

# Cultural Performances and the Integration between Siamese and Malay Society in Kampung Keluang, Besut, Terengganu



W. N. J. Ariffin, N. M. Yusoff, E. M. Rahim, N. A. Bakar

**Abstract:** *This study is conducted to observe how cultural arts performance play the vital role in bridging two ethnics that differ in their cultural backgrounds and strengthen values of integration between Malays and Siamese in Kampung Keluang, Besut, Terengganu, one of the state in Malaysia. Cultural art performance acts as an element of symbolic to represent a group of society. Art performances in local context not only serve as a tool of escapism but also provide values of integration to a group of plural society. This study conducted in ethnography approach by applying two main techniques, namely joint observations and thematic interviews with the villagers in Kampung Keluang, Besut, Terengganu which consist of the Malays and Siamese, besides some other noteworthy individuals. The finding of the research shows that cultural shows still present in certain occasions or events and are seen as a mediator that forms mutual relationship between villagers of diverse cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, some cultural presentations have long been forgotten and rarely demonstrated. Thus, this writing functions as a documentation of the uniqueness of cultural art shows possessed by the Siamese minority and hence be regarded as to how these arts boost the values of integration between Siamese and Malay communities toward the establishment of a harmonical plural society.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Art, Integration, Siamese Minority, Malay Society.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The process of solid integration amongst multiracial Malaysians faces vast challenges. Obvious distinctions between races and ethnics in Malaysia cover the aspects of language, religion, custom and tradition, as well as heritage [1]. These differences throw a significant impact to a nation of plural societies like Malaysia to form a national identity and to cultivate unity among its citizen. In Malaysian scope, the

history of occupation or colonialization is one of the factors that leaves substantial effects thus creates barrier which restricts the formation of unity. Issues of unity and integration between races directly related to the diversity in the core values and social norms they upheld which distinguishes one race from another. Further supplemented by ethnocentrism in individuals and society, they complicate the process of racial and social integration.

Each race possesses cultures that are distinct to others and they would regard theirs as supreme and paramount. This diverse cultural factor is one of the challenges in the formation of integration. Despite that, culture could serve as an element of union to bring different races to live together harmoniously. The ability to love and adore one another, to accept cultural differences, to tolerate with one another, and to hinder over obsessiveness of nationalism are among the foundations ought to be exercised in cultural context to nurture the bond between people. These practices are present in community ambience in Kampung Keluang Besut, between Malays and Siamese with distinct cultural backgrounds and they live peacefully and harmoniously together.

Historically, the arrival of Siamese community to the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia dated way back before the influx of Chinese and Indian ethnics that were brought in by the colonizers. The location of Thailand (Siam) that is next to Malaysia (Malay Land) has contributed to the strong relationship between the Malays and Siamese since they frequently travel in and out of the Malay Land, particularly to Kelantan [2]. According to historical sources, there are huge possibilities that the arrival of the Siamese occurred countless times. In *Sejarah Melayu*, it is stated that the existence of the Siamese in Malay Land Peninsular traced back even before the establishment of Malacca Sultanate and during the era of Malacca Sultanate the Siamese had already settled down in Pahang [3]. The presence of Siamese closely connected to traditional Malay politics. Once when Malacca was colonized, states in the north of Malay Land such as Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu fell to the hands of Siamese provinces. Gifts of golden flowers to Siamese ruler by those states were regarded as *ufti* or tribute to the government of Siam [4].

Relationship between Siam and governments in Malay Land is written in numerous traditional Malay literatures like *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai*, *Sejarah Melayu*, *Hikayat Patani* and *Hikayat Seri Kelantan* [5].

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This indicates the rapport between the Siamese and Malays has long been established. In present context, relationship between Siamese and Malays as particularly observed in the East Coast region, proves that cultural assimilation and integration between them occurred and elements of cultural toleration existed between these two societies.

Geographical location between these two bordering countries has led these two societies of the same origin to constantly interact with one another.

