

HISTORICAL LEGACY IN ETHNO-RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IN MALAYSIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN THE PENINSULA AND SABAH

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ABSTRACT This paper discusses the historical dimension that reflects the circumstances and differences which shape the relations between ethnicity with religious affiliations in Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah. The basis for the discussion is derived from the current reflection on Multi-ethnicity and multi-religious society in Malaysia which is not merely based on a single context at national level. In fact, it is evident that these two interrelated aspects are actually subjected to different contexts in the sub-regions; namely West Malaysia (also known as the Peninsula) and East Malaysia which is composed of Sabah and Sarawak. The different status-quo also reflects different impacts on all issues related to ethnicity and religious sentiments in Malaysia as a whole. Without ignoring the focus on the current perspectives on the differences in ethnicity and religion between the Peninsula and Sabah, it is important to explore the historical development during the colonial period which shaped the phenomena in ethnicity and religion in both areas.

Keywords: *Historical legacy, ethnicity, religion, Malaysia, Sabah.*

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has long been widely recognised as a harmonious model of plural society. Nevertheless, the issues of ethnicity and religion have always been pronouncedly complex. It is generally understood that the concept and the application of plural society in Malaysia in these two aspects are predominantly manifested by the polarisation of the Malays and non-Malays on one hand and Muslims and non-Muslims on the other. This is because the existing major ethnics in Malaysia have commonly been associated with different religions: the Malays with Islam, the Chinese with Buddhism and the Indians with Hinduism. Additionally, the non-Malays are also associated with Christianity. It is important to note that this generalisation is only limited

to West Malaysia or the Peninsula formerly known as Malaya before the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.

In fact, this diversity becomes more complex in Sabah or formerly known as British North Borneo before 1963. Here, the natives or *bumiputera* in the area: namely, the peoples of Dusun/Kadazan and Murut as well as other native ethnics are even more subjected to religious and inter-racial diversities. Needless to say, the circumstances became more complex considering the existence of a considerable number of the Bajaus, the Suluk and the Chinese who have also shaped the religious and multi-ethnic diversity.

The current circumstances certainly raise many questions about the homogeneous perception on the issues pertaining to ethnicity and religion in Malaysia, especially when a comparative study between the Peninsula and Sabah is to be considered. However, it has to be emphasised here that the present circumstances have always been closely related to the historical development. The most significant period in this context is mainly referred to the duration loosely coined as ‘the colonial period’. In fact, historically, it could be construed that the existence of the circumstances in ethnicity and religion in Malaysia is notably moulded during this period. Thus, this paper discusses the historical dimension which reflects the difference in ethnicity and religion in Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah. The basis for the discussion is derived from the current reflections on multi-ethnicity and multi-religious society in Malaysia, which is not only based on a single context at the national level. Such differences are fundamental, and consequently will lead to the understanding of different historical developments in shaping the current status-quo in both areas.

SOCIO-POLITICAL STATUS-QUO IN HISTORICAL DIMENSION

Principally, the existence of the complexity in the socio-political status-quo in Malaysia has always been associated with the legacy of the development during the colonial period. Even though it has been subjected to terminological dispute, basically, the term ‘colonial period’ is generally applied to the pre-independence of Malaya before 1957 and British North Borneo before 1963.

Malaya was governed by the British authorities as a colony in the case of the Straits Settlements, and protectorate in the cases of all Malay States before the Second World War. During the post-war period, Malaya was governed as a single entity as a Crown colony of Great Britain when it was proclaimed as Malayan Union during the years 1946–1948. Then, its legal status was transferred as a protectorate when it was proclaimed as Malayan Federation until the year of its independence in 1957 (Kratoska, 2001: 121–251).

