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Ceramic Raku Practice through the Context of Islamic Art Practice in Malaysia

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Abstract

In contemporary Malaysian art, the concept of authenticity has faced a dilemma, which emerges from ambivalence in the Malay/Muslim community in their belief towards the issues of representation in Islamic art practice. This research will attempt to answer the questions raised in addressing the dilemma of ceramic Raku; a traditional Japanese Ceramic firing practice through the context of Islamic art practice in Malaysia observed as contemporary Malaysia art.

Keywords: Raku; Practice; Islamic Art; Ceramic

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1.0 Introduction

Through an investigation of contemporary Malaysian art, alongside the presentation of a new body of personal artwork, this research explores the contemporary possibilities of materializing spirituality in the context of Malay/Islamic culture and will propose a structured model that could guide Malay Muslim/Muslim artists' art practice. Fundamental to these research findings is a deeper understanding of how contemporary art practice is able to open doors to the experience of spirituality while negotiating religious principles in Islam. More specifically, it elucidates ways that Malay/Muslim artists deal with art practice as a 'vehicle' of 'transfiguration', so that the art works created become the devout representation. How do Malay/Muslim artists reconcile art making as fulfillment of religious duty and, secular values? How do they see and define the meaning of 'imperfect', 'humble beauty' and function in sculptural form as opposed to the beauty in 'utilitarian function' in Raku philosophy?

The first part of the literary investigation will focus on the historical, religious and cultural context of sculptural artworks with particular reference to Malay/Islamic art tradition and the Islamic attitudes towards art practice based upon the study of Islamic principles and interpretations of Holy Quran and the Hadith. The concept of Taqwa (devotion) in contemporary artworks in the context of Malay/Muslim in Malaysia will also be conducted by critically analyzing the artworks by Malay/Muslim artists through observational/precedent studies. In examining the practice by Malay/Muslim artists, the researcher, through the said approach, will gain insights towards the Malay/Muslim artists on their intention, knowledge and medium of communication in engaging the art making process with spiritual practice in either a religious or a secular context.

By cross-referencing both Malay/Islamic studies and the tradition of Raku, this research will explore the common ground between Malay/Islam and Zen Buddhism as well as the elements that resonate in each other in relation to the practice of art making and its interpretation that leads to materializing transcendence/spiritual. This investigation is important in the attempt to create a 'model' of a

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devotional art practice by comparing both religions. Other than looking at the tradition of Raku through a critical analysis of its history, the philosophy and spiritual aspect specifically the concept of 'imperfect', 'humble' beauty and "'thusness' that transcends individual human intention", informed by the spiritual of wabi sabi* will also be conducted.

By examining ways spirituality is interpreted through art practice in Malay/Islam tradition in arts and its principles as a context, the first part of the literary investigation will review the writings by prominent Islamic scholars of the modern world such as Isma'il and Lois Lamy al-Faruqi (1986), Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1987, 2006) and Sulaiman Esa (1997, 2011). The writings by al-Faruqi and Nasr are important to be analyzed because of their contributions toward a better understanding of Islamic art principles in particular. Esa's view on Malay/Muslim art both traditional and modern is considered among the most current and comprehensive in understanding the Malay tradition. The critical analysis on these will frame the meaning of spirituality with regards to art practice in the context of Malay and Islam.

In dealing with the philosophy and spiritual aesthetic of the tradition of Raku, this research will focus on the writings by Gerd Leister (2006), Morgan Pitelka (2001, 2005, 2008), Leonard Koren (1994), Kakuzo Okakura (1964), Haga Kashiro(1995) as well as Mr Raku Kichizaemon IV (1997). Literary analyses by these writings are important because they represent the critical understanding of the historical, philosophical, and religious spirituality as well as contemporary approach towards Raku. As the current head of the Raku family, Kichizaemon IV in particular, is the modern representative of the Raku family and carry a great deal of weight and certainly the closest thing there is today to an 'orthodox' Raku voice. Reza Shah Kazemi's (2010) writing on the common ground between these two religions will be examined to find out whether or not the spiritual of Raku can be used as a 'model' of a devotional art practice in contemporary art practice of Malay/Islamic culture.

