

Local Wisdom in Agony of Death among Malay-Muslim Society in Malaysia

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Abstract

The Malay society is very much concerned with matters pertaining to custom in everyday life. The customs practiced by the people reflect the ingenuity and expertise in dealing with the routine. This matter is recognised as local wisdom. The variety of local wisdom is developed based on the situation, condition and geographical location of a society. Recently, the polemic has emerged among religious scholars pertaining to the local wisdom practiced by the Malay society. The discussion within the society seems to be more focusing on the law itself regardless of the functions and its practices. Therefore, this study aims to explore the functions and the practice of the local wisdom and this article pays more concentration on discussing these matters. This study also concentrates on the local wisdom along the process of the agony of death (*sakāratul maut*) within the Malay society. The practices, the reasons and the functions of practising them are discussed. To achieve the objective, this study has combined the finding from library research as well as field research based on interviews. Qualitative data were obtained from these methods and the contents were thematically analysed to summarize the local wisdom practiced within the Malay society during and after dealing with the agony of death. The result from the study found that the local wisdom within the Malaysia society can be divided into two main functions; first, as a form of submission towards Allah SWT, and second, as the final assistance and respect for the patients during and after the agony of death. This study has suggested the Model of Local Wisdom during the Agony of Death for the Funerary Management.

Keywords: Local *Fiqh*, *Sakāratul Maut*, Agony of Death, 'Urf, Model of Local Wisdom During the Agony of Death for The Funerary Management.

Introduction

Every society has its own customary traditions resulting from interactions among the people within the society and the interactions with the surroundings which consist of the nature and

the belief of everyday life. These customs and traditions have formed inherited knowledge and experience for the society passed from one generation to another (Suwito, 2015: 197). The custom serves as a solution to recurring issues raised in the community (Gannep, 2006: 203). The success in dealing with problems are usually accompanied by certain practice and rituals as a form of gratitude and to symbolize the act of submission towards the Creator (Strauss, 2005: 30-32). Explicit and implicit values in knowledge and practices of the custom and tradition within the society is known as the elements of local wisdom (Strauss, 2005: 31). Local wisdom in customary practices is often associated with religion of the society. The elements of local wisdom also are patterned and guided by religious values (Kaplan, 2002: 88). Studies related to the local wisdom in cultural practices can be divided in two; first, the practices borrowed from other custom, practiced in a new society over and over again, and finally becomes a culture (Walter, 1999: 55). For example, the practice of *tahlil* and *talqin* in Malay death custom were borrowed from the people of Yemeni in Hadramaut (Salleh, 2018: 4). Second, the elements of local wisdom which are derived from the practice of the locals symbolize the identity of a society (Ali, 2011: 26). One of the examples is to bath a dead body using the rice water as practiced in Indonesia (Gannep, 1977: 33).

Literature Review

Sobirin dan Muhayat (2016) have conducted a qualitative review on the management of the deceased practiced by the Muslims and Hindus in Indonesia. The finding shows that this practice is associated with the local wisdoms such as the *ghusl* (washing and shrouding) procedure and burial. However, the Hindus procedure became different in the matter of recitation and the *ngaben* (cremation ceremony) or burn the deceased. Wicaksono (2012) in his master thesis came into conclusion that there was a correlation between the level of knowledge and the behaviour of medical staff in government hospital in Indonesia. Meanwhile, Rahmat (2015) has concluded that there were five levels of natural death, which were denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. This conclusion was made based on the observation conducted by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. Ala (2016) in his research emphasized on good behaviour when dealing with the agony of death patients among the medical students of higher education in Indonesia. According to him, the agony of death was considered as the final journey a human has to endure before moving to the world after.

Guyanti (2018) has conducted a study on the tradition of the people of Baritan and found that the tradition, including the death tradition was divided into two; filtered from other culture, and developed through the wisdom of the people in the society. Lutfi (2016) believes that there are two inclinations in defining the culture, including the culture and tradition of the death. First, the people were inclined to refer to the culture of the Arabs during the revelation of the Quran in the process of establishing *fatwa* on the elements of contemporary culture. Second, the acceptance of local culture existed as long as there was no contradiction with *nusus syar'iyah*. Ali (2011) has made a conclusion based on the acceptance of the culture and tradition from Indonesia that there were two distinct groups in the form of *manhaj*, which were the fundamental group of *Muhammadiyah* and the traditional group of *Nahdatul 'Ulama'*. These two groups were always arguing including in the matter of the custom and tradition of the death. Among the topics debated were the tradition of *slametan*, *tahlil*, *talqin*, and some other practices.

