

THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF MH370: MALAYSIAN MUSLIM SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS RESPONSE

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Abstract:

The disappearance of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 has led to a remarkable Muslim spiritual response demonstrating a profound mass religious coping phenomenon, and understandably, an intense sense of spirituality; This includes significant, no less relevant issues, such as religious, preaching responses and theological interpretations, the pilots suicidal scenario, the bomohs, and interfaith rapprochement. This study not only highlights the social implications of the spiritual and religious capital inherent in Malaysian society, i.e., indicating of adaptable religious capital in Malaysian society at large, but also unveils to a large degree the extent to which the Malaysian Muslim religious and spiritual capital can play a potentially positive, and effective role in coping with disasters and calamities, and further identifies a collective religious pattern used for adapting to and managing national and international catastrophes and crisis.

Keywords: MH370, Malaysian Airlines, religious coping, Muslim spirituality, religious moderator, *bomoh*.

INTRODUCTION

The mysterious disappearance of MH370 on the 8th of March 2014 en route to Beijing shocked the world and placed Malaysia under the world's scrutiny and news spotlight. The flight, which was scheduled to touchdown in Beijing by 6.40 in the morning, disappeared from the radar at 1.30 a.m., 51 minutes after take-off. Such an event is the first of its kind, and remains a mysterious episode in the history of Malaysian aviation. By sunrise, numerous speculations concerning the disappearance of the plane emerged with no clear or definite explanation offered by the local authorities, only causing increased conjectures and confusion among the public. Unconfirmed news reports, information and rumours rapidly circulated; none, however, provided satisfactory evidence to quench the thirst of the general public for definitive answers. With the growth of an increasingly vocal tide for answers came increased critical attention levelled against the efforts of the government and relevant authorities in their search and rescue efforts conducted with the help of neighboring countries such as Vietnam, Singapore, China, and Australia. The operations themselves were not entirely free from confusion, largely due to limited information sharing in the early stages of the search.

Yet prior to the exploration of the Malaysian Muslim religious response, both on the micro-individual and macro-institutional levels, in their coping with the tragic loss of MH370 and the ill-fated two hundred and twenty-seven passengers and twelve crew members, a general overview of the ethnic and religious composition of the Malaysian population is unavoidable. The population of Malaysia as per the census of 2010 stood at 28.6 million with projections suggesting growth ranging from 10 million (35.0%) to 38.6 million in 2040¹. The Malay ethnicity recorded the highest increase, with more than 6 million people from 14.3 million (2010) to 20.9 million (2040)². The total population was a cumulative 28.3 million, of which 91.8% were Malaysian citizens and 8.2 per cent were non-citizens. Malaysian citizens consist of the ethnic Bumiputera group (67.4%), Chinese (24.6%), Indians (7.3%) and others (0.7%).

¹ "Department of Statistics," Malaysia Population Projection: Summary Findings, 2010-2040, accessed April 16, 2014, <http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal>, p.1, 5.

² Ibid.

Among the Malaysian citizens, the Malays are found to be the predominant ethnic group in Peninsular Malaysia, and constitutes a majority of 63.1%. The Ibans constitute 30.3% of the total citizens in Sarawak while Kadazan/Dusun make up 24.5% in Sabah³.

The Malay world, sometimes fondly referred to as *Nusantara* applies to the world of islands; the Archipelago. The arrival of Islam to the Malay world came through Pasai, a state in northern Sumatra in the 12th century by means of Arab traders from the Arabian Peninsula⁴. Pasai was recognized as the pioneering state for its acceptance of Islam, and it is generally recognized that it was Malacca that provided the impetus for Islamic leadership and administration of the Malay states in the region. Parameswara's conversion to Islam after his marriage with a Pasai princess around 1414 and his adoption of the Muslim Megat Iskandar Shah was one reason for the rapid spread of the religion. Malacca is therefore regarded as a major catalyst in the eventual expansion of Islam to other regions such as Palembang in Sumatra, Patani in southern Thailand, North Borneo, Brunei and Mindanao in Southern Philippines⁵.

Islam is the most widely professed religion in Malaysia with a proportion of 61.3 per cent. As a multi-racial nation, other religions embraced were Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%) and Hinduism (6.3%)⁶. Malaysian Muslims are Sunnites⁷ affiliated with the Shafi'i school of law⁸ and subscribe to the Ash'arite theological

³ "Ministry of Statistics," Malaysia Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010. accessed April, 17, 2014, <http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal>.

⁴ Hamka. *Sejarah Umat Islam*. Singapore: Pustaka for all the Muslims in the Malay World. The Governments Antara, 1954, p.454.

⁵ Mohd. Shuhaimi Bin Haji Ishak., 2012. Islam and the Malay World: An Insight into the Assimilation of Islamic Values. *World Journal of Islamic History and Civilization*, 2 (2): 59, IDOSI Publications. Haji Ishak, 2012: 59.

⁶ Population Distribution, 2010.

⁷ Spread of Shi'ism in Malaysia however, has recently been on the rise. This led the Government of Malaysia to take strict measures in safeguarding the Sunni orthodoxy of its Muslims citizens.

⁸ One of the interesting implications of Malaysian legal affiliation with the Shafi'ism involves the legal status of the passengers and crew members missing in the MH 370, and the legal conditions of their household. The Shafi'i school of law of

doctrine. The latter adheres to the principle of human acquisition [*kasb*] through which the Ash‘arites sought to reconcile the views of the Jabrites and the Qadarites. In essence their view posits that man possesses the power to acquire; while stipulating that both the acquired and the means to it are divinely created. As such the voluntary actions of man are created by God, which implies that man has no power for either creation or causing existence. God Almighty creates the action for man and creates in man the power to cause such actions; this means that the action is created and originated from God, while at the same time an acquisition for man. Acquisition represents the customary association between the creative power of man and the act, and as a result, the doctrine of the Ash‘arites implies that man is compelled [*majbur*], yet possesses the free will [*mukhtar*]⁹.

One may grasp these theological persuasions better through the Muslim response to the disappearance of MH 370 which highlights interesting dimensions of the Islamic *Weltanschauung* in regards to collective coping with crises and managing disasters. Muslims view the changing events of life as reflective of the divine decree and

holds two opinions regarding the spouse of the lost husband: The first is similar to the Hanafites, according to which, the status quo shall remain effective until otherwise established. As such, the wife in this case should wait and is not allowed to marry another man until the death of the husband is factually established. Shafi‘i is reported to have said: he whose husband goes missing, or is lost during the night or day, or whose ship is wrecked, or whose news is cut off wherein no person knows of his condition; then his wife is not allowed to marry another man unless she is certain of his state. The Shafi‘ites justify this through the following report on ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib: “Should a woman be tested [losing her husband, she needs to be patient and cannot marry another one until she is certain of his death]”. This opinion is based on the principle of the status quo of life and not otherwise, which is new to the Shafi‘i Madhhab. According to the second opinion, Shafi‘i agrees with Imam Malik with regards to the case of the wife of the missing husband who is required to wait four whole years beginning from the time of his disappearance and/or the disconnection of his news. After this, she would require to observe the period of waiting (*‘iddat al-mawt*) and is allowed to marry following the expiration of the waiting period; which is the old opinion of Shafi‘i. See Yahya bin Sharaf al-Nawawi. *Rawdat al-Talibin wa-‘Umdat al-Muftin*, Ed. Zuhir al-Shawish. Beirut: Al-Maktab al-Islami, Ed. 3, 1991, vol. 8: p. 400.

⁹ Al-Qarni, Isma‘il Muhammad. *Al-Qadha’ wa al-Qadar ‘inda al-Muslimin*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2006, p.240.

wisdom; for them nothing escapes the will and decree of God. The sixth and last article of Islamic faith which requires belief in divine decree finds considerable support in the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad which altogether establish the principle of Divine will in the overseeing of the universe, human life and all of the creation, reinforced with the following: "Know that Allah is capable of all things and that Allah comprehends everything with His knowledge" (Qur'an, 65:12) and "And of everything we have taken account in a clear book" (Qur'an, 36:12). Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: "God recorded everything that will happen in the creation fifty thousand years before He created the heavens and the Earth"¹⁰. Another hadith made with reference to human creation states the following: "...Then it becomes a lump of flesh and forty days later Allah sends His Angel to it with instructions concerning four things, so the Angel writes down his livelihood, his death, his deeds, his fortune and misfortune"¹¹.

