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## Reconsidering Malay Islam as a System of Meaning in Social Reality

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2009-04-28 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: 多和田, 裕司 メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.15021/00002901">https://doi.org/10.15021/00002901</a>

## Reconsidering Malay Islam as a System of Meaning in Social Reality

Hiroshi TAWADA  
*Nagasaki University*

### INTRODUCTION

Whether anthropology today can advance beyond its 'modern' framework, established since the days of B. Malinowski, depends up on our capacity to broaden its perspective. In this so-called post-modern age, once the conventional 'object' of anthropological research, that is, the image of self-sufficient communities isolated from centralized civilisations and indifferent to historical processes, in which particular people live in totally unique ways, has been completely 'destroyed', then it is meaningless to try to represent such communities ethnographically with a naive positivistic approach. So far, mainly because anthropology has been misunderstood as mere 'community studies', numerous village ethnographies have been published, but at the same time, we have to confess that studies which are worthy of the name of anthropology as a genuine human science are still quite rare. To be 'genuine anthropology', what is needed for anthropology today is to overcome this 'village oriented' perspective.

The anthropological study of Islam and Islamic society is, of course, no exception in this context. Islam, having about eight hundred million believers in the region 'from Morocco to Indonesia', could be considered, both in its beliefs and practices, as 'the universal (world) religion'. But it is also true that Islam, when observed empirically in various regions of the world, shows some unique aspects in the history of its expansion. To understand Islam fully therefore, a perspective which can discuss the universality and particularity of Islam at the same time is necessary.

In conventional anthropological studies of Islamic society, however, it must be pointed out that the particularity of Islam in individual societies has been stressed much more than the universality. This is partly because of the fact that the anthropological study of Islam has developed in complementarity with theological studies, and partly because of its predominantly 'village oriented' perspective thus far. As a result, unfortunately, the more anthropology has focused on the level of the 'village', 'locality' and 'context', the less attention has been given to Islam itself, its 'universality' and 'norms'. In other words, the behaviour of Muslims which is based on Islamic norms are attributed to non-Islamic causes like community social relations, the class structure, local culture and so on. As W. Roff (1985) has

warned, Islam has been 'obscured' within anthropological studies of Islamic society.

Recently, a new perspective to restore Islam within anthropology has been developed. It is called the 'political economy of meaning'. According to D. Eickelman, one of the advocates of this new approach, it is the attempt 'to describe how its (Islamic) universal or abstract principles have been realized in various social and historical contexts without representing Islam as a seamless essence on the one hand or as a plastic congeries of beliefs and practices on the other' (Eickelman 1987: 18). It must be obvious that this kind of approach is most welcome, particularly in the study of Malay society<sup>1)</sup>.

In the context of the theoretical concern mentioned above, the aim of this paper is to analyze, firstly, how Islam is understood and practised among the Malays, and secondly, how particular social or political situation in Malay (and Malaysian) society affect their understanding and practice of Islam. The discussion is based on field research in a Malay village in Kelantan, the northeastern state of Malaysia. As long as an individual is a Muslim, his or her behaviour is, first of all, based on Islamic norms. However, because Islam came to the Malay world from outside, as long as he or she is a Malay, a person may follow the Malay norms which are not based on Islam. Of course, these two sets of norms have been already amalgamated, creating a particular system of meaning which could be called 'Malay Islam'. Furthermore, as long as the person lives in a particular situation, the system of meanings on which he or she is depending could be realized only within empirical reality. Below I will attempt to describe this mechanism as concretely as possible.

## MALAY ISLAM AS A SYSTEM OF MEANING

### Islam: Its Ideal

Before discussing a concrete example based on Malay society, we must first consider what Islam is. There are three points to be clarified. Firstly, the Islamic faith requests believers to obey and be totally dependent on God. In the relationship between God and human beings, God is absolute and almighty, and there is no room for human beings to change this relationship. The word 'Islam' itself, deriving from *aslama*, an Arabic word which means to give something important to another, implies this total obedience or submission to the will of God. Therefore, it can be said that a Muslim is a person who leaves everything to God.

This relationship between, God the almighty on the one hand and human beings, the followers, on the other, is realised from the side of human beings by faithful following of the revelation which God gave Muhammad. For Muslims, the word of God (that is the *Quran*), as mediated by Muhammad, is the ultimate truth which cannot be changed nor questioned. To follow it in one's life is the only way to show one's devotion to God.

The teachings of Islam are classified into three categories: *iman*, *ibadat*, and *muamalat*. *Iman* consists of the so called six beliefs of Islam (Allah, Angels, Holy Books, Prophets, the Next World and Pre-destiny) which must be believed in unconditionally. *Ibadat* refers to the five pillars of Islam (Testament of Belief, Prayer, Fasting during the Month of *Ramadan*, Compulsory Alms, Performance of the *hajj*) which may be considered as 'rituals' conducted by Muslims. *Muamalat* contains rules on ethics and behaviour in human relations which cover a wide range of human life such as marriage, inheritance and prohibitions or taboos in everyday life.

These teachings formalized as *muamalat* contain the second distinctive feature of Islam, which is to explain that there is no distinction between the secular and the sacred. This is usually pointed out in relation to the fact that Islam does not have any formal clergy nor any church organization. However, this point must be discussed from the perspective of the Islamic teaching itself. A Muslim is not a person who believes in a 'religion' and conducts certain 'rituals', but a person who conforms in his or her whole life to the teachings of Islam as sent down in the divine revealed word of *Allah*.

