Islam as a factor of
Class, Nationalism, and Ethnicity

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Ajmal is a Muslim living in Malaysia. He identifies himself not only as Malaysian but primarily as a Malay (which is always Muslim). He has lived most of his life in a rural village where his family has a humble existence from farming. With his country’s new emphasis on education, Ajmal has been sent to the university. The city is an entirely new way of life for Ajmal. He is now faced with the reality of Malays competing with the Chinese (and a few Indians) for economic standing. This competition, along with the mere presence of the non-Muslim population, serves to make Ajmal more conscious of his own religious identity, his social standing in comparison to non-native groups, as well as spark his interest in promoting Malay culture.

Competition and ethnic consciousness, however, are not the only factors that affect ethnic identity, nationalism, and social class. Malaysia is a pluralistic society in which many sociocultural dynamics are constantly functioning. It is difficult to pinpoint cause in this type of situation. Therefore, it is only possible to examine broad concepts which most probably interact in order to influence society. One extremely important influence in Malaysian society is Islam. Not only is Islam the official national religion, but it is also a social force that plays a large role in shaping the culture. Here, we will explore the ways in which this social force influences being Malay among other ethnics,
being Malay and poor, and being Malay and Muslim.

First of all, it is important to note that it is impossible to separate these concepts with concrete boundary lines. Consequently, there exists a degree of overlap and interaction between and among them. We may assume that these factors are indeed shaping behavior although the impact may not be apparent. Such a complex social interaction may go completely undetected by the people living in the society as well as being difficult for the outsider to describe. This description and analysis is precisely the goal of this paper. In this light, a few qualifications seem necessary. Firstly, it is important to keep in mind that it is easy to oversimplify the interplay between Islam and the investigated factors. However, attempts will be made not to oversimplify any aspect of this interplay. Secondly, there exists no way in which to systematically examine cause. Therefore, we can only speculate and take the available facts into consideration. Nonetheless, this analysis beyond cause is the anthropologist's niche, and the study goes on.

Being Malay Among Other Ethnics

Nash (1989:5) defines the building blocks of ethnicity as: 1) body - common "substance" shared among group members, 2) language, 3) shared history and origins, 4) religion, and 5) nationality - territory. These characteristics all seem
to be present in defining ethnic groups in Malaysia. Aside from the indigenous peoples of Malaysia, a fair number of Chinese and Indian peoples have taken residency in the country. Obviously, the Chinese and Indian groups are both ethnic groups in this society. When we regard the indigenous peoples of the nation, however, definitions become a bit more complex. According to the census in 1970, those who claimed to be "Malay" were predominantly non-Muslim aborigines and tribal peoples. "Malay" is also taken to be persons of Indonesian descent (Nagata 1974:335). However, the definition of "Malay" by the Constitution is purely a cultural one and differs from some common thought. Culturally, a Malay is one who is a Muslim, habitually speaks Malay, and follows Malay custom (Nagata 1974:335). At any rate, this Malay population actually divides into two separate groups -- Malays and Native Malays. The "Malay" group definitions seem to be similar to those of the Constitution, while the "Native Malay" group definitions seem to hold more closely to those in the census. In reference to Nash's definition of ethnicity, both groups share the same "body," shared history and origins, and nationality. The dividing elements, however, seem to be the most important to them. According to a Native Malay informant, both groups speak Malay, but the Native Malays' original language is usually Kadazan though some speak other tribal languages. (They are possibly some of the aborigines who consider themselves to be Malay in the census.) Malays,
However, generally speak Malay, often with English as a second language. Native Malays consist of various Catholic, Protestant, or tribal religions, whereas, Malays are always Muslim. It seems that this religious difference is more important than the language difference. In consideration thereof, it would follow that Islam is a very significant element in the definition of ethnic groups.

