

# CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS: THE MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE

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## **Abstract**

Malaysia, a multiethnic and multi-religious society in Southeast Asia, has a population of 27.7 million comprising three major ethnicities, consisting of 67% Malays/Bumiputras, 24.7% Chinese, and 7.4% Indians along with many smaller minority groups. The Federal Constitution of Malaysia declares Islam as the official religion, but guarantees religious freedom. Malaysian observes a number of celebrations according to the religious faith of its people. The Malays celebrate their Muslim festivals such as *Aidil Fitri* and *Aidil Adha*. The Chinese in Malaysia celebrate festivals like Chinese New Year and *Chap Goh Mei* where cultural celebrations such as the lion dances and *Chingay* procession take place. For the Hindus, apart from the *Deepavali* celebration, the festival of light, the *Thaipusam* is a celebration where more than one million people flock to Batu Caves. While in East Malaysia, the grandest celebration is *Tadau Keamatan* in Sabah, and *Gawai Dayak* in Sarawak. Both celebrations are of significance as the occasion to mark rice harvesting season. The paper attempts to highlight the celebrations of the major ethnic groups in Malaysia and depicts real experiences of individuals of each group to show that it accommodates the differences in culture and religious belief.

*Keywords: celebrations, Malaysia, multi-religious, constitution and ethnic groups*

## **Introduction**

The Federation of Malaya gained independence from the British government and declared its independence on 31<sup>st</sup> August, 1957. The states of Sabah and Sarawak formally merged with Malaya on September 16, 1963, and the Federation of Malaysia was established.<sup>1</sup> Malaysia is situated in Southeast Asia and consists of Peninsula Malaysia and the states of Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia. It has an area of 329, 758 sq km, of which 131, 598 sq km is in Peninsula Malaysia, Sabah 73, 711 sq km and Sarawak 124, 449 sq km.<sup>2</sup> The states of Sabah and Sarawak of East Malaysia are situated on the north-west of the island of Borneo, and separated from the peninsular by the South China Sea.

Prior to independence, Peninsula Malaysia was called Federated Malay States and was under British rule for more than two centuries. Beginning with the acquisition of Penang Island in 1786, Britain gradually extended its influence into the mainland and finally, by 1909, was in control of whole Malaya.<sup>3</sup> In its quest to exploit and expand the natural resources of Malaya, particularly tin-mining, the British allowed the Chinese from China to come to Malaya. The main flood of

Chinese migration began in the second quarter of the nineteenth century and the mass migration continued until 1930 when they began to settle and to become stable.<sup>4</sup> When the British opened large scales commercial agriculture, Indians were brought from South India. The movement of Indians into Malaya began in the 1820s and continued with the largest annual migration during the period of 1911-1930, when more than 90,000 people arrived.<sup>5</sup> The British neither supported nor restricted the Chinese and Indian immigrants to open up vernacular schools where the medium of instructions of these schools were Chinese and Tamil. In fact, the curriculum used in the schools and teachers were from China and India. The British had also allowed the Chinese and Indians to practice their religions and temples were built as and when they settled in various parts of Malaya.

Malay pupils attended Malay vernacular schools and the medium of instruction was the Malay language. In some parts of the east coast of Peninsula Malaya, the Malays attended privately-funded schools called *pondoks*, where the medium of instruction was in Arabic. A few elite Malay pupils attended the Malay College of Kuala Kangsar specially established in 1909 for the Malays and the Medium of instruction was in English.<sup>6</sup> After independence, the government decided that the national language be served as the instrument of national unity. Since 1970, Bahasa Malaysia is the main medium of instructions in all primary and secondary schools.<sup>7</sup> However, the Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools continued to be taught in Mandarin and Tamil but Bahasa Malaysia was made a compulsory subject for all pupils.

Today, Malaysia has a total population of 27,728,700 people and the breakdown of the population according to ethnic groups is tabulated in the following table.<sup>8</sup>

Ethnic Group	Million	Percentage	Remarks
Malays	14,084,700	54.7	<b>1. Citizens</b> 25,749,600
Non-Malay Bumiputra <sup>9</sup>	3,060,600	11.9	<b>2. N/Citizens</b> 1,979,100
Chinese	6,380,400	24.7	
Indians	1,910,700	7.4	
Others	333,300	1.3	
Non-Citizens	1,979,100		
<b>Total Population</b>	<b>27,728,700</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

The population is unevenly distributed with almost three quarters of the population residing in Peninsula Malaysia. Malaysia is considered a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious country. The Federal Constitution of Malaysia has the following provisions:<sup>10</sup>

**Article 3. Religion of the Federation.** (1) Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may practice in peace and harmony in any part of the country.

**Article 11. Freedom of religion.** (1) Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion.

**Article 12. Rights in respect of education.** There shall be no discrimination against any citizen on the grounds only of religion, race, descent or place of birth.