These 'rituals' and 'rules' outlined in the *Quran*, together with the interpretation of them according to the traditions and sayings of Muhammad called the *Hadith*, constitute *Sharia* (Islamic law). The original meaning of *Sharia* is 'path', but in Islam it has come to mean the right way of life given by God. So, the definition of a Muslim is someone who follows *Sharia* in his or her life and Muslims are expected to obey the *Sharia* as a matter of course.

The right way of life as outlined in the *Sharia* should be followed not only by each Muslim, but also by the whole society in which they live. More strictly speaking, the true community of Islam (*Umma*), the ideal world of God, cannot be realized in this world until every Muslim obeys the *Sharia*. In this sense, the *Umma* cannot be a society whose image has been already determined *a priori* in the teachings of Islam and hence irrelevant to individual Muslims. On the contrary it is a society in which the 'more Islamic' the believers are, the nearer it approaches the ideal. In other words, as Kessler has clearly explained, Islam gives us 'a vision of society which would, or should, emerge if men would only act in accordance with those high principles of personally disinterested motivation which the religion urges' (Kessler 1972: 38). This special relationship between the individual and society is the third feature of the distinctiveness of Islam.

In sum, it is compulsory for each Muslim to try to follow the teaching of God in every aspect of life as evidence of personal submission to God's will. The society which consists of such individuals is the Islamic *Umma* (*Umma Muslima*) in the true sense of the word.

It must be stressed, however, that this ideal society can never been achieved just because it is an ideal. In addition to the obvious fact that any society today can no longer be the same as 'primordial' community of Islam in Muhammad's era, the fact that the ideals of God can be realized only through empirical social situations

makes it impossible for each Muslim, who also cannot exist without being embedded in history, to follow the principles of God perfectly in his or her real life. In this sense, the practice of Islam can be considered as an endless pursuit of the ideal as individual Muslim's try to be 'more Islamic'.

### Being 'More Islamic' in a Malay Context

Islamic belief is considered not only to be a matter of mind, but also something to be expressed through behaviour. Therefore all Muslims who want to follow God's ideal in their minds, try to realize the goal of being 'more Islamic' in their behaviour as well. This is true of Malay Muslims also.

Take prayer as an example. As is well known, Muslims are required to pray five times a day. Non-Muslims often misunderstand this to mean that Muslims must pray at certain prescribed times. But, in fact, it requires Muslims to pray between a certain prescribed time and another. For example, Muslims can pray *Asar* (the afternoon prayer) any time from the starting time of *Asar* until the starting time of the next prayer, *Magrib*. The starting time of each prayer varies day by day, and Muslims will know it by hearing the *Azan* (the call to prayer, usually through loudspeakers of the local mosque) or by consulting the special calendar of prayer times. Malays believe, however, that it is better to pray as soon as possible once a certain prayer time has begun, and in fact people who usually pray on time enjoy a positive reputation as good Muslims. But, it must be added that they would not be criticised at all as long as they do pray, even though just within the time limit. A Malay Muslim is not blamed for having no orientation to be 'more Islamic'.

In the Malay practice of Islam, the conditions for performing the prayer are also influenced by the orientation to be 'more Islamic'. Muslims, in principle, can pray at any place if it is clean; the only condition for prayer is to face towards Mecca. Among Malays, however, it is considered that to pray with other family members, one of whom plays the role of *imam* (the leader of prayer) is better than to pray alone. Furthermore, to pray with many fellow Muslims at a *madrasah* (village prayer house) is considered to be even better.

The same kind of approach can be seen with regard to the clothes worn for prayer. In the case of a Muslim male, the only condition of dress is to be covered from the navel to the knees with clean clothes. But, in the village context, the *kain pelekat* (a cylindrical cloth covering the lower half of the body) is generally preferred to trousers, and it is taken for granted that clothes will be worn on the upper half of the body. Moreover, praying while wearing the *serban* (a cloth used for covering the head) is considered to be much 'more Islamic' than wearing just the white *haji* cap.

In addition to these five-times-a-day prayers, male Muslims are required to come to the mosque every Friday afternoon and pray *Zohor* (the noon prayer) under the leadership of the village *imam*. In ordinary *Zohor* prayers, the believers are requested to pray four *rakaat* (*rakaat* means a designated series of ritual

movements and statements in Arabic, so in the *Zohor* prayer it is repeated four times). But in the case of the Friday *Zohor* prayer there are only two *rakaat*. In other words, for male Muslims to fulfil the duty of the Friday prayer, it is sufficient to pray two *rakaat* with the *imam* and other members of the congregation. In most cases in Malay villages, however, many villagers pray two *rakaat* upon entering the mosque, and two *rakaat* before the Friday *Zohor* prayer. And usually about half of the congregation pray another two *rakaat* after the Friday prayer. These prayers of two *rakaat*, separate from the Friday prayer, which is compulsory, are performed individually and voluntarily. Here too, no one is criticized for not performing these voluntary prayers. However, in the village context, those who come to the mosque early and do all the voluntary prayers are considered 'more Islamic' in comparison with those who come just in time for the Friday prayer and only pray the two compulsory *rakaat*.

