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The 1980s as (an Attempt in) the Decolonialization of Malaysian Art

SARENA ABDULLAH

Abstract

In Malaysia, the implementation of the National Culture Policy in the early 1970s reiterated the ethnic preference policy of the National Economic Policy (NEP). As a result, the subsequent 1971 National Culture Congress (NCC) and the Islamization Policy undertaken by the government in the late 1970s had great influence on art practices in Malaysia, especially during the 1980s. These policies could be seen as an official attempt to shape the Malaysian identity, especially in terms of visual art in post-Independence Malaysia. The first part of this article will discuss the indirect consequences of the 1971 National Culture Policy and several Islam-centred policies since the late 1970s and how several assertions were made through a few writings about Malaysian art: that only certain modern art forms, aligned with the rhetoric of national agendas, were produced and exhibited in the late 1970s until the mid-1990s. This paper will problematize the assertion by discussing some disjuncture and inconsistencies in relation to this narrative of Malaysian art. Thus, this paper will argue how, despite the general perception that the National Culture Congress (NCC) and the Islamization Policy had great influence on art practices in Malaysia, a deeper examination of exhibitions revealed that art-making by most artists still depended on the artists' own endeavours and own modern artistic practice. Nevertheless, as this paper will also highlight, this period is an important attempt in decolonializing modern art in Malaysia by ways of state and institutional support, albeit its limited success.

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Introduction

The racial delineation in a Malaysian historical and political narrative is evident. Historically, colonialism marked the borders and modern polity of Southeast Asia, and the indigenous people of the region were identified in a larger context of the Malay world or Nusantara, especially those who came from countries known today as Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei and the Philippines. Even though the Chinese and Indians actively participated in trade and commerce around the region before the 1400s, it was only after the establishment of the British rule in the region that the Chinese and Indians began to settle in large numbers, especially in West Malaysia, the Malay Peninsula, or the then Tanah Melayu. The influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants that started around the mid-19th century was a direct result of British exploitation of the rich natural resources found in Malaya, such as rubber, tin and palm oil. Such a situation occurred due to policies that were made to serve demands for labour for the colonial economy. This in turn radically transformed the previous indigenous society into a plural society comprising of three main ethnic divisions: the indigenous Malay along with the Chinese and Indian immigrants.[1]

The British "divide and rule" policy during that time had resulted in limited interactions between these communities. Thus, the concept of a "plural society" in 1930s Malaya was only true insofar that there existed diverse communities living in the land. Later, the independence of Malaya was founded on a consensus between leaders of three major ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, and Indian) as part of the requirements to self-govern. However, this "bargaining" approach taken by the three racially-based political parties —United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC)—could not defuse the racial sentiments that had emerged, especially between the Malay and Chinese. As a result, the 13 May 1969 racial riot was the turning point that influenced Malaysia's policies and approaches pertaining to its domestic interethnic relations. Following the suspension of the parliament from May 1969 until February 1970, power was exercised by the National Operations Council (NOC), the Malaysian policy was reshaped and various decisions were made by the NOC while the parliament was suspended.[2] Political and economic reforms were taken by the then Barisan Nasional government such as certain "sensitive" provisions of the Federal Constitution from public discussion[3] and the establishment of the Department of National Unity to study ways and means for restoring interracial goodwill through the drafting of the *Rukunegara* (National Ideology). The New Economic Policy (NEP) was

passed by the Parliament in July 1971. Scholars like Datar[4] noted that policies such as NEP, not the National Ideology, would frame the country in years to come. This policy marked a new turning point for Malaysia's political, economic and social relations and eventually became the foundation of the Malaysian politics of gender, race and religion under the Barisan Nasional government.[5]

The National Culture and Islamization Policy in the 1970s and Its Effect on Malaysian Art

Like the economic development of the time, the development of modern arts in the country could also be argued as being influenced, either directly or indirectly, by the subsequent changes in the government policy initiated by the NOC.[6] Writings of Piyadasa, for example, framed the mid-1970s to the 1990s as the period of emergence of the neo-nationalistic and pan-Islamic tendencies, and this was followed by the neo-regionalist tendencies between the 1980s and 1990s.[7] Nevertheless, despite the similar observation made by Muliyadi on the production of artworks of various styles and themes that revolved around the issue of the national, social and cultural identity portrayed by Malaysian artists since the 1970s, he pointed out that this did not mean that traditional art such as batik, woodcarvings and *wayang kulit* did not inspire Malaysian artists prior to the nationalistic phase.[8]

Based on deliberations gathered from these essays, writings and various art exhibitions held at institutions such as the National Art Gallery, National Museum, MARA Institute of Technology (now a university) and University Malaya, an observation of Malaysian art in the 1980s could be made as such: due to the National Culture Policy and the subsequent Islamization policies, the development of art in Malaysia since the mid-1970s and throughout the 1980s could be read, and has been overtly read, as drawing on the Malay/Islam-centric framework.[9] Thus, the canonization of readings of artists and artwork through the Malay/Islamic lens can be suggested to have begun. T.K. Sabapathy in his article wrote:

> Overtly and covertly, events of May 1969 and the Cultural Congress and no doubt other related movements, began to shape thinking and practices among artists; they were far too shattering and fundamental to be ignored. Throughout the 1970s, artists began the difficult, painful process of rethinking their positions, and recasting their perceptions of culture, language, race, state/nation and identity. For some, the prospects loomed as intolerable and inhospitable and

> they chose to migrate; some retreated into temporary or permanent silence; for everyone else, the stakes were too important and consequential not to be involved.[10]

As the NEP became the core policy of the Malaysian government and the basis of all subsequent top-down policies since the 1970s, the implementation of the National Culture Policy in the early 1970s reiterated the ethnic preference policy of the NEP, while the Islamization Policy undertaken by the government in the late 1970s had great influence on art practices in Malaysia, especially in the 1980s.

The National Culture Congress was seen as an official attempt to shape the Malaysian identity,[11] while the Iranian revolution in 1979 was possibly one of the factors that contributed to the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia in the late 1970s. Chandra Muzaffar has argued, however, that the religious resurgence was an outcome of rapid urban development and modernization, which was further encouraged by Malaysia's ethnically divided society and the consequent strong desire for Malays to seek a common identity such as an Islamic identity.[12] It must also be noted that when Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed came into power, the "Dasar Penerapan Nilai-nilai Islam dalam Pentadbiran" was also introduced in 1985 to adopt Islamic concepts and administrative policies. Islamic boarding schools, the International Islamic University and Islamic Banking were established. This also further reinforced the role played by the Islamic Section of the Prime Minister's Office and the development of Islamic economics.[13]

Despite the overarching narrative of Malaysian art history delineated here, it can be argued that there was resistance to the espoused National Cultural Policy in the realm of visual arts. Among visual artists, the National Cultural Policy was not well received when it was tabled and discussed. In the plenary meeting prior to the Congress, it was proposed that the "Art for Art's Sake" attitude in Malaysia should be changed to "Art for Society",[14] but that proposition was strongly opposed and rejected by the visual artists who claimed that it was an attempt to curb artistic activities in the country.

