

Overcoming Adversity and Challenging Ethnocentric Perceptions: An Ethnographic Case Study of Traditional Malay Boat Making in Terengganu

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Abstract. This article examines the fate of Malay traditional boats and their craftsmen in the face of adversity in the new millennium. The Malays have a rich history of boat-making, dating back to the days of the imperial Han dynasty when Malay, Indonesian and Indian ships dominated the trade between India and China. Among these were the Malay ships, which were recognised as enormous, ocean-going boats that won the Chinese adoration. During the Han period, Chinese warships adopted the ingenious sail-making method of Malay seafarers. However, as time passed and technology took hold, Malay boat building, like many other forms of traditional knowledge and expertise, declined. According to this study, Malay boat making represents a rich storehouse of unique Malay cultural practises. Paradoxically, existing scholarship on the subject often adopts a Western-centric ethnocentric perspective, marginalising the craft and its craftsmen while imposing foreign worldviews upon them. This unintentional epistemological adversity, to some extent, poses a significant threat to the preservation of this endangered local Malay craft and the invaluable cultural heritage it represents. Through an ethnographic case study, this research aims to challenge ethnocentric perceptions, particularly Western by examining the construction techniques, cultural perspectives and unique elements of traditional Malay boat making in Terengganu. By comprehending and documenting this invaluable cultural heritage amid adversity, we contribute to the preservation and appreciation of Malay craftsmanship and indigenous knowledge.

Keywords and phrases: traditional Malay boat, ethnocentrism, local wisdom, Malay boat making, indigenous knowledge

Introduction

Ethnocentric perceptions of traditional crafts can have far-reaching consequences, potentially leading to the loss of culture and indigenous knowledge associated with these crafts. This is particularly evident in the context of traditional Malay boat making, where the cultural significance and historical roots of boat craftsmanship are deeply intertwined with the Malay community. Scholars have extensively acknowledged and emphasised the significant role that boats play in the lives of Malay communities (Mohd Rohaizat et al. 2018). This recognition is particularly situated within the broader context of Malay Polynesian culture, where boats hold immense cultural and practical value. It is worth noting that historical evidence, such as cave wall paintings depicting boat culture, known as *bahari*, discovered in Pulau Muna, Seram and Arguni, islands within the Malay Archipelago, further solidifies the notion that Malay boat culture has deep and ancient roots in the area (Ismail 2009).

Given their predominantly coastal existence in the vast Malay Archipelago, the Malays naturally acquired profound expertise in traditional Malay boat making due to their close relationship with the sea. As one of the earliest indigenous peoples in the region, they originally hailed from coastal Borneo and subsequently expanded their influence into Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula through their extensive trading networks and seafaring way of life (Abdul Mutalib et al. 2016). Through generations of knowledge and experience, the Malays have honed their skills in boat craftsmanship, becoming renowned for their intricate designs and effective navigation techniques. In this regard, it can be seen that the seafaring lifestyle of the Malays has fostered a deep connection with the ocean, shaping their cultural identity and providing them with sustenance, livelihoods and avenues for exploration and trade. Boats have served as vital tools for fishing, transportation and connecting communities across the archipelago. The significance of boats goes beyond their practical uses, as they symbolise the rich heritage, resilience and adaptability of Malay communities.

Therefore, we argue that, by understanding the historical origins and cultural significance of Malay boat culture, we gain a deeper appreciation for the craftsmanship and navigational expertise that have been passed down through generations. It is within this broader context that we can recognise the value and importance of preserving and celebrating the traditional Malay boat making practices, which are intricately intertwined with the identity and history of the Malay people.

To further support this, according to Md Salleh Yaapar (2019), the Malays have a long-standing reputation for their expertise in ship building and navigation, being among the earliest groups to engage in these activities on a large scale. He also asserted that historical records from the Chinese from at least the third century BCE describe the Malays as expert sailors who approached the Chinese shores in large ocean-going vessels from the southern seas and were acknowledged for their exceptional navigational skills. These navigational skills were not based on modern tools such as compasses, maps or charts but on traditional methods such as “celestial navigation”, as referenced by Shaffer in his book, *Maritime Southeast Asia to 1500* (1996, 12).