This same phenomenon can be found in relation to the other duties of Islam such as reciting the *Quran*, being careful of the Islamic dietary taboos and fasting strictly during *Ramadan* (the fasting month).

In discussing these behaviours, and especially in explaining and judging their performance of these behaviours, Malays often use two words, *pahala* and *dosa*. *Pahala* is a recompense for doing something praiseworthy. For example, voluntary prayers and fasting are deemed to generate much *pahala*. Conversely, *dosa* means sin, especially that which deviates from moral or religious norms. Saying 'he or she has committed *dosa*' has very strong negative connotations. Using the examples mentioned above, a man who comes to the mosque early and does many voluntary prayers on Friday would generate much *pahala*. On the other hand, the *dosa* of a man who does not attend the Friday prayers at all is considered to be very large.

Both the concepts of *pahala* and *dosa* come from Sanskrit originally, so they are not peculiar to Islam. But Islamic doctrine contains the notion of a final judgement after the end of the world, in which God weighs the virtues and vices of each person in a balance. Therefore, the concepts of *pahala* and *dosa* can be considered to be a Malay way of understanding this aspect of Islamic doctrine. For Malays, despite the non-Islamic origin of the concepts, so long as he or she is 'more Islamic', the person will receive more *pahala* and hence the possibility to be reborn directly in heaven.

I tentatively conclude that a dominant theme in the practice of Malay Islam is the orientation to be 'more Islamic' in the behaviour of the Malays. Muslims want to be 'more Islamic' by trying to follow the Islamic norms more strictly or more perfectly. But it is impossible to be 'perfect' in this 'real' world. In spite of this absolute impossibility however, Islam in principle expects and requests its believers to try to be 'perfect'. In this sense, it can be said that both Muslims in general and Malays in particular continue to seek an ideal which can never be achieved.

### **Malu as Social Restriction**

Although among Malay Muslims there is a common orientation to be 'more

Islamic' and an evaluation of such behaviour as virtuous, we can observe empirically some subtle differences between the behaviour of individual Malays. These differences are attributed to the social circumstances in which these Muslims are living. More strictly speaking, some social restrictions generated within a particular behavioural context affect their orientation to be 'more Islamic' and as a result cause some variation in behaviour. For example, as already mentioned, for males to wear *serban* (a head covering for praying) is considered to be an expression of the individual's intention to be 'more Islamic'. Nevertheless, not all Malays wear *serban*. The persons who are socially permitted to do so and who enjoy a higher social reputation by doing so are limited to those who know Islam well, who can recite many verses of the *Quran*, who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca and so on. It is very rare for persons without these qualifications to wear *serban*.

The Malay way of regulating this social restriction is through the concept of *malu*, which is often used by Malays along with Islamic concepts to explain their behaviour.

M.G. Swift, an anthropologist who discussed the Malay concept of *malu* (which had been translated as 'shame', 'shyness', or 'embarrassment'), considered it to be a 'hypersensitiveness to what other people may be thinking about one' (Swift 1965: 110). Because of being 'hypersensitive' to others, a person who deviates from what is expected of his or her status or social role, would feel *malu*. This holds true especially in matters outside the realm of the law. It could be said that the fear of feeling *malu* operates as a strong sanction on behaviour for Malays.

In fact the norms of behaviour relating to *malu* ensure that in everyday life no one should ever feel *malu*. In other words, one is expected to be very careful not only to avoid being shamed oneself, but also not to put others in the position of being shamed.

For example, in Kelantan such behaviour as talking loudly, taking an over-familiar attitude towards the opposite sex or wearing Western-style dress, is usually considered to be *malu*, and it is explained that Malays never behave in such a way because they are afraid of feeling *malu*. Similarly, if the amount of meat in the dishes provided for a ceremonial feast (called *kenduri*) is not enough in comparison with the social status of the host, it is considered to be very *malu* for him or her. Therefore, the host must take care in preparing the menu. In the case of avoiding bringing shame on others, an example would be to avoid insisting on one's own opinion too strongly. This could undermine the authority of someone else, especially a more senior person. So one must be sensitive to this, and even in the case when one is right, one is expected to appear to change one's mind and obey the elders, or keep silent.

As already discussed, the teachings of Islam are considered by Malays to encompass one's whole life. On the other hand, the concept of *malu* also works as an indispensable guiding principle for Malays. However, these two sets of norms do not function amongst Malays with equal importance. It is obvious that performing ritual prayers or paying *zakat* (compulsory alms) are more important

than obeying the elders or talking calmly. However, as mentioned below, even the performance of prayers, which seems to be based only on religious principles, is influenced by the norms concerning *malu*, and in this sense, Malay Islam or the Malay world of meaning cannot be discussed only with reference to Islamic principles.

Although the origin of the norm based on *malu* is unknown, it is clear that it has a quite different logic from the Islamic norms. In comparison with Islamic norms which are considered to be 'absolute' in that they are authorized by God, the norms deriving from *malu* could be said to be 'conditional' in that they vary according to social relations at the time. In other words, the former are 'universal' and request all Muslims to behave in the same way anywhere and any time, while the latter are 'relative' and are re-constituted at each moment.

