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The History of Ethnic Relationship in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is a typical multi-racial and multi-religious country. It is a prime example of multi-racial society. One of the outstanding characteristics of its multi-ethnic population today is its highly variegated ethnic mix. The ethnic groups of Malaysia consist mainly of the Malay community, the Chinese community and the Indian community. Malaysia also has other ethnic groups like the Eurasians and natives of West Malaysia and East Malaysia; because of the multi-racial characteristic of the population, it also has varieties of culture, religion, social norms and values. This makes the country a rich field area for studying the interaction and integration among the various ethnic groups. It is important to know the recent level of interaction and integration in multi-racial condition likes Malaysia to set up some policies in idea to remain the solidarity. Without the information about the level of such things, then the country will face a serious havoc situation effected from unsatisfied feeling between all races.

Key words: Ethnic, Relationship, Stereotyping, Culture, Malaysia.

Introduction

Malaysia due to its geographical position has long been a strategic meeting place between the East and the West. Since it lies between the sea routes of India and China, it is the meeting place of great civilization of India and China. It is also a place where major religions of the world meet. The development of Malaysia as a multi-racial nation is closely linked to the above situation. People of different nationalities came and many eventually settled down in the various states in Malaysia giving rise to the ethnic mosaic of today. The presence of large numbers of Chinese and Indians is due to the colonial policy during the 19th century, when the British needed labour for economic exploitation of the Malay states. There was massive immigration of the Chinese and Indians during this period. This also gave rise to the ethnic problem in Malaysia now.

Before independence, the ethnic relationship of Malaysians fitted well into the attributes of plural societies. The economic condition of the various ethnic groups in Malaysia, under the 'divide and rule' policy (practice by the colonial) which was for benefit of the colonizer. The colonist manipulated the ethnic situation such that the various ethnic groups seldom had any opportunity for interaction. They also started stereotyping one another such as determined the field of work, Malays as farmers, Chinese as entrepreneurs and Indian as labourers. This was the ethnic situation of the Malays, Chinese and Indians in Malaysia.

Ethnic Environment:

The situation of multi-ethnic in Malaysia started after the establishment of the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore and later on the acquisition of the Malay territories, the British brought in many labourers from China and India to work in the Malay territories. The population of the Chinese and others increased drastically. By 1911, the total population of the Malays was 2,339,000 making up 53.6% of the total population of Malaya; the Chinese population was 1,291,686 or 29.6% and others were 733,119 or 16.8% (during that time Indian included in the word of 'other'). By 1947 (10 years before independence), the population of the Chinese had increased to 38.4%, whereas the Malays were 49.5% and other were 12%.

Furthermore, the colonial policy resulted not only in the increase of the population especially the Chinese but also created labour segmentation and occupational specialization according to ethnic groups. The Indians predominated in the estate sector, the Chinese in the mining areas and the towns and the Malays 'paddy' growing sector. The persistence of ethnic identification along economic specialization not only strengthened ethnic group boundaries and ethnic identities but also restricted multi-ethnic interaction. Accordingly ethnic divisions were reinforced by economic differences between ethnic groups. As a result, each ethnic group had misconceptions, prejudices, misunderstandings and stereotypes of its own toward other ethnic group. All these factors apparently contributed to ethnic problems in Malaysia.

However, today Malaysia does not fit into this situation as there is now more interethnic interaction in all places. There are also now more interethnic social gatherings and interactions especially for the young people in the schools, workers in the factories and also in the social clubs. Social interaction now goes beyond the markets and sundry shops. A plural society is not a theory but rather a way to describe the segregation among the ethnic groups.

Meanwhile, stereotyping of an ethnic group by another persists on even after independence in 1957. Even now many Chinese still regard the Malays as a 'lazy bunch of people' whereas many Malays regard the Chinese as 'unscrupulous rich businessmen'. There is also a myth that the Malays control the politics whereas the Chinese control the economy. Although, all these seem like started to be forgotten by young generation and added with the help of a policy of interaction and integration from the government (the policy will be discussed later), as long as the people believe in something, even if it is not true, it will have a social impact.

