

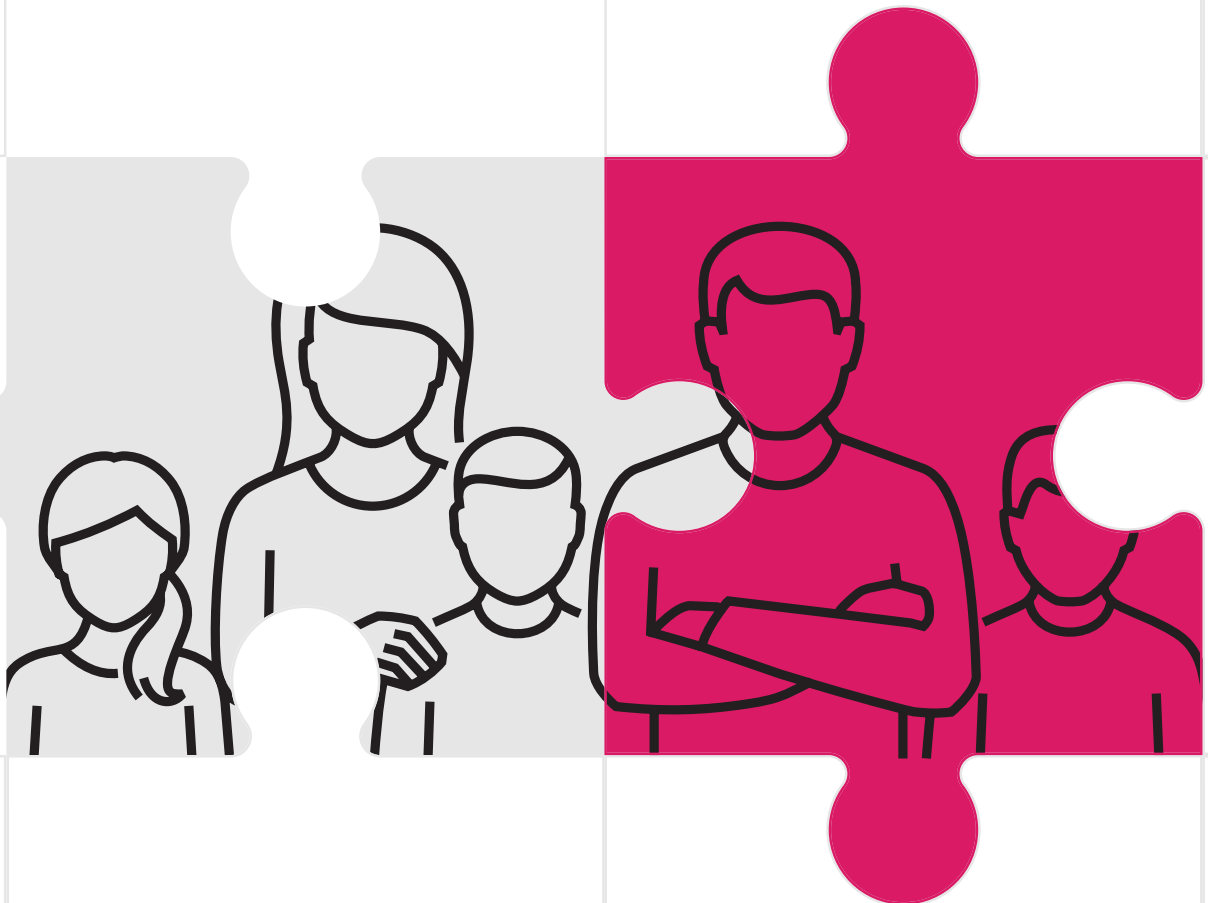
THE

KARYAWAN

PROFESSIONALS FOR THE COMMUNITY

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Blending Hearts and Homes: The Challenges and Opportunities in Navigating Step-Family Life in Singapore



CONTENTS

OCTOBER 2024

01 FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

COVER STORY

- 09 Blending Hearts and Homes: The Challenges and Opportunities in Navigating Step-Family Life in Singapore
by Nabilah Mohammad
- 02 Improving Maternal and Child Health, Achieving Resilient & Inspiring Families
by Dr Nur Adila Ahmad Hatib & Assoc Prof Suzanna Sulaiman
- 05 Unpacking the 2024 National Day Rally Across the Three Languages
by Rifhan Noor Miller
- 13 Pricing Oil in Other Currencies and What It Means for Singapore
by Dr Hazik Mohamed
- 17 Contemporary Challenges to Religiosity In Singaporean Muslim Youths
by Abdillah Ammar
- 20 Malay Youth: Unpacking Places of Leisure
by Nur Izzatie Adnan
- 23 Recalibrating the Search for Youths' Self-Identity with the Wisdom of Muhammad Iqbal
by Nur Faizah Rosli
- 26 Being A Muslim Writer in Singapore – More Than Just Words
by Ameera Aslam
- 29 The Forbidden Cultural Arts: Mak Yong & Kuda Kepang
by Qamar Jannah Fateen
- 32 What Does a Piece of Fabric Tell You About a People?
by Azeem Sulehri
- 35 Stories Across Seas: Prof Nazry Bahrawi's Exploration of Malay-Indonesian Narratives
by Irdina Aisyah Mohd Imran
- 38 Book Review: Reviewing the Ideas of Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji
by Ahmad Ubaidillah Mohd Khair

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

As we delve into the realities of family life in Singapore, it is essential to acknowledge the diversity of family structures that make up our community, including stepfamilies, which are steadily becoming more common. In this issue of *The Karyawan*, our cover story by Nabilah Mohammad on Page 9 sheds light on the complexities and joys of stepfamily dynamics, offering insights into how families navigate these transitions.

The increasing number of remarriages, coupled with the challenges of blending families, calls for greater understanding and support for stepfamilies. Their unique needs – whether emotional, psychological, or logistical – are sometimes overlooked, and yet they are vital to fostering stronger, more resilient families in our society.

As the article highlights, stepfamilies must navigate uncharted emotional territories, where stepparents, stepchildren, and re-partnered parents redefine their roles. Through patience, communication, and empathy, these families can thrive. But for that to happen, our community must be more attuned to their realities and provide the necessary resources to support them.

It is my hope that this issue will encourage us to think about how we can play a part in strengthening families in our community.

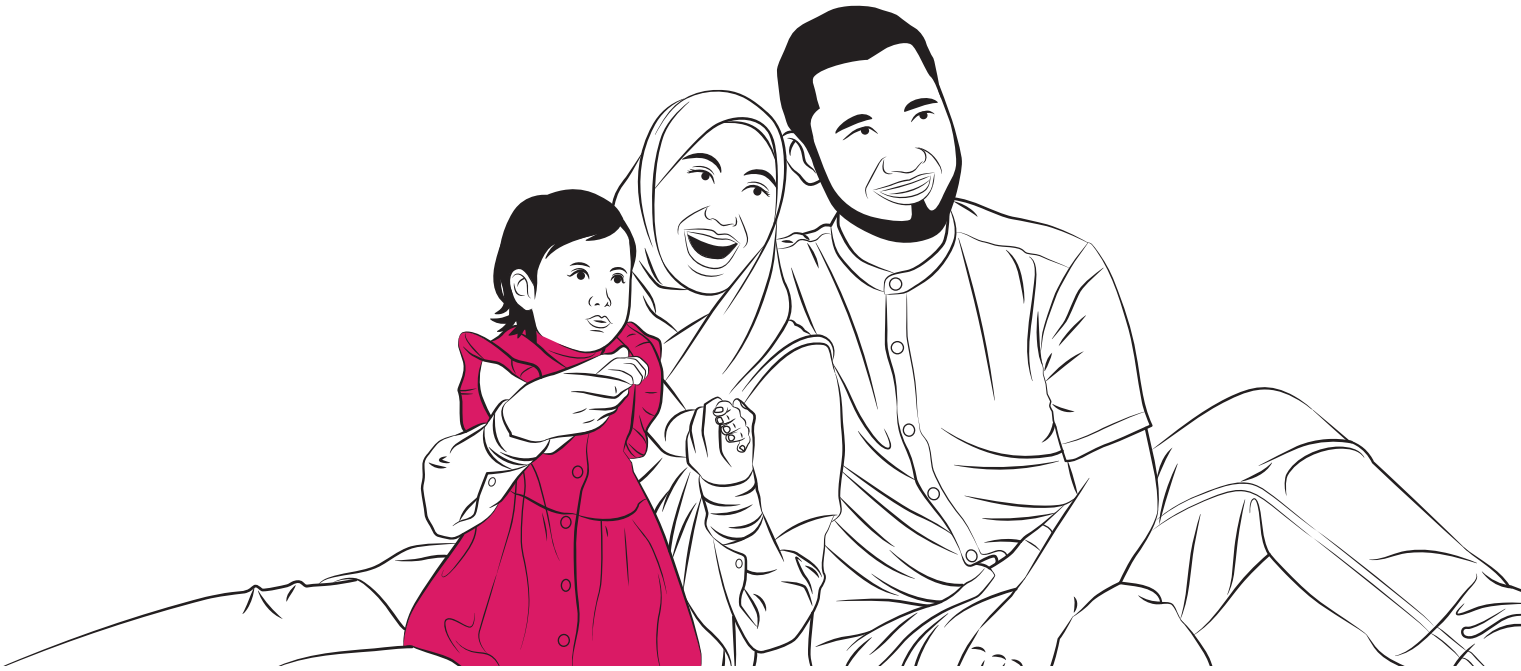


A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several fluid, overlapping strokes that form a stylized representation of the name Fathurrahman Dawoed.

FATHURRAHMAN DAWOED
SUPERVISING EDITOR

Improving Maternal and Child Health, Achieving Resilient & Inspiring Families

BY DR NUR ADILA AHMAD HATIB & ASSOC PROF SUZANNA SULAIMAN



Strong marriages lead to stable families, which are vital building blocks for a healthy society. Optimal health and family wellness during the first 1,000 days of life are essential for unlocking the full potential of the next generation. This crucial period of human development starts from the time a foetus is first formed in the womb, all the way until the child reaches the age of 2 years. Research has shown that due to rapid brain growth and development during these first 1,000 days, the environment and experiences that are provided to a child in order to learn and thrive will have a lasting impact on future health all the way into adulthood¹.

There are several robust initiatives in Singapore that aim to improve health delivery services for mother and child, in line with the Ministry of Health's Healthier SG plan to keep families healthy. Yet, to date, there are no programmes that look into overall health from the time a family is first built, at the beginning of marriage.

IS THERE A NEED FOR ADDITIONAL PROGRAMMES IN OUR COMMUNITY?

A needs analysis commissioned by Temasek Foundation and led by KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) was conducted on 48 Muslim women of Malay ethnicity aged 16 to 50 years in 2020 (unpublished data). The results

revealed significant gaps in the participants' knowledge of their own health and, for mothers, the health of their own children. In addition, the majority reported experiencing at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE) before the age of 18, such as emotional and/or physical abuse. Religion was noted to be an influencing factor for many of these respondents' decisions throughout their adult lives. One recommendation from the needs analysis was to extend the social role of mosques beyond being solely a place of worship, and to enhance the capability of religious personnel to better support Malay-Muslim women in the areas of maternal and child health.

¹ McDonald, C. M., & Thorne-Lyman, A. L. (2017). *The importance of the first 1,000 days: An epidemiological perspective*. In *The biology of the first 1,000 days* (pp. 3-14). CRC Press.

PROJECT ACHIEVING RESILIENT AND INSPIRING FAMILIES (ARIF)

A novel approach was conceptualised to improve maternal and child health in our community; through a multi-faceted programme combining medical and socio-religious support to newlyweds in Singapore. Project **A**chieving **R**esilient and **I**nspiring **F**amilies (ARIF) was a collaborative effort between Temasek Foundation, KKH and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS). Project ARIF leveraged on *Bersamamu*, an existing programme in our community whereby the marriage solemniser, or *naib kadi* (NK), accompanies each solemnised couple for the first two years of marriage to provide guidance. Through Project ARIF, NKs were further equipped with knowledge on maternal and child health, enabling them to support their couples more holistically.

NKs underwent formal training to deliver basic health advice and identify newlyweds with greater needs. The training and expertise were provided by the KKH team, which included three obstetricians and gynaecologists, one paediatrician, one midwife specialising in lactation services, one paediatric nurse clinician and two medical social workers (MSWs). The NKs risk-stratified couples according to their needs, which included both social factors (such as young marriages, previous incarceration, low-income status or rental public housing) and medical factors (such as a history of chronic medical and/or mental illness(es) or intoxicant use). Couples with greater needs received appropriate and timely interventions, including direct medical and/or social work counselling, as well as referrals to relevant external agencies. Two resource centres were set up in An-Nur Mosque and Assyafaah Mosque for the team to conduct counselling sessions with couples and their families within the community. Print and digital resources were also created (available on www.projectarif.sg), including a guidebook on maternal and child health that weaved health information together with sociocultural and Islamic context, with short summaries translated into Malay. ARIF Bulletins were also developed to keep the public informed on maternal and child topics, such as the safety of fasting during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Pregnancies reported were tracked and expectant women were invited to attend pregnancy health advisory sessions. Babies born to enrolled couples were also monitored for their health and developmental status. This was done through direct engagement with MSWs (inclusive of home visits), and child health advisory sessions conducted by the KKH medical team at the resource centres.

Phase 1 of Project ARIF was conducted from September 2020 to August 2022. We enrolled Muslim newlyweds or soon-to-be-wed couples (of whom at least one had to be a Singapore citizen or Permanent Resident) solemnised from July 2020 onwards by NKs trained under Project ARIF. Written informed consent was obtained from each couple prior to enrolment into the programme.

RESULTS FROM PROJECT ARIF PHASE 1

43 NKs and mosque personnel were trained in Phase 1. A total of 2,188 newlyweds were solemnised and given access to all educational resources. All couples were also invited to attend regular public educational forums conducted by Project ARIF. These forums covered topics such as maternal and child health, family wellness, and relevant Islamic teachings and values. A total of 1,416 newlyweds (64.7%) enrolled into Project ARIF and underwent needs assessment conducted by the NKs. Among the participants, 276 individuals (19.5%) were identified to have greater needs, and all received additional support. Some of the support rendered included tailored health advisory sessions conducted by the doctors and/or nurses, featuring personalised counselling on sexual health, family planning, pregnancy, mental wellness, and parenting. 20 individuals were referred to external agencies such as family service centres, the Early Childhood Development Agency's KidSTART programme and INSPIRASI (Centre for Early Marriage Support for Minor and Young Muslim Couples). Additionally, 56 participants attended at least one public educational forum.

There were 39 reported pregnancies during Phase 1 of Project ARIF. All women complied with recommended antenatal vaccinations and follow-up.

16 expectant or post-natal women were counselled on pregnancy-related concerns, breastfeeding, and post-natal care. A total of 18 live babies were born during this period. All children monitored were up to date with the National Childhood Immunisation Schedule and well-baby checks, at the time of reporting. 12 children and their parents/caregivers benefitted from health advisory sessions, including a child development and parenting workshop.

The drop-out rate for Project ARIF was low at 0.85% (12 individuals) and participants' feedback was generally positive. For health advisory sessions and public educational forums, participants were asked to rate their satisfaction scores on a scale of 1 to 5. The mean satisfaction score obtained was 4.89. When asked to rate their increased knowledge and confidence in parenting after accessing ARIF's resources, the mean score was 3.72. This mean score increased to 4.27 when evaluating their willingness and knowledge of where to seek help if faced with challenges pertaining to maternal and child health. Some open-ended written responses revealed that the participants found Project ARIF sessions to be "personalised", "insightful" and "truly beneficial", and that the guidebook was "concise yet very informative". One interesting comment reflected that the respondent's partner had started reading a few chapters from the guidebook, even though he did not usually like to read. Several individuals with high needs expressed gratitude for the individualised support rendered during difficult periods of their early marriage lives. The NKs also gave positive feedback, noting that Project ARIF allowed them to upskill and provide more holistic mentoring for their couples' benefit, as they journeyed with them in the first two years of marriage.

CASE VIGNETTES OF PROJECT ARIF BENEFICIARIES (PHASE 1)

Case 1

M and F met through mutual friends and got married a year later. Both individuals were in their late twenties and were the youngest children in their families. They decided to stay with F's family after the solemnisation while working on getting a matrimonial home. They were blessed with a daughter a year after their wedding.

Cracks in their marital relationship began to appear when M had a change of job with higher pay. Due to his longer working hours, F often felt alone, especially during the first few months of caring for their newborn. On the other hand, M felt that he was already doing his part as the family's provider. During a home visit by the MSW and paediatric nurse clinician, their baby was assessed to be doing well, showing normal growth and meeting developmental milestones. Although F was exhausted from caring for her baby, thankfully her mother was available to provide additional support and caregiving. Both received anticipatory guidance on the child's needs as well as advice on managing common paediatric ailments.

F disclosed that she was keen to work on her marital relationship. Her MSW assessed that F's mother served as a protective factor, helping to avoid unnecessary tension and escalation during interactions with her husband. M and F agreed to attend a counselling session with their MSW and NK at the neighbourhood mosque. Their NK reminded them of their roles and responsibilities, while the MSW facilitated a discussion, allowing the couple to express how each other's decisions and actions had affected and impacted them. During the session, M and F were invited to revisit their marital goals and renegotiate their expectations of each other.

Case 2

A was a new mother who had given birth to a baby girl and was excited to breastfeed her baby exclusively. She couldn't wait to put all the theory and knowledge that she had acquired from lactation education into practice. Unfortunately, her breastfeeding journey became daunting as her milk production was unable to match the baby's demands. Feeling sorrowful, she started displaying depressive symptoms. Her relationship with her husband became unstable due to reduced interaction and communication. As her husband struggled to provide adequate support and turned to unsavoury activities to cope with his

situation, A refused to allow him to care for their baby. There was gradual estrangement and even quarrels in the presence of the baby. Eventually, with support from their MSW, the couple recognised that this would be detrimental to their daughter's emotional and psychological well-being and decided to seek further help and counselling.

THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF PROJECT ARIF

The outcomes from the first phase of Project ARIF are promising and suggest that early support and intervention from the start of marriage give couples more confidence to build their families and may directly or indirectly affect subsequent outcomes including pregnancy wellness and child health and development. The inclusion of NKs as influencing partners in preventive health may increase the receptivity of the couples to health advice and motivate behaviour change. A large study conducted by Guthrie *et al* in Ethiopia emphasised the influential role that faith leaders can play in community health. The study revealed that partnering Orthodox priests with community health workers significantly increased utilisation of antenatal care and facility delivery services for pregnant women².

The use of newly created resources that incorporate health information within a socio-cultural and Islamic context may better resonate with our community and drive further behaviour change. A formal analysis is in progress to objectively assess the outcomes of Project ARIF, and determine how such a programme can be made sustainable for our community.

THE FUTURE OF PROJECT ARIF

Project ARIF is currently in its second phase, and the team has expanded to include an additional MSW and a dedicated research coordinator. Two lead NKs who are under the umbrella of AMP have joined the team as master trainers to continue the work of training the growing pool of Project ARIF NKs. With this "train the trainer" model and established curriculum, we hope to eventually equip NKs in Singapore to support all Muslim newlyweds. To

further ensure the sustainability of our efforts, there has been a gradual shift towards group sessions and workshops for couples, replacing direct counselling and health advisory sessions led by doctors, nurses and/or MSWs. By building a self-sustaining community to share knowledge and resources, more experienced couples who have previously benefitted from our programmes are continuously encouraged to guide newer couples. Furthermore, the team also aims to continue hosting mass health talks and engagement sessions to reach out to even more families and members of the public.

