ini semua berubah apabila majlis bermula...ahhh, ada yang adakan DJ dan kuda kepang dan sebagainya, yang mana unsur kurafat sudah dicampur-adukkan.¹¹

It is a common practice to have some kind of prayers and recitation of the Quran, in the early morning hours of the actual wedding day (before 11 am). This to signify blessings for the newly-wed couple and prayers offered so as to have prosperity and longevity in their marriage. Mr Suraidi agrees with this but

¹¹Mr Suraidi, *Interview* (3rd February 2012)

according to him the ‘problem’ starts soon afterwards – that is, as the festivities starts, there’s bound to be an incorporation of other kinds of customs which is either of non-Malay origin or non-Islamic. This is like having a DJ (disc jockey) or a *kuda kepang* act joining in the merry-making. Mdm Sulehah gave her views on this :

Waktu majlis perkawinan tuh, kalau dijemput kumpulan rebana atau tari-menari orang Melayu kita...kata orang tuh masih ok. Ada budaya yang memang bukan dari budaya melayu macam yang pakai DJ, karaoke atau yang panggil tarian Bhangra dan kuda kepang atau yang lain-lain. Benda camni memang bukan ada unsur budaya kita, memang tak perlu, tapi sekadar menghibur atau menyenangkan orang atau hati tetamu di majlis.¹²

This view given by Mdm Sulehah reinforces the incorporation of other foreign culture in a typical Malay wedding ceremony. Mr Suraidi and Mdm Sulehah both agree that most of these cultural influences are basically not of Malay culture origin. What the researcher has observed and understood from the interviews held is that there seems to be a variety of cultural influences incorporated in the wedding day celebrations such as DJ, karaoke service, Malay or Banghra dance troupe, *kuda kepang* troupe, live band, nasyid singing group and others.

The invited guests are invited to partake in a meal or feast of merry-making in celebration of the newlyweds. This is usually held in the void deck of a housing flat so as to accommodate the large number of guests invited. Besides cutting down on costs, holding the feast in the void deck also enables the guests to view the bridal chamber and the *bersanding* (sitting in state or enthronement) ceremony which is often held in the bride’s or bridegroom’s home. But the place

¹²Mdm Sulehah, *Interview* (Tampines, 5th February 2012)

of ceremony seems to undergo some changes, as what the trend is nowadays, and according to the following informant, there are numerous substitutes with regards to that. Ust Suhimi Wagiman explained on this :

Ada yang bikin walimah di hotel-hotel mewah di mana mereka jemput orang-orang tertentu saja, ada di community center, gedung-gedung perkawinan yang disewakan (macam kat Joo Chiat tuh), multi-purpose hall atau di bawah blok.....ini semua tergantung budget dan kekuatan ekonomi masing-masing.¹³

The informant explains the different venues that Malays use nowadays to hold a wedding ceremony. It ranges from the humble void deck of HDB flats to the luxury of hotels and specially booked accommodation like a multi-purpose hall or a ballroom. It all depends on the amount of money they are willing to spend on the occasion.

With respect to the wedding preparation, it is often based on *gotong-royong* (cooperation) among friends and relatives, for which the Malays are most well-known for. Again in Singapore, simplicity has given way to tradition and requires that such tasks be undertaken by caterers or wedding planners. Mr Zainal elaborated further on this issue :

Dulu culture orang kita gotong-royong, masak sama-sama dan bersembang atau 'rewang' bersama saudara. Sekarang lebih banyak pakai wedding planner atau order je, untuk senangkan lah. Sometimes waste of money, tapi nampaknya times changes (memang berbeza), sekarang orang kita punya buying power lebih kuat, and they are willing to pay. Kerana orang Melayu sekarang tak nak terikat dengan budaya yang dulu atau dikata cara lama.¹⁴

According to this informant, the olden ways of cooperation among family members and relatives alike, is slowly fading away, giving way to modernised

¹³Ust Suhimi Wagiman, *Interview* (Chua Chu Kang, 9th February 2012)

¹⁴Mr Zainal, *Interview* (Joo Chiat Road, 31 January 2012)

methods of preparation for wedding ceremonies, as in the use of wedding planners. This is to save time and energy. Otherwise, much of it would be needed in the whole night of preparation for the actual wedding . Also, the concept of ‘gotong-royong’ is considered outdated especially to the new, younger generation of Singapore Malays.

5. Wedding Favours

During the wedding ceremony, the guests are presented with a *bunga telur* each. Literally, this means "flower and egg". Previously, the gifts were eggs dyed red placed in a cup or container with some glutinous rice at the base. Sometimes a paper flower is added to decorate the gift. The egg symbolises a fertile union and the hope that the marriage will produce many children. Indeed, the Prophet (pbuh) had told Muslims :

تَنَّاكِحُوا، تَكْتَرُوا، فَإِنِّي أَبَاهِي بِكُمْ الْيَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةَ

“Marry and produce many children so that I may be proud of your numbers on Judgement Day.”

[Narrated by Hisham Ibn Sa’din – Abd Razâq]¹⁵

Today, most gifts are commercially prepared and may take the form of chocolates, jelly or even a cake of soap. Ustazah Nurhikmah noted on these changes with her comment :

*Kalau budaya dulu, macam renjis-renjis memang dah takde (dorang pon dah tak nak).....yang penting yang paling moden dan gah. Contohnya, kadang berkat pon dah banyak berubah...tak pakai telur atau pulut, macam mak-mak kita dulu...kalau boleh kasi barang digital, cawan dan pinggan-mangkok, semua lah!*¹⁶

¹⁵ Abu Bakr Abd al-Razaq, *Al-Musonif Abd Al-Razaq* (India, Al-Majlis Al-Ilmiy, 1403 H), Vol. 6, Pg. 173, No. 10391

¹⁶ Ustazah Nurhikmah, *Interview* (Chua Chu Kang, 9th February 2012)

According to the informant, a lot of cultural changes occur due to modernisation and that the Malays in general would like to be kept up-to-date even when it concerns culturally symbolic items like the *bunga telur*. This results in much of the traditional ways (from older generations) being dispensed of or just forgotten, in lieu of modification or innovation.

