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## Some Insights into the Impacts of the Islamic Education on the Non-Muslims in Brunei Darussalam

**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims to analyse the extent at which the non-Muslims in Brunei Darussalam identify with MIB or “Melayu Islam Beraja” (Malay Islamic Monarchy), the national philosophy of the country, by investigating the impacts of the Islamic education on the Dusun Muslim converts before their conversion to Islam. The traditionally, animistic Dusuns is one of the constitutionally recognised ethnic groups in the country and is strongly represented in Tutong District. This paper argues that the Dusuns had developed a strong sense of recognition towards Islam, even before their conversion; and this is significantly the result of the decades-long incorporation of the Islamic knowledge into the national education system. The recognition could be seen from the considerable depth of the Islamic knowledge they acquired, where such operative understanding of Islam simultaneously facilitated mutual emulation of Muslim ways of life. As the mutual emulation was also bolstered by the increasing breakdown of social and cultural boundaries between the Dusuns and the Muslims in the country, the informants of this study began to see the appeals and benefits of Islam as a religious system. Such re-appraisal of the religion, eventually led them to forsake their ethnic religion and convert to Islam, a significant step forward in forging a closer identification with the official religion of the country and ultimately with Brunei’s national philosophy.

**KEY WORDS:** Malay Islamic Monarchy, Islamic education, Brunei’s education policies, the role of education, the Dusuns, and religious conversion.

### INTRODUCTION

The declaration of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Malay Islamic Monarchy), as the national philosophy of Brunei Darussalam in 1984, undeniably has reinforced the strong position that Islam has already acquired since 1959 as the official religion of the country through the promulgation of Brunei’s Constitution. The declaration of the national philosophy in 1984, accordingly, followed by the implementation of the Islamic-driven state policies across different institutions and government ministries, including within the national education provision.

Since 1959, and even more so after 1984, one could witness the ways the inclusion of the Islamic subjects at all levels in Brunei’s education system became evident over

time, despite the changes occurred within the national education system following the introduction of new education policies, for instance, the Bilingual Education Policy in 1984, the Integrated Educational System in 2004, and *Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad ke-21* or SPN21 (the 21<sup>st</sup> Century National Education System) in 2009.

The consequences of the incorporation of religious subjects in the school curriculum are clearly functional to the successful diffusion of the principles and values of *Melayu Islam Beraja* among the population in the country. The sense of recognition towards Islam is evidently implicit in the lives of the population following the constant exposure towards the religion, particularly during their schooling years. What is interesting about this fact, and

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it is worth examining, is that the non-Muslims in the country are also equally exposed to the religion, particularly through the education system where it not only brings about the non-Muslims' awareness towards Islam but it also has somewhat influenced the way they arrange and organise their lives within their personal and ethnic contexts.

This paper, thus, will attempt to provide some insights into the extent of identification with *Melayu Islam Beraja* that the non-Muslim population in Brunei Darussalam has attained by investigating the impacts of the Islamic education on the Dusuns before their conversion to Islam. The Dusuns belong to one of the non-Muslim ethnic groups that have experienced major social, cultural, and religious transformations within their ethnic realm since three decades ago.

This paper will demonstrate how the Dusuns before their conversion to Islam rarely deemed the religion as foreign, let alone as religiously threatening, largely due to the growing familiarity that they had been having with Islam, for many, since their childhood. There are three dimensions in which the impacts of the Islamic education on the Dusuns can be found and analysed: *firstly*, the creation of the foundation of religious knowledge; *secondly*, the mutual emulation of Muslim way of life; and *thirdly*, their conversion to Islam.

It is however worthwhile, first and foremost, to provide the early framework of this paper. Appropriate information on the Dusun ethnic group, who has been identified as the main research subjects of this paper, will be given immediately after this introductory remark. A relevant account on Islam in Brunei Darussalam and its association with the country's national philosophy, *Melayu Islam Beraja*, will accordingly then be presented before the discussion of the paper proceeds to provide a separate analysis on the incorporation of religious subjects in the national school curriculum. Such format of discussion will allow readers to have an informed understanding on how the impacts of the Islamic education on the Dusuns could take place in the form mentioned above.

## THE DUSUN ETHNIC GROUP

The word "Dusun" is a Malay word which literally means the people of orchards. The term "Dusun" was originally used to refer to the group of people living in the inland part of the North Borneo (Evans, 1917:151). In the case of the Dusuns in Brunei, it was their contact with the coastal Brunei Malays that led to the imposition of the "Dusun" ethnic label on the group, primarily because they lived inland, were cocooned by fruit orchards and coconut plantations, and were exclusively rice farmers and fruit growers (Alas, 2009). At present, the Dusun ethnic group is strongly represented in Tutong District of Brunei Darussalam, with a smaller percentage live in Belait and Brunei/Muara District. In Tutong District, several *mukim* (provinces) in the district namely Ukong, Rambai, and Kiudang are the original homeland of the Dusuns.

