



A Silent Revolution in Malaysia: New Politics of Resistance in a Global Capitalist Age*

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This paper explores the future of radical politics in a bifurcated Malaysian society whereby Islamization has paralysed resistance. It argues that in an incapacitated public sphere, resistance has to find new spaces and strategies. Drawing on theoretical innovations from inter-Asia paradigms and evidence of popular religious and artistic practices in urban Malaysia, it makes a case on silent resistance occurring at subterranean, every day and personal levels that reconfigures ethical traditions long in circulation in the (Southeast) Asian region as bearing promise for a renewal of radical politics. That this is so is due to their ability to recover transcultural and convivial pasts and render back a capacity for critical interrogation of hegemonic impositions on self and community. Such quiet practices show that radical politics has to begin with mindful self-transformations and that materiality, bodily experiences and performances are powerful vessels for the renewal of political consciousness and action.

Keywords Radical politics; Inter-Asia studies; Malaysian politics, arts and politics

I. Introduction

Since the new millennium, deep political divisions arising from a dis-embedded Islamic conservatism in the enmeshment between Malaysian ethno-religious nationalism and global Islamism have severely debilitated political opposition, putting into question the future direction of radical politics in Malaysia. The basis of political mobilization has been eroded in three major ways by the politicization of Islam. First, there is a loss of hope in statist and institutional reforms as internal bickering over the issue of Islamic law implementation has derailed plans for a united oppositional coalition in the coming 2018 General Elections. Second, there is an equal loss in hope of civil society to bring about change as it is deeply split

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down the middle by groups advocating for Islam and those defending secularism. Third, class and ideological affiliations no longer suffice as basis of collective mobilization as the politicization of Islam has blurred, confused, and made indecipherable traditional political cleavages.

This sacralization of politics has made strange bed-fellows of people who otherwise have little in common as they band together to defend or oppose Islamization. The quarrels over Islamization have generated endless political stalemates alongside protracted street protests and violence on both sides of the divide. What is disconcerting is that both sides are equally dogmatic and unable to reconcile differences in their imaginaries of Malaysian public life. What is sinister is that this political bifurcation over Islam falls in tune with statist rhetoric of placing Islamic and Western conceptions of human rights, justice and freedom in binary opposition. Criticisms of Islam are quickly flattened as proxies of Western designs and rejected. Even when nuances from Western critical categories are articulated, they are glossed over, and misunderstood. This incapacitation of resistance suggests that radical resistance will need to change course and seek alternative strategies that can mobilize common concerns to struggle for a convivial, just and hopeful Malaysian future.

Current critical paralysis point to the failure of the classical tripartite struggle between state, civil society and capital found in Euro-American political models. The capacity of ethno-religious politics in invading private identities and eroding public political debates suggest that resistance must move beyond the highly charged public sphere. Key in this search is to find other spaces and ways to renew radical thought and action so that it can effectively dismantle the conservative logic of identity politics and bring political extremes into dialogue. To this end, we may have to radically alter our conceptions of politics. The terms of debates on what is political may have to be changed. In other words, we may have to part with normative indexes/categories on what count as resistance and build new ones. The quest for new radical possibilities must be open to atypical critical logics, categories and consciousness as long as they are capable of mobilizing people around shared concerns to struggle against religious bigotry, authoritarianism and exclusionary practices.

In this paper, I argue that the quarrels over Islamic conservatism in Malaysia cannot be resolved by any predetermined political conceptions.

Rather fights over religiosity can only be concretely resolved at the level of social practice. The challenge is to find ways to locate alternative religious/identity ethics and imaginings of ethno-religious co-existence in Malaysian history that can direct an unlearning of established identity categories and a relearning of self and collective conceptions in totally new ways that enable people to see Others in themselves and vice versa. For this, we need to transcend short national history to draw on a deeper regional history of interconnectivity, transcultural and hybrid ethno-religious identifications in maritime Southeast Asia upon which Malaysian modern society is built. To make my arguments, I will draw on recent “inter-Asia” theoretical innovations and empirical evidence of counter-cultural configurations of religious, cultural and linguistic traditions in contemporary urban Malaysia to showcase a silent form of resistance that has effectively changed political engagement away from a highly charged public sphere towards subterranean, every day and personal spheres that promotes inculcations of ethical selves and collective action. In what follows, new theoretical grounds opened up by inter-Asia paradigms to overturn “tradition” from a disdained into a revolutionary resource for self and collective transformations will be first discussed before we turn to quiet reconfigurations of traditions that bear promise for a politics of mutual respect, dialogue and conviviality and the ideational and methodological novelties posed for a renewal of radical political thought and action.

II. Inter-Asia paradigms: The Revolutionary Promise of Tradition

In recent years, loose intellectual currents among East, South and Southeast Asian scholars to reclaim inter-Asia regionalism as resistance provide us with an opportunity to use theoretical innovations on Asian difference to shift the terms of debates on the future of radical politics. These inter-Asia ideas are consolidated by two influential books with different objectives but which share substantive epistemological innovations. The first is that of *Asia as Method* by Taiwanese cultural studies scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010), and its new “inter-Asia methodology” to liberate Asian identities and social-political formations from colonial, Cold War and state powers.

The other is that of *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future* by the Indian historian Prasenjit Duara (2015), and its concept of Asia's traffic of "circulatory histories" and "dialogical transcendence" as resources to overcome the ecological crisis of global capitalist modernity.