Obviously, great changes have been taking place since independence and the structure of ethnic division has been breaking down. For example, there are changes in the occupational patterns in Malaysia. All races were given in the same opportunities especially in the high level occupation like medical practitioners, lawyers, engineers and others. At the same time, the problem faced by *Muallaf* or Muslim converts in interaction and integration related to the ethnic background discussed above and other factors will be discussed in the next sub-topic.

Ethnic Stereotyping:

Generally, in Malaysia, cultural differences do not prevent the various ethnic groups of interacting and integrating across ethnic boundaries. However, certain religious values do have implications for interethnic interaction and integration. For example, it is hard to find a Muslim who would go to a temple. Similarly most of the Chinese (non-Muslim Chinese) would seldom go to a mosque and participate in its activities as the Malay value system different from the Chinese. Islām is monotheistic and exclusive whereas the Chinese religious beliefs are polytheistic and rather tolerant of others. While the Muslims are forbidden to worship idols, the Chinese do not believe so. The principles and rules stated in the al-Qurān are uncompromising with regards to the worshipping of idols. However, the Chinese worship idols and also their ancestors as a way of showing filial piety. Food is another hindrance for social interaction and integration. Pork is forbidden to Muslims and all Muslims adhere to this strongly. Some Muslims also restrict themselves to eating animals slaughtered in the name of Allah.

On the other hand, the Chinese consume pork as a traditional food item. They do not have much restriction for their food except that a small number of them are vegetarians and some do not take beef. Because of this, Muslims do not go to the Chinese restaurants where pork is served. This has therefore reduced the frequency of social interaction and integration between the Muslim Malays and non-Muslim Chinese.

Currently, there seems to be greater awareness among the ethnic groups sensitiveness towards one another. The Chinese understand that pork is not eaten by the Malays. Because of it, most of the organizers of social functions will prepare food which is religiously *halāl* for the Malays. Chinese friends inviting Malays for meals will generally take them to the *halāl* food restaurants. Ten years ago, most of the big hotels in Malaysia served pork as a main item on their menus. Now, as many Malays have become successful corporate figures and the number Malay professionals residing in the town is quite big, most of the big hotels in Malaysia have ceased to serve pork as it is costly to have two separate cold storage areas for meat, one to cater for the Muslims and another for the non-Muslims. As a result, there are more opportunities for interethnic interaction and integration in the big hotels amongst the wealthy Malays and Chinese.

Moreover, in school, children of the Chinese, Malays, Indians and others have plenty of opportunities to mingle at a young age except in independent Chinese schools, where most of the students are Chinese and in religious school where most of the students are Muslims. In conclusion, the interaction and integration between the races in Malaysia had a rose up indicators. Currently, there are also more exchanges of invitations and choices of friends from other ethnic groups.

One of the stereotyping of a Chinese who embraces Islām is known in the Malay language as '*Masuk Melayu*' (discussed in Chapter Two), which is known in Chinese language as '*jip Huan*' or become Malay. In

the Chinese *Hokkien* dialect, this means to enter the way of 'an uncivilized race'. As one of the identity makers of the Malays in Islām, inevitably when a convert embraces Islām, he or she will surely learn some of the Islamic norms. Not taking pork or taking pork is a maker of identity for the Malays and Chinese respectively. Circumcision is to the Chinese a Malay identity. This is usually taken as proof of '*masuk Melayu*' by the Chinese. Even though Islām is universal and even in China, many Chinese are Muslims. In Malaysia, Islām is identified with the Malays. Similarly, the non-Muslim Chinese and Malays have different customs not only regarding food, clothing, decorations on the houses, but also funeral rites. It is the religious obligation of the Muslims to wash the corpse, dress it properly, pray to Allah and bury it, usually without a coffin and with the face looking westward. For the Chinese, the corpse is usually kept in the coffin; 'paper money' known as 'heaven money' is usually burnt and the corpse will face the sky.

