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**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND THE ROLE OF THEORY IN
POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH**

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1. I would like to begin by stating clearly that in any piece of postgraduate research the need for a conceptual framework is vital. Without having a conceptual framework in place it would be well nigh impossible to engage in any form of research. The conceptual framework is necessary in delineating the boundaries, scope and extent of your research undertaking and to ensure that you do not stray away from your aims and objectives. It also demarcates the limits or even limitations (or parameters) of your research undertaking.
2. What do I mean by a conceptual framework? To me a conceptual framework is an orderly and arranged body of ideas in a logical framework in which a research undertaking is embarked upon with the aim of (i) developing a theory (ii) exploring a topic or (iii) developing a hypothesis. I must state here that I am following a qualitative approach in research. A quantitative approach would be different in that the conceptual framework would to (i) test a theory (ii) establish a fact or (iii) show causal or other relationships between variables. In my discussion with you today, I will stress more on a qualitative approach as I am much more familiar with that field.
3. For example, if I am embarking on a piece of research that would like to explore the suggestion that Malays cannot afford to lose political power because if they

were to do so they would be in danger of losing their ethnic and cultural identity. So how would I conduct this kind of research? I would begin by looking into what constitutes being Malay. Is it language, religion, belief system and so on. I would have to look into the origins of Malay identity. I would refer to history, sociology, anthropology, culture etc and then establish a conceptual framework on which to launch my research. It is very important that in such a qualitative approach, I must ensure that my conceptual framework is coherent and logical. Why do I say this? Mainly because the origins of the Malays is also shrouded in myths, legends and supernatural explanation which cannot stand the rigors of scientific and objective inquiry. Anyone who thinks that the *Sejarah Melayu* would be the best point to begin with in understanding the origins of the Malays would have insurmountable problems because it is laced with myths and supernatural motifs. We need to rely on more subjective and documentary evidence that is provable and logical.

4. So I would have to rely on the observations and written records of Chinese and Indian scholars who visited the Malay world long before the coming of Islam to understand that the Malays were Hindus first and that during the existence of the great Malay empire of Srivijaya, there were universities in existence which I Tsing and Fa Hsien attended to study *Pali* and Sanskrit before moving on to India to continue with their studies. I would also realize that before Islam the Malays had *Kawi* as their written script before *Jawi* (Arabic script) came to replace it. It would also dawn on me that that being classified as a *Melayu* meant that I am using a common language known as *Melayu* and that it was the language that gave the people this distinct identity. It would also be clear that *Melayu* was the lingua franca of the region known as the Malay Archipelago because it was the language of traders and that it had to be studied and understood by anyone who wanted to trade here.
5. To further enhance my conceptual framework, I would also refer to the records of Portuguese writers Duarte Barbosa and Tome Pires as well as Francois Valentijn

to understand that “*Melayu*” meant a category of people who used the Malay language in their day to day lives though they were culturally diverse and even had different religious beliefs. Why do I say this? It may surprise you to know that while in Malaysia to “*masuk Melayu*” meant becoming a Muslim and of course Malay, in Indonesia especially in Malaku, Flores and Banda, “*masuk Melayu*” meant becoming a Christian and using *bahasa Melayu* in your daily life because Christianity there is spread via the Malay language. So based on my readings I will come up with a conceptual framework that would show that the term “*Melayu*” was diverse and that it was the language and common cultural traits that was the basis of identity and not necessarily religion.

6. Then of course I will put forward an assumption or theory that in the case of the Malay Peninsula, the term “*Melayu*” evolved to have a different meaning altogether because of the uniqueness of the situation here in the Malay states and also because of the impact of British colonial rule. I would argue that here In Malaya/Malaysia the term ‘*Melayu*’ is perceived in ethnic terms and that religion is the overwhelming determinant in ascertaining ‘*Melayu*’ identity. Here is where the role of theory in research comes into play and we will see its purpose.
7. So where do I get the evidence to back up my theory that in Malaya the term ‘*Melayu*’ is perceived in ethnic and religious overtones? Well I may have to refer to British records at the early period of the 20th century when there was a need to define who was a Malay. Why? British colonial rule led to the influx of foreign immigrants to the point that the Malays were displaced economically and that they were in great danger of losing their land. So when the British promulgated the Malay Reservations Enactment of 1913, it was stated that Malay was one who habitually speaks the Malay language, observes Malay customs and is a Mohammedan (or Muslim). So from that time onwards from the legal perspective Malay identity in the Malay states was straight jacketed into a religious mould. Even Malays here in the Malay states accepted the main ingredients of Islam and Malay language into the definition.

8. From that point onwards as I proceed with my research, I already have my conceptual framework and my theory in place and it is a matter of how choose to write the thesis. But as I had mentioned to you earlier, my conceptual framework and my theory has clearly demarcated the boundaries of my research as well as its limitations. So when I continue my research on what constitutes Malay identity in Malaya, I would have excluded Indonesia where there are also Malays. But they would not qualify to be Malays in my framework because they may be Hindus, Christians or even animists. I am constrained to only Malaya and Malaysia.

9. So as I continue with my basic premise that the loss of political power would entail the loss of ethnic and cultural identity, it is clear that my theoretical framework and my theories would come into play to explain why Malays in Malay will never be allowed to leave Islam and why it is imperative that political control must remain in Malay hands to ensure that this does not happen.