For Muslims, the divine will and decree should not, however, be used as a pretext to release humans from responsibility and accountability of their own deeds; they should rather be interpreted as parallel to human will, freedom, and independent decision-making. As such, Muslims strongly affirm the belief that nothing escapes the divine will, while believing in the necessity for an active search for the possible factors and causes underlying disasters or crisis. The manifestation of this religious belief can be observed in the ability of Muslims who coped with the disappearance of the MH370 plane during which Muslim officials, clerics, and the public altogether expressed their religious acceptance and submission to the Will of God and His wisdom in the vanishing of the plane, yet, nonetheless, explored possible problems the plane might have encountered and continued efforts of search and rescue¹².

¹⁰ Muslim Ibn al Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*. Ed. Muhammad Fuad 'Abdul al-Baqi. Egypt: Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya 'Issa al-Babi al-Halabi wa-Shuraka'uh. Ed.1, 1955, p.2653.

¹¹ Bukhari, M. Isma'il, *Al-Jami' al-Sahih al-Musnad min Hadith Rasul Allah*, Ed. Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib, Ed. 1. Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Salafiyah. 1980, Ed.1, 7454, 2829.

¹² The interpretation of the belief in the divine decree has led to the rise of notably major schools of theology, including the Qadarites who maintain that people instead

Muslims also believe that life is nothing, but a trial of good and bad, and that nothing escapes the knowledge of God as per the Qur'an: "And with Him are the keys of the unseen; none knows them except Him. And He knows what is on the land and in the sea. Not a leaf falls, but that He knows it. And no grain is there within the darknesses of the earth and no moist or dry [thing], but that it is [written] in a clear record." (Qur'an: 6: 59). The disappearance of MH370 falls naturally within the divine plan of testing individuals, families, communities, and society at large. Muslims also interpret trials as reminders of some life lessons, but which may equally be non-comprehensible and as such require total submission to the Will of God. The trials and disasters are known among Muslims as *masa'ib*, plural of *musibah*. Furthermore, Muslims are encouraged to exercise trust in God (*tawakkul*), not through prayer and supplication alone, but through trust born of the heart and mind, increased religiosity, positive attitude, and optimism while adopting every means possible to accomplish their given work with excellence. Trust in God, however, requires belief in God and in the pre-destination decreed by Him while doing the best as per the instruction found in numerous Qur'anic verses such as the following: "The believers are only those who, when Allah is mentioned, feel a fear in their hearts and when His Verses are recited to them, they increase their Faith; and they put their trust in their Lord." (Qur'an, 8: 2). The trust of Muslim's in God, however, may turn unjustified and as such ineffective should Muslims choose to overlook the necessary measures of preparation. Prophet Muhammad is reported to have advised a Bedouin who had left his camel unsecured: "Tie your camel and place your trust in Allah"¹³.

Nevertheless, Islam sets a number of theological and ethico-spiritual guidelines for coping with crisis and disasters; foremost among them, the need to understand and come to terms with

create their own actions and deeds, the Jabrites who believe that human actions weigh nothing compared to the Will of God and as such humans are not responsible for their own actions, and the Ahl al-Sunnah who adhere to the middle path through belief in the decree of the divine while also believing in the potential freedom of human will.

¹³ Al-Sakhawi, Muhammad bin 'Abdul Rahman. *Al-Maqasid al-Hasanah*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, Ed. 2, , 1993, p.89.

the transitory nature of life, the need to exercise humility and patience, remembrance of the eventual return to God, and the holding and coming together in times of need. These are set to provide Muslims with an inner consoling power, balance and positive attitude. The Qur'an draws on several trials such as the following verse: (And verily We shall try you till We know those of you who strive hard (for the cause of Allah) and the steadfast, and till We test your record) (Qur'an, 47:31). The Qur'an also describes death as both trial (Qur'an, 21:35, 77:2) and calamity (Qur'an, 5:106). Among those interesting Muslim beliefs towards life is the appreciation of martyrdom, not only for those who die in defense of their legitimate rights, but also in cases of death by fire, drowning in water and so forth. Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: "There are seven types of martyrdom in addition to being killed in Allah's cause: one who dies of plague is a martyr; one who is drowned is a martyr; one who dies of pleurisy is a martyr; one who dies of an internal complaint is a martyr; one who is burnt to death is a martyr; one who is killed by a building falling on him is a martyr; and a woman who dies while pregnant is a martyr"¹⁴. In another narration, Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: "There are five kinds of martyrs: One who dies of plague; one who dies of a disease of the stomach or intestines; one who drowns; one who is crushed in a collapsing building; and one who is martyred in the way of God"¹⁵.

Muslim Spiritual Response

The disappearance of MH370 resulted in a large-scale Muslim spiritual response, both inside and outside of Malaysia, and was manifested through JAKIM's official appeal to the Muslim public and religious institutions to hold collective prayers of need known among Muslims as *salat al-hajah*. The latter is an established Islamic practice reported on the Prophet Muhammad who used to perform it during times of need, disasters or calamities. 'Abdullah ibn Abi Awfa relates that the Prophet Muhammad said: "Whoever has a need with

¹⁴ Nawawi Yahya bin Sharaf. *Sharh Sahih Muslim*. Egypt: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al'Arabi, 1978, Ed. 2, vol. 13, p.62.

¹⁵ Bukhari, Muhammad Ibn Ismail. *Al-Jami' al-sahih min hadyi Rasul Allah*, Ed.1, Cairo: Al-Maktabaha Al-Salfiyyah, 1980, 2829.

God, or with any human being, then let them perform ritual ablutions well, and then pray two units of prayer (*raka'at*). After that, let them praise God and send blessings on His Prophet, and let them say the following: "There is no god but Allah the Clement and Wise; there is no god, but Allah the High and Mighty. Glory be to God, Lord of the Tremendous Throne. All praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds. I ask you (O Allah) everything that leads to your mercy, and your tremendous forgiveness, enrichment in all good and freedom from all sins. Do not leave a sin of mine (O Allah), except that you forgive it nor any concern except that you create for it an opening nor any need in which there is your good pleasure except that you fulfill it, O Most Merciful!"¹⁶. In his narration Ibn Majah adds the following: "Then one should ask God to grant him anything from this life and the Hereafter because God can [provide them]"¹⁷.

Muslim scholars, however, disagree on acting upon this hadith tradition because of its controversial authenticity. Some do not permit acting upon it due to its unreliable chain of narration, which includes an abandoned narrator (*matruk*), and consequently, doubtful veracity. Some others, however, hold the opinion of acting upon it in view of the fact that this hadith gains strength through other chains of narration, and moreover, based on the principle which permits acting on weak hadith reports on virtuous deeds (*fada'il al-a'mal*), and fall under established principle (*asl thabit*) having no other contradictory report. Muslim jurists have also debated the question of performing the prayer of need in congregation. Those who allow for it base their view according to the principle that is permissible to hold voluntary prayers in congregation (*jama'ah*). Ibn Qudamah (d. 1223) states the following: "It is permissible to hold voluntary prayer, individually and also in congregation because the Prophet Muhammad did both"¹⁸. Nawawi (d.1278) said: "Voluntary prayer fall into two categories, one of which can be held in congregation, such as the

¹⁶ Sakhawi M. 'Abdul Rahman. *Al-Qawl al-Badi' di al-Salat al-Habib al-Shafi'*. Ed. Bashir Muhammad 'Uyun. Riyad: Maktabat al-Mu'ayyid, n.d. p.330.

¹⁷ Al-Albani Muhammad Nasir. *Dha'if Sunan Ibn Majah*. Ed. Zuhayr al-Shawish. Ed.1. Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1988, p.260.

¹⁸ Ibn Qudama, al-Maqdisi 'Abdullah bin Ahmad. *Al-Mughni*, Ed. 'Abdullah al-Turki & 'AbdulFattah al-Hulw. Beirut: Dar 'Alam al-Kutub, 2000, Ed. 5, 1: p.455.

prayer of Eid, prayer of the eclipse (*kusuf*), prayer for rain (*istisqa'*) and night prayer (*tarawih*), and another category which is not recommended, but would still be considered valid if done"¹⁹.

Malaysian Muslims performed the prayer of need (*salat al-hajah*) across mosques, universities, schools and religious institutions; this is highly representative of the religious tone in the action of the government and also indicative of a highly visible spiritual capital inherent within a Muslim society used to cope with crisis and tragedies. Understandably enough, the accountability of Malaysian Airlines for the general public and for the families of the passengers in particular required effective search and rescue efforts in concert with serious probing into the possible causes of the disappeared plane. Muslim religious *engagement*, however, was effectively seen as no less a critical strategy for coping with the magnitude of this event in addition to its contribution to the building of societal religious cohesion while maintaining a certain measure of relief for all stakeholders in light of the mysterious nature of the disappearance and the imperative need to capitalize on religious faith as a moderator in the interpretation, coping and management of crisis.

