

Settling Down Spiritually: Chinese Malaysian's Worship of Datuk Gong

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ABSTRACT

When the Chinese migrated to Malaya en masse in the 19th century, they brought along with them their religious belief. Many aspects of the Chinese Religion are still maintained and practiced by the Chinese in Malaysia today. However, after years of interaction with people from other ethnic origins in Malaysia, the Chinese has synthesized local elements into their belief system. Empirically, the worship of Datuk Gong is one of them. The worship originated from the Datuk Keramat cult, which was popular among the Malays in Malaysia. This paper attempts to explain why the Chinese in Malaysia accepted local elements such as the worship of Datuk Keramat into their religion and the meaning of such acceptance. When the Chinese Malaysian transfigured certain elements found in their religion to accept the concept of Datuk Keramat, it shows their long-term commitment to make Malaysia their home. In order to achieve these objectives, observations and interviews at ten Datuk Gong temples in Peninsular Malaysia were made to collect relevant data. Data gathered shows the Chinese have transfigured their religious practice to facilitate their adaptation to live in a country, which was once foreign to them.

Keywords: Datuk Gong, Chinese Religion, Syncretism, Shenism, Pragmatism.

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese immigrants started to converge in Southeast Asia en masse in the 19th century in search of better opportunities (Freedman, 1979, p. 5) which also saw an influx of their religious beliefs and practices. As a result, their religious beliefs and practices are felt in many parts of Southeast Asian countries. In the context of contemporary Chinese

Malaysian, many aspects of their religiosity are inherited from their immigrant ancestors (Tan, 1983). In other words, the religious practices of the Chinese Malaysian are quite similar to the practices of their ancestors in China. It also means that there are some developments within the Chinese Malaysian religion. When the Chinese landed on Southeast Asia, they faced numerous difficulties in adapting to the new social environment. The adaptation process had caused them to adjust some of their cultural practices. Some of the adjustments required them to change certain aspects of their traditional practices, which included their religious practices. The adjustments caused the Chinese Malaysian religion to develop into an interesting and unique form, and most probably, some of these practices can only be found in Malaysia or its neighboring countries where the Chinese population formed a significant mass. This paper refers their religion as Chinese Religion. This terminology was introduced by Tan Chee Beng (1983) to reflect that the fact that the diverse nature of Chinese Malaysian traditional religious practices should be understood as a whole system instead of being classified into Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism,

Certain aspects of the Chinese Religion in Malaysia are outcomes of alterations, which were made to make end meets. According to Kok (1993, p.119), in many Chinese Malaysian Buddhist temples, a special space is allocated to house ancestral tablets. This feature is not common in the temples in China. In China, the ancestral tablets are placed in ancestral hall and

Chinese Malaysian does not commonly practice this feature. Such contradiction could be an outcome of adapting the design of the Chinese Malaysian temples to the needs of the Chinese immigrants. Probably, in the 19th century, the Chinese in Malaya did not see the need to build an ancestor hall to worship their ancestors since they only perceived this country as a stepping-stone to accumulate wealth. Once they have acquired sufficient wealth, they would not hesitate to return to their homeland in China, where the ancestral hall had already been built. Furthermore, their socio-economic condition did not permit them to do so. The difference between the Chinese temples in Malaysia and China reflects the pragmatic changes of the Chinese immigrants had taken place to suit their needs.