These two books share substantive theoretical-methodological innovations and focus on drawing lessons from East, South and Southeast Asian pasts and presents to overcome two main structural crises of global capitalism, namely state authoritarianism and ecological unsustainability. Hope is placed in "inter-Asia" historical circulations and cultural imaginaries—that are treated as both methods and resources—for inculcating Asian ethical selves and regional transformation as a whole. That is, their "inter-Asia" paradigms call for the development of affective ethical systems of thought and politics, built upon traditional insights from East, South and Southeast Asia, as means of empowering Asians to break free from class, racial, gender, and materialist oppressions created historically by imperial power relations, nationalism, and capitalism. Such moral empowerment, they argue, is derived from a mixture of philosophical, religious, cultural, linguistic and oral traditions in circulation within these Asian regions that have inspired hope, rational deliberation, and political action over time. Both these authors take a controversial approach by locating ethical traditions as an important resource for "a reflexive politics of decolonization," for a decolonised Asian future, in the case of Chen (2010: 13), and for "cultivating the ethical and disciplined self" for an ecologically sustainable world, in the case of Duara (2015: 2).

For both Chen and Duara, the construction of autonomous imaginations of self and society requires a double-movement of, on the one hand, a critical distancing from imperial, capitalist and nationalist imperatives, and on the other hand, a reconstruction of identity or consciousness via redeploying useful elements of traditional, precolonial or non-modern resources. Their claim on the traditional, precolonial or non-modern as resources for generating critical-decolonized thought and action to facilitate personal and social-political transformations is somewhat controversial hence requires some elaboration.

At first glance, this turn to tradition may appear regressive and nativist. However, Chen's and Duara's definition of tradition is far from conventional. Rather they see the traditional, pre-modern or non-modern as providing

rich ethical resources for inventions of autonomous revolutionary imaginations, capable of overcoming colonial, social-political and capitalist oppressions specific to the region. Two examples put forth by these authors may help bring home their points. The first is what Chen calls a strategy of “critical syncretism” to develop critical consciousness by asking deeper questions about oneself and drawing on insights from values and traditions rooted in Asia in order to liberate and change oneself (Chen, 2010: 98-99). He develops this strategy by drawing on the concept of “syncretism,” developed by a regional scholar Edward T. Ch’ien (1986), to explain the hybrid consciousness that arose from a mixture of elements from Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism to combat the orthodoxy of neo-Confucianism in the late Ming era in China.¹ Theoretically, critical syncretism is about both the processes of selective mixing of insights from various traditional sources, as well as developing a capacity for active reflexivity to question normative impositions on one’s sentiments, cultural imaginations and subjectivity. For Chen, in a region deeply inscribed by the uncompleted struggle for decolonization and the crisis of post-independence, and where class, racial, gender, and cultural hierarchies pervade everyday life, Asians have to deploy critical syncretism in order to empower themselves to escape from these encumbrances. He sees a “decolonization” of imperialist imaginaries imposed by colonialism and the Cold War on the Asian thought, body, and action as an absolute necessity in order to prevent a reproduction of imperial power hierarchies and racist attitudes. In Chen’s terms, decolonization refers to “attempts by the formerly colonized to reflectively work out a historical relation with the former colonizer, culturally, politically, and economically” (Chen *op cit*, 3). He sees decolonization as a necessary but painful process of “self-critique, self-negation, and self-rediscovery” to form a “less coerced and more reflexive and dignified subjectivity” (*Ibid*).

In the case of Duara, he sees old cultural models outside of state power that have pervaded and inspired Asian societies since the maritime era as resources for growing the seeds of resistance against the materialism and consumerism of our time. He argues that the region’s traditions such as Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, folk religions, re-

¹ Edward T Ch’ien, *Chiao Hung and the Restructuring of Neo-Confucianism in Late Ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), quoted in Chen 2011, 98-99.

demptive societies, and other faith-based cosmologies offer “non-worldly *moral authority*” (Duara, 2015: 4, his emphases) to inspire and the “discipline of self-formation or self-cultivation and the methodologies of linking the self to locality, community, environment and the universal” (*Ibid.*: 2). He argues that both state/elites and ordinary Asians have drawn on moral authority from these non-worldly traditions to master unruly and oppressive forces in the past and present. He suggests that such moral authority “serves as a historical motor to empower the quest of justice and its ideal of a better world” (*Ibid.*: 125). Such ethics represent a form of “dialogical transcendence” or “*a way of human knowing* based upon an inscrutable yearning or calling with several attributes that coexist in varying degrees” (*Ibid.*: 6, his emphases).

Taking the transcendent as “an inviolable (moral) moral space that may not be fundamentally religious but may be a condition for human aspirations”, Duara sees dialogical transcendence as a method through which groups accommodate diversity through techniques of self-formation that involve bodily practices and embodied knowing (*Ibid.*: 125). Importantly, this ethic of dialogical transcendence is not only a religious inspiration but plays a historical role in the moral empowerment of opposition against injustices and renewals of Asian societies. Duara cites redemptive societies in late imperial China, whose main mission was “to save the self, to save humanity, and to save the world through self-abnegation” as an example of how transcendent ideals and self-cultivation practices played a role in an emergent modern public sphere that accommodated differences during this time of political fragmentation (*Ibid.*: 176).² We could add some contemporary examples such as the activist *phra nak phathanaa* (development) or *phra nak anuraksaa* (ecology) monks in Thailand (e.g., Taylor, 1993: 3-16), the transnational Taiwanese Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzuchi Foundation, and an assortment of NGOs and ENGOs engaged in sustainability efforts to salvage the world from destruction.

