

THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON MUSLIM BUSINESS PRACTICE: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Studies that link business, culture and society are still few especially from the Islamic perspective. Whilst many theories have been propounded regarding Islamic political frameworks, models for business and economy are few and really needed. A lack of guidance based on research and study in the area may lead to a sense of misunderstanding among Muslims. This study examines the influence of Islam and culture on business environment. Examines some approach in understanding culture. Culture has been understood as interdisciplinary field where certain concerns and methods have converged. It is important as it enable people to understand phenomena and relationships that were not accessible through any other disciplines. Culture change which is an important theme is discussed. Changes of culture occur when individuals from different cultures come and live together. Arguments from sociologists on the issue of religion in culture are highlighted. Religion is said as the expression of the values of the society and attempts to safeguard these by endowing them with divine sanction. From cultural perspective of study it is argued that religion is a major source of cultural perspective. Different points from Islamic perspectives on culture lead to conclusion that differences in understanding culture and there is still a large degree of uncertainty in its use.

Keywords: Islamic culture, Islamic business, Religion, Islam

INTRODUCTION

It has been argued that Muslims tend to practice non-Islamic teachings in their daily lives. For example, Winstedt¹ reports that the impact of *Indianising*² influences on the Malay world has been very significant thus, the Hindu-Buddhist influences on the Malays of the Peninsula can be seen in the numerous rituals. Besides the Indian culture, other cultures seem to have influenced and continue to influence Muslim people. Muhammad Abdul Rauf for example mentions that:

“... we tend, in seeking a reform, to borrow and import alien ideas and systems based on ideologies which have their negative features and are inconsistent with our basic faith tradition. These foreign elements are superimposed on a substructure saturated with Islamic ideals deeply rooted in the mind of our fellow believers whether they are dwellers in rural or urban areas, and whether we are in the higher or the lower ranks of the social order. The result is contradiction and conflicts. In confusion, those who are exposed to the glaring promises of getting rich quickly in the rotten methods of those imported systems, succumb to the temptation and rush to the prestigious style of living. Others who fail to partake of these opportunities get frustrated and lose their appetite for hard working and for excellence. Negligence, lethargy and indifference set in, and lead to inefficiency and less productivity and to common suffering.”³

Al-Khatib, Dobie and Vitell,⁴ suggest that for basic survival needs, some people tend to behave unethically especially during difficult economic situations.⁵ Ali discusses the Arab dual identity in detail, attributing it to two main factors: (1) colonialism, which instilled feelings of inferiority in Arab thought and (2) the artificial division of lands into nation-states which is also a factor of colonialism. The influx of multinational corporations into the region also contributed to cultural and social alienation. As a result of social and political instability in countries like Egypt, people tend to believe everything in life especially temporal systems of life that were imported into the country were temporary and were not convincing to become better choice for them. This factor leads them to come back to religious teaching i.e., Islam, which is regarded as a way to stabilise the problem they

¹ R.O. Winstedt. (1961). *The Malay Magician: Being Shaman, Saiva and Sufi*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. p35

² Some scholars use this terminology to refer to Indian civilization in South-East Asia. See B.W. Andaya and L.Y. Andaya.(1982). *A History of Malaysia*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.p14; There have been many theories on when and from where Islam reached the country. See for instance S.Q. Fatimi. (1963). *Islam Comes to Malaysia*, Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute and S.M.N Al-Attas. (1972). *Islam Dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu*, Selangor: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

³ M.A. Rauf.(1987). *Management and Administration-an Islamic Perspective*. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Affairs Division, Prime Minister's Department of Malaysia. p42

⁴ J.A.Al-Khatib, K. Dobie and S.J. Vitell 'Consumer ethics in developing countries: An empirical investigation', *Journal of Euro - Marketing*; 1995; 4, 2; p101

⁵ A.J. Ali in R.Gillian (1999). 'Islamic ethics and the implications for business', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 18, 4 (2). pp345-359.

have had. Modernization in Egypt was also commented on by Hassan al-Banna. He stated: “... there was a deterioration of behaviour, morals and deeds, in the name of individual freedom ... Books, newspapers and magazines appeared whose only aim was to weaken or destroy the influence of any religion on the masses ... Young men were lost and the educated were in a state of doubt and confusion.”⁶

Considering the aforementioned issues, it has been believed that is timely for a new piece of research to be conducted on Malay Muslims to find out how they conduct their business and what culture they practice. The outcome of this research is vital to answer how the above mentioned arguments are still applicable these days. It is also to document using the case study method, the reaction of the Muslim businesspeople to other cultures and how they adapt without breaking core Islamic values.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study focussed on the Malay culture and how it influences them in business settings. The definition of it has been discussed in countless books and articles, and Hatch⁷ claims that there is still a large degree of uncertainty in its use. In discussing culture and society, Turner⁸ defines a cultural study as “... an interdisciplinary field where certain concerns and methods have converged; the usefulness of this convergence is that it has enabled us to understand phenomena and relationships that were not accessible through the existing disciplines.” This study is not just interdisciplinary in approach but also a study on human life materially and spiritually, “...whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual.”⁹ In his book, William gives a wider definition of culture thus:

“Culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior. The analysis of culture, from such definition, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture.”¹⁰

It is also defined as: “... shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives and are transmitted across age generations.”¹¹ Culture thus acts as a medium of communication where people in certain society can be understood.

