

National Policies and Their Reverberations on the Art Making and Art Scenes in Malaysia under Mahathir Mohamed's Premiership

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the direct and indirect reverberations of the 1971 National Culture Policy, followed by the indirect impact of the Islamic resurgence and the 1985 Dasar Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Islam dalam Pentadbiran (Inculcation of Islamic Values in Administration Policy) on Malaysian art and art scene. The National Culture Policy (NCP), reiterated the ethnic preference policy of the National Economic Policy which resulted in an espoused policy that centres on Malay culture and Islam. Although there were incongruences and inconsistencies in the impact of the policy towards the art field in general, this policy has resulted in the rethinking of the presentation of art in Malaysia. This article first discusses the context of the NCP and traced how many exhibitions and discourses along the line of Islamic/Malay culture are frequently organised. This article also discusses the tendency of the artworks that were selected to be included in these exhibitions based on the selection of works that alludes to Islamic art, the Malay culture and works that have both elements of Islam and Malayness.

Keywords: *Islamic art, Malaysia art, National Culture Policy, Islamization policy, Mahathir Mohamed*

INTRODUCTION

An important work that discusses the process of nation building, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Smith (1986) argued that in the process of nation building, the cultural process of collective identity formation must be grounded on the basis of the dominant ethnic group's culture to a certain extent which eliminates the minority ethnic groups' cultures. In Western political theory from the 1930s and 1940s, British Malaya was regarded as the example of a newly coined concept of a "plural society" that refers to a society in which many races or ethnic groups live side by side in separate geographical and sociocultural enclaves, meeting only in the marketplace (Furnivall [1939] 1956, 104). Saravanamuttu too deliberated that the plural society in Malaysia has putative features in which the different ethnic groups were only brought together only for commercial purposes without any real social mixing and cross-cultural contact (Saravanamuttu 2002, 9).

As such were the conditions in the society which was left by the British in Malaya in 1957, Malaysia's nation building did not start immediately after its independence. It was only after the May 1969 racial riot that the subsequent National Culture Policy (NCP), was introduced in 1971 during the National Cultural Congress (NCC). This reiterated the ethnic preference policy of the New Economic Policy (NEP). The NEP became the substance upon which the Malaysian politics of gender, race and religion were continually shaped. The goal of the NEP was to increase Malay economic ownership in order to bring the *Bumiputeras* into the modern urban economy based on two primary objectives. First, the reduction and eradication of poverty, irrespective of race, and second, the restructuring of society so that the identification of race with economic function is abolished.

Eventhough it was not directly implemented it was an important attempt to espouse a post-Independence “Malaysian identity” founded on the culture of the majority ethnic Malays. The Islamic reawakening or the Islamic consciousness among the Muslims in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s was followed by the 1985 *Dasar Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Islam* (Inculcation of Islamic Values Policy) could be seen as further reinstating this pro-Malay NCP.

Although not directly implemented in the context of visual arts, the reverberations of the after effects of such discourse in the larger scale do reflect the art making and monumentalising of certain kind of art and exhibitions within the larger narrative of Malaysian art history. In the context of art, this article aims to discuss the direct and/or indirect reverberations of the NCP on the Malaysian visual art scene from the context of the “new art history” (Harris 2001). The “new art history” does not limit itself to the sole investigation or examination of art objects, but it also examines the social issues and the critique surrounding art production resulting in a more open, interrogative, and self-critical kind of art history (Harris 2001, 2). By drawing on the survey of art works, exhibitions and various discourses from the late 1970s and up to the late 1990s, this study the direct or indirect resonance of such policies on the artworks and exhibitions produced within the larger pluralism/multiculturalism narrative of Malaysia. As Malaysia is a culturally heterogeneous societies that constituting three major ethno-cultural groups, Malay, Chinese, Indian and Orang Asli in West Malaysia and many other ethnicities in Sabah such as Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau and Murut; and Sarawak state Iban, Bidayuh, Orang Ulu and Melanau.

THE NCP IN CONTEXT

The Malaysian historian Cheah Boon Kheng (2002, 76–77) highlighted that Malaysia’s nation building did not start immediately after its independence. In fact, Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia did not emphasise on such nation building and in fact, moved away from the “Malay nation-state” framework and began building a more “pluralistic” and “multicultural Malaya” to achieve national unit. As such, the focus of a national identity was built on a heterogenous or plural cultural identities rather than homogenous or monoculture. The problems of unemployment, poverty, economic backwardness, and deprivation of the Malays in the rural were then more important (Andaya and Andaya 2001, 290–297).

The 13 May 1969¹ riot and its aftermath led to the rethinking of various policies that resulted in an economic and social reform that could been in the NEP, the implementation of the Malay language as the main language through the National Education Policy, the ways for restoring interracial goodwill through the Department of National Unity, and the drafting of the *Rukun Negara* (National Principles) (Lee 2000, 4).

In regards to arts and culture, the NCC was convened in 1971. The publication that was published two years later entitled *Asas Kebudayaan Kebangsaan: Mengandungi Kertaskerja Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan Dari 16hb Ogos–20hb Ogos 1971* (1973) outlined the three principles that were formulated during the congress—that the national culture must be based on the culture of the Malays as the native people of the region, Islam as an important source in determining the form of the national culture, and lastly, the acceptance of elements of other cultures as long as they do not conflict with Malay culture or Islam (Mohd Affandi, 1973).

These principles, presumed to have been suggested and contested during the congress, made the *Asas Kebudayaan Kebangsaan* (1973) as the main document of the policy (Rowland 2004, 48–49). Nevertheless, the policy was not debated but was rather an endorsement of the resolution that came from the Malay Cultural Congress that convened more than a decade earlier on 30 December 1957–2 January 1958. As such the panel of scholars who participated in the congress, Faisal Tehrani argues were not diversified enough resulting in the “marginalisation” of voices of other non-Malay scholars (Faisal 2021).