It is hoped that this pilot model of religious-based community support, designed to address the health literacy and psychosocial needs of newlyweds, can be expanded nationwide and adapted for other faiths. This would aim to improve future child health and developmental outcomes and achieve a new generation of resilient and inspiring families in Singapore. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.

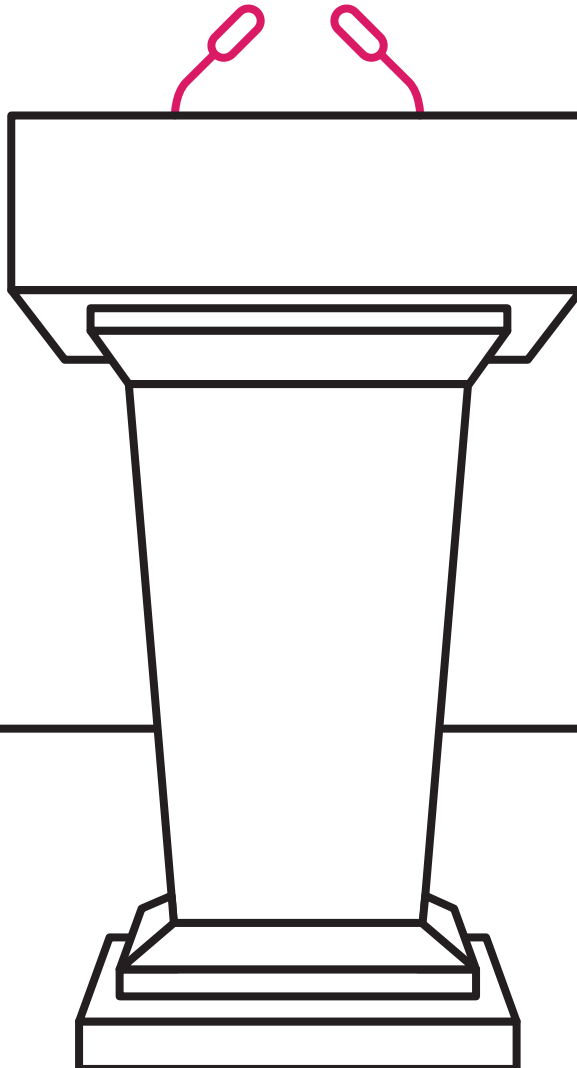
Dr Nur Adila Ahmad Hatib is a consultant paediatrician with the Department of Paediatrics in KKH. She is currently co-leading KKH Project ARIF. She has a keen interest in the development of community paediatrics in Singapore and works closely with the community and primary healthcare sector to advance child health for all.

Assoc Prof Suzanna Sulaiman is Deputy Division Chairman for Division of Obstetrics and Gynaecology. She is also the Head of Department for Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology. She leads KKH Project ARIF. She spends her free time creating content for public education inclusive of ARIF Times for Project ARIF. She is passionate in education for medical students, junior doctors and the community.

² Guthrie, B. L., Tsegaye, A. T., Rankin, K. C., Watson, J. L., & Alemie, G. A. (2021). Partnering faith leaders with community health workers increases utilization of antenatal care and facility delivery services in Ethiopia: a cluster randomized trial. *Journal of Global Health, 11*.

UNPACKING THE 2024 NATIONAL DAY RALLY ACROSS THE THREE LANGUAGES

BY RIFHAN NOOR MILLER



2024 marked a pivotal year for Singapore as Mr Lawrence Wong delivered his first National Day message as the nation's fourth Prime Minister. Following his ascension to office in May, PM Wong's speech introduced "bold but necessary"¹ policies designed to fortify Singapore's social compact in an increasingly uncertain global landscape. His speeches, delivered in English, Malay, and Mandarin, each touched on different aspects of this vision for Singapore's future, though some elements stood out more strongly in certain languages.

GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS AND ECONOMIC REALITIES

Singapore is not insulated from the challenges of a volatile global landscape that is rapidly changing. Beyond United States-China tensions mentioned in PM Wong's speech, other conflicts have gripped communities worldwide like Israel's recent expansion of its campaign from Gaza into Lebanon, threatening a wider Middle East war and Russia's war on Ukraine. There are also conflicts with lesser media coverage like Sudan. Closer to home, there are the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, civil war in Myanmar and confrontations over Taiwan. Peace-making worldwide is in disarray and according to ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data), in 2023, 97% of all political violence occurred in 50 countries². There are 195 countries in the world today, which makes the number slightly over a quarter and this is disconcerting.

The rise of populism and economic protectionism in many countries have also led to a sharp decline in trade agreements, with only five signed annually in the 2020s, compared to double in the early 2000s. 2023 also saw nearly 3,000 trade restrictions imposed worldwide, five times the number in 2015. The global economic outlook has also worsened in recent years, with the World Trade Organization (WTO) reporting that global trade expanded by just 0.2% in 2023, marking the slowest pace of growth in 50 years outside of global recessions³. This stagnation underscores the need for affected countries to be agile in their

economic strategies to remain competitive and adaptable in an environment where global supply chains are shifting.

RESHAPING SINGAPORE'S SOCIAL COMPACT

Beyond global concerns, PM Wong's National Day Rally message focused heavily on strengthening Singapore's social compact. His call to "refresh" the Singapore Dream and "renew" Singapore's social compact is significant, as it acknowledges that the social and economic policies that once fuelled Singapore's growth need to evolve, addressing public concerns over hardening social mobility, protracted elitism and growing inequality. PM Wong's account of his own humble beginnings, growing up in a neighbourhood school and crediting his success to strong mentorship also resonated with many Singaporeans, especially younger generations who may feel disconnected from traditional pathways to success. His speech reflects a strong commitment to tackling inequality, promoting social mobility, and ensuring that Singaporeans have access to opportunities, regardless of their backgrounds.

However, the real test lies in execution. The speeches in the English, Malay and Mandarin languages touched on different pieces of a complete puzzle. It is uncertain if every viewer watches all 3 to get that complete picture, but it is beneficial to piece them together. The Malay speech was also rather short and missed out on important updates present in the English and Mandarin language speeches. On the ground, particularly among seniors in the community, there appears to be much confusion over the various new initiatives and policies, with uncertainties over how, where and when to access them. Also, how to gain further information regarding them. It thus appears that these updates don't reach as many people in the community as one would like.

KEY POLICY ANNOUNCEMENTS (ENGLISH LANGUAGE)

Here are some key reflections and takeaways from PM Wong's maiden National Day Rally Speech in English and for the community to take note of:

For Businesses: Singapore's future competitiveness will rely heavily on innovation and the state will continue to invest in research, development, and infrastructure to foster a vibrant ecosystem for startups and established companies. Regulatory burdens on businesses will also be reduced, and this will be particularly helpful for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to help lower operational costs and increase efficiency. As businesses adapt to changing global conditions, minimising red tape will allow them to respond more quickly to new opportunities.

SMEs make up 99% of enterprises in Singapore⁴. Fostering a vibrant ecosystem for SMEs may align with the aspirations of many Muslim entrepreneurs who have traditionally been active in industries such as food services, retail, and logistics. Many Muslim-owned businesses also fall within the SME category, and this support offers a critical lifeline, to help these businesses explore new growth opportunities beyond their traditional markets. In particular, the push to embrace digitalisation and innovation will also assist these businesses thrive in a more connected and technology-driven global economy.

For Job Seekers: Singaporeans aged 40 and above have received a \$4,000 SkillsFuture Credit top-up and are eligible for a new training allowance of up to \$3,000 per month for full-time courses. This will help older workers reskill and remain competitive as new industries emerge. The SkillsFuture Jobseeker Support scheme offers up to \$6,000 for workers who have lost their jobs, with support tied to career coaching and job matching⁵. This initiative acknowledges that retrenchment is a reality across all industries and provides a safety net for workers while they transition into new roles.

The world of work is changing rapidly, and the rise of automation, artificial intelligence, and digitalisation is transforming industries and making some jobs obsolete while creating opportunities in others. This shift is particularly relevant for workers in the Muslim community employed in industries like manufacturing, construction, and services, which are vulnerable to automation

¹ Spoken by Senior Minister Lee Hsien Loong, to more than 1,000 residents at a National Day dinner in his Teck Ghee ward on 24 August 2024.

² Conflict Watchlist 2024. (2024, Jan 17). <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/>

³ Kose, M. & Mulabdic, A. (2024, Feb 22). Global trade has nearly flatlined. Populism is taking a toll on growth. World Bank Blogs. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/voices/global-trade-has-nearly-flatlined-populism-taking-toll-growth>

⁴ According to the Singapore Department of Statistic's SME Report, 2022.

⁵ Minister for Manpower, Mr Tan See Leng will provide more details at a later date.

and technological disruption. This initiative should be most helpful for individuals who feel they are at a disadvantage due to a lack of access to higher education or specialised training but will have the opportunity to reskill and transition into growing sectors such as green energy, biotechnology, and digital services. For others who may be overrepresented in lower-paying and less secure jobs, these programmes offer a pathway to greater stability and career advancement.

For Parents: One of the most significant policy changes announced was the extension of paternity leave from two to four weeks, starting in April 2025. Additionally, a new Shared Parental Leave scheme will be introduced, allowing parents to split caregiving duties more equitably. These policies aim to address Singapore's declining fertility rate, which hit a historic low of 0.97 in 2023, by making it easier for parents to balance work and family life. The 2025 Budget Announcement will provide more details on the introduction of new support measures for families with three or more children, further encouraging Singaporeans to expand their families.

Our community's fertility rate has not, fortunately, declined as low as the national average. With slightly larger families, this initiative benefits the community in a different manner, marking a significant shift towards greater equal sharing of caregiving between parents. While possibly celebrated by parents though, a mindset shift and support of employers and fellow colleagues will still be needed, particularly for smaller organisations where the sharing of workload from an employee's absence is more significantly felt.

For Home Seekers: Housing affordability has been a growing concern, especially for younger Singaporeans looking to start families. The state will ramp up the supply of Build-To-Order (BTO) flats by 2025 to stabilise the market and enhance the CPF Housing Grant for lower-income families⁶. Singles will also be extended priority access to BTO flats near their parents starting in mid-2025, a move that promotes

family cohesion and offers more housing equity as an increasing proportion of youths choose to remain unmarried.

This is especially relevant for Muslim families, many of whom live in extended family structures. For Muslim families, where filial piety and intergenerational living are highly valued, this is particularly beneficial where strong extended family ties are highly emphasised, and adult children are generally expected to take on caregiving responsibilities for their elderly parents.

For Students: In a major shift, the Gifted Education Programme (GEP) will be replaced by a more inclusive approach where all primary schools will identify and support high-ability learners⁷. This allows greater equity among students, regardless of their school or background to reach their full academic potential. The criteria for taking higher mother tongue as a subject will also be relaxed, allowing greater accessibility for students to pursue mother tongue language studies at a higher level.

This shift reflects a desire to ensure that talent and potential are recognised across the board, rather than concentrated in a select few schools. For many students who may be underrepresented in elite programmes like the GEP due to socioeconomic factors, this policy change offers a more level playing field and ensures that students have greater opportunities to excel. The relaxation of entry requirements to pursue higher mother tongue languages will provide greater flexibility in their education and allow students who are keen to develop their language skills further.

For Sports Enthusiasts: The Kallang area will be transformed into a new lifestyle destination centred around sports, with expanded facilities at the Singapore Indoor Stadium and the creation of a pedestrianised community boulevard. These developments will enhance Singapore's sports infrastructure and promote a healthier, more active lifestyle for all citizens. Singapore Sports School will also move to the Kallang precinct.

Beyond global concerns, PM Wong's National Day Rally message focused heavily on strengthening Singapore's social compact. His call to "refresh" the Singapore Dream and "renew" Singapore's social compact is significant, as it acknowledges that the social and economic policies that once fuelled Singapore's growth need to evolve, addressing public concerns over hardening social mobility, protracted elitism and growing inequality.

⁶ Minister for National Development, Mr Desmond Lee will announce further details at a later date.

⁷ Ministry of Education will announce further details.

KEY POLICY ANNOUNCEMENTS (MANDARIN LANGUAGE)

Here are some key takeaways from PM Wong's maiden National Day Rally Speech in Mandarin and for the community to take note of:

- Announcement of latest tranche of CDC vouchers given out in June 2024, amounting to \$300 for every Singaporean household; and the service and conservancy charges and utility rebates disbursed, most recently in July amid gas and electricity price hikes.
- See above “For businesses” to address concerns by small and medium-sized enterprises concerned about the rise in costs.

KEY POLICY ANNOUNCEMENTS (MALAY LANGUAGE)

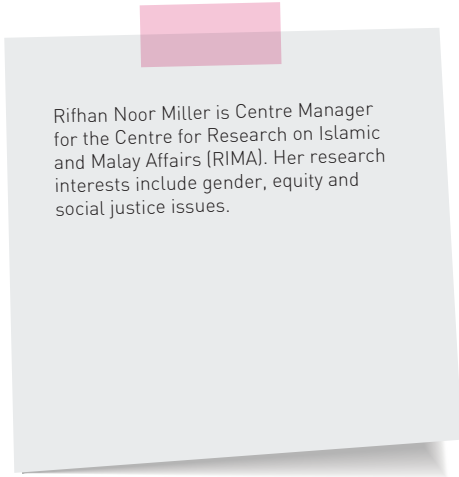
The significant announcement in PM Wong's speech for the community was the establishment of the Singapore College of Islamic Studies. This new institution will play a crucial role in nurturing future Islamic leaders and scholars, while allowing such individuals to remain grounded in Singapore's multiracial and multireligious context. For the community, this development likely addresses a gap in religious education and leadership training as students typically undertake their further education overseas and adapt their learning back to the Singapore context upon returning. This initiative reflects the state's broader support for the community while maintaining its distinctive customs and values.

However, it is worth noting that the Malay speech was shorter and less comprehensive than its English and Mandarin counterparts, missing key updates on policies and initiatives. This may reflect the demographic shift within the Muslim community, as younger generations are increasingly proficient in English and may rely more on the English-language speech to stay informed. Nevertheless, the Malay community's progress and contributions were acknowledged, with PM Wong affirming his commitment to work with Malay/Muslim leaders to build a “Community of Success.”

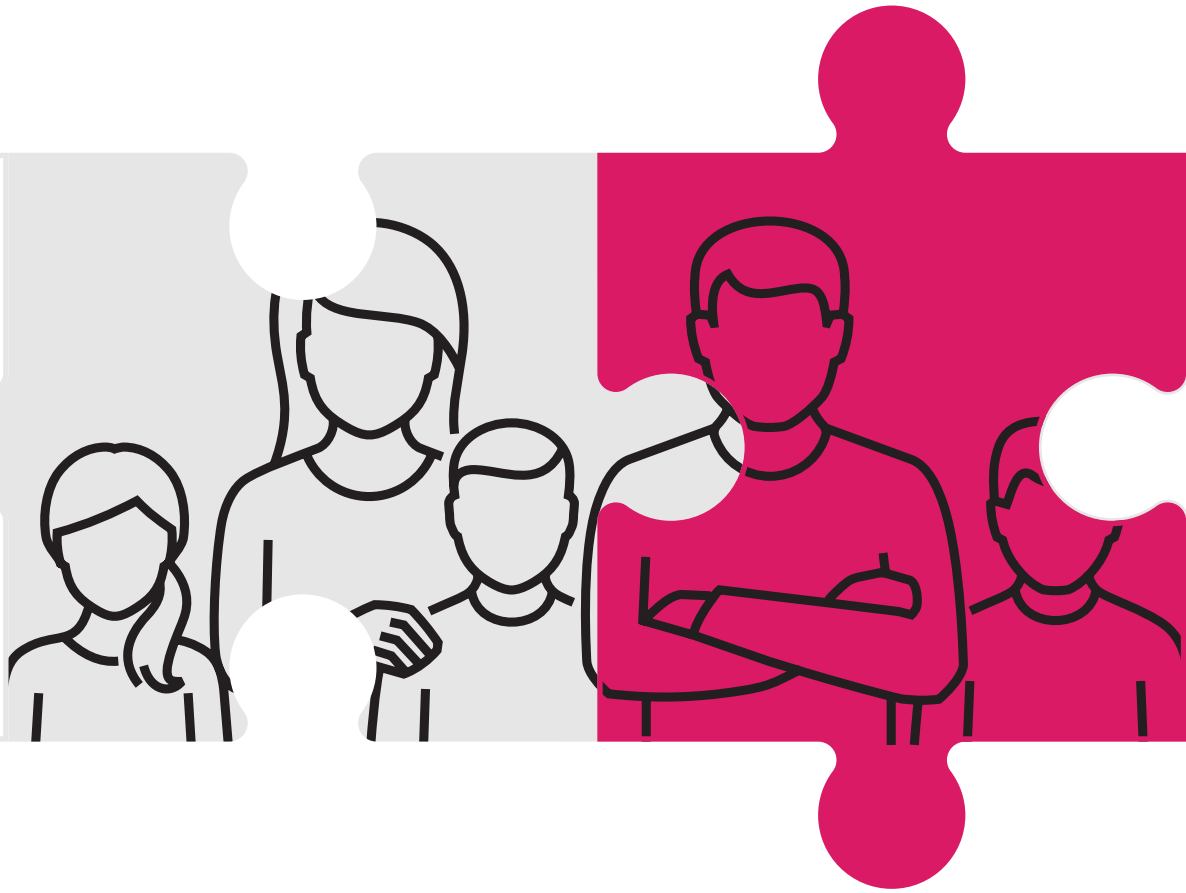
THE PATH FORWARD

PM Wong's inaugural National Day message outlined both the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for Singapore. His speech balanced a recognition of the global and regional uncertainties with a firm commitment to adapting Singapore's social and economic policies to meet these challenges. The challenge now is ensuring that vital information on announced policy changes and new initiatives are well proliferated to the ground and responded to, to translate into real, tangible benefits for all Singaporeans. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.



Rifhan Noor Miller is Centre Manager for the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA). Her research interests include gender, equity and social justice issues.



Blending Hearts and Homes: The Challenges and Opportunities in Navigating Step-Family Life in Singapore

BY NABILAH MOHAMMAD

BEYOND CINDERELLA: UNPACKING THE REALITIES OF STEP-FAMILY LIFE

When we think of step-families, the classic tale of Cinderella often springs to mind – a young girl mistreated by her unkind stepmother, an image that lingers as one of the most iconic depictions of step-family dynamics. Yet, while such stories captivate our imaginations, they offer an overly simplistic view of step-family life, masking the nuanced, multifaceted realities experienced by step-families today.

Although there is no specific local census data on stepfamilies, in the last five years, around half the total number of divorce cases involved families with children. This, coupled with the increasing rate of remarriages, suggest that stepfamilies may be more common in our community than we realise. Of particular concern is that the statistics also reveal that remarriages tend to end in separation more often than first marriages, suggesting that step-families may face specific challenges.

