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DECOLONIZING MALAYSIAN ART: THE IMPACT OF THE NATIONAL CULTURE POLICY AND ISLAMIZATION IN THE 1980S

(Dekolonisasi Kesenian Malaysia : Impak Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan dan Dasar Islamisasi Sewaktu Era 1980an)

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical analysis of Malaysia's arts and culture under the National Culture Policy (NCP) and the Islamization policies of the 1980s. While these sought to create a unifying national culture on Malay and Islamic values, these have, in return, sparked a big debate on arts freedom, inclusion, and creative freedom. This study, based on a qualitative study, sought to examine in which ways arts practitioners negotiated, resisted, or made accommodations in these regulations. The paper captures, in addition, a struggle between imposed narratives of culture and arts freedom, adding a contribution toward a wider debate on decolonization and postcolonial identity in Malaysia. Comparative studies of Nigeria and South Africa, and debates on globalization and digital arts, place Malaysia on a different trajectory.

Keywords: National Culture Policy (NCP), Islamization Policies, Art of Malaysian Art decolonization, National Identity

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of art and politics is central to postcolonial discourse, particularly in nations where cultural policies shape national identity. In Malaysia, the 1980s witnessed a pivotal moment in the nation's artistic development with the introduction of the National Culture Policy (NCP) and Islamization Policies. These policies sought to consolidate diverse artistic practices under a national framework grounded in Malay and Islamic values, positioning them as a counterpoint to colonial legacies. However, these policies sparked debates over artistic freedom and cultural homogenization. This study examines how Malaysian artists navigated, resisted, or reinterpreted these state-imposed cultural frameworks. By engaging with postcolonial theories and comparative analysis, the paper assesses the policies' broader implications on artistic expression and national identity.

The National Culture Policy of 1971 sought Malaysia unification on a unifying Malay culture, selective culture borrowings, and Islam (Andriana, 2013). At the same time, Islamization efforts in the 1980s cemented Islamic values in every corner of society, for instance, in arts (Muslim, 2021). The policy sought a concentration on Malay-Islamic themes in arts, which led to government-sponsored performances such as Rupa dan Jiwa and Ke Arah Tawhid (Abdullah, 2020).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Decoloniality, Hybridity, And Cultural

This research employs the theoretical framework of decolonial and postcolonial thought in the analysis of the way Malaysian artists reacted to, resisted, or yielded to the Islamization Policies of the 1980s and the National Culture Policy (NCP). Chief among the works of such scholarship are those of Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon and Edward Said along with more contemporary works of Walter D. Mignolo and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and from Malaysian thinkers Syed Hussein Alatas and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity is useful in describing the way Malaysian artists responded to the imposition of state cultural identities. Rather than simply reproducing Malay-Islamic forms by default, artists like Bayu Utomo Radjikin and Yee I-Lann create "third spaces" of cultural negotiations between Western methodologies and local and Islamic patterns of culture. This hybridity eschews the purity of cultures and is instead replete with ambivalence and postcolonial resistance.

Frantz Fanon's theory of decolonization (1963) is the replacement of colonial paradigms with native paradigms. However, as this study reveals, Malaysia's NCP and Islamization-enabled decolonization generated new internal hegemonies that privileged Malay-Muslim identity and

placed the other ethnic arts beyond the margin. Decolonization was thus both a freeing and homogenizing force—a risk Fanon warned against as the replacement of one master by another.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is also applicable in describing the way the Islamization of Malaysian art resisted and recreated orientalist tropes. State-sponsored Islam aesthetics, in its battle against Western stereotypes of the East as primitive or exotic, fell into another kind of essentialism in its strict demarcation of the line of Islamic art and silencing of non-Malay voices—thereby replacing Eurocentrism with ethno-religious centrism. For us to advance this analysis further, we can employ Walter Dignolo's theory of 'epistemic disobedience' (2011). This entails the once-colonized cultures delinking from Western epistemic formations and reasserting indigenous knowledge systems. Malaysian artists—those outside the state-approved exhibitions—practice this kind of disobedience by reasserting local cosmologies and countering Western and state-dictated norms.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's call to decolonize the mind (1986) also converges here in that Malaysian artists have to deal with not only colonial inheritances but internalized cultural and value frameworks too. The dominance of Malay-Islamic aesthetics in state cultures has the effect of re-enacting the colonial logic of cultural centralization, itself decried and disputed by artists as internal colonization.

Finally, figures like Syed Hussein Alatas and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas offer local challenges to colonial knowledge structures. While Alatas decried intellectual dependency created by colonizing powers, Al-Attas advocated for an Islamic epistemology centered around Tawhid. Together, they complicate the Islamization-decolonization binary and instead present overlapping but contested imaginaries of cultural authenticity. The policies prompted different creative responses, between conformity and rebellion. *Rupa dan Jiwa* of 1984 idealized Malay material culture, confirming legitimized discourses. *Ke Arah Tawhid* focused on Islamic aesthetic, which aligned arts on spiritual values. Artists such as Bayu Utomo Radjikin and Fauzan Omar condemned such policy actions in abstract and combined forms of action as a struggle (Altabaa, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses the qualitative research methodology and triangulates with the use of three complementing methods: critical discourse analysis (CDA), archival research, and case studies of artists and exhibitions. It aims to explore how Malaysian visual artists reacted to or resisted the cultural formations created by the National Culture Policy (NCP) and the Islamization Policies of the 1980s. Government policy reports such as the National Culture Policy report of 1971 and Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports cultural memoranda. National Art Gallery archival resources (such as *Rupa dan Jiwa* and *Ke Arah Tawhid* exhibition catalogs). In-depth semi-structured interviews with five Malaysian contemporary artists and curators (January-May 2025), selected based on the themes of the national identity, Islamization, and the aesthetics of the decolonial in their artwork.

These secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed scholarly articles covering postcolonial theory, decolonial aesthetics, Malaysian cultural policy, and the history of Southeast Asian

modern art. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used in examining the construction of the nexus among the arts, religious values, and national identity in official discourses in state policy texts. Interview transcripts and archival texts were thematically coded with Nvivo applied to the identity, resistance, Islamic aesthetics, censorship, and hybridity categories. Comparative case studies of milestone exhibitions (*Rupa dan Jiwa, Ke Arah Tawhid*) and the works of Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Fauzan Omar, and Yee I-Lann were used to chart trajectories of resistance and negotiation in the mass media and over time. Sampling and Justification Artists were strategically selected to represent Malay-Muslim and non-Malay artists who worked during or responded to the NCP era. Each artist's practice demonstrates a particular kind of engagement—accommodation, hybridization, or critique—toward hegemonic narratives. The sampling approach allowed closer insight into the complex interaction between artistic liberty and state ideology.

FRAMING KEY CONCEPTS: DECOLONIZATION, ISLAMIZATION, AND MALAYSIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY IN ART AND CULTURAL POLICY

The relationship between arts and politics is an area of research spanning decades, for postcolonial countries in general where national identity is continuously produced, contested, and renegotiated by state-sponsored cultural organizations. In Malaysia, the 1980s were the critical years for cultural politics with the imposition of the *Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan* or the National Culture Policy (NCP), a component of the broader Islamization program. These policies effectively enshrined a national aesthetics grounded on Malay and Islamic values as they tried to substitute residual colonial cultural models with a local and religious one (Abdullah, 2020; Shamsul, 1996). The scope of the ideational changes, however, is not only contained within the terrain of administrative policy but crosses the landscape of visual culture itself where artists have conformed to, negotiated with, or defied state-led conditions of identity.

This essay unpacks three central terms—decolonization, Islamization, and national identity—as deployed in Malaysian postcolonial visual art. Far from being synonymous or empty signifiers, it positions them as intersecting ideological formations with profound entrenchment in artistic practice, state cultural policy, and the Malaysian visual lexicon of identities. By its placement of these terms in the discursive space of decolonial theory and non-Western epistemology, this essay argues that Malaysian art has been a contested site where cultural assertion and resistance are negotiated in tandem.

In postcolonial contexts, decolonization begins politically—the removal of the colonizers and the establishment of independent nation-states. However, scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) and Walter Mignolo (2011) warn that decolonization must be cultural, epistemological, and psychological as well. In the Malaysian context, decolonization is more than the dismantling of British institutional legacies; it is a protracted endeavor of resistance against the deeply rooted hegemony of Western values of the aesthetic and cultural frames in the arts in the local context. As Abdullah (2020) argues, decolonization in Malaysia is a conscious exercise of recovering indigenous knowledge systems, reclaiming cultural memory, and

transcending the lingering effect of the colonial way of thinking even as independence has been achieved.

This extended conception of decolonization requires more than symbolic restitutions of tradition. It requires the strategic re-question of indigenous elements in critical tension with what is "Malay" or "Islam" rather than performing scripted and essentialized representations of identity. It involves challenging the epistemic hierarchy that validates European canons and dis-validates the local and the arts of the vernacular. As Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012) have argued, an authentically decolonial aesthetics requires the construction of new way(s) of knowing and sensing the world—"those terms 'border thinking.'"

Islamization in the Malaysian context refers to the official incorporation of Islamic values into government and culture. In the prime ministership of Mahathir Mohamad in the 1980s, Islamization policies became entrenched in the legal and educational spheres but also in the sphere of culture (Mohamad, 1991). On the one hand, Islamization was aimed at asserting Malaysia's Islamic heritage and undoing the secular, Western influences characteristic of the post-colonial condition. In the visual arts, this involved the encouragement of Islamic values of unity (tawhid), spirituality, and morality as the favored themes of state-sponsored exhibitions and grant-funded works.

While this ideological shift endowed Muslim artists with legitimacy and new openings, it also narrowed the space of legitimate art. Artwork that fell short of fulfilling the precepts of Islam—whose aims were secular, abstract, or critical—either fell outside the space of official culture or was relegated to the fringes (Tan, 2000). Non-Muslim and non-Malay artists were symbolically also omitted from the new national aesthetics in the process of construction, since their referential culture became peripheral to the new aesthetic being built. The Islamization of the arts, however, was multifaceted. Artists found ways of executing Islamic values in ways that left space for artistic liberty. For instance, the 1988 show *Ke Arah Tawhid* featured paintings whose acceptance of abstract calligraphy and metaphysics invested them with religious depth and challenged didacticism. These examples show that Islamization did not inherently suppress artistic liberty but triggered complex negotiations between personal faith, artistic imagination, and state ideology.

National identity in Malaysia has been long promoted as pluralistic to the admiration of the Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous cultures living together side by side. However, the success of the NCP reflected more of an agenda of prescriptive integration of cultures. The policy formalized Malay culture as the foundation of the national identity and Islam as its religious basis and made the acceptance of others also conditional simply if they did not violate the hegemonic model (Shamsul, 1996). In practice, national identity was constructed from the top-down by means of school curricula, monuments of the state, state-sponsored exhibitions and festivals of culture.