Then, how do these two sets of norms operate concurrently in the behaviour of Malay Muslims? What kind of perspective is necessary to understand the behaviour of Malay Muslims which manifests these norms in an integrated way? Since there seems to be no contradiction between them both in the consciousness of the Malay actors themselves and in empirical behaviour observed in Malay society, it is meaningless to try to decide which behaviour originates from Islam and which from the Malay concept of *malu*. Instead, what is needed is for us to discuss these two norms in one framework. To do so, let us consider how Malay Muslims themselves interpret and explain their own behaviour.

### **Islam and *Malu***

Below I will describe the case of a person (here pseudonymously called Daud) and his son-in-law (pseudonymously called Halim). Daud was my neighbor in the village where I stayed during my field research. One day, around ten in the morning, when I was talking with Daud in his house, Halim came from an inner room and started to bathe outside the house. There was a well inside the house, but the male members of the family usually bathed in the fenced space in front of the house because a water-tap was there. Daud, looking at Halim bathing, grumbled to me that Halim did not feel *malu* about getting up so late. According to Daud, Halim, who lives in another town in Kelantan and sometimes comes to visit with Daud's daughter, usually wakes up late even in his father-in-law's home and does not pray the morning prayer at all. As Malays habitually bathe when they get up, 'To bathe now is to tell other villagers that he has just got up, so he did not pray the morning prayer (which must be done before dawn and which requires ritual ablutions to be done beforehand)'. For as long as I have known him, it has been often observed that he did not do the daily prayers nor attend the Friday prayers. In hearing Daud's attitude to Halim, I felt that Daud, who considered himself, and was considered by others, to be a devout Muslim, was irritated by Halim's behaviour, but this was the first time he expressed open criticism.

Furthermore, in the words of Daud, 'Maybe every villager knows that Halim does not pray', and he said, 'I feel very *malu* about it'. In fact, the villagers who

knew Daud well still wondered why he had permitted his daughter to marry Halim and many of them did not like Halim. However, it is significant that Daud, even though he felt so *malu* because of Halim's behaviour, did not advise or scold him at all. Asked why he did not admonish Halim to pray, he explained that 'it is not good for me to do that' because 'Halim is already grown up'. When I asked why it was not good, Daud replied 'Halim would feel *malu* if I were to advise or scold him'.

In this explanation by Daud himself about his behaviour, the relationship between the two norms, one originating from Islam and one from the concept of *malu*, is clearly shown. For Daud, the issue of whether Halim, a member of his family, prays the morning prayer or not is a matter judged according to the Islamic teaching, but at the same time incorporates the feeling of *malu* in such a way that it is necessary for both Daud and Halim to avoid feeling *malu*. The attitude of Daud in not challenging Halim about his Islamic practice, in spite of the fact Daud thinks Halim is wrong and feels *malu* in front of his fellow villagers, could be considered as a typical one for Malay Muslims who try to balance the two different kinds of norms in their daily lives.

As can be observed in this case, one of the biggest reasons for Malays to feel *malu* is to have 'being insufficient' in Islamic practice made public. From breaking the Islamic behavioural norms to not having sufficient knowledge of Islam, once these 'insufficiencies' become known to other people, the person can only feel *malu* very strongly.

However, direct discussion of another person's religious practice rarely happens in the context of Malay Islam. On the contrary, Malays deliberately avoid asking others about their faith. Questions about someone's knowledge of practice of Islam, such as whether one can recite the *Quran*, whether one can name the prophets in order (Muhammad is considered to be the last prophet), whether one attends the Friday prayers every week, whether one 'really' fasts during the fasting month, are hardly ever asked publicly except perhaps on the occasion of teaching Islam to children.

The doctrinal reason for not asking these questions, as a Malay informant explained, is because 'only God knows the faith of each Muslim' and 'man cannot judge how strong a person's faith is' based merely on his or her surface behaviour or the amount of his or her knowledge. However, if we consider that the essence of Islamic practice is to be 'more Islamic', combined with the Malay concept of *malu*, it is easy to understand why Malays avoid asking each other about their Islamic knowledge. As mentioned above, although every Muslim is expected to be 'more Islamic', it is impossible to achieve the Islamic ideal both in theory and in real life. For Malay Muslims who are always faced with this Islamic dilemma, once 'insufficiency' concerning Islam is publicly revealed, it is extremely *malu* for the individual. And as every Malay lives with this dilemma, to expose it openly is 'taboo'.

From the above discussion, it can be seen that Malays do not obey Islamic

norms unconditionally nor live only according to the Malay way of life. Instead, they subjectively interpret Islam and construct the world of Malay Islam as a system of meaning. This system of meaning is, of course, embedded in the real world of Malay and Malaysian society. Therefore, to understand Malay Islam in its totality, it is necessary as the next step to examine how it manifests itself in the socio-political context.

## MALAY ISLAM IN SOCIAL REALITY

### Overview of Malay and Malaysian Society

After independence, the most important national issue for Malaysia has been social integration. For a nation in which three major ethnic groups have their own distinct languages, religions and life styles, achieving harmony and coexistence between them have been established as a goal at the level of national policy: the so-called '*bumiputera* policy'. The New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1971, which was introduced after the May 13th. 1969 ethnic riots between Malays and non-Malays, was focused around the ideology of the *bumiputera* policy, which aimed to improve the status of *bumiputera* (members of indigenous groups, mainly Malays) who had been left behind in the economic realm in comparison with non-*bumiputera* (mainly Malaysian Chinese and Malaysian Indians).