> In the plenary meeting on August 20, Prof. Ungku Aziz, proposed that 'Arts for Arts Sake' attitude in Malaysia should be changed to 'Art for Society'. He stated that artists, have been given full freedom to create, and that the country should now pay attention to art as an element in the economic and political development of the nation. The motion was opposed strongly by the artists who protested that

> this was an attempt to curb artistic activity in the country. The debate lasted nearly two hours which prompted the chairman Tan Sri Nik Ahmad Kamil to decide on voting for a decision. The motion was carried and the artists left en bloc in protest.[15]

Therefore, the opinion that artistic practices in Malaysia should be rooted in a pluralistic reality was vetoed, in favour of another view popular at that time, which called for creative activities to be rooted in social, political and economic realities.

Nevertheless, the turnaround of artists such as Syed Ahmad Jamal and Sulaiman Esa were marked by the groundbreaking exhibitions *Rupa dan Jiwa* (1979), curated by Syed Ahmad Jamal, and *Ke Arah Tawhid* (1984), a solo exhibition by Sulaiman Esa. The *Rupa dan Jiwa* exhibition that was held from 17 November till 9 December 1979 in Universiti Malaya exhibited various forms of Malay material culture and artefacts comprising carvings, manuscripts, woven materials, embroidered materials, *wayang kulit*, *wau* and songket textiles. For the first time, Malay artefacts and visual arts were brought together from all over the country, analysed and presented authoritatively as coherent, distinctive cultural manifestations of the Malays.[16] The exhibition aimed to encourage and highlight Malay designs and aesthetics, and the importance of the search of an (national) identity. The impetus of such a search in terms of identity has influenced Malay artists, especially when it comes to thinking about the uniqueness of Malay material culture, namely, its visuals, form, style, colours, motifs, patterns and originality.[17]

The exhibition's importance was amplified by a subsequent seminar entitled "Seminar Akar-akar Kesenian Peribumi dan Perkembangan Kini", held over three days from 30 November–2 December 1979 and organized by Kajian Senilukis dan Senireka, Institut Teknologi MARA. The national culture, together with the upsurge in Islamic conscience by the end of the 1970s, can be argued, and has been argued, to have important implications on the art practices of Malay artists during the 1970s and 1980s. The eight papers presented by Nazri Jabar, Hijjas Kasturi, Muhammad Hj. Salleh, Ismail Zain, Hashim Hassan, Siti Zainon Ismail, Syed Ahmad Jamal and Krishen Jit pertained to the many issues of identity, the search for the roots of Malay arts and culture, and the espoused national culture. It can be argued that the search for Malay roots and national culture articulated by these papers and discussions, provided a good basis for the development of art that greatly influenced Malaysian artists at that time. They had started to shift from Western modernism to the realization that they could refer to the richness of local traditions.[18]

As mentioned earlier, a significant turnaround in art practice can be seen in the Islamization of Sulaiman Esa's artworks as they reflected the quest for an Islamic aesthetic sought from Islamic spirituality. This was in contrast to the Zen-inspired conceptual-based artworks that he produced in the exhibition *Towards A Mystical Reality*.[19] Sulaiman Esa's *Ke Arah Tawhid* (1984) exhibition was held from 2–8 April 1984 at the Australian High Commission in Kuala Lumpur. His exhibition exemplified the features of Islam as it focused on the theme of monotheism and was influenced by Islamic thinkers like Isma'il al-Faruqi and Syed Hoessein Nasr.[20] He was motivated to study the philosophical writings of Islamic thinkers such as Syed Hoessein Nasr, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings and Frithjof Schuon, and this resulted in his deeper interest in Islamic metaphysics.[21] The series of artworks featured handmade paper adorned with arabesque patterns in line with the arabesque motif. The paper was created with different materials such as bamboo, yarn, gold thread and cotton, which were commonly used in Malay crafts and thus reflected the artist's attempt in combining local materials with Islam. The Islamic concept supported by Sulaiman sought to elevate Islam-inspired art to a more modern approach, as can be seen in *Nurani* (1983), an artistic contemplation piece that perpetuates traditional Islamic arabesque design and Islamic spiritualism. Through the arabesque, Islamic spiritualism in the work was closely wedded with the experience of harmony and archetypical reality through the reflection of the One (Allah the Almighty) and the concept of unity or *tawhid*.

We can observe that various exhibitions pertaining to Malay/Islamic themes were organized by state institutions since then. At a national level, the *Pameran Seni Lukis & Seni Khat: Pameran Tamaddun Islam* (Art and Calligraphy Exhibition: The Islamic Civilization Exhibition) in 1984 was organized at the National Art Gallery, in collaboration with the National Museum, from 21 May till 4 September 1984. Curated by Syed Ahmad Jamal and Sharifah Fatimah Zubir, this exhibition showed artistic works from five countries, namely, Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Lebanon and Turkey, to promote the expansion of Islamic values through the introduction of Islamic aesthetics. Zainol Abidin noted that this exhibition was the first major art exhibition organized in conjunction with the Islamic Civilisation Exhibition.[22] Subsequently, the impact of this could be seen in the various forms of art exhibitions, seminars and scholarly writings that dealt with Islamic art and culture. The subsequent decades witnessed flourishing exhibitions dwelling on the theme of tradition, especially in the context of Malay and/or Islamic exhibitions—the main focus of this paper. For example, *Pameran Seni Lukis & Seni Khat: Pameran Tamaddun Islam* (1984), *The Malaysianness of Malaysian*

Art (1991), *Identiti Islam dalam Senirupa Malaysia: Pencapaian dan Cabaran* (Islamic Identity in Malaysian Art: Achievement and Challenges) (1992), *Manifestasi Jiwa Islam dalam Senirupa Malaysia Sezaman* (Manifestation of Islamic Soul in Malaysian Contemporary Art) (1993), *Art and Spirituality* (1995), *Kesenian Islam: Suatu Perspektif Malaysia* (Islamic Art: A Malaysian Perspective), and *Pameran Alam Melayu* (The Malay Archipelago Exhibition) from 10 August till 12 September 1999.