Meanwhile, the British North Borneo was governed by the British North Borneo Company (BNBC) which was granted the royal charter from 1881 to 1941. Due to the considerable economic burden which had to be shouldered by the company caused by the destruction incurred on the territory during the Second World War, the company decided to cede the territory to the British Government. Accordingly, this territory began to be ruled as a colony in 1946. This legal status continued until independence was granted, and the name was officially changed to Sabah in 1963 (Ibid. 281–7). The fact remains, as a matter of convenience, the British North Borneo was referred to as Sabah or colonial Sabah. Be that as it may, many historians have even used the name Sabah to be applied to the pre-independent period of the territory, even by historians who specifically had extensively written on the history of Sabah, notably James Francis Ongkili (1997) and D. S. Ranjit Singh (2000).

Despite the fact that all those entities are historically related to the British as a single power, it clearly does not reflect the homogeneous circumstances in the internal socio-political aspect of those territories. Certainly, the real circumstances of all the inhabitants in those territories are historically different in the aspects of ethnicity and religious centricities, even during the pre-colonial period.

Ethnicity

It is evident that during the colonial period, the issue of ethnicity was actually more dominant than religion in both Malaya and colonial Sabah. The issue of ethnicity was an obvious concern among the colonial officials as was markedly found in their definitions and applications of the concept of ‘native’. As a matter of fact, these definitions and applications kept changing over time.

Certainly, scholars who wrote on this issue are likewise concerned with the inconsistent definition of the term 'native' in both territories. This dimension is reflected in the writings of Charles Hirschman (1987) on Malay Peninsula and Toru Ueda (2006) on colonial Sabah. Both of them have extensively referred to the census report published by the colonial authorities.

Based on the primary sources which have been utilized by Charles Hirschman and Toru Ueda, it is categorically certain that the inconsistency in defining the concept of 'native' was essentially to emphasize on the distinctions between Europeans and non-Europeans. This idea was clearly manifested in the colonial census report published by the authorities in both territories in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries.

What is more important from the native's point of view is the impact of the application on the society as a whole. Ostensibly, the concept of native in both territories had been applied in different circumstances. In Malaya, the concept of native is predominantly applied to the Malays rather than the aborigines or *Orang Asli*. Despite being categorised as Proto Malays, the *Orang Asli* were later classified as *bumiputera* or native only after the independence (Carey, 1976: 4–21.). The evidence can be seen in the Malay Reservation Land Enactment of 1913 (Malay Reservation Land Enactment 1913). Here, the term Malay race is defined clearly as the native, whereas the *Orang Asli* was never mentioned.

According to Section 2 in the enactment, the term '*Melayu*' (Malay) is actually stipulated as 'Malayan race'. It is defined that a Malay individual is a person of Malayan race, who habitually speaks Malay language or other Malayan languages (e.g. Javanese Malay, Buginese Malay, etc.), and professes Islam as his religion. The 1913 Enactment was later revised in 1933 which repealed the 1913 Enactment. Nevertheless, the 1933 enactment did not constitute any changes to the definition of Malay. Consensually, the definition of the Malay race is accepted to be '*Bangsa Melayu*' which includes all the natives in the Malay Archipelago or '*Nusantara*'. It means that they are not necessarily to be originated from Malaya. Accordingly, the Banjarese, Buginese, Sumatrans and Javanese are also classified as Malays based on the similarities in religion, language, customs and culture as a whole. This

view later became the prevailing application of Malay race in West Malaysia after independence.

Even more significant, the definition of the term ‘Malay’ became even more complex as it was not based on purely ethnic terminology. It can be identified that the reason behind the ratification of the Malay Reservation Land of 1913 and 1933 was more motivated by economic means rather than ethnicity itself. The definition of the term was actually to be applied to the land which was to be reserved only for the Malays. This enactment was designed as a measure to restrict the land alienation from the Malay to the non-Malays; especially the Chinese; and Indians, especially the *Chettians* and so on. It is pointed out by Ahmad Nazri Abdullah (1985: 71) that the attempt to include Chinese or Indians who habitually spoke Malay language was rejected by the Federal Council of the Federated Malay States. This restriction was also applied to the Chinese who converted to Islam and married to a Malay.

