

1. INTRODUCTION

There are several studies on the impact of economic and political environment on entrepreneur's business performance, but just a few studies on the impact of the entrepreneur's cultural and personal background on their business practices (Alwis and Senathiraja, 2003). A study by Waldinger (1990) have shown that cultural background influence their ethnic business. He highlighted that the business success with strategies, heavily depends on the nature of ties among co-ethnics and on the shape of social networks in which immigrants are embedded. Simon (1995) too studied the enterprise culture and how an entrepreneur influence to act in such a way. Most of the cultural in any society basically develop due to religion. It provides the philosophical foundation for beliefs and values (Alwis and Senathiraja, 2003). According to Nanayakkara (1997) as a result of the sophistication of Asian societies there has developed some unique norms and values which are reflected in the conduct of business and management of organizations. These norms and values have close resemblance to some aspects of Buddhist ways of life as practiced within many reformulations of Buddhism in different parts of Asia.

Therefore factors may vary in different environment, religious and cultural backgrounds which influence women to venture into business and entrepreneurship. This paper discusses to what extent religious and cultural values has an influence on how women interpret their entrepreneurial behaviors and practices. Insights into the influence of religion and cultural values is based on a study of 31 Malay rural business women in Kedah, Malaysia. This study shows that the women business-owners asserted that the success or failure of an entrepreneur depends not only on inherent socio-psychological attributes or socio-economic attributes but also placed importance on being a pious, committed and a dedicated Muslim woman. They are able to construct the relationship between religious values and their contribution to business success. Hence, this paper will attempt to interpret how religion that is Islam influenced their entrepreneurial behavior and practices.

2. BACK GROUND OF STUDY

For the purpose of this study, I have focused on the District of Pendang in the state of Kedah Darul Aman in the north of Malaysia. This district and state are categorized as developing states with the majority population being ethnic Malay, especially in rural areas. There are significant reasons for selecting this area. Firstly, there is a need to conduct a study of the rural women in this area as no previous study has been done. Secondly, it is clear that there has been an 'emergence of a particular group of women entrepreneurs' who have the potential to contribute to the nation's economy and the labour market. An extensive review of the literature clearly reveals significant limitations in the existing literature on entrepreneurship, particularly that of rural women entrepreneurs. Recent studies have been conducted on female entrepreneurship but not many have focused on a rural setting.

The first stage in sampling involves identifying the 'relevant population', which in this case is the Malay businesswomen in the state of Kedah Darul Aman, Malaysia. The 'sampling unit' is the individual person in that population. Kedah Darul Aman has various programmes and development agencies geared towards improving the social and economic situation of Malay women in the rural areas. Since the inception of these agencies the vast majority of Malay women have become participants and beneficiaries and are the target groups of the development process. One such agency is Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM).

As a result of a brief pilot study carried out at the initial stage of the research, the office of AIM provided a list of names and addresses of Malay women business owners, all of whom were participants in the programme. With this superficial survey and preliminary assessment and with the help of AIM officials I have selected 31 samples. McMillan and Schumacher (1989) agree that the determination of the sample size should take into consideration several factors such as the type of research, the research hypothesis, financial constraints, the importance of the results, the number of variables studied, the methods of data collection, and the degree of accuracy needed. Based on the judgement and suggestions of earlier researchers, I managed to select 31 cases (the number of respondents also depends on the length and time of the fieldwork). De Vaus (1991) and Mason (1996) also argue that a smaller sample can be anticipated if there is less variation in the population and their responses. The selection of samples was based on the following criteria to provide sampling units appropriate to this study:

- i) Women who had been in business for more than 2 years. This is to ensure they are committed to business and have experience of being a businesswoman in a business environment.
- ii) The women selected were spread over a variety of different types of business at various AIM Programme centres and could be categorized as petty traders, owners of family farms and plantations and micro-enterprise owners.
- iii) Women/participants were all able to make their loan repayments as scheduled by the evaluation committee of AIM and had a substantial monthly income (a criteria set by AIM in considering the participants as 'successful' in business).
- iv) Participants were all accessible.
- v) Participants were all willing to participate in the study.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies of entrepreneurs have greatly interested researchers from various academic and practitioner orientations. This has generated classical works on the effects of entrepreneurship on economic development and the factors which might explain entrepreneurial behaviours. Much of the research has focused on the socio-economic and personal characteristics of successful entrepreneurs with the hope that such research would assist in the early identification of those individuals who have the potential to become successful entrepreneurs. Some other research has focused on sociological factors such as role models, socio-economic status, ethnicity and educational backgrounds associated with entrepreneurship (Belcourt, 1988; Brah, 1992; Dhillion, 1991; Maimon, 1998; Maimon, 2001).

Stevenson (1990) has summarised research on entrepreneurship into three major areas: background factors and personal characteristics, psychological attributes and traits, and situational factors. One of the earliest studies on entrepreneurs found that people with certain social experiences and backgrounds are more likely to start up their own companies (Cooper, 1981), for example people whose parents started businesses. One of the earliest piece of research (Brockhaus, 1988) revealed that people who start their own business are also found to have a certain psychological make-up as a result of their family upbringing or past socialization.

