

Tracing the Mark of Circumcision in Modern Malay/sian Art

by

Izmer Ahmad

BFA, University of Lethbridge, 1992

MFA, University of Victoria, 1996

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Supervisory Committee

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Dr. Astri Wright, (Department of History in Art)
Supervisor

Dr. Michael Bodden, (Department of Pacific and Asian Studies)
Co-Supervisor

Dr. Stephen Ross, (Department of English)
Outside Member

Professor Robert Youds, (Department of Visual Arts)
Outside Member

Abstract

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This dissertation examines the trace of circumcision in modern Malay/sian art. The term ‘Malay/sian’ is used in this dissertation to refer to Malaysians of Malay descent with Islamic affiliation. This research is premised on the hypothesis that the cultural politics that defines the works produced by artists of Malay-Muslim affiliation is constituted by the discourse of the body. This research takes the task of locating this hypothesis in a selection of paintings by these artists. I argue that circumcision, which in Malaysia is understood as the obligatory and identifying mark of the Malay-Muslim (male and female, to varying degrees), is a significant trope underlying the themes of the graphic mark, the body and social power in the production of personal, ethno-religious and national identities.

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INTRODUCTION

Summary

This dissertation examines the trace of circumcision in modern Malay/sian art. The term ‘Malay/sian’ is used in this dissertation to refer to Malaysians of Malay descent with Islamic affiliation.¹ This research is premised on the hypothesis that the cultural politics that defines the works produced by artists of Malay-Muslim affiliation is constituted by the discourse of the body. This research takes the task of locating this hypothesis in a selection of paintings by these artists. I argue that circumcision, which in Malaysia is understood as the obligatory and identifying mark of the Malay-Muslim (male and female, to varying degrees), is a significant trope underlying the themes of the graphic mark, the body and social power in the production of personal, ethno-religious and national identities.

Modernity dislocated Malay/sian-Muslims from their rural settings and ethno-religious traditions. This led to a crisis of identity which was resolved by marking the body with signs of Islam - speech, attire and diet – in order to maintain a sense of identity and continuity. Significantly, these embodied practices were also accompanied by the sustained presence of circumcision as an ethno-religious and national index. Given the current status of circumcision in Malaysia as an exclusive mark of Islamic identity, I argue in this dissertation that an analysis of modern Malaysian art through the trope of circumcision would be beneficial to: (1) explore the body as a symbolic object or an artifact in which histories and ideologies are localized; and (2) explore the status of the

¹ The term Malay/sian and Malay will be used alternately. Malays in Malaysia are all Muslims.

body as not simply a surface that host marks but is itself a collection of marks from the beginning.

In relation to modern art, this analysis interrogates the figurative-abstract dichotomy in art criticism, in particular as pertains to abstract expressionism, and identifies the possibility of understanding of non-figurative art, i.e. the absencing of the body, as itself a discourse of the body. I argue that this understanding of the body is crucial if one is to address the Malay/sian scenario fully, where the Malay-Muslim body outside the canvas is systematically marked while within the canvases of Malay-Muslim artists, generally speaking, the body is exiled. This is done so that they may be filled with abstract motifs taken from traditional indigenous and/or Arabo-Islamic traditions. In this dissertation I juxtapose these seemingly disparate realms of marking in order to investigate the shaping of Malay-Muslim flesh and canvases into the bodies of the nation. What this study seeks to accomplish ultimately is an understanding of the roles of mark and marking in the formation of the individual and the social body by looking at the relationship between inscription, the inscribed and the inscribing body.

Context

Artists throughout the history of modern Malaysian art have constantly laboured to articulate local identity and project a sense of collective belonging. Among the early Malay painters this was done through depictions of the bodies of rural Malays, which were held as signifying a collective indigenous identity and their struggle in the modern nation-state. Such was the mission of a collective known as the *Angkatan Pelukis*

Semenanjung (Peninsular Painters) during the 1950s, when Malayan² nationalism and the struggle for independence were at their peak. These painters dwelled on depicting the native's bodies in their rural landscapes and activities. For them the body 'names' the land, conferring an identity upon the soil that hosted them.

The interest in the relationship between the body and the land continued in the 1960s, immediately after national independence. But this time it was registered in a different form, through a landscape that is abstracted by the force of the painter's gesture that produced swift, energetic marks. During this period, modern Malaysian painters were exposed to Abstract Expressionism. They re-interpreted its conceptual base to address their own local Malaysian context. It was understood that the painter's gesture and emotion, i.e. the body and its interiority, signifies both the national and individual jubilation and optimism inspired by the act of de-colonization.

Abstraction became more pronounced in the 1980s-1990s among Malay/sian-Muslim artists. These were the years of Malay-Islamic revivalism, when the quest for personal and collective identity was undertaken by referencing traditional arts that are non-figurative in character. The general tendency during this time was to rejuvenate the abstract motifs on canvas and disowning the human figure in painting. However, while the artists were busy absenting the body from their canvas, the general Malay/sian-Muslim population was committed to offering their bodies to the marks of Islam.

As a result of rapid modernization, a crisis of identity had emerged among Malay/sians. This crisis was handled by turning to Islam as a point of anchorage to ensure a sense of community and cultural continuity while entering modernity. The result of this

² Malaysia was formed in 1965; before that it was known as Malaya. Malaya will be used throughout this dissertation when referring to pre-1965 period.

move was the offering of the body to the marks of Islam, through diet, clothing and behaviour. It was contended that Islam defines Malayness and sets the Malays apart as a people in the ambiguity of modern life and within the multi-ethnic nation. Significantly, this embodied politics is accompanied by the public appearances of the subject of circumcision under the auspices of the state. In the Malaysian context, circumcision is understood as the defining fleshly mark of Islam, and all Malaysians of Malay descent are Muslims.

These factors give shape to this dissertation, in which I propose that the variations of bodily discourses in both art and non-art contexts can be strung together by the trope of circumcision. It will be shown that not only does circumcision imprint a communal logo upon the Malay body but it is also implicated with the mythical origin of the state. The latter is significant in the study of modern Malay/sian art, for the state is not only responsible for mobilizing Malay bodies but also for instituting the notion of a national identity that is premised on (Malay-Islamic) ethno-religious affiliations. The catalyst for this phenomenon can be traced to the racial strife that occurred in 1969. To fully appreciate all these, a quick glimpse into Malaysian history is necessary.

The story of Malaysia is plotted by successive waves of migration and encounters with foreigners. Archaeological and linguistic evidence suggest that habitation began between 4000 and 3000 BC, when proto-Austronesian speakers from Taiwan migrated southward through the Philippines, northern Borneo, Sulawesi and central Java. This was followed by migrations into Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and Vietnam (Bellwood 1997). The region's early (documented) history was characterized by significant Hindu and Buddhist influences that culminated under the Srivijaya empire which began around

the 5th century in Palembang (Southern Sumatra) and reached its peak during 10th-11th century (Munoz 2006; Coedes 1968; Wolters 1967). Its influence extended throughout Java, the Malay Peninsula and Borneo. Scholars have also argued that Srivijaya had different centers, which had shifted from time to time before Sumatra came to host its capital. For example, J.L. Moens' study of the Tang Annals (China) led him to conclude that the centre was at first located near what is now Kelantan, a state on the north-east coast of the Malaysian Peninsula (Suleiman 1980). Archeological finds identify some centers of Srivijaya on the peninsula, located in the states of Kedah (north west), Perlis (north west) and Perak (central west) (Jamal & Yatim 1980). Roland Braddell suggests that Sabak, a region in the west coast of Borneo, might also have been a Srivijayan capital given that Arab sources referred to the King of Srivijaya as the King of Zabag (Braddell 1980).

Considerable archaeological finds pointing to the notion of Melayu (Malay) has been dated to the reign of Srivijaya. They refer to 'Malayu' as a kingdom in southern Sumatra, located somewhere within the vicinity of Palembang and Jambi (Southern Sumatra). Stone inscriptions dated to the 10th century speak of a kingdom called Malaiyur in the area of Jambi. Other evidence suggests that Malayu had existed before Srivijaya and then became a part of the empire. O.W. Wolters wrote of I Tsing, a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who visited Palembang/Srivijaya in 671, and who in his later voyages between 672 and 692, recorded that "Malayu was now Srivijaya" (Wolters 1967: 17). A threat of rebellion from Malayu against Srivijaya was recorded on a stone inscription dated 686 found in Jambi (Suleiman1980).

According to Leonard Andaya (2004) the Malay Peninsula became a significant part of Melayu when immigrants from Palembang established the Melakan empire in the 15th century. This is immediately followed by the establishment of Islam on the Malay Peninsula, marking the height of the Melakan empire, which ended with the Portuguese invasion in 1511. In 1641, the Portuguese were ousted by their commercial competitor, the Dutch, who were assisted by the exiled Melakan leadership. In 1786, the British acquired the island of Penang through a treaty with the Sultan of Kedah. Direct and widespread British colonization began in 1874, with the signing of the Treaty of Pangkor through which the tin-rich state of Perak came under British rule (Hooker 2003; Andaya & Andaya 2001).

Malaya gained its independence on 31 August 1957, to be governed by the Alliance coalition composed of three ethnic-based parties: UMNO (United Malays National Organization), MCA (Malayan Chinese Association), and MIC (Malayan Indian Congress). The formation of the Alliance was preceded by an agreement between the parties in 1955 which stated that “the non-Malay parties accepted Malay political hegemony in exchange for citizenship rights” (Cheah 1999: 105).³ The new agreement formed a new legal basis for Malay political dominance and restored the continuation of the pro-Malay policy.⁴ This was a political blow to non-Malays, especially the Chinese who constitute the largest ethnic minority in the peninsula.

³ Between 1850 and 1930 the colonial government brought in a massive influx of immigrants from China and India as labourers. Occupation was divided according to ethnicity: Chinese were placed in tin-mines and in commerce, Indians in rubber and oil palm estates and Malays in agriculture. This led to a socio-economic imbalance and deep racial tensions that Malaysia is still grappling with till today.

⁴ The Malay’s special status as the indigenous people was threatened in 1946, when the British, in an effort to recover from the war in Europe instituted the Malayan Union proposal to centralize Malaya to maximize control over its resources. Under the proposal “citizenship would be widened to include non-Malays ... The Malay sultans will retain their positions but sovereignty would be transferred to the British Crown” (Andaya and Andaya 2001: 264-6). The proposal was halted due to Malay protests.

The ethnic tension culminated in the 1969 general election in which the Chinese took the opportunity for the first time since independence to express their political frustrations by backing the non-Malay parties. Their victory was celebrated on the street of Kuala Lumpur with provocative slogans like ‘Malays May Return to their Villages’, ‘Kuala Lumpur⁵ Now Belongs to the Chinese’ (Goh 1971). The Malays, still grappling with the economic and educational disadvantage (Lee 1971-72), responded, engaging in days of rioting and violence. The incident made it possible, for the first time since independence, for the Malays to reactivate and rationalize their political hegemony through a political ideology derived from the special rights of the Malays as *bumiputera* (son of the soil, i.e. indigenous) (Mariappan 2002; Verma 2002). This became a central driving force for a Malay-dominated government to formulate and implement subsequent policies that were aimed specifically at urbanizing and modernizing the Malays.

In 1972 the New Economic Policy (NEP) was implemented to urbanize the Malays and turn them into active players of modernity and industrialization (Verma 2002; Marriappan 2002; Mutalib 1990; Ali 1981; Malaysia 1971). This was preceded by the National Cultural Congress (NCC) in 1971 which outlined the criteria for a common national identity that privileges traditional Malay elements. The NEP and NCC began to show their results by the 1980s. The Malays increasingly left their villages to pursue tertiary education and to become the middle-class in the cities. The numbers of formally trained Malay artists also increased significantly, actively asserting their ethnic and religious affiliations through the channel of modern art. These developments illustrate the cyclical relationship between the NEP and the NCC to produce and market Malay culture, in art, handicrafts, performances, films, music, museums and theme parks

⁵ Capital of Malaysia

(Gomes 1999; Kahn 1992). In turn, these products were consumed by the growing urban-based Malay middle-class as a way to maintain connection to its history and culture.

As a modernization program the NEP encourages out-migration of the Malays from their villages into the cities. This produced a crisis of identity among the Malay immigrants, which was resolved by turning to Islam as a stabilizing element. Consequently, this led to the increased embracing and popularity of an Islamic discourse among urban Malays who increasingly began to inscribe their bodies with the marks of Islam.

It is within this context that paintings by Malay artists after the 1970s came to be dominated by non-figurative themes, inspired particularly by motifs from Islamic patterning and traditional textiles that were understood as embodying elements of both Malay and Islamic identity. Since the absence of the body in these works is conceived within a general context of bodily inscription, their significance must be clarified beyond the figurative-abstract dichotomy. Circumcision, the exclusive mark of the Malay-Muslim, is proposed in this dissertation as the trope that governs the themes of the graphic mark, the body and social power in the creation of personal, ethnic, religious and national identities.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology:

Within the current academic convention, this dissertation locates itself within the field of Malaysian Studies, a sub-branch of Southeast Asian Studies, with a focus on modern art and theoretical underpinnings in post-structuralist analysis.

The artworks discussed in this study were viewed personally during my fieldwork in 2005. The contextual materials informing them, which informed my explication of the works, are gathered through archival research as well as based on my own personal experience as a Malay/sian citizen. The data are assessed according to the objective of this research to locate the trace of circumcision in modern Malaysian art. In doing so, I take cue from the writings on modern Malaysian art as well as those on modern Southeast Asian art and supplemented them with the discourse of the body.

Writers on modern Malaysian art such as Redza Piyadasa (1998a; 1998b, 1994; 1993; Piyadasa & Sabapathy 1983), Yeoh Jin Leng (1997; 1988), Kanaga Sabapathy (1996a; 1995) and Zakaria Ali (1991; 1979) demonstrate that local history and tradition are central to the shaping of modern Malaysian Asian art. Similar emphasis was also given by scholars of modern Southeast Asian art such as Nora Taylor (2000), John Clark (1998; 1993), Apinan Poshyananda (1996; 1992), Jim Supangkat (1996) and Astri Wright (1994).

These scholars argue that modernism in Southeast Asia must not be interpreted according to the Euro-American canon. Instead, it must be assessed within the context of local histories and contingencies. Astri Wright cautions against imposing a 'western' art historical discourse onto Southeast Asian modernism, reminding us that the "cultural vocabulary" which underlies the images "are rooted in a reality [historical and contemporary] which has a different anatomy than that of modern Western art" (Wright 1994: 6). Jim Supangkat (1996) argues that modernism in Indonesia is based on a different premise from Euro-American modernism. While the latter is founded on the ideals of the avant-garde that are hostile to the idea of tradition, the latter was premised

on the revival of traditions. He emphasizes the fact that the beginning of modernism in Indonesia was inseparable from nation building hence was dependent on forming a coalition (or at least on promoting the ideal of partnership) between modernity and the existing local traditions. John Clark shows that this phenomenon is also true in the general discourse of modernism in Asia. He argues that Asian artistic modernism, unlike the Euro-American avant-garde, was never founded on hostility towards heritage in favour of the new. "[F]or the Asian artists, history becomes a ferocious domain of subjectification in their work" (Clark 1998:297).

In short, any reading or interpretation of modern Malaysian art is obliged to take into account the various factors surrounding the artwork and its production. To access these factors one must get acquainted with what Astri Wright (1994) terms 'cultural vocabulary' which provides the screen of meanings onto the art works. In art historical terms, a fuller understanding of an artwork may be achieved through iconographic analysis, which assume that "every image contains a certain amount of ... 'symbolic' matter which may be elicited by a close reading of the image and some knowledge of the referential context of the work" (Preziosi 1998: 231). My analyses of the different layers of symbolism in modern Malaysian art observed this framework, drawing from various sources in order to explicate the signification of the images in relation to the Malaysian context. These sources include the materials on modern Malaysian art as well as the historical studies on modern Malaysia mentioned below in the literature review. I also consulted anthropological and ethnographic materials to explicate the symbolisms of circumcision. These include the scholarship of Wessing (2006), Bougas (1994), Kershaw (1979), Wilder (1970) and Winstedt (1982; 1969; 1950; 1926).

Through the subject of circumcision I re-conceptualize the notion of history, tradition and culture as the ‘domain of subjectification’ in the discourses of modern Malaysian art, thus providing a conceptual framework by which to interpret the works produced by modern Malay-Islamic artists from the perspective, and at the level, of the body. I capitalize here on the notion of ‘the body imprinted by history’ by Michel Foucault for a general theoretical framework to articulate the working of history on the body. Foucault’s observation of the relationship between social power and embodiment also underlies Aihwa Ong’s interpretation of the body politics in modern Malaysia. In this dissertation I attempt to negotiate all these approaches to offer a reading of modern Malaysian art through the concept of embodiment. I believe this aspect of modern Malaysian art needs to be critically addressed, not only because modern Malaysian artists have persistently articulated local identity through the image of the body, but also due to the significance of the body in modern Malaysian cultural politics.

Literature Review:

Modern Artists of Malaysia (Sabapathy & Piyadasa 1983) can be singled out as the publication that offers the most comprehensive overview of modern Malaysian art. It elaborates on a selection of major artists whom the authors see as engaging the dominant themes that define the development of modern Malaysian art. *Vision and Idea: Re-looking Modern Malaysian Art* (National Art Gallery, 1994) is also an important resource, containing a collection of essays that explore the conceptual themes of modern Malaysian art. These themes are defined as reflecting ‘the nation’s deep history and mythology’. The article ‘Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art

in Post-Independence Period' by Redza Piyadasa (in Clark 1993: 169-81) provides an excellent summary on the subject, which the author argues is based on a merging between regionalism and internationalism.

A Brief History of Malayan Art (Hsii 1999) is an early account of the subject. Written by a Chinese school-teacher who emigrated from China in the 1920s, the book provides a significant counterpoint to those written by local authors. Hsii argues that Chinese émigré artists makes a major contribution to Malaysian art while contending that western aesthetics provides a significant neutral ground for the multi-ethnic nation. Similarly, the essays in *Semangat Pelopor Seni 1950an-1960an* (National Art Gallery 1997) and *Retrospektif Pelukis Nanyang* explore the role of Chinese émigré artists in introducing modernism to Malaysian art.

Writings on modern Malaysian art occur largely through curatorial essays that can be found in exhibition catalogues. They are general in nature, providing quick overviews of the subject. The more elaborate ones can be found in *Rupa Malaysia: A Decade of Art 1987-1997* (National Art Gallery 1997), *The Pioneering Spirit* (Yeoh 1997), *Vision and Ideas: Relooking Malaysian Art* (Sabapathy (ed.): 1995), *Contemporary Paintings of Malaysia*. (National Art Gallery, 1988) and *Contemporary Artists of Malaysia: A Biographic Survey*. (Asia Society, 1971). The essay 'Thematic Approaches to Malaysian Art History' by Sabapathy (1996) is significant in this regard, because the author attempts to amend the 'diffused aims' and 'fluctuating scholastic activities' that characterize writings on modern Malaysian art.

The subject of identity is the focus of the essays in *Persoalan Seni Rupa Sezaman: Cetusan Rasa Seniman Malaysia* (Yayasan Kesenian Perak, 2003)

Kemalaysiaan Senilukis Malaysia: Soal Identiti (National Art Gallery, 1991), *Seni dan Nationalisme* (National Art Gallery, 1991) and *Tradisi, Kemodenan dan Jatidiri* (Yayasan Kesenian Perak, 1999). 'Art and Identity' by Zakaria Ali (1979) is also significant publication, offering a critical and comparative viewpoint.

The topic of Islam in modern Malay/sian artistic identity is explored in 'Malaysian Art: A Search for Local and Islamic Identity (Awang 1990), *Identiti Islam Dalam Seni Rupa Malaysia: Pencapaian dan Cabaran* (Esa 1992), 'The Reflowering of the Islamic Spirit in Contemporary Malaysian Art' (Esa 1993), *Islam and the Politics of Art in Post-Independence Malaysia* (Esa 1997) and 'From Traditional to Modern Malaysian Art: The Dialectics of Displacement and Reappropriation' (Esa 1997b). In these writings, Esa argues that Islam defines Malay identity and is therefore the foundation of the modern Malay aesthetic. 'Sacred Pictures Secular Frames' (Rajah 1998) explores how traditional Islamic emphasis on stylization is re-interpreted by modern Malaysian artists. Their re-examination of the visual vocabularies of the local traditions as well as those from outside (India, Persia and the Middle East) enables them to engage the modernist principle that rests on abstraction in local terms.

Reviews on modern Malaysian art appear occasionally in art periodicals such as *Art and Asia Pacific* and *Asian Art News*, which focus on contemporary art and individual artists. *Asian Art News* 6 (5): Sept./Oct. 1996 is devoted to Malaysia and thus provides a fair overview of modern Malaysian art and artists working in the mid- to the late 1990s.

The development of modern Malaysian art revolves around the question of identity and national history and closely intertwines with the ideological networks of the

larger socio-historical contexts. More specifically, to paraphrase Redza Piyadasa, it is a ‘critical extension’ of the 1971 National Cultural Congress. Therefore, my study on the subject proceeds in tandem with the history of the NCC and its repercussions. The original papers/proposals tabled during the NCC can be found in *Asas Kebudayaan Kebangsaan* (Malaysia 1973). The implementations of these proposals are further articulated in *Masyarakat dan Kebudayaan Malaysia: Satu Analisis Perkembangan Kebudayaan di Malaysia* (Deraman 2001) and *Beberapa Aspek Pembangunan Kebudayaan kebangsaan Malaysia* (Deraman 1978). This research also draws from scholarly studies on the cultural politics of post-NCC Malaysia offered by *Malaysia, State and Civil Society in Transition* (Verma 2002), *Cultural Contestations* (Ibrahim 1998) *Modernity and Identity* (Gomes 1994), and *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia* (Kahn & Loh 1990).

Given the ethno-religious specificity of the present research, I draw significantly on materials that address such thematics. The Islamic discourse that followed the NCC and NEP and continues to shape contemporary Malaysia are examined in *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics* (Mutalib 1990), *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia* (Anwar 1987) and *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam, Modern Religious Radicals and Their Roots* (Nagata 1984). *The Origin of Malay Nationalism* (Roff 1967) details the pivotal role of Islam in shaping Malay nationalism in the early 1900s, hence is indispensable for understanding its current forms. The significance of these specific themes can also be better contextualized in tandem with more general historical studies such as *A Short History of Malaysia, Linking East and West* (Hooker 2003) and *A History of Malaysia* (Andaya & Andaya 2001) that include pre-modern Malaysia. Andaya (2004), Wolters

(1967) and Coedes (1968) provide valuable study on the emergence of the notion of *Melayu* (Malay) in the early history of the region.

The conceptual trajectory of this dissertation hinges on the subject of circumcision. As in the case of modern Malaysian art, a comprehensive scholarly study on Malay circumcision is also non-existent. Apart from a film produced by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage (Malaysia 2000?), the materials on the subject come from the vignettes found in anthropological and ethnographic literature. The latter includes ‘Traditional Circumcision Rites in Patani and Kelantan’ (Bougas 1994), *Berkhatan* (Malaysia 1981), ‘Menace and Reassurance in Malay Circumcision (Kershaw 1979) and *Asal-Usul Adat Resam Melayu* (Sidin 1964). The film offers important visual clues to the elaborate pre-modern/-Islamic, indigenous symbolisms and mythologies that are associated with the rite. Their explication is inferred from the textual materials contained in the *Malay Annals* (Shellabear 1961; Cheah et.al. 1998), *History of Java* (Raffles 1965), *The Malay Magician* (Winstedt 1982) and *Malay Magic* (Skeat 1972). The Islamic contents of the rite can be found in *Circumcision in Islam* (Abdu’r-Razzaq 1998), ‘Hukum Berkhatan’ (Abdul Ghani 1994), and ‘He Was Born Circumcised’ (Kister 1994). A global history of the rite is offered by Gollaher (2000) in his *Circumcision: A History of the World’s Most Controversial Surgery*.

Chapter Summaries.

Chapter 1 is divided into two sections. The first section provides an overview of the historical development of modern Malaysian art. It identifies the artists considered to be representative of the particular periods and/or themes. It argues that modern Malaysian art has been concerned with the question of identity since its very inception. The early

versions of this concern mutate into a discourse of ethnicity and nationalism. The second section looks at how this transformation occurred at the level of the body and traces the emergence of circumcision as a conceptual category that can be employed to interpret modern Malay/sian art.

Chapter 2 looks at the subject of circumcision and discusses the levels of symbolism that historically occurred during the rite. Although the rite is commonly understood by Malay/sian-Muslims as a mark of Islamic affiliation, the symbolic dimensions lead into a much more complex territory, including the myth of origin of the Malay proto-state. Therefore, the rite carried a specific ideological bearing that is imposed on the body. The chapter concludes with reflections on the implication of circumcision in our readings of modern Malaysian art and the possibility of locating its trace in the latter.

Chapter 3 identifies the use of textile motifs in modern paintings as an extension of the code of circumcision by being founded upon the notion of bodily inscription in a more general sense. It argues that within the ethno-nationalist context of post-1971 NCC textile exists as the exteriority of the body as well as its interior. The latter can be located around the notion of national 'soul' and/or 'personality' that is attributed to national cloth/attire. The chapter also includes a detailed discussion of a painting by Mastura Abdul Rahman. It argues that her work contains the signification of a circumcising mother who turns an infant into an individual by weaning him/her into the realm of the symbolic thus the social. As such, the mother's body exists as an ideological site, which explains the emphasis on maternal metaphor as the body of the nation in modern Malay/sian art

Chapter 4 examines abstract expressionism in modern Malaysian art where gestural and graphic spontaneity symbolize the nationalistic sentiment during the years that followed national independence. Taking the work of Syed Ahmad Jamal as a case study, I argue that the painter's gesture is the effect of being inscribed, and that what appears to be spontaneous ejections of marks are in fact a result of rigorous discipline and deliberation. Therefore, the 'expressive' brushstroke is in fact a result of a certain limit imposed on, or repression of, the body by socio-cultural conventions. It is here that the trace of circumcision is located, as a body that is both subjected to and empowered by an external force.

The concluding chapter summarizes the arguments that were presented throughout the chapters and re-iterates the location of modern Malaysian art within the dialectics between inscription and the body. Within the ethno-religious confine of modern Malay/sian embodied identity, the implication is that such an assessment can be engaged in local terms through the logic of circumcision. The relevance is further emphasized by the fact that not only is circumcision commonly understood in Malaysia as the mark of Islam, but the symbolic dimensions of the rite also allude to pre-Islamic significance which revolves around the mythical origin of the Malay proto-state. This tells us that the rite not only carries a religious meaning but also fulfils a fundamental secular and ideological function. It is the latter's significance that is pursued in this dissertation to articulate the body as the place where traditions, histories and ideologies are localized.

Contribution

This research contributes to our knowledge on modern Malaysian art, which has neither been amply documented nor studied, whether locally, regionally or internationally. It also introduces a specialized discussion on the subject of the body, which has neither appeared in the analyses of modern Malaysian art nor within the context Malaysian Studies. The same may be claimed for the field of Southeast Asian Studies as a whole. This study also contributes to the field of art theory and criticism, which occurs especially in my examination of the relationship between inscription and the body that question the conventional art historical demarcation between figurative and abstract art. The general field of (western) Art History will also benefit from my exposition of the ways Euro-American modernism and visual traditions are translated in a non-western context and history.

CHAPTER 1: Modern Malaysian Art: Historical Overview (1930s – 1990s) and the Subject of the Body

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section provides an overview of the development of modern Malaysian art and identifies the artists who are considered representatives of particular periods in this development. In charting the course of this history, one finds that the issue of identity is the constant under which modern Malaysian art operates. Artistic productions are driven by the need to articulate modernity in local terms, by people with diverse cultural and genetic roots who continuously labor to ensure that artistic modernity attains local relevance. By doing so, the force of artistic modernity is ‘tamed’ whereby art may function as cultural renewal, thus providing a sense of cultural and historical continuity. With the advent of nationalism this process became intertwined with state-formation. Art gained particular trajectories, dissected into ethnic and religious traditions, became a part of nation building. The role of Malay nationalism has been privileged on the theatre of state-formation. The plot thickens in the aftermath of the 1969 racial riot, following the 1971 National Cultural Congress that identified Malay tradition and Islam as the foundations for national culture and ‘soul’.

The second section of this chapter traces this ideological dynamics at the level of the body. It takes cues from the fact that Malay nationalism in art was inaugurated through the figurative genre. It will be argued that the absenting of the body in the Malay-Islamic art of the 1980s-90s does not constitute a pure opposition to the figurative genre. Instead, the replacing of the human figure by abstracted markers of identity will be seen as itself a discourse on the body. In this way, abstraction and the figurative genre will be posited as constitutive of each other. In addition, it will be argued that Malay-

Islamic abstraction implicates the body by being conceived during the period when Malay bodies are being deliberately veiled by the marks of Islam. Since Islam is understood in modern Malaysia as one of the core elements that defines Malayness, the final portion of this chapter will invoke the subject of circumcision, which is considered by Malay/sians as the defining and obligatory mark of Islam.⁶

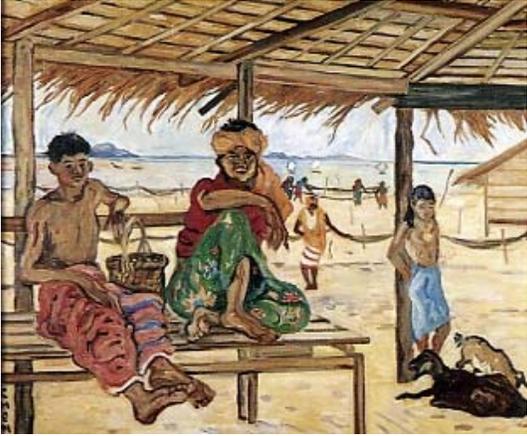
Modern Malaysian Art: A Historical Overview

The Formative Period: The Nanyang and Penang Artists

It is generally contended that modern Malay/sian art, as a sustained and coherent effort, received its initial impetus with the arrival of Chinese immigrant artists in Singapore during the early 1900s (Hsii 1999; Yeoh 1997; Piyadasa 1994; Piyadasa 1993; Sabapathy and Piyadasa 1983; Beamish 1954). The activities of those termed the Nanyang Artists (FIG. 1-4) have been identified as the beginning of modernity in the art objects of the region, with painting as the privileged object and activity in/of this history. Its story unfolds as Chinese artists, mostly from Shanghai, started to migrate south in the 1930s to find refuge from ideological conflict and Japanese invasion of China (Yeoh 1988; Piyadasa 1979). The arrival of these painters “proved to be consequential to the development of the contemporary movement in painting in the two island ports of Penang and Singapore and eventually in British Malaya” (Yeoh 1988: 52).

One of these artists was Lim Hak Tai who came to Singapore in 1937. Following his arrival was the establishment of The Nanyang Academy of Fine Art in 1938, with

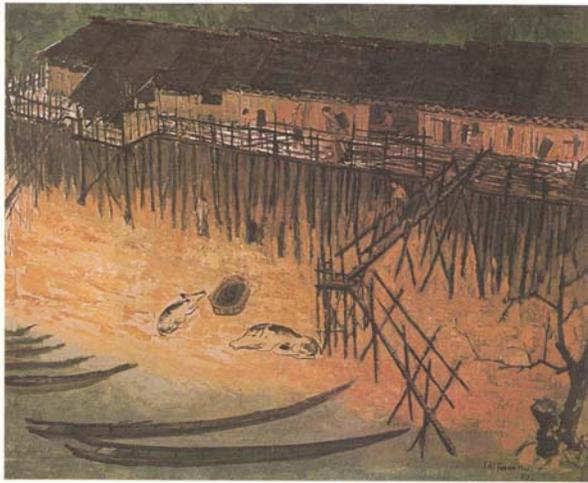
⁶ This applies to both male and female circumcision.



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Lim himself as the principal of the academy (Tan 1994; 1992).⁷ The project was funded by a group of Chinese merchants, especially one under the name of Tan Bee Siang (Yeoh 1988) and a group of local Chinese millionaires/art collectors (Piyadasa 1979).⁸ The teachers at the academy were Chinese immigrants, largely comprised of the alumni of three art schools in China: Shanghai Art University, the Shanghai School of Fine Arts and the Sin Hua Academy. All of them were rigorously trained in traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting. Prior to the establishment of the Nanyang Academy, these artists had formed the Salon of Art Studies in 1935, later re-named Society of Chinese Artists (Yeoh 1997). They were also familiar with the artistic currents of Europe; they recognized the dominance of Impressionism, Fauvism and German impressionism, due to their training in China by a generation of artists “who had gone to Paris ... in the wake of the modernization process propagated by Chinese intellectuals and revolutionaries” (Piyadasa 1994: 29).⁹

European modernism that was examined in China would now be explored throughout the south-seas (Nanyang) region of British Malaya. Although equipped with the knowledge of both European modernism and Chinese visual tradition, these artists aspired “to establish a uniquely Nanyang (south-seas) style” (Yeoh 1988: 54). This was submitted through the themes of local landscapes and subjects, depicted in manners in

⁷ The academy is still operating today.

⁸ They are: Datuk Loke Wan Tho, Datuk Tan Tsze Chor, Datuk Lee Kong Chian and Datuk Aw Cheng Chye. The prefix ‘Datuk’ is an honorific title bestowed by Malay royalty upon distinguished individuals, both females and males.