Thus, it can be seen that during the colonial era and a few years after independence, there was very little interaction and integration among the ethnic groups. As discussed before, the colonial policy was the main factor. Besides those differences in religions, food, culture and value systems further separated the Malays and the Chinese. The number of Chinese in Malaya who before independence intended to return to China was high. A big number of them had dual citizenship even after independence. The national status of a Chinese living in Malaya was a matter of considerable uncertainty during the colonial period. All persons born in British territory of Singapore, Penang and Malacca (during the colonial period, Singapore, Penang and Malacca put directly under colonial government and the people automatically have British citizenship, meanwhile the remain states considered as Malaya) held British citizenship but Chinese born in the Malay states (other than Singapore, Penang and Malacca) were not British subjects nor were they subjects of the *Sultān* (head of the states). They were treated by the British authorities as a British protected persons and were granted passports accordingly. Finally, after the independence, the British no longer to give British citizenship to those who are staying in Singapore, Penang and Malacca.

It happened as well on the side of education. The educational system was indefinite. The Chinese generally sent their children to the Chinese schools with their syllabus adopted from mainland China and this cultivated their nationalism towards China; Malays sent their children to *Madrasa* (religious school) and Indian to Indian schools. There is no space for them (Malays, Chinese and Indian) to interact and integrate as a community (Malaysian community). As a result, to the Malays, the Chinese were foreigners. They came from China and controlled the economy of Malaysia which the Malays feared greatly. Nowadays, the desire among the Chinese to go back to China has become history. The young Chinese do not have any memories of their fathers and forefathers who harboured the hope to go back to China. None of them would like to return to China as living is hard over there. However, the races stereotyping in Malaysia should look as good from the angle of ethnic situation. Then, it can be cleared why it happened.

Malaysia's strategic location has made it the target of cultural impacts and influences from countries such as China, India, Indonesia, the Middle East and those in Europe. Malaysia is a 'melting pot' of the culture of the great world. During the pre-colonial era and before the coming of Islām, Malaysia or Malaya it was known then, was very much under the influence of Indian culture. Till today, the Hindu influences are evident in the language, literature and customs. For example a couple who just married mostly of all races will be called '*Raja*' from the word Sanskrit which means 'free to do anything'. While Hinduism has had an influence, the most important influence on Malaysian history is Islām. Islām was introduced by the Indian and Arab merchants to the local people. When the Malacca *Sultān* became Muslim after 1400, Malacca became the centre of Islām and from it, the religion spread to other regions. Now, it is obviously a very important religion and is the official religion of all the states of Malaysia and is the religion of all the Malays in Malaysia. A big numbers of Indian Muslims, a few converted Chinese Muslims, as well as some native people are also Muslims. The influence of Islam can be seen in the existence of the mosques throughout the countries, the various customs related to Islām, the ways of clothing of the Muslims and the holidays of the Islamic festivals.

Meanwhile, in the colonial era, Christianity was introduced to Malaysia. Missionaries followed the conquest of Malacca by the Portuguese in 1511 and also later when Malacca fell to the Dutch in 1641. The British finally extended full territorial rights to the whole of Malaya. Presently, there are churches belonging to both the Catholic and Protestant denominations throughout the country. The influences of Christianity can be seen in the various schools, hospitals and orphanage homes set up by the missionaries. Besides that, Christmas is a national holiday in Malaysia. Unfortunately, during the British colonial era, the Malays were the most neglected ethnic groups in Malaya. The Malays were not given much chance to work and they stayed in the rural areas. The Malays also did not have much chance of a good education as they did not like to go to the Christian missionary schools. Furthermore, the colonial government had no intention of advancing the Malay ethnic group economically. The British exploited the ethnic situation in Malaya. They wanted the natives to remain a backward ethnic group so that they would not think of ruling their own country. The natives were stereotyped as a backward and lazy people and were not given much chance in education or other fields.