6. Enthronement (Bersanding)

The word *bersanding* literally means "The bride and bridegroom sitting together on the bridal couch". Known as the *pelamin* (dais), this couch is the centrepiece of the whole ceremony. Two *pelamins* are required - one in the bride's house and the other in the bridegroom's. Ust Suhimi Wagiman agrees that a number of traditions are actually imported from other sources such as Hindu, Arab culture and others alike and so he verifies that *bersanding* ceremony is one of those traditions which is adapted from the Hindu's wedding ceremony.

Ust Suhimi Wagiman stated :

Dari dulu budaya Hindu sudah diimport...tapi tak lah yang sembah-sembah api.... cuma ikot budaya cara bersanding dan tak salah lah kalau dorang tuh nak ikot budaya mana pon. Ada yang ikot budaya Arab.....dorang tak nak ikot budaya Melayu.¹⁷

The informant asserts that it is only the normal wedding customs of the Hindus that is being followed and not to the extent of their religious beliefs. So it is generally still acceptable (as Muslims) as it is just a matter of preference which custom they would like to adopt.

As the *bersanding* ceremony customarily takes place in the afternoon, the bridegroom entertains guests at his own house in the morning. At the agreed

¹⁷Ust Suhimi Wagiman, *Interview* (Chua Chu Kang, 9th February 2012)

time, he is escorted in a procession with a *hadrah* or *kompang* band (male music group)¹⁸ to his bride's house.

On arrival, the *mak andam* (beautician) as well as members of the bride's family will waylay the groom and ask for an "entrance fee". Only when they are satisfied with the amount presented that the bridegroom is allowed to take his place besides his bride. After successfully overcoming the "obstacles", the ceremony takes place. Relatives will sprinkle petals and rice (fertility symbols) on the couple seated on the "throne".

An *astakona*, a tiered pedestalled tray, is also placed in front of the *pelamin*. Each tier contains a mound of cooked yellow rice studded all over with red-dyed eggs. This tray will later be presented to the *emak pengantin* (a close friend or relative chosen to be the matron of honour for the marriage) as an act of appreciation for her help during the ceremony. The groom then sits with the bride on the *pelamin*. After this the couple returns to the bridegroom's house in a procession. They are normally accompanied by the *hadrah* band. The music proclaims their marriage to the world. At the bridegroom's house, the '*bersanding*' ceremony is repeated for the benefit of the bridegroom's kinfolk. This is followed by feasting and merry-making (details regarding this subject-matter are similar to those explained in the earlier section). The wedding celebrations come to an end when the bridal pair returns home to the bride's house to pay respects to her family.

¹⁸Hadrah – A group of men beating a rhythm on their timbrels and reading verses from the Quran. The arrival of the groom is heralded by the hadrah troupe. This group, of mostly teenagers, will beat the kompang (hand drums) and sing Quranic verses and good wishes. The groom is often flanked by bunga manggar (palm blossoms) carriers and a busload of relatives and friends.

7. Attributes of The Malay Wedding Processes

The analysis of culture is no easy task, due to the ever changing dynamics and variables involved. There are numerous factors which attributes to the evolution and transformation of culture and traditions both internally and externally. This task of analyzing also involves the deciphering of detailed descriptions of multiple aspects of society and environment, so as to make sense when seen from different perspectives. Therefore, the author utilises an anthropological approach as a tool of analyzing data.

It seems that the Malay wedding processes have gone through a lot of changes. This may be viewed as though they are suffering from a climate of decline in terms of culture and traditions. The influence of dominant methodologies and foreign or external ideologies have made their impact on them over time while other internal factors such as different culture traits also support the changes both directly and indirectly.

The consensus amongst most of the informants, is that definitely there has been changes as to how the Malay society practise their wedding traditions which has been localized and greatly modified from its "original" form a few decades ago. Such localization process has manifests itself in the form of varied cultural rituals and traditions, as well as cultural expressions such as the *kuda kepang*, *Bhanghra* dance troupe, live band performances and more the religious-related ones like the *nasyîd* singing troupe. Due to all of these modified features, a distinct form of cultural evolution has emerged.

Cultural evolution is said to be the process of invention, diffusion and elaboration of the behaviour that is learned and taught in groups and is

transmitted from generation to generation; often used to refer to the development of social complexity.¹⁹ And it is evident that the Malays have gone through a form of cultural evolution which transposes itself in the different types of wedding traditions performed by them during different time zones. In conjunction with this cultural evolution, one of the informant, Ust Abdul Rahman explained his view where he defines a specific time line of occurrences.

Tradisi atau kultur perkawinan orang Melayu Singapura adalah suatu acara yang memberi tahu orang bahwa sifulan sudah berumahtangga.

Tradisinya terbagi tiga, yaitu :

Pertama, tahun 40'an hingga 60'an – lebih pada adat kemelayuan ada pendekatan unsur-unsur Islam yang lebih mendalam. Kerana waktu hijrah orang Indonesia dan Malaysia ke Singapura, dan budaya-budaya masing-masing dibawa ke sini seperti orang Jawa, Boyan, Bugis, Melaka, Riau dan lain-lain.

Keduanya, tahun 60'an hingga 80'an – tetap ada unsur Islam seperti marhaban dan maulud, tapi sudah dimasukkan unsur-unsur lain seperti ada musik atau 'live band' yang lebih mainkan lagu Reggae dan Pop yeh-yeh (lagu-lagu melayu 60'an). Di situ ada juga joget lambak dan unsur-unsur lagu disco yang diselitkan.

