

ISLAM AND THE MALAY CIVILISATIONAL IDENTITY TENSION AND HARMONY BETWEEN ETHNICITY AND RELIGIOSITY

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Introduction

In this paper, our primary aim is to discuss the meaning and characteristics of the Malay civilisational identity as has been primarily shaped by the religion of Islam. This objective of our inquiry is fully justified as it is dictated by the sheer past course of Malay history. Following the fateful encounter centuries ago between an Islam that was globalising itself to the furthest corners of the earth and the Malay race long known for its openness to cultural influences both from the east and the west, a new Malay civilisational identity was born.¹ Despite numerous studies that have been carried out until now on various aspects of Malay history, culture and civilisation, not much effort has really been spent on bringing out into sharp focus the identity of this civilisation.² What we hope to offer here is a discussion of this neglected aspect of Malay studies.

The objective of this inquiry is also justified and, one can even say, made necessary by the contemporary concern for the future of the world's multi-civilisational character. This concern is expressed in the form of questions that raise doubts about the direction in which our global order is presently moving. Are we reaffirming the principle of civilisational pluralism or are we abandoning it? Are we advocating dialogues of civilisations in pursuit of global peace or are we promoting clashes of civilisations that will lead to global chaos? Apparently, in the past several years there has been a lot of talk going on all over the globe on the subject of dialogues, conflicts and clashes of civilisations. But to the dismay of many people, one major consequence of the September 11 tragedy, itself advanced

in certain circles in the West as convincing proof that a clash of civilisations has already taken place, is that the nascent global movement for dialogues of civilisations is losing momentum while the more localised movement in America for clashes of civilisations appears to be gaining momentum and dangerous influence in the corridors of power.

We maintain the position that dialogue of cultures and civilisations is a moral virtue worth pursuing and defending at all times and in all kinds of situations no matter what happens to the world. We may even venture to claim that dialogue of cultures and religions has become an imperative in our day. In Islamic religious terminology, such dialogues have become *fardhu kifayah* meaning a societal obligation to be fulfilled by individuals and groups capable of delivering success to these dialogues.³ Any idea that may contribute to the promotion and strengthening of a global dialogue culture is most welcome. In this regard, an investigation into the meaning of civilisational identity in general and Malay civilisational identity in particular would be very helpful. No discussion pertaining to dialogues of civilisations is deemed serious enough and complete without the civilisational identity first being explained. Indeed, both the ideas of dialogue and clash of civilisations are meaningful only if we think of them as having identities that somehow can exercise free choice either to peacefully co-exist or to be enemies engaged in perpetual conflicts and wars.

Too often people talk about clashes of civilisations without bothering to explain what they mean by “clash” in the civilisational sense, which different elements of civilisation are involved in the clash, and how the clash occurs or is going to occur. If the study of Malay civilisational identity could contribute to the contemporary global discourse on dialogue of civilisations, it is because it affirms at least three things. Firstly, Malay civilisation is a major world civilisation in its own right. Secondly, it is a major branch of the global Muslim civilisation. Thirdly, the historical shaping of the Malay identity contributed by many cultures and civilisations provided an excellent instance of Islam the religion fulfilling the very purpose of its existence, namely a civilisational synthesis out of diverse cultural elements guided by the principle of *tauhid* (unity).

We seek to also discuss the kind of relationships that exist between the

defining elements of the Malay civilisational identity. These relationships may be described in terms of tension and harmony that have practical consequences in almost every domain in the life and thought of the Malay people. Ethnicity and religiosity are the two poles of Malay identity. It is with the tension and harmony between these two poles that we are primarily concerned here. A comprehensive treatment of the Malay civilisational identity would require the collaborative contributions of many disciplines, including science of civilisation, history, theology, philosophy and ethnography insofar as these pertain to the world of the Malay race. Such a treatment, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. While relying on the findings of many disciplines, our approach here to the problem is largely shaped by the perspective of civilisational studies, and is thus primarily philosophical and historical in nature. This philosophical-historical treatment does not mean it is without significance and implications for other methodological approaches to the study of Malay civilisation. It may well serve as both an intellectual support and a critique of findings and observations such as made in ethnographic and ethnological studies of Malay culture.

