



Islam or progress of the nation?: An assessment of the *aurat* issue in Malay newspapers and magazines in the 1930s

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Abstract

Western media often perceive Islam as a misogynistic religion which hampers the progress of a nation. One related issue is “*aurat*” which is considered as a means to denigrate women in the society. In pre-Independent Malaya debates raged around the contested perceptions and interpretations of *aurat* in its relation to Malay modernisation and the urgency of achieving ‘progress’ for Malays on par with other communities in the country. Articles were published in Malayan newspapers and magazines debating the need to enhance awareness about the progress of the Malay nation. This study assessed the differing interpretations of the principle of *aurat* among Muslims in 1930s Malaya. The information scrutinised was derived from polemics published in Malay newspapers and magazines circulated in Malaya in the 1930s. The findings revealed that people were torn between modernization and traditionalism, viewing them as a choice between westernization and Islam. The establishment of secular education and social mixing with the non-Muslim community exposed the Malays to new norms and values. In this transitional period, social norms and values transformed according to the surroundings. The materials demonstrated how the Malay Muslims responded to the call of development and the extent to which they were ready to embrace modernization, which some viewed as a detachment from pristine Islamic teachings, especially regarding the issue of *aurat*.

Keywords: *Aurat*, Islam, Malays, neutral group, progress, westernized group

Introduction

Western media perceived Islam as a religion that suppresses the progress of a nation. The negative and shocking stories about Islam such as honour killings, genital mutilations, stoning of adulterous or blasphemous women, child marriages as well as *burqas* (face veiling) have been highlighted to emphasize that Islam discriminates against women (Amriah & Ratnawati, 2011). One of the issues related to Muslim women that have been debated is “*aurat*” which is considered as a means to discredit women within the society.

In Malaysia, the issue of the *aurat* emerged recently when Ra’amah Ebrahim, a Muslim woman, declared on social media that wearing a *tudung* is unhygienic. Her argument echoed the assertions presented by liberal Muslim groups, such as Sisters in Islam, which promote the reinterpretation of the Quran. Such groups assert that such a reinterpretation is necessary to enhance the quality of Muslims’ observation of ‘true Islam’. This discussion marks a reoccurrence of developments that took place within Muslim society in Malaya prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. As Malay nationalism reached its peak, newspapers were used as a platform to call for development. Malays were urged to change their lifestyles because some of the Malays believed that the most important step in reaching ‘progress’ was to adopt a western lifestyle. This approach tore Malays into groups because some members of Malay society

hesitated to follow this idea due to its incompatibility with Islamic teachings. The issue was subsequently debated in the newspapers and magazines circulated in Malaya. Many intellectual Malays opted to share their opinions and ideas in newspapers and magazines. Both media had played as important mouth pieces for the intellectual Malays from conflicting groups to disseminate their ideas. These published materials had proved its effectiveness in determining Malay Muslims perception on issues that occurred within the Malay society since late nineteenth century until today (Mohd Safar, 2004; Jamaie Hj Hamil et al., 2014)

This article aims to present a clear picture of the dilemma, the choose between Islam and 'the progress of the nation' for Muslims in Malaya in the 1930s. Articles published within the period of this study discussed the importance of youth's role to contribute in the development of Malay society. Generally, the Malays supposed that the younger generation had to play a crucial role in nation building, and this perception remains in the Malay society up to these days. Haslinda Abdullah et al. (2013) in the study of the Malaysia Youth Council (MYC) in Malaysia for example, shows that youth generation in Malaysia is expected to play positive and effective role towards society and country in order to enable Malaysia to emerge as a developed country. Young generation of the 1930's were exposed to new norms and values due to their social mixing and educational background which were based on secular principles. Thus, conflicting ideas with older generation were inevitable. The issue of *aurat* is one of topics which had attracted much debate. Close scrutiny of the issue of *aurat* among Muslims in Malaya during this period of study will clarify the development that occurred in the social history of Muslims in Malaya. It could also provide a glimpse into the reasons that Muslims in Malaysia continue to have different interpretations of the principle of *aurat*.