Traditionally, the Dusuns are animist in their belief. The integral forces and guidance that they believe to have influenced their universe and daily life are the spirit beings and one of the divine spirits that the Dusuns believe to have directed the destiny of all its inhabitants is *Derato*, the main god in the Dusun cosmology. As the Dusuns are traditionally rice farmers, the *Derato* has the highest rank in importance in their life where the ethnic group believes that it is *Derato* that provides them with a bountiful harvest year after year.

According to the oral tradition, the Dusuns believe that the rice seeds were brought down to earth by the son of *Derato*. Thus, in order to show their appreciation for *Derato's* consent to allow human beings to plant the rice seeds on earth, and to be thankful for the harvest and to ensure another good harvest in the next farming season, the *Temarok* ceremony is conducted by a group of *belian*, the only intermediary between *Derato* and humans, at the end of a harvesting season. For the Dusuns, the *Temarok* ritual is considered as the heart of their animistic practices.

However, in the recent decades, the Dusun religion was getting increasingly marginalised within the ethnic realm, partly due to the promotion of modern education system. As a *belian's* ritualistic knowledge, which includes

the *Derato* language and the *Temarok* ritual, is regarded as sacred, it is a taboo for a *belian* to acquire secular knowledge as such acquisition could corrupt the sacredness of the ethnic rituals. Consequently, a *belian* cannot attend school as this can be seen as disrespecting the divine knowledge the *belian* has been conferred with (personal communication with informant A, 9/7/2009).

Such ritualistic taboo clearly is not in line with the state policy where since 1970s, the country has been putting forth efforts in promoting an equal access to school provision to all population and that an attendance to school is made compulsory to all children aged seven and above. In addition, the eagerness of the Dusun parents to provide their children with the best education possible is perhaps the reason why many parents never really consider of passing down the ritualistic knowledge to their offspring despite the fact that they themselves adhere to the ethnic religion. Inevitably, the situation has caused many young Dusuns to be increasingly pulled away from the ethnic religion (personal communication with informant B, 16/7/2009).

Moreover, with the Islamisation of the school system, educated Dusuns have been exposed to a different kind of religious belief from the one that is practiced by their parents. In fact, statistics show that year by year, there is an increasing number of Dusuns abandoning the animist religion and committing themselves to Islam as their new faith. This leads us to the key scope of this paper where the impacts of the Islamic education on the religious orientation of the Dusuns will be discussed in detail in the subsequent paragraphs.

In order to achieve the objective of this paper, a collection of interview data from the Dusun Muslim converts and the non-Muslim Dusuns which was recorded during the author's doctoral studies in 2008 and 2009 will be utilised. About 60 informants were interviewed, including 10 non-Muslim informants who shared their valuable insights on the impacts of the Islamic education and their individual perception towards Islam. As part of the ethic safeguard, the data used in

this paper has been de-identified in order to protect the anonymity of the informants.

### **ISLAM IN BRUNEI AND MELAYU ISLAM BERAJA**

Brunei Darussalam has been known across the world for her long and staunch practice of Islam, observing and upholding centuries-long Islamic traditions and values. Historians, however, found it difficult to determine precisely the period as to when Islam first came to Brunei, primarily due to the absence of credible historical records that could serve such purpose. To resolve the historical conundrum, the conversion of the first Sultan of Brunei, Awang Alak Betatar, to Islam in 1368, following his marriage to the Princess of Johor Sultanate has always been taken as evidence to substantiate the definite presence of Islam in the country which then led to the establishment of Brunei's Muslim Sultanate during the century (Mansurnoor, 2012:133).

For the ensuing six centuries, the position and the role that Islam occupied and respectively played in the country varied throughout the period. The reliance on non-Islamic construct of kingship for maintenance and legitimisation purposes remained evident, as illustrated by the preservation of the oral history which narrates the origin of the father of Awang Alak Betatar whom the locals believed to have born out of *Hiranyagarbha*, the cosmic Hindu egg (Brown, 1980).

Despite the fact that this particular oral tradition, as many argue, is borderline myth and history, the Hindu-imbued oral history remains as one of the essential representations of Brunei's past. The traditions within Hinduism were also adopted and in fact institutionalized during the centuries, as can be seen from the employment of Hindu elements in the investiture ceremonies for conferring titles to state dignitaries and appointing new state officials. The recitation of *chiri* during the ceremonies was strongly imbued with Sanskrit in order to reinforce the notion of kingship which was primarily to legitimatise Sultan's authority (Maxwell, 1881:86).