Islam is the official religion of Malaysia but other ethnic groups are allowed to practise their religious beliefs and cultures. Similarly, the law also provides the opportunity to all races irrespective of their faiths and cultures to a modern education at least up to secondary school.

## Islam and the Muslim Celebrations

While Malacca was recognized as the pioneering state to receive Islam via the Sultanate Kingdom of Malacca after the conversion of King Parameswara to Islam upon his marriage to a Pasai princess in 1414 where he adopted the Muslim name Megat Iskandar Shah,<sup>11</sup> it was established that Islam came to the Peninsula much earlier by the evidence of Trengganu inscription dating to 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 1303.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it was generally accepted that Malacca provided the impetus for Islamic leadership and administration of the Malay states.<sup>13</sup> Since then, Islam has been the official religion of the Malays and, much later, also the official religion enshrined in the constitution of Federation of Malaysia.

Islamic religious tenets and principles have become the main source of guidance among the Malays. While the basic principles and practices are as instructed by religion, there are ceremonies following Malay traditional practices. The most important fundamental practices followed by the Malays are the performance of the "Pillars of Islam."

The "Pillars of Islam" are the basic tenets of Islam. Liturgical prayers should be performed five times daily. The religious ritual of fasting for 30 days during the month of *Ramadhan* and paying of *zakat* (tithe) on income and production is one of the "Pillars of Islam." The Malays generally look forward to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, a lifetime requirement for those with financial means and good health.<sup>14</sup> The five daily prayers can either be performed alone or in congregation, though, congregational prayer is commended in relation to its merits of twenty seven times that individual prayer. Congregational prayers are performed in a mosque and or chapel called the *surau*.

The most celebrated month in Islam is *Ramadhan*. During the month of *Ramadhan*, there are two kinds of communal feasts, namely, the *iftar* (fast-breaking) feast and *more* (supper) feast. The *iftar* feast is held immediately after the call of *azan* (call for prayer). In villages across Peninsula Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak, the exchange of *kuih* (pastry or small cakes) is practised in Malay neighborhoods. The *more* (supper) is held after the *terawih* (prayer performed during *Ramadhan*) prayer. Unlike the *iftar*, the meal normally consists of *kuih* and tea.

The end of *Ramadhan* marks the beginning of the month of *Syawal*. This is a time of festivity for the Malays as they celebrate *Eid Fitri*. On the morning of *Eid Fitri*, the males will adorn traditional Malay costumes such as *baju Melayu* (Malay shirt with trousers), *samping* (cloth wrap around the waist outside the outfit) and *songkok* (head wear) and will proceed to the nearest mosque to perform the *Eid Fitri* congregational prayer. The females normally adorn the *bajung kurung* (two pieces of cloth of fine and beautiful design). One of the significant events of *Eid Fitri* festivity is the *rumah terbuka* (open house) which normally runs for almost the entire month of *Syawal*. This is an occasion where Malays not only invite Muslim friends and

relatives to their homes but also the Chinese, Indians and others as well. Guests and well-wishes will enjoy traditional Malay *Eid fare* such as *lemang* (glutinous rice mixed with coconut milk), *ketupat* (rice packed in coconut leaves) served with chicken or beef *rendang* (stewed in coconut milk).

*Eid Adha* is another important celebration of the Malays, an event seventy days after *Eid Fitri*, though it is of lesser significance to the former. However, major festivities are confined to the Malays in the villages and especially in the states of Kelantan and Trengganu in Peninsula Malaysia. The important feature of this occasion is the ritual of *korban* (slaughtering of cows and goats) after the *Eid Adha* prayer. The ritual is normally conducted either within the compound or near the mosques or *suraus*. The meat from the slaughtered animals are then distributed to the poor within the vicinity of each mosque or *surau*.

Although the Malays have varying experiences on the celebration of *Eid*, let us consider a segment of an interview with Zainuddin (commonly known as Pak Din), a retired army personnel.

*Eid* celebrations, either *Fitri* or *Adha*, are the two most important celebrations for all Muslims. *Eid Fitri* is a celebration right after *Ramadhan*. It symbolises our strive and commitment to complete the fasting during *Ramadhan* where we have to abstain ourselves from eating, drinking and sexual relations during the day for a month. *Eid Fitri* is also an occasion for family reunion. As I am now residing in Selayang and all our children are working in Kuala Lumpur, they will come to visit and stay with us for a few days. However, for *Eid Adha*, not all of them will come home as the holiday is short. Just like in the past, I normally pay a sum of money to the local mosque for a portion of a cow to be slaughtered. I normally help out in the slaughtering and preparing of the portions of beef for distribution.