The second part of this research represents a critical reflection on personal artistic practice as a Malay/Muslim artist. This research will employ a methodology called phenomenology of artists' self-reflexive art practice introduced by Scrivener and Sullivan (2005), in approaching the research questions above by describing and analyzing the personal lived experience from a theoretical framework using hermeneutics method. By placing the art making process in the center of the circle, the circles surrounded the center investigate specific topics such as religion, culture, contemporary arts and tradition. The researcher will approach these topics as an artist as well as a researcher who reflects and criticizes each area from collective personal experiences. It is also the researcher's main intention to describe what is it to be 'transformed' or 'transfigured' that leads to attainment of spiritual transcendence in relation to his art practice. As spirituality is very personal and individualized, methodological processes will be employed to objectify the subjective factors.

This investigation will draw upon an autobiographical approach, through a complex interplay of personal religious belief, nationality, cultural background and personal training in the area and art practice as part of this research. A series of ceramic artworks will be discussed by using personal documentations, sketches, photography and video documentation as the tools: the main aim is to materialize the engagement of the spiritual state in art practice that later manifested itself in ceramic sculptures. The analysis of researcher's personal art practice will be compared with the literary analysis and observational/precedent studies in a response to the dilemma of Malay/Muslim artists explained before.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Raku Pottery

Raku is a style of pottery that originated in Japan. Hideyoshi, the Japanese emperor, conferred the name 'Raku' on him. Its translations include "enjoyment," "contemned," "pleasure," and "the best in the world." (Andrews, 1994). Raku porcelain is traditionally used in Japanese tea rituals and is hand-shaped rather than thrown. It was fired at a low temperature for less than an hour before being taken from the kiln and let to cool in the open air.

Sen Rikyu was revered as a god of tea throughout the Edo period, according to Sen(1998) (1600-1867). He was a well-known individual who specialised in chanoyu (tea ceremonies) based on the wabi-sabi aesthetic. Since that time, everyone in the tea school has learned from his chanoyu spirit. Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598), the Japanese emperor, believed this national tea expert to be his personal tea consultant. "As a tea teacher, Rikyu defied the norm of chancy by freely transforming mountains into valleys, changing west to east, and breaking the rule of chancy," Yamanoue Soji, one of Rikyu's followers, said. He had an impact on Japanese art and culture, including flower arrangements, pottery, and zen garden design. According to Varley (1998), Rikyu was an extremist who rattled the world tea's foundations and possibly even the aesthetic order itself. The myth goes that one day, Sen Rikyu was inspired by the wabi-style tea bowls used in the tea ceremony and later met a potter named Chojiro (1512-1592), who was most likely Korean.

Chojiro was pushed by Rikyu to employ the tile-firing process. To satisfy the great tea master's desire for simple, monochrome bowls with depth and width. Chojiro's bowls were not thrown on a wheel or constructed from coils, but rather moulded and carved like sculpture. The bowl's most amazing features were the basic colour and metal lustre glaze over the surface. The name Raku was given by the king Hideyoshi, who was drawn to the Zen tea bowls while attending a tea ceremony at the court. Raku highlights the most notable achievements of Japanese ceramics during the Muromachi period (Dumoulin, 2005). The raku name has been carried down through successive generations of the family for over 400 years. For instance, 'Mr. Raku'-Kichiemon is the 15th generation in the hereditary succession (Hoover, 1977).

2.2 The Influence of Zen Buddhism

Raku is a type of ceramic. It's worth noting that Zen Buddhism impacted not only ancient Japanese tea masters, but also twentieth-century western artists. Zen Buddhism is a hybrid of Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism from India. The Zen spirit is an attempt to immediately realise the meaning of life, which guides individuals to be wise and tranquil, and emerges them as participants in re-discovering their natural connections. Zen Buddhism originated in China, moved to Korea and Japan, and gained widespread popularity in the West by the mid-twentieth century (BBC,2002).