As such, the NCP mooted a form of collective identity formation on the basis of the culture of the dominant ethnic group, although various cultures, cultural expressions, and identities by various ethnicities in Malaysia can be considered as part of the national culture as long as they do not contradict Malay culture and Islam. Nevertheless, the NCP was never legislated into an act unlike the National Language Bill of 1961 and the Education Act of 1967, nor was it formalised into an action plan such as the NEP (Rowland 2004, 48–49). Nevertheless, it has impacted the discourse of Malaysian art and culture. Scholars such as Mohd Taib Osman (1988), Aziz Deraman (1988, 1990), and Wan Abdul Kadir Yusuf and Zainal Abidin Borhan (1985) have contributed a body of discussion in support of the NCP that were published by state-affiliated agencies such as the Ministry of Culture and Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP). On the other hand, criticisms on the NCP could also be read through the writings by Kua Kia Soong (1990) and other works by Heng (1998), Crouch (1996), Munro-Kua (1996), and Loh and Kahn (1992) have examined the influence of various policies including the

NCP, towards the Malaysian society. This article however, focuses on the aspect of Malaysia art, within the larger Malaysia art scene and art historical narrative under Mahathir Mohamed's premiership.

NCP AND ISLAMIZATION POLICY DURING MAHATHIR MOHAMED'S PREMIERSHIP

The period under Mahathir Mohamed was seen as the time when the government shackled or dismantled Malaysia's reliance and ties with the British.² Mahathir's policies could be traced to the ideas proposed in *The Malay Dilemma*—a desperate call for the sociopolitical decolonisation of the Malays and a direction towards the construction of the Malay nation-state (Ooi 2006, 173). The Islamic reawakening in which Islam played a larger role in personal lives and even in public affairs (See Milne & Mauzy 1999, 81; Chandra Muzaffar 1987, 4–5; Khoo 2001, 162). Mahathir made a lot of effort into projecting his “Islamic” government (Ooi 2006, 176) by initiating the International Islamic University Malaysia, the Islamic banking, and supported the government-sponsored *dakwah* under the Prime Minister's department resulted in a more coordinated response of *dakwah* (Milne and Mauzy 1999, 85–86). Mahathir also initiated the *Dasar Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Islam* (Inculcation of Islamic Values Policy) in 1985 to inculcate good work ethics, positive values, hard work, diligence, effectiveness and efficiency, and other positive traits among the public administration sector, besides his “*Bersih, Cekap, dan Amanah*” (Clean, Efficient, and Trustworthy) and “*Kepimpinan melalui Teladan*” (Leadership by Example) mottos. In many ways, Mahathir co-opted Islam into his administration and given full support in establishing and supporting Islamic institutions (Milne and Mauzy 1999, 85).

Mahathir's influence on arts and culture in general were limited. His speeches emphasis the importance of science and technology as the way forward in building an industrialised country. It could be argued that Mahathir was not interested in arts and culture but this could be the field in which he plays his “politics of ambiguity” to promote cultural tolerance within the society (Ibrahim 1983, as cited in Mohamed Mustafa 2014, 134). This is due to the fact that his words could reflect his personal preference in regards to cultural issues to reduce the salience of conflictual matters so that he would get a more consensual appeal among voters. In reality, the NCP was not implemented and pursued aggressively as Mahathir only inherited the policy and did not make sufficient proposition to implemented any blueprint from the NCP. While the Malays welcomed the policy guidelines of the NCP, non-Malay communities perceived it as a sign of Malay cultural dominance over other groups. The emphasis on Islam and Malay culture as foundational elements was seen as a major threat to the multiethnic nature of Malaysian society, as it had the potential to dilute or weaken other cultures (Mohamed Mustafa 2014, 125–127). For example, several memorandums in opposition towards the NCP were delivered and Mahathir had to assure from time to time that the concerns of the non-Malay communities regarding the assimilation of the policy will not be executed (Mohamed Mustafa 2014, 126–128). Even before the Vision 2020, Mahathir (1988) reassured the non-Malays:

By accepting Malaysia, *Bangsa Malaysia*, and Bahasa Malaysia does not make us a Malay. In terms of ethnicity, we remain as Chinese, Indian, Iban, Kadazan, or Murut and so on... Without abandoning our ethnic identities, we could still be a meaningful *Bangsa Malaysia*.

Despite such reassurance, the increase presence of Malay/Islamic cultural constructs and symbols could be seen happening in the public sphere (Lee 2000, 1, 3) through the subsequent discourse following the NCP, the Islamization policy, and Mahathir's support towards Islam had resulted in a more amplified symbolic presence of Malay culture and Islam in Malaysia. In art itself, Nurhanim Khairuddin (2011, 37) pointed out, “Although some NCC resolutions were rejected by certain artists, conceptual framework delineated by NCC largely made them recognised the presence of elements in their surroundings that could be used to achieve the goal of defining Malaysian identity.” Therefore, we could observed that the NCC became the turning point to a few artists began to think and re-think about the question of the identity in the context of their artmaking. As such, the next section will discuss the context of art making, exhibitions and various discourses in the largely changing landscape of Malaysian art during Mahathir's time.

THE CONCESSION AND NEGOTIATION OF THE MALAYSIA MODERN ART SCENE

The impact of the NCP though not immediate, began to shape the thinking and practice among artists (Sabapathy 1994, 71). The *Rupa dan Jiwa* (1979) exhibition was duly noted as a turning point by scholars on the rethinking their identity. The exhibition highlighted and incorporated the Malay form of aesthetics that

including paintings, sculptures, engravings, book decorations, crafts, weavings, embroideries, leather puppets, wool, and *songket* (gold thread weaving).³ The impact of this exhibition were further amplified through the *Seminar Akar-Akar Kesenian Peribumi dan Perkembangan Kini* (Seminar on Indigenous Artistic Roots and its Current Development) (1979), which was held at Institut Teknologi MARA (ITM), Shah Alam, the same year.⁴ Subsequently, various art exhibitions held at national institutions such as the National Art Gallery, National Museum, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka⁵, ITM (now Universiti Teknologi MARA), and Universiti Malaya had begun to address the disposition of the NCP. As these were official institutions, such exhibitions were regarded as major events and an important and significant site of exhibit. As there were only a few early commercial galleries and no other alternative places to exhibit, opportunities to exhibit in these institutions were regarded as an important chance not to be missed by artists. The National Art Gallery has, over the years, served as the main platform in which artists exhibit their art although there were a few early commercial galleries such as Samat Art Gallery (1966–1977), Gallery 11 (1960–1970), APS Gallery (1967–1969), and Saujana Gallery during the 1980s, these galleries only lasted a few years. Only since the 1990s onwards that commercial art galleries became more prominent due to the expanding art market in Malaysia later. Due to these circumstances, the Malay cultural activities were given considerable attention within the larger national level art institution during the 1980s and these institutions have more “access to festivals, awards, competitions, and state funding” (Rowland 2004, 100).