According to Geertz (1960), the practice and tradition are implemented based on communal practice. The *Slametan* communal feast was described as a way of social and moral support

to the family of the deceased. Meanwhile, Woodward (1989) agreed with Geertz by mentioning that the *slametan* traditional element came from local interpretation of Sufism practical element which aims to pray for the well-being of the deceased. Kaplan (2002) also has written in detail about the *slametan* culture of the Indonesians and concluded that *slametan* was a symbol of worship towards the Creator and as an effort to ask (pray) for something from the God. Whereas, Van Gannep (1977) has observed the death tradition of the Javanese people and summarised that there were five phases a deceased should have passed through including the agony of death, washing, the praying ritual, sending to graveyard, and condolences ceremony. All of these were established based on the spirit of mutual support and assistance, the basis of Malay local wisdom.

Suwito, Sriyanto and Hidayat (2015) has defined the rituals related to the Malays death tradition by establishing two functions; first, as a form of tribute to the deceased who were once a living human and contributed to the Nature. Second, it is a way to return to God, the value of submission, and the process of asking forgiveness on behalf of the deceased. This ceremony represents the level of knowledge acquired by a society. A study was done by Said (2017) regarding to the *massalo* tradition practiced in Indonesia. *Massalo* is a local tradition related to communal contribution to the families affected by the death. The *massalo* tradition acts as moral support to the family of the deceased in the form of community awareness, kinship relationship, and the practice of helping each other among immediate family members. A manuscript study on the text written by the Muslim scholars of Archipelago regarding to the agony of death (*sakāratul maut*) was done by Yusuf and Munadi (2015) on the manuscript of *Risālah Sakrat al-Maut* written by Abdul Rauf Singkel and it can be concluded that based on the finding, the signs of the agony of death are dreaming in the present of father and mother, and seeing good reward through smiling faces or the other way around. Whereas, Karim (2015) has clearly defined the meaning of death through the perspective of *tasawuf* knowledge and suggested that some of the rituals were meant for social support, meanwhile some others have deviated from the teaching of Islam.

From the literature review, most of the death traditions written by the scholars were customs and traditions of the people of Archipelago mainly in Indonesia. Limited references were found related to the death tradition of the Malays in Malaysia except the study done by Marinsah (2016) and Sendera (2014; 2016) related to death tradition of the Bajau community in Sabah. Therefore, this study aims to explore the death tradition of the Malays in Malaysia related to the agony of death in detail.

Research Objectives and Questions

The objectives of this research are; first to explain the practices of local wisdom in dealing with the agony of death patients within the death tradition of Malay society. Second, to elaborate the philosophy and functions of local wisdom in dealing with the agony of death patients within the death tradition of Malay society. Third, to establish a model of local wisdom in dealing with the agony of death patients. Meanwhile, the research questions are; first, what are the practices of local wisdom in dealing with the agony of death patients within the death tradition of Malay society? Second, what are the philosophy and functions of local wisdom in dealing with the agony of death patients within the death tradition of Malay society? Third, what is the model of local wisdom in dealing with the agony of death patients?

Research Methodologies

In order to achieve and answer the research questions, library research was done through document analysis to review literatures related to the death culture of the Malays particularly during the agony of death. This study also implemented case study method using qualitative approach. The main method used in this study is semi-structured interview as suggested by many researchers (Cresswell, 2012; Saleh and Sam, 2010; Marican, 2009; Kumar, 2009). This pilot study was conducted with the interview of three participants. This pilot study aims to find the coordination between the answers given by the participants with the objectives of the study. Participants chosen were mortuary managers from two states; Kedah and Perak. The participants were selected based on the following characteristics; (1) have more than 20 years of experience managing the *janazah* (deceased), (2) local religious leaders such as the *Imaam* and teachers of religion, and (3) having formal or informal educational from institutions recognized in the society. The results from the interviews were transcribed to become narrative data and were thematically analysed.