Basically, Siamese and Malay society shared similar cultural histories which have the influences of animism, Buddha and Hindu. As Islam set its foot in the Malay Land and was embraced by the Malays, it transformed much of the Malay cultures and thus distinguished the way of life between the Malays and Siamese. Siamese community in Kampung Keluang retains strong bond with the local communities. Though the distinction in their cultural background with the Malays is apparent, it does not hamper them from building robust relationship with the locals. In addition, the history of their settlements in the village that went back to ancient times plays vital role to suit the Siamese well with the local communities. Regardless of the elderly, teenagers or children, the researchers found out that they are able to mingle themselves well and respected one another. This strong relationship has dated back for a long period of time. Siamese and Malays have been living together harmoniously and they accepted one another as part of their lives.

There are several circumstances that push towards the harmonic relationship of these villagers. The most evident is the use of communal public areas and facilities provided such as markets, shops, playgrounds and schools. This sharing has indirectly created a social space for the villagers regardless of the Siamese and Malays to get to know and to be acquainted with one another. Besides, leadership role has major impact in bridging the gaps between cross cultural societies. In Kampung Keluang, Malay and Siamese leaders work closely to ensure the welfare of the villagers in general are taken care of.

Attitudes of the Siamese and Malay societies in this village should also be praised. They still maintain the traditional elements in the context of neighborhood relationship which is observable through the culture of visiting one another although they are of different races. Nonetheless, the primary aspect that is emphasized in this writing is cultural tolerance adopted by the villagers in the context of cultural art performances. The practice of cultural arts in this village is truly harmonious as they display mutual respect, show mutual appreciation and preserve their cultural heritage respectively.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHOD

### A. Respondents.

The respondent in this study is the Siamese Community in Kampung Keluang, Besut Terengganu. The Siamese community refers to a group of people who declare themselves as of Siamese descendant and also approved by other ethnicities taking into consideration the behavioural and characteristics that is considered pertinent to the Siamese race which include the linguistics aspect, ethnical identity,

historical values and tradition [6]. The Siam society in Terengganu is not as many as Siamese Community in the state of Kelantan where many of them mainly reside in the districts of Tumpat, Pasir Mas and Bachok. Terengganu is one of the states with high percentage of Malays. 94.2 percent out of a million Terengganuites consists of the Malays; followed by 2.5 percent Chinese, 0.3 percent Indians and 3.0 percent represent the other races [7]. The Siamese community falls under the category of other races and indeed a minority in this state. In Terengganu, Besut is a district which populates Siamese residents who live in a village named Kampung Keluang. This village is surrounded by other villages where majority of the residents are Malays. Kampung Keluang is a settlement which is situated in a rural area, located in the province of Kampung Raja and administrated by the Village Safety and Development Committee (JKKK) Kampung Keluang. The total number of residents in Kampung Keluang is 1592 people consisting of the Malays with 1325 people (83%), 45 Chinese (3.5%), 214 Siamese (13.5%), and only 8 Indians (0.5%). Kampung Keluang has a majority of Malays and Siamese is the second highest of race in this village. The Siamese are far less than Malays with a ratio 1:6. This has made them a minority who lives in a residential area monopolized by Malays.

### B. Method

This research used ethnographic approach that associates with the way of life of the community and requires the researchers to elaborate on the lifestyle and culture of humans naturally [8]. In an ethnographic study, field work is the main medium for researchers in order to obtain primary data based on certain resources. In the process of data collection, researchers have stayed together with the sample group, involved with their daily activities and established a strong relationship with them. This phase requires the researchers to secure a strong relationship with the Siamese community because it influences the findings.

