

THE MALAY FUNERAL RITE: A RITUAL ANALYSIS

■ Keys to reaching a people are usually not apparent from superficial contact. Here, among the Muslim Malays, an in-depth analysis of a vital ritual sheds light on what strategies might be used in communicating the gospel to them both clearly and effectively.

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Many anthropologists have studied the modern Malay, and each has his/her own theory. Malays are a difficult group to study because of their traditional diversity. However, on the worldview level many common themes can be seen which make them distinctly Malay.

The central thesis of this article is that ritual analysis can be utilized to determine significant worldview themes which can then be used in the process of contextualization of the gospel message to that particular culture. "Rituals reveal values at their deepest level . . . Men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed" (Turner 1982: 6).

I will first describe the funeral ceremony of the Malay Muslim and then analyze this rite. I will be using Van Gennep's model of the ritual process as the structural basis for analyzing this ritual and will then uncover several important worldview themes. It is not unusual in ritual context that almost every article used, every gesture employed, every song or prayer, and every unit of space and time stands for something other than itself (Turner 1969:15). Therefore, special attention will be placed on the interpretation of these symbols. Finally, I will discuss the missiological implications of these themes in the contextualization of the gospel for Malays.

The Malay Muslim

Anthropologists tend to distinguish four categories of indigenous

inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula and the surrounding islands: the Negrito (Semang), the Senoi (Sakai), the Proto-Malay (Jakun), and the Deutero-Malays (the 'Malay' of the present day). The ethnic origins of the modern, civilized Malay, the Deutero-Malay or Coastal Malay, are the subject of much controversy. It is said that they originated from the mainland of South Asia. How they came to the Malayan peninsula and what transformations they underwent en route are unknown. Suffice it to say that a southern Asiatic people did migrate from the mainland, probably around 2000 to 1500 B.C., and populated the coastal regions of the peninsula.

The Malays displaced the sparse populations of aboriginal peoples—Negrito, Jakun, Semang, Senoi—who moved into the hills and jungles of the interior, where they have lived in small nomadic bands up to the present time.

The Malay culture and worldview have been strongly influenced by the migrations of several large cultural groups to the Peninsula. Indian influences from the west and Chinese from the north and east established the early pattern of cultural influence; the growth of Islam and European military strength mark the later stages.

Islam first began to spread among the Malays during the height of the Melaka kingdom in the fifteenth century. As we will see later, it has become deeply imbedded in the Malay identity. It is now assumed that if you are a Malay, you are a Muslim. However, Islam may only fulfill the broadest sense of Malay identity, it could be considered the 'glue' which

holds them together as a people.

The Malay Funeral Rite

When a death occurs in a Malay household the first thing which is done—be it in an urban or rural setting—is to inform the Imam or some other mosque officials of the event. Thus, who has died and when and where he/she is to be buried can be posted on the mosque notice-board for the information of the congregation. Then the news of the death is passed by word of mouth to relatives and close friends who live nearby.

If the death occurs in the afternoon or at night, the funeral is usually fixed for midday or at the very latest the afternoon of the following day. But if the death takes place at dawn or in the early part of the day, the burial is arranged for the same afternoon or the next morning, because Islamic tradition requires the deceased to be buried as soon as possible (Mohtar 1979:9). This may also have to do with the fact that the longer the body is left unburied the greater the opportunity for evil spirits to cause problems for the deceased and his family.

A platform is set up in the very center of the house. The body of the deceased is then taken from the place where he/she died and placed upon the platform or bed which has been covered with a clean sheet of fine cloth over a new pandanus leaf mattress. The corpse is laid on its back and positioned so that the feet are pointed towards Mecca. The hands are crossed over the chest just below the breast-bone. The body is next shrouded from head to foot in fine new cloth usually several layers thick. The cloth must be of fine texture, of no

recognized color, but may be richly interwoven with gold thread. Another cloth is hung over the bed so as to prevent any dust or dirt from the roof from falling onto the body. At the head of the corpse five or six new pillows are piled, with two more on the right and left side of the body resting against the ribs, while just below the folded hands a pair of betel-nut scissors are laid. On the matting at either side, a bowl is placed for burning incense (Mohtar 1979:9).

From this moment until the body is laid in the grave the "wake" must be religiously observed, and the body must be watched both by day and night to see that nothing which is forbidden comes near it. The members of the deceased's family and his intimate friends who wish to see his face for the last time may do so by looking through the fine cloth covering it or by lifting up the cloth. This is done with the greatest care and respect.

Custom dictates that all who come to see the deceased must avoid making unnecessary noise, but are expected to continually recite the Islamic confession of faith (Mohtar 1979:11). It is at this point that the coffin is made ready for the deceased. The simplest form of a coffin which is used among the Malays is a single plank about six feet in length. The most extravagant type is like three sides of a box with its sides bulging out. Both ends of the coffin are open and there is no bottom at all. The planks are washed to insure their cleanliness, and lined with white cloth. About three inches of earth, quicklime, tea-leaves, rush-piths, and camphor are deposited into the coffin in successive layers. Afterwards, when the deceased has been laid on the top, tea-leaves are put at front and back of the body.

When the right moment has come, the body is taken from where it is lying and brought to a place where it will be prepared for washing. This will be done by a man in the case of a male and a woman in the case of a female (Mohtar 1979:11). The washing of the body is done in the ordained manner with the greatest care until it is completely clean. It is usually done by the village Imam or a close relative. The washer shampoos the body while the rest of the family pours water over it. The body then undergoes a second washing, this time with a cosmetic which is prepared by taking a handful of rice, two or three dips of lime, and a pinch of gambier.

These last three elements are the ingredients of the popular betel-nut "chew". All of the above materials are then mixed with water in a large bowl holding about two gallons. This is then sprinkled over the corpse. The next washing is with lime juice. Four or five limes are squeezed into a large bowl containing water and the washing is repeated.

The final washing, or "Nine Waters" (so called from the water being scooped up, and poured three times to the right, three times to the left, and three times over the front of the body from head to foot) is then performed using fresh water. When the washing has been completed, the body is smeared all over with camphor and sandalwood powder and cotton wool is put at the joints and the main orifices. After this the last kiss is given by the relatives, who must be careful not to disturb the deceased by letting their tears fall upon its features (Mohtar 1979:12).