The presence of Islam in the Constitution seems to be further evidence that it is an important part of the Malay identity (Ratnam 1969:143). However, according to the Constitution not only Malays can claim Malay ethnic status (Nagata 1974:337). Due to their cultural assimilation, most of the Indonesian, Arab, and Indian Muslim contingents can legitimately claim Malay status. Not all consistently do so, however. Ethnic group boundaries are rigidly structured. Differences in ethnic groups can be detected not only by physical attributes, but the lifestyle of each group also differs (Native Malay informant). Ethnicity seems to determine the type of clothing that an individual wears, religion, and also seems to correlate with the occupation an individual pursues. When a marriage occurs between people of two different ethnic groups, the woman is "adopted" into her husband's group, and she also "adopts" that group's identity (Native Malay informant). Consequently, even though Malaysia is a matriarchal society (Fraser 1960:302), the children will gain their identity from the father's ethnicity.
Even though ethnic group boundaries seem to be rigidly structured, they are also permeable -- it is possible to move from one group to another. For instance, Nagata (1974:339) states that the variables of culture (including religion), social institutes, and identity have different significance in different contexts. Therefore, depending on the circumstances, an individual could identify himself as Chinese, Indian, etc. The focus of the situation determines the individual's perception of his own ethnic identity. In any case, the tendency is to identify one's self as only secondly "Malaysian," but firstly as either Malay, Chinese, or Indian (Nagata 1974:333), thus illustrating the importance of ethnicity in Malaysia. This importance is also shown by the resilience of Indian, Indonesian, and Arab identity even after several generations (Nagata 1974:345). The importance of Islam in conjunction with ethnicity will be discussed later.

Despite the importance of ethnic identity, some individuals may move rather freely from one ethnic reference group to another (Nagata 1974:340). This move, interestingly enough, may often occur without role conflict or marginality. In fact, the switch in ethnic identity seems to be positive. It allows the individual to avoid tensions due to inconsistencies in role expectations. Few are even aware of these shifts in reference group. Nagata (1974:343) calls this situational selection. She defines three pressures in the selection of ethnic group as: 1) the desire to express
social distance or solidarity, 2) expediency, or the immediate advantages of a particular selection, and 3) consideration of social status. There seems to exist an easy flow from one ethnic group to another, but what are the advantages? Why would this type of interaction exist if ethnic identity is so important? On a personal level, one may be able to avoid negative stereotypes by simply shifting identity. Quite possibly, a shift in identity may at times be beneficial by shifting into a positive stereotype. In addition, people often use ethnic terms to express association/dissociation with another individual (Nagata 1974:340). When speaking of individuals against whom there is some negative feeling, an ethnic epithet is used that is different from the one currently being claimed by the speaker. For instance, a village dweller may identify his neighbor as a Malay "like all of us here" until the neighbor's chickens stray into his yard, etc. Now the villager may be heard saying, "well, what can you expect, she's just an Indian" (Nagata 1974:341). In contrast, positive sentiments are likely to generate common identification of the same ethnic group.

Another advantage of situational selection may involve, as Nagata suggested, expediency. This factor may involve requirements of current place of residence (Nagata:341). For instance, many Indian Muslim business men with dual residence in Malaysia and India fall into this category. These men are mostly in the import/export business. They
maintain families and households in both Malaysia and India. They divide their time between the two households. Therefore, a shifting of their ethnic identity would be beneficial so as to fit into each culture. In this way, the person is not estranged in either culture.

Situational selection may also be used to determine which reference group the individual will identify with where social status and mobility are concerned. For example, a household of an Indian man and a Malay woman employ a servant girl who comes from a family of the same ethnic mix (Indian father, Malay mother). The girl normally speaks Malay, wears Malay dress, and considers herself Malay. Her employers also refer to her as Malay. However, when the topic of conversation turns to master/servant relationships, the ethnic variability emerges. According to her employer, it is preferable to hire servants of a different ethnicity than one's own family, otherwise, they will gossip to other members of the community about household affairs (Nagata 1974:342). Even though Malays prefer to hire non-Malay servants, they are usually Muslims. When this non-Malay ideal cannot be attained, ethnic fictions are used (such as the one above). At times, if it is impossible to consider the servant to be of another ethnic group, the employer will temporarily switch his/her ethnic status (Nagata 1974:342).