Local Wisdom

Local wisdom is a form of deep and creative thinking of a practice in a society. It contains of implicit values of the practice itself. Explicit values can be understood by physically looking at the practices, however, deep observation in appreciating the philosophy behind the practice is needed to understand the explicit values of a practice (Salleh, 2018). These values are difficult to recognize only through mere observation, yet guidance and narrative from earlier generations are needed (Salleh, 2017). One of the examples of the local wisdom within the Malay society regarding to washing the deceased is by using the coconut milk as practiced by the people of Bajau in Sabah.

Implicitly, coconut milk is always used in cooking and other than to make the meal more delicious, it helps to soften the meat too. Therefore, the coconut milk is used for its explicit function which is to soften the joints of the dead body as to replace the function of the larynx leaf which is difficult to find in Sabah. Coconuts are easier to find around the island and they become a regular plantation along the seafront. The function of this local wisdom element was scientifically tested (Marinsah, 2018).

The Death Culture of the Malays

From the literature review and interviews (Salleh, 2017; Salleh, 2018; PKPJ 4, 2018; Geertz, 1960; Gannep, 1977; Suwito, 2015) the death culture of the Malays can be divided into four phases;

- i. The agony of death phase: It is also called the phase of dying, which is the final phase before someone dies. This phase is so important for the Malays as it is the final journey of the patient (Abdul Karim, 2015: 21). Among the practices during this phase are recognizing the signs of the agony of death, the recitation of Quranic verses, facing the patients towards the *qiblah*, isolating the patients in a specific room, gathering the *jama'ah* of the mosque for the praying process to ease the death, calling the children and family members to come home for the last visit, dripping water in mouth and wiping the patient's body (PKPJ1, 2019; PKPJ2, 2019; PKPJ3, 2019).
- ii. Post-death phase: This phase is known as the phase for initial support immediately after the death. In Malay society, among the initial assistances are to close the eyes of the deceased and bind the chin, take the cloth off, cover the body with unsewn *batik*

sheet, to cover the face using turban, *bakai* wash, clean the stool, put a heavy object on the stomach, fold the hands of the dead body in *qiyam* position, light on the incense, massage and oil the joints, spread around the news, and recite Quran (PKPJ1, 2019; PKPJ2, 2019; PKPJ3, 2019).

- iii. Pre-burial phase: This phase starts with a visit from relatives, preparing the shrouding materials, *janazah* prayer, sending the deceased to graveyard and preparing the grave.
- iv. Post-burial phase: Traditions and customs practiced during this phase include the recitation of Surah al-Insan, *tahlīl* and *talqīn*, watering the grave with rose water, sprinkling flowers on the grave, preparing *kepok* (tomb) and *nisan* (tombstone), *kenduri arwah* (funerary ceremony), *duit kepala mayat* (portion of wealth left by a deceased wife for the husband), and *khairāt* or the company serves for the family after the death of a family member (PKPJ1, 2019; PKPJ2, 2019; PKPJ3, 2019).

Death Custom within the Malay Society during the Agony of Death

In discussing the matters regarding to death custom within the Malay society, local and western scholars have agreed to divide the practice into two; first practices and rituals borrowed from other cultures, and second, practices resulting from the ingenuity of Malays through interactions with the surroundings. Borrowed practices can be the *tahlīl* which was borrowed from the people of Yemeni Arabs, the practice of choosing the right date for ceremony from the Hindus of Archipelago and the practice of reciting the Quran from *Syar'i* Commanding tradition (Guyanti, 2018: 35). Practices born from the local culture can be the *khairāt* (or some places call it company), washing the deceased using *sintok*, henna leaves and coconut milk, shrouding the dead body with a sprinkle of *cendana* powder, the chalk of *Barus* and rose water, and many other practices to mention (PKPJ1, 2019; PKPJ2, 2019; PKPJ3, 2019).