After this has been done, the body is carried once more to the center of the house or to the verandah in order to be placed in the shroud, which consists of a shirt and trousers of unsown white cloth, on top of which is put another piece of unsown white cloth as a covering. The body is then laid on the mattress or mat again, this time with its head to the north, and on its right side looking towards the west (Mecca), which is the position it is to occupy in the grave (Mohtar 1979:12). The body is then bound from the feet to the neck by a number of strips of white cloth. These strips are wrapped three times around the body, while the head is left uncovered for the time being.

Before the body is completely enwrapped in the shroud, the close relatives of the deceased sprinkle a handful of sandalwood powder over it, specially provided for the purpose of a last token of dispensation to the deceased. When this has been done, the head is also covered and bound up, and the body is placed inside the wooden, bottomless coffin. A piece of white cloth stretched taut underneath and nailed to the sides of the coffin serves as its floor. A betel-nut tray containing all the articles required for chewing betel is then prepared, together with a new mat of pandanus-leaf, in which five white cloths are rolled up, and a brass bowl or alms box, in which the contributions of the deceased's relations are to be

placed.

When everything is ready, the coffin is lifted onto a litter and covered with several layers of good cloth. The uppermost cloth is usually embroidered or inscribed with verses from the Quran. This cloth is always made of a colored material, usually green, but never white. Then the litter is slowly carried by those present to the nearest mosque for prayers, if the prayers have not already been said at the house. When the prayers have been said, the family of the deceased distributes some money, as far as their means allow, to those who performed the prayers.

The coffin is lifted up once more and taken to the grave which has already been dug. Three men then lower the body into the grave, where three others are waiting to receive it, and the corpse is deposited in the cavity on its right side, looking toward the west (Mecca), and with the head therefore lying towards the north. The coffin is lowered into the center of the grave so that it just covers the body of the deceased. Before filling in the grave, the caretaker of the mosque will climb down and open up the coffin. He will then untie the knots in the shroud and wedge in clods of earth, most of which have been collected by the family of the deceased, around the body. He then makes the last call to prayer in the ear of the deceased, after which the grave is filled with earth. At this point the bystanders occasionally hand lumps of earth to the men standing in the pit, and after putting them to the nostrils of the deceased "to be smelled", they deposit them at the side of the grave until it is filled to the top (Mohtar 1979:14). Malay custom does not allow the earth to strike against the coffin in its fall, so great care is taken in this process. Next, one of the relatives takes a piece of any hard wood, and rudely fashions with a knife a temporary grave-post, which is round for a man and flattened for a woman. One of these posts is placed exactly over the head of the deceased and the other over the waist. To the end of the grave-post a strip of white cloth is tied as a sign of recent death.

Leaves are then strewn on the ground at the left of the grave, and five cubits of white cloth are spread out to form a mat, upon which the Imam takes his seat. The rest of the company are seated on the leaves to the left of the grave. A bottle of sandalwood water is

then brought to the Imam, who pours it out in three libations, each time sprinkling the grave from the head to the foot. If any water is left, the Imam sprinkles it upon any other graves which may be near. At the same time the Imam deposits flowers in the same way over the grave. The Imam then recites the final recitation, repeats the confession of faith and says some prayers. Although there may be neither sun nor rain, custom rules that the reader of the prayers be protected by an umbrella (Skeat 1900:325). It is said that the deceased will briefly revive in order to hear the confession of faith and then fall back to lifelessness. The company of people present join in the recitation gradually increasing the speed of the prayers. When they finish the contributions in the alms-box are divided among the entire group as alms. The master of the house then invites those present to partake of the funeral feast, which in no way differs from an ordinary Malay banquet (Mohtar 1979:15).

It has been Malay custom, even before Islam came, to hold a special feast for the soul of the deceased on the third, seventh, fourteenth, fortieth and hundredth day after his death. During the feast the Quran is read to the deceased individual. Great care is taken in this reading because the slightest slip or mistake is considered a great sin. The anniversary of the dead relative is also kept as a holiday by all who wish to show him/her respect. This concludes the usual funeral ceremonies, but a day is generally chosen in the month of Ramthan or Maulud for the purpose of offering prayers and feasting for the ancestors. The funeral is over.

Symbols and Ritual

Before discussing the business of ritual analysis one must first examine the components which make up rituals. The "molecules" of a ritual are its symbols (Turner 1982:14). Within the ritual almost every article used, every gesture employed, every song or prayer, every unit of space and time, by convention stands for something other than itself. Arnold Toynbee in his book, *A study of history*, says that a symbol is not identical or co-extensive with the object that it symbolizes. If it were this, it

would be, not a symbol of the thing, but the thing itself (Toynbee 1976:26). For Toynbee the function of a symbol is to illuminate truth. An effective symbol is the illuminating one, and effective symbols are an indispensable part of our intellectual apparatus. The human mind is functioning symbolically when

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some components of its experience elicit consciousness, beliefs, emotions and images respecting other components of its experience (Whitehead 1928:27). Without symbols our minds could not order and define the world around us. Communication would also be impossible. All communication, whether through language or other means, makes use of symbols (MacIver 1950:340). Society could scarcely exist without them.

Symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos and their worldview. (Geertz 1968:3,5). Geertz says that culture itself is a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols. These patterns of meaning perpetuate and develop cultural knowledge about and attitudes towards life (Geertz 1968:28). Man orders and interprets his reality by his symbols and even reconstructs it.

Operators such as symbols are either descriptive or transformational. In other words, a symbol either says something about the order of the world as it is or else it purports to alter it by metaphysical means (Leach 1976:182). For Whitehead the symbol refers to cultural meaning; for Toynbee it illuminates reality; for Leach it can effect a transformation of the literal and commonplace; for Geertz it is the key to unlocking the "hidden treasures" of a culture. However, all would agree that symbols are vitally important to the definition, development and communication of knowledge within all human societies.

Rituals are mosaics of cultural knowledge. They are rich in symbolism and pregnant with meaning (Turner

1982:13). Rituals communicate the most important ideas and beliefs of a people. Rituals reveal values at their deepest level. Men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized, it is the values of the group that are revealed (Turner 1982:6). Because these forms of expression are conventionalized they help communicate knowledge in a consistent fashion. Mary Douglas says that rituals are the institutionalized means of establishing and preserving symbolic order (Douglas 1970:73). Rituals are to effect a reconciliation between the visible and invisible parties concerned (Turner 1982:20). Rituals help to keep this harmony between the natural and the supernatural, the individual and the community, while at the same time imparting knowledge about the way things are and how they should be.