The alterations made by the Chinese Malaysian on their temples may not be significant enough to highlight how they have altered their religion to suit their needs and identity in Malaysia. It will be significant if they have transfigured certain aspects of the nature of their ancestral religiosity. Judging from the present state of the Chinese Malaysian religious practices, the transfiguration is obvious when they have included local elements into their religious belief especially in the worship of Datuk Gong. Many Chinese Malaysians worship Datuk Gong and this is evident when one observes the landscape of a Chinese majority housing area in this country. In most of the Chinese Malaysian homes, there will be a shrine which they use to worship *tian gong* (God of Heaven). But for the Chinese who worship Datuk Gong, there is

an extra mini shrine. This shrine is different from the *tian gong* shrine in terms of its design. While, the *tian gong* shrine is either supported by a pillar or hung on a wall, the Datuk Gong shrine is normally built on soil. Some are built on stilts that resemble the design of a traditional Malay house. The shrine houses the Datuk Gong. A closer look at the idol of Datuk Gong will certainly raise many questions especially those who do not understand the Chinese Religion. The miniature resembles the feature of a Malay man. Clearly, this worship is something that is unique and is not practiced in China, the land of Chinese Malaysian forefathers. The Chinese Malaysian is worshipping a deity which is not worshipped by their ancestors.

This paper intends to relate the worship of Datuk Gong to the Chinese Malaysian needs when settling down in this country. The worship is an outcome of the transfiguration of certain aspects of the Chinese religiosity. However, it will not emerge unless the Chinese has already developed similar concept much earlier. It will also not emerge if the Chinese Malaysian and their immigrant forefathers do not see the necessity to worship Datuk Gong. Besides these two conditions, the worship of Datuk Gong would not be possible if the worship is not supported by principles found within the Chinese Religion. The principles have provided ample rooms for the Chinese Malaysian to alter their ancestral religious practices. In order to discuss the above, this paper will elaborate the nature of Chinese Religion and Datuk Gong worship in Malaysia. The spiritual needs of the Chinese Malaysian will also be discussed to establish

the link between their needs and the Datuk Gong worship, a Chinese way of settling down spiritually.

METHODOLOGY

One of the characteristics of Chinese Religion is that the religion unifies human microcosm and divine macrocosm (Ackerman, 2001, p.293). The Chinese believes man, nature and divinity form a unified cosmos (Adler, 2002, p.113). This belief indicates the role of meaning in the Chinese Religion. The relationship between human and divinity is actively determined by individuals. Each individual has his or her own interpretation of how the relationship should be managed. Based on this characteristic, it is important to understand how the Chinese Malaysian interpret Datuk Gong and how the interpretation is expressed when they settled down in this country.

In order to find out the identity and history of Datuk Gong, the rituals and offering in the worship, the methods of interview and observation were employed. Data collection was carried from April 2010 till June 2010. Interviewees are the committee members of the Datuk Gong temples visited and also the worshippers met in the temples. A few Datuk Gong temples, located in several states in Peninsular Malaysia, namely Penang, Perak, Selangor and Kuala Lumpur were visited for the purpose of the study. Before discussing the worship of Datuk Gong, the writing in the following section attempt to provide a background understanding on the nature of Chinese Religion in Malaysia.

THE SYNCRETIC NATURE OF CHINESE RELIGION

It is incomprehensible to observe a Chinese worships a Malay man who is also a Muslim without understanding the nature of Chinese Religion. Those who do not understand the nature of Chinese Religion will certainly question such worship. However, it may not be so if the worship is understood from the worshippers' point of view. Generally, as immigrants, it was natural for the Chinese to build their relationship with the local people. The Datuk Gong worship represents the Chinese's intention to establish a spiritual relationship with Malaya and its people.

Goh (2009, p.121) linked the worship of Datuk Gong to the anxiety which the early Chinese immigrants had when they arrived in Malaya. The early Chinese immigrants needed a local force to safeguard their well-being in a foreign land. *Datuk Keramat* was seen as suitable to play the role of the local force. Their worries then were many. Being immigrants, they were worried of dangers such as illness. The popularity of *Datuk Keramat* among the Malays as healers had then caused the Chinese to worship *Datuk Keramat* as Datuk Gong.