An important exhibition was curated by Syed Ahmad Jamal and Sharifah Fatimah Syed Zubir entitled *Pameran Seni Lukis dan Seni Khat: Pameran Tamaddun Islam* (Art and Calligraphy Exhibition: The Islamic Civilisation Exhibition)⁶ launched by Mahathir himself. This was the first time that a larger exhibition on Islamic civilisation that focusses on both art and calligraphy took place in Malaysia. Not only limited to Malaysian artists, artists from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Lebanon, and Turkey also participated in the exhibition.⁷ This was followed by Seminar Kesenian Islam (Islamic Art Seminar) which was organised by DBP on 1 August 1984 and Pameran Sinarcipta (Sinarcipta Exhibition) by lecturers from ITM at which highlighted themes of *seni Islam* (Islamic art), *seni peribumi* (indigenous art) and *seni antarabangsa* (international art) (Dzul Haimi 1984) also organised in the same year.

The National Art Gallery also promoted their own collection of calligraphic art. They had started to organise *Seni Khat daripada Himpunan Tetap* (BSLN) (Calligraphic Art from the Permanent Collection) in 1986 and had taken steps to organise several international exhibitions by modern Muslim artists elsewhere.⁸ With these exhibitions organised during the 1980s, the National Art Gallery continue to organise a few other exhibitions during the 1990s with titles such as *Identiti Islam dalam Senirupa Malaysia: Pencapaian dan Cabaran* (Islamic Identity in Malaysian Art: Achievement and Challenges) (1992), *Pameran Rupa dan Jiwa: Kesenambungan Tradisi Senirupa Malaysia Sezaman* (Form and Soul Exhibition: Continuity of Tradition in Contemporary Malaysian Arts) (1993), and *Manifestasi Jiwa Islam dalam Senirupa Malaysia Sezaman* (Manifestation of Islamic Soul in Malaysian Contemporary Art) (1993) (to mark the National Art Gallery’s 35th anniversary). Even a month before the Festival Istiqlal II (a festival that showcased various expressions of Islamic culture and art of the Malay Archipelago), the NAG organised *Art and Spirituality* (1995), *Art and Cosmology* (1996) and *Kesenian Islam: Suatu Perspektif Malaysia* (Islamic Art: A Malaysian Perspective) (1999). This therefore, reiterated the emphasis or the visibility of Islamic art to the Malaysia public.

On top of that, aligned to the NCC’s first principle, the NAG had also organised *Pameran Seni dan Kraf* (Art and Craft Exhibition) in 1988 and *Pameran Alam Melayu* (The Malay Archipelago Exhibition) from 10 August 1999 until 12 September 1999 as well. Even for tourism promotion, the National Museum and Malaysia Tourism Board organised an exhibition entitled *Malaysian Art: Contemporary Paintings and Traditional Adornments* in New York in 1996. The consistent visibility on Islamic and Malay themes were also taken up by private galleries. In 1993, Park Royal Hotel and AP Art Gallery organised *Pameran Seni Rupa Islam* (Islamic Visual Art Exhibition) (1993) and Petronas Gallery organised *Oasis in A Storm: Islam and the Balancing of the Forces of Materialism* (1997).

ISLAMIC (VISUAL) ART EXHIBITIONS

As the three main anchors of the NCP are based on the culture of the Malays, and Islam as the overarching guideline, it is not surprising that through Islam and being a Muslim, Islamic aesthetics and Malay culture became the key features of the various exhibitions and artworks by Malay Muslim artists began to be selected, promoted, and contextualised under Islamic art and/or Muslim art.

The theme of these exhibitions from the 1980s and 1990s could be seen as being pulled towards, and often times, overlapped by Islamic tendencies (through the ideas of Islamic art/Islamic aesthetics) and Malay

art. Although the writings of the catalogues were most of the time titled, positioned, or contextualised as Islamic art, the production, selection, and presentation of modern artworks for these exhibitions can be categorised as follows:

1. Art that is Islamic-centric by artists who adopt Islamic aesthetics or philosophy as the central approach in their modern art making.
2. Art that is Malay-centric by artists that highlight Malay culture, either from cultural objects or from non-object culture as the subject matter in their modern art.
3. Art that embraced both Malay and Islam—Malay/Islamic-centric by artists whose work made direct reference to Malay roots or Islamic influence where they overtly used Malay forms with the merger or the underlying principle of Islamic theology that resulted in a form of “decorative” art. In regards to the first inclination, Malaysian artists have also asserted Islam a large role in their life through their art making. As such, Sulaiman Esa (1995, 11) wrote, “In the post-colonial period, authenticity and self-understanding for many Malaysian Muslim artists resides in Islam. It is Islam that constitutes the essence of their selves-hood, their identity that gives meaning to the ‘Muslimness’.” The parallel of the notion of “Islam as the way of life” propagated by *dakwah* activities and the call of becoming a better Muslim as mentioned previously can be argued as one of the impetuses that drive these artists to find a sense of purpose on their modern art making, and this could be seen through the religious approach embraced in their art making. Not only is the totality of the modern Islamic principle of shunning human and animals obvious in their work, but also, and most importantly, the Islamic design conventions were further enhanced and recognisably presented such as the Arabic Script or Jawi script, calligraphic motives and the arabesque, the displays of verses from the Quran or the Hadith, and epithets praising God’s supremacy.

Even in art, Islam and the ones who embrace Islamic approach in their art making are seen as a personal conviction or individual observance, or an *ad-din*, “way of life”. In this case, Sulaiman Esa turned over towards Islamic art from his (and Redza Piyadasa’s) conceptual art approach (in their attempt in relinquishing artists’ dependence on Western influences) was marked by his *Ke Arah Tauhid* exhibition in 1984. His collaboration in the *Mystical Reality* exhibition (with Redza Piyadasa) had espoused Malaysian artists to be liberated from Western art tradition (Siti Nur Balqis and Sarena 2020) and his *Waiting for Godot* series reflected the juncture of his search for a Malaysian art identity. During his postgraduate studies, Sulaiman Esa was greatly influenced by Islamic thinkers like Isma’il al-Faruqi, Syed Hossein Nasr, Titus Burckhart, Martin Lings, and Frithjof Schuon (Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin 2011, 38), who motivated him to conduct a close research on Sufism and Islam, and Malay arts and crafts.