Ritual Analysis

Ronald Grimes tells us that when doing ritual analysis it is important to focus on six major areas: ritual space, ritual objects, ritual time, ritual sound and language, ritual identity, and ritual action. He believes that each of these areas are vital parts of every ritual. However, when endeavoring to understand the ceremonial rites of a culture it is not enough to look at the pattern of behavior alone. We must also seek to discover the symbolic dynamics which are taking place within the ritual context. These rituals, developed by each culture to varying levels, always are characterized by the surface structure—what is seen, and the deep structure—the meaning of what is seen.

As Geertz and others have stated, all of the symbols within the surface structure of a ritual can help us to understand the deep level assumptions of reality which the culture embraces. E.R. Leach feels that people engage in ritual to transmit collective messages to themselves, while other scholars argue that they also engage in ritual in order to communicate with the spirits (1979:229). In either case, the communication intended to change human situations is the most important idea in Malay ritual systems. If the ceremony is done incorrectly, there is a resultant insecurity and loss of power, a loss of

'vital force' or *semangat*. When ritual is followed correctly, the force is increased (Ginsburg 1958:230).

Victor Turner defines "rites of passage" as rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position, and age (Turner 1967:94). Found in all societies, they are more clearly seen in small-scale, relatively stable societies. They show a man's movement through his lifetime from his mother's womb to his grave (Turner 1967:28-29). Van Gennep has demonstrated that all rites of passage have three stages: (1) *Separation*, indicated by symbolic acts depicting detachment from an earlier state; (2) *Transition*, in which a person passes through a middle realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or of the coming state; and (3) *Incorporation*, shown by symbolic acts indicating re-entry into social visibility (Van Gennep 1909:15-25). It is my belief that the Malay funeral shares with other Malay rites of passage a common profile i.e., a three-part structure described by Van Gennep's insights. I will now analyze the Malay funeral rite keeping in focus Grimes' six major symbolic elements of every ritual and emphasizing Gennep's three stages of the ritual process.

The first stage of the Malay funeral ritual is symbolized by the separation of the deceased individual from contamination of various sorts. This must be done quickly—normally on the same day which the person has died. The usual reason given when one asks why there is so much haste is that the spirit of the dead man is flying around loose until he is buried, and this is dangerous to everyone, especially to the survivors. The sooner he is buried, the sooner his spirit can return to its natural home (Geertz 1969:3). The body of the deceased is placed on a platform which has been covered with a clean cloth over a new pandanus leaf mattress. The body is next shrouded with cloth which must be of fine texture and colorless. The important concept to note in this description is that the body must be protected from contamination through using, clean, new and white (colorless) objects. These words reveal that it is of utmost importance that the body of the deceased be kept separated from any of the evil or negative contaminating influences of this world, be they coarse cloth, aged materials, dirt or colors

(which may represent contact with this world).

Another symbolic act which demonstrates this separation stage is the placing of a betel-nut scissors on the corpse and the bowl of burning incense positioned on either side of the platform. It is said that these scissors prevent the body from being stepped upon by a devil or a ghost. It is believed that contact with iron prevents the dead body from rising again should it happen that evil influences are involved. In the past, short iron weapons were used (and sometimes still are) in place of the betel-nut scissors. The scissors may then represent a weapon of iron which the soul of the deceased can utilize for protection against the possible attacks of malevolent spirits. Such things as limes, iron tools, and weapons are dangerous to spirits (Endicott 1981:116). The burning incense is also a symbol of protection from harmful influences and is utilized in many other Malay rituals as a power tool against evil spirits.

Although protection is vitally important at this stage of the funeral; spiritual power is also a dominant theme. The fact that the platform for the deceased is placed in the very center of the house is quite significant in understanding Malay worldview. The house is probably the most highly valued material possession of the village Malay. The house represents and encompasses values, emotions, ambitions, motivations, and sentiments. Since the major social activities and relationships of the Malay villager receive expression within the house, it follows that the house and the

household are the most meaningful social units in Malay life. For the Malays building a house involves not just the provision of shelter from the elements, but the creation of a social and symbolic space—a space which both mirrors and moulds the worldview of its creators and inhabitants (Waterson 1990:263). The well-being of each house is inextricably linked to that of its inhabitants and can now "live", "die" and even be "molested". This makes the house the spacial focal point of Malay worldview. In their worldview prime importance is given to each man's house, his fields or stretch of beach, and his kin (Ginsburg 1958:216) (see figure 1 below).

The house is not only the focal point of Malay social relations, but it is also a place of spiritual power—especially the center of the house. Before building a house the village *Bomo* or magician performs special rites over the site to pacify or drive out the spirits guarding the area so that they will not inflict any harm. The *Bomo* erects a small structure two feet by two feet, known as the 'ritual hut', where the center of the house will be located. He begins to burn some incense in it, over which he smokes small plates of 'roasted rice'. All the time while he is doing this, he recites incantations to drive away the evil spirits and tells them not to interfere with the people involved in the opening up of the land (Ali 1975:171).

The house which is built there has the most clearly defined boundaries (figure 1) and is most insulated from wild spirits (Endicott 1981:112-113). The center-post or the *Tiang Seri* is then placed on top of the location and further sacrifices made to appease the earth