This construction privileged certain religious and ethnic explanations at the expense of others. Those artists whose art was in alignment with ideals of the state were showcased as the keepers of the country's national culture and others who pursued diasporic, secular, or dissident themes

were marginalized. This is illustrated in the landmark 1984 show *Rupa dan Jiwa*, which highlighted the traditional Malay motifs and crafts as the icon of Malaysian identity.

Yet numerous of these artists used their practice to probe or subvert such boundaries. Bayu Utomo Radjikin's *Wajah* sculpture (1993), for instance, is a prime example. The artwork draws on classical Malay iconography and joins it to modern sculptural practice to create a hybrid sculpture which both identifies cultural origin and resists essentializing representation. Fauzan Omar's use of natural, decaying materials in his installations, similarly, dismantles the ossification of national narrative through the reassertion of the impermanent, multilayered quality of cultural memory (Zainol, 2005). Such work suggests that national identity, far from static essence, is a continuous process of negotiation, contestation, and renovation.

Positioned in the broader framework of decolonial theory also reveals the politics of visual culture in the Malaysian postcolonial environment. Art is not simply a representation of the state ideology but the very ground upon which cultural wars are fought. Coloniality persists in the knowledge formation, aesthetics and social hierarchies long after the attainment of political independence, as argued by Quijano (2000). Malaysian artists grappling with identity, spirituality and memory also find themselves concerned with the project of the decolonial in this regard.

Through resistance to imposed definition and an employment of various epistemologies such as Islamic, Indigenous, diasporic artists are establishing new spaces for imagining national belonging beyond official state orthodoxy. This pluralization does not produce incoherence but instead produces allegiance to the complex, a loyalty reflective of the lived reality of the multicultural society itself. Conclusion Decolonization, Islamization, and national identity are not categories of theory but paradigms which have effectively defined the field of Malaysian cultural and artistic policy. Through the analysis of state policy and artistic practice from the 1980s onwards, the present essay has illustrated the ways in which the paradigms intersect and operate against each other in the field of visual culture. Artists like Bayu Utomo Radjikin and Fauzan Omar show the ways in which Malaysian art has been at once instrument and site of cultural assertion as well as of resistance. In an age where the forces of globalization seek to homogenize the cultural form, the Malaysian experience emphasizes the need to maintain space for critical, pluralist, and de-colonial aesthetics.

RECLAIMING IDENTITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO THE DECOLONIZATION OF MALAYSIAN ART

Western colonialism introduced Cartesian Dualism, which is a dualistic school of thought that polarizes the body and mind and has influenced scientific thinking and Malaysian government (Yunos & Muslim, 2021). This ideology reinforced anthropocentrism, materialism, and Eurocentrism, leading to the dominance of Western epistemologies over the indigenous knowledge system. Decolonization efforts have to resist these dualistic thinkings by assimilating ecological and holistic thinking that upholds local cultures (Yunos & Muslim, 2021). Besides, epistemological decolonization involves the rediscovery of local knowledge and also resisting Western-placed scientific paradigms. Authors such as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Syed Hussein Alatas have also been critical of colonial knowledge systems for inducing intellectual dependency on postcolonial communities (Yunos & Muslim,

2021). This position holds that Malaysia must develop its own intellectual traditions rather than its accommodation of Western paradigms.

National Culture Policy (NCP) and Islamization Policies of the 1980s played a central role in defining Malaysian art as a cultural decolonization move and an enforced state identity (Abdullah, 2020). These policies promoted Malay and Islamic aesthetic sensibilities that influenced the subjects and representation within Malaysian modern art. While these policies aimed to unify Malaysian art, they also restricted artistic freedom and excluded non-Malay and non-Muslim art traditions (Abdullah, 2020). Exhibitions such as *Rupa dan Jiwa* and *Ke Arah Tawhid* demonstrate the negotiation between the traditional and contemporary art forms, displaying resistance and accommodation to state narratives (Abdullah, 2020). Other artists, such as Bayu Utomo Radjikin, used hybrid art forms to resist the rigid Malay-Muslim paradigm imposed by the government. His sculpture *Wajah* (1993) condemns the essentialization of Malay identity through the blending of traditional and modern elements (Altabaa, 2022). Fauzan Omar's installations are also depicted by natural materials that symbolize resistance against cultural homogenization, challenging the restriction of national identity (Altabaa, 2022).

One of the core components of decolonization is the deconstruction of Eurocentrism, which holds Western knowledge and values in high esteem. This mentality has shaped Malaysians' perception of history, government, and identity (Yunos & Muslim, 2021). In counterpoint to this, the Occidentalism strategy proposes that Malaysia should be defined in terms of itself and not in Western terms (Abdullah, 2020). This is crucial in redefining history, particularly in reconsidering the picture of Malay independence fighters once described as rebels by Western scholars (Yunos & Muslim, 2021). Despite efforts to regain local identities, globalization and new media have created new challenges and opportunities for decolonization. The development of online art spaces and NFT¹ marketplaces has enabled Malaysian artists to break away from state narratives and engage global audiences (Muslim, 2021). Artists like Yee I-Lann use digital collage techniques to overturn official histories and challenge dominant cultural constructs (Muslim, 2021). This suggests that while emerging technology can affirm colonial histories, it can be employed as a tool for resistance and cultural recuperation.