Throughout the research process, researchers have involved with daily activities of the Siamese community for over 12 months and continued to do so until the researcher obtained enough data to be analysed. In order to collect the data, the researcher has applied a few technique such as the observation technique followed a series of interviews with the respondents both formally and informally. Through this technique, researchers have entailed the community activities together with the villagers to observe the elements of cultural art and integration process among the villagers. Interviews were conducted through three phases which are formal, informal and focus group discussion (FGD). Researchers have conducted formal interviews with a row of leaders from the Siamese and Malay community as well as several villagers that pose significance to the research needs. Formal interviews were conducted to acquire official information and specific views from the respondents regarding a subject matter. However, researchers were keen on conducting interviews informally especially when doing activities with villagers in order to obtain much authentic findings in terms of data validity.

Interviews through conversations with the villagers either individually or in groups were adhered to themes specified and provided that they were within the context of the research. Primary data obtained from the field work were analysed manually.

Apart from that, researchers also opted for secondary data and sorted them using N-Vivo software to support the research finding.

### III. RESULT DISCUSSION

#### A. Cultural performances of Siamese community.

Loy Krathong is an annual festival celebrated by Siamese Buddhist. It is celebrated once a year on particular dates according to the Siamese calendar. Nevertheless, it sometimes might be held on other dates depending on suitability and availability of the local villagers. Loy Krathong festival in Besut, however, is not quite similar and as grand as in Thailand. Loy Krathong is famously known for its two rituals; one of which is the flying 'lampion', which is a lantern resembling a huge *tanglong* made of paper and lighted with candles in it. Another ritual is the drifting of 'krathong' that looks similar to a lotus and is also lighted up with candles in it. Figure 1 below showed the "krathong" used in the celebration. 'Krathong' is often washed away on the ocean or river mouth. During the 'krathong' wash away ritual, devotees would put belongings such as hair, nails and sometimes coins as a symbol of self-purification. Devotees would also recite prayers and state their wishes when drifting 'krathong'.



Figure 1: 'Krathong' used in the Loy Krathong celebration.[9]

According to villagers, the Loy Krathong festival is a symbolic way for mankind to apologize to the water for sins they had done to the water. They regard water as a holy creature and human constantly use it to clean dirty things. This act is assumed as a wrongdoing towards the water. To use water and caused it to become not clean anymore is a sin and human needs to appreciate and offer apology to the water. Thus, among the purpose of Loy Krathong celebration is to worship the water god and to obtain forgiveness and mercy from the water god for their sins.

Before the Loy Krathong festival is celebrated, devotees would commonly hold a worshipping ceremony as one of its ritual that needs to be completed to seek blessings for the upcoming festivity. Once that they are done with the worshipping ceremony, they may celebrate the Loy Krathong

festival with excitement and other cultural events such as parade of replicas, cultural dances and singing performances that would attract the interest of the local Malays to spectate together. The celebration of this festival is held on a large scale together with many other events like dance shows, sports and games, lucky draws, singing performances and sales booth. The carnival is also enlightened with the presence of the Kota Putera Member of State Legislative Assembly, village head, and the local Malays.

According to Siamese tradition, the dates for Loy Krathong celebration would follow the Siamese calendar but sometimes being suited and adapted to availability of the locals. The joy of celebrating Loy Krathong is shared and felt with the participation of almost all Siamese community by holding parade to the river mouth situated near Pantai Keluang. Cars are decorated and the ornaments usually represent the type of year in the Siamese calendar. If it falls on the dragon year, they would decorate cars with replicas of dragons, and would decorate cars with replicas of rats should it is the rat year. Nonetheless, it all depends on the financial allocation that they have. Sometimes the decorated cars are excluded from the carnival due to financial constraint. Yet, the 'krathong' parade would still be held by a mass crowd and usually accompanied by music tunes and cultural songs.



Figure 2: Siamese cultural dance during Loy Krathong celebration.[9]

Songkran is another significant festival that has elements of art and is celebrated in conjunction with the New Year in Siamese calendar. Songkran is well-known for its water fight festival. Songkran is actually a festival and is a part of Siamese culture that is celebrated as a way of eliminating bad deeds or negative attitudes in oneself and substituting them with the better. Along with the beginning of a new year, they leave behind the yesteryear's bygones and replace them with new things for a better new year.