Apart from the *Eid* celebrations, there are other religious celebrations. One of the important celebrations which have both religious and social meanings is *Maulidur Rasul* (Prophet Muhammad's (peace upon him) birthday). The celebration of the birthday normally involves on the procession along designated roads or gathering in the villages organised by the Department of Religious Affairs (DRA) of the states or by the committees of the mosques across the nation. Another occasion is *Muharram*, the beginning month of Muslim calendar. The DRA of each state often requests committees of mosques and *suraus* to organize special prayers for the event.

Other than the congregational prayer of *Eid Fitri* and *Eid Adha*, the Malays perform the compulsory weekly Friday congregational prayers at various mosques in Malaysia. Every Thursday night, the Malays normally perform the *Maghreb* (early evening prayer) and *Isya'* (night and last prayer) prayers at the mosques. The time between these two prayers, (about an hour) the time is spent on the recitation of *Surah Yasin* (a chapter from the Holy Qur'an), and followed by *doa selamat* (thanksgiving prayer).

## Chinese Religions and Celebrations

The immigrant Chinese brought their religions from China, and they are either Buddhists, Taoists or Confucians.<sup>15</sup> The Chinese believe in the worshipping of many gods. Among them; is *Kwang Yin*, a goddess for the Buddhist Bodhissattava Avalokiteswara faith, *Kwang Ti*, a god worshipped especially by Penang Taoist Chinese and *Wang Yeh*, a divine who possesses spiritual powers to inspect the universe. Ancestor worship in Confucian authority is common, though much of it is in the worship of *Shen* and *Fu*, the local deities.

The speaking language or dialect of the Chinese is diverse. Teochew is widely spoken in the southern state of Johor while Hokkien is the Chinese lingua franca in most places in Malaysia, especially in Johor, Malacca, most parts of Selangor, Penang, Kedah, Perlis, Trengganu, Kelantan and Sarawak. The majority of the Chinese in Negri Sembilan, Perak, Pahang, and Sabah are Hakka and Cantonese. While Hakka is the second largest dialect group in Peninsula Malaysia after Hokkien, Cantonese is widely spoken in Kuala Lumpur. The other minority dialect groups of Hainanese, Kwongsi, Hokchui, Foochow, and Hokchia are scattered in Perak, Pahang, Sabah and Sarawak.<sup>16</sup> However, the common language of the Chinese is Mandarin which is also the official language in Chinese schools.

Today, there are 1,287 government-funded national-type Chinese primary schools, 60 privately run independent Chinese secondary schools and three private institutions of higher learning using Mandarin as their medium of instruction.<sup>17</sup> This is largely due to the policy adopted by the British which allows the Chinese to establish primary and secondary schools as long as they were financially independent. The policy also enabled the Chinese to use Mandarin as the medium of instruction.

The medium which is as efficacious as anything in keeping the Chinese together as a community is the cement of ritual and celebration. The most important and widely celebrated festival for the Chinese is the Spring Festival, more popularly known as Chinese New Year. Falling on the first day of the “first moon” in the lunar calendar, normally between January 21<sup>st</sup> and February 19<sup>th</sup>, the Lunar New Year marks a time when Chinese families unite for the *Thien Nin Fan* (family reunion) to celebrate the coming of the “first moon.”<sup>18</sup> The Chinese Lunar calendar is divided into a cycle of twelve years. Each year is named after an animal: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Hare, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Chicken, Dog and Pig.<sup>19</sup> The Chinese begin the celebration with the *Thien Nin Fan* and a visit to the nearest temple to receive blessings from the God of Prosperity. The children look forward to the festival as they will receive *ang pow* (a little red packet) containing *Lai See* (lucky money) from their parents or other well-wishers.

New clothes are worn during this period. In the temples throughout the country, throngs of devotees, bearing gifts, joss-sticks and candles, converge for worship and to *Kao Chim* (ask about the future). Greetings of *Kung Hei Fatt Choy* – happiness and prosperity – are exchanged among family members and friends.<sup>20</sup> Visiting continues for the next 15 days. On the fifteenth night, the celebration ends with a closing celebration called *Chap Goh Meh*, which is dedicated for young women.<sup>21</sup> The Chinese believe that this is a lucky day for young women and it is an occasion and best opportunity to find one’s life partner.

*Chap Goh Meh* is also called the feast of the first full moon. The purpose of the original Lantern Festival in China was to welcome the warmth and increasing sunlight of the winter and to pray for the right amount of rain.<sup>22</sup> The Lantern Festival is the lightening up of the house and surrounding it with multi-colored lanterns. It was very popular among the children before the invention of electricity where lamps were carried to wherever they went during the night.

