MULTIPLE FAULTLINES AND IDENTITY OF INDIGENOUS CHRISTIANS/CATHOLICS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract
This paper explores the complexities of the contested political terrain in Malaysia that abounds in multiple faultlines within Peninsular Malaysia and between East and Peninsular Malaysia. The resultant rupture occasioned by the Allah controversy shored up the intricate interplay and asymmetrical relations between the dominant ‘fictitious self’ and subjugated ‘fragmented self’ of the minority ethnic and religious communities. Such rupture calls for a reconciliatory praxis by which the ‘subjugated and dominant self’ concertedly work towards restorative and structure justice instead of the pretentious simulation of a fictitious unity under 1Malaysia. Amidst the political upheavals, the Christians of the fragmented indigenous communities constantly negotiate their hybridized or multiple identities embedded in their crossed religiocultural traditions. By “traditioning,” the indigenous traditions embrace the diverse religious and local traditions through ‘multiple participation’ while their multiple identities remain staunchly grounded in the Christian faith.

Keywords

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a political terrain of contestation that continues to shape the multi-ethnosocial relations between and identity of the dominant Malay Muslims and the subjugated non-Malay ethnic and religious other. This paper attempts to describe the Rukun Negara and Federal Constitution as the structural framework of governance that upholds national unity amidst the plurality of cultures and religions in Malaysia. This will be dealt with in the first section. The second section explains Malaysia as a political terrain of contestation that occasions the need for the subjugated-reconciliatory praxis. This praxis is a process that involves individual and social reconciliation in which the demand for justice is central. The final section deals with the assertive process of the Christian minority, especially the Bumiputra Christians/Catholics. These Christians/Catholics resort to the process of hybridization to negotiate their identity in this shifting political terrain of multiple contestation.

1. RUKUN NEGARA AND FEDERAL CONSTITUTION: FRAMEWORK FOR AN ASYMMETRIC PLURALITY

Malaysia is a postcolonial nation state. The Rukun Negara and the Federal Constitution provides the structural framework for the regulation of the plurality of cultures and religions. The five principles of Nationhood aim to uphold a semblance of national unity in a multilingual, multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious nation-state. The Federal Constitution is a legal framework that upholds the intricate power relations in a volatile political terrain in which the ethno-religious asymmetry is keenly felt. The Federal Constitution upholds the Malay political dominance, the special position of Malays, Malay rulers, constitutional monarchs, Malay as the national language and Islam as the official religion of the state. Article 11.1 and Article 11.3 guarantee to uphold the constitutional rights of the ethnic and religious minorities to practice their languages, cultures and religions. The same constitutional freedom is curtailed under Article 11.4 that clearly stipulates that “State law and in respect of the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Labuan, Federal law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam.”

This legal framework affects the intricate power relations between an ethnic majority of 67.4 percent of Bumiputra (literally, ‘sons of the soil’), comprising the Malays and ‘other Bumiputra’ who are the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak. The majority of the Bumiputra are the Malays of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. This Muslim majority of 61.3 per cent in Malaysia also includes the Bumiputra converts of Sabah and Sarawak. This Muslim majority enjoys a
power relation that disfavors the non-Muslim minority comprising of the believers of Buddhism (19.8 percent), Christianity (9.2 percent), Hinduism (6.3 percent), and Confucianism, Taoism, tribal/folk/other traditional Chinese religion (1.3 percent). This asymmetric ethnosocial relation warrants further discussion (see section 2 below). Of special interest in this study is the minority Christian population of 2,392,823 in Malaysia, with 1,549,193 Bumiputra Christians from Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak.

In the postcolonial era of modern Malaysia, the asymmetry of ethnic and religious majority and minority is perpetuated in the imagined and institutionalized ‘epistemic communities’ (Mills 1997:79). The perpetuation continues under the administration of Prime Minister Najib and his slogan of ‘1 Malaysia: People First, Performance Now.’