In short, Chen’s politics of self-decolonization and Duara’s politics of self-abnegation pose us with a radical insistence that the first step of liberation has to begin with the self—to free oneself from all kinds of worldly

² Some examples of redemptive societies were the Daodehui (morality Society), the Daoyuan (Society of the Way), the Red Swastika Society, the Tonghsanshe (Fellowship of Goodness), Zailijiao (the Teaching of the Abiding Principle) and the Shijie Zongjiao Datonghui (Society of the Great Unity of World Religions) (see Duara, 2015: 178).

trappings such as nationalist, consumerist and other forms of desires—before collective change can happen. Against the norm of perceiving such self-abnegation as apolitical, religious or aesthetic practices, inter-Asia approaches suggest that they posit us with an alternative form of political ethic with transformative potential. They capture the urgency of self-transformation pointing to the political significance and inter-dependence of cultivating ethical-selves and collective transformations.

A politicized approach to self-abnegation overturns normative understanding of the political. The philosopher, Rada Iveković has poignantly noted that the ethic of disengagement from will power in many Asian traditions is at best, understood as religion or aesthetics, but never political in Western political thought (2010: 51). That this is so, she explains, is because the concept of inner freedom does not fit with the subjective positioning required in the Western normative understanding of the political.

To Iveković, a new understanding of inner freedom as political would require not only an epistemic revolution but “cognitive justice” given the wide gaps of misunderstanding in the “political and theoretical language between ‘Asia’ and ‘Europe’ (*Ibid.*: 47). In an attempt to bridge the gap of reasoning between Western emancipatory patterns and the intimately political dimension of self-abnegation in Asian philosophical traditions, Iveković argues that the quest to decentre, dispossess or dissolve the self is equally an emancipatory act (*Ibid.*: 54). She argues that act of freedom is about undoing divisions in minds to re-understand subject-object, self-other, feminine-masculine, full-empty, unity-diversity and so on as undifferentiated, mutually constitutive and harmonious.³ Freeing the mind from dichotomous modes of perceptions, she argues, can help us capture the “cooperation of minds” and gain new insights and ways of collective action (*Ibid.*: 59).

We can surmise that inter-Asia methodologies set themselves apart from Western critical norms by sowing the seeds of revolutionary possibilities

³ As an example of such undifferentiated logic of unity in diversity, Iveković cites the Taoist idea of a supreme void before any division, named *qi*. *Qi* is the receptacle of both *yin* and *yang* (the female and male principles) and undifferentiated though doubly constituted unity of fullness/emptiness, movement/rest and feminine/masculine (Anne Cheng, *Histoire de la Pensée Chinoise* (Paris: Seuil, 1997) as quoted in Ivekovic, 2010: 54). The philosophy of mindfulness in Zen Buddhism provides another example of the complementarity of contradictions and differences (for e.g., see Thich, 2006).

in quotidian “practices” of tradition. However, the concept of tradition deployed by inter-Asia paradigms has its own sets of origins and meanings and differs from normative understandings in Western social sciences. For instance, inter-Asia’s conception of tradition is not to be confused with the modern “invention of tradition” identified by historians Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992). In Hobsbawm’s and Ranger’s approach, tradition is not stuck in the past but rather something present which is newly invented, often by the state. Tradition from the inter-Asia perspective is not a modern invention. Rather, it is a resilient category standing outside the fold of the modern despite its imbrication with it. Perhaps, tradition may be best grasped in terms of an evolving, growing practice with ancient roots but whose practice is not history. It is a living moral resource intelligible to local communities employable for self- and -collective decolonization purposes towards building autonomous Asian ethical systems of thought and politics for a more just, sustainable and promising modernity. In other words, inter-Asia methodologies are calling for a kind of anti-institutional, ethically-driven role for tradition in the present. They argue for the recognition of the positivity of Asian ethical traditions in and on their own terms, on the belief that the possibility of an alternative modernity/future can be found there.

This substantive claim on tradition turns Asian ethical difference into a critical epistemic concept. It suggests that irreducibly different ethical traditions from East, South, and Southeast Asian regions provide methodologies and resources for self- and collective change to resist nationalist, imperialist and capitalist pressures. By doing so, inter-Asia methodologies radically redefine “tradition” to stand for a completely different non-static logic and temporality, that cannot be subsumed by, but rather co-exists with, the modern. These enduring yet varying autochthonous spheres of the traditional are keys to radical transformations of the self and community in the past and the future. By insisting that liberation arises from the politics of different actualities, inter-Asia methodological paradigms draw attention to distinctive sets of ethical imperatives arising from, and which are responsive to, the region’s complex realities.

This is not to say that all configurations of tradition are radical in nature. Clearly, they take all forms. Regressive translations for domineering purposes at both official and ordinary levels in the region are clearly observable.

Yet, we cannot ignore trends of popular sovereignty across the Asian region that fall along the lines identified by Chen and Duara. Developments in Malaysia bear out progressive political possibilities and it is to these configurations that we next turn.

III. Islamization: The politics of tradition

Malaysian transformations since the late twentieth century have been characterized by an escalating anti-West rhetoric on the part of the state whereby elements of “tradition” and “Islam” are valorised and re-scripted into new mind sets, ethnic identifications, and grandiose urban built forms to express new national sensibilities that are responsive to market instrumentalities. This counter-cultural idiom of Malaysian political economy could be understood in terms of its postcolonial location in late capitalism. Like many ex-colonies, economic modernization is imperative for Malaysia’s national survival. Yet, economic modernization implicates a hierarchical set of meanings that establish the West as the forerunner against which other countries are judged. Hence, for a developing economy like Malaysia, capitalist modernization is at once an experience of liberation and domination: It is understood as an opportunity to imagine an autonomous future distinct from the West on the one hand, but also an unending race to catch up with the West, on the other. As much as this interlocking sense of opportunity and disempowerment is deployed by the state to legitimise its anti-West rhetoric, it is also nevertheless a product of historical and economic structures of subordination and domination and hence resonates with ordinary Malaysians at the everyday level who are well aware that the level of participating in the global world remains different for people of colour and who come from different historical locations outside western world. This in part explains why the government’s critical stance against the West has largely received public endorsement although there is resistance to government policy on many fronts.

