



**REFLECTIONS ON THE
SINGAPORE MUSLIM COMMUNITY:
CULTURAL PROGRESS AND IMPEDIMENTS**

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SYNOPSIS

The Singapore Muslim community consistently prides itself as a model minority Muslim community and one that aspires for excellence. This lecture seeks to examine issues relating to the cultural and religious life of the community as it attempts to navigate current and future challenges that confront it. Impediments to the process of its adaptation to the changing needs and conditions of society and their ramifications on the community's well-being will also be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the 21st century, several major episodes of national significance have posed significant challenges to the identity formation and development of Singapore's Malay/Muslim community. This lecture will focus on three of these episodes, namely the attack of 9/11 and its aftermath, the Bicentennial, and the Singapore conversation on gender equality. These events strongly affect the community's sense of its religion, cultural tradition, history, and society amid the rapidly changing condition of Singapore and the larger global landscape. The overriding aim is to examine how the leaders and intelligentsia of the community, the drivers of its cultural and religious traditions, have responded to these episodes in their attempt to alleviate challenges confronting the community and facilitate its adaptation to the demands of the change.

RELIGION

The first episode occurred on September 12, 2001, Singapore time, when a transnational terror group's vicious attack on the city of New York sent chilling repercussions worldwide and gripped Singapore with intense fear and insecurity.

The power of the American media broadcasted the tragedy worldwide as it happened, thus globalising the tragic event. Never had such a local tragedy reverberated to become a tragedy for humanity almost instantaneously.

The tragedy was labelled an Islamic terrorist attack on the civilised world because the perpetrators used Islamic theological injunctions to justify their deranged acts.

Instead of instinctively and categorically denouncing and condemning the distortions of such claims as religious, dominant voices in the US and many parts of the world readily framed the root of the tragedy as lying within Islam itself. More than 1 billion Muslims worldwide, with 1400 years of civilisation, began to be called upon to explain and clarify their religion and denounce violence and extremism.

Muslim minority communities were no exception. They, too, were called upon to reaffirm their loyalty to their nation-states vis-à-vis the imagined global community of the Islamic *ummah*.

Despite the complex web of causes that gave rise to the emergence of transnational extremist movements like Al-Qaeda, discourse on their emergence and the phenomenon of terrorism was simplified and reduced to the problem of religion or, more emphatically, theological misunderstandings or misappropriation of the faith by Islamist radical and extremist groups.

This framing of the tragedy and terrorism did not emerge suddenly. On the contrary, dominant political and academic views about Islam in the Western World, especially after the fall of the Berlin wall, had already become increasingly hostile.

The post-cold war insurgencies by elements associated with transnational Islamic organisations and growing uneasiness with the expanding Muslim communities in western countries had dominated the media and public opinion both in the west and at home. A new narrative on the post-cold war threat and a new intellectual framework were needed to replace the cold war paradigm.

For instance, Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History" argued that the end of the cold war marked the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government."

This early euphoria of the victor is now deemed threatened by the new threat to their global interest – radical Islam and Islamic fundamentalism.

In response to Fukuyama, Samuel Huntington, the scholar who made famous the thesis of "The Clash of Civilisation", contended that the conflict between ideologies of the cold war era has ended and is being replaced by the ancient conflict between civilisations along cultural lines. The civilisation that dominates, he asserted, will shape the form of human government. In his view, Islam's clash with western civilization is deeply rooted and presents a foreboding threat: "Islam's borders are bloody and so are its innards. The fundamental problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power".

Another prominent scholar with a similar culturalist view, Bernard Lewis, an influential expert in the US on Islam and the Middle East, had also argued that the failure of the Islamic world to modernise or to keep pace with the West is the root of Muslim rage and its deep resentment of the West. In his description of contemporary Muslims' response to western civilisation, Lewis asserted that "[T]he struggle of the fundamentalists is against two enemies, secularism and modernism".

In Lewis' view, Islam is locked in its own struggle. Islamic fundamentalists are opposed to its effort to modernise. He warned, "If the fundamentalists are correct in their calculations and succeed in their war, then a dark future awaits the world, especially the part of it that embraces Islam." For Lewis, the Muslims' anti-west mood and movement "...is no less than a clash of civilizations, the perhaps irrational but surely historical reaction to the ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular presence and the worldwide expansion of both".

As Michael Hirsh, the deputy news editor for Foreign Policy, in his article "Bernard Lewis Revisited", had said, in Lewis' millennial construct, Osama bin Laden would be viewed "...less an aberrant extremist than a mainstream expression of Muslim frustration, welling up from the anti-Western nature of Islam". In an interview with Hirsh, Lewis asserted that he had "no doubt that September 11 was the opening salvo of the final battle,".

The culturalist thesis had occupied the mind of Singapore's leaders much earlier in managing its race relations. Separation from Malaysia following the racial riots of 1964, post-separation inter-ethnic tensions that followed, and the rising Muslim revivalist rhetoric in Malaysia had shaped Singapore's policy of selective national service enlistment of Muslim youths in the military, especially in sensitive areas in the Singapore Armed Forces.

The resurgence of religious practices amongst the Muslims in Singapore from the 1980s had also been perceived as manifestations of growing religious conservatism in keeping with the worldwide trend. Lee Kuan Yew, then Senior Minister, concurred with the then-dominant narrative that “this heightened religiosity facilitated Muslim terror groups linked to Al-Qaeda to recruit Singapore Muslims into their network.”

Ex-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong also pointed out, “[It] is necessary to emphasise that the war against terrorism is not a war against Islam. The majority of Muslims have nothing to do with terrorism or extremism. However, militant terrorist groups have hijacked Islam as their driving force and have given it a virulent twist.

This dominant paradigm was brought right home in October 2001, about one month after the September 11 tragedy, when Singapore announced the arrest of Jema’ah Islamiah (JI) operatives in its very own country. For the first time, Singaporeans were introduced to this illusive movement and its potential threat to the security of the nation. The JI, a regional-based terror organisation, affiliated with Al-Qaeda, was also responsible for the Bali tragedy in 2002. The perception of the civilizational clash was thus brought closer to home.

Singaporean Muslims were called upon to clarify the position of their religion vis-à-vis western civilisation. Islam, the dominant religion of the Malays, became a civilisational entity, a new fault line in the battle and clash of civilisations. No longer is Islam merely the religion of the Malays; it has now become a marker of a global civilisation that the Malays share with other Muslims forming the ubiquitous *ummah*.

This imagined socio-cultural and political entity called the *ummah* is deemed to be at odds with modern civilisation, represented by democratic and pluralistic ideals. Political Islam is seen as a threat to democracy and the principles of the multi-cultural nation-state. This global fault line posed a potential threat to the city-state as a global city. The global fault line had become local, adding a new dimension to Singapore society's religious and racial fault lines.

Prominent Muslim leaders and key Muslim organisations in Singapore were prompted to join the rest of the world in condemning the terror attack on September 11 and to categorically reject any association of the attack with Islam and Islamic teachings. However, one cannot expect the dominant narrative of the clash of civilisations to be easily wished away by these mere condemnations and expressed rejection of violence.

The problem of violence and terrorism had been predominantly framed as a cultural problem of the Muslims and as an Islamic theological anomaly. In a society organised based on race, the stigmatisation of Islam, it was feared, could be easily manipulated, and induce backlash among the Malays.

Thus, in the months following September 11, the government spearheaded a series of initiatives to enhance inter-religious conversations and promote harmony between ethnic groups. Although these have helped counter any ethnic tension and stigma cast upon Islam, the deep-seated view that Islam impedes social integration complicates genuine efforts to deal with the challenges.

The government called for “moderate” Muslims to speak up against radical Islam and terror inflicted in the name of Islam. As the problem has been predominantly perceived from the culturalist lens, it is believed that only Muslims can best resolve the challenge and that this resolution is crucial for the nation's well-being. Non-Muslims, they claimed, needed the assurance that their Muslim compatriots do not harbour, nor does Islam preach violence and hate towards others of different faiths.