In various mosques and *suraus*, Muslims performed their prayer of need, known in Malaysia as *solat al-hajat*, and recited parts of the Qur'an. The prayer was essentially held for the safety of the passengers and the flight crew. Public religious activities were managed by both private and public sectors such as JAKIM, BAKTI, IKIMfm, Media Prima Berhad and others. A common feature of those religious services was that the prayers were made to ask for the help and guidance of God to find the plane soon. Prime Minister, Seri Najib Tun Razak, joined this prayer in the Mosque of Sultan Abdul Samad in Kuala Lumpur International Airport and pleaded to the masses to pray together for the safety of people in MH370²⁰. Mosques and *suraus* throughout Malaysia have swiftly responded to the call made by the Prime Minister to seek God's help²¹. The

¹⁹ Al-Nawawi, Yahya bin Sharaf. *Sharh al-Muhadhdhab*. Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, n.d., vol. 4: p.5.

²⁰ Utusan, 2014

²¹ "JAKIM holds joint prayer for MH370 passenger families," accessed on March

Mosque of Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin in Putrajaya, for example, organized a mass prayer with the hope that the missing MH370 would be found soon²².

The Muslim public was also exhorted to show patience and calmness towards the test of God and to continue prayer²³. On the 17th of March 2014, in the Everly Hotel in Putrajaya, JAKIM and the Malaysian Airlines co-organized the prayer of need alongside the recitation of Surah *Yasin* for fifty family members of the passengers and crew for three consecutive days. This religious event is reported to have attracted the attention and sympathy of Muslims throughout Malaysia and inspired continued praying for the safety of all of the passengers and crew members of the missing aircraft. Such religious functions reflect a depth of proffered moral and religious support to both the families of passengers and flight crew members while responding to the plea made by the Prime Minister's Department to seek help from God ("JAKIM," 2014). These mass prayers were held essentially to ask God for guidance and help to locate the plane, especially with the failure of the search and rescue operation to explain the impasse international agencies and national groups found themselves in.

Prayers were also held in many other Malaysian cities. In Kelantan, for instance, Johor Religious Council adviser, Datuk Nooh Gadut, led a group to Perhentian Island, Terengganu to hold prayers and recitations of the Qur'an. The group also included sixteen officers from the Malaysian Armed Forces Religious Corps (*Kagat*). Effectively, they sought to hold a mass prayer and recite all of the thirty chapters of the Qur'an to seek the guidance of God. In Malacca and at the House of the State, about five hundred Muslim, including the Chief Minister, Datuk Seri Idris Haron, participated in prayers and readings of *Yasin*, led by the Chief Mufti of Malacca, Datuk Wira Rashid Redza Md. Salleh. Datuk Idris expressed his hope that

19, 2014, <http://www.islam.gov.my/en/jakim-anjur-solat-hajat-bersama-ahli-keluarga-penumpang-mh-370>

²² "Melancholy mood during prayers to save MH370," Malaysia Gazette, accessed March 12th 2014, <http://malaysiagazette.com/nasional/suasana-sayu-semasa-solat-hajat-selamatkan-mh370#axzz2yjuADVS>

²³ Utusan, 2014

the search and rescue operation would find a positive solution, and moreover, reminded Muslims that the disappearance of the MH370 holds blessings and that God would certainly answer their prayers. In Kedah, about one thousand members of the Organization of Indigenous Perkasa Malaysia (Perkasa) performed prayer at the Rahman Mosque, Taman Wira Mergong; praying for the safety and well-being of the passengers of the MH370. According to its President Datuk Mohd. Yusof Ismail, similar activities were also held in sixteen other mosques in the country²⁴.

Salat al-hajah was also held in various universities, schools, colleges and institutions throughout Malaysia, all entreating God's help and guidance, praying for smooth and effective search and rescue efforts²⁵. Among the religious schools to have performed the prayer of need is that of Sarikei in Sarawak, which held a mass prayer asking God to send His blessing upon the search and rescue teams, while also praying for the safety of the missing flight²⁶. Similarly Selangor's PAS Youth and Dewan Ulama held a prayer of need, and recited the *Yasin*, which as noted earlier, is understood to alleviate hardship by virtue of its recitation²⁷. Together, they prayed to God for the safety and protection of the passengers and crew of

²⁴ "Another prayer seeking guidance from God," Utusan Online, accessed March 15th 2014, http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/Dalam_Negeri/20140314/dn_15/Lagi-solat-hajat-mohon-petunjuk-daripada-Allah.

²⁵ "Non-Muslims share," 2014.

²⁶ "Perdana Menteri Sertai Ribuan Jemaah Solat Hajat di KLIA," Utusan Malaysia, accessed on March 16th 2014, http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/Dalam_Negeri/20140315/dn_03/Perdana-Menteri-sertai-ribuan-jemaah-solat-hajat-di-Masjid-KLI; "Murid SK Agama Sarikei Solat Hajat Permudah Cari MH370," The Borneo Post, accessed on March 25, 2014, <http://www.theborneopost.com/2014/03/16/murid-sk-agama-sarikei-solat-hajat-permudah-cari-mh370>.

²⁷ Numerous hadiths extol the virtue of reciting *Yasin*, as: "He who recites the Chapter of *Yasin* in the evening shall wake up forgiven". Ibn Kathir (d.1373) comments: Some scholars state: "Some of the characteristics of this Surah (chapter of the Qur'an) is that it cannot be read during hardship except that God makes it said hardship easy, as its very recitation for the dying person is to seek mercy and to ease the passing of the soul. See Ibn Kathir, Isma'il al-Dimashqi, *Tafsir al-Quran al-Azim*, Ed. Mustafa al-Sayyid Muhammad and others. Beirut: Dar 'Alam al-Kutub, Ed.1, 2004, 11: p.342-343.

MH 370²⁸. In the Zetro Building surau, the National Service Training and Ministry of Defence, *Yasin* was also recited, alongside prayers for help for the safety of the flight passengers and crew. The prayers specifically asked God to alleviate the condition of the drought, and also for the safety of the NST trainers who had already completed their training and were on their way home²⁹. The Karangkrif Media Group also performed the prayer of need and recited *Yasin*. Their prayer was for the safety and protection of the passengers and crew of MH370³⁰. In Sri Perdana, BAKTI, a congregation prayer of over three hundred Muslim female was held with recitation of *Yasin*, and religious sermons³¹. The staff of Media Prima Berhad also held the same prayer in Masjid Wilayah Persekutuan³².

Malaysian Muslims studying or working abroad also performed the prayer of need. In Qatar, Korea, the United States, the United Kingdom and some other countries, many Malaysian Muslims joined in prayer for the safety of the missing flight and for the moral and religious support of the family and relatives of the passengers and crew members of the aircraft³³; “Rakyat Malaysia di New York”). In Qatar, for example, Malaysian Muslims performed the prayer of need for the safety of the passengers and crew and also as a

²⁸ “MH370: Police calls for organizing prayer in KLIA,” Harakah Daily, , on accessed April 3rd, 2014, <http://bm.harakahdaily.net/index.php/berita-utama/26398-mh370-polis-tanya-siapa-anjur-solat-hajat-di-klia>.

²⁹ “Prayers and recitation for MH370,” Malaysian Ministry of Defence, National Service Training Department Portal, accessed March 28th 2014, www.khidmatnegara.gov.my/majlis-solat-hajat-dan-bacaan-yassin-untuk-mh370.

³⁰ “MH370 Prayers and Wishes: Karangkrif,” Sinar Harian, accessed on March 25th 2014, www.sinarharian.com.my/semasa/solat-hajat-mh370-di-karangkrif-1.259604.

³¹ “Missing MH370: Rosmah joins solat hajat to pray for missing plane,” New Strait Times, accessed March 14th 2014, www.nst.com.my/latest/font-color-red-missing-mh370-font-rosmah-joins-solat-hajat-to-pray-for-missing-plane-1.513290.

³² “Solat Hajat MBP Untuk Pesawat MH370,” March 14th 2014, accessed http://www.tv3.com.my/beritatv3/berita_terkini/Solat_Hajat_MPB_Untuk_Pesawat_MH370.html, on 03/14/2014.