This NEP has substantially achieved its target<sup>2)</sup>, but at the same time, it has brought drastic changes to Malay and Malaysian society during the 20 year NEP era. A most prominent feature has been the shift of Malaysian politics from an inter-ethnic to an intra-ethnic focus. With the success of the NEP (and the *bumiputera* policy), the status of Malays has risen overall (not only politically but also economically and culturally), and as a result, key domestic issues in Malaysia have changed from a focus on Malays vs non-Malays to that of the various conflicts and rivalries between the Malays themselves. This tendency has accelerated since the 1980s. Most major issues in recent Malaysian politics relate to real or latent conflicts between the Malays.

Among such issues, the one which seems to be most directly catalyzed by the NEP is the intensification of rivalry between UMNO (United Malays National Organization), the leading partner in the ruling Barisan coalition, and PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia), a Malay (Islamic) opposition party. With its penetration into Malaysian society in general and Malay society in particular, the NEP has deepened the gap between the Malays with access to the NEP's economic benefits and those without. This imbalance among Malays has been reflected in the political conflicts between UMNO and PAS, intensifying the rivalry between them which can be traced back to the 1950s<sup>3)</sup>. This has been strongly observed in the rural areas, because, in addition to the fact that the rural population consists mostly of Malays, the close ties in rural social relations make it easy to observe people's political affiliations. Furthermore, because of the fact that political leaders have a strong

influence not only in political but also in economic and social affairs, political affiliations operate as a very important factor for villagers in their everyday lives. In any Malay village, everyone knows 'who belongs to which party'.

The so-called UMNO crisis of April 1987 has accelerated this situation. As the result of the coalition formed between PAS and Semangat 46 (S46), a political party made up of members who split from UMNO, the conventional rivalry among Malays has been ever more intensified. This tendency is especially observed in Kelantan, in which Malays account for more than 90 per cent of the state's population. There are two reasons for this political 'heat up' in Kelantan. Firstly, the leader of S46, Tunku Razaleigh, is a member of Parliament representing a constituency in Kelantan and also a relative of the *sultan* of Kelantan, so the party can appeal to the loyalty of Kelantanese Malays. Secondly, in Kelantan, as opposed to other states in Malaysia, PAS had always been strongly supported. Therefore, both UMNO and anti-UMNO supporters surmised that there would be a turnover of political control from UMNO to anti-UMNO in Kelantan if the corporation between S46 and PAS was achieved<sup>4</sup>. It is not exaggerating to say that most of Kelantan has split into two conflicting political factions.

It must be remembered that Malay Islam as a system of meanings, at least the Kelantanese version of Malay Islam after 1987, manifests itself only through this social reality.

### **A Marriage Ceremony: An Example of the Way in which Malay Islam Manifests Itself**

The case below is presented to show how Malay Islam manifests itself in the social and political reality of Kelantan society. At a marriage ceremony held at a village in 1989, when the political rivalry mentioned above had reached its peak, participants were perplexed by a trivial question posed by the *imam* who was conducting the ceremony, to the bridegroom. On the one hand, this questioning of the bridegroom by the *imam* is part of the marriage ceremony, but on the other hand, the particular question he asked can be considered to be a result of the political conflict in that village. Hence, this example will clearly show the mechanisms by which Malay Islam is practised in a specific context.

The Malay Muslim marriage ceremony is divided into two parts, called *akad nikah* (marriage contract) and *bersanding* (to be set next to one another) respectively. According to Islamic doctrine, the former ceremony is mandatory and is sufficient in itself for the marriage to take place. The most important element of the *akad nikah* ceremony is the ritualized dialogue between the *imam* and the bridegroom. Usually the *imam* asks the bridegroom about the *Rukun Iman* (six fundamental beliefs) and the *Rukun Islam* (five pillars of Islam) and then permits him to take the vow of marriage. In Kelantan the ceremony of *bersanding* is held a few days after the *akad nikah*. This is a feast usually held at the bride's house and functions to announce the marriage to the community. Despite Islamic doctrine, in village society the marriage is not considered to be official until this

*bersanding* ceremony has been performed.

The marriage ceremony in question was being performed according to this procedure. It was between the eldest son of the *penghulu* (the head of a *mukim*, the lowest unit of administration in Kelantan) of X village and a female relative of the *penghulu* of Y village. They were to be considered *jodoh* (well-matched) except for the fact that the father of the bridegroom was an active member of UMNO but the father of the bride was a strong supporter of PAS.

On the day of the *akad nikah*, after the prayer time of *Isya* (the night prayer), the bridegroom and his party arrived in several cars at the bride's house. There her close relatives had been awaiting their arrival, having finished all preparations for the ceremony. The bridegroom, wearing a black *baju Melayu* (traditional Malay dress for men) got out of the car and exchanged greetings with the bride's father at the entrance to the house. They were invited to enter and a meal of several dishes was served to them. The *imam* of this village, another guest who would play a leading role in the *akad nikah* ceremony, was waiting for their meal to finish, from time to time checking some documents which he had brought for the purpose of registering the marriage.

