

Social Relation between the Malays and Chinese Communities from a Civilizational Perspectives

Wan Norhasniah Wan Husin, and Mohd Ridhuan Tee Abdullah

Abstract—Towards the end of 19th century, the discovery of tin and the growing importance of rubber, had led Malaya to once again become the centre of attraction to western colonization, which later on caused the region to be influxed by cheap labour from China and India. One of the factors which attracted the alien communities was the characteristics of social relation offered by the Malays. If one analyzes the history of social relation of the Malays either among themselves or their relation with alien communities, it is apparent that the community places high regards to values such as tolerant, cooperative, respectful and helpful with each other. In fact, all these values are deeply rooted in the value of 'budi'. With the arrival of Islam, the value of 'budi' had been well assimilated with Islamic values thus giving birth to the value of 'budi-Islam'. Through 'budi-Islam', the Malay conducted their dealings with British as well the other communities during the time of peace or conflict. This value is well nurtured due to the geographical circumstances like the fertile, naturally rich land and bountiful marine life. Besides, a set of Malay customs known as 'adat' custom contributed in enhancing the values of budi.

Keywords—Adat System, budi and Islam, Chinese community, Malay community

I. INTRODUCTION

THE debate on the social relation between the Malays and Chinese communities in Malaysia has been put at the central stage with different perspectives. Review of the past literatures shows that, among the most prominent aspects are from the political, economical, social class and historical perspectives. Work of K.J. Ratnam [1] titled *Communalism and The Political Process in Malaysia* mostly focused on political and cultural aspects in which almost all communities were adamant in maintaining their cultural elements in the national system. Meanwhile Colin Abraham in [2] in his book titled, *The naked of social order and the root of Racial polarisation in Malaysia* articulated the major factors that caused ethnic strain were due to economic disparity which followed the ethnic line, ethnic differences and the obvious existence of social class. Almost a similar aspect was discussed by Philip Loh Fook Seng [3] in his writing titled

Seeds of Separatism Educational Policy in Malaya 1874-1940. Slightly on a different aspect in Sia Keng Yek [4] in his book titled *SRJK (Cina) dalam Sistem Pendidikan Kebangsaan, Dilema dan Kontroversi* elaborated the twists and turns facing the Chinese community in establishing the vernacular education system in Malaysia after the independence. The real accounts of the clashes between these two ethnics communities can be found in the writings of Cheah Boon Kheng [4] titled, *Red star over Malaya, resistance social conflict during and after the Japanese occupation, 1941-1946* and *The masked comrades, a study of the communist united front in Malaya 1945-1948*. During this critical period including the 14 days reign of the Red Star over Malaya after the Japanese withdraw had caused a lasting effect on the social relation between the Malay and Chinese communities.

In this work, the author put an effort to investigate on a different perspective that has not been specifically elaborated before that is based on civilizational perspective. It focuses on two aspects of values which are termed as core cultural values and internal values. Core cultural values refer to the major elements of a culture like language, religion, education, and other form of traditions. As for the internal values or known as core values, refer to the values which guide the thinking and actions of an ethnic community. For the Malays, their core cultural values are Islamic religion, Malay language and Malay customs, and their core value is known as *budi* which can be translated as considerate, cooperation, helping each other and tolerant with other people with the aim of preserving or achieving peace in social relations. The result from the analysis based on the perspective of civilization demonstrates that through the cultivation of the budi values, the Malay community forged social relations with other communities by stressing on the spirits of being tolerant, cooperative and helpful to uphold peace and harmony when living in a plural society.

II. A CIVILIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE AND *BUDI* AS THE MALAY MIND

A civilizational perspective refers to an approach that debates on the internal values of one's mentality and personality at the level of individual, family and society that bears the responsibility in guiding the demeanour and actions of oneself. The emergence of the internal values differs between communities, for it all depends on the cultural framework adopted by the community [6]. Generally, the

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concepts of value is referred to as the belief that influences individuals, or a social institution like families or schools to act based on the main values adopted by a community.

