

## Islam and Muslim in Multi-religious Society: Realities and Challenges in Sabah, Malaysia

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**Abstract:** One of the sources says that Islam has come to Malay World in eleventh century of *Masihi* and this is supported by the discovery of gravestone in Champa, Gresik Java as well as Kedah together with the discovery of stone monument in Terengganu dated 1303 *Masihi*. This situation is exposing the phenomenon of Islam's growth in the Peninsular Malaysia earlier from the Borneo Isle where it has been receiving Islam during the 15<sup>th</sup> century of *Masihi* intermediated by *al-Makhdum*. Thus, this argumentation is at least influencing the history and the situation of Islam's development of the Borneo especially in Sabah amongst the native people. Nevertheless it is indisputable if we assumed that the empirical battle to authorize religion of Islam from the Peninsular Malaysia has empower an inducement towards the local fundamentalists to accentuate the Islamic spiritual *da'wah* at Sabah until Islam has been the official religion of the state. Hence, from the prepared revision and analytical reflection, we shall examine and explore the history as well as the growth of Islam's prospect especially at Sabah by considering the aspect of Islamization reality and current religious activities including Christianization. We also explore the development's factors, institution and also the person in authority towards this issue. It is adequate to highlight that Islam's nuance at Sabah, which situated in the north of Borneo Isle, is multi-dimensional in its characteristic, which is in itself is a unique state in the country.

**Key words:** Islam • Sabah • Christians • Muslim and non-Muslim relation • Religion issue

### INTRODUCTION

Assuming the future of current Muslim community is not supposed to be perceived from today era only, yet the chronology of historiography should be observed as well by examining the future path and prospect of Muslim community in multi-dimensions encompassing the past and today. If we examine the past community, we will be able to observe a generation of *khair ummah* whom engraving the history of Islamic civilization in total. The record of knowledge enhancement that is very fascinating attracted the interest of West scholars to be the 'disciple' of us. Though, the engraved are only able to be acquired

through the vista of history. In contra, the proudness of us today is for the civilization and achievements of the West that is extraordinary until it enslaved us as the faithful followers in a lot of knowledge discipline [1,2].

Though from the transition of knowledge culture, Islam never hold us to learn other civilization culture and excellence for lesson of comparative advantages because Islam encourages *lita'arafu* process that is reciprocity attitude; get to know, learn, share beneficial matters, contribute something that suits Islamic *tasawwur* (worldview) [3] that also limit us in line with the Islamic *syariah* which is deep-rooted based on *manhaj al-Quran al-Karim* dan *Sunnah* of the prophet *Rasulullah s.a.w.*

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That is how a 'journey' reflecting the excellence of previous Muslim community urges us to be well-developed not only based on the excellence in *ta'abbudi* prospect but also dominance in total. Malaysia for instance, the title of developed country is essentially to be praised, yet deep observation is also essential to examine does the material development is already enough to accomplish *baladatun toyyibah wa rabbun ghafur* or not. In other definition, the future of Muslim community needs to be established by examining and analyzing the current reality and challenges. Hence, we will scrutinize the state of Sabah prospect through Islamic optic by highlighting the reality discussion on Islam development as well as its challenges especially the one that is encountered by Sabah Muslim society.

It is needed to be known that researches about Islamic nuance at Sabah is not moving actively as other states in Malaysia, though it has been existed rigidly outside the Islamic epistemology discussion especially [4,5,6]. Hence, author is saying that this study will give some concrete pictures based on empirical argumentation of the past and currently.

#### **History and Developments of Islam at Nusantara Region:**

Reading the history of Islam development in Nusantara, various theories has been suggested by scholars. Some has claimed that the early arrival of Islam was in *Alam Melayu* [1,7] by the Arab, India and some of them claimed it was from China. It is said that through trading urbanization Islam came. However, facts from the event that Islam takes place, responsibilities of the first generation that embraced Islam, early relationship of West Asian traders as well as Nusantara with some inscription statements and empirical data in this region, it is rigidly stated that Islam has come from the Arab and not from India [8,9]. This situation was supported by John Crawfurd when he observed the strength of the Arabs armies at that time had influenced the spread of Islam to be established at the East states especially in *Alam Melayu* through the *mubaligh* that had roles in spreading Islam upon multi-prospects, whether through trader, marriage or consistent *da'wah* activities [7,10]. The same issue was also stated by T.W Arnold [11].