Figure 1. Spacial Orientation in the Malay Worldview

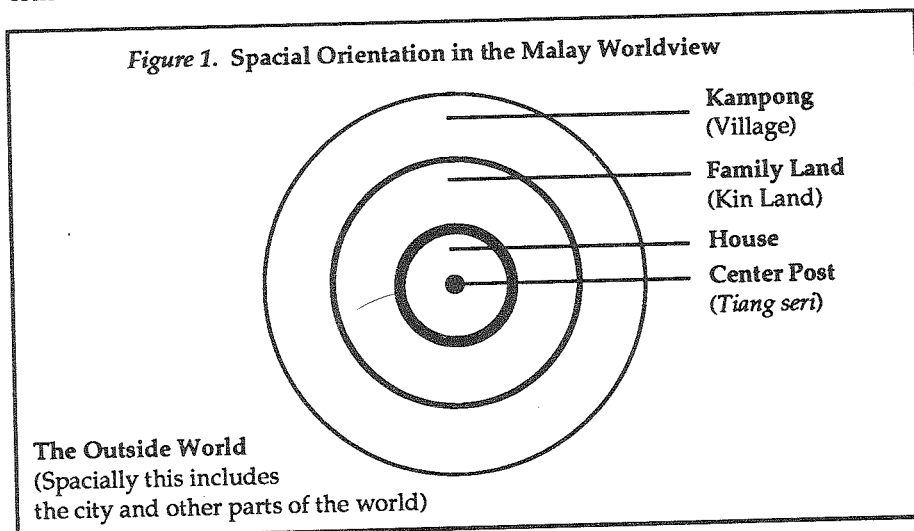
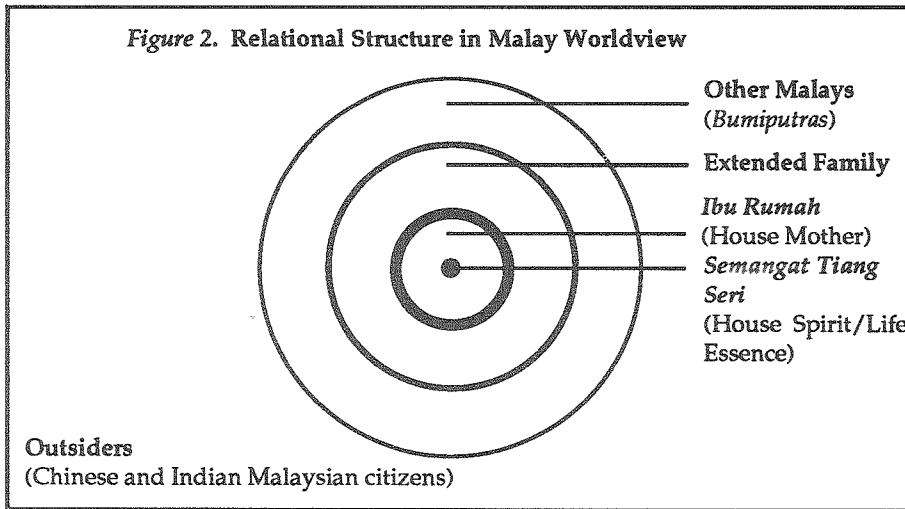


Figure 2. Relational Structure in Malay Worldview



spirits. The spirit or *semangat* of the house lives in the *Tiang seri* (Yuan 1987:99). Without *semangat* the house is empty and isolated, life in the house will be restless and well-being threatened (Yuan 1987:99). The *semangat* of the house will ward off evil spirits and ghosts (Yuan 1987:100). *Ibu Rumah* is the woman or mother of the house who is responsible to care for the house (Yuan 1987:101). She will make sure that everything is done to maintain harmony with the house *semangat*. Three cloths called *Bunga halang* are placed on top of the column in order to ward off evil and so that the house will be peaceful and the well-being of the occupants will be ensured (Yuan 1987:96). One of the cloths is black, symbolizing mysterious powers. The second cloth is red, symbolizing life and courage. The third cloth is white, symbolizing purity and power (Yuan 1987:99). We can see here that from its very conception the house is a place of protection and power against evil forces in the spiritual realm. It is not hard to understand, therefore, why the Malays perceive the center of the house to be the most protected and most powerful location of all.

In addition to the body being placed in the center of the house it is also positioned with its feet facing Mecca. To the Malays the world itself is thought to be situated with its corners toward the four cardinal points. According to a Malay charm-book, the pillar of the Ka'bah, which is the navel of the earth, has growth comparable to a tree, its four branches extending north, south, east, and west, where they are called the "Four Corners of the World" (Endicott 1981:123). Therefore Malay graves are oriented on a north-south axis with the

corpse's head to the north and the face turned west toward Mecca. Houses are usually oriented with reference to the four directions at least to the extent that people avoid having the door face south, since this would bring bad luck (Endicott 1981:123). This is also a very important action relating to the acquisition of spiritual power, sometimes referred to by Folk Muslims as *Baraka*. *Baraka*, or blessing, can be gained, in this case, by pointing the individual towards some power location, which in this case is Mecca. The fact that the body's feet are pointing towards Mecca and not the face is significant in that it demonstrates that the deceased is not yet passed through the preparation phase of the ritual process. The deceased's loved ones who wish to see his/her face for the last time may do so by looking through the fine cloth covering. This demonstrates the completion of the separation process and a final farewell is allowed.

Now that the deceased has been protected and empowered he/she is ready to pass into the "transition" or transformation stage of the ritual. Noise is especially avoided during this phase of the ritual as it may arouse the evil earth spirits which could upset the delicate balance in this transformation process. Power words, such as the confession of Islamic faith, are considered helpful at this point to insure the uninterrupted transition of the deceased through the necessary preparations for his/her burial. In this Malay ritual the individual passes through a transformation process which prepares him/her for life on a new spiritual plain.

The focal point of this preparation is the ceremonial washing of the body. There are four washings all together. Each one reveals a pattern of passage from lesser to greater ceremonial cleanness. The different elements utilized in each of the washings clearly demonstrate the level of purity which the Malay culture attributes to those materials. In the first washing shampoo and water are used. In the second washing a handful of rice, three dips of lime, and a pinch of gambier are used and mixed with water. Next, the juice of four or five limes are mixed with water and poured over the body. Lastly, fresh water is used in a ceremonial washing where cleansing is done not only on the corpse; but also to the space on its right and left. This final washing is probably done to insure the purification of any contaminating materials around the body—either spiritual or physical.

It is significant that the first element used in the washing process is shampoo. This is a substance which is used everyday by all Malays and has no real spiritual importance but to demonstrate the first step in the process of ritual purification. The materials used in the next washing do have spiritual attributes and are used in other aspects of the Malay funeral in cleansing ritual objects. These elements are lime and water of which only small amounts are used in the second washing. This is to gradually introduce the body to these power substances. The third washing utilizes them in a much greater concentration, while the final washing uses only fresh water. We may interpret from this pattern of use that rice, lime and fresh water are considered to be power substances. These are also utilized for the purpose of ritual purification in other Malay ceremonies. Limes are seen as very dangerous to evil spirits and are therefore used for protection from these influences (Endicott 1981:116). Water spirits are considered by the Malays to be good and are therefore useful in the spiritual purification process (Endicott 1981:105).

Evidence of the usefulness of these elements can be seen as we survey the Malay rituals connected to divination, child birth and insuring a bountiful harvest (Mohtar 1979:25-30). Two reasons are given for the prohibition of tears near the corpse: it makes the atmosphere dark so that the deceased will have great difficulty finding his

path to the grave; and it so upsets the deceased that he cannot bear to leave the house (Geertz 1969:16).