Subsequent research has suggested that formal and informal learning experiences contribute to entrepreneurial success (Bird, 1989). Chong (1993), concluded from a study undertaken in an Asian environment that entrepreneurs are essentially products of their own society. They are prepared for entrepreneurship by the socialization processes of their culture and society,

channelled into entrepreneurship by their local social structures, and then catapulted into entrepreneurial actions by their immediate social circumstances.

The important early German sociologist Max Weber (1958), has argued that industrialization first took place in Protestant areas of Europe primarily for cultural reasons. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber (1958) examines the relationship between the rise of certain forms of Protestantism and the development of Western capitalism. Specifically in his exploration of the influence of culture and values in generating entrepreneurship Weber has argued that the values of Protestantism have variously motivated individuals to pursue business as a way of living. Other early researchers Schumpeter (1934) and Cochran (1949) also emphasized the importance of cultural values in promoting the spirit of entrepreneurship, and Hofstede (1991) emphasised that religion and race are among the cultural factors often seen to have a major influence on individuals' entry into entrepreneurship.

Subsequently, Lee (1996) and Redding (1986,1990) have also placed emphasis in their writings on the role and influence of Chinese ethnicity and culture on entrepreneurial success. These scholars have identified that the combination of Chinese family dialect, family structure and culture, and the Confucian value system may exercise a particular influence on the setting up of a business. Gupta attempts to explain how the success of Indian entrepreneurship may be due to cultural values in his book *Indian Entrepreneurial Culture: Its Many Paradoxes* (1994). This empirical study of 150 entrepreneurs from Calcutta has revealed a model that suggests a pattern of eclectic entrepreneurship forged out of the interaction between two distinct sets of forces. One set is represented as the plane of entrepreneurial autonomy by qualities of individualism, social conditioning, and the propensity to exploit structural opportunities, while the second set of forces is made up of structural determinants such as religion, culture, and socio-political conditions.

A similar study was also conducted by Patricia Sloane (1999) on urban Malay entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Through deploying an ethnographic approach in the research methodology, the study attempts to explore the complex themes of Islamic duty and financial obligation which underlie Malay life in relationships with parents, spouse, cohorts and the community and in relation to the development of entrepreneurship in the Malay community. The study also explored a redefinition of Islamic economic beliefs and meaning which have shaped the Malay understanding of entrepreneurship. However, this study has focused only on urban Malay entrepreneurs who might have a different interpretation of the meaning of entrepreneurship. I intend that my study fills the knowledge gap by exploring similar themes with some other Malay entrepreneurs, specifically Malay rural business women. My study hopes to provide an understanding of a different kind of interpretation of how Islamic economic beliefs and meanings have shaped the Malay understanding of entrepreneurship.

The study by Alwis and Senathiraja (2003) among small and medium scale business in Sri Lanka have shown that business value formation is influenced by the socio-cultural and personal background factor such as age, ethnicity, religion and education. The study shows that Sinhalese and Tamil are highly religious businessmen and more ethical.

4. THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON ENTREPRENEURIAL BEHAVIORS

The following discussion is an attempt to interpret how religion, that is Islam, influenced the entrepreneurial behaviours and practices of the businesswomen in this study. According to Zainah (1987), 'from the time they discarded their animistic beliefs and embraced Islam during the days

of the Malacca Kingdom (15th Century), the Malays have never changed their religion'. Noraini (1984) has further stressed this point and states that Islam is a significant ideological force that influences Malay women's way of life and is an important factor influencing the development of the Malays.

Islam is the official religion of Malaysia. All Malays are Muslim, whereas the majority of Chinese are Buddhists or Christian and Indians are usually Hindus. As Muslims, the Malays practice and uphold the Five Pillars of Islam, that is, the professions of the Faith, the daily prayers, the fasting during Ramadhan, payment of the annual tithe (*zakat*), and the pilgrimage to Mecca. Islam, which literally translated means 'total submission', is not only a belief system but also a way of life. Muslims are expected to run their lives according to '*koranic*' injunctions (Afshari, 1987: 10)

In support of these statements earlier studies have argued that religion has an influence on economic activity including Geertz's (1956) famous study of pious Muslims in Indonesia, Bellah's (1970) study of the correlation between the religion of the Tokugawa and bureaucratic values which are conducive to economic growth, Gupta's (1994) study which sought to explain entrepreneurial success through religious values in India and, most recently, a study by Sloane (1999) which focused on the 'Islamic view' of entrepreneurship among the urban Malay Muslim entrepreneurs of Malaysia. All these studies were mapped along the lines of Weber's study of Calvinist entrepreneurs in seventeenth – century Europe.