Budi is the core foundation of the Malay community's identity which functions as the main element in *budidaya* or culture, where *budi* is defined as the soul while *daya* is defined as physical actions [7]. The combination of *budi* and *daya* had resulted in the birth of culture, which refers to all sorts of traditions practiced by the civilized Malay community. The main aim is to preserve peace and harmony in society, which is expressed through relations formed with other members of community [8].

Budi is defined as the spiritual foundation that guides the Malays in whenever they communicate with others. The emergence of *budi* is the result of a combination of intellect, feelings and emotions that continues seeking for positive elements in society. In making decisions, the Malays rely on their intellect, which are aligned with moral values, individual needs and other people's needs as well, based on the guideline of *budi* - that one needs to consider others and to heed the advice of others. Meanwhile, their modest and sensitive nature has resulted in turning the Malays into gentle beings that are polite, cultured and civilized [8]. Their interactions are always laced with consideration, which unveils their high intelligence and artistic skills. While interacting, whether among themselves or with people from other ethnics, *budi* stresses upon three main principles -*budi bicara*, the interaction skills used while communicating, *budi pekerti*, manners that highlight their decency and *budi bahasa*, the language that reflects their high modesty. Generally, *budi* is a combination of considerate use of action, language and interaction skills between the people who are highly sensitive towards others' feelings in order to achieve the goal of maintaining peace and harmony within a society.

It is difficult to define *budi* scientifically as it involves abstract internal elements. The abstract phenomenon of *budi* is similar to the experience of other ethnic communities, which can only be appreciated by the community itself. Culture is best defined as symbols or emblems that carry their own meanings that can only be interpreted by those familiar to them, such as road users who know the meaning of all the road signage. The same principle is applied to *budi* which is intertwined with *budi bahasa*, *budi pekerti* and *budi bicara* when one interacts with the environment, with other people and with the Creator [9].

The assimilation of *budi* was fortified with Malaya's natural surroundings that was bestowed with an ideal climate and geographically safe from any natural disasters. This situation had somewhat influenced the Malays' character from being industrious, as they had easy access to their daily sustenance, whether from the fertile land, the mild seas, or the rich forests that were abundant with provisions that would not make them starve [10], [11]. The peaceful and tranquil surroundings had led the Malay community to form a sacred bond with their environment, which made them eternally grateful towards nature that had given them so much. The feeling of gratitude or *budi* towards their nature further formed the foundation of

the Malay mentality that aimed to achieve harmony and peace, for it resulted in the feeling of respect and devotion towards the power of Mother Nature.

Other than geographical setting, the Malays' character and actions were also influenced by a Customary System that incorporates the social norms in constructing the Malay identity. Conceptually, the customary system stresses on two main aspects, with the first one being culture as a way of life or culture that undergoes adaptations and transformations. The customs in this context is not a core value as it could undergo changes due to surrounding influence, hence they are categorized as customs and rites [6], [8], [9]. Meanwhile, the second aspect is the pattern of character and practices of the Malays that have been immersed in their life for a long time that they had become a tradition. This is categorized as the true tradition or *nan sabana adat* or custom that has been institutionalized. It is the customary rules or social rules that encompass ethical and moral codes that depend on the social values borne out of the core elements of *budi* [12], [13]. The adoption of *budi* into the Malays' social norms had influenced the elements of religion, language, traditions, politics, economics and arts to conform to the elements of *budi*.

The principle of *budi* was further reinforced with the arrival of Islam in Malaya. The influence on Islam in the Malay civilization was very strong that it was impossible to detach. The introduction to the teachings of *tauhid*, which only acknowledges Allah the Almighty as God and rejects the pagan rites of worshipping goddesses and the mystical world, had transformed the Malay community. Through the teachings of *tauhid* and *taqwa* concepts, slowly, the acts of revering among mankind, especially towards the royals and chieftains, and differences of rank in society based on the caste system as propagated by Hinduism were rejected. Even though the Hindu religion had arrived in the Malay realm earlier, but the effect was not strong, as it only added some minor changes to the Malay traditions [13].