As a direct or an indirect result of the policy, it can be observed that most works produced in the 1970s and the 1980s can be categorized in three affinities in terms of subject matter or inspiration: Malay-centric, Islam-centric or both Malay/Islam-centric. The Malay-centric subjects have Malay culture as the main subject matter in either tangible or intangible forms. This can be seen in works with central elements and themes derived from intangible Malay culture, traditional dances and theatre, and myths and folk stories. The second category of artworks based on Islamic aesthetics such as the Arabic script or Jawi script, calligraphic motifs, the arabesque, displays of Quranic or Hadith verses, and epithets praising God's supremacy, were further enhanced by the concept of Islamic spirituality that underscored their work. As modern artists, they did not restrict themselves to certain traditional media but generally adopted Islamic aesthetics or philosophy into their modern art-making. It was within this new context of modernization that their works were significant as the inner dimension of Islam and the essence of Islamic spirituality had been recreated and sustained. Besides those who made direct references to Malay roots or the Islamic influence, existed another group of Malay artists whose works, though seemingly using overtly Malay forms, suggested the usage of the underlying principle of Islamic theology to create 'decorative' art. The works produced by these artists place great emphasis on the decorative elements of Malay textiles such as batik, and even architectural elements such as woodcarvings or Islamic design conventions.[23]

In Search of a National Identity: Some Disjuncture and Polemics

Despite such observations and the overarching narrative of how the national policies influenced artistic activities in Malaysia, the most important question here is: how far has the NCC influenced visual art practices in Malaysia? What were the strategies or negotiations of artists in reading and rereading the NCC and how was it adopted, adapted and assimilated into what were already established as modern art practices in Malaysia at that time? This section will discuss and highlight the disjuncture, incongruities and polemics of accepting the top-down national cultural policy by first examining two main

points: first, the works of several artists who had invested efforts in deriving the themes and subject matter of their art from regional subject matter even before the promulgation of the national identity agenda, and second, the link between figuration and Abstract Expressionists in the context of Malay/Islamic aesthetics as an indirect call for a form of national identity.

As observed by Muliyadi earlier, despite the inclusion of Malay-Muslim artists in various Malay/Islamic art exhibitions, not all Malay/Muslim artists were influenced by the impetus of the National Culture Policy or by Malay cultural interests and the Islamic resurgence that occurred at that time. Even prior to the 1980s, there were already artists who produced artworks based on their regional identification and this involved both Malays/Muslims and artists of Chinese ethnicity. Chuah Thean Teng, Patrick Ng Kah Onn, Nik Zainal Abidin and Syed Thajudeen, for example, were among the artists who were already deriving their artistic identity from regional cultures and histories before the National Culture Policy. Thus, their works were easily selected for various exhibitions with Malay/Islamic themes. That said, such early attempts were not seen as a cohesive form of consolidated art movement as they were segmented at best within the early history of modern art in Malaysia.[24]

Patrick Ng was one of the few artists who was observed by a few scholars to have presented a form of a regional identity through scenes such as bathing, drying clothes, fishing, local landscapes, folk games and local myths in his art. A reference to the *kechak* dance, a type of Balinese dance that retells the Ramayana myth from India, was captured in *Spirit of the Earth* (1959).[25] His artwork also portrays numerous elements that allude to local or regional nature—tropical trees, pineapples, banana trees and even a Malay kampong stilt house.

Besides Patrick Ng, Chuah Thean Teng's batik was also often singled out as a Malayan art form. As noted by Frank Sullivan:

> The streams of influence in art from East and West converge in Malaya, and slowly but surely the artists of Malaya are building a bridge between two worlds, both in techniques and ideas. In Chinese-style painting, this is particularly clear. The brush is still used in the ancient way, but the traditional conventions of subjects are being discarded; artists using this form are depicting directly the Malayan scene. Even more interesting is the adaption of the centuries-old method of making batik cloth as a medium of painting. This is no longer an experiment but a fact, a painstaking but richly colourful alliance of old methods and new outlook.[26]

Frank Sullivan, the curator of the Commonwealth Institute in London also wrote on Chuah Thean Teng's batik:

> It is astonishing to think that although making batik has been common for hundreds of years, no one before Teng ever thought of adapting this age-old craft as a medium for fine art. Teng, and Teng alone, is responsible for this most original contribution to the whole world of art.[27]

Batik was asserted to be a unique Malayan contribution to modern art, and works by Chuah Thean Teng, who is also aptly known as the Father of Malaysian Batik, attest to how batik can be used as a modern art form.[28] Although I have argued elsewhere that the artistic output during the period of the 1950s and 1960s were influenced by Malaysia's early form of plural society, this period has also seen expressions of hybridity.[29] In the last few years of colonial rule, the British advocated the idea of the 'Malayan' by introducing coercive collaboration through culture and by promoting the explicit ideology of citizenship.[30] However, these early attempts to consolidate a certain identity were segmented and inadequate.

The convergence of Eastern (read: regional) and Western approaches to art could also be seen in works by Nik Zainal Abidin, a self-taught artist who mostly referred to his Kelantanese cultural roots for visual inspiration since the 1950s. For instance, he created a work where the Ramayana narrative was translated into the Kelantanese *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet). Redza Piyadasa wrote in a flattering manner:

> It might be claimed rightly, in retrospect, that Nik Zainal Abidin was a highly significant artistic fore-runner anticipating the subsequent artistic involvement with Malay cultural 'roots' that was fashionable during the 1980s. He was there long before the other Malay artists had even rediscovered the need to assert their historical cultural roots. He had anticipated, even decades earlier, the subsequent self-conscious and somewhat emotional search, undertaken by so many Malay artists during the 1980s, for their threatened Malay-ness in the face of rapid social transformation. Nik Zainal Abidin had projected a Malay-centred vision long before the emotive sentiments of the National Cultural Congress of 1971 were championed.[31]

Nik Zainal Abidin's portrayal of the ancient art form of *wayang kulit* and its stories was among the first in transferring *wayang kulit* characters onto a modern visual art form. *Wayang kulit* uses flat, articulated figures to create

cut-out figures, which sometimes include translucent colours and other types of detailing, held between a source of light and a translucent screen. Most of Nik Zainal's paintings were based on *wayang kulit* characters or captured moments. His rendition of the stylized shadow puppets, rearranged in colourful and dramatic forms with delightful watercolours, was executed with much detail and precision to draw parallels with the highly cultivated Southeast Asian Ramayana epic tradition and art form. Although the art was produced in the context of modern art, his approach was distinctively his and it was maintained throughout his life.