Due to the complexity of issues in analyzing and examining the wide scope of religious ideas that influence economic activity, the analysis is structured along the following aspects: (i) The teachings of Islam on economic practices and work ethics; (ii) The Islamic perspective on female employment.

4.1 The Teachings of Islam on Economic Practices and Work Ethics

In exploring the relationship of these factors to entrepreneurship among rural Malay women, what I gathered, observed and realized from interviews and observations during conversations was that their religious upbringing and teachings, specifically as Muslim women and as Malay village women, influenced their interests, aspirations, behaviours and practices in how they ran their businesses. This started with their aspiration of wanting to improve their quality of life and to be a dedicated Muslim through practicing the teachings of Islam. The interviews indicate that these Malay businesswomen tried to interpret the practice of doing business as work, which they regarded primarily an act of devotion to God.

I became curious about the idea that being a businesswoman is primarily an act of devotion to God. In order to find out more about this perception, I had to carry out more interviews and cross-checked the views with the literature. Having reviewed Syed Othman's (1994) 'The Role and Influence of Religion in Society' and M. Bassioumi's (1993) 'Business Ethics in Islam', and Rawlins (2004) I became convinced that Islam can play a positive role and influence all aspects of human life, including economics.

Islam has a very clear position on this matter. The Holy Prophet of Islam had clearly elaborated his saying: "*Sustenance consists of ten parts: nine in trade and one in other belonging.*"(Al-Ghazali, *Ihya ulum-uddin*, Vol.2). This saying of the Holy Prophet is an unmistakable dictum to Muslims to participate actively in commercial activities for the stability and development of society. Indeed, the Prophet himself was a businessman before he became the Prophet, and many of his close companions were successful businessmen. The

religious importance of individuals' involvement in trade and commerce is reiterated by some of the sayings of the Holy Prophet. He spelled out the significance of the trader in the following sayings: "*Righteous businessmen will be the first to enter paradise*", and "*A truthful merchant will be raised on the Day of Judgment together with the truthful and the martyrs.*"(Cited in Bassiouni, 1993).

These sayings of the Holy Prophet provide clear direction for Muslims of the importance to involve themselves in trade and commerce, where they are required to subscribe to ethical and moral practices while carrying out their commercial activities. Indeed this principle is a winning formula for Muslims to adopt if they want to succeed in business today, because it takes into account the earning of profit (the bottom-line of any business) through social responsibility. In fact this is an approach that can lead to market optimization. The Holy Quran instructs Muslims: "*Oh ye who believe! Eat not up your property among yourself in vanities: But let there be amongst you traffic and trade by mutual good-will*" (Holy Quran 4:29). The Holy Prophet further elaborated: "*Endeavouring for lawful earning is a religious struggle.*" These instructions of Islam provide the sense of purpose and mission for Muslims in carrying out their business, and enable Muslim businessmen to continuously improve their commercial involvements. 'The above positions of Islam on trade and commerce should encourage and motivate present day Muslims to participate actively in this profession. They should aspire to play in key position locally and internationally in the present economic scenario. This is a religious requirement, failing which can reduce the Muslim economic and social position in society' (Nik Mustapha, 2000:68).

Muslimahs throughout history have demonstrated their business savvy through *musharakah* (partnership). For example, in the years before Muhammad's prophethood, Khadijah Khuwaylid was a successful businesswoman in Mecca, who every year would employ men to trade on her behalf. She provided capital financing to these merchants and made them equity partners in her trade and profits. One of the merchants she hired was Muhammad whom she later married (Alsaahar, 1976). After Muhammad became a prophet, Khadijah resumed control of her business affairs so that Muhammad could pursue his religious mission (Haykal, 1976). In this example, not only is it clear that Islam allows for women to own and operate a business but the entire Muslim world is indebted to Khadijah, the original businesswoman who contributed greatly to its growth.

Having noted the historical importance of the role of the Islamic businesswoman I would also like to elaborate 'the conception of work' here from the perspective of Islam because of its far-reaching implications for the Malay businesswomen in this study. As Othman Alhabshi (1996) writes, the first implication is that there are at least three forms of rewards for one whose work is counted as a devotional act. Firstly, s/he obtains the material rewards which s/he pursues. Secondly, s/he also obtains the material rewards of the satisfaction of successfully completing a task which s/he set out to do. Thirdly there is the reward Allah promised to all His servants in the hereafter for their devotional acts. Those who seek only material rewards will obtain only such material rewards, and they will be deprived of reward in the hereafter.

The second implication is that the follower of Islam is highly motivated to perform tasks to the best of his/her ability; as motivation triggered by the sincere intention to serve Allah, desiring his/her efforts to be counted as service to Allah. The sincere intention which accompanies such work will keep the believer continuously aware of being closely observed by Allah, accountable to Him in everything s/he does, every second of every hour and every hour of every day.

The believer is motivated by the awareness that his/her performance will be well rewarded in this world and in the hereafter, and that the rewards are commensurate with the standard of the performance. As such s/he is inspired to work to his/her best ability in order to receive full recompense.

