

**CULTURAL BACKGROUND
OF THE
PEOPLES OF MALAYA**

By

NEOH THEAN CHYE, DIP. ARTS.



BY THE SAME AUTHOR

**The Making of the Modern World
Book III.**

**Questions & Answers in History
for The Federation of Malaya Lower
Certificate of Education Examination.**

IN PREPARATION

**The Beginnings of the Modern Age
Book II.**

CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE PEOPLES OF MALAYA

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TO
MY FATHER
NEOH HOCK SENG

**WHO MADE MANY THINGS
POSSIBLE FOR ME,
THIS BOOK, A SMALL TOKEN
OF AFFECTION,
IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED
ON HIS
SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY**



MESSAGE FROM THE PRIME MINISTER

I have much pleasure in wishing you every success with the publication of your "Cultural Background of the Peoples of Malaya."

A work such as this which aims to broaden general outlook and interests among children and elders alike in the cultural background of the various races of the united Federation of Malaya may well play a part in the future of this country.

It will extend the harmony and understanding, through which we as a nation will always endure.

(TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN PUTRA)
PRIME MINISTER.

Kuala Lumpur,
22nd April, 1960.

P R E F A C E

Since the achievement of Malayan independence in August 1957, a new chapter has come to be written in the history of this nascent nation. Hitherto, the four major types of people in Malaya — Malays, Indians, Chinese and Europeans (M.I.C.E.), have been content to live their own lives and pursue their own avocations in more or less water-tight compartments. The Malays, essentially a rural people form the bulk of the agricultural community cultivating paddy and rubber, and if they live along the coasts as they do in the east coast become simple fisher-folks. The Indians, mainly Tamils, Telegus, Malayalis and Punjabis (including Sikhs) are not only estate workers but also play an important part in the administrative, social, economic and political life of the country. The Chinese, who have a finger in almost every pie, are miners, traders, farmers and workers in town and country. The Europeans play a dominant role in the rubber and tin industries, in commerce, banking and the professions. To-day this policy of isolation and contentment can no longer be allowed to continue. It becomes an anachronism in the new Malaya. Thus this book came to be

written. Its aims are two-fold. First, it is meant primarily for pupils of our schools in Forms IV and V who prepare for the Cambridge Oversea School Certificate and Federation of Malaya Certificate of Education examinations, and secondly it is also meant for the general readers who wish to obtain a broad outline of the cultural background of these peoples so that they may the better be able to understand their fellow Malaysians. Unity in diversity, understanding and goodwill, tolerance and the spirit of sacrifice, devotion and loyalty — these could only materialize when we accept the rich cultures of the past and intermingle them with our own. For we must remember that culture is not the monopoly of any one race or people. It is a universal commodity, and the intermingling of these four major cultures of the world viz. Indian, Chinese, Islamic and European in the fertile soil of Malaya, will help to dispel the mist of ignorance and lead us to become the inspiration of the future.

In conclusion, I wish to express my grateful thanks to Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-haj, Prime Minister of the Federation of Malaya, for his kind Message.

N. T. C.

TAPAH, PERAK.
14th March, 1960.

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CHAPTER ONE

1. The Main Features Of The Islamic Religion

In the hot, sandy deserts of the Arabian peninsula there dwelt certain tribes of Semitic blood. These Bedouins (people of the desert) traded through the medium of caravans. For the most part they were pagans worshipping stones and idols in those days long ago. One of them, a man of the Quraysh tribe (the ruling clan of Mecca) called Muhammad, was an orphan boy. He was cared for by his grandfather, Abdul Muttalib and later by his uncle. Like Moses, truths were revealed to him by God through an angel. The revelation of God (Allah) as conveyed to Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel is now contained in the Koran, the sacred book of the Muslims. At first the inhabitants of Mecca mocked at this inspired merchant, and, since no man is a prophet in his own country, Muhammad left Mecca. This was the "Hegira" (622 A.D.) or "Flight" and from it dates the Muslim year. He went to Yathrib, which was to become Medina, "the City of the Prophet". There he preached the inspiring, new religion, Islam, which means "the

submission of the believer to the Will of Allah". The newest and greatest prophet of the desert, Muhammad, (peace be upon him) taught a pure form of monotheism. "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the prophet of God." He forbade the worship of idols and images and laid down a code of rules, both penal and civil. He never claimed to be more than the apostle, or messenger, of God. He never proclaimed that he was the Way, the Truth, and the Life, as in the case of Jesus of Nazareth. (But Jesus is regarded by Muslims as one of the prophets of God, the last of whom was Muhammad himself.) The Holy Prophet proclaimed that he was just an instrument or tool in the hands of the Almighty Allah. He was only the transmitter of His words sent through the Angel Gabriel to him. At first slowly, and then like a tide, his words swept over the Arabian sands. People listened to him and followed him. And those who rallied to his teachings were called 'Muslims'—'the subjects of the Divine Will'. So Islam, the latest of all great world religions, spread more rapidly than any of the other great religions. In just a hundred years it had carved out an empire stretching from Spain and North Africa to the plains of India. Today there are over 300,000,000 Muslims spread in all parts of the world. Being a truly democratic religion, because it believes in the perfect brotherhood and equality of Man before God of all Muslims, no matter what their race,



colour, origin or position may be, this faith, an inspiring force to-day, will be the inspiration of the future.