2. A CONTESTED POLITICAL TERRAIN OF FAULTLINES

The aforementioned asymmetry in the imagined ‘epistemic communities’ of 1Malaysia is apparent in the Malay Muslims and non-Malays contestation. Farish Noor is right in pointing out that “Malaysia’s history has become a highly contested discursive terrain where the struggle to define Malay history and Malayness itself is fought” (3). But this is a battlefield where the religious identities of all ethnic communities are fought, resisted and negotiated. Yet there are other ethno-religious faultlines between the Malay Muslim Bumiputra and indigenous Muslim Bumiputra, the Muslim-Bumiputra and non-Muslim Bumiputra, peninsular Malaysian Malay Muslims and the Baujau, Bugis and Sulu Muslims of Sabah and the Dayak and Melanau Muslims of Sarawak, East Malaysia. The religious faultline does not discount the additional faultlines between the ‘unified subjects’ and the ‘fragmented subjects,’ sameness and difference, homogeneity and heterogeneity. In other words, the struggles of the non-Muslims to define their diverse ethnosocial-national histories and identities are taking place on the converse side of the divide as well. In fact the contestation on both sides of the divide is far more complex, differentiated and diverse than meets the eye.

In this terrain, the ethnic and religious minorities who constitute the “fragmented subjects” have to imagine/construct “what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we represent ourselves” (Hall 4). The exercise of (re)imagining Malaysia is never whimsical nor is it mere sloganeering of the “fiction of unity.” (Re)imagining Malaysia calls for a critical scrutiny and redress of “the dominance of an ethnic religious minority over the subjugation of ethnic and religious minorities” because many in the body politic “are wary of an ‘epistemology of ignorance’ that calls for their complicity as ‘[s]ignatories to the Contract’ in ‘maintaining the fiction of unity’ (Bong158).
2.1. 1MALAYSIA: A CONTESTED POLITICAL PROJECT

The simulation of “fiction of unity” through the imagined “epistemic communities” has inadvertently proven to be untenable. Sharon Bong, a Malaysian feminist theologian, warned that doing unity “in the construction of a fictitious subject, that of 1Malaysia – as fixed, stable and immutable ... without adequate cognition and redress of the root causes of this conflict, is dangerously myopic” (154). The cautionary query of Susan Maria Michae is timely: “Where are we heading with the 1Malaysia concept that our Prime Minister introduced? Perhaps it is time to realize that spreading a slogan isn’t good enough to bring a nation together. What matters is how many of us Malaysians truly believe that we are one” (11). The condemnatory remark of Stephanie Sta. Maria on the Prime Minister is even more cutting: “It was your chance to leave a legacy by uniting the nation to stand up against the real enemies – ignorance and fear... When it came to delivering your “People First” promise, you chose who those people would be. When it came to “Performance Now,” you failed to see the sense of urgency” (10).

2.2. THE RUPTURE OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

Deserving special discursive attention is the recent shift of the faultline between the dominant majority Muslims and subjugated minority Christians. This shift is occasioned by the desecration of places of worship in the first weeks of January 2010. Religious violence reared its ugly head in the splashing of paint and torching of at least 10 churches, arson attacks on two surau, throwing stones at a Sikh gurdwara and hurling wild board heads at two mosques. The bone of contention has been the constitution, legal and political contestation of the use of the term Allah by the Christian minority.

2.3. THE ALLAH CONTROVERSY

The Allah controversy has had its share of tussle between the Catholic Church, the government and the judiciary. The controversy dates back to the 1986 government ban on non-Muslims, occasioned by the use of the Arabic words like “Allah,” “solat,” “Kaabah,” and “Baitulaah” (Surin 2010). In 2008, Herald was prohibited from using Allah in the Bahasa Malaysia section. When Herald contested this legally in 2009, the High Court ruled in favor of Herald upholding the Church’s “constitutional right” to use the word Allah. When the government appealed, the Court of Appeal overturned the High Court decision in 2013. The Catholic lawyers filed an application with 26 questions that refer to the Federal Constitution, administrative law and the judicial power. The legal application questioned the power of the home minister to ban the use of Allah which was scheduled to be heard in the Federal Court on 24 February 2014. What is apparent, as Sharon Bong argues, “the places
of worship that were desecrated become sites of contestations of sameness/difference: Allah as referent for God versus Allah as referent for neither the ‘Muslim God’ or the ‘Christian God’”(150). The Federal Court’s decision on June 23, 2014, has rejected a challenge from the Catholic Church seeking to overturn a ban on non-Muslims using the word “Allah” to refer to God. The same ruling has put this legal battle to rest.