The third implication is that the believer can develop into a proactive, diligent, disciplined, reliable, and organized performer. These characteristics are typical of the highly motivated worker, who normally performs best when s/he is satisfied with the material rewards. The motivation of a sincere intention of being a good servant of Allah creates a superior degree of commitment and devotion.

The fourth implication is that the believer will always attempt to keep away from immoral practices in the course of his/her duties. Immoral practices may involve any action that will affect his/her integrity, trustworthiness and character. In other words s/he should avoid various vices which may include backbiting, slander, rancour, envy, miserliness, ostentation, pride, and conceit. Whilst avoiding vices is the first phase of forming a good character, the enhancement of such a character with virtues completes the process of good character building. As such, the believer will also attempt to improve his/her character by continuously exhibiting patience, gratitude, hope, fear and truthfulness.

A fifth implication is the development of quality workers with excellent performance, considered to be the net result of the Islamic conception of work. Workers who are primarily motivated by a sincere intention to excel for the sake of their Creator, imbued with strongly grounded moral values, will undoubtedly produce superior outputs, whether in the form of goods or services, provided they are given the opportunity to do so.

4.2 Islamic Perspective on Female Employment

To elaborate the Islamic attitudes and perspectives on Muslim working women, I summarize here the writings of Mehrun Siraj (1984) on that issue. Islam does not forbid women to work and earn a living. Muslim women have held jobs outside the home from the time of the Prophet, the best examples being that of Khadijah, the Prophet's first wife who was a trader and a business woman and Fatima, his daughter, who spun wool for a wage so that her earnings could supplement the income of her husband Ali.

Women's right to work, as with any other right in Islam, is subject to certain basic principles. The nature of the work undertaken and the conditions under which it has to be carried out should not conflict with these basic principles. First, the job should not involve doing that which is prohibited by Islam, such as the sale of alcohol or prostitution. Secondly, it should not interfere with the performance of the obligatory prayers five times a day or the obligatory fast during the month of '*Ramadhan*'. For Muslims it is important that the prayers be said at the prescribed times. These and other *Hadith* emphasize the importance of prayer to a Muslim so it is of great importance that any work undertaken by a Muslim should not result in neglecting or failing to pray at the prescribed times.

Thirdly, the workplace should not expose women to physical or moral dangers. There should not be a mixing of the sexes which might lead to '*fitnah*', '*khalwat*' or '*zina*', loosely translated as backbiting or gossip, close proximity and adultery. The main aim of this rule is to protect the woman's reputation so that there is no loss of respect for her. It is for this reason too that she is enjoined to dress modestly. For the married woman there are two

additional conditions: her husband must agree to her working and her job should not be the cause of the breakdown of the family unit, because the preservation of the family as a stable unit of society is a principle of paramount importance in Islam. Finally, another principle that applies equally to men and women is that in any kind of employment there should be no exploitation of the worker.

Using these perspectives as a framework, I have sought to analyse the economic practices of the women under study and explore to what extent religious values have shaped the economic and business-related behaviour of Malay rural businesswomen. This discussion is intended to highlight relevant aspects, including performing the pilgrimage, the dress code, performing rituals and the concept of rewards.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Influence of Religion to Venture into Business

Data from the recorded interviews and transcriptions show that Islamic teachings have some bearing on these rural Malay women entrepreneurs during the process of starting-up a business and in their subsequent business practices. From the 31 women I talked with and interviewed it can be observed that they addressed these typical expressions and reasons of why they decided to become an entrepreneur:

“ ... Islam preaches that we should work hard and have a better quality of life. This has inspired me to start – up in business because I have many children and I want to help increase my husband’s income. However, I cannot perform my work in business too freely because there are restrictions to the mobility of married Muslim women which I have to follow.”(SO)

Other respondents offered similar views, revealing how Islam provides enabling factors as well as constraints. These views were echoes by another woman when she said,

“Yes, because I have got to seek permission each time to leave the house, seek permission from my husband to start up this business and as a Muslim Malay woman I am not allowed to do jobs which are not women’s work, and I have to be careful with my dress code. However being a Muslim too has shaped my entrepreneurial behaviour because I am not afraid to take risks or face failure. I must earn as much money as possible and this allows me to perform the haj (the pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca). I was actually inspired by the teachings that the wife of the Prophet was a successful businesswoman. I want to perform the haj with my own money, so I have to work hard and do honest business to get ‘rezeki halal’ (earnings permitted by God)...” (RYA)

By way of indication that there are certain values held by Malay rural women about going out to work and running a business, one woman clearly states that,

“as a rural Malay Muslim woman, I could not just walk round the village any time I like, people would start gossiping, so for those jobs that need to

be done far away my husband would willingly help me and go out, and he does just that.” (HA)