But the Chinese Malaysian would not be able to accept a foreign element into their religion if their religion is exclusive. The worship of Datuk Gong by the Chinese Malaysian must have originated from certain characteristics of the Chinese Religion which caused the religion to be inclusive. As a result the Chinese Malaysian are able to worship Datuk Keramat as their deity. The key to the inclusiveness of the

Chinese Religion is the syncretic nature of the Chinese Religion. DeBernardi (2009), Goh, (2009), Tan (1983) and Sakai (1997) believe the worship of Datuk Gong is an outcome of the syncretic nature of Chinese Religion.

According to Tan (1983, p.220), most Chinese Malaysian refers to their religion as *bai shen* or *bai fo*. The former refers to the worship of deities and their interpretation of deities refer to all deities found in Chinese religious system, including those from Buddhist origin. The latter refers to the worship of Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. However, in actual practice, they may include all deities, including those from Taoist origin. Due to such circumstances, Tan labeled the Chinese Malaysian religion as Chinese Religion. Generally, most Chinese Malaysian worship Buddha and Taoist deities simultaneously. It is common in the Chinese Malaysian's home to find Buddha being positioned next to Taoist deities in the altar. Such sight is also common in most Chinese temples. These features indicate the inability of the Chinese Malaysian to separate or differentiate Buddhism and Taoism. For them, both religions carry the same sacred significance. In other words, the Chinese have amalgamated Buddhism and Taoism and such practice had caused Tan to label the religion of the Chinese Malaysian as Chinese Religion. In his opinion, it is erroneous to associate the majority of the Chinese Malaysian to Buddhism, Confucianism or Taoism. The Chinese Malaysia traditional religious beliefs have to be viewed as a whole system.

The Chinese does not only amalgamate Buddhism and Taoism. To a certain extent Confucianism has also been integrated into their religion (Adler, 2002, pp. 91-94). In Adler's view, Confucianism reinforced the elements of mysticism within Chinese Religion by bringing in concepts such as *Tian Li* (principle of Heaven). There are also elements of other religions in Chinese Religion. DeBernardi's (2009) findings show the Chinese Malaysian has not only worshipped Buddha and Tao deities. According to DeBernardi, elements of other religions such as Christianity and Hinduism are also found in Chinese Religion. The mixtures of many religious elements are further complicated by the worship of deified men. Yang (1961) elaborated on the existence of ethnopolitical cult or popular religion among the Chinese. Normally, these cults exist within certain locality but there are also some cults which became popular and are now worshipped by Chinese all over the world. The cult of *Guan Di* is one of such cult. The ethnopolitical cults have also emerged in Malaysia. Early Chinese immigrants deified their leaders. When a respected leader died, the leader was worship, deified. One of such cult is the *Si Shi-Yeh* cult in Rasah, Negeri Sembilan. He was a Chinese triad leader in the 19th century. When he was murdered, his followers deified him and built a temple for him.

What allows Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and other religions supernatural elements to be amalgamated as the Chinese Religion? Which aspect of Chinese Religion

system allows them to do so? Scholars (Goh 2009; Tan 1983; Bernardi 2009) attributed the amalgamation to the syncretic nature of Chinese Religion. The syncretic nature of Chinese Religion is not a recent development. The idea of worshipping gods of different religions or sects has always been a part of Chinese religious practice. Twinem's (1925) study exhibited the syncretic nature of Chinese Religion in Shanghai, China. His study described the syncretic nature of *Wu Shan She* (Apprehension of Goodness Society) which combined five religions – Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Mohammedanism (Islam) and Christianity. The society preached good deeds as their central principal.

Similar combination can be found in Malaysia. The *Che Ru Kor* Moral Uplifting Society in Endau, Johor unites five religions, i.e. Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism into a single belief. As an extension of *Dejiao*, a Chinese religious movements started in early 20th century (Goh, 2009), the society promotes good deeds and moral virtues through its 'ten virtues and eight rules', developed through the amalgamation of Confucianism and Taoism principles. Members of the society believed in one supreme deity who is similar to the concept of the belief in one God of the Christians and Muslims. The only difference is that the society supreme deity is *Guan Di-yeh* who succeeded the throne of heaven after the abdication of the Jade Emperor (Goh, 2009, p. 115).

