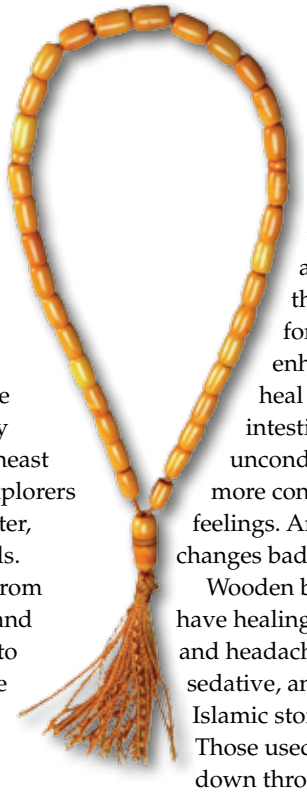
Malay Prayer Accessories

By Prue Harrison

18th Century, Turkey; *Ornately inlaid mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell* rihal *from Turkey would have served in a stately setting*

19th Century, India; *Indian* rihal *made from panels of jasper stone probably made for personal use*



Prayer beads, *gift of Friedrich Sphuler, Germany*

The majority of Malays in Singapore are Muslim, and the traditional prayer accessories they use are not dissimilar from those used in other Muslim countries, as Islamic prayer ritual has remained constant throughout the centuries. *Tasbeeh*, or prayer beads, are among the more interesting accessories, not only because they come in many forms, but also because of the controversy surrounding their use. Prayer beads came to Southeast Asia via India, where early Muslim traders and explorers adopted the practice from Hindu worshippers. Later, European Christians also began using prayer beads.

The controversy surrounding the beads stems from several issues. It was thought that those carrying and parading their beads were doing so out of vanity, to show onlookers that they were praying even while going about their daily business. Such vanity is frowned on in Islam. It was also believed that when using the beads during prayer, the recital became too easy to keep count of, thus allowing the person in prayer to become distracted or to day dream. Clearly this would not be condoned. Another reason, and perhaps the most important for staunch Muslims, is that it is believed the correct way to count the repetitions is by using the fingers of the right hand, as did Prophet Mohammed.

Many counting aids have been used, from stones to date pits and to knots in woven fabric, so the use of *tasbeeh* has become accepted practice. *Tasbeeh* come in many materials, the most usual in Singapore being stone and wood. The healing power of stones is well accepted in Singapore and is no different when the prayer beads consist of stones. Tiger's-eye, for example, is believed to have a calming effect, enhance understanding, strengthen belief and heal abdominal ailments such as kidney, liver and intestinal problems. Turquoise keeps the feeling of unconditional love in one's heart, meaning one can feel more connected with Allah. It also draws out negative feelings. Amethyst can be spiritually uplifting, black onyx changes bad habits and amber eases heavy burdens.

Wooden beads release a pleasant scent when used and have healing properties. Rosewood reduces nervous tension and headaches and relaxes the user. Sandalwood is a sedative, antiseptic and antidepressant. Search the online Islamic stores for *tasbeeh* and one finds many variations. Those used by Malay Muslims today may have been passed down through the generations or given as gifts following a devotee's successful return from the *haj* pilgrimage.

Another prayer accessory that has survived the test of time is the *rihal*. This book-stand is used to hold the Quran while praying, reading, committing the verses to memory or studying. Children are given their own *rihal* once they start religious classes, even if these are taught by an elder in their own home. A Quran is a heavy tome and classes last over two hours with students sitting on the floor, so the value of a good stand is understandable. Many *rihal* are elaborately carved with lattice patterns, inlaid with mother-of-pearl or with other woods (rosewood or sandalwood) in flower or star motifs and now even come in plastic. Older *rihal* were crafted from silver and even gold, especially those used by royal families and rich traders. Nowadays it is not unusual to see Malay children walking to religious classes with their *rihal* protruding from their backpacks.

Quran *from Central Java, Indonesia*

Prue Harrison, *originally from England, has lived in Singapore since 1984 and been married to a Malay for 20 years. Her latticed, wooden* rihal *is now used as a decorative piece in the dining room.*

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