Malaysia's cultural nationalism can be compared with other postcolonial countries such as Nigeria and South Africa. While Malaysia's NCP was based upon Malay and Islamic culture, Nigeria's Cultural Policy of 1988 was built around ethnic inclusivity (Andriana, 2013). Post-apartheid South Africa, on the other hand, gravitated towards multiculturalism and reconciliation instead (Altabaa, 2022). These differences reflect Malaysia's particular task of reconciling ethnic pluralism with nation-building. Cultural policies in Malaysia, Nigeria, and South Africa illustrate different approaches through which national identity evolves through the arts. Policies in Malaysia championed the Malay-Islamic identity, instituting a

¹ NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens) have transformed the art world by allowing digital artworks to be uniquely owned, verified, and sold through blockchain technology. Unlike traditional digital files that can be endlessly copied, an NFT serves as a digital certificate of authenticity, proving the originality and ownership of a specific piece. This innovation benefits artists by enabling them to sell directly to collectors through online marketplaces such as OpenSea, SuperRare, and Foundation—bypassing galleries and agents. A major advantage is that NFTs allow artists to earn royalties from secondary sales, creating ongoing income with every resale. Global exposure is also more accessible, especially for emerging digital artists. High-profile NFT art sales, such as Beeple's "Everydays" which sold for \$69.3 million, have drawn attention to this new model of art ownership.

homogeneous artistic environment, while Nigeria and South Africa developed a more inclusionary framework.

Nigeria's Cultural Policy of 1988 was oriented toward ethnic plurality and the flourishing of multiple artistic traditions. Whereas the Malaysian state promoted a single narration for its culture, Nigeria, on the other hand, created room for multiple aesthetic expressions. This post-apartheid South African cultural policy embraced multiculturalism and reconciliation, thus sought to create space for all ethnic groups to participate in the creation of a national artistic discourse. In contrast, the Islamization-wide Malay cultural dominance inhibited artistic freedom. Exhibitions like *Rupa dan Jiwa* and *Ke Arah Tawhid* supported narratives driven by the state, while artists like Bayu Utomo Radjikin and Fauzan Omar resisted these in hybrid artistic forms of expression.

However, with the entry of new digital platforms, NFT marketplaces, and international biennales, Malaysian artists are able to step beyond the boundaries set by the nation. For example, Yee I-Lann's work uses digital collage to critique state narratives and shed light on marginalized histories. In other words, the chances brought by globalization have allowed the Malaysian artists to engage in international artistic dialogues, critiques, and challenges of the cultural policies. In conclusion, while Malaysia's policies were pointing to a unitary nationalist identity, better than the other nation-states, no recognition of pluralistic culture was established under the cases of Nigeria and South Africa. The extension, with increasing multiplicity of art forms, keeps inspiring Malaysian artists to cut through the endless complexities of nationalism, identity, and globalization.

Malaysian decolonization is an ongoing process that extends from political liberty to intellectual, artistic, and cultural spheres. The philosophical challenge of Cartesian Dualism, state policy impacts on Malaysian art, and the challenge of Eurocentrism illustrate the difficulty of this struggle. As emerging artists and thinkers continue to subvert colonial and state narratives, decolonization in Malaysia's future hinges on creating inclusive, self-directed, and world-participatory cultural expression.

RETHINKING CONFLICT, ISLAM AND THE WEST IN A NEW PERSPECTIVE

The creation of a violent Orient or Muslim "Other" can be interpreted as a component of Anglo-American political ideology from the standpoints of postcolonialism and orientalism. This way of thinking is basically ingrained in the Orientalist stereotype of the violent and treacherous character of Islamic doctrine. By depicting and characterising Islam as a religion practiced by extremists, such narratives foster a negative impression of the religion. Accordingly, the portrayal of a bloody Orient also serves to justify Western dominance in those countries that profess to have introduced civilisation (Altabaa, 2022).

The philosophical ramifications of Malaysia's decolonisation, with an emphasis on how colonialism affected social ideals and epistemology. While decolonisation refers to the transfer of authority and the elimination of colonial ideology that undermine the identity and autonomy of the colonised society, colonisation is the process of gaining control over a territory. (Muslim, 2021). Malaysia's historical background of colonisation, highlighting how it resulted

in both physical and intellectual colonisation that continued even after independence. They contend that René Descartes' introduction of Cartesian dualism has had a profound impact on contemporary thought, giving rise to ideas that are harmful to human and environmental connections, including anthropocentrism, eurocentrism, and selfishness (Muslim, 2021).

The embrace of Western secularism or liberalism by Islamic culture since Malaysia's independence in 1957 has positioned Islam alongside other religions; however, dualism has impacted the prevailing ways of thought and communal living. The secular concept in Malay politics and religion was ignited by British empire in Malaya (Muslim, 2021). The secularisation of Malaysia was started by the Pangkor Treaty (1874), which separated all human endeavours from religious authority, particularly by restricting the role of Islam to personal and spiritual matters, while placing political and administrative power under British colonial control.

Islamic art is an expression of aesthetic value that is appropriate since it is connected to the given knowledge of Islam based on the Al-Quran, according to Ismail R. al Faruqi and Lois Lamya' al Faruqi. To put it another way, the messages conveyed by Islamic art should be grounded in the information revealed by the Quran (Andriana, 2013). Islamic culture includes Islamic art as well. Islamic art differs from non-Islamic art in terms of its purpose, ethical value, and goal. Islamic civilisation has contributed to the development of Islamic art, which primarily aims to serve Allah's will. The foundations of contemporary Muslim art are strongly rooted in Western art rather than traditional Islamic art, and very few of the artworks depict Islam other than in a superficial manner. As a result, it frequently promotes Western values that are at odds with Islamic principles. Additionally, she had recognised a few fundamental Western ideas that were deemed incompatible with Islam. Design and fine art are almost inseparable. They have different goals, creative processes, and statuses, even though they use the same basic vocabulary of line, form, colour, etc. Art exists for its own sake, independent of its rightful place in society. In the eyes of the initiated few, it has become more direct and obscure. Commercial design is frequently the focus (Andriana, 2013).