Given the Malay people’s strong association with their traditional boat culture, we hope to challenge ethnocentric preconceptions in this ethnographic case study by delving into the building processes, cultural viewpoints and unique characteristics of traditional Malay boat making in Terengganu. Inadvertently, we may contribute to the preservation and appreciation of Malay workmanship and indigenous knowledge by documenting and understanding this unique cultural heritage in the face of hardship.

The term “adversity” in this context refers to the challenges and threats that traditional Malay boat making faces in the modern era. Factors such as ethnocentric perceptions, especially Western-centric perception amongst others, such as, modernisation, globalisation and changing lifestyles pose risks to the marginalisation, loss, or diminishing of traditional boat making practices and cultural knowledge. Ethnocentric perceptions, which prioritise one’s own cultural perspective over others, can contribute to the undervaluation or neglect of traditional practices and indigenous knowledge (Prince et al. 2016).

By emphasising the importance of understanding and documenting traditional Malay boat making in the face of adversity, this research seeks to shed light on the challenges, particularly in terms of ethnocentric perceptions that jeopardise its Malay cultural significance. As such, it aims to raise awareness about the need to preserve and appreciate this cultural heritage, not only for its intrinsic value but also as a means to sustain the craftsmanship and indigenous knowledge passed down through generations.

By challenging ethnocentric perceptions and promoting appreciation, this research aims to contribute to the resilience and safeguarding of traditional Malay boat making in Terengganu, situated within the broader context of the Malay Peninsula. Among the states in Peninsula Malaysia, it is widely recognised that the

craftsmanship of traditional Malay boats in the east coast, particularly in Kelantan and Terengganu, is highly refined (Pisol 2003).

By emphasising the importance of understanding and documenting traditional Malay boat making in the face of adversity, this research seeks to shed light on the challenges, particularly in terms of ethnocentric perceptions that jeopardise its Malay cultural significance. In this regard, this study will explore the traditional Malay boat's structure in the context of both its designs and association with the Malay culture.

Traditional Malay Crafts Reflecting the Malay Culture

Culture encompasses various aspects of a population's way of life, including their arts, beliefs and institutions. It is a rich reservoir of knowledge that is passed down from one generation to another. Salam and Osozawa (2008) describe culture as the "existing knowledge system" of local people. In a broader sense, culture can be defined as a collection of beliefs, practices, rituals and traditions shared by a group of individuals who possess a common identity, such as ethnicity, race, or nationality (Buchanan 2018).

According to Spivak (2012), rituals play a crucial role in consolidating, supporting and advancing beliefs and suppositions within a culture. In the context of this article, crafting is viewed as a ritualistic activity that serves to reinforce and demonstrate the belief system of the Malay people. Cultural products, including crafts, are intricately linked to the daily lives and thought processes of a community. Therefore, it can be argued that traditional Malay crafts hold significant value in reflecting and embodying the essence of Malay culture.

This perspective finds practical application in the construction of traditional Malay houses, which showcase the traditional Malay building system centred around Malay anthropomorphism (Syed Iskandar 2001). The construction techniques and design elements of these houses are deeply rooted in the cultural values and belief systems of the Malay people. This further supports the notion that traditional Malay crafts serve as profound reflections of the Malay culture. Drawing a connection to boat making, it is worth noting that traditional Malay boat makers often possess the skills and knowledge required to build traditional Malay houses as well (Pisol 2003). This overlap in craftsmanship strengthens the argument that the construction approach and structure of traditional Malay boats are heavily influenced by the Malay belief system.