If Nik Zainal Abidin's works mostly refer to the Ramayana epic characters that define the Kelantanese *wayang kulit*, Syed Thajudeen's references to the Ramayana epic are more direct in his consideration of the delicate influences of the Rajasthan miniatures.[32] Syed Thajudeen, who attained his arts degree from Madras College of Arts, produced works that reflect his early training and early Indian influences. His unique lyrical style, grandeur and almost mystical paintings capture the figurative style of the regionally well-known character, inspired by a class trip to the Ajanta Caves of Maharashtra. When viewed in detail, the artist's choice of colours and impressionistic manner imparts a magical, mysterious and certain fantasy, as can be seen in *Ramayana* (1972) and *The Cosmic Dance* (1971).

Thus the search for a certain Malayan/regional identity had begun even before the promulgation of the NCC. Such works were conveniently included in various Malay/Islamic-themed exhibitions, under the pretext of holding up the national culture. A case in point is Ahmad Khalid Yusof's *Alif Ba Ta* (1971). I would like to emphasize how the reading of this artwork was also indirectly influenced by the Malay/Islamic promulgation of art in the late 1970s and 1980s. *Alif Ba Ta* (1971) is a silk-screen work that has often been included in exhibitions of Islamic art, and has always been presumed to have been influenced by the Islamic tendencies among Malay Muslim artists, as it is filled with Arabic/Jawi script, juxtaposed with or imposed on black vertical and horizontal lines, which are in total contrast with its bright red background. The Arabic calligraphy was a concept that he adopted for this work, but it was actually produced prior to the Islamic resurgence of the late 1970s.

In narrating the life of Ahmad Khalid Yusoff, Zakaria Ali wrote:

> Malah sebelum kongres tersebut ambil ketetapan bahawa budaya Melayu itu diterima sebagai asas kebudayaan kebangsaan yang disumbang oleh kumpulan etnik yang lain, Ahmad Khalid, sama seperti intelektual Melayu yang lain, tetap percayakan hal yang sama.[33]

> (My translation: Even before the congress decided that Malay culture is accepted as the basis of national culture with contributions by other ethnic groups, Ahmad Khalid, just like other Malay intellectuals, still believed in the same idea.)

On the initial impetus that led to the production of the work, which was produced well before the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia, this explanation can perhaps enlighten us about Ahmad Khalid Yusof's impression on the question of Islamism in this work:

> Ahmad Khalid tunjukkan catan jawinya yang menarik kepada pengunjung. Mereka bertanya bolehlah karyanya itu dipanggil 'Seni Islam'? Dia enggan jawab boleh atau tidak. Dia tahu bahawa dalam takrifan yang ketat, seni islam itu bererti khat yang merakam ayat-ayat Qur'an, ikut peraturan kadar banding diperturunkan oleh Ibnu Muglah pada kurun ke sepuluh mengenai penulisan dan dekorasi pinggiran. Sebaliknya, karya Ahmad Khalid tiada ayat-ayat Qur'an. Dia terangkan bahawa jawinya yang terputus-putus itu serupai skrip Arab tetapi huruf *lam-alif, nun, 'ain, sad, dad, ya, mim, hamzah* sengaja dia bancuh, ikat, tenyih, tindih. Dia seru agar huruf-hurufnya itu dianggap sebagai sapuan berus mengecat warna lembut dan panas.[34]
>
> (My translation: Ahmad Khalid showed his attractive *jawi* paintings to the visitors. They may ask, can this artwork be called 'Islamic Art'? He refused to answer, for he knew that in a strict definition, Islamic art means Islamic calligraphy that records the Qur'anic scripture, following the rules of scale taught by Ibn Muglah in the 10th century on the writing and tableware decoration. Instead, Ahmad Khalid's artwork has no verses from the Qur'an. He explained that the choppy *jawi* looks like Arabic script but the letters *lam-alif, nun, 'ain, sad, dad, ya, mim, hamzah* were purposely mixed, tied, pressed and overlapped. He said that the letters were considered as painted soft brushes of light and warm colours.)

Thus the general assumption that Malay/Muslim artists were moved by the National Culture Policy and the Islamic resurgence in Malaysia must be tread on carefully, as not all artists were directly influenced by such policies and inclinations. The artists were not solely to be blamed. As I have pointed out earlier, Malay and Islamic aesthetics were highlighted in the curatorial approach of these exhibitions. The selection of artists and artworks in these

Islamic art exhibitions might not have been carefully thought out, resulting in the inclusion of artists and artworks that could have been easily read as Islamic, despite the premise of the artworks being otherwise. Thus, what was reflected in the Islamic exhibitions also influenced the writings of Malaysians during that period, especially in catalogue essays.

As much as Malay/Islam became central in the 1980s, if we were to examine the exhibitions that were organized back then, what seems to have been included in the few art exhibitions can be problematized. This is especially true if we were to examine the inclusion of Abstract Expressionists works in the context of Malay/Islamic-themed art exhibitions since the 1980s, for example, *Pameran Seni Lukis Dan Seni Khat: Pameran Tamaddun Islam*. This can be explained by the fact that in Islamic art, there is limited use of naturalistic images of living beings. As such, Abstract Expressionist works can be conveniently positioned and categorized as Islamic, or at least adherent to Islamic principles.[35] Deliberating on the manifestations of Islamization in modern Malaysian art, Zainol Abidin also made similar observations of the artworks that were produced and exhibited in Malay/Islamic-themed exhibitions during that time, which shunned figurative representations—and not necessarily "because of Islamic interdiction, but because they empathized with the abstraction of the avant-garde".[36] Thus, it can be argued that Malaysian artists who produced artworks using the Abstract Expressionist approach were not dictated by the NCC and the Islamic policy despite their works fitting into a very loose Islamic aesthetic understanding.

This phenomenon was quite rampant. In the *Pameran Seni Lukis Dan Seni Khat: Pameran Tamaddun Islam* catalogue, artworks such as Ibrahim Hussein's *Genting* (1978), Sharifah Fatimah Zubir's *Cahaya Hijau* (1983), Khalil Ibrahim's *Bayangan* (1981) and Abdul Latif Mohidin's *Senja* (1963) are among those that adhere to the Abstract Expressionistic approach that were included in the show. Ibrahim Hussein is known for his large paintings dominated by splashes of colours and arrays of thin lines. Sharifah Fatimah Zubir's works were always emblazoned with deep colours of navy blue, red, yellow and green that were painted thickly on the canvas. Khalil Ibrahim is known for his abstract, dark silhouette figures in sarong against a predominantly bright background of East Malaysian coastal village landscapes. Abdul Latiff Mohidin is known for his expressionistic works since he returned from Germany after his studies in the 1960s. It must be noted, however, that even though these artists were mostly known for their works that mainly employ or deal with formalistic investigations, abstractions or expressions, these works, as I have argued elsewhere, must be read and understood within a localized context.

