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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### THE TOURIST GAZE: DELINEATING PREFERENCES OF THE MALAY MUSLIM WOMAN

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#### ABSTRACT

This article basically explores the literature on examining the tourist gaze in differing circumstances. Without intending to engage in a feminist debate, the authors focus on the preferences of Malay Muslim women tourists as one of the factors that contribute to the growth of domestic tourism in Malaysia. The understanding of tourist behaviour, gender groupings, culture and religion are the main concerns of this paper as the objective was to ascertain how the Muslim identity of a group of female tourists influences them when they visit a particular tourist destination. The discussions go further by using the Malay Muslim women's own tourist gaze as a tool to explore these perceptions. This approach delivers outcomes substantially different from those of previous studies in comparable Western environments which helps to better understand the social dimensions of a Muslim community, particularly that of the Malay women. Since the tourist gaze and experience is a fascinating social phenomenon, the challenge lies in understanding the tourist's behaviour in general, and the Malay Muslim women tourist's behaviour specifically, and how coastal destination appeals to their gaze.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Michael (2007) states that in a traditional analysis of tourism, people are recognised for participating in a physical movement to a destination. However, defining tourism solely in terms of travel did not prove to be particularly helpful for a detailed tourism analysis since tourism is essentially about both people and places (Pearce, 1997). Michael adds that "the emphasis has switched to the behaviour and motivation of travellers, bringing the purpose of travel into the assessment and this helps to identify a particular group of consumers with particular attributes as the defining focus of the industry" (2007, p.17). The evolution of destination development builds on the tourist's consumption of place and culture, equivalent to the concept of the tourist gaze as developed by John Urry (1990, 2002). The significance of the concept of the gaze in tourism studies has been noted in other literature and published works (e.g., Bianchi, 2009; Buddhahumbhitak, 2010). Since tourism is such a broad subject, there are several reasons for choosing Muslim women as the topic of analysis. First of all, since Muslim women are an emerging and growing tourist market, the study of their travel behaviour is particularly pertinent at this stage. Second, no research to date has investigated Muslim women's perspectives and their gaze. Finally, there is an absence of information on the perception and preferences of Muslim women tourists with respect to the coastal destination.

Therefore, it is essential to examine the experiences of Muslim women tourists, as they are among the major market segment especially for domestic tourism industry in Malaysia. The gaze of individual tourists is dynamically influenced by a number of factors that encompasses the social, physical and cultural environment. This includes locations, context, tourists' motivation, activities, expectations and their former experiences. As one of the dominant market segments in the Malaysian tourism industry, how do Malay Muslim women experience places that they visit? Embarking from this initial inquiry, the main objective of this study is to establish and expand the concept of the tourist gaze through analysing the experiences of Malay Muslim women in coastal destination. While the intention of the study is not to generalise the findings for all tourist segments, this is as a stepping stone towards unpacking the notion of the tourist gaze and how it is shaped in the Malaysian context. This study plans to examine a beachside resort town in Malaysia which includes in-depth semi-structured interviews to Malay Muslim women tourists, coupled with site observations around the coastal destination. This qualitative approach hope to generate findings that provide both a descriptive and interpretive account on the gaze and experiences of the Malay Muslim women, which are appropriate for this research.

#### What is the tourist gaze?

The concept of the tourist gaze has been debated among tourism analysts over the past 20 years. Although the concept has its roots in Western thoughts, it has gradually taken on a

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broader international and interdisciplinary scope. When first introduced, the concept drew attention to the often subjective nature of tourism experiences, as well as to the perception of these experiences. This reflects the idea of the tourist gaze as the way in which the tourist perceives his or her experience (Buddhabhumbhitak, 2010). The term tourist gaze was originally devised by John Urry in 1990, borrowing from Foucault's notion of the medical gaze, and he has written extensively about this concept since. Buddhabhumbhitak (2010) argues that the term refers to the degree of judgement when a tourist visually sees. As emphasised by Jenkins (2000, p.73), tourism is all about "seeing and being seen." In other words, only by gazing do tourists interpret destinations (Urry 1990). According to Jenkins (2000), central to this conceptualisation is the means to weigh up the differences and similarities of experiences, for tourism is more than a demand for new and different experiences. The studies conducted so far have produced similar results for the experience of the gaze, perhaps in part because the concept has been dominated by ideologies created and informed by Western people. However, some analysts, such as Li (2005), have begun to note that there are different forms of the tourist gaze associated with different types of tourism. Urry (2002) suggests that these differences are associated with what tourists are looking for and gazing upon.