Background

Islam emphasizes the importance of protecting one's honour and virtue, as they will determine the fate of a Muslim (male or female) in the life hereafter. Submission to Allah means following all of his rules and regulations and avoiding anything *haram* (forbidden). In terms of gender relations, Islam emphasizes the importance of protecting oneself from committing sins. There were great apprehensions that open interactions between males and females would lead to adultery (illicit sexual intercourse), which could jeopardize the order of the entire Muslim community. Thus, close proximity between non-*mahram* males and females was not allowed, and if there were occasions where they had to meet with each other, they would wear modest attire according to Islamic rules. Such attire covers their *awrah*, parts of body that might trigger sexual desire.

The term *awrah* [lit. Arabic language], also known as *aurat* refers to genitals (*al-sau'at*) (Ibn Manzur, 1990: 616), but may also refer to anything that is shameful to expose to others (al-Razi, n.d: 461). Both women and men are required to dress modestly and to conduct themselves in a manner that befits their dignity, not tempting others. It should be emphasized here that the concept of *menutup aurat* (covering certain parts of the body) for women in Islam is not posited in terms of women's spiritual status in relation to men. Rather, it is framed as part of Islamic ethics that ought to govern the social lives of men and women. However, most discussion about modesty in Muslim societies, including that of Malay society, focuses on the issue of *aurat* for women, and little attention is given to that of men. For the sake of this discussion, we will only highlight the issue of *aurat* for women, especially Malay women during early 20th century.

At the age of physical maturity (puberty), women are obliged to cover the *aurat* (Abu Dawud, 1998: 621-2). There are various interpretations among Islamic jurisprudence scholars about which parts of body must be covered. Islamic scholars have various interpretations of the following Quranic text: '... and to display of their adornment only what is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornments save to their own husbands, their fathers ... (al-Nur, 24: 31).

Referring to the above Quranic text ('what is apparent'), al-Qurtubi opined that these words refer to the woman's hands and face because these two parts of the body are apparent when they are working or

performing personal rituals, such as praying or participating in a state of *ihram* (consecration during *umrah* and *hajj*) (al-Qurtubi, 1977: 192-3). This view is also shared by al-Jassas in his *Ahkam al-Quran* (al-Jassas, 1993: 460) and al-Tabari (al-Tabari, 1985: 303-306). According to al-Tabari, any adornment worn on those two particular parts of the body, such as mascara, rings, bracelets and henna, are allowed to be seen by others, including non-*mahram* men (Ibid). Commenting on the same phrase, Ibn Abbas, the famous companion, said, 'It means the face and hands'. Thus, a woman must cover all of her body, except her face and hands, while in the presence of men (Ibn Qudamah, 1994: 416-7). The majority of the scholars of Islamic jurisprudence have opined that all parts of women's bodies must be covered, except her hands and face. Abu Hanifah, on the other hand, stressed that, along with the hands and face, women were also not obliged to cover their feet.

Islamic jurisprudence books provide various reports on Muslim jurists' views on this matter. Although the majority of the scholars from the Shafi'e school of jurisprudence noted that a woman's hands and face were allowed to be exposed to non-*mahram* men, al-Shawkani reported that some of the Shafi'ites opined that a woman must cover her entire body, including her hands and face (al-Shawkani, 1993: 55). According to Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and his followers, all parts of the woman's body were *awrah* and must be covered without exceptions. He asserted that the most attractive parts of women's bodies, capable of enticing men, were their faces and hands (Ibn Rushd, 2002: 110)

As opposed to women who cover their *awrah*, those who display their beauty are perceived as having committed *tabbarruj*. *Tabarruj* refers to not only beautifying oneself but also to displaying oneself with the purpose of enticing attention. Displaying one's beauty is considered to be one of the gravest destructive sins because it brings a curse and expulsion from the mercy of Allah.