Nevertheless the emergence of a strident orthodoxy in the enmeshment of Malay identity politics within the global tide of political Islam has complicated the politics of an alternative capitalist modernity. The arrival of narrow Islamic interpretations derived largely from the Middle-East has the

effect of “pulling the rug off from under.”

Malaysian political foundations, so to speak. While concerted Islamization of the Malaysian bureaucracy has begun since the 1980s, the consolidation of conservative forces and the emergence of religious hardliners both within and outside the government only became evident in the new millennium. The embedding of a de-territorialised pan-Islamism in the Malaysian political landscape is inevitably a product of the nexus between Malay nationalism and growing militancy of global Islamic politics by the new millennium. This has seen the rise of dogmatic brands of narrow Islamism that ignore the history and spirit of conviviality long found in a plural society like Malaysia.

The new millennium has seen new controversies over Islamic orthodoxy as it spreads into efforts to implement an Islamic state and Islamic criminal law, sparking divides between Islamists and progressives (comprising both Muslims and non-Muslims) over constitutional guarantees within the multiracial body politic of Malaysian society (Noor, 2002; Othman, 2003; Martinez, 2001; Mohamad, 2001). A series of controversial court cases over the past few years involving cases on religious rights over the dead, forced separation of Muslims from their non-Muslim spouses and children, conversion and apostasy in Islam worsened public anxiety over the growing powers of Islamic orthodoxy. Unhappiness over court rulings in these cases led to a series of public protests, vigils, and forums as both Islamist and secularist groups sought resolution on the issue of constitutional guarantee of religious freedom and clarity in jurisdiction of the syariah and civil courts over matters of religion.

As the fight between “Islamists” and “secularists” over the supremacy of Islamic law versus Federal Constitution escalated, loose coalitions between diverse groups were formed on each side to consolidate their power base and create platforms to voice concerns. The coalitions formed to advocate secularist interests included: the Inter-Faith Commission, established by the Human Rights Sub-Committee of the Bar Council, which encourages dialogue across different religious faiths; the Article 11 Coalition (named after the constitution article that guarantees the right of every Malaysian citizen to “profess and practice his religion”) comprising thirteen religious and human rights groups; and the Merdeka Statement,⁴ a non-governmental nation-building social document

⁴ This initiative was launched by the Centre for Public Policy Studies and Asian Strategy and

towards creating equal opportunities and stronger civil liberties backed by forty-two think tanks and human rights, economic and religious organisations, including the Malaysian Bar Council and the Sisters of Islam. On the opposite camp, alliances of right-wing Islamic groups among which included: the Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs (ACCIN—a loose coalition of thirteen Muslim NGOs); PEMBELA or Defenders of Islam; ISMA or Malay Muslim Solidarity; PERKASA or Mighty Native Organization and Lawyers in Defence of Islam⁵—a group established by Muslim lawyers on July 2006 to counter the Malaysian Bar Council’s secularist position on the issue of religious freedom.

This row over Islam and religious freedom saw uncompromising positions at both fronts. For Islamist groups, the supremacy of the syariah courts in deciding on Islamic matters was unquestionable and they wanted the powers of this religious court strengthened. They referred to the status of Islam as the official religion in Malaysia’s Constitution to support their claims and criticised secularist arguments of absolute religious freedom as ignoring this special position of Islam. For progressives, the supremacy of the Federal Constitution and the civil courts in adjudicating on religious freedom was absolute and they wanted the reassurance of this guarantee. In support of their claims, they reverted to historical facts and documents to argue for the secular status of the Malaysian state despite Islam as its official religion.⁶ The fundamentally opposing positions between the two camps led to much acrimony with Islamists vilifying their opponents as secularists while progressives disparaging Islamists as demagogues.

Leadership Institute on 2 August 2007 (Bede Hong and Hon Yi Wen, “Minister breaks rank on Islamic state”, *Malaysiakini*, 2 August 2007 <<http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/70670>> (accessed 12 April 2008).

⁵ See Fauwaz Abdul Aziz “Lawyers set up group to defend Islam, *Malaysiakini*, 13 July 2006 <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/53818> (accessed 6 April 2008).

⁶ Secularist factions often cite the Memorandum by the Alliance between the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) to the Reid Commission (an independent commission tasked to draft the Malaysian Federal Constitution prior to the country’s Independence), dated 27 September 1956, which states, “The religion of Malaysia shall be Islam. The observance of this principle shall not impose any disability on non-Muslim nationals professing and practising their own religion, and shall not imply the State is not a secular State”. For an example, see press statement by Ambiga Sreenevasan, President of Malaysian Bar Council, in “Malaysia a secular state”, President of the Malaysian Bar Council, 18 July 2007. http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/press_statements/press_statement_malaysia_a_secular_state.html> (accessed 12 April 2008).

The weakening of the state due to corruptive allegations around the 1MDB scandal has lent increasing inability or perhaps unwillingness of the state to reign in Islamic conservative forces as ethno-religious identity politics serves as a powerful tool to divide and rule. As such, there has been an unfolding of a series of debacles around the zealous behaviour of the various Islamic Religious Councils in arresting Muslims against *syirik* (proscribed) practices or blasphemy. Such intolerant practices further widened ethno-religious divides alongside increasing curtailment of personal freedom amongst Muslims among which banned them from: yoga practice, making festivity wishes for Christmas and Deepavali⁷ to their non-Muslim friends, engaging in inter-faith dialogue, working in establishments serving alcohol, taking part in beauty pageants for Muslim women and so on.