Due to the economic implication, it is evident that the ruling authorities in the Unfederated Malay States have applied the term ‘Malay’ as a purely ethnic one. This can be seen in the Land Enactment of Johor which stipulated that ‘Malay’ must be a Malay who habitually speaks Malay language and believes in Islam (Johor Land 1936: Section 1). Based on this definition, the Arabs have been excluded from the Malay race since they maintain their Arab genealogies and their titles as sayyids. It is for this reason that they are excluded from acquiring the Malay Reserved Land in Johor (Abdullah, 2009: 50. See also Abdullah, 2017 & 2018). It is also found that a similar provision has also been applied in Kelantan and Terengganu (Wong, 1975: 512–3).

More to that, it has also been brought to the argument whether the Malays should also be applied to those from matrilineal descent. In the editorial column of *Utusan Melayu* in 1940, the editor raised his concern about the liberalisation of the Malays who were descended from the maternal lineage of Malay. The question was on the legitimacy of the *Jawi Pekan* (*Jawi Peranakan*) in Penang and Kedah, especially the Indian Muslims known as ‘*Keling*’, and the Arabs who were considered as Malays even though the Malay line was gained matrilineally (*Utusan Melayu*, 8 May 1940).

This ethnicity dimension became further delicate when the matter involves the Malays from other regions. The issue here was the term ‘Malayan race’ which was viewed to be only applicable to the Malays who originated from Malaya. However, there are other Malays who originated from Indonesian territories, such the Banjarese from Banjar Masin in Kalimantan, the Buginese from Sulawesi and other sub-ethnics from Sumatra and the Javanese from Java. In an article published in the editorial column of *Majlis* in 1934, it was claimed that the Sumatrans and Javanese must be classified as Malays since they possessed many similar characteristics in terms of language, religion, customs and culture; being the inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago (*Majlis*, 8 Jan 1934 & 25 Jan 1934). It is crucial to point here that they are recognised as Malays and this definition have been legally applied in West Malaysia since independence. Accordingly, the ethnic categorisation in Malaya and later Malaysia was simplified as Malays, Chinese, Indians and others based on the Malayan census of 1957 (CAB 134/1949 1961: Appendix B).

Conversely, the circumstances in colonial Sabah were considerably different as is extensively discussed by Toru Ueda (2006: 74–85). From his assessment, based on the census of North Borneo 1957, one essential point derived from this piece of writing is that the Malays in Sabah were not regarded as natives. In fact, the series of official census from 1892 to 1931 did not stipulate Malays including Javanese, Banjarese and Kelantans, as natives. The concept of native in colonial Sabah was initially applied to ‘Interior natives’ and ‘Sea Coast natives. The former referred to Tutongs, Dusuns, Dyaks, Kadayans, Muruts and Bisayahs, while the latter were Bajows, Sulus, Illanuns and Tidongs.

It is confounding to discover that the concept of ‘native’ was not necessarily referred to the natives of British North Borneo or Sabah. Other natives listed are the ‘native of India and Ceylon’, ‘natives of Netherlands India’ and ‘natives of Sulu Archipelago’. This indicates that the Malays were generally regarded as equal to the non-Borneo natives. Generally, the concept related to natives of Borneo are composed of 20 ethnic communities of Bajaws (land and sea), Buludupi, Bruneis, Dusuns, Dyaks, Idahan, Illanun, Kedayan, Kuijau, Muruts, Orang Padas (Besayas), Orang Sungai, Peluan, Sulu, Tagals, Tambunwa, Tenggara, Timogun, Tidongs and Tutongs.

It is apparent that the Malays were excluded from the status of 'Native'. According to the Land Proclamation of 1913, 'Native' means 'any aboriginal inhabitant of the Malay Archipelago and the children of such an inhabitant by any union with any native or alien, or any other Asiatic who may be or become entitled to be ranked as a native in accordance with the rules laid down for the purpose' (Land Proclamation, 1913). Nonetheless, based on the census of 1921 and 1931, the Malays were still not classified as native despite the fact that they were the majority inhabitants of the so-called Malay Archipelago. In fact, when compared to those who were born from inter-marriages between the natives and non-natives, the latter were considered as native. Therefore, only the off-springs of the Malays who married the Sabahan natives can be deemed as natives.