The scenario was different with the arrival of Islam which stressed on the aspects of harmony, equality, justice and peace in society. The essence of Islamic teaching that calls upon its followers to treat everyone equally and fairly and outlines one's faith and *taqwa* towards Allah the Almighty as what sets them apart had attracted the Malays in droves to embrace Islam as their religion [13]. This was further fortified with the similarities that exist between Islam and *budi*, which main aim is to attain peace and harmony in society. As a result, Islam had brought about changes in the lives of the as Malays it was easy to match Islam with the Malays' culture [14].

Even though Islam managed to dominate various aspects of the Malays' culture and identity, but the acceptance of Islam by the community was not total. The strong influence of *budi* that had dominated the Malays' soul had somewhat made the community taking some aspects of Islam lightly even though they were aware that some elements went against the teachings of al-Quran and al-Sunnah. The nonchalant manner was more obvious when Islam came into contact with the secular ideologies practiced by the West, and became more visible when it was popularly adopted by the Malay noblemen

and middle-class community that dominated Malaya's administration. As a result, the Islamic values were adapted to align with the elements of *budi* that gave birth to a Muslim-Malay identity that differed from the Middle-East Muslim community. The extent of the Malay values was such, that whenever a non-Muslim individual in Malaysia embraced Islam, he was considered to have converted into Malay. The phenomenon was made popular with the term *masuk Islam* (embracing Islam) that is similar in meaning to *masuk Melayu* (embracing Malay) [15]. The force of Islam in influencing the customary system had assimilated the core values of *budi* and Islam in the heart and soul of the Malays, which led to the origin of the term *budi-Islam*. The values of *budi-Islam* are what dominate and guide the Malay community in leading their life, thoughts and actions.

As a result of interaction between *budi* and the geographical surrounding, culture and Islam had resulted in certain social values, that are compromising, cooperative, respectful, and helpful [16]. The Malay communities are tolerant, and their compromising attitude is due to their way of leading life moderately in every aspect. For example, if there were confrontations due to small misunderstandings, they are encouraged to seek forgiveness to maintain peace and harmony.

Cooperation among the Malays is to protect common interests, especially when facing enemies or calamities, other than to ensure that any task can be completed easily and that any problem can be solved together. For example, planting of paddy and ploughing of paddy fields were carried out collaboratively by the community or a joint effort better-known as *gotong royong* to ensure that the tasks could be completed fast. Meanwhile, the *budi* extended by the community are usually rewarded by dishes duly prepared by the womenfolk as a gesture of gratitude [16], [9].

Respecting each other is a value expected among the Malays in order to reduce the social gap among the community, as it is a way of avoiding one from turning snobbish. To earn respect from others, a person must also respect others. This character is instilled from home, where children are trained to respect their elders through the way they call and talk to the elders. In return, parents, the elderly, teachers, leaders and administrators, will shower the younger generation with affection that is shown from gestures or polite talk [16], [13]. By respecting each other, peace and harmony will prevail, as each community member tries their best to avoid conflicts and disputes in social relations.

III. SOCIAL RELATION IN THE MALAY COMMUNITY

With the aim of maintaining peace, the Malays preserve cordial social relations with other Malay ethnics within the Malay realm. As they come from a similar civilization, the differences between their religion, traditions, language, education, political system and judiciary are not as disparate. The tie was made stronger through a call from the al-Quran that heeds its followers to form harmonious relations either when they communicate among themselves, or with the

Creator.