Malay view of outsiders

The significance of this ceremonial washing can only be understood as we consider the Malay deep level assumption that purity is intrinsically connected with their concept of "good" and especially spiritual good. This aspect of Malay worldview expresses itself in the arena of non-Malay relations. To the Malays virtually all "outsiders" would be considered ritually impure. On the worldview level it would appear that to be non-Malay is to be, in a real sense, "dirty". Malays hold to the opinion that all Chinese are dirty (see figure 2, page 49). The principal meaning implied is not so much physical dirtiness as ritual impurity, and this attitude finds its most powerful symbolic expression in the Malay injunction against the eating of pork (Turner 1982:6).

In addition, Chinese are described as being dirty from observations based on the conditions of living of Chinese families in small towns. Here the contrast between the village Malay and the Chinese with respect to the value placed on the house is a most important factor. As I have mentioned before for the Malay the house is a place of worship and spiritual power and it is also the center of each Malay individual's personal world. The house, its furnishings, and its inhabitants are a source of pride and an object of ambition for the Malay, so that the house, however poor, is always clean and tidy. It is considered a place of worship and therefore must be kept clean and protected from contaminating substances. For the urban Chinese there does not seem to be the same concentration of worldly and ritual attitude on the house as there is for the Malay. Thus, no matter how clean a Chinese may be, he is always ritually impure to the Malay. This is just one example which demonstrates the dynamic outworkings of this worldview concept which defines for the Malay the relationship between purity and good, and impurity and evil.

Following this ritual purification the body is carried once more to the center of the house. The body is then laid on its right side looking towards Mecca. The body is now in an even greater power

position than earlier i.e., in the center of the house and this time facing Mecca. It is at this point that the body is placed in its "power clothes" or burial wrappings. It is important to note that all of the cloth that has come into contact with the deceased has been without exception, white or at least colorless. This is significant because it also tells us something about the Malay worldview as relates to colors. To discover the full impact of this we must look at Malay traditional beliefs.

Although Islam is strongly entrenched in Malay society and culture, this does not mean that it has displaced the traditional beliefs. In the daily activities of the people, due respect must be shown to the spirits, otherwise they are capable of causing pain, suffering, and disaster. Therefore if a person wants to go through a forest or climb a hill, for example, he has first of all to ask permission by saying "Salutations venerable one, may I pass?"; or if he wants to open up a piece of land, either for the construction of a house or for cultivation, it is necessary to pacify the spirits guarding the place or to drive them away. In the same way, evil spirits are driven away before the planting season, and due care must be taken not to upset the spirit or vital spirit *semangat* in the crop before harvesting, as this is believed to be responsible for bringing about good harvests. Furthermore, the traditional spirits are believed at times to be the source of power and the ultimate cause of anything which occurs. Such a belief therefore runs counter to Islam because it encourages a form of polytheism *syirik*. But in spite of this, the traditional belief systems still prevail, primarily because they are deeply embedded and have defied many an attempt to uproot them.

In traditional Malay beliefs, there are jinn, ghosts *hantu* and spirits (*jembalang*, *penunggu*, *semangat*). These supernatural beings are believed to reside in all things in nature—mountains, hills, seas, rivers, land, trees, rocks and so forth. It is important to note that the white jinn *Jin Islam* are considered to always be good, while the black jinn *Jin Kafir* are usually considered to be evil (Endicott 1981:99). In addition to this obvious connection between color and spiritual morality, the black jinn are equated with earth spirits while white jinn are considered to be jungle spirits.

Color associations

Color associations seem to relate earth and jungle, like jungle and water, as black and white. There is a white angel in charge of the jungle which is probably the same as the white sheikh, wizard, or king of the virgin jungle cited in charms. The earth, on the other hand, is almost always associated with black. The jinn of the earth are black, they are given black offerings... At one mining ceremony. . . with both earth and jungle spirits the offerings must include both white and black fowls in equal proportions. (Endicott 1981:108)

It is significant, therefore, that white cloth is used so frequently in the Malay funeral rite. White flags are also hung on fish traps to keep away spirits that might frighten the fish. Therefore, we can see that the symbolic nature of the color white is a deep structure (worldview) assumption which can be found throughout Malay folk religion. This use of the color white, most commonly in the form of cloth, is to elicit the help of the white (good) jungle spirits, and to protect the deceased from the malevolent influences of black (evil) earth spirits. Although Endicott would agree that there is some relationship between color and morality in the Malay pantheon, he would argue that this is not a consistent theme throughout their belief system (Endicott 1981:99). However, he fails to recognize that the Malays are folk Muslims and that they have been able to quite successfully integrate much of the cosmology of Islam with their traditional beliefs.

Green is considered a power color which is believed to bring good luck. This is probably a borrowing from the early Indian Muslim sects which became the foundation of Islam in Malaysia. However, the color green is found in other parts of the Malay funeral rite and may be equated with the color of the jungle—making it a color synonymous with good. Endicott seems to disregard the fact that whenever we see this type of syncretism within a culture there are bound to be some conceptual misfits which exist on the worldview level. However, if these inconsistencies do not cause a problem for the culture, then there will be no perception of conflict and change will probably not be consciously considered.

An example of this kind of

integration as regards colors is the use of a green cloth as the final covering over the coffin of the deceased. Perhaps this green covering acts as a spiritual camouflage of sorts to protect the deceased as he/she leaves the safety of the house. In this case the green color seems to represent the human realm, while the white symbolizes the spiritual world of the dead, although both colors are considered good. This interpretation seems to be consistent with the use of leaves and white cloth after the body has been laid in the grave and buried. Leaves are strewn on the ground, and white cloth is spread out. The separation between the white cloth and the leaves are symbolic of the superhuman and human realms. Sandalwood water is poured out. At the same time the Imam deposits flowers over the grave. Sometimes they will even plant a shrub, bearing a white flower (Skeat 1900:397). All of the above mentioned elements are obviously equated with the jungle spirits and are meant to appease these benevolent beings as well as to protect against the earth spirits whose domain is being disturbed.