Sulaiman Esa not only exudes his ideas through his fresh breath of artworks, but he also curates, writes, and discusses various philosophical and Islamic art and as someone who has received a Western art education, Sulaiman cannot evade from his own training as a modern artist. As such, we could observe that he did not limit himself to a particular style, media, or conventional technique. In *Ke Arah Tauhid 1*, he continued his exploration of material and technical experimentations, whilst considering/employing the concept of Islamic philosophy and Islamic aesthetics. The three Islamic concepts of his main source of philosophical inspiration are the concept of tauhid—the inclusion of the belief in one God in his artistic considerations, the concept of traditional forms and/or abstract patterns as a form as spiritual discovery and Islamic cosmology, and the Islamic concept of *Nur* (light) which is a source of strength that can illuminate, eliminate, and even destroy something.

In his *Nurani* (1983) (Figure 1), the presence of light was symbolised using gold and silver threads, and at the centre of the work itself, is a spectral of colours that is the focus of the work. By focusing on geometric or arabesque forms with a combination of materials (acrylic, yarn, and paper) and techniques (painting, dyeing, weaving, and paper making); the concept of Islamic spirituality as an artistic contemplating piece is denoted in the experience of harmony, the reflection of the One (Allah the Almighty), and the concept of unity of *tawhid* (asserting oneness) (Animah Syed Mohamed 1984). Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1987, 196), in discussing Islamic spirituality, also highlighted how a piece of traditional calligraphy, or an arabesque, can speak much more eloquently of the intelligence and nobility that characterises Islam and its message through the serene, intelligible, structured, and highly spiritual character of Islamic art.

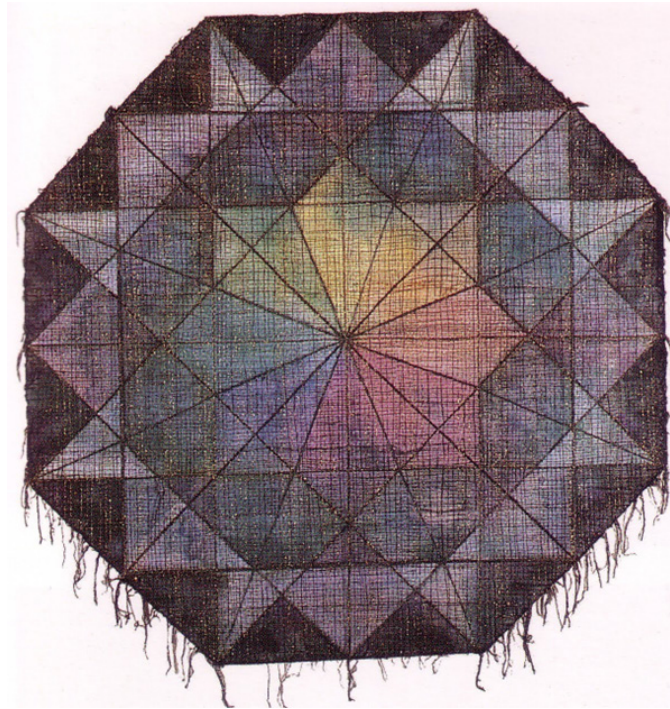


Figure 1 Sulaiman Esa, *Nurani* (1983). Mixed media, 150 × 150 cm.

Source: National Art Gallery collection.



Figure 2 Zakaria Awang, *Murakabah* (1991). Fibre glass, wood block and gold paint, 120 × 120 × 120 cm.

Source: Artist's collection.

Besides Sulaiman Esa's emphasis of tawhid, the use of Arabic script, khat, geometric, or arabesque forms by Malay Muslim artists was also adopted and adapted in their modern artwork. Among these artists are Ahmad Khalid Yusof, Ghaffar Ibrahim, Zakaria Awang, Ponirin Amin and Raja Zahabuddin. Zakaria Awang for example, carved Quranic verses on pieces of wood, stacked them as aesthetically pleasing constructs "to propagate, to teach and to convert, as Islam is a proselytizing faith" (Ali 1991, unpaginated). In *Murakabah*, 1991 (Figure 2), Zakaria constructed the sculpture by using fibre glass, wood, and black and gold paint; it is an artwork that is profound in Islam and yet engaged with modernity in terms of both art and life (Rajah 1998, 69). The verses in Arabic script were written in a swirling crater that is often used to cook in a large scale in a village ceremony and banquet—an ideation perhaps of the endless concept of chanting or *zikir* (Halim 2018, 268).

Essentially, to produce Islamic art, one must first understand the meaning of Islam as a religion or more precisely, as an *ad-din* or a way of life where Allah SWT the Almighty is worshipped and obeyed, not strictly in the narrow religious sense, but in a manner that includes all aspects of human life. It could be deduced that the quintessential message of Islam as expressed through these works are important not only because they are timeless, or rich with symbolism pertinent to Islamic teachings, but most importantly, because these works shaped an Islamic identity among artists. With a more subtle artistic approach, Islamic consciousness have influenced the shaping of identity among Malaysian artists. As trained modern artists, they do not restrict themselves to certain traditional media but generally, they adopt Islamic aesthetics or philosophies into their modern art making. It is within this new context of modernisation that their works are significant as the inner dimension of Islam and the essence of Islamic spirituality have been recreated and sustained.

Another inclination that could be seen in these exhibitions is that some artists are pulled towards their ethnic identity than religious identity. As such, we could see that besides Islamic-themed artworks, works by artists that fall along the Malay culture were also included in these exhibitions. This is not a surprise as the link between Malay art and culture and its association with Islamic aesthetics and values since the arrival of Islam to the region was being reasserted and revisited. The subject matter and approach by Din Omar, Mad Anuar Ismail, Anuar Rashid, and Tengku Sabri Tengku Ibrahim could be skewed towards this direction in which cultural materials or objects that are pertinent in the livelihood of the Malay society, for instance, *tepak sirih* (betel slab), *sirih* (betel), *pinang* (areca nut), *lesung* and *anak lesung* (pestle and mortar), etc., become the subject matter.