This fact was also served as the evidence of Islam arrival especially at Malaysia. According to Wan Hussien Azmi, Islam arrival and development at Malaysia is one of the researches area that was vital to describe an accurate picture for Islam history especially at Nusantara and in *Asia Tenggara* at general [12]. Malaysia geographical location is also shows us that it cannot be separated from

Malaya Isle. What had happen within one area surely would affect Malaysia. Moreover, the business relationships from Arabs merchants show us that if they dropped by at the business harbor at Indonesia, they eventually will drop by at Malaysia harbor. Hence, the theory of some scholars who claimed that Islam had arrives at Malaysia since the century of 7 *Masihi* was actually originated from this theory and was not non-empirical [13]. This situation was supported by the discovery of Kelantan gold dinar on 1914 that marked the positioned place of Kelantan Islamic at the second middle of decade from 12 M [13].

But, some of the Orientalists claimed that Islam over this region was originated from India, other than Arab and Persia [14]. Among of their arguments are there were the same *mazhab* practiced by the residents form both places and this is also authenticated by the voyager, Ibnu Batutah [15]. The discoveries on relationships between South India and Malaya Isle are actually some evidences that show the preacher originated from India is involved too in culture assimilation processes and *fikrah* Islamization, besides their role as Nusantara preachers.

Yet, author does not deny the role that has been played by the da'ie from Arab in context on early Islam spread to this region [15]. Despite the accurate date of Islam arrival is around the third century of *Hijrah* which is 10 Century of *Masihi*, Islam is well spread at Malaya on the 14 century as stated in the Terengganu stone monument that stated the law enactment enforced at that time which is 702 *Hijrah* which is 1303 *Masihi* [16]. The main highlighted conclusion here in accordance to Mahyudin Yahaya is Islam arrived to Malaya since the first century of *Hijrah* or seventh *Masihi*. The first district that accepted Islam is North Sumatera district and the first Islamic governance is Perlak that is founded by the Arabs 840 *Masihi* [7].

Hence through this scholarly observation, it show the starting point of Islam historiography development based on accurate theory and it enhances from day to day based on factually chronology. The development of Islam as a result of its own people is a matter that is considered as *tabi'i* from the Islamic perspective as the religion obligates the people to spread the religion based on the concept of *bi al-hikmah wa al-mau'izah hasanah*. Because of its urges to spread Islam not on the basis of forcing, the development process is slow. It is not wrong to claim 9 *Masihi* as the starting point of Islam amongst the local people and on 10 *Masihi* as the start of Islamic wide expansion all over Malaysia until Muslim community was formed [12].

In nutshell, it is clear that Islam has arrived and established at Malaya and the theoretical assumption has shown that abundance of researches regarding history of Islam in Malaysia is more aligned towards Malaysia peninsular. Yet, the development of Islam in Borneo Isle especially at Sabah is a bit slow not only from the development aspect, but also towards its comprehension due to some factors though there were institutions, societies and individual whom had took part to spread the *Deen* within the society. Therefore, on the next chapter, author will try to expand Islamic prospects in Sabah to examine the authentic progress together with its reality and challenges encountered by the natives of this below the wind state.

### Prospects of Islam in Sabah

**Brief Introduction to Sabah:** Sabah is a state located at the north of Borneo Isle and become Malaysia's second largest state after Sarawak. It covers area with width 72,500 kilometer square with beaches along 1,440 kilometer as the South China Sea located at the west beach, Sulu Sea at the East Coast and the Celebes Sea at the south [17]. Sabah is divided into two main regions which are the West Coast (Kota Kinabalu) and East Coast (Tawau, Sandakan, Semporna, Lahad Datu, Kunak) [18]. Sabah is also known as 'the state below the wind' because of its location which is located outside and north of storm zone area. Sabah too is synonym with the title of multiracial community. The native communities are consists of at least 30 races and ethnics that uses more than 50 languages and not least than 80 dialects. The main ethnics are consists of: Kadazandusun (that is a third of the total Sabah's population) Murut, Paitan, dan Bajau. The other native's residents are including Bonggi, Iranun, Ida'an and Brunei. In addition, the Chinese is the biggest non-native community. With that, Sabah has plenty multiracial ethnics with their own cultural background. According to the archeological artifacts, Sabah has been occupied by the population at least since 28,000 years ago. Islam has approached Sabah by the end of tenth decade through the Arab's and India's merchant and also as a result of the expansion of the Brunei Malay Sultanate regime [18].