Due to the fact that Malaysia is a pluralistic society, ethnic group relations become important. It is true that these relations are influenced by Islam. This national
religion does seem to cross-cut ethnic boundaries. In fact, in Malaysia a convert to Islam is also thought to "become Malay," or "masok Malayu" (Nagata 1974:339). When the population was mostly "Malayu jati," or pure Malay, "masok Malayu" operated much more readily and easily. However, now that there are more Indian and Chinese in the society, the Malays' ethnoreligious consciousness has increased. Nagata (1974:339) suggests that now religious and ethnic reference groups are mutually independent. Therefore, to convert to Islam would not necessarily mean to convert to Malay culture and customs. At any rate, when an Indian becomes Muslim, he is considered to become Malay. This acceptance may be due in part to the shared heritage of the Hindu-based "adat" (custom). Both groups share similar culture customs, which makes the conversion to Muslim/Malay smooth and accepted. As well, the common association of Islam may reduce the salience of ethnic boundaries and create the possibility of overriding ethnicity (Nagata 1974:339). Therefore, at the conversion to Islam, men become equal and ethnicity falls to a power that is stronger than itself.

"Becoming Malay," however, operates much less readily for Chinese converts (Nagata 1974:345). Resentment between the Malays and the Chinese seems to be the cause of this rejection. Around the end of World War II, many clashes took place between the Malays and the Chinese concerning discrimination and equality (Hashim 1983:43). Distrust of the Chinese, suspicion and fear of Chinese political
ascendancy arose from these confrontations. These resentments have been passed on from generation to generation and are still in existence today. Not only do Malays reject Chinese converts, but the Chinese reject them also (Nagata 1974:345). The convert has chosen to abandon his Chinese heritage (whether for religious reasons or due to marrying a Muslim), and so he is left estranged in the society with no ethnic group to identify as his own. As well, when the Chinese convert enters the Islamic community, he can never forget that he is "really a Chinese" (Nagata 1974:346), but he no longer reverts to his Chinese identity (Nagata 1974:343). Consequently, this rejection and estrangement of the Chinese seems to be an exception to the unifying powers of Islam.

The ultimate idea in the equality of all men is the idea of interethnic associations. Many interethnic Muslim associations do exist which cross-cut ethnic boundaries; however, the bulk of the leadership tends to be of only one ethnic group (Nagata 1974:339). The concentration of one group in leadership seems to be a built-in bias in the association. In contrast, this may not be viewed as a bias by the society, but rather the concentration could be due to differences in leadership styles. Rather than create conflict within the association, a concentration of one ethnic group in the leadership would enhance effectiveness by decreasing misunderstandings based on cultural differences. Thus, an association with mostly Malays or
Indians in leadership positions may be looking to the betterment of the interethnic association rather than communicating that one group is better than the other group. As we will see later, the problems come between associations rather than within them.

Despite these interethnic groups, there seems to exist a Malay Muslim bias. Muslim institutions receive special aid for education, building mosques, pilgrimages to Mecca, etc., which is supported by the Constitution (Ratnam 1969:144,147). These privileges, however, conflict with the Islamic tenet that all men have equal social obligations, are equal before the law, and have equal work opportunities (Kamil 1970:64). Although these inequalities are in conflict with the ideology of Islam, they are not completely unexpected. After all, Malaysia has become a pluralistic society with many more boundaries between groups of people than it had previously. Islam and ethnicity, therefore, seem to overlap but are not totally encompassed in one another.

Being Malay and Poor: Class Differences

It is often claimed that Islam cross-cuts sociocultural boundaries -- it is a universal religion. Yet, how true is this statement? It seems that by nature, man tends to build walls and boundaries. As an ideology, Islam claims to be an egalitarian religion ("The Five Pillars") in which all human beings are seen as equal before God as long as each person
fasts and gives alms. The mandate is also issued that one should not favor one being at another's expense (Kamil 1970:63), thus eliminating any potential for inequalities. However, one imam was quoted to have said, "No system can sustain or work unless it adopts racism [ethnicity] and selfishness [class distinctions]" ("Islam"). This statement seems to be directly contrary to Islamic teachings -- a contradiction perhaps between ideology and practice. Since no sociocultural system exists without contradiction, it seems that Malaysia has its own version of contradiction.

