

Study on the Malaysian Islamic Visual Art: The Contemporary View

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Abstract

Malaysia gained its independence on August 31, 1957. For a long time after independence, it has been largely assume that Malaysia is a secular state in that the basis of its laws is the English Common law. Malaysia inherits a Westminster-style of government with parliamentary democracy. Islam had spread out in Asia since the 13th century and reached Malaysia a century later. Before the advent of Islam in Malaysia, the Malays followed customary law. Upon the Rulers and their subjects embracing Islam, attempts were maded to adopt Islamic Law and to modify the Malay customs to make them conform to Islam. Before the coming of the Colonials powers, the law, which was applied in the Malay States was the Islamic Law. The processes have also influenced the Malaysia Islamic visual art, which there this paper focus on the issue facinginit. This paper is the conceptual framework paper.

Key Words: Malaysian, Islamic, Visual Art

Introduction

The Federal Constitution of Malaysia provides that Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practice in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation. Its federal laws are English Common law in orientation. However, its state laws are mainly Islamic laws. This is because Malaysia has a parallel legal system of Civil and Islamic laws. State laws are Islamic laws. Federal law is Civil law.

The concept of Islam leads humankind to tawheed (the oneness of Allah) and submission to Allah Almighty. Islam encompasses all aspects of human's life where one's characteristics will be incomplete without religious awareness.

In Islam, there was no discrimination, or division on the basis of colour, class tribal affiliation, race, homeland and birthplace, all of which gave rise to problems. Equal rights seemed the right human solution, which in practice meant the acceptance of rights and obligation as a member of the Islamic Community. The pious person achieved sublimity and nearness to Allah.

Before the coming of Islam, the indigenous Malays embraced an ancient religion with various forms of belief with some of the population belonging to the Hindu/Buddha religion. Life was structured and arranged in ways that showed the influence of more than one religion. This can be seen not only in the Malay's cultural patterns but is also part of the 'power' structure of state dignitaries and princes.

Literature Review

Aminah Syed Muhammed (1983) had mention that before Islam reached Malaysia, there was animism, Hinduism and to the extent Buddhism was the main religions that shaped the local culture and evidence and their influence remains to this day.

However, the challenge to the integrity and moral culture of the nation and the development of the information technology boom in the era of globalization was equally impressive. Internet, for example, allows users to gain all kinds of knowledge and information with ease, but at the same time, it contains a lot of information that are destructive, immoral and contrary to the values and ethics as well as culture and religions.

Since Malaysian independence in 1957, Islamic society's acceptance for Western secularism or liberalism has placed Islam as part of other religions; however, the dualism has influenced the general patterns of thinking and community living.

According to Ahmad Zaki Abdul Latiff (2012), the British imperialism in Malaya has sparked the secular concept in politics and religion of Malay society. The Pangkor Treaty (1874) initiated the secularization in Malaysia in which it has dissociated all human activities from religion influences. All the religious matters were put under the responsibility of Sultan or Monarch (Islamic Ruler) whereby all political and administration issues were put under the power of Residence.

Islam is a religion revealed by Allah S.W.T to the entire human race of the world. Islam is a compatible religion that suits human nature in which it fulfills human's preferences, needs, traits, wishes, desires, feelings, soul and mind. Allah S.W.T. creates man who comes with the soul, emotion, conscientiousness and love for anything beautiful.

As the matter of fact, art is equal to beauty and is subjective in nature. The art can be seen, heard and touched by refined soul, but may not be express by words and languages. It is difficult to

define art accurately and it is even more difficult to explain the concept of the particular beauty and loveliness.

In Islam, depiction of human and animals is strongly discouraged. Therefore, Muslims are not allowed to hold an image of any living beings and associate it to the religious art. This is because it is feared that it will lead to the act of idolatry by glorifying idols or any physical objects.

On the other hand, Islamic art focuses on floral, pattern or non-object-related art. A decorative writing style is sometimes used within these pictures showing elaborate Arabic letters or words. Shapes such as squares, triangles, oblongs and circles are also used as an alternative to living beings to create an abstract and geometric patterns.

Al-Farabi (1967) mentioned that, art is an invention, the design of beauty. Besides, Al-Ghazali (1997) also defined art as a work related to the sense of the human soul that fits his natural disposition (fitrah). However, Western culture foresees art as nothing attached to religion, in which upholds secularism that separates the worldly things with religion.

Nonetheless, the West still considers art as something idealistic and related to moral. They viewed art based two different approaches: art for the sake of art and art for the community. The aim of art is to create any art creation delivering either good or bad messages. In contrast, art for the community are used for the social, political and moral purpose.

Islam on the other hand generally defines art as a value involves aesthetic and ethic, between beauty and goodness. In particular, if Islam only focuses on the concept of beauty similar to "art for art" philosophy and disregards the good and the bad aspects, it will create exaggeration of attitude in arts in which such situation is contrary to the teachings of Islam. Allah S.W.T. said:

"Allah does not love the transgressors" (Surah Al-A'raff: ayah 31)

For the Muslims intellectuals, Western modernism was viewed as essentially hedonistic, not moralistic but decadent and had thus to be rejected. It is socialistic and individualistic in orientations and not religion-centered. In short, the Western-derived modern artistic and literary movements, founded on humanistic individualism and self-expression, therefore also needs to be rejected. Art's real function is to highlight the worship of Allah and his divine laws. Only religiously inspired art forms are valid for Muslims.