In the process of dealing with the agony of death patients, one of the borrowed customs is the recitation of Quran for example *Surah Yāsīn*, *Surah al-Ra'd*, and *Surah al-Wāqī'ah*. Reciting Quran at the moment of *sakāratul maut* was done based on a few Ahādith of the Prophet (pbuh) from different status as well as the opinions from Muslim scholars derived from the books of Fiqh of Mazhab Shāfi'i. Other than that, the patients were also taught to pronounce the *Shahādah*, or known as *talqīn*. This act was also done based on the command of the Prophet (pbuh). The people also have borrowed practices from the Yemeni which were the practice of *Salātul Hājāt* (the prayer of need) and to pray for the well-being of the patient. All these practices of reciting the Quran, praying (*du'a*), and the *Hājāt* prayer are mentioned in the Quran, however the form of practices and its practical are borrowed from other culture. Even though, they are all borrowed customs, the locals of Malay society have tailored these practices to be adapted with the needs and culture of the people (PKPJ1, 2019; PKPJ2, 2019; PKPJ3, 2019). For the practices resulting from the Malay culture itself are consisted of the signs of death, the tradition of calling children to come home, dripping water in mouth, the culture of advising the family of the deceased, changing the position of the patient towards facing the *qiblah*, moving the position of the patient from dark to a place exposed to sunrise, the practices of opening the roof, planting *bertih*, asking for repentance, putting a practice to an end, and inheriting practices of previous people (PKPJ1, 2019; PKPJ2, 2019; PKPJ3, 2019).

Local Wisdom in the Agony of Death (*Sakāratul Maut*)

The Malays basically will return to Allah SWT at the moment of disparities through recitation of the Quran, *du'a*, and the *Hājāt* prayer. This reflects how Islam stands firmly in the heart

and lives of the Malays. When one of the members of the society is tested with the agony of death, the family of the patient will usually invite other members of the community to gather at the patient's home to recite *Yāsīn*, perform the *Hājāt* prayer, and make *du`a* together. This approach illustrates the high value of servitude inside the soul of the Malays, the act of returning to Allah SWT and effort to pray for the easing of affairs. This practice of visiting others is actually derived from the concept of Sunnah of the Prophet (pbuh). Starting from the recitation of *Yāsīn* and the performance of the *Hājāt* prayer, people are implicitly channeling moral support to the family of the patient. At this moment, the Malays interact, give help to the family in the form of advice which can calm them and other physical and emotional support needed by the family. On the other hand, the people also are channeling spiritual support towards the patient through collective *du`a*. Most of the time, the ritual of reciting *du`a*, performing the *Hājāt* prayer, and reciting the Quran are led by a person who is the most religious and respected in the society, as an honor from the Malay society towards a person who is close to Allah SWT (PKPJ1, 2019; PKPJ2, 2019; PKPJ3, 2019).

Local wisdom of the Malay people extends to the knowledge of observing the sign of dying. The signs are useful as a signal for the family and the society to make early preparation for the death. The signs are just tips and guidance, and not exactly right. Among the signs assumed as death is approaching are frequent dreams of passed-away parents, or someone who have long gone, eyes ears begin to fall from their position, recover from sick, always thirsty and ask for more water, the back starts to flatten, wavy stomach and chest, eyes looking upward and the sound of *ghargarah* in the throat. These early signs usually becomes the signal to call upon children and relatives to come home and visit the patient as well as to seek chances for asking forgiveness. They are also used by the society to prepare for the death, including to provide expenses for the *khairāt*, preparing the materials for washing, shrouding and burying the dead when someone dies (PKPJ1, 2019; PKPJ2, 2019; PKPJ3, 2019). The society also considers that the process of the agony of death is the final journey for a human to endure, therefore, this patient will be treated with care and in order. Among the traditions Malays will implement are to move the deceased to a place or into an isolated room in order to separate the patient from the talk of people who are visiting that might disturb the process. Some are placed in a small room, some under the mosquito net, and the family limits the number of people who can enter the room. This small room or mosquito net calms the patient at the moment of enduring the agony of death in the last moment of his life. Other than that, the society also advise the family to stay with the patient and immediately teach them the *talqin* when the patient's chest and stomach starts to become wavy. This is a way of showing support for the patient to remember Allah SWT at the last moment of his life. For patient who has suffered a long period of dying situation, usually the Malay people will move his body towards facing the *qiblah* as an effort to seek the Blessing of Allah SWT, wipe his body with prayed water to refresh his body and reduce heat, and drip drops of water into his mouth to reduce dryness of the tongue and mouth to ease him pronouncing the *Shahādah*. All of these are form of physical support from immediate people to help the patient of the agony of death (PKPJ2, 2019; PKPJ2, 2019).