It's hard to talk about raku without mentioning Zen. Sen Rikyu was without a doubt one of the greatest Zen philosophers. The core ideals of Rikyu were WA, KEI, JAKU, SEI, which stood for harmony, respect, tranquillity, and purity. Wabi-sabi, which denotes satisfaction with simplicity and austerity, as well as appreciation of the imperfect, became an aesthetic and tenet of chanoyu as a result of Zen Buddhism's impact. As a result, chanoyu affected many aspects of Japanese culture, art, and religion at the time, including architecture, interior room decorating, pottery, paintings, calligraphy, and flower arranging (TSOL, 2016).

2.3 Malay Ethnic

Malay Ethnic has been defined as people who speak the Malay language, practice the Malay customs and embrace the Muslim faith. The word 'Malay' or 'Melayu' is difficult to define precisely because of the lack of historical information and sources. The word Malay and Malayness have been associated with a particular group of people living mostly in Malaysia, in parts of Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Burma, Singapore and the coastal area of Borneo.

Although it is challenging for the "Malays" to be defined, according to the History of Jambi, the word Malay or Melayu originated from the name of a river closed to Batang Hari (muara Jambi) in Sumatera, Indonesia. There was a Malay Kingdom approximately 1500 years ago before the Kingdom of Srivijaya was established. Therefore, from an etymology point of view, the word "Melayu" originated from the Sanskrit "Malaya" which meant "bukit" or hill. The word Melayu in English was believed to be given by the Dutch who invaded the peninsular Malay and used the term "Malayo" which originated from the word "Malaio", given by the Portuguese.

In the context of modern Malaysia, according to the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, a Melayu or Malay refers to a person who practices Islam and Malay cultures, speaks Malay language, and whose ancestors are Malays. According to Salwa Ayob (2009), the definition of Malay by the Federal Constitution of Malaysia is not entirely agreed upon by the Malay historians and etymologists because the meaning is beyond the definition given. The Pribumi ethnics that are scattered all over the Malay Islands show some similarities to one another in physical appearance, language and cultural manifestation (but they do not practice the Malay way of life and are not Muslim). They are considered not "Malay" and can not be part of Malay entity as according to Federal Constitution of Malaysia. Yaakob Harun (2004) explained that in Malaysia (Brunei Darussalam included), people who are Muslim and practicing the Malay customs and way of life (adat) are considered as "Malay" regardless of their ethnicity and whether or not they originated from the same Malay Archipelago, including China, India, Pakistan and Arabic.

Although the term is still being used in modern Malaysia, the identity of the Malay is becoming more complex especially for the young generation born from a mixed marriage (inter-ethnic marriages) as well as the "Indian Muslims" that have been granted the status of "Malay" in their birth certificate and Identity Card, for ethnicity. Generally, among the Malays, other than cross-cultural marriages, those who are from different races will be accepted as "Malays" when they convert to Islam and practice the Malay customs. The term "Malay" was further widened when the Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia (Malaysian Statistical Department) defined Malay ethnic to include Indonesia, Jakun, Semai, Semalai, Temiar and other groups of Orang Asli (Indigenous people) as well as other Malays.

2.4 Visual Art Representation in the context of Malay and Islam

In visual art representation, Islamic teaching in the eyes of the non-Muslims, appears to be antagonistic towards visual representation. The notion of aniconism initiates the cultural pathology of iconoclasm, which is the destruction of images and imagery of 'idols'. The law of the Shari'a strongly prohibits the naturalistic representation of human and animal images. The basic intention is to prevent 'created' beings from challenging the Attributes of God. It is also to avoid them from committing Shirk (idolatry) or to associate other beings or reality with God and accordingly to prevent them from harboring multi-culturalistic nuances that would steer them away from their faithful monotheistic belief. In dealing with the dilemma that exists in sculpture production as perceived in its relation to Malay/Muslim artists beliefs, one substantial tension recognized is the polemic concern of sculptures as representation of 'idols': a basic aesthetic issue that hinders the employment of figures in Islamic visual art. The principles of Islam play an important role in the creation of artworks by Malay/Muslim artists. But how do we judge the degree of these principles among Malay/Muslim artists? It is important to analyze the artists' environment, their culture and level of religious perceptions as well as circumstances in which these aesthetic values and artworks were created. In judging these values, the character of these Malay/Muslim artists must be able to be analyzed, as well as their artistic aims and objectives, and the religious and social ambience of their lives. Only then, it is possible to visualize the determination that they have and the means they resort to in achieving their artistic goals.