Luckily, since independence, Malaysia has undergone rapid changes and development in the various fields of activities. The policy of the government is to unite all the ethnic groups so that they can make this country their home. It has always been the policy of the government to maintain and strengthen goodwill, understanding and friendship among people of all races so that they ultimately will be able to regard themselves as members of one nation and as one people. This takes time but it must be the unshakeable determination of all of Malaysian to move ahead toward the goal. However, the problem in Malaysia is that it is a melting pot of some of the most important cultural traditions in human history. Here, the culture of China, India, the Middle East, Europe and indigenous *Polynesian* Malay culture have come together. Thus, the challenge is to harmonize the various cultures and this is not an easy task. The three main ethnic groups of Malaysia, Malay, Chinese and Indian are not only physically different from one another but also differ in a sociological sense. They have differences in customs, languages and religions. On the other hand, non-Malays Muslims who conform to Islamic norms are generally accepted as Malays. There is no colour prejudice at all. It appears that the main barrier to interethnic marriage is related to religions and customs.

In the recent past, the implementation of Malay as an official language as well as the medium of instruction in the schools and universities in Malaysia has enabled more young people to speak Malay. Besides, there are now more books published in Malay. The Main Malay newspaper has become the most circulated newspaper as many Chinese also read the Malay paper. The Malay language has indeed become the common language used for interethnic communication. After the Second World War, there were a few isolated outbreaks of interethnic violence. The race riot at May 13, 1969 or known as the May 13 incident could have easily got out of control. Fortunately, the ethnic leaders had mobilized opinion against violence and ethnic hostility. At the time of the riot, the Chinese were envious of the political position of the Malays while the latter were envious of the economic position of the former. The Chinese firmly believed that their wealth was due to their industriousness, thriftiness and adaptability to modern ways. The Malays believed that they were 'the sons of the soil' and they ought to control the country. They perceived that the Chinese were brought in by foreign rule and they should have any political stake or economic power in the country.

However, after independence, new development took place. Polarisation of population among the various ethnic groups was fuelled by political and economic competition besides differences in languages, customs and religions and demand for education of individual ethnic groups like the '*Merdeka University*' (means Independence University) for the Chinese. This led to mistrust among the various ethnic groups. Finally after the 1969 election, another ethnic conflict broke out. Since then, Parliament has passed an act forbidding the people from discussing sensitive issues such as the position of the *Sultān* (states and Islamic leader in Malaysia), the rights of *Bumiputera*, the official language and the official religion of the country. The government also implemented a new policy called New Economic Policy (NEP) to bridge the economic gap between the Malays and the Chinese. The two biggest ethnic groups, the Malays and the Chinese have their own values, norms and practices different from each other.

On the other hand, during and after the Japanese occupation (1945-1947), some Chinese joined the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). Although only a small number of Chinese become members of MCP, the Chinese were generally stereotyped as communists by the Malays at that time. Political and economic competition between the Malays and Chinese, the economic differences between the two ethnic groups and the differences in the value system, culture, languages and the long period of mistrust developed eventually into major communal conflict (on the May 13 incident). After that, especially after a new economic policy was introduced to eradicate poverty of all ethnic groups and then to attempt to give the Malays 30% of the management and share of the economy. The Malay language also was made the medium of instruction in all schools and even in the universities later. Many state government authorities also encouraged Malays to participate in commercial corporations lead by the government. There were also great structural changes. The public sectors especially the police, navy and air force have become staffed mostly by Malays. Most of the academicians and administrative staff of the Universities are also Malays. The number of medical practitioners, lawyers, accountants, engineers and other professional people from the Malay ethnic group has also been increasing rapidly.

As a result, there are also more Malays in the towns than in the past. There has also been more interaction and integration between the Malays and the Chinese, right from primary schools and secondary schools and universities compared to the colonial era. Besides schools and universities, there have been much more interaction and integrated in many places and many sectors and obviously there have also been more visits from one ethnic to another. Political leaders also take the opportunity to have 'open house' since it encourages social interaction and integration among various ethnic groups.

Finally, because of the introduction of the Malay language as a medium of instruction in schools and universities, the young Chinese can all speak Malay. Thus the Malay language as a unifying force has been successful. With the prolonged impressive economic growth of Malaysia, as well as the very low unemployment rate, the ethnic competition for economic welfare has been much reduced. However, personal interaction among the various ethnic groups in Malaysia is restrained by the different religions of the people. For example, as Islām

is a religion with strict rule, the Malay being the Muslim will not like to enter a house where a dog is present. Many Chinese families unfortunately rear dogs as pets and for security reasons.