Culture change is, therefore, an important theme of this study. Among the studies that combined material and spiritual matters were such as have been done by Frank Boas.¹² His study covered intangible aspects such as on the artefacts, folktales, magical practices and religious beliefs. From his study, he argued that changes of culture occur when individuals from different cultures come and live together. Individuals tend to develop a new culture as they discover new knowledge, invent to produce something new and finally spread or diffuse it from one another. This process leads to cultural changes or “acculturation”¹³.

Sociologists argue that religions are in close contact with cultures. However, religion can be differentiated from culture by the existence of ‘supernatural power’, which is outside the regular process of nature¹⁴. Religion is concerned with the expression of the values of the society, and attempts to safeguard these by endowing them with divine sanction. As a social phenomenon¹⁵ religion lays on two fundamental categories: beliefs and rites “...the first are states of opinion and consist of representation; the second determined modes of action...Now the special nature of this object [rite] is expressed in belief.”¹⁶ According to Durkheim¹⁷, the distinctive aspect of religion is that it deals with the references to the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’. He argues that the ‘sacred’ consists of texts. They have special authority in religious traditions and are frequently used. On the other hand, ‘profane’ actions are related to religious rituals such as prayers. Other activities such as eating and drinking performed in religious settings were also considered as ‘profane.’¹⁸ These acts affect religious forms, values and beliefs of the individuals and transcend the circumstances and conditions of material life in the pursuit of spiritual goals which are rooted in faith¹⁹.

⁶ H. Al-Banna as cited in, C.P. Harris (1964) *Nationalism and Revolution in Egypt: The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood*. The Hague: Hoover Institution of War, Revolution and Peace, p 146

⁷ E. Hatch. (1973). *Theories of Man and Culture* New York: Columbia Press, p 1

⁸ G. Turner. (2003) *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*. London: Unwin Hyman, p9.

⁹ Raymond William. (1966) *Culture and Society 1780 - 1950*, London: Penguin, p16

¹⁰ Raymond William. (1975) *The Long Revolution*, London: Penguin, p57.

¹¹ R.J. House. et al. (1999). ‘Cultural influences on leadership and organizations’, In: W.H. Mobley, M.J. Gessner and V. Arnold. (eds), *Advances in global leadership*, Stamford: JAI Press. pp 171-233

¹² Mentioned in J. Friedl (1976). *Cultural Anthropology*, London: Harper’s College Press, p375

¹³ I. Robertson. (1981) *Sociology*. New York: Worth Publishers Inc. p 378

¹⁴ A. Malefjit. (1968) *Religion and Culture: An Introduction to Anthropology of Religion*. London: Macmillan, p9

¹⁵ In understanding religions, Durkheim has suggested we should look at it as a social phenomenon. See his, ‘Concerning the Definition of Religious Phenomena’ in W.S.F. Pickering (1975), pp74-79, ‘Guyau - L’ Ire’ligion de l’ avenir, etude de sociologie’ in W.S.F. Pickering, (1975), p24. See also S. Lukes. (1973) *Emile Durkheim - His Life and Work : A Historical and Critical Study*, London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, p237.

¹⁶ W.S.F. Pickering. (Ed.) (1975) *Durkheim on Religion - A Selection of Reading with Bibliographies*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p113

¹⁷ E. Durkheim. (1964) *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Tran.) G. Catlin, New York: Free Press, p52

¹⁸ ‘Sacred’ and ‘profane’ are discussed in many works of Durkheim and others. See

W.S.F.Pickering. (1984) *Durkheim’s Sociology of Religion: Themes and Theories*. In other writings, Durkheim defines sacred and profane as, “...those whose representation society itself has fashioned; it includes all sorts of collective states, common traditions and emotions, feelings which have a relationship to objects of general interest, etc.; and all those elements are combined according to the appropriate laws of social mentality. Profane things, conversely, are those which each of us constructs from our own sense data and experience; the ideas we have about them have as their subject matter unadulterated, individual impressions...” See his, ‘The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: The Totemic system in Australia’ in W.S.F. Pickering. (1975) *Durkheim on Religion - A Selection of Readings With Bibliographies*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. P95. Sacred from Durkheim’s view has been summarised as ; non-empirical, involves of ‘power’, it is ambiguous with respect to nature, culture and human welfare, it gives strengths, it

Belief is at the very heart of any religion²⁰. Religious beliefs and rituals consist of meanings and cultural practices that are special because people assume they are linked to a sacred and supernatural realm²¹. The understanding of faith is very important in this study and acts as the main factor in developing the inner strength of a Muslim. It is also regarded in many religious traditions as virtue or an 'act of will or commitment' to the person's spiritual goal. Religious beliefs, in particular, express patterns of meaning, which are significant to their believers.