One of the most dominant aspects in creating artworks with regards to Islam is the way in which a distinct style, shapes or motifs, represents the product of Islamic faith and ideology. It is clear that Islam does not permit iconography in arts mainly because in Islamic belief, incarnation of a living thing is only an act of God. Moreover, God alone is the Creator and Sustainer of life. Any Muslim who tries to create a living being is often seen as making an attempt to rival God. Representational art is considered Shirk or idolatry which goes strongly against the teaching of Islam. Iconography will lead to the worship of various

deities. It is expressed in the Shahada: "There is no God except Allah". Because of this monotheistic teaching, Islam is not entirely conducive to the mainstream fine arts, which are based on iconography creation. Hence, Muslim artists resorted to other types of arts such as arabesque patterns or calligraphy, which can be used in comprehension of the words from Holy Quran.

Islam strongly prohibits representational art. Therefore, the question is how could the artists glorify God in their creative endeavors? In other religions, figurative paintings or sculptures are installed and worshipped in their religious places. However, it is the question of how can artistic works, in particular contemporary sculptures be created as such? Islam strongly reminds the artists not to incarnate the human body or indulge in producing figurative sculptures. This gives the artists a basic idea, while the principles guide him to the style and aesthetic values.

3.0 Methodology

This qualitative study will be centralizing on the discipline of ceramic firing process which known as Raku as it pertains to the emergence and development of Japanese civilizations' philosophy tradition. This historical analysis is based on the iconographical model of Erwin Panofsky's Theory of Meaning in Art depicted from the study of Shatford (1986) and Jorgensen (2003); that includes both the aspect formalistic and contextual analysis Raku. The main aims of his approach are 'connoisseurship and humanism', stressing on the importance of looking at the process or Raku through the context of Islamic art practice in Malaysia. Along the study, at least there will be three (3) stages of level which are: Pre-Iconography, Iconographical Analysis and Iconological Interpretation.

Erwin Panofsky's Theory of Meaning in Art
Based on Descriptions by Shatford (1986) and Jorgensen (2003)