In the context of Malaysian art itself, the term 'Abstract Expressionist' is applied loosely to describe the kind of work that moves towards abstraction or non-representational art and does not imply the kind of Abstract Expressionism that Greenberg espouses in the context of Euro-American art.[37] Therefore, although the exhibition was entitled *Pameran Seni Lukis & Seni Khat: Pameran Tamaddun Islam*, it can be argued that the works included in the exhibitions were implied to be Islamic art, regardless of whether they were modern or otherwise. In other catalogues such as "Kesenian Islam: Suatu Perspektif Malaysia",[38] works by Fauzan Omar, Fauzin Mustaffa and Juhari Said were also included. The inclusion of other works that fall into the Abstract Expressionist category could be seen in other exhibitions as well.

Thus, these Abstract Expressionist works were indispensable and in fact further entrenched during this period, as they fit into the non-figurative works that are the basis of Islamic art. As T.K. Sabapathy put it:

> In the production of art itself, 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, expressed for example in the Redza Piyadasa-Suleiman Esa exhibition called *Towards a Mystical Reality*, have not been sufficiently compelling to inspire dissenting art movements powerful enough to nudge Abstract Expressionism from its hegemonic position. Art reflecting the global Islamic revivalism in the 1980s has either aligned itself with tendencies in Abstract Expressionism or found kinship with decorative art.[39]

Therefore, the selection of Abstract Expressionist works as part of a modern take of Islamic art can be contested as a form of indoctrination of Malay artists to produce works that adhere to Islamic aesthetics and ideals. This was supported by another observation made by Zainol Abidin, who stated, "Among many Malay/Muslim artists, it was during the Eighties that they consciously and seriously attempted to marry Islamic concepts, in whatever guise, with modernist attitude in art."[40] These "guises", as termed by Zainol Abidin, can be seen in the selection of works that fall under the Abstract Expressionist and even formalistic approach. It should also be noted that these works were easily accepted and included in the series of exhibitions mentioned above.

It must be noted here that, as most of the artists were trained in Western art practices, the impetus of the National Cultural Congress and Islamization policy resulted in a different response from Malay/Muslim artists. Coombes

observed that a number of artists felt like they had to include their ethnic and spiritual vocabulary so that Western viewers could understand Islamic art and Islam. On top of that, artists felt that using Western visual vocabulary in producing modern art was acceptable so long as it adhered to Islamic content.[41] Thus, such perceptions can be argued as the reason why the NCC can be seen as a failure in the field of visual arts—the NCC only impacted a few artists, as most still retained their ways of art-making. Abstract Expressionist art and even modern art in general can coexist and be adapted as part of Malay/Islamic works. Such artworks could have also easily been included in exhibitions as long as the works adhered to Islamic ideals.

Of course, the latter perspective also allows most contemporary art to be read in such a way that is appropriate to the framework espoused by Malay/Islamic art tendencies. That was the irony that even the curators and writers for these exhibitions had to admit. As far as selection and curation was concerned, Coombes tackled these issues by basing the premise of his curatorial endeavour on "Islamic art" and "Muslim art" in the exhibition *Art & Spirituality* in 1995, thus allowing a larger scope of artworks to be included in the exhibition. In the catalogue itself, he wrote that "Islamic art" is a term that can be used for works that mainly transmit the Word of God by way of calligraphy, illuminations, geometric patterns or arabesque designs. "Muslim art", on the other hand, consist of works produced by Muslims that stand outside of Islamic tradition, but do not transgress the bounds of Islamic decency and decorum, for example, an artwork that uses contemporary vocabulary but is essentially guided by Islamic sensibilities.[42]

As Sulaiman Esa himself concluded in the exhibition catalogue, "Manifestasi Jiwa Islam Dalam Senirupa Malaysia Sezaman":

> In spite of the general achievements made by Malaysian artists, their approaches are not without shortcomings. As observed by many critics, the most serious of these is the lack of sound understanding of the basic philosophical and metaphysical principles that constitute the foundation of Islamic art. Their approaches to things Islamic deal mainly with the obvious elements of form, imagery, and content of Islamic art, but seem to ignore the fundamental issues such as the rationale, the metaphysical and philosophical principles and the spiritual roles and the objectives of Islamic art.[43]

On top of that, the fact that exhibitions, exhibition-making and, even more so, critical curatorial approaches were basically new in Malaysia at that time, could explain why the framing of these exhibitions and the selection of works could be short-sighted or based on mere curatorial impulse. Since the art

could fit into various interpreting frames, not just Islamic art or Muslim art, such as Abstract Expressionism, art movements, styles, social themes, these works could be easily selected and framed as such. As the late 1970s and the 1980s marked a new turning point for the search for a national identity, various shortcomings in exhibition framings and selection of artworks should be highlighted and re-examined.

NCC and Islamization Policy? A Decolonialization Intervention in Malaysia's (Modern) Art

Despite the discrepancies that this paper discussed earlier, the proclamations of the NEP, National Culture Policy and the Islamization Policies must not be seen in a totally negative light. The impact of these policies can be seen as part of the decolonization phase in Malaysia that inevitably created an intensified interest in modern art by questioning Malaysian art from the perspective of a nationalistic agenda. In fact, in 1991, an exhibition entitled *KeMalaysiaan Senilukis Malaysia: Soal Identiti* warranted the question, "What is the Malaysianness of Malaysian art?"[44] The pertinent question of one's (nationalistic) identity had begun to encroach on the mindset of Malaysian artists.

A good case can be made that despite the success (or otherwise) of policies such as the NEP, National Culture Policy and the Islamization Policies, which directly or indirectly impacted visual artists in Malaysia, such a shift in thinking was perhaps needed in an attempt at decolonializing the mindset of Malaysian artists. Sulaiman Esa, as one of the curators for a few of these exhibitions and whose practice had been directly impacted by this shift of thought, highlighted two major arguments. He argued that the introduction of modern art in Malaysia had inevitably led to the introduction of an underlying philosophy, attitude and rationale that was secularly-based and materialistic in nature, as well as anti-religious and anti-spiritual. These were infused with the secular spirit that had colonized the Malay mind and thus resulted in the crisis of the Malay identity. Such is evident in modern Malaysian art. The modern values introduced by modern art, he argued, contradicted with the values of (traditional) Malay society.[45] Second, the British, by marginalizing the political and economic hegemony of the Malay Sultans, had severed the Malay craftsmen from their economic source through royal patronage. Moreover, the creation of a plural society by the British effectively destroyed the social and cultural dominance of the Malays, which indirectly displaced the viability of traditional arts. Third, the fact that traditional religious education was replaced with humanistic and secular education by

the British had inevitably resulted in the displacement of spiritually-based traditional art.[46]