Dan pada masa tahun 90'an – hingga sekarang – Adab-adab Islam memang sudah agak kurang. Budayanya agak beza, mereka adakan pesta 'dinner', adengan DJ dan karaoke (yang memekakkan telinga).²⁰

In brief, he explained that the culture and approach in the 40's to 60's are more Islamic oriented because of the influx of immigrants like the Javanese, Boyanese and Melaccan Malays. While during the 60's to 80's the influence of reggae music, pop yeh-yeh (Malay 60's music) and even disco was the 'in' thing which overwhelmed the traditional wedding cultures to a certain extent. And lately during our present time, the culture is more influenced by

¹⁹Aaron Podolefsky/Peter J. Brown, *Applying Cultural Anthropology-An Introduction Reader*, 5th Edition (California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2001), 301

²⁰Ust Abdul Rahman, *Interview* (Bedok 19th Feb 2012)

western ideology such as having a dinner reception dinner that includes loud music which is definitely non-Islamic.

The informant asserts that changes and evolution to the Malay cultural heritage happens at every turn of ten or twenty years. This may be considerably true as historical records of Malay wedding does show significant changes making a traditional wedding turning into a more contemporary styled celebration. This notion of cultural evolution is substantiated by interviews with more senior informants like Ustazah Farhana, Mdm Juliana, Mr Zainal and a few others. They have verbal references from their parents and grandparents who have lived during those period of time mentioned and have experiences to validate this theory. Photo collections of Malay wedding ceremonies during the 60's, 70's and 80's are also kept by them which the researcher verifies to be authentic research documents.

The product of cultural evolution is evident when the wedding celebrations include a live band (playing a mix of pop and rock songs) or DJ service which is of western influence and culture. This is definitely a far cry from its humble beginnings where normally Malay traditional singing or dancing is employed, representing more of the original Malay cultural values and ideals. Part of evolution is actually a diffusion of foreign culture into the local ones and thus elaborate into its own brand of culture practices as what a prominent anthropologist once remarked; "Culture is contagious." meaning

that customs, beliefs, tools, techniques, folktales, ornaments and so on may diffuse from one people or region to another.²¹

a. Cultural Polarities

After careful interpretation and scrutinizing of data, the writer comes to realize that there are a few reasons and factors as to why the Malays practise and uphold their traditions as they are today. Within the period and area of study, the author employed cross-referencing of data to have a better understanding of these reasons which predominantly are due to a variety of cultural polarities of the Malay society and that of trend adaptation.

One distinct characteristic of a typical Malay wedding is the phenomenon of having the *kuda kepang* as part of the celebrations. As explained in chapter II; *kuda kepang* is of Javanese origin although it is called as '*kuda lumping*' or even by other names in different parts of Indonesia. The very reason the host or 'doer' employs them into the midst of the merry-making is because of their Javanese lineage. The local Malays may come from Javanese descent from their parents' or even grandparents' lineage, thus they feel they belong to this particular ethnic group of Malays. So it only makes sense to have their cultural traditions being displayed in one of their most important event that happens once in a lifetime. It gives them a sense of traditional pride and purpose because it shows that they have an association with some cultural heritage, even though sometimes it is only for the parents' sake.

Through observation and comparison of data, these polarities are quite distinct, one being of Javanese and the other of Malay descent, but they are still

²¹Leslie A. White, *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol 16, 15th Edition (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Incorporated, 1995), 877

inter-related somehow to a certain degree of cultural ideals. Another similar case, is the incorporation of *Bhangra* dance troupe in the wedding celebrations, whereby most probably the ‘doers’ are of Indian or Pakistani descent (whether directly or indirectly). This ethnic group also have their own set of values and cultural ideals and therefore have to be understood on their own terms.

The following informant gave her view regarding this issue, gathering from her own experiences with Malay weddings. Ustazah Farhana commented :

Apa yang saya lihat sekarang yaitu tradisi cara perkawinan orang Melayu, adalah mengikut cara atau budaya orang Hindu dan juga ada kesinambungan dengan adat orang Negeri Sembilan (Malaysia) dikatakan cara adat ‘mupate’. Ini tergantung pada silsilah keluarga masing-masing, kalau memang ada keturunan dari atau kaitan dari silsilah demikian, maka lebih kuat budaya itu dilakukan.²²

According to Ustazah Farhana, the Malay wedding traditions being practised at present in general are linked with either that of Hindu’s or of Malay traditions from Negeri Sembilan (Malaysia) called ‘*mupate*’ traditions. This depends on the degree of association that each individual or group feels. In order to arrest the decadence that is threatening their own cultural heritage or traditions, these groups of Malays feel ‘compelled’ to practise cultures and traditions that are similar to the ‘original version’.

From the examples cited, it can be understood that evidently it is not the question of the superiority of one culture over another, but rather these practices come about due to an ‘internal bond’ which is irrefutable sociologically.

²²Ustazah Farhana, *Interview* (Bedok, 13th February 2012)

This 'relationship' between one culture to another assumes that it is functional and acceptable even with the symmetry of different cultural polarities.

b. Culture Traits

The Singapore Malays have their own culture traits which implicates their different social background and descendents. As a society or individual, these culture traits play an important role as to how they perceive their own culture to be at present and as to how they perform their wedding traditions. Therefore, logically a culture trait must offer some advantage, some utility or pleasure, to be sought and accepted by a certain group or individual.

