# Interaction of Plural Society in Malaysia: Diatribe or Dialogue

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**Abstract:** Multi-racial is a unique features in Malaysian's society. It is become more interesting with the existence of heterogeneous characteristic which called as plural society. In Malaysia, the level of social interaction in plural society is minimal. Because of that reason, many conflicts arise before and after The Independence Day of Malaysia. Residential segregation and different working environment also helps to create a big gap between ethnics. The identification of each of the major ethnics in Malaysia, parallel with the identity of their cultures and religions. The Malay-Muslims are the majority group, followed by Chinese, which followed Buddhism, Confucius and Taoism as their religion and Indians are mostly Hindus. Christian is also rapidly growing religion in Malaysia. These differences contribute to the complexity and conflict between ethnics. This situation is predicted to become worst if there are no efforts taken to reduce the gap between ethnics. This process can be done through dialogues between different ethnics and religions. Through dialogues, disgruntlement and stress relations between ethnics can be minimized. Hence, this paper is attempted to discuss the formation of plural society in Malaysia, by looking at the level of interaction between ethnics. This paper also suggested several solutions through dialogues approaches. The solution is hope can be applied in Malaysian society to develop more harmonious relationship between ethnics.

**Key words:** Multi-racial · Plural society · Religious dialogue · Malaysia · Ethnic

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is made up of two major segments, peninsular Malaysia formerly known as Malaya; and Sabah and Sarawak situated along northern rim of the island of Borneo. Based on current statistic from Department of Statistics Malaysia, it is shown that population of Malaysia residents comprise about 28, 719.5 million and more than 178 ethnic groups.

According to Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs information, the Malays are about 53.3 %, although there are also Muslims of Indian and Chinese descent that make up the total component of Muslims at 60.4%. Non Muslims constitute about 39.6% of the population which consists mainly of Christians (9.1%), Buddhist (19.2%), Hindus (6.3%), Confucians and others (5.0%) [1]. Members of indigenous tribe of East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) and the aboriginals of west Malaysia have animistic beliefs, although many Dayaks, Ibans and Kadazans of East Malaysia have converted to Catholicism.

This heterogeneous composition of society is parallel with Mc Gee (1965) analysis's, that third from five phase of the growth population in the Malaysian region from 1786-1914 is unquestionably of major significance for the present-day population patterns and problems of the Malaysian territories [2]. The importance of the large scale Chinese, Indian and Indonesian migrations into Malaya during this period which created the plural society of today. Generally, in plural society, the inter-ethnic interaction has happened but with minimal contacts and usually the nature of interaction rooted in conflict, rather than close co-operation. The conflict is based on the dissatisfaction of one another. Thus, the dialogue approach is more relevant to generate mutual understanding as well as to enhance national integration among Malaysian society.

The Portrait of Malaysian Society: One of dominant features of independent countries (53 years) is its plural population and society. Plural societies have been a subject of analysis since Furnivall introduces term. Basically, a society is plural when there exist differences

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in ethnicity, language, race, caste, assumed blood ties, customs or territory. The term "plural society" was first introduced by Furnivall (1967) in *Netherlands India*, in which he defined as "comprising two or more elements or social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit" [3].

According to Abraham (1997), plural society in Malaysia refers to a society where the Europeans, Malays, Chinese and Indians were separated by race, institutional and cultural patterns and differential access to political and economic power, such that these divisions are mutually reinforcing rather than cross cutting [4]. Beginning in the 1870s shaped the Malay community consider as multi-racial, but the formation of a pluralistic society (plural society) took place in 1910's. In other words, it refers to a society that heterogeneous characteristic [5].

It is distinguishing features of society include: 1) the fact that rulers and ruled are of different races and live apart from one another in separate communities; 2) the absence of national consensus- i.e., a set of cultural and political values shared by the different communities; 3) the coincidence of economic activities with racial divisions; 4) the reliance on the marketplace as the only common meeting ground for the different races; 5) the assertion that plural society are inherently prone to conflict and therefore require some external force to hold them together [6].

As a result from British colonial "divide and rule" policy, the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians were never integrated as one community which geographically segregated these individual communities into three different areas. The Chinese were concentrated in urban areas, the Malays were mainly in rural areas and the Indians were in rubber plantations [7].

Beside segregation of residential, Malaysian society can be classified into several characteristics, such as specialization of work, separation process of socialization and mobility and isolation of culture. These characters can be seen in portrait of Malaysian society today. The existence of economic specialization and segregation of living among the ethnic groups would not only reduce the opportunities for inter-ethnic relations, but to strengthen ethnic prejudices, stereotypes and ethnocentrism among members of ethnic groups. Separation of residence according to ethnic group lines allows the members of each group kept in the group privacy from other groups. This scenario will effected the integration process in Malaysian society.