The issue of *aurat* and the Malay dilemma

Lewis (2009) and Lee (2014) provide a general description of the attire and fashion used by Muslims in Malaya. Both suggest that western attire was common among Muslims in Penang and Malaya, respectively. Social mixing and a flourishing entertainment industry, especially cinema in Malaya, exposed Muslims to new fashions and styles. Bandung fashion, Shanghai fashion and western fashion penetrated society, and western attire was seen as a symbol of progress. The Malays began looking up to those wearing western attire. A reader of *Tanah Melayu* stated that he was addressed as *wak* (lit. uncle) when he was wearing *songkok* (Asian cap resembling fez) but received better treatment when wearing western attire, even being addressed politely as 'Mister' (*Tanah Melayu*, January 1935: 1).

Yet, the wearing of western attire among men caused uneasiness in Malay society within this period of study. Meanwhile, the adoption of western attire among Malay women became an area of heated debate in local newspapers because it involved religious issues (*aurat*) (*Pemimpin Malayu*, 12/09/1933:11). The debate involved various views held by members of Malay society. For the sake of discussion, this paper will refer to those who adopted western attire as the 'westernized group'. Meanwhile, the second group, who choose to maintain Malay traditional clothing, is labelled as the 'neutral group'.

At the beginning of the 1930s, *Saudara* reported that Malay women were drawn to a new fashion, referred to as 'European fashion' (*Saudara* 09/08/1930: 1; *Saudara* 16/08/ 1929: 1). The women began wearing gowns, high heels and famous hair-dos that originated in the west. In addition, the use of make-up products, such as face powder and lipstick, became increasingly common. *Saudara* (16/08/1930) reported that such women were even comfortable touching up their make-up in public areas, such as the cinema or on public transport (*Lanca*). Apart from the adoption of western attire, western dress codes and ethics seemed to enter Muslims' worldviews in the 1930s. From articles printed in local Malay newspapers, it is possible to determine the extent to which Malays were influenced by western dress codes and ethics. The use of bathing suits among women at pools in Singapore was normal. For example, *Dunia Sekarang*, in its criticisms against Malay women in Singapore, stated that 'semi-naked women' were common at pools in Singapore (*Dunia Sekarang* 15/09/ 1934: 4). Many Malay women preferred

western attire due to their desire to appear stylish and beautiful based on the latest trends (*Dewan Perempuan*, 01/06/1935: 37). Furthermore, the prices for such styles were lower than traditional Malay attire (*Pemimpin Melayu*, 11/05/1934: 10).

Reports in newspapers and magazines suggest that the westernized group had abandoned the principle of *aurat*, arguing that the adoption of new fashion was a stepping stone for the Malays to emerge as a modern nation (*Kemajuan Melayu*, April, 1932: 7). This assumption was supported by a general understanding that Turkey was able to be on par with European countries because of its women's adoption of western attire (*Saudara*, 02/02/1929: 1). Subsequently, the obligation to cover *aurat* was no longer at the centre of Malay women's attention during this period of study. The editor of *Saudara*, for example, stated in his column that the majority of Malay women seemed to ignore warnings and reprimands by Muslim scholars about dress and attire (*Saudara*, 16/08/1930). This attitude may relate to developments that took place within Malay society during that period of time. Malay nationalists were campaigning to improve economic conditions in order to emerge as a modern nation; many had shifted their focus from religious issues to economic issues after 1926 (Roff, 1967). Hence, some people, especially in the westernized group, were eager to detach themselves from Malay backwardness, ignoring Islamic teachings on matters that they considered trivial, such as *aurat*.

On the other hand, the neutral group continued to write to newspapers to share their thoughts that Muslims were obliged to observe Islamic teachings. Ba Mim wrote a letter questioning a proposal that suggested pantaloons as boys' school uniforms because they would expose the boys' knees, which is contrary to men's *aurat* in Islam (*Tanah Melayu*, December 1934: 3-4 & 17). In his response to the letter, a columnist for *Tanah Melayu* known as Bang Mat put forward a bold response, noting his reluctant acceptance of western attire while reminding the letter writer that Turkey had adopted these styles earlier (*Ibid*; *Tanah Melayu*, February 1935: 6-7). Even though Bang Mat acknowledged that Islam had forbidden its followers to expose their *aurat*, he expressed that the obligation to 'cover the knee' is a trivial issue compared to the attempts to develop the Malay nation (*Ibid*). This opinion was shared by another reader who argued that Malays were obliged to improve the conditions of the 'two million' members of Malay society. He added that the Malays had to channel their attention into helping the country develop rather than worrying about the need to 'cover the knee' (*Tanah Melayu*, May 1935: 3-4).