³³ “Warga Malaysia Luar Negara Adakan Solat Hajat,” Berita Harian. Accessed on March 13th 2014, http://www.bharian.com.my/bharian/articles/MH370_Warga_Malaysia_diluar_negara_adakan_solat_hajat/Article/index_html; “Rakyat Malaysia di New York Anjur Solat Hajat Untuk MH 370,” The Malaysian Insider, accessed on March 18th 2014, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/bahasa/article/rakyat-malaysia-di-new-york-anjur-solat-hajat-untuk-mh370-bernama>.

sign of moral and religious support to the passengers and families of the flight crew³⁴. Malaysian Muslims working with Al-Jazeera in Doha also prayed for the safety of the MH 370 passengers and crew³⁵. Similarly, *salat al-hajah* was also held in Brunei³⁶ and Cambodia³⁷, with Muslims invoking the blessing of God in the ongoing search and rescue operations. For instance, in the Mosque of Hassanal Bolkiah, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei, Prince Abdul Malik Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah joined thousands of Muslims in performing the prayer of need who asked help from God to track the MH370. In the United Kingdom, Sheffield's Malaysian Student Association also prayed for the safety and protection of the passengers and crew of MH 370³⁸. In South Korea, the Malaysia Student Associations in the University of Korea, Sungkyunkwan University, Inha University, Seoul National University, Malaysian Muslims also performed the prayer of need to seek God's help and guidance so that the passengers and crew of MH 370 would be found safely and soon³⁹. Similarly in Queens Malay Club, Belfast's Malaysian students performed the prayer of need and asked for God's help that the passengers and crew of MH370 would be found soon⁴⁰.

³⁴ "Warga Malaysia Luar Negara Adakan Solat Hajat," Berita Harian, accessed on March 18th 2014, http://www.bharian.com.my/bharian/articles/MH370_Warga_Malaysiadiluarnegaraadakansolathajat/Article/index_html; "Rakyat Malaysia di New York Anjur Solat Hajat Untuk MH 370," The Malaysian Insider, accessed on March 18th 2014, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/bahasa/article/rakyat-malaysia-di-new-york-anjur-solat-hajat-untuk-mh370-bernama>.

³⁵ "Warga Malaysia Luar Negara Adakan Solat Hajat," Berita Harian, accessed on March 13th 2014, http://www.bharian.com.my/bharian/articles/MH370_Warga_Malaysiadiluarnegaraadakansolathajat/Article/index_html; "Rakyat Malaysia di New York Anjur Solat Hajat Untuk MH 370," The Malaysian Insider, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/bahasa/article/rakyat-malaysia-di-new-york-anjur-solat-hajat-untuk-mh370-bernama>.

³⁶ "Sultan Brunei Titah Rakyat Solat Hajat #MH370," My News Hub, accessed on March 13th 2014, <http://mynewshub.my/2014/03/13/rakyat-brunei-doakan-keselamatan-mh370/> on 03/13/2014.

³⁷ "Muslim Community in Cambodia Prays for Flight MH370," accessed on March 14th 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrhnOc5EhqC>.

³⁸ "Warga Malaysia Luar Negara Adakan Solat Hajat," Berita Harian

³⁹ Ibid.,

⁴⁰ Ibid.,

Besides prayers, a noticeable rise in calamity-related religious lectures were found, held with the intent to not only educate, but also remind the Muslim public of the lessons obtained from the disaster. Ustaz Azhar Idrus⁴¹, Ustaz Abdul Halim Nasir⁴², Ustaz Shamsuri Haji Ahmad⁴³ and Ustaz Idris Sulaiman⁴⁴ were among many religious teachers and preachers who reminded Muslims in Malaysia of the importance of retaining positivity vis-à-vis the test of God. Themes in those preachers' talks generally addressed the weakness of man's knowledge when contrasted with that of the Divine. Those preachers exhorted Muslims to continue praying for God's guidance and blessing for the success of the search and rescue operation, and the quick recovery of the missing flight. They also sternly reprimanded those who used this situation to make profit through speculation and rumors. Additionally, they highlighted the danger inherent in spreading baseless rumors and speculations, especially through third party information for this violate the Muslim code of ethics. Instead, they insisted that all Muslims needed to show patience and continue praying to God so as to pass this test with faith and belief in God⁴⁵.

To further shed light on the phenomenon of religious coping, vis-à-vis the MH370 national disaster, and to better portray, render and contextualize the workings of religious coping on public sentiment and aggregate emotion, a Tone timeline visualizer method was used to measure the average tone on a positive/negative spectrum; making use of the Global Database of Events, Language and Tone, based on an R statistical computing/graphical method. The

⁴¹ “*Hambafaqir. Di Mana MH370?-Ustaz Azhar Idrus,*” accessed on April 10th 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRiNjT073IM>, on 04/10/2014.

⁴² “*Abu Khadijah. Ustaz Abdul Halim Nasir (MH 370),*” accessed on April 10th 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eA6n961gzjM>.

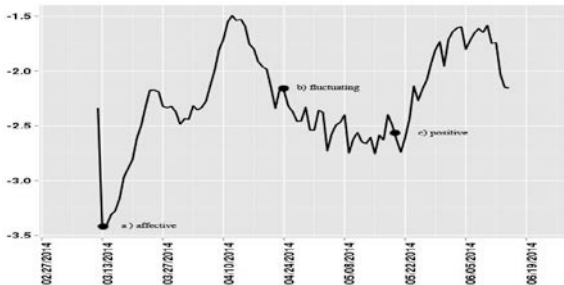
⁴³ “*Zonkita Zonkuliah. MH370 Serah Kepada Allah – Ustaz Shamsuri Hj Ahmad,*” accessed on April 10th 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJRjmcaNjXE>.

⁴⁴ “*Ustaz Idris Sulaiman–Nasihat Berkenaan Peristiwa Kehilangan Kapal Terbang #MH370,*” accessed on March 12 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yXbeh7YSIc>.

⁴⁵ “*Accept MH370 Tragedy with Patience,*” Borneo Post, accessed on April 5th 2014, <http://www.theborneopost.com/2014/03/27/accept-mh370-tragedy-with-patience>.

timeline was created in an attempt to aid in isolating and identifying shifts, primarily in emotional intensity of prayers and vigils held for MH370, as well as the relative amount of coverage they received, which in turn would aggregate social engagement. Tone effectively encompasses emotion expressed about the disaster, as well as the emotional context of events related to the crisis. While it may not present a perfect measure for social consciousness and response to an issue, it is nonetheless an effective means of identifying underlying causal connections between physical actions.

An advanced Boolean search ranging from the dates of March 8th 2014 to June 16th 2014, with a requisite ‘MH370’ term, and conditional parameters: ‘*solat* OR *hajat* OR prayer OR MH370’. Matching results collected by day over time and are quantified on the basis of highly positive (+100) to highly negative (-100). Results are included if enough coverage exists within a specific subset over two days to yield a quantifiable tonal score. To make trends more apparent and deal with daily fluctuations, the visual output was smoothed according to a 7-day rolling window function. Relevant shifts in tone intensity across the selected range are categorized into three primary phases for the purposes of interpretation, namely, a) affective, b) fluctuating, and c) positive.



The affective phase is characterized by two respective spikes towards the positive emotional tone spectrum, from a low of -3.467 to a low of -1.427, respectively. The period, from the disappearance of the plane to early April reflects an intensity of prayer, vigil corresponding with hope, faith and mass social support, made evident

in the in viral trending social network hashtag #prayformh370, which reached a plateau toward the end of the affective phase.

The fluctuating phase reflects a period of mass social consternation ranging approximately from the 24th of April, 2014 ranging towards the 20th of May, 2014, characterized by renewed grave insights, yet no less disturbing speculation concerning the involvement of foul play, conspiracies and the like. This in turn was followed by a rekindled interest in allegedly withheld information on the part of Malaysian Airlines.

The positive phase denotes a stabilization of public emotional sentiment, coupled with consistent social outreach in the form of regular prayers of need in communal gatherings and religious services; alongside a vindication of the Malaysian military for alleged incompetency, and the acquittal of Malaysian Airlines; culminating in the payment of compensation to the families of the lost MH370 victims. Regardless, families continue to hope, pray, investigate, gather funds, and hold vigils in anticipation of the eventual discovery of the plane⁴⁶.

While prayer and spiritual resilience is all very well when understood as a mechanism for large-scale societal catharsis and coping, the inner workings of this method are as of yet unexplored. The insight into the efficacy of prayer for Muslims revolves around the central precept that God fully understands, helps at every moment of life, and consoles His servants in need of assurance. Prayer (*salat*) is implicit with opening doors to deeper dependence, intimacy, hope and comfort. It also serves as a source of calmness, serenity, intrinsic satisfaction, relief for worshippers from anxiety and anger, while facilitating the sharing of pain and grief with the community at large, and further strengthening their sense of unity, and enhancing comfort and peace. Prayer for Muslims is a powerful exercise of patience, humility and emotional and social balance. The prayers of need held widely throughout Malaysia are evidence of the effective coping of the Muslim community with the tragedy, and also of capitalizing on

⁴⁶ Result of Tone Timeline Visualizer, (a) affective, (b) fluctuating, (c) positive. Generated by Global Knowledge Graph Tone Timeline, In *Global Database of Events, Language and Tone Analysis Service*, accessed June 16, 2014, <http://analysis.gdeltproject.org>.

society's religious and spiritual assets, the strengthening of spiritual and religious presence in the public sphere, and notably of Islamization and religious modeling of young generations accordingly⁴⁷.