While there appears diminishing hope for effective intervention from civil society, out of impotence also grew new possibilities. The bigotry and futility in a highly charged Malaysian public sphere have pushed some to seek alternative political expressions. Political critique has increasingly turned to new subterranean and everyday spaces in the form of a quiet spread of alternative Islamic imaginaries in affront to dominant conceptions. Here, practises of tradition as counter-culture provide avenues for the recovery of shared civic dimensions of ethnic interchanges and conviviality that overthrow bigoted religious discourses. I will use popular religion, artistic representations and linguistic practices to show how tradition is an effective resource for resistance against growing ethno-religious bigotries in Malaysian public life.

IV. Trans-cultural Cosmologies

Although Islam has become highly regulated in the Islamization of Malaysian public sphere, alternative interpretations of Islam have not disappeared in everyday life. Here, I want to use an urban revival of a local Muslim guardian spirit, the *keramat*, and the colourful Sky Kingdom (*kerajaan langit* in Malay) cult as two examples of spiritual resistance which

⁷ This is the festival of light for Hindus all over the world to mark the triumph of good over evil.

advance a syncretic mixture of Islam, Hindu-Buddhist, Sinic, and animistic cosmologies from a deeper maritime past in defiance of mainstream Islamic discourses. Let me begin with the *keramat* cult.

The *keramat* is a cult of Muslim saint worship that has long been practiced in Malaysia and the wider Malay world. Hybrid practices of the *keramat* cult—a syncretism of Malay and Indian-derived Shia’ beliefs as well as Islamic mysticism (*tasawuf*) in Sufi Islam that draw on established Malay animistic notions of souls (*semangat*) throughout the natural world—has long characterised the maritime world of the Malay archipelago. For instance, the French scholar, Chambert-Loir (2002), has noted that mausoleums of Muslim saints were built upon Savaite temples and Buddhist stupas in Java as early as the 15th and 16th centuries. A study by Salmon (1993) also shows “cultural symbiosis” in the spread of this cult across Java and on an island off Aceh during the beginning of the 18th century. An example is the presence of Islamic holy tombs across the island of Java ascribed to Zheng He—the Chinese Muslim commander-in-chief of the Ming fleets. In a previous study, I had noted the ascendancy of *keramat* or Muslim saint worship as part of Chinese popular religions since the 1980s in urban Malaysia (Goh, 2012). The emergence of this urban popular religion, I had argued, must be understood in terms of increasing constraints on trans-cultural and trans-ethnic spaces within a highly ethno-religiously charged political economy in Malaysia. The rise of official Islamic orthodoxy, which rests on a more universalistic rather than localised conceptions of the religion, had among other things, led to an emptying-out of local Malay cultural (*adat*) influences. The *keramat* became one of the affected institutions. Under increasing Islamization in Malaysia, hybrid Islamic practices such as the *keramat*—which was once largely observed among rural Malay communities—came under increasing attack in the 1980s. It was criticized for contradicting official Islam. The eastern states of Kelantan and Trengganu controlled by the Islamic opposition party, PAS, even banned *keramat* worship. The overt push for a pristine Islam in Malaysia gradually forced the Malay community to abandon *keramat* worship. Rural Muslims were increasingly pressured to abandon this practice deemed to be *syirik* (proscribed) as urban middle-class civil servants such as school teachers were job-posted into these villages and began to impose their more purist interpretations of Islamic doctrines. As Malay-Muslims abandoned this practice, the Chinese and Indians grad-

ually took over the worship of the *keramat* and in this process brought it into the urban terrain.

In the spread of this popular religion to Malaysian urban centres, two-way flows of transculturalism can be observed in its religious symbolisms. On one hand, the *keramat* has become sinicised and renamed as the *datuk kong* (*nadugong*), a guardian spirit of local sacred places. On the other hand, the adoption of this Muslim saint worship has led to the Islamization of Chinese popular religious rituals and symbolisms which include: Malay-Muslim figurines representing *datuk kongs* – where these figurines don *baji* prayer caps (headwear associated with Islamic *ulama* or pious men), traditional Malay hut-shape structures with horn-shaped Minangkabau roof-tops, the incorporation of star-and-crescent symbols of Islam and the Malaysian flag into *datuk kong* shrine structures, the Islamization of associated rituals and the offering of Islamic kosher food. Fantastic hagiographies around worshipped saints are not uncommon and often contributed to urban legends on the power of *keramats* (see Sevea, 2009).

Yet, the *keramat* cult is not the only popular Islamic practice that rehashes the trans-ethno-religious cosmologies of a deeper maritime past. There are many everyday practices of Islamic syncretism that draw on trans-ethno-religious cosmologies of a deeper maritime regional history. While such hybrid Islamic practices are often banned, new ones keep cropping up (see Abdul Hamid, 1999). Sometimes, even bans could not erase them from public and cyber imaginaries. One such popular Islamic practice is the defunct *Kerajaan Langit* (literally, Sky kingdom)—a cult which drew on a mixture of Hindu, Buddhist and Christian cosmologies—founded by a self-style spiritual leader, Ariffin Mohammed, or more fondly known as “Ayah Pin.” Like the *keramat* cult, the symbolisms and hagiography of Sky Kingdom’s founder equally depict fluid trans-religious cosmologies of a deeper past.