A Spiritual Anthropology: The Place and Role of Ethnic Identity

Anthropology is usually defined as the study of humans, especially of the variety, physical and cultural characteristics, distribution, customs, and social relationships of humanity. A spiritual anthropology would be interested in some of the more fundamental aspects of humanity studied in scientific anthropology but always with the view of clarifying their spiritual meanings and significance. But more than in these aspects this branch of religious science is interested in the spiritual dimension of both individual and collective human existence such as the spiritual elements in human nature and the classification of human beings into spiritual types. In Islamic intellectual history, it was characteristically common to find scholars treating anthropology as a discipline that deals with both the scientific and spiritual study of humans. It seems that the Qur'an itself has inspired such an integrated and holistic view of anthropology.

Certainly the Qur'an's spiritual anthropology is as much interested in the division of humans into spiritual types as in the division of the human species into

racial and ethnic groups. In this discussion we are primarily interested in the later division but focusing on its civilisational significance. The Qur'an has emphasised this anthropological fact but with a spiritual bias in the following terms:

O humankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is acquainted (with all things).⁴

In maintaining that there is a definite purpose to the diversity and pluralism in the ethnic composition of humankind,⁵ the Qur'an has accorded a religious legitimacy to the place and role for ethnic consciousness and identity in the organisation of human society and the global community. Having an ethnic consciousness and identity is something natural to human beings. Because of the natural human tendencies to be attached to one's ethnic group, ethnicity is one of the natural principles of human social organisation. Islam which claims to be regulating human life in conformity with the nature of things would be the last to say that ethnic loyalty is necessarily opposed to the universal goals of religion. Far from seeking to abolish ethnic feelings and identity from the human consciousness, which would be practically impossible, Islam prefers giving recognition to their usefulness in serving religion's higher spiritual and moral purpose as embodied in the above quoted Qur'anic verse.

It is true there are some Muslims today who condemn appreciations of ethnicity in an absolute sense in the name of Islamic universalism. Such a view can be based only on a misunderstanding of Islamic teachings. These people defend their view by appealing to certain prophetic hadiths which they have interpreted as condemning '*asabiyyah* in all its colours and forms. Popularly quoted are the two following hadiths. "There is no '*asabiyyah* in Islam," one of them says. The other declares, "Whoever calls to '*asabiyyah* is not one of us." It is important to emphasise that these hadiths like any other hadith should not be understood in isolation from the rest of Islamic teachings. Both hadiths need to be understood in their proper historical and cultural context. We should not understand them in a

way that would contradict them with other hadiths, and more importantly with the Qur'an itself. As for the precise contextual meaning of each hadith, the Prophet wanted to emphasise to his followers that the pre-Islamic *'asabiyyah* had no place in the new religion. It was not *'asabiyyah* as such that was to be discarded but rather the *'asabiyyah* of the pre-Islamic Arabs which was tribalism at its worst. These Arabs knew of no other form and role of *'asabiyyah* save their own tribal *'asabiyyah* that was limited to serving sectarian goals and interests. Since the Prophet's global mission was to establish a supra-ethnic religious community and a new social order based on the universal principles of law, order, justice and the pursuit of common interests as envisioned by Islam, he had to paint that *'asabiyyah* as something opposed to the universal spirit of Islam.

While the two quoted hadiths seem to suggest an absolute condemnation of *'asabiyyah*, much more numerous hadiths talk about the Prophet's appreciation of the positive ethnic traits and virtues identified with the various tribes, particularly his own tribe the Quraysh, the most privileged and influential of them. Just because the Prophet was appreciative of many things about the Quraysh and several other tribes including their leadership qualities, it does not mean he was promoting ethnic parochialism and favouritism or *'asabiyyah* in the negative sense. Or is he simply to be reduced to a tribal leader as some people have erroneously done. Even the Qur'an has honoured the Quraysh by naming one of its chapters after the tribe, reminding them of the various favours God had conferred on them before Islam, such as the guardianship of the Ka'abah.⁶ And they were told that if their privileged ethnic position were now to be employed in the service of one God and his new prophet instead of their polytheistic beliefs, then more divine favours were awaiting them.