On the basis of interview data and observations made during this study I am inclined to see that Islamic teachings have an important and significant role in influencing these rural women to take up business ownership. This again is supported by the Islamic approach adopted by the programmes implemented by the AIM Project to enhance entrepreneurial development among its participants. This has reinforced the belief that Islamic teachings are very significant in developing entrepreneurial traits and behaviours among individuals, especially with regard to women. For instance, the Pledge which has to be recited by every ‘*sahabat*’ before and after every AIM-supported activity they carry out plays a significant role in enhancing aspirations and strengthening the will to succeed and to improve their quality of life through being self-employed. The Pledge is very much related to Islamic faith and values:

“It is our responsibility to Allah to strive to increase our income, to help our fellow group and centre members whenever they are in difficulty, to use the profits from our loan to bring our families out of poverty, to motivate and provide the opportunity for our children to continue their schooling and to repay our loan weekly without fail. Allah bears witness to all that we say and do.”(Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia Yearly Report, 1999)

Most of the Malay rural women studied are middle-aged and seem hard-pressed to make a transition from being weavers, wage-workers in the paddy or rubber plantation to becoming self-managing members and owners of a business enterprise. These rural women entrepreneurs felt that like urban men or women running small businesses they had acquired various entrepreneurial qualities. They also believed that even without formal education or entrepreneurial training, being a Muslim and embracing and following the teachings of Islam and Malay values and culture had all in some way provided them with the knowledge and skills needed to become an entrepreneur. Among the important basic qualities they believed one should hold when performing any kind of work, and especially when doing business, were honesty, patience and gratitude, moderation (which is perhaps the opposite of the customary profit-making tenet of most entrepreneurs), unselfishness, incorruptibility, and the importance of maintaining good friendly relationships with everyone especially fellow Muslims.

Following these precepts they believed that by becoming a successful entrepreneur they would have a better quality of life which would make them a better Muslim and that a good Muslim can be successful in life, particularly as an entrepreneur (a virtuous circle). The second assumption drawn from these findings is that these Malay rural women entrepreneurs had made the link and were able to explain why they decided to enter self-employment as a result, in part, of their religious and value systems.

To find out more about this claim, I went back to the narratives of the businesswomen:

“I think religion has a role to play. I learned that the Prophet and his wife Khadijah were successful business people. Doing business is a way of getting ‘rezeki halal’. If we do our business in accordance with the Islamic way, there are rewards in life of the hereafter. Honesty, patience, and trustworthiness have been the values that I hold on to in running my business. All Muslims are encouraged to work hard to obtain ‘rezeki halal’. Islam forbids its followers to give up when they face failure. I

believe religion does play an important role in the way we behave and act as business people. Maybe in other religions too.” (RH)

“...as a woman or even a Muslim woman, I believe every woman has the right to go out and work and have her own income. There can be rewards in the life of the Hereafter. But the work you do must be ‘halal’ and must have good intentions.” (FAR)

“...I learned that a Muslim must have a good life and must not live in poverty. Everyone must work hard and earn the ‘rezeki halal’ and the best work we can do is doing business. This spirit might have had a little influence on my decision.” (CKM)

“...Islamic teachings encourage followers to stay out of poverty and it is believed that the Prophet said that 90% of our income should come from doing business. Maybe this is a calling and it did influence my decision to set up the business.” (FB)

5.2 Performing the Pilgrimage

One of the tenets of Islam is the ‘haj’, the pilgrimage to Mecca, which should be undertaken whenever possible and at least once in a lifetime. To make the journey, each person needs to accumulate approximately RM10,000. Analysis of the interview data indicated that the ‘haj’ occupied an important place in the businesswomen’s aspirations, along with learning how to be successful in business and a degree of economic advancement, by way of ‘encouraging capitalistic values’ (Wilder 1968). In this study there is evidence for the influence of religious belief on economic behavior. Evidence from Geertz’s (1956) study of Javanese entrepreneurs and Sloane’s (1999) study of Malay urban entrepreneurs in Malaysia both support the contention of this present study that certain religious beliefs can influence economic behaviour. According to Geertz (1956) the haj represents a drain on capital into consumption expenditure, but its most important effect seems to have been to give certain aggressive peasants a religious economic goal toward which they could direct their lives and so build up more complex and systematic patterns of economic behaviour. To describe this phenomenon, I turn to the narratives of my respondents:

“I want to perform the haj to Mecca, so I must work hard and earn the money, and it must be through my own effort. My husband’s income is not enough, even though he said he would contribute. I believe my business can provide the extra savings for the trip. It might take some time, for as you know the trip to Mecca costs a lot of money.” (PM)

However, the ‘haj’ occupied a less important place among the aspirations of the two widows and the youngest women. When asked ‘How do you relate the duty to perform the ‘haj’ to what you do as a businesswoman?’ Sharipah, the youngest of the respondents, said:

“Yes I thought about the Mecca trip but it is not on my agenda yet. I am still in my twenties so I think I am concentrating on scaling up my business. Besides to perform the haj, I need to learn more about it first, maybe I’ll do it in the next 15 or 20 years.” (SA)