The syncretic nature of Chinese Religion allows different sects or religions to take part

in forming Chinese's religious ideologies and practices. The unity of different religious elements constructs new ideologies that add dynamism to Chinese Religion. The dynamism portrays the openness of Chinese Religion in incorporating elements that the Chinese perceive as important and benefit them. Just like *Wu Shan She*, *Che Ru Kor* Moral Uplifting Society place good deeds and behaviors as the central principles that have to be followed by its members. These principles are derived from the teaching of the five religions. In other words, members of the society believe all religions have the same objective. The society unifies the teachings of the five religions and derives principles that benefit human kind. This conclusion confirms Ackerman's (2001) observation. Syncretism has allowed different religions or sects worship by the Chinese to maintain their respective identity while contributing to the development of new ideologies and perhaps new practices too.

Up to this stage, this article has explained the reason for the mixture of religions found in the Chinese Religion. It is due to the syncretic nature of the Chinese Religion; the religion has absorbed multiple religions and transforms them into the religious practices of the Chinese. But, what caused Chinese Religion to be syncretic in the first place? To answer this question, Elliot (1955, p.27) introduced the concept of *shenism*. The concept is derived from the term *bai shen*. *Bai* means to pray or worship while *shen* means powerful spiritual beings which must be worshipped to secure human well being.

In Elliot's observation, Chinese worship many *shen* with pragmatic purposes. The *shens* have different tasks to perform and hence worshipped according to their task. *Da Bo Gong* for example is worshipped to bring wealth as well as protection since he is the local god of soil. *Guan Shi Yin* (Goddess of Mercy) is worshipped for salvation from negative karma. Summarily, the deities are worshipped because the Chinese hopes to use their magical power to fulfill their desire. Therefore, in Goh's (2009, p.112) view, *shen* is an almost-empty concept. It is up to a person to interpret the concept and as such *shen* may differ according to the person needs at different point of time and place.

Consequently, the syncretic nature of Chinese Religion is probably an outcome of the pragmatic needs of the Chinese. Their needs are intertwined with their religiosity. The intertwining is a consequent of the Chinese belief that the divine, human and nature are elements of cosmos. As a result of such belief, the Chinese believe their relationship with the divine or should be mutually benefitting. The divine will assist them by fulfilling their needs and in return the divine will be worshipped. Since the divine or *shen* is an almost-empty concept, there is no boundary to stop the Chinese from including divine elements of other religions as their *shen*. In the context of Chinese Malaysian, their cosmos are very much confined to the physical and social environment of Malaysia. Their needs have been pre-determined by their intention to settle down in this country either temporarily or permanently. In order

to fulfill their needs, the Chinese seek the assistance from the divine found within their interpretation of 'Malaysian cosmos'.

Hitherto, the syncretic nature of Chinese Religion has devised an open system within the Chinese cultural system (Lee, 1986, p.199). It enables the Chinese to accept and absorb whatever that they perceive as beneficial and useful to them. This pragmatic approach has allowed Chinese Religion to be inclusive. The inclusiveness of Chinese Religion has enabled it to transfigure; to accept elements found in other religion or cultural practices and this include the worship of Datuk Gong in Malaysia.

THE CONCEPT OF DATUK GONG

In relation to the acceptance of Datuk Gong as a *shen*, the Chinese Malaysian (either the 19th century immigrants or their descendents) needed a local divine force to protect them from the harm that they may encounter in this country. Besides warding off harm, the Chinese Malaysian are also hoping the local divine force would be able to provide them opportunities to amass wealth and prosperity. Traditionally, within the Chinese Religion, these needs are provided by *Du Di Gong* (god of the soil). In the Chinese language, *Du Di* carries the meaning of local soil. Thus, *Du Di Gong* is the local deity whose role is to protect and assist the people who live in a particular locality. Datuk Gong has been accepted by the Chinese Malaysian as their *Du Di Gong* (Sakai, 1997). The Chinese Malaysian worshipped Datuk Gong for protection, wealth, health and multiple other needs. The

implication derived from such needs is the acceptance of *Datuk Keramat* as the *Du Di Gong* of the Chinese Malaysian; a clear-cut transfiguration of elements found in Chinese Religion to fulfill the needs of the Chinese Malaysian.