2.4. THE DOMINANT-RECONCILIATORY DOMINANT SUBJECTS

In the face of such asymmetry that has reared its ugly head in religious violence cited above (Section 2.3), it is religiously laudable for the dominant Malay subjects to support the Catholic Church or Christianity in what Sharon Bong called the dominant-reconciliatory trajectory or praxis (163). This is evident in Azmi Sharom’s note: “The Catholic Church must not back down on this matter. It is in the right and if it gives in now, it will set the precedence that a bunch of thugs with firebombs can dictate the type of country we live in … we must never allow the mob to rule” (N48). What needs further exploration and discussion is what I term the subjugated-reconciliatory praxis of the fragmented subjects (non-Malay Christians) who seek redress and justice along with reconciliation.

3. NEGOTIATING THE RELIGIOUS ASYMMETRIC RELATION AS CHRISTIAN MINORITY

In such a volatile political terrain, the Christian minority has to negotiate the contestation through a reconciliatory praxis as subjugation subjects. The reconciliatory praxis does not foreclose the demand of justice (Section 3.1-3.3). At the same time, the negotiation of such subjugation calls for an assertive process of forging a hybridized identity. This assertive negotiation is all the more demanding amongst the indigenous Christians in Malaysia (see section 4).

3.1. THE SUBJUGATED-RECONCILIATORY PRAXIS

The advocacy for a reconciliatory praxis is based on the many unresolved questions in the call to “turn the other cheek.” This call has uncritically glossed over the differences and the injustices in the hasty call for forgiveness and peace. The cry of SL is truly indicative: “How much more the good Muslims, Christians, the Sikhs, the Hindus have to sacrifice for the sake of ‘peace’” (Herald11). Deborah Loh, the daughter of a pastor, poses her challenge: “How much does the Malaysian Church’s instinct for survival [get] in the way of holding government leaders accountable” (157). Sharon Bong shares her dilemma in her questions: “To what extent are Christians, as members of the ‘epistemic communities,’ complicit in the episteme violence of being silenced as ‘non-Malays and non-Muslims’? Has the
Christian praxis of forgiveness been coopted by certain quarters in ‘maintaining the fiction of unity’?” (156).

The subjugated-reconciliatory praxis of the fragmented subjects has its basis in the clarion call of the “fictitious subjects” or the Christians calling for what is best labeled as “cheap” peace and forgiveness. When interviewed the day after the torching of the Metro Tabernacle Church, the senior pastor said, “The Church did not condone such acts but would forgive those responsible” (156). A newspaper carried a Christian exhortation that states: “Christians, follow the teachings of Jesus and love them all – including the perpetrators of these acts. Exchange acts of hatred with acts of love so that the rakyat of all faiths remain united once more” (Sharom N28; Bong 156). The convenient resort to the praxis of “forgiveness” begs the call of the “fragmented subjects” for a just redress of the systemic ethnic and religious inequalities and inequities in Sabah, Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia.

### 3.2. RECONCILIATION AS INDIVIDUAL-SOCIAL PROCESSES

In the resort to the reconciliatory process, the “fragmented subjects” need to recognize that reconciliation is more complex than “we turn our cheeks; let’s just forgive and forget.” Reconciliation involves personal and social reconciliation. Commenting on individual and social reconciliation and their relation, Robert Schreiter, an American theologian committed to the nexus between theology, conflict and reconciliation explains: “Individual reconciliation… focuses upon the restoration of the damaged individuals” occasioned by events of the past while “social reconciliation focuses upon the reconstruction of the moral order [and] more directed to the future” (183). Schreiter adds, “both draw upon the resources of truth-telling, the reconfiguring of narratives, and the refashioning of relations of the past” (183).