A very interesting symbol which is used by the Imam at this point in the ceremony is the umbrella. Although there may be neither sun nor rain, custom rules that the reader of the prayers be protected by an umbrella. Therefore, this umbrella is symbolic of something greater than its obvious function. Endicott says that the umbrella is considered to be something which is very dangerous to earth spirits. In fact, umbrellas may not even be carried into a mine, which is considered to be the domain of the earth spirits (Endicott 1981:111). Endicott's theory of the Malay view of ultimate reality gives some insight as to the symbolic significance of the umbrella. He reports that a fundamental distinction between bounded and unbounded space is made in the Malay worldview. The quadrilateral is the bounded space, while circles are considered unbounded space (Endicott 1981:123-24). The former is equated with the terrestrial world, while the latter represents the heavenly unlimited realm. Evidence of the quadrilateral portion of this theory can be clearly seen in both the construction

of the Malay houses, the boundaries drawn for the Kampongs (villages), and the Malay concept that the world is situated with its corners toward the four cardinal points. Also, altars, offering trays, and the platforms erected in the houses of bride and groom are usually square. Existence of the circular (unbounded) spacial concept is evidenced by the fact that the earlier graves of the Malay people were a circular mound with a single grave-post in the center (Skeat 1900:405). These tombs are now considered to possess the greatest

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spiritual power and are therefore treated with highest respect (1900:397). Endicott likens this unbounded space to the "...circular umbrella of the heavens..." (1981:124). It is interesting to note the correlation between this spacial worldview concept and the umbrella used by the Imam during the finale of this transformational stage of the funeral rite. It would appear, therefore, that this umbrella symbolizes the final translation of the deceased from this bounded earthly existence into the unlimited heavenly realm. This would support Leach's belief that a symbol communicates something about the order of the world as it is, their worldview (1976:182).

It is said that at this point the deceased will briefly revive in order to hear the exhortation read by the Imam and then will fall back into a lifeless state. It is very important at this stage that the family shows *Iklas* which is no emotional attachment to the deceased. Alms and a few coins wrapped in paper are then given to each person at the funeral to symbolize *Iklas*: as they can give away money without feeling any remorse, so they can let the deceased go with no wish to cling to him emotionally. *Iklas*, is the watchword, and although it is often difficult to achieve, it is always striven for (Geertz

1969:41). This marks the end of the transition stage of the Malay ritual process.

Incorporation

The final stage in the ritual process is "incorporation". This takes place when symbolic acts are performed which indicate re-entry into social visibility. Although the nuclear family is the basic unit of Malay society, the second most important unit is often the village, or kampong. This is the social and territorial context in which most of an individual's daily and seasonal activities take place. Therefore, we would expect that the incorporation process would include not only the members of the nuclear family; but also relationships which extend out into the entire village community. Among the Malays this is exactly what occurs. The feasts, usually simply called *makan pulot*, "eating (glutenous) rice," form a

necessary part of all important religious ceremonies, as well as those marking transitions in an individual's life cycle. In addition, especially during the months immediately following Ramadan, the fasting month, large numbers of *makan pulot* are held throughout the area for no specific ceremonial purpose, but rather as pleasant and prestige-enhancing social events. These events give opportunity for the Malay families to develop extra-kin relationships.

It is at these life crisis events that the community *semangat*—a soul-substance or vital force found in all things—must be strengthened. Its quantity, and perhaps quality, vary from object to object and from one part of an object to another. However, whether resident in inanimate objects, plants, animals, or men, it is the same. The loss of *semangat*, or its insufficiency, is usually manifested by poor crops, infertility of women, generally run-down conditions in the village, and illness. At most of the feasts connected with births, weddings, funerals and the like Malays eat *nasi semangat*, a specially prepared ceremonial rice, as their means of renewing this spiritual force. *Nasi semangat* is a part of most important ceremonial activities in the villages; it can never be absent from those

celebrating life cycle events, including funerals. These events are dangerous periods in the life of the individual, his or her relatives, and by extension, the whole community. Therefore, it is necessary to bolster the group of participants with as much *semangat* as possible. This demonstrates the importance of the funeral feast as a dynamic force for incorporation of the family of the deceased back into the community.

The Malay funeral feast begins with the master of the house inviting all of those who are present at the ceremony to partake of the funeral feast. At later feasts the entire village is invited. It is during these feasts that the family of the deceased is incorporated back into normal inter-village social relations. The extreme emphasis placed upon perfection in the reading of the Quran at these feasts is evidence that what is going on here is much more than just social reinforcement of the tenets of Islam. Furthermore, it is likely that the activities of the feast are just as much a form of incorporation for the deceased, into the unbounded heavenly realm, as it is for his family, into their well defined world of social obligations.

Every year a day is chosen for the purpose of offering prayers and feasting for the ancestors. This celebration is a "feast for the soul of the deceased" and is repeated annually as a sign of both respect as well as an acknowledgement of the dead relative's continued interaction with the family and his/her dynamic existence in an unbounded dimension. The funeral is over.

CONCLUSIONS

Missiological Implications

We often evangelize on the assumption that the audience will respond positively if we just present the plan of salvation in the same manner in which we first heard it. No response or negative response is often interpreted as a rejection of the message, when it may be instead a lack of understanding. This is because each culture is a filter through which all incoming communication must pass (Engel 1988: 40). A water filter works in much the same way. It screens out impurities and other unwanted material and allows only desired contents through. This filter contains all that we know, believe, and value. One of the components of this filter is our worldview. Worldview

is a whole set of basic values and beliefs about life. It is a kind of window through which we view everything around us. It determines how we perceive the world around us and how we understand its messages.

Communication is much more than the transmission of a message; it happens when that message reaches the mind of the receptor and understanding is achieved (Engel 1988:41). By focusing on the felt needs of the people we can make the relevancy of the Gospel message clear to those we want to reach. This is why it is important to base our communication strategy on the specific worldview of our audience, rather than on a predetermined form of method. In addition to this, we ought to make ourselves aware of the indigenous forms of communication already present in the culture of our target audience. People will always be more receptive to the styles and symbols which are appropriate to their context. For this reason we must look for culturally appropriate themes and symbols of communication which will help us to communicate the Gospel clearly.