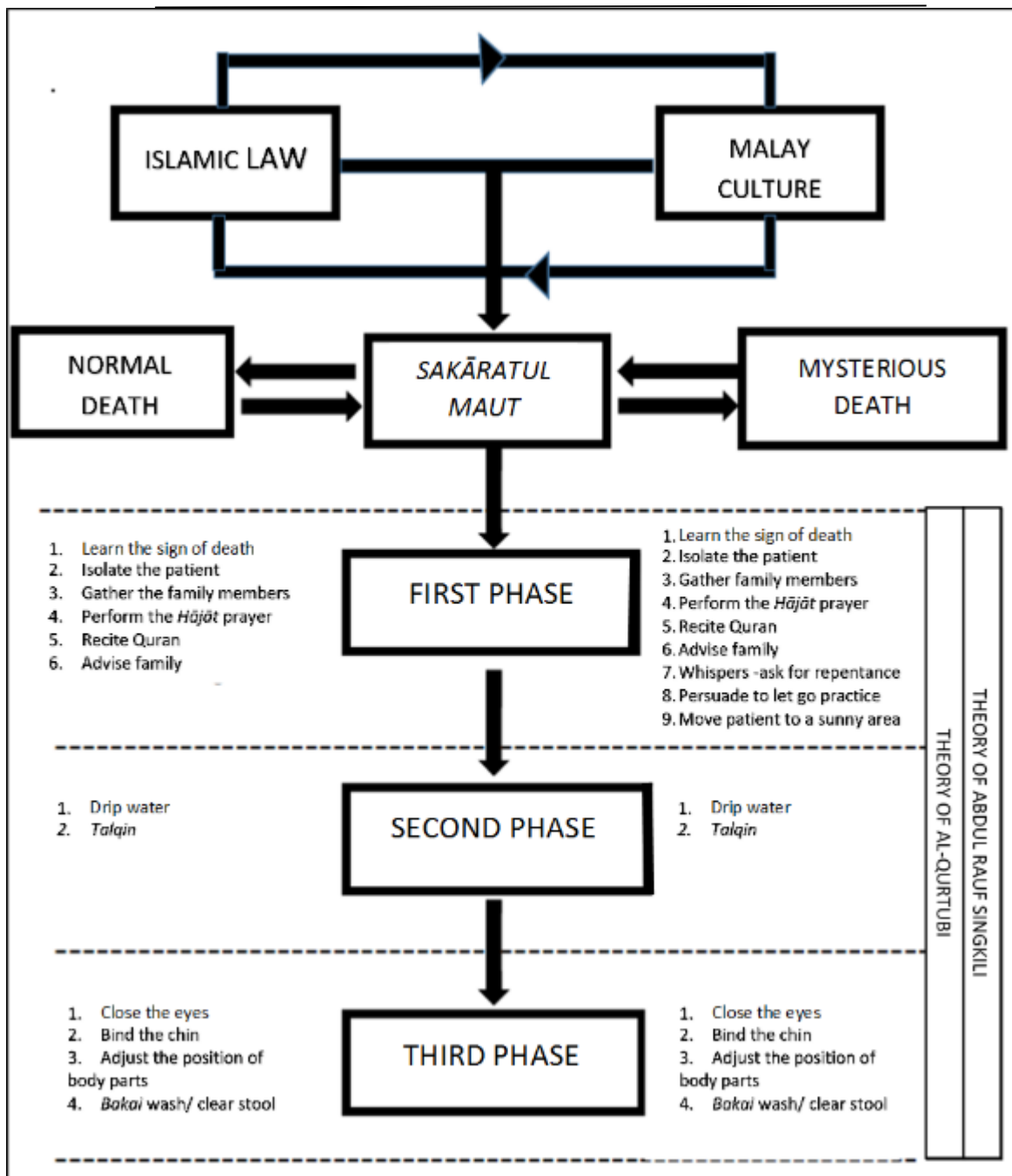
For a patient who has been suffering long period of dying situation, and believed to be possessed and disturbed by malignant spirit as a result from necromancy, using *susuk* (charm needles) and bewitched, among the efforts that are done by the Malay people are; to wipe the body of the patient with *mutlaq* water recited with the verses of Quran, the mixture of *bidara* leaves, and for the patient who uses *susuk* is wiped with water of *remunggal* leaves