The two widowed respondents expressed their intentions of performing the *haj* in a very sad way. I observed they were almost in tears when acknowledging that their husbands had died, leaving them widowed:

“... as a widow, I felt very sad. Actually we plan to perform the haj together, but thoughts of the trip are not my priority now, the extra money from my business has to go to my children. I must keep them alive. But I know performing the haj is a must.” (SH)

5.3 The Dress Code

Among women in Malaysia Islamic consciousness and Malay ethnicity are often expressed in the wearing of various types of veils (*tudung*). In Malaysia, wearing the *‘mini-telekung’* is very common and this practice persists among the Malay businesswomen in this study. The circumstances surrounding veiling practices raises an interesting point because the recorded narratives and transcripts indicate the belief that veiling is a requirement of the Islamic religion which did not affect them as businesswomen, but there were also respondents who showed some disparity in this matter who regarded it as a restriction to their mobility. According to one woman:

“...unlike other people, I cannot perform my work in business so freely because I have to follow the mobility restrictions of a married Muslim woman. I am not allowed to do jobs other than women’s work and I have to be careful with my dress code, especially the ‘tudung’ (veiling).” (HA)

These expressions were echoed by two other women, including this view:

“Wearing ‘tudung’ is a must; I know that and began to wear it when I started school, so I am used to it. It can be a nuisance when you try to ride a motorcycle. But I don’t bother. It does pose some difficulty but I don’t really see that as a big problem.”(SAK)

When asked how they deal with this situation, the women had a broad consensus. Interestingly, while some of the women dressed according to Muslim dress code, some would vary their dress depending on the situation they were in. When I met Sharifah while working on her vegetable farm she was wearing pants and a big hat which hid her hair completely. When I asked her why she was not wearing her *‘tudung’* she responded:

“I cover my head and put on the ‘tudung’ wherever I go as my religion prescribes. As I am working on the farm, I have to put on very loose pants which do not reveal my body and this hat to cover my hair is like wearing a ‘tudung’, and I am still adhering to Islamic values.” (SJI)

It is clear that the demands of their businesses had led the women to vary their religious practices. The preceding discussion was intended to show that religion plays an important role in determining acceptable values that must be upheld by these Malay businesswomen.

In order to explain these phenomena, I went back to my interview data. There are indeed statements that raise interesting questions worth exploring more closely such as:

“I believe religion-based values become easy and convenient reference points for designing my business plan.” (SAK)

“... faith in God has given me strength and my religion has helped tide me over in numerous crises.” (RYA)

“... religion motivates you to remain honest and often determines what business you should stay out of...” (RI)

This study shows that there are respondents who attest to the significant impact of religion in their lives as well as in their business. Through the analysis of the interview data and observations I have identified at least three important phenomena that support the contention in this study that certain religion values have influenced the economic behaviour of some businesswomen.

5.4 Performing Rituals

Two rituals were performed to mark the founding of a business or during the start-up of business operations. The first type is the ‘*kenduri*’ (religious festivities which include a formal gathering of family and friends) and ‘*majlis doa selamat*’ (the reciting of verses by religious teachers to ask for Allah’s blessing for the success of their business). These religious festivities usually took place within the compound of the respondent’s house and sometimes at the mosque. Throughout the entire field-work and interview process I noted that about 50% of the respondents talked of the importance and significance of performing these rituals:

“I arranged a small feast to mark the start-up of my business and invited a number of religious men to recite the Quran, to ask for God’s (Allah’s) blessing.” (PM)

“I felt having ‘kenduri’ is significant, Allah will then bless what we do, and we will be successful in business. When family and friends attended the feast, I felt the confidence to go into business and they were the well-wishers providing emotional support for our venture.” (MM)

However, I also heard two contrasting views:

“I had to do without the ‘kenduri’. My start-up capital is small, so I don’t have the extra cash to invite my friends and family to a feast to mark the start-up of my business. But I perform my daily prayers and ask for his blessings instead. Probably I will hold a feast when I make large profits. Performing a ‘kenduri’ I believe is not a must.” (BM)

“I know the ‘kenduri’ (feast) is relevant but I have not done it that needs money too. I’ll wait till I make big profits. I have always kept that in mind.” (RCN)

5.5 Reciting of Quranic Verses

According to one respondent one way to attract customers is to hang prints of relevant verses from the Holy Quran in their business premises. Another respondent mentioned that she called in one of the male religious teachers in the village to recite the Quranic verses in her restaurant at the beginning of her business operations. I also observed that there were frames of Quranic verses hanging on the walls of both business premises and in their houses. I was invited by two respondents to peek into a prayer room which had been built in their business premises, complete with prayer mats and the Quran. As one of the respondents explained:

“... this prayer room is important as I am making time for prayer in a busy work-day. I do not have to rush home to perform my daily prayers. Sometimes when I feel tense and upset about my business performance, I go to the prayer room and recite the Quran, and it gives me some time off and helps me become relaxed again.” (SO)