As discussed here, it is undeniable that the National Culture Policy and the Islamization policies played a major role in the development of Malaysian arts, especially from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. The Islamization policies, for example, further reinforced what the government endorsed as the national identity, which was based on Malay culture to bolster Malay-Muslim autonomy in the country. Although these events may be seen as manifesting the hegemony of Malay culture despite the fact that the country is multiracial and claims to be based on diversity, the national culture should not be seen in a totally negative light. Ooi Kok Chuen,[47] for example, asserted that before the 1971 National Culture Congress, Islamic art in the country tended to be marginalized due to the impact of colonization. However, the policy was restored and Malay-Islamic elements were entrenched in mainstream artistic discourse, and to him, the sanctification of Islamic principles and aesthetics, and the centralization of indigenous/Malay art forms to the cultural foreground, contributed to the Malaysian cultural matrix.

Although Ooi's argument is somewhat justified, it is not free from scrutiny. While the impact of National Culture Policy and Islamization policies can be clearly observed in the flourishing of Malay/Islamic themes in artworks and exhibitions, the fact is that some of these works still adhere to the individualistic approach of 'art for art's sake' as found in the wide application of the Abstract Expressionism approach. These "guises", as noted by Zainol Abidin, further contributed to complications in understanding and/or delineating the persisting question of the definition of Malay/Islamic art. On the one hand, the cherry-picking of Abstract Expressionism as a form of art that can be easily framed to be a part of Malay/Islamic artworks had defeated the purpose of the National Culture Policy which aimed to break away from the individualistic and elitist attitude of modern arts. These artworks can be construed as a discourse on form rather than their essence as a potential medium to nurture the creation of a national identity among the society at large. On the other hand, these types of artworks, as stated by Sulaiman Esa above, further obscured the fundamental principles of Islamic art. Interpretations and justifications that only resorted to forms, imageries and content alone have created misleading notions—or to an extent, confusion—that associated any artwork made by Malays, Muslims or both as Islamic art.

On top of that, despite the pertinent issues admitted by Sulaiman Esa himself, it must be highlighted that the establishment of art schools such as Institusi Teknologi MARA (now MARA University of Technology) that produced many (Malay) Malaysian artists were based on the Western arts and

design curriculum—Bauhaus, in particular.[48] This was also where Sulaiman Esa and many other Malaysian artists studied and taught. What the shift in thinking inspired by the NCC and Islamization Policy resulted in can only be seen in the subject matter of the modern art produced by Malay artists or, at times, in the context of reading these subject matters through a nationalistic construct. Thus, it can be argued that though the attempt in shifting the thinking only happened on the surface—i.e. subject matter explored, materials used, the ideas behind the artwork, etc.—the pedagogy of the Fine Arts programme at ITM was not decolonialized as it was still rooted in Western tradition. The teaching of Malay traditional arts such as songket-making, metalwork, batik, weaving, etc. has not been introduced in the arts and design institution as a core subject that students have to undertake. Thus, graduates were well versed in Western mediums such as oil and paint and saw art as a personal expression, rather than knowing and learning Malay traditional arts and professing the symbolism of motifs of local aesthetics. This could be one of the reasons for the emergence of the National Culture Policy, and why the Islamization Policies had limited and unsustainable long-term impact on Malaysian modern art. To further solidify locally-rooted arts pedagogy, the teaching of art also has to be holistic in order to be effective and culturally strong. Students need to learn about other aspects of Malay and Islamic culture whether through calligraphy, dance, woodcarving, the performing arts, shadow puppetry, etc.

Nevertheless, the nationalistic agenda that can be argued as being upheld through the National Culture Policy, can be viewed as an important phase of decolonialization that has to be charted, even if the framework of Islam/cultural nationalism from artists has not been successfully ingrained in the practice of younger artists, even those from ITM, over the decades. The proliferation of exhibitions revolving around such themes during the 1990s did not help to solidify specific ideologies and discourses that perpetuate a cultural hegemony in modern Malaysian art. According to Maznah Mohamad, "Nationalism was a period during which the people struggled to resist colonial domination, which was then followed by the construction of a cohesive territorial nation through accommodative or coercive means to overcome ethnic, religious, tribal, or linguistic divide."[49] During this nationalist phase, nation-building and public discourse in Malaysia were dominated by issues such as national identity, national culture, national language, national education, national integration, etc. Thus, a search for a national identity in terms of modern art could not have been avoided, although in the case of Malaysia, this attempt is limited to the narrow definition that is more pertaining to Malay and Muslim identity.

When observed in this manner, the acclaimed impact of the National Culture Policy and Islamization policies on Malaysian art development (particularly on Malay/Islamic arts) is debatable based on the two points discussed earlier: firstly, not all the artworks with Malay/Islamic flavours produced by Malay/Muslim artists during the time adhered to or were inspired by the National Culture Policy and Islamization policies implemented by the government; and secondly, it is necessary to further scrutinise artists, artworks and curatorial teams included in Malay/Islamic-themed exhibitions to gain a deeper insight into the art scene in the 1980s. It is important to break away from the conventional interpretation that dwells on the discourse of forms rather than the essence of an artwork that falls under Malay/Islamic themes. At the same time, this could provide valuable insights for a fresh discourse on Malaysian art. The period of the 1980s, the impact of the National Culture Policy and the Islamization resurgence on Malaysian art, and even curatorial approaches during that time should be further investigated and problematized, if not questioned. This should not be done in order to deny the impact these national policies had on Malaysian art, but to give a better and fairer reading on artworks that Malay/Muslim artists produced and to provide further scrutiny of the events that happened during that decade.

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NOTES

1 For an extensive history of Malaysia, see Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1994).

2 Andaya, Barbara Watson and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1994).

3 Cheah Boon Kheng, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), pp. 132–3.

4 Kiran Kapur Datar, *Malaysia: Quest for a Politics of Consensus* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1983), p. 78.

5 The Barisan Nasional coalition governed Malaysia until it was defeated by the Pakatan Harapan coalition that won the Malaysian elections on 10 May 2018.

6 I have discussed elsewhere that the initial context of modern art in Malaya was influenced by key social transformations in Europe during the late 18th century, in which fine arts were independent of crafts and began to be regarded as objects that concerned refined tastes and ideas in Europe. Evidently, the art and craft dichotomy can be observed in the early writings and observations of Malayan arts by British officers such as in R.O. Winstedt, Tony Beamish, Marco Hsu and even in Sabapathy and Piyadasa's *Modern Artists of Malaysia* (1983). See Sarena Abdullah, "Expanding the Historical Narrative of Early Visual Modernity in Malaya", *Wacana Seni: Journal of Arts Discourse* 17, 1 (2018): 42–5.