The same attitude was adopted by another columnist who managed the women's section in *Tanah Melayu*. She appealed to Malay women to stick to the 'modern principle' even though it was wrong according to Islamic law. Subsequently, she encouraged Malay women to abandon head scarves, to enjoy freedom, to engage in sports and to mix freely with the opposite sex (*Tanah Melayu*, September 1936: 13-14). The above discussions demonstrate that Malay journalists and readers were aware of the rules and regulations regarding *aurat* according to Islamic teaching, but they opted to abandon them because they were less significant than the progress of the Malay nation.

The westernized group and the neutral group appear to differ in their interpretations of Islamic teaching. The neutral group seems to have felt that the adoption of new fashions was deviant (*Tanah Melayu*, December 1935: 18). *Kemajuan Melayu* argued that Muslim women who believed in Judgement Day were not supposed to imitate western fashion, also warning men not to allow their women to wear that style, as they too would suffer severe punishment from God (*Kemajuan Melayu*, May 1932: 44). A *Dunia Perempuan* reader shared this opinion, describing those who adopted western fashion as sinners (*Dunia Perempuan*, September 1936: 2-3). The westernized group tended to oppose these arguments. In response to the letter stating that wearing pantaloons is *haram* (forbidden) according to Islamic teaching, Tok Ngah asserted that God had never asked men to observe the principle of *halal* and *haram*. In addition, he argued that the principle of *aurat* was trivial compared to the need to develop the Malay nation (*Tanah Melayu*, March 1936: 2).

The justification for this attitude can be traced to another comment he wrote in *Tanah Melayu*. He asserted that issue politics (*siasat*) were more important than religion (*Tanah Melayu*, December 1935: 4-5). The westernized group made arguments that members of Malay society needed to move ahead with the changing times, adapting to transformations in society. On the other hand, the neutral group insisted

that even though new fashion was 'better' than Malay traditional attire, Muslims should use their wisdom to determine which is more suitable for Muslim people (*Kemajuan Melayu*, April 1932: 7). The westernized group saw no obligation for Muslims to observe Islamic teaching because Malay society was struggling to become modern and developed, and they believed that they had to imitate developed nations. On this basis, the editor of *Tanah Melayu* boldly insisted that those who wanted to observe Islamic principles should stay put in their homes because the others 'were competing to collect wealth and move toward progress' and because 'progress is more important than religion' (*Tanah Melayu*, December 1935: 13 & 19). His frustration with the attitudes of the neutral group was clear, as he recommended that they reassess their thoughts on the issue of western attire because they were clearly wrong in their judgments. He was convinced that the neutral group was wrong because there was no way that they could surpass the intellect of Mustafa Kamal Basha [The first president of Turkey] (*Tanah Melayu*, December 1935: 13 & 19).