A brief experience of Chinese celebrations is discussed by Wong Chee Kong (commonly known as Ah Kong) who runs a car repair shop in Selayang Baru, as follows:

Every year we will celebrate *Kung Hei Fatt Choy* in Bahau, Negeri Sembilan. Both of my parents stay in Bahau. As I am the oldest in the family, I must show good examples to our siblings and visit them. There is not much fuss about the visit as my in-laws are staying with me and on most instances they would accompany us to Bahau. All the siblings will arrive a day before *Kung Hei Fatt Choy* as the night before it there will be a family feast. My mother normally prepares our favourite dishes. This is an important occasion for all the family members to get together and meet once a year. My parents normally look forward for such gathering as it is also an opportune time for them to get to know their grandchildren. After the dinner, we normally proceed with firecrackers. Despite the fact that it is banned, we limit to small scale fireworks to avoid untoward incidents. The Chinese believe that fireworks will drive away evil spirits and at the same time welcome good fortune to the house. On the morning of *Kung Hee Fatt Choy*, we normally start with prayers to our ancestors for forgiveness as well as blessings. Unlike other religious faith, the Chinese will not visit any grave or burial site as it is *sui* or bad luck. Thus, after payer the time is spent enjoying the food and liquor or playing cards or *mahjong* (Chinese solitaire game). Later in the day, we normally visit our relatives and friends. For *Chap Goh Mei*, the celebration is held at our respective residence. My parents will take turn to visit each of our five siblings. However, the celebration is smaller in scale but the mood and festivity is somewhat similar.

During the New Year celebration, there are two activities that the Chinese will not miss: a Lion dance performance and the shouting of the *Yam Seng*. The Lion dance will chase away evil spirits, and bring people luck and prosperity. *Yam Seng* is a Malaysian Chinese form of toasting, which means "to drink to one's victory or success."<sup>23</sup> The burning of fire-crackers during Chinese New is noisiest on the first, second and fifteenth day.<sup>24</sup> However, the government has banned the burning of firecrackers and firing of *meriam buluh* (bamboo canon) due to the frequent loss of lives and serious injuries to body parts especially in children. The firing of *meriam buluh* is a traditional favorite pastime for Malay children and youths in the villages, in view of the excitement of *Eid Fitri* celebration.

*Chingay* is another cultural activity still practiced in Penang. The *chingay* team consists of a few members who are experienced and skillful in acrobatics. Long poles



with banners are balanced by the mouth, shoulder as well as hips of the acrobats who are mostly men. The *chingay* acrobats will try to balance the long pole with the banners flapping in the air as long as possible on any mentioned parts of the body. Besides the *chingay* acrobats, there is a team of youth on various kinds of bicycles, some having one wheel each. This is also part of the *chingay* team.<sup>25</sup> Normally, accompanying the *chingay* acrobats, there is a group of drummers who motivate the acrobats with their loud beating of the drums. The *chingay* acrobats are normally men.

## Hinduism and Hindu Celebrations

Large-scale migrations of Indians from the sub-continent to Malaya followed the extension of the British formal rule of the Federated Malay States of Malaya. By the time of Independence in 1957, the number of Indians stood over 820,000. The overwhelming majority of the migrants from India were Tamil-speaking Indians from the south of the sub-continent.<sup>26</sup> As they had been accustomed to the British rule and low standard of living in India, it was comparatively easy for the Indians to settle down in Malaya. They were employed in the cultivation of crops such as spices and pepper in the 1820s, sugar in the 1830s, and coffee in the 1870s, and with the 'rubber rush' in the early years of the twentieth century, more migrations were needed for the cheap labour force of the rubber estates.<sup>27</sup>

The British allowed the Indians to attend primary schools subsidized by the government through grants, and Tamil was the medium of instruction. Initially, a Tamil school education of a minimum of 4-year duration was available for the Indians and was provided at the primary level only. Parents, mostly illiterate, did not see the value or purpose in a secondary education in Tamil. After Independence, Tamil education was streamlined into a six-year primary education.<sup>28</sup> Today, there are 94,907 Tamil schools in Malaysia.<sup>29</sup> Upon the completion of a six-year Tamil education and to continue into secondary schools, the pupils need to attend a year of Remove classes as the medium of instruction in secondary schools is the national language, that is, *Bahasa Malaysia*.

The majority of the Indians in Malaysia are Hindu. Hinduism is regarded as the world's oldest living religions. This religion has no founder. It is ethnic, not creedal, with a history contemporaneous with the history of the races with which it is associated. Hence it is closely connected with mythology, folklore, customs and manners of the Hindus, making it rather difficult to distinguish its essentials and nonessentials.<sup>30</sup> Hinduism is often characterized as a belief in *samsara* (reincarnation) determined by *karma* (the law that all actions have effects), and that salvation is called *moksa* (the liberation from this cycle of rebirth).<sup>31</sup> It is a monotheistic religion which believes that God manifests himself or herself in several forms.<sup>32</sup> The Hindu believes that *Brahman*, is the pinnacle of the pantheon of all deities from whom new god-forms may emerge.