As a matter of fact, having embraced Islam the Quraysh and their descendents provided leadership for the *ummah* during much of its history especially during the early centuries of its expansion and civilisation formation. The heroic history of the Quraysh in the Islamic era was not about ethnic triumphalism but about how an *'asabiyyah* has become an effective instrument of universalism. Particularism need not clash with universalism since they pertain to different planes of ideas. Islam has demonstrated in its history that it is capable of harmonising

between the needs of particularism and those of universalism. From the scholarly point of view, it was Ibn Khaldun, acclaimed as the founder of modern sociology, who had led the way in showing the positive meaning and function of *'asabiyyah* in civilisation building.⁷

Islamic perspectives on the meaning and function of ethnic identity are perhaps best summed up by the Qur'anic verse earlier cited. The verse rationalises the existence of ethnic identities and proposes the only sane way they can coexist peacefully in the world. The main purpose of ethnic pluralism is not the cultivation and affirmation of ethnic particularism for its own sake and glory but the fostering of inter-ethnic and inter-cultural acquaintance and understanding directed to serve a universal purpose that is ultimately divine. By and through "knowing one another" as envisaged by the Qur'an, ethnic groups and nations would be moved to go beyond ethnocentrism to embracing a spiritual universalism. What does the Qur'an mean by "knowing one another"? The Qur'an does not explain, but the philosophical meaning of the verse helps us to grasp the intended objects of this mutual knowledge and understanding. Philosophically what the verse is telling us is that God has created multiplicity and diversity out of unity, and He wants to lead multiplicity and diversity back to unity. This is precisely the divine purpose in the creation of both the natural and human worlds. Originating from the first human couple God had created, the human family has grown into a large tree with a multitude of ethnic branches. Each ethnic branch possesses an identity of its own with its specific characteristics that distinguish it from other branches. Consequently, the ethnic branches, each possessing a kind of soul and collective consciousness, are able to know one another.

The Malays form an ancient and major ethnic branch of the contemporary human family tree. In their tradition since time immemorial they believe in the idea of human races having some sort of souls. *Bahasa jiwa bangsa*, as a traditional Malay saying goes, literally meaning "language is the soul of a nation." The implication of this idea is that language primarily defines ethnic identity. In the larger context of civilisational space and time that is of primary interest to us in this essay, the Malays have defined their ethnic identity in terms of *budi bahasa*. It is possible to know the substance of the Malay soul or identity through a perceptive

study of the unique traits of the Malay language. The close relationship between language and ethnic identity is by no means confined to the Malay race. After all, the Qur'an looks upon both languages and ethnic identities as among the wonders of creation. Further, the Qur'an maintains that God has sent a messenger to every nation and the divine message brought was always in the language of his folk. These teachings of the Qur'an make it quite clear that an Islamic anthropology worthy of its name would be interested not only in the scientific significance of the variety of human languages and ethnic groups, but also in their spiritual significance.

It seems obvious to everyone that if we want to truly know and understand a particular ethnic group the best way would be to learn and master its mother tongue. Going back to the question of what the Qur'an means by "knowing one another", it is then also obvious that this mutual acquaintance and understanding is to be understood at various levels of knowledge, from knowledge of physical characteristics to knowledge of psychological traits as embodied in the ethnic soul, and from knowledge of manners and customs to knowledge of the higher aspects of culture and civilisation. From the point of view of Malay ethnicity, the greater portion of these different levels of knowledge would refer to the knowledge of its *budi bahasa*.

We need to understand why the Qur'an wants all the ethnic branches to truly know one another. If an ethnic branch does not care to know other branches of the human family tree, at least some of them if not all, and especially its neighbouring branches, then one likely major consequence of its ignorance would be to fall into the pride of ethnic superiority which can have further negative consequences on its relations with other ethnic groups. Another likely consequence would be for the ethnic branch in question to fall into insignificance in the cultural atlas of the world. Every ethnic group has the potential to attain greatness both in the worldly and spiritual senses. No ethnic group is condemned by birth to eternal backwardness. The Qur'anic view is that "God will not change the conditions of a people unless they themselves change what is within themselves." In other words, every ethnic group has the freedom to shape its destiny.