The religious emphasis, however, took a turn towards Islam in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Brunei

Sultanate placed a relatively strong emphasis on the religion as the accommodation of Islamic principles and concepts in state laws became more pronounced than ever. Islamic-based *Hukum Kanun Brunei*, Brunei's register of laws, was promulgated during the reign of Sultan Hassan (reigned 1605-1619). The basis of *Hukum Kanun Brunei* was *Hukum Kanun Melaka*, a manual of Muslim laws which was compiled during the reign of Sultan Muzaffar Shah of Malacca (reigned 1446-1459).

This fact, in many ways, explains why the contents of *Hukum Kanun Brunei* were almost identical to the contents of its prototype. *Hukum Kanun Brunei* generally framed a code of conduct to be utilised by the Sultanate in regulating the Brunei society, particularly that concerning family matters, commercial transactions, property, and criminal offences. As the practice of *Hukum Kanun Brunei* remained central until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, one could take this fact as an illustration of the prominence that Islam enjoyed in the country across the centuries.

However, the establishment of the Residential System in Brunei (1906-1959) effectively shifted Islam away from such prominence. The presence of a British Resident at the centre stage of Brunei's state administration had drawn the Brunei Sultans into a secondary governing role as the Sultan should seek the Resident's advice on all matters of state administration, except those pertaining to Islam and the *adat* or custom (Hussainmiya, 1995:17). This hierarchy of rule clearly demonstrated a corresponding relegation of status for Islam as well as the *adat* in the Residential administration during the period.

When Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III ascended to the throne in 1950, the existing power clash between the Resident and the local governing body became more serious, generating further conflicts within the top circles of the state administration. Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III determined to resolve the power clash in a constitutional manner, leading to the promulgation of Brunei's first written Constitution in 1959. With the rightful retrieval of the executive power from the British Resident, Islam no longer filled

the secondary position it occupied during the Residential period as Brunei obtained her internal independence from the British Residential rule.

Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III declared Islam as the official religion of Brunei as the Constitution specifies that "[t]he religion of the State shall be the Muslim Religion" and "[...] that all other religion may be practised in peace and harmony" (JPK, 1959:33). To further ensure the centrality in the role that Islam should have in the country, the Constitution also establishes the position of the Sultan as the head of the Islamic faith. Thus, in a straightforward sense of the declaration, the constitutional role of Islam in the country has clearly been defined where state policies and directives from then on were to be regulated in accordance to the religion of Islam.

Expectedly, the adoption of Islam as the state religion generated a myriad of developments which brought into being a rather progressive Islamic state. The turning point of these Islamic-driven developments is definitely in 1984, when *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB), or Malay Islamic Monarchy, was declared as Brunei's national ideology, concomitant to the proclamation of Brunei's full independence. With the declaration of the national ideology, the role played by Islam in the country had notably evolved and now defined to serve an ideological purpose for the population. In other words, together with the other paramount elements, *Melayu* (Malay) and *Beraja* (Monarchy), Islam will define the way of life of the population (the Muslims in particular), so that they will be getting more structured and arranged in ways that are in line with the core values and principles of the national ideology (Haji Ibrahim, 2003:67).

The state developments in the post-independence period evidently demonstrate the accommodation of the state philosophy as the changes and transformations across different ministries, state institutions, and other agencies started to take place so that the three guiding principles, *Melayu*, *Islam*, and *Beraja*, are learned, practised, and communicated well within the society. For instance, the accommodation could be seen from the reorganization of the education

system, broadcasting organisation, civil service agency, and banking system in order to accommodate the state philosophy and to be in line with the principles and concepts of the state religion. This has definitely spurred the formation of a Muslim *ummah*, or community, which is much more solid in organisation and conspicuous in appearance than it was decades ago.

Thus, following the momentous change that the role of Islam played in direction brought about by the declaration of *Melayu Islam Beraja*, new education policies were drafted and implemented to govern curriculum transformation in the national education system. The following discussion entails a comprehensive description of Brunei's national curriculum since 1984, with an emphasis on the incorporation of Islamic subjects, into the education system as outlined by the post-1984 education policies.

#### **BRUNEI'S EDUCATION POLICIES AND CURRICULUM CHANGES**

It is worthwhile to note that the incorporation of Islamic subjects into the school curriculum did not merely start after the declaration of Islam as state religion in 1959, as stipulated by the articles of the Constitution, or after the declaration of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Malay Islamic Monarchy) in 1984, although it is undeniably true that the development of the education provision in Brunei has been greatly influenced by these momentous events. One of the earliest incorporations of the Islamic subjects into the school curriculum was in 1946 when *Pelajaran Syariah* (subject of Islamic law) was taught once a week to pupils of primary III or IV by mosque officials such as the *imam* and *bilal* (Mohd Daud, 2004:1).