An important occasion for the Hindus in Malaysia is *Deepavali*. The word *Deepavali* originates from *dipa* meaning light and *gavali* meaning a row. Thus, *Deepavali* means a cluster of lights. It is also known as Festival of Lights, when Hindus have a light display in their houses. *Deepavali* is usually celebrated in

October or November, the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the Hindu Calendar.<sup>33</sup> The celebration of *Deepavali* symbolise the victory of Lord Krisna over the demon, Ravana. To welcome the occasion, Hindus decorate their houses with lights or oil lamps. The early morning of the day of *Deepavali* begins ritual bath of *nallennai* (ginger oil) on the head and body. The Hindus believe that the ritual bath cleanses them of all the sins and prepare them for holy prayer to be performed at the temples. The day normally starts with exchanges of visits and gifts with relatives and then followed by rituals and prayers at a local temple. The lighting up of their houses with oil lamps continue for several nights. By lighting their houses, Hindus believe that the souls of the dead will have no difficulty in finding their way to Heaven. To the Hindus, light symbolizes purity as light dispels darkness and as a basis to overcome evil.

Another important celebration for the Hindus in Malaysia is the three-day long celebration of *Thaipusam* which falls on the tenth day of *Thai* of the Hindu calendar. *Thaipusam* symbolize of the victor of Lord Murugan who defeated the *asuras* (evil spirits). It is believed that Lord Murugan defeated the demons with a spear known as *Nyana Vel* given to him by Shiva, Lord of Destroyer.

*Thaipusam* begins with a grand procession of a magnificent silver chariot bearing statues of Lord Subramaniam, the god of prosperity, accompanied by drumming and chanting. Hindu devotees carry *kavadis* in fulfillment of vows taken in devotion to their god Lord Murugan. Their tongues and cheeks are skewed with long metal needles or rods, and others crawl on broken glass or knives. All these acts are performed to show devotion to Lord Murugan.<sup>34</sup> Every year hundreds of thousands of Hindu devotees visit Batu Caves to pay their homage and offerings. The highest number was recorded in 2006, the numbers of devotees exceeded 1,000,000 as reported by BERNAMA.<sup>35</sup> Hindus normally practice austerity which includes fasting, eating only vegetables during the *Thai* month to cleanse themselves from sins. Batu Caves is the place where spiritual and mystical power is sought and *Thaipusam* symbolizes the day to pay penance and thanksgiving for Hindu devotees.

An account of the interview with Rajan, a newspaper vendor for the locality of Selayang is presented below:

*Deepavali* is a colourful celebration and thus is known as the festival of lights. Hindus light their homes with oil lamps to celebrate the occasion. The preparation for the celebration in our hometown in Bidor starts at least two weeks before the day with the cleaning the entire of the house. We usually wake up early in the morning of *Deepavali* and begin the day with ritual oil bath. After adorning new clothes and taking breakfast we will go to the nearest temple to pray for happiness and prosperity. We return home and enjoy the delicacies prepared earlier. Typical Hindu dishes such chicken *tandoori*, fish curry and vegetables will be served. While in *Thaipusam*, it is more an out-door celebration. Hindu devotees will need to prepare themselves by praying and fasting. On the day of the occasion, their heads will be shaved and they begin the pilgrimage journey from Sri Mahamariamman Temple



in Kuala Lumpur to Batu Caves for a 13-km walk on barefoot. The entourage of the journey includes family members, relatives and friends. Hindu devotees will perform the traditional dance *kavadi attam* throughout the journey accompanied by incessant drumming and chanting of “*vel vel shakti vel.*”

## Indigenous Peoples of East Malaysia

Malaysia has two states on the island of Borneo, namely Sabah and Sarawak. Both states formally joined the Federation of Malaysia on 16<sup>th</sup> September 1963. Prior to that, both states were under the British rule. The population of Sabah and Sarawak are made of many ingenious groups. The people of Sabah are divided into 32 officially recognized ethnic groups while Sarawak has more than 40 ethnic groups. Each of the ethnic group has its own language, culture and lifestyle.<sup>36</sup> In view of this, this research will only focus on the biggest ethnic group from each state, namely the Kadazan-Dusun of Sabah and Dayaks of Sarawak.

The majority of the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak are Christians. This was due to the missionary efforts of the British to convert them to Christianity. During their rule, the schools established for these communities were schools ran by Christian missionary, and non-government groups. Today, their children attend government schools and the medium of instruction is Bahasa Malaysia. Thus, the national language is spoken across all ethnicities in Sabah and Sarawak but the Malay dialects here differ much in intonation and inflection from the West Malaysian version.