Social relations among the Malay communities are very amicable, as depicted in the relations between the aristocrats and the commoners, where they compromise with each other, while the Rulers are very concerned with the welfare of their subjects thus the subjects were loyal to their Rulers in return. It was in line with religious demands which call upon its followers to be loyal to fair rulers and be subservient to Allah and the Prophet. Based on history, rebellion by the mass towards their Rulers had never taken place in the Malay society. What transpired were mainly clashes and battles among the aristocrats, either between Rulers or among chieftains to gain authority, or skirmishes between chieftains and their Rulers due to dissatisfaction towards sentences meted out by Rulers which were deemed as cruelty. One example was Hang Jebat's rebellion against the Sultan who had unfairly sentenced the death penalty upon Hang Tuah. The incident did not incite any uprising against the Sultan among the subjects, as they steered away from interfering in the affairs involving the aristocrats, as they would just heed advice from the rulers [16]. A similar scenario was witnessed during the clash between the Malay-Islam kingdom of Melaka and the Javanese empire that involved the nobles. The common subjects only entered the fray if their kingdom were attacked.

Malaya's ideal geographical location which was well-protected from natural disasters and its thriving economy had indeed lured other Malay natives to migrate to Malaya, like those from Java, Bali, and Minangkabau. From the aspect of culture, the migrating tradition was a common practice, as it was believed that it could improve one's life conditions [17]. Hence, even though many migrants from the Malay realm especially those from the Javanese ethnicity arrived in Malaya, but almost no clashes took place with the locals. The Malays' attitude of being tolerant and respectful towards others had caused the interaction and integration process to take place easily. The shared culture became more congruent as the migrants respected the Malay communities' traditions [18].

The same attitude was witnessed when the Malays were facing danger. Swettenham's research on the Malays' way of life highlighted several incidents that showed the community's collaboration when faced with imminent danger. Among the incidents were the slaying of a tiger that attacked a Javanese village, and the amok incident of an Imam who was furious over his wife's infidelity. Imam Mamat was said to have murdered his wife, brother-in-law, family members and friends over feelings that he was being betrayed [10]. Even though the incident affected the community's peace and harmony, the issue was settled amicably through the people's cooperation. It was the spirit of cooperation that led to the birth of the value of togetherness or "our people" in the Malay community, the spirit of protecting and upholding the rights of the Malays from being eroded [13], [16]. However, the Malays' tolerant nature and concern towards other people's feelings had not led to extreme *ethnocentrism* that could affect the interests of non-Malay communities.

The Malays accommodating and compromising nature was

evident during the post-independent period that was reflected through the government's efforts. Tun Abdul Razak, the Second Prime Minister, implemented the New Economic Policy with the aims of eradicating poverty among the Malay ethnics, especially those living in remote villages [19]. It was continued through the efforts of the fourth Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who continued to safeguard the rights of the Malays by improving their economic standing so that they could be at par with the non-Malay communities. Among the initiatives introduced by the government were channelling financial aids for the abject poor, building low-cost homes and improving the economic clout of the low-income earners to elevate them into middle-income earners [20]. In general, social relations between the Malays were formed upon the basis of accommodating each other in order to protect the peace and harmony of the plural society.

A. Interaction between the Malay and Chinese Communities

Around the 3rd A.D., Chinese traders arrived in Malaya and began to partake in business activities [21], [22]. It was the start of the Chinese social interaction with the locals, the Malay community of the sacred land. The arrival of British in the 19th Century saw an influx of Chinese and Indian communities converging upon the region in order to meet the labour needs required by the British economic sector.

With spirit of tolerance and considerate, the community interacts with other communities such as Chinese and Indian communities. According to [23], the Chinese community in Malaya was not ill-treated by the Malay community. Chinese used to hold the post of Police Chief (*Syahbandar*) to look into the welfare of their community. From a political angle, the social relation forged is still based on the need to maintain peace and harmony. With this spirit also the Malacca ruler opted to seek refuge of his government under the Ming emperor from the attack from his enemy especially from Majapahit ruler. As a result, the Malacca ruler prepared to send an annual gift (*ufiti*) to the Chinese ruler and he did it by himself instead of through his representative. Because of his humbleness, the emperor sent a group of army with the strength 37 thousands personnel to protect Malacca. Due to this protection all the trade activities can be carried out in peace [21], [22].