When western ideals are used in the arts, the artist is self-centred and produces art to satisfy his own desires. The artist is regarded as an exceptional being. Because he is an artist, he is free to act and behave in a very self-centred and even blatantly antisocial manner. The definition of art is non-existent. It seems that no one ever dares to state, "That is not art." This effectively perpetuates the mentality of non-art or anti-art. An artist's work is accepted seriously, and occasionally he is even granted a financial reward to further develop his ideas, even if those concepts are so weak or jumbled that they require extensive verbal explanations to explain the artwork that is meant to communicate them (Andriana, 2013). Western art is aimlessly stumbling without any clear focus or coherence. The foundation of all art is human inspiration or thought. Art that is taken seriously must always look for new or unique forms. Art from the past soon becomes irrelevant and out of date. In actuality, Islam places a high value on beauty awareness. Other essential elements of art are truthfulness, originality, purity, and honesty—all of which are ingrained in Muslims' souls. Art has evolved into the material that bridges the gap between the creator's spirit and that of the observer or admirer (Andriana, 2013).

Islamic art is distinct and has its own historical legacy. Islamic art, which is founded on Islamic sources and emphasises the requirements and desires of Islamic Tawheed and regulations, has

continued to evolve in its own form and philosophy. Islamic art has had a period of emptiness, and its continuation with Western art has been fruitful. Islamic art has been studied using Western formulas. Their theology, however, was unable to accommodate the Western worldview. As a result, it makes writing the history of Islamic art difficult. The Islamic research technique, on the other hand, is founded on the Quran (Andriana, 2013). The terms "Islam" and "art" combine to make Islamic art. Islamic art, according to him, is any work of art created or established by a Muslim. Islamic art truly refers to the way that Islam is manifested in art, and when we discuss how Islam is manifested in art, we are referring to Islamic art. Islamic art is an extension of art from earlier eras that was created and shaped by the idea of Allah's Oneness (Tawhid). To put it another way, any kind of art can be considered Islamic art as long as its ideas and teachings are in line with those of Islam. Additionally, these works of art must be created by Muslims, and when creating art, a Muslim artist should draw inspiration from and consult both the Quran and Hadith (Andriana, 2013).

Art, according to Al-Farabi, is an invention, the creation of beautiful. Al-Ghazali, however, also described art as a work that relates to the human soul's sense that suits his innate nature (fitrah). However, Western society maintains secularism, which disentangles religion from the material world, and views art as having nothing to do with religion (Andriana, 2013). However, art is still viewed as idealistic and morally connected in the West. They had two distinct perspectives on art: art for the community and art for the sake of art. The purpose of art is to convey positive or negative messages through any kind of artistic endeavour. On the other hand, community art serves social, political, and moral purposes (Andriana, 2013).

This was made abundantly evident in Sulaiman Esa's 1977 painting *Waiting for Godot*, which sparked debate in the visual arts community even before it was put on display. The head of the department at his place of employment was shocked to see his etching on the wall and accused him of being insensitive by combining an image of a nude woman with a verse from the Al-Quran. In addition to illustrating his own crisis of artistic identity, the etching technique photo he used to represent himself also illustrated the nation's cultural crisis in the 1970s, particularly among the Malay Muslims' reaction to Western influence (Andriana, 2013). These art series were separated into two groups, each of which had images that were highly contradictory. First of all, the pictures of nude ladies in the pose that sparked the yearning on the underside. On the upper side, however, is Islamic calligraphy that was printed from the mosques of Cordoba and the Alhambra (Andriana, 2013). On the other hand, art is often defined in Islam as a value that combines aesthetics and ethics, between righteousness and beauty. In particular, Islam will produce an exaggerated attitude in the arts, which is against Islamic teachings, if it just emphasises the idea of beauty, akin to the "art for art" ideology, and ignores the positive and negative aspects. The statement "Allah does not love the transgressors" was made by Allah SWT (Surah Al-A'raff: ayah 31). Muslim thinkers believed that Western modernism was fundamentally hedonistic, decadent rather than moralistic, and should be disapproved of. Its tendencies are individualistic and socialistic rather than religious. In summary, the contemporary literary and artistic traditions that originated in the West and are based on humanistic individualism and self-expression must also be refuted (Andriana, 2013).

The true purpose of art is to draw attention to the worship of Allah and his holy rules. For Muslims, only artistic expressions that are motivated by religion are acceptable. Two significant reasons have contributed to the emergence of Islamic art in Malaysia: the first is the National Cultural Congress, which was established by the National Cultural Policy (Dasar

Kebudayaan Kebangsaan) in 1971; the second is the global Islamic renaissance (Andriana, 2013). The August 1971 National Cultural Congress was regarded as a turning point in Malaysian history. He points out that the conference established three fundamental ideas, one of which is Islam, as the foundation for the formation of national culture. The indigenous culture of the area must serve as the foundation for Malaysian culture. Reasonable cultural elements from other cultures can be accepted (Andriana, 2013).