Moreover the reconciliatory-fragmented subjects need to initiate a process of reconciliation that calls for restorative and structural justice. For Schreiter, restorative justice, “calls for some compensation to victims for what they have lost” (182) like educational funds without implying that the injustices committed can be undone. Yet restorative justice “tries in some measure to make amends for the evil of the past by dealing with its consequences still with us in the present” and “the decisions made carry with them great symbolic and ritual import, because they not only address the past but also say something about the kind of future a society wants” (182).

Restorative justice is a prelude to structural Justice. The latter tries to address the inequities, the socio-economic imbalances in society which fostered the violence in the first place. Schreiter asserts that structural justice “often involves
difficult issues such as redistribution of land, reclamation of property, restructuring educational and social services in a society so that the poor or the marginalized are not disadvantaged” (183). This entails the building of a just society as humanly as possible where the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, political structures of good governance, agencies for human rights and modes of economic development are legally in place and constitutionally guaranteed.

Ultimately, the success of social reconciliation depends on the commitment of the reconciliatory-fragmented subjects who are committed to resolutely guide the process of social reconciliation with a vision and mission “to imagine a new society which is in continuity with its past yet not beholden to the evil that had been perpetuated” (183).

4. NEGOTIATING INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

Of particular concern in this contested terrain is the second assertive process of how the indigenous Christians/Catholics negotiate their identity in Malaysia. This process of identity formation is complex, hybridized and therefore multiple, context-specific and situational. According to Premawardhana “identities need not be multiplied; they are multiple” (77). Jeannie Hill Fletcher concurs, “One’s ‘Christian’ identity ought not be thought of as isolated from other communities, nor as unaffected by so-called ‘non-Christian communities’ (religious or cultural)” (99). This assumption presupposes that each home religiocultural tradition of the different ethnic communities in Malaysia is already a crossed tradition for reasons that religious traditions, as Premawardhana argues, are “not pure origins but cross-fertilizations and hybridizations” (93). In the process of “traditioning” that Jeffery Carlson describes, traditions are already cross-fertilized or hybridized due to selective reconstruction (78-79). Thus Albertus B. Laksana summarily concludes, “local cultures with their religious components – which, in the case of Java, also include layers of Hinduism, Buddhism, and native spirituality – have become an integral part of local Christian identity” (502) that facilitates the practice of what John Berthrong calls “multiple religious participations” (35; Voss Roberts 49). In this sense, Carlson is right in postulating that “all these traditions and identities are more an amalgam of impermanently related bits and pieces than the pristine singularities” (qtd. in Premawardhana 90).

4.1. HYBRID/MULTIPLE IDENTITY

As Homi Bhabha postulates, “the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are neither the One...nor the Other.... But something else” and “it is from this hybrid location of cultural value – the transnational as the translational – that the postcolonial intellectual attempts to elaborate a historical and literary project” (248).
The notion of hybrid identities is situational in that it depends on the context and level of understanding of the conversational interlocutor. An indigenous person may identify her/himself to the outsider, within or outside of Malaysia, who have little interaction with and knowledge of the indigenous peoples as a Malaysian who is ethnically an Orang Asli in West Malaysia, or a native of Sabah and Sarawak. However, to her/his neighboring villagers, s/he will immediately identify her/himself as Semai, Murut and Iban. In an international conference, an indigenous academia in a university will identify her/himself as part of the local university community and global intellectual community. At an ecumenical conference, s/he may identify her/himself as a Semai, Murut and Iban Christian or Catholic. In the complex terrain of contestation, an indigenous Christian or Catholic lives with a hybrid identity embedded in a ‘crossed tradition’ that grounds her/his sense of personal identity. This home-identity is her/his “primary cultural identification in order to survive mentally” (Rizvi, 206-26; Hall, 1-17; Svensson, 139). In an age of globalization, the hybrid ethnic identity has enabled an indigenous person to navigate within the intra (“the multiple streams of religiousness”) and inter (lines between ethnicities and religions) boundaries of the nation state and also those that demarcate the local and global as well.