Later in 1937, the concept of 'Native' was applied consistently with the 1913 land proclamation. This concept was also applied to any aboriginal inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago. The Malay Archipelago is defined as the region comprising of the States of North Borneo, Brunei and Sarawak, the Straits Settlements, the States of Malay Peninsula, the Netherlands Indies and the Sulu group of the Philippine Islands (Native Administration Ordinance 1937). The provision which applies the concept of native to the children of such an inhabitant by any union with a non-native is still preserved and legally recognised.

However, the application of this concept was later restricted to Borneo territories as stated in The Labour Ordinance 1949. According to this ordinance, 'native' means any person of a race or tribe indigenous to the Colonies of North Borneo or Sarawak or the State of Brunei (Ordinance 1949, No.18). Nevertheless, the legal application of native was restored to that of 1937 status-quo under Ordinance No. 28, of 15th December, 1952. The only minor difference in the 1952 Ordinance is that the word 'Netherlands Indies' was changed to 'Indonesian' and was classified as 'native' (Ueda, 2006: 83). Later in 1961, the native categorisation in colonial Sabah and also Sarawak was simplified as non-Muslim Indigenous and Muslim Indigenous (CAB 134/1949 1961: Appendix B).

The major difference in terms of ethnicity between Malay Peninsula and colonial Sabah refers to the position of the Malays. In Malay Peninsula, the Malays are stipulated as the majority native while in colonial Sabah, they are ambiguously recognised as native. When Sabah was incorporated into Malaysia, the implication is that the Malays were applied in accordance with the constitution which stipulated that a Malay person must be a Muslim, who habitually speaks Malay language and practices Malay customs (Federal Constitution of Malaysia 2014: Article 160 (2)). This means that the constitutional term is not merely applied as an ethnic term but has also incorporated a religious element that is, Islam.

Religion

The concept of ethnicity and religion is integral in Malaysian society. The non-Malay natives are classified as *'bumiputera'*. The Malays, requisitely, must be Muslims. In historical and contemporary contexts, the Malay centrality itself is intimately associated with Islam. In the context of the Malay society in the Malay Peninsula and North Borneo, Islam has long been considered as an integral and fundamental characteristic in Malay culture. The Malays have long been synonymously identified with Islam in both territories, at least since the sixteenth century.

It is understandable that this status-quo is much associated with the prevalence of the long existence of the numerous Malay Sultanates in the peninsula. This has to do with the fact that the Malay sultans as the paramount rulers of their kingdoms are proclaimed as the protectors of Islam. This proclamation is signified with the title *'Dzillullahi fil- 'alam'* which means 'the shadow of God' in all Malay Classical texts such as *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), *Tuhfat al-Nafis* (Precious Gift) and various legal texts known as *Undang-undang Melaka, Pahang, Johor, Kedah* and so on.

In many respects, it is generally known that the historical dimension of the Malay society in Malaya had been shaped by Islamism, albeit overshadowed by western secularism. The British continued to preserve the paramount position of the Malay rulers as the heads of Islam and Malay customs in the Malay states. Since Islam was constituted as the religion of all

states, the Islamic institutions such as Islamic councils, *Baitul-Mal* (Islamic treasury), and *Waqf* (Islamic Endowment) had undergone considerable expansions during this period. Additionally, Islamic education also became mass education which evidently increased the literacy in *jawi* reading and writing among the Malays (Yegar, 1979: 187–260).

Furthermore, it is even more significant to point out here that the Malays continued to be inspired by Islamism in the aspect of nation-building. This can be seen in particular reference to the emergence of Muslim political consciousness and the onset of Islamic political activism. Indisputably, Malay nationalism was pioneered by the Malay young generation of Islamists known as '*Kaum Muda*'. The term 'nationalism' here refers to the scope of political sphere covering the whole Malay society as a single 'community' and 'race'. These two words mean '*bangsa*' as a broader term than '*Rakyat*', or subject of a kingdom, '*Kerajaan*' (Milner, 1995: 89–113). Those young reformists were comprised of teachers, scholars, and students who imbibed the reformist ideas centred on the writings and teachings of Muhammad Abduh from Egypt and Rashid Rida, the editor of *Al-Manar* magazine. Although they did not have any formal organisation, their collective ideas and actions were reflected in the establishment of their own magazines; notably *Al-Imam*, *Neraca*, *Al-Ikhwan* and *Saudara* (Azyumardi Azra, 1999). In the meantime, this reformist also inspired the traditionalist Malay religious elite to promote Islam in defense of the traditional Islam under the auspices of the Malay rulers.