⁹ The Nanyang painters brought with them a long and dynamic history of both traditional and modern Chinese painting. During the early 20th century artists in China attempted to reform traditional art as a part of the larger project of cultural renewal, and they looked to the west for inspiration. Beijing was the center of intellectual and artistic reform up to the mid-1920s, when it was violently suppressed by the government. An exodus of leading artists and intellectuals taking refuge in Shanghai ensued. By this time Shanghai was already a leading centre of economic and cultural modernity, with its prime area occupied by the International Settlement and French Concession. All these were among the determinant factors that helped to shape Shanghai into a centre of modern art (See Clarke 2000; Clark 1990; Sullivan 1996).

which European modernism and Chinese ink-brush tradition consciously merged. The hybridization of the painterly vocabularies became more intensified with the arrival of Cheong Soo Pieng and Chen Wen Hsi from the Sin Hua Academy (Shanghai) and Georgette Chen from Paris, whose visual experimentation attempted to fuse renaissance naturalist principles with the aesthetics of Chinese scroll-painting. Beamish (1954) wrote of Cheong Soo Pieng as an outstanding representative of the modern school of Malayan painting who is “constantly experimenting with new techniques” to combine “the flowing line of Eastern painting with Western cubism” (Beamish 1954: 37). A similar mingling of tradition and modernism is also evident in the works of Lai Foong Moi, whom Sabapathy & Piyadasa (1983) considers as “one of the most important woman artists” (p.45) in the Singapore-Malayan region.¹⁰ The simplification of form in her *Gadis Melayu* (Malay Girl) (FIG. 4), for instance, abandoned the refinement of contour, resulting a certain harshness and monumentality in the figure that is reminiscent of Paul Gauguin’s Tahitian women. But the minimum tonality and the compressing of space emphasize the flatness of the figure and pictorial plane, bringing a crucial convention of Chinese painting into the composition. Traces of Chinese aesthetics are more evident in *Rumah Panjang* (Long House) (FIG. 3) where linearity predominates her interpretation of Borneo’s tribal heartland. Similar principle can also be seen at work in Cheong Soo Pieng’s *Kampung Nelayan* (FIG.2).

¹⁰ Except for Ariana Rabindranath’s Master thesis (2003), I do not know any other systematic studies on Malaysian female painters. However, texts on the subject do appear in curatorial essays and art periodicals, especially since the mid-1980s. Rabindranath (2003), Sharifah Zuriah (1988) and Galeri Petronas (1999) argue that female artists have progressively achieved a place of their own in modern Malaysian art. They have moved “from being models of men artists to the role of being artists and art educators in their own right” (Sharifah Zuriah 1988:87). Although Laura Fan (1999) reminds us that cultural expectations placed on women as the primary caregiver is a crucial aspect that has to be addressed critically regarding the development of women artists in Malaysia, both she and Rabindranath (2003) argued that Malaysian female artists have been constantly developing personal styles that are born from “strong individual identities” (Rabindranath 2003: 7).

The consistent use of indigenous subject-matter and reference to tradition tell us that these early Malayan modernists were concerned with the “issues of cultural identity, of content and relevance and of pictorial composition”, which they addressed with “verve and honesty” through a “synthesis of East and West” (Yeoh 1988: 54). In this sense, Malayan modernism departed from the European model. “The subsequent syncretization”, wrote Piyadasa, “bore a sophistication that had not been seen in Malaya earlier. Their domination of the art scene during the late 1940s and 1950s were to be expected” (Piyadasa 1994: 30). This merging of elements uses a method central to the indigenous civilization of the region, the syncretism that Astri Wight describes in her discussion of modern Indonesian art as “processes of adaptation and assimilation of foreign elements, forging them into a personally and culturally unique idiom” (Wright 1994: 93-4). Such a process, according to Clifford Geertz, is at the core of social struggle and (re)formation, for “balanced syncretism” is especially critical during social and ideological changes. The capacity to equilibrate and synthesize the foreign with the familiar, the global with the local, would enhance the chances for survival of any social and cultural group confronting historical contingencies (Geertz 1973: 147-8). Stummer & Balme (1996) similarly argued that

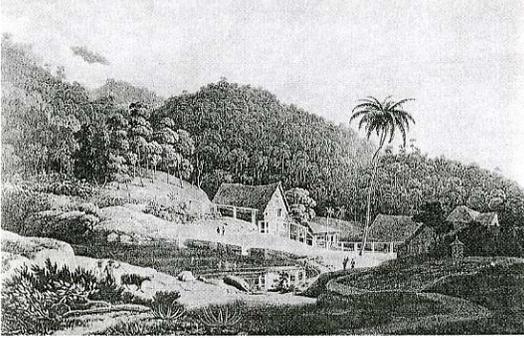
cultures which find themselves in a process of rapid change, crisis, and acculturation are continually involved ... in ... constant re-evaluation of cultural practices. ... writers and artists involved in creating and working in syncretic processes are having to refashion meanings from diverse cultural sources to create a new quilt in which the seams have varying degrees of visibility (Stummer & Balme 1996:13)

The interpretative dialogue between the old and the new is “refined by references to the process of syncretism, the tendency to identify those elements in the new culture with similar elements in the old one, enabling the persons experiencing the contact to move

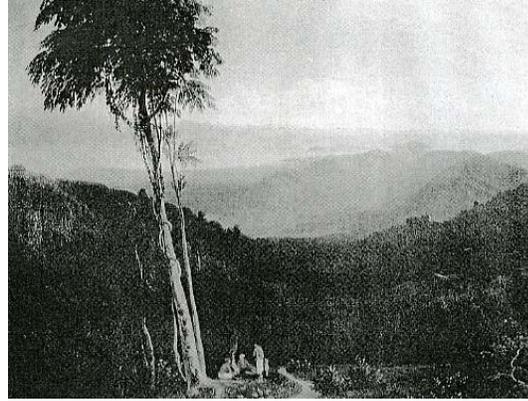
from one to the other, and back again, with psychological ease” (Herskovits 1958:57). In short, syncretism is both the point of departure as well as the end result, referring to the very mechanism that produces and sustains a given society, a process that is simultaneously subjective and historical.

The significance of the Nanyang artists is situated in their sensitivity and labor to facilitate a dialogue between worlds, through which the familiar is weaned and contracted with the foreign. Since such process is determinant of cultural survival in the sweeping current of change, it is particularly indispensable to an immigrant community, enabling the re/dis/located subject a degree of ‘ownership’ over their new home. This is evident in the consistent, almost exclusive, use by the artists of subject matters that are indigenous to the region. Similar dynamics are also staged at the northern tip of the Malay Peninsula, on the island of Penang.

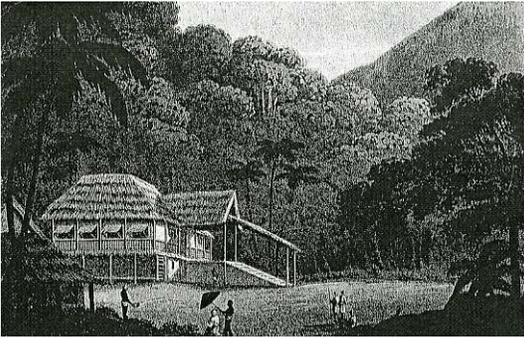
Like Singapore, Penang was also an international port, with a predominantly Chinese business community, European entrepreneurs and colonial officers. The island was the subject of some of the earliest colonial depictions of the peninsula, when it was visited by artists from the East India Company in the early 19th century, who were given the task to record the British Empire, which by then had included Malaya (Zakaria Ali 2000; McAlpin 1997) (see FIG. 5-8). Penang was veritably the seat of things Anglo, including art. Available on the island by late 19th century were journals such as *Punch* (1841) and *London Illustrated News* (1842) that featured reproductions of artists such as William Blake and Gustave Dore, thereby spreading European Romanticism to this corner of the British empire (Yeoh 1997).



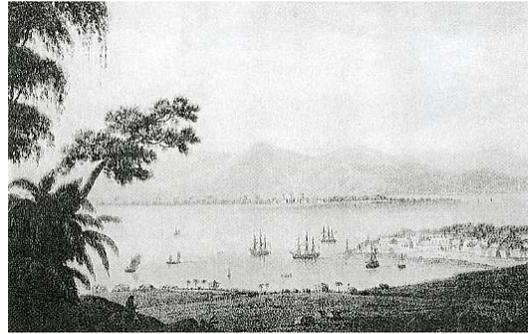
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In the 1920s there existed a group of artist who called themselves the Penang Impressionists. It was formed by the wives of the colonial officers who were stationed on the island at the time. It was an exclusive establishment, for no local painters were admitted into the circle, with the exception of Abdullah Ariff and Mrs. Lim Cheng Kung. The former was a self-taught Malay artist who was welcomed for his technical instructions, and the latter a Chinese millionaire's wife whose wealth supported the activities of the group (Yeoh 1997; Tan 1992). The Penang Impressionists was reported



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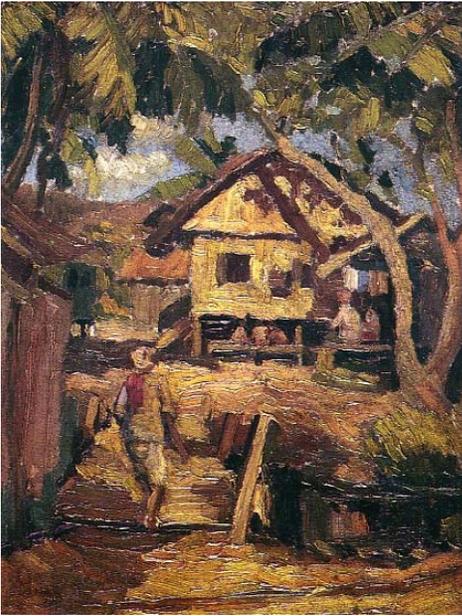
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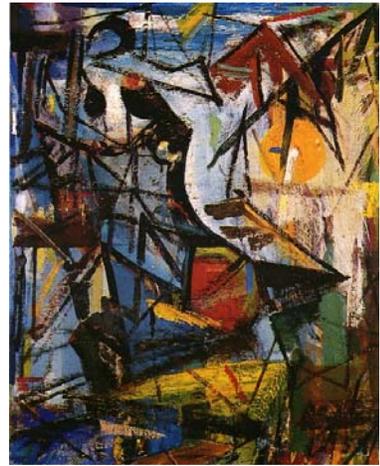
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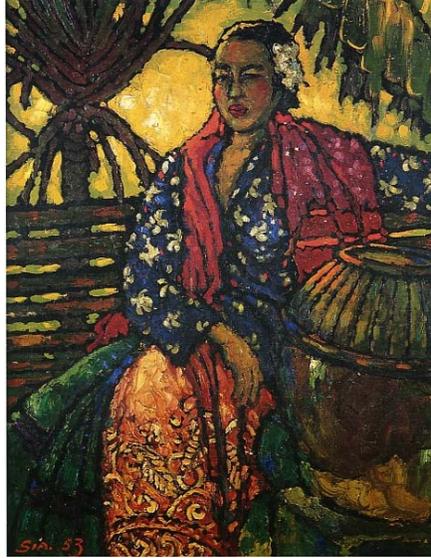
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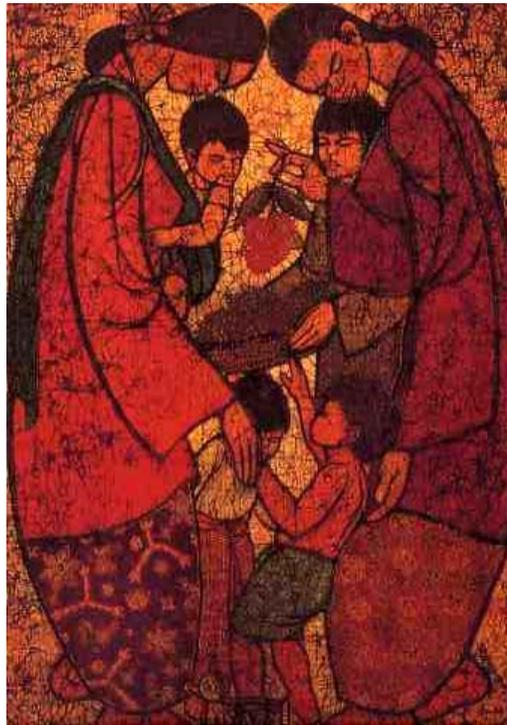
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as being quite lively, with annual exhibitions held regularly until 1937, when they ceased due the advent of the Second World War. Their last exhibition in 1937 featured, by special invitation, works by the Penang Chinese Art Club (Ibid). The Penang Impressionists was disbanded shortly thereafter, its members were either transferred or returned to Europe; the group was never reinstated.

As for the development of local artistic communities in Penang, their beginning is attributed to the painter Yong Mun Sen,¹¹ who arrived from Singapore in 1920. He immediately acquired a studio space, and soon began to display watercolors that are characterized by “sensitive fluid washes of color executed in Chinese ink-painting style” (Yeoh 1988: 54) (FIG. 9). His works “reflected conscious attempt to incorporate the Chinese artistic spirit” (Tan 1992: 10). The works by Yong, like most of his contemporaries such as Abdullah Ariff (FIG. 11), Khaw Sia (FIG. 15) and Kuo Ju-Ping (FIG. 13), were picturesque, “idyllic landscapes in the romantic tradition” (Yeoh 1997: 25). Tan Chee Khuan , gallery owner and collector of Yong’s works, considers him the Father of Malaysian Painting. Piyadasa (1994), however, disputed this claim after a discovery of a painting dated 1921 by a Malaccan based Chinese painter. He also pointed to the Sri Lanka-born O. Don Peris who became the court painter for the Sultan of Johor in 1922. In a provocative footnote, Piyadasa critiqued Tan’s claim as

somewhat amateurish and dilettantish and ... more harm than good has been done ... I [Piyadasa] do not like the idea of any particular Malaysian artist [being privileged as] the “Father” of the modern Malaysian art ... Its origins were ... complex [and] multi-faceted ... That Yong Mun Sen was one of the pioneers ... cannot be denied. So were ... others. ... with the discovery of ... pre-war artists such as Low Kway Song in Malacca and O. Don Peris in Johore, it has become even more difficult to justify the

¹¹ Yong is a fourth generation Chinese Malaysian, born in Sarawak (Borneo). He returned to China in 1901-10 and 1914-17 to study art in Quandong before deciding to settle in Malaya (Ooi 2002).

dubious claims made on behalf of Yong Mun Sen by Dr. Tan (Piyadasa 1994: 47 n. 12)

In response, Tan accused Piyadasa and his publisher (the National Art Gallery) of impinging upon his “right to freedom from public humiliation and mental anguish” (Tan 1998: 19). Threatened with a lawsuit by Tan, the National Art Gallery, after a few negotiations, agreed to revise the controversial footnote.

Yong Mun Sen might not be the definitive historical ‘father’ of modern Malaysian art. Nonetheless, he proved to be a very influential figure, a senior male, so-to-speak, in a diverse artistic community. In 1936 he allied the artists in Penang to form the Penang Chinese Art Club (Yeoh 1997; Tan 1992). The Malay painter, Abdullah Ariff also joined this collective and shared their interest in the landscape genre, rendering villages and seaside predominantly in watercolors. The group was also affected by the works of Lee Cheng Yong, who returned in 1934 from his study at the Shanghai Academy of Fine Art (Tan 1992). Penang Chinese Art Club was an active organization that held regular annual exhibitions, which were interrupted by the Japanese Occupation of Malaya in December 1941.

Japanese forces had frowned on cultural activities particularly of the Chinese. As a result, all evidence that could be incriminating to members of the Penang Chinese Art Club was put to the fire. ... [the occupation] curtailed activities of the art group ... the pressure ... to survive became the prime concern. Over four years of mental duress were stifling to the creative imagination (Yeoh 1997: 28)

The Penang art scene re-emerged after the Second World War. The Japanese departed and the Penang Art Society was formed in 1952, led by Loh Cheng Chuan, a physician, lover of poetry and Chinese calligraphy, and “a great collector of paintings” (Yeoh 1997: 29). It became the base for a number of prominent painters, such as Yong Mun Sen,

Chuah Thean Teng, Kuo Ju-Ping, Kaw Sia, Tay Mo-Leong and Tan Choon Ghee. Loh Cheng Chuan managed to secure fairly regular contributions from wealthy patrons, especially through regular exhibitions in Singapore and Ipoh, “where there were rich tin-miners and clients” (Yeoh 1997: 29). Loh also organized visiting artists from China, such as Xu Beihung and Da-Chien, who were familiar with European modernist currents and introduced Fauvism and Expressionism to the artists in Penang.

The familiarity with European modernism by the Shanghai painters, including those who made up the Nanyang establishment, can be attributed to the revolutionary developments taking place in China during the pre-War era, during which Chinese intellectuals were “adopting Western values and advocating modernizing reforms” (Piyadasa 1994: 26). One of the Penang artists, Chuah Thean Teng, related in an interview that local Chinese artists “were aware of the developments in China”, and his own earlier interest in woodcuts “was fuelled by books and periodicals arriving from China” (Piyadasa 1994: 27). This technical interest would be re-articulated in the form of batik technique, which “he learnt in Java during the war years [early 1940s]” (Yeoh 1988: 54) (see FIG. 16). This transport of traditional techniques into the painting convention “caused quite a stir and excitement when ... shown in Kuala Lumpur” (Yeoh 1988: 54) in April 1957 (Sullivan 1963).¹² The enthusiasm that surrounded his works was due to the fact that “the technique was an indigenous one ... which implies cultural traditions of the region” (Yeoh 1997: 26).

¹² This solo exhibition was preceded by two successful solo exhibitions: first in Penang in 1955, followed immediately by another one in Singapore. As Frank Sullivan put it, “[i]n the space of a few months Teng ... emerged in the top ranks of Malayan art as a happy philosopher of the human condition, embracing all Malaya and her people of many races” (Sullivan 1963, unpaginated).

Another important figure during this period was Tay Hooi Keat, who, in 1948, became the “first Malaysian to go to Britain to study art at the Camberwell School of Art” (Tan 1992: 6). Upon his return, he formed the Penang Art Teacher’s Council in 1952, consisting of local schoolteachers. The group held drawing and painting sessions/lessons on Thursdays, and was later re-named the Thursday Art Group in 1957. Active members included Tay Hooi Keat, Abdullah Ariff, Lee Joo For, Tan Lye Ho and William K.K. Lau. The group then merged with another number of teachers and re-formed as the Penang Teachers Art Circle in 1966. The circle hosted demonstrations by visiting artists, lectures/discussions on art trends and historical movements, as well as organizing field trips. (Yeoh 1997; Galeri Petronas 2001a) The group held its first exhibition in 1964, featuring watercolors, oils, sculptures and ceramic vases. The group remains active, with annual exhibitions held until today.

The significance of the Penang artists in the early developments of modern Malaysian art was noted by Piyadasa:

the emergence of modernist art impulse ... signaled ... new modern artistic commitment which ... allowed local artists the means of transcending their earlier, more prescriptive and symbolic interpretations of reality ... This consequential changes ... allowed for a more individualized mode of creativity ... founded [on] ... naturalistic vision of reality and ... experimental modes of creativity. This new ... approach, essentially open-ended and non-communal in its orientations, had proved especially enticing to our early pioneering artists (Piyadasa 1998a: 23)

However, it is perhaps not entirely accurate to describe the art of these early painters as ‘essentially non-communal.’ As we have seen, their activities were characterized by continuous collective efforts in the formations of artists groups throughout its course. Perhaps it would be better to understand these artists and their productions as a result of them becoming increasingly a community of their own against the background of newly

emerging modernity and urbanization, with different socio-cultural implication and challenges. This, I think, explains the unique and historic role that Malaysian artists of Chinese descent played in modern Malaysian art. While the Malays do not, historically, have a painterly tradition, the Chinese have a long history of painting. The Chinese paintbrush is as ancient as Chinese history itself. Moreover, the defining moments of Euro-American modernism are indebted to encounters with oriental aesthetics. The encounter with the spatial convention of Oriental painting – particularly the Japanese prints - would generate among early European modernists the drive to abandon spatial illusionism and strove for absolute pictorial two-dimensionality. This culminated into a formalism that rejected representational imageries in favor of abstraction. Traces of oriental calligraphy is permanently etched in American abstract expressionism, in the paintings of Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline and Cy Twombly, to mention a few. At any rate, abstraction, which is the Euro-American modernist staple, is the very basis of traditional Chinese aesthetics.

Chinese calligraphy is an art of line, the structuring of line, the harmonious and rhythmical motions of line. It presents the form of beauty that does not rely on realistically copying nature, but, instead, depends on abstraction (Wu & Murphy 1994: 307)

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that early modern Malayan art were led by painters of Chinese descent who confronted modernism with no hesitation, treating it as an ally instead of a source of anxiety.

Another factor that could be added to the dominance of Chinese artists is their social position as citizens of the city. Modern art is essentially an urban ritual, with a particular support from the merchant class. As mentioned earlier, the activities of the Penang artists were sustained through the patronage of ‘rich tin-miners and their clients’.

Such situation is also true in the neighboring Indonesia. Wright (1992) notes that here “collecting modern painting is ... characteristic of the Chinese elite” who possesses the right combination of “capital, modern Western-style education” and “long-standing cross-national and cross-cultural experience” (Wright 1992: 93). This pattern of connoisseurship extended back to China. As John Clark (1998) argues, the adoption of European aesthetics in China during the 18th and 19th centuries served the interest of the merchant class very well. The absorption of the European techniques into the traditional canon enabled a distancing from the realm of Chinese ‘high-art’ that is associated with the literati, i.e. the Chinese educated elite. A ‘contamination’ of traditional aesthetics was crucial to the rising merchant class and inter-regional trade, forming a hybridized aesthetics as the visual lingua franca for a community who depended on cross-cultural contacts.

1950s : Kuala Lumpur as Cultural and Artistic Centre

The works of Nanyang and Penang artists of Chinese descent define the formative years of modern Malay/sian art. The thematic for both groups, however, are almost exclusively non-Chinese, focusing on Malay bodies (especially female), villages and activities, converted into collectibles for the merchant class. While the status of Singapore and Penang as the art center is well established, they certainly had some counterparts on the peninsula that are worth noting. In the 1993 Singapore Art Fair, a painting dated 1921 by a Melakan painter, Low Kway Song, was shown (Ooi 2002; Piyadasa 1994). There was also O. Don Peris, a Sri Lanka-born painter who was trained in Paris, settled in Johor Baharu in 1922 and became the court painter for the Sultan of

Johor (ibid). Kuala Lumpur¹³ hosted a considerably active art scene under the auspices of the Chinese merchant class. Here, a Chinese art society called *United Artists, Malaysia* was formed in 1929, well before the establishment of the Singapore Salon of Art Studies in 1935 (Yeoh 1997; Piyadasa 1994). The society charted its objectives as: “(1) to preserve Chinese Ancient Arts; (2) to encourage and promote the appreciation of fine arts of all nature; (3) to encourage the study of foreign arts; and (4) to publish and distribute matters relating to the fine arts” (quoted in Yeoh 1997: 25).

Kuala Lumpur’s importance as a centre for modern art grew after the end of Second World War. Artistic activities increased drastically during the 1950’s, with supports from the local elites, whose patronage and influence helped to establish the Arts Councils in 1952. While its main focus is on drama and music, the organization also sponsored individual art exhibitions, like the solo debut for Cheong Soo Pieng in 1956 and Chuah Thean Teng in 1959 (Yeoh 1988; Piyadasa 1994). British Malaya in 1950s witnessed increasing systematization of nationalism, and for the artists, it was the period of art movements that are becoming more socially engaged, and the beginning of the institutionalization of the arts through the formations of the Art Council in 1952 and the National Art Gallery in 1958.

The Wednesday Art Group

In 1951 Peter Harris arrived from Britain to Kuala Lumpur to be the Superintendent of Art for the Federation of Malaya. Harris was assisted by the General Primary School Supervisor and journeyed around the country, to develop art education for primary schools (The Art Gallery 2001). He then started art classes on wednesdays for art

¹³ Present capital of Malaysia



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teachers and children, which evolved into the *Wednesday Art Group* (WAG) (FIG. 17-21). He organized sessions of figure drawings and outdoor sketchings at scenic locations around Templar Park, Port Klang and Melaka. Among its members that would later rise to prominence would be Syed Ahmad Jamal, Ismail Mustam, Patrick Ng Kah Onn, Ho Kai Peng and Jolly Koh. Ismail Mustam describes Harris' teaching as encourages "unconventional ways of seeing", stressing "freedom of expression uncluttered by prejudiced view of ideology ... He expressed disenchantment for people who insisted on and advanced rigid pedagogical methodology in art education" (Yeoh 1997: 34-5). The WAG considered the aesthetics of the Nanyang group too traditional. They also avoided depicting subject matters that are overtly political. The group declared that it wanted to

break away completely from our previous work and start a new style that is essentially Malayan in character. It has nothing to do with those ultra-smooth seascapes or depictions of violence and strikes of a political nature which are favored by some practicing artists in Malaya (Ibid: 34)

Harris left Kuala Lumpur in 1960 to become the Art Superintendent in the state of Sabah (Borneo), and with his departure the force and energy of the group would gradually diminished. Nonetheless, his teachings and the gatherings that he helped established could be considered precursors that would help to concretize the shape modern Malaysian art.

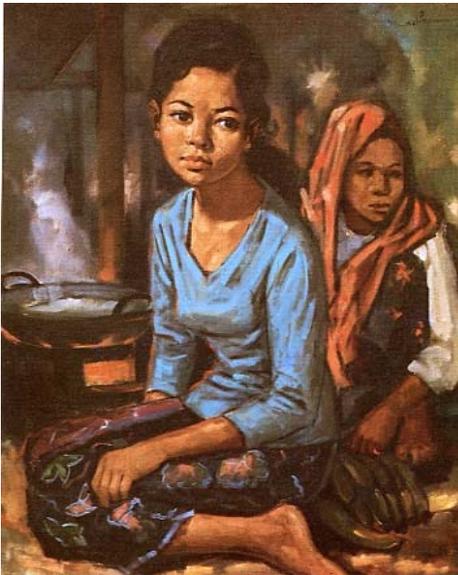
Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung (Peninsular Painters)

Another important group during this time was the *Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung* (APS) (Peninsular Painters) (FIG. 22-24), founded in 1956 by the Indonesia-born Hoessein Enas. Hoessein was largely self-taught, except for two years of informal tutorials by a Japanese painter in 1942 Japan-occupied Jakarta (Tan 1994). Hoessein arrived in Penang

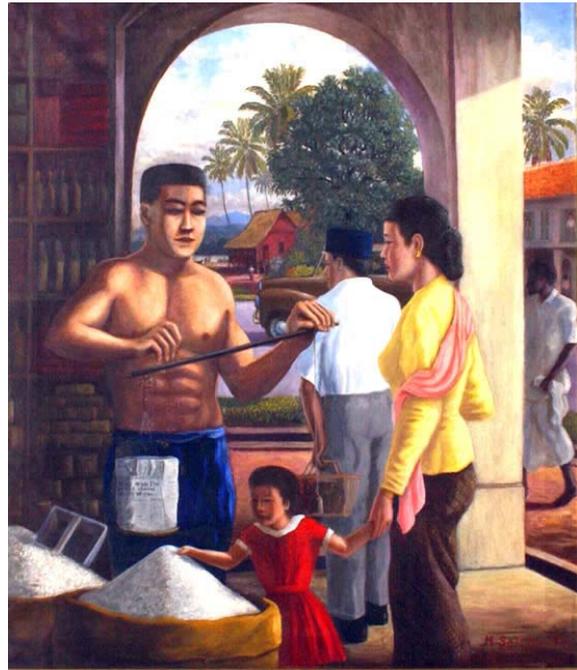
from Indonesia via Singapore in 1947, but was later encouraged by Frank Sullivan (journalist, art patron and later the press-secretary for Malaya's first Prime Minister) to move to Kuala Lumpur. He followed Sullivan's advice and came to the capital in the mid-1950s, during the time of heightened nationalist climate. By this time Malay nationalism had grown considerably stronger, and UMNO was expanding its influence after its successful dismantling of the Malayan Union proposal in 1946. By the mid-1950s it was clear that national independence was inevitable. The communist insurrection had been a significant financial burden to the colonial government. Given that Britain at this time was still recuperating from the war, the Malayan colonial government was desperate to be released from the financial cost incurred by the Malayan communists. Malaya was granted independence in 1957, with Tunku Abdul Rahman as its first Prime Minister. It was during this crucial period of national history that Hoessein Enas, together with Yaacob Latiff (who would later become the first mayor of Kuala Lumpur) formed the *Majlis Kesenian Melayu* (Malay Arts Council) in 1956. The council would carry a "distinctive Malay-centered voice in the art scene" and act "as a counterpoint to the English and Chinese-educated art groups that were already active" (Piyadasa 1994: 36). The formation of the council was triggered by the "spirit (*semangat*) to rescue the honor of Malay artists" and the "spirit of national struggle in demand of freedom for the Malay Land (*Tanah Melayu*)" (Kassim 1998: 19). The council became the "rallying point for the growing numbers of Malay-educated artists, art teachers and art lovers ... caught up with the ... resurgent Malay nationalism" (Piyadasa 1994: 36). It was joined by Malay painters such as Mohd Salehudin, Mazeli Mat Som, Hamidah Suhaimi and Hamidah Manan. Hamidah Suhaimi is perhaps the earliest documented Malay female artist. In



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1960 she traveled regularly from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur to receive art lessons from Hoessein Enas (Ismail 1982). She was awarded the first prize in the 1963 Malaysian Art Exhibition, described as “non-hesitant in her choice of colours and has very matured strokes which speak for her individual style which is also not devoid of something Malaysian in its subject materials” (Malaysia 1963: 10).

The APS developed a close relationship with the Malay elites, and in 1956 Tunku Abdul Rahman became its patron (Piyadasa 1994; Sabapathy & Piyadasa 1983). It was “the only group to be officially supported by the newly-formed Ministry of Culture with a special annual grant” (Piyadasa 1994: 36). *The Majlis Kesenian Melayu* was subsequently re-named the *Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung* (Peninsular Painters), and would continue its objectives to sustain “the self-conscious projection of the Malay ethos and the celebration of the Malay socio-cultural condition” (Piyadasa 1994: 37). The group outlined its objectives as: (1) bringing together the artists in the peninsula, (2) working on developing and elevating Malay artistic standard, (3) encouraging its members to produce paintings of high quality, and (3) liaisoning with other artistic organizations to develop Malay art (Kassim 1998). Their paintings portray the activities of the Malay subjects – pounding rice (FIG. 22), selling in a market (FIG. 23) and purchasing goods from a Chinese merchant (FIG. 24) - in order to highlight the reality of Malay rural life; such thematics were seen as vital to the regeneration of Malay pride and political ambitions. In 1964, Hoessein’s disciple, Mazeli Mat Som, took over the leadership of the APS and “expanded APS’ empire”, opening branches in the states of Kelantan, Kedah, Pahang, Sabah and Sarawak (Kassim 1998: 21). Mazeli also changed the name to *Angkatan Pelukis Se-Malaysia* (Painters of Malaysia) in 1968, and organized

educational trips for its members to Singapore and Indonesia. APS remains active to the present. In the late 1980s the organization worked closely with governmental bodies such as the Ministry of Culture and the Malaysian Handicraft Development. This led to the establishment of an Artist Colony as part of the Craft Complex in Kuala Lumpur (Ibid).

Apart from the better known WAG and APS, there existed also a smaller community of painters in Kuala Lumpur at the time known as the Selangor Art Society. It was formed in 1954 and was not as active as the other groups. They met once a week to study figurative painting and portraiture, and could be seen on weekends and public holidays “dotted about and around K.L [Kuala Lumpur], busy sketching the picturesque folk and scenery of Selangor¹⁴ ” (Yeoh 1997: 36). Among the members were Chang Nai Tong, Long Thien Shih, Zakariah Noor, Grace Selvaratnam and Yap Hong Ghee.

The National Art Gallery

The Arts Council of the Federation of Malaya was formed in 1952 to encourage artistic and cultural development in Malaya. Its declared objectives were to

assist the development of Malayan culture by encouraging and developing in the Federation of Malaya a greater knowledge, understanding and practice of the Arts. It will operate as an inter-racial and non-political body, performing its functions through the voluntary part-time efforts of its members. (*Report: The Case for the Arts Council 1964* quoted in Yeoh 1997: 32)

It advanced two possible approaches to governing national artistic productions:

One is complete control and supervision of the arts; a quick glance at the Communist world shows the stultifying results of such control, with the arts becoming purely a vehicle of ideological propaganda. The other is active co-operation by government and a recognized organization for policy and administration ... In the Federation of Malaya, since Merdeka [Independence], the official policy ... has been to encourage and foster the arts, but not to control (Ibid: 33)

¹⁴ The state where Kuala Lumpur is.

The council became the single body that is responsible for exhibitions, locally and abroad. Among its notable contributions were organizing international exhibitions: Chuah Thean Teng (London 1959), Malayan/Singapore Art Exhibition (India 1961), First Exhibition (Commonwealth Institute, London 1962), First International Art Exhibition (Saigon 1963) and Malaya/Malaysia Art Tour (Australia 1963) (Yeoh 1997). The federal government then mandated the council to form a committee that would supervise the formation and administration of a National Art Gallery (NAG). The NAG was established in 1958, signaling

official recognition of the plastic arts as an important integral part of nation building ... The results of [the artists] efforts would be collected, housed, displayed for public exhibition and preserved ... as plastic manifestations of the living cultural heritage of the nation (Yeoh 1997: 33)

The establishment of the NAG provided the institutional umbrella under which modern Malaysian art would be nurtured and gradually acquire its own agenda and national character. The effect became more pronounced when Singapore separated from Malaya in 1965 to become a republic. Kuala Lumpur would continue to be the centre for cultural and socio-political development of Malaya, and the significance of Nanyang (and Penang) would gradually wane from modern Malaysian art.

1960s: National Independence and The European Experience

With the independence of Malaya in 1957, concerted efforts were made to fill the different levels of governmental personnel. Consequently, funding was made available for Malaysians to be trained in Britain. A significant factor that contributed to this development was the dramatic increase in numbers of school-going children since the end

of World War 2, which created an immediate need for teachers on various modern subjects, including art. In response to this need, the Specialist Teacher's Training Institute (STTI) was set up in Kuala Lumpur in 1960. The objective of this institution was to re-train experienced teachers for a full year to be graduated as specialist-teachers. In addition, selected graduates were sent to Britain for further training, among whom would become influential in shaping the direction of modern Malaysian art in the 1960s upon their return.