### 4.2. Identity Rooted in Indigenous Cosmology

There is an indigenous saying in Northern Luzon of the Philippines, among the Igorot in the Mountain Province: “You can take an Igorot out of the mountain but you can never take the mountain out of an Igorot.” This idiom suggests that the sacred cosmology or spirituality is in the blood of the Igorot/indigenous communities. In other words, the Christian or Catholic identity can never be dichotomized from the indigenous cosmology-spirituality. The holism of the indigenous religious beliefs is the basis to postulate that the indigenous identity is never single but multiple and therefore hybridized. In referring to Biraban and his hybridized belief, as he was a Christian of the Aboriginal tribe called Awabakal, Anne Keary remarks: “Biraban remade the Christian deity as an indigenous being, incorporated him [sic] into an Awabakal cosmological and geographical order... and portrayed him as a special yirriyirri [holy] figure for Awabakal men while portraying himself the role of Jehovah’s interpreter” (282). The indigenous Christians/Catholics are awakening to a sense that they can be Christians/Catholics and indigenous/tribal at the same time. To this end, the address of St. John Paul II in Alice Spring was truly affirming: “The Gospel now invites you to become, through and through, Aboriginal Christians... You do not have to be people divided into two parts, as though an Aboriginal had to borrow the faith and life of Christianity, like a hat or a pair of shoes, from someone else who owns them.”

### 4.3. Identity Embedded in the Spirit World
The religious cosmology of the indigenous peoples is always associated with the spirit world in which the centrality and respect of the ancestors are indispensable and integral to their religiocultural identity. In this vein, C. Mathews Samson urges: “scholars working in Mesoamerica have much to learn from the Maya worldview, which informs us that it is important not only to bring the ancestors into a new space and time but also to look for signs of balance, harmony, and equilibrium in the midst of social changes that none of us can escape” (70). Moreover, Samson argues: “In contexts of violence and massive cultural change,” the “historical memory and testimonies (the act of recounting the stories of individuals and peoples) augment those other discourses (religious and secular) that daily define” (70) what is common and particular in the religious identity of indigenous Christians/Catholics.

These indigenous Christians/Catholics need “to find a place from which to act within the world, a need to blur (and perhaps cross) boundaries in the continuing struggle to renew a sense of self and community” (72). For them, “the past is not simply left behind, and space has to be made for the ancestors who may yet speak again in unimaginable places” (72). It is not surprising that the hybridization of identity has become an undeniable reality in the life of the indigenous Christians/Catholics. The richness of hybridity cannot be simplistically dismissed as religiously unacceptable or unorthodox for reasons that Samson has insightfully asserted: “Pluralism itself becomes a resource for re-enchantment rather than a threat” (72).

CONCLUSION

In the postcolonial nation state of Malaysia, the processes that facilitate the shifting of the faultlines are dynamic, complex and even multilayer/level/sectoral on both sides of the divide. Managing the complexities and narrowing of the gaps in these divides call for redress of the inequalities and inequities of the ‘fragmented subjects’ to ensure the feasibility of reconciliatory praxis of the “fragmented subjects” in imagining the “epistemic communities” in Malaysia. In this contested political space, hybridization of the religiocultural identity and beliefs of the indigenous Christians/Catholics has to be emphasized as they negotiate the ethnosocial-national boundaries in Malaysia and the global world. Hybridity and pluralism that are accommodative of the complexity, differences, commonality and particularities only enrich the moral fabric of the “epistemic” and the multiple identities of the indigenous Christian communities in Malaysia.
Works Cited


