

## **Religious Identity of the Malay Muslim Middle Class: A Case Study in Klang Valley, Malaysia**

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**Abstract:** The change of Malaysian economy based on agriculture sector to a new industrialized economy has brought dramatic changes in employment from labor-orientation to service-orientation. It also affected the process of urbanization significantly since the 1970s which contributes to the emergence of Malay Muslim middle class. This study is based on a survey conducted on 638 respondents who work or reside in the Klang valley and receive at the minimum of RM2,000.00 monthly income. The respondents were chosen randomly. It also discusses three domains of the Malay Muslim middle class identity, namely; self appearance, consumerism and religious socialization. The result indicates that those domains have been influenced by the 1970s Islamic resurgence and the policy of the Malaysian government.

**Key words:** Religious identity, Malay Muslim middle class, policy, respondents, economy, Malaysia

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Malaysia is a Muslim country. The Muslims consist of 55% of the 25 million of the total population. The emergence of Muslim middle class has begun in 1980s after the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971. The main objectives of the NEP was to restructure the specific fixed occupations based on certain ethnic groups such as Malays in the farming sector, Indians in the commodity sector and Chinese in the business sector. According to Torii (2003), the basic philosophy of NEP has been the bedrock of the succeeding economic plans, the National Development Policy (NDP) of 1991-2000 and the National Vision Policy (NVP) of 2001-10.

Due to the economic achievement in the 1980s and 1990s, the demography of Malay middle class has shifted from the traditional sphere, i.e., government to private sectors. From the favorite jobs as Malaysian Civil Service (MCS) administrator and teachers, there is a slightly change of their involvement in private sectors, especially as the managers in Government Link Companies (GLC) or become a new tycoons (Chong, 2005). Three changes of economic background have contributed to the status of the middle class economic sphere. They are; the change of Malaysian economy based on agriculture sector to new industrialized economy; the change of employment from labor to secondary and tertiary sectors and the change of society based on agriculture to industry were effecting significantly into urbanization processing in 3 decades

(Embong, 2002). During the economic boom in Asia in the 1990s, Malaysia saw significant economic growth. The Malaysian economy continued to boom at historically unprecedented rates of 8-9% a year for much of the 1990s. This economic achievement has successfully shifted the Malay lower to the middle class.

Most of this group had studied in managerial and professional field in Western countries such as United Kingdom, United States and Australia through governmental express lane programs' in 1970s and 1980s. Returning home, they live in towns or cities, especially in Klang valley, being appointed with good positions in the Government Link Company (GLC) such as Petronas and Sime derby or in private companies either as executive, manager, consultant or human resource officer. Although, they had studied abroad in the secular Western countries, some of them were actively joined the Muslim students' activities which collaborated with those from Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, etc. Due to their strong position in the government sectors and private sectors, they have been portrayed as the representatives of the Muslim image in Malaysia. Economically, they have contributed in developing Islamic banking system, Islamic insurance (Takaful Islam), ar-Rahnu (Islamic Pawn Broking). Most of them take Islam very seriously and follow its precepts as a lifestyle as much as a religion. Their religious beliefs are maintained through education, parent background and cultural transmission. Religious beliefs can be rigidly and unreflectively adopted or can be flexible leaving one open

to the consideration and assimilation of new ideas. This study examines 3 domains of Middle class namely: Self appearance and lifestyle, consumerism and daily religious socialization practices as have been introduced by Clark (2007).