Some of the STTI graduates became prominent figures in modern Malaysian art, such as Redza Piyadasa, Chew Teng Beng and Ahmad Khalid Yusoff. These British-trained graduates provided Malaya with the necessary personnel to run the academic sector of the nation. In 1956 the MARA¹⁵ Institute of Technology (MIT) was founded to provide tertiary education exclusively for ethnic Malays. Its Faculty of Art and Design was incepted in 1967, offering courses in painting, graphic design, textiles, fine metals and industrial arts (UiTM 2008).¹⁶

The role of MIT is absolutely significant in the nurturing of Malay/sian artists from the late 1960s onwards, and the majority of well-known Malay/sian artists today received their initial training there. Then, in 1967, Chung Chen Sun (a graduate from the Nanyang Academy) and a group of Chinese entrepreneurs in Kuala Lumpur met to discuss the possibility of establishing a Nanyang-style school in Malaysia. The meeting proved to be productive, for the Malaysian Art Institute (MIA) was immediately funded and operating

¹⁵ Acronym for *Majlis Amanah Rakyat* (Council of Trust of the People)

¹⁶ The MIT was initially known as RIDA Training College in 1956, then as MARA College in 1965. It was renamed MIT in 1967, and became a university in 1999, henceforth known as Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) (see UiTM 2008).

(Yeoh 1988).¹⁷ Its students were comprised mostly of those from “Chinese Mandarin Schools” and the courses were limited to “Chinese ink-painting and calligraphy” (Ibid 57). Unlike the MIT that receives federal funding, the MIA is a private enterprise. Thus as the latter expanded, to ensure steady enrolment, the majority of its courses were geared for utilitarian purpose, like Commercial Art and Interior Design. Both MIA and MIT were based Kuala Lumpur. Next, Penang reclaimed its artistic territory in postcolonial Malaysia, founding the Fine Arts programs at Universiti Sains Malaysia in 1972. These are the major institutions for artistic training in Malaysia. In addition, from the 1980s onwards various private art colleges emerge throughout the country, offering courses mostly in graphic design.

During the 1960s Malaysians began to go abroad on a regular basis to study art. Artists went mostly to Britain and USA, some to Germany, Australia., Taiwan, Japan, India and France. In fact, almost all modern Malaysian artists have had their training abroad. During his appointment in Malaya, Peter Harris fought for scholarships to be granted to local artists to be trained in Britain. Here is Harris in his own words:

I set to and bullied as best as I could the Education Department ... At length I was promised one ... There was an obvious candidate in a young man called Yeoh Jin Leng,¹⁸ very positive, intelligent, and gifted. He finally got the full works and returned to the North of Malaya a few years later (The Art Gallery 2001: 19)

This was merely a beginning of what would become an academic tradition in Malaysia, for young minds to spend the early years of their adult life in western cities. Their impacts are far-reaching and the consequent merging of experiences (domestic and

¹⁷ MIA’s official website states that it was established in 1967 (MIA 2008).

¹⁸ This is the same Yeoh whose historical accounts on modern Malaysian art I’ve been quoting in this chapter. It is a common practice in Malaysia for artists to also be researchers and writers on art. Other prominent figures assuming such double-standing are Redza Piyadasa and Zakaria Ali.



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foreign) continues to shape the local art scene. For Yeoh Jin Leng it facilitates the flow of ideas that contribute to national artistic growth in a fundamental way.

The cultural intrusion and infusion of one art form upon another, East or West, is a phenomenon which has continuously developed the Malaysian art scene and it provides the necessary rejuvenation ... In the encounters of cultures, new dimensions of values take root and grow (Yeoh 1988: 57)

Yeoh does not see this as a phenomenon unique to Malaysia, but one which is deeply implicated in the history of western modernism as well.¹⁹ He describes how American abstract expressionism had its antecedents in European Expressionism. De Kooning arrived in the USA with European surrealism and abstraction that provide “the basis and synthesis for his artistic involvement” (Yeoh 1988: 91). The invocation of abstraction in relation to the national experience very much describes the artistic atmosphere at the

¹⁹ Migration is a significant factor that shaped western modernism. One can just think of the definitive role of Africa to Romanticism and Cubism, Japanese prints to Impressionism, and primitivism to German Expressionism. These examples illustrate the centrality of physical travel, of objects and peoples, in modernism. Migration is also integral to traditional Indo-Malayan culture, expressed by the term *merantau* (travel) to acquire *rezeki* (fortune) and ‘fill the chest with knowledge’ (*mengisi ilmu di dada*).

time. “Malaysian art of the 1960s was ... placed in the Western framework of abstract art” while at the same time attempted “to manipulate Asian elements into modern art” (Jit 2003: 219) (see FIG. 25-29). The painter Syed Ahmad Jamal argued for the synergy between Abstract Expressionism and the Malaysian temperament. A painter himself, S.A. Jamal describes the “immediacy and mystical quality” of abstract expressionism as appealing “particularly to the Malaysian temperament and cultural heritage” (S.A. Jamal quoted in Sabapathy 1996: 35.) He congratulates a fellow painter, Lee Joo For (see FIG. 26), whose “graphics, generated by the libido, Eastern metaphysical symbolism and socio-political slant, stimulated the Malaysian art scene in the 60s” (S.A. Jamal 1979: 76). S.A. Jamal himself was consciously articulating his expressionism within the context of local temperament and signification. He drew substantially on the flow, rhythm and form of Islamic calligraphy, both in subject matter and in the physical process of painting itself (FIG. 29). All these efforts are ultimately tied to the national experience. “Malaysian artists access to abstract expressionism was accompanied by their claim to forge a sense of selfhood in their art [that is] encouraged by the sense of liberality and freedom that was caused by the socio-political climate of a post-independent Malaysia” (Jit 2003: 217). Abstraction and energetic brushstroke exemplifies for the artist the ecstasy and optimism brought by the newly won national independence (Yeoh 1997; National Art Gallery 1975).

1970s: The ‘New Scene’ Artists

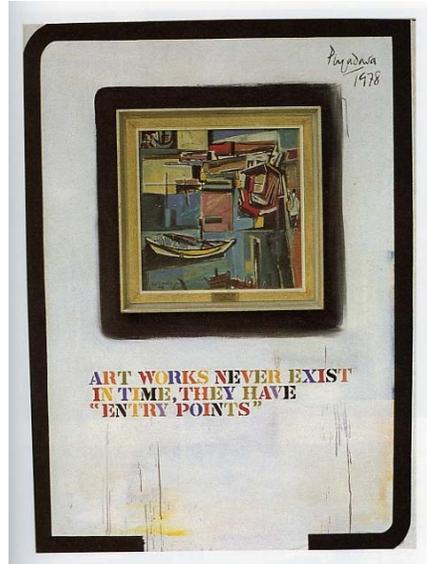
Graduates of the MIT returned from their training in the west during the 1970s to add new dimensions to Malaysian art. Many of them were encapsulated in the western currents of the time such as Pop Art, Op Art, Conceptual Art, Happenings and

Minimalism. Once at home, a variety of stances were taken by the respective artists, reflecting their diverse backgrounds and trainings. The 1970s was marked with innovative interpretation of art and art making, spearheaded by artists known as the 'New Scene' artists (FIG. 30-33). Its efforts converged and were showcased in the exhibition *Towards the Mystical Reality: A Documentation of Jointly-Initiated Experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa* in 1974. The occasion featured randomly selected found objects, accompanied by captions that specified their respective contexts, thus inviting several possible readings of the objects. In fact, the audience was not presented with objects proper, but rather was confronted with *situations* that called for knowledge to be re-considered and experience re-aligned (Piyadasa 1977; Sabapathy 2001). For example, *The Empty Bird cage after the Release of Bird at 2.46 p.m. on Monday 10th June, 1974* (FIG. 33) presents a situation that invites the spectator to forge a connection between the banal nature of the object ... and the precise notation contained by the caption. It is a means of jostling the audience into considering processes of cognition and apprehension without the use of conventionally crafted objects carrying symbolic values (Sabapathy & Piyadasa 1983: 25)

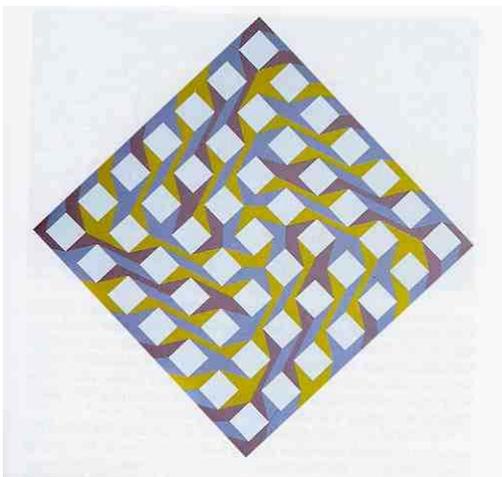
Piyadasa and Sulaiman refer to the objects as 'situational works' that were intended to raise "the level of critical acuity as an integral, defining component in the creative process" (Sabapathy 2001: 51). As situations, the objects take the role of props, and art-making becomes the occasion for the artist and the props to be bounded, "gathered in a random fashion, act as *mediums*. The hope for end is art = reality" (Sabapathy & Piyadasa 1983: 25).



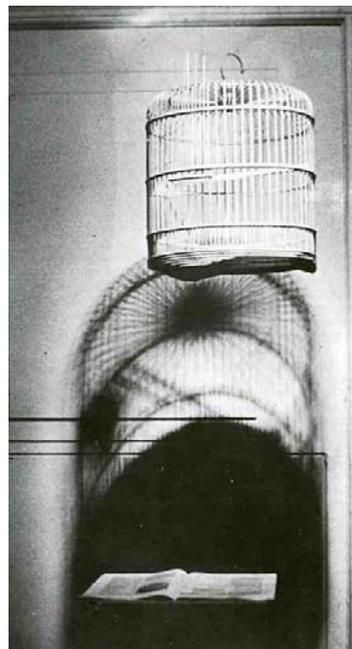
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In their Artist Manifesto (Piyadasa & Esa 1974) Sulaiman and Piyadasa equated the process of art making, with the process of knowing. They turned towards Asian thoughts and traditions, particularly Taoism and Zen, for alternatives to what they termed “20th century scientific materialism.” The latter, they contended, was imposed through “the long period of colonial domination” and has produced in Malaysia “artifact-based attitude” and “pretty pictures” that are

little more than exercises in good tastes. The local artists ... have never come face to face with the analytical and questioning nature of modern art. ... It is our belief therefore that some honest re-considerations be made at this juncture in the 70s ... The artist HAS a choice and he CAN dictate the process of perception. IT IS OUR CONTENTION THAT THERE ARE ALTERNATE WAYS OF APPROACHING REALITY AND THE WESTERN EMPIRICAL AND HUMANISTIC VIEWPOINTS ARE NOT THE ONLY VALID ONES THERE ARE (Ibid: 6-7. Capitalization in original)

Mystical Reality intended to question the philosophical foundation of modern Malaysian art, i.e. the current ways of knowing. The artists

rejected the ‘empirical’ and ‘egotistical’ basis of European art and proposed that true art lay in the mystical perception of ordinary reality. At the same time they reclaimed conceptualist modes for eastern art...The object is activated into a play of absence and presence (Rajah 1998:69)

Coating Duchampian objects with Asian philosophies, the *Mystical Reality* exhibition signified a localization of modern art. By invoking Buddhist, Taoist and avant-garde thoughts to regionalize modern art and the creative process, *Mystical Reality* also functions as a significant counter-narrative to the dominant socio-political current in Malaysia at the time, which had increasingly become to be dominated by Malay/sian ethno-nationalist sentiments.²⁰

²⁰ During the opening of the *Mystical Reality* exhibition, Salleh ben Joned, a writer and dear friend of Piyadasa, caught everybody, including the artists, by surprise by urinating on the Artist Manifesto. Later, Piyadasa wrote in a periodical demanding an explanation. In an open letter to Piyadasa, Salleh ben Joned

In 1971 a National Cultural Congress (NCC) was convened in response to the ethnic violence that erupted between the Malay and the Chinese on May 13, 1969 in Kuala Lumpur. Due to lack of economic and educational opportunities for the Malays following the 1957 *Merdeka* (Independence), and provoked by the result of the 1969 general election that signaled the rise of Chinese political power to further substantiate their economic dominance, Malay insecurity and grievances exploded into days of rioting, killings and destruction of properties. Consequently, the incident reactivates and rationalizes Malay political hegemony to reinstate the special rights of the Malays as the *bumiputera* (son of the soil). This became a central driving force for a Malay-dominated government to formulate and implement subsequent policies that were aimed specifically at promoting Malay economics and culture. The 1971 NCC held the mandate to

look into issues concerning culture in Malaysia, with a view to advising the government on formulating its policy on national culture ... a tremendous effort was made in the field of art including the visual arts, trying to analyze the possibilities of formulating a Malaysian identity (Zakaria Awang 1990: 26)

The conference concluded that the official National Cultural Policy shall be founded on the pre-eminence of Malay cultural values and forms. Within this context, the privileging of non-Malay-Islamic concepts of Taoism and Zen by *Mystical Reality* in 1974 counters the ethno-nationalist vision of the Congress. However, the propositions of *Mystical Reality* would be marginalized and virtually silenced in the subsequent art and art historical discourses in Malaysia. In 1978 the School of Arts and Design at MIT

answered: “Not only my action is fundamentally serious, it is also consistent with the spirit of Zen which you keep invoking in your manifesto! Yes, there was an unashamed stink of Zen in my pissing (“Stink of Zen”, by the way, ... is ... a fairly respectable phrase used in Zen literature) ... had ... the people there [during the opening] were not so solemn ... or not so awed by the self-declared importance of the occasion, they would have smelt the stink of Zen and laughed the laughter of Zen. You will remember that ... my actual pissing was aimed at ... the only object that was not ‘found’, that was created –the manifesto itself. ... a loud laughter should have been heard from among the audience – the laughter of enlightenment (Jones 1994: 22-3).

organized a seminar to discuss “The Roots of Indigenous Arts and Its Recent Development”. This marked a turning point in the Malaysian art scene. Following the seminar, the exhibition entitled “Akar-Akar Pribumi” (The Roots of Indigenous Art) was set up. ... The emphasis on a national culture identity in the '70s took a back seat to Islamic aesthetics. This was parallel to the revived positive commitment to Islam as a total way of life (Zakaria Awang 1990: 27-9)

Following the NCC, the Malay-centred MIT played “a leading role in finding a solution to the problem of visual arts” and “shouldered the great responsibility of formulating a concrete convincing basis as to how art should be reflected in the process of searching for identity” (Ibid 27). The seminar it hosted concurred with the mounting Malay/sian-Islamic ethno-nationalism throughout the nation after the 1969 riot.

1980s: Malay/sian-Islamic Revivalism

The 1971 Congress concluded that the official National Cultural Policy should be founded on the pre-eminence of Malay cultural values and forms. In the visual arts, the conclusion of the NCC was pursued in the 1978 ‘Roots of Indigenous Arts’ exhibition and seminar in ITM (MARA Institute of Technology) that aimed to articulate indigenous Malay aesthetic and the centrality of Islam in it.

The title of the show ... sought to differentiate it from the general appellation of ‘Malaysian’ art, which suggests multi-racial artistic endeavor. By aiming to privilege and elevate the Malay ethnic elements, and to promote Malay ethnic identity, the exhibition clearly revealed a dynamic ideology and ethnicity ... that the exhibition was exclusively conceived, organized and dominated by a group of Malay artists who were faculty members and graduates of the Malay-dominated ITM’s School of Art and Design clearly indicated the ethno-centric nature of the show (Esa 1997: 151-2)

A year after the ‘Roots of Indigenous Arts’ exhibition/seminar, the National Museum held a showcase on Malay/sian crafts. The ‘*Living Crafts of Malaysia*’ exhibition in 1979 featured traditional Malay arts such as woodcarving, textile, metalwork and pottery. In

the same year the *Rupa dan Jiwa: Form and Soul of Malay Art* exhibition was mounted at Universiti Malaya. It was curated by a prominent modern Malay/sian artist, Syed Ahmad Jamal, and aimed to challenge the view that traditional arts are mere ornaments and crafts, and to emphasize how Malay/sian objects are manifestation of civilizational content. It was “an attempt at reconstructing ... authentic Malay tradition in visual forms” by presenting Malay artifacts as “a rich, culturally and emotionally charged reservoir of resources” (Sabapathy 1995: 108-9).

These events were among the platforms for urbanized Malay/sians to articulate their history and identity. They offer them the ‘raw’ materials that they are invited to retrieve, reclaim and represent in new contexts. Post-1969 Malay artists would be self-consciously responding to a very particular view of their ancient heritage for self-realization.

Inevitably, artistic developments during the 1970s and 1980s would become largely shaped by the new social-political and social-cultural context ... the search for artistic directions would now become more complex and more self-conscious, motivated by the new politicized circumstances ... Ethnicity would become more pronounced as a significant issue in the art making process ... epitomized by self-conscious interests in Malay history, cultural mores, myths and legends, literary and folk art forms, aesthetic principles, artistic techniques and sensibilities...motivated by the need to assert a Malay presence and identity within the local arts scene (Piyadasa 1998a: 28)

The renaissance of Malay-Islamic ideals denotes the deep personal need among modern Malay artists for an art that would address the themes of religion, culture and/or the psychological fragmentation of the period. Modern Malay/sian art in the 1980s was characterized by the rhetoric of nativism, with particular attention to the cultivation of the Islamic ideal in art (Ahmad Shariff 1994). Islamic elements are cited to exert Islam as

“the civilizing force ... that differentiates the Islamic artist from the non-Islamic artist” (Yatim 1999: 15). In 1984, the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports organized an international exposition of Islamic art and culture. Comprised of both historical and contemporary artifacts, it aims to expose the Malaysian audience to the achievements of the Muslim world (Esa 1997). The exhibition *Islamic Identity in Contemporary Art of Malaysia* at the National Art Gallery in 1992 continues to reinforce the role of Islam in contemporary Malaysian art, while at the same time called for multi-cultural and multi-religious considerations (National Art Gallery 1992). This was followed by series of Malay/sian-Islamic exhibitions such as *Manifestation of Islamic Spirit in Contemporary Malaysian Art* (1993), *Form and Soul: The Continuity of Traditions in Contemporary Malaysian Art* (1993) and *Art and Spirituality* (1995) at the National Art Gallery. They feature retrievals and interpretations of traditional Malay/sian-Islamic forms derived from both local and foreign sources (India, Persia and the Middle-East) in modern gallery context. All these entailed a preference for abstract, aniconic art under the colophons of Islamic spirituality, based on a

metaphysics where [the] human [being] is a theomorphic creature whose duty is to represent God on earth as well as to function as the conduit for God’s grace to the world.... Islamic metaphysics necessitates the Muslim artist to distinguish himself/herself from his/her Christian, Hindu, Buddhist or Humanist and Naturalist counterparts ... He/she cannot represent God in iconic or other forms ... His/her artistic activities are efforts to re-experience (*mengecapi semula*) the archetypal reality ... to re-unite with God (Yaapar and Ali 1997: 43-5, my trans.)

It was deemed that the spiritual capacity of art can be harnessed by re-examining traditional art, using the “collective and shared vocabulary of forms, patterns and symbols” to “generate [a] spirit of collective effervescence and interconnectedness” that “contributes to the process of social integration and cohesion” (Esa 1997: 21).

Counter-discourses: Non-Malay Malaysian Artists

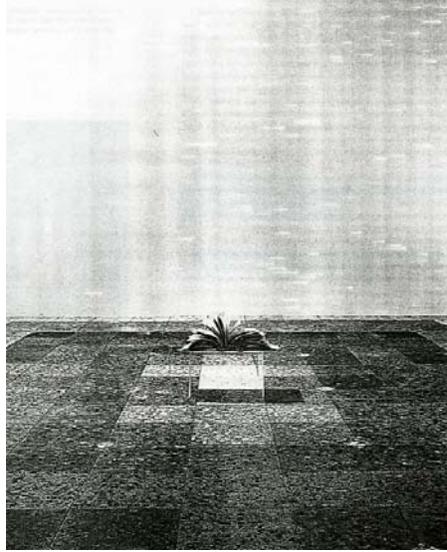
The privileging of Malay-Islamic ideals in national culture gave rise to counter-narratives by non-Malays. The state-sponsored Islamicization roused fear of social and cultural marginalization among non-Malays, who in turn began to produce dynamic and innovative interpretations of their own cultural legacy. The identity politics provoked by the 1971 Congress and its subsequent effects had produced

reactions from a number of non-Malay artists, provoking a new journey of discovery of the self and the other ... the questions of ethnicity [among] both ... Malay and non-Malay artists forced new directions in modern Malaysian art. These responses were directly connected to the new politicized contexts and realities, and allowed the production of works of art arising from social, economic and political tensions. (Piyadasa 1998b: 35)

Thus one finds artist like Wong Hoy Cheong who is committed to visually narrating the roles of the immigrant communities in Malaysian history. Labeled a “*bo-kia* (not afraid) artist” by Ooi Kok Chuen (a local art critic), Wong is “dedicated to raising socio-political bugbears” (Ooi 2002: 42-3). In *She was Married and Had 14 Children* (FIG. 34), exhibited in 1996, Wong highlights the “impact of rubber and migrants on the modern history of Malaysia” (Findlay 1996: 59). In the more recent *Text Tiles* (FIG. 35), he offers a critique of cultural essentialization that shape Malaysia’s fragmented society. The work is constructed from books (mostly on Asian subjects) that “were shredded, blended, burned and carefully sealed” to form tiles on the floor (Mandal 2001: 74). The work attempts to engage postcolonial racialization in contemporary Malaysia by showing how identity-formation constitutes a process of knowledge production as well as its control



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and consumption. It shows how conventional understanding of cultural identity has been politically appropriated to produce narrow and parochial versions of identity, and stresses the need for a visual vocabulary that functions as an alternative and liberating narrative.

In 1996 a group of young Chinese artists, graduates of The MIA (where Wong Hoy Cheong taught at the time), gathered under the name *Periphery* and mounted an exhibition at Galeriwan, Kuala Lumpur. The works collectively staged “the sense of tension and uncertainty ... They [the artists] appeared to be trying to locate a voice within themselves, a voice closely linked to their ‘Chinese-ness’ within the art and Malaysian contexts. They felt frustrated and constrained by the lack of opportunities” (Wong Hoy Cheong quoted in Ooi 2002: 43).

Other non-Malay artists who share a similar stance would be Kung Yu Liew, J. Arunendera and Eng Hwee Chu, all of whom are committed to bring forth the narrative of minority groups in Malaysia. Arunendera is an exceptional figure given the scarcity of Indian artists in modern Malaysian art. Only one other Indian artist is chronicled - Nirmala Shanmughalingam.²¹ This situation is perhaps reflective of the issue confronting the local Indian community in general. The ethno-national policy of the state threatened their position as a professional elite, and it was pointed out that if it continues, “the Indians will have nothing to fall back upon. They have no independent economic activities, unlike the Chinese. ... Government departments and municipal services increasingly employ Malay labour. Private industry [in post-independence Malaysia], largely Chinese, prefers Chinese labour” (Arasaratnam 1970: 200). Trapped in ethnic politics, Malaysian Indian’s ability to diversify their economic, social and political base

²¹ Reproductions of some of the works by these artists can be found in Balai Seni Lukis Negara 1998 and Galeri Petronas 1999.

was seriously compromised. Arunendra's paintings (FIG. 36-37) are suggestive of the Indian condition in postcolonial ethno-nationalist Malay/sia. His figurative works depict the Indian people in their activities, from domestic to ceremonial. His *Marching Forward* (FIG. 37) relays the image of an Indian man during the Thaipusam celebration with his body pierced with the *kavati*.²² The subject matter of Thaipusam also suggests a distinct Hindu cultural nationalism, due to its association with the political struggle, power and prestige of the Hindus (Lee & Ackerman 1997).

Nirmala Shanmughalingam is known for her socially conscious works that are done almost exclusively in black and white (FIG. 38) (Valentine Willie 1998; National Art Galley 1991). The issues she addresses are wide-ranging, from local deforestation to international politics. She takes inspiration from Otto Dix, Jacques Callot and Goya, whose socially engaged works move her "most strongly" and help her to "work with honesty" (Valentine Willie 1998: 5). She also cites Ch'ing dynasty's Four Monk Painters and the Eight Eccentrics of Yangchow, particularly the painter Cheng Hsieh who represents for her "an exemplary freedom of spirit and temperament ... defiant of all convention" (Ibid: 7).

Critical responses to Malay/sian-Islamic nativism not only emerged among non-Malay citizens but also from the Malay/sian artists themselves who questioned the mainstream interpretation of Malay tradition and the Islamic ideals that the former is supposed to shoulder. Hasnul Jamal Saidon and Nasir Baharuddin, for example, argue that there is no such thing as Islamic art, as something which can be neatly contained in

²² *Kavati* are wooden or metal arches mounted on the shoulders of devotees during Thaipusam processions. They are supported on the human body via sharp hooks dug into the skin, as an act of self-sacrifice or the carrying out of vows.

any particular formal or conceptual category. For them *Tawhid* need not be approached formalistically and contemporary expressions of Islam need not be limited by the historical forms of geometry, calligraphy and the craft traditions (Rajah 1998). Sulaiman Esa would widen his interpretation of Islamic art and identity, evident in his later works that address the pluralism of Malay/sian identity and history by juxtaposing Islamic patterning with Hindu-Buddhist imagery (See Galeri Petronas 2001b).

The Body in Modern Malay/sian Art

Modern Malay/sian art after the 1971 NCC is characterized by the rise of Malay/sian-Islamic consciousness. This is registered by Malay-Muslim artists through the language of abstraction as the vehicle to affirm both their socio-history as Malay-Muslims as well as the modernity of their art. However, Wong Hoy Cheong, the *bo-kia* (not afraid) Chinese-Malaysian artist, abhorred the valorization of abstraction during this period as signifying a fundamental reluctance and failure to produce a socially engaged expression. In his commitment to produce a sufficiently politicized aesthetics he turned to the human figure (FIG. 34), as an act of resistance to what he saw as apolitical in abstraction (Jit 1993). A similar strategy is also adopted by J. Anurendera in his depictions of the Indian minority in Malaysia (FIG. 36-37) and by Nirmala Shanmughalingam in her political art statement (FIG. 38). The works by these artists and Wong's critique struck a particular chord in the history of modern Malay/sian art where the body has been consistently featured as the medium by which to express regional identity. The works of Nanyang and Penang artists testify to such observation, where we find constant graphicization of the Malay body as the flesh of the region. It is through

depicting the Malay body, especially its female, that the dislocated Nanyang and Penang pioneers find and sustain their new identity.

It is through the native's bodies and the marks associated with them – physiques, attires, locales and activities - that a 'regional identity' is observed, interpreted, aestheticized, signed and collected by the merchant class. This piercing, caressing and gathering of Malay bodies by the gazes, brushes and capital transactions of the non-Malay pioneers without a doubt merit closer scrutiny. But that is not within the scope of this research. The task of this dissertation is to articulate the works of Malay artists in their attempts to find a place in the modern nation-state and the larger world or internationally in terms of modern art. As indicated earlier in this chapter, these artists found a collective voice during the mid-1950s through the formation of the APS. The Malay body would henceforth be reclaimed by Malay artists and given overt ideological stance. These artists were uncompromising in their politics of the human figure. In the 1968 Salon Malaysia the APS "protested against the method of categorizing art works adopted by the Salon, which they perceived to be partial towards abstraction and biased against realism, and removed their submission" (Sabapathy 1994: 57).

For the APS the figurative genre was seen as an important tool to carry a 'distinctive Malay-centered voice in the art scene' and a 'self-conscious projection of the Malay ethos'. By placing the human figures into their landscapes the APS turned the native's body into the signifier that 'names' the land, "giving identity to the physical and social world that is depicted" (Ahmad Shariff 1998: 18) (see FIG. 22-24). It was an attempt to convey the painters' "encounter with modernity" that is marked by the "anxiety due to cultural transformation" (Ibid). The painted flesh, then, was the means

for the APS to articulate the socio-cultural predicaments of the ethnic Malays whose participation in the urban milieu, artistic and others, had been fairly limited.

The irony is that the body is aborted in Malay/sian art of the 1980s, only a few decades later, when increasing numbers of Malays have become urbanized, thanks to the NEP. The situation in the Malay/sian visual arts shifted at this time towards the non-figurative canvases that featured interpretations of traditional textiles, carvings and Arabic calligraphy. At first glance, paintings of the 1980s appear to have been cut off from APS' initiatives, abandoning the native's flesh as a sign of communal struggle and substituting in its stead the disembodied, abstract markers of identity. On the other hand, however, abstraction in the 1980's can be interpreted as embodying the very gist of APS' corporeal ideals and continuing its proposition. Such interpretation may be achieved if we consider Muliyadi Mahamood's description of the APS' paintings. According to him, the APS turned portraiture into a national marker by making natural depiction of the body "suits (*disesuaikan*: meaning both to modify and suit) national identity, through attires, customs (*adat resam*) and occupations [of the potrayed]" (Mahamood 2001: 9).

This means that what governs the notion of identity for the APS is not merely the body in itself, but more importantly how the body is marked, modified, composed and (re)presented. Such emphasis, in my opinion, shows the awareness by the APS on the nature of the body in painting: that the body in painting is the body experienced as inscription, i.e. as a representation or substitute. As a substitute, the body in painting is proof of an absent body that has been taken over by its two-dimensional surrogate – the graphic mark. We can see, therefore, a link between the ethno-nationalism of APS' naturalistic depiction of the body and the disembodied ethno-nationalism of 1980's

abstraction. This link can only be appreciated if we are willing to bracket the conventional distinction between figurative and non-figurative art and think of the body-in-painting as an object in its own right, i.e. as inscription that both substitutes for as well as adds to the actual body. If we accept this proposition we are better able to appreciate the historicity of the absenting of the body in the 1980s as a discourse of the body, for these paintings were produced at the time when the Malay-Muslim body was being relentlessly offered to the force of social inscriptions.

Islamicization of the Body and its Implications on the Readings of Modern Malay/sian Art

According to Zainah Anwar (1987), the Malay language had ceased to be a distinguishing symbol of Malay identity during the 1980s because the national education system had created a new generation of non-Malays fluent in the language. Consequently, religious revival came to occupy the place of Malay language to project of an exclusive identity, turning the previous “Malay non-Malay” dichotomy into “Muslim non-Muslim” (Anwar 1987: 82). In response to the dislocating effects of modernity, “almost overnight, large numbers of university students, young workers, and even professionals began to enact – in prayer, diet, clothing, and social life - religious practices borrowed from Islamic history” (Ong 1995: 175). The crises of modernity and its attendant moral uncertainties that accompany nation-building and subject-formation led to Islamicism among modern urban Malays to negotiate the changing meaning of Malay-Islamic nationalism through their bodily practice and representation. While there are numerous literatures devoted to the subjects of ethnicity and Islam in Malaysia, none address the

question of the body explicitly despite the prevalence of the Islamic and state discourse on clothing, diets, rituals and speech of Malay/sians. An essay by Aihwa Ong (1995) is a notable exception, in which she examines the sieges on the bodies of Malay/sian by the competing forces of Islamic revitalization and state ideologies. Although her concern is exclusively on the female body, the essay provided valuable conceptual and historical framework for a wider understanding of the discourse of the body in relation to modern Malay-Islamic identity and modernity.

Like most analyses of post-1969 Malay/sia, Ong's essay locates the ethnic riot and its aftermath as a turning point, particularly the social engineering of the Malay community by the New Economic Policy (NEP). This policy

represented not only the economic modernization of Malay society, but also a social intervention into its very constitution and understanding of itself ... the widespread popularity of ABIM²³ raises the question as to why university-educated men and women in the 1980s came to identify, in their words and bodily presentation, with the ethos of resurgent, patriarchal form of Islam (Ong 1995: 161-2)

As a program to create and proliferate Malay capitalists, professionals and workers, the NEP was designed to stimulate urban migration among the rural Malays, which contributed to the crisis of Malay identity. Farmers were subsidized and smallholders were turned into commercial farmers. Out of this pattern, those who do not own land were cut from the traditional tenure system (Scott 1985). This group would end up as day laborers, moving from cropping to wage economy (Banks 1983). The dependency on wage work led to a dependency on modern educational system, which made Malay migration into cities irreversible. National examinations were held from which Malay/sian students are selected and sent to urban schools, colleges or overseas

²³ Acronym for *Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia* (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement).

universities under state scholarship. State intervention in the forms of the NEP, family planning policy and promotion of Malay/sian out-migration (from villages to cities) contributed to an immediate urbanization of Malay/sians. The rise of a Malay/sian petite bourgeoisie, in turn, is accompanied by the rise of Islamicism. Being middle class, Nagata writes,

means being a part of a status group defined largely by a generalized bureaucratic lifestyle based on consumerism, which effectively eclipses older, more subtle and meaningful cultural distinctions ... that fear of loss of identity as a Malay ... is part of the middle-class problem ... A revitalized Islam ... remains an important element of Malay identity, is polished up as the chief symbol and guiding spirit of a new form of Malay distinctiveness, even in middle-class suburbia. This is Malayness in Muslim dress (Nagata 1984: 72)

Shamsul A.B (1994) provides a similar observation when he notes that urban migration has resulted among the Malays in a sense of cultural dislocation that is remedied by the assertion of Islam as the marker of identity. This situation is also true for the artist. The painter Sulaiman Esa asks, how will the Malay artist,

reconcile the forces of Tradition which define their selfhood, identity and dignity with the subversive and secular forces of modernism? Living in the modernizing plural society, what is his true identity? Is he a Malay, Malaysian or Muslim? Is he Muslim first or citizen of his country? ... The need for self-definition and self-discovery ... ‘Who am I? and what are my roots?’ ... It is within this context ... that ... the National Cultural Congress (1971) and later ... Islamic revivalism (80’s) became the most crucial and meaningful to many Malay artists (Esa 1992: 26)

Along with their urbanized non-artist fellows, modern Malay artists, according to him, would gather under the roof of Islam in their search for a sense of “selfhood, ... spiritual specificity and ... ontological situatedness” (Ibid: 27). Islam “sets the Malay apart from the other group” and “gives meaning to “Malayness” (Ibid).