The Level of Interaction in Malaysian Society: In order to analyze the level of interaction in the context of the reality of a p lural society in Malaysia, Mazrui (1971) model can be applied. There are four stages before the integration process to achieve actual unity level [8].

The first stage: the "bare-coexistence" This is a minimum degree of interaction between the different groups. These groups need not even know of each other's existence. Their co-existence with a number of other groups in the same national entity is not always a conscious coexistence. In Malaysia context, this level of integration between the mid-nineteenth century to the early nineteenth century 19M-20M which is before the Second World War. The first stage is referred to the meaning of the plural society espoused by Furnivall.

The second stage: "a relationship of contact". The second degree saw the open conflicts between communities in the social system. This means that the groups have at least some minimal dealings with each other or communication between each other. The groups need not be on friendly terms. This level can be seen in the era of Japanese occupation in Malaya until a few years after independence.

The third stage: "a relationship of compromise". The third level is a relationship based on compromise between the races. By this time the dealings between the groups have become sufficiently complex, diverse and interdependent to require a climate of peaceful reconciliation between the conflicting interests. The groups still have clearly distinct identities of their own, as well as distinct interest. In Malaysia context, the leaders of each ethnic make collaboration to increase the level of understanding with the adoption of government policies aimed at building a united Malaysian race aside parochialism and racist.

The fourth level is "the stage of coalescence". This is the final stage of national integration. This is a coalescence of identities, rather than a merger of interests. Diversity of interests would continue. Although society has been in the third level, the integration process does not show continuous transformation leading to the fourth level. Consolidation of multi-ethnic society forms the basis of completion of a new society (the stage of coalescence). Immigrant communities will lose much of its original identity. Therefore, Malaysian societies have been through two levels and now are at the third level. The actual unity does not exist yet and is still a long way [9].

In Malaysia, the two crucial bases of cultural differential and thus of potential disintegration are language and religion. Language is a definitive characteristic for all three major communities. In a language, the Malay enjoys greater internal homogeneity than do the Chinese and Indians. Only the Malays can be fully defined by a single language. The Indians are not all Tamil-speaking, some of them tend to use their tongue language such as Telegu, Malayalam, Sindhi, Bengali etc [10], while the Chinese may speak one of multitude of different dialects, i.e. Foochow, Hokkien, Toechew, Hakka and Cantonese etc [11]. For both the Indians and Chinese a linguistic map parallels the homeland origins of the immigrants [12].

Based on theory introduced by Hock (1991), the problems of national unity today may to be construed as the "ONE" - Problem Syndrome. Old problems are those related to inter racial conflict. This conflict is usually seen in terms of communal confrontations [13]. It occurred when different races exposes hostile sentiments toward one another. Ideology becomes a main influence, i.e. communal ideologies as represented by UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) for Malays, MCA (Malaysian Chinese Association) for Chinese and MIC (Malaysian Indian Congress) for Indians. Moreover, the racial, occupational and ethnic stereotypes of the local population did little to provide an insight into inter racial sentiments of the Malays, the Chinese, the Indians and other groups. It can be seen tragically in May 13 1969 riot. New problems refer to intra-racial conflict. Usually this conflict seen in terms of contradictions and confrontations inter racial group. It includes the issues of factional leadership and party support for conventional values such as Malay Nationalism, Chinese chauvinism, Indian neutrality etc. While emerging problems comprise those transcend inter-racial and intra racial conflicts. They include a hybrid of class, interest groups and generational conflicts. Different between classes of people or interest groups are usually dormant in any society. So far, in Malaysia, they tend to be over-shadowed by a variety of problems that are identified along racial origin and ethnic affinity.

After independence, most Malaysians are having a fragmented vision based on racial and ethnic struggle that could narrow the unity and peace relations between the races. Racism is still strongly influenced the thinking, attitudes and values, demands, aspirations and competition, prejudice, stereotype and discrimination in all aspects between the races in Malaysia. All these elements contributed to the outbreak of inter-ethnic problems and conflicts. In addition:

- Attitudes of several non-Muslim religious activists who are both questioning and inciting convert issues (of Islam) among the non-native ethnic groups.
- Shariah and Civil Technical Committee who are responsible in the reviewing process and for making amendments in Islamic and civil legal system so that both are made to be more Malaysian is always negatively understood by the non-Muslims. This in turn had caused the reviewing process to be done in low condition to avoid objections by the non-Muslims.
- The actions of MCCBCHS (Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism) who meddled with political issues; they strictly objected the suggestion by PAS (Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party) to implement Hudud laws in Kelantan [14].
- Government's Islamisation Policy such as the insertion of Islamic values had been judged by the non-Muslims as an effort to strengthen the position of the Malay communities, which was called to be as an extreme Malay nationalism that it threatens the positions of the non-Muslim communities [15].