The Malaysian Muslim response, however, confirms the general principle prevailing among Muslims that religiosity is the best way for believers to cope with life events, in addition to performing prayers and religious practices. Furthermore, religiosity as a coping strategy is found to be more important and useful with stressful events beyond the individual's control⁴⁸. According to Mujahid, the feeling of stress can be contained when Muslims continuously remember the short span of life and remember God through practice of *zikr* (remembrance of God), making of supplications (*du'a*) and recitation of the Qur'an. These spiritual measures are set to help Muslims cope with all kinds of life problems such as stress, anxiety, and work-family conflict⁴⁹.

The Theory of the Pilots' Suicide

The unexplained disappearance of Malaysian Airlines MH370 has raised a host of theories attempting to come to grips with the elusive case, made no less sensitive by the repercussions the of flight's tragic end may potentially signify. For the reason that the Malaysian primary social coping mechanisms are religious and spiritual in nature, the possibility or even suggestion of suicide is socially jarring, made even more so with the primacy of spirituality as a coping mechanism in the entire affair. The present discourse remains

⁴⁷ Former Prime Minister of Malaysia Mahatir Mohamad explains: "What we mean by Islamization is the inculcation of Islamic values in government. Such inculcation is not the same as the implementation of Islamic law in the country. Islamic laws are for Muslims and agreement for their personal laws. But the laws of the nations, although not Islamic-based, can be used as long as they do not come into conflict with Islamic principles". *Interview with Mahathir Mohammad*, Utusan Melayu, October, 26-27 1984.

⁴⁸ Meguellati, A., Grine, F, Mohd Nor Mohd R., Zulkifli Mohd Yusoff M. (2014). Measuring Religiosity and Its Effects on Personal Well-Being: A Case Study of Muslim Female Academicians in Malaysia. *Journal of Religion and Health*. Springer: New York, 2014, 2: 6-7).

⁴⁹ Ibid.,

rife with speculation on the likelihood of mechanical failure, foul play⁵⁰, and perhaps most significantly, the potential for intentional suicide on the part of one or more of the pilots. Only a thorough investigation may yield facts capable of clarifying what in fact occurred on the otherwise ordinary night of March 8th, 2014. While concrete evidence has yet to dispel the confusion surrounding the inexplicable events leading to the flight's eventual disappearance, the commonly postulated theory of a pilot-assisted suicide may be easily found as rather weak, and perhaps somewhat sensationalist of all the assertions put forward. With the absence of any indication of sinister or criminal intent, media outlets quickly picked up the suggestion of pilot suicide rather quickly and often without verification. The sentiment snowballed and gained momentum in a matter of a day, following a comment attributed to the daughter of Pilot Zaharie Ahmed Shah asserting that her father had been 'disturbed' prior to his departure; a statement now known to be falsified by the UK tabloid *The Daily Mail*⁵¹. Having said this, postulation on the disappearance of the plane as part of a planned suicide generally follows two tracks, the first being a politically or religiously motivated suicide attack directed against all flight passengers and crew, and the other asserting that the suicide was motivated from some deeper personal despair or rooted in psychological-disorder.

While both theories may have academic merit at best, the socio-religious and cultural background of the two pilots must nonetheless be taken into objective consideration. Pilot Zaharie Ahmad Shah, aged 53, is described by friends as a family man, a widely respected and known expert and an acclaimed enthusiast of the virtual flight simulation community, and moreover a religiously-minded man⁵². This is particularly significant given the

⁵⁰ "MH370 Puzzle raises legal problems, 3 News, accessed on May 15th 2014, <http://www.3news.co.nz/MH370-puzzle-raises-legalproblems/tabid/417/articleID/343697/Default.aspx>.

⁵¹ "Speculative MH370 coverage shows decline in media standards," USC Annenberg, accessed May 10th 2014, <http://www.neontommy.com/news/2014/05/speculative-mh370-coverage-shows-decline-media-standards>.

⁵² "MH370: Capt Zaharie was not suicidal," The Star, accessed May 20th 2014, <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2014/05/19/MH370-capt-zaharie-not-suicidal>.

conservative nature of Malaysia, which constitutionally recognizes itself as a Muslim-majority country, reflecting Islam as the official religion of the realm. The pilot's former school describes him as a hard-working and good student⁵³, while the Malaysian aviation community confirms his status among the top pilots in the country⁵⁴, and widely recognized for his reputation for mentorship⁵⁵. Old family friends detailed his altruism, and that he loved children and moreover wished to organize charities for them⁵⁶. Likewise, his community *imam*, or religious prayer leader, notes that co-pilot Fariq 'Abdul Hamid, age 27, regularly attended congregations in the community mosque and events⁵⁷.

Both pilots were ethnically Malay, which in of itself indicates a propensity for religious conservatism; made evident through the close relationship between culture and religion in the ethnic Malay social context. This is manifested in the numerous cultural traditions stemming from Islamic religious sources, including conceptions of modesty, extreme respect to elders, charity and so forth. Perhaps more significantly, is the air of infamy and strong social stigma associated with acts that are counter to the socio-cultural-religious norm, as is the case with murder, rape, theft and rather relevantly, suicide, which perhaps accounts for the fact that while suicide is not unheard of throughout Malaysia, it is rarely associated with Muslim

⁵³ "MH370 Lost in Indian Ocean: School honors Capt Zaharie," New Strait Times, accessed on April 20th 2014, <http://www.nst.com.my/latest/font-color-red- mh370-lost- in-indian-ocean-font-school-honours-capt-zaharie-1.541519>.

⁵⁴ "Pilot's Possible Role in Flight 370 Vanishing 'Unthinkable' to Friends," New York Times, accessed on April 10th 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1fE7kWj>.

⁵⁵ "Police at Malaysia Airlines' Flight MH370 Pilot Zaharie Ahmad Shah's home," AU News, accessed on April 10th 2014, <http://www.news.com.au/world/asia/police-at-malaysia-airlines-flight-mh370-pilot-zaharie-ahmad-shahs-home/story-fnh81fz8-1226855935206>; "Who are the pilots of flight MH370?" BBC News Asia, accessed on April 10th 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-26628684>.

⁵⁶ "Missing MH370: Pilot's friends rally to his defense," The Star, accessed on April 10th 2014, <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2014/03/22/Pilots-friends-rally-to-his-defence>.

⁵⁷ "Missing MH370: First officer Fariq cared and loved by many," New Strait Times, accessed on April 10th 2014, <http://www.nst.com.my/latest/font-color-red-missing-mh370-font-first-officer-fariq-cared-and-loved-by-many-1.507409>.

populations due to the intensity of religious invocations against the act.

The assumption of suicide for personal, religious or political reason is further weakened given the lack of motive, displayed or assumed, for the actions. Consider the rather lengthy flight to the South Indian Ocean for the purpose of suicide, when from the perspective of convenience, any closer region would have sufficed. Moreover, suicide for a political end or other such cause may be effectively ruled out, considering the lack of any attempt at publicity to draw attention to the specific fact or reason. For all the concerted efforts of a multitude of nations, little is known about any motive, whether grounded or speculative, for a possible pilot suicide. The socio-religious ethnic Malay culture is self-descriptively conservative in nature, which coupled with a diffused yet no less intense awareness regarding Islamic injunctions and stigma associated with suicide, establishes the possibility of pilot suicide for MH370 as improbable at the least. The suicide scenario is highly unlikely given the lack of obvious motive and clash with essential religious principles that seek to inculcate awareness and value for the sanctity of life, human honor and accountability to the Divine on a constant basis, in each of its adherents. In this regard, perhaps the simplest explanations are the most credible, as opposed to ones that clearly go against the grain of rationality, or at worst, raise too many unanswerable questions to allow the suggestion to remain viable.

According to the research of Mohd Hussin Habil et al, it is possible that religious and cultural beliefs could be important predisposing factors. For him, apparently, the Islamic religion is very definite and vocal in prohibiting suicide among its followers which could be one of the factors contributing to the low incidence of suicidal behavior among the Malay population not only in Malaysia, but in Singapore as well⁵⁸. In the absence of more explanatory data, Ineichen argues, it is reasonable to assume that religious beliefs play their part in maintaining this state of affairs. Meanwhile, Islam appears to remain implacably opposed to suicide, while maintaining a growing spectrum of religio-political philosophies within its ranks.