The crisis of identity led to calculated attempts by Malay/sians to merge their modernity with Malay-Islamic symbols, as a gesture of resistance which sets up certain limits to modernity whose (westernizing) force is seen as threatening to their personal and cultural identity. In art this gesture takes place by painting the body out of the picture. Outside the confine of the pictorial space the Malay-Muslim body takes the role of the canvas; it is veiled with marks - clothing, diet, rituals, etc. - of Islam, adopted from Islamic history and Malay tradition. Rigorous references were made to the Quran and Hadith²⁴ that “are replete with injunctions for the appropriate conduct of daily life, even to details of controlling bodily emissions and cleansing thereafter, acceptable styles of personal deportment and dress, and diet and modes of food preparation” (Nagata 1984: 5). Among the female members these constitute the wearing of the *mini-telekung* (a scarf that frames the face and covers the hair and chest) with the customary *baju kurung* (loose-fitting Malay dress). Some adopted the middle-eastern *jubbah* (robe) and *purdah*, veiling the entire face except for the eyes (Ong 1995; Nagata 1984). The male members adopted the body-image of the prophet, by marking their body with the growing of a beard, and some turn to wearing the middle-eastern robe, turban and skull-cap (Muzaffar 1986). All these strategies were accompanied by rigorous observation of dietary rules and food preparation. Foods prepared by non-Muslims were now avoided, which led to an increase in Malay-Muslim food manufacturers. The Islamicization of the body during this period is a case of resistance that insists on a model of modernity that takes the Muslim

²⁴ The collected sayings and deeds of the Muslim prophet, officially compiled nearly a century after his death. This delay is due to the strong reservation by the prophet and the first four caliphs (who were his companions) against it. They were very concerned that such act would: and that it would have the effect of assigning to the prophet a divine status, discouraging Muslims from referring directly to the Quran, and confusing the message of the Quran. To solve the problem, the rule of *isnad* was introduced when hadiths were compiled, where a hadith is considered valid only if its accompanied by a chain of transmitters who were actually present when the prophet performed a saying or a deed (Berg 2000)

lifestyles into account. It is also a class critique led by ABIM's *dakwah* (proselytizing) movement against the materialism of the Malay nouveau-riches created by the NEP (Kessler 1980), whose reliance on capitalism produces "development which propagates inequality ... void of moral and spiritual values" (Ibrahim 1986: 5). At the foundation of this critique is the fear of the very survival of the Malay community against the onslaught of materialism and secularism, which is inextricably linked to and manifested in, the 1969 riot: "After May 13 [1969]", writes one political leader, "it was all a question of survival of the *umma* [community], of the Malay race. Previously we thought about all these problems outside Islam, when actually we could have solved it with Islam" (ABIM leader quoted in Anwar 1987: 11).

Islam becomes the means through which the re/dis/located rural Malay/sians find their urban corporeal forms and meanings. The body becomes the stage for competing models of modernity. As such, it is proposed here that abstraction by Malay-Muslim artists tenders a particular discourse of the body where disembodied markers of identity instance a mode of expression that is rooted in the body that is simultaneously over- and em- powered by cultural and social marks. If the socio-economic and cultural phenomenon of modern Malaysia is the product of the post-1969 national policies, so are the vicissitudes of the Malay/sian body.

The blueprint for inscribing the body with ethno-national markers was in fact tabled during the 1971 NCC, which identified five areas as needing immediate attention for the development of national identity: language, official attire, the arts (dance, music and carving), architecture and food (Malaysia 1973). This formulation suggests that the wound of colonialism and the 1969 racial strife might be healed by the stitching of

national markers on the regions of the body, both interior and exterior. As we have been made aware, the indigenous and Malay-Islamic components of the nation shall henceforth be the guiding principle of a national identity. In 1972, one year after the congress, Mubin Sheppard, who presented on traditional Malay music and crafts during the assembly (Sheppard 1973a; 1973b), published *Taman Indera, A Royal Pleasure Ground: Malay Decorative Arts and Pastimes* (Sheppard 1972). It is a monograph that catalogues Malay traditional aesthetics: textile, carvings, weaponry, architecture, performing arts, etc., and foreworded by Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, then the Prime Minister and engineer of the NEP and NCC. He “heartily welcome[s]” the publication, regarding it as “a comprehensive study on Malay decorative arts and pastimes ... But of greater significance is the fact that the finer features of this proud cultural heritage are acceptable as a firm foundation for the evolution of a national identity” (Ibid: *Foreword*). In retrospect, the book seems fitting for the subsequent generation of Malay artists who would reference their tradition to find continuity and identity on their canvases. It especially captures the notion of Islam as that which ‘sets the Malay apart from the other group’, for *Taman Indera* opens with the subject of circumcision, the mark that, in the Malay/sian context, is exclusively associated with Islam and the Malays.

Mubin Sheppard introduced his book on traditional Malay aesthetics with a full-page colored photograph of a nine-foot model of a processional bird used to carry a Malay prince during his circumcision (FIG. 39). The image is accompanied by a two-page description of the royal rite, which is immediately appended to a brief history of the Malay Peninsula.



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Circumcision also prefaces other publications on Malay/sian art. It opens *Rupa dan Jiwa* (Form and Soul) (1992), written by the prominent Malay-Muslim painter Syed Ahmad Jamal, who curated an exhibition bearing the same title in 1979. As recounted earlier in this chapter, the exhibition sought to emphasize the civilizational contents of Malay aesthetics, bringing to the fore traditional design and art objects as the templates for national artistic identity. Like *Taman Indera*, *Rupa and Jiwa* (both the exhibition and later publication) is framed by the post-1969 ideological current, and is also a catalogue of Malay aesthetics and objects - metalwork, weaponry, textile, woodcarving as well as manuscript illustration. The book opens with an image of a menhir shaped into a keris, a traditional Malay dagger, bearing the mark of circumcision (FIG. 40-41). The image is placed next to the authorial intent to “emphasize the unique attributes of Malayness (*sifat ke-Melayuan*) in order to create the awareness that physical forms (*rupa bentuk pernyataan*) reflect the soul (*jiwa*) of the culture that produces them. ... Archeological studies of artifacts, carvings and inscriptions on stones and metal show that civilization in this region was designed by local genius (*bijak pandai tempatan*)” (S.A. Jamal 1992: xvii, my trans.). The concept of identity as interior, thus fundamental, essential and unique, is reiterated later in the book: “These artworks are manifestation of the soul ... that grows on this earth as ethos of the race (*bangsa*) ... through which the collective spirit (*rohani*) of tradition is gathered” (Ibid: 148).

This same menhir is also quoted in other publications, which treated it as some sort of an ancestor to Malay/sian aesthetic. It prefaces *Rupa Malaysia, A Decade of Art, 1987-1997*, a catalogue of exhibition that inaugurates the opening of the new and permanent building of the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur. It was also quoted in

Malaysian Batik, Creating New Traditions (1987), under the section “Early Expression”. These seemingly casual references to circumcision in relation to Malay cultural identity is complicated by other discourses on circumcision outside the artistic field. I suggest here that, in relation to the ethno-religious foundation of modern Malay/sian identity, circumcision is a significant trope underlying the ideological dynamics of modern Malay/sian cultural politics. During my visit to the National Museum in August 2007, my entry to the main exhibition hall was greeted by life-size mannequins enacting circumcision, placed next to those observing the annual Islamic celebration of *Idul Fitr*. These were followed by re-creation of wedding ceremonies and traditional attires of the different ethnic groups in Malaysia.

The state’s involvement in the circumcision rite is also evident through the world wide web; googling ‘berkhatan’ (the Malay term for circumcision), one finds accounts of mass-circumcision under the auspices of local authorities, involving up to 250 bodies at once.²⁵ The Malaysian Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs’ website boasts a photo of a middle age *Orang Asli*²⁶ man who was Islamicized together with a group of *Orang Asli* youths (FIG. 42).²⁷ All these findings beg a degree of analysis of a subject that is so little

²⁵ For example, see: (i) ‘Majlis Berkhatan Anak-Anak Proton’ (Circumcision Ceremony for the Children of Proton), http://www.salam.com.my/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=9&Itemid=2, accessed August 14/ 2008 (Proton is the national car manufacturer); (ii) ‘Berkhatan Beramai-ramai Akan Jadi Acara Tahunan Pemuda [UMNO]’ (Mass-Circumcision will be an Annual Event for the [UMNO] Youth), <http://www.pemudawilayah.org/modules/AMS/article.php?storyid=156>, accessed August 14/ 2008. UMNO is the acronym for the United Malay National Organization, which is the political party that has been ruling Malaysia since national independence (1957); (iii) ‘Majlis Berkhatan [Anjuran Parti Islam Se-Malaysia] Selesai Sempurna’ (Circumcision Ceremony [sponsored by Malaysian Islamic Party] Safely Completed), http://paritbuntar.pas.org.my/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=27&Itemid=36, accessed August 14/ 2008; (iv) ‘Seramai 202 Kanak-Kanak Sertai Majlis Berkhatan [Anjuran UMNO]’ (202 Children Took Part in a Circumcision Ceremony [sponsored by UMNO]), <http://www.pemuda.com.my/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=4877>, accessed August 14/ 2008.

²⁶ *Orang Asli* means Original People, referring to the aboriginal tribes living in the jungles of the Malaysian peninsula. They will henceforth be referred to as Aslian.

²⁷ http://www.jheoa.gov.my/v2/bm/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=85&Itemid=151, accessed August 14/ 2008. The images of the youths are not downloadable.



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FIG. 43-44: Mass Ear-piercing and circumcision ceremony organized by the state of Perak (Source: Berita Perak (Perak News), <http://berita.perak.gov.my/dis04/muka8.htm>, accessed 11 Nov. 2007)

researched, so elusive yet so widely and so intimately distributed. The sustained presence of circumcision as ethno-religious and national index suggests that it is a trope of considerable significance. Given the communal character of Malaysian cultural identity and its dependency for its modernity on embodied ethnicities, an analysis of circumcision would be useful on least at two levels. Firstly, it allows us to explore the mark as a social procedure that transforms the corporeal substance into a symbolic object through which histories and ideologies are localized. Secondly, it enables us to transcend the figurative-abstract dichotomy in art criticism and analyze the absenting of the body in art as itself a discourse of the body. Doing so enables us to bridge the works of APS with those of the post-1969 generation, especially the Malay-Islamic ethno-religious abstraction of the 1980s-1990s and the markings of the body its non-art context. Abstraction during this period rose from a segment of the Malay population who were urbanized, modernized and turned into participants in local and global economy and histories by the state apparatus. It was born out of a generation that had come to assume not only a definite position in modernity but was also imbued with the insecurity and uncertainty arising from this new location. The security of extended family kinship bond and the familiarity of a rural community are lost in fulfilling the requirement of modernity. In turn, the dispersed Malay communities find a common ground under the banner of Islam through which their interests coalesce and activities are organized.

Since Islam exists as the inscription that holds the Malay/sian bodies – their outlooks, thoughts, intentions and identities – together, it will be useful to examine the subject of circumcision in the present research, for it is, in the eyes of the Malay-Muslims, the defining mark of the Muslim identity, both male and female. Moreover, I

argue that the rite parallels the figurative genre in art because the circumcised body is not separated from inscription in the sense that it is both the mark and the flesh. As a mark of identity, the status of circumcision is comparable to tattooing where an allegiance to a group is permanently imprinted on the body. But it is differentiated from tattooing in the sense that the latter is marked through an additive process, while the mark of circumcision is imprinted subtractively. While signification in tattooing is generated by introducing foreign materiality - pigment - to the body, the mark of circumcision is received by subtracting from the body a part of itself (foreskin and blood for male; clitoral prepuce and blood for female).

In other words, the circumcised body is both inscribed upon and is itself the materiality of its own inscription. This, in my opinion, re-iterates the notion of the body in the painting of the APS. By the same token, it sheds new light on the disembodied Malay-Islamic revivalism three decades after the graphicization of the Malay body by the APS. At any rate, the body, both within and without the canvas, is subjected to social markings whereby the flesh is controlled, modified, codified and empowered. By submitting their bodies to the mark of Islam, the urbanized Malay-Muslims find a common language that gathers and assembles the disparate histories of their dis/re/located bodies. The mark of Islam mediates between bodies as the sign through which bodies flows into one another. The grafting of meanings in/onto the body through diets, rituals, clothing, etc. is not unlike the standardization of the tongue, throat, lips, ears and breath in speech. In both cases the body is submitted to, and formed by, symbolic conventions, resulting in exchange and partnership. If the inscribing of bodies produces alliance, then the mark must be credited not only for providing the individual

with a vehicle for meaning and exchange but also, consequently, the coming of a community – and thus the state. It appears to be so in the case for circumcision, the fleshly mark of Islam that the Malays are obliged to host yet required to cover. This will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2: Circumcision and its Vicissitudes

This chapter explores the subject of Malay circumcision. It will be shown that the rite not only carries a religious significance but is also embedded with the mythical origin of the Malay proto-state. Although circumcision is generally understood in Malaysia as the mark of Muslim adulthood, it will be shown that this signification is overdetermined. A closer look at the symbolisms of the rite reveal that this religious mark also points to fantasies of criminality and perversion, which renders the circumcised body as the recipient of an identity of a sinner. This chapter will conclude with a discussion on the repercussion of the above upon our interpretations of modern Malay/sian art.

Although references will be made to female circumcision, my analyses draw mostly from the male ritual. This is largely due to a virtual absence of materials on the female rite, as well as to my own experiential positioning. Even the sources on the male rite are by no means readily available. To date, there is no monograph study on the subject. Except for a videorecording produced by the Malaysian Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage (Malaysia 2000?), the data presented here are largely gathered from the few lines tucked here and there within ethnographic literature on the Malays.

Ritual Description

The practice of male and female circumcision in the Malay community today is understood as an exclusively Islamic practice. It is a ritual that affirms the Malay's alliance to Islam and membership in the nation of the People of the Book (*Ahli Kitab*) since the arrival of the religion on its shore some five centuries ago (Anisah 1994, 1995; Bougas 1994; Jabatan Kebudayaan Negeri Pahang 1991; Kershaw 1979; Wilder 1970;

H.M. Sidin 1964; Syed Alwi 1962; Ryan 1962). However, as we shall see later, this interpretation is quite overdetermined and a closer reading of the rite reveals quite the opposite and much more. The status of circumcision in Malaysia as an exclusive mark of Islam which originated from outside the peninsula is supported by the fact that the ritual is not practiced among the Aslian groups, with the exception of the Jahut and Semelai tribes (Hood Salleh, 1980?; Couillard 1980; Carey 1970). The majority of the Aslian tribes objected to conversion to Islam mostly on two grounds: circumcision and food restrictions (Carey 1970; Endicott and Dentan 2004). The Semai refer to the Malays as “chopped” people (Endicott and Dentan 2004). Thus circumcision in Malaysia exists as a specific marker of the Islamic faith. Being a sign of identity, it is the occasion where Malay collectivity manifests itself graphically; it creates a communal logo permanently imprinted on the body of its members.

The rite occurs among males between the age of seven and twelve, and earlier for females. Male circumcision is accompanied by spectacle and festivity, while it is performed more privately among females. Male circumcision is closely associated with attaining proficiency in reading the Quran (the Muslim’s holy book), and it is usually carried out once the boy has satisfactorily completed his Quranic lesson. This graduation is termed *khatam Quran*, attained when one demonstrates a proficiency in the voicing of the Arabic letters and melodic recitation of the verses. During the *khatam Quran* ceremony, the boy is beautifully dressed and he will read a portion of the Quran to an audience at his home. Circumcision is performed on the next day, beginning with a ceremonial bathing in cold water, either in a river or in his own house, in the morning (Sidin 1964; Wilder 1970). The boy then presents himself to the *mudin* (circumciser).

Verses from the Qu'ran are recited while the operation takes place and only men are present during the actual cutting (Ryan 1962). Otherwise, women are fully present and involved throughout the ceremony.

In a re-creation of a traditional male circumcision by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage (videorecording) (Malaysia 2000?), the novices are seated on a bridal dais in front of the *mudin*. After a meal of yellow glutinous rice and roasted chicken, they are carried to the river for the ceremonial bathing, accompanied by a group of musicians. Most rode on the shoulder their fathers, but one was carried on a processional bird. Wayne Bougas (1994) noted that processional vehicles are constructed for those from more affluent families. They sometimes take the form of a boat, denoting journey and transition, which in some cases a structure of a mosque is fitted to seat the boys. The novices are carried around the village and eventually to the house where the circumcision would take place. The procession also includes a group of armed men heading the march, musicians and individuals carrying the keris, *nasi semangat* and a branch of tree known as *buah sepuluh* (ten fruits), fitted with foods and fruits. The *nasi semangat* is a ritually prepared glutinous rice to be consumed prior to the cut in order to strengthen the boys' spirit. The boy is seated on a banana trunk on which his foreskin is pegged with a cleft stick. The cut is performed, the foreskin is either discarded or kept for later use, to be brewed and consumed once he is married (Bougas 1994). In another instance, Winstedt reported that the boy is "seated on a bridal dais ... and his fingers stained with henna". Sometimes the boy "lies full length ... and his mouth stuffed with a lump of glutinous rice and three grains of parched rice. A chicken is put on the body and if she is slow to peck, it will be long before the boy marries" (Winstedt 1982: 113). For the royalty, status

is indicated in a ceremony that is more lavish and elaborate. The prince is clothed in richly woven attire and gold such as bracelets, breastplates, forehead plates and bangles. He is “borne in procession ... on painted elephants or on men’s shoulder ... in a royal processional cars ... [or] on a huge colored model of Visnu’s garuda” (Winstedt 1982: 112). The latter prefaces *Taman Indera*, Mubin Sheppard’s book on traditional Malay arts.

‘Petala Indera’ or Garuda

The identity of Sheppard’s royal circumcision bird is indicated by the “long, striped snake, writhing upwards, gripped in the bird’s beak but unable to escape or injure its captor” (Sheppard 1972: 1). A devourer of serpent, the royal bird is, without doubt, the winged steed of Visnu, reiterating the earlier report by Winstedt. Garuda is an Indic mythical bird, the devourer of serpent and emblem of the deity Visnu (Dallapiccola 2002; Zimmer 1974). His mother, Vinata, was enslaved by her sister (both are mothers of the Nagas (serpents)), whose freedom was ransomed by the son’s stealing of amrita, the nectar of immortality, from the gods. Garuda flew to the heavens and battled the deities for the prized elixir. He “attacked the gods on all sides ... And blood began to flow copiously from the bodies of the gods ... the son of Vinata mangled them with his wings, talons, and beak”. The bodies of the gods and their assistants “looked like masses of black clouds dropping thick showers of blood” (Mahabharata: Section XXXII). On his way back, he was met by Visnu who “was gratified at that act of self-denial on the part of Garuda”(Ibid: Section XXXIII) and offered the bird the gift of immortality without having to consume the amrita. The god Indra, also in admiration of Garuda’s courage and self-sacrifice, offered his “sincere and hearty friendship”. Since Garuda had no use for

the sacred liquid, the god Indra asked him to return it, since those “to whom thou wouldst give it would always oppose us [the gods]. Garuda then promised that no one should be granted a sip of the amrita, and that Indra could take it back instantly as soon as it is placed down for the serpents. The deal was struck, Garuda paid the ransom, and his mother was freed. The serpents left the amrita on the ground, went away to perform sacred rites in preparation to consume the sacred liquid. They returned only to find out that it had been taken away. Garuda, “very much delighted, enjoyed himself” in the forest, “accompanied by his mother. Of grand achievements, and deeply revered by all rangers of the skies, he gratified his mother by devouring the snakes” (Ibid: Section XXXIV).

Within the Malay archipelago, Garuda takes the form of either a raptor or a hornbill. Garuda is a raptor in court contexts, as the “vehicle of the God Vishnu, who in Java as elsewhere was mostly relevant in court circles where he often incarnated as the ruler” (Kulke 1978: xv). In non-court milieu it tends to take the form of the hornbill, as it does among the Ngaju Dayak (Borneo). The Ngaju emphasizes the unity between bird and serpent, speaking of “the Watersnake who is also the Hornbill” in which the serpent is depicted with feathers and the hornbill is given scales (Schärer 1963: 18). Such relationship is also given in Sheppard’s circumcision bird, which is portrayed as a scaly bird (see FIG. 39). The unity between Garuda and the serpent is rooted in the symbolic convention within the Malay archipelago, defining both animals as “subsets of a larger category of *naga* [serpent], respectively define the categories of the upperworld and underworld as the male and female extremes” (Wessing 2006: 205). As feminine, she is the earthly serpent symbolizing fertility. As masculine, he is the rain cloud, the serpent of

the sky. In Indian symbolism lightning and raincloud are serpentine, both belong to the category of *naga* (serpent; dragon). “Rain is the waters of the sky, the snakes to be venerated being the rain clouds and the lightning flashes. Such snakes are also the source of water for the Javanese” (Wessing 2006: 212). Another merging between Indic and indigenous significations is given by the title of Sheppard’s circumcision bird. Its name is *Petala Indra* (Sheppard 1972), associating the bird with Indra, the Indian thundergod.²⁸ In addition, the heavenly realm where deities reside is referred to in (pre-Islamic) Malay mythologies as *keinderaan* (lit. ‘Indraness’) (Syed Omar 1993). The figure of Indra also binds the circumcision bird to the indigenous paternity of the sky, embodied by *Karei*, the thunder deity. Among the Aslian tribes of the peninsula, Karei is the law-enforcer who punishes transgressors by sending lightning, tigers or sickness (Cole 1945; Evan 1968; Schebesta 1973; Endicott 1979; Howell 1984;). This deity is also

highly sexed and in constant look-out for new wives. When a baby is born ... he then starts to have sexual intercourse with the baby girl. With very little girls he does this by placing his penis between their toes. Then, as they start to grow older, he moves up their legs until at puberty he has reached the vagina. ... [He also] has sexual intercourse regularly with all females, both human and animals. ... Girls and women are unaware of this regular interference (Howell 1984: 80-1)

This sexually aggressive male deity is also a punisher of incest who abducted an incestuous aunt and nephew, took them to his heavenly abode and fed the couple to his dog. Thus it is forbidden “for parents and adult children of the opposite sex to be in close physical contact” (Ibid: 82).

The circumcision bird thus presents a syncretization between a Hindu deity and the local sky deity, the masculine serpentine upperworld. At the same time the bird

²⁸ *Petala* in Malay means layers, as in layers of sky or earth. In Indian mythology ‘Patala’ refers to the nether regions (Stutley and Stutley 1977). It also refers to the region of the serpents, ruled by Vasuki, the serpent king who is the son of Kadru, Garuda’s aunt who enslaved his mother (Dallapicolla 2002).

connotes a mastery over this world, a mastery that is based on predatory principle, given Garuda's antagonistic status as the devourer of serpent.²⁹ The portrayal of Garuda as a scaly bird emphasizes aggression and oral incorporation as the means that unite the bird with the serpent. Killing and devouring is not merely an act of annihilation, but more importantly it is a means of incorporating the power of the 'enemy'. The 'enemy' is both threatening and nourishing, and, as given by the mother-son union in the Indic myth, killing and eating the enemy is also a proof of love.

The killing of a paternal upperworld serpent is central to the mythical history of peninsula Malay royalty. It began with three heavenly princes – Nila Pahlawan, Krisna Pandita and Nila Utama – who descended to Palembang (Southern Sumatra), mounting a white bull, landing on the rice-field belonging to the widows Wan Empok and Wan Malini. Nila Utama wedded Dang Sendari, the daughter of the local chief, Demang Lebar Daun, and became the king of Palembang and received the title Sang Sapurba. He then travelled to Minangkabau where he defeated the serpent Saktimuna, the 'Water Giant'. The slaying of the serpent installed Sang Sapurba as the king of Minangkabau, and from him the lineage of peninsular Malay royalty is established (Shellabear 1961).³⁰ According to Richard Winstedt, the names Nila Utama and Sang Sapurba are localized forms of the Sanskrit Tilottama and Suprabta, both being the "nymphs of Indra's heaven" (Winstedt 1926: 414). This explains the fact that Malay royalties were legitimated as "incarnations or receptacles of ... Indra", the Hindu god who, in Indian mythology, is

²⁹ Since birds generally prey on serpentine creatures (worms and snakes), Garuda can also be interpreted as epitomizing the general ornithological attribute as predator and devourer of serpents.

³⁰ The Perak royalty (Malaysia) claims descendant from Sang Sapurba (Winstedt 1926). Its Royal State Sword is proclaimed to be the very weapon used by Sang Sapurba to kill the serpent. The sword is featured in the state's official website: <http://www.perak.gov.my/sultan/english/pedang.htm> (accessed Jan 29/2008). In the Raffles edition of the *Malay Annals* (Cheah 1998) Sang Sapurba is known as Sri Tri Buana.

responsible for slaying “the serpent demon” who is the rain cloud, forcing the serpent to release his water (Winstedt 1950: 151-2).³¹ It also elucidates the invocation of Saktimuna as the father of evils in the peninsular rice-planting ritual:

In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate!
Ancestors that inhabit the layers of the earth!
Genies of the soil! Idols of iron!
Get ye aside, Genies and devils!
.... Trespass not where Allah hath forbidden,
..... I know the origin whence ye sprang,
From the soil of Mount Meru ye were born
In the clouds, called the beautiful Billowy Ones!
.... I know the origin of you spirits of evil:
Ye were sprung from the serpent Sakti-Muna
Genies infidel and Muslim!
You and I are of one origin, both servants of God
But ye are born of hell-fire,
And I of the light of the prophet;
Ye are children of Sakti-Muna the serpent,
I am descended from the prophet Adam (Winstedt 1982: 42)

The incantation indicates the superior ancestry of the human community, warning the ‘father of evils’ against withholding his waters thus interrupting in the year’s harvest. The paternity of Saktimuna is also emphasized by the sacrifice of a male goat to expiate the rice-field. This is relayed by William Skeat who attended a ceremony to purify a rice-field in a Malayan village called Sebatu. Believed to be ‘infected’ by an evil spirit, a ritual purification was planned for the field, and for this purpose a small wooden altar was constructed on the field. The *pawang* (medicine man) took out from a bag a “skin of a black male goat with the heads and horns attached and containing the entrails ... a hole about two feet deep ... had been dug under the altar, and the remains of the goat were ... buried in it.” (Skeat 1972: 232) The flesh itself was cooked and placed on the altar. In the Indonesian-Malay world a goat is a buffalo-substitute: “the buffalo is the sacrificial animal par

³¹ The name of the Indic demon is Vritra (Dallapicolla 2002).

excellence, but whoever cannot afford one may sacrifice a goat instead” (de Jong 1965: 287). This means that in the rite attended by Skeat, a buffalo was actually the intended victim to expiate the evil spirit. As indicated earlier, the latter descends from the Saktimuna, who originates from ‘the clouds called the beautiful Billowy Ones’. He is the slain paternal sky serpent, the dead Water Giant from whom is demanded his Water. Significantly, the animal that is sacrificed to his descendant is also paternal animal. This identity is given in the story of *The Mad Buffalo*, contained in the *Hikayat Seri Rama*, the Malay version of the Hindu epic Ramayana “with a few Islamic adjustments here and there” (Barret 1963: 531). The epic forms the narrative of Wayang Kulit (shadow play), a popular folk entertainment that is also ritually performed by the peninsular Malays during harvest, as well as healing rituals, marriage and circumcision (Winstedt 1969). *The Mad Buffalo* tells of a senior male buffalo who kills every male calve in order to prevent contesters to his dominance of the herd. “The father always kills his sons at birth, but the daughters he rears and makes them his wives” (Sweeney 1972: 104). One cow, however, secretly calves in a cave and gave birth to a male. The son “grows up and she tells him of his father’s past conduct, and he decides, with his mother’s consent, to kill his father”. Sure enough, on the day “his footprints are of the same size as” his father’s the son leaves the cave, kills his father and becomes the new leader of the herd (Sweeney 1972: 104. See also Zieseniss 1963: 51).³²

The killing of the goat, i.e a buffalo-substitute, reiterates the slaying of the raincloud. In both cases the killing of a paternal figure secures the harvesting of rice. In turn, the power of the evil father is re-signified and harnessed to the service of the ‘good’.

³² In one version of the tale the mother only consented to her son’s confronting his father once she noticed that his footprint is bigger than the father’s (Sweeney 1972).

This occurred through the forms of: (1) the rain that penetrates the earth and irrigates the field, and (2) *kuku kambing* (goat's hoove), the dibble stick used by the peninsular Malays to thrust the rice seed into the earth (Wessing 2006; Skeat 1972). In this defining moment, the act of violence – killing - are mitigated into a fertilizing act to produce the very grain that not only had become the national staple crop but also was responsible for the emergence of Malay proto-states. Wet rice cultivation on the Malay peninsula was propagated “through the establishment of Indianized settlements and the accompanying process of Indianization” (Mahmud 1972: 83). This was developed further under Thai, and later Javanese, political control, resulting “the rapid spread ... of wet rice cultivation and permanent settlement” (Ibid: 84). The introduction of rice into the indigenous diet and the colonization of lands suitable for its cultivation are the basis of the Malay proto-state. This transition into agricultural settlements marks the emergence of an organized society who depends on the manipulation of nature. Central to this community is the mastery over the rain cloud, the masculine serpent of the paternal upperworld. As one who not only subjugates the serpent but also loves and is nourished by killing the serpent, Garuda exemplifies this absolute mastery over the masculine upperworld whose forces must be owned by the citizens of the earth. The circumcision bird is not a mere fanciful, personal princely affair, but a complex merging of the themes of aggression, violence and love underlying the mythical origin of the Malay proto-state. The quotation of Garuda @ Petala Indra by Mubin Sheppard goes beyond nostalgic reflection of cultural ‘pastimes’. Appended to the historical narrative of the Malay peninsula, and evoked in the context of post-1969 cultural politics, the imagery and textual reminiscing of the royal circumcision fulfils a specific political function: it is a strategic placing, however unconscious, of a

fundamental ideological preface to a Malay/sian ethno-national aesthetics. *Taman Indera* opened an era with an object laden with the mythico-symbolic origin of the state, and the irreversible mark of Islam it inherits and continues to host on the bodies of its Malay citizens.

The Ritual Meal

The symbolisms of the royal circumcision bird weave together the themes of killing, eating and social power from which emerges the organized Malay community that confronts natural forces with human deliberation and system. The will to master the masculine serpent (the raincloud) leads to the irrigation of the rice-fields. This means that the mastery of the terrestrial waters is at once the mastery of the earthly waters. The carving and irrigating of soils, the severing of rice from its stalks and its consumption along with the slaughtering of domesticated animals are all signs of an agricultural settlement that has foregone the nomadic life of hunting and gathering. The focus in the circumcision bird on oral incorporation as both annihilating and uniting also mobilizes a degree of cannibalistic fantasy, for killing and eating in this context are at once the signs of hostility, (em)power(ment) and love. Following Peggy Sanday's definition of cannibalism, I argue that the royal circumcision bird, by embodying the act that institutes agriculture and Malay kingdoms,

expresses the ontological structures for being-in-the-world in terms of which human understands the forces of life and death and use this understanding to control these vital forces deemed necessary for the reproduction of society (Sanday 1986: xi)

The vital forces to be mastered are nature itself; cultivating and harnessing its abundance led to the structuring of human life and the land which in turn gave rise to the Malay

princely states. These forces are also laden with parental metaphors; mastering them would also be mastering the parental power they embody. The slain serpentine rain cloud is essentially a father figure, for the pre-Hindu Malays refer to rain as “Father Water (*Bapa-ku Ayer*)” and the land as “Mother Earth (*Ibu-ku Bumi*)” (Wessing 2006: 213). These terms occur constantly during rice-rituals on the Malay Peninsula (Winstedt 1982). They were retained during the period of Indianization, when stories like the following were told up and down the Malay peninsula. Siva, who

usurped the place of Father Sky (or Father Water, as he is sometimes called) and his wife is known to the Malays as Mahadewi the great goddess, as Kumari the damsel, and above all, as Sri goddess of rice-fields. As Sri she ... has taken the place of “Mother Earth,” just as her divine spouse represented “Father Sky” (Ibid: 6-11)

Siva, the Father Sky/Water, is a Hindu deity who is most frequently worshipped in the form of a vertically placed castrated phallus (linga) locked inside a horizontally positioned vagina (yoni), emblem of the female side of the divine, or the Great Goddess. The Malay peasantry continued Sang Sapurba’s heroism and demanded from the Father his water to irrigate and fertilize the field, ensuring the preservation of the settlement. The land itself is seen as the feminine “underworld,” that is “a place of waters and origins” where “the water of life is a parallel with the amniotic fluid in which fetuses mature” (Wessing 2006: 208). In the context of agriculture, the earthly water is a controlled production through the containment and re-channelling (thus re-signification) of the rain. This means that the Father’s water is always already the earthly amniotic fluid: the paternal water is, in effect, the Mother, i.e. the father’s mate. What is accomplished by the slaying of Saktimuna and the sacrifice of the paternal goat/buffalo is the release of the ‘divine feminine’ from paternal monopoly, and this act was instrumental for the creation,

nourishment and re-generation of the Malay subjects and state. For this very reason the Mother must receive a similar fate as her beloved, for it must be ensured that she is never monopolized by a single subject but perpetually distributed throughout the community. Thus we find that the murder and cannibalization of a maternal-figure are also symbolized in circumcision rite, sublimated during the ritual meal that preceded the procession.