Against this backdrop, understanding the lived experiences of step-family members in Singapore becomes essential. To better understand these family dynamics, Singapore Children's Society carried out a study between December 2022 and March 2023, gathering personal stories from step-families. This included insights from 20 young adult step-children aged 18 and above, who shared their memories of growing up in a step-family unit, as well as ten stepparents and ten re-partnered biological parents. Through their stories, we get a glimpse into the ups and downs of step-family life in Singapore.

ELLY'S JOURNEY: GROWING UP AS A STEP-CHILD

Elly's journey through family life has been a dynamic and evolving experience. Raised initially in a single-parent household following her parents' divorce when she was just two years old, Elly's early years were marked by the presence of her mother, her sister, and the support of her grandparents. Her biological father played a minimal role in her early life, a figure more absent than present.

At the age of eight, her family structure began to shift when her mother remarried a man with three children from his previous relationships. Elly recalled that

the wedding seemed to unfold around her, with decisions made and events planned without her fully understanding what was happening. As a young child, she found herself as a passive participant, swept along by the excitement and changes without a clear sense of what it all meant. Elly vividly recalled the day of her mother's wedding, a memory tinged with confusion and a sense of displacement.

"I remember their wedding. I had no idea what was going on. I think as a child I was like nine, right, you have no idea what a wedding is, what it means. Suddenly my mom had like a lot of makeup on her face. I remember being very puzzled by that... I just felt very off that day... I'm like okay, this person, like, is he here to love me? Is he here to provide? Is he just here for my mom? Like very confused as a child because you don't really know and no one's telling you anyway."

While her mother and new step-father celebrated their union, Elly felt that she was left to navigate her new reality on her own. On top of that, she was expected to adjust immediately to calling her step-father by a new parental title.

"[Initially, I was taught to call my step-father 'uncle']... And then, as soon as they got married of course you have to transition to Baba (a term for Father). It felt very strange... I know I wasn't the happiest child on the day of the wedding."

Elly's family expanded further when her mother had a baby with her step-father, adding a younger half-sister to the mix. From the outset, acceptance was a significant hurdle. Her family's dynamics were upended in ways she could not have anticipated. Elly, who had always been close to her biological mother, struggled with the idea of sharing her mother with a new step-father. In addition, Elly found herself caught between two **conflicting parenting styles** that made her childhood particularly challenging and confusing. Her step-father, she described, was a man of few words and firm rules. His strict disciplinary approach, which starkly contrasted with the more lenient methods she was accustomed to, created friction and complicated her ability to bond with her step-father.

"Like my mom says, it's okay. But then, my stepdad says no, you should be punished even worse. So, it's very difficult to understand, and of course, because he's not my real dad, then the resentment grows right, because, like, okay, 'who are you? You're not my dad, so why are you trying to discipline me?'"

Elly's sentiments are shared by many other step-children in the study, who often struggle with adjusting to the presence of a new adult figure in their lives. The sense of intrusion is often strongest when step-parents attempt to take on responsibilities that traditionally belong to biological parents, such as discipline. Majority of the step-children often felt that discipline should remain the responsibility of their biological parents, with step-parents taking on a more supportive or friendly role.

PARENT, BUT NOT QUITE: A STEP-PARENT'S STORY

On the other side of the dynamic, some step-parents, like Kai, a step-father to two young children, desired a more involved role. This included assuming the disciplinarian role and making decisions for his step-children.

However, like Elly, Kai's journey as a step-father has not been without its challenges. Initially, Kai struggled deeply with understanding and defining his role within his new family dynamic, especially with the boundaries set by his wife, who chose to handle most disciplinary matters herself. Kai's wife preferred that he take on the more light-hearted, "fun" role. This approach stemmed from a belief that the children needed stability and continuity, which could be disrupted if Kai became too involved.

Kai, however, felt strongly about contributing more significantly to the family. He wanted to be an integral part of his step-children's lives, not just as a passive observer but as a figure who could provide guidance and support. This desire led to frequent disagreements between him and his wife.

"[As a step-father, I would like] equal parenting decisions. If I am to drive the same car as you, I expect the same responsibilities to be given to me, and at the same time the same benefits. You tell me that it's fifty-fifty, but all I can do is press the horn. It doesn't make sense."

As a society, we have a crucial role to play in supporting and enhancing the experiences of step-families. We can foster a more inclusive environment by promoting understanding and acceptance of diverse family structures. Providing accessible resources and support systems tailored to the unique needs of step-families can make a significant difference. Community programmes, educational workshops, and counselling services that address the complexities of step-family life can offer valuable assistance.

Kai's struggle to define his role within the family echoes a broader challenge faced by many step-parents – role ambiguity. Navigating uncertain boundaries, undefined expectations, and the struggle to establish their place within the family can create tension and frustration.

“You can try but you have to accept that, regardless, you are not their parent per se, so it's a very big oxymoron, parent but not parent.”

Kai's challenges also extended beyond the home, particularly with his step-children's school. According to Kai, the school primarily communicated with the biological father, leaving Kai out of critical discussions and decisions. Despite Kai's eagerness to be involved and his efforts to engage with the school, he found himself constantly being side-lined, which led to a sense of exclusion. This lack of inclusion was not only frustrating for Kai but also disheartening as it undermined his role and contributions as a step-father.

“They only reach out to the biological father... I think a lot more inclusion would be best lah.”

This sense of exclusion in the educational landscape is not unique to step-parents like Kai. Many step-children, including

Elly, have reported feeling excluded and invalidated by schools, especially when it comes to administrative matters, school activities, and class discussions.

FINDING SUPPORT AND UNDERSTANDING

Both Elly's and Kai's struggles underscored the complexities of blending families, where step-family members are pushed to navigate unfamiliar territory. However, like many other step-family members in our study, both Elly and Kai were able to find ways to negotiate these challenges. In addition, most of the step-family participants reported that, over time, things tended to get better with patience and maturity. They found that as relationships develop, and individuals adapt, the challenges of blending families often became more manageable.

The turning point for Kai, for instance, came through active communication and a mutual effort to understand each other's perspectives. Kai and his wife started to reevaluate their approach to parenting and agreed to set aside specific times to discuss their parenting strategies and roles openly.

“[Be patient] and listen. Because if you're patient but you don't want to listen to whatever's going on, there's no point.

But if you can listen and try to understand, that is also a long way to make your relationship better.”

Kai began to focus on establishing trust and building rapport with his step-children rather than enforcing discipline first. This shift in strategy allowed him to connect with them on a personal level and support them in ways that felt natural and respectful of their existing family structure.

Elly's turning point, on the other hand, came during a difficult period in her life when she struggled with depression and suicidal ideation. Her step-father's unexpected show of vulnerability during this time helped shift her perception of him, marking the start of a new chapter in their relationship. It was during this critical moment that Elly saw a side of her step-father she had never seen before.

“My mom told me . . . that [my step-father] actually cried because he didn't want to lose me. So, I feel like that was the pivotal moment. For me, I was just like, ‘okay, you know what, he actually cares. He just shows it in a different way.’”

It was a painful journey, but through this ordeal, Elly came to understand that her step-father's care and concern had always been there, albeit expressed in a way that she had not recognised before.

“I just wish that they had more conversations when we were younger. You know, like if he had shown his love in this way a lot earlier, then we wouldn't have hated him so much.”

Elly's story also highlighted the importance of a strong support system outside the immediate family. Her grandparents, with their unwavering love and support, provided a safe haven and balanced out some of the complexities at home. They were a constant reminder that love and stability existed beyond the immediate turmoil. Many other step-children echoed this sentiment, highlighting the significant role of grandparents and extended family members in step-children's lives. For many of them, these adults often served as crucial sources of emotional support and stability, helping to navigate the challenges of blended family dynamics.

Elly also highlighted the importance of schools recognising and addressing the unique challenges that step-children might face. She thought that her school could have played a more active role in providing tailored support to children from diverse family backgrounds, such as offering counselling or creating peer support groups.

"[The] primary environment [for a child] is the school, so I think having school counsellors would help... [Providing] proper training for these counsellors, to use the correct language, [for example,] don't use [terms] like broken family, not assuming that [step-children] are going to be struggling in school. I mean, they might be struggling, but I feel like it shouldn't be the first thing they assume."

These stereotypes and stigmas, as shared by Elly, was also a recurring theme raised by other step-family members.

Kai, on the other hand, recognised and understood possible constraints faced by the school, including overwhelmed staff members having limited capacity to handle extensive administrative tasks. He realised that expecting the school to change its practices entirely might be unrealistic. Hence, he decided to take a proactive approach by introducing himself personally to the teachers to help bridge this communication gap.

"I don't think it is [the school's] fault. It is just a system, I recognise. That's why I introduced myself [to the school]."

REFLECTIONS ON THE JOURNEY

Elly's and Kai's journeys are just two of many that reflect the intricate realities of step-family life in Singapore. Both Elly and Kai's story served as reminders that step-families, though faced with unique challenges, have the potential to create deeply rewarding family experiences. Ultimately, the journey of blending a family is one of patience, understanding, and incremental steps. By recognising the emotional landscape on both sides – what hurts and what helps – families can work towards building connections that, while different from traditional roles, are no less meaningful.

For Elly, navigating life in a step-family was a journey of adjustment and discovery.

Despite the initial challenges, Elly found that her step-family also offered several advantages that enriched her life in unexpected ways. She reflected on how her step-family brought unique and memorable experiences into her life.

"I guess, if my mom didn't marry him, we wouldn't have had all of these weird memories of us, eating durian by the roadside... [My step-father] would make sure that every single school holiday, we would go for a trip to Malaysia, but it's still a trip... All of us would wear like, the same colour T-shirt, same pants, same sandals... So [my mother and step-father] will go shopping for us and they would buy us like the same pants, same sandals and like same T-shirt, maybe different colour but same design... To make us feel like we are one big family."

Another notable advantage Elly highlighted was the positive impact on her mother's well-being. For Elly, having her step-father around brought emotional relief and stability for her mother and the family.

"My mom has someone that loves her. So, I feel like that's the plus side... Because she told me she was really lonely... And I'm pretty sure having like a dual income household does help... Yeah, she's not as stressed about money."

Kai viewed step-family life as a unique opportunity for personal growth and development, even though it is not something one typically aspires to. In Kai's words,

"Nobody wakes up saying I want to be in a step-family, right? But the good thing is that you'd be a better person."

For Kai, these experiences helped him grow into a more resilient, empathetic, and adaptable person, making step-family life a powerful catalyst for becoming the best version of oneself.

"You learn how to handle different situations. You know how to be accommodating. You know how to compromise. You know how to be more forgiving."

As a society, we have a crucial role to play in supporting and enhancing the experiences of step-families. We can foster a more inclusive environment by promoting

understanding and acceptance of diverse family structures. Providing accessible resources and support systems tailored to the unique needs of step-families can make a significant difference. Community programmes, educational workshops, and counselling services that address the complexities of step-family life can offer valuable assistance.

Moreover, encouraging open dialogues and sharing stories of step-family successes and challenges can help normalise these experiences and reduce stigma. By creating a culture of empathy and support, we contribute to making step-family life more enriching and less isolating for those who are navigating it.

Ultimately, the journey of blending families is one of continuous growth and mutual understanding. For Elly and Kai, and many other step-families in Singapore, the path forward may still have its ups and downs, but through small acts of understanding and consistent efforts, they are crafting a family narrative that is uniquely their own.

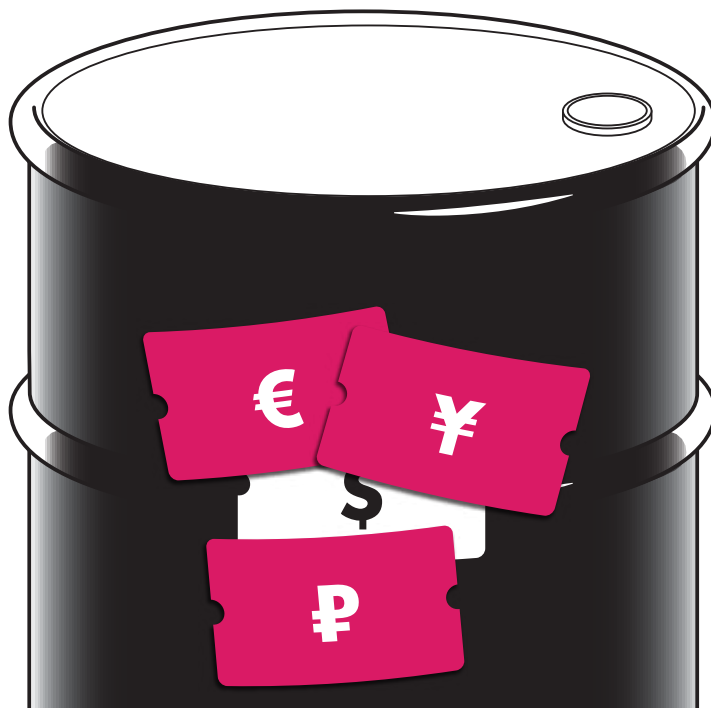
While this research study has delved into the experiences of step-children, step-parents, and re-partnered parents, the perspective of the re-partnered parents has not been shared in this article. However, the writer would like to acknowledge their experiences as equally vital, and their contributions have been invaluable to the overall understanding of step-family life. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to ensure the privacy of our interviewees. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.

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Pricing Oil in Other Currencies and What It Means for Singapore

BY DR HAZIK MOHAMED



In June 2024, news of the US-Saudi Arabia petrodollar deal expiring after 50 years went viral and within weeks, the US stock market suffered. Reports now claim that there was never such agreement in the first place (Morningstar¹, July 17th, 2024). The premise of said agreement was that Saudi Arabia would price its crude oil exports in US dollars and use proceeds to purchase US Treasury bonds. In exchange, the United States would give the kingdom military aid and equipment. Under said arrangement, Saudi Arabia secured its economic and general security while the United States gained a reliable supply of oil and a captive market for its debt.

Whether there was an official agreement or not, the petrodollar system has been a cornerstone of the global economic order since the 1970s when oil-exporting countries had priced oil exclusively in US dollars to the benefit of the greenback as the preferred global reserve currency. However, the immediate effects on US dollar hegemony would be affected if Saudi Arabia openly considered pricing oil sales in other currencies², since oil still drives the modern industrialised economy despite efforts to shift towards renewables. Shifting away from the dollar could influence the dynamics of international trade agreements, affect

other commodity markets, and challenge global financial stability.

GLOBAL CONSEQUENCES AS SAUDI ACCEPTS MULTI-CURRENCIES FOR ITS OIL

The potential end of the petrodollar – simply referring to oil priced in US dollars – could have significant consequences for the global economy, including Singapore, because surplus oil exporters who are paid in dollars will recycle them through US Treasury bond purchases, thus helping to finance US trade deficits. Here's an analysis of the possible impacts and implications:

¹ <https://www.morningstar.com/news/marketwatch/2024061751/reports-of-the-petrodollar-systems-demise-are-fake-news-heres-why>
² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-considers-accepting-yuan-instead-of-dollars-for-chinese-oil-sales-11647351541>

US Dollar Depreciation

The US dollar may depreciate if nations that export oil begin to accept other currencies in exchange for the commodity. This would drastically reduce the demand for the US dollar worldwide. Since the value of their reserves would decline, nations with sizable US dollar reserves would be severely impacted by this depreciation. This could cause economies that rely heavily on the strength of the dollar to become unstable.

Increased Currency Volatility

Ending the petrodollar system may cause significant volatility in currency markets. Exchange rates may become more erratic as nations and companies adopt new payment methods and protect themselves against currency risks. Economic instability could result from this volatility's disruption of global investment and trade.

Higher Transaction Costs

As currency conversion and exchange rate hedging are required, conducting oil trade in multiple currencies may result in higher transaction costs. Businesses engaged in international trade and finance would see a decline in profitability as a result of these additional expenses.

Impact on US Influence

Given that the US's global economic dominance has been built on the petrodollar system, its geopolitical influence may decline because of its demise. If the US dollar's influence in the world's oil trade declines, other major economies, such as China and the European Union, may gain more economic clout.

Status as the Preferred Reserve Currency

The fact that oil is priced in US dollars alone has an importance that goes beyond the domains of finance and oil. The agreement strengthened the position of the dollar as the global reserve currency by requiring oil sales to be made in US dollars. The American economy has been significantly impacted by this as well. Because of the continued strength of the dollar due to the global demand for dollars to buy oil, imports are still reasonably priced for American

consumers. A strong bond market and low interest rates have also been bolstered by the inflow of foreign capital into US Treasury bonds.

However, if the oil market diverges from the US dollar, this demand might decline and affect the US economy. This change emphasises how crucial it is to diversify currency holdings internationally to lessen dependency on the US dollar.

Oil Market Stability

Moving away from the petrodollar might lead to temporary volatility in the oil market while new trade agreements and pricing schemes are developed. This volatility could cause swings in oil prices, which would impact economies that rely on oil imports and the world's energy markets.

Geopolitical Shifts

Alternative currencies in oil trading have been supported by nations like China and Russia, and if they are successful, this could increase their geopolitical influence at the expense of the US. This shift may result in the creation of new oil trade-based political and economic coalitions, which would reorganise the world's power structures. By utilising their solid diplomatic ties and cultivating relationships with emerging powers, nations must navigate these shifting dynamics. This development is mostly due to the changing power dynamics in the oil market.

In addition, the world's dependency on oil has decreased with the rise of alternative energy sources like natural gas and renewables. Furthermore, the conventional dominance of the Middle East has been challenged by the rise of new oil-producing countries like Canada and Brazil.

Financial Markets

As the demand for the dollar declines globally, the value of assets denominated in dollars may also fall, which would affect global reserves held in dollars as well as US Treasury bonds. The adoption of new currencies in oil trading would require financial institutions across the globe to modify their operational procedures, which could lead to increased transaction costs and complexity. To respond to these developments, Singapore

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can provide comprehensive currency management services and ensure the smooth integration of new currencies in trade and finance. Hence, the global financial sector must be more adept and flexible.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SINGAPORE Economic and Trade Impacts

Singapore is a major hub for international trade, so the possible demise of the petrodollar system could have a big impact here. Due to the need for regular currency conversions and exchange rate

hedging, the shift to multiple currencies in the global oil trade could result in higher levels of currency volatility and increased transaction costs. To manage the risks involved, this environment may disturb the established trade patterns and call for more complex financial strategies. Due to its extensive integration into international trade networks, Singapore's economy would need to change by diversifying its foreign exchange reserves. To protect against US dollar fluctuations, this diversification could entail holding larger quantities of other major currencies and possibly precious metals like gold. The country's strategic location and robust infrastructure can serve as assets in navigating these changes, ensuring it remains a vital node in global commerce despite potential disruptions.

Financial Services Sector

The depreciation of the petrodollar may present opportunities as well as challenges for Singapore's financial services industry, which is already a world leader in financial intermediation and currency trading. The need for financial services linked to currency risk management would probably rise due to the shift to multi-currency oil transactions. The innovative and efficient banks and financial institutions in Singapore could increase the range of services they offer to meet this expanding demand, further solidifying Singapore's position as a leading financial hub. Furthermore, as companies look for a sophisticated and stable environment for managing intricate multi-currency operations, this scenario may draw more financial activities to Singapore. Singapore can take advantage of possible market volatility to grow its financial services sector by building on its current strengths and improving its financial infrastructure.