In accordance, only few studies of tourist gaze from Eastern perspectives have been published (e.g., for a Chinese perspective see Fountain *et al.* 2011; for a South Korean perspective see Lee, 2001), and, judging by their conclusions, their gazes are different from those of Western people. For example, according to Li (2005, ii), "One outcome of this research is the identification of a Chinese tourist gaze that has many elements which distinguish it from the western tourist gaze ... and this has produced what I termed "the relational tourist gaze". Another gaze described by Urry (2002) is the reverential gaze, which is "used to describe how Muslims spiritually consume the sacred site of the Taj Mahal. Muslim visitors stop to scan and to concentrate their attention upon the mosque, the tombs and the Koranic script" (Edensor 1998, in Urry 2002). This shows that there will always be other senses in which the gaze varies from place to place (Urry, 2002). In a broader context, gazing upon a different destination engages the appreciation of different signs and symbols (Bocock, 1993). Signs in tourist destinations are critical elements because they indicate the meaning of the destination; as Bono (2008, p.47) observes, signs "are indicators of the uniqueness of places." In simple words, there are physical features that indicate the differences between places. The concept of the tourist gaze is a challenging and interesting one. Principally, the idea is "what is in a tourist's mindset ... what they see, are aware of, expect and are conscious of" (Buddhabhumbhitak 2010). Therefore, what tourists have interpreted at a particular destination is what is actually gazed at by them. Tourists have both expectations and preferences about the type of experience they will have while travelling. As Shelby *et al.* (1983) notes, "preferences are people's idealised conceptions of how they would like things to be, while expectations are tempered by more pragmatic assessments of the likelihood that certain situations will actually come about." Understanding tourists' expectations is fundamental to understanding tourist satisfaction because satisfaction is a function of performance expectation (Fountain *et al.* 2011; Jacobson, 2001; Oliver, 1980). As Oliver (1980) states, "satisfaction increases as the

performance/ expectation ratio increases." Tourists' perception of a destination is likely to be influenced not only by their own experience but also by their expectations of that destination. These expectations are built on the representations permeating their own culture and absorbed from the media, the advice of friends and relatives, and guidebooks and travel brochures (Jenkins 2000). However, tourists' expectations of a destination do not necessarily match what is described in the guidebook or travelogue. Different expectations held by different tourists in different kinds of environments result in different types of gazes.

### The Gaze ... Through the Eyes of others

Given the lack of information on the tourism industry and development in Malaysia, which is a mainly a Muslim country, this research assumes that, first, Islam has an influence on approaches to developing the tourism industry in Malaysia. Secondly, the tourist experiences of Malay Muslim women to some extent have been influenced by such approach in developing the tourism industry. On the other hand, Malaysia's economic growth has been extraordinary over the last two decades, and women were believed have played an increasingly substantial role in the country's development. In this context, it can be mentioned that when the economy is doing well (keep increasing), their needs (such as go travelling) also increase.

### Religion

According to Henderson (2003), "Tourism is traditionally closely linked to religion, which has acted as a powerful motive for travel from the time of early pilgrimages to contemporary journeys to sacred places." It is also believed that religion is one of the vital factors shaping women's attitudes (Read 2003). As Ratuva (2002) stresses, "religion has always played an important role in providing moral guidance, legitimizing cultural practice ... [Religion] plays a pivotal role and in this regard, it is important to understand the inner feelings of people in relation to their faith." Religion can affect one's daily way of life, which in turn influences the intentions of Muslim women to travel and also affects the way they travel. Din (1989) defines Muslim countries as those where the majority of the population are followers of Islam. Islam has been the official religion of Malaysia since independence in 1957; nonetheless, other religions may be practised in any part of the country, as stated in the Malaysian Constitution, art. 12(2):

Every religious group has the right to establish and maintain institutions for the education of children in its own religion, and there shall be no discrimination on the ground only of religion in any law relating to such institutions or in the administration of any such law; but it shall be lawful for the Federation or a State to establish or maintain or assist in establishing or maintaining Islamic institutions or provide or assist in providing instruction in the religion of Islam and incur such expenditure as may be necessary for the purpose.