Malay circumcision began with a ritual meal, consumed by the novice in the morning before being carried in the procession. The meal consisted of yellow glutinous rice and roasted chicken (*ayam panggang*) (Malaysia 2000(?); Sidin 1964; Ajmain 1960), colors with strong symbolism: “Yellow and red both stand for blood in Malay magic” (Laderman 1983: 243 n 16). Chicken is the embodiment of *semangat* (spirit, soul), summoned during rice-ritual by saying “Cluck, cluck, soul ! Cluck, cluck, soul! Cluck, cluck, soul!” [Kurr, kurr, semangat! Kurr, kurr, semangat!] (Skeat 1972: 229). The various stages of the planting ritual on the Malay peninsula are accompanied by incantations and prayers, addressed to Allah, the Prophet Muhammad and to a feminine rice spirit named Sri Dangomala. She is requested to deliver a nine-month- old baby, a metaphor for “healthy, heavy-grained rice” (de Jong 1965: 287). Sri Dangomala is a syncretic name of the peninsula rice goddess whose genealogy goes back to India and Java. Sri or Seri refers to “the Hindu Sri, the goddess of grain, therefore, a deity of immense importance to the old Javanese and the Malays” (Skeat 1972: 89). Dangomala is a localized “Javanese word *dumilah*, meaning ‘glowing’, which forms part of the name Retna Dumilah, the “Glowing Jewel” from which Tisnawati, the woman who was the origin of vegetation, was born” (de Jong 1965: 287). The tales of Retna Dumilah and

Tisnawati are featured in the Javanese myth *Manek Maya*. According to this myth, the world was possessed by a male deity called Sang yang Wisesa (the all-powerful) who resides at the centre of the universe. Then occurred a “dreadful conflict of the elements”, upon which the deity

saw a ball suspended over him, and on his laying hold of it, it separated into three parts: ... the heavens and earth, the sun and moon, and the third was man, or Manek Maya ... Sang yang Wisesa ... addressed himself to Manek Maya and said, “Hereafter thou shalt be called Sang yang Guru ... I give up the earth and all that is attached to it, to be used and disposed of according to thy will and pleasure ... The earth being in great distress, unfixed ... The sun, moon, and sky ... all came to lend their assistance ... and by their united influence the earth became still and fixed (Raffles 1965: ccvi)

Empowered by the deity, the primordial human restored order into the world by dictating to the sun and moon the rule of their cycle. Sang yang Wisesa also granted Sang yang Guru’s request for “nine male and five female children [be] born unto him, without the assistance of a mother” (ibid). All the sons were dispatched to various regions of the earth, five of them each took a sister as his consort. The deity then created “another degree of mankind”, a hermit named Sang yang Kanekaputra,

who was superior in abilities to all the other created beings, being grown up, was sent by his father to do penance in the ocean, who gave him at the same time a precious stone, called *retna dumilah*, fraught with wonderful power of rendering its possessor insensible to hunger, cold, thirst &c. and which completely fortified him against the effects of water, fire, &c. (ibid: ccviii)

Upon learning about such a stone Sang yang Guru demanded to possess it, but Sang yang Kanekaputra refused to give it up. The former resorted to forceful means, and in the midst of their struggle Retna Dumilah fell through the layers of the earth. Once she reached the final region, she was swallowed by the presiding male deity, Anta Bogo, “who was in shape like a dragon” (ibid: cxiii). Sang yang Guru dispatched his army to

obtain the jewel from the serpent. A battle broke out and Anta Bogo was defeated. The jewel box was handed to Sang yang Guru, who, with great physical effort, tried to open it but to no avail. Loosing his patience, he “threw it down with great violence; upon which it broke into pieces” (ibid: ccxiv). Out of the ruins emerged “a virgin, to whom Sang yang Guru gave the name of Tesna-Wati” (ibid: ccxiv). Sang yang Guru then raised her as a daughter. When she grew up, however, her father took “a fancy to this virgin, wishing to make her his wife”. Tesna-Wati refused but eventually gave in to his persistence. She attempted to delay the father’s wish by requesting for him to obtain some exotic objects as marriage gifts. The impatient father forced himself on her, and the “resistance she made, joined to the rough and violent manner in which he proceeded, caused her to expire in his arms” (Raffles 1965: ccxv). When she was buried, various species of vegetation sprout out of her carcass. “From the hands grew up plantain trees, from the teeth Indian corn, from other parts *pari* [rice]” (ibid: ccxv).

In another myth, which Justus van der Kroef (1952) termed “the oldest rice legend in Java”, Retna Dumilah is a woman instead of a precious stone. She is called “the glowing jewel of the universe”, created by Batara Guru, the “leader of the gods”. However, his “fatherly sentiment ... soon changed into passionate love, and he expressed his desire to have her as spouse. Retna, in horror of what appeared to her to be an incestuous request, refused. Unable to restrain himself, Batara Guru took her by force, which resulted in Retna’s death. The father buried his beloved daughter and “changed her name to Tisna Wati (“the beloved of promise”)”. He then practiced asceticism as a sign of grief and remorse, during which the god of death appeared and told him that “while he could never hope to regain his beloved, her body would yield the richest treasures for

Batara Guru and his people". Forty days after Tisna Wati's burial, rice emerged from her body, along with various other vegetations from her head and limbs (van der Kroef 1952: 49-50).

It is through the image of the rice that the above stories connect with the Malay-Islamic circumcision rite. Implicit in the circumcision meal is the notion of a violated and murdered female whose carcass is the origin of rice. Cannibalistic symbolism is strongly suggested by the culinary details of the meal. The rice used is glutinous rice that is colored yellow, a color that is symbolic of blood. Glutinous rice has a chewy and 'meaty' texture, lending it a much more solid, almost sculptural quality, compared to regular rice. While the latter is cooked by boiling, i.e by immersing it completely in water, glutinous rice is commonly cooked by peninsular Malays by steaming, placing the grain over boiling water. It occupies a similar culinary structure with the chicken that is roasted over an open fire. Both the rice and chicken are suspended over the source of heat as opposed to being within it, such as boiling or stewing. Levi-Strauss' culinary triad – raw, rotten, cooked – would be a useful analytical tool here. According to him, raw is related to cooked as 'untransformed nature' to 'transformed nature'. The transformation itself is further divided according to the methods of transforming: if it occurs naturally the raw becomes rotten; if it occurs through human process the raw becomes cooked (Levi-Strauss 1969). In the circumcision meal the category of rotten is reproduced within the category of cooked food itself. Suspended above the source of heat, the contact between nature (rice and chicken) with culture (cooking receptacle) is minimized, emphasizing (hot) air as the agent of transformation. The circumcision meal is symbolic of eating something rotten, sublimating the consumption of a dead body of a female from

which rice - a sign of communal life and the foundation of Malay proto-states - originated.

The rice myths give us the identity of the carcass as the daughter who was raped and murdered by her father, who is the motherless primordial son, the first human who inherited the earth from his father. However, Retna Dumilah/Tisna Wati can also be interpreted as a symbolic mother, for Retna Dumilah whom Sang yang Guru so desired to possess, embodies unmistakable maternal characteristics. She is “fraught with wonderful power of rendering its possessor insensible to hunger, cold, thirst &c. and which completely fortified him against the effects of water, fire, &c. (Raffles 1965: ccviii). In short, the precious jewel is a nourishing, comforting and sheltering female, whose power is essentially that of an ideal mother who is omnipresently nourishing and protecting. Having been denied a real mother, the motherless Sang yang Guru destroyed the symbolic mother, smashing the jewel box that would not open for him. Another substitute was supplied in the form of a virgin-daughter, causing the father to be overcome with desire once more, although this time his desire assumes an explicitly sexual form. Ernest Jones tells us that the “man who displays an abnormally strong affection for his daughter also gives evidence of a strong infantile fixation in regard to his mother . . . In his phantasy he begets his mother . . . becomes thus her father, and so arrives at a later identification of his real daughter with his mother (Jones 1938: 523). Sang yang Guru embodies this plot-line in caricature, as the one who raised an army in his quest for the little maternal box. As the divinely authorized ruler of the earth, he also fits the profile of modern incest pathology. Drawing from modern data of incest crime, writers conclude that incestuous fathers are generally heads of homes who turn into juvenile caricatures at

the onset of their daughters' pubescent development. Onto the daughters are projected the image of the beloved who the father had courted in his youth. Through this fantasy, the father becomes a youth again. At the same time, his present wife is turned into the forbidding mother and the daughter into the all-giving mother whom he once sought in marriage (Cormier et al.1962). The motherless Sang yang Guru, who destroyed the maternal box that won't open for him, is an archetype of the modern incestuous father. In "taking the daughter, therefore, he is at last able to possess the mother he felt was denied to him in his childhood, and whom he can take because he is now powerful" (Ibid: 212). Yet, unlike the modern aggressors, Sang yang Guru was barred from accomplishing the incestuous union. This denial is not due to any external intervention but to the force of his own desire, the tantrum that destroyed the symbolic mother and the lust that killed her substitute. Nonetheless, the remorseful son/father is forgiven by the gods, his violence expiated by the coming of rice, which is destined to be the 'richest treasures' for his people. In lieu of an exclusive possession of the mother by the son/father, the descendants of Manek Maya, children of the primordial son/father, must ensure that the father continues to release his mate, i.e. his Water. Only then a harvest is secured and the children may partake in their share of the dead mother. This share is claimed during the circumcision meal, a share that is also one of the the building blocks of the Malay proto-state.

Incest Symbolisms in Malay Circumcision

The ritual meal consumed by the novice is known as *Makan Adap-Adapan*, named after a ritual observed during wedding ceremony where the bride and groom feed each

other roasted chicken and yellow glutinous rice (Malaysia 1981; Sidin 1964; Ryan 1962). Its purpose in the matrimonial ceremony is to foster intimacy between the couple, observing the customary ideal captured in the saying “married first, then love each other” (Sidin 1964: 66, my trans.). Not only are the circumcision initiates fed the same ritual meal as the newly weds, they are also dressed in wedding attire, seated on a bridal dais and displayed to the guests (Malaysia 2000(?); Malaysia 1981; H.M. Sidin 1964). These spectacles strongly suggest that the Malay-Muslim rite is an initiation into the age of adulthood and marriageability. Moreover, despite the emphasis on the Islamicity of the rite, the convention adopted by the Malays disregard the practice of the prophet who circumcised his grandchildren on the seventh day after their birth. The prophet himself was initiated according to what has been, and still is, the Judaic convention³³, circumcised and named by his grandfather³⁴, Abu Muttalib, on the seventh day.

Abu Muttalib was summoned by Amina the night when she bore the Prophet. He took the child and brought it to Hubal,³⁵ who was placed in the Kaaba; he invoked God and thanked Him for His precious gift, the birth of the Prophet ... Abd al-Muttalib circumcised the child on the seventh day of his birth, arranged a party on this occasion and named him Muhammad (Kister 1994: 17)

Before the advent of Islam, circumcision was performed among the Arabs before or during marriage ceremony, sometimes in the presence of the bride-to-be. The rite was known as *khitan* or *khatan*³⁶ - meaning ‘to be related by marriage’ or ‘to perform a marriage ceremony’ (Lipsky 1959). The sacrificed prepuce is, so-to-speak, a bride-price.

³³ Jewish boys are circumcised and named on the seventh day after birth (Gollaher 2000; Glick 2005).

³⁴ The biological father, Abdullah, died before the prophet was born.

³⁵ Hubal was the prime deity in pre-Islamic Makkah (Mecca). During polytheistic Arabia, only Hubal’s statue is placed inside the Kaaba (a cuboidal structure in Makkah, the holiest place in Islam, which is believed was originally built by Adam and re-constructed by Abraham), while other deities were placed outside the Kaaba. “The [pre-Islamic] ritual performed in front of this statue [Hubal] contained typical Abrahamic elements, circumcision in particular” (Rubin 1990: 103).

³⁶ The same term is used in Malaysia, referring to both male and female circumcision.



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46.



47.



48.



49.

FIG. 45: Women preparing the ritual meal for male circumcision (Still from Malaysia 2000?).
FIG. 46: Men constructing the peacock for the circumcision procession (Still from Malaysia 2000?).
FIG. 47-48: The novices mounted their fathers en route to the ceremonial bath (FIG.48), while their wealthier colleague (FIG. 49) journeyed on the peacock (Still from Malaysia 2000?).
FIG. 49: Krishna adorning peacock's feather in his crown (Source: http://www.infobankofindia.com/stotras/text_images/krishna_stotra/gif_files/krsna.jpg, accessed Feb. 6/2008)

Islam removes this spectacle from Arabia, and prescribed for male circumcision to be henceforth performed between the ages of 6-12 and known as *tahir*, meaning the spiritual purification required to be able to enter the mosque and practice the religion (Ibid).³⁷

By merging matrimonial symbolism and religious identity, the Malay practice fuses the conventions of Islamic and pre-Islamic Arabia, although one may claim that it was the latter's significance, albeit in indigenous forms, that is being emphasized in the Malay rite. The Islamic component, which is the actual cut itself, is very brief compared to the more elaborate pre-Islamic, indigenous symbolisms that preceded the wounding. These components, as mentioned earlier, began with a ritual meal that is named after a wedding meal. This, together with the general feature and festivity of the occasion, seem to confirm that the Malay rite is an initiation to marriageability. Circumcision brings the body into a legal territory, to be the subject of the mating rule that demands the exchange of bodies. This transaction, as we shall see later, is the contractual basis of the Malay proto-state. On the other hand, however, there is no symbolic *akad nikah*³⁸ is to be found during the ceremony. Instead, in this production of the groom-to-be, one finds constant allusions to failed incestuous desire. In the filmic re-creation of the rite (Malaysia 2000?) this allusion occurred in first instance during the ritual meal and the incestuous episode that underlies the violated mother that is being consumed. In the same film, incest symbolism secretly recurred during the procession, where the novice is carried on a yellow peacock (FIG. 48).

³⁷ The age for performing the rite is also similar to the Malays. This convention may be attributed to the fact that the Arabs claim descendants from Ishmael (Abraham's first born). Ishmael was 13 years-old when Abraham received the injunction to circumcise himself, his family and followers.

³⁸ Solemnization ceremony, commonly takes place at the beginning of the wedding day.

While in Indian Hindu iconography, Garuda (a strong, eagle-like bird) is the vehicle of Visnu, in the Malay epic *Hikayat Seri Rama* (HSR), Visnu is depicted riding a golden peacock.³⁹ The epic is narrated to the mass through *Wayang Kulit*, the shadow theatre that is also ritually performed during the circumcision ceremony (Winstedt 1969).⁴⁰ There exist various versions of the epic as copyists translated and distributed it throughout the Malay world. All of them portray protagonist Seri Rama as the reincarnation of Visnu (Matusky 1993; Sweeney 1980; Barret 1963). The epic centers on the quest of Seri Rama to rescue Siti Dewi, his bride-to-be who was kidnapped by a powerful king named Maharaja Wana. The evil king is the reincarnation of Siranchak, who waged a war against Mahabisnu (Visnu). The latter, upon learning of Siranchak's plan, gathered alliances, descended to earth on a golden peacock, and reincarnated as S. Rama. In honour of the bird's seniority and friendship, "Mahabisnu agrees ... that it will be the peacock who will start the war" (Barret 1963: 537).

The enmity between S. Rama and M. Wana began when M. Wana demanded from S. Rama's father (Sirat Maharaja) his wife, Chahaya Bulan⁴¹ (S. Rama's mother). S. Maharaja refused, fought and was defeated thus obliged to comply to M. Wana's demand. Powerless against M. Wana, Chahaya Bulan hatched a scheme, scraped some dead skins off her body and formed her double named Mandudaki. Unaware of the trick, the bad king took off with the double and impregnated her. However, divination revealed to M. Wana that the birth of the child would bring trouble to his kingdom. Consequently,

³⁹ As mentioned earlier, HSR is the Malay version of the Hindu epic Ramayana with some Islamic modifications. Dr. Astri Wright, who specializes in Indian and Southeast Asian art and iconography, observes that it is possible the switch from Garuda to a peacock, a bird much depicted in Islamic art, particularly the very mobile medium of Persian miniatures, and in Indo-Islamic art, is an example of Islamic influence (personal communication).

⁴⁰ Shadow-play is also performed during Javanese circumcision (Geertz 1960).

⁴¹ According to the version collected by Sweeney (1972). In another version her name is Mandudari (see Zieseniss 1963).

the unborn fetus, S. Dewi, was disposed in a jar and set adrift in the ocean. It reached the shore and was found by a sage who took the unborn fetus and raised her. Unaware of their common lineage, S. Rama won S. Dewi's hand in an arching contest, in which M. Wana was among the contenders, also unaware of his relationship to S. Dewi. While the sage was busy preparing the elaborate wedding, the impatient S. Rama decided to flee, taking S. Dewi away without telling her (adopted) father. The sage was furious and declared that the couple were "likely to encounter trouble and separated by MW [M. Wana]" (Sweeney 1972: 97). Indeed, M. Wana pursued the fugitives and managed to kidnap S. Dewi. In turn, S. Rama gathered alliances and waged war against the kidnapper. The tale ended with the annihilation of M. Wana and the joining of S. Rama and S. Dewi.⁴²

At the core of this epic romance is the mitigation of incest themes, between S. Rama, S. Dewi and M.Wana, which concluded with the defeat of the father's desire and the romantic union between the (pseudo?) siblings.⁴³ This incest motif is widespread in the renderings of the epic within the Malay-Indonesian archipelago as well as insular Southeast Asia, "clearly present in the Malay and part of Javanese traditions, as well as the Siamese *Ramakein* version (Noorduyn 1971: 155). Thus it is no surprise that the "contamination of the nuptial-bed of the teacher" would be "destroyed through the recitation of the Rama-mantra" (Stutterheim 1989: 1). In Hinduism, violating the teacher's bed is a deadly sin, equivalent to brahmanicide, for "the foremost meaning of *guru* [i.e teacher]... is 'father'. ... For that crime [of violating the guru's bed] no other

⁴² Full version of the epic in English can be found in Sweeney (1972) and Ziesenis (1963).

⁴³ Malay wives still commonly refer to their husband by the term *abang*, meaning older brother.

punishment is laid down except that of cutting the penis” (the Laws of Manu⁴⁴ quoted in Ramanujan 2002: 121).

In Hindu mythology the symbolism of the peacock is also associated with Krishna (Klostermaier 1998), the juvenile reincarnation of Visnu whose crown is adorned with peacock’s feather (FIG. 49). Krishna, along with Garuda, is the central theme of the temple reliefs at Penataran (Java), attributed to King Hayan Wuruk (A.D. 1350-1389) who ruled at the height of the Madjapahit empire. The reliefs are to be interpreted in the context of the “ritual policy of the Madjapahit kings”, which is “to ensure the enduring worship of his [Hayan Wuruk’s] ancestors in these state temples. ... In that context it is not surprising that it is the adult phase of Krsna’s life and his heroic deeds as a king that have been highlighted ... The visual version, ... through its selection of scenes, is very clear in its depiction of a model king. This king is the human reincarnation of a god” (Klokke 2000: 38). Like Sang Sapurba who established the Malay royalty by slaying a demonic serpent, Krishna, the model king for the Madjapahit empire, is also credited with a similar deed. As a boy, he was sent by Visnu to assist a cowherd community whose water source was being poisoned by an evil serpent.

Krishna came to a place along the river, where the water was whirling, white with foam. This was the ... underwater den of the great serpent king, Kaliya ... Krishna, the adventuring seven-year old ... girded his loins ... and jumped ... into the depths ... The serpents ... bit him with mouths running with venom, and they fettered his limbs with their coils ... Balarama [Krishna’s elder brother] addressed him: “ ... why do you exhibit this human frailty? ... you have played the babe and the boy ... Display now your infinite power ... His arms stirred, his hand began to beat the coils that entwined him. ... he released his limbs from the serpent coils, and ... began to dance on the mighty head. Whenever the monster attempted to rear its neck, the divine boy trod it down; again and again ...

⁴⁴ Hindu law.

until the great king spat blood, and lay stiff as a stick ... Krishna ... liberated mankind from a threat and peril ... so that the idyllic life of man, as represented by the camp-circle of the cowherds, should not be injured (Zimmer 1974: 79-87)

The thematic resemblance to Sang Sapurba is unmistakable, for Krishna's subjugation of the serpent rescues the 'idyllic life of man' and ensures the continuity of a human settlement. The figure of Krishna also reiterates the incest motifs of Manek Maya and HSR because Krishna's youthful eroticism is bounded to incestuous desire. This is symbolized by the cowherd women who "are at once maternal and erotic in their relationship with him; they function simultaneously as his nurses and his lovers" (Doniger 1993: 296). The Law of Manu clearly classifies erotic relationship with one's wet nurse as incestuous and calls for the castration of the convict (Ramanujan 2002). While the god Krishna is spared from the disciplining wound, the post-Hindu Malay youth, onto whom is imposed the divine image, must receive the identity of a symbolically de-phallicized mortal.

As the rider of a peacock, the Malay novice personifies Vishnu, the ideal father-figure who "appears in diverse forms, but always as a benign, gentle figure, succouring and sustaining, who inspires love" (Carstairs 2002: 176). As a young man, he is Visnu in his youthful reincarnations: S. Rama who married his sister and killed the bride's father, and the incestuous Krishna, "the great lover ... [the] effeminate, seductive and yet divinely powerful youth" (Carstairs 2002: 176). In short, the Malay novice is cloaked with the signifiers of an ideal lover and father. However, the complete absence of symbolic *akad nikah* and the sustained occurrences of incest motifs in circumcision suggest that the rite brings the novice into the age of marriageability by foregrounding the crime that defines marital rule. The rite presents matrimony in its inverse form: it

produces the groom-to-be as the abject ‘other’ of the Law whose ‘illegal’ sexuality defines the very rule of sexual relationship. The rite imposes upon the novice incestuous personalities, be they Sang yang Guru, S. Rama or Krishna. The continuous binding of the Malay novice to incest motifs suggests that at the core of this ‘initiation into marriageability’ is the binding of the novice to the law of mating. This is achieved by identifying him with the very crime that defines this law. Beneath the veil of festive visibility and godly embodiment the boy secretly receives the identity of a sinner, a criminal who, according to the Law, must be de-phallicized. In this sense, the rite has nothing to do with masculine heroism or virility. It is in fact a symbolic renunciation of the phallus to redeem a sinner so that he may be legally constituted into the mating order. As Wilder (1970) insists, despite the casual allusion by the *mudin* to masculine sexuality “it is not incumbent upon circumcised [Malay] boys to ‘prove’ their sexuality ... it is not by any means an induction into manhood generally” (Wilder 1970: 228). The renunciation of the phallus in Malay circumcision is anticipated by the very procession that tags to the novices their incestuous divine identities. Their mounts, whether they be the bird or the fathers, deliver them to the river in which they are soaked for a few hours before receiving the defining cut. After visiting the incestuous symbolism in the ritual meal and then assuming incestuous figures during the procession, the novices “soaked themselves (*berendam*) in the river for a few hours” (Malaysia 2000?). They are told to “bathe as much as they please (*mandi sepuas-puasnya*)” so that their penises “shrink and soften (*menjadi kecut dan lembut*)” (H.M. Sidin 1964: 118). Instead of possessing an erect, virile phallus these would-be-men/-husbands/-fathers are ‘humbled’ to host a soft and shrunken penis, anticipating therefore the actual partial subtraction of the genital that

would take place immediately once the boys left the waters and returned to dry land. In the final scene of the spectacle, the Laws of Mating, Manu and (Islamic) Monotheism are allied through the excision of the foreskin, forging in its stead the bloody ring of circumcision. This seal of the Laws is also etched on the female body

Female Circumcision

Malay girls are also circumcised, by a female circumcizer who is also designated by the term *mudin*, or by a midwife. Females, however, receive the mark much earlier, usually before the age of three, and the procedure is generally performed in privacy rather than publically (Wilder 1970). The extent of wounding is also considerably lesser, imposing an incision rather than excision of the clitoral prepuce (Isa et al. 1999; Omar 1994; Laderman 1983; Strange 1981). Women describe it as “a nicking procedure using the tip of a pen-knife or razor blade on the tip of the clitoris, drawing a drop of blood ... causing the infant minimal pain, usually expressed as a short cry” (Isa et al. 1999: 140-1). This description concurs with an eyewitness account by Carol Laderman, a medical anthropologist, during her field research:

The midwife makes a tiny cut with a razor blade or knife. Only a microscopic amount of tissue is removed, not enough to impair the organ's function but sufficient to satisfy tradition (Laderman 1983: 206)

Roziyah Omar, also a medical anthropologist, similarly observed that the wounding “involves only the removal of the clitoral prepuce” (Omar 1994). This convention is also practiced “in almost every region [of the Indonesian archipelago] reached by Islam”, where “a small piece of the upper part of the clitoris was removed or cut off ... or rubbed off ... or touched” with a knife or scissors (Feillard & Marcoes 1998: 342).

Given that the female rite is found only in the Islamicized parts of the archipelago, we may assume that it is, like the male rite, an imported practice to mark the contract between the indigenous body and a new social and religious alliance. Furthermore, as described above by informants and scholars, the operation follows the general Islamic convention, which defines *khifd* (female circumcision) as “cutting the skin which is located above the urinary orifice without exaggeration and without rooting it out. A *fuqaha* (religious scholar) by the name of Al-Sha’rawi stipulates that if the girl does not have any flesh protruding, the procedure should not be done” (Abu-Sahlieh 1994: 17).⁴⁵ Thus female circumcision is designated by the term *khifd*, meaning “to lower the level” (Abdu’r-Razzaq 1998: 51). The endorsement of the practice is founded on a *hadith*⁴⁶ that relays a conversation between the prophet and Umm Habiba, a female circumcizer: “Are you still practicing today what you used to practice before? ... It [female circumcision] is allowed ... if you do it, do not overdo it because it brings more radiance to the face and it is more pleasant for the husband” (quoted in Abdu’r-Razzaq 1998: 30-1, Abu-Sahlieh 1994: 9). According to the jurist al-Juwayni the Prophet’s words “do not over do it” means “leave the fleshy part protruding.” The Muslim *fuqaha*’ unanimously agree that it is *sunna*⁴⁷ to circumcise boys, and the operation on girls is held not as a *sunna* but “a matter of honour” (Abdu’r-Razzaq 1998: 46).⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Therefore it is not to be confused with clitoridectomy, which involves total removal of the clitoris.

Complete excision of the clitoris is strictly forbidden by the *syariah* (Islamic Law) (Abdu’r-Razzaq 1998).

⁴⁶ Collected sayings and deeds of the Muslim prophet

⁴⁷ Meaning highly recommended

⁴⁸ This ruling is implied by the prophet’s endorsing it under the category of ‘it is allowed’ rather than obligatory. Concerning hermaphrodites, some Muslim jurists think that both genitals must be circumcized, and some say that only that which passes urine is subjected to the cut. Others said that the operation must be delayed until it is possible to tell which one of the two is predominant (Abu-Sahlieh 1994).

Despite this ruling Malay women, like their male peers, “felt that circumcision was a religious requirement ... an important practice in the preparation of any daughter for adult life” (Isa et al. 1999: 140-2). It is “akin to the circumcision of boys” and “is their formal entry into the Muslim world” (Firth 1966: 26). However, as noted above, the wounding of girls is much lesser compared to the boys, and the feminine rite also seems to be less dramatic, lacking the elaborate festivity and symbolism. The latter may be true at the first glance. During his field research Wilder (1970) observes that “the boy’s transition to marriageability is clearly designated by circumcision”, whereas “[b]y contrast, the girl’s transition at this point is relatively unmarked” (Wilder 1970: 223). He overlooked the group of girls gathering to have their ears pierced during the male rite that he attended, missing altogether the significance of the event. *Bertindik*, i.e the piercing of girls, has long been a local tradition to mark the female transition into marriageability. During the ceremony the young girls would be clothed in bridal attire and seated on a bridal dais to receive the mark of adulthood on their ears (H.M. Sidin 1964). Moreover, simultaneous circumcising of boys and piercing of girls has long been an established custom of Malay royalty. Haron Daud (1993) recounted a pre-modern royal festivity which celebrated the simultaneous piercing and circumcising of the princess and prince, respectively:

The Sultan of Pahang proceeds to prepare for his daughters, Raja Puspa and Raja Kesuma Dewi, to have their ear pierced, and to purify [circumcise] Raja Ahmad [his son]. The king was sleepless for seven days and seven nights due the feasting, dancing and entertainment ... When the fortunate time (*ketika yang baik*) arrives, so the daughters’ ears are pierced and Raja Ahmad is circumcised (Daud 1993: 181-2)

This act, according to Daud, set a precedent for the other aristocrats to pierce their daughters’ ears, and they did it in such close resemblance to male circumcision that the

girls were carried in procession, fed the ritual meal of *Nasi Adap-Adapan* and ceremonially bathed. Winstedt (1982) relayed a similar ceremony in the court of Perak that took place in the eighteenth century. The princess was carried in a procession before “large ear studs” were inserted into her ears, which she bore throughout her maiden days and “discarded formally on the consummation of her marriage” (Winstedt 1982: 112). Today, the same state extends this rite to the commoners. On December 25, 2004, the Perak State celebrated its orphans by piercing the girls and circumcising the boys at once (FIG. 43-44).⁴⁹ In another state-funded event, in the state of Trengganu, 200 boys were circumcised and 100 girls pierced simultaneously.⁵⁰

When done within an Islamic context, the piercing of girl’s ear is her symbolic circumcision. It is a tribute to Hajr, the Muslim matriarch, and the marking of her body. This signification originated in a strife between the wives of Abraham - Hajr and Sarah. Hajr’s son, Ismail (i.e. Ishmael, Abraham’s first born and the ancestor of the Arabs) defeated Sarah’s son, Ishaq (i.e. Isaac, Abraham’s second born and the ancestor of the Jews) in a race. Abraham’s delightful response to Ismail’s victory enraged Sarah, enough for her to take a vow to cut three parts of Hajr’s body. Given Hajr’s status as the slave, Abraham was wary of Sarah’s demand. The patriarch proposed a compromise, which Sarah accepted: Hajr’s ears would be pierced and she would be circumcised instead (Kister 1994). In this context, the piercing of the girl’s ears during male circumcision is in effect a simultaneous circumcision of both sexes. In addition, Ajmain (1960) indicates that female circumcision used to take place among peninsular Malays between the ages of 40 days (i.e. upon the mother’s release from post-partum confinement) to 12 years old

⁴⁹ *Berita Perak* (Perak News) online: <http://berita.perak.gov.my/dis04/muka8.htm>, accessed on 11 Nov. 2007.

⁵⁰ <http://www.bescomm.net.my/v2/sub/index.php?id=34&modul=berita>, accessed on 11 Nov. 2007.

(age of puberty). Therefore, the female wound, like its male counterpart, is also a mark of Muslim adulthood.

Ethnographic data dated to the early 1920s indicates that “among the Javanese *priyayi* (aristocracy) or in various sultanates, ceremonies as important for boys were held for the girls. ... In Sunda, the girl was circumcised together with her brother” (Feillard & Marcoes 1998: 343). As the practice appears in the Malaysia today, the pre-modern significance of female circumcision is sustained through the contemporary spectacle of ritually piercing the feminine ears during male circumcision. As symbolic circumcision, the daughter’s ears reiterate the fate of her genitalia. Her body bears the double mark of Hajr, the circumcised and pierced Muslim matriarch. Through this mark the Malay-Muslim feminine emerges together with her masculine others, under the penetrating and subjectifying gaze of fellow citizens, state officials and academicians.

Bearing the sign of adulthood and marriageability, the female body is now subjected to the conjugal law of exchange. By foregrounding marital signification, the female rite recapitulates the legend of Sang Sapurba and the mythic origin of the Malay kingdom. After his descent to the field of Palembang Sang Sapurba was wedded to Radin Sendari, the daughter of a local chief, Demang Lebar Daun. The marriage brought the prince into a social contract with the Malays, ensuing the blueprint for Malay lordship and bondage. These are expressed in the exchange between Demang Lebar Daun and Sang Sapurba:

if your Highness desires your humble servant’s daughter, then must your Highness make a covenant with your humble servant [that] the descendants of your humble servant shall be the subjects of your Majesty’s throne, but they must be well treated by your descendants. If they offend, they shall not, however grave be their offence, be disgraced or reviled with evil words: if their offence is grave, let them be put to

death, if that is in accordance with Muhammadan law.” And the king replied. “I agreed ... but I in my turn require ... that your descendants shall never for the rest of time be disloyal to my descendants ... And Demang Lebar Daun said, “Very well ... But if your descendants depart from the terms of the pact, then so will mine (Cheah Boon Kheng et.al. 1998: 16)

Mohd Taib Osman argued that this episode in the *Malay Annals* demonstrates that the socio-political order of the Malays “is bound up in a network of kinship” (Osman 1985: 51). The myth illustrates that the ultimate aim of conjugal contract is reciprocity, for the exchange of bodies that took place in Palembang generated a contract between two parties’. The joining of Dang Sendari to Sang Sapurba sealed an alliance between ‘foreigners’ and this alliance formed the basis of the Malay kingdom. As argued by Levi-Strauss (1969), the meaning of marriage resides in the principle of exchange. It is a rule of mating that obliges for men and women to be exchanged just as one would exchange goods or objects of value. Incest prohibition is integral to the mechanism of exchange and socialization because it is the law that imposes obligatory ejection of the individual from the family. This law demands for bodies to leave their original source of love and security, and be exchanged with those of ‘foreign’ blood. Incest prohibition ensures that alliances are established and solidarity widened through the transaction of the flesh that is accompanied by gift-givings. Bodies are objects among objects of value to be donated, exchanged and circulated. The circulation of bodies in marriage is a circulation of symbols between households that leads to the widening of alliances. Mating rule and kinship system is “a kind of language, a set of processes permitting the establishment, between individuals and groups, of a certain type of communication” (Levi-Strauss 1963: 61). Through marital transaction bodies are “circulated between clans, lineages, or

families, in place of the words of the group, which are circulated between individuals” (Ibid).

Since strict mating rules, i.e. incest prohibition, is a human reserve, the human community is nothing but a symbolic collective whose structure mimics and is defined by the very life of symbols. The obligatory exchange of bodies, desire and love defines the symbolic species, the speaking animal: humanity was born from the womb of symbols, became a species through speech, and is constrained to live as symbols. As faithful avoiders of incest, the human subject, married or not, is fully and absolutely within the domain of symbolic exchange. This is why the human subject, even the most promiscuous and sexually ‘liberated’ one, never achieves a *purely* sexual, sensual and genital union. The grafting of meanings upon sex (good, perverse, healthy, liberated, etc.) indicates the symbolic nature of human sexuality. Humanity, thus culture, is defined by this fundamental absence of a ‘real’ sexual relation, a dispossession of originary love and the absolute dependency on their substitutes. In turn, this cleavage is tirelessly stitched by ideals, fantasies and wishes, through our unprecedented capacity of equilibration, thanks to our ‘superior’ brain mass, that organizes the arbitrariness of objects and occurrences into meanings. Consequently, all bodies (animate or otherwise) are humanized and sexualized, thus become meaningful. We re-move things and bodies from their brute physicality towards ideals and abstractions, which, in turn, produce concrete material effects in the forms of desires, thoughts, behaviors and products. The endless cycle of sexual signifiers – Mr./Mrs. Right, monogamous/promiscuous, gods/goddesses, Father Sky/Mother Earth, rainclouds/rivers, land/goat-hoof, etc.- marks our descent into the masturbatory regime of the mind. Here, in the reign of the symbolic, the world, the self

and others are wished and mastered through the magical power of representation that (con)fuses absence with presence, the ‘real’ with its infinite prosthetics.