7 Redza Piyadasa, "Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in Malaysian Art in the Post-Independence Period", in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Broadway, NSW: Wild Peony and The University of Sydney East Asian Series, 1993), p. 171; Redza Piyadasa, "Modern Malaysian Art", in *Festival: Contemporary Asian Art Show* (Fukuoka: Fukuoka Art Museum, 1980), p. 330.

8 Muliyadi Mahamood, *Seni Lukis Moden Malaysia: Era Perintis Hingga Era Pluralis, 1930–1990* (Cheras, Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications and Distributors, 2001), p. 15.

9 The National Art Gallery has, over the years, served as the main platform for artists to exhibit their art. Although there were a few early commercial galleries such as Samat Art Gallery (1966–77), Galleri 11 (1960–70) and APS Gallery (1967–69) and Saujana Gallery during the 1980s, these galleries lasted only a few years. Commercial art galleries only became prominent from the 1990s onwards, thanks to the expanding art market. See Sarena Abdullah, "The Emerging Alternative Practices in Malaysian Art", *Art & the Public Sphere* 7, 1 (2018): 7, https://doi.org/10.1386/aps.7.1.25. Any other possibility of what happens outside of the institution is not known so far, and even collaborative groups such as Anak Alam were more aligned to the interdisciplinary and experimental aspects of art from visual, theatre and poetry. See T.K. Sabapathy, "Thoughts on Mustapa Ibrahim's Pictorial World", in *Mustapa Haji Ibrahim Paintings, 1968–2008* (Kuala Lumpur: R.A. Fine

Arts, 2008), p. 20. Nevertheless, a further scrutiny of this collaboration and its impact has not been explicitly examined, at least to my knowledge.

10 T.K. Sabapathy, "Merdeka Makes Art or Does It?", in *Vision and Idea: Relooking Modern Malaysian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), p. 71.

11 The three principles of the National Culture were discussed and concluded. First, *Kebudayaan Kebangsaan Malaysia haruslah berasaskan kebudayaan asli rakyat rantau ini* (Malaysian National Culture must be based on the indigenous culture of the people from the region). Second, *Unsur-unsur kebudayaan lain yang sesuai dan wajar boleh diterima menjadi unsur kebudayaan kebangsaan* (Elements from other cultures that are deemed proper and approriate can be integrated as parts of the national culture). Third, *Islam menjadi unsur penting dalam pembentukan kebudayaan kebangsaan* (Islam as an important element in forming the national culture).

12 Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd., 1987), pp. 24–5; Hussin Mutalib, *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 127–52.

13 See Noor Husna et al., "The Implications of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's Leadership on Islamic Economic Development in Malaysia", *Sains Humanika* 8, 3-2 (2016): 81–6.

14 It must be noted that the manifestation of the slogans "Seni untuk Masyarakat" (Art for Society) and "Seni untuk Seni" (Art for Art's Sake) was significant, especially among literary scholars ASAS 50 (The Generation of the Literati Scholars of the 1950s). Some of the Malay literati believed in the concept of "Seni untuk Masyarakat", which they claimed would create a more focused artistic work by uplifting readers' "consciousness". Thus, the success of any artistic work should be measured by its social consciousness and didactic function. The group that propagated "Seni untuk Seni" argued, on the other hand, that literary works must also be seen as a form of pleasure and highlighted the importance of aesthetic quality. They claimed that by accentuating the social function of the work, literary works would be reduced to a form of propaganda. This polemic did not prevail as more members of ASAS 50 defended the concept of "Seni untuk Masyarakat" due to significant and convincing arguments made by the proponents of this concept. For further reading, see Mariappan 1997; Osman & Hamid 1988.

15 Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Senilukis Malaysia 57–87* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Senilukis Negara, 1987), p. 62.

16 Redza Piyadasa, *Masterpieces from the National Art Gallery of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2002), p. 33.

17 Mazlan Abu Bakar, "Seni Lukis Ke Era Pengisian", *Dewan Budaya* (Kuala Lumpur, August 1996), pp. 64–6.

[18] Mazlan Abu Bakar, "Seni Lukis Ke Era Pengisian"; "Seminar Akar-Akar Kesenian Peribumi Dan Perkembangan Kini", in *Seminar Akar-Akar Kesenian Peribumi Dan Perkembangan Kini* (Shah Alam: Institut Teknologi MARA, 1979). Sulaiman Esa, "The Reflowering of the Islamic Spirit in Contemporary Malaysian Art", in *Pameran Manifestasi Jiwa Islam Dalam Senirupa Malaysia Sezaman* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1993), unpaginated.

[19] Sarena Abdullah and Chung Ah Kow, "Re-Examining the Objects of Mystical Reality", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19, 1 (2014).

[20] Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin, "Esei Kurator – Pusaran Perjalanan Seni Sulaiman Esa: Dari Laman Damai Ke Taman Duka Lara", in *Raja'ah: Seni, Idea Dan Kreativiti Sulaiman Esa Dari 1950-an–2011* (Ipoh, Perak: Balai Seni Visual Negara, 2011), hlm. 24.

[21] Nur Hanim Mohamed Khairuddin, "Mendekati Keperibadian Sulaiman Esa", in *Raja'ah: Seni, Idea Dan Kreativiti Sulaiman Esa Dari 1950-an–2011*, ed. Rahmat Haron and Teratak Nuromar (Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia: Balai Seni Visual Negara, 2011), hlm. 254–5.

[22] Zainol Shariff, "Towards an Alter-Native Vision: The Idea of Malaysian Art Since 1980", in *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), pp. 79, 109.

[23] Sarena Abdullah, "The Shaping of Modern Art Identity in Malaysia", unpublished thesis, Department of Art History, SUNY, Buffalo, 2005, pp. 38–63.

[24] Sarena Abdullah, "Absenteeism of Malaysian Identity in Art in the Early Years of Independence", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15, 1 (2010).

[25] Abdullah; T.K. Sabapathy, "Patrick Ng Kah Onn", in *Modern Artists of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1983); Simon Soon, "Fabric and the Fabrication of a Queer Narrative", *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific Issue* 38 (2015).

[26] Frank Sullivan, "Malaya", in *Commonwealth Art Today* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1962), pp. 83–4.

[27] Frank Sullivan, "Teng, Master of Batik, 17 November 1963, p. 4", *The Sunday Mail*, 1963.