Syed Ahmad Jamal had employed the *tumpal* (triangle) motif into his *songket* (a traditional Malaysian handwoven fabric) work as seen below (Figure 3) and such triangulation motif also denoted a *gunungan* (mountains) motif. The central background space of horizontal colour panels, in the form of a triangle signifies a composition which is at once modern and evocative of Islamic textile arts such as *batik* and *songket* from the region. Traditional head cloths in *batik* or *tumpal* employ the triangle format and Syed Ahmad Jamal's use of the triangle as a central motif makes it more directly connected to the textile arts of the Malay Archipelago. This brings us to another series of work by Syed Ahmad that was inspired by or referred to the Malay legends and myth-inspired series (Figure 4). The *Gunung Ledang* (Mount Ledang) was described numerous times in Malay traditional literature and oral traditions such as the Hikayat Hang Tuah.⁹ D'Zul Haimi (2009, 85) pointed out how Syed Ahmad Jamal alludes to unfulfilled dreams, a theme that is consistent with the popular Malay folklore of the Ledang princess. The work portrayed a huge triangle with several horizontal stripes referring to the mountains with various small triangular shapes floating in the sky, filling up the space above the canvas in the background.



Figure 3 Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Tumpal* (1975).
Songket weaving, 205 × 103 cm.

Source: National Art Gallery collection.

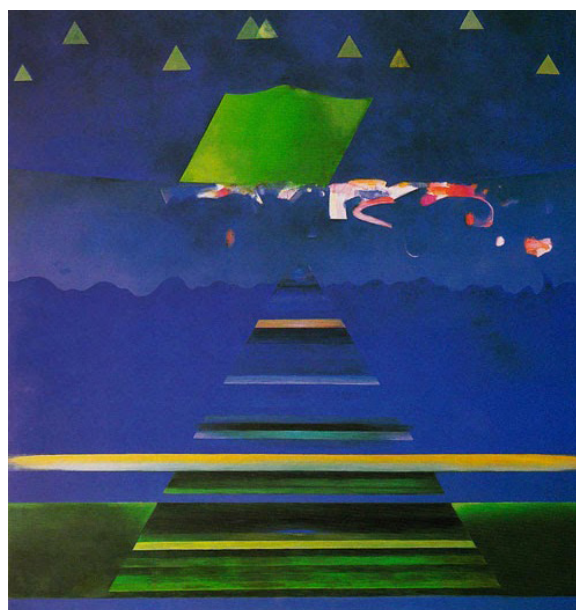


Figure 4 Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Tanjung Kupang, Gunung Ledang* (1978). Acrylic on canvas.

Source: Singapore Art Museum collection.



Figure 5 Ruzaika Omar Bassaree, *Dungun Series II* (1978). Wood structure and emulsion paint, 28.5 × 36 in.

Source: Muzium dan Galeri Tunku Fauziah.

Ruzaika Omar Basaree's *Dungun Series II* (Figure 5), created in 1979, reintroduced wood carvings into the realm of art appreciation, which is a very important element in traditional Malay homes, mosques, and palaces in the context of fine arts. In this particular series, Ruzaika had chosen traditional Malay architectural motifs such as windows decorated with ornate wood carvings. As others attempt to break two-dimensional artworks into three-dimensional artworks, that many explored during the 1970s (Sarena 2017), in this series, Ruzaika expanded the meaning of paintings that are two-dimensional into three-dimensional shapes in which she had replaced the wooden doors or windows in place of the canvas. Ruzaika inadvertently could also be seen as exploring Islamic aesthetics by her direct reference to the philosophy of Malay carving of *awan larat*. It must be noted that architectural elements and artefacts that were ornately decorated by woodcarving capture "the Malay understanding of the ontological interrelationship between God-Man-Universe" (Sulaiman 1992, 22). Mad Anuar's journey towards his search for a Malay identity was described by Zakaria Ali as a "long and torturous journey" in which at the end, he deals with nothing but wood—*cengal*, *melati*, *merbau*, *ciku*, *sena*, and *nangka* (Zakaria 1991). For example, *Storm Riders* series reflect the challenges and obstacles faced by the East Coasts fishermen when a storm is fast approaching; the wind howls and the waves crash against their boat—a representation that appears over and over in his sculptures, in wood and steel. Although it can be argued that the subject matter highlighted by Mad Anuar was adversity, the adversity faced by these fishermen is situated well within the Malay spirit. Other examples of works which have Malay elements as its core include Anuar Rashid's *Inderaputra* (1978) based on the ancient story of Inderaputra, and *Pawang* (1990) by Tengku Sabri Tengku Ibrahim. On top of that, even batik has become a subject matter as seen in the works of Hashim Hassan's *Burung Batik* (1992) (Harozila 2007).

The third form of works that are often included in these exhibitions are works that denote both Malay and Islamic elements. It must also be noted that during these times, artworks that allude to both Malay and Islam, especially in the context of *batik* and textile exploration were popular and often included in these exhibitions. The *batik* that was being produced during this time were not like the works of Chuah Thean Teng, Tay Mo Leong, and Lim Khoo Hock (Toya) which portray Malay women and kampung scenes, but the *batik* and textiles produced by these artists place great emphasis on the decorative elements and motifs, imbued with subtle Islamic design conventions.

Curator Zainol Shariff concluded that the *batik* patterns produced by artists such as Fatimah Chik, Syed Shaharudin Bakeri, Khatijah Sanusi, and Mohd Najib Ahmad Dawa reflect the curiously essential relationship between ethnicity and religion, that is, between Malayness and Islam. Since the majority of the population of the Malay Peninsular and Indonesia are Malays, *batik* is produced by a sizeable number of Islamic believers and the abstractness of *batik* (that derived its motifs from nature and plants) contributed to the Islamic elements of this kind of work (Zainol Abidin 1994, 87–94). This kind of work also differs from what Harozila binti Ramli termed as 'painting batik' or paintings

that captures of people wearing *batik* cloth as daily clothing or paintings that uses *batik* motifs as the main subject in their work. The application of these paintings are usually using various medium, not *batik* as the main medium. These approach could be seen in the works of Hashim Hassan, Chang Fee Ming, Ismail Kadir, and Yeong Seak Ling (Harozila 2007, 215–87).