Conclusion: Circumcision and its Implication on Modern Malay/sian Art

My analyses of Malay circumcision demonstrate that the rite does not only signify Islam but also a series of pre-Islamic meanings, which center around the period of agricultural settlement and the mating rule that bring bodies together into to create a community and polity, such as the early Malay a kingdoms.⁵¹ While the rite is commonly understood as a religious requirement, a closer look at the various symbolisms shows that not only Malay circumcision fulfils a socio-political (i.e. secular) function, but they also point towards the opposite of religious piety. The presence of symbolic murder, rape and incest problematize the normalizing status of circumcision an index of identity and religiosity. The persistence of these fantasies of perversions means that the Malay-Muslim body is in effect given the identity of a sinner and circumcision is an act of expiation to redeem this identity. Only by acknowledging this aspect of the ritual may we appreciate the fact that it is an obligatory mark of identity that Malays are required to cover. It is a mark of identity that is reserved for the part of the body known as *kemaluan* (Malay term for the genitals, meaning shamefulness). Circumcision is a mark of criminality and therefore of shame, expressing at mythical level the slaying of a father-figure, the murder and rape of a mother-figure, and the embodying of the novice of incestuous personalities.

⁵¹ At the very end of my study, I came across evidence of a ‘partial male circumcision’ being practiced in the Indonesian region prior to the coming of Islam. The practice involves slitting through the foreskin but not completely removing it (Kaptein 1995). Although I am unable to fully incorporate this finding in the present study due to time constraints, I foresee it as a significant entry point for future research to link Malay-Muslim circumcision with other pre-Islamic genital (and other bodily) modifications involving both males and females.

Pertinent to the subject of modern Malay/sian art is the mythical origin of the Malay proto-state that is present during the rite. This renders the invocation of circumcision in relation to post-NCC artistic identity and the general national cultural area constitutes a significant ideological connotation. As expressed by the mythic structure of the rite, the institution of the Malay proto-state is premised on (1) symbolic murders of parental figures in the service of agricultural settlement (wet-rice cultivation), and (2) the exchange of bodies through mating rules. The rite not only signifies a religious affiliation but also the very mechanism that initiates a social contract. It commemorates a parental death and the mobilization of bodies whereby alliances are forged. Consequently, the body proliferates into a community and state. In this sense, circumcision is fully implicated within the scenario of post-1969 Malay/sians, a generation who were cut off from its rural kin and in search of a collective ideal to hold them together as distinctive cultural and artistic community in a modern mass-society that threatened to reduce them to generic men and women. As examined in the previous chapter, this dynamic takes place through the body and stretches beyond the individual and communal ideals to form the kernel of national identity and soul in the making of a state.

Given the socio-cultural and historical contexts outlined in the previous chapter the relevance of an understanding of circumcision in order to interpret post-1969 Malay/sian cultural identity and, by extension, its artistic practices, goes without saying. The presence of emblems or images of circumcision in the books about Malay/sian arts, in the National Museum display, and the continuing involvement of the state in the rite means that the rite holds a fundamental significance to Malay-Islamic as well as a

national sense of identity. The task at hand is to locate the traces of circumcision in modern Malay/sian art. This, I argue, is a given in the search for an identity that will define Malayness and ‘set them apart’ as a group. The fact that in circumcision the histories and pre-histories of the Malays are imprinted on the body would also necessitate that a reading of modern Malay/sian art takes into consideration on the relationship between the inscription and the body. All of these perspectives were amply noted at the end of the preceding chapter, both in relation to art and to the larger social contexts. The notion of the inscribed body shall be pursued further in the following chapters, involving more specific analyses on the use of textile motifs in painting (Chapter 3) and the status of the painter’s gesture in Malay/sian abstract expressionism (Chapter 4). I will argue that the logic of circumcision is extended in both cases where the body is subjected to and substituted by socio-cultural markings.

CHAPTER 3: The Body Dressed: Textilization of Painting in Modern Malay/sian Art

This chapter examines the trace of circumcision through the discourse of the inscribed body that informed the citations of textile motifs in modern Malaysian painting of the post-National Cultural Congress period. As summarized in Chapter 1, Malay/sian-Islamic nativism in modern Malay/sian art emerges after the 1971 Congress as a binding between ethno-nationalism and modernity. It marks the struggle to form an expression that will address the crisis of identity brought on by modernity. State intervention in the social-engineering of the Malay/sian society had transplanted Malay/sians from their rural homes and communal lives into multi-ethnic cities. A new Malay/sian petite bourgeoisie quickly emerged, the native middle class whom Noordin Selat calls a “confused” lot: “its roots in the native way of life but its shoot and branches are Western, foreign.” Selat goes on to write: “the Malay middle class suffers from an inner conflict ... The Malay middle class adopts the British model because there is no Malay model of the middle class ... appreciating Beethoven and Picasso, doing the cocktail rounds, and wearing coats and ties in the equatorial heat” (Selat 1984: 45-6). The passage signals a re-examination of identity through a re-evaluation of cultural and artistic references to and regulation of the body. Written in 1984, the text recapitulates the discourses of the body during the period when the (re/dislocated) Malay body is offered to host a series of socio-religious marks to redeem a crisis of identity. The marks of Islam took the task of re-defining the Malay identity, ushering the body into the path of individual and cultural redemption. This chapter will look at the workings of this notion in the use of textile motifs in painting. Since the role of the state is instrumental in modernizing the Malays

(through the NEP) and promoting a national identity through Malay-Islamic identifications, it will be argued that these paintings instance the discourse on the body as the intersection of power and subjectivity.⁵²

The Body in/of Inscription

In 1995, the National Art Gallery mounted the *Art and Spirituality* exhibition, featuring Malay-Islamic textiles such as batik and songket as disinherited forms to be reclaimed and elevated (Balai Seni Lukis Negara 1995). The nationalization and Islamicization of cloth as the vehicle to contour and sculpt the Malay/sian bodies into national agents was drafted in the 1971 NCC that outlined the criteria for a national costume (see FIG. 50-52). The Congress decided that the traditional Malay suit would be the national costume for men. This is composed as masculine version of *baju kurung*, (lit. 'caging/imprisoning blouse'), which is shorter than the feminine one, and comes as a set with trousers. They are to be worn with the *samping* (short tubular skirt) and the *songkok* (traditional hat). A western suit is acceptable clothing for Malays but must be accompanied by the *songkok*. For women, the blouse *kebaya pendek* (short kebaya) is recommended, worn with *batik sarong* (tubular long-skirt, extending from the waist to the ankle), and a *selendang* (shawl) that encircles the neck and extends to the waist.

⁵² Textiles have played a central role in the communities that inhabited the Indonesian-Malaysian regions from early historical times though we do not have a carefully documented history of textiles in Malaysia. This history is multi-faceted, especially due to the region being located in the middle of the ancient sea-trading route between China and India. The development of Malaysian textiles is shaped by these cross-cultural contacts, through which technical and design innovations were introduced in the local products (National Museum (New Delhi) 2003; Maxwell 2003;1990; Ismail 1997; Arney 1987). Textiles fulfil an important social function in the Malay world. They can be "a mark of identity" to indicate one's "age, gender, marital status, place of origin, or even occupation" (National Museum (New Delhi) 2003: xi).



50.



51.



52.

If *kebaya labuh* (long kebaya) is opted for instead, it can be worn with any type of sarong but the hair must be worn in a knot/bun (*bersanggul*), with a similar prescription for the shawl as for the *kebaya pendek*. A *baju kurung* can be worn with any type of *sarong*, with the *selendang* circling the neck and extending to the waist, with any hairstyle. These formulations concluded with brief recommendations on the roles of language, food, performing arts and architecture in developing national identity (Idris 1973).

In another recommendation on attires, a female presenter by the name of Azah Aziz argued that the national dress for female must be chosen from among traditional Malay varieties of clothing.

The costumes of other ethnic groups such as *cheongsam* [Chinese] and *sari* [Indian] already have the identity as national costumes of China and India and can therefore not be among the possible choices to be the Malaysian national costume. ... Our choices will be limited to the five varieties of Malay costumes for woman: *baju kurung*, *kebaya labuh*, *kebaya pendek*, *baju kedah* and *baju moden* (Aziz 1973: 341, my trans.)

The discussion proceeded as follows: *Kebaya Pendek* is widely worn in Indonesia and Singapore; *Baju Kedah* is the informal attire for a particular province (Kedah) in the peninsula; and *Baju Moden* (Modern Blouse) contains too many western elements. These varieties were recommended for the workplace due to their simplicity and practicality. Among the five varieties only *Baju Kurung* and *Kebaya Labuh* were seen as fulfilling all the criteria. Between the two candidates, *Baju Kurung* was deemed as most suitable because it is more widely worn throughout the peninsula, compared to *Kebaya Labuh*, which is mostly used by women of the west coast. It was emphasized that the dress code only applies for formal ceremonies and events hosted by Malaysian representatives in foreign countries. Otherwise, individuals are free to choose any clothing they wish to wear.⁵³

The role of dress as a conveyor of identity lies in the function of cloth to capture the body and turn it into the social material of the community in the form of the subject or the self. The intimation between clothing and the body have led sociological studies of dress to incorporate the subject of the body (Arthur 1999; 2000; Haye and Wilson 1999; Roach-Higgins and Eischer 1992). Dress is understood as belonging to a network of body supplements – accessories, behaviors, diets and surgeries – that function to launch social interaction by projecting identity. It provides the vocabularies for social roles, by enabling the questions who one is and who one wishes to be (Evenson and Trayte 1999). Dresses are symbols through which one locates the social and cultural settings and through them individuality and sociality are thus locked together, and auto-presentation and –promotion are rooted in a fundamental collectivity. Patrizia Calefato locates dress

⁵³ As it stands today, traditional Malay attire is more commonly worn by women on a daily basis. Men generally use western clothes except on formal occasions.

as the medium which “turned the body into a discourse, a sign, a thing ... A body permeated by discourse, of which clothes and objects are an intrinsic part, is a body exposed to transformations, ... a body that will feel and taste all that the world feels and tastes” (Calefato 1997: 72).

Thus, textiles and/or clothing are inevitably ideological, for they carry the symbolic function to hold a community together by providing a common vision, language and set of practices. Any employment of a given symbolic convention is never a ‘natural’ act but the setting to work of the body, thought and desire by something external. Even human evolution is dictated by the external -we have the body we do because of the intruding exterior world that imposed itself on us, forcing us to adapt (or mis-adapt). It is due to this nature of the human species that culture takes root:

the very flexibility of our biological existence makes necessary another kind of informational system. Because we have no genetic system of information for human behavior, we need a cultural system ... The hypothesis, therefore, is that where human beings exist, a non-symbolic mode of existence, and even less, a nonsymbolic kind of action, can no longer obtain. Action is immediately ruled by cultural patterns which provide templates or blueprints for the organization of social and psychological processes (Ricoeur 1986: 11-12)

As enforcers of language and convention “symbols operate at the microscopic level of normative social control. Normative social control begins with personal social control through self-regulation, followed by informal social control” (Arthur 1999). This is finally “managed through formal social control measures, administered by specialized agents. Thus, norms are managed through social control to inhibit deviation and insure conformity to social norms at even the most minute level”. This minute level is ultimately the body, which carries, perpetuates and reproduces the normative values of the social

body through the symbolic devices it carries (Douglas 1982). One such symbol is dress, which functions to “delineate the social unit and visually define its boundaries” (Arthur 1999). The ideological power of dress lies in its capacity as a symbol to constrain the uncertainty and flexibility of the body and discloses its possibilities. This happens, however, at the price of other possibilities. The ability of cloth to disclose, integrate and legitimate is central to the naturalization of the body and consequently identity. The body is flexible and unpredictable, and as such the body has neither identity nor nature. Its symbolization, whether through clothing, word, image, etc. means that the body as it is known culturally and intelligibly is not simply natural but is *naturalized*.

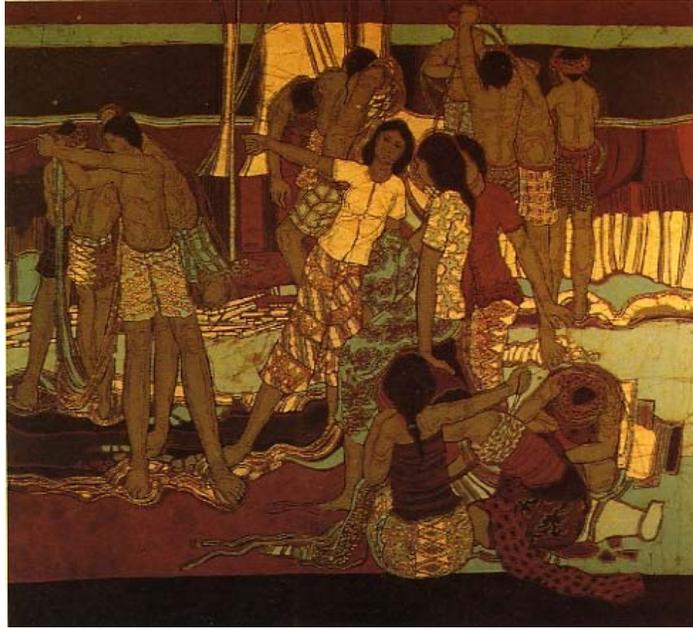
By inscribing meanings on the body cloth arrests the generic viscerality of the body, symbolizes it, textualizes it, invests it with significations and by doing so turns bodies into tools, both individual and social. The form this tool takes is identity and the subject, as motor, mental, symbolic, psychological and spiritual apparatuses for personal, communal and national use. Dress is the articulation of the body by socio-cultural syntax, where our relationship with clothes is “based on the conviction that the internal connections ... between them and the human body ... presents itself as an organized and homologous system ... as a language, ... a sign system, a piece of society materialized in objects, styles, rites, modes of the body appearing” (Calefato 1997: 70). As the mode for the body to appear, dress disrupts the dichotomy between body and its external sign. As Azah Aziz (1973) argued during the NCC the national costume for Malaysian women must embody the following criteria: authenticity (*Keaslian*); eastern value/trait/personality (*Peribadi Timur*); dignity (*kesusilaan*); gracefulness (*lemah-gemalai*). Therefore, clothing/dress embody the power of cloth to “create behavior

through their capacity to impose social identities and empower people to assert latent social identities” (Crane 2000: 2). As manifestations of authenticity, eastern traits, dignity and grace, dress provides for the body a “reservoir of meanings that can be manipulated or reconstructed so as to enhance a person’s sense of agency” (Ibid.).

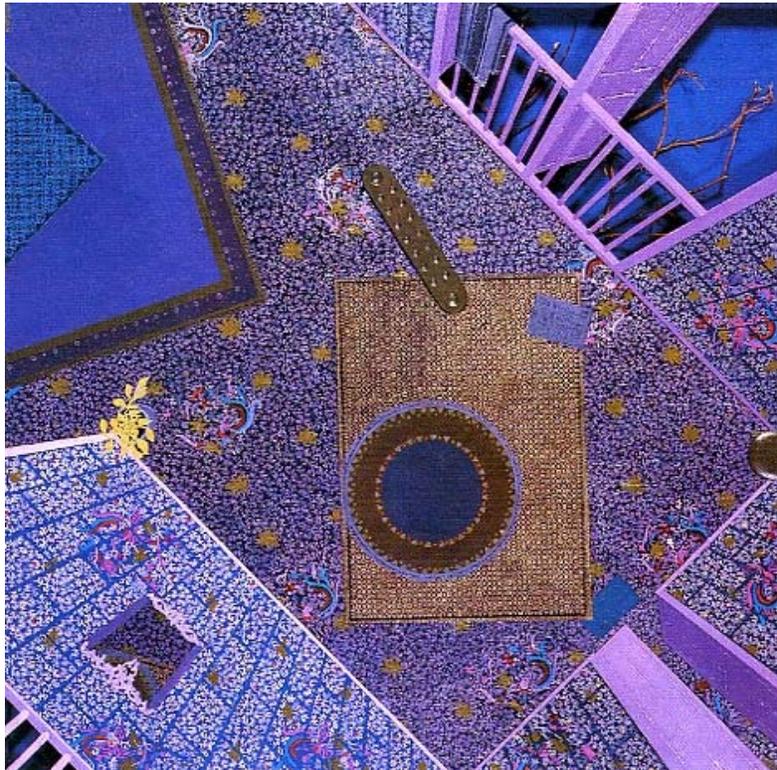
By being the catalyst for behavior, cloth assumes the figure of intentionality. It leaves the exteriority of the body and ‘enters’ the body to be its interior. This in turn enables cloth to be the vehicle to ‘truth’ and legitimacy, for it is now the essence of the wearer. As a personality it is the very interiority of the wearer’s body. The national dress interiorizes the body and to dress oneself up is not only to wear a body but also a soul. Cloth does not merely substitute for the body but supplements the very mechanism that animates bodily agency. Thus the body is not merely a host for inscription but always already a somatography, and clothing is the inscription that delivers the body from nothingness into something, being into meaning. Textiles constitute the mark through which the body, identity and the subject emerge as effects of *naturalization*, i.e. as symbolization. As the mode for the body to appear, cloth (con)fuses nature and naturalization, and by doing so, endows identity, subjectivity and subjecthood with the claims to truth and legitimacy, personally and collectively.

Batik as the National Body

As noted in chapter 1, the status of cloth as an ideological apparatus in modern Malay/sian art were already manifest in the works of the APS, who employed



53.



54.

attire, along with landscape, i.e., nature, as an ethno-nationalistic mark in painting. The political implication of cloth takes a new turn after the 1971 NCC, with the absenting of the human figure in painting by abstract batik motifs (eg. FIG. 54). Batik became an official state project in the late 1970s, with the announcement by the Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak that Batik clothing would be acceptable attire for the workplace. By this time batik patterns were already inscribed on surfaces of objects, from purses to toaster covers, wall panels, hotel furniture and uniforms (Arney 1987). In this sense, paintings such as *Pantai Timur* by Khalil Ibrahim (East Coast) (FIG. 53) and *Interior No. 29* by Mastura Abdul Rahman (FIG. 54) would occupy similar categories of ‘Batiked’ objects. They are, in Piyadasa’s term, “critical extensions of the National Cultural Policy”. Conceived during the 1980s-1990s, it can also be argued that these works mark and unite the competing factions in the struggle among the competing ideologies of modernity, between that of the state and Islamicism. The Malay/sian textile tradition of batik inscribes on the body simultaneously the signs of Malayness, Islam and modernity.

The roots of Malaysia’s batik tradition can be traced back to Java. Although the inhabitants of the Malay peninsula were familiar with the batik textile for a very long time, its widespread use has been dated to the establishment of the Melakan empire by Parameswara in the 15th century (National Museum (New Delhi) 2003).⁵⁴ According to Arney (1987) and Malek (1973) the production of batik in the peninsula only flourished significantly in the nineteenth century, when the Javanese industries were producing specialized design for the Islamic market. In the 1920s batik was still imported from Pekalongan, Gresik, and Lasem, all of which were trading centres in north Java (Maxwell

⁵⁴ Parameswara was a Srivijayan prince of Palembang who fled the attack from the Majapahit empire in the late 14th century.

1990; Arney 1987; Fraser-Lu 1986). These textiles provided the initial templates from which Malaysian batik was developed by the Malays in the east coast “to create a new Malaysian attire and, ultimately, a tradition of the modern world” (Arney 1987: 41). The Pekalongan cloth is characterized by large floral motifs with intricate geometric background. Lasem was known for batik made for Muslim traders. It uses stylized floral motifs, simplified backgrounds and color schemes on the body of the cloth (*badan kain*) and *pucuk rebung* (bamboo shoot) motifs on the head of the cloth (*kepala kain*). The Malay/sian batik industry grew significantly in the 1950s. After the 1957 national independence the National Art Gallery

encouraged batik as a medium for expressing the Malaysian experience. National competitions were held to encourage the development of this technique ... The Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA) [Council of Trust for the Indigenous People] was established in the early 1960s ... to provide assistance to the rural population, primarily Malays. ... The MARA Handicraft Development Center ... encouraged the search for new techniques and patterns. ... In 1968 ... the MARA enterprise, Bumiputra Batik Marketing Corporation was established to assist the east coast batik producers in marketing their products (Ibid: 50-1).

In 1973, the Malaysian Handicraft Board took over the MARA Handicraft Development Center and all regional training centers. This government body is responsible for training new apprentices as well as for providing technical and marketing assistance to established artisans (Malaysian Design Council 2003; Arney 1987). The Handicraft Board, formerly known as RIDA (Rural Industry Development Authority), was established in 1958 to “raise the economic status of the rural population by indulging ... in craft activities” (Malaysian Design Council 2003: 1). RIDA became the Malaysian Handicraft Board in 1973 and *Kraftangan Malaysia* (Malaysian Handicraft) in 1979. This government body

was mandated by Act 222 of the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation in 1979 to “promote ... stimulate and rehabilitate traditional skill and craftsmanship”. Its responsibility is to “develop ... stimulate growth and maintain [the] standards ... of the craft industry for local and foreign markets.” *Kraftangan Malaysia* proceeds with the mandate of introducing “mechanization ... in order to expedite [the] production process and reduce cost” and promote “factory-like operation in rural areas ... to produce crafts in [a] more organized, systematic and disciplined manner” (Malaysian Design Council 2003: 3-9).

The development of Malaysian batik since its localization in the late 19th century parallels with the growing roots of modernity and the increasing affirmation of Malay-Islamic identity in the Malaysian Peninsula. As a symbol, batik is a means of inscribing the body to produce and signify a modern Malay/sian social, economic and political anatomy. Developed by the Malays in the early 1920s (Arney 1987; Malek 1973), it marks the modernity of their bodies, initiated from communitarian life into nationalism and capitalism.

Significantly, Malay/sian batik is also strongly associated with Islam. As mentioned earlier, Malaysian batik developed from the Indonesian prototype, and when this arrived on the peninsula it did so as an Islamicized cloth. Although batik in Indonesia is not readily associated with Islam, its rise in Java has been linked to the rise of Islam and the fall of the Hindu kingdom of Majapahit. According to Maxwell (1990), batik production flourished with Javanese court culture of the eighteenth century, when the influence and role of Islam was expanding significantly. This may also explain why batik generally did not have similar magical connotations as pre-Islamic Indonesian textiles.

Rather, batik motifs and cloth styles were linked more to status, genealogy, wealth and power. The rulers of Java have control over certain designs, most of which are variations or localizations of prestigious Indian textiles admired by the elite.⁵⁵ The textile merchants on the north coast of Java were largely Muslims of Indian and Arab descent who immigrated, settled and married among the local population from the 14th century onwards, if not earlier. They are known as the *Kauman* community who became “wealthy batik merchants, producing high quality batiks” that gave them “continuous contact with the aristocracy” (Nian Djoemena 1993: 435). The *Kauman* adopted local attire but consciously differentiated themselves from pre-Islamic local tradition through textile-design. This can be seen in the prominent use of non-figurative patterns, particularly the dotted design known as the *nitik*, combined with some floral elements (Maxwell 1990). Certain cloth types were associated with Islamic religious leaders (turban, long robe), but among the larger communities it was the design (motifs) that functioned as markers of distinction. Subsequently, “Muslim traders on Jawa’s north coast encouraged production of particular styles for Muslim consumers, especially in Sumatra ... [Inhabitants of] Lasem [on north coastal Jawa] created a unique styles which remains popular among Malay batik producers to this day” (Arney 1987: 39).

Thus batik was domesticated on the Malaysian peninsula at a time when it had been closely affiliated with Islamic identities and communities for several centuries.

Consequently, it is not surprising that batik is often synonymous with Islam among

⁵⁵ The development of batik in Java during the 19th century was a solution to the aristocratic demand on foreign textiles. In pre-Islamic Java, textiles played important roles as religious offerings in mortuary rites, healing, and in communal, agricultural and life-cycle rituals. Batik-making villages in Java at the time were located near royal cemeteries, and the production was controlled by female relatives of the officeholders. The cemeteries hosted shrines, which were constantly visited by pilgrims. The villagers were exempted from paying taxes in return for maintaining the cemeteries. Maxwell (1990) argues that all these factors contributed significantly to the gradual accumulation of wealth and time for batik skill and production to culminate in this area, which in turn gave rise to important batik centres.

Malay/sians, albeit in indigenous form. It can be argued that batik continues the work of circumcision by conferring upon the body a localized Islamic identity. While circumcision is a permanent and private marker, batik is a removable external sign. Nevertheless, batik involves a degree of privation, for cloth in the pre-modern Malay context functions as a marker of personal identities (for e.g: age, gender and marital status). This traditional significance is reiterated in modern ethno-national context where batik is personalized as the national trait or soul that one would wear. In addition, the discourse of modern galleries and museum posits textiles into the notion of permanence by treating the fabric as an artifact to be guarded and conserved .

Through the language of batik Malay/sians are able to retain a local sense of identity and articulate this identity in Islamic terms. According to Syed Ahmad Jamal, batik techniques became the means for Malay/sian painters to assert their Islamic identity through the aesthetics of infinite patterning stylization and the denaturalization of floral motifs that reflect the Islamic notion of transcendence beyond the phenomenal world (Balai Seni Lukis Negara 1986). The deployment of infinite patterning by Malay artists signifies the Islamicization of the cloth and the localization of painting. It denies naturalism and illusionism (volume and three-dimensionality), emphasizing in their stead aniconic imagery and the two-dimensionality of the pictorial space (see FIG: 55). Sulaiman Esa (Galeri Petronas 2001) relays the significance of infinite patterning and vegetation motifs in the following verse:



55.



56.

*Tumbuh berpunca
Punca penuh rahsia
Tajam tidak menikam lawan
Tegak tidak memaut kawan
Tapi berlegar penuh mesra*

Sprouting from a source
A source that is the mystery of all the mysteries
Sharp yet not piercing the foe
Firm yet not restraining a friend
Ever embracing in harmony (my trans.)⁵⁶

The first two lines refer to divinity as the unknown origin. The last three lines are ethical imperatives, i.e. a system of constraint that relates to a person achieving success and asserting personal goals whilst maintaining social decorum, for example, by avoiding unnecessary tension. The Islamicity of the cloth, in turn, islamicizes the body. Herein lies the transformative role of batik as the inscription that signifies the emergence of modern Malay-Islamic subjects. It not only provides the external marker of identity but also the ideals of personal behavior. Batik re-generates Azah Aziz's notion of the 'personhood' of cloth as something that is not merely an artificial appendage to the body but a consciousness, a personality and a trait (*keperibadian*).

By inscribing the historicity and identity of their bodies, batik sets into motion the process "through which the human body is placed, temporally and spatially" (Calefato 1997: 69). Indeed, batik is not worn all the time. According to the NCC it is only obligatory at certain times, either for the workplace or formal occasions. As such, batik and national dress codes follow the general operation of clothing which inscribe upon the body its rhythm and cadence, duration and tempo. They define what kind of body to assume and when to assume it. As a mnemonic device that fabricates continuity of/on/

⁵⁶ Esa did not specify whether this verse is his own composition or is a traditional Malay verse or poem used to describe the spiritual, moral and ethical implication of traditional aesthetics.

/through the Malay/sian body, the national dress is the function of time in the constitution of a historically defined selfhood. The prescriptive and conventional status of batik as a national identity renders identity as a citational practice. Since the batik is understood as a medium for developing a sense of national ‘soul’, it is posited therefore that identity is not preceded by a universal soul or consciousness. On the contrary, the soul is the effect of citation, an after-effect of inscription.

Clothing operates as a subsidiary of time; it is the inscription of time from which emerges the awareness of past, present and future. It prescribes agency to the wearer by plotting on the body its past, its present significance and its future direction. At a general level, batik, as an ethno-national mark, is the inscription of the historicity of the Malay/sian body. This aspect is signaled by *Pantai Timur* (FIG. 53), which features men and women of the Malaysian east coast, represented on cloth through batik techniques, and presented as a painting. By focusing on the congregation of Malay bodies working at a textile production site, the batik-painting recalls the roots of Malaysian batik in the east coast industries. As a batik-painting, it presents the alliance between tradition and modernity, continuity and change. As a gallery based object, the main target of the image is the urban viewer. Produced in the 1980, this painting is posited within the discourse of identity facing the urbanized Malays; hence it represents an attempt to reconcile the crisis among the culturally dis/located modern Malays. *Pantai Timur* offers them the screen of tradition as the ideal to (re)form their industrious bodies. The bodies in *Pantai Timur* are not only subject to the history of Malay/sian batik but also to the rhythms of work that had produced this history and the history of the modern Malay/sian body. *Pantai Timur*

presents batik as an external logo of identity, and textile tradition and technique as a disciplinary element that determines bodily behaviours, actions and productivity.

As a mark that inscribes upon the Malay body its identity and historicity, batik-painting extends the discourse of circumcision that imprints upon the body both its ethno-religious affiliation as well as the narration of the state. Like the symbolisms invoked during the circumcision rite that re-visit the mythical origin of the Malay proto-state, batik 're-tells' this story by forming a basis of national identity or trait. At a more general level, both batik and circumcision presents the body as what Michel Foucault describes as "the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration" (Foucault 1984: 83). The circumcised body is re-marked, textiled, and continues to be ritualized on the streets and workplaces. The Malay body continues to be "imprinted by history and by the process of history's destruction of the body" (Ibid). The inscriptive process of enculturation morphologically (trans)forms the body into a text. By doing so it enables the reincarnation of social fictions that can then be read as the truth of being. The mechanism of cultural construction is understood as "history" and its specific operation as *inscription*. The body is culturally constructed through its subjection to the inscriptive operation of "history" that takes hold of the body, disfigures and distorts it, shaping the body into a signifier. The body, in Foucaultian sense, is figured as a surface, or blank page, available for inscription, awaiting the "imprint" of history. Although Foucault appears to argue that the body does not exist outside the terms of its cultural inscription, it seems that the very mechanism of "inscription" proposed by his model implies a power that is necessarily external to the body. As Judith Butler points out, the

emphasis on the body as an *inscribed surface* implies that the ‘constructed’ or ‘inscribed’ body has an ontological status apart from that inscription, which is precisely the claim that Foucault seeks to refute (Butler 1999). And surely, batik, as identity, personality and ‘soul’, does not privilege the body with an ontological status that is outside its inscription. Malay/sian bodily identity and national consciousness through batik exist as after-effects of inscription.

The status of inscription as the materiality of the body is also emphasized in circumcision. As mentioned at the end of chapter 1, the mark of circumcision is achieved through a subtractive process, that is, by taking away a part of the body as opposed to adding a purely external entity. As a site for scarification, the circumcised body is marked by its own flesh. In addition, the rite begins with a ritual meal that alludes to the mythical origin of the Malay proto-state. The novice begins his initiation into Muslim adulthood by symbolically eating a ‘national’ history, ingested and turned into the very flesh of the subject. This signification also marks the beginning of Malay nationalism in art, revisited by the founder of the APS, Hoessein Enas. His *Gadis Menumbuk Padi* (FIG. 22) features a young Malay girl pounding rice, preparing the grain for domestic use. The painting was done in 1959, two years after national independence. Through the shadows of Retna Dumilah and Tisna Wati, this work foregrounds ‘Malay ethos’ and the plight of rural Malays in a newly emerging modern nation. Nationalism and ethnic struggle are registered in a painting that is yet another substitute of the dead mother whose death gave birth to the grain that installed the Malay proto-state.

Rice continues to be the effect of maternal absence for the modern Malays, for it is the common food used for weaning (Ahmad et.al. 1996; Firth 1966). For the Malay

individual then rice is a mother-substitute, which inscribes one's body with the loss of the maternal breast. Rice is the object that severs the mother-child dyad and individualizes their bodies, turning a mother-child unit into a mother and a child. At the same time, rice buffers this gap by being the substitute for the receding maternal breast. Since the latter is not only a nourishing contraption but also a love object, weaning also marks the child's quest for a substitute for an originary love. Therefore, as an agent for weaning, rice sets to work the mating rule of loving away from the mother, forfeiting the pleasure and intimacy of her body with another outside the family. Consequently, as noted in the previous chapter, an alliance is forged and a family proliferates beyond the household into a community.

These circumstances complicate our reading of the nationalistic *Gadis Menumbuk Padi*. The painting contains within it the traces of circumcision as the instituting of both the social and the individual. At the social level, it subjects the Malay body to the agent of weaning that institutes a community and a proto-state. At the individual level, it suggests a quest for the lost originary love, the substitute which the painter appears to find in a young rural Malay girl, in the nation-state and in the love for the *ibu pertiwi* (motherland). A similar logic can also be seen at work in *Pasar Minggu* (The Weekend Market) by Mazeli Mat Som (FIG. 23), Hoessein's disciple who expanded the 'APS' empire'. Malay nationalism is expressed in the painting through a carefully posed body of a young Malay female. Behind her, an older female lurks, casually seated near a cooking wok. We are again reminded of the substitutive play between young and old females and oral satisfaction/love. The nationalistic impulse in modern Malay/sian art is inaugurated through the figure of love brought by the receding mother, a threatening loss that is

avoided by the adult male painters who crutch the maternal absence by tracing in graphic form the body of the nation as a young female.

The Maternal Batik

The figure of the mother re-appears in post-NCC Malaysia to articulate the plight of the Malays who are re/dis/located into the modern cities. *The De-Tribalization of Tam binti Che Lat* (FIG. 56), which was painted in 1983, continues to invoke the maternal symbol in the midst of nativist leanings in modern Malaysian art. The painting brings together in one pictorial space the signs of its time: designer wicker furniture, grille iron gate, tennis player, interior plants, local newspaper and a belly dancer. These markers of modernity circulate around and detribalize the old Malay woman in the foreground. The painting

clearly ... alludes to the consequences of drastic social change. The wizened old Malay woman, Tam binti Che Lat, bears witness to the new way of life already encroaching the Malay world with the new tastes, new habits and newer modernistic contexts. The grille iron gate reaffirms the new notion of urbanized middle-class privacy and also, the new sense of insecurity. Ismail [the artist] had made a matter-of-fact statement on the nature of cultural dislocation ... the growing “detribalization” of the Malays in the new contemporaneous contexts they were already finding themselves in (Piyadasa 1995: 43).