Based on the description, it can be asserted that by understanding the intricate relationship between traditional Malay crafts and the Malay culture, one can gain a deeper appreciation for the cultural significance embedded within these crafts. The craftsmanship and artistic expressions found in traditional Malay crafts serve as tangible manifestations of the beliefs, practices and traditions cherished by the Malay people throughout generations. Through these crafts, the unique identity and values of the Malay culture are preserved, celebrated and passed on to future generations.

Traditional Malay Boats Reflecting Malay Culture

It may be argued that the cultural context is an essential consideration when studying traditional Malay boats, as they reflect people's culture and belief systems. This idea of the boat's inextricable connection to its culture is reinforced by Nik Hassan Shuhaimi Nik Abdul Rahman, who asserts that traditional Malay boats reflect not only the myths and tales of the people, but also their cultural perspective on form and technology (Nik Hassan Shuhaimi et al. 2013). In other words, the traditional Malay boat construction not only encompasses the technical aspects of boat making but also mirrors the society's cultural values. Amongst the cultural aspects that influence the building of the Malay traditional boats are religious beliefs and myths of the Malay world, which relate to both the pre-Islamic and Islamic Malay community (Nik Hassan Shuhaimi et al. 2013). Mohd Rohaizat Wahab argues that "boat construction was carried out extensively and in accordance with the cultural tradition, passed down for generations" (Mohd Rohaizat and Zuliskandar 2020) supporting Nik Hassan Shuhaimi et al. (2013) assertion of the traditional Malay boats' close association with Malay cultural beliefs. In terms of the Islamic beliefs of the Malays, Mohd Rohaizat explains that traditional boat building arts have utilised shapes and their inherent meanings that do not go against Islamic principles, such as floral elements, Islamic calligraphy, geometry and abstract designs (Mohd Rohaizat et al. 2018). The awareness of the existence of non-Islamic images is not intended to question or criticise the Malay community for its historical customs and beliefs, but rather to exemplify and raise awareness of Malay art image vocabulary among the population at large (Nik Hassan Shuhaimi et al. 2013). The usage of flora as a theme on Malay boats, according to Coatalen, reflects the Muslim prohibition on deifying living beings. This confirms that religion, integrated with the Malay culture, has a significant impact on how the Malay traditional boats are made (Coatalen 1982). Additionally, the rituals involved in building the boat reflect religion and mythologies as much as the boat itself. In this regard, Pisol Maidin further elaborates on the cultural influences in the creation of Malay boats, such as the Islamic belief system and Malay taboos, albeit these influences are more relevant to the rituals involved

in building the boat than in its actual structure. Some culturally established acts connected to the building of boats include specifics on the motives of painted decorations and carvings, suitable boat maintenance days and the prohibition against women working in the boat workshop (Pisol 2003, 49–55).

Another way to appreciate how these traditional boats reflect Malay culture is through the old Malay mathematical system used in their construction. According to Mohd Rohaizat et al. (2017), the boats not only serve as physical representations but also embody the creative minds of Malay artisans who translated mathematical principles into the repeating motifs visible in the boat's beautiful art.

Despite the importance of the Malay cultural system in boat construction, past research has not given it much consideration. While Pisol (2003) establishes links between certain characteristics of Malay boat manufacturing and Malay culture, he does not provide thorough explanations of how the Malay belief system influences boat designs in particular. For instance, little is known about how the craftsmen determined the lengths of the measuring tools, referred to as *tali sifat*, which signifies the primary string or rope used, or how they precisely determined the weights of boat building tools like stone weights. Additionally, how do Malay boat makers approach the process of *mengagak* the waterline? The term *mengagak* is rooted in the Malay word *agak*, which means to estimate. These examples highlight how the formulation of proportions used by generations of Malay boat makers impacts the functional aspects of the boat's structure.