Leslie A. White says that the concept of culture embraces the culture trait of mankind as a whole. An understanding of human culture is facilitated, however by analysing the "complex whole" into the component parts of each category. In somewhat the same sense that the atom has been regarded as the unit of matter, the cell as the unit of life, so the culture traits is generally regarded as the unit of culture. A trait may be an object (knife), a way of doing something (meaning), a belief (in spirits) or an attitude (the so-called horror of incest). But within the category of culture, each trait is related to the other traits. A distinguishable and relatively self-contained cluster of traits is conventionally called a culture complex.²³

Through field observation, the author recorded a variety of culture traits that were demonstrated during the course of a Malay wedding which in turn explains the traditions that they practise. By having different culture traits, each group or individuals claim their right to perform their traditions in their own way

²³Leslie A. White, *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol 16, 15th Edition (Chicago: 1995), 878

which they deem appropriate. This is especially true and clear during the wedding feast where the host incorporates foreign cultural elements like having contemporary English or traditional Arabic concepts of decorations. Others may include acts or performances as part of the merry making, like a *Zapin* dance troupe (traditional Malay dance) or having a mobile karaoke service. Mdm Najiha gave her views on the issue of different culture traits and incorporation of other cultures.

Walau trend atau culture which is non-Malay, but it is something good even though it may come from Western culture or Hindu culture, tapi tak go against aqidah Islam,....why not?.....Example macam a one-time seating reception or dinner, ini memang diimport dari Western culture..... something yang we can follow.²⁴

She acknowledges the fact that there seems to be the trend of incorporating other foreign cultures which is non-Malay. According to her, this is acceptable as long as it does not go against Islam's principles and beliefs. Western and Chinese culture of a one-seating dinner reception is acceptable because it has its positive values like promoting of family or communal ties and it reduces wastage at the same time. What she meant is that there's always 'two sides of the coin' to a certain culture trait and one has to look at both angles to see its true value and meaning.

The following are excerpts from three other informants detailing the different kind of culture traits that is evident in a typical Malay wedding. Mdm Juliana :

Dalam konteks sekarang, tradisi dulu masih agak dipertahankan seperti hantaran, bersanding dan lain-lain lagi. Zaman sekarang dah menjadi budaya campuran atau mixed culture, seperti budaya Cina, Hindu dan lain-lain.

²⁴Mdm Najiha, *Interview* (Joo Chiat Place, 31 January 2012)

Ini kerana trend atau ikut-ikutan dari cara atau budaya orang lain...seperti adakan sesi fotografi sebelum mereka bernikah. Itu sebenarnya cara orang luar seperti budaya orang Cina atau Barat.²⁵

According to Mdm Juliana, certain traditions are still being upheld to the present day but with the inclusion of other traditions. Presently, there is a good mix of cultures incorporated into a Malay wedding. Western cultures are also being practised such as having a photography session before the actual solemnization ceremony. Mr Suraidi also gave his opinion on this :

Pandangan saya sendiri, culture perkawinan masyarakat Melayu Islam di Singapura, itu lebih mirip adat-adat bercampur,.....adat-adat Jawa, India dan Melayu semenanjung. Kebanyakan adat-istiadat yang lama, lebih mirip pada adat orang Hindu, seperti tepong tawar, pecah telur dan sebagainya.²⁶

Mr Suraidi acknowledged the fact that the present Malay wedding culture is a mix from different cultures and traditions imported mainly from Java and India. He commented that a spectrum of Hinduism lingers within the Malay culture and traditions. Ust Suhimi Wagiman explained further :

Ketika mengadakan majlis walimah tuh, orang kita mengikut pada apa yang mereka berpegang (apa yang difahami) dan tergantung pada prinsip masing-masing. Yang tegas tuh (boleh dikatakan ekstrim) adakan walimah dengan pisahkan laki-laki dan perempuan,..... tiada lagu, DJ, kuda kepang atau lain-lain. Yang agak sederhana tuh, cuma ikut-mengikut cara orang lain bikin walimah mereka.²⁷

The informant stressed that rituals and traditions are carried out based on individual understanding and principles. These are grouped into different categories; the more extreme ones where they segregate the men and women folk in their seating arrangement and the more subtle category where they tend to follow the mainstream Malay society in terms of their cultural practices.

²⁵Mdm Juliana, *Interview* (Pasir Ris, 17th February 2012)

²⁶Mr Suraidi, *Interview* (Jalan Kayu, 3rd February 2012)

²⁷Ust Suhimi Wagiman, *Interview* (Chua Chu Kang, 9th February 2012)

Based on these commentaries, the author sums up what an anthropologist defines as acculturation; the process of extensive borrowing of aspects of another culture, usually as a result of external pressure, and often results in the decline of traditional culture. This does not dictate that traditional culture is totally lost or dispensed of, as in the case of assimilation. Assimilation describes the process of change that a minority ethnic group may experience when it moves to a country where another culture dominates. By assimilating, the minority adopts the patterns and norms of its host culture. It is incorporated into the dominant culture to the point that it no longer exists as a separate cultural unit.²⁸

c. Trend Adaptation and Competitiveness

Evidently, the Malays want to be able to follow or being up-to-date with the current trend including whatever is being practised at present time. If they don't follow the mainstream society and their practices of trendy cultures, they might feel being left out of the general 'flow of things'. There is also peer pressure from friends or relatives who will label them to be 'outsiders' for not doing the 'in thing' or practising trendy cultures like the others.

Although the older generation and the more adherent Muslims might not approve of it, as it normally leads to extravagance and wastage or sometimes non-Islamic traits might be included in the occasion, the general Malay society seems to think that it's better to do something rather than nothing at all. In other words, it's better to have or 'borrow' some kind of culture ideals and concepts to cling on to, than having none. This is partly due to the

²⁸Conrad Phillip Kottak, *Mirror for Humanity, A concise Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, 4th Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 74

diminishing older traditions and with the onslaught of new ones and factors of modernisation. It is also due to borrowing of one's culture or custom whereby it goes through a localization process and ultimately manifests itself in the form of cultural expressions.

The following are commentaries from informants regarding the said issue.