The European came to Sabah two decades later. During 1775, the Hindia-East British Company has opened a merchant center at the Balambangan Island. Though, Sabah has been administrated by the Borneo South British Chartered Company from 1881-1942 as after that the Japanese army occupied this state. After the destruction due to war, Sabah became the British colonized state until 31<sup>st</sup> August 1963 after it gain its own

government from the British Empire. On 16<sup>th</sup> September 1963, Sabah and Sarawak, Singapore and Malaya have become Malaysia [19].

**Review of Historiography of the Arrival of Islam in Sabah:** Considering the future and challenges of Islam at the North region of this Borneo, historiography review is vital. This is due the chronological event that happen either before the independence until today can be examine through the scrutinize analysis of history. Thus, the effort of reviewing the community of Muslim at Sabah need to be started by reviewing the background and Islam's history at Sabah from the early Sulu's Sultanate era and Brunei's Sultanate era. Both of them are the earliest conquerors of Sabah and they are a part of association from the Islam's ruler that exists at the Malay Isle [20]. Jamdin Buyong, an academia explained that both of them have become the vital details in discussing the early history of the spread of Islam at Sabah. This is not only due to their location that was the nearest to state of Sabah but also the history of Bajau and Malay-Brunei ethnics population at both coast region of East and West of Sabah has been the supporting evidence of both sultanates towards introducing and preaching Islamic belief among the native communities [21]. Thus, author will argue from different transition of dimension whether involving the political, social and other aspects conceptually formed from abundance interference of Sabah non-aborigine.

The spread of Islamic belief has accumulated plenty of conflicts in Sabah's history. The conflicts is not only the events that happen after independence but also what has happen before that especially during the colonization. As this is the beginning of foreign influence in local political issue during that era, it is also a start of changes in the religious range in this state. The 18<sup>th</sup> century recorded the start of power interference from the colonizer when the earliest merchant center established in Balambangan Island. In 1761, [22] Kudat is the starting point of "interference" thus inculcating the spirit of defending the notion honor until affecting the spirit of Islam sovereignty itself.

If we observe the history in details, it is examined that Islam has occupied Sabah since the tenth century of *Masihi* from the merchant activities between the Arabs and Chinese [23]. Although there is other opinion that Islam has subjugated since the seventh century of *Masihi* based on the discovery of gravestone by the local Muslim at Bud Dato, Jolo from 1310 M and it is find out that this discovery is earlier than the arrival of Syarif Awliya

al-Makhdum [24] who is an *ulama* where he is also believed to preach Islam for the local preachers at Sulu Isle on 1380 M and well-spread to Sabah East Coast.

Yet, another sources stated other information that the acceptance of Islam among Sabah local people is on the century of 15 M. when a person from Idahan ethnic, Abdullah who lived in Lahad Datu embraced Islam on 1408 M through al-Makhdum [23]. This is based on the findings of handwritten document with 140 pages in *Jawi* writing with Idahan languages in Sepagaya village at Lahad Datu. The content is as well covers the Islamic teaching including the practical manual on praying and others [22]. In short, though there were a lot of facts regarding the arrival of Islam at Sabah [22,25,26], yet the acceptance from Sabah native residents had only started from the early 15 century [26] and this is when the episode of their battle on Islam sovereignty at the North Borneo Isle begins.

**Reality and Challenges of Islam in Sabah:** In order to have clearer pictures on Sabah Islamic development situation, author has made Islamic terminologies transition though the indirectly affected dimensions towards this state Islam development. The terminologies are divided to several dimensions that is from the author claims, it is based on historical method to give the accurate picture of situation that happen at Sabah together with the society reactions encompassing political, social, education, Christianization movement and other aspects.