Further investigation into the application of the Malay mathematical system in boat making is essential to gain a deeper understanding of how these traditional boats reflect Malay culture. By delving into the intricate calculations, estimations and proportional considerations involved in the construction process, researchers can unravel the connection between mathematical concepts, cultural beliefs and the resulting boat designs. Exploring the rationale behind the choices made by Malay boat makers regarding measurement tools, weight distribution and waterline estimation would shed light on how their cultural values and knowledge system were integrated into the crafting process. Such in-depth analysis would provide valuable insights into how the Malay cultural system shapes not only the artistic aspects but also the functional and practical elements of traditional Malay boat construction. As previously mentioned, how did the craftsmen determine the lengths of the measuring tools, known as *tali sifat*, which means the main string or rope used and the precise weights of boat building tools, such as the stone weights? How does the Malay boat maker approach *mengagak* the waterline? These are just a few examples of how the measuring tools and proportion formulation used by generations of Malay boat makers affects the functions of the structure.

Traditional Crafts and the Beliefs of its People

This study is based on a theoretical framework that emphasises the strong connection between cultural products and the culture or belief system of the individuals who create them. It is widely recognised that the practices and rituals involved in craft-making are intimately linked to the cultural beliefs of a specific group (Syed Iskandar 2001). Taking inspiration from Spivak's (2012) assertion earlier that rituals align with and support beliefs and suppositions, as well as the definition of culture provided by the *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Buchanan 2018), which defines culture as a shared set of beliefs, practices, rituals and traditions among a group with a common identity, it becomes clear that cultural crafts are deeply interwoven with the belief systems of the communities that produce them. Additionally, the proposition that culture typically encompasses a set of attitudes, values and norms further reinforces this perspective (Woodfin 2014, 124).

In this study, the operational definitions of culture encompass various elements such as myth, religion, rituals or practices and traditions. Similarly, cultural crafts are operationally defined in terms of the structure and design of traditional Malay boats. These operational definitions are informed by Nik Hassan Shuhaimi's and Mohd Rohaizat's arguments that mythology and religion are essential components of culture, along with the general understanding that a people's practices or rituals should be considered integral to their culture (Nik Hassan Shuhaimi et al. 2013, 100; Mohd Rohaizat et al. 2018, 379; Buchanan 2018, 105).

Ethnocentric Perspectives and Extinction of the Traditional Malay Boats

Studies on traditional Malay boat making have long warned about the craft's decline and imminent extinction. Nik Hassan Shuhaimi et al. (2013), for instance, stated that the "traditional boat is slowly becoming extinct as new engines replace sails" and concluded that Malay boat making is "a tradition facing extinction". There is an urgent need to locate and study existing decorated traditional Malay boats, as the construction of this type of boat is rapidly diminishing. Immediate action is crucial to document and preserve this valuable cultural heritage (Nik Hassan Shuhaimi et al. 2013, 100). Sheppard (1963) had foreseen this fate, warning of "many examples of Malay artistry and craftsmanship that have gone unnoticed for half a century and will soon share the fate of other beautiful Malay objects, forgotten". The decline in traditional Malay boat building skills has also been observed in the South Sulawesi region, where the number of craftsmen has significantly decreased in recent years. Rising material costs are one of the main reasons for this decline, causing many boat builders to give up and abandon the craft (*MyMetro* 2020).

Despite some progress in the study of traditional Malay boats in the South Sulawesi region, research on construction techniques and traditional boat building remains limited. Most of the ethnocentric research conducted on boat building technology tends to focus primarily on construction and structural aspects, often neglecting the exploration of the local Malay cultural perspective. Previous studies on traditional Malay boats have predominantly examined decorative aspects, such as decorations and carvings, rather than delving into the intricate techniques involved in boat making (Coatalen 1982; Mohd Rohaizat et al. 2018, 294–302). Therefore, there is a pressing need for extensive and in-depth research on Malay traditional boat building technologies from a Malay cultural perspective (Salam and Osozawa 2008, 201).