The parallel and overlapping between Islamic concept and Malay traditional art is not a surprise; the writings in the catalogues that were mentioned earlier noted how Malay traditional art has incorporated and adapted Islamic approaches in the way how imageries, patterns, and motifs were used in Malay art. Batik works such as *Fabric in Red, Blue and Green* (1982) (Figure 6) by Syed Shahabuddin Bakeri, *Archipelago Series: Temples* (1986) by Fatimah Chik, and *The Growth* (1996) by Mohd Najib Ahmad Dawa further explore the fine art approach of *batik*. These *batiks* are not worn, but they are hung in a gallery, to be appreciated as an art piece. Zainol Abidin Ahmad Shariff (1994: 90) pointed out that the abstraction of floral and natural motifs into *batik* contributed to the “Islamic” form of the work, and he pointed out that to many Malay Muslim artists, indigenous Malay forms and symbols are often associated with Islamicness as long as it is not contradictory to the Islamic principles—as in the case of *batik*. This demonstrates the closely link between ethnic and religious ties in the Malay Archipelago.

The decorative elements and motifs based on the repetitive motifs in *batik* were also translated by Mastura Abdul Rahman into her Interior series. By employing both architectural and textile elements in her work, *Interior No. 29* (1987) (Figure 7), the traditional architecture of the Malay house has been flattened, and filled with motifs and patterns from *batik* as seen from the top. Imbued with a deep blue and purplish colour, her work is filled with Malay flavour and essence through the all-encompassing decoration that highlights the spatial interior ambience of traditional Malay houses. The traditional kampong house is decorated with various motifs akin to the motifs from *batik* with rectangular mats and circular mats placed in various positions within the space. We can see that a *congkak* (traditional Malay game) and newspapers are near the window. The decorative component could be seen as over domineering in this work. Although we could deduce that the work was derived from Malay architecture and *batik*, the Islamic elements could be seen in how the work attests to the concept of manifestation of unity in the principle of diversity based on Islamic aesthetics, as the overt decoration, based on nature, directs the eyes to nowhere in particular, trying to enmesh any focal point that screams for attention. The eyes have to adjust and absorb the pattern and colours of the surface before they begin to pick up, one by one, the architectural elements seen from a bird’s-eye view.

THE ECLIPSE OF THE NCP IN THE VISUAL ARTS

Besides the NCP and the Islamization policy undertaken by the Malaysian government, the assertion of Malay and Islamic identity in fine arts should also be argued in the context of the emerging Malay middle class. For Loh and Kahn (1992), proliferation of “traditional Malay culture” among the new Malay middle class as their identities were the result of the construction and

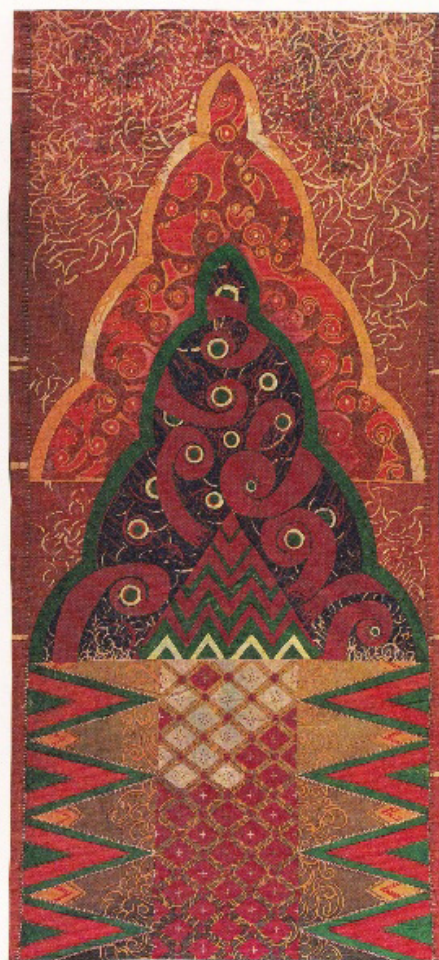


Figure 6 Syed Shaharuddin Bakeri, *Fabric in Red, Blue and Green* (1982).

Batik, 225 × 102 cm

Source: National Art Gallery collection.

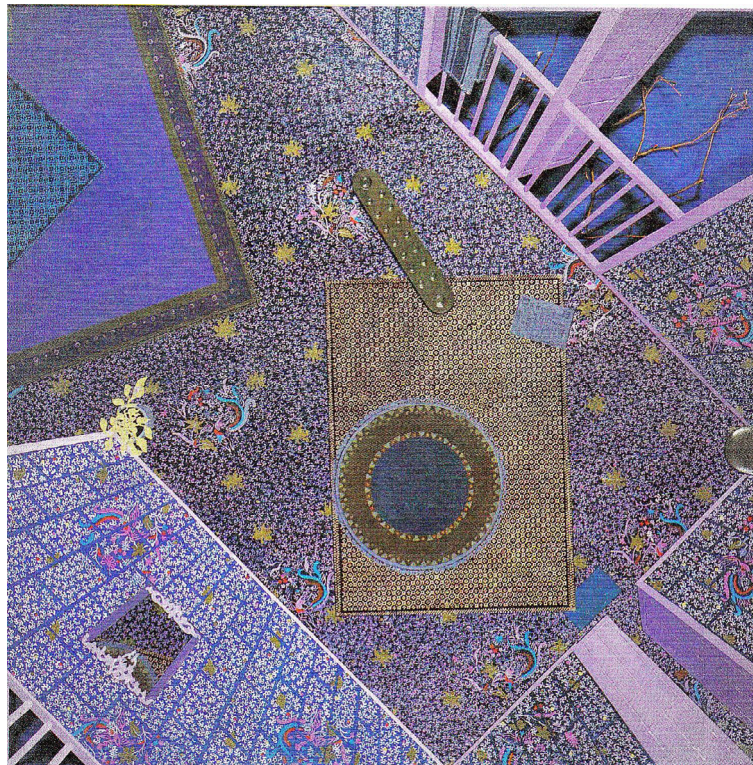


Figure 7 Mastura Abdul Rahman, *Interior No. 29* (1987).