This is a mammoth task for the community as it is expected to deal with pre-existing prejudices on Islam, dominant Western narratives about Islam, and radicalised Muslims' actions in Singapore and abroad. It required Muslim leaders and intelligentsia to constantly be on guard against all sorts of influences from within and abroad, even as the community struggled with pressing social and economic challenges amid the rapidly changing world and conditions of society.

The dominant narrative of a civilizational clash especially concerning Muslims' attitude towards secular states and institutions and their response to modernisation, were articulated as a challenge to ethnic integration, social cohesion, and religious harmony.

Integrating the Malays into the "mainstream" and ensuring Muslim loyalty to the nation vis-à-vis their emotional affiliation to fellow Muslims have been significant concerns of government leaders and still are. These concerns preceded September 11 but were intensified and heightened following the tragic event.

Certain religious practices of Muslims are still regarded as obstacles in the ongoing national integration project. Muslims' lack of involvement in grassroots and multi-ethnic national platforms and their perceived stricter observances of dietary restrictions, attire and lifestyle have recurred in public discourse as signs of concern impacting their social interactions with non-Muslims. The more recent attention to Arabisation and its impact on the lifestyles and religious practices of the Malays is also an indication of this looming concern.

It is not unreasonable to maintain that no other religious communities have ever been called upon to embark on such a mammoth socio-cultural project of countering extremist ideologies. This is essentially the role of the cultural elite, intellectuals, and intelligentsia in society. The call for “moderates” to respond and take up the challenge is hardly helpful as it neither enables us to identify the group that drives the community’s culture, nor does it sheds understanding on their thought and orientation on concrete issues.

The challenge against radicalism/fundamentalism/terrorism requires enormous intellectual resources that are clearly beyond any community’s ability. Moreover, the risks of creeping hate and violent ideologies are not exclusive to the ideology of some Muslims and their religious views.

I started this lecture with the episode of September 11 and dominant intellectual and public opinions about Islam and Muslims at the turn of the 21st century as a point of departure. It will help us understand the response of the Muslim intelligentsia to these narratives and their implications.

I am not here to discuss how Islam and Muslims got entangled in the world order after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the problems of transnational insurgencies, or the rise of global movements like Al-Qaeda and the JI.

Instead, I would like to focus on the responses of the dominant Muslim religious elite and intelligentsia in Singapore to the dominant narrative of the clash of civilisation and the allegation of the theological anomaly of Islam in modern society. The incident has also challenged the religious elite to deal with the aftermath of September 11 as Muslims faced backlash and stigmatization by fellow Singaporeans.

In its attempt to understand the threat of the terrorist network operating in Southeast Asia and Singapore, the Ministry of Home Affairs presented to Parliament the White Paper on the Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism. Although the White Paper avoided the explicit framework of the clash of civilization in the exposition of the terror networks operating in Southeast Asia, it attempted to link the radicalisation of these terror groups with growing Islamisation in this region and the rise of a conservative brand of Islam that is said to be imported from the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. This was said to result in more “Muslims being stricter and more orthodox in matters of diet, dress, religious observances and social interactions”. With this, Islamic theology and Muslim religious practices did not escape as one of the causes of radicalisation and terrorism.

The response of the Muslim religious elite to the White Paper clearly reflected these concerns. The Malay/Muslim community and religious leaders were focused on addressing the problem by strengthening religious education, religious orientation of religious teachers, and building trust in religious institutions like mosques and madrasahs. The community leaders are also strongly committed to building ties across all groups in Singapore.

The role of the community's dominant elite and its intelligentsia as drivers of its cultural and religious traditions is crucial in shaping its direction and transformation in this time of rapid change. Their thought on Islam and the nature of their religious orientation has serious ramifications not only on the problems of extremism and radicalism but also on broader challenges affecting the development of the community. How they respond to these challenges determines whether they catalyse society's socio-cultural development or impede this process.

I shall focus my attention on two pieces of documents that best reflect the views of the religious elite in dealing with the ideological challenges of various parties.

On September 2003, PERGAS, the Association of Muslim Scholars in Singapore, undertook what it deemed a direct counter initiative to Al Qaeda and JI ideology by organising the Convention of Ulama (Muslim scholars). The objective of the Convention was to rally Muslim scholars to define and combat extremism. The gathering culminated in a book entitled Moderation in Islam in the Context of the Muslim Community in Singapore.

One of the significant contributors to the book maintained that the book is particularly relevant to counter-ideological efforts in two respects. Firstly, it highlighted critical extremist thinking and misinterpretations of Islam and offered rebuttals using the same arguments employed by Al-Qaeda and JI. Secondly, it provided a 27-point “Charter of Moderation” for the Muslim community in Singapore. The Charter, it is claimed, helps guide the community to practice Islam in the context of Singapore, particularly for Muslim scholars and religious teachers in their drive to promote moderation. In short, it was a blueprint for the organisation to help guide its members.

At the very outset, the problem had been defined by PERGAS as theological in nature, requiring theological counterarguments. The book alluded to PERGAS as the representative of moderate views and, therefore, guardian of the true teaching of Islam. In actuality, the prescriptive views are that of a small group of religious elites who attempted an authoritative framing of religious discourse and the teachings of Islam in Singapore.

I shall not discuss the entire content of the book here. I have discussed critical issues raised in the text elsewhere in my works. I would encourage others to read them and welcome constructive comments so that we can benefit from our collective wisdom.

Suffice to say that although the work was positioned as a counter-ideology to the extremists', it was certainly not a critique of the ideology of Al-Qaeda or JI as a transnational movement, nor can it be considered an analysis of the political thought of their founders and thinkers.

The book did not provide an understanding of the factors that have conditioned the rise and appropriation of such thought by the followers of these movements, nor did it offer a progressive Islamic political thought for contemporary society.

It is also not a critique of the dominant essentialist representation of Islam as a civilisation that clashes with a modern society that has been similarly caricatured based on an idealised image of values of liberal democracy stemming from Judeo-Christian traditions.

Essentially, the book contained abstract exhortations of theological principles. Insights into the concrete phenomenon of extremism or the constant struggle of Muslims to make sense of their religious and cultural traditions during rapid change are generally absent.

Lacking insights into the sociohistorical context of radicalism and terrorism, the nature of thought that has emerged from it, and the forces which support and sustain it, the book cannot be said to shed light on the ideology of the extremists, the individual actors, and the nature of the movement.

The complexity of the problem of terrorism and its ideology cannot be simply reduced to a theological matter that theological arguments can resolve. The battle of countering the ideology of extremism cannot be achieved by advancing theological counterviews. Theological proclamations and justifications shrouded in religious rhetoric and dogma do not provide insights into personal motivations, group interests, or social and psychological experiences relevant to understanding the phenomenon.

On the contrary, theological exhortations often invite counter-theological viewpoints amongst experts to justify violence. It renders theological views to be pitted against one another. Equating theological perspectives with ideologies of groups promoting violence and terror fits Bernard Lewis' thesis that terrorism and violence are crises within Islam itself in dealing with secularism and modernisation.

In fact, the book can be said to affirm the very thesis of the conflict of civilisation. It also declared PERGAS' strong commitment to political Islam, which demonstrates as obligatory for Muslims to believe in and strive for. By political Islam, the authors did not mean the infusion of universal ethical and moral values informed by Islam into social and political institutions and policies on governance. What is deemed political Islam is an imagined total system of Islam with all the essential elements like laws and legal institutions, which they refer to as *hudud* and *shurah*, and which they regard as divinely ordained and hence not subject to reevaluation.

Although the authors claimed that the belief in these is obligatory for Muslims who must strive to implement them, they also asserted that Muslims of Singapore don't need to practice them given that they are a numerical minority and politically emasculated. They also dismissed violence as a means to ensure the application of their total system, which they claimed is fundamental to Islamic belief.

The principles of *fiqh* of the minority, which they imported from Qardhawi's formulation, and exigency (*darurah*), which they invoked, allowed them to accommodate the rules and policies of a secular state. Their attitude towards secular institutions, laws and agencies is one of tolerance. These are tolerated because they allow Muslims to practice Islam's basic religious tenets.