As mentioned earlier, the Datuk Gong worship in Malaysia originated from the concept of *Datuk Keramat*. Besides Goh (2009), Cheu (1992) had also related Datuk Gong to the worship of *Datuk Keramat*. The incorporation of Datuk Gong worship into Chinese Malaysian religion transfigures Chinese Religion by bringing in local elements into the complex cosmos of Chinese Religion. The worship of *Datuk Keramat* is by itself an outcome of Islamic mysticism. It is a Malay cult which worships saints. These saints or *Keramat* were pious men, preachers of Islam and leader of Islamic movements and were believed to have semi-divine power. *Datuk Keramat* worship is no longer popular among the Malays today. Due to the revival of Islam which started since the 1970s, the worships are now done privately (Lee, 1988, p. 402).

Although the Malays have almost deserted the *Datuk Keramat* worship, the Chinese have sort of preserved it, albeit within the context of Chinese Religion. The interactions between the Chinese and the Malay in Malaysia have provided a platform for the *Datuk Keramat* worship to be accepted by the Chinese Malaysian. The *Datuk Keramat* concept is accepted and was later pronounced as Datuk Gong by the Chinese. The 'Datuk' in the Datuk Gong concept is the *Datuk Keramat*. 'Gong'

is an honorific title attached to Chinese deities. Therefore the Datuk Gong concept maintains the identity of *Datuk Keramat*, a feature of the syncretic nature of Chinese Religion.

DATUK GONG WORSHIP: RITUAL AND IDENTITY

The authors visited ten Datuk Gong temples and numerous Datuk Gong shrines to learn more about the Datuk Gong worship. Surprisingly, in the visits, they discovered temples which worship non-Malay Datuk Gong. Such discovery contradicts their earlier assumption that all Datuk Gong are Malay Datuk Gongs since the belief originated from the worship of Datuk Keramat. In this section, the authors will explain Chinese Malaysian Datuk Gong worship and their interpretations concerning the worship.

Malay Datuk Gongs

Seven out of the ten temples visited by the authors worship Malay Datuk Gongs. In these temples, the authors observed that the Datuk Gongs ethnic origin were clearly represented by the appearance of the figurines. In these temples, the Malay Datuk Gongs were positioned in the center altar, a feature to indicate their status as the resident deity of the temple. Their figurines were crafted to resemble the feature of a Malay man wearing either a *songkok* (a black headgear) a *kopiah* (a white headgear) or a *tengkolok* (a traditional Malay headgear). The other indicator observed would be the Datuk Gongs' clothing. The Malay Datuk

Gongs were crafted as a Malay man wearing *Baju Melayu* (traditional Malay clothing).

The Datuk Gongs ethnic origins observed in the Malay Datuk Gong temples were also reflected through their names. In *Lian Hup* temple in Kelang, Selangor, the Datuk Gongs of this temple were named as Datuk Haji Keramat and Datuk Mustafa. The worshippers got to know the Datuk Gongs' names from through a trance session held by a medium. The authors also visited temples where the Datuk Gongs' names were based on colors. In such temples, the Datuk Gongs' were referred to as Datuk Hijau (Green Datuk), Datuk Hitam (Black Datuk), Datuk Merah (Red Datuk), Datuk Kuning (Yellow Datuk) and Datuk Biru (Blue Datuk). According to Cheu Hock Tong (1992, p. 387), the colors represent the different functions of the Datuk Gongs. For example, the Yellow Datuk is supposed to take care of the general well-being of the people living in a particular locality meanwhile the Green Datuk is to take care of the flora and fauna. A *Keris* (Malay dagger) was also found in all the Malay Datuk Gong temples. In some of the temples, the authors noticed that the *keris* was placed at the Datuk Gong altar. In some other temples, the *keris* was inserted into Datuk Gong figurine's palm. The *keris* strengthened Malay ethnic identity of the Datuk Gongs.