Among the earliest studies of the Malay middle class group was a research by Scott (1968) which focused on their elite position in the Malaysian Civil (MCS) then followed by Nordin Selat's mobility study on 105 respondents of Malay administrators in Kuala Lumpur. The study was on the differences between the old middle classes who were dominated by the aristocratic class from the new Malay middle classes which include the British-educated graduates from Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK). His study indicated that the Malay middle class has a different value from the other classes such as their lifestyle, housing, consumerism, educational background, social life and political leanings. However, the research did not study the practice of the Muslim middle class and their appreciation of Islam. Result of Nordin Selat's study indicated that 70% of Malay middle class were consisted of three children. They live in bungalow houses around Kuala Lumpur with its own landscape. They love to play golf and like to read English magazines such as Newsweek. Only 4.76% of them like to watch religious program on TV. The extensive studies of the Malay middle class have been widely done in the 1980s and there were a number of seminars and writings concerning the Malay community had been held in Malaysia. Among the significant seminars conducted in the last decade was the International Conference of the Modernization and National-Cultural Identity in 1983. The seminar produced a proceeding, race, class and development in Malaysia edited by Ali (1984). These writings generally reflected a conflict of classes in society due to the relentless efforts of the government in improving economic performance. In the 1990s, research on the Malay middle class continued by a number of non-Malay writers such as Kahn (2003) who found that the rise of the Malay culture and Gomez (1990) which focuses on corporate emergence. The most recent contemporary study of the Malay middle class was Middle class: The development and it's role in Malaysia which has been done by Abdul Aziz (2012).

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Subjects:** The information about the subjects are shown in Table 1.

**Sample and procedures:** Respondents for this study were 638 Malay middle class individuals (303 males and 335

Table 1: The demographic characteristics of the subjects

Groups	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	303	46.7
Female	335	51.6
<b>Age in years</b>		
<30	261	40.2
31-40	258	39.8
41-50	91	14.0
>50	36	5.5
<b>Monthly income (RM)</b>		
2000-3999	536	82.6
4000-5999	66	10.2
6000-7999	26	4.0
8000-9999	3	0.5
>10000	9	1.4
<b>Profession</b>		
Professional	200	30.8
Lecturer/teacher	169	26.0
Manager/administrator	77	11.9
Businessman	9	1.4
Service	106	16.3
Agriculture	2	0.3
Industry	5	0.8
Others	72	11.1

females) who reside or work in Klang valley from 6 local municipals. They were randomly selected by quota sampling. The research assistants personally went to interview the respondents and to distribute the questionnaires. Demographic questions on age, gender, academic background, monthly income and profession were used to get information on the background of the participants. Part of the questionnaires used Religious Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ-R) containing 13 items for assessing religious principle and religious attitudes. Each item is rated on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The reliability of the scale was  $\alpha$  0.787 as suggested by Cronbach (1951). Results of the study have been analyzed by using descriptive analysis.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results are discussed based on Bourdieu (1984) who categorized identity in several features including self appearance, consumerism and religious socialization. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants. There were almost an equal number of male (46.7%) and female (51.6%). Most of the respondents have an income >RM 3,000.00 month<sup>-1</sup>. A majority or 30.8% of respondents are professionals.

**Self appearance:** Affected by the Islamic resurgence of the mid 1970s, Muslims in Malaysia have been increasingly manifesting their identity through the use of Islamic forms of dress. Thus, it is common now-a-days in Klang valley, especially in the city of Kuala Lumpur, to

observe the Muslim ladies cover themselves with the head scarf and Muslim robes. Economically, due to the high demand on Muslim dress known as busana Muslimah, the emergence of Muslim boutiques and Muslim brands using Arabic words have been a new Islamic trend in the Klang valley.

The Malay middle class women actively pursue an Islamic worldview and lifestyle that makes *dakwah* fashions compatible with popular and foreign influenced trends. In a cosmopolitan appearance, Muslim women wear the head scarf with Levi's jeans and bringing Italian handbags and Blackberry handphonses. And for the Muslim men, with the *kopiah* on their head, they wear neck ties and driving BMW but keeping beard. Muslim dress symbolized the de-peasantisation, the exploration of modern Malays class mobility and gender identity. The Malay Muslim middle class who pursued their higher education overseas or local universities speak English fluently and posses prominent status in the society.

As early as the 1990s, the English newspaper, *New Straits Times* published articles and pictures of middle-class lifestyle in a section known as the lifestyle. The local newspaper, *The Star* provided special columns concerning culture, arts, environment, women, travel and entertainment. *TV3* daily programmes, *Wanita Hari Ini*, *Style on TV2* and *Stylo Lifestyle on NTV7* also highlight tips and issues related to the image and lifestyle of the Malay Muslim middle class. Magazines such as *Impiana* and *Anjung Seri* published monthly to meet the taste of the class at their home.