However, the development of religious education before 1959 was irregular that it severely affected its progress and well-being. The reason for this was primarily due to the shortage of qualified religious teachers, but more importantly due to the lack of firm educational policy that failed to produce an effective management of religious education (JPI, 1996:54). It was only after the formation of the Department of Religious Affairs and

Community Affairs in 1960 (following the declaration of Islam as the official religion in 1959) that meaningful and positive progress began to take place. Proper incorporation of Islamic Religious Knowledge as a school subject began to take place in the curriculum of most Malay and English government schools during the period.

The Islamic subject incorporation became much more evident with the passing of Bilingual Education System in 1984. While the primary emphasis of the new education policy is to provide the population with an equal proficiency in *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) and the English language, the instillation of the Islamic values in the school curriculum remained as the primary aims of national education system (MoE Brunei Darussalam, 1990:7). Hence, Islamic Religious Knowledge (IRK) subject was taught in *Bahasa Melayu* for 6 years at the primary school level alongside secular subjects such as Mathematics, General Studies, and Geography (MoE Brunei Darussalam, 1990:15). Whereas at the lower secondary school level, the IRK was one of the compulsory and examinable subjects to be taken by all students. Options were only made available at the upper secondary school level where IRK was one of the optional subjects to be offered to students in all streams: Science, Arts, and Technical and Vocational (MoE Brunei Darussalam, 1990:18-21).

At the turn of the century, Brunei introduced a new education policy, the Integrated Education System. The new policy was an effort to integrate the religious and non-religious school system and to bring the running of the two separate school systems under a single management of the Ministry of Education. But what is more important is that the philosophy behind the introduction of the Integrated Education policy was to instil the values and the principles of *Melayu Islam Beraja* among the population, where the contents of the existing school subjects were reviewed and appropriate adjustments were made, so that the contents of the subjects would incorporate the philosophy of the system.

Hence, the content of IRK was simultaneously under review and was

introduced as Religious Education under the Integrated Education System. Religious Education was made compulsory at the primary school level and it was taught for 30 minute per period for 11 periods in a week (15 periods for the upper primary level). The non-Muslims, however, were given the option and they could take other subjects (Arts and Handicraft, *Bahasa Melayu*, Library Studies) as a replacement to Religious Education.

However, due to some great challenges in fully implementing the system, one of the challenges is the lack of skilful teachers and experienced educators that were able to offer effective teaching in an integrated schooling system (Lubis, Mustapha & Lampoh, 2009:58), the Integrated Education policy was withdrawn in 2005. The Bilingual Education policy was resumed until 2008, when Brunei launched a new education policy, namely SPN 21 or *Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad ke-21*, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century National Education System (MoE Brunei Darussalam, 2009).

With the introduction of the new education system, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century National Education System in 2008, Islamic Religious Knowledge and *Melayu Islam Beraja* are among the key learning areas specified by the new education policy, where the intended learning outcomes pertaining to these two subjects are for the students to “acquire the knowledge and understanding concerning the religion Islam on the aspect of Revealed Knowledge (*Fardhu Ain*) and Acquired Knowledge (*Fardhu Kifayah*) in the *Akidah* (creed of) *Ahli Sunnah wal-Jamaah* or Sunnite Muslims (MoE Brunei Darussalam, 1990:38). Thus, based on this, Islamic Religious Knowledge subject remains as one of the compulsory complementary subjects for Year 1 until Year 8. It is only in Year 9 to Year 11 that the religious subject becomes one of the elective subjects in the school curriculum (MoE Brunei Darussalam, 1990:45-46).

It is also worthwhile to note here that the acquisition of religious knowledge, particularly for the Dusuns, is not only made through the secular channel of education system. Since the 1990s, there has been an emerging trend among the non-Muslim parents to send their offspring to attend religious schools, whose

establishment is primarily to provide the Islamic knowledge to Muslim children. The rationale behind this emerging trend is rather simple: the Dusun parents wish to see their children to receive all-rounded academic knowledge, including to be well-versed in *Jawi* (Arabic script with Malay language) and to fully understand Islam as the official religion of the country (personal communication with informant C, 19/7/2009).

The curriculum of a religious school normally consists of core subjects as Al-Qur’an, *Ibadat* or Islamic rituals, *Tauhid* or divine unity, *Tarikh* or history, *Praktikal Sembahyang* or the practical teaching of the Muslim prayer, *Tajwid* or proper pronunciation in reading of the Al-Qur’an, *Tasawuf* or Islamic spiritualism, *Muamalat* or Islamic laws in social relations and economic activities, and *Munakahat* or Islamic laws of marriage (JPI, 1996:129). As of 2010, there are about 570 non-Muslim students enrolled to religious school throughout Brunei (Abu Bakar, 2010:4). Similar to the other Muslim pupils, the non-Muslim children are to complete their religious education in 6 years, where upon passing their final examination, they are to be awarded with Primary Religious School Certificate.