Recognising that the construction and structure of the boat reflect the Malay mindset and technology, it becomes evident that an ethnocentric perspective, based on Western frameworks, tends to overlook the crucial Malay cultural aspects of traditional boats, consequently resulting in the loss of original Malay techniques. This oversight should be seen as a loss by scholars and individuals interested in the Malay world, as the traditional Malay approach to boat making embodies unique Malay technology and wisdom.

In contrast to Western boat making, which follows a standardised procedure with blueprints and frame-building as initial steps, the Malay approach is more instinctive, flexible and attuned to the elements. Malay boat making does not heavily rely on balancing tools but instead depends on the builder's naked eye and instincts (Mohd Yusof 2015; Hawkins 2014). The concept of *agak-agak*, to reiterate, the Malay word for estimation, lies at the heart of Malay boat making, reflecting the Malay mindset of avoiding rigid measurements. Malay boat makers employ estimation techniques using stone weights, the traditional method of measurement using strings called *tali sifat* and the concept of *mengagak garis air*, which means estimating the waterline of the boat. These practices reflect the boat proportions passed down by earlier generations of boat makers (Pisol 2003).

Studies conducted by Salam and Osozawa (2008) on Malay boat makers in the Spermonde archipelago in South Sulawesi, as well as Mohd Rohaizat and Zuliskandar's (2020, 58) research on traditional Malay boats in Kelantan, provide additional evidence that traditional Malay boat makers do not rely on technical plans or drawings. Moreover, boat designs are closely intertwined with nature, often incorporating elements inspired by flora and fauna, such as fish or birds. Nature-inspired designs are a distinct characteristic of Malay craftsmanship, akin to the patterns found in batik fabric. Expanding research on traditional Malay boats to encompass the cultural perspective is crucial to fully appreciate and preserve the

rich heritage of Malay boat making techniques. By embracing the Malay mindset, which emphasises estimation, reliance on instincts and a deep connection with nature, scholars and enthusiasts can uncover and celebrate the unique technology, wisdom and cultural values embedded within traditional Malay boats.

On the whole, the traditional craft of Malay boat making is facing the adversity of extinction, as warned by scholars such as Nik Hassan Shuhaimi et al. (2013) and Sheppard (1963). There is an urgent need to locate and study existing traditional Malay boats in Terengganu that are decorated, as the custom of constructing this type of boat is rapidly diminishing. The decline in traditional Malay boat building is attributed to various factors, including the diminishing pool of craftsmen and the rising cost of materials (*MyMetro* 2020). Despite some studies on traditional Malay boats, research on construction techniques and boat building from a Malay cultural perspective remains limited. Ethnocentric perspectives, which approach the study of Malay boats from a Western framework, often overlook the cultural aspects and indigenous knowledge embedded in the craft. This oversight exacerbates the ongoing loss of the original Malay practices and technologies of traditional boat making.

The Approach of the Study

The focus is primarily on Terengganu Malay traditional boats as it is well known among scholars in the field that the east coast was the centre of boat making and it has been asserted that throughout the Peninsula Malaysia, Pulau Duyong in Terengganu is the most notable location in terms of practicing the craft of traditional Malay boats (Nik Hassan Shuhaimi et al. 2013). The boat maker selected, PA (given codename as PA), is the last remaining boat making craftsman on Pulau Duyong. He attests to the dying culture, stating that when he was growing up in the area of Pulau Duyong there were at least 34 boat making workshops but now only three remain.

The larger study, from which this article is derived, adopts an ethnographic case study framework. This framework allows for the examination of how people engage with their culture by observing and investigating their cultural practices and rituals (Creswell 2021, 522–523). In this particular case, the focus is on the traditional Malay boat construction within the cultural context of the Malay belief system. While it may seem contradictory to apply a Western framework to study Malay culture, which questions the ethnocentric approach often associated with Western perspectives, the researchers are aware of this bias. They strive to acknowledge and highlight the culture and language of the Malay boat maker, going beyond mere literal interpretation. The chosen methodology framework is considered the most

suitable approach as it recognises the boat maker's perspective and emphasises the voice of the local informant to gain insight into their culture. This is achieved through data collection methods that involve non-structured observation and semi-structured interviews.