After the dinner, a new carpet was spread in the middle of the main room. The bridegroom and the *imam* sat on the carpet facing each other. On the right hand side of the *imam* was the bride's father, also facing the bridegroom. A relative of the bridegroom handed the *imam* a photo album in which bank notes were displayed. This was the bridewealth, called *mas kahwin* (gold for marriage) in Kelantan. The *imam* and the bride's father confirmed the sum, in this case 3,000 Malaysian Ringgit.

Thus the *akad nikah* ceremony began. Firstly, the *imam* asked the bridegroom about the *Rukun Iman* and the *Rukun Islam*. The bridegroom answered these questions accurately. Usually after these two standard questions about Islam, the *imam* lets the bridegroom take the vow of marriage, but in this case, he requested that the bridegroom further explain the *Rukun Nikah* and the *Rukun Saksi*. The *Rukun Nikah* and the *Rukun Saksi* are the principles for marriage and the principles for witnesses to the marriage respectively. The former states that marriage consists of five elements which are the groom, the bride, the bride's guardian, two witnesses and the vow of marriage. The latter defines the criteria for witnesses to the *Rukun Nikah*: they must be Muslim, male, not blind, not deaf and able to understand the vows. Unlike the *Rukun Iman* and the *Rukun Islam* which almost every Muslim knows precisely, it is very rare for Malays to be able to explain the *Rukun Nikah* and the *Rukun Saksi* both in terms of contents and in terms of the right order of the elements. This bridegroom was no exception. He tried to remember the items but could not. After several wrong answers, he managed to reply with the help of the *imam*.

Although it was obvious that the relatives of the bridegroom were very angry, they could not express anything openly. The bride's family were also disturbed by the unexpected outcome. They tried to smooth things over, but without success.

Thus, the prayers for celebrating the marriage were performed in a chilly atmosphere. Even after the *imam* had left, the anger of the bridegroom's party was still high and they went home quickly, without even enjoying the refreshments prepared by the bride's relatives.

Three days after the *akad nikah*, the *bersanding* ceremony was held at the bride's house. The main topic of conversation among the villagers who came to help with the cooking for the feast and among the guests who were invited to the ceremony was of course about the 'unusual' questions at the *akad nikah*. The *bersanding* ceremony itself was conducted without any problems, but the incident which occurred during the *akad nikah* ceremony became the central topic of village gossips for a long time afterwards.

Concerning the 'unusual' questions asked by the *imam*, the father of the bridegroom told me that his son was questioned in that way 'because he (the father) supported UMNO', and 'the questions were irrelevant to Islamic teaching'. He continued, 'That village (Y village) is dominated by UMNO, so that *imam* wanted to show his power by shaming us'. According to his interpretation, the *imam* used 'Islam as a political tool'. The comments of the father of the bride were a little different. He said that he had not heard such questions in an *akad nikah*, but it was desirable for his son-in-law to be able to answer them. In his opinion, 'marriage as such (but in this case of his daughter) has nothing to do with politics, and so it would be regarded by the *imam* also'. The *imam* himself said about this *akad nikah* ceremony that his questions were 'not unusual' and had no bearing on political matters. He said, 'It is much better for the bridegroom to learn Islam even though he may feel ashamed in the process'. He stressed that it was his duty to spread Islamic knowledge at any opportunity.

The responses of the villagers towards this event were varied. Some villagers, like the father of the bridegroom, blamed the *imam* for asking 'too many' questions. They insisted that the *imam* took advantage of his role and used Islamic teaching to shame the bridegroom and his family, who belonged to the opposite group in local politics. On the other hand, there were some who blamed the bridegroom for not having enough Islamic knowledge. However, it must be stressed here that these two opinions represent the extremes, and that most villagers could not give an explicit view of the matter. Apparently this *imam* deviated from the Malay cultural norm as discussed in the second part of this paper, but no one could clearly criticize him for doing so. On the contrary, for some villagers this affair gave them an opportunity to reflect upon their own attitudes towards Islam.

### **The Political Situation in the Community**

The guests who attended this marriage ceremony were also embedded in the political situation of that time. After the split of Semangat 46 from UMNO, the political structure of villages in Kelantan changed their framework of rivalry, from UMNO versus PAS to UMNO versus PAS/S46. Both X and Y villages experienced this restructuring process. After the general election in 1978, the majority of

residents in both villages supported UMNO and this structure of UMNO as the majority vs PAS as the minority lasted for about ten years. However, after 1987 the two villages began to move in different directions.

In X village, just as in other areas of Kelantan, about half the former UMNO members joined S46. Led by an ex-*penghulu* of X village, they asserted themselves with various activities, such as withdrawing their members from 4B (the youth association), setting up a large signboard at the entrance of the village to express their support for S46, and so on. In addition to this, because of the intense pressure brought to bear on the community by the *penghulu* and UMNO in the 'UMNO era', the PAS supporters felt a strong antipathy against UMNO and S46 as well, and as a result, three parties led by separate leaders campaigned respectively for the forthcoming elections. (But finally in December, 1989, an alignment between S46 and PAS was achieved in this village and a rally which the supporters from both S46 and PAS attended was held at the house of the ex-*penghulu*.)