Painted by yet another male artist, the image can be seen as extending and reformulating Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung’s symbolisms. It continues the APS’ tradition of bearing upon the female body the politics of modernity and ethno-nationalism. It departs from the former by abandoning the centrality of the young female body as the figure of the nation and adopts an old female as the mark of anxiety. It is an image of hope and fear, contained by a body that was once nourishing and sustaining, but is now an exhausted

senior female who bears the sign of life dissipating. She is meant to be lived as a symbol of tradition and identity that is currently understood as being under siege.

The notion of the mother is also the subject of *Interior No.29* (FIG. 54) by Mastura Abdul Rahman. This painting features the interior space of a traditional Malay house known as the 'Ruang Ibu' (Mother's Space) that is marked by batik motifs. Like the architectural space, the use of batik in the painting is also symbolic of womanhood. The artist, in her own word, states: "I am a typical Malay woman, so I like Batik" (Queensland Art Gallery 1993). The painting is yet another example wherein Malay identity is affirmed and manifested through art. In this sense, the painting continues the labors of the APS that express Malay identity through a maternal metaphor. Yet, as a work by a female artist, the painting introduces a female voice on a subject that has been hitherto largely articulated by male artists. Mastura also departs from the APS in her avoidance of the figure, opting to express maternity and womanhood through the language of abstraction. This move places her within the trend of the time, when Malay/sian artists were consciously articulating their identity as Islamic. By merging batik motifs and traditional Malay architecture, Mastura's painting also articulates in visual terms the discussions that took place during the 1971 NCC. It concretizes the ideas brought about by two of the papers presented which proposed batik as an important element in architectural interior design. Habibah Baharuddin argued that Interior Decoration constitutes a fundamental aspect in developing national identity. She proposed that "Malay aesthetics be employed as the basis for Interior Decoration ... because only through Malay aesthetics can a national identity really emerge" (Baharuddin 1973: 329, my trans.). By "encouraging the use of batik in domestic spaces,

as bedspreads, upholsteries, pillow covers, curtains, table spreads and wallpapers” she argued for a fuller incorporation of this art form into interior decoration (Ibid: 334). In another paper, Ramli Malek extends Baharuddin’s recommendations to public spaces, arguing for the incorporation of traditional textiles into “hotels, theatres, offices, ministries, etc.” (Malek 1973: 406). Mastura’s painting re-locates these propositions into the gallery context and supplements them with the discourse of the mother.

By identifying Malay womanhood with batik in this work, Mastura invokes the circumcision of the Malay female, for batik is a common marriage gift in Malay weddings.⁵⁷ Batik is the object that is exchanged along with the bodies between parties. As noted in chapter two, female circumcision marks her Muslim adulthood and marriageability; it signifies that she has now reached the age of exchange. This transaction ejects the individual from the comfort of her family and connects her to another family, forming alliances that cause bodies to multiply into social organizations. As the marker of her fleshy transaction, batik defines her womanhood as her circumcision that subjected her to the same mating rule that took Dang Sendari away from her family and instituted the Malay kingdom in Palembang. Batik accompanies the Malay woman as she watches her family recede into the background. In the company of batik she leaves her original love objects who subjected her to the mark that now turns her not only into a love object for another, but also into a circumcising mother.

The ideological repercussion of the above is implied in Mastura’s painting, although it is cloaked under the guise of aestheticism. Sim Tam describes Mastura’s

⁵⁷ Marriage itself is a form of a gift from the parents to their offsprings. “In Malay society, there was no state of adult bachelorhood ... [T]he most important, single, material role that parents played in the lives of their children was in arranging their marriages and establishing them in viable households of their own” (Banks 1972: 1260).

painting as *halus*, a traditional aesthetic term meaning ‘refined’ that refers to the “aesthetic component (finely made) as well as [to the] moral one (refined, correct)” (Sim 1993: 108). The carefully planned design metaphorizes the striving for “an ordered and harmonious society” (Ibid). Hence, Mastura’s works are clearly ideological, localizing the order of the social at the level of the body. These occur through two elements: the textile symbolism and the reference to the interior of traditional architecture. Textiles not only bind the body to the social but are in and of themselves a symbolic body for they are traditionally defined as “the skin of *adat* [customary laws]” – as a body (Ibid).⁵⁸

In the painting this corporeal exteriority is supplemented by an interiority, symbolized by the architectural space. This interiority has nothing to do with a purely biological, natural or universal space that is outside social power. On the contrary, the “*Interior Series*” refers to the spatial design of traditional Malay houses and the arrangement of their interiors which are reflective of social relationships” (Sim 1993: 109). Traditional Malay houses only have one room proper, which is reserved for the newly weds, guests or is to be used during illness or death (Mohammad Rasdi et.al. 2004). The rest of the home’s spaces are collective spaces, shared by the family members and used to host guests during social gatherings. The house is generally divided into two main zones; the guest zone is located in the front area of the house; the family zone is in the back of the house, where the kitchen is.

The main area of the house is known as ‘Mother’s Space’ (Ruang Ibu) or ‘Mother’s House’ (Rumah Ibu). This is the area depicted in *Interior No. 29*. In traditional Malay architecture, ‘Mother’s Space’ is preceded by a smaller space called the *serambi*, which is at the very front of the house. When one enters the house, one first enters the

⁵⁸ The sociologist Bryan Turner also refers to dress as the ‘social skin’ (Turner 1990).

serambi, then the ‘Mother’s Space’, followed by the kitchen. During social gatherings, males are seated in the *serambi*, and women in the ‘Mother’s Space’. The latter is slightly raised and walled from the former. One enters the ‘Mother’s Space’ through a door and at the bottom of the entrance a wooden plank (usually 2-3 inches thick) is placed across the floor. This plank is called the *bendul* and it serves to demarcate the space, for “male visitors are seldom invited to go over the *bendul*” (Mohammad Rasdi et.al. 2004: 37, my trans.).

This spatial gendering is also accomplished by raising the ‘Mother’s Space’ above the *serambi* in order “to ensure the privacy of the female’s area” (Ibid). The door to the ‘Mother’s Space’ is also slightly lowered, forcing one to lower one’s head upon entry. The raising of the ‘Mother’s Space’, and the lowering of the door, “prevent [male] visitors from peeking (*menjengah*) into the female’s space” (Ibid).⁵⁹ The *bendul* on the floor also fulfils a similar function, for it raises a consciousness within the male’s feet – signaling the necessary sense of caution upon crossing a threshold when entering the ‘Mother’s Space’. At the same time the lowered door forces the lowering of the head and the bending of the torso, discouraging a male visitor from looking while simultaneously emitting through his posture the “sign of respect”⁶⁰ upon entry (Ibid).

When considering the above, the focus of Mastura’s painting is the zone that is forbidden, except with permission, to the male subject. While the space suggests a degree of female autonomy, that it is socially reserved for females, its prohibitive status targets the male body. By using the Mother as the privileged trope for this prohibition, the

⁵⁹ Looking or gazing has an aggressive connotation in Malay thought. This can be deduced from the fact that the blade (of a knife, sword, keris, spear, etc.) is designated by the term ‘mata’ (eye). To look is to cut, penetrate, wound and kill.

⁶⁰ As a general rule, it is rude to walk upright in front a seated congregation – regardless of gender - during a social gathering.

architectural metaphor defines the female body as a ‘motherness’ that is barred from masculine access except by the female’s, i.e. maternal, consent. Implicit in Mastura’s painting is the maternal authority over the access to her body. The painting articulates, through the figure of architecture, the maternal gesture that imposes a limit for the adult male against her body as his source of (scopophilial) pleasure. In socio-sexual terms, the painting turns on the red lamp of incest.

This authoritative gesture had arguably already taken place when the maternal breast and its milken fluid first penetrated the infant’s body. To begin with, every infant is presumably conceived without (the infant’s) consent and born into a state of absolute dependency. Its life and death is fully subjected to the goodwill of others. Since child rearing in the Malay society is mother-centered,⁶¹ the mother is without doubt the child’s first and prolonged encounter with the Other. What I here call ‘the mOther’ took the prosthetic task of compensating for the infant’s motor and sensory incapacities, endows her with the power over life and death, which she exercises through her analytical prowess to interpret the infant’s inarticulate cry that determines the latter’s access to her body. The infantile need for food and shelter, its instinct for survival, is displaced onto the mOther’s analysis. The infant’s body is spoken for, interpreted and overwritten by the mOther. The infant’s cry

speaks in the Other ... designating by “Other” the very locus evoked by recourse to speech in any relation in which such recourse plays a part. If it speaks in the Other, whether or not the subject hears it ... it is there that the subject finds his signifying place in a way that is logically prior to any awakening of the signified (Lacan 2002: 275)

⁶¹ Malay mothers take the role of the “nurturant figures” providing the children with “earliest and most dependable source of social gratification.” (Banks 1972: 1256).

The mOther hypothesizes upon the infant's abstract demand, providing a series of objects for him/her. And it takes more than one try to come up with the correct hypothesis. This means that the objects - breast, bottle, toy, etc. - are received by the infant as demands *from* the mOther as his/her location in her. The objects (im)pose upon (and elicit from) the infant the fundamental question: *What do you want from/of me?* Do you want me to defecate? suckle? crawl? speak? Through its encounter with maternal analyses and demands, the infant turns the objects into signifiers and reduces them into signs of identification.⁶² The maternal gift/demand becomes the mother's double, her substitute into which the infant locates itself as the object of love and the object as maternal love. The objects are not purely objects but symbols of maternal presence and love. But as symbols, they are her substitutes, that is to say, they are her body and love as absences.

The absence of the mother produces the inarticulate cry through which one emerges as a subject of speech. The cry is the proto-symbol that attempts to master the maternal absence. The (re)appearance of the mOther to attend to the cry attests to the victory of the child. However, this triumph is short-lived, if ever at all. By responding to the cry through the supply of her body (breast) or other substitutes (toy, etc.), the mOther silences the cry. This means that the maternal presence not only soothes, but also deprives the human child of the only tool s/he has to master her. The (re) appearance of the mOther cancels the proto-speech and interrupts the coming of the speaking subject.

The ultimate expression of the silenced body is of course the corpse. In other words, a *total* presence or absence of the mOther will constitute an ultimate threat. Fortunately for the infant, s/he is not 'everything' for the mOther who has other things to

⁶² Detailed explication of this process is provided by the concept of 'Demand' by Jacques Lacan. On the relationship between the infant and objects see Melanie Klein's object-relation theory (Klein 1950).

do. Consequently, absence is re-introduced into the circuit, and within this rhythm of presence and absence, life and death, one emerges as a symbolic organism. The maternal analyses and care of infantile instincts authorize the child into the world of symbols where s/he would harness the power of absence. The child is thrown into the realm of substitutes and weaned from the maternal body to become an individual who finds meanings and love away from the mOther.

The above analyses tell us that the human subject is biologically social, that is, socialized out of biological needs. The effect of this bio-sociality in sexuality and love is the mating rule that limits the access to and pleasure of the maternal body from the adult sons and daughters. The former is expressed by the Malay architecture's 'Mother's Space' that limits the access of the male subjects. By identifying her womanhood with the 'Mother's Space' Mastura re-institutes the maternal demand for her children to desire and love further afield and find (an)other. Through the illusionary depiction of architectural convention and placement of objects she introduces depth to the painting, luring the viewer to enter this exclusive space. But the very encounter with this space is immediately denied by the patterning that flattens the space and distributes our vision *across* the surface rather than *into* it. The painting seduces so that it can frustrate.

The symbolism of textile also emphasizes the artist's status as the daughter of this demand, for it invokes the object that accompanies her entry into the mating rule. At a more general level, she outlines the structure that underlies the beginning of nationalism in modern Malay/sian art, invoking the authority of the circumcising mother that imposes upon her children a series of symbolic objects as her substitutes. If circumcision functions to initiate the Malay-Muslim individual into the mating rule which demands that one

leave one's original source of love and pleasure and find another source, I argue that the work of circumcision ultimately goes back to the labour of the mother. Since early child-rearing in Malay society is mother-centered, the infantile body in its totality (with its physical, emotional, psychological and intellectual needs) is submitted to the mark of the mother. As I have shown above, drawing on insights from psychoanalysis, the intimacy with the mother is also simultaneously a weaning from her. The latter is accomplished through a series of symbols provided by the mother that substitute for her body: toys, blanket, images, and, of course, her name and the word mother.

One of the later manifestations of this maternal demand/inscription is the mating rule that orders one to love and to be physically intimate with *someone else*. Since Malay circumcision marks the age of marriageability, the rite attempts to finalize the mother's demand that we find another body to love and be intimate with. But a (lover's) body is just another substitute in a series of substitutes; there are other substitutes such as objects, acts, words, names or ideas/ideals. Among the ideals at stake in modern Malay/sian art are those of communal and national identity.

As we have seen in this chapter, the ideal of communal binding and national pride is articulated by the Malay/sian painters through the symbols of the mother, i.e through maternal substitutes. Malay identity and nationalism are articulated through the maternal imaginaries that collectively function as the body of the nation. *Girl Pounding Rice*, *The Weekend Market*, *The De-Tribalization of Tam binti Che Lat* and *Interior No. 29* are the construction of this body. They concur with the claim by Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989: 1) that the "central dimensions of the roles of woman are constituted around the relationships of collectivities to the state" and vice-versa. Ingrid Makus similarly argues

that the “care of children is necessary for the perpetuation of any political community that embodies continuity” (Makus 1996: 8).⁶³ The relevance of this formulation to nationalism goes without saying - women’s social and ideological roles are intertwined with their socio-biological functions to organize infantile biological drives. In the Malay-Muslim society where child-rearing is mother-centred, women’s social and ideological roles are intertwined with their biological functions that posited the maternal body as the place where sociality (i.e. the symbolic) is inaugurated.⁶⁴ In the Malay household where infant-rearing is mother-centered, maternal authority and care re-mark one’s biological instincts, thus forming the interiority of the body. The subject is permanently imprinted by the maternal mark that weaned him/her away from the maternal body towards substitutive pleasures and love. This act culminates in the ejection of the individual from the family towards another. For the Malay family the mother is a circumcising mother, whose breast and analyses intrudes and inscribes her children’s body whereby the latter is weaned away. The circumcising knife furthers her work, cutting her children away from the household, and resulting in bodies that expand into another family to bring about a community. The maternal body is the proto-ideological site where the ideology of love is inaugurated, authorizing the individual as a bio-social organism.

⁶³ For further readings in the relationship between nationalism and gender see Mostov 2000; McClintock 1995 and Stoler, 1995. Analyses of the subject pertaining to Muslim Malay/sia can be found in Ng 2006, Stivens 1998, Ong 1995 and Nagata 1984.

⁶⁴ This does not mean that women are more biologically inclined than men. Both sexes are governed by biological drives. In Malay society where the care of the infant is almost exclusively a maternal function, the mother will have the most authority over the infant’s body and desire. In other words, the mother *functions* as the primary organizer of *drives*. Since the organization of infantile biological drives (hunger, pleasure, etc.) leads to substitutes or symbols, the task of organizing the drives implies a fundamental social function. This is why I refer to the human subject as a bio-social organism whose socio-symbolic existence is arguably rooted in its biological functions that lead to the organization of drives through symbolic substitutes.

Conclusion

This chapter posits batik-painting within the discourse of the body, by showing its relationship to: (1) the *Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung* (APS, the Association of Peninsular Painters) and (2) the inscribing of the body by the 1971 National Cultural Policy and its aftermath. Both raised the issues regarding origin, identity, norms, and values that encourage artists to explore traditions that would create a specific body that can be called the body of the nation. The batik-paintings of the 1980s-1990s are situated within the cultural politics of the body of post-1969 Malay/sia that informs its project of national identity.

Within the context of the competing Islamicism in post-1970s Malaysia, between the state and resurgent Islam, the citation of batik in modern Malay/sian art is certainly closer to the position of the former. Instead of imposing on the body Arab-Islamic marks, the Indigenous-Islamic one (batik) is opted for instead. Like circumcision, batik confers to the body a Muslim identity within the plurality of local symbolisms. By the same token, reference to the batik tradition in modern Malay/sian art subdues the Islamicist discourse and is closer to the state's position and its cultural mission to inscribe and legitimize the bodies and identity of its citizens. By juxtaposing batik-painting and the phenomenon of the body in the larger context we would be able to transcend the figurative-abstract dichotomy and re-conceptualize the absence of the body in the batik-painting as itself a discourse of the body. The particularity of this discourse is that the body is understood as not a pre-inscribed surface but as a collection of marks that creates the body as surface for further markings. This, arguably, takes effect the moment the body is born to become the subject of the mOther. The marking and re-marking of the

Malay body by the maternal demand launches the work of circumcision that detaches the individual from his/her own body and the family to be re-attached to symbols and other family. The result of this process is the community and the nation that is held together by symbols, summarized in modern Malay/sian art through the figure of the mother as the symbol and body of the nation.

CHAPTER 4: The Body Gestured: Abstract Expressionism in Modern Malaysian Art

This chapter investigates the discourses surrounding abstract expressionism in modern Malaysian art. While stressing the local context and imageries in the readings of this particular episode in modern Malaysian art, I do not posit Malaysian Abstract Expressionism as existing completely independently from its western counterpart. Rather, I see the New York and Malaysian painters as co-extensive. I see the latter as having chosen to pursue an aspect of the former that has always already been in effect in New York since its inception in the 1940s-50s but which mutated differently in Malaysia under distinct historical and cultural trajectories. These, I argue, can be better understood once we attend closely to the stylistic feature, or more accurately, the visual vocabularies adopted by these artists which privileges the gesture of the painter. By doing so we may also link Abstract Expressionism in Malaysia to the larger phenomenon of the inscribed body that defines the cultural politics of modern Malaysia that is grounded in nationalistic sentiments.

The Malaysian Encounter with Abstract Expressionism

Abstract Expressionism began in New York in the 1940s with roots as diverse as European modernism, American Regionalism, Mexican murals, Native American art, Surrealism and eastern calligraphy (Craven 1991; Polcari 1991; Shapiro & Shapiro 1990). Some of its better-known representatives are Willem de Kooning, Barnett Newman, Adolph Gottlieb, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell and Jackson Pollock; the less well known includes Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Janet Sobel, Norman Lewis and

Romare Bearden (Gibson 1997). By the time Abstract Expressionism was institutionalized in New York at the end of the forties the movement had acquired its own technical and conceptual characteristics:

The new painting dispensed with recognizable images from the known world. Its surfaces were often rough, unfinished, even sloppy, with uneven textures and dripping paint ... It was an art that aimed to negate the art of America's recent past as well as that of more distant times and places ... The tradition of art as communicator or as source of pleasure appeared to have been abandoned by an intensely individual school of painting, in which each artist had a distinct, immediately differentiable calligraphy. Yet all seemed to share certain assumptions: the need to explore the subconscious, the value of the exploitation of chance; the capacity of paint to serve as a vehicle for emotional expression ... The artist became, in a sense, only the conduit, the brush by means of which automatic writing transmitted emotion onto an external objects, the painting surface (Shapiro & Shapiro 1990: 1-2)

This stylistic and conceptual innovation was transplanted into Malaysia in the 1960s. As pointed in chapter one, the need for teachers of modern subjects arose immediately after national independence in 1957 due to dramatic enrolment in local schools. Consequently, the government established the Specialist Teacher's Training Institute (STTI) in Kuala Lumpur in 1960 to re-train teachers into specialist-teachers. Out of its graduates, a number were selected and sent to Britain for further training. Among them were Yeoh Jin Leng (Chinese Malaysian) and Syed Ahmad Jamal (Malay Malaysian) who were dispatched to the Chelsea School of Art in England. Both of them would return as propagators of Abstract Expressionism.

However, it is part of the story that neither painter was trained as an abstract expressionist. They did not encounter abstract expressionism in their British classroom. S.A. Jamal describes his academic life in England as "disappointing" and "uninspiring" (Sabapathy 1996: 31). Instead, that particular inspiration was supplied by local galleries

which were hosting exhibitions of abstract expressionists at the time.⁶⁵ S.A. Jamal also found his catalyst in the paintings of Goya (Spain) which contained the ‘raw’ quality that he could not find in British and French art.⁶⁶

Both Jamal’s and Yeoh’s interest in Abstract Expressionism is founded in their conviction about the relevance of the New York paintings in regard to their local experience. For Yeoh, the encounter of Robert Motherwell and Mark Tobey with eastern calligraphy had “united western expression and eastern meditation” to arrive at “calligraphic compositions in enlarged dimensions” (Yeoh 1988: 57). Similarly, S.A. Jamal is convinced of the validity of Abstract Expressionism to the Malaysian experience, describing the “immediacy and mystical quality” of Abstract Expressionism as appealing “particularly to the Malaysian temperament and cultural heritage” (quoted in Sabapathy 1996: 35). He was consciously articulating his expressionism within the confines of local signification, drawing substantially from the flow, rhythm and form of Islamic calligraphy, both in subject matter and manner of painting. Thus, these two painters found two of the criteria of the New York school previously mentioned particularly relevant. These are: calligraphic immediacy and the idea that the artist is the conduit through which human interiority flows; both are ultimately linked to ethno-religious identity and the nation.

Abstract Expressionism in modern Malaysian art was challenged during the 1970s by the ‘New Scene’ artists. The latter intended to end the expressionist era, by a sustained

⁶⁵ Personal communication with S.A. Jamal. According to Nancy Jachec (2000) the United States Information Agency held its first exhibition of American art in England in 1953. This means that the movement was already circulating in England by the time the Malaysians arrived.

⁶⁶ Personal communication. Goya’s important works were produced during the brutal French occupation of the Iberian peninsula. His works were anti-colonial, which provides an interesting angle to Jamal’s nationalistic stance.

rejection of the gestural emphasis. Their hostility towards the local expressionists was founded on what was perceived as the latter's uncritical use of western-style modernism, which was perceived to usher in "an individual approach to knowledge which differed from the more traditional and religio-centred world-views" of the region (Piyadasa 1994: 23). The modernism of the 1950s and 60s were seen by the New Scene Artists as unable or unwilling to challenge its problematic foundation, that is the colonial educational system with its dual emphasis on individualism and naturalism. For them, Abstract Expressionism essentially extended the colonial system that was implemented to train

local personnel to serve in the various government agencies, especially at the lower levels. For this, competency in the English language was the principle requirement ... Legal and cultural values and systems were promoted in order to ensure a sense of loyalty to the regime (Piyadasa and Sabapathy 1983:1)

Gestural emphasis epitomized for the New Scene artists western individualism and the painters were seen as reinforcing western aesthetics. Therefore the decolonizing potential of expressionist aesthetic is severely limited. In the 1980s, amidst the Malay-Islamic revivalism, Ismail Zain stated that

there is no other artistic convention within Modernism of the West which was not only politically motivated, at its initial stage, but had also congenially availed itself so conveniently to the imposition of cultural or political adjuncts for the purpose of legitimizing the ethnic and the vernacular within Modernism, as Abstract Expressionism and the post painterly abstraction of Late Modernism. Being a product of the post-[S]econd World War era as one of the facets of its internal history, Abstract Expressionism is truly one of the most successful exports to the world; perhaps next to MacDonald[s] and Coca-Cola. ... It is ironic ... and derisive ... that ... the Eastern man ... would find his ... sufi wisdoms and hypothetical forms of a lost vernacular [through abstract expressionism] (Zain 1989: 23-4)

According to Sabapathy (1994), Zain drew from the works by Max Kozloff, Eva Cockroft and David and Cecile Shapiro who investigated the appropriation of abstract

expressionism by the USA's Cold War propaganda during the 1950s. They examined the co-optation of Abstract Expressionism, via the International Council (IC) at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York and by the United States Information Agency (USIA), as U.S. governmental efforts to tout the freedom and individualism available in the West in contrast to Soviet totalitarianism. Serge Guilbaut (1983) extends Kozloff's (1985) argument that the promotion of abstract expressionism as an American avant-garde during the 1950s was aimed at supplanting Paris with New York as the art centre of the world by focusing on Abstract Expressionism as a triumph over the technical perfection of European avant-garde. The American essayist/art critic Clement Greenberg saw Jackson Pollock as "more interesting" than his French counterpart, Jean Dubuffet, because Pollock was "more rugged, violent, and brutal". He regarded Pollock's brutality, crudeness and virility as "crucial elements in such uncertain times, more impressive than Parisian charm". For him, Pollock offers the powerful and vigorous art that the Western world needed (Guilbaut 1983: 176-8). "Just as the nations of [post-war] Western Europe were reduced to the level of dependent client and colonized states", Kozloff wrote, "so too was their art understood here [in the USA] to be adjunct, at best, to our own" (Kozloff 1985: 115-16).⁶⁷

However, other scholars like Orton 1983, Larson 1983 and Jachec 2000 demonstrate that the project of promoting abstract expressionism by the U.S. government was actually done more diplomatically. Rather than focusing on the 'inferiority' of the European avant-garde, the USIA's and the IC's efforts strove to present Abstract Expressionism as a continuity of Euro-American cultural and intellectual history, thus

⁶⁷ One may argue that the merging between Abstract Expressionism and local traditions by Malaysian artists functions to subdue such hierarchy in the post-colonial context.

stressing the significance and compatibility of the USA as an ally to Europe (and western civilization in general). The need for a "leftist" art was identified by the U.S government after an internal assessments conducted by the USIA in 1953 on the European reception of their exhibitions. The USIA found that the Europeans were particularly unimpressed by the more traditional fine art exhibits under their auspices, and was told that "America needs to ... dispel 'skepticism' about the value of modern American art and to demonstrate to the world that the U.S possesses spiritual values" (quoted in Jachec 2000:165). The 1955 Senate hearing on the 'American National Arts, Sports and Recreation' supported the promotion of American avant-garde because

the United States have fallen to the habit of letting the rest of the world believe ... that the creative artists of the United States have little to contribute to the cultural growth of our civilization. The communists have exploited this myth by propagandizing the peoples of the world with the story that we ... are materialistic barbarians (Senator Herbert Lehman quoted in Larson 1983:110).

It was in the interest of winning the European left's hearts and minds that drove MoMA's open lobbying of the Congress during the 1950s to finance a cultural campaign against communism. MoMA argued that the avant-garde artists are able to supply post-war western society the political and spiritual leadership it needed, in an era tortured by doubts and by fears for the very survival of civilization. Yet, MoMA's call, which was printed in *The Magazine of Art* in November 1954, never referred to any specific modernist practice but was prefaced by a photomontage of a "range of painterly styles, from ... social realism to ... abstraction" (Jachec 2000:167). Abstract Expressionism was only single out as a viable U.S political investment in 1958, well after it had a well-publicized reputation in the United States as an art of dissent. European responses, particularly of the unaligned left, to Abstract Expressionism and its existential rhetoric

made it the vehicle for promoting the United States among recalcitrant independent leftists groups in Western Europe as, the very least, tolerant, and, at best a potentially socialist society. Abstract Expressionism was formally and ideologically the closest American practice to Western Europe's own informal practices, which were critically supported by the European non-aligned leftist intelligentsia" (Ibid: 14).

This absorption of existentialist politics into American political establishment was made possible through an appropriation Harold Rosenberg's idea about individual agency in relation to Abstract Expressionism. Rosenberg perceives the historical function of artistic modernism as providing an uncompromising humanist response to industrialism's mechanization and massification of human existence, and to him, abstract expressionism was the new modernism that reinvigorated the essentially Marxist critique of the old (Rosenberg 1970). The painters' emphasis on bold, gestural brushstrokes that represent the painter's presence on the canvas stands as an effort to preserve individualist value and agency within an increasingly mechanized society. The emancipation of the individual became a cultural (and in particular artistic) rather than political enterprise. Since artistic modernism is the natural counterpart to industrialization, its vitality being commensurate with industrial strength, the place of its emergence inevitably favoured the United States at this historical juncture. Thus the assimilation of Abstract Expressionism by the American establishment added cultural and intellectual ingredients to its military and economic privilege at the time. Abstract expressionism came to embody the role of the USA as the saviour of the post-war west, physically and intellectually. However, the success of this campaign was not premised on the superiority of America over Europe, but instead on the affirmation of their ideological and intellectual kinship.

While the story of Abstract Expressionism's co-optation into the Cold War propaganda within the Euro-American context was amply documented, I am not aware of anything similar in the rooting of Abstract Expressionism Malaysia, and neither did Ismail Zain provide any in his critique. However, we can see how the role of the state in promoting Abstract Expressionism outside the USA lends the rhetorical device for Zain to extend the New Scene's critique into the years of traditional revivalism in modern Malaysian art. The assault continues in the 1990s through the pen of Krishen Jit:

the hold of Abstract Expressionism appears to be strong despite the changing times and the emergence of alternative gestures. New art manifestations that arose in the 1970s... have not been sufficiently compelling to inspire dissenting art movements powerful enough to nudge Abstract Expressionism from its hegemonic position (Jit 1994: 7-8)

However, the activities of the local expressionists never coalesced into any unified collective or manifesto, meaning that the claim on the hegemony of Abstract Expressionism in Malaysia might be a bit exaggerated.

Nonetheless, Yeoh Jin Leng responds to these criticisms and insists on the relevance of 'abstract expressionism' to the Malaysian experience:

Artists of the 60's were conveniently grouped as Abstract Expressionist and, even though the basic drives that launched American Abstract Expressionism are quite different from those of the Malaysian 'group', categorized as 'Abstract Expressionist' ... [it] was not in reality a borrowed idiom. It was a natural means, as a natural development from the loose atmospheric form of the early watercolours...[it] drew substantially from *Nusantara* spirituality, regional landscape elements as well as the flow, rhythm and form of Islamic and Chinese calligraphy (Yeoh 1996: 94)

Instituted after national independence, the local landscape and rhythmic brushwork that forms its image (FIG. 29) signified the birth of a nation and the reaction of its subjects to the occasion. S.A. Jamal remarks that the energetic immediacy of expressionist

brushstrokes in the 1960s captured the spirit of national independence, the “joy, ecstasy, optimism, and all those things which happened because we were right in the midst of the great happening” (S.A. Jamal quoted in Balai Seni Lukis Negara 1975). The same enthusiasm was shared by Yeoh, for whom the “utopian visions of nationalism generated the freedom for self-expression and the creative will” that were manifested through energetic brushstrokes that designate the land and the interiority of its subjects (Yeoh 1997: 32). At this particular historical juncture the painter’s gesture and the marks it ejected were bound to a nationalistic sentiment that was held to be linked to the freedom of the individual. These were proposed through the image of the land and the language of gesture.

The Expressionist Landscape

Nationalism and individual autonomy are linked by the painters through the landscape genre that are partially abstracted due to the use of energetic brushstrokes. As indicated in chapter one, the ideological implication of this genre in relation to modern Malaysia can be traced to works of colonial painters to document the state of British empire in equatorial Southeast Asia. The formal convention employed in these paintings served an explicit colonial theme, one that instilled a commanding view in their British viewers/patrons. With the achievement of national independence landscape became a medium for articulating national consciousness and identity.

To the post-independence generation the landscape genre provided a “sense of cultural identification and emotional belonging” (Piyadasa 1993: 71) with which “to define a role for themselves in the new contexts they had found themselves in” (Piyadasa 1998: 24). For the Malay/sian artists this significance was historically located in the

works of the APS who emerged during the years of Malay nationalism to represent Malay struggle through the images of Malay bodies in rural landscapes. The linking of the land to national sentiment was also suggested by Abdullah Arif, the early and only Malay painter working among the Penang artists in the 1930s. His *Malayan Tin Mine* (FIG. 11) portrayed a land that “has been violated [and] disemboweled in order to exploit its interior contents for industrial and commercial purposes.” (Sabapathy 1996: 38) Sabapathy’s reading of the painting resonates with the historicity of the Malayan soil, for the tin mine is what brought about the full colonization of Malaya, and the subsequent economic dominance by European and Chinese entrepreneurs (Andaya & Andaya 2001; Ali 1981). The mine is the context through which the rural Malay had become gradually and increasingly displaced throughout its modern history. It is also the context through which the complexity of the Malaysian condition would be punctuated by ethnic politics, occasionally erupting into physical violence. The colonial desire for tin and the industrialization of palm and rubber had brought in the influx of migrations from China and India, leading to a radical imbalance in Malayan political life, as factional struggles erupted between and within the communities.

The Malaysian expressionists continued the ideological connotation of landscape. Their works that appeared immediately after national independence project “a sense of overt idealism and expectant hope and pride in the land and its peoples....attempts to define a role for themselves in the new contexts they had found themselves in” (Piyadasa 1998a: 24). This was emphasized by S.A. Jamal who writes: “the root of Malaysian painting certainly seemed to grow in the countryside -the rural scene of rice-fields, fisherman’s huts, boats, and the ubiquitous swaying of coconut palms, served as germs of

ingredients of visual identity” (S.A. Jamal 1979: 71). Of his own *Nipah Palm* (1957) (FIG. 25) he wrote that it was the “result of ecstatic response by the artist in his re-acquaintance with his birth-place ... home from overseas” (S.A. Jamal 1979: 72). To offer context to this statement, the 1960s, according to Piyadasa,

was essentially a decade marked by new-found pride and euphoria in our new sense of nationhood... a veritable symbol of the new sense of exuberance. ... The land afforded the returning artist a sense of cultural identification and emotional belonging. Some of our best landscape paintings were produced during that era of nationalistic euphoria. (Piyadasa 1993: 71)

Kanaga Sabapathy welcomes the tone of S.A. Jamal’s and Piyadasa’s passages when he describes the significance of the landscape genre as a means to demonstrate a “profound, strong and enduring kinship with the land” (Sabapathy 1996: 38). The artists “expressed this by employing a variety of pictorial methods. There also are particular, ideological manifestations arising from these affinities,...the eminence of Malay’s foregrounded, as they lay first claim to possession and suzerainty of the land” (Ibid).