The data analysis derives from the field text which was the interview with respondent (code named PA) to gather information relating to construction approaches and structure of the traditional boat in the context of Malay culture or belief system. PA is a 58-year-old individual and widely recognised among the local residents of Terengganu. He is one of the few remaining boat builders located on Pulau Duyong, the renowned centre for traditional boat construction in the state. The information gathered was then triangulated through observation of the traditional boats during a research field trip. Selected traditional Malay boats were observed at the Terengganu State Museum, focusing on the *Sekoci* boat, a small boat which was suggested by PA as it can be used to represent the general idea of the structure and design of the Malay traditional boats, particularly within the east coast of the Malay Peninsula.

The Process of Malay Boat Building

In an increasingly globalised world where cultural diversity is at risk of being marginalised, it becomes paramount to delve into the intricacies of traditional boat building practices among the Malay community, as they offer profound insights that can challenge ethnocentric perceptions and foster a more inclusive appreciation of diverse cultural heritage (Booth 2014). To highlight the elements of Malay technology in crafting a Malay boat, it is useful to know the steps involved in its making. Mohd Yusof (2015), a locally known researcher on Malay traditional boats, lists the following:

1. First the base – *lunas* and *linggi* – are laid out as foundation for the boat. The term *lunas* refers to the keel of a boat. The keel is the longitudinal structure or backbone that runs along the centreline of the vessel's bottom. It provides structural strength and stability to the boat and helps to maintain its course in the water. The term *linggi* refers to the strakes or planks that are attached to the sides of the boat's hull. These strakes run horizontally along the boat's length and form the outer shell or skin of the vessel. The *linggi* planks are typically fastened together using various techniques such as stitching, nailing or bolting. According to PA, both *lunas* and *linggi* are important components in traditional Malay boat building, contributing to the overall strength, stability and structural integrity of the vessel.

2. Next, the wood to make the body of the boat is chosen. Terengganu builders tend to use *cengal* wood (*Neobalanocarpus heimii*), which is a tropical hardwood tree.
3. The wood is sawed into planks and dried for six months. This is an important step to remove the moisture and sap in the wood so that the wood does not shrink when it is assembled. The locals term this as *proses mematikan kayu* (literal translation: killing the wood).
4. The craftsman can adopt different approaches of building, depending on the kind of boat being built. Nevertheless, all boats build the surface structure or *kulit* (literally translated as skin) first, then only is the frame fitted on. The uniqueness of the Malay method of constructing boats by first creating the shell and then the frame is supported by Mohd Rohaizat and Zuliskandar (2020, 60), who cite Pierre-Yves Manguin's discussion in "Trading Ships of the South China Sea" to assert the specificity of the "shell-first construction technique" to traditional Malay boat builders.
5. Various traditional techniques are used to secure the wooden planks together to construct the floor and its attachment to the boat outer structure. Example, *kun*, a Malay term that refers to several wooden joints that secure the floor to the frame of the boat.

Based on observations and interviews, the boats are finished with a coat of paint and added decorations.

Exploring Ethnocentric Dimensions in Malay Boat Construction

Whilst not intending to undermine the gravity of adversity faced by the boat maker from the prospect of extinction of the craft, this section will focus on the ethnocentric dimension, as this was one of the significant themes appearing in the literature and this was confirmed by the boat maker. The use of measurement units in traditional Malay boat construction has been largely influenced by ethnocentric perspectives. Most studies measure boat dimensions in terms of imperial or metric units without acknowledging or recognising that traditional Malay boats were originally constructed using different measurement units that were rooted in Malay culture and body dimensions. Salam and Osozawa's (2008) study of traditional boats in the Spermonde Archipelago, South Sulawesi, for example, presents measurements of Malay boats in meters, neglecting the original Malay ways of measurement that relate closely to the average Malay people's body type and dimensions. This disregard for indigenous measurement systems

demonstrates a continuation of the ethnocentric practices that were prevalent during colonial times.