Mixed media, 115 × 115 cm.

Source: National Art Gallery collection.

reconstruction of class since the NEP. Therefore, it can be pointed out that the artworks and exhibitions as discussed in this article, are reflective of Kahn's observation above. Firstly, the makers and the consumers of these visual imageries of artworks are part of the growing middle class of civil servants, educators, and professionals. Secondly, even though the images are supposed to symbolise the plural culture/ethnicities of Malaysia in general, there are several of them that only refer explicitly and exclusively to the culture of the Malays and Islam. Thirdly, these images represent Malay culture in a feudal and patriarchal manner, which is the antithesis of a modern society.

This is reflective within the larger observations made by other art historians and curators especially in regards to the study of modern Asian art. Art Historian John Clark who studies the aspects of cultural transfer in Asia in his seminal work *Modern Asian Art* pointed out that Asian culture had their own needs and developmental dynamics for modern and tradition transfers to happened, assimilated and transformed (1998, 12). These observations made in the context of Asian art reflected Smith's (1986, 385) observation on the cultural expressions of those from the newer modern nations. Often times, these cultural expressions were connected with either earlier ethnic categories and communities, created out of pre-existing origin myths, ethnic cultures and/or shared memories. According to Smith, these cultural expressions often resulted a sense of vivid, widespread sense of an ethnic past, that are more unified and distinctive. Poshyananda (1996, 15) explained that since tradition practices in Asia extends across vast heterogeneities and cultural differences that it has become essential for individuals especially artists to assimilate, adapt, and even resist certain form of traditions. Therefore, some artists regard the traditional as an inheritance that offers inspiration for their creative imagination whereas others redefine and renegotiate tradition through cultural and regional identity resulting in artworks that can be challenging, innovative, and provocative at times.

All of these considerations could be observed in the context of art works produced by these artists which could be seen in the works that have been discussed above. To Malay artists, cultural objects such as *tepak sirih*, *sirih*, *pinang* and *lesung*, as well as elements and themes derived from traditional dance and theatre, myths and folk stories, and the traditional Malay worldview have become central, even though the usage of these cultural objects and traditional lifestyles have become irrelevant as the Malays began to embrace modernisation and adopt a modern lifestyle.

Thus, it can be argued that as Malaysia went through a decolonialisation process, it also went through a nationalist phase, in which nation building and public discourse were dominated by issues such as national identity, national culture, national language, national education, national integration, etc. Mohamed Mustafa (2014, 27) pointed out that Malaysia began to industrialise and were spearheaded by the drive of modernism; modern nations like Malaysians have only extended and deepened premodern ethnic identities and structures, and these require symbols, myths, and memories of ethnic cores.

It cannot be denied that, with the discourse surrounding the NCC, the emphasis on decolonisation during Mahathir Mohamad's tenure as the fourth Prime Minister, and the various exhibitions organised as well as works produced, the impact of the NCP and the Islamic resurgence on modern Malaysian art is significant. Although the NCP was not fully enacted and did not have the force of law, its influence, as reflected by scholars such as Muliyadi Mahmood, was described as pluralist (2001) and regarded as the beginning of a postmodern approach in the context of Malaysian art (Sarena 2018a).

Mahathir Mohamad's Vision 2020¹⁰ advanced the ambitious vision of a multi-ethnic Bangsa Malaysia, which aimed to equalise all Malaysian citizens regardless of race or colour, promote the use of the Malay language, and uphold Malaysia's national constitution as the guiding principle (Cheah 2002, 220–21). This vision also opened up a door of discourse of identity, race, and religion into the public sphere. Five months after Mahathir announced his Vision 2020, an important exhibition pertaining to the question of what is Malaysian art, or what Malaysian art should be, entitled "The Malaysianness of Malaysian Art" (1991) was held. It was curated by Zakaria Ali, who aimed to answer the pertinent question of what is Malaysian art. Bringing forth the issue of a Malaysian identity (or even the lack of a constitutional definition of a Malaysian identity), Zakaria Ali put forth the argument that one does not have to be a Malay to be a Malaysian as being Malaysian is a form of citizenship, regardless one's race and religion. The central theme or question of identity can also be observed in *Identiti Islam Dalam Senirupa Malaysia: Pencapaian dan Cabaran* (1992), and such self-questioning was also reiterated by Harun Abdullah Coombes in "Art and Spirituality" (1995, 26–28) where he posed the questions regarding Islamic content in contemporary art, what is Islamic art and Muslim art, and how this could and should be an assertion of one's identity.

Even Sulaiman Esa acknowledged the shortcomings as artists still lack a solid understanding of the basic principles that constitute the foundation of Islamic art, especially in the context of rational and spiritual goals as well as the metaphysical and philosophical principles. By the year 2000, there are three main groups—artists who embraced a Sufistic and metaphysical model as espoused by Syed Hossein Nasr and the rational model as espoused by Ismail al-Faruqi, and younger artists who took a more liberal approach in their interpretation of Islamic art with the belief that Muslim artists should challenge Western art on its own ground; these artists adopt and adapt Western art vocabulary of modern art forms and infuse them with Islamic content (Sulaiman 1993).

Based on the discussion of the NCC and the Islamization policy, artists' expression cannot be confined to a certain way of art making. Based on the discussions and arguments above, it can be argued that the influence of both the National Policies discussed in this article only resulted an impetus of the interests and reverberations during Mahathir Mohamed's premiership. The policies however are not strong enough to regulate the development of art concepts and withstand the transformation, the changing and globalising art worlds happening at that time.