Meeting Felt Needs: Power for Production and Protection

Much of the folk religious practices of the Malay people are related mainly to both the productive and protective aspects of life. The productive aspect is the process of economic production. At some stages of this production a number of rituals involving magical belief are still carried out by people individually or collectively in the hope of getting a better harvest or driving away pests and other evils that can cause damage or destruction to their produce. The protective aspects are practices believed to protect people from being afflicted by evil spirits. When Muslims resort to the help of the spirits through their mediums for curative or productive purposes, they are doing so simply as an "attempt" to ward off any ill-fated consequences. This is in line with the Islamic doctrine that although man's fate is fundamentally predestined, he is free to make an "attempt" in the hope that it may be changed. It is through such rationalization that the belief in traditional spirits is ideologically tolerated to some degree by many Muslims. As one person aptly sums it

up, "We are all human beings. We carry out all these rites only as an 'attempt' to change our fate. But we submit everything to God, because He determines all" (Ali 1975:65). However the Malays may explain away the use of magic, the fact remains that their use of magic is proof that orthodox Islam is insufficient to cope with the realities of everyday life.

The major theme throughout the Malay funeral rite is protection and power for transformation. The Malays are in constant fear of the power which spirits have over their lives. This is an area that the Christian message must address. "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle" is discussed by Dr. Paul Hiebert as the middle zone of worldview often missed by cross-cultural missionaries. This middle zone is characterized by "this worldly" concerns which help to define the values and aspirations of people in certain cultures. This is definitely true of the Malays who are primarily interested in keeping peace and harmony in all aspects of life—both visible and invisible. When this important area is overlooked the need to address it, is very often, if not always, fulfilled by some form of folk religion (Hiebert 1982:35-47).

The greatest conflict that Islam is experiencing today among the Malays is in this middle zone. The Malay folk religion is the major hindrance for the pure Islamic tradition and Law. Not only does Islam discourage belief in this realm and the practices associated with it; it doesn't seem to know how to deal with the felt needs of the Malay people. This is one of the most dynamic advantages that Christianity could have over Islam in a Malay context. True Biblical Christianity addresses all areas of human need, including "this worldly" spiritual realities. There are many common aspects of Malay life which, for them, necessitate special attention to spiritual forces: protection while traveling, building a new house, festivals to insure a good harvest, etc.

It would be advisable for any missionary in a Malay village to approach these as opportunities for "power encounters". In the Malay context this might translate into praying for Christ's protection as one travels through forests. Addressing in prayer the appropriate spiritual forces of evil in that geographical region would be quite

a dynamic model for communicating the relevancy of Biblical "spiritual warfare". Another example of contextualization would be praying over the sights for new houses in the community, and asking that Christ be the "centerpost" or *Tiang seri* of that home. Another possibility is asking that the "*semangat* of Christ" would dwell there in order that there might be continual harmony among the members of its household. Additional examples are publicly invoking the power of God to bring an abundant harvest for the community, challenging the "spirits of the earth" to resist it, and having *Makan Pulot* celebrations in thanksgiving for God's abundant provision. These methods of incarnational proclamation must be fundamental to the strategy of a missionary to the Malays.

Utilizing Indigenous Symbols

Something should be said at this point about the importance of being aware of the meanings behind Malay symbols. Victor Turner says that symbols are the basic building-blocks, the "molecules", of ritual (Turner 1982:14). As we have seen in the above analysis of the Malay funeral rite, certain objects, colors, and directions carry with them significant, clearly-defined meanings. These symbols cannot be ignored by the would-be missionary. There should be awareness and sensitivity on the part of the cross-cultural communicator in regard to these aspects of Malay culture.

Colors

The Christian field worker should be aware of the fact that the color red is equated with the spirits of the air. In Biblical symbolism the devil is sometimes referred to as the "prince of the powers of the air". One may be tempted, therefore, to equate the color red with the devil. However, Lim Jee Yuan makes it clear that red represents life and courage. Life and courage are not necessarily two attributes which we would want to ascribe to Satan. Instead, these are attributes of Christ's character. Therefore, the color red being used on clothing, flags or pictures i.e., to represent the courageous and lifegiving nature of Jesus' death, would be easily

understood by the Malays. In addition, an attempt should be made to use the color white when representing anything holy, pure or divine. This would be the appropriate color communication for power and purity in the Malay context. Also the color black, because it is equated with evil earth spirits or

The house would be the most appropriate environment for the presentation of the Gospel as well as the nurture and fellowship of believers. As Waterson has stated, the house is the center of concentrated spiritual energy and it is where some of the most important rituals of life are performed. This makes the Malay house a natural "Christian chapel".

mysterious power, may be an effective way to symbolize human sin or perhaps the devil. However, again we run into the problem of contrasting meanings. Although black is connected with mysterious powers, it is also used as a powerful protection color especially as regards the house. If one is attempting to represent man's sin or sinful nature it may be better to utilize earth or animal symbols, rather than colors, as the following Malay proverbs do: (Winstedt 1950:5,9)

"Where is there earth that escapes rain or man unspotted by sin?"

"Will a crocodile reject a corpse or man abjure accustomed vices?"

"Dogs return to a carcass as men to sin."

"However much a dog's tail is stroked, it will never be straight."

"Wash a crow with rose-water, its feathers will not become white."

The Christian worker must be conscious of the fact that these symbols hold important meaning for the Malay people. It is our responsibility as communicators to learn and utilize the forms which possess the appropriate meanings we want to convey.

The House

For the Malay, the house is a place of worship and spiritual power. It is also the center of each Malay individual's personal world. The house is the concentration of powers—a place

where rituals are performed (Waterson 1990: 34). The house, its furnishings, and its inhabitants are a source of pride and an object of ambition for the Malay, so that the house, however poor, is always clean and tidy. The house is probably the most highly valued material possession of the village Malay. It frequently represents the greatest single investment of wealth but it is also the center and focus of all that is vital in their emotional, social, and cultural life. In Indonesian and Malay communities, *semangat* is the spirit that inhabits all objects and places, especially the house. This makes the house a living thing with human parts to it. This living house is an animate entity infused with a vital force or *semangat* of its own. The ceremonies enacted in the preparation for and the construction of each house help to invite this vital force into the buildings (Waterson 1990:34).

Therefore, I would like to suggest that a "house church" model for church planting be adopted as the primary strategy in reaching Malays. The basic social and economic unit in the Malay culture is the nuclear family. The house would be the most appropriate environment for the presentation of the Gospel as well as the nurture and fellowship of believers. As Waterson has stated, the house is the center of concentrated spiritual energy and it is where some of the most important rituals of life are performed. This makes the Malay house a natural "Christian chapel". Thus the house church model would be the most compatible with the traditional Malay culture.