Thus, in view of the comprehensive incorporation of, and emphasis on, the Islamic Education in Brunei’s school curriculum, as explained above, it is rather inevitable for the Dusun pupils who are at the receiving end of the curriculum to construct an appropriately deep understanding of Islam as a means of building a knowledge base, while gaining awareness of the true value of Islam as an established religion through personal reflection and evaluation. The following discussion will illustrate the powerful impact that the Islamic education has on the informants of this study which eventually led them to their conversion to Islam.

## RECOGNISING ISLAM

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the contextual environment of the non-Muslims in Brunei generally serves as a knowledge foundation which allows any individual to be acquainted with Islam in one way or another. The informants of this study generally

share the same view that their personal and contextual environment made them aware of Islam. Having to watch television programmes aired during the month of *Ramadhan* (fasting in Islam), made them aware of the religious requirement of fasting for the Muslims and that the celebration of *Eid ul-Fitr* will take place at the end of the fasting month.

Many informants admit that, as kids, they eagerly waited for *Eid ul-Fitr* celebration as they would be given green money packets from their Muslim relatives and neighbours, when they came to visit the latter during the festive month of *Syawal* (the 10th month of the Arabic/Islamic calendar). Similarly, as the Brunei government necessitates the expansion of mosque infrastructures nationwide as an extension of the religious propagation efforts, a non-Muslim would easily become aware of the fact that it is an obligation for the Muslim males to go to mosque every Friday afternoon to attend the mass congregational prayer (personal communication with informant B, 16/7/2009; and with informant C, 19/7/2009).

As the above contextual influence play a significant role in forming the fundamental awareness of the exposition of the Islamic teaching, the incorporation of the Islamic knowledge into the education system has resulted in a continuous and further exposure to Islam. Many Dusuns believe that they learnt more about Islam from school, particularly when they studied at secondary school level as the contents of the Islamic subjects are more in-depth and detailed in nature. For instance, a 23-years old student still remembers how she and her classmates recited the *Syhadah* as loud as they could in class until they were able to memorise the *Syhadah* by heart (personal communication with informant D, 25/7/2009). Interestingly, the informant did not realise at that time that the *Syhadah* is actually the proclamation of faith, the first pillar of Islam, that declares the oneness of Allah.

Another informant, now a school teacher, was a little more inquisitive in trying to understand what the religion actually teaches its followers. She shares her schooling experience where she still vividly remembers

the first basic fact about Islam which strikes her the most during that time was how a Muslim could recite *doa* (prayer) anywhere and anytime the person desires to ask for Allah's blessing and protection (personal communication with informant E, 2/8/2009). While a 44 years old municipal staff silently questioned why only Muslims could visit the Holy Land of Makkah, a place where the Muslims congregate every year to perform the Hajj pilgrimage (personal communication with informant F, 2/8/2009).

The acquisition of the religious knowledge could also go far beyond facts and figures as the Dusuns were also taught the real essence of the Islamic education. As part of the syllabus of the Islamic subjects, Al-Qur'an verses such as *Al-Fatihah*, *Al-Asr* and the four *Quls* (*Al-Ikhlash*, *An-Nas*, *Al-Falaq*, *Al-Kafiruun*) are taught to the students, where they learn to recite and memorise the verses as well as to comprehend the interpretation of these verses clearly and in detail. The recitation and the memorisation of the Al-Qur'an verses normally will intensify as the students prepare for their monthly tests and important school examinations.

In addition, the recitation of these Al-Qur'an verses could also occur outside class. A 37 years-old teacher shares her experience where the recitation of *Al-Fatihah* by school children at her school every morning before the start of class and she noticed that even the non-Muslim children, including her Dusun siblings and cousins who attended the same school, participated in the recitation together with their Muslim friends. Whereas for her, after listening to the recitation for many years, she could recite the entire verse of *Al-Fatihah* long before she had the intention to convert to Islam (personal communication with informant G, 5/8/2009).

Likewise, many were acquainted with the basics of *sholat*, the Muslim prayer, from the sequence of the body movements to the verses which need to be recited during each movement (Ahmad Kumpoh, 2011:134). Interestingly, none of them complained much about learning Islam at this stage. In fact, many talked about how they enjoyed learning something different from what

secular subjects normally teach them and such enjoyment reflects in their remarkable examination results they attained for Islamic subjects (personal communication with informants H and I, 9/8/2009).