The fact that the Datuk Gong is a Malay man and worshipped by the Chinese Malaysian is certainly an interesting phenomenon to be studied. Questions such as do the Chinese worshippers know that they are worshipping a Malay deity, and if

they know, why do they still want to worship it? These questions were posted to several Datuk Gong worshippers.

All the worshippers interviewed in the Malay Datuk Gong temples knew that they were worshipping a Malay deity. The members of Bagan Sekinchan Datuk Gong Temple Committee said that they knew about it and they were not surprised. They explained that the Datuk Gong must be a Malay since the term originated from the Malay language. According to them, a Malay Datuk would be helpful in solving their local daily issues. In another interview session, the interviewee, Mr. Ng, former chairman of Teluk Intan Datuk Gong temple's committee concurred that the Datuk must be a local person, recognized for his contribution to the local community and as such the local person must be a Malay.

The worshippers were also asked whether the Datuk Gong worship would be a strange practice since worshipping a Malay Datuk Gong would mean they were worshipping a Muslim. One of the worshippers at Kampung Sawa Datuk Gong Temple, Mr. Lau expressed that there should not be anything strange about it. To him, a Datuk's religious identity and ethnic origin should not be the focus of the worship. The focus of the worship should be on the Datuk Dong's *ling* (magical power). According to him the Chinese worshippers needed a local divine force with *ling* to assist them to resolve local issues that affect their well-being. That force should be represented by the Malay who knew and were familiar with local surroundings who coincidentally would be a Muslim. Therefore, it should not

be viewed as strange. He further explained that, there was nothing wrong to worship a Muslim. In fact, he believed that the Malay and Muslim identity were the reasons to worship a Malay Datuk Gong. According to him, "If the Datuk Gong is not representing the feature of local force, the *ling* is absent and the Datuk is not a powerful one."

The rituals of Datuk Gong worships and the design of the Malay Datuk Gong temples or shrines visited by the authors had also exhibited the Malayness of Datuk Gong. In the visits, the authors observed that some of the temples were very expressive in reflecting the Malayness of the temples' Datuk Gongs. For instance, *Lian Hup* Datuk Gong Temple has a dome as its roof. A dome is a symbol of a Malay mosque. Such design had caused uneasiness among the local Malay people. There were attempts to demolish the temple but were unsuccessful (Lee, 1988, p. 412). According to Mr. Soh, the medium cum caretaker of the temple, the dome design should not be an issue. He said, "The dome merely represents the identity of the Datuk Gong, a Malay deity and we have no intention to offend another religion." In other words, the design of the temple is merely showing the identity of a Chinese deity who is a Malay man and also a Muslim. The cultural expression of Datuk Gong's Malay identity was also found in the design of Datuk Gong shrines. Most shrines visited in Bagan Sekinchan, a fishing village exhibited the design of traditional Malay house.

Besides the architectural aspects, the Malayness of the Datuk Gong had also been observed in the rituals practised by

the worshippers. In a *Datuk Gong Dan* (festival to celebrate Datuk Gong's birthday) organized by Desa Aman Puri Datuk Gong Temple Committee, the worshippers were cautious in selecting their offerings to the temple's Datuk. Since Islam forbid pork, the worshippers did not serve any pork to the temple's Datuk Gong during the festival. Instead of serving pork, the worshippers served chicken curry and mutton curry to the Datuk Gong. Other food offered to the Datuk Gongs were Kopi-O (coffee without milk), betel leaves, native cigarettes and *nasi pulut kuning* (yellow glutinous rice). All these offerings were made to suit diet of the Malay Datuk Gong they were worshipping. In another *Datuk Gong Dan*, held by Kampung Datuk Sawa worshippers, they sacrificed two goats as offering to the temple's resident Datuk Gong. The temple committee hired two Malays to slaughter the goats to adhere to the Islamic method of slaughtering. Such action was taken to ensure that the mutton would be 'halal' (permissible according to Muslim beliefs and values) and safe to be 'consumed' by the Datuk Gong.