The grandest festival in Sabah is *Tadau Keamatan* (Harvest Festival) which is celebrated by Kadazan-Dusun in the month of May, just before the rice harvesting season. *Keamatan* is celebrated in honor of *Bambaazon*, the spirit pleased and handled with care in order to ensure a better harvest next year.<sup>37</sup> According to a Kadazan-Dusun legend, there once lived a family known as *Kinoingan* (God of Kadazan). He had a wife, *Suminundu* and a daughter by the name of *Hominodun*. *Kinoingan* had to sacrifice his beautiful daughter to save the Kadazan-Dusun from hunger. *Hominodun*'s corpse was filled with paddy grains and *Bambaazon* or the rice soul or spirit that emerged from the grains.<sup>38</sup>

The *Keamatan* Festival symbolizes the homecoming *bambaazon* to the *tangkob* (paddy store house) through the spiritual ritual of recitations performed by the community. A Kadazan priestess known as *Bobohizan* then set up to select seven stalks of ripe rice. This is then followed by a ceremony called *Magavau*, a feast ceremony in which the *Bobohizan* is fed by various delicacies and *tandut* (fermented rice). The *Keamatan* Festival ends with the selection of *Unduk Ngadau* (Harvest Queen). A local beauty is chosen among the young Kadazan-Dusun girls who are dressed in their traditional costumes. The Harvest Queen is chosen in memory of the legendary *Haminondun*. The Kadazan-Dusun community enjoys themselves on this occasion with the drinking of *tapai* (wine made from rice) and dancing into the night.

Dominic Dambul of Ranau, Sabah, an undergraduate student of IIUM, gave a brief account of the celebration as follows:

The Kadazan-Dusun community gets together during the month of May on the occasion of *Tadau Keamatan* or Harvest Festival. The celebration is to offer thanksgiving to *banboozon* (rice Spirit) for a bountiful harvest. The occasion is marked by plentiful of food and *tuak*, a type of wine made from rice. There is a number of booths set-up to showcase some of the local handicrafts and products. On stage, there will be a number of traditional dances performed by the locals. The most anticipated event of the celebration is the beauty pageant called *Unduk Ngaday*, the selection of Harvest Queen.

Unlike the Harvest Festival of Sabah, the *Gawai Dayak* is the festival celebrated by the Dayaks of Sarawak at the end of the paddy harvesting season. The week-long festival is full of merry-making, dancing and drinking of a potent rice wine known as *tuak*. In this festival, the blood of the sacrificial pig is shed in the blessing ritual on the *batu panggol* (whetstones) of the longhouse. The ceremony is performed to honour the mystical visit of *Pulang Gana* (god of fertility), from whom prayers and sacrificed are offered for a bountiful harvest and protection of the community.<sup>39</sup> This occasion is of significance for the determination of the site of cultivation of the next season. The liver of the sacrificed pig is examined by the community leader and the ritual of blessing is performed to ensure the success of the coming season.

The whole community of a long house helps to decorate the house with *pinang laka* (palm leaves), colourful buntings and lights. Outside the house, a bamboo tree is erected tied with red and white *tambai* (cloth) around it. The community welcomes guests and visitors to witness the event. A simple ceremony is performed by the chief known as *bebiau pengabang* by waving a white cockerel several times around the visitors head. The Dayaks believed that this ritual blesses the visitors while at the same time rid away evil spirits. This is then followed by a feast and *tuak* (potent rice wine) is served. Several plates of the food and *tuak* are placed in several plates as an offering to *Petara* (God). They believe that *Petara* will come to eat and this practice symbolizes the unseen arrival of the *Petara* who they believe is present during the *Gawai*.

An account of the interview with David AK Ajek who is from Sri Aman, Sarawak, a final year IIUM's Law student is discussed in the following section.

The *Gawai Dayak* is a celebration for the Dayak community. This is an occasion where the Dayaks visit their relatives and friends commonly known as "*ngabang*" in local Iban language. The celebration starts on the 31 May of every year with a ceremony called *antu rua*, a ritual to cast away evil spirits. In the evening, another ceremony called *miring* (offering) takes place accompanied by *gendang rayah* (ritual music). Dinner is then served and all those present are expected to talk and mingle. At midnight, a procession is performed to welcome the god of fertility called *Ngalu Petara* up and down the longhouse. The chief of the longhouse then will lead the drinking of wine called *tuak*. The 1<sup>st</sup> of June is the day of *Gawai*, the homes of the Dayaks are opened for

visitors. The *bebiau pangabang* ceremony is performed by the chief of the longhouse to all visitors. As usual *tuak* will be served. The celebration turns merrier with traditional dances and music.