**Religious Dialogue in Malaysia:** Myth or Reality: In a normal conduct, a dialogue process will involve discussion among two or more parties by having features of meeting, communication, agreement, understanding and collective understanding. By examining current trends, we can detect three forms of religious dialogue that are now expanding in Malaysia. These three forms of dialogue are not static and often change, either to become better or worse. Firstly, dialogue in life; when members of different communities are forced to or even strived to live together outside their own comfort zone with no religious scope boundaries. Secondly, dialogue through acting out together; this is realised whenever every believer of different religions come together to plan and implement actions that will benefit all parties. Normally, this form of dialogue is done by the Muslim and non-Muslim NGOs whom unite in order to fight for issues involving global humanity such as environmental issues, consumerism issues, etc. All parties are to agree with their religion's roles in various values and formula in order to solve

societal problems. Finally, dialogue through intellectual discourse; it is planned to be in either (i) bilateral form (involving two religions) such as Islam-Christian Dialogue, or (ii) trilateral form (involving Abrahamic religion) such as Islam-Christianity-Jew or even (iii) multilateral form (involving Abrahamic religion and culture). Clearly, this multilateral form of dialogue is more effective because the discussion is more focused and controllable. However, this form of dialogue is still limited in current Malaysian context, especially when it is specifically done in higher education institutions and it is scope had not been expanded to societal living.

However, several negative trends related to the reality of religious dialogue, specifically; 1) Prejudiced attitudes of Muslims towards other religions. Muslims need to be taught to practise religious pluralism [allow religious pluralism] of the non-Muslims because generally the Muslims are still biased towards the other believers. This has caused the Islamic revival movement which is happening in Malay community to exclude the non-Muslims communities in Malaysia. 2) Such negative scenario had caused non-Muslims to be afraid of and become cynical towards the development of Islamic revival movement. 3) Failure of religions dialogue in many official government policies. According to a Chinese scholar, Paul Tan, he questioned the impact ability of discourse dialogue in life which is created in official government events such as in school and public places. It is considered to be less effective to create awareness for Muslims to understand the universal good values of other religions. As a result, this trend would cause Muslims to be unprepared to attend non-Muslim events like funerals and weddings. On the contrary, the non-Muslims like Buddhists, Hindis, Taoists and Confucius devotees can easily interact with the Christians. Furthermore, Paul Tan strictly emphasised that failure of religious dialogue is caused by three major factors; 1) Lack of experts who truly understands the religions in Malaysia. 2) More focus is given to aspect of differences in ethnic groups especially between Malays and non-Malays and 3) No openness from the Muslim community to confront and have dialogue session with the non-Malay communities [16].

As for Muslims, the religious dialogue trends or even religious pluralism concept which has been used as central agenda by several current Islamic institutions should to be supported, based on a few of its major benefits, among which are;

- Positive element as a result of implementing openness that also included toleration which acknowledges other's perspective, comprising of two main aspects; (a) being open and in the need of mutually studying all sects in Islam and (b) being open towards all devotees of major religions of the world. We can learn from the nobility of the West, China, Korea and Japan civilisations which was caused by the teachings of ethics and work value ethos that are possessed by major religions of the world such as Confucianism, Shintoism and Protestant ethics.

- As major alternative to fill up the development of pro pluralism that was caused by era of globalization. Islam is seen as able to satisfy anxiety of universal mankind as caused by the rejection of the Westerns on religious teachings through the concept of secularism. As it should, religious pluralism approach has to be proposed and developed in Islamic learning in order to fill up space and need of showing the love of Islam to the societies of the world.

- This pluralism approach can be used as chief means to defeat racial polarisation issue which strikes the current Malaysian society. In order to forget the 13th May 1969 tragedy and to strengthen unity of diverse society in Malaysia, the Government and NGOs, either Muslim based or non-Muslim based, had been struggling to contribute constructive ideas to accomplish this unity programme. Majority of the NGOs agreed that religion as a factor, when compared to ethnic and culture, can be a point for unity as all devotees of major religions in Malaysia believe that every religion discourages its people to act belligerently and to oppress one another. In other words, Malaysians should practice religious tolerance to ensure that they can live together in peace and harmony [17].

**CONCLUSION**

Obviously, the dominant characteristics of Furnivall's plural society still existing in contemporary Malaysian society. It's include residentially separated communities, economic differentiation by ethnic, unequal distributions of wealth, little intermarriage and most important, one politically dominant community. However, we can say that the close link between ethnicity and religion in Malaysia cannot be deniable. Mostly, it will effected the social

interaction between ethnics especially in plural society context. The conflicts happened in Malaysian society demonstrated that the level of interaction still in lowest level. It's becoming an increasingly issue in social relation and has become a potent source of challenges to the solidarity and unity if we not take any appropriate action to handle this problem. As suggested, dialogue civilization or inter religious will contributed a significant solution to reduce gap of dissatisfaction and tension according to ethnic relation in Malaysian society.

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