Non-Malay Datuk Gongs

As discussed earlier, the Datuk Gong worshippers also worship non-Malay Datuk Gongs. In Broga, Selangor, the authors visited *Shi Natuk* (Stone Datuk) Temple in which an Orang Asli (aborigine of Malaysia) Datuk Gong was worshipped as the resident deity. In their visit to this temple, the authors analyzed newspaper reports found in newspaper cuttings that

were pasted on the notice board of the temple. The newspaper cuttings illustrated the origin of the temple. The temple was established due to a local legend. According to the legend, the Datuk Gong of the temple provided protection to the villagers who were facing persecution of Japanese Army during the Second World War. The Datuk Gong hid the villagers via its supernatural power. As a result, the Japanese armies failed to find them. Such legends had caused the worshippers to believe that the Datuk Gong of this temple has *ling*. As a result, this temple became highly popular among Datuk Gong worshippers. The temple is one of the most popular Datuk Gong temples in Malaysia. Based on the newspaper reports, hundreds of tourists and worshippers would visit the temple during weekend and Chinese festival. According to the temple care taker, Mr. Soon, due to temple's popularity and large number of worshippers, the temple managed to accumulate big sum of donation every year. The money was used for charity. Every month, the temple's committee would spend nearly RM30, 000 for charity causes. Through conversation with Mr. Soon, the authors had also discovered that since the Datuk Gong of this temple originated from the Orang Asli ethnic origin, food offering made by the worshippers differ slightly from Malay Datuk Gong food offerings. The worshippers served pork and liquor. Other than that, the architectural design of the temple also did not reflect any Malay or Islamic influence.

Besides the Orang Asli Datuk Gongs, there are also Datuk Gongs from other

ethnic groups origin. For instance, the authors discovered four Datuk Gongs of different ethnic origins worshipped in Kampung Sawa Datuk Gong Temple. The resident Datuk Gong of the temple was Datuk Kassim, a Malay Datuk Gong and other Datuk Gongs were Datuk Che Pu Long (Siamese), Datuk Ah Chong (Chinese) and Datuk Mutu (Indian). According to Mr. Soh Huat (temple's medium) Datuk Ah Chong was deified as a Datuk Gong due to his contribution in developing the temple. Meanwhile, Datuk Mutu was worshipped as a Datuk Gong after a nearby Indian community worshipped him as their deity. Mr. Soh Huat further elaborated that although Datuk Kassim was the resident Datuk of the temple, his rank was lower than Datuk Che Pu Long, a Siamese Datuk. He explained that such hierarchy was created because in the past, Gerik was under the patronage of the Siamese rulers. Similar temple was found in Taiping, Perak. The temple was built by the villagers of Kampung Penglong and house four Datuk Gongs of different ethnic origin. Based on the information provided by Mr. Ng (former medium and caretaker of the temple), the Datuk Gongs were from Malay, Chinese, Indian and Sikh origins and as such the temple was named as *Datuk Empat Keramat* Temple.