Accordingly, the Islamic religious reform eventually turned out to be associated with radical Malay Nationalism which became the pioneers in the quest for independence for colonial Malaya. However, needless to say, their independent ambition was superseded by the success of the western Malay nationalist movement led by the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO). One of the fundamental strengths of UMNO was their association with the Malay rulers. UMNO was also able to incorporate the traditionalist Islamic elite who had long been associated with the Malay rulers withal. Thus, it is prevalent that the symbiotic relation between Malay and Islam was significantly relevant in Malaya during the colonial period. Ergo, the definitions of the Malayness and Islam serve as an integral part in the Malayan Constitution of 1957 and continued to be applied to the Constitution of Malaysia.

This definition is applied as a single meaning at the national level. Be that it may, it does not reflect the situation in Sabah. The Malays were evidently not the majority in Sabah despite the fact that the territory used to be subjected under the suzerainty of the Muslim Sultanate of Brunei and Sulu during pre-colonial period (Singh, 2000: 57–112 & Abu Bakar Hamzah, 2011: 80–22). In fact, the majority of the native inhabitants in the territory; notably the Dusun/Kadazans, Murut and so on were non-Muslims who practised animism (Rutter, 2007: 20–45). A considerable number of them remained as animist, and a proportion of them were eventually converted to Christianity during the colonial period. The penetration of Islam into those communities was only eminent during post-independence (Muhiddin Yusin, 1990: 31).

It could be construed that the process of transformation in Sabah during the colonial period was actually associated with Catholicism. The most obvious circumstance can be seen in the case of Catholic Christianisation through the missionary led by Fr. Prenger among the Kadazan community at Inobong, Penampang in 1887. More significantly, the establishment of the education system which promoted literacy and numeracy in the society was made integral with Catholicism even though the BNBC was not interested in promoting education among the natives.

It was proclaimed that one of the chief aims of the Catholic mission in North Borneo was to open schools for the natives. In contrast, the BNBC had a different idea about education. The company allowed the Chinese and other races to attend school but the company considered it a waste of money to support the natives. As a result, only the town mission schools improved. In some cases, the company actually hindered missionary work among the natives. At this time, the government was suspicious about the presence of missionaries among the natives. Their presence and influence were seen to have made the natives politically aware of their rights (Ongkili, 1997: 57).

However, eventually, the Catholic missionary managed to promote mass education among the Kadazan community, this development had a major impact on shaping the religious sphere of the Kadazans who were regarded as the majority of the inhabitants in Sabah. Rev. Fr. Augustine Wachter, *Prefect Apostolic for Labuan, North Borneo and Brunei* moved from his headquarters

in Labuan to Penampang on 26 July, 1927. Since then, Penampang became the centre for Catholicism in Sabah. In fact, Catholic teachings which included the sermons and congregations were given in Kadazan dialect in Penampang (Poilis, 1981: 16). It was even more significant to note that by 1953, there were 40 Catholic schools in Sabah with almost 6,000 students and the majority was the natives. The Catholic schools used the native language as medium of literacy and instruction at the elementary stage and then shifted gradually to English language by the third or fourth year (Reid, 2009: 191).