According to MulyadiMahamood (1992), Islamic Art in Malaysia has been initiated by two important factors: the first factor is the National Cultural Congress that sets by the National Cultural Policy (DasarKebudayaanKebangsaan) in 1971 and the second factor is caused by the world global Islamic revival.

Malaysian Islamic Visual Art

Mohamad Ali Abdul Rahman (2000) noted that the National Cultural Congress held on 16 to 20 August 1971, was considered as a new phase in Malaysian society. He indicate that there are three key principles outlined by the congress include:

1. Islam as a basis in the development of National culture.
2. Malaysian culture must be based on the culture of the indigenous people in the region.
3. Elements from other cultures that are reasonable and in line with the above can be accepted as an aspect of National culture.

According to Zakarian Ali (2013), in his writing on Islamic Impression in Malaysian Contemporary Art exhibition, most of the existing Islamic Art artists were those who already well known for so long. He has interpreted His work in translating their artwork through verbal and written as well as his experience being with them. He also adds that the Malays themselves has been influenced by the western culture that has been introduced through technology and education. Living in the modern world with lots of constraint including time, financial and space has caused many Muslim Malays slowly forgetting the Malay Art and Islamic culture or Islamic Art.

The lack of popularity of Islamic Art in Malaysia is obvious. Ahmadrashidi Hassan (2012) explains that writing and publication focusing on the development of Islamic Art in Malaysia are very few, but still there are some researches, writings and publication of Islamic Art in Malaysia that can be considered as significant. Lack of text such as in terms of quantity and quality is a source of discontent and dissatisfaction among those involved in the arts of Malaysia (Sarena, 2010).

Furthermore, Ahmadrashidi Hassan (2012) also mentioned that most of the exhibition themed on Islamic Art has started from the 80s and 90s. However, the pioneer to Islamic Art exhibition in 1975 at UniversitiMalaya, titled PameranSeniKhaf (Khaf Art). It is the exhibition, organized by the University Cultural Center Departmeny.

Some of Islamic Art exhibition in group was held of which are 'RupadanJiwa' (1979), 'SeniRupa Islam Malaysia' (1991), Identiti Islam dalamSeniRupaMalayisa:PencapaiandanCabaran' (1992), 'ManifestasiJiwa Islam' (1993), 'Kesenian Islam, SuatuPerspektif Malaysia' (1995), 'Art and Spirituality' (1995), 'Echoes of Infinity' (1996), 'Yang MahaEsa: Kepada Mu Kekasih' (2010) and 'Taman Nurani' (2013) .

In addition, there are also solo exhibitions using the theme of Islamic Art held in the country such as 'KeArahTauhid' (1980)SulaimanEsa, 'AntaraLangitdanBumi' (2000)Datuk SyedAhamd Jamal, 'Insyirah' (2001)SulaimanEsa, 'Ruang' (2004) Datuk Syed Ahamd Jamal, 'Garden of the Heart' (2007)Sharifah Fatimah Zubir and 'Yang MahaEsa: KepadaMuKekasih' (2010)SulaimanEsa.

All of these activities clearly demonstrate the existence of a large amount of work done under the auspices of Islamic Art.

Issu in Axiological Malaysian Islamic Visual Art

Islamic Art developed of its own distinctive styles and share certain characteristics, such as the use of calligraphy to transform simple objects into works of art or the use of abstract designs to decorate works intended for religious contexts. The continuous movement of artists, patrons, and objects throughout the Islamic world has played a significant role in determining the dynamic nature of its artistic tradition.

Malaysia's multi-racial and multi-cultural has influenced its artworks. As Western art historians have long been determined that, any culture of interest should have its own forms of art. However, in Malaysia, the reasons are far from obvious, as works from the Malay world include magnificent textiles, manuscripts and metalwork that were produced by Muslims for Muslims, serving an Islamic purpose.

Ismail R. al-Faruqi and Lois Lamy' al-Faruqi (1985) defined Islamic art as a manifestation of aesthetic value which is suitable as it tied to the revealed knowledge of Islam based on the Al-Quran. In other word, messages of any Islamic Art works should be based on the revealed knowledge and the messages as contained in Al-Quran.

Robert Irwin (1982) stated that Islamic Art as the art of Islamic cultures and not just to the arts related to the religion of Islam. Furthermore, Islamic Art is neither art of specific era nor that of particular place or people and it neither a style nor a movement.

Moreover, the painting of SulaimanEsa , *Waiting for Godot* (1977) has caused controversy in visual art world even before it being exhibited. As soon as he placed his etching on the wall, the head of department in his workplace was very surprised and has blamed him because of his insensitive feeling by putting Al-Quranic verse together with image of naked women.