Despite the standard of equality given to Muslims, social classes still exist in Malaysia. In order to look back at the roots of this type of inequality, it is necessary to look back at British colonialism in Malaysia. After the British took control of the country, they decided to exploit the rich natural resources it possessed for their own economic gain. The Malaysian people did not wish to run the tin mines and the rubber plantations for the British, and so this colonial power found another way. They brought Chinese and Indian people into the country in order to exploit these resources. Suddenly, Malays were confronted with a massive group of foreign peoples who were living in their homeland and controlling the economy. The Malays now find themselves the poorest in their own country. Of the poor households in the nation, 78% are Malay (Nash 1989:240), making their income still below that of the Chinese and Indian. More specifically, Chinese income is
approximately 2.44 times that of Malays, and Indian income is about 1.77 times the Malays (Nash 1989:240).

Not only is the majority of the wealth in the hands of a small minority, but the poor Malays are exploited by Chinese and wealthy Malay middlemen (Hashim 1983:67). This exploitation would imply that the differences are not only economic but also deal with social class. Such a widespread exploitation would suggest the existence of social differences between groups; otherwise, the discrimination would be scarce. Also in support of social levels is the level of knowledge within a group. Specifically, religious knowledge is unequal between classes. Theology is only known in the courtly circles, whereas the peasantry is unaware of these scholastic traditions (Osman 1980:46). Consequently, it seems that there are at least two social classes or levels within the society and even within the same ethnic group.

Social classes are also separated geographically. This type of trend is often found in societies where policies do not disallow people to seek to live near others who are similar to themselves. Geographic differences in settlement patterns can be seen not only locally but also nationally. For instance, on a local level, Chinese are often found living in urban areas, with Malays in rural areas (Hashim 1983:64; informant) and Indians spread throughout both rural and urban areas (Esposito 1987:178). Nationally, rural Malays are found mostly outside the cities on the peninsula,
while Native Malays (meaning non-Muslims) are found mostly on Borneo (Esposito 1987:178). This supports Esposito's (1987:178) claim that ethnicity correlates with geography, occupation, economic status, and religion. Thus, it seems that social class is entwined with ethnicity, occupation, and religion (namely Islam).

Class distinctions, therefore, are both economic and ethnic within Malaysia. These differences tend to be evident throughout society rather than solely within the non-Muslim population. This brings up the unanswered question of how class differences are reconciled among Muslims who believe that all men are equal. It is possible that Malaysians do not consider class distinctions as inequality. Nevertheless, the question remains unanswered, and social classes seem to exist in the Muslim and non-Muslim populations of Malaysia.

Being Malay and Muslim Nationalism

Nationalism in Malaysia is multifaceted. Two factors seem important in relation to nationalism in this Islamic society-- territory and religion. Each type of nationalism can be seen in Malaysia. At some points, both seem to work together, while at other points they seem to work against one another. Nevertheless, each type of nationalism can be seen functioning in society.

Prior to World War II, there was no single version of Malaysian nationalism but rather three streams -- Malay,
Chinese, and Indian (Hashim 1983:56). Since independence, however, a movement toward a Malaysian national culture and nationalism has developed. Wang Gungwu has stated that this new Malaysian nationalism should consist of two elements: 1) a nucleus of Malay nationalism enclosed by 2) the idea of Malay-Chinese-Indian partnership (Hashim 1983:56). This idea seems to have been supported by the emphasis on the Malay language as an integrating factor. In this way, language serves as the foundation for a Malaysian culture. The Malay-Chinese-Indian partnership would bring all three cultures together rather than implying one as better or more dominant than the others. This partnership would require a culture change or reorientation. Therefore, the success of this idea would be directly correlated with the amount of resistance in the culture to any type of culture change.

Is the idea of establishing a Malaysian nationalism more important than a Muslim nationalism? In some ways it is more important to be Malaysian (strictly based on land and language). For instance, the average Malay Muslim puts certain Malay tenets before his Islamic precepts (Fraser 1960:302). For example, the treatment of women seems to be governed more by Malay tenets. In the Islamic belief system women are not much more than property to a man. She has no voice in the society or in the home. Men and women are segregated in every area of society. According to Malay tenets, however, there is only segregation of the sexes when it relates to the mosque and religion. There is a feeling of
equality between the sexes. Often, if a woman has a better business sense than her husband, she will handle the family's finances, which would never be considered from an Islamic standpoint that was strictly fundamental. Also, Malays want full ownership of the country (Ratnam 1969:144).