Though not seeking to demolish existing institutions, their views create the ambivalence that impairs Muslims from making fundamental contributions to their development.

Their mode of thinking reflected in raised and conceived issues can best be described as fundamentalist. The book celebrated the term fundamentalist, meaning believing in the totality of an Islamic life system based on what it deems as divine dictates and principles. This, it claims, is distinguishable from the modern secular system, although it also shares with the latter some similar features, like democracy and pluralism. Yet, what these similar features are in praxis is not clearly defined and left to one's imagination.

The only difference between the fundamentalists who strive for the "totality" of what they deem an Islamic system with that advocated by PERGAS lies in the use of violence. The difference lies not in the structure of thought but in applying the instrument of power. The fundamentalist strives for the totality of their Islamic system for the minority community comes in dribs and drabs like demand for *tudong*, Islamic finance, halal certification, religious schools, and others through civic and political advocacy. While non-violent fundamentalists are critical of state institutions like MUIS for not fully expressing or articulating a more political Islamic agenda, they deem it integral to faith and cannot be compromised.

The abstract exhortation of rules in the Charter cannot seriously and adequately serve as a guide for Muslim scholars in tackling future challenges and in dealing with the existential difficulties of competing ideologies in so many relevant areas. Although the principles listed in the guide are sound and are generally known, the lack of illustration of their application in tackling concrete challenges and contentious issues in contemporary society limits their efficacy as a meaningful and constructive guide.

Religious teachers are also often selective in the application of these principles. For example, amongst religious teachers, there is a general suspicion, if not dislike, for certain faith communities like the Jews, Christians, and Ahmadis, or even Malays who adopt the Shia version of Islam or uphold opinions and practices on Islam that may not be quite mainstream. There is also general ignorance and suspicion, amongst many religious teachers about secular apparatus and institutions, like the state, education, and laws.

Many concrete contemporary challenges and issues require a fresh examination of the application of universal Islamic principles of engagement. These urgently need clarifications and guidance, which principles reiterated in the abstract do not address.

The Muslim Religious Council of Singapore also took the cue from the dominant clash of civilisational frameworks and worked toward averting such a clash.

The approach it adopted was to imagine a community of excellence in socio-religious life in Singapore. MUIS attempted to reconcile the concept of excellence from the religious perspective with the social one.

Ten desired attributes represent MUIS' idea of excellence in socio-religious life. What is MUIS' understanding of religious excellence? Let me quote from the introduction to the *Risalah*, MUIS' document that contains the building of this imagined model society: "From the religious perspective, 'excellence' means the ability to perform the rituals of Islam while appreciating their significance and internalising the values embedded within them. By doing so, we can manifest the religion's beauty. This beauty, when shared with humanity, will bring goodness to everyone. In other words, a Muslim community of excellence is religiously profound."

MUIS' idea of social excellence is equally limited. Let me also quote from the *Risalah*: In the social sense, 'excellence' refers to our ability to partake in nation-building fully and to position ourselves as full members of the Singaporean society. In other words, a Muslim community of excellence is also socially progressive."

Ten attributes are delineated in the *Risalah*, which MUIS deems necessary to create a community of excellence. These are: holding on firmly to Islamic principles while adapting to the changing context, appreciating Islamic civilisation and history, having a good understanding of contemporary issues, appreciating other civilisations, being morally and spiritually strong, practicing Islam beyond rituals, and riding on the modernisation wave, being well-adjusted and contributing to Singapore's multiracial society and secular state, being inclusive without contradicting Islam and believing that good Muslims are also good citizens. For each attribute, prominent Muslims from the past or present are presented as examples of the fact.

MUIS' approach to addressing the dominant narrative of the civilisational clash between Islam and the West presents the attributes of an ideal imagined Muslim society. It totally ignored the dominant culturalist critique of Islam as a civilisation pitted against the west. It also does not tackle essentialist portrayals of Islam's religious and cultural traditions, which are prevalent in dominant views about Islam amongst Muslims and others.

The *Risalah's* abstract ideas offer limited guidance for Muslims on their traditions. It glossed over many problems on how these attributes operate in the context of concrete challenges faced by the community. Assertions of Islamic values of excellence formulated in the abstract do not suffice to ensure their meaningful application in concrete contexts and challenges. How these values can be institutionalised is also not discussed.

Another significant omission is the effort to engage in self-reflection on major cultural and religious impediments that thwart the realisation of a community of excellence. For instance, many backward and negative religious views in circulation need to be tackled. Amongst these are rigid and puritan views on Islam, paddled by religious fundamentalists that threaten the diversity of religious beliefs amongst Muslims and positive relations with non-Muslims. Their strong tendency to pronounce judgements on issues not within their expertise using religious rhetoric has also threatened the diversity of religious thought within an increasingly complex and pluralistic society. Moral panic and pejorative labelling are often invoked against those whose views may not be mainstream or not dominant within the spectrum of religious views. These present significant problems that must be tackled if Islam is to play a relevant and positive role in building a community of excellence.

HISTORY – THE BICENTENNIAL

In his 2018 New Year message announcing the 200th anniversary of Raffles' landing, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong acknowledged the long and complex history of Singapore that "stretches back at least 700 years", as a maritime emporium in the 14th century. It was the first time Singapore's official history got its clock turned back to 700 years and possibly beyond in the history of maritime trade in the region. It ran counter to the conventional narrative that Singapore had been only a sleepy backward fishing village before Raffles landed.

Initially, many people, especially the Malays, saw this as an opportunity to reconstruct Singapore's official history by incorporating the precolonial political and cultural history of the Malays that went back to Melaka and the Srivijaya era.

The erection of the statue of Sang Nila Utama, the 14th-century founder of the native maritime port, at the mouth of the Singapore River was seen to restore the significance of the native prince and somehow deny Raffles' status as the founder of Singapore.

The elaborate enactment of the tales from Sulalatus Salatin or the Malay Annals at the National Day Parade, that year was also viewed by the Malay cultural elite as Singapore's readiness to reconstruct its official history beyond 1819 by incorporating precolonial Malay historical elements.

The more recent recovery of archaeological evidence of the old maritime city and the establishment of the historical gardens at Fort Canning was further seen as indications of the state's efforts to recover Malay history.

They confirm the story of the *Sejarah Melayu* about the greatness of Singapore as a native maritime city. However, they did not bear much significance in understanding the establishment of modern Singapore or our development as a nation.

The Malay cultural elite saw these as efforts at the historical redemption of the Malays as the indigenous people of Singapore. However, this status embedded in the nation's constitution has never been officially disputed.

The consistent and continuous message of Singapore's struggle as a society of migrant communities and the thesis that the term Malay was the construction of the British, which referred to the plethora of migrant communities from the region, had irked the Malays. There is also a general dislike for Raffles, who is seen as a manipulator of the rift within the Malay ruling class, which led to the eventual cessation of the island to the British.

The Malays' commemoration of the Bicentennial revolved around the attack on Raffles and discussions on precolonial Malay history that stretched back to Melaka. This famous Malay maritime empire succeeded Srivijaya. In the Malay Annals, the Sultans of Melaka and Johor traced their ancestry to the Srivijayan kings.

A book, "*Beyond Bicentennial – Perspective on Malays*", was produced to document Malay contributions to Singapore. The chapters in the book written mainly by the Malay intelligentsia, according to the editors, served "to balance perspectives that adopted uncritical stance towards British colonial rule...providing alternative viewpoints towards Raffles and the British, as the historical narratives of Singapore have been much more focused on and influenced by the colonial standpoint".

The editors further stated that “the bicentennial provides us with the opportunity to reflect and re-examine the position of the Malays in Singapore’s history.” The title *Beyond Bicentennial* reflects their desire that the history of Singapore should be studied beyond 200 years.

This dominant perspective revealed how the Malay intelligentsia in Singapore perceived the bicentennial. While one can understand and empathise with their dislike for Raffles and their attachment to the Malay’s precolonial cultural and political history in their historical and social memory, these sentiments impeded critical discussions on the Prime Minister’s message in conjunction with the commemoration of the bicentennial.