⁵⁸ Mohd Hussain Habil, T Ganaesvaran and LS Agnes. “*Attempted Suicide in Kuala Lumpur*”, in *Asia-Pacific Journal of Public*, 1992/1993, vol. 6, no. 2: p.7.

Western influences and material demand forces are notably more competitive, aggressive and driven, and therefore, may accompany a rise in suicide rates from their present very low bases⁵⁹.

New Platform for Critique:

The loss of MH370 represents yet another major crisis following one of the worst seasons of drought in the country, which was responsible for serious water shortages in several states of Malaysia. What is more, one week following the disappearance of MH370, six Malaysian Muslim teenagers died of drug over-dosage in a Future Music Festival Asia Concert 2014 held in Kuala Lumpur⁶⁰. The social anxiety manifested itself in Malaysian Muslims' view of these calamities as clear signs of a test from God, resulting from the failure of Muslims to properly uphold the teachings of the religion of Islam. As a result, many Muslims became more vocal in expressing the need for immediate changes, not only in MAS, but in the government as well. This contention is largely held not only for the reason that MAS Airlines is owned by the government, but also because of numerous extravagant concerts and festivals through the Visit Malaysia Year 2014 program held by the Ministry of Tourism⁶¹.

Many Malaysian Muslims called on the government to improve their policy in this respect. One of the top issues was the need to Islamize MAS and the government to avoid the wrath and displeasure of God. One outspoken voice among many was that of Imam Muda Khairul Azhar⁶² who called for the transformation of the current policies of MAS Airlines, including the need to begin the flight journey with religious supplications, in a manner similar to the Qatar and Saudi Airlines. He proposed that the Qur'an be broadcast and

⁵⁹ Bernard Ineichen. "The influence of religion on the suicide rate: Islam and Hinduism compared", in *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 2004, p.34.

⁶⁰ "Konsert Festival Future Music Asia 2014- 6, Mati dan 14 Dirawat di Hospital," accessed on March 16, 2014, Utusan Kini.

⁶¹ "Tahun Melawat Malaysia? atau Tahun Melacur Malaysia?" Buletin Terkini Online, accessed March 17 2014, <http://buletin-terkini-online.blogspot.com/2014/03/tahun-melawat-malaysia-atau-tahun.html>.

⁶² "Hikmah Di Sebalik MH 370: MAS Perlu Berubah. Hadi Arbain," accessed April 5th 2014, <http://www.hadiarbain.com/2014/03/hikmah-disebalik-mh370-mas-perlu-berubah.html>.

entertainment on flight be regularly monitored to avoid negative, unwholesome influences. Many other Muslims also raised the issue of flight attendants' uniform which needed to comply with the norms and rules of the *Shari'a*, and that alcohol be banned altogether on board Malaysian flights⁶³.

Muslims also voiced the need for constant monitoring of entertainment in Malaysia. Unwholesome entertainment used to attract foreign tourists to Malaysia is perceived as a double-edged sword⁶⁴. Even though small scale industries might be booming because of the increase in the number of tourists in Malaysia⁶⁵, untamed entertainment is perceived to undoubtedly cause negative influences on Malaysia's teenagers who represent the future of the country. In this regard, the ends do not justify the means. These transformations were proposed to bring Malaysia up to another notch as an exemplary Muslim country, and save Muslims from the wrath of God.

The *Bomoh's* Search

While religion and spirituality do play a significant role in social perception, coping and understanding, traditions and culture are not marginalized. Rather, we witnessed in this incident an interesting blend of culture influenced to a large extent by religious beliefs, yet no less true to its own cultural heritage. The *bomoh*, commonly perceived as a shaman of sorts, is traditionally perceived to act as intermediaries or mediums to spirits. According to old Malay cultural belief, all living beings possess spirits that need to be fed. Before food is given to the spirit, the *bomoh* will "consult" with the spirit and make use of incantations for this purpose. The items prepared for

⁶³ "Pengajaran & Iktibar Disebalik Tragedi MH370: Gantikan Pakaian Menjolak Mata & Hidangan Arak. Mas Tonjolkkan Malaysia sebagai Negara," Berita Semasa, accessed on March 4th 2014, <http://www.beritasemasa.com.my/mh370-pakaian-menjolak-mata-arak-mas-malaysia-airlines>.

⁶⁴ "Malaysia Adalah Antara Negara Paling Banyak Mengadakan Konsert Setiap Tahun," Media Suara Insan, <http://suarainsan.net/malaysia-adalah-antara-negara-paling-banyak-mengadakan-konsert-setiap-tahun>.

⁶⁵ "Blanket Ban Not The Answer, Says Concert Promoter," New Straits Times, accessed on April 22nd 2014, <http://www.nst.com.my/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/blanket-ban-not-the-answer-says-concert-promoter-1.563969>.

this ceremony consist of a plateful of parched rice and/or yellow rice, a bowl of water, an incense burner, a nail measuring five to six inches, candles, and a silver ring⁶⁶. *Bomohs* recite parts of the Qur'an with the intention of helping the victims and afflicted, while some seek assistance from evil spirits. These *bomohs* are known as witch doctors. Some *bomohs* learn from their spirit guides or genies⁶⁷.

The local healers used for treatment of illnesses are collectively known throughout the Malay culture as the *bomoh*, which refers to a wise man or the village doctor who cures the sick through traditional healing practices. Such practices exist in Malay culture before Malaya converted to Islam from Hinduism. Commenting on the origins of shamanism in Southeast Asia, Heinze observes that shamans were active during the formative periods of most world religions and even prehistoric times⁶⁸. He explains that the struggle for the survival of man in prehistoric times led to the development of manipulation of the natural and unseen forces, and beliefs and faith in spirits presented solutions acceptable to the indigenous people⁶⁹. *Bomohs* are popular in Malaysia among all three races, but the term itself carries a negative connotation as the *bomoh* treatment is not really based on either Qur'anic teachings or scientific methodology.⁷⁰

With the loss of MH370, spiritual practitioners volunteered to help locate the missing plane. A notably unorthodox spiritual practitioner commonly known as the shaman announced to the public that he possessed the power to help the government in its tracking efforts. In this manner, he appeared with his retinue in Kuala Lumpur International Airport to perform spiritual rituals, which some believed would lead to finding the site of the plane. With the title of "Raja Bomoh Sedunia" or "World Shaman King", this coterie led by Ibrahim

⁶⁶ Hj. Mohtar, 1979.

⁶⁷ Amber Haque, "Culture-bound syndromes and healing practices in Malaysia", in *Mental health, Religion and Culture: Routledge*, p. 689, 285

⁶⁸ Heinze, R.-I. *Trance and healing in South-East Asia Today*. Bangkok: White lotus, 1997, p.689.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁰ Amber Haque & Khairul A. Masuan, "Perspective: Religions Psychology in Malaysia", in *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 2002, 12: 4, p.285.

Mat Zin⁷¹ performed their ritual in front of the media news reporters, both local and international. Soon due to alleged restrictions, Zin declared his inability to provide a concrete solution to the mystery of the disappearance of the plane⁷².

The voice of the spiritual witch doctor drew various responses locally and internationally. Some saw such actions as possible alternatives while others expressed outrageous feelings towards this mockery⁷³. Generally, Muslims in Malaysia exhibited disappointment towards this incident as the international media began to associate Islam with unorthodox spiritual practices, especially after the recitation of verses from the Qur'an in the performance of their rituals⁷⁴. According to Muslims, the spiritual rituals carried by these practitioners did not represent Islam. On the contrary, they deserved strict condemnation. The Islamic Department of Selangor (JAIS) issued an edict barring against shaman demonstrations in the KLIA, while ensuring that they would take action against the unorthodox practitioner as per the Selangor Shari'ah Crime Enactment⁷⁵. The Department of Islamic Advancement Malaysia (JAKIM) also released a media press in which it declared that the practice made by Ibrahim Zin was forbidden⁷⁶, for according to their view, it violated the

⁷¹ "MH370: Malaysian Shaman Performs Ritual to Help Find Missing Malaysian Airlines Flight, Islamic Religious Department Shuts It Down," International Business Times, accessed on March 13, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.com/mh370-malaysian-shaman-performs-ritual-help-find-missing-malaysian-airlines-flight-islamic-religious>

⁷² "Wow Media Network. Raja Bomoh MH370," accessed on March 10th 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwvKXIOWCjc>, on 03/10/2014.

⁷³ "Chinese Ridicule Malaysia's Recruitment of 'Witch Doctor' to Track Missing Plane," South China Morning Post, accessed on March 20th 2014, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1447159/video-chinese-ridicule-malaysias-recruitment-witch-doctor-track-missing?page=all>.