Investment Flows

Capital flows may be significantly impacted by the potential global economic realignment that would come with the demise of the petrodollar. With its strong regulatory framework and stable political climate, Singapore may grow in popularity as a place to invest. Singapore may be the ideal place for investors to place their money if they are searching for safe havens in a more

dispersed global monetary system. This flood of capital has the potential to boost the economy in many areas, encouraging innovation and growth. However, to realise this potential to the fullest, Singapore would have to keep improving its investment climate by upholding high governance standards, efficiency, and transparency. Furthermore, creating new financial services and products to meet the demands of foreign investors may increase Singapore's attractiveness as a global financial hub.

Energy Prices and Supply Chains

Going beyond the petrodollar system will inevitably result in changes to supply chains as well as fluctuations in the price of energy globally. These changes could present serious risks to Singapore's economy, which has a significant maritime sector and high energy consumption. The costs of production and transportation can be impacted by fluctuating energy prices, which can harm Singaporean businesses' ability to compete. Singapore might make greater investments in renewable energy sources to lessen its reliance on imported fossil fuels and reduce these risks. Moreover, increasing energy efficiency in all sectors of the economy would save expenses and promote environmental sustainability. In the face of changes in the global energy market, Singapore can protect its economic stability and foster sustainable growth by proactively modifying its energy policies and infrastructure.

Geopolitical Positioning

With the end of the petrodollar, Singapore will need to use its well-known diplomatic dexterity to navigate a changing geopolitical landscape. To preserve its strategic advantages, Singapore needs to carefully balance its relationships as the influence of major powers like the US and China changes. It will be essential to actively participate in international organisations and fortify relationships with important oil-exporting countries. Singapore's standing on the international scene may be improved by its capacity to cooperate and mediate on international financial and economic issues. Through the utilisation of its advantageous geographic position and diplomatic connections, Singapore can maintain

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its crucial role in establishing a stable and all-encompassing global financial framework. By taking the initiative, Singapore will be able to manage the risks and take advantage of the opportunities brought about by the move away from the petrodollar.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR SINGAPORE

Singapore must strategically position itself to navigate these changes to ensure its continued economic stability and growth. By diversifying currency reserves, strengthening financial infrastructure, adapting energy policies, and leveraging diplomatic relations, it can proactively mitigate risks associated with these global financial shifts.

Diversifying the Economy and Enhancing Resilience

Prioritising resilience and economic diversification is crucial for Singapore, given the possibility of the petrodollar system collapsing. It is imperative that its economy be diversified beyond conventional industries like trade and finance. Through promoting expansion in developing sectors such as green energy, technology, and advanced manufacturing, Singapore can lessen its reliance on external economic shocks. To open up new growth opportunities, innovation and entrepreneurship must be promoted. Singapore should also strengthen its economic buffers, such as keeping sizeable foreign exchange reserves and creating strategic inventories of necessities, in order to increase its resilience. By taking these steps, Singapore will be better equipped to weather economic shocks and preserve stability in a world that is becoming increasingly unstable. Furthermore, Singapore may decide to increase its holdings of gold and other major currencies to reduce the risks related to US dollar depreciation.

Strengthening Financial Infrastructure

Singapore must improve its financial infrastructure to stay competitive and take advantage of the shifting global financial landscape. This entails investing in cutting-edge financial technologies, fortifying regulatory frameworks, and fostering efficiency and transparency in the financial system.

Financial institutions in Singapore ought to enhance their competencies in domains such as multi-currency transactions, blockchain technology, and currency risk management. By doing this, Singapore can draw in more foreign financial activity and solidify its status as the world's preeminent financial centre. Furthermore, to establish international standards and guarantee the stability of the financial system, cooperation with regulatory agencies and international financial centres will be essential.

Energy Policy Adaptation

A diversified energy supply and investments in renewable energy would help Singapore reduce the risks brought on by fluctuations in the oil market. Singapore ought to expedite its shift towards renewable energy to alleviate the potential hazards linked to worldwide energy price volatility. Energy security will be improved and reliance on imported fossil fuels will be decreased by making investments in solar, wind, and other renewable energy sources. To increase energy efficiency and dependability, Singapore can also investigate developments in energy storage and smart grid technologies. It will be essential to encourage public and private investments in green technologies and to promote sustainable practices across industries. Singapore can establish itself as a clean energy hub in the region and draw investments in green technology by spearheading the adoption of renewable energy, thereby promoting long-term economic sustainability.

Leveraging Diplomatic Relations


Strategic diplomatic agility is necessary for Singapore to navigate the changing geopolitical landscape. It will be crucial to continue taking a balanced stance in its dealings with superpowers like the US, China, and the EU. Singapore should keep up its vigorous advocacy for a secure and inclusive global financial system in international organisations and forums. It will also be crucial to form partnerships with major oil-exporting nations and take part in international energy discussions. Additionally, Singapore can position itself as a mediator in regional and international conflicts by utilising its advantageous location and well-established reputation for neutrality. Singapore can protect its interests and

increase its geopolitical influence by pursuing a proactive and well-balanced diplomatic strategy.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, the end of the petrodollar system would represent a dramatic change in the political and economic climate of the world, with far-reaching and intricate effects on a variety of industries and geographical areas. The demise of the petrodollar could bring difficulties, but it also gives Singapore a chance to further establish itself as a flexible and resilient global financial hub. Singapore can effectively navigate the transition by taking proactive measures to manage risks and capitalise on emerging opportunities. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.



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CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOSITY IN SINGAPOREAN MUSLIM YOUTHS

BY ABDILLAH AMMAR



Singapore, a small island nation known for its cultural diversity and economic strength, is home to a Muslim minority comprising approximately 15.6% of its population¹. Within this secular, multiracial society, Muslim youths encounter unique challenges in balancing their religious identity with the expectations of a rapidly modernising world. As the country embraces secularism while maintaining a multicultural environment, young Muslims must navigate their faith in a way that reconciles their religiosity with the realities of living in a globalised, secular society. This experience is often shaped by both internal community expectations and broader societal influences.

The religiosity of Muslim youths in Singapore holds significance not only within the Muslim community but also for the overall fabric of the nation. Understanding how young Muslims negotiate their religious beliefs and

practices in the face of contemporary challenges provides insight into the broader dynamics of social cohesion and religious pluralism in Singapore. Factors such as secularism, changing norms and alternative viewpoints contribute to the shaping of their religious experiences and identity. We shall explore these contemporary influences, highlighting how young Muslims adapt their faith and religious practices while contributing to the discourse on the intersection of tradition, modernity, and religion in Singapore's diverse and secular society.

ISLAM IN SINGAPORE

The Islamic presence in Singapore has been a significant component of the nation's religious tapestry since its modern inception. The Muslim populace in Singapore is predominantly of Malay ethnicity, with substantial Indian minorities, as well as others. Consistent with the broader Malay Archipelago, the

majority of Singaporean Muslims who are Sunnis subscribe to the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence (*madhhab*). This particular tradition was disseminated throughout the region primarily through the activities of Hadhrami merchants, who engaged in both commercial endeavours and religious propagation (*da'wah*)². Many of these traders established permanent residency in the area, forming matrimonial alliances with the indigenous population and thereby creating a lasting demographic and cultural impact. The Islamic scholarly tradition is represented in Singapore through various educational institutions. These include full-time *madrasahs* (Islamic schools), such as Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, as well as numerous part-time religious education centres and informal study circles (*halaqahs*) conducted in mosques and private dwellings. It is noteworthy that a considerable segment of the Muslim community, particularly those of Indian descent, adheres to the Hanafi

¹ Department of Statistics Singapore. (2021). Singapore population census of 2020, statistical release 1. <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/cop2020/sr1/cop2020sr1.ashx>

² Tan, J. (2018). Singapore's Arab community traces ancestral roots to Yemen's Hadhramaut Valley. Arab News. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1342016/amp>

school of jurisprudence³. Additionally, there is also a tiny percentage of Shia Muslims in Singapore, with Al-Burhani Mosque being dedicated to the *Dawoodi Bohra* Shia community, and the Jaafari Muslim Association for the *Ithna 'Ashari* Shia community.

Furthermore, the influence of Sufism (*tasawwuf*) is strongly observed in Singaporean Muslim practices, manifested in Mawlid gatherings, collective remembrance (*dhikr*) sessions, and the presence of Sufi orders (*tariqa*) in communal spaces. This spiritual dimension of Islam can be traced to the Sufi practitioners who settled in the region, including Hadhrami merchants who brought with them the Ba 'Alawi Sufi tradition from Hadramawt, Yemen⁴.

Additionally, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), established in 1968, serves as a pivotal institution in governing Muslim affairs in Singapore, harmonising religious practices with the nation's secular framework. It oversees important aspects of Muslim life, including mosque administration, halal certification, and Islamic education – thereby addressing the community's religious and social needs. MUIS has significantly shaped the Muslim community's approach to religious observance within a multicultural context, ensuring that Islamic principles align with broader societal norms. These endeavours position MUIS as a vital intermediary between the Muslim community and the state, fostering both religious integrity and civic participation.

RELIGIOSITY IN THE SINGAPOREAN MUSLIM CONTEXT

Islamic religiosity, particularly in the Singaporean context, is a complex construct that encompasses not only beliefs and practices but also ethical conduct. The multidimensional nature of Islamic religiosity is reflected in various measurement scales developed by researchers, such as the Muslim Religiosity-Personality Inventory (MRPI) paper published in 2005⁵. This instrument

assesses two primary dimensions: the Islamic worldview, which gauges the depth of essential Islamic creed; and the religious personality, which evaluates worship practices and interpersonal relationships with others.

In Singapore, the expression of religiosity among Muslim youth often involves a delicate balance between adhering to traditional Islamic values and adapting to the demands of a modern, secular society. This balance is exemplified by the Singapore Muslim Identity (SMI) initiative, which encourages Muslims to maintain core Islamic principles while adopting a progressive, adaptive, and inclusive religious outlook⁶. The SMI initiative highlights the evolving nature of religious expression in Singapore, where Muslims are encouraged to integrate their faith with the realities of contemporary urban life. This adaptive approach to religiosity demonstrates how Islamic principles can be applied flexibly in different sociocultural contexts, while still maintaining their fundamental integrity.

Furthermore, from a paper published in 2019, it has been identified that Muslims in Singapore generally have a higher level of religiosity compared to their peers from other religions, with 90% of those aged between 18 to 25 being found to be steadfast in their religious conviction⁷. Despite these high levels of religiosity, younger generations of Muslims were identified to be less religious than the older generation. This is in line with the trend of decreasing religiosity among religious adherents in the country.

NAVIGATING SECULARISM

Singaporean Muslim youths face significant challenges in negotiating their religious identity within the framework of a secular state. Singapore's commitment to secularism, which separates religion from political administration and public institutions, can create tensions for young Muslims seeking to express their faith in public domains.

This complex interplay between religious expression and secular norms is exemplified by ongoing debates, such as the wearing of the *hijab* in certain professions such as nursing and uniformed services⁸. It took a long time before Muslim women were allowed to wear the *tudung* in the healthcare sector in 2021. However, restrictions still remain for students in public schools, as well as personnels working in uniformed services such Home Team and Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), as a strict public secular image needs to be maintained. While external expressions of religion do not fully measure the religiosity of a person, letting them have the agency to be able to choose to wear them in these spaces would ease the tensions these young Muslims have in a secular environment, and thrive.

CHANGING NORMS

The tendency for younger Singaporean Muslims to self-identify as less religious compared to their older counterparts can be attributed to several factors. These include evolving societal norms, increased exposure to diverse perspectives, and shifting interpretations of what defines religiosity. However, it is important to note that this self-reported lower religiosity does not necessarily indicate a decline in faith or religious practice. Rather, it may reflect a more introspective and nuanced approach to religion among the younger Muslim generation. These individuals may adopt a more modest stance when assessing their own religiosity, demonstrating a critical and reflective engagement with their faith. This shift in self-perception could suggest a more complex understanding of religious identity rather than a simple decline in religious commitment or belief.

One notable example of this trend is the reduced prevalence of young people attending physical religious gatherings and classes compared to the older generation. In the past, these communal gatherings were vibrant, serving not only to strengthen religious devotion but also to reinforce bonds among families and

³ Chanbasha, A. R. (2021). *Indian muslims in Singapore: History, heritage and contributions*. Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs.

⁴ Abaza, M. (1997). A mosque of Arab origin in singapore: History, functions and networks. *Archipel*, 53(1), 61–83. <https://doi.org/10.3406/arch.1997.3392>

⁵ Krauss, S. E., HJ Hamzah, A., & Abd Hamid, J. (2005). The muslim religiosity-personality inventory (Mrpi): Towards understanding differences in the islamic religiosity among the malaysian youth. *Pertanika Journal of Social Science & Humanities*, 13(2). <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/42990809.pdf>

⁶ Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura. (2006). *Risalah for building a Singaporean muslim community of excellence* (2nd ed.). Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura. <https://www.muis.gov.sg/-/media/Files/OOM/Resources/Risalah-eng-ir.pdf>

⁷ Mathews, M., Lim, L., & Selvarajan, S. (2019). *Religion in singapore: The private and public spheres*. Institute of Policy Studies. <https://kyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-working-papers-33---religion-in-singapore-the-private-and-public-spheres.pdf>

⁸ Hwee Min, A. [n.d.]. *NDR 2021: Nurses in public healthcare sector will be allowed to wear a tudung with uniforms from November*. CNA. Retrieved 11 September 2024, from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/nurses-can-wear-tudung-public-hospitals-uniform-national-day-rally-2021-2143126>

friends. The decline of such gatherings can be partly attributed to the dismantling of communal housing structures, such as traditional villages called *kampung*s, where such venues ease the process of having mass communal gatherings. Additionally, the rise of social media has made religious content and resources more readily accessible online. Consequently, the weakening of these physical communal bonds may lead to a perceived decrease in religiosity, as younger Muslims are less engaged in traditional, in-person religious spaces.

ALTERNATIVE VIEWS

Another factor contributing to the challenge of maintaining religiosity among younger Singaporean Muslims is their evolving perspectives on engaging with religion. With better educational opportunities and increased attendance at local universities, many young people are exposed to diverse methods of engaging with religion. While, as previously mentioned, this does not necessarily signify a decline in faith, a lack of solid grounding in religious knowledge may inadvertently lead to confusion regarding their beliefs and expressions of religiosity. Although Islam encourages critical engagement with different viewpoints – as can be seen in the history of Islamic intellectual tradition where Muslim scholars actively engage with a plethora of different views – this can present challenges for some youths in attaining religious conviction (*yaqin*), a fundamental aspect of the faith. This is particularly true when some of these viewpoints may be contrary to Islamic values and ethos. One not equipped with the proper tools to make sense and expound on these different, and possibly, conflicting views have the tendency to fall into more confusion.

A more extreme issue arising from this exposure is the risk of young people encountering alternative extremist religious views that contradict Singapore's pluralistic, multicultural, and secular society. For instance, in 2022, a self-radicalised 18-year-old was detained for planning acts of armed violence both in Singapore and overseas⁹. This included targeting members of the Sufi and Shia communities and planning to bomb the

Maqam Habib Noh shrine, deeming the gravesite un-Islamic. Cases of online radicalisation like this often occur due to unrestricted access to extremist ideologies via social media and a failure to verify these deviant and harmful understandings with local religious authorities who are equipped to address and clarify such doubts.

PROPOSED INITIATIVES AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

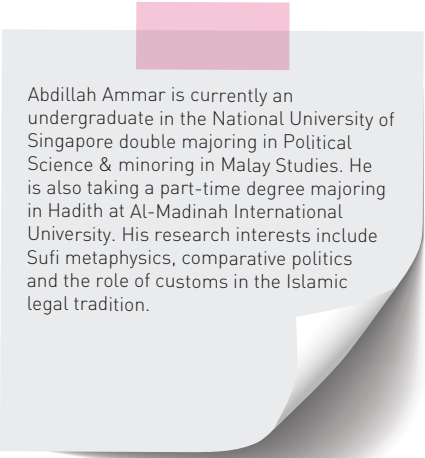
In response to these challenges, various initiatives have been implemented in Singapore to support Muslim youth in maintaining their religiosity. One such initiative is the *SMI* programme mentioned previously, that aims to foster a progressive and inclusive Islamic identity that is compatible with Singapore's multiracial and multireligious society. The initiative emphasises ten desired attributes for Singaporean Muslims that can be emulated, including being firm upon Islamic principles while adapting to changing context, appreciating one's own civilisation and history and the civilisation of others, and being well-adjusted as a contributing member to a multi-religious and secular society.

Adding on, recognising the critical role of religious teachers in guiding youth, the Asatizah Recognition Board (ARB), established under MUIS, oversees the Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS) to officially recognise and regulate religious educators in Singapore. This initiative ensures that *asatizah* (religious teachers) meet specific qualifications and uphold high standards in their roles, including leading formal classes, delivering Friday sermons, conducting public lectures, and more. The scheme sets forth a series of requirements and credentials that these educators must possess in order to qualify. Additionally, the ARB provides continuous training and professional development opportunities to help educators stay current with the needs of the community. These training programmes focus on addressing ever-evolving social and contemporary issues, ensuring that the *asatizah* are not only knowledgeable in Islamic teachings but also well-equipped to engage with the community in a way that is both relevant and progressive.

Furthermore, more communal initiatives are needed, as they are essential to engage youth, focusing on reinforcing their religious identity and foundation while encouraging an appreciation of diverse perspectives. These efforts aim to enhance social cohesion and prepare young Muslims to navigate and succeed within a pluralistic, secular society. Such initiatives help shape a Muslim identity that remains true to Islamic values while being contextually relevant to Singapore's distinct multicultural environment, ensuring that young Muslims can thrive in both their faith and the broader community.

As Singapore continues to evolve, so will the challenges faced by Muslim youth and the strategies to address them. Future research could explore the long-term effects of these initiatives on youth religiosity and how the concept of Islamic religiosity itself may evolve in response to contemporary challenges. Ultimately, the experience of Singaporean Muslim youth offers valuable insights into the broader question of how religious communities can maintain their faith and identity while actively participating in modern, secular societies. Their journey in navigating these challenges contributes to the ongoing global discourse on religious pluralism, social cohesion, and the role of faith in the modern world. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.



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⁹ Singam, K. V., & Hasbi, A. H. (n.d.). *Commentary: How Singapore can tackle the growing spectre of teen terrorism*. TODAY. Retrieved 11 September 2024, from <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/commentary-how-singapore-can-tackle-growing-spectre-teen-terrorism-2119616>

Malay Youth: Unpacking Places of Leisure

BY NUR IZZATIE ADNAN



Recently, an Instagram reel of OMGxBH (a social media platform launched by Berita Harian to spur youth-oriented conversations) went: “*Kalau ada Rumi, baru orang muda pergi Geylang?*” This reel was released as part of marketing efforts to promote the completion of the first phase of rejuvenation works in the Geylang Serai Cultural Belt, and this particular question can be briefly translated into “Only if there is Rumi, then will the youth visit Geylang?”