The obsession of the westernized group with encouraging members of Malay society to adopt western attire came from their assumption that western fashion could serve as a tool for the Malays to achieve development. They argued that traditional Malay attire was unfashionable, out of date and inappropriate for parties, ceremonies and workplaces (*Kemajuan Melayu*, April 1932: 7). By comparison, western attire was beautiful, neat and up to date (*Pemimpin Melayu*, 11/05/1934: 10). In other words, a western style of clothing would enable Malay women to better socialize and contribute to the nation's development. *Tanah Melayu*, for example, printed a picture of Malay women in traditional attire with a caption acknowledging it as 'beautiful and sweet', but stressing the fact that it could hinder the movement of the wearer. Therefore, Malay traditional attire was 'unable to help Malay reach for progress' (*Tanah Melayu*, December 1934: 5). In other words, the caption suggests that Malay traditional attire was inappropriate at workplaces, potentially curbing Malay women from contributing to the economy. Subsequently, women who were reluctant to accept a western style of clothing were regarded as a threat to efforts to improve the conditions of Malay society (*Dunia Perempuan*, September 1936: 2-3). They were looked down upon because they dressed in 'shabby clothes, wearing head scarves and chewing betel leaves'; they were unable to contribute to the nation's development because they could not even improve themselves (*Ibid*). Meanwhile, the neutral group found the argument that fashion would help the Malays to emerge as a modern nation to be baseless and unacceptable. A poem entitled '*Pakaian*' printed in *Dunia Akhirat* suggests that attire was only an accessory and had no role in developing or improving Malay society in any way (*Dunia Akhirat*, 25/04/1937: 2). The author emphasises that the Malays could only overcome their backwardness and become a developed nation if members of society equipped themselves with knowledge and worked hard toward that goal.

From the westernized group's point of view, Malay traditional attire was an obstacle to the country's forward progress. Responding to a letter criticizing the transformation of Malay dress from traditional to western style, *Tanah Melayu* proposed that the Malays had to get rid of the negative heritage of their ancestors. These harmful traits, such as being 'lazy, poor, stupid, dirty, uneducated and weak in everything (*dhaiif*)', had to be replaced by positive characteristics from Europeans. Malays needed to be 'intellectual, wealthy and progressive' to enable the emergence of a progressive nation (*Tanah Melayu*, December 1935: 4-5). From the viewpoint of the westernized group, maintaining Malay traditional attire would be an act of 'stupidity and backwardness' (*Tanah Melayu*, July 1936: 9-10). *Tanah Melayu* asserted that Malays needed to imitate developed nations like England, Japan and Turkey. Hence, imitating western style was the only way to save the Malay nation from backwardness (*Tanah Melayu*, June 1935: 6-7; *Tanah Melayu*, August 1935: 1-2; *Tanah Melayu*, July 1937: 4). Furthermore, *Tanah Melayu* convinced its readers that another Muslim country, Afghanistan, had adopted the same approach, and sources from Mecca and Medina were implying that Muslims in the holy cities would follow suit (*Tanah Melayu*, July 1936: 1-2). The westernized group pledged that the neutral group was wrong in insisting on maintaining Malay traditional attire because developed nations like England, Germany, Japan, Italy and Turkey had abandoned their traditions in order to move forward (*Tanah Melayu*, July

1937: 1-2). Clearly, the westernized group's justifications came only from their understanding of the history of developed nations while religious rules and regulations played a minimal role.

As mentioned above, the neutral group hesitated in accepting the western style of clothing because they were concerned about violating the principle of *aurat*, a concern that the westernized group regarded as baseless. An author stated in *Dunia Sekarang* that 'new developments within Malay society', such as the adoption of western clothing was unfamiliar and seemed to be incompatible with Islamic teachings. However, he also urged the Malays to let go of their prejudices because such attitudes were not deviant. In fact, Turkey had already done the same thing (*Dunia Sekarang*, 15/11/1935: 4). Meanwhile, a *Dunia Sekarang* columnist responded to a reader's comment about Malay girls in Penang's English schools wearing short-sleeved blouses, insisting that they deserved no criticism because Turkish women had also adopted western attire (*Dunia Sekarang*, 01/09/1935: 1). Both asserted that the adoption of western attire did not go beyond the boundaries set in Islamic teachings. The use of Turkey as justification for Malay's adoption of western styles came from the view that Turkey's understanding of Islam was superior because Turkey used to be the leader of the Muslim world (*Dunia Sekarang*, 15/11/1935: 4). The westernized group had undoubtedly made Turkey and European countries the centre of their justifications and judgements. The westernized group's discussions and arguments in newspapers, as consulted in this study, illustrate that Muslims' understanding of the obligation to cover *aurat* during this period was superficial.