In accordance, many verses in the Qur'an can be interpreted as showing how tourism is very much encouraged by Islam. For example, Surah Al-Hujaraat, verse 13, reads:

Oh mankind, surely we created you from male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may know ...

This verse describes the order of God so that people may know each other despite being of different nations and tribes. Although people differ in customs, religion, and skin colour, Islam teaches that all the world's nations and tribes are descendents of Adam and Eve, and of course all human beings are brothers (Husni and Newman, 2007); the only differences are their beliefs and ideologies. Tourism meets these challenges by fostering the ability to recognize and respect other people's art, culture, and heritage, and in so doing strengthens ties with other people. In Malaysia, Islam not only influences the Malay culture but also influences policy making. The Malaysian prime minister, Datuk Najib Tun Razak in Bernama (2007) has stated that Malaysia is not a secular country because being secular, by Western definitions, means that Islamic principles are not used to govern the country, whereas in fact Islam serves as a basic reference point for decision making. It was further noted by Hamdan (2009) that the Sultan (King) or state ruler is the leader of Islam in Malaysia. Table 1 shows the religious composition of Malaysia based on the 2010 census. Tun Dr Mahathir Mohammad, who served as prime minister from 1981 to 2003, promoted Islamic doctrines by, for example, revising the national legal system to be more Islamic; establishing religious knowledge, such as introducing Islamic economic institutions; and upgrading Islamic centres. The idea of integrating Islam and modern ways of life is supported by Hamdan (2009), who states that the study of Islam and modernization should be blended together because Islam provides important guidelines for living a moral and modern life. Department of Statistics Malaysia in 2010 stated, the percentage consists of 61.3% and forms the largest population compared to other religions in Malaysia. Although Islam is the dominant religion in the country, the constitution still guarantees religious freedom for many other faiths. Understanding this demographic variation is of crucial importance for understanding that socio-economically and culturally, the Malays are very different from other ethnic groups in Malaysia (Mastor et al., 2000). The rapid pace of present-day socioeconomic development further adds to Malaysia's diversity. Generally, since independence, relations between Muslims and other ethnic groups in Malaysia have been peaceful. It is believed that the Malay version of Islam is quite moderate, because Muslims and other non-Muslims have lived in harmony and peace in the same community for more than six decades (Esposito and Voll, 1996).

### Malay Women

The Federated Malay States Enactment No. 15 (1913) defines a Malay as "a person belonging to any Malay race who habitually speaks the Malay language and professes the Muslim religion." In accordance, from Ong's (1990) perspective, it is shown that the role of Islam is strongly reflected in establishing the behaviours and beliefs of Malays. In addition, in East Malaysia (i.e., Sabah and Sarawak), Malays also include people who convert to Islam and adopt the Malay culture and customs (Hamdan, 2009). In terms of Malay women's role in everyday life, studies show that one of the most significant roles for women is their participation in household work. Omar (1994) states that Malay women and *kerja-kerja rumah* (household work, such as cleaning, washing the clothes, and cooking for the whole family) are often emphasized as one. Over the past 30 years, study by Swift and Laderman (in Omar, 1994) have shown that Malay women are