Songkran is famous for its water fight as it has the festival of water splashing unto one another. The water splashing ritual is in fact a symbol of self-purification from inner and outer impurities as well as to instill goodness in every individual. Songkran festivity celebrated by the Siamese in Kampung Keluang is held in *ketik* lawn and has its own specific procedure. The celebration would be started off by honouring the monks present on the day by watering the monks' heads or washing their hands.

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The water used for the monks is mixed with fragrances. It is then followed by the respected people in the village such as the village head, pious people, elderly, parents and older siblings. For the older generation, it is sufficient to just wash their hands as a sign of self-purification and apology for their wrongdoings. Only then they would splash one another with water and rejoice with others.



**Figure 3: Hand-washing ritual of the monks by villager.**  
[10]

### B. Art and its role in the formation of integration.

Art in culture is an external element and has become a symbolic to a group of society. Art activities are one of the many branches of culture consist of various categories that is hard to classify specifically. Nevertheless, art as one of the elements of culture, in general, is divided into numerous components. It comprises the aspects of dance performances, music, drama, architecture, handicrafts, weaving, pottery and carpentry [9]. Each one of them has varied examples. In the local community, art performances are not a taboo and are practiced as a tool of escapism after a tiring day at work. Art shows like shadow play or *wayang kulit*, *menora*, *makyong*, *gamelan*, among others, have become a norm for the community to entertain themselves and are performed in events and ceremonies. Often, they are performed in healing and worshipping rituals as majority of these traditional performances closely related to the belief of animism in the past.

Art is a human expression that portrays the many aspects of life, documentation of life rules and cycles, thoughts and specific needs of a society [11]. It is not external in nature, but possesses internal contents made up of values, moral, philosophies, and education owned by a society. Folk art performance is a form of traditional entertainment inherited from one generation to the next. Art performance is dynamical, not only narrative, singing, music, acting but also governs the element of rituals. All these lead the art performance to be constantly adored and sustained.

Generally in Malaysia, traditional art performances such as shadow play or *wayang kulit*, *makyong*, *rodan* and *dikir barat* are still actively practiced and requested in certain events and ceremonies. Though limited, these traditional arts managed to gain the attention and interest of not only the local Malays but also other races. Typically, in the east coast communities of which majority of them are Malays, whenever there are cultural performances being held, other minorities also made their presence felt not only by spectating the show, but also participating in the cultural performances. This phenomenon

creates positive vibrants in the context of ethnic relation and brings about the spirit of integration among races in Malaysia. Apart from that, it shows that the roles of cultural art performances are wide in scope and not only for the purpose of mere entertainment and pleasure to spectators.

The phenomena in Malaysia proves that art collections not only able to set tranquility and peace to human, but also serves as integrated social tool [12]. Cultural performances like music, songs, dances and theatres are capable to form social union on two different levels; production and acceptance. Acceptance, honour and recognition given by one ethnic towards the art cultures of other ethnic demonstrate the existence of social union among them.

In Kampung Keluang, cultural art shows also play the key role in connecting communities of different races when they shared their respective arts. Cultural arts like *wayang kulit* or shadow play, *makyong*, *menora*, and cultural Siamese dances like Loy Krathong are among the cultural performances held in this village and constantly received warm welcomes from local community. They are so into folk cultural arts and regard art cultural performances as part of the ancestor's legacy shared together and need to be preserved. However, according to the interview with the villagers, they admitted that the excitement and ambience of cultural performances that used to be held in the past was different as compared in the present. The villagers stated that local art performances like *makyong*, *menora* and *wayang kulit* were once lively and frequently held. The participation by Malays, Chinese and Siamese villagers was also high.