⁷⁴ "Non-Muslims share in prayer of need," Astro Awani, accessed on March 9, 2014, <http://www.astroawani.com/news/show/kongsi-maklumat-solat-hajat-bukan-islam-turut-berdoa-31558?cp>.

⁷⁵ "JAIS to bar shamans at KLIA," FMT News, accessed on March 14th 2014, <http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2014/03/13/jais-to-bar-shamans-at-klia/>.

⁷⁶ "JAKIM: Do Not Use 'Bomoh' to Locate Aircraft," Malaysian Digest, Accessed on March 18th 2014, <http://www.malaysiandigest.com/frontpage/29-4-tile/492791-jakim-slams-those-who-use-bomoh-to-locate-aircraft.html>.

Muslim faith and involved elements of polytheism, superstition and fraud. JAKIM also reminded Muslims to be wary of such practices because they violated the teaching, of Islam that brought down the wrath of God and wasted efforts.

According to Amin Iskandar, a writer for the *Malaysian Insider*, the shaman should not have been allowed to join the search of MH 370, while acknowledging that his practice represented part of the Malaysian culture, especially in backwater villages and in the political arena⁷⁷. The difference perhaps was that in the past only informed Malaysians knew about these unorthodox practices, however, now such acts had been widely exposed to the world. As such, the practitioner gained much exposure from his presence in KLIA.

Malay magic is closely related to shamanism, and educated Malaysians consider it to be in conflict with Islamic teachings and avoid such practices⁷⁸. Among the Malays, it is known that asking for favors (incantations) from anyone other than God is a mark of polytheism or *shirk*, and is strictly prohibited (*haram*). Consorting with spirits is also considered *haram*, but nevertheless used in Malay and Indonesian cultures. Guided by the Islamic religion, the Malaysian government has laid down conditions for *bomohs*: (a) practice should not use any form of magic or witchcraft; (b) must be based on the principal of Oneness of God (*tawhid*), and the belief that there is no power other than God capable of bringing good or bad to anyone; (c) not slaughter animals in the process of treatment unless it is done in an Islamic way; and (d) it not violate any of the principles of Islamic law⁷⁹.

Concerted Interfaith Efforts

By nature of its diversity and geophysical location, Malaysia

⁷⁷ "Amin Iskandar. *MH370, Raja Bomoh dan Masyarakat Melayu*," The Malaysian Insider, accessed on March 21st 2014, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/opinion/amin-iskandar/article/mh370-raja-bomoh-dan-masyarakat-melayu>.

⁷⁸ Haque, Masuan, 2002, p.285

⁷⁹ 'Abdul Halim. "Bomoh Guidelines from Islamic Perspectives. Kuala Lumpur: Department of Islamic Development, Government of Malaysia Press", Culture-bound Syndromes and Healing Practices in Malaysia, ed. Amber Haque., in Metal health, Religion and Culture, 1999, p. 692

embraces many different ethnic races, cultures, faiths and religions. Islam is the most widely professed religion in Malaysia with the proportion of 61.3 per cent. As a multi-racial nation, other embraced religions are Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%) and Hinduism (6.3%)⁸⁰. Yet in spite of these religious, ethnic and cultural differences, many inter-faith mass prayers were held for the safety of MH370 in several states of the country like Penang⁸¹ and Kuala Lumpur⁸². These worship services sought to offer religious and moral support, and bring blessings to the family members and friends of the ill-fated MH370 passengers and its crew members. Worshippers wished the relatives of the victims strength during their time of sorrow, while expressing their interest in helping them out.

Followers of all faiths joined in prayer and held programs and activities, including vigils, drawing murals and setting up walls of hope, as well as releasing balloons. On March 18th 2014 for instance, the Friendship Group for Inter-religious Service (FGIS), organized an inter-faith prayer at the Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin Mosque in Putrajaya⁸³. Paizan Tukirin, Chairman of ABIM's Islamic Outreach led this event. Father Philip Thomas, Federal Territory CCM President; Ven B. Sri Saranankara Nayaka Maha Thero, Chief High Priest of Malaysia; and Kavitha Sathasivan, Malaysia Hindu Sangam Segambut Division Youth Chief led prayers. This event was perhaps

⁸⁰ Population Distribution," 2010

⁸¹ "Looi Sue-Chern, *Penang Police to have Interfaith Prayers for Missing Flight MH370*," The Malaysian Insider, accessed on April 14th 2014, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/penang-police-to-have-interfaith-prayers-for-missing-flight-mh370>; "Putrajaya Malaysia: *Inter-faith Service for MH370*," Regional Interfaith Network, accessed on April 14th 2014, <http://www.regionalinterfaith.org.au/home/oceania-news/1149-malaysia-inter-faith-service-for-mh370.html>.

⁸² "Missing Jet MH370," 2014

⁸³ FGIS was established in 2002 as a platform to gather all major religious groups in the country. Its affiliates comprises of the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), the Buddhist Maha Vihara, the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM), Malaysia Hindu Sangam and Malaysian Gurdwaras Council. It is coordinated by the Sathya Sai Baba Central Council of Malaysia. Its objective is to promote inter-faith harmony and human values by working together in helping the needy and contributing to nation building.

unique in view of the involvement of a mosque administration and its organization in the mosque.

Holding inter-faith prayer is not uncommon in Malaysia, especially among Buddhists, Hindus and Christians. What is rare perhaps is for this program to have been held in mosques. It would seem that with a national disaster of this magnitude, those religious differences have been cast, temporarily at least, with the hope that these inter-faith prayers would curb the feeling of helplessness among people and restore their hopes as the search for the plane continued. The Imam, an Azharite graduate, invited FGIS to organize more similar programs at the mosque and offered to sponsor some of them. This was to help promote awareness of unity in diversity and further create a powerful spiritual resonance and bonding⁸⁴.

Yet another instance where the disappearance of MH370 united Malaysians in interfaith religious prayers was on March 19th, 2014. Gathered in the courtyard of a shopping mall, a Muslim religious prayer was followed by a Christian reading from the Bible, then a Buddhist monk, a Hindu and finally a Taoist priest echoed the Imam's pleas before hundreds of worshippers. Bridget Welsh, a political scientist from Singapore Management University, comments: "In the shared sadness of loss, the tragedy has revealed and reinforced a strong sense of community... If anything, this is a silver lining of the tragedy... But such differences have been set aside—at least temporarily—following the disappearance of the plane"⁸⁵. At the inter-faith vigil at the Curve in the Kuala Lumpur suburb of Damansara Perdana, leaders of several religious groups went on-stage to offer their prayers. Many in the crowd wore white t-shirts emblazoned with the words "Unite for MH370" and held white balloons with hand written messages of hope inked on their surface. The Taoist priest beseeched God for divine intervention,

⁸⁴ "Malaysia: Inter-faith service for MH370", *Regional Interfaith Network*, accessed on April 14th 2014, <http://www.regionalinterfaith.org.au/home/worldwide-news/1149-malaysia-inter-faith-service-for-mh370>.

⁸⁵ "Missing Jet MH370 unites Malaysia in Interfaith Religious Prayers," *The First Post*, accessed on March 21st 2014, <http://www.firstpost.com/world/missing-jet-mh370-unites-malaysia-in-interfaith-religious-prayers-1440845.html>.

while the Sikh leader pleaded for an end to the plane's disappearance. Teh Su Thye, whose Global Peace Foundation co-organized the gathering with local singer, Reshmonu, a Hindu, said the tragedy showed that deep inside the heart of every Malaysian, we care for one another and that we are one family. In a statement, Reshmonu said: "For one night, we forget our divisions and stand united for... faith, compassion and love"⁸⁶.

In what seems to be a recurring motif among national police and military arms, Penang police also held interfaith prayers and performed special prayers for the recovery of the missing Airlines and for the safety of its passengers and crew. Penang police, Chief Datuk Abdul Rahim Hanapi, affirmed that the entire force in the state sympathized with the families of the missing passengers and crew. Datuk Abdul Rahim Hanapi, the Police Chief in Penang, stressed the need for Malaysians to stand together in unity for the sake of the country⁸⁷. He said: "Like all Malaysian citizens, our hearts go out to them as well. Tomorrow, we will have four interfaith special prayers at different times and venues. We will pray together for the missing aircraft to be found as soon as possible and for the safety of its passengers and crew. This is the time for all Malaysians to stand together in unity and pray". The special prayer was held at the Mahindarama Buddhist Temple and St. George's Church simultaneously. Muslim officers also took part in a mass *salat al-hajat* at the state police headquarters, which was followed by a prayer at the Hindu Sivan Temple⁸⁸.

The intense interfaith atmosphere is especially significant considering prior controversies, particularly with reference to the

⁸⁶ "Missing plane bolsters racial unity in Malaysia," Associated Press, accessed on March 21s 2014, http://www.myrepublica.com/portal/index.php?action=news_details&news_id=71253.