Sky Kingdom was said to have its origins in the 1980s but only came into public limelight in late 1990s with the escalation of new Islamic orthodoxy in Malaysia. It came under persecution when Islamic authorities rounded up four of its followers for deviant Islamic practices in 1997 and subsequently, Ayah Pin was jailed for apostasy in 2001⁸ before the

⁸ See Adrian David, “Ayah Pin ‘Sky Kingdom’ sect leader is dead,” *New Straits Times Online*, 23 April 2016. <<http://www.nst.com.my/news/2016/04/140972/ayah-pin-sky-kingdom-sect->

destruction of the religious commune in 2005.⁹ Operating from a religious commune in the east coast state of Terengganu in peninsula Malaysia, the Sky Kingdom promoted universal unity among all religions and advocated a liberal belief in “many paths one God, many names, One God, and One Sky Kingdom for all religions”.¹⁰

Its commune was noted for a colourful giant structure containing a huge teapot, umbrella and a concrete boat which were interconnected by walkways decked by Roman pillars and balustrades made by wood and plaster. The huge teapot was said to signify the purity of water and its medicinal value while the tall umbrella adorned with bright yellow canopy was said to represent the nine planets in Hinduism and symbolised an abode for people to take shelter beneath God.

In part, the cult caught public attention due to its mysterious supreme leader and fantastic religious iconographies. Hagiography around Ayah Pin, the cult's supreme leader, who disappeared temporarily following crack-down on the cult but who was eventually jailed for 11 months for apostasy, helped to propel this Islamic cult into public limelight.¹¹ Ayah Pin was said to have been visited by the arch angel Gabriel since he was a little boy. Popular beliefs have him as the reincarnation of Jesus Christ, Buddha, Shiva and Prophet Muhammad. Believed to have died 17 times, he was said to have returned each time to save the lives of all people from all religions. Even though this cult was eventually banned and its commune demolished in 2005, it has remained in popular and cyber imaginaries – with two Wikipedia entries and many virtual sites.¹² Hearsay has it that followers of the cult especially among university students and the *orang asli* community remain till this day.¹³

leader-dead> (accessed 28 September 2016).

⁹ This demolition was not undertaken by the religious council but by the local land office under National Land Code for unauthorized construction.

¹⁰ See blogger under name of “Ayah Pin” <http://theskykingdom.blogspot.sg/2005/08/sky-kingdom-profile.html> accessed 28 September 2016.

¹¹ Ayah Pin died at age 73 in 2016.

¹² See: Wikipedia entries under “Sky Kingdom” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sky_Kingdom> and “Ariffin Mohammed” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariffin_Mohammed>; and blogger under name of Ayah Pin” <http://theskykingdom.blogspot.sg/2005/08/sky-kingdom-profile.html>> (accessed 29 September 2016).

¹³ See Adrian David, “Ayah Pin ‘Sky Kingdom’ sect leader is dead,” New Straits Times Online,

The proliferation of trans-ethno-religious expressions in popular religious practices which defy official definitions of Islam such as *keramat* worship and Sky Kingdom force us to rethink the political significance of popular religious traditions. The fusion of the past and present, hybridity and syncretism and the active revivals of trans-ethno-religious identifications located between memory and history—which include hagiographies of Muslim saints and religious leaders—make us mindful of their relationship with current politicization of Islam in Malaysia as well as their imbrication with a deeper fluid maritime world of Southeast Asia. The persistence of trans-ethno-religious imaginaries suggest that Islamic orthodoxy and bureaucratisation in modern Malaysia could not erase the deeper legacies of porous trans-ethno-religious traditions long in regional circulation upon which Malaysian modern history was built. Such popular religious practices are potent when understood in the context of dehumanizing and dogmatic tendencies in the fight between Islamic and secularist groups over the future of Malaysia. The cultural symbolisms alluding to deeper trans-ethno-religious regional and local pasts suggest a counter-cultural impulse. Evidently, memories about shared deeper ethno-religious cosmological traditions have refused to go away and find expression in the unregulated spaces of popular religious practice.

While such spiritual resistance does not fit into the realm of formal politics, they are inevitably political vehicles in themselves as they serve to remind us about alternative ethno-religious narratives and social-cultural orders which had, otherwise, been silenced or forgotten in current nationalist identity discourses. They constitute part of an on-going dialogue and re-enactment of memories of alternative Islamic conceptions that challenge narrow interpretations of ethno-religious identifications imposed by Malaysian official discourse. Their alternative imaginations expand and diversify public registers of Islamic imaginaries by bringing back convivial and inclusionary definitions that often strike powerful cords with fellow Malaysians who are cognizant of the less judgemental, more tolerant and fluid understandings of Islam with deep roots in the Malay world of Southeast Asia. Such symbolic expressions in the resurgence of this once abandoned

ethno-religious cosmological traditions can potentially unsettle official or sanctioned present discourses on Islam and ethnic identifications, providing us with a means to rethink and transform resistant politics.

The potency of such popular religion lies in the fact that all Malaysians—experts and ordinary people alike—are capable of interpreting and decoding their trans-ethno-cultural imaginaries. This is because the history of consciousness has its own history in collective and individual lives and not just in official narratives. Here Walter Benjamin's work is a useful reminder on the potential of all human beings to know their own histories. In *The Storyteller*, written in 1936, Benjamin has noted how a mundane institution such as fairy tales is in fact a mode of cultural heritage—that fairy tales keep alive the promise of liberation. Even children, Benjamin reminds us, can master their experiential world by learning from what people do—the capacity for experience and making sense of the traces of history around us lies in all of us. Popular curiosity about the creativity, contradictions, phantasm, ambivalence and dislocation of popular religious practices can help evoke questions on the past and present—awakening creative spontaneities to render back a capacity for critical interrogation of the past and present undermined or distorted by the politicization of ethno-religious identities in Malaysia.