It is not easy to sum up the greatness of this Holy Prophet. He was a remarkable man with remarkable qualities. He was a great preacher with the gift to express himself and to stir his hearers to their hearts. He was a sagacious statesman and greatly far-sighted. He welded his people together, and by his outstanding leadership, led to the rapid and firm expansion of a small desert state to become a world empire. He was truly "one of the wisest of all men, one of the kindest of all mankind, and one of the lights of the world".

I will quote from two distinguished Muslim scholars about the Prophet's life and work. G. D. Kheirallah in his "Islam and the Arabian People" says: 'Muhammad is a social mentor and law giver by whose code to-day one-fifth of the human race is governed; a prophet who led human souls from idolatry and paganism into the simplest and clearest conception of the Creator and His worship; rational and humane, he struck at all fetters and brought forth the first true reformation by faith and reason; he opposed slavery and abolished caste, class, colour, and race distinction; he encouraged learning and mercy, taught charity and goodwill.'

And Syed Ameer Ali in "The Spirit of Islam" writes: 'His life is the noblest record of a work nobly and faithfully performed. He

infused vitality into a dormant people; he consolidated a congeries of warring tribes into a nation inspired into action with the hope of everlasting life; he concentrated into a focus all the fragmentary and broken lights which had ever fallen on the heart of man Such was his work, and he performed it with an enthusiasm and fervour which admitted no compromise, conceiving no halting; with indomitable courage which brooked no resistance; and allowed no fear of consequences; with a singleness of purpose which thought of no self.'

And now what manner of a man was this Holy Prophet? He was said to be of average height or a little above the average. He had a broad chest and shoulders. Of a sturdy build, he possessed a large and prominent forehead with black eyes and a touch of brown. His thick long hair was straight or slightly curled. With his thick beard and spare cheeks his large mouth showed a pleasant smile. Of a fair complexion, he walked fast and was always thoughtful and busy. He never spoke unnecessarily, but when he did, it was to the point. Gentleness and tenderness characterised him. He was specially tender towards children. An interesting sidelight to his personality was his magnetism. He won men's affection and secured their devotion by his own qualities of courage, resoluteness, impartiality, firmness, generosity and charm of manner. In general he was of a contemplative nature.



It is interesting to note that when the Holy Prophet closed his eyes in 632 A.D. there was unrest and revolt in the air. At this crucial juncture in Islamic history, Abu Bakar, the Prophet's trusted follower and son-in-law proclaimed solemnly to the seething crowd: 'O, Muslims, Muhammad has left this world. Whoever has followed Muhammad, Muhammad is dead, but whoever has followed Allah, Allah lives and will never die.' With these stirring words the crisis, which faced the new faith, disappeared. Abu Bakar, who was appointed by the Prophet himself to be the first Caliph (successor) issued this order before they set out on their first great campaign to win men to the new faith: 'Men, I have ten orders to give you, which you must observe loyally. Deceive none and steal from none; betray none and mutilate none: kill no child, nor woman, nor aged man; neither bark nor burn the date palms; cut not down fruit trees nor destroy crops; slaughter not flocks, cattle, nor camels except for food. You will fall in with some men with shaven crowns, smite them thereon with the sword. You will also meet men living in cells; leave them alone in that to which they have devoted themselves'. No wonder under such a humane leader, Islam had an excellent start after the Prophet's death. From the mountains of Iran to the steppes of Tartary, Khyber Pass and Sind, the Crescent flew. The following will give an indication of the rapid initial advance of Islam.

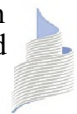


A.D.	634	Capture of the city of Basra.
	635	Victory over the Persians at Qadasiyya, and capture of Damascus.
	636	Byzantine forces defeated at Yarmurk.
	637	Umar, the second Caliph, entered Jerusalem.
	638	Mesopotamia conquered.
	639	Egypt fell to the conquering Arabs.
	640	Jerusalem, Mesopotamia and Babylonia fell.
	641	Great victory over the Persians at Nehavend. End of the glory of the Sassanid Empire.
	642	Alexandria surrendered.
	647	North Africa invaded for the first time. Tripolis fell.
	649	Cyprus fell.
	667	Invasion of the island of Sicily.
	670	Kairowan in North Africa founded.
A.D.	674-679	Siege of Constantinople.
	697-698	Remnants of the Roman Empire disappeared from the southern shores of the Mediterranean.
	711	Tariq ibn Ziyad crossed the Straits of Gibraltar.
	711-712	Sind and Uzbek conquered.



Faith and courage, boldness and luck and the inner weakness of their opponents had made possible the rapid advance of Islam into these territories.