In this respect, the Kadazans became integral to Catholicism in Sabah. Although the Catholic missionary did not promote political awareness and the sense of unity among the Kadazans, the Kadazans' nationalism was inspired through their education in Catholic schools. They were now able to read public newspapers such as *North Borneo Herald* and *The Official Gazette*, which contained international major events at that time. Moreover, it encouraged the writings and publications in Kadazan language which led to the growth of ethnic pride which had never happened before. As a result of this development, the Kadazan graduates who were fluent in English, and with their commitment to promote Kadazan language, formed the Kadazan Cultural Association (KCA) under the leadership of Donald Stephens (later Muhammad Fuad Stephens). He later founded and led the Kadazans' first political party in Sabah known as United National Kadazan Organisation (UNKO) in early 1960's. He is also the first Chief Minister of Sabah when the state entered into the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.

By examining these comparisons, certainly, it is clear that there is undeniably a symbiotic relation between ethnicity and religion in both territories. On one side, there are the Malays and Islam in Malaya, and on the other, there are the Kadazans and Catholicism in Sabah. These two different circumstances were correlated when both territories were incorporated into the Federation of Malaysia as a single nation. However, in terms of ethnicity and religion, the nation is still overshadowed by major differences due to each historical legacy. Such differences certainly establish the precedence for the differences in perceptions on issues pertaining to the imposition of any single meaning related to ethnicity and religion at the national level.

In many respects, the distinct differences in historical developments of both territories during the colonial period are still relevant until today. Generally, the degree of symbiotic inter-racial integration resulted from inter-racial marriages and the assimilation of non-native into native communities are less common in West Malaysia than in Sabah. This is simply because Islam is more dominant in West Malaysia and appears to be viewed as a restricting factor. Due to the synonymy of Islam with the Malays, it seems that the Chinese in particular, are more willing to convert to Christianity compared to Islam. Typically, the Chinese appear to be dissuaded to convert to Islam for fear of being labelled as '*masuk Melayu*'. This term had long been in existence as a tradition in the Malay society (Gullick, 1991: 277).

The above issue is also closely related to the process of racial integration. It is widely believed that the most common way of promoting a symbiotic inter-racial relation is through inter-racial marriages. Islam forbids marriages between different religions. Ergo, inter-racial marriages are only possible if the non-Muslim partner is willing to profess Islam. Undeniably, this circumstance does not provide flexible means for the assimilation with other races.

On the contrary, such a problem appears to be less apparent in Sabah. Inter-marriages of the natives and the Chinese in Sabah have long taken place since the majority of the natives practise animism and many Chinese do not regard religion as a main issue in a marriage union. It was only the Christian Chinese who were concerned about religion in forming the union. It also appears that the marriages between Kadazans and Chinese for instance, are widely practised because inter-religious marriages between the Christians and non-Christians (except Muslims) are not exactly unlawful. This resulted to the emergence of a sub-ethnic group called Sino-Kadazan. Such differences also reflect other general issues which are more concerned with perceptions rather than substances. For instance, the concept of religious tolerance is perceived differently based on each understanding of different social environments. Ordinarily, the Sabahans are viewed to be more liberal compared to the Malays in the Peninsula.

CONCLUSION

Having observed the comparisons between the Peninsula and Sabah, it can be concluded that the differences in ethnicity and religion in both territories were derived from historical development especially during the colonial period. Until today, the Malay centricity and Islam are dominant in the Peninsula, while Christianity prevail in Sabah among the majority of the natives, especially the Kadazans. Indeed, this part of the historical legacy of the colonial period has moulded the current reflection of multi-ethnicity and multi-religious society in Malaysia. In actual fact, the differences in ethnicity and religion based on location of different territories that had undergone different historical paths are eminent and cannot be applied as a single context at national level.

The popular usage “Let’s agree to disagree” is the best way to mirror the situation in Malaysia regarding ethnicity and religion. Differences in perceptions, beliefs and understandings on these two aspects, albeit fundamental, are cushioned by tolerance. It is hard to discard or ignore the issues of ethnicity and religion in a plural society, and Malaysia is no different. The colonials did create a pool of diverse population in Malaysia. Nevertheless, being in a place where the majority are from different ethnicity and beliefs, harmony and prosperity are formed naturally rather than imposed. In fact, it is the very imposition of political views that have marred Malaysia and cause polarisation and disharmony among its people.

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