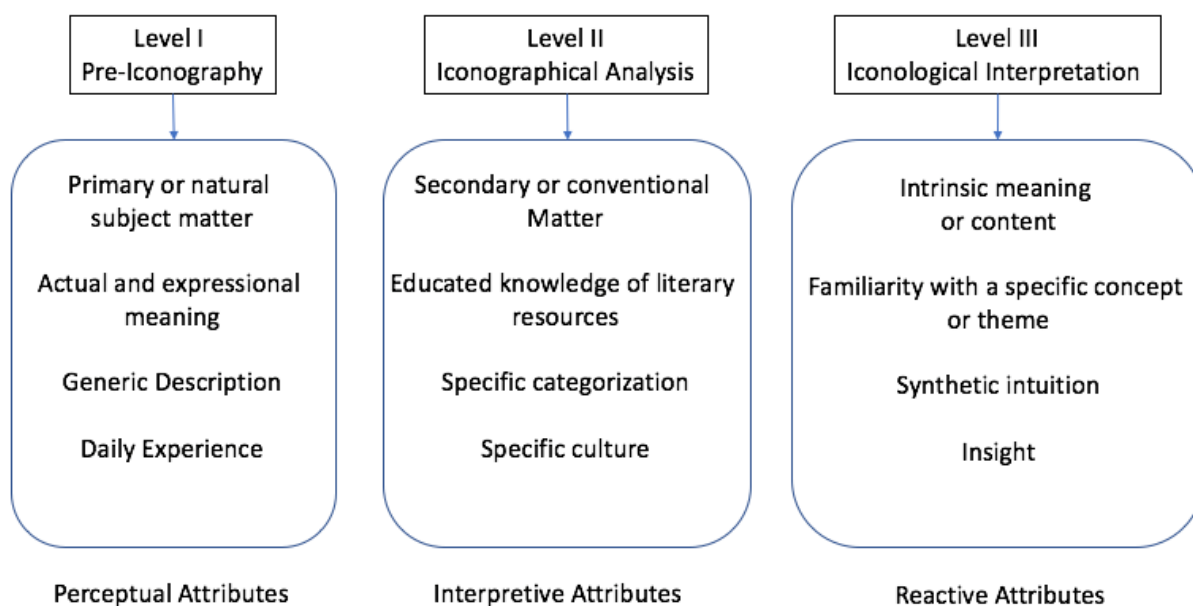


Fig. 1: Erwin Panofsky's Theory of Meaning in Art

4.0 Findings

Throughout this study, we distinct Raku tradition and its contemporary practice refers to the spiritual, religious, philosophical, ceremonial and functional characteristics of a specific style of ceramics, which this research suggests could provide a 'parallel', through which the practice of spirituality becomes fulfillment of religious duty in the Malay/Muslim context of art creation. This research also postulates that the spiritual aspects of Raku ceramic practice may also propose a model by which the spiritual transcendence may occur in contemporary art practice generally and specifically in the context of Malay/Islamic culture. Through an investigation of contemporary Malaysian art, alongside the representation of Malaysian Raku artwork, this research explores the contemporary possibilities of materializing spirituality in the context of Malay/Islamic culture and will propose a structured model that could guide Malay Muslim/Muslim artists' art practice. Fundamental to these research findings is a deeper understanding of how contemporary art practice is able to open doors to the experience of spirituality while negotiating religious principles in Islam. More specifically, it elucidates ways that Malay/Muslim artists deal with art practice as a 'vehicle' of 'transfiguration', so that the art works created become the devout representation. How do Malay/Muslim artists

reconcile art making as fulfillment of religious duty and, secular values? How do they see and define the meaning of 'imperfect', 'humble beauty' and function in sculptural form as opposed to the beauty in 'utilitarian function' in Raku philosophy?

5.0 Discussion

The first part of the literary investigation will focus on the historical, religious and cultural context of sculptural artworks with particular reference to Malay/Islamic art tradition and the Islamic attitudes towards art practice based upon the study of Islamic principles and interpretations of Holy Quran and the *Hadith*. The concept of *Taqwa* (devotion) in contemporary artworks in the context of Malay/Muslim in Malaysia will also be conducted by critically analyzing the artworks by Malay/Muslim artists through observational/precedent studies. In examining the practice by Malay/Muslim artists, the researcher, through the said approach, will gain insights towards the Malay/Muslim artists on their intention, knowledge and medium of communication in engaging the art making process with spiritual practice in either a religious or a secular context. By cross-referencing both Malay/Islamic studies and the tradition of Raku, this research will explore the common ground between Malay/Islam and Zen Buddhism as well as the elements that resonate in each other in relation to the practice of art making and its interpretation that leads to materializing transcendence/spiritual. This investigation is important in the attempt to create a 'model' of a devotional art practice by comparing both religions. Other than looking at the tradition of Raku through a critical analysis of its history, the philosophy and spiritual aspect specifically the concept of 'imperfect', 'humble' beauty and "thusness" that transcends individual human intention",[†] informed by the spiritual of *wabi sabi*[†] will also be conducted.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

As discussed in the previous discussion, the principles of Islam have vital roles in the creation of artworks by Malay/Muslim artists. But how do we judge the degree of these principles in Malay/Muslim artists? It is important to analyze the artists' environment, their culture and the level of religious feelings as well as circumstances in which these aesthetic values and artworks were created. In judging these values, the character of these Malay/Muslim artists must be able to be analyzed, as well as their artistic aims and objectives, and the religious and social ambience of their lives. Even though no one individual is the same, sharing a common guideline under the broader principle of Islam enables the Malay/Muslim artists to find a common ground that binds them. Understanding each of their similarities and differences as well as the religious belief that chains them would be tremendously helpful in any analysis of their art pieces. Armed with solid knowledge of these fundamentals, the researcher would find it possible to visualize the determination that they had and the means they resorted to in achieving their artistic goals.

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[†]Literally means beauty of the 'humbleness' and 'imperfection' derived from the teaching of Zen Buddhism.

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