Thus, there is no doubt that such way of learning Islam offers a definite sense of familiarity with the religion. In fact, the intensified interaction with Islam at school significantly influenced the way the Dusuns perceive and think. Many informants agree that they began to have the capacity to discern right and wrong, good and evil, in accordance to what they learnt from school. For instance, a Dusun housewife who converted to Islam in 1998, spoke of her gradual changing attitude towards gambling and drinking after learning the fact that the activities were prohibited in Islam, due to their damaging consequences to one's conduct, life, family, and even community as a whole (personal communication with informant J, 15/8/2009).

Whereas another informant, a 51 years-old welfare officer, had long believed that Islam is the truest religion of all; otherwise the words of Al-Qur'an would have not been able to disarm and conquer the heart of fearless individuals such as Caliph Umar. Accordingly, a new form of perception on Islam began to dawn upon the two informants and both of them became more convinced that Islam is the right religion for them which eventually to their conversion to the religion in 1998 and 2003 respectively (personal communication with informant K, 15/8/2009).

As the way of thinking of the Dusun Muslim converts was evidently equivalent to their growing sense of identification with Islam and its teachings before their conversion; it is also worthwhile to mention here that the effects of the Islamic education on the (non-converts) Dusuns also significantly defined the ways they think and communicate. The analysis of the interview data equally detects similar rhetorical changes in the way the Dusuns responded to interview questions and in their conversation as a whole. Although not all Dusun informants used Islamic rhetoric in their verbal interaction and only a handful of them have such tendency, it nevertheless reflects a crucial fact that there is a certain

extent of (unconscious) incorporation of the Islamic values and ideas in the way of thinking of the Dusuns.

An interview with a 39 years-old broadcasting officer, for instance, illustrates the use of Islamic rhetoric. In discussing about the practice of the ethnic *adat* (custom) and its preservation issue, he believes that irrespective of the type of religion one observes, there is always a need to preserve the Dusuns' cultural practice so long as the practice is not against the *aqidah* (religious creed). In other words, the informant argues that the Dusuns should uphold elements of the ethnic culture so long as they are not in conflict with the basics beliefs of Islam. His statement without doubt reflects his acknowledgment of the prominence of Islam in the country's ethos. He is aware of the prohibition imposed by the government on cultural activities which are not in line with the Islamic teachings (personal communication with informant L, 20/8/2009); and this should be taken as a clear illustration of the extent of religious knowledge and understanding gained by the informant.

At the same time, however, the sense of familiarity bred from the Islamic education does not necessarily mean that the non-Muslims would also regard the Islamic education as the theological representation of Islam. While many did recognise the values of Islam as a religion, some, however, perceived the Islamic subject as comparable to other secular subjects, which are similarly taught through facts-and-figures approach. For instance, there are informants who admit that they regarded the Islamic subjects as among the subjects that they can rely on in order to pass important school examinations for an admission to higher education (personal communication with informants M and N, 25/8/2009).

This perspective could perhaps partly explain why many schooling-age Dusuns never objected to the subjects that teach them the religion they were not born into or raised in. In other words, the Dusuns accepted the educational values, rather than the theological aspects, of Islam and, therefore, the knowledge on Islam that they acquired from the education

system does not necessarily reflect their sense of belief in Islam and its teachings. Instead, such knowledge only serves for educational purposes and to add more information to their existing knowledge for them to understand the mainstream religion.

However, notwithstanding the above perception, the accumulated knowledge on Islam has led to a greater willingness on the part of the Dusuns to interact with Muslims. Such willingness replaced the feeling of awkwardness which was initially experienced by the Dusuns, particularly those who attended school that has majority of the school community is Muslim Malays. Many informants agree that their school experience is the foundation of their acquaintance with Islam and its teaching that later facilitated their interaction with Islam. For instance, a 41 years-old public relation officer and a 51 years-old welfare officer, both Muslim converts, were frequently introduced to and met people from all walks of life, including the Muslims who were their employers, work colleagues, professional acquaintances, close friends, and even neighbours (personal communication with informants O and P, 29/8/2009).

Analysing their interview data, it is evident that the informants viewed themselves as being not at all different from their Muslim colleagues and had no reservations about working together with the latter. This, however, does not mean that they disregarded the differences in terms of religious orientation that they certainly have with the Muslims, but the informants perceived such differences as irrelevant to how well they fit into their working and social environment. In fact, their growing relationship with their Muslim acquaintances and friends had enabled them to actually see beyond what they learnt from school or being communicated by mass-media, and accordingly shared the knowledge further with their non-Muslim friends.