According to Mr Faisal :

Nampaknya niat atau 'game' untuk sampaikan khabar tentang perkawinan sudah lari. (Hajat sebenarnya mungkin dah berubah). Kebanyakan orang nak berlumba dan bersaing dalam segi kebesaran majlis, jumlah orang dijemput. Ibaratkan orang kita nak 'the first of everything' – barang nak serba baru atau lain dari yang lain, macam barang custom made or something different lah. Market price belanja biasanya about 40-50k (termasuk dengan makan).²⁹

Mr Faisal explained the uprising trend of being 'competitive' in holding a wedding ceremony. As a result, it deviates from its original intention of broadcasting the marriage to the masses so as not to have any negative implication or 'distorted view'. He asserts further regarding the trend of wanting the latest and the more luxurious wedding ceremony and that who is able to 'outgun the rest of the herd' in terms of expenditure which presently can reach up to thousands of dollars. Mdm Juliana also emphasized :

Kalau tak ikut yang berlaku sekarang mereka rasa ketinggalan dengan mengatakan.....Everybody is doing it, why can't I!.³⁰

In this short statement, Mdm Juliana expresses her concerns over the competitiveness among local Malays. This is mainly because they don't want to be 'left behind' in terms of new trends and want to be on par with the latest trends. Ustazah Nurhikmah remarked :

²⁹Mr Faisal, *Interview* (Joo Chiat Place, 31 January 2012)

³⁰Mdm Juliana, *Interview* (Pasir Ris, 17 February 2012)

Dari segi perkawinan, yang penting tuh adalah akad nikah, tapi sekarang di Singapura nih, saya tengok macam-macam. Kalau tengok walimah yang grand, dorang nak yang lebih grand...dah jadi macam competition (persaingan) gitu.³¹

The informant stressed on the importance of the ‘*akad nikah*’ which is the verbal contract during the religious solemnization ceremony. But what she noticed at present is the adaptation of various cultures with all its grandeur and lavishness thrown into a single wedding ceremony. Therefore it becomes bent into a competition of the sort; who can manage a better and grand wedding ceremony.

B. Muslims’ View On Cultural Practices

The outlook towards life is an integral part of cultural ideology which makes assumptions as to how we answer the question ‘why’ about somethings in life. To answer this question, society expresses its culture in order to attain certain meanings.³² We have seen through findings and observation of the Malay culture that there is a myriad of reasons as to why the Malays dispense, obliterate or preserve certain culture and traditions. When they express it objectively, it is mainly due to acculturation and diffusion from other cultural ideologies such as Western or Chinese ideologies and thus becomes what is called innovation of new cultures. On the other hand, when it is done subjectively, it is mainly because of their association with religion, that Malays are generally Muslims.

Although inseparable, there is a thin line between religion and tradition, and more than often the actual view or perception of it becomes vague.

³¹Ustazah Nurhikmah, *Interview* (Chua Chu Kang, 9th February 2012)

³²M. Munandar Soelaeman, *Ilmu Budaya Dasar, Suatu Pengantar* (Bandung: PT Refika Aditama, 1987), 98

The social fact is that cultural ideology and doctrines are often practised as formalities only, due to limited knowledge of religion, thus they tend to postulate (take for granted, to be true). This is considered to be one of the weaknesses of the Malay society and it prevails due to other reasons such as feelings of being a Muslim. This is explained by Jajat Burhanudin that the feelings of the Malays are identified with Islam. Islam is acknowledged as having constituted a significant part of Malay society; Islam is regarded as the source of its cultural identity. Thus, if what is conceived of as being Islamic, as such it is accepted.³³

The following informant, Mr Suraidi gave his opinion on this issue :

Malangnya juga sebahagian orang anggap ini sebahagian dari adat dan tidak menjadi masalah diadakan.....sedangkan kalau ditanyakan pada orang yang lebih arif tentang perkara yang sedemikian rupa, musik itu sendiri, dia subjektif.....boleh menjadi haram kalau ianya itu mengkhayalkan apalagi kalau dicampur dengan berdansa dan sebagainya.....³⁴

Mr Suraidi explains that certain ritual or acts which is actually non-Islamic are taken to be acceptable in wedding ceremonies since they are practised by others before. This is in the case of a live band playing loud music whereby it is actually a subjective issue in terms of religious adherence. The informant asserts that if there are other attributes like ‘*mengkhayalkan*’ (fantasizing) associated with this music performance, it may be deemed as *haram* (non-permissible) according to the Islamic rulings.

From the standpoint of the more adherent Muslim, the locus of religiousness has some serious implications for the appreciation of the remnants

³³Jajat Burhanudin, *The Making of Islamic Political Tradition in the Malay World*, Studia Islamika – Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies, Vol. 8, No.2 (Jakarta: IAIN, The Institute for Islamic Studies, Syarif Hidayatullah, 2001), 5

³⁴Mr Suraidi, *Interview* (3rd February 2012)

of cultural ideology. Indeed the practicing adherents of Islam will shun non-Islamic practices with regards to holding a wedding ceremony or *walimah*. These include the wanton display of the bride to members of the opposite sex who are not her family members, playing of loud music and intermingling of the different sexes during the meal. There is also the tendency of making Islamic values easily made to bend and suit itself to every occasion, that is in this case to suit the formalities of a wedding celebration. Thus, to subscribe to such paradigm is clearly unacceptable and considered a displaced notion to them and it consciously shows the dominance of Islamic values inherited in Malay culture. It also shows the sense of religious awareness of local Muslims being of the Syafi'i mazhab because it is considered to be one of the more discreet sect in Islam.