responsible for almost everything in running their households. It is clear that in the past, women were more actively involved than men in domestic work. However, this trend has changed, and more women are now sharing household chores, looking for sources of income outside the home, and socializing in the wider society. Based on Ninth Malaysian Plan, the increase in domestic tourism has been caused by several factors (Malaysia, 2005). This increase is also in line with the growth of household income and improved quality of life and lifestyle enjoyed by Malaysians, which has permitted them to travel more frequently. In addition, Malay women also "have a strong sense of community spirit, placing great emphasis on manners or *adab*" (Mastor et al. 2000). This attitude is also evident when they go on holiday. However, Islamic culture imposes severe restrictions on women, and tourism activities are no exception. As noted by Henderson (2003), the "tourism movement and industry practice are determined by conditions in society and mirror unequal gender relationships where these exist." However, the recognition of the role played by Muslim women at present appears to be an advantage not only in their roles as a housewife or a mother, but also as a tourist. This is further clarified in the Qur'anic verse quoted below, which describes the words of God and is akin to God creating a universal brotherhood through tourism (people meeting and knowing each other in a new place). Indeed, the creator facilitates people moving from one place to another while enjoying the food abundantly provided by God:

He it is, Who has made the earth subservient to you (i.e. easy for you to walk, to live and to do agriculture on it, etc.), so walk in the path thereof and eat of His provision, and to Him will be the Resurrection (Surah Al-Mulk, verse 15)

### The Malay Muslim Woman Tourist and Notions of Muslim Identity

"Islam permeates every facet of life of the Malays, especially in the realm of values and behavior. In the realm of values, the Malays rely heavily on religious sources" (Mastor et al., 2000). Islam has influenced Malay men and women in various ways, including dress codes and lifestyle. It has also influenced the individual Muslim's travel code of conduct, especially for women. Omar (1994), for example, lists the following features that Malay women should display:

1. Their style of clothes reflects modesty and femininity and does not encourage men to do evil.
2. They are graceful, religious, obedient and able to take care of the family.
3. Their active participation in economic activities show that they are not "victims" but partners in family and community life.

In order to identify the impact of Islam on tourism, it is necessary to investigate the Islamic doctrines that will identify and help to explain what sort of tourist and tourism activity is most preferred by Muslims. As Armstrong (2003, p.158) mentions, Islam is a religion of peace. However, the media, and particularly Western media, give the impression that Muslims are violent and engage in combative forms of religiosity. Although Malaysia has experienced a financial crisis triggered by the global financial meltdown, its tourism industry was not affected, since Malaysia is politically stable compared to neighbouring countries such as Indonesia and

Thailand (Che Ani Mad 2006). It can be argued that despite the growing threat of terrorism and other problems around the world, Malaysia is considered a safe destination to visit. Islam also emphasizes on strengthening the relationships “between man and God, man and man; man and environment” (Azmi Aziz, Abdul Hadi Harman Shah and Mostafa Kamal Mokhtar, 2006). According to Din (1989), to travel in Islam means “to be spiritually ‘purposeful,’ which makes Muslims aware of the greatness of God through observing the ‘signs’ of history and natural and manmade wonders, all of which are gifts of God.” This view is supported by Henderson (2003), who states that according to the Qur’an, Muslim people should travel in order to appreciate the beauty of God’s creation. Therefore, through travel, Muslims can view themselves as good followers of the Islamic faith.

### *Tourism Industry: A Malaysian Perspective*

The development of Malaysia as a Muslim country is similar to what has taken place in other major religious countries. Arguably, one of the characteristics of people in developed societies, regardless of gender, origin/background, and culture is the desire to be a tourist. To comprehend what is emerging today from a Malay Muslim’s perspective as a tourist, a more nuanced understanding of the Islamic revival from a Malaysian perspective is necessary; as Said and Funk (2001, p.4) stated, “Islamic revival spans the political and ideological spectrum, influenced as much by local socio-political conditions”. This revival has influenced the way people live in Malaysia since the 19th century. A study conducted by Hooker (2003), however, shows that the official process of Islamization in Malaysia began centuries ago in 1303, in fact. This is evident in the *Batu Bersurat Terengganu* (Terengganu Inscription Stone), which is inscribed with *Jawi* writing and contains inscriptions about Islamic legal guidelines on misdeeds and sanctions (Tourism Malaysia, 2010). The development of Islam in Malaysia, especially after independence, was quite varied. Hamdan (2009) notes that in the 1970s and 1980s, knowledge of Islam was heavily influenced by the middle class, especially university students; there was increasing demand for more research and literature on Islamic themes, and a diversity of Islamic programs on local television and radio. However, there has been very little effort to consider religious themes in tourism studies. Malaysia’s popularity as a tourist destination, on the other hand, has constantly increased since 2000. However, the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States has tarnished the image of Muslims destinations and caused a worldwide misconception towards Muslims and their culture (Henderson, 2003). This in turn affects the percentage of tourist arrivals in Muslim countries. The imbalance in media coverage of Islam can be minimised by understanding the concept of tourism in Islam as well as the actual position and cultural climate of Islamic countries as a whole. At the beginning of promoting Malaysia as a tourism destination, such restrictions certainly reduced Malaysia’s attractiveness to the international tourism market. However, even though Islam is often associated with conservatism, anti-Western sentiment, and terrorism (Armstrong, 2003), Malaysia is well received by many tourists. This may be because Malaysia is seen as practising moderation in Islam and has a good track record in all respects, including the tourism industry itself (Henderson, 2003). The influence of Islam has also been described by Hong (1985), who contends that Malaysia, as a Muslim nation,