By using the etching technic photo, it represented himself, which not only shows the crisis of art identity in himself but also depicted the crisis of culture in the country in the year of 1970s especially among the Malay people who are Muslims towards the Western influence. These series of artwork were divided into two categories which have very contradict images between them. Firstly, the images of naked women in the position which aroused the desire at the bottom side. Meanwhile, at the top side, there is an Islamic calligraphy which has been printed from Cordoba and Alhambra mosque.

Islamic art is a part from Islamic culture. The difference between Islamic and non-Islamic art is its intention, aim and ethical value. The achievement gained by Islamic art is a contribution from Islamic civilization in which the main objection in Islamic art is for the seek of Allah (swt). According to Aminah Syed Muhammed (1995) that,

“Hardly any of the art works reflect Islam except in a superficial way, and the roots of contemporary Muslim art are firmly planted in Western art rather than in traditional Islamic art. The values thus promoted by it are Western and as such, they are often in conflict with Islam.”

She also had identified some of the basic concepts taken from the West that considered contrary to Islam.

1. Fine art is virtually separated from design. Despite using the same basic vocabulary of line, form, color, etc., they do not share the same aims, creative processes or status.
2. Art is for art's sake, divorced from its proper role in society. It has become obscure and is increasingly directed toward the initiated few.
3. Design is often primarily commercial and involves problem solving on a purely practical level. It is not usually expected to fulfill any spiritual need of man, except on a very basic level; aesthetic values are often incorporated, but their aim is to give pleasure and rarely go as far as to convey any higher meaning.
4. The fine Art artist is egoistic, creating works to fulfill himself.
5. The fine art artist is a revered being superior to others. He is allowed to be very selfish, even thoroughly antisocial in his behavior and actions, simply because he is an artist.
6. There is no concept of what constitutes art. The spirit of non-art or anti-art still effectively prevails, since no one apparently ever dares to say, "That is not art." Even when an artist's ideas are as weak or garbled as to need lengthy verbal explanations to elucidate the artwork that is supposed to express them, his work is still taken seriously, and he is even sometimes given a monetary award to develop his ideas further. Western art is groping blindly without any specific direction or unity.
7. Human thought or inspiration is supreme as the basis of all art.
8. Serious art must always seek new or different forms. Yesterday's art quickly becomes outdated and irrelevant.

In 1971, the First National Cultural Congress was set up with the objective to encourage artist to project the sense of national pride and identity in their work. With the clear sense of direction outline in the Congress, the perspective that had a bearing in the larger interest of the nation in presenting the national culture now shapes the artists' minds. RedzaPyadassa (1992):

"The growth of a modern art tradition in Malaysia since independence has manifested essentially pluralistic tendencies, as might be expected of a multiracial and multicultural environment lacking a homogenous cultural identity."

The series, *Toward to Mystical Reality* (1972) atau 'KeArah Hakikat Mistik' is a collaboration between Sulaiman Esa and his friend Redzha Piyadassa which held at *Sudut Penulis* at *Dewan Bahasan dan Pustaka* in year of 1972. This piece of work has broken out a debate among the activist of art and literature. This exhibition has opened an argument and a question about space, material and time in the usefulness of daily object and text as mental experience. It suggests space, time and shif as a new idea in Malaysian art.

Conclusion

It was a reaction made by Cultural Congress not only in rejecting the Western art theory but also as a manifestation to free the Malaysian artist from the Western influence. They have assimilated the East and West culture in a new perspective as a scientific research from mental, mediative and mystical view, which contain in Asian philosophy in relation to the philosophical practice of Taoism and Zen.

Actually, the awareness about the beauty is an important factor in Islam. Among the other important factors in art are fact, originality, purity, honesty and all of these have established in the soul of Muslims. Art has become the substance that connecting the soul of creator with another soul that is the appreciator or observer.

Islamic art possesses its own historical heritage and unique. Islamic art has continued to develop in its own form and philosophy that oriented based on Islamic source emphasized on the needs and wishes of Islamic Tawheed and laws.

DzulHaimi (2001) stated that the history of Islamic Art has under gone a vacant situation and the continuation has been fulfilling with Western Art. Western formulas have been use in studying the Islamic Art. However, the West worldview could not fit in their theology. Hence, it creates problems in writing the history of Islamic Art. In contrast, the Islamic research methodology is based on al-Quran.

The suggestion made by Syed Ahmad Jamal that also been supported by DzulHaimi Md. Zain (2001) , when the former recommended that Islamic art is formed from two words which are "Islam" and "Art". He defines that Islamic art as an artwork or art object developed or founded by a Muslim.

Osman Bakar (1995) mentioned that Islamic art actually referring to the manifestation of Islam and when we talk about the manifestation of Islam in art, it actually is referring to Islamic art. Islamic art is a continuation of art from the bygone age that has developed and designed by the concept of the Oneness of God (Tawhid) that is Allah s.w.t.

In other words, any form of art can be view as Islamic art as long as its content is aligned to the thoughts and teachings of Islam. Besides, these artworks must be produce by Muslim and a Muslim artist should base and refer to both Al-Quran and Al-Hadith in the effort to develop artwork.

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