For those unacquainted, Rumi The Poet’s cup (abbreviated as Rumi) is a highly youth-frequented Muslim-owned cafe located at Haji Lane, that offers affordable drinks and desserts. Part of its charm is the ambience contributed by the alfresco dining experience where seating areas are extended onto Haji Lane itself, the music, as well as the occasional events that they organise (See: Rumi Blind Date Night)¹. Looking at this as a sociological site of study, we can situate Rumi to

belong to the category of the *third place*, a phenomenon coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg that describes places that “host the regular, voluntary, informal [...] gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.”² We can also look at this through the lens of leisure studies, where leisure can be explored vis-a-vis one’s culture, life course, or in relation to consumption.³

In the realm of leisure studies, the ways that people carry out leisure have been said to only be described in detail in only a few, almost exclusively Western societies⁴. As such, this raises an inquiry regarding specific communities and how they might interpret and carry out leisure. Specifically, what might leisure look like within the Singaporean Malay youth community? Roberts notes that the youth is the first age group whose “leisure received sustained scrutiny”, where the uses of free time by young people were likely to be defined as a “social problem”.⁵

Referencing one of the few studies on leisure of young Singaporeans, Chew et al (1998) examined the leisure activities of Singaporean youth, vis-a-vis gender, race, religion and residential type. It was found that the Malay community appears to engage more often in social and recreational activities than youth of other races.⁶ It is hence surprising that for the pervasive stereotype about Malays and *lepak* (hanging out), there has been very little study about this phenomenon of *lepak*/leisure behaviours within the Singaporean Malay community. This article then aims to uncover the notion of leisure in the community, particularly in relation to place.

WHY RUMI?

Of course, Rumi isn’t the only place that is associated with the Malay youth. If we were to observe the Kampong Glam area surrounding Rumi, there have been many businesses and spaces of consumption popping up for the youth in this

¹ Zulkifli, D. (2024) ‘Tempat lepak “mat minah”? Rumi The Poet’s Cup ada tarikan sendiri, kata pelanggan’, *Berita Harian*, 25 May. Available at: <https://www.beritaharian.sg/gaya-hidup/tempat-lepak-mat-minah-rumi-poets-cup-ada-tarikan-sendiri-kata-pelanggan>

² Ray Oldenburg. (2008) *Project for Public Spaces*. <https://www.pps.org/article/roldeburg>

³ Blackshaw, T. (2013). *Routledge Handbook of Leisure Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203140505-61>

⁴ Chick, G. (2013). Leisure in culture. *Routledge Handbook of Leisure Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203140505.ch18>

⁵ Roberts, K. (2013). Leisure in culture. *Routledge Handbook of Leisure Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203140505.ch22>

⁶ Chew, S. B., Leu, M., & Tan, K. H. (1998). Leisure Activities. *Values and Lifestyles of Young Singaporeans*, 89–126.

particular area of Bugis over the years – from the myriad photo booths opening up along Haji Lane, thrift shops, record stores, to the quaint cafes for desserts and drinks, and the countless restaurants in the area. With the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) officially designating Kampong Glam as Singapore’s Malay-Muslim heritage district in 1989⁷, the appeal of this area can also be said to be its Muslim-friendly aspect, where the choice of halal and Muslim-friendly food options available to the Muslim community are comparably ubiquitous.

GEYLANG SERAI VS KAMPONG GLAM

Muzaini (2020) in *Locating “Malay Places” and Ethnic Identity Making in Singapore*, highlights four areas that have played a crucial role in helping the Malay community navigate their ethnic identity in the history of Singapore – Kampong Glam, Geylang Serai, Telok Blangah, and Kallang (except that the latter two are now less associated with the Malay community).⁸

There is an observation made in the question raised in *“Kalau ada Rumi, baru orang muda pergi Geylang?”* – being that Geylang is not frequented enough by the youth, despite it being a “Malay place”. What might be different between Kampong Glam and Geylang Serai, and where exactly do our youth spend their leisure time?

The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) website indicates how the Malays shifted to the periphery after the British dissolved a floating Malay village on the Singapore River in the 1840s, eventually congregating in Geylang, where it is now promoted as a “Malay heartland”. This has had an effect on the present where Singaporean Malays are drawn to the less central, heartland location of Geylang Serai for ethnic food or clothing.⁹ Here, there is a sort of dichotomy of the conception of “Malayness” – one of a peripheral/heartland Geylang with its organic culture borne out of the people themselves. This is in contrast to an urban/central Kampong Glam whose

Stebbins (2007) has identified eight forms of casual leisure that include: play, relaxation, passive and active entertainment, sociable conversation, sensory stimulation, casual volunteering, and pleasurable aerobic activity. While Singapore has placed a lot of thought into allocating and curating spaces for the wide range of recreational activities for its citizens, there is value in looking at places where people choose to organically congregate and gather — one whose meaning is curated and created by the people themselves.

modern, hip culture is said to adopt a more cosmopolitan perspective to fit the image of Singaporean progress.

TAKING A STEP BACK

Shifting away from a racial lens, Singapore’s Recreation Master Plan shows that Singapore is looking at urban planning through a more intentional holistic approach that incorporates working, living, and playing.¹⁰ This Master Plan takes into consideration three key strategies, through enhancing recreational potential of green and blue spaces, activating underutilised spaces for recreation, and making recreation inclusive for all. What underlies recreation in the urban planning of Singapore is how these spaces built serve an important purpose of bringing people together, fostering stronger social ties and promoting cohesiveness in the nation.¹¹ But leisure can be defined in many ways, and in various forms. Stebbins (2007) has identified eight forms of casual leisure that include:

play, relaxation, passive and active entertainment, sociable conversation, sensory stimulation, casual volunteering, and pleasurable aerobic activity.¹² While Singapore has placed a lot of thought into allocating and curating spaces for the wide range of recreational activities for its citizens, there is value in looking at places where people choose to organically congregate and gather – one whose meaning is curated and created by the people themselves.

A commentary on CNA in early 2024 hints at the loss of these organic spaces for recreation after a street football court in Bedok was temporarily closed in response to residents’ complaints of noise. Yeo argues in this commentary regarding the implications of the loss of spaces such as void decks where children used to play, or the shifting of basketball courts to the community centres.¹³ The loss of accessible, close-proximity spaces comes with the loss of unstructured free play, which is important to foster

⁷ Tantow, D. (2012). *Politics of Heritage in Singapore, Indonesia and the Malay World*, 40(118), 332–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2012.725553>

⁸ *Locating “Malay Places” and Ethnic Identity Making in Singapore*. Singapore Research Nexus. (2022). <https://rass.nus.edu.sg/arn/2022/04/13/locating-malay-places-and-ethnic-identity-making-in-singapore/>

⁹ Tantow, D. (2012). *Politics of Heritage in Singapore, Indonesia and the Malay World*, 40(118), 332–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2012.725553>

¹⁰ Woo, J. J. (2024, May 1). Commentary: singapore is getting serious about recreation. CNA. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/singapore-work-play-live-recreation-ura-master-plan-viaduct-rooftop-4302846>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Blackshaw, T. (2013). *Routledge Handbook of Leisure Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203140505-61>

¹³ Yeo, E. (2024). Commentary: it’s time to think about where kids can freely play football in singapore. CNA. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/singapore-street-football-court-close-space-children-play-sports-4027101>.

independence, creativity, problem-solving and other important skills for the development of a child.

Where else might youth spend their time? With the ubiquity of shopping malls in Singapore, it is not a strange sight to see our youth spending time at the mall after school, work, or during the weekends, considering the affordances in a mall that offers a myriad of food, retail and entertainment options. It is hence no wonder that the most common site for recreational consumption is the shopping mall. However, the cookie cutter format of shopping malls in Singapore makes it hard to differentiate the stores of one mall from another. This makes them devoid of identity, even though each individual mall may offer goods and services that appeal to various communities. The purpose of these can be seen to provide spaces where consumers can celebrate and experience different cultures, be it theirs or not. For instance, for the Malay/Muslim community, fully halal food courts that offer various cuisines from all around the world allows for a space for people to congregate, since eating can be said to be a social activity in itself. (By virtue of a meme, Wingstop is apparently also claimed by the Malay community.)

Ooi (2005) surmises that “having a certain identity – ethnic or cultural – is supported in large part if there are spaces or places in which one can meet others of a similar identity and social background who can affirm this identity.”¹⁴ An example of what malls could look like in fostering identities would be the recently closed Peace Centre, after social movement PlayPan took over in October 2023 to encourage community-building activities. The mall then grew to house many businesses that did not have physical shop presence beforehand, of which may include a gallery, thrift stores, and a photography studio. To quote Associate Professor Ijlal Naqvi, the “exuberant, messy vitality of the community at Peace Centre convened by PlayPan [...] encouraged a spirit of play, a DIY attitude, and fostered an

atmosphere of generosity and mutual support among everyone there”.¹⁵ That said, while the function of each mall is up for individual shopping mall owners and operators to define, we also note that there is rarely an opportunity for youth consumers to make meaning out of the spaces in shopping malls, that allows them to iterate and strengthen their identities.

MEANING-MAKING IN GEYLANG

Circling back to the Instagram reel referenced previously, it is interesting to hear the responses of the youth who were interviewed when asked “*What should Geylang have to attract more youth?*” Aside from the seasonal Ramadan bazaar when there is more footfall in general, answers from these youth suggested more cafes, thrift shops, photobooths, and events – all these to promote the space to be more resilient for the youth. We note how most of these answers allude to this vision of a Geylang Serai that replicates the atmosphere of Kampong Glam, with one answer even mentioning “[bringing] the vibes of Arab Street to [Geylang].” We also note how these answers mention specific types of shops (thrift shops, photobooths, cafes) that may or may not be present in malls that relate to specific types of leisure that allow youth to create and affirm their individual identities. The initial thought is never the mall.

KAMPONG GLAM: A PLACE FOR THE YOUTH?

Perhaps the ubiquity of cafes like Rumi suggests a continuation of a trend of *kopi* consumption at the *kopitiam*, that met “local needs for a third place beyond the realms of home and work”.¹⁶ These *kopitiams* then become local nexuses where people of any culture, religion or social class can socialise, drink, and play chess due to their low barriers of entry with regard to cost and accessibility. Bringing this to today’s context, these cafes then become places where youth can conduct leisure. While there is the element of consumption, as one has to purchase to patronise the space, these youth may not perceive themselves as consumers at independent cafes in

comparison to larger coffee chains, since youth are now more conscious of supporting independent businesses as compared to big coffee chains that are said to promote consumerism.¹⁷ In Malay social circles, language has also evolved to accommodate this phenomenon, with the terms *mengeteh/mengopi* being widely used to describe “having tea/coffee”. Of course, this expression isn’t only limited to those drinks. It just describes hanging out and sharing stories at an F&B establishment. If one wishes to patronise more traditional coffee places in the area, one can just turn the corner to find restaurants like ZamZam, Victory, or Bhai Sarbat to *mengopi*.

Another factor could also be the later closing times of these places. Malls in Singapore generally close at 10pm even on weekend nights, but there are F&B options open till a later time if the establishment is not located in a shopping mall. The extra hours when spending time with your friends matter.

As much as the earlier generations were drawn to the less central, heartland location of Geylang Serai to assert identity, this younger generation seems to be more inclined to the more urban Kampong Glam area with its own unique culture that seems to seamlessly blend modernity and community. There is so much more that can be observed and unpacked about these leisure behaviours and preferences of a community, which can be important for urban planners, policy makers, or business owners to consider – where a pertinent consideration includes allowing for enough space for culture to thrive organically when curating recreational spaces. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.

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¹⁴ Ismail, R. (2006). Ramadan and Bussorah Street: The spirit of place. *GeoJournal*, 66(3), 243–256. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-006-9027-y>

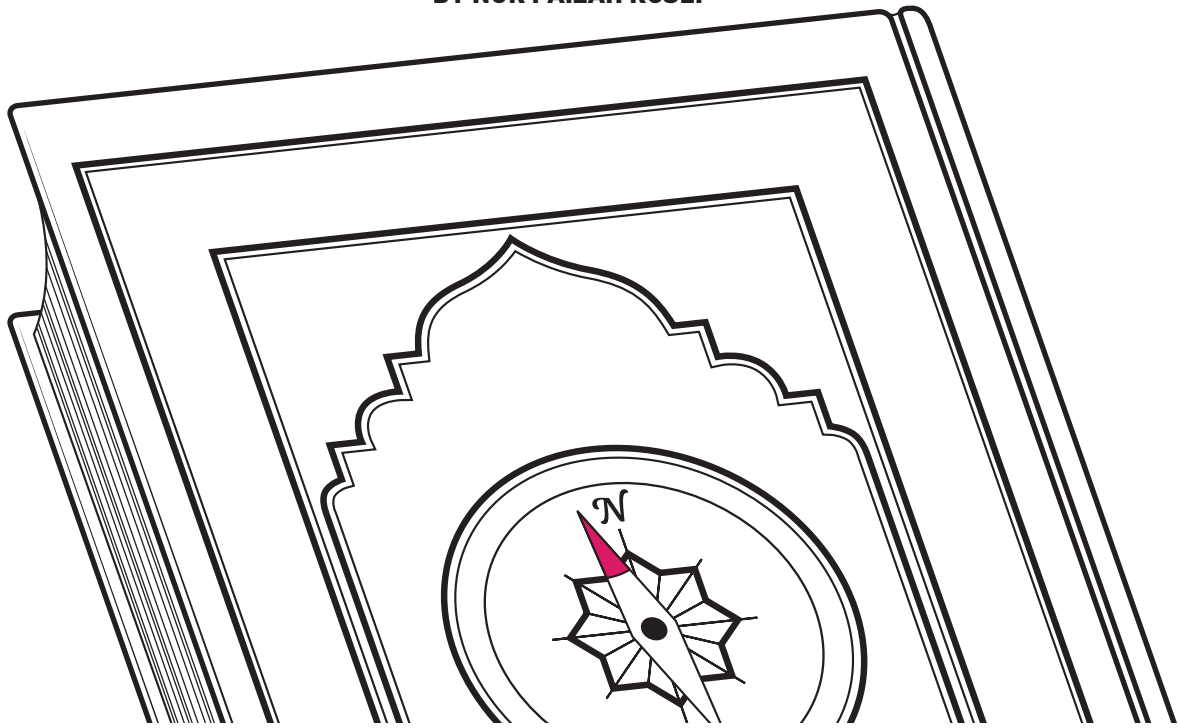
¹⁵ Chiu, C. (2024). It’s hard to find another place like this: Peace Centre to close after Jan 28. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁶ Chang, C., & McGonigle, I. (2020). Kopi culture: Consumption, conservatism and cosmopolitanism among Singapore’s millennials. *Asian Anthropology*, 19(3), 213–231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478x.2020.1726965>

¹⁷ Ibid.

Recalibrating the Search for Youths' Self-Identity with the Wisdom of Muhammad Iqbal

BY NUR FAIZAH ROSLI



Allama Syed Muhammad Iqbal is known as a scholar, poet, philosopher, and a valuable contributor to Islamic thought. Having grown and contributed most to his home region of Pakistan, he is often attributed by the people with the title *allama*¹ which highlights his vast knowledge and leading role in revising knowledge with Islamic principles and values. While those outside of South Asia may overlook his significance following his vision that inspired Muslims in India to embrace their religious identity, Muslims should regard Allama Syed Muhammad Iqbal as a role model-scholar of the last global Muslim community or *ummah*. This piece seeks to inspire readers to contemplate how Iqbal's 20th

century understanding of the self can be contextualised to guide the youth in recalibrating their search for identity in a world of distractions.

ACKNOWLEDGING TIMELESS GUIDANCE

In maintaining a safety net of test and trial in one's search, how does taking notes from a 20th century Muslim thinker help? In accepting this notion, one must free the mind from existing prejudices. The first is to accept that guidance can be timeless, even if it was derived from the last century, some do not necessarily carry an expiration date. Secondly, recognise that the best scholars traverse beyond the main discourse of Islam

that people view as a religion that only commands rituals and practices and guides one's values and ethos. To capture this imagery in Iqbal's own words:

"Religion is not a doctrine, nor a priesthood, nor a ceremony, but religion is a way of life which prepares man to fulfil his duties even in the age of science and strengthens his will, thereby enabling him to reach truth."

If you identify everything – your life, your existence – with Islam then it would not feel like you must consciously put Islam to work, rather it is already at work. In my study of Muslim modern thinkers, I saw the brightest light bulbs being set

¹ The word "Allama" is derived from Arabic, meaning "scholar" or "learned person." It is adapted to an honorific title as a mark of respect for individuals who have made significant contributions to Islamic scholarship or have achieved high levels of expertise in their field.

off by names unknown to the tongue. Rightfully, these ideas deserve more spotlight than they have received, and this piece intends to do so.

Bear in mind that this piece does not intend to transplant you into Iqbal's context of constructing national unity in 20th century British India. However, benefitting from the aspiration that Iqbal had of establishing the identity of a Muslim minority group, it hopes to inspire the youth in figuring out his or her self-identity in this ever-changing landscape. While our bodies may stay put in this little red dot, our mindset and thinking should not be limited geographically. This piece implores you to seek out possibilities of understanding the self, and not be fixated on the overwhelming Western influenced content that consumes our day-to-day.

CONTEMPORARY OBSTACLES TO IDENTITY SEARCH

The challenge of coming to terms with one's identity applies to any youth who has interactions with the world beyond his abode. Identity development starts as early as the adolescent years until individuals finally settle with a refined sense of self². This piece focuses on the personal identity that one wishes to project to their families, friends, and society at large. While this development happens organically to everyone, the process and challenges are given less attention and would naturally be discussed in close circles only. However, recent threats to our society – whether ideological or cultural – has piqued the interests of writers, researchers, and community leaders to address the commonly shared challenges of identity development.

Research and observational studies have highlighted the common phenomena of the 21st century as the culprits behind the struggles of self-identification. The advent of social media platforms, often displaying unrealistic yet glorified identities and personalities, can develop a negative social bar that youths feel pressured to attain. The concurrent self-assessment based on online content,

coupled with external pressures from family and society, can further aggravate sentiments of feeling inadequate or alien from standards set around them.

Community leaders have also voiced their concerns adding to the pool of obstacles. Author of *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to the Sexual Revolution*, Carl R. Trueman³ highlights the challenge of expressive individualism where young impressionable audiences disregard the norm and traditions for not reflecting their “real selves.” Instead, they jump to extremes in deciding who they ought to become using new yardsticks. He shares a similar sentiment with Iqbal that the youth need to be in touch with God and their spirituality to find themselves, instead of being led by their own devices. To capture this critical point, it was reflected in the foreword of the book in these words:

“Because men have forgotten God, they have also forgotten man; that’s why all this has happened.”

The Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE) has also demonstrated interest in adolescent development and puberty on secondary educational experience. A study and intervention plan were commissioned to observe and combat impacts on crucial areas like aspiration building, personal identity cultivation and social relations maintenance, entitled DREAMS⁴. It is hoped that this section has proven the worth to advocate for a serious need to recalibrate how youths should think of their identity.

IQBAL'S SELFHOOD: WHO YOU ARE AND WHO YOU CAN BE

It is fair to say that people often do not fully understand their true essence as human beings. It is pertinent to surrender ourselves as something inconceivable like an unknown product until we read the manual and understand the operations it was built for. We are not meant to be more than what we were designed to be.