### C. Openness of Malay society celebrating the uniqueness of Siamese cultural arts.

The openness of Malays and Siamese towards the uniqueness of their diversity has long existed. As an entity that instills identity, art plays vital role as the symbol of identity to a society. The distinctions on the elements of culture for Siamese and Malay ethnics may bring about conflicts to ethnic relations if there are no values or openness among its members in accepting their respective diversity. They share a common neighbourhood for a very long period of time and have actually shared the same lines of history. Historical factors in the process of integration are important as they can form common values [13] (Jagdeo 1979). When they shared common values in the context of past history, they indirectly build mutual sense between Siamese society and the local Malays. They also impart the value of nasionalism and possess the same spirit of patriotism.

According to the authors' interview with the village head, the history of Siamese migration to the village has been around for a long time and the Siamese have built their lives and cultivated their own culture that resembled the characteristics of the local culture. Their life journey with the Malays began from the colonization era until now. As the nation celebrates its independence of more than half a century, togetherness and unity between these two ethnics grow stronger. Though they still retain the identity of their ethnic, their relation with the Malays is intact, as a result of their openness.

Culture share factor is not the only reason to the openness of Malays and Siamese. Apart from past history, culture literacy is also a factor that contributes to the process of integration. Culture literacy embedded in the Siamese towards the Malays helps them to understand each other's needs in cultural context. When the Siamese recognizes the needs and wants of the Malay culture in religious context, for example, they would avoid any actions that may trigger sensitivities of the Malays.

In any cultural elements, be it from the aspects of religion, custom, taboo and language, each has their own awareness about the need to preserve common values. The local Malays are very fond towards the attitude of the Siamese and the way they carry themselves, as well as the respect that they show towards the Malays in their daily lives. Interviews with the Malays revealed that the Siamese are good in maintaining their relation with the locals especially the Malays. The interaction between Siamese and Malays shows that the Siamese are good in tackling the hearts of the local Malays and at the same time the Malays accepted them as their neighbours. The Malays always hold to their customs and social norms inherited from one generation to another. Moral values during interaction are highly emphasized by the Malays and are manifested in their social relation.

The norms of the Malays in their social relation always stresses on three main values which are mutual respect, consensus and cooperation or tolerance [14]. The first value; respect, is nurtured by the Malays from their very young age. The younger generation shall respect the elders, students shall respect their teachers and citizens shall respect their leaders. The respect is repaid with love, responsibility and implementation of trust appointed to them. Respect, as regarded by the Malays, can directly hinder sense of ego and arrogance. The same goes to tolerance, as instilled in the Malays; it prevents arrogance, nourishes togetherness and stops conflicts. The core values imprinted in the identity of the Malays has influenced the strong relation between them and the other ethnics among them. The Malays openness towards the Siamese is influenced by those three main values stated earlier. Though the Malays acknowledge and aware that they are dominant in terms of culture and even have the advantage on power, they do not take advantage on other ethnics and never treat them bad. The harmonic atmosphere in Kampung Keluang is a result of a strong relation between Siamese and Malays driven by the culture of lives of villagers and spirit of solidarity of traditional society.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The finding of the study showed that sharing of certain cultural elements as found in Malay and Siamese society has lead to positive implications towards ethnic relations in this village. Unity depicted by the Siamese minority among the majority of Malays shows the degree of positive integration through cultural practices of which has achieved the level of assimilation and amalgamation. Descent relation would then ease the plural society institutions to function well.

Development and welfare of each member of community would be preserved if they managed to maintain the relation between them and avoid conflicts with one another. Culture,

which has become an element to distinguish each ethnic should not be observed as a reason to separate the society but should be regarded as a unity element between two different ethnics. Plurality and diversity of society is inevitable. The current situation is not suitable for one ethnic to just mingle with their own ethnic without the socialization of other ethnics. The condition of community that varies in its ethnic composition need to be dealt with tolerance and each party should take part to ensure these ethnics can interact well with one another. The situation in Kampung Keluang where Siamese society has been living for years with the Malays has eased the process of integration to be preserved and sustained. has resulted them to culture share with the Malays. Settlements shared with the Malays for a long period of time has resulted to experience culture share with the Malays. Tolerance and culture share has finally become a catalyst in order for them to retain the good relation.

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