The father of the bridegroom, who was the *penghulu* of X village, was a strong supporter of UMNO. As he was born in another district in Kelantan and moved to this village after his marriage, it may be said he did not have enough political support in X village itself. But because of his strong participation in the political activities of UMNO since his youth, he was given the status of *penghulu* after UMNO's return to power in Kelantan. After the split within UMNO, however, with the weakening of his power base in this village, his 'outsiderness' began to rise a point of criticism. Furthermore, his inability to understand Malay written in Roman letters (*rumi*) (he was able to understand Malay written in Arabic letters (*jawi*)), which had never been an issue before the UMNO split, was suddenly attacked by the ex-*penghulu* and S46 members, who insisted that there were more capable people for the leadership of this village.

On the other hand, in Y village, the number of villagers who changed their political support from UMNO to S46 was relatively small. Moreover, even after the village had split into three factions, that is, UMNO, S46 and PAS, the leadership of this village was controlled substantially by the *penghulu* who was also an UMNO branch head, and he was supported by almost all villagers, from both the UMNO and the anti-UMNO factions. In these political relationships, the leader of the villagers who were opposed to the *penghulu* was the *imam* of the wedding incident. According to the UMNO members, this *imam* had originally supported UMNO, but moved to PAS when PAS became influential in the area. On the other hand, the *imam* himself explained that he changed to PAS because he was disillusioned with the worldliness of UMNO.

The parents of the bride came from Y village and were distant relatives of the *penghulu*. Politically they supported PAS, but religiously they had a close relationship not with the *imam* but with the *ustaz* (religious teacher) of the *madrasah* (village prayer house). The father of the bride usually prayed with this *ustaz* at his *madrasah*, so it can be said that in the context of Islam, they were teacher and pupil. This *ustaz* had studied Islam at universities in Mecca and Egypt

for more than ten years, and he played a leading role in teaching Islam in the district. He was an elder brother of the wife of the *penghulu* and had good relationships with the *penghulu* and other UMNO members, although he himself stated he was a 'strong' PAS supporter.

The *penghulu* did not say anything openly about the relationship between himself and the *imam*. But the behaviour of the *penghulu*, such that he went to a mosque in another village for the Friday prayers, was an obvious indication that they were opposed to each other. Moreover, the villagers, who had close relations with the *penghulu* regardless of their political loyalties, often came to see the *ustaz* to ask his advice about Islamic matters.

This is the social reality in which the villagers of both X and Y villages were living when the marriage ceremony was conducted. Thus the question which must be considered is how Malay Islam is expressed in this particular social reality.

### **A System of Meaning Changing in Social Reality**

On the one hand, if the incident of the marriage ceremony is discussed only in the context of the community's political relations, the *imam's* behaviour would be considered to be an example of the 'politicization' of Islam. As the father of the bridegroom insisted, with the intensification of conflict between UMNO and PAS, the *imam*, a local leader of PAS, 'used' Islam as a political tool by asking such questions. He intended to show his 'power' to the father of the bridegroom who was an UMNO leader in X village, to the father of the bride who supported PAS but was a close associate of the *penghulu* of Y village, a local UMNO leader, and even to the PAS supporters over whom he did not have strong influence. His purpose was to make the bridegroom (and his entourage) feel *malu* by exposing the insufficiency of their Islamic knowledge.

On the other hand, however, if this case is analyzed from a cultural point of view, the 'unusual' questions of the *imam* could be considered as an outcome of trends to 'purify' Islam. In other words, he tried to purify the 'folk' Islam practiced among village Malays. The *imam's* questions were an expression of his orientation to be 'more Islamic' in social life. Furthermore, the fact that this *imam* was not criticized on the basis of prevailing cultural norms in the practice of Malay Islam shows clearly that the villagers could also share the same orientation as the *imam*, at least at that time. Therefore, this might be considered as the result of a significant change in the Malay cultural world.

It must be stressed however, that these two 'causes' of the *imam's* questions influence and reinforce each other, and as a result, he was able to behave in such a peculiar way. In short, for the *imam*, the conflict between PAS and UMNO had to be interpreted primarily as a conflict based on the difference between their religious orientations. Therefore, to express his political support for PAS he resorted to Islam, which is the foundation for the identity of PAS as a political party. In the context of the political relations mentioned above, even though his questions had broken the normal conventions regarding questions about Islam, he single-

handedly constructed a new reality by showing he was 'more Islamic' than the UMNO supporters.

But in another sense it was not only the *imam* who re-interpreted and reconstructed social reality at that time. When they faced the reality of the situation created by the *imam*, with the exception of a few persons like the father of the bridegroom, the villagers could not help accepting this new reality. This was because, in terms of Malay Islam, they were Muslims too and so they recognized that becoming 'more Islamic' was a way to achieve God's ideal. Moreover, in terms of experiential reality, they were also involved in the political conflict between UMNO and PAS. The questions of the *imam*, which were a challenge against the 'taboo' about changing the conventions of the *akad nikah* ceremony, served to show them more concretely the world of meaning which until then they had only vaguely perceived. At the same time, the incident awakened them to the fact that the conflicts were further intensifying.

A few villagers, represented by the father of the bridegroom, could not accept this new reality. However, the situation was such that they were no longer able to criticize the *imam's* behaviour using the reason that he had broken the 'taboo'. According to Islamic doctrine, there is nothing wrong in asking about the *Rukun Nikah* or the *Rukun Saksi* during the *akad nikah* ceremony. So, with the change of orientation towards Islamic purity and the intensification of local political conflict, the Malay norm concerning *malu* lost all its influence.