“I use specific verse from the Quran to call for customers, like this verse ‘ayat seribu dinar’. You can see I have it framed on the wall in my house and in my business premises. With this I believe God (Allah) will always provide help.” (RS)

5.6 Choosing the Type of Business

Rabeah, the sole-owner of a small business producing traditional Malay cookies and cakes, explained how she decided what type of business to go into:

“I learned that women have the right to work and be involved in trading but in Islam it is subject to certain basic principles. We should not be involved in selling what is prohibited by Islam, for example the sale of alcohol...” (RS)

Similarly, another respondent talked about the importance of the concept of ‘halal’ (religiously legitimate) when a Muslim works:

“... earnings from work must be ‘halal’ and this includes the amount of work in terms of hours, the price to be paid or the quantity to be produced and the quality to be achieved. It must also not involve prohibited goods or forbidden acts such as adultery and theft. If the worker cheats the employer or vice-versa, then the earnings he or she gains is not halal and the consequences of using non-halal earnings are that you will not earn good rewards from Allah.” (FAR)

“... I am doing tailoring, so this kind of business is halal. I am not breaking any Islamic principles and I am very happy...” (LD)

5.7 The Concept of ‘Halal’ and ‘Haram’

My respondents’ concern to choose the right type of business activity led me to explore in greater depth how they showed their awareness and understanding of the concepts of ‘*rezeki halal*’ and ‘*haram*’. The literature of Islamic teachings on economic practice indicates that profits must be obtained only in a permissible way. ‘The Shari’a divides rules of conduct between ‘Halal’ and ‘Haram’, meaning essentially that which is permissible and that which is impermissible. The distinction between the Halal and the Haram applies to legitimate and illegitimate profits’ (Minus, 1993:119).

Hence to avoid obtaining illegitimate profit, s/he will always attempt to keep away from immoral practices in the course of her/his duties. I observed that both definitions were explored by my respondents. In interviews my respondents expressed their concern that that the money they earned from their business operation should be permissible (*halal*) and that they should not generate earnings forbidden by Islam (*haram*), as the following narratives show:

“I must be confident that the business I do is permitted by god (‘secara halal’) and I must make sure I do not override any of my religious teachings like cheating, being over-thrifty or not paying my debts. Wherever I go I must get consent from my husband, this is our religious teaching...” (AMN)

“My business is trading women’s clothes. This type of business is totally legitimate and it does not involve any prohibited goods. I believe I am earning ‘rezeki halal’ (permitted earnings). This is important. I believe if we do business in accordance with Islamic ways, there are rewards in the ‘life hereafter’. This has been prescribed in my religion, I know that.” (RH)

“Our business operation must be ‘halal’ and honest and truthful in its dealings. I have always been aware of this. I believe if we are honest in our dealings, we may make good profits. But we must remember that the punishment by God is given in life of the Hereafter’. I don’t like this.” (NMI)

5.8 The Concept of ‘Ikhtiar’ and Rewards

The respondents in a study by Sloane (1999) on Malay urban entrepreneurs in Malaysia generally agreed that ‘Allah’ (God) does not like poverty, because it signifies the taint of laziness, passivity, and irresponsibility that allows time for sin and this is why Muslims must work hard to honour God’s abundant worldly gifts. This is consistent with my respondents’ frequent references to working hard and their need to have ‘*ikhtiar*’, to gain rewards and success. ‘*Ikhtiar*’, the term frequently used by my respondents to explain their success in business,’ is a Malay word meaning ‘the individual’s free choice and will to show effort in life’ (Sloane, 1999:63). I observed that most of my respondents believed that if you have ‘*ikhtiar*’ you will do well in business and be rewarded by God. Hence the act of ‘*ikhtiar*’ was seen by the respondents as one of the ingredients for achieving success in business.

Some respondents gave examples of ways of showing ‘*ikhtiar*’ in their business activities:

“...the community always says that rural women are not fit to do business or to work. But I believe with the women’s spirit, aspirations and ‘ikhtiar’ they can earn rewards for self-improvement and bettering the quality of life for their family. I believe women can be successful, I hold to this principle and it works.” (MH)

“...my inspiration was created and triggered by the feeling of wanting to try...I felt ‘berikhtiar’ and feelings of envy at the success of other Malay business women. We must be ‘berikhtiar’ and we will surely be rewarded.” (HA)

“... to succeed, I developed courage, I try to work in the spirit of ‘ikhtiar’ and ‘kecekalan hati’ (inner strength) and the willingness to learn, to read and ask a lot of questions of people who know better with all these I believe the rewards are there.”(BM)

5.9 What does ‘success’ in business mean?

The respondents were asked how important the business ventures were to them. Almost all of them regarded it as their whole life and their only means of earning a decent living. They regarded it as the only way of getting a job as their academic qualifications were low, disbaring them from obtaining a well-paid job. They felt that they must work hard to succeed. They perceived success differently from the operational definition derived from the literature reviewed. Success does not entirely mean wealth, and the majority expressed success as ‘living in harmony’, ‘having good relationships with the family and other people’ and being able to perform the ‘*haj*’ (pilgrimage) in Mecca.