As for the potentiality that is in store for ethnic groups to rise to greatness, it may be actualised because God has endowed each of them with what we may call

an ethnic genius.⁸ However, this ethnic genius is of no consequence if it is not cultivated and developed to maturity. When ethnic branches are conscious of their own ethnic genius as well as the geniuses of other ethnic branches, then they are likely to refrain from indulging in claims of ethnic superiority such as priding in being the master race as Hitler did for the Aryans. Many factors may come into play in shaping the ethnic genius of a particular people. These factors include religious beliefs, climatic conditions, and cultural and political history. But the most important of these factors is perhaps religion. Moreover, in the case of the same ethnic branch, no two religions in its spiritual history are affecting in the same way and to the same extent the shaping of its ethnic genius.

To appreciate this fact, it is sufficient to look at the cultural history of the Malays and compare the transformation of the Malay mind as effected by Islam to that effected by Hinduism and Buddhism. Nothing better illustrates the qualitative differences separating the two cultural transformations than the artistic and literary manifestations of the Malay genius of the two eras.

The traditional Malay artistic genius is well-known. In the pre-Islamic era of Hindu-Buddhist influence, Malay art was dominated by graven images and naturalistic expressions in conformity with the artistic tastes of the two religions as well as with indigenous arts that still thrived. When the Malays converted to Islam, their minds became more abstract as required by the principle of *tauhid* (unity) that constitutes the core teachings of the new religion. Their artistic genius was nurtured and channelled by Islam into the creation of a new artistic tradition founded on the written words as best exemplified by calligraphy and which was more appreciative of abstract art forms.

When it comes to the literary tradition of the Malays, we are seeing an almost entirely new creation at the hands of Islam. With the Islamic transformation of the Malay mind, the primacy of the oral tradition in the pre-Islamic era gave way to the primacy of the written tradition. One can say that a department of the Malay genius has remained untapped by civilisation until the coming of Islam to the Malay world and was therefore only a potentiality awaiting actualisation in history. Islam turned that potentiality into an actuality. The examples of the Malay artistic and literary traditions have helped us to make clear the following points that need

further clarification. First, an ethnic genius requires the intervention of an outside cultural force like religion to help it develop its full range of potentialities into concrete cultural traits befitting a mature civilisation. Second, the cultural products of the marriage between ethnicity and religiosity vary from religion to religion. Third, Malay ethnicity has found richer expressions in Islamic religiosity. We will discuss these points in greater details in the later section.

By knowing one another in the deepest sense of the indiam, the ethnic branches will come to understand the true purpose of them having ethnic identities. Their goals are to acknowledge both their commonalities and differences and to recognise what these signify for inter-ethnic living. The commonalities are the universals that need to be strengthened and the differences are the particulars that need to be respected. What are these commonalities? The Qur'anic verse under discussion mentions the most important of them. First, we have a common human ancestor. Second, in consequence of the first, all ethnic groups form branches of the same human family tree. Third, we are all God's creatures answerable to Him. Fourth, our worth and dignity as humans before God is evaluated on the basis of our piety and righteousness and not our ethnic origins. The science of anthropology would reveal many more commonalities but this issue is not our concern here. If the Qur'an has mentioned only those commonalities it is primarily because humans tend to forget easily or belittle those facts and thus need to be reminded of their importance and true significance.

What are the particulars that differentiate the ethnic branches from one another? The same Qur'anic verse mentions only one of them, namely as a broad category consisting of the specific characteristics that define their ethnic identity. Of course, if we are to itemise these characteristics we may end up with a good number of them. Physical characteristics, language, customs, culture, and manners are to be counted among the most important of them. Even the religion an ethnic group has embraced may be domesticated by its defining characteristics so as to produce a new religious culture unique to its geographical region. Another thing, an ethnic branch may share some characteristics with some other ethnic branches.

In recognising commonalities and differences between them, the ethnic branches are celebrating diversity within unity and unity in diversity. One of the

rationales for the existence of Islam is precisely to announce this celebration to the whole of humankind. That celebration entails in practical terms the genuine feeling of inter-dependence and the pursuit of inter-ethnic co-operation. To know that each ethnic branch is special in its own way would help to strengthen that feeling of inter-dependence and the spirit of inter-ethnic co-operation. The cultivation of each ethnic genius itself in all its expressions requires inter-ethnic co-operation. However, our celebration of ethnic diversity is not complete and from the spiritual point of view, even meaningless, if we are not fully conscious of our common humanity and the true criterion of our worth and dignity before God. In spiritual terms, the *raison d'etre* of each ethnic branch is to be an instrument for the fulfillment of God's will on earth and to co-operate with all other ethnic branches in the pursuit of that goal.