Historical discourse on Singapore’s long history beyond 1819 had started much earlier. A book written by three Singaporean historians titled “Singapore 700-year history: from Early Emporium to World City” was published in 2009. Former Minister for Information, Communication and Arts, Lui Tuck Yew, had then asserted that the history presented in the book effectively expanded the singular historical narrative of Singapore, pushing its boundaries by adding depth and layers to the evolving Singapore. The authors explicated that the book situates current concerns about Singapore’s status as a global city in the post-cold war cycle of globalisation within the larger framework of earlier globalisation cycles and linked what was happening to the broader spatial context of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Contextually, the book cannot be isolated from geopolitical and economic discourses on Asia that arose at the end of the 1990s and early 2000, which projected the grand narrative of the Asian century. The extension of the historical timeline of Singapore’s history to 700 years served Singapore’s new strategic interest that latched on to the grand narrative of the world of the 21st century as the Asian century.

More recently, big powers like China and India have embarked on the promotion of mythologies and appropriated images of their societies' interactions with the ancient Maritime Silk Road to project their geo-economic and political strategies. Deep social memories of interactions between countries in Southeast Asia and imperial China, and the Indian kingdoms will shape their understanding and response to invitations to partake in new economic ventures spearheaded by these big powers.

It now becomes clear that how countries understand the geo-economic and political contestations of maritime Southeast Asia today depends on how they reflect and reconstruct the history of the ancient maritime trade.

Another project of the new Asian century that attempts to position Singapore's strategic interest in the region is the reconstruction of Buddhist influence in Southeast Asia's historical past. This is witnessed in the establishment of the Nalanda University project.

The project announced by the Indian President during his visit to Singapore in 2005, much driven by Singapore and supported by other East Asian countries, was conceived as a vital instrument of soft power for rising Asia above the West. It was aimed, as Amartya Sen, the founding Chairman of the University, had said, to boost Asia's confidence in its intellectual and academic capacities, rivalling great Western universities like Oxford and Harvard and reflecting Asia's emergence.

In support of the project, the Srivijaya Nalanda Centre was established at ISEAS Yusof Ishak in 2009. One of the objectives of the Centre was to develop the "Nalanda idea" and "Srivijaya idea" of Southeast Asia as a place of mediation and linkages amongst great civilisations. It was to embody an appreciation of Asian achievements and mutual learning, exemplified by the cosmopolitan Buddhist centre of learning in Nalanda and Srivijaya.

George Yeo, then Singapore's foreign affairs minister, explained that "Nalanda is about the past and the future. On one level, it is a celebration of the Buddhist heritage that has contributed so much to the cultures of Asia. Whether consciously or not, Buddhist values and philosophy had influenced the daily lives of hundreds of millions of East Asians, helping to shape a persistent pattern of social interaction which makes East Asia an identifiable civilizational area". Yeo also described the project as the "icon of Asian Renaissance". In his words, "as Asia re-emerges on the world stage this century, its civilisational origins will become a subject of intense study and debate." "Asians", he added, "will look back to their own past and derive inspiration from it for the future."

The project is also not isolated from the civilizational discourse trending at the turn of the last century. Huntington's clash of civilization theory provided the framing of the West's perception of the future of the world's nations. Islam and other Eastern religions like Confucianism and Buddhism that had given rise to civilizations were pitted against the Judea-Christian civilization of the west. Attempts at reviving the Buddhist civilisation of East Asia, the heritage of the Srivijaya empire of Southeast Asia and India's Nalanda were part of the project of civilization framing by Singapore's strategic thinkers like George Yeo. In Yeo's words: "...in the same way as one could identify the origins of Western civilization in Greece, Rome and Judeo-Christianity, so too could one trace the origins of East Asian civilization to the influence of Confucianism, Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism." He added that "[A]s Asia re-emerges on the world stage in this century, its civilizational origins will become a subject of intense study and debate. Asians are rediscovering their own past and deriving inspiration from it for the future. This inspiration covers all fields, including governance, scientific inquiry, architecture, wellness, and aesthetics. A tremendous burst of creative adaptation is increasingly evident across Asia. The Western world underwent a similar phase as it emerged from the medieval ages. Hence the word 'renaissance' has come to be applied to Asia's re-emergence today."

The discourse on Singapore's history, which situates its strategic interest within the framework of civilizational heritage and long historical cycles of Maritime Southeast Asia linked with China and India, was and is not on the radar of the Malay community. When Singapore's 700 Years History was first published in 2009, it escaped the attention of the Malay cultural elites. The book may seem irrelevant to them as it did not touch on the history of Malay kings or Malay cultural history. The Nalanda discourse that focused on Srivijaya's commercial, cultural, and religious interactions with India and China also escaped the attention of these elites who do not share the culture and the religious beliefs of Srivijaya.

Yet, the history of long maritime cycles and the civilizational heritage of the Malay world is significant in enhancing understanding of the movement of not just trade but people, culture and ideas, and elements of soft power. It is equally important in understanding the rise and fall of the native port cities and the Malay ruling and trading classes. In short, the long history of Malay politics, culture, and ideas can be better informed by this framework of economic cycles.

Historians have used this perspective to argue that the economic activities of the Temenggong and Bugis trader's settlement in Singapore before the British landed in 1819 was the period of the early revitalisation of the economic cycle and not the sleepy backward port dominantly portrayed in Singapore's official history texts.

Though there have been attempts at examining their history before colonialism, the Malay cultural elite can ride on such frameworks and approaches to ask relevant questions and expand their reflections on the culture and ideas of the dominant class. They can contribute to a better understanding of the rise and fall of the Malay maritime dominant class and other societies. There are always gaps in the way we construct the past. Being conscious of these serious attempts at reconstructing Singapore's maritime long cycles of history vis-à-vis China and

India does not mean one should not be aware of ideological influences in reconstructing Singapore's history. It is nonetheless necessary to harness relevant perspectives from these developments to address questions helpful to uncovering the social history of the Malays.

The native ports that provided thriving markets for traders from many places were, by necessity, developed as cosmopolitan port cities. What does the rise of these native free globalised Malay maritime ports at Singapore or Malacca tell us about the thinking of these elites that are relevant to us today? How can we develop those applicable to strengthen our inclusive and cosmopolitan tradition and identity and ward off parochial and exclusive elements creeping into our cultural life today?

The second narrative pertains to the history of the nation. This is not new. Modern Singapore was deemed to have started with the establishment of a colonial port by Raffles. This narrative served the need to build a nation out of multiracial communities based on a shared history. What has shifted is an attempt to deal with more varied narratives about Singapore's history and its emerging multi-cultural communities.

While many Singaporeans may accept the "establishment" view, which has become dominant as represented in school textbooks and official policies, competing perspectives have emerged such that it has become no longer prudent for the top-down approach in constructing and dictating the official Singapore story.

These competing narratives have come mainly from recorded social memories of communities, curatorial heritage projects, films and performing arts over the last 60 years. Amidst the changing landscape of diverse articulations of the people's history, the Prime Minister himself had called for a more thoughtful bottom-up construction of Singapore's history as a nation. In his speech announcing the

plan for the bicentennial anniversary, he called for Singaporeans to "understand truly how far back our history reaches, and how complex it is".

In launching the Bicentennial anniversary, the Prime Minister urged Singaporeans to "reflect on how this nation came into being" and "think of how we can move forward together." Stories and collective memories, he added, give life and meaning to Singapore and ignite Singaporeans' interest in discovering more about themselves and their past. He also said that over two centuries, all these different strands wove together into a rich tapestry, a shared sense of destiny, and eventually a Singapore identity and nation.

According to an article in the Straits Times, the Singapore Bicentennial Office in the Prime Minister's Office promised that historical accounts will acknowledge the not-so-shining elements of colonial life, such as "squalor and segregation". Gene Tan, the Executive Director of the Bicentennial Office, affirmed that the bicentennial intends to be "responsible to history" and will not shy away from addressing historical elements that may not always be positive.