The following comments highlight the importance of Islamic values in relation to cultural practices. Ust Suhimi Wagiman commented :

*Kita perlu tukar sesuatu budaya tuh kalau dia sudah langgar etika Islam. Perlu kita ingat,.....Islam tuh bukan Melayu.....kerana Melayu itu suatu bangsa, contohnya ada Melayu asli, Melayu kafir pun ada.*³⁵

The informant stressed on the importance of Islamic ethics when one is engaged in cultural activities like wedding ceremonies. This limitation should be carefully noted otherwise one would not know the fine line between religion and culture. He added on about race and religion being two separate entities – what is meant here is that a Malay Muslim will put emphasis of his actions on religion first, rather than culture, as opposed to a Malay who is non-Muslim who will do otherwise. Ust Abdul Rahman remarked :

³⁵Ust Suhimi Wagiman, *Interview* (Chua Chu Kang, 9th February 2012)

*Kekuranganya orang kita, apabila tidak memanfaatkan maqasid syari'ah bila menilai sesuatu. Kita tidak memanfaatkan mana dharuriyyat, hajiyyat dan mana tahsiniyyat.*³⁶

In his brief statement, Ust Abdul Rahman explains that one of the weaknesses of local Malay Muslims is that they don't really look into the aspect of '*Maqâsid Syaria*'. This can be defined as the goals and objectives of Islamic law, which evidently is an important and yet somewhat neglected aspect of a practising Muslim in general. Generally the *Syaria* is predicated on the benefits of the individual and that of the community, and its laws are designed so as to protect these benefits and facilitate improvement and perfection of the conditions of human life on earth. This theme is subjected to three parts which are *dharuriyyat*, *hajiyyat* and *tahsiniyyat*, which means that as a Muslim, his actions should be based and balanced on these three attributes (essentials, necessity and luxury) in order to achieve the goals or objectives of the *Syaria*.

The vital elements in a certain cultural ideology or that in particular of the Malay cultural ideology, besides other factors, therefore relates to religion that is Islam. Whether it is practised subjectively or objectively, it is the basic assumption that whatever is found in Islamic values play an important role in making their culture and traditions morally and ethically acceptable to the Malay society. This is because religion becomes the basic framework and dimension of a certain cultural ideology and we always look towards that dimension as a source of direction. Stephen R. Kellert (filologist) explains that the Latin root of religion means 'to link back'. "We are linking back to our fundamental source of

³⁶Ust Abdul Rahman, *Interview* (Bedok, 19th Feb 2012)

wisdom and knowledge. Wherever we look, there is the desire to link back – to find the source. It is religion and poetry, and we see it in different forms within all our greatest teachings. We are always going back in order to move forward. We must go deeper in order to move outward. It is always so because what we seek is already there and available – if we choose to look.”³⁷

Historically, the influx of immigrants from different Malay origins contribute to the incorporation of cultural and traditional practices. Even though the present Malay community may not be the original breed of Malay immigrants which comprises of Javanese, Boyanese, Banjarese, Malaccans and others, but attributes of their culture and traditions are inherent in them, thus subconsciously urge them to uphold it. History has proven itself many times over, that man will eventually want to go back to their roots, no matter how far they go astray.

Whether a certain society recognizes it or not, origins and historical roots always sway them in a certain direction in terms of culture appreciation and preservation. Historical facts can therefore identify and serve as a tool of proving the ‘authenticity’ and ‘original source’ of a certain culture. As for the Malay society’s context, signs of historical influence can be seen manifested through their initiation of wedding ceremonies.

The following informant, Mr Zainal commented on this issue in his interview :

Culture perkawinan masyarakat Melayu Islam di Singapura, memang ada kena-mengena dengan sejarah. Kerana kita minoritas (sekitar 13% - 18% dari 6 juta penduduk), dan dari jumlah ini semua background

³⁷Stephen R. Kellert & Timothy J. Farnham, *The Good in Nature and Humanity – Connecting Science, Religion and Spirituality with the Natural World* (Washington: Island Press, 2000), 152

*berbeza,..ya ada Jawa, Melaka, Bugis dan macam-macam.*³⁸

Mr Zainal asserted that traces of historical influence are evident in the Malay wedding culture, especially during the *bersanding* (enthronement) ceremony which is on the wedding day itself. The researcher had noticed a variety of cultural settings during these occasions which had exemplary historical influences like the decorations, the clothing and rituals performed. These rituals are closely related to different cultures since the time they were ‘imported’ during the Malay migration period (early 40’s and 50’s).

As today’s world tilts towards globalisation and modernisation, it is inevitable or impossible to say the least, to escape from the influx and ‘invasion’ of foreign cultures. It is not so importantly ‘how’ nowadays, but a matter of when it will happen and this is due mainly to the advances made in the information technology and transportation sectors. Pop culture and western ideologies pertaining to celebrations or having a feast have made a big impact on the local practitioners of traditional cultures, in particular that of local Malay community.

The following informant explains on how external influence penetrates and has an impact on local Malay society and their culture. Mr Suraidi commented :

*Apa yang dapat saya lihat, di Singapura nih, kami terdedah kepada unsur-unsur atau cara kehidupan ala Barat, melalui TV, internet dan alat informasi begitu luas. Orang yang pakai internet tuh, telah menjangkau 80% di Singapura ni saja.*³⁹

³⁸Mr Zainal, *Interview* (Joo Chiat Road, 31st January 2012)

³⁹Mr Suraidi, *Interview* (3rd February 2012)

Mr Suraidi describes that not only the Malay society but the country as a whole is susceptible and easily exposed to other foreign cultures, especially that of Western culture and ideologies. This is due to the wide usage of information systems and technologies like the internet and broadcasting of international programs via the television.

As described in the perspective of anthropology, culture is constantly changing. It changes internally through the fickleness of popular fads – the latest music, foods, slang, clothing fashions. It changes internally through innovations and inventions – new ideas and combinations with old ideas to create new things. Culture changes because of external influences through a process of diffusion, or the voluntary borrowing of items and ideas from other cultures. Most aspects of any contemporary culture have diffused from other cultures.⁴⁰

In general, Asian societies tend to idolise and hence mimic Western cultures in many aspects of their lives. This tendency in turn drives them in pursuit of an ‘ideal culture’ which is really something ambiguous as the saying goes “beauty is in the eye of beholder” and so does one’s culture and traditions.