This is not to say that larger gatherings would not be effective. However, because of the anti-Christian sentiments of the Malaysian government it would be difficult to meet in large numbers. Nevertheless, Malays do participate in many corporate lifecycle and seasonal events which help to bring them together with a larger group of kinsmen than they would normally interact with. Therefore, it would be quite appropriate for the house churches to gather together on special occasions to build relationships on a broader level.

Makan Pulot: Community Harmony through Feasts

One of the over-arching evaluative worldview themes among the Malays, as among most tribal and folk cultures, is the paramount importance placed upon the maintenance of peace and harmony in all interpersonal relationships. Malays are lovers of "ordered peace". Malays continually strive for calm and harmonious social relations. To the Malays this principle of relationships is even more important to them than keeping the Islamic Law (Fraser 1966:76). This, of course, is a major problem for the Islamic leaders among the Malays. Christianity could very effectively speak to this need by emphasizing how Christ simplified the Law down to two great commandments: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all your mind, soul and strength; and thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (*Holy Bible*, Mark 12:30,31). Emphasizing the very practical principles for insuring harmonious relations with your fellow man and with God found especially in the epistles of Paul, would have a tremendous impact on the Malay community. Also, demonstrating from the Bible how Christ was our example of a servant and how he always showed others appropriate respect, would be meaningful to the Malays. Malays believe that all relationships should be established at a personal level. This means that "mass media" type evangelism would probably not be as effective among Malays as face-to-face forms of presentation.

The most important usage of these relationships is participation in feasts; and this participation, in turn, periodically reinforces and validates the relationships for other forms of interaction. The feasts, usually simply called *makan pulot*, form a necessary part of all important religious ceremonies, as well as those marking transitions in an individual's life cycle. In addition, especially during the months immediately following Ramadan, the fasting month, large numbers of *makan pulot* are held throughout the area for no specific ceremonial purpose, but rather as prestige-enhancing social events. It would, therefore, be very important for the new Malay Christians to continue to participate in these events as they are vital to maintaining social and cultural

connectedness with the community. Using glutenous rice in place of bread during communion would be a powerful symbol for the Malay Christian. It is at these events that the traditional art forms of the Malay people come to the surface, such as the *pantun* which is an indigenous form of musical story telling. The Malay Christians could take full advantage of these events to introduce the gospel message utilizing indigenous art forms such as: *Wayang puppets*, *pantun*, drama, etc.

During these celebrations Malays will not hesitate to say yes if they are invited to someone's home for a lunch or dinner. Some missionaries have taken advantage of these religious celebrations and planned a dinner party in their friend's home during each of the cultural and religious events. This is even done during Christian festivals such as Christmas. This has proved to be an effective way to begin discussing religious matters. It has also been used as the first step in establishing cell groups and house churches among Malays in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Ritual Purity: Who Should Go?

Next I would like to address the question of "What would be an appropriate mission force for Malays?" Cleanliness in the Malay worldview can be considered to encompass both the realm of physical hygiene as well as that of rituals. "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" is the familiar American maxim which reveals our own sense of personal hygiene being connected with individual morality. Malays also are very conscious of their personal cleanliness as well as the general neatness of their homes. Both their bodies and their houses are considered places of worship. Their bodies and their relationship to the house is a dynamic Biblical parallel which could be a "symbolic bridge" for the presentation of the Gospel. Every society discovers its most authentic symbols by drawing upon the analogies offered by the patterned behavior of the human body (Douglas 1970:112).

In a real sense for the average Malay physical cleanliness is directly related, if not synonymous, with ritual purity. As I mentioned earlier on the worldview level it would appear that to be non-Malay is to be, in a real sense, 'dirty' or 'ritually impure'. Therefore, for

the Malay the sense of being clean goes far beyond the physical to the social and the spiritual. For centuries the Malays and the Chinese have held on to a strong racial and cultural prejudice toward each other. To the Malay the Chinese are ritually impure and because the majority of Chinese live in urban centers they are looked at as representing everything Malays dislike and fear about the outside world. I would conclude, therefore, that Chinese would not represent an appropriate mission force for the Malays. Again, this is not to say that God cannot use Chinese to minister to the Malay people, however, it is unlikely that a Malay would accept the Gospel message from a Chinese missionary without extreme suspicion of their motives. In fact, even in Singapore Chinese Christians are aware that a Malay who rejects a gospel tract given by a Chinese, will happily accept the same tract if it is given by a caucasian Westerner. Also, because the Malays strictly observe a prescribed system of etiquette, relations between villagers and non-Malays are difficult to pursue satisfactorily unless the outsider can fulfill the Malay expectations of the role in which he is defined. Of course, in this case the optimum mission force would be a Malay Christian. However, because there are so few Christian Malays this would not be very realistic. Therefore, if a non-Chinese foreigner could find an appropriate role to take in a Malay Kampong, he could do quite well. However, this individual or team would need to be highly skilled in interpersonal relationships and cultural sensitivities. Westerners, in general, normally score very low in this arena.

Ritual Analysis: An Aid to Mission Strategy

Ritual analysis can be used to determine significant worldview themes which in turn can be utilized in the process of contextualization of the gospel message. Rituals do reveal values at their deepest level (Turner 1982:6). Geertz says that culture itself is a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols. Rituals, therefore, being rich in symbolism, contain large chunks of cultural knowledge. If man orders and interprets his reality by his symbols, then one would expect to discover an abundance of valuable insights into the worldview of the people through ritual analysis. Special attention, therefore,

has been give to the symbols found in the Malay funeral rite and to interpreting the deep structure meanings and discovering worldview themes.

In this article I have first described the funeral rite of the Malay Muslims and then attempted to analyze it utilizing Van Gennep's model of the ritual process as the structural basis, while emphasizing Grimes' six major ritual focuses. It is not unusual in ritual context that almost every article used, every gesture employed, every song or prayer, and every unit of space and time stands for something other than itself (Turner 1969:15). Therefore, special attention has been placed on the interpretation of these symbols. I then discussed the missiological implications of some of the most important themes which I discovered. I found that protection from malevolent spiritual forces, the centrality of the house, harmony in interpersonal relations, physical and spiritual purity, and corporate identity are all important worldview themes with their corresponding felt needs that must and can be addressed by the Christian worker presenting the Gospel.

I believe that the above mentioned strategy will be dynamically effective among Malays primarily because it reaches deep into the heart and mind of the Malay people and communicates clearly the love and power of Christ. ■

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