On the other hand, some of the food originally belonging to one ethnic group has become neutral in ethnic identity. For example, '*Nasi Lemak*' (Coconut Rice) is a very well-known Malay food but now it is a food commonly taken by all ethnic groups in Malaysia. Similarly, '*Yong Tau Fu*', '*Mee*', '*Bee Hun*' and '*Kuew Tiaw*' are originally Chinese food but are now accepted by all ethnic groups. Furthermore, certain social behaviours are still a sign of particular ethnic identity. For example, wearing '*Songkok*' (the information about this thing will come later) is a sign of Malay identity and is unbecoming for the Chinese to wear it. Using chopsticks for taking food may not be acceptable to some Malays.

Thus, it appears that the two ethnic groups of Malays and Chinese have similar values in certain aspects but different in others. Their main differences are the way of life including the religion aspect. For examples, in religion aspect, the worshipping of the death is forbidden in Islām while it is a virtue to the Chinese. On the other hand, both the Malays and Chinese visit the graveyard to clear the grass growing around the tomb. The Malays used to read the verses of al-Qurān and offer prayers to Allah for the peace of the death during the *Eid* festival while the Chinese used to bring offerings like steamed cake with roasted pork to offer the death during the '*Cheng Ming*' festival. They also burn candles and incense while worshipping the death in the cemetery during this festival. These acts are strictly forbidden by Islām.

However, Malays as an ethnic group have great powers of absorption. Even as early as during British period there were some Chinese who had converted to Islām and integrated into the Malay group. They are called *Chinese 'Peranakan'*. Another example is about the Malacca state sultanate was Hindu initially but when their descendants embraced Islām, they too were integrated into the Malay group and become known as the Malacca Islamic sultanate. The Malays also had absorbed the *Javanese* (people who came from Java island, Indonesia), the Indian Muslims, the Arab Muslims and the *Orang Asli* (native people) Muslims. All these groups have been integrated into the Malay race. The Chinese in Malaysia being an ethnic group with their own distinctive culture, languages, beliefs and value system should be measured their interaction and integration into the Malay community. Then, Malaysia will be known as the most harmonies country in the South East Asia region. With an impressive economic growth of an average of 9% per year and full employment for the past five years, it is less likely an ethnic conflict would occur in Malaysia now.

However, the ethnic relationship through historical background above cause a policy enforcement in 1971 known as '1971 National Culture Policy' in Malaysia. Even though, the policy still on disputing agreement but the content was encouraged Malaysian to have better interaction and integration.

1971 National Culture Policy Of Malaysia:

Generally, Malaysia national cultures and practices based on '1971 National Culture Policy' which is focused on the three major concepts which are; Malay culture, suitable elements from the other cultures may be accepted as part of the national culture and Islām is an important component in the moulding of the National Culture. The policy emphasises values on courtesy, moderation, tolerance, harmony and cordial relations among family members, neighbours and community. As Malaysian respect each other's beliefs and faiths, cultural and religious festivals such as *Hari Raya* (or *Eid* Celebration for Muslim), Chinese New Year (for Chinese), *Deepavali* (for Indian-Hinduism), Christmas (for Christian), *Gawai* Day (for native people) and other auspicious occasions are given due importance. One of the unique features of Malaysia is its multi-racial population which practices various religions such as Islām, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism and Christianity. Each ethnic group has its own beliefs. Under the policy, Islām took place as the official practice religion of Malaysia but there is freedom of worship especially those who are non-Muslim. These will follow the Constitution of Malaysia which stated that Islām is a national official religion. The Malay Language is the national language of the country as mentioned earlier before. However, the people are free to use their mother tongue and other languages. English as the second language is widely used in business.