That said, this piece will not be a step-by-step guide on how to find your respective

Iqbal makes it clear that a Muslim would naturally recognise that his existence is purposeful and not without a goal and plan set into play. While other cultures and religions have unique opinions on the value of the self, Iqbal has underscored his role of a Muslim thinker to clarify the significance of the self in Islam⁵.

identities and personalities. It is hoped that, with the foundation laid down explaining the potential that you can be and ought to be, youths find it in themselves to make better choices and recognise the grey zones they should stay clear from.

Iqbal makes it clear that a Muslim would naturally recognise that his existence is purposeful and not without a goal and plan set into play. While other cultures and religions have unique opinions on the value of the self, Iqbal has underscored his role of a Muslim thinker

² Butler, A. (2010). Adolescent Identity Development: Who We Are. *ACT for Youth*. <https://actforyouth.net/adolescence/identity.cfm>

³ Carl R. Trueman is a prominent American theologian and church historian recognised for his significant contributions to Reformed theology and historical theology.

⁴ National Institute of Education. (2024). About DREAMS. *DREAMS: DRivers, Enablers, and pathways of Adolescent developMent in Singapore*. <https://dreams.rdc.nie.edu.sg/about/>.

to clarify the significance of the self in Islam⁵. Iqbal quickly establishes the significance as having the capacity to develop into a prime stage that almost reflects the Highest Ultimate Self i.e. God, thereby highlighting the connection and reality of the two. This statement – however daunting it presents itself – serves as an encouragement to readers as Iqbal seeks to empower people to reach the maximum potentiality of themselves. To put things into perspective, it parallels Maslow's *Self-Actualisation* being the final yet inevitable level of need to be achieved as it concludes the culmination of other primary growths and fulfilment⁶.

From this, Iqbal asserts in his philosophy that the human self is as real as it can be. In other words, every individual created by the Ultimate is the result of an intentional process. Every breathing moment is a decidedly given opportunity for us to *carpe diem*. This realisation should inspire the slightest spark in people to make the best of their time. Before we go on wondering what should fill up our days, the first step of affirming the reality of your existence should be completed. In other words, you need to grasp that you are here, that you matter, and you have work to do.

The second part of Iqbal's philosophy is that the human self is given a superior rank among other creations for the noble things he is destined to do⁷. This is aligned with the Islamic belief that man is bestowed dignity and honour, and for this, he must keep up his moral and spiritual excellence as part of his deal with God. The Quran reveals:

Indeed, We have dignified the children of Adam, carried them on land and sea, granted them good and lawful provisions, and privileged them far above many of Our creatures. (17:70)

After establishing the reality and significance of the self, it is crucial that the youth focus on the next task at hand, before moving on to others. Erik Erikson describes this experience as exploring

their personal identity and developing a sense of self. This is part of the sequential developmental tasks each person goes through with every period of life⁸.

Iqbal suggests two interventions when exploring your identity and role, that is, to prioritise processing in solitude and practise purifying the heart. As mentioned earlier, every self is intentionally created to do remarkable things, therefore everyone should translate this as having to figure out their own calling through trial and error. The road to self-discovery is a winding and turbulent one and not granting yourself the solitude to breathe and think for your own is destructive.

YOUTH TO YOUTH, WE CAN DO BETTER

We often know what we want but we lack the motivation and willpower to make it a reality. We know what is right and wrong, what is within our capacity that we should try and what is beyond that we should surrender. We can but for so many distracting reasons we do not, especially when left to our own devices.

This is where we should take the first step of seeking help. As our society becomes more welcoming to shares of intangible struggles, we should make use of the opportunities available with the hopes that more can be done to improve the status quo. While statistics point to over 75% of mental health issues occurring before the age of 25⁹, we as youths are aware that common mental health issues are explainable by everyday minute stresses that we learn to keep to ourselves from a young age. As Singapore relies on its human capital to grow into a prosperous nation, it requires resilient citizens who use their means and courage to boost themselves from any setbacks. We must not give in to nihilistic attitudes that seem to project itself on the 21st century while pushing us towards despair and inactivity.

The original Persian poem by Allama Syed Muhammad Iqbal was translated into *The Secrets of the Self* by Reynold A. Nicholson. Keen on Oriental Studies,

he was especially interested to translate Iqbal's original *Asrār Khūdī* so he reached out to him to respectfully propose his intention. Nicholson acknowledges the Western education influence in Iqbal's works but still recognises it as an authentic Muslim output calling him a "religious enthusiast." If a non-Muslim could be invested in a Muslim and respect the gravity of excellence in his work, what more from his own community of Muslims.

It may seem that we do not have to insert Islam at every fraction of our problems but that is our own faulty understanding of Islam. As hinted before, you will not feel you have to insert Islam if you accept it wholeheartedly that it will find itself in all areas of life. A practising Muslim should not be defined solely by his outward actions, but his inner conviction that Islam is for him and to each their own. I could be speaking from my privilege when I say that I do not think we should view practising Islam as a chore. I admit that even with my privileges, I face difficulty and lack tenacity to commit to what it means being a Muslim. However, something that cannot be practised fully should not be abandoned wholly. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.

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⁵ Iqbal, M. I. (2012). *Iqbal's Philosophy of Khudi*. <https://hamditabligh.net/pdf/IqbalsPhilosophyOfKhudi.pdf>.

⁶ Hopper, E. (2024). *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Explained*. ThoughtCo. <https://www.thoughtco.com/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs-4582571>.

⁷ Tarannum, M. (2023). *Allama Iqbal and His Philosophy of Self (Khudi)*. Aura Magazine. <https://auramag.in/allama-iqbal-and-his-philosophy-of-self-khudi/>

⁸ Palm, M. (2024). *Lifespan Human Development: A Topical Approach*.

<https://openbooks.library.baylor.edu/lifespanhumandevlopment/chapter/chapter-19-1-eriksons-theory-of-psychosocial-development/>.

⁹ Beyond Blue. (2024). *Youth and Mental Health*. Beyond Blue. <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/mental-health/youth#people-to-talk-to>.

BEING A MUSLIM WRITER IN SINGAPORE - MORE THAN JUST WORDS

BY AMEERA ASLAM



After getting 3 books published in 5 years, there is still much for me to learn about the publishing industry and just how many things I had assumed wrongly. It has been a really interesting journey and I believe it is only getting started.

Growing up with my nose in books, it had always been my dream to have a book with my name on it as the author. Little did I know that writing is but one of many tasks an author does. Alongside the creative process, significant time and effort go into marketing, promoting, and connecting with readers. As I pen down this article, I reflect on my own journey and insights shared by fellow local authors Maria Mahat and Ustaz Ahmad Ubaidillah.

Maria Mahat, Founder of Ungu Pen, was my first publisher. She edited and published *Soulful Stories of Hope, Love & Light*, an anthology of 23 local Muslim authors back in 2017. She has been farther along this writing and publishing journey than I have.

She noted, "In recent years (post-2015), after the birth of *The Truth Seekers @ Haji Lane* by Maryam Amelie, I started seeing more Muslim voices in various genres such as *First Fires* (Jihat Rehana Begum), *The Gatekeeper* (Noraliah Norasid) (Winner of the 2016 Epigram Books Fiction Prize, Winner of the 2018 Singapore Book Award for Best Fiction and Cover Design), Suffian Hakim, Mizi Wahid, etc."

She was very candid about the challenges of being a writer in Singapore, not just a Malay/Muslim one: "The market in Singapore for Malay books is very small. 500 sold out print run could be considered successful but in terms of profit, almost none. Authoring is usually a side hustle that brings immense pleasure but a lot less income. Hence, most authors have full-time jobs, other streams of income or have someone they can depend on for their livelihood. This is the case for almost all writers in Singapore, not just Muslim ones. The reality is that the world of publishing is huge. As small independent publishers with limited funds and market in Singapore, we have barely scratched the surface."

THE HIDDEN WORK BEHIND EVERY AUTHOR'S SUCCESS

I have just returned from spending almost 3 months across Australia for my book tour. In the past 3 months, I have sold more books than I did in probably the entire year prior. As an introvert who would rather stay home or go hiking in the mountains with one or two other people, it has been nerve-racking to speak to big groups and crowds. But I have had to push myself beyond my comfort zone. One lesson I have learnt in my experience as a published author is this: you can write the greatest book that was ever written, but if no one knows about it, its impact will be severely limited. Putting yourself out there and letting people know about you and your book has been the best way to actually sell them.

Before my flight to Melbourne, I did not have any events lined up yet. I had prepared a proposal that I sent out to Muslim organisations across Australia and there had been some interest but I still did not know if I was going to be away for two weeks, two months or had to return to Singapore with nothing to show for it. Almost three months later, and after speaking to audiences in Melbourne, Sydney, Gold Coast, Brisbane and Adelaide, from high school students to women in their 60s, I am deeply grateful and humbled I took the leap and got the chance to do this. Once, after my event in Brisbane, an Indonesian woman came up to me and said that it was the first time the community has had a speaker from the Malay world, and she was thrilled to hear my Malay accent addressing a crowd of mostly Arab, Indian and Pakistani Australians.

While I enjoyed the book tour and meeting different people while gushing over books and poetry, it wasn't what I expected I had to do when I was a young girl dreaming of being a writer. I envisioned spending hours and hours in a scenic cabin in the mountains somewhere, dedicated to my craft, reading and researching and writing pages after pages. In that naive scene, all I had to do was read and write. A million rounds of edits, arguing with printers about types of papers and print quantities, going on Instagram Live, organising book launches and tours by myself, lugging boxes of books up and down trains and planes, figuring out how much to charge for the books, speaking

engagements or workshops were all not part of that idyllic dream. I laugh now thinking about how little I knew and how ill-prepared I was for "being a writer". Part of me is relieved that I didn't know. Otherwise, I might have been put off from the prospect of being a writer entirely!

And yet, we write for a greater purpose, which helps us endure the publishing side of things. For Maria Mahat, she confessed that she stumbled into writing and publishing, "I didn't plan to go into writing, let alone publishing. At the same time that I published *The Truth Seekers @ Haji Lane*, I was also an educator training preschool teachers in the Malay language curriculum. Hence, I heard much feedback about the dearth of Malay picture books published locally. I started with *There are Saga Seeds in our Pockets!*, and the rest is history. I have done Malay and bilingual picture books, short stories, and middle grade chapter books in Malay, and I will be publishing an English language middle grade book with a well-known international publisher slated for 2025/2026, inshaAllah."

WRITING WITH PURPOSE: ISLAM AS INSPIRATION

For Ustaz Ahmad Ubaidillah and myself, our motivation lies in Islam. For me, my spiritual and religious life had been so enriched by books written by our Muslim scholars. I am inspired that Singapore, specifically Kampong Glam, used to be a regional Muslim publishing and printing hub in the late 19th century. I spent many hours browsing, buying books and speaking to the booksellers at Wardah Books on Bussorah Street, learning about our unique heritage. Aside from writing my own books, I've long translated works for many local *asatizahs* from Malay to English.

Ustaz Ahmad Ubaidillah says, "I believe that there is currently a gap in our local literary scene for a form of literature that is religious and conscientious, be it fiction or non-fiction. Our challenge is to ensure that we remain consistent and constant in producing good works of literature based on our Islamic values that engage with the wider society, not just Muslims. Malaysian literature laureate, Shahnon Ahmad, summarised it well when he wrote that Islamic/Muslim literature should be a form of literature for the Creator that enlightens Mankind. I believe that to succeed as a Muslim writer in Singapore is

to advocate positive values rooted in our religion in a way that can be universally understood by Singaporean readers and elsewhere. I would say that our past Muslim authors in Singapore, fiction and non-fiction, poetry and prose, have cultivated that tradition of developing conscientious literature. It is up to the current generation to continue this tradition."

While I had recently ventured to Australia for my book tour because I believed I needed to reach English-speaking Muslim audiences for my book, both Ustaz Ahmad Ubaidillah and I published our recent books with a Malaysian publisher. For me, it was because I felt I had reached the Singapore Muslim audience with my first 2 books and if I wanted to gain access to a wider readership, going with a Malaysian publisher could help in that regard.

PUBLISHING ACROSS BORDERS: VENTURING INTO MALAYSIA

When I asked Ustaz Ahmad Ubaidillah, this was what he had to say: "The decision to publish with a Malaysian publisher was because my novel revolved around Muslim characters with themes of religious humanism and religious extremism, while also being rooted in both Jordan and Singapore contexts. An author must be sensitive to the intended readership of their manuscript, as the fate of their work, and to some extent, their future as an author, are dependent on it. I believed that publishing in Malaysia, a country that has a strong Muslim readership, would bode well for my novel. For this reason, bearing in mind that some Malaysian publishers do distribute publications in Singapore, I decided to send my manuscript to Gerakbudaya, which they fortunately accepted. The process of editing my novel with Gerakbudaya was an enlightening one as well, as I learnt a lot from my editor Rachel and the rest of her team about editing, designing, and publicising. Nevertheless, I look forward to working with Singaporean publishers one day."

All 3 of us – Ustaz Ahmad, Maria Mahat and myself – were at the Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair or Pesta Buku Antarabangsa Kuala Lumpur (PBAKL) this year. There were other Singaporean authors as well, Ustazah Liyana Musfirah, Maimunah Mosli, the sisters from Homely Hammock, Ustaz Mizi Wahid, Muhammad Ashraf, Nur Khairiah, amongst others.

As we continue this journey, we must collectively support one another, enhance our visibility, and engage our communities to create a vibrant literary culture. Ultimately, being an author is not just about the words we write; it's about the connections we forge and the impact we strive to leave on our readers.

Participation in literary events is vital for networking, learning and visibility. Given the size of Singapore, authors and publishers need to venture to present their works at international platforms whenever possible.

Ustaz Ahmad Ubaidillah says, "I have attended PBAKL as both an author and a consumer, and I never fail to feel enlightened after attending. Such events are useful as they allow Singaporean authors and publishers to showcase our works that are unique and are able to bring value to the attendees. Although I do not know the technicalities of it, any author who has the chance to showcase their work at these type of events should grab the opportunity. To be a published author means you must go beyond sitting behind a desk typing on your laptop and actively promote your work. An author is a sum of many things, not just a writer. Authors are teachers, advocates, facilitators, and entertainers, who should be dedicated in promoting the literary art form wherever and whenever."

On being at PBAKL and other events, Maria Mahat says, "If you are a self-published author, you have to do what you have to do to get your books out there – whether setting up booths, sharing your journey via events, podcasts, vodcasts, having an active online presence etc. Setting up a booth can be costly, especially overseas. As a self-published author, you are both an author and an entrepreneur; you need to work out your costs to see the viability of setting up a booth locally or overseas. If you are published with a publisher, the heavy weight of setting up a booth will be done by your publisher but you still have a duty and responsibility to make your presence at the booth and market your books. You are your own book influencer."

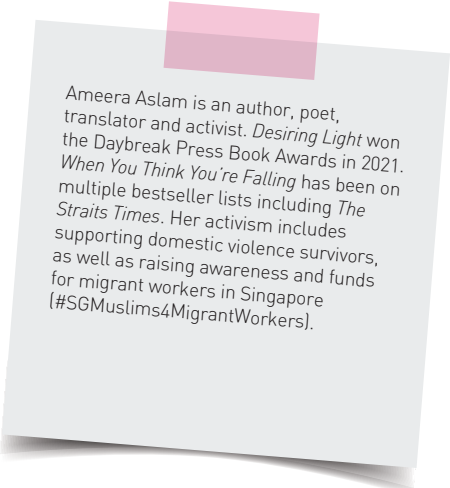
CONCLUSION

While I looked forward to gaining new audiences in Malaysia with my third book, I never expected the response it would get in Singapore. My books are to do with my experience as a Muslim and my target audience are Muslims as well. Specifically, my third book, *When You Think You're Falling*, is a non-fiction book on *istiqamah*, or persistence and steadfastness in your journey to God. In Malaysia, "Islamic non-fiction" is a category or genre in itself, but that genre does not exist in Singapore.

So it's been a great surprise for my book to be in the Straits Times bestseller list together with books like *Ikigai* by Hector Garcia and Francesc Miralles, *Atomic Habits* by James Clear, and *Living The Asian Century* by Kishore Mahbubani for multiple weeks since its publication in March! As a writer writing about Muslim topics in secular Singapore, I didn't think success could be found here. And yet, I've realised that success can be defined in various ways.

Reflecting on my own experiences alongside the insights of Maria Mahat and Ustaz Ahmad Ubaidillah, it becomes clear that being a Muslim writer in Singapore involves a blend of creative endeavour and strategic marketing. It's about cultivating a sustainable literary ecosystem that celebrates diverse voices and perspectives.

As we continue this journey, we must collectively support one another, enhance our visibility, and engage our communities to create a vibrant literary culture. Ultimately, being an author is not just about the words we write; it's about the connections we forge and the impact we strive to leave on our readers. ■



Ameera Aslam is an author, poet, translator and activist. *Desiring Light* won the Daybreak Press Book Awards in 2021. *When You Think You're Falling* has been on multiple bestseller lists including *The Straits Times*. Her activism includes supporting domestic violence survivors, as well as raising awareness and funds for migrant workers in Singapore (#SGMuslims4MigrantWorkers).

The Forbidden Cultural Arts: *Mak Yong & Kuda Kepang*

BY QAMAR JANNAH FATEEN



The convergence of tradition, spirituality and cultural preservation presents a complex challenge for indigenous art forms, particularly those deeply rooted in animism and shamanistic rituals. *Mak Yong* and *Kuda Kepang* are two traditional Southeast Asian performing arts that have captivated audiences with their blend of dance, music and rich storytelling. Despite their artistic beauty, both art forms have faced substantial criticisms and scrutiny, and in some regions, shunned, due to their perceived conflicts with Islamic religious practices — particularly in Malaysia and Singapore, where Malay communities in both countries are predominantly Muslims. Diving deeper, let us explore the unique

cultural significance of these art forms and the challenges brought about by contemporary society as practitioners of these art forms grapple with cultural preservation and religious practices.

CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL ROOTS OF MAK YONG AND KUDA KEPANG

Mak Yong is believed to have originated over centuries ago in the region now known as Kelantan, Malaysia. It is a captivating blend of storytelling, dance, music and improvisation and is often performed to enact ancient myths and legends. Some major stories performed are recounts of the adventures and fates of royal-celestial figures, deeply rooted in the mythology of the ancient

Kelantan-Pattani Sultanates, dating back to the Srivijaya Empire (7th-13th century)¹. *Mak Yong* was traditionally performed in the royal courts and rural villages for entertainment and healing purposes. Historically, when the art form was performed as healing rituals, *Mak Yong* alone, or combined with *main puteri*, serves as a vehicle of healing or exorcism through a patient's participation in a dramatic performance. In a way, the practice was seen as a "psychotherapy" for depression². Ultimately, due to its deep-rooted history, *Mak Yong* is more than an artistic performance; it carries significant spiritual elements linked to pre-Islamic animistic beliefs.