recited with the verses of Quran. From the old tradition of the Malay society, the rooftop is open to let the sunrise in, however, nowadays, people do not do this anymore, yet the patient is moved to a place exposed to the sunshine such as near the window. Its function is to prevent the patient from staying in dark, which is easy for the malignant spirit to occupy and disturb the patient. If the children of this patient has seen him occasionally worship this entity during their lifetime, and has occasionally done activity to feed the malignant spirit, usually the funerary manager whispers at the ear of the patient asking him to repent and to let go practices which has become routine of his life. The family also is advised not to accept any condition set by the patient with any genie or devil. There are a number of family member who invite *bomoh* and shaman and make new agreement with the genie and devil by planting *birtih* in certain area with strong intention to ease the process of *sakāratul maut* (PKPJ1, 2019; PKPJ2, 2019).

Model of Local Wisdom During the Agony of Death for Funerary Managers

The finding of this study should be supported with the legal details (*hukm*) in order to develop future studies because some of the death customs of the Malay society particularly in the time of *sakāratul maut*, at a glance, comply with the Quran, Sunnah and *ijtihad* of the *‘ulama’*. Indeed there are also customs deviate from the principles of *Syari’ah*. However, with the aim to facilitate the funerary managerial, this study purposes a model of local wisdom for funerary managers as a guide and free from confusing elements emerged in the society. This model was developed based on the combination of models developed by Ramli et.al (2018) regarding to the Local Wisdom of the Islamic Law in Malay World, the discussion of al-Qurtubi (1425 H) in his writing of *Kitāb al-Tazkirah bi Ahwāl al-Maut wa Umur al-Ākhirah* and Singkili (n.d.) in transliteration of *Risālah Sakāratul Maut* done by Yusuf and Munadi (2015) about the phases of *sakāratul maut* endured by a patient.

The rational of choosing these models are discussed further. First, the rational of choosing the model of Ramli (2015). It is the only model available related to the local wisdom and the interactions between the Islamic Law and the Malay World of Archipelago are discussed. Second, al-Qurtubi’s model is chosen because its discussion was made based on the Quran and Sunnah at every phase of *sakāratul maut*. Third, Abdul Rauf Singkili’s model is chosen because the manuscript can be considered as the earliest manuscript written about the agony of death in the Malay World. As a result from separating, combining and analysing these models as well as the findings from the interview and field observation, a model of local wisdom during the *sakāratul maut* for funerary managers is developed. The following figure illustrates the model.

Figure 1: Model of Local Wisdom during the *Sakāratul Maut* for Funerary Managers

Conclusion

Fundamentally, there are various values that reflect communal and submissive (to Allah SWT as the Creator of Universe) local wisdom of the Malay society in the process of the agony of death. Among the values are the value of praying for each other through the recitation of Surah *Yāsīn*, spiritual support towards the patient and his family, moral support showed by the society through the culture of visiting each other and offering help and advice towards the patient and his family. In dealing with death, it can be clearly observed that the Malays respect the eldest or the wisest in the society as the rituals of praying (*du`a*), reciting *Yāsīn*, and the performance of *Hājāt* prayer are led by the eldest, wisest and the most respected in the society. The value of physical support is also shown towards the agony of death patient

as seen from the practice of wiping the patient who has been suffering for a long time and dripping water in his mouth so that the act will facilitate the patient to pronounce *Shahadah*. Local wisdom also can be seen through the effort of the Malays dealing with the malignant spirit during the agony of death, however, this matter should be further discussed together with the explanation from the point of Islamic law.

The findings of this research are theoretically and practically important. From the theoretical aspect, it helps to develop literature pertaining to the management of agony of death, especially within the Malay society, which is found to be limited. If there is, it is only in the form of verbal forms that circulate within the community. In practical, this article serves as a reference for the *janāzah* caretaker when dealing with the agony of death patients. The model was developed based on a number of previous models related to the culture and the management of the agony of death patients which occur in the Malay world. The discovery and construction of this model is significant in the effort of facilitating the management of the agony of death patients within the Malay community and to add value to the current literature on the management of these patients.

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