The Malay community in general is not against progress but admits that there is a high price to pay for it, like losing part of its cultural heritage, or some might perceive it as lost in modernity. Cultures are always changing and the direction of that change is towards a single world system. In other words, cultures change because a society’s economy is pulled into the world economy. “Progress” is a label placed on cultural and economic change, but whether

⁴⁰Roberta Edwards Lenkeit, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 36

something represents “progress” or not depends on one’s perspective.

Norashikin gave her views :

To me, our culture and tradition is very rich. Ni pun sekarang dah dikurangkan. Kalau nak ikutkan last time lagi banyak dia punya processes, dia punya adat yang kita dah buang ataupun dah terlalu leceh. Macam dulu ada merisik dulu, baru meminang baru tunang. Macam sekarang dah cut short. Ada orang meminang dan terus tunang, tak ada merisik. Kita punya culture dah tukar pasal pemodenan.⁴¹

The informant agrees to modernity and believes in the richness of the Malay culture. But at present most traditions have been obliterated by the new generation of Malays since it is thought to be redundant. This can be seen clearly as in the case of the Malay engagement, whereby most traditional rituals such as the ‘*merisik*’ is outdone in lieu of modernisation.

Progress is perceived as advancement that alters and heightens the ‘standard of living’ but also in the same manner has detrimental effects on culture and traditions of a certain society. Evidently, the Malay society has had its fair share of cultural decay in the past few decades. Yet, looking at the flip side of the coin, the state of progress has in a way redefined the Malay cultural wedding and its traditions to suit the era of modernisation. .

Transformation takes place within and amongst cultures by means of ecological and environmental changes – by diffusion of advantageous cultural traits among societies at approximately equivalent stages of cultural development by acculturation, or the acquisition of a foreign culture by a relatively subject people or by the evolution of cultural development. The following informant shared his view regarding this issue. Ust Abdul Rahman stated :

⁴¹Norashikin, *Interview* (Bedok, 23rd January 2012)

*Kerana status budaya-sosial itu berubah maka budaya berubah kerana pengaruh dari lingkungan dan pendekatan mereka dalam mengadakan walimah. Perubahan budaya dipengaruhi juga oleh tuntunan anak-anak modern sekarang.*⁴²

According to Ust Abdul Rahman, the environmental condition greatly influences the cultural-social status of the local Malays and this in turn reshapes and redefines the approach of having a *walimah* or wedding ceremony. Besides that, the new and young generation also in a way dictates these changes which cause cultural transformation.

At present, most of the old Malay customs and traditions are dispensed with. This is not a matter of being disrespectful to the elders or turning the other cheek on older traditions, but the conditions and environment have moulded the culture and mindset of local Malays in the direction of a whole new dimension – that is they become readily adaptable to changes and flexible in acceptance. The change in conditions here is the transformation of Singapore itself from a rural residential island to a progressive city state and unique environment of mixed ethnic groups of diversified cultural backgrounds living together as a single nation.

1. Non-Islamic Rituals and Traditions

The author was aware that a majority of the Malays are Muslims and that Islam as one of the vital elements of a local Malay. This social fact was proven to be very instrumental when they gave their sentiments regarding non-Islamic rituals and traditions which are being practised during Malay wedding without

⁴²Ust Abdul Rahman, *Interview* (Bedok, 19th Feb 2012)

any 'remorse' of any sort. This is especially in the case of having the type of *kuda kepang* act which includes the trances and incantation.

The following informants gave their insights regarding this issue.

Mdm Juliana commented :

Dari pandangan Islam sememangnya kita lebih mencari berkat dalam majlis. Kita boleh bersuka-suka, tapi tak boleh dan tak berkat lah kalau diadakan benda lain seperti 'kuda kepang' (yang makan kaca semua tuh) dan termasuk unsur-unsur syirik dan tahayul.⁴³

The informant disagrees with the practice of reading incantation in this traditional act of *kuda kepang* because by doing that it involves the embodiment of other entities such as spirits or metaphysical beings with the reader or dancer. This results in strange and abnormal behaviours like eating of broken glass and heading of coconuts husks with their bare heads. The author had witnessed instances such as this on actual research site and it's becoming more of a trend to the local Malays, especially for the younger generation.

Mdm Julia further explains that the Islamic culture is to have blessings and rejoice for a specific purpose in a *walimah* and not to have other non-Islamic attributes which leads to *syirik* and *tahayul* (deviation from the teachings of Islam). Syazana explained :

Kuda kepang...I'm scared of kuda kepang. It's tradisi orang Jawa I guess. Last time I ever saw makan kaca, berasap-asap and all the babies started crying. They also bawak barongan. Jangan cakap budak-budak, kita pun takut. Kita yang datang wedding to pun macam eh kita nak balik..tarian apa tak tau. Ada pakai cabuk lah.....menurun-menurun ni semua tak baguslah, we are celebrating a marriage bukan nak panggil setan ke apa. Da tak bagus ah..dapat dosa.⁴⁴

⁴³Mdm Juliana, *Interview* (Pasir Ris, 17 February 2012)

⁴⁴Syazana, *Interview* (Bedok, 23rd January 2012)

The informant relates her rather unpleasant experience attending a typical Malay wedding where there was the *kuda kepang* act being performed. The act also involved abnormal behaviours which frightened babies, small children and even adults (including herself). This gave her a negative impression as it deviates from the original intention of celebrating a marriage. She added on that as a Muslim it is sinful to be engaged or associated with such acts.

While it may be considered to be 'trendy' to some, this particular tradition comes with a backlash; when this *kuda kepang act* involves the reading of incantation (normally of ancient Javanese origin) thus the whole act of traditional dancing sways into another direction of unpredictability and sometimes even chaos.