POSTCOLONIAL ARTISTIC IMAGINATIONS AND CONTESTS

By the end of the 20th century, there was an urgent debate among Malaysian artists of legacies of colonialism and a multi-ethnic complex. The postmodern and conceptual arts of the 1990s made such a possibility for challenging national narratives and themes of margin and identity a possibility (Rajah, 1998). Wong Hoy Cheong, for instance, made use of media and video in confronting historical traumata and contributions of Chinese Malays in Malaysia (Raslan, 2002). Indian and Chinese community struggles, and ethnic and social inequalities, in another example, were highlighted by such artists as J. Anurendra and Eng Hwee Chu. The hard-line ethno-national forms of expression disappeared in this period, as multiculturalism and hybridity in redefining Malaysian identity in a scenario of globalization appealed more to artists (Ismail, 1995). Conclusion The evolution of modern Malaysian art is a broader decolonization process, ranging from its earliest Western influences, reasserting national identity, and on to resisting officiating narratives. While Western influences dominated earliest paintings of Malaysia, independence marked attempts toward reestablishing native and regional forms. Reaffirmation of ethno-religious identity in Malay nationalism, and in Islamic revival of the 1970s, and postmodern painters of the 1990s resisting hegemonic representativeness, in Favor of a more inclusive, multi-racialized discursive space, typify this process. With Malaysia maintaining its postcolonial status, modern paintings create an active discursive space for reflection, contestation, and remaking.

Even though the it objectively examines many points of view rather than just trying to validate preconceived notions, the logic offered for the issue statement seems biased. By emphasising the relationship between politics and creative expression, this piece advances our knowledge of the intricacies surrounding Malaysian art's quest for a national identity. The research issue posed by the author is in line with the understanding of the complications surrounding Malaysian art in the 1980s by the larger academic community, especially with regard to the National Culture Policy and Islamization Policies (Abdullah, 2020).

The National Culture Congress was perceived as an official endeavour to shape the Malay identity, which is shown in the discussion of how these policies sought to shape a national identity through art. The author also draws attention to artists' opposition to the idea of "Art for Society," which is consistent with the academic community's larger criticism of the imposition of top-down regulations on artistic expression (Abdullah, 2020). This opposition reflects a broader discussion about the function of art in society and the conflict between personal creativity and social norms, a topic that has been examined by a number of academics in the subject. All things considered, the author's investigation into how these policies affect artistic practices advances a sophisticated comprehension of the relationship between politics,

culture, and identity in Malaysia and is consistent with current scholarly debates concerning the decolonisation of art and the pursuit of national identity (Abdullah, 2020).

According to the article, although "these policies could be seen as an official attempt to shape the Malaysian identity" and explores how the Islamization and National Culture Policies were a part of a larger effort to use art to shape Malaysian identity. According to the author, "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." This further emphasises the influence of these policies on creative practices. This points to a dramatic change in artistic expression that is consistent with the pursuit of national identity, a crucial component of decolonisation. (Abdullah, 2020) The article argues that the National Culture Policy and Islamization Policies of the 1980s were significant turning points in the decolonialization of Malaysian art because they encouraged artists to explore and assert their cultural identity through regional customs and aesthetics, despite opposition to the notion that art should be based on social and political realities. Pioneering exhibitions like "Rupa dan Jiwa" and "Ke Arah Tawhid," which presented Malay material culture and emphasised the importance of a national identity, served as examples of this shift. These rules ultimately aimed to foster a single Malaysian identity, but they also highlighted the challenges and disputes that the creative community faces in trying to reconcile traditional influences with modern artistic expressions (Abdullah, 2020).

Given that colonialism created ethnic boundaries that remained after independence, the historical background of Malaysia's racial demarcation is essential. Malaysia's political, economic, and social relationships were altered by the NEP and its follow-up policies, creating a plural society with communities of Chinese, Indian, and Malay people. (Abdullah, 2020) The National Operations Council (NOC) and the NEP were established as a result of the 1969 race riots, which forced a reassessment of interethnic relations. As stated by Sarena There were many different artistic reactions to these policies. Some artists supported "Art for Art's Sake" and rejected the idea that art should fulfil societal demands, while others embraced Malay and Islamic themes. Prominent shows, like "Rupa dan Jiwa" and "Ke Arah Tawhid," featured traditional materials and aesthetics in an effort to investigate and affirm Malay identity via art. The efforts of other ethnic groups and the larger cultural landscape, however, were frequently eclipsed by the need for a Malay-centric art narrative (Abdullah, 2020).

The document also challenges the notion that the National Culture Policy had an impact on all Malay/Muslim artists, pointing out that many had already been experimenting with regional identities before it was put into effect. Long before the 1980s, artists such as Chuah Thean Teng and Nik Zainal Abidin had forged their identities using local cultural allusions (Abdullah, 2020). The story is made more difficult by the inclusion of Abstract Expressionist pieces in Islamic art shows, even though these pieces frequently did not fit the desired Islamic aesthetic but were yet classified as such. Debates over artistic freedom and the place of art in society were triggered by the National Culture Policy and the Islamization Policies, which sought to promote a unified national identity. In an attempt to decolonise Malaysian art, the regulations encouraged artists to find their own voice (Abdullah, 2020).

Overall, the highlights how the National Culture Policy and Islamization Policies reflected the difficulties of identity formation in a multiracial setting by sparking discussions about artistic freedom and the function of art in society, even as they sought to use art to forge a unified

national identity. The primary goals of Malaysia's 1980s Islamization and National Culture Policies were to strengthen Malay culture as a key component of national identity and to create a unified Malaysian identity (Abdullah, 2020). Established in the early 1970s, the National Culture Policy sought to promote Malay culture while incorporating contributions from other ethnic groups. It did this by restating the National Economic Policy's (NEP) ethnic preference policy. Furthermore, in reaction to the Islamic revival spurred by world events like the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Islamization Policies aimed to strengthen Malay-Muslim autonomy and identity (Abdullah, 2020).