Meanwhile, the neutral group suggested that traditional attire, such as *baju kurung*, *kebaya labuh* and *sarung*, which were used to cover women's faces, were the most appropriate clothing for Malay women (*Dunia Akhirat*, 25/04/1937: 2). Clearly, the westernized group refused to share this opinion. Other than the arguments discussed above, this group also noted a health issue in maintaining Malay traditional attire. On the basis of this concern, the westernized group noted that the features of Malay traditional attire, which usually included thick and large layers, could cause health issues. One article suggested that the thickness of Malay attire prevented air circulation (*Kemajuan Melayu*, April 1932: 7). In short, some Malays asserted that western attire like gowns were better because they allowed more air circulation than large and messy Malay traditional attire. One reader from Ulu Selangor wrote in about appropriate school uniforms for Malay girls under the age of eleven, suggesting that they wear a *baju kurung* or gown and maintain short hair. According to the author, wearing a head scarf could cause a foul odour and hair lice because it was made from a thick textile material (*Saudara*, 02/02/1929: 1). The principle of *aurat* seemed to be insignificant in the discussion, as the author suggested that only girls over eleven years old should be allowed to wear long hair.

Unlike the westernized group, the neutral group considered the length, size and layers of traditional attire as a guarantee that Malay women would preserve their dignity in accordance with Islamic teaching (*Kemajuan Melayu*, April 1932: 7). Based on the obligation to cover *aurat*, one Malay woman affirmed that she would stick to Malay traditional attire even though western and Bandung styles were more 'beautiful and neat' (*Ibid*). The neutral group called on supporters of western attire to revisit and adhere to Islamic principles. They warned women that exposing their bodies and faces to the public threatened their pride and dignity (*Pemimpin Melayu*, 11/05/1934: 10). Different from the westernized group, the neutral group found it insulting to Islam that Malay women were adopting western style clothing and wearing clothes like tight trousers, short and hanging blouses, high heels and slit skirts. Teruna Jaya wrote a letter to convey his frustration about Malay women in Singapore and sarcastically asking them to change their religion to Christianity (*Dunia Sekarang*, 15/01/1935: 6). This comment shows that part of the reason the neutral group hesitated to accept a western style of clothing was out of respect for the traditions of Islam. The neutral group was unable to swallow the idea that Muslims in Malay had to adopt western fashion simply because the Turkish had done so (*Tanah Melayu*, March, 1934: 3-4).

On the other hand, reading materials show no hesitation in printing images that would be considered unacceptable on the basis of covering *aurat* in Islam. A magazine entitled *Dunia Baharu*, which was published in Penang (1948), printed a number of semi-nude and nude pictures. In explaining the matter, the magazine informed readers that after careful deliberation, they had decided to publish the pictures

because newspapers in London and Paris had frequently done the same (*Dunia Baharu*, 1948: 1). Even though the author went on to ask a satirical question demanding that Malays judge whether or not western civilization could suit Malay society, these photos explicitly demonstrate that the principle of *aurat* was trivialized by some Malays. The same conclusion can be reached through close observation of the discussions and thoughts presented in related articles. For example, in an attempt to encourage Malay women to be progressive, *Dewan Perempuan* published a picture of a Chinese woman in sports attire. The caption for the photo states that her fashion hints at fitness and confidence – basic requirements for progressive women. Malay women were urged to adopt that style and attitude, but at the same time, they were reminded that it was unacceptable to wear this same style at dance parties and at the cinema. Such commentary suggests that many Malays viewed adopting western clothing as an essential step in bring Malay up to the standards of other communities in Malaya and the issue of *aurat* was secondary.

Conclusion

Former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad in his announcement about Vision 2020 stated that Malaysia aims to be a fully developed country by the year 2020 in Malaysian own mould. Hence, the answer to what is the most suitable approach for the Muslims to move forward as a developed nation as it was envisioned in the Vision 2020 is urgent. This paper discusses on the social history of Muslims in Malaya in the 1930s based on articles published in newspapers and magazines in that period. It demonstrates that the superficial understanding of the Islamic teachings and the meaning of a progress or developed nation led the members of the society into a conflict. Clearly, it was a threat to the efforts made to improve the society and developed the country.

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