Majority of the informants are in consensus with the above two in terms of opposing the *kuda kepang* act which includes trances and incantation. This is because it is considered to be a deviation (*syirik*) in terms of Islamic ruling where the doers call upon other source of power and enlightenment other than God himself. This demonstrates the basic awareness amongst Muslims of the permissibility issues surrounding acceptable or non-acceptable practices when religion is concerned, even though some may not be of the adherent category.

2. Factors of Common Formalities

Due to its long standing presence in the community, the practices become a normal and common or almost obligatory tradition. The author had observed personally the recurrence of these cultures and traditions on more than one venue in the said research location and this is also verified by the interviewees namely, Mdm Najiha, Mdm Izan, Ustzh Farhana, Ust Raja Muzafar and others.

The following informant explained their views on common formalities.

Mdm Sulehah explained :

Waktu majlis perkawinan tuh, kalau dijemput kumpulan rebana atau tari-menari orang Melayu kita...kata orang tuh masih ok. Ada budaya yang memang bukan dari budaya Melayu macam yang pakai DJ, karaoke atau yang panggil tarian Bangra dan kuda kepang atau yang lain-lain. Benda camni memang bukan ada unsur budaya kita, memang tak perlu, tapi sekadar menghibur atau menyenangkan orang atau hati tetamu di majlis.⁴⁵

According to Mdm Sulehah it is acceptable to invite other performing acts like singing or dancing troupe of Malay attributes. She acknowledged the fact that other forms of entertainment are usually combined in a typical Malay wedding which sometimes is non-Malay or non-Islamic, but it is still acceptable on the basis of entertainment and merry-making.

All of the interviewees agreed that the inclusion of various types of traditions, may it be traditional or modern ones, ultimately becomes part of the Malay cultural practice or '*adat-istiadat*' in terms of holding a wedding ceremony. By acknowledging and accepting the different cultural or traditional variants into 'one's backyard', inherently it becomes a common practice thus constitute what they call the local Malay culture.

In the Islamic perspective, something which has a long-standing convention is called '*urf*'. The term *urf*, meaning "to know", refers to the customs and practices of a given society. Although this is not formally included in Islamic law, the *Syaria* recognizes customs that prevails in that given society provided that *urf* must be compatible with the *Syaria* law. These said customs must therefore be of something common within the given society

⁴⁵Mdm Sulehah, *Interview* (Tampines, 20th February 2012)

either in the context of action or discourse. It can also be in the form of customary laws or common formalities which has localized dominance that can blend cohesively with Islamic rulings or prevailing laws.⁴⁶

3. Sense of Identity

The older generation feels that it is their duty and pride to uphold what their predecessors have been practising, and it would be a shame just to let go of their long standing traditions only to give way to the new cultural trends. It gives them a sense of identity that they are still intact with the cultural background of their forefathers.

According to the new generation, it is only practical to modify their traditions which suits the conditions of changing times. Since the world has changed so much as compared to the time their parents lived in, so does their culture. With regards to wedding traditions in one way or another, they have to change and accommodate the changing world and environment that they now live in.

The following informants made comments regarding this issue.

Ustazah Farhana stated :

Budaya yang ok tuh, boleh diteruskan dan kalau boleh jangan dimansuhkan secara total, kerana kalau tiada budaya-budaya seperti itu, tidak nampak lagi budaya kemelayuan kita masa kini maka hilang lah Melayunya.....contohnya, pengantin lelaki menyambut sang isteri atas pelamin atau permainan kompong.....itu ok lah. Karena dengan adanya walimah orang Melayu seperti inilah maka jelas nampak budaya kita sebagai orang Melayu.⁴⁷

Ustazah Farhana suggested that certain culture and traditions which is acceptable to be preserved and not to dispense of it totally because it serves as a

⁴⁶Totok Jumantoro, Samuel Munir Amin, *Kamus Ilmu Ushul Fiqh* (Jakarta: Amzah, 2005), 334

⁴⁷Ustazah Farhana, *Interview* (Bedok, 13th February 2012)

symbol of the Malay identity. These are like the rituals performed on the wedding dias and the escorting of the wedding couple by the *kompang* or *hadrah* troupe. Most importantly is that within the practices of a Malay wedding lies the pride and aspirations of the Malay culture. Ust Raja Muzaffar commented :

Untuk masa akan datang yang tidak baik tuh, atau melanggar Syari'at, tak perlu dipertahankan. Sebahagian tuh, bolehlah kita pertahankan....ini adalah dengan galakkan masyarakat dan latihan bagi kumpulan-kumpulan belia yang active dalam benda-benda tuh...mungkin diadakan di CC (community centre) atau tempat lain. Yang bagusnya adalah dukungan dari pemerintah untuk teruskan budaya-budaya Melayu kita yang bagus.⁴⁸

The informant agreed to the preservation of acceptable culture and traditions as long it doesn't go against Islamic ethics or rulings. He further added that this should be done by constant practice and they should get support by the mainstream society which includes private institutions and the government. The stress here is on cultural preservation as it is part of the Malay heritage and culture.

While in the case of the more adherent Muslims who acknowledge that there must be changes in the world today, something which is inevitable, they stand firm on their principles that whatever traditions the Malays practise, they must however adhere to the Islamic rules and ethics pertaining to weddings explicitly, because generally Malays are Muslims, so they must act according to their faith as Muslims.

In the midst of these different groups or categories who have their own beliefs and priorities that sought to justify the preservation of Malay culture,

⁴⁸Ust Raja Muzaffar, *Interview* (Bedok, 19th February 2012)

the emergence of a 'cultural identity struggle' is imminent. This can be interpreted as attempts made to fill the 'gap' between heritage and cultural identity. Therefore the outcome of this is that each category which has the longing to relive the cultural sense and belonging will do their utmost to prevent their own cultural identity from fading out through the passage of time.