¹ Adapted from PUSAKA organisation's website

² Chen, P. C. (1979). Main puteri: An indigenous Kelantanese form of psychotherapy. *Int J Soc Psychiatry*, 25(3), 167-175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002076407902500302>

Similarly, *Kuda Kepang* is a traditional Javanese dance form that spread to Malaysia and Singapore, with the migration of Javanese people to these regions. *Kuda Kepang* is a hobbyhorse trance dance, which has been part of the Singaporean Malay community's cultural practices since 1948, when Javanese performers first began organising performances in Singapore. Although contemporary *Kuda Kepang* performance in Singapore share similarities with Javanese traditions like *jaranan*, *kuda lumping*, *reog*, and *jathilan*, Singaporean Malay practitioners have localised the art form. The dance form typically involves performers raising woven rattan horses — it is believed to symbolise the heroic efforts of the Wali Songo (Nine Saints) who spread Islam in Java³. However, the dance also sometimes takes on spiritual and ritualistic elements, with performers entering trance-like states, engaging in feats of supernatural strength or self-mortification, like walking on hot coals or consuming glass. As the *gamelan* ensemble plays the mystical instrumentals, performers inhale the incense smoke from an incense burner in the middle of a circle. As they inhale the smoke, they enter a trance state, inviting *djinn* (invisible spirit) into their bodies. These trance states, known as *naik angin* (literally “rising wind”), are thought to be a manifestation of spiritual possession, adding an element of shamanism to what is otherwise a martial and celebratory performance. Conclusively, performers “possess the ability to perform superhuman feats in this state”⁴.

In its glory days, *Kuda Kepang* was often performed at weddings or functions in Singapore. Remembering my childhood, I was scared yet fascinated by the whole performance — the beautiful chimes of *gamelan* in the background, coupled with the artistic movements of the performers with their vibrant and eye-catching props. Needless to say, I was glad to be able to witness such beauty that we do not get to see often today.

THE ‘FORBIDDEN’ ARTS

The spiritual elements that underpin *Mak Yong* and *Kuda Kepang*, however, placed both art forms in tension with aspects of Islam. In Malaysia, arts associated with pre-Islamic practices have often been viewed as contrary to Islamic teachings. In 1991, the Kelantan state government, under the rule of Shariah, banned *Mak Yong*, citing its roots in animism and Hindu-Buddhist tradition, which existed before the arrival of Islam in the region. This prohibition significantly impacted the art form, with few opportunities for performances and a diminishing pool of practitioners. While efforts have been made to revive *Mak Yong*, including a UNESCO proclamation in 2005, recognising it as a *Master of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, the ban in its birthplace remains a contentious issue. Fortunately, the Kelantan state government lifted its ban on *Mak Yong* in 2019, albeit with the condition that the practice will be regulated within the Shariah⁵.

Similarly, *Kuda Kepang* has faced religious scrutiny in both Malaysia and Singapore, where its trance element and links to pre-Islamic spiritual practices have led to restrictions on its performance. In Johor, Malaysia, *Kuda Kepang* was banned outright for a time, although some performances are allowed today under strict regulations. In Singapore, the government has also imposed restrictions, particularly on the trance and spiritual aspects, to ensure public safety and maintain religious harmony. Consequently, modern performances of *Kuda Kepang* in Singapore often exclude the spiritual possession elements that once defined the dance, focusing instead on its artistic and cultural value. These bans and restrictions reflect a broader struggle within Malay-majority Muslim societies between preserving cultural heritage and adhering to religious practices. Given the concerns by the local community regarding elements of *Kuda Kepang* — in particular its shamanistic aspects which are seen to be against Islamic teachings — some

Singaporean *Kuda Kepang* troupes began to travel to Bintan and other islands in the Indonesian Riau archipelago to perform.

CULTURAL PRESERVATION OF THE TRADITIONAL ART FORM

The prohibition and regulation of *Mak Yong* and *Kuda Kepang* highlights a critical dilemma in the modern world: how can we preserve and adapt traditional art forms within an evolving religious and cultural landscape? Following the epistemological approach of Cultural Evolution, it offers valuable insight into understanding the importance of preserving traditional art forms within the broader context of the Malay world's cultural evolution, as it highlights the dynamic relationship between cultural adaptation and the need to maintain identity heritage in the face of changing societal influences⁶.

In both Malaysia and Singapore, efforts have been made to modernise and preserve these traditions, albeit with varying degrees of success. In the case of *Mak Yong*, there has been a concerted effort to promote the dance-drama as a cultural artifact rather than a living spiritual tradition. Government initiatives and arts organisations have worked to promote the “clean” versions of *Mak Yong*, emphasising its artistic qualities over its ritualistic significance. Notably, PUSAKA, a non-profit organisation dedicated to preserving and supporting the continuity of traditional performing arts in Malaysia, has been at the forefront of these efforts. It was founded by Eddin Khoo who was determined to support and revitalise the traditional arts after several, including *Mak Yong*, *Wayang Kulit*, *Menora* and *Main Puteri*, were banned back in 1991. Now, PUSAKA partners with 25 communities of traditional performers throughout Malaysia, and has even organised a *Mak Yong* performance in Singapore, with the *Kumpulan Mak Yong Cahaya Matahari* — one of Malaysia's most esteemed *Mak Yong* groups, founded by the legendary Che Ning.

³ Hardwick, P. A. (2014). *Horsing around Melayu*. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 87(1), 1-19.

⁴ Quek, H. (2022). Lashed and whipped to investigate Singapore's forbidden art of Kuda Kepang. *Rice Media*. From <https://www.ricemedia.co/kuda-kepeng-dance-culture-singapore/>

⁵ Ar, Z. (2019). Kelantan lifts Mak Yong ban after two decades, but insists performances must be shariah-compliant. *Malay Mail*. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/09/25/kelantan-lifts-mak-yong-ban-after-two-decades-but-insists-performances-must/1794202>

⁶ Alfian, S. F. (2020). Sustaining Mak Yong – Main Puteri in Raman: A discussion of its existence in cultural evolutionary thread. *Jurai Sembah*, 1(2), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.37134/juraisembah.v011.2.1.2020>

While restrictions and prohibitions have been imposed on these art forms to ensure adherence to religious practices, there is also a growing recognition of their cultural importance. Efforts to revitalise and adapt these art forms are encouraging, however, my question remains: can *Kuda Kepang* retain their essence and traditional art forms, if their spiritual roots are severed? The balance between religious practices and cultural preservation continues to be a delicate topic, and as society evolves, so too must these art forms, continue to adapt to new contexts while retaining their core identity.

After all, there are two broad categories of *Mak Yong*: those intended for ritual and healing purposes, and entertainment purposes. Eventually, the latter is often practised in modern context. *Mak Yong* performances must adhere to Shariah-compliant guidelines and requirements, making it compulsory for performance to have no elements of worship or shamanistic rituals, as well as making it compulsory for performers to cover as much skin as possible.

However, this approach raises concerns about the loss of the art form's deeper meaning and the disconnection from its spiritual roots.

This was a stronger case for *Kuda Kepang* in Singapore. *Kuda Kepang* has been adapted for modern audiences, particularly in Singapore, where the emphasis is now placed on the aesthetics and beauty of the dance, rather than its supernatural, mystical elements. While this allows the art form to survive in a highly regulated society, it also


reflects the tension between cultural preservation and modernisation. For younger generations, *Kuda Kepang* may be seen more as an artistic performance, rather than a spiritual experience – leading to questions about what is being preserved when the essence of the tradition is adapted to align with modern context.

The future of *Kuda Kepang* in Singapore lies at the intersection of tradition, spirituality, and modern identity. Personally, I do think that the traditional art form of *Kuda Kepang* is beautiful, with the *gamelan* playing in the background, and wooden horses dancing their way through the performance. While restrictions and prohibitions have been imposed on these art forms to ensure adherence to religious practices, there is also a growing recognition of their cultural importance. Efforts to revitalise and adapt these art forms are encouraging, however, my question remains: can *Kuda Kepang* retain their essence and traditional art forms, if their

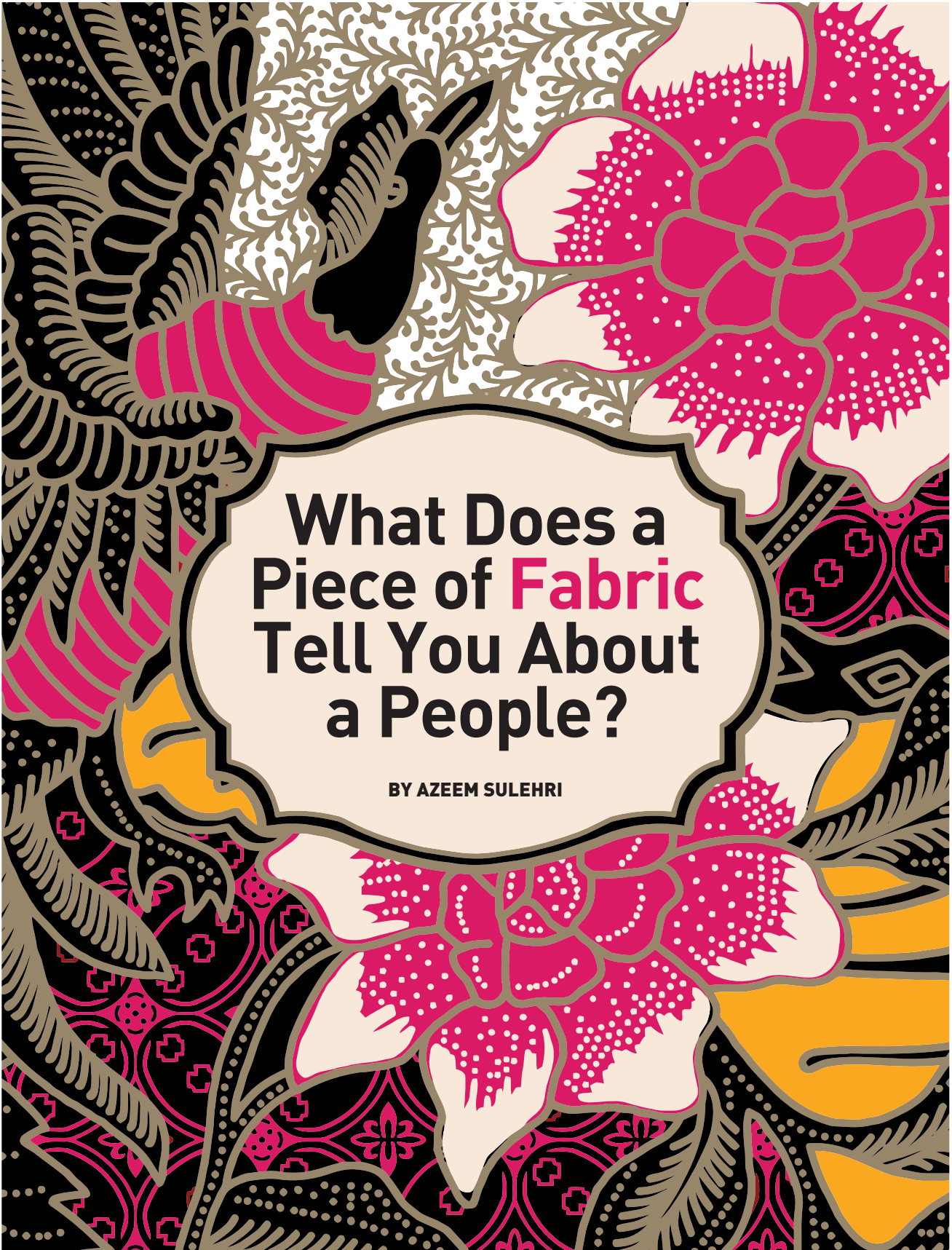
spiritual roots are severed? The balance between religious practices and cultural preservation continues to be a delicate topic, and as society evolves, so too must these art forms, continue to adapt to new contexts while retaining their core identity. The prohibitions that *Kuda Kepang* face reflect broader societal tensions between religious conservatism and cultural preservation. As both art forms adapt to new regulations and changing norms, the challenge will be to preserve their essence while ensuring they remain relevant and accessible to future generations. In a world increasingly concerned with preserving intangible heritage, there are whispers on how we, the Malay/Muslim community, can maintain the integrity of traditional practices while ensuring their survival in a rapidly evolving society.

Whether or not *Kuda Kepang* in Singapore is maintained, and *Mak Yong* maintaining their traditional core whilst practising good religious practices, *Mak Yong* and *Kuda Kepang* represent a vital thread in the cultural tapestry of Southeast Asia. Ultimately, cultural preservation will depend on how successfully they navigate the complexities of tradition and modernity. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.



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In the Malay Peninsula, fabrics hold the essence of a people's identity, linking the present to a rich past. Batik, songket, and Peranakan embroidery carry stories of culture, tradition, and the endurance of communities. These materials serve as vessels of cultural memory, preserving and conveying the identity, power, and resistance that have shaped the region.

CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Fabrics reflect the deep connection to nature and the unique cultural heritage of the Malay peninsula.

In the villages along the east coast of the Malay Peninsula, batik emerged as a form of artistic expression deeply connected to the natural world¹. The motifs found in batik – leaves, flowers, and animals – represented the environment in which the people lived.

The process of creating batik was almost ritualistic. Using a *canting*, artisans carefully applied wax to specific areas of the cloth to prevent dye from penetrating those sections, preserving the natural colour underneath. By repeatedly applying wax and dyeing the fabric in multiple stages, they created intricate, layered patterns depicting the Malay Peninsula's flora, fauna, and landscapes².

Batik's motifs carried meaning as well – the *pucuk rebung* motif, resembling bamboo shoots, symbolised resilience and growth, while the *sisir tebu*, inspired by the sugarcane plant, represented the sweetness found in simplicity.

Batik reflects the character of each region across the Malay Peninsula, shaped by local culture, environment, and history. Each region has distinct cultural symbols and beliefs that are often reflected in batik motifs and patterns³. For instance, Indonesian batik often incorporates more intricate designs with symbolic meanings rooted in Javanese philosophy and history, while Malaysian batik has floral and plant-based motifs due to the natural environment of the region.

The Peranakan community, descendants of Chinese immigrants who settled in the Malay Archipelago, developed a unique cultural heritage that comes to life in their textiles. The Nyonya kebaya, a traditional blouse-dress combination, is perhaps the most iconic of these textiles. The blouse is adorned with intricate embroidery that blends Chinese, Malay, and Indonesian influences. Each stitch carries meaning – motifs like the phoenix embody beauty and grace, while the peony is a symbol of wealth and honour.

Peranakan textiles are not confined to garments alone. In the home, embroidered tablecloths, bedspreads, and even cushion covers are common – each piece often becoming a treasured heirloom. These textiles are integral to family rituals, playing a central role during events like weddings, Lunar New Year celebrations, and ancestral rites. These items represent a deep commitment to preserving cultural identity and fostering family unity.

POWER AND DIPLOMACY

Clothing was a powerful emblem of status and authority in the courts of the Malay Peninsula. The Sultan's robes, woven with gold and adorned with intricate patterns, were declarations of divine right and political power. These robes often contained symbols of the cosmos, representing the Sultan as a central figure of the universe.

Songket, a material woven with threads of gold and silver, was reserved for royalty and the elite. The motifs within each piece of songket, such as *bunga tabur* and *awan larat*, played with light and shadow, adding movement to the fabric. These patterns symbolised prosperity and divine connection, reinforcing the wearer's position within the social hierarchy.

The *tengkolok* or *destar*, a traditional Malay headgear, was another symbol of royal power. Its intricate folds conveyed specific meanings, often reflecting the wearer's rank and loyalty to the Sultan. Reserved for royalty and high-ranking officials, it was a sign of authority and status.

The gifting of garments during royal ceremonies, as described in the Malay Annals, was an act of diplomacy. When a foreign envoy received these garments, it was a statement of peace and honour, and a subtle reminder of the Sultan's power.

RESISTANCE

Clothing has also served as a tool of resistance against colonial rule and social hierarchy. The Dutch, who ruled over the Indonesian archipelago, imposed regulations on traditional dress, using clothing to enforce social stratification. The *sarong*, once viewed as inferior by the Dutch, became a symbol of both control and defiance. European women in the colonies appropriated the *sarong*⁴, creating their own versions with luxurious fabrics and European-influenced batik designs. Locals saw this appropriation as an assertion of colonial dominance over their identity.

The *sarong* also became a symbol of resistance. During pro-democracy protests in Myanmar, women hung lines of *htameins* (the Burmese *sarong*) to shame military officers, using the cloth to challenge the status quo. These stories of garments as tools of power and defiance illustrate how fabric can carry the weight of history, culture, and political struggle.

The *sarong's* role as a symbol of defiance in the Malay Peninsula echoes throughout Southeast Asia. The Dutch attempted to suppress local customs by enforcing dress codes, yet the region's people continued to wear their traditional garments, often in defiance of colonial regulations. These pieces became emblems of cultural resilience, preserving the memory of a people who resisted external control and maintained their identity in the face of adversity.

THE MODERN FUSION OF TEXTILES

Today, the fabrics of the Malay Peninsula continue to evolve, with contemporary designers drawing on these rich traditions to create fashion that speaks to a global audience⁵. Batik, songket, and Peranakan embroidery have found new life in modern

¹ Samin, M.A. (2012). *The traditional Pelangi cloth of Malay Peninsula – A study of design and identity*. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271337185_The_Traditional_Pelangi_Cloth_of_Malay_Peninsula_-_A_Study_of_Design_and_Identity_-

² Ibid.

³ Wee, F. (2024). *Distinguish Indonesian Batik from Malaysian Batik*. <https://batik-shirt.com/en-en/blogs/batik/malaysian-batik?srsltid=AfmB0oowR6zGKp0sDYR95fkkS5nDkN7J4D1k9sdTXb7wBA1pxXnA4W5>

⁴ Zein, Z.M. (2021). *The sarong and gender colonialism in Asia*. *Kontinentalist*. <https://kontinentalist.com/stories/the-sarong-and-gender-colonialism-in-asia>

⁵ Yeo, Z. (2017). *The way we were: Fashion through the decades*. *BiblioAsia*. <https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/vol-13/issue-3/oct-dec-2017/fashionthroughdecades/>

Batik continues to symbolise cultural resilience, adapting to the demands of modern fashion while preserving its connection to the past. The national airline uniforms of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia feature batik prints, showcasing the region's cultural heritage to the world. The *parang gondosuli* motif worn by Garuda Indonesia flight attendants, for instance, is a modern interpretation of traditional designs, connecting past and present in a single piece of fabric.

garments, allowing a new generation to connect with their cultural heritage.

The development of batik fashion in Malaysia during the 1960s marked a significant shift in how these materials were perceived. The introduction of metal wax-stamping (*batik cap*) allowed for the mass production of cotton yardage, making batik accessible to a wider audience. This innovation enabled the creation of Western-style dresses, blouses, and skirts, which incorporated traditional motifs in a contemporary context.

Batik continues to symbolise cultural resilience, adapting to the demands of modern fashion while preserving its connection to the past. The national airline uniforms of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia feature batik prints, showcasing the region's cultural heritage to the world. The *parang gondosuli* motif worn by Garuda Indonesia flight attendants, for instance, is a modern interpretation of traditional designs, connecting past and present in a single piece of fabric.

Songket, too, has been reinterpreted for the modern world. While traditionally reserved for royalty and the elite, songket materials are now used in various contexts, from formal attire to high fashion. The patterns and shimmering threads of songket continue to convey a sense of

power and prestige, even as the fabric finds new expressions in the 21st century.

In Singapore, the fusion of Malay textiles with Peranakan artistry gives rise to a unique cultural expression. As Singapore modernises, the kebaya evolves too, incorporating contemporary fashion trends while maintaining its traditional roots. This blend of old and new allows the Peranakan heritage to thrive in a rapidly changing world, allowing the community's stories, values, and artistry to continue to be celebrated.