The indigenization and nationalization of the expressionist landscape are given a distinct ethnic flavour in a historical exposition of Malaysian expressionism at the National Art Gallery in year 2000. The exhibition was entitled *Bara Hati Bahang Jiwa* and central to the curatorial intention

is the claim that *semangat*, *amok* and *adab*, concepts from the Malay worldview, have resonated with and against incoming expressionist tropes, enabling both their assimilation and their transformation into new indigenous forms. At the heart of the Malay system of ideas is *semangat* or the vital principle... in the sense of the will to exist and in the sense of disembodied essences ... It is proposed in the present exposition that it is an engagement with *semangat* that characterizes the first phase of Malaysian Expressionism – that what is ostensibly a response to the vitality of the

tropical landscape, is in fact, at a deeper unconscious level, an encounter with an indigenous vitalism (Rajah 2000: 39)⁶⁸

The concepts of *semangat*, *amok* and *adab* are threaded with the concepts of ‘indigenous vitalism’ and ‘unconscious’ to indigenize Malay/sian ‘expressionism’ as a form of internalization where nature becomes the source of inner motivation. It is a reading of human interiority as the residency of nature, whose voice and animating power are within us. Therefore, the self is discovered by a turning within, towards one’s own sentiments and inclinations. Knowledge and truth radiate from within the subject, as that which nature marks as significant, and through it the individual rediscovers his/her natural impulse and is opened by it. The revivification and restoration of the individual through nature slides into the pantheism of *semangat* that ‘expresses’ an ethno-national landscape, identity and spirituality. Consequently, fast and bold brushstrokes were valorized as citations of ‘the flow, rhythm and form of Islamic and Chinese calligraphy’ that articulates ‘*Nusantara*⁶⁹ spirituality’ in paint. Graphic automatism becomes a ‘natural’ means to affirm individuality through the nation, as well as a means to articulate their modern identity.

Calligraphy, the Body and the Nation

Gestural emphasis was adopted by the New York painters to produce effects of spontaneity and directness of marking, which intimates one’s signature as a graphic ‘immediacy’ that establishes a sense of authentic individuality. Disillusioned with the war

⁶⁸ *Semangat* is the universal spirit that is contained in every physical manifestation of life and the world. These are the spirits that dwell in rocks, earth, fire and all natural objects and may become disembodied when ‘startled’, whereby the harmony of creation is disrupted, resulting in illnesses and other misfortunes. The human soul itself is comprised of three elements: *nyawa* (vital breath), *roh* (the Arabic term for spirit or soul) and *semangat* (the spirit of physical life) (Endicott 1970).

⁶⁹ The term *Nusantara* designates the Malay world, referring to the regions in the Indonesian-Malaysian archipelago including the southern islands of the Phillipines.

and bourgeois dominance, the New York painters perceived the tangible world as a subject no longer worthy of painting. It was their conviction that the value and meaning of painting could be retained only through the act of doing it, that is, in the act of (continuing) to paint. In 'de Kooning Paints a Picture' (1953), Thomas Hess describes Willem de Kooning's spontaneous and impulsive-looking paintings as demonstrating that the process of making the works was actually more relevant than the final product itself (quoted in Landau 2005: 14). Hess' interpretation renders de Kooning's paintings quasi-ritualized and this understanding of painting as a ritualized performance becomes the basis for Harold Rosenberg's re-conceptualization of gestural Abstract Expressionism into the more experientially based category dubbed "Action Painting". For Rosenberg, the canvas was to the painter "an arena in which to act -rather than a space in which to re-produce, re-design, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event" (Rosenberg 1952: 22-3). To further stress the importance of the process/act of painting over the actual final product, he asserts that the "apples weren't brushed off the table in order to make room for perfect relations of space and colour. They had to go so that nothing would get in the way of the act of painting." (Ibid: 23) This is a particular aspect of the movement, a conviction in the power of the medium itself to signify, that meaning does not precede the painterly process but "hinges upon those points where the artists encounter our response -namely the picture plane" (Anfam 1990: 108). The freshness of mark-making that signals the painter's bodily rhythm during the execution of the work is a strategy to invoke viewers participation into the process of painting so that the making and viewing collapse into each other to form an occasion to create meaning. Thus, the spontaneity of brushstroke,

materiality of paint, bodily trace and viewing experience are not to be understood as the presence of subjects, but rather as techniques to (re)invent the subjects. They function to inscribe immediacy and to situate the painting and viewing subjects spatially and temporally. Historically, this may be dated back to Leonardo da Vinci who encouraged artists to seek aesthetic motivations and technical innovations in random stains on walls (Kemp 1989). This spontaneity of inspiration is matched by the Renaissance convention of illusionism and the picture plane as a window that offers immediate access to the world. Later in French Impressionism, thickness of paint and the speed of its application intensify fleetingness of appearance, placing objects at specific place and moment in time. All these technical transformations are threaded by the same conceptual premise: a commitment to painting as a technique whereby vision can be organized to create experiential immediacy as a present moment of viewing. In other words, painting -the act of making it, viewing it, and responding to it - becomes an installment of automatism. The New York painters are heirs to this technique and in their hands the very process of making marks itself is maximized and so is its inscriptive power to create automatism. This culminates in Jackson Pollock who describes the primacy of process as follows:

When I am *in* the painting I am not aware of what I am doing. It's only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well (quoted in Landau 2005: 140)

The spontaneity of marks is produced by a certain play between passivity and activity, by letting 'it come through' because 'the painting has a life of its own', and this play is constantly regulated so that he does not 'lose contact' with the process and produces

mess. Hence graphic automatism has little to do with being spontaneous or expressive. On the contrary, automatism to Pollock “served more as an instrument to add calculated elements of chance, spontaneity and flux” (Anfam 1990: 110). As an instrument, automatism is an invention, and its role in western painting since the Italian Renaissance up to the post-war New York avant-garde testifies to the historicity of this invention. Given abstract expressionism’s interest in the unconscious, one finds the status of automatism as technicality, as opposed to natural reflex, also evident in Andre Breton’s instruction on how to write a surrealist text:

Put yourself in the most passive, or receptive, state you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and those of everyone else. Tell yourself that literature is the saddest path that leads to everything. Write quickly, without a preconceived subject, fast enough not to remember and not to be tempted to read over what you have written (quoted in Lucie-Smith 2001: 34)

Both Breton and Pollock testify to the conventional or prescriptive status of automatism, and hence do not assign it with autonomous or originating subjectivity in any sense. They confirm spontaneity as a fabrication, achieved by inscribing passivity and by putting the subject ‘in the most passive, or receptive state’ so that ‘I am not aware of what I am doing’.

It is precisely this aspect of Abstract Expressionism that renders it suitable for communal, ethnic and nationalist sentiments. It is an unmistakable legacy of eastern calligraphy where linear automatism does not signify a pre-existing subjectivity, but instead is the very creation of the individual. The joining of calligraphy and Abstract Expressionism means that graphic automatism is fundamentally a fabrication of personhood, agency and empowerment that is rooted in and inextricably bound to the manufacturing of a docile body.

As mentioned earlier, Yeoh Jin Leng (1988) emphasized the affiliation between Abstract Expressionism and eastern tradition by invoking the encounters by the American painters Mark Tobey and Robert Motherwell with eastern calligraphy, which resulted in a re-dimensioning of calligraphy into a new form of art. For Yeoh, this serves as an appropriate model for the newly independent Malaya, because it exemplifies the possibility of merging tradition with modernity. Furthermore, the migratory elements that underlie the technical and conceptual development of Abstract Expressionism approximates the syncretic tradition of Malaya, where local and foreign elements are constantly forged together to shape its pre-modern kingdoms and continue to do so in the new, modern nation-state.

The valorization of eastern calligraphy by Abstract Expressionism exemplifies the “cultural intrusion and infusion” that has always been an integral part of the nation’s history and artistic production (Yeoh 1988: 57). This privileging of calligraphy by a Malaysian artist of Chinese descent in the service of national sentiment captures a particular aspect of Chinese calligraphy that is tied to social power. According to Yuehping Yen (2005) and Kraus (1991), Chinese calligraphy has always been ideologically motivated, for the control over written characters has always been the determinant of power in China. This was evidenced by the unification of China by the Qin dynasty in the 3rd century BCE through standardization of written characters for the entire nation. The Communist Revolution undertook similar reform in the 1950s, simplifying hundreds of characters to increase the literacy rate. Calligraphy is a feudal remnant retained by the revolution, and political figures have scattered their marks throughout the nation, in the titles of local newspapers and the names of buildings. The

calligraphic state is also more intimately diffused on the bodies and gestures of its subjects. Consider the regimentation of the body in the following calligraphy lesson taught to children 7-8 years of age in China:

The pupils are first taught ... how to handle the brush and to grind the ink. They are encouraged to hold the brush very tightly. To test this, the tutor will sometimes creep up behind a pupil and try to snatch the brush out of his hand ... Then the tutor shows them how to move the brush and shape the strokes ... The wrist and the elbow should be level with one another and maintained at a height not much below the shoulder. When a pupil has practised for some time, the tutor places on his elbow joint a flat weight of some kind. The weight is not fastened to the elbow ... and has to be balanced while the writing is executed. This exercise has the effect of strengthening the muscles of the arm ... The body should be held square to the table, with the chest not more than three inches from the edge. The back should be upright –at right angles to the surface of the table; and the shoulders level and parallel to the table ... The body should form an immobile base from which the arm can operate like the ‘arm’ of a crane. The left elbow is bent ... and the left hand rests on the paper ... The right elbow is bent and the right hand holds the vertical brush ... The head ... is inclined slightly towards the paper (Chiang 1973: 189-201)

Such dispersal of power at the corporeal level summarizes Yuehping Yen’s reading of calligraphy as “social calligraphy”; where “the significance of calligraphy has escaped the confines of literati’s studies and aestheticians’ theoretical ruminations ... calligraphy becomes part of everyday life and carries with it the power and influence that affects people’s social life” (Yuehping 2005: 3-4). Through calligraphy individuals are taught discipline and self-preservation and enhancement, for the act of writing bestows upon the individual a sense of historicity and belonging in the circuits of power and knowledge. More importantly, calligraphy is the very technique of creating the individual itself, for the regimentation of the body aims to ensure “that each stroke be made in a single movement, with the brush travelling the length of it in the right direction. It is utterly

contrary to the nature of Chinese calligraphy ... to correct or retouch a single dot” (Chiang 1973: 190).

Graphic automatism is achieved by making the body the locus of reason and deliberation, and the resulting spontaneity is essentially a coupling of reason and habit that intensifies inwardness and internalization. The body is thus interiorized from which agency emerges as reflex, i.e. as habitualization and automatism. Calligraphy becomes the inscription of the very depth from which self-articulation rises, thus enabling the illusion of the subject as the autonomous origin of actions and behaviours.

Given the above, we may question the accusation leveled against the gestural emphasis by the Malaysian expressionists as being apolitical. On the contrary, it is rooted in an affirmation of social power that seeps into the body and animates the painter. A similar stand is taken by S.A. Jamal, the Malay-Muslim painter who defines his painterly gesture as a ‘cultural habit’ rooted in the parental and social demand to practice his *Jawi* (Arabic) letters when he was growing up.⁷⁰ This work of the social is represented by Jamal in *Tulisan* (Writing) (FIG. 29), which takes the Arabic letter ج (pronounced ‘jim’) as its subject-matter, executed in the modern medium of oil on canvas. It was produced in 1961, four years after national independence, confirming therefore Jamal’s ‘expressionistic’ calligraphy as a nationalistic gesture. In fact, his interest in calligraphy as a painterly subject began in 1958, just months after the historic moment was declared.

⁷⁰ Personal communication. The term *Jawi* came from early Arab traders and designates the Malay world in general. It did not carry any specific religious connotations to the Arabs but it certainly did among the Malays. The local category of “*Bahasa Jawi* [Jawi Language] was used to denote Malay as a Muslim language” as well as to distinguish it from languages of Islam (Sweeney 1987: 56). This ethno-religious meaning of *Jawi* is also evident in the Malay/sian term *Jawi Peranakan*, which refers to Muslim Malays of Indian ancestry, and in the fact that conversion of non-Muslim and circumcision are both designated by the term *masuk Jawi* (entering *Jawi*) (Ibid).

His choice seems fitting, for the Arabic-Islamic letters that would be the mark of Malay-Muslim are also closely tied to social power.

The earliest known evidence of the use of the Arabic alphabet in Malaysia can be found on the Trengganu Stone.⁷¹ Located in the state of Trengganu (north-east coast of the Malaysian peninsula), the stone dates from the early fourteenth century and signifies the finalization of the Jawi alphabet in the country (al-Attas 1970; Awang 1985). It employs the *naskh* script (Ali 1994), a cursive script that also forms Jamal's *Tulisan*. The choice of the script by the engraver of the Trengganu Stone surprises the art historian Zakaria Ali because it is a fluid form that does not suit as one to engrave in stone, compared to the geometric and vertically oriented Kufic script. This choice can be explained if we look at the history of the script. The cursive script was invented and included into the calligraphic canon by Ibn Muqlah, the *wazir* (minister) and calligrapher to the Abbassid Empire (750-1258 A.D) (Blair 2006; Roxburgh 2003; Issam El-Said 1976).⁷² This script was instituted after the ninth century and represented a specific development in Islamic calligraphy. Traditionally Quranic manuscripts employed the rectilinear script, but after the ninth century the round script, which was traditionally reserved for the chancery, was assimilated into the aesthetic canon. The fluidity of the round script deemed it a more efficient bureaucratic tool than

the stately kufic [script] reserved for monumental inscriptions and Koranic manuscripts. ... This canonization of the round script was part of major

⁷¹ For an image of the Trengganu Stone see “The Ancient accessed Script of Southeast Asia – Part 2, June 20th 2007 (2007 SEAArch- The Southeast Asian Archeology Newsblog), <http://www.southeastasianarchaeology.com/2007/06/20/the-ancient-script-of-southeast-asia-part-2/>, accessed August 14/ 2008.

⁷² The empire included Persia, the Arabian Peninsular and northern Africa. Ibn-Muqlah is known as “the prophet in the field of handwriting”, whose graphic mastery “is poured upon his hand [by God], even as it was revealed to the bees to make their honey cells hexagonal” (Abū Hayyān 1971: 33).

social changes that produced international Islamic civilization ... in which power and culture were decentralized to many courts (Blair 2006: 143)

The invention of the cursive script was politically motivated; it was the vehicle through which a Muslim identity was forged under a centralizing power.⁷³ The expanding of the Abbasid empire was accompanied by the adaptation of the Arabic alphabet “to other languages, such as Persian, Seljuk and Ottoman Turkish, Hindustani, Pushtu, Malay, Berber and Swahili” (Ibid:132). This expansion led to modifications of the script, giving birth to various modalities of Ibn-Muqlah’s prototype, including the ones on the Trengganu Stone and Jamal’s canvas.

As the script of the chancery, the cursive alphabet is based on a notion of secular as opposed to spiritual authority. The secular foundation of the round script is demonstrated by the inclusion of signed colophons in the Quranic artefacts and manuscripts utilizing the script. In contrast, manuscripts before the ninth century employing the rectilinear kufic were penned by the *ulama*’ (religious scholars) and they were never signed (Blair 2006). Furthermore, the nature of cursive script made it especially suited for the democratization of writing, paving the way for the institutionalization of handwriting in the expanding empire. This, in turn, functions to bind the body to the legal sphere, because “the handwriting of each individual ... can be distinguished from the handwriting of any other individual” and it “indicates a person’s will and intention” (Muslim jurist quoted in Rosenthal 1971: 61). The individual character of writing and the innate meaning and purpose of writing bestows writing an

⁷³ Anthony Welch also provides similar observation when he writes about a caliph who decreed Arabic to be “the administrative language of Islam and that epigraphic statement should replace the portrait of rulers on coins ... and legitimized rule on coinage, the art form most seen and most used by the populace. On documents, doorways, minarets, and objects it was also the ruler’s name, and not his face, that symbolized the state ... The script served as the binding visual medium of the state – both to its Muslim and to its many minorities” (Welch 1979: 23).

evidential role, binding the writer into a legal contract as a subject who is legally accountable for his/her act and intention. In short, writing writes the inhabitants of the empire out of anonymity into existence as subjects of the caliphate.

The status of the cursive script as the vehicle that binds the self to the law can also be observed in the Trengganu Stone. The inscription it bears is a series of legal edicts by the state at the time headed by “the self-styled Raja Mandalika [who was] bent on implementing Islamic laws” (Ali 1994: 47). It warns the people against stealing, fornication and rebellion. While other offences may be expiated through payment of fines, fornication may not: “if they are free persons and bachelors then whack them with rattan a hundred times. If they are ... with wives or ... husbands, then bury them up to the waist, stone them to death. If they revolt then torture them” (quoted in Ali 1994: 51).

The political role of the cursive script continued into modern Malaysia when it was used by vernacular literatures during the 1920s-30s to instill nationalist sentiments among the Malays. These ranged from the moderate nationalisms of the *Lidah Teruna* (The Stripling Tongue) and *Majallah Guru* (Teachers Magazine), to Islamic reformisms of the to *Idaran Zaman* (March of Time) and *Al-Ikhwān* (The Brotherhood). They all signified, on one hand, the

reestablishment of religious nationalism ... and, on the other ... growing recognition by Malays of their social and economic backwardness in relation to other communities [The] newspapers ... were regarded by many literate and aspiring Malays as essential prerequisites for membership in the modern world (Roff 1967: 162)

These periodicals were born from urban Malay intellectual clubs, such as the *Persekutuan Perbahasan Orang-Orang Islam* (Muslim Debating Society) and the *Maharani Group*, that were devoted to defend, promote and improve Malay life.

Published exclusively for the Malay audience, these periodicals were all printed in the Jawi script, which made clear its targeted audience. The script, “rarely mastered by the non-Malays,” was used in all traditional Malay texts and the Islamic education system (the *madrasah*, or religious school; Hooker 2000: 87). Jawi provided the Malays with a sense of allegiance, and was regarded “as their ‘national script’; most Malays rejected publications which did not use it” (Ibid:80). The Jawi script fulfilled an ethno-nationalist function to form what Benedict Anderson (1991) calls ‘reading coalitions’, by providing a common point of reference that bonds members of a social group. The status of the script, however, was challenged in 1963. Due to the

increase of secular education via the Malay language, the Latin script began to advance in popularity. This situation was reinforced by the Language Act of 1963 which clearly stated that the script of the national language shall be the Rumi [Roman] script (Haji Omar 1982: 4)

The displacement of the Jawi script was meant to shape a unified national language through the Roman script that standardizes the tongues, eyes, and hands of its multi-ethnic speakers. This took place “only after a lengthy and heated debate about the significance of the Jawi script for Malay (Islamic) identity” (Hooker 2000: 87). Despite its marginalization by the 1963 Act, the Jawi script continued to be the preferred script for the rural Malay population and the generation educated before 1957 (Haji Omar 1982).

Given the history of the script, in regard to Jamal’s painting *Tulisan*, we can certainly dismiss the allegation against Malaysian Abstract Expressionism as ideologically non-committal. Jawi’s valorization in the painting *Tulisan* reminds us of the continuing influence of the script. Its specific contribution, however, lies outside linguistic context

and foregrounds the politics of form. This is also central to the history of the cursive script. El-Said & Parman (1976) point out that Ibn-Muqlah's prototype not only signifies the reach of the Islamic empire, but also provides the template for the development of Islamic aesthetics. It led to variations of the script that caused calligraphy to develop "into a major decorative art form which provided scope for self-expression to the artist in the Muslim world" (El-Said & Parman 1976: 132).

Through calligraphy words assume the role of an image where "writing is ... a symbol of Islam, the writing and not necessarily the meanings of the words which were used so decoratively" (Leaman 2004: 21).⁷⁴ This means that writing is not simply a utilitarian, technical invention that carries a meaning. Here writing is meaningful in itself; it is a symbol, hence it is laden with ideological potentials. The latter is achieved through positing calligraphy as a concept of imaging-writing that provides the common image of identification among the ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse population. Due to its visual intricacies and highly abstracted forms, the majority of the viewers, especially the non-Arabic ones

have no idea what the writing actually means. ... Just because calligraphy is writing, and consists of words and sentences ... it does not follow that the meanings of those words and sentences are what the words and sentences are all about ... [They] sometimes indeed are literally ... unreadable, and often difficult to read. Some styles ... are deliberately illegible ... What is

⁷⁴ The conception of writing as image was critical to the identity-formation of the early Arab-Muslims. Rosenthal (1971) points out that the early Arab-Muslims were of very modest political organization compared to the 'great civilizations' that surrounded them. The politico-linguistic project of the early Muslims encountered most resistance from the administrative institutions of these civilizations and their non-Arabic-speaking subjects. As a result, the linguistic mission was compromised, giving way to graphic projects. This move was significant because it bound the Muslims to regional history as well as asserted their status as a break from that history. (A parallel might be seen in how Christianity distinguishes itself from Judaism through the sacralization of images, which is forbidden in the latter.) The Muslims arrived as a new monotheistic generation, distinguishing themselves from the previous communities through the aestheticization of their alphabetic letters, the imaging of the script into a non-imagery image. Thus, in Judaism and Christianity, whose sacred texts dominated the middle-east for many centuries, calligraphy did not develop into a similar position and status as it did in Islam (Ibid).

going on here is indeed writing, but ... it is the form which is all important
(Ibid: 35-7)⁷⁵

This ‘formalist’ turn entails a significant ideological impact because the form of the script of the text fulfils a political end more immediately than the (readerly) content. The concept of writing and letters as symbolic objects in themselves offers a crucial political solution to the expanding empire. While “it was no longer possible to influence ... speakers of foreign tongues in ever more remote territories and to require of them the tremendous sacrifice of giving up their own languages ... the sacrifice of changing scripts was much more easily accomplished” (Rosenthal 1971: 53). The result of this formal shift is comparable to raising a new national flag. The “believers may be unable to read it, understand it ... just the same way that those on the battlefield who fight to save a flag from capture are not necessarily fighting for that particular configuration of shapes and colours. Rather, they fight for a cause” (Leaman 2004: 55).

Tulisan is heir to the development of the cursive script that landed on the shore of the Malaysian Peninsula sometime in the 14th century to displace the (Indic) Pali script (Haji Omar 1982; Sweeney 1987). As a marker of nationalistic inspiration, it continues the work of the script in vernacular literatures to mobilize the Malays against colonialism under the ‘flag’ of Islam. In this regard, S.A. Jamal anticipates the embodied marks of Islam during the post-NCC Malay-Islamic revivalism. In both cases, the disparities of Malay lives are brought together under the singularity of Islamic identity. The embodied nature of the script can also be discerned if we consider Benedict Anderson’s notion of ‘reading coalition’ which is accomplished through print-capitalism to distribute the nation

⁷⁵ A contemporary counterpart to this phenomenon is typography. The primacy of forms in typography explains why, for example, institutional letterheads are less likely to employ ‘fluffy’ letters that a bakery would.

among strangers, enabling them to imagine their connectivity (Anderson 1991). A ‘reading coalition’ is accomplished by imbuing the graphic mark with the mission to domesticate and mobilize the body and its interiority (emotion, thoughts, etc.). This is precisely what *Tulisan* demonstrates, through the painter who, ‘like a calligrapher, ... paints from right to left’ (Galeri Petronas 2000: 11). The painting does not stem from an autonomous self but is a result of what the painter terms ‘cultural habit’. This ‘cultural habit’ is no personal affair for it seeks to capture the ‘ecstasy’ and ‘optimism’ of national independence through energetic brushstrokes. The limiting of gesture to a Malay-Islamic context (painting from left to right) is a nationalistic imagining through a fashioning of the body. The act of the letter on the painter’s sense of self is emphasized by the fact that not only the letter ج forms a part of his name, but the letter also symbolizes the soul in Islamic mysticism (Schimmel 1984; Seyyed Hossein Nasr 1978). *Tulisan* confirms the status of the letter as the vehicle for the self and the nation, the site where the body becomes a social body. In nationalistic terms, the letter was meant to be the proof of the painter’s empowerment which emerges as an after-effect of national triumph.

Having said that, one may, however, question the sociality of *Tulisan* given the form it assumes. The painting does not present a recognizable symbol but appears to be what would generally be termed as expressive or spontaneous form. It hardly resembles its prototype, the letter ج. The iconographic certainty of the cultural template is replaced instead by a wandering and swirling of lines, sketchy effects alluding to the process of forming the letter rather than to the letter itself. The painter himself related that while the painting indeed *is* rooted in the letter ج, the icon itself is quite secondary to the painting. What is important is the act of painting the letter itself, hence the title

Tulisan (writing).⁷⁶ This assertion seems to undermine the formalist ideology of the cursive script and convey the full authority of the painter over his ‘creation’. However, such a view is nullified by the notion of ‘cultural habit’; what appears to be ‘expressive’ and ‘spontaneous’ notation is in fact a manifestation of a convention at work. The form that *Tulisan* assumes is grounded in a practice known among Islamic calligraphers as *mashq*, the disciplined scribbling or constant application of an interrupted movement. The act defines the foundation of calligraphy, for “the constant application of *mashq* improves the hand writing” (Abū Hayyān 1971: 29). The accomplishment of a pupil is first graded by “*sawwadhu* (he sketched it)”, followed by a permission “to sign with *mashaqu* (he practiced it)” before finally graduating with the permission “to sign with *katabahu* (he wrote it) (Schimmel 1984: 43-4). Even an accomplished calligrapher “had to fill page after page or wooden slate after slate with *mashq*” before executing a letter (Ibid: 42).

The calligraphic lesson itself is a regimentation of the body, involving specific coordinating of the body. The student must learn

how to sit properly, usually squatting, but also sitting on his [or her] heels; the paper should rest on his [or her] left hand or on the knee ... The calligrapher needs five things: a fine temperament, understanding of calligraphy, a good hand, endurance of pain, and the necessary utensils ... While practicing, the calligrapher was not supposed to lift anything heavy in order to protect his [or her] hands (Ibid: 38-44)

The care of the hand results in the “decisive factor” in calligraphy, for it ensures “the ability to keep the ends straight, to make even the beginnings of the letters, to preserve order and arrangement, to avoid precipitation, to show forcefulness while letting oneself go, and to let one’s hand go while using a forceful compact writing” (Abū Hayyān 1971:

⁷⁶ Personal communication, January 1, 2006.

31). While constant scribbling improves one's skill, it can also cause fatigue in the hand, making "the calamus aggressive, or caus[ing] the writing tool to be rebellious" (Ibid: 29). In short, *mashq* is a disciplinary regime to harness the work of the body to service of convention. The corporeal effect of *mashq* is given by the story of the calligrapher Hafiz Osman who struggled to rise above his fatigue during an arduous pilgrimage "to fill sheets of paper with his *mashq*" (Schimmel 1984: 38).

Given the factors outlined above, Jamal's understanding of gesture is fully within the confine of tradition: it is born out of the conditioning of the body by convention through the agency of the letter. *Tulisan* affirms the dependency of personhood on the citationality of gesture and mark, thus stressing cultural force as the disciplinary mechanism that compels the hand to move in a specific way. Since the painter's gesture is instituted externally, it is not possible to define it as 'expressive', i.e. as the full-presence of an originating subject, intentionality, or thought. Rather, S.A. Jamal's agency is obtained through a repression of his body so that his hand is habitualized to gesture 'properly'. His approach towards gesture concurs with Elizabeth Grosz's description of the body as a "concrete, material, animate organization of flesh, organs, nerves, skeletal structure and substances, which are given a unity and cohesiveness through psychical and social inscription of the body's surface" (Grosz 1995: 104).

Rather than representing autonomous agency, gesture is an effect of social discourse that shapes the body's capacities, desires and materiality. Rather than preceding the body as a mastery of a biologically/naturally given thing by a free, self-constituting agent, S.A. Jamal's subjectivity is a result of his occupying a 'malleable' body that is formed through time by being constituted within a specific nexus of culture. For this

reason, the painter's gesture remains within the trope of circumcision, where the body is dependent on social power that trains the body to perform and emit signs.

Calligraphic gesture and automatism contribute to the naturalization of the body - its thoughts, emotions, desires and behaviours – and open the way to mark the canvas in a manner that mimes the bodily movement of the painter. Within the ethno-nationalist framework the subordination and domestication of the painter's body compels the body to signify the limit as its manifest essence, style and necessity. Formed as such identity becomes a natural reflex, with yearning for attributes one passionately desires to attach to for the possibility of individuation. By making self-determination co-terminous with national autonomy, nationalism becomes the technique of power that disciplines the body and by doing so creates and proliferates the individual in the sense espoused by Foucault, as “an effect of power, and at the same time ... the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle” (Foucault 1980: 98). Since nationalism is the instituting moment of the self, society and state, the shaping of the painter's gesture is the very act of forming him as a national subject, of securing and maintaining his individuality and subjectivity. Personhood is signified by his/her mark, the graphic evidence, a body embalmed in inscription to become a social anatomy. Calligraphic signature is the effect of power, the very material of power, and through it the individual becomes the body of the nation.

Conclusion

All the above factors provide enough ground for us to dismiss the labeling of Malaysian Abstract Expressionism by their critics as apolitical or propagating

individualism. The style may invoke a certain notion of individuality through its spontaneous appearance, but within the context of the cursive script this automatism and individuality are developed as the effect of, not outside of, the social. The painter's gesture on the canvas is a proof of the body that is offered to ideological force. And since this force seeks to domesticate the body into a community, the painting of S.A. Jamal, within the context of Muslim-Malay/sia, inevitably carries the trace of circumcision. The letter ج enables the painter and 'creates' him as a communal and national subject by assuming a violating function. The letter carries the normative force that forms the painter's name, dictates his bodily conduct and ritualizes the modern painter into the larger Malay/sian-Islamic community. It provides the behavioural template by inscribing the painter's body, transforming muscular articulation into a meaningful act, and through its stroke the individual and the nation are instituted. It demonstrates the centrality of the body in identity-formation and shows that any attempt at identification is always an ideological project. The letter ج in *Tulisan* extends the function of circumcision to de/re/trans/form the viscosity of the flesh into an intelligible body, normalizing, ritualizing and initiating the painter and his work into the Malay-Islamic order of embodied meanings. By acting on the painter's hand, thought and intention the letter renders the painter's body as a sedimented effect of inscription. The body is fully within the realm of the mark for it is (re)inscribed every time it inscribes.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation I have attempted to locate the trace of circumcision in modern Malaysian art. I took the nationalistic figurative works of the early Malay painters as an entry point to argue the persistence of the body in the formation of modern Malay/sian identity. I employed the understanding of the body as a symbol provided by these artists to establish a relationship to the non-figurative works by the post-1969 Malay-Muslim artists that were informed by a national identity that is based on ethno-religious principles. I argue that this relationship is particularly relevant due to the persistence of the discourse of circumcision under the auspices of the state. The relevance is further emphasized by the fact that not only circumcision is commonly understood in Malaysia as the mark of Islam, but also the symbolisms of the rite alludes to pre-Islamic significance which revolves around the mythical origin of the Malay proto-state. This factor led me to conclude that the rite not only carries a religious meaning but also a fundamental secular connotation. It is the latter's significance that I pursue in this dissertation, arriving at the understanding of the body as the place where traditions, histories and ideologies are localized.

Malay painters emerged onto the scene of modern art during the height of Malay nationalism. Working under the collective *Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung* (APS - Association of Peninsular Painters), modern Malay/sian painters articulated the predicaments of their community through the image of the body. In their works the native's body is not only marked by attires and occupation but is itself a mark that names the land on which it stands or is seated.

The conception of the body as a mark or a symbol complicates our understanding of the body in painting, where the body not only symbolizes but also is itself a symbol. Such understanding blurs the conventional distinction between figurative and abstract art, and consequently demands of us a conceptual shift to understanding the discourse of the body in modern Malaysian art. This shift enables us to stitch together the seemingly disparate oppositions – figurative/abstract; body/mark; inscribed/inscribing - and to address these disparities within the common aim of modern Malay/sian art: the mark is the creation of bodies that leads to the binding of bodies.

In this respect, the APS anticipated the emergence of the discourse of the body in post-NCC Malay/sia where bodies are collected under the mark of Islam to tackle the dislocating effects of modernity. It also foretold the emergence of circumcision as the elusive yet persistent ethno-national-religious index that punctuates the identity politics of modern Malaysia. As the embodiment of the dialectics between inscription, the body and the nation, modern Malay/sian art inevitably exists as the trace of circumcision, for the latter is also the marking of the body that gathers bodies and recapitulates the mythical origin of the Malay state. This trace disguises itself in paintings, in the forms of textile, the mother and the letter, all of which revolve around the body as the individual as well as the community and nation.

The status of textiles or cloth as an embodied phenomenon resides in its intimacy with the body. In the modern Malaysian context, textiles, in particular the batik tradition, are inseparable from the notion of national identity. Batik is the mark that provides the Malay body with an identity at both personal and collective levels. The embodied significance of textiles as parallels to the process of inscribing of bodies is ‘radicalized’

in their association with the mother, who is the originary marker of the individual body. To clothe oneself in batik is to conceive one's body as an object or image that is composed of lines, colors, shapes and symbols – the 'textiled' body is a body composed of marks. When coupled with the maternal metaphor this inscriptive power of cloth to provide intelligibility and meanings to the body is radicalized. This is because, in the Malay society where child-care is mother-centred, the mother is the original marker of bodies, who organize the subject's biological functions and drives through her body and its substitutes - toys, soother, her name, etc. The body is not only subjected to biological needs that inscribe upon it the various sensations of hunger, content, pleasure and pain but also is conditioned by a re-marking by the mother. It was in search of the mark of the mother that the inarticulate infantile cry is rooted in. In other words, the human body – its emotions, thoughts and desires - is fundamentally a product of marks and re-marks. I pursue this relationship between the body and the mark through my readings of the painting by Mastura Abdul Rahman in tandem with the works by Hoessein Enas and Mazeli Mat Som to illustrate the persistent discourse of the body in relation to Malay ethno-nationalism. In foregrounding the inscribed body as the conceptual category to interpret modern Malaysian art I am able to bring Abstract Expressionism back into the picture and posit it as not in complete opposition to the local history. I demonstrate that Malay/sian Abstract Expressionism does not signify an autonomous individualism that is outside socio-cultural and historical contingencies. Rather, I argue that the idiom is rooted in the inscribing of the body by socio-cultural convention which manifest in the concept of calligraphic gesture.

In conclusion, my dissertation concurs with the writings on modern Malaysian and Southeast Asian art that argue for a cultural and historical specific reading on the subject. This study supplements these observations with the focus on the body as the locus of traditions and histories and highlights the underlying violence/violation in the formation of the cultural, social and the national subjects. This ‘enabling injury’ takes different forms on and through the body - language, identity, attire, gesture, etc. – all of which transform the flesh into a symbolic and signifying organism. As a symbolic being, the human subject is inevitably born into the function of the mark and is posited into the rhythms of inscribing and being inscribed. Within this pulsating work of the mark, the individual emerges as a symbolic being who relates to him/herself and others through and as symbols.

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