Another informant, a 33 years-old Dusun, who is working with a government department that is responsible for supplying material for television documentaries, also shares his experience of acquainting with Islam. On daily basis, he would constantly

encounter an abundant amount of information on Islam as he sieved through and downsized torrents of information given to him. His job responsibility clearly requires him to possess some knowledge on Islam, so that he can effectively decide what is relevant and what is not to be depicted in television documentaries. At this point, he believes that the Islamic education he gained from school has helped him to carry out his job well (personal communication with informant Q, 2/9/2009).

### **EMULATING MUSLIM WAY OF LIFE**

Analysing further the interview data of the informants of this study, one could detect the ways how the religious knowledge gradually influenced and changed the ways the Dusuns led their everyday lives. The emulation of Muslim way of life was becoming evident, particularly in the case of the Dusuns who were nearing their conversion to Islam. One of the Islamic lifestyles, that are commonly adopted by the non-Muslims in Brunei, is the Muslim way of dressing. Theoretically, one's way of dressing is a significant visual identification of the religious, social, cultural, and even political orientation of the individual. For the Dusuns, however, there have been remarkable changes in the dress code of the Dusuns as the adoption of Muslim dress sense has increasingly become the general norms in their lives.

Analysing the life experience of the Dusuns, school uniform is one of the means that has contributed to their initial emulation of the Muslim dress code. The fundamental uniform code in Brunei schools is that headscarf is compulsory to be worn both by Muslim and non-Muslim female students at all school levels, with an exception at the primary level where it is optional but encouraged for non-Muslim pupils to wear one (KP Brunei Darussalam, 2006:13).

However, as the Dusun female began to understand the religious significance of headscarf, that is to protect women's modesty, they began to wear the headscarf not only when attending school but also during non-school activities and events. As told by a 53 years-old teacher, she continued to wear headscarf after she finished secondary school

and enrolled to teachers' training college. At that time, she was fully aware of the fact that it was not compulsory for her, as a non-Muslim teacher trainee, to wear headscarf, or *Baju Kurung*, when attending class. Nevertheless, she continued to adopt Muslim way of dressing as she already felt comfortable and even admitted the fact that she liked the way she looked with headscarf than without (personal communication with informant R, 7/9/2009).

Similar experience is clearly reflected in the interview data of many female Dusun informants; and, in fact, the wearing of the headscarf accordingly lead to cases of mistaken identity where some Dusuns were thought to be Muslim as they would be greeted with the Islamic salutation of *Assalamu'alaikum* or peace be upon you (Ahmad Kumpoh, 2011:28). Simple or trivial this situation may appear, it is nevertheless a clear illustration of how the Dusuns have placed a greater value on the Islamic way of dressing and this has resulted in the minimal differences in the way the non-Muslims who observe the Islamic dress code *vis-à-vis* the way the Muslims dress themselves.

This observation is in line with V.T. King's argument that it is rather difficult nowadays to distinguish between those who are originally part of the mainstream society, i.e. the Brunei Malays, and those who are recently integrated into the society, i.e. the rest of the ethnic groups (King, 1994:186). Taking this analysis further, it is safe to argue that the impact of the Islamic education has reduced the importance of dress code as a crucial key in understanding how the lines of differentiation are drawn between the Muslim and the non-Muslim ethnic groups in Brunei Darussalam.

The application of the Islamic knowledge to the daily life of the Dusuns is equally evident. A 58 years-old army personnel admits that it has become a routine for him to recite *Bismillah* (in the name of God) before starting any work, even before his conversion. He first learnt the Islamic ideal of *Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim* when he was in his primary school, where the beginning of each class began with a group recitation of the *kalimah* (confession). While the Muslims do the recitation in order to ask for Allah's blessings in the work they

are about to carry out, the informant initially joined the group recitation of *Bismillah* after repeatedly seeing his Muslim school friends engaged in the religious conduct. Based on his observation during those early years, the informant believed that there must be something inherently good about reciting *Bismillah*, although he was yet to fully understand the virtues and the inner meaning behind the routine (personal communication with informant S, 15/9/2009).

Interestingly, a considerable number of the convert informants also share the same schooling experience, and many even adopted the constant use of the exclamation "*Ya Allah*" (Oh my God), the spontaneous murmurs of "*Alhamdulillah*" (all praise is due to God), and the expressions such as "*Astaghfirullah*" (I seek forgiveness from God) and "*Insyallah*" (by God's willing) in their conversations and interactions. All these evidences illustrate the solidification and the application of the Dusuns' religious knowledge on Islam as the school system constantly feeds the non-Muslim students with information on Islam in class or outside of class. Such steady flow of information, then, creates a knowledge platform upon which the religious knowledge of the Dusuns expanded and naturally become useful as it developed.