These measures were a part of a larger initiative to promote a shared Islamic identity among Malays and address Malaysia's ethnically fragmented society. With the goal of incorporating Islamic values into many facets of Malaysian life, the 1985 release of the "Dasar Penerapan Nilai-nilai Islam dalam Pentadbiran" placed even more emphasis on the adoption of Islamic principles in cultural activities and governance (Andriana, 2013). By encouraging Malay and Islamic themes in the arts, the National Culture Policy and the Islamization Policies profoundly altered Malaysia's cultural environment. In order to create a national identity based on Malay culture, the National Culture Policy, which was put into effect in the early 1970s, restated the National Economic Policy's (NEP) ethnic preference policy. This was further supported by the Islamization Policies in the 1970s. As a result, artists started incorporating Malay-Islamic motifs into their work, which helped to strengthen the Malaysian cultural matrix and solidify these aspects in mainstream artistic discourse (Abdullah, 2020).

It contends that the effects of these regulations were not totally clear-cut, nevertheless. Even though they promoted the growth of Islamic and Malay themes, many artists persisted in their individualistic practices, frequently following the "art for art's sake" mentality, which made it difficult to define what exactly qualified as Islamic or Malay art (Abdullah, 2020). Artists also rebelled against the regulations, fighting for artistic independence and rejecting the idea that art should fulfil social functions. Furthermore, Western art traditions encouraged the founding of art schools and institutes like the MARA Institute of Technology, which hindered the incorporation of traditional Malay arts into the curriculum. Since the pursuit of a unified cultural identity was frequently limited to a specific meaning centred on Malay and Muslim identity, this discrepancy between the policies and the actual practices of artists brought to light the difficulties of navigating national identity within a multicultural society (Abdullah, 2020). The National Culture Policy has significantly influenced the education and preservation of cultural heritage in Malaysia by promoting the integration of traditional arts into educational curricula. For instance, the establishment of art schools, such as the MARA Institute of Technology, aimed to produce artists who could engage with Malay traditional arts (Abdullah, 2020).

The article written by Sarena Abdullah presents several strengths and weaknesses in its exploration of the impact of the National Culture Policy and Islamization Policies on Malaysian art during the 1980s. Strengths of the study include its thorough examination of the historical context and the critical engagement with various artists' perspectives. However, limitations may arise from the lack of quantitative data and the potential oversight of artists who did not conform to the dominant narratives of the time. Overall, the article provides valuable insights into the cultural dynamics of Malaysia during the 1980s, while also

acknowledging the ongoing challenges faced by artists in navigating their identities within a politically charged environment.

One of the strengths of the article is its thorough examination of the historical context and the critical engagement with various artists' perspectives. The author notes, "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. This highlights the depth of research and the acknowledgment of pre-existing artistic expressions that contributed to the national identity discourse. Additionally, the author emphasizes the significance of exhibitions like "Rupa dan Jiwa," stating that it "exhibited various forms of Malay material culture and artefacts" 8, showcasing the importance of these events in shaping the cultural landscape.

However, a notable weakness in this study of Sarena is the lack of quantitative data to support the claims made about the influence of the policies on artistic practices. The author mentions that "the selection of artists and artworks in these exhibitions" was influenced by the curatorial approach, but does not provide specific measurements or statistical significance to substantiate this assertion. Furthermore, the article acknowledges that "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" indicating a need for a more nuanced exploration of the artists' motivations and the diversity of their responses to the policies. Overall, while the article effectively highlights the complexities of the cultural dynamics in Malaysia during the 1980s, it could benefit from a more balanced approach that includes quantitative analysis alongside qualitative insights.

DECOLONIZING MALAYSIAN ART: BOLD MOVE OR BRUSHSTROKE IN THE DARK?

Malaysia's post-independence history has been defined by efforts towards consolidation of unifying national identity in the context of its populations' heterogeneity. The Islamization Policies and the National Culture Policy (NCP) were such socio-political necessities and had their ramifications on cultural and arts practice in Malaysia. The NCP established Malay culture as the unifier, and Islamization policies propagated Islamic values into every facet of ways of lives, including arts. The policies were grounded, in significant ways, on then-dominant global Islamic revival trends and regional political context (Muslim, 2021).

However, contemporary Malaysian arts continue to bargain, resist, and redefine such frameworks imposed on them by the state. The current paper discusses the arts' responses towards Malaysia's cultural policies from the works of such arts including Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Fauzan Omar, and Yee I-Lann. The paper also contrasts Malaysia's cultural nationalism approach with other approaches of Nigeria and South Africa and brings into view the single contribution of Islamization towards Malaysia. The paper also discusses the impacts of online spaces and global markets for arts on Malaysian arts' changing identities and forms.

The National Culture Policy of 1971 sought to promote national culture whose root origins were from Malay cultural heritage. The policy made national culture be grounded on indigenous Malay culture and supplemented with such cultural factors from other cultures.

Islam also emerged as a pillar of national cultural policy (Andriana, 2013). The policy sought to strengthen national identity against other cultures, and this resulted in clashes between Malaysia's various ethnic communities. Parallel to the NCP, Malaysia experienced Islamization trends from the 1980s, with international forces of renewal and national forces influencing them. The country affirmatively disseminated Islamic values in such areas of society as governance, arts, and education. Islamization of arts and culture led to more domination and censorship, for instance, of arts and performance arts, where un-Islamic subjects were proscribed (Muslim, 2021).