**Islamic Transition from Sabah Political Dimension:** Before Sabah independence, the historical transcripts did not discover any special institutions or party in this state that was actively move based on politic platform. It is only the collaboration of communities that formed society based on races and religion that exist. This is because since the British North Borneo Chartered Company governed around 1881-1940 which enforcing secular system especially in education system has gave negative impact towards Sabah community [27]. This situation urges the community at that time to unite and defended their rights as Sabah natives especially towards Christianization movement issue [22]. Though before the arrival of British, most of the districts were conquered by Sulu and Brunei Sultanate, yet, their harmonization and peace had never been threatened because both of its cultural background values had similarities with the local culture and were not against each other [22].

This issue was continuous during Japan colonization of Sabah during 1941-1945 and the administration era of British Colony during 1945-1963. Yet, through the urge awareness plus the condition of other countries around Malaysia that fought for independence such as Indonesia, Malaya, Singapore and Brunei, it had stimulate awareness among the Muslim of Sabah to fight for their independence and then inculcating Islamic teaching [22] as a result of establishment of few societies including *Persatuan Sahabat Pena Malaya*, [28] *Parti Barisan Pemuda (BARIP)*, *Parti Kebangsaan Melayu (PKM)*, [23] *Persatuan Khairat Jumaat Muslimin (KJM)* [23] and *Persatuan Ikhwan Sabah*, [23] at the same time, the other societies that move actively appeared to strengthen Islam position such as *Persatuan Islam Tawau (P.I.T)* was established on 1955 by O.K.K Haji Zainal Kerahu. While *Persatuan Islam Putatan (P.I.P)* was established on 1959 by Ustaz Haji Awang Sahari Abdul Latif and *Persatuan Islam Sabah (P.I.S)* was established on 1960 by Datuk Haji Mohd Kassim Hj Hashim [29]. This situation is also supported by Margaret Clark Roff in her work *The Politics of Belonging* by saying that the establishment of political parties at Sabah was a direct reaction towards the establishment of Malaysia by Tunku Abdul Rahman on 27 May, 1961 [30].

Yet, era 1960 was the starting points for the existence of political parties at Sabah and from this moment, various conflicts created especially among the political party that indirectly affect Islam development at Sabah. This situation is consistently observed until 1994 [22]. It is undeniable that we must deliberate on different roles by the political leaders with own different ideologies at that time. Yet, changes can be observed during few years after that when religion sentiment has not become the foundation base. Though, author believed that religious issue was still there up until today. It is known that those were surely different from the one originated from the early politic struggle at Sabah. The visible similarities are most of the early politic delegation uses religion sentiment as an approach to secure their political power.

**USIA: Islamization Boosts in Sabah:** The alliance of three society; *Persatuan Islam Tawau (P.I.T)*, *Persatuan Islam Putatan (P.I.P)* and *Persatuan Islam Sabah (P.I.S)* has formed an institution called as United Islamic Sabah Association (USIA) on 1968 led by YB Haji Mustafa Bin Datu Harun [29]. USIA existence is not only has become advocator of Muslim community plus it has been the main sources to spread Islam to the local. The support from

state ruler at that time whom was led by the administration of Unites Sabah National Organization party (USNO) from 1969-1975 directed by Tun Mustaffa strengthen USIA position to spread Islamic teaching. Allocation of timber area for 34 800 acre by the state ruler and the establishment of *Majlis Ugama Islam Sabah (MUIS)* [28] not only secure the financial resources for Islam development but also advancing the establishment of USIA branches on the other area. As a result, during 1972, there were 294 branches of USIA established and the memberships increased up until 49 449 people [22].

This phenomenon continues until the administration by Harris Mustaffa Mohd Salleh that was also managed BERJAYA (1976-1986). Yet, this situation changes under the administration of PBS party (*Parti Bersatu Sabah*) by Datuk Seri Pairin Kitingan who led Sabah during 1986-1993. This happen when he was threaten by the vast development of reverted Muslim involving thousands people of Sabah native community. Over few resources, until 1976 there were 50 000 people reverted to Islam [31].