Ethnicity and Religiosity in a Civilisational Marriage

Islam claims to be the last of the divinely revealed religions and also the only religion to have explicitly stated from its very beginning that it has been sent to the whole of humankind. According to Prophet Muhammad, all prophets of God before him had been sent to specific peoples, meaning that their respective messages from Heaven have likewise been targeted at specific audiences. He alone had been given a universal message meant for the whole world. What actually happened in history had turned out to be quite different. A few religions like Judaism and Hinduism and Taoism continue to be identified exclusively with specific ethnicities: Judaism with the Jewish people alone, and Hinduism overwhelmingly with the Indian race, and Taoism with the Chinese. Some others have grown to become world religions identified with many ethnic groups. Interestingly, religions in this category, like Buddhism and Christianity, have become minority religions in their own respective birth places but have found their largest concentration of followers in far away lands, the former in the Far East and the latter in Europe and the Americas. From the point of view of ethnic complexity that characterises the global demographic make-up of each of the world religions, Christianity and Islam stand out prominently above the rest. These two sister religions in the Abrahamic family are the only real world competitors for adherents.

It seems obvious that religions which have adherents scattered in numerous ethnic groups have manifested themselves in a variety of forms producing all kinds of local cultures with a religious colouring. Conversely, an ethnic group that over time has overwhelmingly opted to embrace a new religion finds itself deeply immersed in the complex process of cultural fusion. The process involves all the things that usually go into the working of what I call a civilisational marriage between ethnicity and religiosity. In conformity with the ideals and the code of practical conduct favoured by the new religion, an ethnicity may have to discard some of its old beliefs and practices deemed no longer reconcilable with the new. It is obvious that conversion always necessarily involves the acceptance of new beliefs and practices. However, for the most part the process is not about discarding the old for the new, but about reconciling the old with the new, and reinterpreting the old in the light of the new with the view of producing a new cultural synthesis.

As all marriages go, it is about partnerships in the pursuit of certain goals in life. In the case of civilisational marriages of the kind which we are interested in here, the partners are an ethnic branch and a religion. This marriage between an ethnicity and a religiosity will have its cultural offspring. Clearly, the success of the marriage calls for the inter-play of two geniuses, an ethnic genius and a religious genius. The quality of such marriages tends to vary with ethnicities and religiosities. Talking about the performances of Christianity and Islam in such marriages in history, no less an authority than Arnold Toynbee, a leading modern authority on civilisation studies, has made the observation that Islam had achieved a far greater success than Christianity. This essay does not permit us to go into a detailed discussion of this very important issue, especially in the light of many Christians in America depicting Islam as an evil religion. However, since the issue of success in question has relevance to our discussion of Malay Islam as a civilisational marriage between Malay ethnicity and Islamic religiosity, we will say a few words about the Islamic genius which we think explains Islam's relative success in overcoming racism and maintaining inter-ethnic harmony within its own cultural boundaries as well as in the preservation of indigenous cultures. A major portion of that genius has already been discussed at length when we talk about Islam's legitimisation of ethnic identities. Another aspect of the Islamic genius pertains to its ability to produce

orderly and peaceful cultural fusions and cultural synthesis as history has witnessed it in so many instances. One such instance, and indeed a major one by world standards, was the Southeast Asian historical phenomenon of a cultural synthesis between Malay ethnicity and Islamic religiosity that was to produce what may be legitimately called Malay Islam.