The policy also reflects different cultural traditions, including those of China, India, the Middle East, Europe, and the entire Malay Archipelago. Early Malay empires absorbed Indian influences (also mentioned before), such as Hindu epics and the Sanskrit language. The kingdom of Malacca, centered in the present-day state of Malacca, developed as an Islamic state, or sultanate, in the 1400s. Later, new cultural influences from Europe and China mixed with Hindu and Islamic traditions. A collective but distinctively Malay cultural pattern has emerged out of all these influences, with artistic expressions in literature, music, dance, and art forms. On the other hand, since the policy was introduced and practiced in 1971, there are some ongoing debates. Obviously, it was focusing on discrimination against the cultures of other communities. As a result, the other non-Malay cultures were seldom represented in government official functions, especially in the 70's and 80's when Malaysia started to promote national culture to the world in the name of 'Visit Malaysia' which is part of

persuading tourism. Since then, the implementation of such policy has created a lot of controversies, causing ill feelings among the various ethnic communities.

Therefore, in 1983, the major Chinese organisations in Malaysia submitted a 'Joint Memorandum on National Culture' to the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports of Malaysia. For them the cultures of other communities had been gradually sidelined since the implementation of the 'National Culture Policy'. On the other side they also proposed the revival of multi-culturalism. It highlighted the fact that Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural society, and that the national culture ought to be based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (the declaration was commonly used at western countries) and the relevant international covenants, the Federal Constitution (refer to the Constitution of Malaysia), and ethnic equality and democratic dialogue. Four principles to develop the national culture were given: firstly; the fine elements of the culture of each ethnic community must form the foundation of the national culture; secondly; the guidelines to the establishment of a set of common cultural values are science, democracy, rule of law and patriotism; thirdly; the common cultural values must be expressed through the multi-ethnic format; and finally; the process of moulding the national culture should be consistent with the principle of equality of all ethnic groups and the process of democratic consultation.

The 'Joint Memorandum', supported by suggestion through 'working paper' prepared by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) which discussed about making standard national culture policy of Malaysia. The 'paper work' narrowed the culture of Malaysia to cultural pluralism. The suggestion given that any understanding of culture's policy in Malaysia must take into account the interplay of the following forces:

1. Religion
2. Race and ethnicity
3. Cultural values
4. Economic power
5. Political power
6. Language transmission or values
7. National Building

Finally, the government of Malaysia responded all the suggestions made by various groups about '1971 National Culture Policy of Malaysia' through a declaration by 'Congress of National Culture' which held at the University of Malaya in 1990. Part of the declaration said: "... *It is important to remain and follow the '1971 National Culture Policy' in line with the Constitution of Malaysia, especially in several articles such as Article 11, Article 152, Article 153 and Article 160...*" The declaration gave a clear indication that national culture should be based on the elements of Malay culture, values accepted in other cultures (refer to other races in Malaysia) and Islām as the official religion of Malaysia.

Conclusion:

Within Malaysian society there is a Malay culture, a Chinese culture, an Indian culture, a Eurasian culture, along with the cultures of the indigenous groups of the peninsula and north Borneo. A unified Malaysian culture is something only emerging in the country. The important social distinction in the emergent national culture is between Malay and non-Malay, represented by two groups: the Malay elite that dominates the country's politics, and the largely Chinese middle class whose prosperous lifestyle leads Malaysia's shift to a consumer society. The two groups mostly live in the urban areas of the Malay Peninsula's west coast, and their sometimes competing, sometimes parallels influences shape the shared life of Malaysia's citizens. Sarawak and Sabah, the two Malaysian states located in north Borneo, tend to be less an influential part of the national culture, and their vibrant local cultures are shrouded by the bigger, wealthier peninsular society. Throughout Malaysia's brief history, the shape of its national identity has been a crucial question: should the national culture be essentially Malay, a hybrid, or separate ethnic entities? The question reflects the tension between the indigenous claims of the Malay population and the cultural and citizenship rights of the immigrant groups. A tentative solution came when the Malay, Chinese, and Indian elites who negotiated independence struck what has been called "the bargain." Their informal deal exchanged Malay political dominance for immigrant citizenship and unfettered economic pursuit. Some provisions of independence were more formal, and the constitution granted several Malay "special rights" concerning land, language, the place of the Malay Rulers, and Islam, based on their indigenous status.

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