Malays are thought to be the true "sons of the siol," or "bumiputra," and so the country is consequently thought to be rightfully theirs. The fact, however, that Malays view themselves as economically backward in comparison to the aliens in their country (Hashim 1983:25) poses some problems in promoting nationalism. This seems to be the point where Muslim nationalism begins to be more important than the Malaysian nationalism. Whether due to modesty or viewing themselves poorly, Malays seem to esteem themselves as unworthy. Therefore, they do not always cling to their Malay identity, but see their Muslim identity as more beneficial to them and as a more worthy cause. This could be due to the fact that Islam acts as a source of communal solidarity (Ratnam 1969:144). It poses the question of whether it is more important to be Muslim than to be Malaysian.

Islam has been the foundation of Malaysian culture since the 14th century (Osman 1980:47). It has only been since the preindependence period, however, that religion has assumed any political significance (Ratnam 1969:143). At this time, Malaysia's Constitution was formed, in which Islam was declared the official religion, and Malays were guaranteed special position in society (Esposito 1987:197).
It was only logical that Malay political groups would then develop, such as the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP). Despite the fact that both these groups are working toward special privileges for Malays, much conflict occurs between them. In fact, more conflict occurs between these Malay groups than between Malay and non-Malay groups (Ratnam 1969:146).

Interestingly enough, Muslim nationalism is widespread but does not seem to cross-cut all boundaries or social categories. Such a form of nationalism would potentially seem to be a unifying force, particularly the Islamic belief of equality among all men. However, the political activism within the Muslim community seems to splinter the expected and intended unity.

Islam in Malaysia is often considered to be the religion of the state rather than the religion of the nation. There is no head of the Muslim religion for the whole of the nation, but each state has its own sultan (Ibrahim 1978:214; Ratnam 1969:147). This correlates with the attitude of non-involvement of high ranking officials, while the local officials are often very active (Ratnam 1969:147). The sultan of each state is, in some respects, the carrier of Muslim nationalism. He has jurisdiction over both Muslim law and Malay custom in each state (Nagata 1974:334). Therefore, the way in which the sultan feels about his own Malayness can greatly affect how the people in
his state feel about their Malayness and their own feeling about nationalism in the country.

During the period of 1906 to 1926, Muslim/Malay nationalism experienced a tremendous boost (Hashim 1983:26). The Kuam Muda movement called for a return to the original teachings of Islam. It also wanted the active participation of Malays in education and economic enterprise. This "religious phase" played an important role in Malays seeing themselves as a distinct ethnic group (Hashim 1983:26). Malays soon began to consider themselves a significant group among the wealthy Chinese and Indian groups in the country. Muslim and Malay nationalism then became important in order to better their social and economic standing. After all, Allah (God) promised that Muslims were chosen and would prevail over unbelievers (Madan 1976:144).

Conclusion

In many societies, religion is not merely a belief system but a way of life. It is not just a part of life but is life itself. The same is true of Islam in Malaysia. Islam plays a significant role in most parts of life in Malaysia. This paper has explored some of these roles. More specifically, we have investigated the ways in which Islam influences class differences, nationalism, and ethnicity. There is no doubt that Islam does indeed have a great impact on Malaysian society. Islam seems to be the skeleton
that the culture is built upon. It is a complex and difficult structure to analyze, but it does give a clearer picture of the society and its functions.

This study has attempted to examine the structure of this skeleton by analyzing some of the meat on it. In this way, we have examined some of the aspects of society that seem to be most important to the people. One weakness in this paper, however, is the lack of information on lifestyle. This is an important factor in investigating the influence of Islam on the society. Therefore, more ethnographic research needs to be done focusing on the lifestyle of Malaysians and how this lifestyle fits into the larger structure.

Islam is a unifying force in Malaysia. It is, however, also an arena of discord, as seen by the struggles between ethnic groups as well as within Muslim groups. This belief system has been the basis of Malaysian society for centuries, which would build a strong case for Islam. The society built around this religion seems to work. The trend of this region of Asia appears to be one of fluctuating domination. One power will be in control until it falls to another, greater power. For example, before Islam was the dominant power in the region, Hinduism was dominant. It eventually fell to Buddhism, which fell to Islam. Thus, Islam seems only to be another example of this type of trend. Within Islam itself, we also see this type of flow. The power of Islam still prevails, and the society still
functions. Thus, we can sort out the characteristics of Islam throughout all of Malaysian society.
References