Malaysian artists had also reacted differently towards such policies, resisting, negotiating, and accommodative with, and against, narratives of the state. Bayu Utomo Radjikin stands among Malaysia's best painters of today who resist mainstream cultural and national discourses. His works primarily deal with disaffection, identity, and power. His best-known sculpture, *Wajah* (1993), addresses strict projection of Malay identity, combining traditional and contemporary imagery for defying artificial national identity. The hybrid approach of Bayu symbolizes the general challenge of Malaysian painters in maintaining cultural heritage and individual style (Altabaa, 2022).

Another significant contributor, Fauzan Omar, deals with installation works with the intent of destabilizing mainstream discourses. From natural material such as wood, organic texture, and yellowed leaves, Fauzan constructs a symbol of resistance against sanctioned arts and cultural homogenation. Fauzan's works refer towards vulnerability of imposed cultural constructs and resilience of other discourses. With his installation works, Fauzan questions the stringent regime of the NCP and the constrictive influence of Islamization policies on arts (Altabaa, 2022). Yee I-Lann: *State Critiques and Digital Collages* Yee I-Lann, utilizing computer collages, offers a different way of resisting. Her works resist discourses of the state, and more immediately, discourses of gender, history, and cultural identity. With their distortions of historical images and super-imposing them on present-day scenarios, Yee resists official histories and cultural constructs imposed on the people by the state. The utilization of computer-mediated forms of communication indicates a departure from conventional forms of arts with national and religious policies (Muslim, 2021).

“NEGOTIATING IDENTITY THROUGH ART: CULTURAL POLICY AND NATIONALISM IN MALAYSIA, NIGERIA, AND SOUTH AFRICA”

The cultural policies of Malaysia, Nigeria, and South Africa present a comparative vision of how postcolonial nations resolved cultural nationalism with their use of art. Nigeria's cultural policy of 1988, for its part, made efforts towards national unification with its cultural heritage of its races. With Malaysia, with Islam and Malay culture being the topmost priority, its policy made efforts towards inclusivity, embracing indigenous arts, languages, and customs. However, both of them faltered with cultural nationalism of the state and present-day changing and adaptive natures of arts (Andriana, 2013). Post-apartheid South Africa practiced cultural renewal with reconciliation and multiculturalism. The country's cultural policy addressed historical grievances and established a national identity of plurality. The policy process of South Africa, in contrast with Malaysia, where Islamization has defined cultural policy, had a wider and more secular policy with greater freedom for the arts. Artists from both countries,

however, used their works for mobilizing and remaking discourses of national identity (Altabaa, 2022).

The rise of the web and online arts has made a huge contribution towards the arts of Malaysia, with arts being able to transcend national boundaries and restrictive cultural policies. Digital platforms, including online galleries, markets for NFT, and social networks, have allowed Malaysian painters more exposure and freedom. Artists can showcase their works internationally without being institutionally sanctioned galleries and spaces. This has liberated the arts and has enabled them to challenge national cultural policy and interact with hybrid, globalized forms of representation (Muslim, 2021).

Participation in international Biennales The increasing presence of Malaysian artists on international biennales signals the rise of transnational cultural identity. The visibility of such names from Singapore and the Venice Biennale has created opportunities for Malaysians to engage with international discourses and share their cultural narratives. The exchange signals a departure from the strict boundaries of the NCP, reflective of the flexibility of cultural identity under a postcolonial environment (Andriana, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The impact of Malaysia's National Culture Policy (NCP) and Islamization Policies of the 1980s on the country's artistic landscape has been profound and multifaceted. While these policies sought to establish a cohesive national identity through the promotion of Malay and Islamic cultural values, they also generated significant debate regarding artistic freedom, inclusivity, and creative autonomy. The policies were a product of broader socio-political and religious influences, shaping the themes, aesthetics, and institutional structures of Malaysian art.

Artists responded to these cultural impositions in diverse ways, from accommodation and adaptation to outright resistance. Figures such as Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Fauzan Omar, and Yee I-Lann exemplify the spectrum of responses, using various artistic media to critique, reinterpret, and subvert state-driven narratives. Their works highlight the complexities of cultural negotiation in postcolonial Malaysia, where traditional and contemporary influences collide in the quest for self-expression and national identity.

The comparative analysis with Nigeria and South Africa reveals that while all three nations engaged in cultural nationalism through policy-driven approaches, Malaysia's unique emphasis on Islamization set it apart. Unlike the multicultural policies of post-apartheid South Africa or the ethnically inclusive frameworks in Nigeria, Malaysia's policies reinforced a specific ethno-religious identity, leading to greater artistic constraints and contestations.

Despite these challenges, the rise of digital art, online platforms, and global art collaborations has allowed Malaysian artists to transcend national boundaries and rigid state narratives. Online exhibitions, NFT marketplaces, and international biennales provide alternative spaces

where artists can engage with transnational discourses, asserting identities that move beyond the limitations imposed by the NCP.

Ultimately, while Malaysia's cultural policies sought to define a unified national identity, the country's artistic landscape remains dynamic and ever evolving. Artists continue to navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, cultural imposition and autonomy, nationalism and globalization. Their work not only reflects the ongoing negotiations of identity within Malaysia but also contributes to broader conversations about postcoloniality, decolonization, and artistic resistance in the global arena.

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