Despite their hard surroundings, the Arabs were a very gifted and capable race. Thus when the doors of the wide world were open to them, with their alert minds, they acted with great sagacity and assimilated whenever possible the higher Greek, Roman and Persian cultures and therewith laid the foundation of the famous Islamic culture of Spain and the East. They did not destroy in blind fanaticism whatever they found as the Mongol hordes did later on. The sensible Arabs were careful not to inflict unnecessary harm on conquered peoples. Thus Arabic became the lingua franca and non-Arabs wrote and taught in it. This contributed to the fame and glory of the Arabs. A notable feature also in those early centuries of the Islamic faith was the complete concord between Christians and Muslims. There was no deep-seated animosity between them. Schools of higher learning flourished and free education was common in most. Hospitals were established and medical science made progress. Rhazes or Razi (c.865 - 925 A.D.) wrote a compendium of medicine which was used in the Universities of Europe till the seventeenth century. He wrote about small-pox and measles, and knew about vaccination. He located the retina as the seat of vision and urged that chemistry should be brought into



the service of medicine. He even knew how to produce artificial ice! And he was not alone in these. There were other Arabs skilled in various arts and sciences. Their versatility seemed to know no bounds. So while Europe was still backward, Damascus, Baghdad and Cordova were great cities. The last was the most civilized city in Muslim Spain. 'Travellers from the north heard with something like fear of the city which contained seventy libraries and nine hundred public baths; yet whenever the rulers of Leon, Navarre or Barcelona needed such things as a surgeon, an architect, a dress-maker or a singing-master, it was to Cordova that they applied'. Suffice it to mention that the art of paper making came to Europe through the Arabs who learnt it from the Chinese when Samarkand was captured in 704. As a result of this paper mills were opened in Syria, Spain and Sicily, thus enriching the literature of Europe and the world. In brief, learning and culture flourished and filled life with pleasure and ease in the vast domain of Islam. Then the inevitable happened. The Turks, a branch of the Mongols, rose to power in Central Asia. A stern, disciplined, fierce and military people they overran the Arab conquests, and although some were converted to Islam, the tolerance and mellow influence of it were never the same in their hand as they were in those of the Arabs. Islam became rigid and hard and progress became static. No wonder things changed. And no wonder we

had the Crusades and the struggle which followed.

Let us then leave these brief sketches and deal with the “Five pillars” of Islam.

The first is the Confession of Faith or the affirming of absolute Divine unity and the messengership of the Prophet Muhammad. “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the apostle of God”. This belief in one God, the Creator, is absolute and unchangeable. Muhammad is the last great Prophet and has brought to men the final revelation which God has for them.

The second is Prayer. Worship would be a better name for the ritual expresses adoration not petition. The worshipper must be ritually clean. Hence he must wash himself with water, sand or dust, as the case may be. The daily prayers are five in number: before dawn, at noon, in the middle of the afternoon (when a stick casts a shadow its own length), at sunset and at nightfall. Prayers are said facing Mecca. The time of prayer is announced by the muezzin crying from the minaret:

“Allah is great, Allah is great
 There is no God but Allah.
 Muhammad is Allah’s apostle.
 To your prayers! To your devotions!
 Allah is great; there is no God but Allah!”

Muslims try to be in a mosque for prayers whenever possible. Fridays are special days for

public prayer in the mosques.

The value attached to prayer is quoted below :

“God has promised to take into paradise him who keeps the five prayers and omits none because He despises what is due to them.”

“Which is the best act? Prayer at the right time.”

“Prayer is the key to paradise.”

The five prayers remove sins as water removes dirt. At the resurrection, God will pay no heed to the good deeds of one who has neglected prayer.

“Prayer is the prop of religion; he who neglects it has destroyed religion.”

The third is Fasting. During the whole of the ninth month of the Muslim year i.e. Ramadan, it is necessary for all believers to fast except children, pregnant women, the sick, aged and travellers, though travellers are expected to fast the same number of days at some other time. The fast which began with the appearance of the new moon would last till the next new moon was seen.

The fourth is Alms Giving. “Legal alms” or “religious tax” would be better names for this institution. From the first Muhammad insisted on charity. Later he fixed the minimum by law. The owner of five to

nine camels pays one sheep. The owner of twenty dinars (gold) or two hundred dirhams (silver) had to pay five per cent on his capital. (The charity given at the end of Ramadan is not part of the alms.) To-day pious Muslims distribute their alms regardless of taxes paid to the state.

The fifth is the Pilgrimage or Haj. It is the duty of every Muslim to make the pilgrimage once in his or her lifetime. Pilgrim dress must be worn. During the twelfth month of the Muslim calendar pilgrims choke the paths to Mecca to join the ceremonies centring around the ancient Ka'aba and the Mosque of Mecca. Rank and race and wealth are forgotten. The pilgrims join in the sacred rituals of the pilgrimage, which has been an important unifying agent for Islam. It strengthens the bond of fellowship among Muslims.

One of the reasons for the enduring influence of Islam is this: 'Wherever a group of Muslims settled, their first duty was to erect a place of worship. The strength of Islam has not been the sword or army nearly so much as the mosque and school.' The mosque 'serves also to house religious schools of an advanced type and occasionally even primary Koran schools. It is also an inn where any belated traveller may rest for the night, where the poor who must beg for their living can sleep, and where any man v/ho is sick may rest till he recovers, if he has no better place to go This function of the mosques as philanthropic