CONCLUSION

Although this article has highlighted and discussed the impact of the NCP and Islam in the context art and art exhibitions in Malaysia, it must be pointed out that the politics of nation building in Malaysia is basically the politics of mediating identities (Mohamed Mustafa 2014, 2). Besides the discourse that followed Vision 2020 and the inherent globalisation, there was also a corresponding rise in cooperative interaction across ethnic boundaries in the burgeoning 1990s art scene. Malaysia's visual arts practices have become more expansive, plural, and dynamic in terms of disclosure in either theme or material exploration, going beyond the boundaries of traditional techniques such as painting and sculpting. The emergence of collaborative works among artists and the use of new media such as computers, videos, the Internet, and other electronic tools have significantly altered the landscape of the visual arts in Malaysia as a whole. Art exhibitions are not only limited to the institutional galleries of art groups, collectives, and spaces, but also cover selected art festivals and even community-engaged art projects which became the alternative sites for exhibition-making and even art making (Sarena 2018b). On top of that, the rise of commercial or private galleries that exhibit and support modern and contemporary art, which are very much dictated and influenced by financial contingencies and the

sales in the general art market since the 1990s, marked a shift from producing art on a part-time basis to a more professional career. By the mid-1990s, Muhammad Ikmal (1996, 56) highlighted how “[t]he commercialisation of culture, particularly as exhibits or attractions for the tourism industry, has depoliticised the promotion of culture as a specifically ethnic project” which led to the attraction of consumerist middle class culture altering the cardinal Malay culture.

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NOTES

1. 13 May 1969 was the worst racial riot that broke out in Kuala Lumpur that was believed to be the result of the dissatisfaction of the Malays over non-Malay threats and challenges towards Malay rights, Malay political primacy and discontent about the economic power of the non-Malays, which were seen as the primary factor of this riot.
2. This could be seen in Tun Mahathir Mohamad’s “dawn raid” upon the London Stock Exchange, his “buy British last” campaigns, Look East, and anti-Commonwealth policy.
3. *Rupa dan Jiwa—Pameran Seni Rupa Melayu* (1979) was held at Muzium Seni Asia in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of the Universiti Malaya’s Malay Studies Department at the Dewan Tunku Canselor, Universiti Malaya from 17 November to 9 December 1979. In 1992, a book with a similar name was published by Syed Ahmad Jamal. Prior to *Rupa dan Jiwa*, Syed Ahmad Jamal who curated the exhibition, had also curated *Pameran Seni Khat*—a travelling khat (Islamic calligraphy) that started from Universiti Malaya in Kuala Lumpur to other states such as Kelantan, Terengganu, Johor, Pulau Pinang, Perlis, Kedah, and Perak from September 1975 until May 1978. He also visited the World of Islam Festival (1976) in London, the largest exhibition of Islamic material culture in a Western country at that time that could be argued may have influenced him in his shift of interest towards local and Islamic art and material culture which helped him in executing *Rupa dan Jiwa* (D’Zul Haimi 2009: 77).
4. The seminar had gathered scholars that presented their papers on various topics of Malay culture to further promote and discuss their interest in this under-researched area. Nazri Jabar, Hijjas Kasturi, Muhammad Hj. Salleh, Ismail Zain, Hashim Hassan, Siti Zainun Ismail, Syed Ahmad Jamal, and Krishen Jit presented and spoke on cultural topics that have never been presented and discussed in a seminar format.
5. Writings published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka such as the ones published in *Dewan Budaya* amplifies the public discourse on the NCP.
6. The first *Pameran Seni Lukis dan Seni Khat* (1984), which was organized as part of the *Pameran Tamadun Islam* (Islamic Civilization Museum) for example, was an exhibition of Islamic arts with the inclusion of modern art with Islamic positioning—with curatorial essay by Syed Ahmad Jamal, Sharifah Fatimah Syed Zubir, and the reprint of an article by Lois Lamya’ al-Faruqi entitled “Islamic Art or Muslim Art?” (1984). This exhibition could be seen as the first international Islamic art exhibition that consists both material and visual culture from calligraphic to abstractions that was positioned as Islamic. The essay by Lois Lamya’ al-Faruqi that selected to was reprinted for this catalogue had started with the question of Islamic art of Muslim art and posted that “the arts of Islamic culture are integrally related to Islam and its ideology of tawhid” (np) and has further discussed the basic principles of “Islamic art”—the abstract quality, stylization, denaturalization, infinite patterning, the Quran as the model of art. Lois had also written on taqlid that she argues will hinder creativity and encourages Muslim artists to put in effort in their artistic work.
7. Among them Hasan Celebi (Turkey), Abdul Djalil Pirous, Ahmad Sadali, Amri Yahya, Saiful Adnan, Subarna (Indonesia), Saiful Islam (Bangladeshi) and Wajih Nahle (Lebanon). Local artists include

Awang Damit Ahmad, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Zakaria Awang, Sulaiman Esa, Omar Basaree, Syed Abdul Rahman Al-Attas, Syed Mahdar al-Shahab and many more (Nor Azlin et al. 2011).

8. Calligraphy Exhibition by Sadequain from Pakistan (1985), Seni Lukis Palestin exhibition, International Calligraphy Exhibition by Hamid Al-Hamidi (1988), and even an exhibition on architecture entitled Islamic Architecture Exhibition, Spain in (1988). This was followed by Contemporary Art from the Islamic World, Barbican Centre London (1989), Calligraphy Art International Exhibition (1990), and Islamic Calligraphy from China Exhibition (1999) (Balai Seni Visual Negara 2013 163, 165).
9. Hikayat Hang Tuah tells the tale of the legendary Malay warrior and his four warrior friends who lived during the height of the Sultanate of Malacca in the 15th century. Often narrated as a mountain of great spirituality, where Hang Tuah and his fellow brothers came to seek knowledge and meditate in the Hikayat above, the mountain is also related to the myth of a princess called Puteri Gunung Ledang, who was wooed by the Sultan of Malacca, Sultan Mahmud Shah (Nurkhozilah and Liza Marziana, 2018). See http://mcp.anu.edu.au/N/Tuah_bib.html
10. The meaning of “fully developed” did not only meant in economics, but also political, social, spiritual, psychological, cultural development, as well as national unity. In the vision and mission of Vision 2020, Mahathir listed nine challenges in which he mentioned living in harmony with different ethnics, caring culture, creating a liberated, secure, developed, mature, consensual, moral and ethical, tolerant, scientific and progressive, an economically just and prosperous society as keys to grow our country. It can be seen that beyond economics, the core ideas of Vision 2020 also included ethnicity, democracy, ethics, religious culture, science and technology, and citizenship.

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