⁸⁷ "Looi Sue-Chern, Penang Police to have Interfaith Prayers for Missing Flight MH370," The Malaysian Insider, accessed on March 10th 2014, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/penang-police-to-have-interfaith-prayers-for-missing-flight-mh370>.

⁸⁸ "Looi Sue-Chern, Penang Police to have Interfaith Prayers for Missing Flight MH370," The Malaysian Insider, accessed March 10th 2014, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/penang-police-to-have-interfaith-prayers-for-missing-flight-mh370>.

government verdict on the affirmative exclusive use of “Allah”—the Arabic word for God—for Malay Muslims only, which the Catholic Church challenged in an ongoing court case in which many Muslims saw as a threat to the dominance of Islam⁸⁹. The interfaith efforts jointly organized are extremely significant not only to the country’s sustainable development and social harmony, but also highlights the existence of much more viable potential of communication, dialogue, and collective awareness on the need to place the national common interests above religious differences and divisions.

Contrasting between MH370 and MH 17

Exactly four months and nine days later, on July 17 of 2014, another Malaysian airline flight MH17 enroute from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, crashed in Ukraine leaving the 298 members on board dead. This time, however, the plane had not disappeared presumably over the Indian Ocean, but was unfortunately shot down in Donetsk, Ukraine by Ukrainian rebels. Unlike the mysterious disappearance of MH 370, this time the causes were not at all mysterious for the perpetrators were quickly identified. It is in this context of coming to know about the crash that Malaysian, religious attention this time was largely focused on the human agent rather than on conducting prayer of *salat al-hajah* as is the case of MH370. Malaysians, however, and to a relatively small extent organized religious prayers and recitation of the Qur’an, yet this time with a different goal; their spiritual and religious attention appears to have shifted towards another critical extension of Muslim spirituality, namely, the need for justice and advocacy of the rights of the deceased and their families.

⁸⁹ “*Missing jet MH370 unites Malaysia in interfaith religious prayers.*” First Post, accessed on March 23rd 2014, <http://www.firstpost.com/world/missing-jet-mh370-unites-malaysia-in-interfaith-religious-prayers-1440845.html>; “*Missing jet MH370 unites Malaysia in interfaith religious prayers.*” First Post, accessed on March 23rd 2014, <http://www.firstpost.com/world/missing-jet-mh370-unites-malaysia-in-interfaith-religious-prayers-1440845.html>; “*Muslim Groups claim anti-Islam agenda in US reports on MH370.*” Malaysia Today, accessed on March 30th 2014, <http://www.malaysia-today.net/muslim-groups-claim-anti-islam-agenda-in-us-reports-on-mh370/>; “*Malaysia, Iran, Islam, and the Missing Flight MH370.*” Debbie Schlüssel, accessed on March 10th 2014, <http://www.debbieschlusssel.com/69973/malaysia-iran-islam-and-the-missing-flight-mh370/>.

Yet one cannot ignore the fact that few religious events were in fact organized as a response to the crash of MH17, including the *salat al-hajah* held by the National Union of Flight Attendants Malaysia in memory of the MH17 cabin crew held at Kuala Lumpur International Airport mosque. The Union called upon all cabin crew members to gather and pray to Allah for protection from disaster and misfortune. They also prayed for the family members of MH17 cabin crew to be given strength and fortitude in facing the difficult times and dealing with sorrow. The Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) sent a delegation of ten JAKIM personnel, including two women, as well as two members of the Military Religious Corps,⁹⁰ to Ukraine in order to help with religious guidance and funeral rites⁹¹. Similarly a religious officer was sent to the Marriott Hotel in Putrajaya to lead the nightly prayers and hold remembrance of God rituals (*tahlil*) and conducts the recitation of *Yasin* for families of flight MH17 crash victims staying at the hotel.

Before the repatriation of the twenty Malaysian victims, the Minister of Islamic Affairs in the Prime Minister's Department, Jamil Khir Baharom, called on all mosques to hold funeral prayers in the absence of the dead simultaneously with the funeral prayers held at the Putra Mosque, Putrajaya for the victims of the MH17 crash as well as for the mosques to hold *tahlil* sessions before the remains were laid to rest after arriving from Amsterdam, the Netherlands⁹². JAKIM had even prepared a special sermon text to be adopted during sermons for all mosques nationwide in preparation for the funeral⁹³.

⁹⁰“MH17 crash: Jakim prepared to handle remains of victims for journey home,” The Star/Asia News Network, accessed, September 10th 2014, <http://news.asiaone.com/news/malaysia/mh17-crash-jakim-prepared-handle-remains-victims-journey-home#sthash.cypHKguv.dpuf>.

⁹¹“Mosques throughout the nation hold funeral prayers for MH17 victims” Bernama, September 10th 2014, www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/mosques-throughout-the-nation-hold-funeral-prayers-for-mh17-victims-bernama#sthash.jo2CeSdF.dpuf.

⁹²“jakim-sends-10-imams-to-ukraine-over-flight-mh17-crash,” Bernama, September 10th 2014, www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/jakim-sends-10-imams-to-ukraine-over-flight-mh17-crash-bernama.

⁹³“Solat-jenazah-hadir-dan-ghaib-mangsa-nahas-MH17-hari-ini,” Utusan, September 10th 2014, www.utusan.com.my/utusan/Dalam_Negeri/20140822/dn_05/Solat-jenazah-hadir-dan-ghaib-mangsa-nahas-MH17-hari-ini.

Both incidents, however, and to a large extent, reflect genuine religious accommodation and moreover fall within the purview of Muslim religious beliefs and acts. Knowing the causes of the crash, however, led to somewhat different religious response and drove the religious response to a rather different course of action reflecting the genuine circumstances surrounding the event. In both losses, however, the MH370 and MH17, a clear Malaysian religious and spiritual response was manifest, and while the response appears to be more intense in the first, it continues to drag those religious feelings and spiritual devotion into a far practical form of state accountability and justice of the perpetrators, alongside an official and public condemnation of the perpetrators and a call for justice for the lost lives of the passengers. The religious consciousness this time was focused on condemnation of the brutality, terror and the unjustified destruction of human life and killing of innocent people, which had led to approximately 200 crew members resigning from MAS airlines particularly after the second tragedy⁹⁴.

This is an interesting interplay between various domains of spiritual devotion reflective of Islamic merging of the sacred and the mundane and of its capitalizing on the sense of social and civic obligations as reflective of healthy inner spiritual devotion. One may observe, however the dynamic borders of spiritual commitment with the surrounding events that are yet to unfold among those that are defined, understandable and definite. This is not to suggest by any means that Muslim spirituality or religiousness acts solely in the realm of arcane knowledge or vagueness and that it is dissolved once the change is comprehended and becomes understandable, but rather reflects the effective fluidity of Muslim spiritual and religiousness versus the constant changes in the environment. One may observe a natural religious accommodation vis-à-vis the disaster, but with a limited politico- institutional religious exercise in view of the exigent reality of the case. Yet what one may describe as limited religious response is in fact nothing, but natural articulation of religious precepts and proportionately conscious reaction to unfolding the

⁹⁴ “200-mas-crew-members-resigned-after-mh370-mh17,” astroawani, accessed on September 10th 2014., <http://english.astroawani.com/news/show/about-200-mas-crew-members-resigned-after-mh370-mh17-report-42570>.

development of the events, and as such displays clear signs of flexibility, rationality, and pertinence.

CONCLUSION

The Malaysian Muslim response to the ill-fated MH370 demonstrates not only a deep sense of spirituality and public awareness of the need to opt for religious devotion as a coping moderator during times of crisis and disaster, but also speaks of a strong and effusive sense of religious unity and solidarity affecting most, if not all, of the domains of development in the country. Such large scale religious coping is also reflective of a growing sense of religiosity among the masses, resulting highly from the effective project of Islamization of institutions and society in general and pioneering projects, particularly in the fields of Islamic finance, *Shari'ah* compliant tourism and hospitality and Islamization of education and development in general. The fact that no reports exist of ridicule leveled against the plea for the Muslim masses to use prayer as a coping strategy is reflective of an unspoken consensus among religious elites and the masses alike on the unified front of the religious community in Malaysia. One would assume that the response of the Malaysian Muslims, which is very reflective of their beliefs and increased commitment to religion, showcases interesting religious patterns on how Malaysian Muslims fundamentally use religious faith and practice to interpret crisis and calamities, and moreover illustrates the manner in which they collectively capitalize on religious identity and sentiments to cope with the pertaining development of the disaster. Future possible scenarios will likely not escape this established pattern of religious and spiritual response.