In historical accounts, references to foreign boats and measurement units further illustrate ethnocentric perceptions in the study of Malay boats. Sheppard (1963) describes the length of the *Sekoci* boat in feet, highlighting the colonial influence on the measurement units used. Smyth (1901) even goes as far as using a Norwegian boat, the Penzance lugger, as a reference to define what a boat is in his study of Malay boats. Such references not only disregard the cultural and linguistic aspects of Malay boat construction but also reinforce ethnocentric viewpoints that undermine the Malay's ability to develop their own sea-going boats.

This ethnocentric perception of Malay boats continues into the 21st century, as researchers persistently use foreign measurement units without acknowledging the cultural significance of the indigenous measurement systems. The boat maker PA, in his interview, expressed his dissatisfaction with the use of inches and feet as measurement units, seeing them as remnants of colonialism. This ongoing practice of disregarding the cultures and beliefs that produced these boats is disconcerting and perpetuates the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge.

Furthermore, there is an issue of ethnocentric reversal among local scholars where they adopt the ethnocentric perspectives of the Other to read their own culture. Mohd Rohaizat et al.'s (2018) contention that Malays believe in creatures or external forces in the middle of the ocean, which influences their boat launching rituals, represent a form of ethnocentric reversal. PA, on the other hand, explains that only rituals associated with Islamic beliefs are performed during boat launching. This reversal highlights the tension between preserving pre-Islamic cultural practices and conforming to the strict Islamic ideologies promoted by the state. The self-censoring of Malay belief systems and the adoption of foreign perspectives demonstrate the complex interplay of ethnocentrism within the local context.

Conclusions

This article aims to recognise the challenges faced by the local Malay craft of boat making, which serves as a poignant example of the gradual loss of an esteemed Malay cultural heritage rooted in indigenous wisdom. Extensive documentation exists to preserve and document various aspects of this craft, while actual boats are carefully preserved in the state museum. However, previous studies referenced in this article inadvertently contribute to ethnocentric perceptions that further marginalise the fading craft. As such, the research was carefully designed to

prioritise and acknowledge the Malay craft, culture and distinctive technology derived from local indigenous knowledge. The objective was to determine whether the utilisation of an ethnographic case study approach could empower the craftsman to openly share his Malay wisdom and technological expertise in boatmaking. Although the findings from the interview session and observations are still a work in progress, it is evident that the respondent, PA, exhibited comfort and enthusiasm in showcasing photographs and mementos from his illustrious career spanning over 50 years as a craftsman. Initially, PA may have approached the interview with caution, but he gradually warmed up to the research team as the interview progressed. Perhaps he simply needed reassurance that the research was not driven by an ethnocentric agenda seeking to expose uncomfortable memories of pre-Islamic rituals. Can PA overcome his adversity? Can he embrace the changes when the craft he has dedicated his life to no longer thrives? Despite his initial reservations, PA eventually opened up and shared invaluable insights into the traditional Malay boat building techniques. His growing trust in the research team emphasises the significance of building rapport and understanding the cultural context within which the research is conducted.

In conclusion, the ethnocentric perception of Malay boat construction is evident in the use of foreign measurement units, references to foreign boats and the adoption of ethnocentric viewpoints by local scholars. These practices undermine the cultural significance and unique craftsmanship of Malay boats, perpetuating the marginalisation and neglect of indigenous knowledge. Challenging these ethnocentric perceptions is crucial for fostering a more inclusive understanding and appreciation of traditional Malay craftsmanship, as well as recognising the habits of thinking, cultural beliefs and practices that influence boat construction in Malay culture.

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