As cities expand and their skylines converge into sleek towers of glass and steel, these fabrics remain a link to an identity that transcends the homogenised facades of modern life. In the patterns and in the way they're worn, a piece of cloth becomes a quiet reminder of who we are, carrying a thread that connects us to our heritage. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.

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STORIES ACROSS SEAS: **PROF NAZRY BAHRAWI'S** EXPLORATION OF MALAY- INDONESIAN NARRATIVES

BY IRDINA AISYAH MOHD IMRAN



Like many other Singaporeans who have ventured abroad to expand their horizons, Professor Nazry Bahrawi's journey has been shaped by a deep desire to push boundaries and explore fresh perspectives. Currently an assistant professor of Southeast Asian Literature and Culture at the University of Washington, Seattle, his work draws on his Malay-Muslim heritage, blending themes of folklore, fantasy, and critical race theory to challenge prevailing academic frameworks and enrich the study of Malay-Indonesian culture.

Professor Nazry's decision to pursue an academic career abroad stems from both his passion for storytelling and his commitment to shedding light on the cultural complexities of the region. As a literary translator and scholar, his work has carved out space for often-overlooked narratives, fostering a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and the power of storytelling. He delves into the intersection of literary narratives, cultural identity, and racial discourse.

He shares with the *Karyawan* team his personal and academic journey—from growing up in Singapore as an ethnic minority to navigating life and academia overseas, and how his experiences have shaped his teaching, research, and vision for the future of Malay-Indonesian cultural studies.

Q: Could you tell us more about yourself and your family?

Nazry: I come from a family of four siblings, all three of whom work in Singapore and raising families of their own. Both my parents are retired but kept happily busy with grandchildren. We were a working class family. As typical of such families, my siblings and I had funded our own postsecondary education. I was lucky enough to have landed some scholarships to study in the UK that includes the British Chevening Award. My partner is also an academic who had first moved to Seattle with me.

Q: What does your daily work entail?

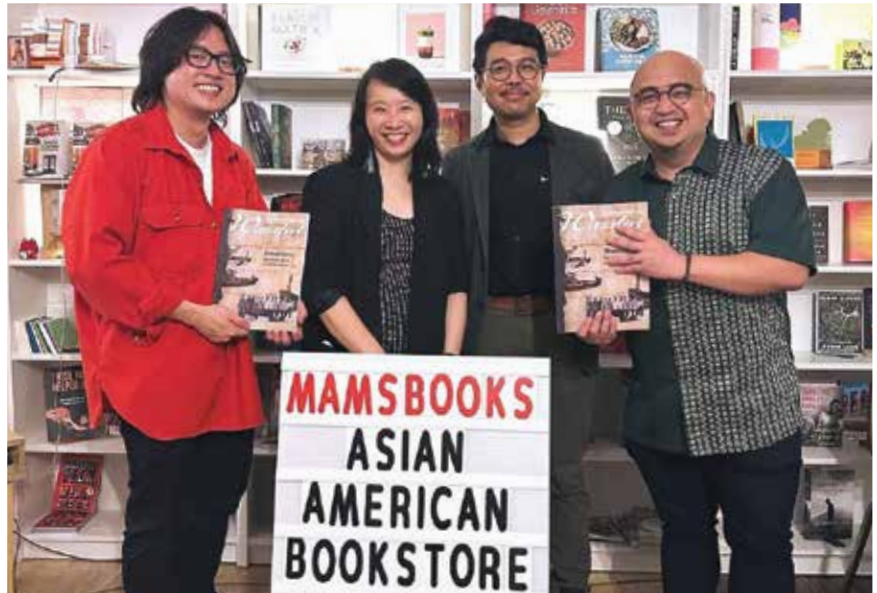
Nazry: As an assistant professor, I'm required to teach, research and take on administrative duties. A typical week for me would be setting aside about two days for teaching and class preparation, and

about three days for research with half a day for administrative duties. As I was the first hire in my department for the Southeast Asian cultural studies programme, I was happy to take on the role of programme coordinator to help grow this new area.

I enjoy conducting my research and welcome the extensive support I get here. In my career, this is probably the most empowering work environment I've been in. It was a bonus for me to discover that University of Washington has an excellent collection of Malay and Indonesian books. This was probably due to the interest of senior and retired scholars like Celia Lowe, Christina Sunardi, Charles Hirschman and Lauri Sears, and the work of our dedicated Southeast Asian librarian Judith Henchy.

Q: Your work spans a wide range of topics, from racial discourses in Malay-Indonesian literary works to translation studies. What initially drew you to these fields of study?

Nazry: While my career path may seem diverse, one common thread has always been my ardour for literary narratives. The more fantastical the narrative, the better. I'm particularly drawn to genres of folklore, mystery, and even horror. There's something special about a story that can make you believe the unbelievable. My life reflects this deep interest in narratives. I became a practitioner, crafting stories in various forms. I wrote for and edited magazines including at Darul Arqam in the years following 9/11, then became a journalist in Brunei and Singapore, contributing even to *The Guardian* in the UK when I pursued my Master's degree there with the support of the Chevening scholarship. I went on to do my PhD at the University of Warwick and was hired by Singapore University of Technology and Design a few months before I graduated. Since becoming an academic, I've decided to shift some of my attention to the other end of the literary spectrum, focusing on studying narratives. Yet, I still do continue producing them not so much as a journalist anymore but as a literary translator, a rewarding endeavour that bridges cultures and stories in new and meaningful ways. I was honoured to have translated the works of two Cultural Medallion winners, Nadiputra and Mohamed Latiff Mohamed.



Dr Nazry and collaborators Dr Joanne Leow, Dr Reuven Pinnata and Adrian Alarilla at the launch of his co-edited *Wasafiri* special issue journal on Southeast Asian writing at Mam's Books, an independent Asian American bookshop in Seattle.

Q: Are there any future projects or areas of research you are particularly excited about, or have been a highlight in your career so far?

Nazry: I'm enthralled by the intricacies of my current research investigating animal lores and tropes in Malay-Indonesian literature and film. Animals are often seen as inferior to humans. Here, I'm reminded of Professor Faizah Zakaria's recently published book *The Camphor Tree and the Elephant* (University of Washington Press, 2023) which points to a significant change among the Batak's views about animals and nature generally when they converted from animism to Islam and Christianity in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, this conversion had reduced the status of non-humans from an equal partner in worldmaking to something less, she argues. My research is premised on the idea that animals can be our teachers, and that in fact we in the Malay world possess a folkloric tradition of thinking with them. Simply put, animals help us imagine how we can form kinship. Without giving too much away, I'm hopeful that the book I'm writing might help loosen the grip of US-based critical race theory as the premium means of thinking about racial formation and relations. We too, in the Malay world, can think and possess theory, and they are just as valuable. Reflecting on my work so far, I'm most proud of the edited short story collection *Singa-Pura-*

Pura (Ethos, 2021) because it's a work that was informed and inspired by the praxis of Malay Singaporean authors on the ground. It's also my first published work that had paired theory with practice.

Q: What first motivated you to move abroad? How often do you return to Singapore?

Nazry: I'd come to the conclusion that my work, writ large, in Singapore could only go so far and that it had reached its limit. The only way forward for me to grow as a scholar and a person was to try my luck elsewhere. To this end, I count myself lucky to have found a place where my work was well-received and where I can get the support that I need at this stage of my career. I'd encourage others who feel the same to consider doing likewise. I return to Singapore each summer, drawn back by the familiar warmth of family and the irresistible charm of my nephews and one niece. During these homecomings, I reconnect with a small but enduring circle of friends, reminiscing through a constellation of shared memories and celebrating new ones. As I observe Singapore from afar, what fills me with the deepest sense of pride is witnessing the growth of civil activism and the arts in Singapore. This is led by the young and young at heart daring to challenge the status quo and to push the boundaries of what is possible.

Q: As a Malay-Muslim scholar from Singapore, how have you navigated cultural and religious differences while living and working abroad?

Nazry: Growing up as an ethnic minority in Singapore has prepared me well for navigating different cultural landscapes. I've worked in Brunei and studied for several years in the UK before my current stint in Seattle. These days, I rarely experience culture shock. However, I do make it a point to steer clear of far-right circles whose ideologies stand in stark contrast to the values I hold dear.

Q: Can you share any experiences where your background as a Malay Muslim provided a unique perspective in your academic or professional life?

Nazry: In the US, where I teach, it's fascinating to observe how DEIJA (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Justice, and Accessibility) operates. Here, identities are fragmented in a unique way – Asian Americans and African Americans are considered minorities, yet they are not indigenous. In contrast, Native Americans, while also being minorities, have a much stronger emphasis on their indigeneity, as seen in movements like the push for LandBack. This dynamic makes me reconsider the concept of indigeneity and its ties to land. Some might argue that Malay Muslims in Singapore are "immigrants" and therefore cannot claim indigeneity. To me, Malay Muslims in Singapore are both minorities and indigenous – but not to the land itself,



Dr Nazry delivering a performance lecture about his translating Mohamed Latiff's short story *Cinta Gadis Korea* at The Arts House Singapore.

rather to the wider region of the Malay Archipelago. A central concept that signifies a sense of belonging to a homeland in Bahasa Melayu is *tanah air*, or the land-sea space, which points to a jurisdiction traversing seas and straits. Our sense of indigeneity is premised on a different constellation of naturescape from the Native Americans in the US.

Q: How do you stay connected to Singapore and your roots while being so far away? Have you found ways to connect with other Southeast Asians or Muslims in the places you've lived?

Nazry: Aside from my trips back home, I try to stay connected with the Singaporean community in Seattle and neighbouring Vancouver where I have some good friends who were formerly Singaporean and now citizens of Canada. Travelling from Seattle to Vancouver is like going from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur. Interestingly, Singaporeans are one of the fastest-growing minority groups in Seattle, and there's an active group here that holds regular meetups and maintains a lively WhatsApp chat. I've met some wonderful people through this network, but there are very few Malay Singaporeans in the Emerald City. In fact, I only know two – one has since returned to Singapore, and I do my best to stay in touch with the other. The gatherings at her home always remind me of my own family get-togethers, filled with warmth and familiarity. It was through these gatherings that I met other Muslim individuals, including the remarkable Turkish-American activist Aysenur Ezgi Eygi, whose tragic murder in the West Bank this year still weighs heavily on my mind.

Q: Looking back, how do you think living and working abroad has enriched your life, both academically and personally?

Nazry: I lead a life now that feels much freer than the one I had in Singapore, a freedom shaped not only by geography but by the diversity of people and ideas I encounter daily. Living in an environment where I'm exposed to such a wide array of perspectives has truly broadened my horizons. I've found that this openness to new experiences has allowed me to think more critically and creatively, challenging the assumptions and norms I once held. It's more than just the freedom to move or speak – it's the freedom to engage with different worldviews, to have

my beliefs tested, and to grow from these interactions. This constant flow of ideas, cultures, and identities has enriched my understanding of the world and deepened my own sense of self.

Q: What advice would you give to other Singaporean Malay-Muslim individuals who are considering pursuing academic careers abroad?

Nazry: Go for it.

Q: How do you envision the evolution of your work in the coming years, particularly in relation to your experiences abroad?

Nazry: I'm eager to explore the intricacies of Malay-Indonesian cultures with the same innovative spirit that scholars of other Asian cultures have embraced. I hope to help pioneer new areas of focus such as the intersection between animal studies and race as well as delve into the realm of science fiction and fantasy (SFF) to offer fresh and imaginative perspectives of our rich cultural tapestry.

Q: What legacy do you hope to leave in your field and for future scholars?

Nazry: I aspire to actively contribute to the growth of Malay-Indonesian cultural studies and envision a future where my work, alongside that of others, helps establish this field as a vital academic discipline. My hope is to see dedicated units, or even full departments, in every university in Singapore and major universities worldwide foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of Malay-Indonesian cultures. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.

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Book Review:

Reviewing the Ideas of Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji

BY AHMAD UBADILLAH MOHD KHAIR



It is often overlooked by the Muslim community in Singapore that we possess a rich religious intellectual heritage left behind by our religious luminaries. Figures such as Almarhum Ustaz Syed Abdillah, Almarhum Ustaz Syed Ahmad Semait and Almarhum Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji, were prolific authors that left behind a trove of writings encompassing their ideas and thoughts. I believe that the writing output of the older and previous generations of the religious fraternity was dynamic, producing different forms of religious writings such as commentaries on the *Quran* and *Hadith* (*Prophetic Narrations*), translations of significant religious works, as well as articles and opinion pieces addressing jurisprudential and socio-religious issues. These are evergreen works that are still relevant, being used and studied until today to enhance religious understanding. The previous generation of religious teachers and scholars inculcated a writing tradition that is still practised by the current religious fraternity. *Asatizah* such as Ustaz Yusri Yuhbi, Ustaz Haniff Hassan, Ustaz Mustazah Bahri, and until his recent passing, Almarhum Ustaz Jakfar Embek, have been active in writing and publishing works. In recent years, I observe that there has been an increased awareness to acknowledge the legacies of Singapore's religious luminaries, with many written works to commemorate their contributions to the Muslim community and the society at large.¹

One of these figures who has had several writings published regarding his scholarship and contributions is none other than Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji, a renowned and respected religious cleric and scholar. Ustaz Sonhadji is regarded as a visionary and conscientious community leader, having held leadership roles in several important institutions, such as Madrasah Aljunied, Masjid Muhajirin, PERGAS, and many others. He is also deemed as the 'teacher of teachers', as he taught numerous students that went on to become prominent religious figures in Singapore, such as former Mufti Syed Isa, Ustaz Abu Bakar Hashim, Ustaz Pasuni Maulan, Ustaz Hasbi Hassan, and many others. Not only this, he is also the only local cleric so far to have written a complete *Tafsir* (*interpretation*) of the

¹ See PERGAS. [2014]. *Beacons of the Ummah: Tracing the Footsteps of Singapore Religious Leaders* (series). Muhammad Mubarak. [2020]. *Equipping the People with Knowledge*.

Quran, which first started out as a weekly radio series, before being published as *Abrul-Athir*.

The subject of this book review is a three-volume publication that was released in 2023 by PERGAS, titled *Meninjau Pemikiran Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Mohamad Milatu Daripada Khutbah-Khutbah Karangannya (Reviewing the Ideas of Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Mohamad Milatu from His Written Sermons)*. This momentous and significant publication, the first of its kind, was written and edited by Ustaz Mohamed Qusairy Thaha, Ustaz Muhammad Haniff Hassan, and Ustaz Mustazah Bahri. As the title indicates, the three-part series consists of a biographical section about Ustaz Sonhadji, an explanatory chapter regarding Ustaz Sonhadji by the authors, and also a compilation of his Friday sermons that have been divided thematically. Volume One are his sermons under the theme '*Al-Quran and Connection with Allah*'. Volume Two are his sermons under the themes '*Economy, Career, and Education*' & '*Adab, Ethics, and Integrity*.' Volume Three are his sermons under the themes '*Women, Family, Humanity, and Community*.'

While there have been previous writings on Ustaz Sonhadji, this publication in my view, is of utmost significance due to its comprehensiveness and multi-faceted beneficial nature. It acts not only as a conveyor of Ustaz Sonhadji's ideas, with the transliteration and thematisation of his sermons, but it also provides a clear flow and structure that guides readers on understanding his legacy in a contextual and methodical manner. By providing the biography and introductory chapters at the beginning of the book, the publication allows readers to contextualise and comprehend the nature of his ideas and writings, which are best understood in the context of when they were written (between 1970-1980). The categorisation of Ustaz Sonhadji's ideas into two orientations; traditionalist and progressive, is very relevant to prevent a generalist perspective towards Singapore's past Islamic fraternity that might conclude it being exclusively beholden to a single orientation. The point underlined by the three authors indicates that while it is relevant for academic and intellectual purpose to specify the orientation of

certain religious figures, there still remains space for substantial discussions and explorations of their ideas. The authors of this publication have used Ustaz Sonhadji as an example of a religious figure that advocated both traditionalist and progressive ideas, which indicates that categorisation of a figure into a specific orientation should not be taken as a complete representation of his intellectual legacy.

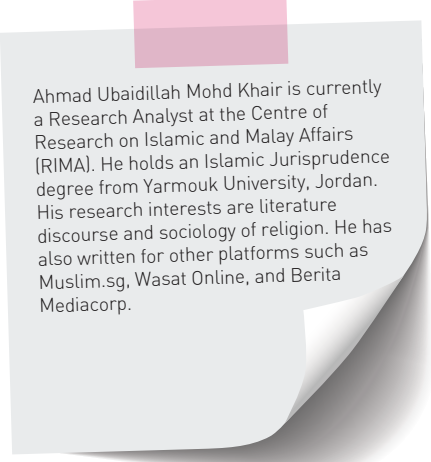
Upon reading the publication, I found that one of the many enlightening parts of the publication is the authors' explanation and contextualisation regarding the stance of Ustaz Sonhadji on various contentious issues that can be found in his sermons, such as *Hudud* (Islamic Law), and the celebration of Good Friday and Christmas. Acknowledging that such stances can be 'misunderstood as radical and problematic, due to the understanding that they are not supportive of inculcating social harmony in the eyes of certain political leaders',² the three authors cogently express that such writings should not be used to paint a negative and misunderstood portrayal of Ustaz Sonhadji. Drawing on their experience of working together with him, the authors state that the stance of Ustaz Sonhadji is better represented through his contributions as a religious scholar who advocated moderation and contextualisation, as evident through his many contributions such as being the advisor and resource person of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG). It is also stated that he partook in PERGAS' Scholars Convention in 2003 regarding *Hudud* in the context of Singapore, which concluded a moderate stance that is suitable for Singaporean Muslims as expressed in PERGAS' publication, *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Malay Muslim Community in Singapore*.

In other regards, the thematisation of Ustaz Sonhadji's sermons is also a valuable trait of this publication, which will undoubtedly be useful to a wide range of audience: general readers, students, and researchers. It allows readers to choose which specific topics they wish to read on, and also appreciate the breadth of his ideas that are still relevant in Singapore's context. In addition to this, the authors also provide an in-depth summary of all

the sermons, a testament to their comprehensiveness and desire for readers to benefit and grasp the teachings in Ustaz Sonhadji's sermons. A point that should be made, is that while I see the importance for this publication to be in Malay, it is also relevant for it to be in English as well, so that they will be accessible to non-Malays and non-Malay speakers. I hope that there will be efforts underway to translate this work into English.

It is my hope that the publication of this book will herald a period where there will be more writings and discussions on the ideas and legacies of past religious scholars. Such activities are necessary to develop more writers and thinkers within the religious fraternity. As aforementioned, the past few years have seen efforts to document the legacies and contributions of past *asatizah*, but it is important to elevate the level of writings and discussions and consciously build upon the ideas brought forth by these luminaries. This publication, written by three *asatizah* intellectuals, represents such an effort. Even so, writings such as these should be complemented with discussions in the public space, so as to sustain the interest and momentum in engaging and producing this strand of religious discourse. Otherwise, if not engaged, these books will be mere ink and paper, their potential untapped. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.



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¹ Mohamed Qusairy Thaha, Muhammad Haniff Hassan, and Mustazah Bahri. (2023). *Meninjau Pemikiran Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Mohamad Milatu Daripada Khutbah-Khutbah Karangannya*. Pp 28-31.



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