The principle of wanting to maintain peace continues and this can be seen in the modern history of Malaya. Just before the independence the attitude of reconciliation was shown by Tunku Abdul Rahman (Tunku) the Alliance party chief, by agreeing to meet the Secretary of Malayan Communist Party, Mr. Chin Peng, in the Baling talk in 1955 for the sake of peace of the country. At that time, communist revolt was the major disturbances in the country. His sole objective was to get independent for Malaya as promised by the British; however, the later condition for the independence was the cessation of communist hostilities. Tunku planned to persuade Chin Peng to lay down their arms and the government was prepared to grant amnesty to the communist fighters. However Tunku strategy was wrongly footed since the communist was adamant in maintaining their ideology and did not want to

compromise on that. So the talk failed due to the arrogance of Chin Peng with the belief that the communist hands were the one who determined whether the country will be in peace or chaotic conditions. After the peace offer was turn down, the only option left for Tunku was to be firm in facing the communist threat by waging a continuous war for the sake of country peace and finally the menace was fully eliminated in 1980s [24].

The same situation took place when the Malay was facing communist (three stars) during their 14 days reign after the Japanese surrender. The violent and cruel attitudes of the communist towards the Malays were unacceptable. They laced the mosques with pig manure and asked the Muslim to change their weekly Friday prayer to Saturday which undoubtedly exploded the Malay anger. As a result all the Muslim communities from Malays, Jawa, Banjar or Minangkabau stood up to fight the communist and labelled their enemy as the infidel that it was a religious obligation to wage a war. Since most of the communist members were Chinese, so the sore relationship between the Malays and Chinese continued till the country was in the verge of getting the independence. Although the communist struggle was said to drive out imperialist, however even after the independence their threat to the country continued and because majority of the communist members were Chinese then the fight against the communist after the independence were seen as the fight against the Chinese. It became more complicated when the call to fight the communist was responded with lukewarm by the Chinese community to the extent it was viewed with prejudices by the Malays and started to question on the loyalty of the Chinese to the country. Some of the communist members fled to Indochina after the communist established their foothold there [5], [25].

In general, the Malay community was respectful and civil towards foreigners as the main aim in life for them was to live peacefully. To ensure the continuity, the non-Malays must also accommodate the Malays' religion and traditions, and avoid from inciting the Malays' wrath, such as by questioning their status as the indigenous people of the land and mocking their religious affairs.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, the Malay communities give a great respect to other communities with the hope of maintaining peace and harmony in the society and in return they expect other communities will respect their core values which any disturbances will touch their sensitivities. The most important aspects are their historical fact about this country and their religious values.

The civilizational perspective shows that the core elements of *budi-Islam* play a huge role in shaping the principles and demeanour of the Malays. Both aspects affect the social relations of the Malays whether when they communicate among themselves, or with other non-Malay communities, with the aim of preserving peace and harmony in the society. It was reflected through their tolerant attitude, cooperation and

respect towards others without any prejudice to one's race or religion. By holding fast to the values, the Malays were never guilty of mass killing or being subjected to massacre since time immemorial, from the Melaka Sultanate era until the period of independence. The values had also allowed the Malay leaders to protect the Malay community from being annihilated by foreign super powers that came to conquer Malaya, like British and Japan. Through talks and dialogues, the Malay leaders not only managed to secure independence for Malaya, but also protect Malayan subjects from any gruesome war as some countries had to endure. Hence, the values of *budi-Islam* had led the Malays to become accommodating, cooperative, and courteous which were reflected in the history of social relations among the Malay community and when coming in contact with other communities, which could be the foundation in shaping future social relations of the Malays and other communities in Malaysia.

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