Though, they have been exposed to the foreign values, i.e., the Western lifestyles and identities, the result showed that the respondents preferred to portray themselves as Muslims compared to other identities (Table 2).

**Consumerism:** As Mulder (1994) states, one way or another, consumerism affects the life of people, enticing them to surround themselves with all kinds of good that become indispensable as markers of urban lifestyle. As early as 1990s, Islamic goods such as books and magazines, Islamic medical services and Islamic banking became a high demand to Malaysian Muslims. One of the findings showed that most of the respondents (30%) preferred to read religious magazine compared to English (5.1%) followed by general interest magazines (6.9%), family magazines (30.2%) and academic magazines

(1.8%). Religious magazines become the main choice because they provided the respondents with the Islamic information and teachings.

Currently, *halal* (lawful or permitted) food consumption is a big concern in Malaysia. In 1970s, it was very difficult for Muslim to go to a restaurant and ask if the products were *halal* or not because there were no *halal* signs or logo. But now-a-days many restaurants including *Pizza Hut*, *MacDonald*, *KFC* and even many Chinese restaurants have put up *halal* logo endorsed by the Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (*JAKIM*). A new Enactment (Department of Malaysian Religious Development, 2011) stated that any irregularities of *halal* logo will be fined a sum of MYR 200.00.

A significant development in the Muslim world in the 1970s and 1980s was the pan-Islamic movement. This movement aimed to revive the glory of Islam and began to demand the application of the Islamic laws in all aspects of life including economic and financial activities. The country has witnessed the emergence of a number of Islamic banks and financial institutions whose modes of operation are distinct from those of conventional banks. Most of the respondents (55.8%) admitted that they preferred the Islamic banking system compared to the conventional banking system. The main reason of their preference is due to their view that Islamic banking and financial system is a process of liberating the Muslims from the yoke of domination by Western thought, values and institutions and remodeling their social and economic life in accordance with the Islamic law.

**Religious socialization:** Religious socialization refers to the development of the individual from infancy upwards; it is intertwined with the educational system whether through formal education in schools, through non-formal programmes or informal education such as family upbringing. It is intrinsically based on the right to education and hence the maximization of the potential of the individuals in the process of development. In Malaysia, most of the Muslim middle class had gone through the religious educational system whether at formal religious schools or through informal programmes at the *madrasahs* or mosques. Now-a-days, most of the children in Klang valley have to attend religious school either in the afternoon or morning depending on their formal school system.

In 1960s, English language has been regarded as the language for the elites especially for those who work on government sectors. However, after the Islamic resurgences in 1970s, besides national language, most of the Muslim middle class use Arabic terminologies instead of the English word. The word *I* and *You*, *mummy* and *daddy* replaced by Arabic words; such as, *ana*, *anta*, *ummi* and *abi*.

Table 2: Respondents' identity preferences

Preferred identity	Percentage
As a Muslim	83.2
As a Malay	4.9
As a Malaysian	2.9
As others	7.1

Regarding to the religious practice, it is common now-a-days, that most of the Muslim middle class attend religious activities such as group prayer and religious circle. Result from this research showed that most of the participants pray at their workplace (regularly -12.8%), attend weekend religious circle (49.8%) which current issues and writings of religious reformist such as Hassan al-Banna of Egypt regularly discussed, recite the Quran (37.1%) and perform pilgrimage to Mecca (6.5% regularly go to Mecca).

### CONCLUSION

The religious practices of the Muslim middle class portrayed the image of Islam and Muslim in Malaysia. Generally, the Malay Muslim middle class have tried to adapt or to Islamize the foreign values with Islamic and local values. They work hard to demonstrate how the particularities of their visions are compatible with capitalism and modernity. The Islamic identities of the class have been influenced by the Islamic resurgences in the 1970s and by the Islamic programmes introduced by the government. Generally, the Malay Muslim middle class prefer to be identified as a Muslim (religious identity) rather than Malay (ethnic identity).

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