**‘Anti Islam’ Phenomenon in Sabah:** The accomplished victory of PBS party led by Datuk Pairin Kitingan, a Sabah Christian figure and ‘defender’ of Asia Methodist Church was none wasted opportunity. Their awaited patience for 22 years paid after a controversy in Sabah political system take place and thus led to PBS victory [32]. Delicate strategy was form for every aspect in order to abolish Sabah Islamic culture [33] as well as securing Christian position at Sabah. Several drastic steps done were as follows;

- Church building all over Sabah; at wide-ranging area and anywhere else whether within Islamic villages as happen in Kiulu village and at Moyog Penampang as well as Papar. As a result, within a year which was on 1986, the number of church had double increased in amount with total of 677 [33].
- The establishment of Sabah Bible College (SBC) [34], Summer Institute of Linguistics [33] and Institute for Development Studies (IDS). In theory, the establishment of IDS was an independent institution such as *Institute of Strategic and International Studies* (ISIS) at Kuala Lumpur; yet, IDS functioned as research center for the advantages of Kadazan and Christian [33].
- Islam community subjugated. Important position of state government were filled by Kadazan Christian, highlighting composition of Kadazan Christian in

Cabinet members, ‘family’ domination of Datuk Pairin upon *Yayasan Sabah*, changes of district Malay officer, controlled activities by *Majlis Agama Islam Sabah (MUIS)* [35] and interfere Muslim economic activity [35], as well as anti-Islam slogan, anti-Malay and anti-peninsular was wide-ranging to claim Kadazan Christian privileges [35].

This situation clearly stated the nuance of Islam position at Sabah through multi-dimension polemic which has shown us that Sabah was Islamized earlier. Yet, the religious conflicts had assimilated Sabah to the global Christianization concept. Though the 1990 era gave some changes towards Islam development especially on education context such as the establishment of *Sekolah Ugama Islam Sabah (SUIS)* as today it is known as *Sekolah Agama Negeri (SAN)* and the establishment of *Sekolah Menengah Ugama (SMU)* on each zone at Sabah, establishment of *madrasah* or *pondok* for instance *Madrasah al-Irsyadiyah* at *Marakau Ranau* [36] and *Pondok Fizilalil Quran* [37] at Kota Belud. Plus, the establishment of *Pusat latihan Dakwah* (PLD) too just like PLD situated at Keningau, Sikuati Kudat, Tongod and Kundasang [38]. But, the ruler base is still entangling the Islam development satiation at Sabah until today.

**Current Reality and Challenge to Muslim Society [39]:** The advancement and reality of Muslim Society today can be examine after embracing various challenges and defiance encompassing various aspects especially towards confronting the missionary movement and when spreading Islamic *da’wah* at Sabah. Yet, according to Suraya Sintang [20] the problems nowadays is not the same as the previous people encountered during 1960-1970’s era. In the contrary, the arising challenges not only involve external factors but also encompass the internal aspect of the Muslim itself [39]. Among the problems are as follows:

**Attitude Problem:** An observation done through *Projek Penyelidikan Pembangunan Rakyat Sabah (PERASA)* on 2009 [20] show us a result that almost entire area and district at Sabah has attitude problem. This is considered as the main problem encountered by the Muslim either they are born Muslim or reverted Muslim.

Through observation, the attitude problem of Muslim community at Sabah either they are born Muslim or reverted Muslim is their determination when undertaking

religion obligatory, partner irresponsible attitude, society attitude that is less attentive towards the problems and welfare of other Muslim brotherhood, ignorance on religion limitations, comparing attitudes for the assistance given by the Islamic organization with other organization, mentality subsidy, less determination attitude towards provided religious activities, sufficiency attitude as they feel they have enough religious matters comprehension and there is no need to increase knowledge, blind followers of own ethnic's custom, too dependable and has no initiative to improve oneself. Yet, the highlighted attitude is the unconcerned attitude regarding education especially upon religious aspects. This is because from the author own experience in communicating with the native community of Sabah, the ignorance of religious education aspect is the main cause that led to various problems entangling Muslim community especially at Sabah. Therefore, it is observed that those whom have the authentic comprehension after examining the truth of Islam are better in their *ta'abbudiyah* aspect as compared to those who is the born Muslim.

**Infrastructural Challenge:** Sabah's geographical structure which is basically covered with plenty of mountains and its geographically wide in its location has been the contributing factor for infrastructure problem. The road infrastructure that was hardly for people to go through requires high determination in order to approach the rural Muslim community and also the newly reverted Muslim at Sabah. Yet, if we examine the optic from previous Christian missionary movement at Sabah, this problem is none of their disruption to spread their religion until the end of the rural place. The same determination shall be inculcated not only among the appointed official *da'ie* but also to the *da'ie* volunteers in order to spread Islamic teaching [20]. Nonetheless, the religiosity should able to be a guiding principle in respecting others, as this would create peace environment in the multi-religious society [40].