The fantastic hybrid iconographies of the *keramat* and Sky Kingdom cults bear witness to traces of prior life as well as active identity constructions at the intersections of memory and history. I argue that they provide a materialist pedagogy to recover ethical conceptions of self and the collective. At a time of great political uncertainties over the present and future, we need to explore all possible avenues that can help alter attitudes and action to change the course of human future for the better. In the context of Malaysian political life where rigid ethno-religious identities prevail, events and acts that can undo divisions in minds to open up new vistas of seeing Others/diversity in oneself or overlapping rather than separated nature of identity categories may well be political. Practices of alternative religious traditions may be political acts in themselves with potential to shake up homogenizing definitions of self and community and spark inspirations to imagine and work towards a more hopeful, just and convivial future.

Popular syncretic Islamic practices such as the *keramat* and Sky Kingdom cults may not fit with conventional political thought but are neverthe-

less institutions with potential to affect private spheres and identifications, in particular, to free minds from dichotomous modes of perceptions by presenting clues on moral and civic dimensions of trans-ethnic exchanges. As such there is a need to review how we look at such popular religious practices which are often deemed to be apolitical. If identity politics has invaded private spheres, resistance may have to begin from within the individual. Hence, far from being apolitical, religious cults such as the *keramat* and Sky Kingdom have the capacity to unsettle thought with their fantastic symbolisms. The ability to undo thought is political in itself as such “mindful” politics can foster the politics of respect and unity. By recovering convivial pasts, present nationalist identity categories can be unlearned and relearned so that warring factions may be induced to reflect on their own complicities with, as well as enact distance from, identity categories exploited by national and global capitalist forces.

Besides popular religion, the politicization of Islam has also collapsed into artistic practices. It is to the play of aesthetic and linguistic traditions by young artists that we next turn to trace more grounds for revolutionary change of thought and action.

V. Art and politics

Rejecting dogmatic extremes that dominate Malaysian public sphere, many young Malaysian artists have contributed to a quiet spread of alternative commentaries on religion, identity, society and humanity in their artistic practices. These nascent practices point to a new/alternative public sphere in the making. This emerging public sphere has also a distinct virtual and transnational networking dimensions as young artists are IT savvy and well-networked both within and outside the Southeast Asian region. Their social imaginaries, which are expressed directly online or find their way into the internet, are often heartening as they present ethno-religious divides in innovative, humorous and outlandish ways that either parody their follies or expose erased similarities, shared pasts and affinities. By doing so, such artistic practices help expand on registers of public reasons on identity, religion, equality, justice and humanity. Here I will discuss two different kinds of artistic engagements: the first is on the revolutionary art

of a Malay-Muslim artist collective that has overturned Islamic taboos set in place by Islamization since the 1980s; and second, the deployment of local linguistic traditions by socially engaged artists as an imaginary source of resistant knowledge.

The MATAHATI (literally, “Eye of the soul”) is a leading Malay-Muslim artist-collective in the contemporary Malaysian art scene noted to have paved the way by taking on previous Islamic taboos in their newer conceptions of Malay(sian) art since their arrival into the local art scene in the early 1990s. Formed originally by seven fellow graduates¹⁴ (but now with five members) from the Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi Mara—the public university reserved for bumiputeras (Malays and indigenous people) — Matahati gained fame for their brand of loud and explicit emotional representations of human figures which broke with a Malay artistic tradition of eschewing figurative representations since the 1980s as a result of Islamization.¹⁵ Representing a younger generation of Malay-Muslim artists, Matahati members have used their art to engage with questions of Islam, history and identity, in both playful and serious fashion. I will pick two works by two members—Ahmad Fuad Osman and Hamir Soib—to explain their artistic engagement with the politicization of Islam and ethnicity in Malaysia.

In an artistic performance, *The Hair Piece /Peace* (2004), Ahmad Fuad Osman engaged with the issue of race/ethnicity by giving a most personal aspect of himself to strangers as an act of trust and respect of Others (see Yap, 2009).¹⁶ For this performance, he recruited his audience to assist in cutting his hair which he had grown for the past five years. As his hair cut progressed, words depicting the identity categories of ‘Male’, ‘Malaysian’, ‘Asian’ and ‘Muslim’ written on his back came slowly into view to the audience. In a painting-cum-installation entitled *Tak Ada Beza* (No Difference) by Hamir Soib, a family of pigs depicted in a painting was used to parody the problem of abortion or abandoned new born babies—common amongst

¹⁴ The present members are Ahmad Fuad Osman, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Hamir Soib @ Mohamed, Kamal Ariffin Kamisan, Masnoor Ramli Mahmud and Soraya Yusof Talismail.

¹⁵ For details on the complexities of expressions and styles in the search for an Islamic identity in Malaysian art, see Zainol Shariff, 86-87.

¹⁶ The first performance was in 2004 during Fuad’s residency in Vermont, USA and the later was at an exhibition in Kuala Lumpur in 2007.

unmarried Muslim women given the severity of syariah penalties that could include a combination of a fine, jail and canning for such an offence (see Goh, 2008). The use of the figure of the pig to lampoon human behaviour is particularly potent in the Malaysian context when we consider how proscribed the pig is within Malaysian Islamic discourse whereby its Malay term, *babi*, has even been widely replaced with an Arabic equivalent, *khinzir*, in what appears to be an attempt to make the mention of this animal in social discourse somewhat more acceptable (*Ibid.*).