Malay Islam: The Marriage between Malay Ethnicity and Islamic Religiosity

A heavenly religion like Islam needs earthly instruments such as in the form of ethnicities in order to become a living reality in the lives of human beings and in the ordering of human societies. For that reason, Islam has come to sanctify the role of ethnicities in civilisation building. It was the destiny of the Arabs to become the first ethnicity to enter into a civilisational marriage relationship with Islam. This is not to say that Islam has become completely Arabised to emerge into a purely Arab religion that somehow will later be followed by the non-Arabs. Two things have guaranteed that there will always be an objective and an ideal Islam that is not to be exhausted by one interpretation such as the Islam as understood and practised by the Arabs. One is the Qur'an whose original content is preserved to every word and every letter until the end of the world. The other is the Prophet's own life or Sunnah which has an intrinsic value that transcends space and time in serving as a practical model to be emulated by every generation of Muslims anywhere on earth. The Prophet may be an Arab, but as a universal model for all believers coming from numerous ethnic branches, his Sunnah is one from which the elements of Arabness have been detached though the boundaries are not always clear to many people.

Apart from these two guarantees, the expansion of Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula was as swift as lightning as if in a hurry to dispel any illusion that it was purely an Arab religion. A new major ethnicity entering the fold of Islam was the Persians. The Malays were a later addition, more than six centuries after the Arab conversion to Islam. Like the Persians, the Malays had quite a rich pre-Islamic civilisation as a result of extensive encounters and interactions with Hindu and Buddhist civilisations. Before Islam, the Malays had entered into a civilisational marriage with Hinduism and later Buddhism. Considering this fact, the Malays'

conversion to Islam entailed for them the complex process of re-evaluating their pre-Islamic heritage and establishing an ethical-legal system and socio-political order in the light of the new religion, and creating a new cultural synthesis. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas has termed this process *Islamisation* which he has divided into an earlier phase dominated by jurists and theologians and a later phase dominated by the Sufis.⁹ Al-Attas' identification of the two phases of Islamisation is of relevance to our discussion of the emerging Malay-Islamic civilisational identity.

An important question to ask in this connection pertains to the beginnings and the formative period of Malay-Islamic civilisation. When can we identify the beginning of this new civilisation and what was the dominant element of Islam that shaped its formative period? It seems safe to say that there is some sort of a universal pattern according to which regionalised Islamic civilisations have been founded and developed in different parts of the world. Everywhere whenever Islam was to develop and grow into a distinct civilisation, it began with the organisation of its followers into a religious community in accordance with its revealed laws collectively termed the Shari'ah. The beginning of Islam as a civilisation may be identified with the founding of the first Muslim community in Medina following the Prophet's *hijrah* to the city from Mecca. In Medina, laws for the new community was revealed in stages. The Prophet had also established a socio-political order with clear guidelines for inter-faith living and co-operation for the city-state's different religious communities who as fellow citizens were to have common rights and responsibilities. It was here that seeds of the new civilisation were sown. It is therefore justifiable to identify the beginning and formative period of Islamic civilisation with the establishment of the Shari'ah.

In the case of Malay-Islamic civilisation, its beginning and formative period may be identified with the founding and growth of the first Malay - Muslim kingdom in Pasai at the turn of the thirteenth century. If jurists and theologians had flourished in the royal courts during this formative period as witnessed by the famous medieval world traveller Ibn Battutah and as asserted by al-Attas, it was because they were the experts in the much needed Shari'ah. Many things old and new – beliefs, practices, and institutions – had to conform to the requirements of the Shari'ah, including the feudal system of kingship.

Objections may be raised that the Shari'ah is hardly compatible with such a political system. But the traditional Malay ulama generally took the position that it was acceptable in the context of the time as long as nothing stood above the Shari'ah, the rulers included. Tensions between the new legal thought and the local *adat* needed to be resolved as well, and to a large extent harmonisation had been achieved. When Islam spread to the other islands in the Archipelago and new centres of Muslim power were established, this phase of Islamisation repeated itself to varying degrees of fervour and success.

A civilisation is not complete until the cosmos, the arts and the sciences, and literature have also been cultivated in the light of its world-view, epistemology and value system heralding the birth of a new intellectual tradition. Thus we have the later phase of Islamisation that was to be dominated by the Sufis.¹⁰ They were mainly the ones who had undertaken the task of resolving the conceptual overlappings and confusions between the old and new ideas such as those pertaining to cosmological and eschatological beliefs. The pre-Islamic Malay cosmos seen mainly through the prism of an Olympian Greek-type mythology in its decadent stage was gradually Islamised. Thanks to the metaphysical doctrines and a profound spiritual knowledge in their possession, the Sufis were intellectually and spiritually well equipped to deal effectively with the problems posed by pre-Islamic Malay mysticism. As was generally true of Sufism in the rest of the Muslim world during the period of Muslim history under consideration, the Malay Sufis also excelled in literature and dominated the cultivation of the traditional arts and sciences. At the level of ideas, the centre and the peak of the Malay-Islamic intellectual synthesis was the seventeenth century Aceh.