Professor Tan Tai Yong, a historian and member of the Singapore Bicentennial Advisory Panel, asserted that the Bicentennial would be a reflective attempt to understand the "full essence and complexity" of events in Singapore's 700-year-long history.

The attempt at revisiting Singapore's colonial history was expected to debunk the conventional narrative that Singapore had been only a backward fishing village before its transformation into a developed country today. Indeed, the island's social history with its growing trading communities and Chinese planters before the landing of Raffles and the consequent impact of colonial policies, and its continuities in the evolution of Singapore's socio-political outlook have yet to be explored. Similarly, competing narratives of the more recent history of our

nation-building must form part of the woven tapestry that the Prime Minister had urged for.

Responding to the Bicentennial Office's call for reflection on our history, the Straits Times' Deputy Political Editor opined that "[T]his should not turn into a simplistic ledger exercise to determine if colonialism had been good or bad for Singapore." It is far better, he added, "to simply allow a heterogeneous mosaic of stories to be told, without drawing easy conclusions, and letting those stories act as natural building blocks in constructing a more textured understanding of history by Singaporeans. And if this warts-and-all approach to history is the right one to take, should it not apply also - one might argue - to how Singapore examines all periods in its history, whether that history is centuries-old or just decades-old?"

The official narrative on the significance of Raffles landing is still much emphasised in building a multi-racial society. As the Prime Minister had asserted, "had Raffles not landed, Singapore might not have become a unique spot in South-east Asia, quite different from the islands in the archipelago around us, or the states in the Malayan peninsula. But because of Raffles, Singapore became a British colony, a free port, and a modern city."

In his Bicentennial anniversary address, the Prime Minister further emphasized the significance of the Raffles landing: "1819 marked the beginning of a modern, outward-looking, and multicultural Singapore. Without 1819, we may never have launched on the path to nationhood as we know it today. Without 1819, we would not have had 1965, and we would certainly not have celebrated the success of SG50. 1819 made these possible".

In 1965, Singapore decided to name Raffles, the British imperialist, as the founder of modern Singapore, although the leaders were fully aware of the negative aspects of colonial rule. Singapore's struggle for independence was, after all, an anti-imperialist struggle. However, the leaders also acknowledged the positive aspects of British imperial rule. As Rajaratnam had asserted then, the national history of the new nation must attempt to preserve the best part of British rule, and the narrative of the new nation serves this purpose.

The leaders then also saw the value of keeping Raffles' association with Singapore. It served the country's strategic interest by sending a positive signal to foreign investors of its commitment to free trade and protecting their investments.

Choosing 1819 as the starting point of Singapore's modern history was no less motivated by the urgency to build a common shared history. Rajaratnam believed that the establishment of Singapore brought people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds from various places was a good starting point. The government, he said, "had been careful about the kind of awareness of the past it should inculcate in a multi-racial society".

For the Malays, adaptation to the demands of the new political, economic, and social conditions posed severe challenges. They developed an enigmatic frame of mind as they suddenly became a minority after Separation, relatively poor and socio-economically backward. They were confronted with the dilemma of being isolated from the region with people with whom they had shared their culture, history, political and ancestral ties.

Rahim Ishak captured this dilemma succinctly in the early period of Independence. In his words, "The Malays today consequent upon Singapore's separation from Malaysia were placed in a dilemma of being a minority relatively poor and backward and yet living in a region where people of their race, religion, culture

and language predominate and decisively hold sway in their political lives.” He added that under the circumstances, “we must try to understand deeply and with utmost sympathy this enigmatic frame of mind the Malays are in for no fault of their own. It is important that we find a long-term solution to this problem of theirs, that is, of being isolated, so to speak, in their own home country.”

The social memory of this enigmatic frame of mind was mainly recorded in the literary works of a small number of Malay writers. The number of Malay writers and Malay intelligentsia in Singapore had by then been depleted because of their exodus to Malaysia after the independence of Malaya in 1957 and exacerbated by their isolation after independence. The exodus of the Malay intelligentsia and talent to Malaysia continued long after separation.

Even earlier in 1963, *Konfrontasi*, launched by President Sukarno in Singapore and Malaysia, had already isolated the Malay intelligentsia from their cultural counterparts in Indonesia. This linkage that hitherto prevailed never recovered and the severance was reinforced as the Malay cultural intelligentsia continued to look inward in their efforts to develop themselves.

The saving grace was the establishment of the Department of Malay Studies at the University of Singapore by the late Syed Hussein Alatas in 1967. Works of Alatas and scholars from the department critical of colonial writing and scholarship and on the Malay feudal class paved the way for new perspectives, not only on colonial history but also on the history of Malay feudalism and the Malay ruling class. The employment of multidisciplinary and sociohistorical perspectives in the study of the social and cultural history of the Malays and the history of ideas provided the much-needed intellectual perspectives and ballast to help the Malay cultural intelligentsia examine Singapore’s history and the community’s social memories of centuries old and contemporary times. One area of study that has been given serious attention in the Department is the critical study of

colonial history and colonial scholarship and their ramifications on the progress and well-being of the society.

The continuity of colonial ideas has strongly affected the mental framework of the nation's intelligentsia on how they understand their society and nation. Colonial scholarship on Malay culture and its history has also remained so dominant as to shape the perspectives of the community's intelligentsia in reconstructing its social history. This can be seen in curating stories on Malay communities in museums and cultural centres. Critical scholarship on intellectual captivity and its serious ramifications on the Malays and how others perceive them formed the thrust of research and teaching spearheaded by Professor Alatas and his students at the Department.

While the pragmatic position of the early leaders of Singapore, like Lee Kuan Yew and Rajaratnam on Raffles and colonial rule, was to project Singapore's openness and maintain positive ties with its major trading partners, especially Britain and the West, for the sake of Singapore's development, the current Prime Minister's positive perspective on the colonial rule before independence in his Bicentennial anniversary message, may have reflected his concern with contemporary movements of decolonisation in former colonial countries such as the attack against "white privilege". The narrative that the Chinese were a privileged group in colonised countries in the Malay world socio-economically may similarly result in anti-Chinese sentiments, which do not auger well for Singapore and its neighbouring pluralistic societies. This dangerous view has been circulating amongst nativistic anti-Chinese movements in the region.

The way to counter such a narrative is not to avoid a critical examination of colonial capitalism and its impact. Simplistic views on the positive impact of colonial capitalism in our stories of nation-building, such as those that echo the dominant narrative that success during the colonial era was all a matter of

working hard, enhance the perception gap between races on the impact of colonialism.

The ramifications of colonial capitalism on various communities have not been adequately understood. We have not been able to share stories of the everyday struggles of the poor and the weak, oppressed by the exploitation of the privileged class in colonial history. Such exploitation was not confined to the British but cut across all racial groups. At the expense of the poor, the collusion between the privileged natives and colonial powers has often been overlooked or missed. Critical studies on economic interactions facilitated by colonial capitalism are pertinent in shedding insights into contemporary class division and inequality problems, which are often clouded and distorted by racial categories.

The Malay Studies department has spearheaded such research since Independence. At the same time, the Department has also embarked on critical studies on Malay feudalism and its continuity amongst the new Malay intelligentsia, which is highly important to mitigate the rise of xenophobic and chauvinistic ideas of Malay history and culture. How the Malays and others can benefit from these works to craft a new narrative about colonialism and pre-colonial history that avoids the problems of parochial ethnonationalism, ideology, and the utopian fundamentalism that we see ravaging some groups within the region will depend very much on the perspectives and commitment of our intelligentsia.

The dominant view that Raffles' landing in 1819 was a key turning point in history that set a different trajectory and brought our diverse communities together for the betterment of lives and fortunes cannot be the singular narrative about the nation's history.

The Johor *Temenggong's* relocation to Singapore in 1811 and the development of settlements, including that of Chinese planters and Bugis traders, tell a story of continuity in the economic cycles of Singapore as a cosmopolitan native port. The port and harbour built by the *Temenggong* and the region under his control allowed for establishing of regional and trans-regional trading networks, allowing the British to expand further. Raffles did not sail into a political and socio-economic vacuum. According to Borschberg, "The British settlement was not founded at the absolute low point of the previous long-term down-cycle, but rather at an early stage of economic revitalization, at the beginning of a new long-term up-cycle".