These two artistic examples may not fit neatly into what social scientists would usually consider as politics. Neither do all these two artists consider themselves to be political. However, their critical parody of identity and Islam strike powerful chords and are easily understood by fellow Malaysians given the pervasiveness and resilience of rigid ethno-religious categories in their everyday lives. While their art may reach a limited audience, the internet—the very infrastructure for the spread of financial capitalism—provides a powerful means for disseminating their works. There is an active virtual world for the Malaysia artistic scene which serve to communicate artistic interventions made by artists to a wider local and even international audience.

These artistic politics suggest that the sensory, aesthetic and tactile dimensions of artistic representations as well as the internet provide conducive vehicles for alternative ethical-political conceptions about identity and religion, shifting critical engagements away from an incapacitated public sphere. Such artistic practices offer the possibility of alternative Islamic critique other than the political extremes found in traditional public sphere. The interactive, transient and increasingly virtual nature of alternative meaning-making on Islam and identity in the art world—which is equally found all over the world—warrant a consideration of their possible impact on the future of Malaysian society.

In closing, I would like to discuss a turn to local linguistic traditions as a source of resistant knowledge by other young artists. In my ongoing research amongst young artists in Kuala Lumpur, I found a common strategy of using the national language to counter hegemonic and bigoted discourses. One example involves Malay language reclamations to counter statist polemics against mass demonstration (in Malay transliteration, *demonstrasi* or *protes*, which are increasingly common in Malaysia) as “Western” and as therefore unbenefit-

ting of Malaysian culture. In defiance, young artists have sought to expand the political vocabulary of resistance by drawing on a familiar but less frequently used equivalent Malay word of *tunjuk perasaan*, which literally means, “to show feeling” (Tan, 2015: 9-12).

The noun *perasaan* comes from a root word *rasa* that has its origins in Sanskrit that refers to “juice, nectar or sap, taste and flavour, feeling and emotion” (Fan, 2014). However, due to its wide regional circulation, *rasa* has gained a multiplicity of meanings, describing everything from Hindu aesthetics to Javanese spirituality and the Malay psyche over time.¹⁷ In Malay, however, “*rasa* encompasses feeling both in the sensory and emotional sense—the sense of taste, the sense of touch, as well as the essence of emotion.” (Fan, 2016). The following interpretation by Fan is particular poignant in explicating the Malay worldview and sensibility: “*rasa* is imbued with an earthiness and physicality that locates a thought or feeling in the body itself. It is the intuitive instinct of both positive and negative mentions, and its intuition enhances its authority. It is something like a ‘gut feeling’, only more vivid, versatile and vast” (*Ibid.*).

Given that *rasa* is closely associated with the contemplative, emotive and embodied, it is not surprising that artists in Malaysia have used the sophistication of this Malay linguistic expression of *tunjuk perasaan* and its regional rootedness to reclaim political demonstration as a form of local culture. The following expressions, by a young Malaysian artist-activist-cum-intellectual, capture sentiments shaping an emergent popular sovereignty concocted from cultural-linguistic traditions that have long circulated in the region:

“*Tunjuk perasaan* is a demonstration of our agitation, a vocabulary of resistance that takes into consideration the postcolonial politics of *budaya* [culture]. The agony of resistance, committed to the sentimentality of *perasaan*, in the form of blood, sweat and tears, is regarded as the solemnity of power. Astir with *rasa*, each and every cell, organ and body trembles and activates our contemplative awareness. The amorphous *rasa* is the tremor that comes with indignation, the sense of defeated-ness that ends with radical empowerment. Cold sweat. Skin on fire. Thus spake [*sic*] the practitioners of *rasa*: *Tunjuk*

¹⁷ For a classic study on the logic of *rasa*, see Paul Stange 1984. More recently, Laura Fan has an interesting contemporary take on *rasa* in the arts world in Southeast Asia (Fan, 2016).

perasaan budaya kita [To show feeling (Demonstration) is our culture]!" (Tan, 2015: 11).

The play of language shows how quintessential linguistic traditions with their multi-layered richness shaped over time by trans-cultural and belief systems are poignant resources for empowerment and freedom from the rhetoric of national ethno-religious and cultural discourses. In the Malaysian context where cultural tradition is often the handmaiden of national values, reflections on deeply rooted cultural and oral traditions can whiff up alternative ethical, humane, just and compassionate sensibilities for counter-cultural resistance. It is a case of using culture to counter culture.

VI. Conclusion

The above-mentioned practices of tradition are clearly forged by instinctive human reactions against the schisms and constraints of current ethno-religious nationalist struggles in Malaysia. They produce clues on how resistant politics may have to change course in the context of a thoroughly incapacitated traditional public sphere. These practices of tradition may not fit neatly into what social scientists would usually consider as politics. Nonetheless, they offer hope of alternative political aspirations and human conviviality other than the political extremes found in contemporary Malaysian society. These practices reveal how radical politics lie in ordinary, everyday ways of practising the principles of traditions and not merely in self-consciously political movements. Practicing tradition, a seemingly conservative category, becomes a source for revolutionary possibilities. While the reclaimed traditional ethics may not add up to a clear category of values or specific set of principles, it is possible to identify a rough approximation of prioritized values. They bring into audibility and visibility neglected, if not silenced, values of trans-ethnic and trans-religious imaginaries long in regional circulation which are cognizant of inter-connections, inter-dependence and mutual constitutions of life, people and ways of living in contrast to the narrowness and rigidness of current identity discourses. The reclamations and representations of traditions show that radical politics begins with mindful transformations and that

the material world, bodily experiences and performances are powerful conduits for the inculcation of ethical politics and action.

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