

FROM KERAMAT TO DATUK GONG:
A RELIGIOUS EXCHANGE BETWEEN
THE MALAYS AND THE CHINESE

See Hoon Peow

Abstract

This short paper explores the nature of the keramat beliefs among the Malays and the Datuk Gong cult among the Chinese. The case of keramat beliefs and the Datuk Gong cult is an interesting and rare case of religious exchange between the Malays and the Chinese. It is a good example of how religious traditions interact with local traditions.

Keywords: *Keramat, Islam, Datuk Gong, Taoism, Pantheon, popular Islam, Chinese Religion*

Introduction

As early as 414 A.D. the Chinese had made contact with the Malay Archipelago (known to the Chinese as *Nanyang*). The first significant Chinese settlements in the area date from the thirteenth century¹. The best known early contacts with the Malay Archipelago probably occurred during the Ming Dynasty, when the Chinese eunuch, Admiral Cheng Ho, visited Malacca in the fifteenth century, after which the Chinese began to settle in the Malay Archipelago². In the 19th century, due to hardships in China, the Chinese began to migrate to the then Malaya on a big scale under the encouragement of the British colonial government.

Since then the Malaysian Chinese have to some extent assimilated many aspects of Malay culture, e.g., in dietary practices,

¹ Comber (1983). *13 May 1969: A Historical Survey of Sino-Malay Relationship*. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann Asia, p. 1.

² *Ibid.* p. 1.

clothing, and adoption of Malay words in their dialects. However, the Chinese have evidently resisted assimilation in terms of religion, i.e., the Islamic faith. Even the most assimilated *Peranakan* Chinese or the *Baba-Nyonya* have retained their Chinese religion, although they have adopted many aspects of the Malay culture. However, there seems to be an exception to this rule. The Chinese seem to have accepted a Malay deity, i.e., the *Datuk Keramat* or in Chinese the *Datuk Gong*, as one of the most widely worshipped deity in Malaysia.

The Nature of *Keramat* Beliefs and Practices

The Malays who have long professed the Islamic faith are still engaged in many dispersed practices and beliefs, especially with spirits and supernatural powers of persons, locations, animals and objects. Osman believes that in fact the practices and beliefs among the Malay Muslims show some peculiar features that are worthy of serious analysis. The key to understanding Malay folk beliefs is in the concept *keramat* as the Malays understand it³. Osman⁴ and Endicott⁵ believe that *keramat* is the most important key concept in Malay folk beliefs.

Osman provides a very useful summary of the *keramat* belief and its veneration among the Malays⁶. He distinguishes six sets of *keramat* beliefs and venerations among Malay folks. They are as follows;

1. Worship of the graves of persons said to have attained sainthood (*wali'*) while alive or posthumously;
2. Worship at graves of kings, magicians, founders of settlements, and sometimes those of obscure and dubious history who are also referred to as *keramat*;
3. Belief in living saints and wonder workers (*keramat hidup*);

³ Osman, M.T. (1989). *Malay Folk Beliefs: An Integration of Disparate Elements*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 116.

⁵ Endicott, K.M. (1991). *An Analysis of Malay Magic*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, pp. 90-95.

⁶ Osman, pp. 121-122.