The Prime Minister's suggestion for Singaporeans "to reflect on how the nation came into being, how we have come this far since, and how we can go forward together" should allow for alternative narratives on the founding of modern Singapore. The alternative narratives should be part of remaking our nation's history. The alternative narrative is already part of the social memory of the Malays, and this should eventually seep into the historical awareness of the nation.

The heterogeneous mosaic of stories of the Malay community has proliferated over the last 60 years and more. Varieties of works, from literature to curatorial work in libraries and museums and from films to performing arts, attempt to capture the social memories of the community. This proliferation has been facilitated by expanding the cultural intelligentsia, better state funding of social memory projects, and platforms to tell stories. However, the production of works on Malay cultural memories and heritage is still far less than those produced by the Chinese community. This reflects the Malay community's intellectual resources and social capital level.

Works that are critical of the official history or critical of community memories, or outside mainstream narratives are somewhat limited. Ideas critical of dominant Malay elites are often not shared with other communities. For that matter, interest in such essential works is somewhat limited. Cultural elites of different communities also work in silos within their own cultural and intellectual enclaves. Social and cultural sensitivities prevent others outside the community from engaging critically in their social memory. It is rare to find cultural activists who can function across communities to produce and share narratives critical of the community's normative social memory. Although many of the community memory projects are available in English, cultural elements are still not so easily transferrable just by having access to the English language.

The role and function of cultural translators go beyond simple translation of language. Familiarity with cultural knowledge and nuances across different cultures is critical. Cultural essentialism and prejudices often complicate efforts to share ideas across communities. In Singapore, where race and language form the basis of managing our cultural projects, the task of creating stories based on everyday experiences shared by all emerging out of the tapestry of a heterogenous mosaic of stories renders the need for cultural translators more critical. We have yet to see serious efforts amongst cultural intelligentsia to develop the skills and competencies needed for cultural translators or mediators.

The community's lack of cultural translators may impede the incorporation of the community's social memories into mainstream narratives. The development of such cultural translators is critical for the minority Malay community. Stories get better shared across communities in areas where the Malays have good cultural translators. There are few amongst the Malay cultural intelligentsia who operate comfortably between societies. They are found, for instance, amongst those working in interfaith and inter-religious circles and the arts sectors, especially in theatre work, where there are greater opportunities to articulate ideas with a

common language. But even in these areas, resources are inadequate.

Even communication between different groups within the Malay community needs to be strengthened. How research gets translated to and by our intelligentsia as cultural translators are crucial to the circulation of ideas that can enhance cultural life. The bridging of understanding and perspectives will help the community to benefit from serious research undertaken at institutions of higher learning that can inform cultural intelligentsia in their efforts to construct multiple narratives that enrich our social memories. These memories will help researchers ask relevant questions to navigate the future and its place in the nation. This can only be effective if research address problems of relevance to contemporary society.

GENDER

On 20th September 2020, the Ministry of Social and Family Development launched the “Conversations on Women’s Development” to kick-start the national effort to identify and tackle issues still affecting women in Singapore. This review is a major government initiative to address cultural and structural impediments that continue to confront Singaporean women nearly six decades after Independence.

Although the position of women in many areas such as education and politics and their contributions to the economy have improved significantly since Independence, the advancement of women’s interests in these areas is still a “work in progress” to quote Minister for Home Affairs and Law, Mr. K Shanmugam. The Minister admitted that “there remain cultural, social and structural hurdles” in all these areas.

Indeed, over the last sixty years, women’s participation in all areas of the public sphere has been phenomenal. This demographic shift reflects the changing

conditions of our society and corresponds to changes and reforms in our culture, social structure, and how we organise our society.

The Women's Charter, introduced in 1961, provided the legal framework for sweeping changes that institutionalised women's rights in the family domain. Looking back, one wonders how these rights, which are so essential for women, had to be ensured through a special piece of legislation. Yet, this Charter was needed to secure the rights and protect women's interests as cultural traditions, norms, and social structures were slower to adapt to society's changing needs and conditions.

Although Muslim women are exempted from specific provisions of the Women's Charter in matters relating to marriage and divorce where the Muslim law regulated by the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) 1966 applies, their rights in other areas are equally protected by the Charter. Most of the provisions of AMLA on matters concerning the rights of married Muslim women also mirror the provisions of the Women's Charter.

Initially, there was some resistance to these changes, especially from traditionalist groups. The disruption gave these groups a sense of insecurity and ambivalence. However, the substantive merit of the reform and the reality of the changing socio-economic conditions inevitably conditioned the adaptation of cultural views and norms accordingly.

Women's education, participation in the workforce, and the struggle for independence of Malaya had empowered them for changes ahead. The firm support of the political and cultural elite and the intelligentsia enabled the changes and reforms to proceed despite initial ambivalence and resistance amongst conservative factions within the community.

Since then, several laws and regulations have been introduced to protect the rights of women in the family and public domains where their interests are at stake. Despite these reforms, many unresolved issues still bear on their development and well-being vis-à-vis their male counterparts.

The conversations in the women's series were very much women's affairs. In October 2020, only twenty-five percent of the participants were men. This may reflect deep-seated cultural attitudes about gender inequality issues. The lack of participation of men in the discourse on gender inequality may be indicative of their level of concern over these issues and the persistence of gender disparity within society. However, the expansion of female intelligentsia has enabled issues faced by women to be raised and discussed by fellow women.

Gender disparity is a persistent form of inequality in every country. No country in the world—rich or poor—has achieved gender equality. The Global Gender Gap Report 2020 ranked Singapore 54th among 153 countries. While we are one rank below the USA, we are even lower than the Philippines and Bangladesh. The Gender Social Norm Index, using a slightly older data source from 2010-2014, showed that 9 in 10 people are prejudiced against women, less in education but more in politics. An editorial in *Lianhe Zaobao* published in September 2019 while supporting women's rights reminded readers to acknowledge the "reality" of differences between men and women, citing the traditional view of gender traits and gendered social roles that had evolved through millions of years of evolutionary history.

Such traditionalistic perceptions of women's characteristics and roles are also not uncommon in the religious discourse of Muslim religious teachers in the community who invoke divine command and teachings as the basis for their perception. Too often, their constructions of the divine design are based on general and abstract articulations that fail to tackle specific issues relating to

women in concrete social and historical contexts.

Malay women are also not unfettered from traditional cultural practices and beliefs on gender relations and roles. The conflation of religious views on women and gender roles with cultural norms and practices complicates the discourse on gender inequality in Malay society. Discussions on cultural impediments in the Malay community often encounter minefields of religious views and teachings that are difficult to negotiate.

Many of these views tend to be extricated from sources that portray religious traditions formulated in the past when women's involvement and roles in the public sphere were relatively circumscribed. Some, though, have emerged fairly recently and do not represent mainstream beliefs or practices in the past. Earlier religious beliefs and practices of Malay Muslims that have long been modified by custom and sanctioned positively by the religious and cultural elite of that time are now being challenged and replaced by ideas conditioned by the resurgence of Islam in the region. The belief that the *hijab* is mandatory for Muslim women to guard their modesty is a case in point. Other examples include the literal reading of the Muslim inheritance law in favour of males irrespective of the wishes of the deceased, women's primary role as caregivers in the family, and the requirement for them to seek their husband's permission to work or when leaving the house. These do not reflect actual religious norms and practices in the past. Yet today, such practices are theologically articulated as permitted deviations due to exigencies (*darurat*).

We also often hear arguments today that women's rights in Islam are not based on gender equality but gender equity and gender justice. Discourse on gender critical of certain Muslim practices is often derogatorily labelled as the work or voice of Western feminists or liberal Muslims whose ideas oppose or undermine Islamic views on women's rights.