Other than belief, prayer is also important when discussing the issue of religion. It is "the centre of religion."²² It also brings humans in direct contact with God, it is where faith comes into practice. The essence of prayer is stated by Heiler as, "... without prayer faith remains a theoretical conviction; worship is only an external and formal act; moral action is without spiritual depth; ..."²³. Prayer is not just a close communion of man with God but the forms of the social relations of humanity are also reflected from it.²⁴

Sambur Bilal, studied prayer from the viewpoint of Muslim and Western scholars. He argues that from al-Ghazali's perspective, prayer acts as a strong psychological force on man and makes belief alive.²⁵ He also sees prayer as a religious and moral guidance to man.²⁶ The other Muslim's scholar, Ibn 'Ata Allah sees prayer as a kind of human obedience toward God and not as a kind of petition as it has been understood by some people. His argument is quite similar to what has been suggested by Iqbal.²⁷ This study further suggests that, for Muslim scholars, prayer has a close relationship with morality.²⁸ For Iqbal, prayer is "... an inspiring source, which can transform and guide people to better levels."²⁹ Al Ghazali looks at prayer as a religious and moral guidance to man.³⁰ Similarly, from the Western point of view, Heiler for example divided prayer into prophetic and mystical types.³¹ The prophetic type include social and worldly matters. The mystical type on the other hand concerns more on individual satisfaction. From those studies, religion has been argued to have a positive contribution on morality. These interrelations will be studied in depth in this research.

Other than what has been discussed by sociologists, culture is also discussed in the field of management. Humphreys³² discusses three kinds of culture in organisations; national culture, organisational culture and occupational culture. He defends the significance of religion in culture, and even stresses that religion is a major source of cultural perspective. Hofstede,³³ puts culture as a 'mental software' that makes people from same national cultures think and act in similar way. He defines organisational culture as "... the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from the other."³⁴ In organisational culture, religion is viewed as an important factor as it is in society in general. A study³⁵ which compares between faith-based and secular agencies indicates that in terms of culture, the faith-based agencies applied religious values significantly in staff-client interactions. Some faith-based agencies are found to be using religious symbols in their staff name cards and agency's logo. The recent debate in the British media on the worker with the cross and the Muslim woman with her veil are cases in point.

National culture is also noted in close relation with religious beliefs. Tibi³⁶ compared the influence of religion on culture in Germany and in the Middle East and tried to understand how interblending of culture and religious values benefit social changes. He concludes, in the case of the Middle East, the same thing can happen given the condition that the local culture has to be renewed with modern understanding. This innovation is then to be structured with a development strategy with Islamic ethics to become an essence.

obtains great respect and makes ethical demand upon the believer. Sacred also "...impinges on human consciousness with moral obligation, with an ethical imperative." T.F. O'Lea. (1966) *The Sociology of Religion*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. p21

¹⁹ J.J. Coakley. (1998) *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies*. Boston: Irwin McGraw-Hill, p479

²⁰ K. Engebretson. (1996) *Creating Meeting Essays in Belief*. University of Sydney, Sydney: Social Science Press.

²¹ J.J. Coakley. (1998), p478

²² F. Heiler. (1932) *Prayer - A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion*, Translated and Edited, Samuel McComb. New York: Oxford University Press, p358

²³ *ibid*, p362

²⁴ *ibid*, p358

²⁵ B. Sambur. (2000) 'Prayer in the Psychology of Religion With Special Reference to al- Ghazali, Ibn 'Ata' Allah and Iqbal', *PhD Thesis*, University of Birmingham, p306

²⁶ *ibid*, p309

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ *ibid*, p308

²⁹ *ibid*, p309

³⁰ *ibid*, p309

³¹ See F. Heiler. (1932) *Prayer - A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion*, Oxford University Press, New York, p105

³² M. Humphreys. (1996). Cultural Difference and its Effect on the Management of Technical Education, *Leadership and Organizational Development Journal*, 17,2, pp.34-41.

³³ G. Hofstede. (1991). *Cultures and Organisations: Software of the Mind*. London: McGraw-Hill, p5

³⁴ What he means by 'a group' is people those who have necessary contact with each other. 'Category' on the other hand are people who do not have necessary have contact to and from each other but share something in common. See G. Hofstede. (1991). *Cultures and Organisations: Software of the Mind*. London: McGraw-Hill, p5.

³⁵ R.H. Ebaugh. et al. (2003). 'Where's the Religion? Distinguishing Faith-Based from Secular Social Service Agencies.' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 42, 3, pp1-48.

³⁶ B. Tibi. (1986), 'The Interplay Between Cultural and Social-Economic Change. The Case of Germany and of the Arab Region-Cultural Innovation' in the Development Process in