This festival continues for two days until the final night when a contest is held to choose the *Gawai Queen* and *Gawai Warrior*. The young girls wear traditional costumes while the young men wear traditional warrior costumes. Celebrations centre around a *ranyai* (ceremonial tree) in the common verandah of the longhouse. The end of the *Gawai* is signified by the removal of the *ranyai* tree.

## **Factors Contributing to the Diverse Cultural and Religious Celebrations**

The historical processes in which diverse cultural and religious groups came and resided in Malaysia makes the nation a place that allows and accommodates social and cultural diversity and the multiplicity of categories used by the people to interact on a daily basis. The significance of the image of Malaysia as a multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-religious nation is projected based on the relationship built over the years on the thrust of friendship and unity. The expression of friendship and united image of Malaysian is often represented by the unique concept of "Open House." Malaysia can proudly announce that the "Open House" expresses a unique way in which the people of Malaysia visit each other on festive occasions of a race or an ethnic group.

Looking at cultural and religious celebrations, we can readily notice that there are indeed several factors that contribute to the harmony of the diverse make-up of Malaysian society. The following discussion attempts to drive home the importance of each factor.

### ***Constitutional Right***

Islam is the official religion stipulated in the Federation Constitution of Malaysia. The Malays who form the majority of the population of Malaysia are Muslims as Islam is their religion and follow Malay customs and speak the Malay language. The other communities such as the Chinese and the Indians enjoy certain protected privileges as enshrined in the Federal Constitution.

The Federal Constitution of Malaysia, by virtue of the article 3(1), and article 11(1), guarantees the right of each race or ethnic group to profess and practice its religion. The law provides equal right of each citizen to continue with the traditions inherited from his forefathers. The Chinese and Indians are given protection under the constitution to continue to practice their religions which they brought from China and India. Similarly, the Malays and indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak enjoy the same right.

The legal aspect of the law makes it necessary for the government of the day not only allow its citizen the freedom to profess and practice its own religion but that freedom includes the right to build its own house of worship. By virtue of the provisions provided in the constitution, Malaysia allows the constructions of religious buildings such as mosques, Buddhist-Taoist temples, Hindu temples, churches and sacred sites which are to be found in various parts of the country.

### ***Coalition Government***

Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first prime minister of Malaysia, was the most notable figure that was responsible for the seeking of Malaya's independence from the British. Tunku realises that United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) was not prepared to open its door to the other races. The most logical step that Tunku took was to invite other emerging political parties such as the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) to form the Alliance. When the Alliance, the coalition of UMNO, MCA and MIC won the general election in 1955 with a landslide victory, the British foresaw that the three major ethnic groups of Malaya were able to forge an acceptable level of understanding and cooperation among themselves and eventually granted Malaya her independence.

The coalition of three political parties represented the Malay, Chinese and Indian segments of the population. As a symbolic gesture, the historic Malacca city was chosen for the declaration of independence and the date official declared as "Merdeka Day" (Independence Day) was August 31, 1957. Thus, the Federal Constitution of Malaysia was drafted within the framework put forward by the coalition of UMNO, MCA and MIC, the political parties representing the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities, who were the three major segments of the population under the British rule.

The coalition of three political parties during the time of Tunku Abdul Rahman and the present coalition of fourteen political parties that include those from Sabah and Sarawak under the common political platform of National Front is another important factor. The fourteen political parties represent all the different ethnic groups in Malaysia. Through the coalition of political parties, the government is able to foster racial harmony by allowing the cultural and religious experiences of each ethnic group to prevail. The experiences of the diverse cultural and religious festivals is one the key principles of the coalition government. This brings the sense of unity and also enhances the spirit of give and take among the fourteen coalition partners of the government.

### ***National Public Holidays***

The government recognises the importance that each ethnic group is allowed to preserve and celebrate its cultural and religious observances. Muslim festivals and observances, such as *Hari Raya Aidil Fitri* and *Adha*, *Maulidul Rasul* and *Muharam* are declared as official public holidays. Similarly, other celebrations in Malaysia such as Chinese New Year, *Deepavali* and Christmas are also declared as national public holidays. Other important festivities that are declared as public holidays are *Thaipusam*, *Wesak*, *Hari Gawai* and *Tadau Keamatan*.

For the many citizens of Malaysia, the many festivals spanning the many racial and ethnic groups express the true racial and religious harmony and tolerance. Not only do the various ethnic groups have a constitutional right to express their cultural and religious observances, but they are allowed to apply for permits to stage public processions through the streets to celebrate their festivals. Many of the locals have the opportunity to enjoy the events looking on from pavements as the procession takes place and some even participate in the festivities.