[28] Besides Chuah Thean Teng, Khalil Ibrahim, Ismail Mat Hussin, Tay Mo Leong, Fatimah Chik, Toya, Yusoff Abdullah, Syed Shaharuddin and Seah Kim Joo are among modern artists who have used batik as a medium of their artwork. For further discussion on batik and its role in modern arts, see Harozila binti Ramli, "'Batik Painting' dan 'Painting Batik' dalam Perkembangan Seni Lukis Moden Malaysia" (Batik Painting and Painting Batik in the Development of Malaysian Modern Art), unpublished thesis, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2007. For a recent exhibition on batik, see *Love Me in My Batik: Modern Batik Art from Malaysia and Beyond* (Kuala Lumpur: Ilham Gallery, 2016).

[29] Emelia Ong and Izmer Ahmad, "Expressions of Hybridity as Strategy for Malayan Nationalism: Selected Artworks in Modern Malayan Art", *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse* 14, 1 (2015): 1–30.

[30] T.N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 275.

[31] Redza Piyadasa, "The Distintive Artistic Achievements of Nik Zainal Abidin", in *Seni Dan Budaya Pada Alaf Baru* (Ipoh: Yayasan Kesenian Perak, 1999), p. 65.

[32] Ramli Ibrahim, "Syed Thajudeen and the Art of Love", in *Cinta Tercipta … and There Is Love …: Pameran Senilukis Ciptaan Syed Thajudeen* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2006), p. 23.

[33] Zakaria Ali, *Alif Ba Ta: Riwayat Hidup Ahmad Khalid Yusof* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 2004), p. 83.

[34] Ali, *Alif Ba Ta: Riwayat Hidup Ahmad Khalid Yusof.*

[35] The absence of figurative representation is one of the main aspects of Islamic art. Nonetheless, the absence of figures in the works selected in these exhibitions does not imply that figuration was totally shunned in Malaysian arts practice. See Zena Khan, "Debunking the Myth XL", in *Debunking the Myth XL: An Exhibition of Selected Figurative Works from the Aliya & Farouk Khan Collection* (Kuala Lumpur: Artcube, 2016). For some personal accounts on the teachings of figuration at ITM, see Hasnul Jamal Saidon, "Amron Omar and the 'Duel' Drama within the Discourse of Malaysian Modern Art", in *Pertarungan: Amron Omar* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Visual Negara, 2012), pp. 128–33.

[36] Shariff, "Towards an Alter-Native Vision: The Idea of Malaysian Art Since 1980", p. 84.

[37] I have argued elsewhere that the forms and colours employed are used to communicate or reflect an arousing spiritual state experienced by the artists. Within this nationalistic upheaval, the localization of Abstract Expressionism happens at two points of Malaysian art history. First, Abstract Expressionist is associated with Malaysia's (then Malaya) independence in 1957 as espoused by Syed Ahmad Jamal—see Syed Ahmad Jamal, *Senilukis Malaysia – 25 Tahun* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1982), unpaginated. The second and further entrenchment of the Abstract Expressionists' work is an indirect consequence of the 1971 National Cultural Policy and subsequent Islamization Policy. For readings on Abstract Expressionists art in Malaysia, see Sarena Abdullah, "The Localization of Abstract Expressionist Style in Malaysia Art", in *ICSSH 2009: Proceedings of the 2009 International Conference on Social Science and Humanities*, ed. Yi Xie (Singapore: IACSIT Publishing, 2009); Sarena Abdullah, "Contextualizing Abstraction and Abstract Expressionist Art in Malaysia", ed. Hanafi Hussin et al., *5th International Conference on Southeast Asia (ICONSEA*

2013) (University of Malaya: Department of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Malaya, 2013); *Kesenian Islam: Suatu Perspektif Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1995), pp. 31–2, 35.

38 Ibid.

39 T.K. Sabapathy, "Introduction", in *Vision and Idea: Relooking Modern Malaysian Art*, ed. T.K. Sabapathy (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), p. 7.

40 Zainol Shariff, "Towards an Alter-Native Vision: The Idea of Malaysian Art Since 1980", in *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art* (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), p. 80.

41 Harun Abdullah Coombes, "The Islamic Spirit: Social Orientations in Contemporary Malaysian Art", in *Art & Spirituality*, ed. Hani Ahmad (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1995), p. 25; Niranjan Rajah, "Sacred Pictures, Secular Frames", *Art Asia Pacific (Australia)*, 1998, p. 70.

42 Coombes, "The Islamic Spirit: Social Orientations in Contemporary Malaysian Art", pp. 18–9.

43 "Class, Ethnicity and Diversity: Some Remarks on Malay Culture in Malaysia", in *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia*, ed. Joel S. and Francis Loh Kok Wah Kahn (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992).

44 Zakaria Ali, "Kemalaysiaan Senilukis Malaysia: Soal Identity/The Malaysianness of Malaysian Art: The Question of Identity", in *Kemalaysiaan Senilukis Malaysia: Soal Identity/The Malaysianness of Malaysian Art: The Question of Identity* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1991).

45 Sulaiman Esa, *Identiti Islam Dalam Senirupa Malaysia: Pencapaian Dan Cabaran* (Kuala Lumpur: Balai Seni Lukis Negara, 1992), p. 24.

46 Esa, "The Reflowering of the Islamic Spirit in Contemporary Malaysian Art".

47 Ooi Kok Chuen, *A Comprehensive History of Malaysian Art* (Penang: The Art Gallery, 2002), p. 30.

48 ITM, which started with three full-time lecturers and two part-time lecturers, became a major programme that produced renowned Malaysian artists. The first batch had 33 students enrolled in the one-year foundation course before the students were later required to major in Three Dimensional Design, Fine Art, Graphic Design, Textile Design or Fashion Design. The idea of including a foundation year was based on the Bauhaus model. This does not come as a surprise as most of the early lecturers teaching at ITM had already attained their Diploma in Art and Design (DipAD) rather than the previous Intermediate Certificate in Art and Crafts, followed by a National Diploma in Design (NDD) in London. For a further discussion of arts education in the United Kingdom, see Nigel Llewellyn, "Introduction: Histories and Context", in *The London Art Schools: The Reforming the Art World, 1960 to Now* (London: Tate Enterprises Ltd., 2015); Hester R. Westley, "Shifting Foundations: The Pre-Diploma Course", in *The London*

Art Schools: The Reforming the Art World, 1960 to Now (London: Tate Enterprises Ltd., 2015), p. 88.

[49] Maznah Mohamed, "From Nationalism to Post-Developmentalism: The Intersection of Gender, Race and Religion in Malaysia", *Macalester International* 12 (2002): 81.

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