“My quality of life has improved, spiritually and economically, and our family relationships are good. I observe that there are businesswomen who succeed in business but maybe not their marriage. So I consider success in business means success in life too. I hope to go to Mecca to perform the ‘haj’. This would be my ultimate success, to show my thanks to God for giving me a good life.” (AMN)

“I have extra income to support my family. We have a better life now. Materially of course you don’t see a big house or a luxurious car. What satisfies me is that I get ‘rezeki halal’ through doing business and at the same time I am still devoted to religious teachings, committed to being a responsible wife and mother and to performing the daily religious rituals like praying five times a day. My family is happy so that is success.” (SRI)

“Success...I see it from two perspectives: success in business means your sales are high, you made good profits, you are able to pay your debts and buy things for your children. But to me success is like a whole package. Success in doing business and as well as success in carrying out your domestic responsibility as wife and mother to your children.” (MD)

Each respondent was asked to talk about what she felt was responsible for her success, and then about any factors that may have hindered her advancement in business. Although the descriptions of specific success factors were generally similar the areas of emphasis varied. Some of them spoke of individual drive and recognized the need for higher levels of intellectual attainment through relevant self-taught skills, but almost all of the 31 respondents acknowledged a need to maintain a balance between career (as a businesswomen) and the demands of their personal life .

A few mentioned the need for a strong sense of self esteem, a supportive family, a strong will and a need to maintain a strong work-oriented enthusiasm. Others frequently mentioned that life experience from raising a family and part-time work served to enhance their progress and development. Almost all the 31 respondents mentioned their faith in Islam and were of the opinion that being a dedicated Muslim woman had contributed to their success in business.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In line with my discussion of these findings I draw upon the work of Patricia Sloane (1999) in *'Islam, Modernity, and Entrepreneurship among the Malays'*. Through using an ethnographic method of data collection she was able to share (with her respondents/informants) their understanding of Malay entrepreneurship. Her analysis is primarily about the choices, images, and strategies of entrepreneurship development in the lives of the Malay entrepreneurs (both men and women). Her study showed how 'a certain group of educated, cosmopolitan, middle and upper-middle class Malays demonstrate the ways in which the late twentieth century experience of accelerated social and economic change has become meaningful and validating to some. The process by which moral obligation to others, hard work and Islamic faith has become symbolized together in economic activities' (Sloane,1999:16). She explored the theme of 'good work' in Malay life and demonstrated how entrepreneurship has become the main vector of ethnic, religious, and moral worth and a test of virtue and modernity among the Malays.

Sloane (1999) also explored the complex themes of Islamic duty and financial obligation which frame Malay relationships with parents, spouses, cohorts and the communal group. She also explored the crucial, self-consciously modern redefinition of Islamic economic beliefs and meanings which have shaped the Malay understanding of entrepreneurship. However Sloane confined her research to urban Malays, so this present study has extended its focus to explore similar themes in the lives of Malay rural women business owners. It is interesting, however, to note similar findings in interpreting how Islamic economic beliefs and meanings have shaped the Malay understanding of entrepreneurship. Both Sloane and this study have shown that the Malay entrepreneurs believe that people who work hard towards progress are usually rewarded more than those who do not. There is therefore general agreement among Malay entrepreneurs about the ideology of 'effort and promise of reward', the concept of '*halal*' (permitted by God) business practices, the social obligations as a Muslim towards the family and society and the importance of performing the '*haj*' to Mecca.

My search for a cultural interpretation of entrepreneurship benefited enormously from the remarkable experiences of an ethnographic encounter with the 31 Malay businesswomen of Pendang, Kedah whose narratives, ideas, thoughts and feelings about their economic behaviour and practices have raised questions of how religious values influence economic activities. This

paper has attempted to explain the transcendent nature of the Islamic values and the underlying justification for their applicability in all spheres of human life, especially in the establishment of an exemplary work culture based on an 'Islamic alternative'. In the context of this study and among these Malay businesswomen, business ownership may be said to be an experience of belief and action in search of virtuous reward.

Hence, this study stimulated my interest and raised questions about how religious ideas influence the economic activity of the Malay businesswomen in my study. During the interviews I observed that the women wanted to demonstrate the uniqueness of their 'entrepreneurial' culture and emphasised that religion had played a significant role in their decision to become businesswomen and in their success in business. This study has shown how the respondents themselves regarded both economic action and its rewards as part of the prescribed virtues and consequences of their belief. My theoretical intent here is not to argue whether economic and social factors are more important in determining the success of these women business owners. I argue instead that using economics to analyse entrepreneurship does not preclude the possibility that it might also be explained by sociological and cultural factors. This study has found that religion does play a role and becomes an important factor influencing the economic behaviours and business practices of Malay businesswomen.

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