These generalised attacks and emotive labelling do little to identify and clarify concrete issues facing Muslim women. Gender equality refers to equal treatment, equity, and justice whenever it applies. One cannot say that Islam does not recognise the equal treatment of women in any matter. There are so many areas where Islamic norms require equal treatment of women. Furthermore, the secular view on gender equality in our current discourse does not demand a rigid application of equal treatment in all matters where such demand would not be of any good to women. Only when we examine concrete and specific issues can we decide how best to apply and give meaning to the value of equality that will render it relevant to the actual problem at hand.

Similarly, using terms like “toxic masculinity” and “patriarchy” without understanding issues relating to managing change affecting gender roles and relations cannot contribute to alleviating problems of cultural lag and its impact on women. Cultural lag affecting different aspects of a community’s culture is a complex problem to manage. The type of cultural elites and their orientations in the community determine the pace and nature of adaptation to change. Rhetorical debates and labelling will not help us understand and develop relevant and valuable perspectives to deal with women’s problems arising from lag in adapting to the changing conditions of society.

As a matter of principle, gender justice must start with accepting equal treatment for women. Any differential treatment towards them must be reasoned based on considerations of the challenges, needs, and specific conditions women face.

Now, let us examine specific problems that prominent women’s groups articulated in their response to the government-initiated National Gender Equality Review. *I shall focus on the special issues Muslim Women face as explained by the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) in its Omnibus Report and PPIS’s submission, which overlaps with the ones raised by AWARE. I will also highlight some of the*

cultural problems that I think should concern PPIS but have been omitted in its report.

In July 2021, AWARE released its report on gender equality in response to the National Gender Equality Review. AWARE's Report made 88 recommendations on many issues affecting women. It claimed that its recommendations are inclusive and represent the hope of women's long struggle for advancement. Malay women were not isolated from all the problems raised in the Report, although the degree of intensity of these differed.

Few of the recommendations dealt specifically with Muslim women's issues. Four of the five matters involved the administration of Muslim law as laid out in AMLA. The Report claimed that the framework of AMLA is based on the premise that it "regards men as the protectors and providers of women and grants additional rights and privileges to Muslim men as a result." However, this is actually a perception not expressed in AMLA itself. It reveals the report's attitude of the Report toward AMLA as legislation that privileges Muslim men.

As mentioned earlier, many provisions in AMLA strengthen and protect the rights and interests of married and divorced women. They are comparable to progressive laws found in many enactments of the Muslim law in the states of Malaya at that time. The AMLA also provides vast leverage for Muslim judges to select and apply substantive Muslim law and Malay customs based on their understanding.

AWARE's Report highlighted concerns in four specific areas of Muslim law—polygamy; the requirement of consent of a *wali* or legal guardian for the marriage of his ward/daughter; a woman's conditional right to divorce, and the law on inheritance relating to the division and distribution of properties. These are issues similar to Article 16 of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which the government and MUIS have scrutinised

since Singapore ratified the Convention in 1995.

Many changes have been made to the Women's Charter and AMLA to align these laws with CEDAW. A standing inter-ministry committee on CEDAW was formed to oversee its implementation in Singapore. It comprised relevant ministries and public sector agencies that coordinated and implemented initiatives under their purview to address gaps and ensure greater gender parity consistent with the principles of CEDAW.

Singapore's Fifth Periodic Report to the UN Committee for CEDAW of 2015 listed the advances made in the law and procedures in AMLA relating to women. However, Singapore continues to retain partial reservation on Article 16, which deals with marriage and family, to accommodate, amongst other matters, certain practices of Muslim law in AMLA.

The state's explanation for applying Muslim law regarding polygamy, *wali*, divorce, and inheritance attempts to mitigate the allegation that these laws discriminate against women. It also sought to distinguish similar discriminatory laws practiced in some Muslim countries. The state argued that the reservation is necessary to "protect the rights of minorities", referring to the Muslims practicing their personal and religious law as set out in AMLA. The practice of Muslim law varies among countries according to the different schools of law adopted by the community and their cultural traditions. The state defers to MUIS on Muslim law as practiced in Singapore.

In 2017, AWARE released the CEDAW shadow report "Many Voices, One Movement", prepared by a coalition of thirteen NGOs. The report is a response to the Fifth Periodic Report on CEDAW. Amongst other issues, the report called for Singapore to withdraw its reservations on Article 16. It argued that the reservations suggest that the state believes AMLA and Muslim values are

incompatible with Article 16. It also commented on the state's explanation of the practices of Muslim law here and expressed the standpoint that these practices as discriminatory. However, it did not engage in a thorough discourse about the nature of these laws, their application, and the cultural and social consequences that merit rethinking them. AWARE believed that AMLA could be amended to protect the Muslim community's religious and cultural rights while extending equal treatment for Muslim men and women. It pointed to other Muslim countries like Turkey, Morocco, and Tunisia, which have different ways of practicing the Muslim law that it deems more gender equal.

AWARE's attempt to reintroduce its 2017 critique of Singapore Muslim law in its recent Report did not add additional research input and data in its effort to advocate for change. While the laws highlighted by AWARE do warrant rethinking to reflect the changing conditions of society, there are challenges to the approach or strategy it adopts, that is, by engaging with stakeholders of the law such as MUIS and other NGOs focussing on Muslim women. However, the advocacy model adopted by some Muslim women NGOs in neighbouring countries, such as Malaysia's Sisters in Islam and *Musawah*, that involves confronting religious scholars on their own turf may not be the best strategy here. The lack of necessary resources and social capital to advocate for alternative forms of Muslim law available to AWARE reinforces the challenge.

The report also reveals that AWARE has crafted the problem of gender equality as a problem with Muslim law. It wants to deal with equality by proposing alternative forms of Muslim law that it deems more equal or abolishing those it evaluates as objectionable or incompatible with the times, such as the requirement of the consent of the *wali* for the marriage of his ward/daughter.

This approach invites immediate counter resistance from the custodians of the law and segments of Muslim women who want to practice them for reasons best known to themselves, including the belief that these laws are immutable and part of their faith in Islam. AWARE may not have the resources to deal with this kind of resistance, nor may it want to battle with such group thought that may expose it to the danger of being labelled as authoritarian by those who wish to uphold the law on religious or other grounds.

Like most religious laws, Muslim law does not change easily, unlike civil laws, which are subjected to changes through the democratic law-making process. The orientation of stakeholders of the law also renders the task of rethinking the law slower to change. Change in religious laws usually arises in the face of political pressure or when the law itself becomes irrelevant. When these occur, change is inevitable.

While I do not deny the need for sustained engagement with dominant stakeholders for change of the Muslim law to ensure gender equality aligned with the changing condition of society, the legal arrangement that binds the Muslim personal law on the Muslims of Singapore cannot be overlooked as part of the effort at addressing the lag. This is a procedural challenge more than a substantive legal one. It is the legal arrangement in which the Muslim law binds all Muslims irrespective of their status as equal citizens of the state unless they abjure Islam, which presents issues for those seeking access to civil law that is deemed as more proactive in addressing the challenge of gender equality in family law.

Giving Muslims access to civil law does not require dismantling Muslim law. For example, if a Muslim has full access to the provisions of the Wills Act, he/she has the liberty of making a will based on the faraid. Muslim couples who want to register their marriage under the Women's Charter as a matter of civil law

requirement and based on their religious outlook on gender can benefit from this arrangement whereby their legal rights and obligations within the family are determined by civil law, like other citizens. Any other matters about religious obligations, such as the *nikah* ceremony, can be performed separately. Muslims who want to live well as good Muslims where their basic religious practices are protected based on citizenship can do so much like any other citizen by this arrangement.

We must regard this proposed change to the binding arrangement of the Muslim law on Muslims as procedural and not substantive. To some extent, the process of change is not altogether novel. Two decades ago, in 1999, AMLA was amended to allow Muslim couples to pursue divorce-related matters on custody, disposition, and property division in the family court. Enforcement of *nafkah eddah* and *mutaah*, as well as personal protection orders for Muslims, had also come under the purview of this court. The path for other aspects of Muslim law to be heard and determined by the Family Justice System, with jurisdiction over non-Muslim citizens, should be made available to Muslims if they decide to do so. Protecting the rights of the minority must not deny their equal treatment under the law, including protecting their religious belief and outlook that is not homogenous for all Muslims.