DATUK GONG AND CHINESE MALAYSIAN INTERPRETATION

Based on the above findings, the Chinese immigrants and their descendants have acknowledged the importance of worshipping

the local divine force to safeguard their well-being. This explains why most Datuk Gongs are Malays. However the interpretation of the local divine force is not confined to the Malays. As discussed earlier, some Datuk Gong worshippers worship Siamese Datuk Gong and also Datuk Gongs of other ethnic origins. Whether or not the Datuk Gongs' ethnic origin are Malays or from other ethnic origins, the fact that can be established here is that Chinese Malaysian has transfigured the concept of *Du Di Gong* or Earth God by replacing it with what they interpret as the local divine. The holistic nature (unifying human, divine and nature in one cosmos) of Chinese Religion has permitted the Chinese to be pragmatic. Under such holistic nature too, the Chinese are permitted to worship any divine elements which they consider as worth worshipping. The Chinese Malaysian have chosen to worship Datuk Gong because they believe that the local divine force that will be able to assist them. Being immigrants, the Chinese Malaysian forefathers sought the blessing of Datuk Gong to assist them to adapt to a foreign environment. They needed a force that was able to provide them security as well as opportunities to prosper. By worshipping Datuk Gong, they assumed their needs were taken care of by a local divine force.

Chinese believe that human, divinity and nature form a unified cosmos. The non-dualistic nature of Chinese Religion allows human and the divine to correspond (Adler, 2002, pp.112-113) to maintain the harmony of the cosmos. The non-dualistic nature has also caused Chinese Religion to

be syncretic, pragmatic and inclusive. In Malaysia, the Chinese need a local divine power to correspond with to safeguard their well-being. *Datuk Keramat* which was worshipped by the Malays for more or less the same reason was then selected and included in the system of Chinese Malaysian Religion. However, as time passed by, the Chinese enlarged their interpretations of local divine power. Thus, Datuk Gong worship is not confined to Malay Datuk Gong worship. The worship of other Datuk Gong of non-Malay origin proved that the Datuk Gong may not necessarily be a Malay. As the Chinese interact with people of other ethnicities, they started to visualize the others as forces to be reckoned with too.

This development has been described by Goh (2009) as the hybridization process of Chinese religious practices in Malaysia as well as Singapore. Due to interaction with other cultural systems, the Chinese hybridize their religious practices by including elements found in other cultures into their religious system. Such hybridization as shown in the Datuk Gong worship reflect the syncretic nature of Chinese Religion. Underlying the syncretic nature, is the Chinese Malaysian pragmatic approach to contextualize and interpret the Malaysian social and physical surrounding.

Their needs have motivated them to search for a local divine power that will be able to solve their problem or assist them to achieve their desire and the search is not confined to the traditional elements found within the Chinese Religion. As discussed above, the meaning of *shen* or

the divine is not restricted by cultural or physical boundaries. It goes beyond these boundaries and very often what constitute *shen* is dictated by the needs of the Chinese. As a result, the Chinese Religion is able to accept and to a certain extent amalgamate element found in other religions and beliefs. Their descendents continued the worship with similar interpretations. The worship provided them the spiritual link which connects them to a place and enables them to make a living in a place that later they call home.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above discussion, the worship of Datuk Gong by the Chinese Malaysian is not incomprehensible after all. The nature of Datuk Gong worship will naturally invites questions especially from the Malays since the worship involves them. But if studied, Datuk Gong worship is merely an outcome and reflections of the nature of Chinese religious system. The syncretic, pragmatic and inclusive nature of Chinese Religion has allowed the Chinese Malaysian to transfigure their *Du Di Gong* concept and localized it in Malaysia in the form of Datuk Gong. If Geertz's (1975) definition of religion is to be used here, then to a large extent the worship of Datuk Gong has illustrated the culture of the Chinese Malaysian. According to Geertz (1975, pp. 87-125), religion is a system of symbols which provide the motivation for human to build the general order of living. As immigrants and now descendants of the immigrants, the Chinese in Malaysia are always aware of the necessity to interact

and to respect people of other ethnicities who live in this country. The interaction and respect will develop harmonious relationship which is prioritized by the Chinese culture. The worship of Datuk Gong is the Chinese Malaysian way of adjusting and to live in a country which was once foreign to them. It is a spiritual approach used by the Chinese Malaysian to settle down in Malaysia.

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