As this has become one of the disruption factors for *da'wah* activities towards Muslim society at the rural area such as at Tundun Bohangin village dan Bongon Besar Island at Sandakan district. The same situation is also happening towards the communities at Teburi and Sri Darun village at Lahad Datu as well as Pisang village at Kota Belud. The implication can be observed as lack of religious programmes become contributing factors to other problems for instance they converted back to their previous religion [41, 42].

**The Role of Government Agency and the Policy Institutions:** Follow up actions from the responsible party whether involving the government agency or the social responsibility from the private party and NGO is needed to empower Islamic understanding as well as its society problem at Sabah. The reason is because from the author observation, it is discovered that some of the involved staffs is described as '*melepaskan batuk di tangga*' upon empowering Islam when they faced problems as well as accomplished trusted responsibilities. Other than that, the problem of assertion for authority towards the unfulfilled criteria of public authorities in various sectors especially those in the area of Islamic empowerment is one of the contributing misleading of Islamic administration and management. Thus, the author would suggest organization such as JAKIM, JHEAINS, *Pusat Zakat Baitulmal*, leader's delegation and policy institutions collaborate and enhance their efforts in accomplishing their responsibilities to ease the Muslim society problems at Sabah.

#### **Encouragement Towards Islam's Spiritual Empowerment at Sabah:**

- Ensuring comprehensive grasp in terms of understanding and contemplation for Islamic comprehensiveness teaching towards all Sabah's *born Muslim* as well as the *reverted Muslim* and does not accomplishing something that Malay people always said as "*melepaskan batuk ditangga*."
- Pursuing an advanced preaching effort at all levels through the empowerment of well-established institution for Islamic education. This is because due to the organized Christianization strategies at Sabah through the medium of education, it becomes one of their succeeding factors in their preaching activities.
- Enhancing and improving the facilities as well as commodities that cover the basic needs demand such as the electric supply, road amenities, school infrastructure especially at the areas and districts of Muslim community. This is need to be considered as the abandonment of this aspect affect some group of Muslim indigenous community converting back to their previous religion even after reverted to Islam.
- Empowering the roles of Government, Policy Institute, Collaboration of Islamic Non-Government Organization Malaysia such as *JAKIM*, *JHEAINS*, *Pusat Zakat* towards defending Islamic authority

especially within Sabah as well as initiating alternatives and also proactive ideas in enhancing Islamic teaching at Sabah.

- Enhancing religious activities on every inch of Sabah's areas even villages in line with the current advancement and necessities.
- Be explicit on the assertion for authentic leader as he is the one that will lead Islamic organization which has been responsible in upholding Islamic tenets at Sabah. This is because due to writers observation, the process of appointment for vital position in the government which is more likely to be characterized as 'own colony' causing a bad circumstances towards the effort in empowering Islamic teaching among Sabah's society.

### CONCLUSION

The growth of Islam at Sabah since before the independence era up until today show us a profound transformation after following the nuance of multi-dimensional development levels. Although the growth of Islam at Sabah is a bit gradual at the beginning due to the unavailability of well-organized education system, the effort of preachers whom arrived at Sabah to spread Islam were not affected. The affected pressure since been colonized has affected the condition badly. Yet, episode of battle for defending the native's privilege has become the nurturing voice for Islamic community against the colonizer. On the end of 1960's until the early 1970's, it has witnessed the spread of Islam within all Sabah's areas as a result of the ruler's support at that time. Yet, the struggle of political party that was inflicting with sense of religion on 1980's has affected the Sabah's Islam community for being oppressed again until the slogan of "*potong bawang*" [33] that were voice out intensely by the Christian figure at that time. The consequence can be observed up until today from the political, social as well as education aspect are still affected along with the claimed era of 'abundance conflicts' in Sabah's history.

Therefore, empowerment energy and collaboration amongst the academia and Islamic *umara'* must be accumulated in establishing programme and suitable activity to be organized amongst Muslim community especially at the Borneo Isle so that they will not left behind on context of enlightenment for *Deen al-Islam* according to the authentic way and be able to solve future tribulation tests of native residents of the state below the wind.

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