This procedural change will likely improve and strengthen Muslim law and the Syariah Court. After the amendments in 1999, the Syariah Court underwent positive changes with more resources to improve its processes and judicial capacity. The appointment of law-trained civil officers with substantive experience and practice in civil law as Syariah Court judges and registrars improved the court's judgment and administration. Though the early days of reform of the Syariah Court saw the appointment of a civil law Muslim judge as the President of the Court received with suspicion by a dominant section of the conservative religious elite, over time, as more judges were appointed and proved their competency in

handling Syariah law cases, the resistance gradually faded.

The quality of judges at the Syariah Court has improved thinking on substantive law and its application. The Syariah Court also now boasts of women judges and registrars. With better judicial officers, there will possibly be quiet reforms relating to some of the procedures which are unnecessarily tedious and cumbersome for women. The *kholo'* divorce that allows women to seek divorce without showing cause is a case in point. It is similar to the right accorded to husbands for unilateral divorce. In divorce cases, emotional and psychological factors are major concerns for women. Men often use these as weapons of revenge. The current procedures for such divorce that require the intervention of hakam or arbitrators and the husband's consent for the divorce can be further examined to ensure greater equality.

Over time, the views of the religious elite about Muslim law will evolve, and cultural lag can be bridged. Our religious elites have already been trying to think about how to provide Muslims with the instruments to make "wills" by invoking new legal concepts like *nuzriah* and *hibah rukbah* though how these instruments can be developed as unique instruments protected by law is still far from clear.

Many other recommendations of AWARE that affect women are equally important, and Muslim leaders must be concerned with examining them. Problems faced by marginalised women due to socio-economic factors, legal status, or even their sexual orientations should not be outside our areas of concern. Their issues are often multi-dimensional.

Muslim leaders and the intelligentsia may disagree with the approach taken by organisations like AWARE. Still, they must indeed have cognisance of the existential problems it has raised about women and address these concerns (I will address this further when dealing with PPIS). Perhaps it is in these areas

that AWARE is best positioned to work with MUIS in research, data collation, and engagement in understanding the problems, especially of disadvantaged groups, to help improve and better serve their needs. Many of the issues may not be with the law but more with difficulties relating to access to resources and social services.

Let us now examine PPIS's response to the gender equality project to understand the sense of frustration of certain segments of the Malay community on this matter. I am relying on the Executive Summary of the Report as the full text of the Report is still not publicly available.

PPIS has taken a slightly different focus on the problem of gender equality. The title of its Report -SHAPING MINDSETS TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY - THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY'S PERSPECTIVE, contains seven recommendations for Singapore's review of women's issues and reflects its focus. The Report is the outcome of conversations with forty-two community leaders and members of the public of varying ages, professions, backgrounds, and gender on issues that centre on women's leadership, unpaid work, workplace discrimination/harassment and sexual objectification of women. PPIS stated that the discussions gave the organisation insights into the prevalent social norms specific to the Muslim community that impedes gender equality. From the method of study, its areas of focus, and findings, "gendered social norms," as the Report described, seem to be a significant source of frustration for educated Muslim women.

The Report highlighted the following: cultural inhibitions that impede women from voicing their opinions, gendered roles, and expectations, the dilemma of balancing family and work that stifles women's potential and growth and their role in leadership positions, as well as gendered barriers, cultural prejudice, and discrimination. Gender inequality is evident in cultural expectations of women's role as the family's primary caregivers and the lack of compensation and

acknowledgement of this role. Sexual objectification of women is also one of the major concerns of the Report. According to the Report, the demeaning attitude towards women that reduces them to sex objects is still common in all demographic and age groups in Singapore. It makes women vulnerable to domestic violence and abuse and creates a hostile work environment for women. The Report stated that “when sexualised representations of girls and women are institutionalised in the cultural fabric of a society, sexualisation will be seen as an accepted norm”. It also highlighted casual sexism as a norm in the community and that women are expected not to take it seriously.

The sense of frustration in dealing with these problems is clearly very intense. However, it is unclear if these statements are a warning about the phenomenon or an indictment of Singapore society. It is unclear from the Executive Report if and what PPIS has identified as gendered social norms. It is unknown whether PPIS has identified prevalent religious views about women, which form what it maintains are gendered social norms. Islam is, after all, a significant element in the community’s cultural life. If the Report is an indictment of the community’s social norms and cultural perceptions of women, the problem should be clearly formulated. The carriers or propagators of such thought must also be identified so the issue can be meaningfully addressed.

Glossing over cultural and social impediments that impede gender equality without identifying the factors conditioning them and the carriers responsible for them will not help educate the community on proper attitudes towards women. Many of us know that sexualisation of women and attitudes that reduce and demean them as objects of sexual temptation is not uncommon in popular religious discourse. Sermons and writings of popular preachers are littered with caricatures and sexist remarks about women. The popular view on the need for women to dawn the hijab cannot be isolated from a sexist lens that sees women’s hair as a source of temptation. I am sure that such views do not represent the

thinking of our learned religious elite and that there are serious efforts on their part to trump them.

Perceptions of women as objects of temptation and stereotypes against both sexes and their gendered roles are not uncommonly propagated in religious sermons and texts. Traditional roles of husbands and wives that are cultural legacies of the past have been promoted as justifying and reflecting male superiority over women in all domains. It is no wonder that even today, Muslim women are underrepresented in leadership positions in mosques and Muslim organisations. This is a prevalent phenomenon. I'm sure our educated religious elite has a proper nonbiased explanation of the meaning of religious teachings. However, there is hardly any serious effort to correct such [mis]understanding. The recent incident of some young asatizah who made toxic sexist practical jokes on their female counterparts on social media attests to the dominance of such thinking. Little did they realise the power of social media in causing so much psychological harm to the victims. Their distasteful act highlights how the sexuality of women has been deemed a fair game for jokes. It appears not to be taken seriously until the power of social media lays bare the hurt and damage done to these female asatizah.

I can go on with a long list of examples, but it will not make any difference if our intelligentsia does not come on board to stop the rot. It is not only the responsibility of PPIS to champion gender equality. Organisations like PERGAS can undoubtedly play a vital role in promoting gender equality or, at the very least, help fight toxic views about women erroneously justified based on religion or culture.

We must be aware that gender inequality manifests and impact diverse groups differently. Those in the lower socio-economic groups often experience inequality on multiple dimensions. Psychological and/or physical disabilities may compound

their challenging socio-economic condition, or they may be marginalised simply due to their sexual constituents and orientations. The resources available to them to address their problems are often grossly limited.

Community intelligentsia, including community organisational leaders, often think that the challenges they face with gender inequality are the same for all women. Yet, the privileged usually have better capacity and social capital to address the difficulties, not so for the underprivileged. AWARE has made representations of some of the plight of this group. PPIS, with its network of services for the underprivileged, have access to their stories. Their existential problems and concerns need to be articulated and addressed, such as inadequate wages, lack of relevant skills, single parenthood, mental illness, and other disabilities that directly affect their empowerment. There are also other marginal voices like those we see expressed in '*Beyond Hijab*' and '*Growing Up Perempuan*' that needs to be listened to. One cannot assert that one's views represent the Muslim community if the issues of concern for the disadvantaged and marginalised are absent. I think there is room for their stories to be captured and represented in the effort to address gender equality.

CONCLUSION

I have discussed three major episodes that have emerged within the community in the last two decades, or so that relate to issues pertaining to religion/culture, history, and gender relations. Each episode represents challenges in these domains and captures how our elites and intelligentsia have responded to them. I've tried to examine what they have given attention to, what they have missed, overlooked, or negated, and how these affect the community. I've also tried to emphasise the overriding need for developing our cultural tradition and its creative and critical synthesis with relevant ideas and contributions of others in dealing with changes confronting the community. The overarching concern is strengthening our primary social institutions amid our time's changing conditions and challenges.

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