What must be seen in the behaviour and opinions of the participants in this *akad nikah* ceremony is not a mere reflection of Malay Islam as a 'static' system of meaning, nor a set of merely 'utilitarian' reactions caused by local politics, but the subjective interpretation of meaning and reconstruction of reality by the people, in the context of both cultural and social dimensions. In other words, the range of difference in individual behaviour and opinions shows the dynamic of Malay Islam as it is continually renewed in social reality, by each Malay, at each moment. However, once the pendulum of Malay Islam, which swings between 'universal' and 'local', or 'high' and 'folk' in E. Gellner's terms (Gellner 1981, 1992), starts to move to the universal side for some reason, the interpretation of meaning and reconstruction of reality have to be done in conformity with the universalist orientation to be 'more Islamic'. This is because the word of God and the practices of Muhammad are believed to be absolutely true and an ideal for every Muslim.

## CONCLUSION

In studying contemporary Malay Islam, we can observe various changes in its system of meaning caused by both political and also more general conflicts in Malay society. In other words, the orientation to be 'more Islamic', which is a basic element in Islam, but which had been offset by various non-Islamic norms prevailing in Malay society, has begun to change in degree from 'more' to 'more and more', as a consequence of the intensification of political conflict among the

Malays, especially in the 1980s. As long as Islam remains the 'absolute' way to legitimize one's behaviour, but at the same time, as long as the difference between the orientation to be 'more Islamic' among Muslims is only 'relative' in the sense that this orientation will never be realized, then once any conflict among Malays is debated in the context of Islam, it will, inevitably result in the 'escalation' of Islamic ideals. That is to say, the 'universality' of Islam, which tends to move towards Islamic ideals, receives further emphasis in any 'particular' situation, such as political conflict in Malay society.

This same phenomenon, the 'escalation' of Islam, can be easily found in some recent political debates in Malaysia. In the case of proposed amendments to the constitution concerning the status of the *sultans* in 1993, and in the series of debates concerning legislation to prohibit liquor consumption in Kelantan from 1991 to 1992, both sides of the debate stressed that they (their policies, their opinions, their decisions, etc.) were 'more Islamic' than their opponents as a strategy to gain mass support<sup>5)</sup>. Needless to say, both these debates were highly politicized. The former took place in the context of a power struggle between the traditional Malay elites and the Malay new rich. The latter is a manifestation of the conventional rivalry between UMNO and PAS. However, in both cases, Islam was used by both parties as the discourse of legitimation. Such statements as 'all Muslims are equal in the sight of God', 'Muslims should obey the law of God, not the law of human beings', 'Islam prohibits the consumption of liquor', 'Islam recognizes the right of non-Muslims', were often repeated in the course of these debates<sup>6)</sup>.

As analysed in this paper, in order to understand Islam in general and Malay Islam in particular from an anthropological point of view, what is needed is, firstly, to consider the relationship between universal Islam and its local development at the level of cultural meaning, and secondly, to analyse how this particular version of Islam is realized in various social contexts. Only anthropological enquiry, which attempts to examine the interpretation and reconstruction of meaning within experiential reality, can discuss not only universalist Islam and its particular cultural manifestation within a social structure, but also the dynamic relations between them.

## NOTES

The discussion in this chapter partly overlaps with the content of my papers previously published in Japanese (Tawada 1991, 1993, 1995). I am especially grateful to Dr. Shamsul Amri Baharuddin of the National University of Malaysia for his intellectual encouragement and hospitality. I am also indebted to Dr. Wendy A. Smith of Monash University for her comments and suggestions to a previous draft of this paper. Of course, final responsibility for errors is mine alone.

- 1) Up to now, many publications in Malay studies have treated Islam as their central focus. It must be said, however, that in spite of the large number of these papers, the question of how Malay Muslims interpret and practise Islam still remains to be discussed. Even in

- anthropological studies of Malay culture and society, one of the aims of which is to describe the Malay way of thinking and behaviour, this kind of hermeneutic approach is commonly lacking, with a few exceptions (see Kessler 1978, ch.11).
- 2) The two major goals of the NEP were; (i) the eradication of poverty, and (ii) the restructuring of society so as to reduce and eliminate the identification of race with economic function. The target of the second goal was that share ownership should be restructured so that by 1990 the *bumiputera* would own and operate at least 30% of the total. In 1990, after 20 years of the NEP, the *bumiputera* have achieved 19.6% of the total.
  - 3) For example, Shamsul A.B. has traced this process in detail, based on the local history of a Malay village (Shamsul 1986).
  - 4) The results of the 1986 general election show that Barisan won 29 (UMNO 28, MCA 1) seats in the Kelantan State Assembly against the PAS score of 10 seats. However PAS obtained 45.9 per cent of the total vote in Kelantan. Therefore, the contest could be considered to be closer than it appeared (Sankaran R. and M. Hamdan A. 1988). Moreover, in both the 1990 and 1995 general elections, as was expected at the time, the PAS-S46 coalition won a majority in the State Assembly. (In October 1996, Semangat 46 dissolved and most of its members and supporters rejoined UMNO.)
  - 5) I have analyzed this 'escalation' process as observed in the latter debate, with a focus on the insistence that things should be 'more Islamic' as the major discourse (Tawada 1995).
  - 6) These assertions can be found quite easily in articles reporting the debates in the major newspapers.

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