Tension and Harmony between Ethnicity and Religiosity

Generally speaking, the traditional Malays under Islam had achieved considerable success in creating harmony between ethnicity and religiosity in practically every branch of civilisation. Malay-Islamic civilisation was very much a living reality with an identity that clearly distinguishes it from both the pre-Islamic Malay civilisational identity and other branches of the global Islamic civilisation. It is an undeniable fact that tensions in one form or another have always existed between

Malay ethnicity and Islamic religiosity during the past seven to eight centuries of their civilisational marriage. This is only to be expected since both ethnicity and religiosity have their demands and needs. However, it is to the credit of both the ethnic genius of the Malays and the spiritual genius of Islam that over the greater part of the civilisational domain harmony has prevailed to this day.

Various factors may upset the delicate balance that a particular culture and civilisation has attained between ethnicity and religiosity. Due to both external and internal factors, perceptions, understandings and appreciations of religiosity may change in a way that brings about new interpretations of the religion. In response to the various forces and phenomena that seem to challenge its civilisational identity, an ethnic-religion based culture may take various measures which aim at preserving and strengthening that identity. It is also possible that identity itself is thoroughly examined even to the point of unintentionally creating a civilisational crisis. In the modern period, we can see some of these factors at work, such as the large-scale entry of Chinese and Indian immigrants to Malaysia under British colonial rule. It was under the perceived threat of this flooding of immigrants into the Malay-Islamic civilisational identity that the Malays sought a political protection through the Federal Constitution upon the country's independence. The constitutional definition of Malay in Islamic terms needs to be understood in the light of the centuries old Malay-Islamic civilisational identity that is responding to the challenges of the modern world.

Footnotes

¹ For discussions of this theme, see our 'Traditional Malay Thought and Globalization' in Asmah Hj Omar, ed., *The Genius of Malay Civilisation* (Tanjung Malim: Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, 2003); and *Southeast Asian Islam and the Three Waves of Globalization*, Occasional Papers, Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University, 2003.

² For pioneering treatments of the historical and philosophical dimensions of Malay-Islamic civilisational identity, see Syed Muhammad Naguib al-Attas, *Islam Dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1984).

³ For a global view of the meaning of civilisational dialogues and its attendant problems from the perspective of the Islamic world, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Civilizational Dialogue and the Islamic World,' in *Encounters*, 8:2 (2002), pp. 127-137. See also our *Islam and Civilizational Dialogue* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1997). For Qur'anic foundational principles of civilisational dialogue, see our 'Inter-Civilizational Dialogue: Theory and Practice,' in Nakamura Mitsuo, Sharon Siddique, and Omar Farouk Bajunid, eds., *Islam and Civil Society in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2001), pp. 164-176. On some of the contemporary Muslim voices of dialogue, see John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, 'Islam and the West: Muslim Voices of Dialogue,' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 613-639.

⁴ *The Qur'an*, Chapter 49, Verse 13.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of this theme, see Osman Bakar, 'Inter-Civilizational Dialogue: Theory and Practice.'

⁶ See *The Qur'an*, Chapter 106.

⁷ See Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1958).

⁸ My first encounter with this very interesting concept was in the work of Fritjhof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and Way* (London: Perennial Books) where he makes a brief reference to the ethnic Malay genius in relation to traditional arts and crafts. Professor Asmah Hj Omar, the leading scholar of linguistics, has recently edited a work based on the first international conference on Malay Civilisation she organised for the Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris with the captivating title *The Genius of Malay Civilisation*.

⁹ See Syed Muhammad Naguib al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago* (Kuala Lumpur, 1969).

¹⁰ On the place and role of Sufism in the development of Malay civilisational identity, see Osman Bakar, 'Sufism in the Malay-Indonesian World,' in S. H. Nasr, ed., *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations* (New York: Crossroads, 1991), pp. 259-289.