rejects certain forms of travel behaviour, including displays of affection and sex in public areas, drinking alcohol, wearing revealing or scanty clothing, and nude sunbathing. Gambling and prostitution are also described as offensive and unacceptable. In accordance, the government has addressed requirements/instructions for tourist (as mentioned above) without offending Muslim religious sensitivities in order to increase the national income, particularly through revenue from the tourism industry. Since tourism has become a significant aspect of contemporary life, and thanks to Malaysia’s rapid economic development, improvements in people’s financial status, and current travel trends, Malay Muslim women have moved to higher levels of Maslow’s (1968) hierarchy of human needs. Maslow’s (1954, p.92) describes the increasing of human needs as “the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming.” However, Henderson (2003) found that although there is much more recognition of the positions and power of Muslim women, there are weaknesses in recognition of their participation in the tourism industry, either as tourists or as hosts.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The term gaze in tourism literature denotes the way in which people steadily and intently look towards a destination with great interest and wonder. Observing Muslim women tourists relaxing, walking and taking photographs at a destination demonstrates that most of them are acting in similar forms of activities and experiences. As travel is regarded as a desirable form of leisure, a kind of romantic experience that satisfies our taste for novelty (Urry 1990), it seems relevant to the research question that one should be aware that travellers might differ in their motivations and reasons for travelling. This is important to note because Muslim tourists seem likely to be restricted from many tourist activities. However, there is an argument that travel is supported by Islam. Islam understands the desire to be elsewhere and look for new environments and challenges, which are inspiring for everyone. Interestingly, leisure and travel were believed perceived by Malay Muslim women as something that reflected their own religious faith. This is largely because the Islamic rules and principles by which Malays live create a balance between lifestyle and serving God. Besides, there is a growing sense desire for a romanticized version of a spiritual destination that allows them to experience beauty, calm, and tranquility. These Muslim women’s gazes, however, initially are believed were different from the reverential gaze described by Urry (2002). Their spiritual gaze echoes Urry’s (2002) contention that there will always be other senses in which the gaze varies from place to place. Recreational travel by Westerners is indeed away from home as well as for the Muslims but it also reflects reconnecting with the world’s creator, in the Muslim perspective. For Muslims, travelling is about re-anchoring their beliefs through appreciation of God’s creation. In other words, the Muslim gaze again is consider very different from the tourist gaze. In short, the concept of the tourist gaze originally is too individualistic to be consumed in Malaysia’s existing tourism industry. Malay Muslim women have clearly emerged as an important tourist segment and a potential market; yet they are not well understood, and more research is needed on this topic. The review of the existing literature involved examining studies with the goal of understanding Muslim women tourists’ backgrounds and images. “Religion

has often been tied to tourism through traditional pilgrimages, where tourists travel for novelty, to display their beliefs, or to experience the divine” (Sahabu, Wearing and Grabowski 2011); furthermore, as Sahabu *et al.* (2011) state, religion has always influenced people’s daily lives, their decisions, and, more importantly, their perceptions of the world. This paper concludes that Islam plays a major role in influencing Muslims’ travel by intertwining deeply personal motivations, experiences, and expectations.

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