### ***Vernacular Chinese and Tamil Schools***

The Federal Constitution also guarantees the right to education. The constitution stipulates that there is no form of discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, descent or place of birth. By virtue of the constitutional right to education, Malaysia allows its citizens the freedom of choice to education. There are many forms of formal education in Malaysia. There are national schools that aim to foster racial harmony in which Bahasa Malaysia is the main medium of instruction in all primary and secondary schools. While the Chinese and Indians are allowed to send their children to Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools in which the medium of instructions are Mandarin and Tamil, respectively. These privileges were agreed upon by the coalition parties of the Alliance and continue to exist under the present government.

The increasing number of Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools depicts the tolerant aspect of Malaysian society. The Malays have no qualms with their existence as there are also Islamic religious schools run by the states through the Department of Religious Affairs. The Chinese and Indians consider it important to preserve their mother-tongue languages as these are the traditions that they inherited from their forefathers from China and India. The government continues to support the Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools by giving them various subsidies and grants.

The government realizes that the fundamental area for the promotion of racial harmony of the population must be nurtured at the earliest possible stage through education. One of the positive steps taken by the government was the introduction of Bahasa Malaysia as a compulsory subject in all schools including the vernacular Chinese and Tamil schools. Bahasa Malaysia originated from the Malay language has been the spoken language in the Malay Peninsula for centuries. Even today it is a common sight to find an ordinary Chinese and an Indian man talking to one another in the Malay language. Though English is a widely spoken language among Malaysians who are educated in English both at homes and at the work place, Bahasa Malaysia remains one of the most important unifying factors to unite the many ethnic groups in Malaysia. It is the language spoken in the markets, shops, factories and public areas in the towns and more so in the rural areas both in Peninsula Malaysia and East Malaysia.

### **Conclusion**

Malaysia is a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious society. The population is made up of three major races, namely Malays, Chinese and Indians, while the many ethnic groups of Sabah and Sarawak are among the other ethnic groups in Malaysia. Endowed with the ethnic heritage of diverse origins, Malaysia is a country that tolerates the practice of diverse religious faiths and cultural festivals. Traditional and popular festivals of each ethnic group represent the treasured legacy helping them to continue to exist until today. The government recognises them, and in fact, declares certain dates as official public holidays.

Malaysia realizes that in order to maintain peace and harmony, celebrations and festivals of each culture must be allowed to continue as they were expressed previously. Celebrations and festivals are significant as they are the basis for mutual respect and understanding for all Malaysians. There are provisions in the country's

law that protects the identity and heritage of all Malaysians. On the basis of strong synergy among the various ethnic groups, Malaysia has made much progress socially since its independence in 1957. Finally, the cognitive respect and understanding of each ethnic group towards other cultural and religious observances marks a milestone in the level of cooperation achieved by the Malaysian society.

## Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup> Kernial Singh Sandhu, "The Coming of the Indians to Malaysia," in *Indian Communities in Southeast*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), p. 151.

<sup>4</sup> John Gullick, *Malaysia: Economic Expansion and National Unity*, (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1981), pp. 52-57.

<sup>5</sup> Kernial Singh Sandhu, "The Coming of the Indians to Malaysia," p. 155.

<sup>6</sup> M. Bakri Musa, *An Education System Worthy of Malaysia*, (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information Research Development, 2003), pp. 70-71.

<sup>7</sup> F.H. Wong, "History, Structure, Administration and Objectives," *Readings in Malaysian Education*, (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya, 1977), p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Source of information: Department of Statistics Handbook (M) 2008, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Non-Malay Bumiputra are mainly indigenous people in Sabah and Sarawak.

<sup>10</sup> *Federal Constitution of Malaysia*, (Kuala Lumpur: International Law Books Services, 2002), pp. 13, 19-30.

<sup>11</sup> Hussein Mutalib, "Islamic Polity in Southeast Asia," in *Islamic Civilization in the Malay World*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1997), p. 9.

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<sup>17</sup> Tan Teong Jin, Ho Wah Foon and Tan Joo Lan, *The Chinese Malaysian Contribution*, (Kuala Lumpur: Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies, 2005), pp. 235-236.



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- <sup>19</sup> Pham Duc Thanh, *Traditional Festivals of Asean*, (Hanoi: The Gidi Publishers, 2003), p. 116.
- <sup>20</sup> Gregory Leong, *Festivals of Malaysia*, p. 19.
- <sup>21</sup> Pham Duc Thanh, *Traditional Festivals of Asean*, p. 117.
- <sup>22</sup> Khoo Joo Ee, *The Straits Chinese: A Cultural History*, (Amsterdam: The Pepin Press, 1996), p. 106.
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- <sup>34</sup> Gregory Leong, *Festivals of Malaysia*, pp. 3-4.
- <sup>35</sup> Malaysia National News Agency, news dated February 11, 2006.
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- <sup>38</sup> Pham Duc Thanh, *Traditional Festivals of the Asean*, pp. 119-120.
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