Likewise, an equally remarkable impact of the Islamic education on the Dusuns is the evident tendency to restrict themselves from non-permissible types of foods in Islam. A 55 years-old village head, first learnt at primary school the fact that Islam forbids the consumption of porcine food products, intoxicants (alcoholic drinks), and that all meat must be slaughtered according to Islamic requirements. When he attended secondary education and took the IRK (Islamic Religious Knowledge), this domain provides an avenue for the informant to learn further about the Islamic dietary laws and this helped him to understand better the rationale behind such religious restrictions that Islam imposes on its followers (personal communication with informant T, 22/9/2009).

Another informant, 51 years-old male convert, also learnt about the Islamic dietary laws from school. In the interview, he revealed

the fact that he found *halal* (allowed) products were much more palatable even before his conversion in 2003, where he would be looking for the *halal* certification logo on food before buying them. Significantly, about some ten years later, both informants solely relied upon their solid familiarity with Islam and made the ultimate decision to convert to Islam as both of them did not see the need to search for further verification that could give them the strength and confidence to branch out from their ancestor faith (personal communication with informants U and T, 22/9/2009).

Similarly, the attendance of Dusun children to religious school has equally significant impacts. Although the afore-mentioned number of the non-Muslim children attending religious school appeared rather small, the impacts of the religious knowledge they acquired cannot be easily dismissed. Eight of the informants of this study are those who attended or were still attending religious school during the study's fieldwork in 2008 and 2009.

It is worth repeating here that the non-Muslim children, who are enrolled into a religious school in Brunei, not just learn Islam through textbooks, but they also study the holy book of Al-Qur'an and practically perform the daily prayer as part of the subject taught in the curriculum. Moreover, it is a common practice for religious schools in the country to perform *sholat Zohor* and *sholat 'Asar* congregationally as the call for the two *sholat* (prayer) are within the school hours. Thus, in view of this fact, there should be no question about the significant depth of religious knowledge that these children acquired from the education system. Accordingly, one of the indications of such extent of religious understanding possessed by these non-Muslim children is the performance of *sholat*.

A Dusun parent, whose children attended and completed religious school in the 1990s, revealed how her children would take ablution upon hearing the *Adzan* (call to prayer) for the *Maghrib* prayer and accordingly put on their *telekung* (white cloak covering a woman's head and body worn at prayer), preparing themselves to perform the *sholat*. Another informant, a 33 years-old school teacher, also

performed the prayer during her schooling years due to the persistent curiosity with the truth that a daily prayer could help her to gain better grades in examination. Accordingly, the informant not only performed the *sholat* with her schoolmates at school, but she also started to perform the daily prayer in the privacy of her bedroom (personal communication with informants V and W, 29/9/2009).

The above interview data, thus, show how the children developed a sense of recognition and relationship with Islam. What should also be highlighted here is that these children were somehow not familiar with the Dusun religion, in the same way they acquainted with Islam. Both informants whose interviews were stated above moved out from their Dusun village when they were still at a very young age as their parents were working in the city area. The families had been residing in a Malay neighbourhood in Brunei-Muara District for many years and these changes without doubt affect their identification with the Dusun community. Both of them cannot identify themselves clearly with the Dusun religion and evidently they lack of a concrete knowledge about the ethnic *adat* (custom).

Such lack of knowledge on the Dusun *adat* can be found in the interview data of 18 years-old tertiary student who attended and completed religious education in 1995. Talking about her experience during a funeral ceremony of her male relative, she was perplexed to observe the way the Dusuns carried out the funeral ceremony of the deceased. She was confused when she saw her deceased uncle was dressed in his favourite attire and not in white cotton cloth. What caused the informant's confusion was the basic fact that she could only identify with the Islamic funeral ceremony, where a deceased Muslim is wrapped in a white cotton shroud after the deceased is bathed and before the congregational funeral prayer is performed. Whilst the Dusun funeral ceremony is carried out a more elaborative way, where the body of the deceased is bathed and prepared in a way desired by the family. The family will choose the kind of dress, hairstyle, and perfume which would be worn by the deceased (cited in Ahmad Kumpoh, 2011:33-34).

## CONVERTING TO ISLAM

Based on the above discussion, one cannot doubt the extent of the Islamic knowledge possessed by the informants and how the Islamic education unmistakably provide them with the opportunity to gain a direct experience with Islam and to experiment with the religion on their own accord and at their own pace. Consequently, such acquisition of religious knowledge and information magnified the differences between their Islamic-influenced ways of life *vis-à-vis* the ways the Dusuns typically live their life.

Many informants believed that the familiarity with Islam inevitably led them to evaluate the Dusun religion or to ponder upon their existing lack of religious commitment. For instance, a 57 years-old education officer began to read more about Islam, as what he learnt from school, inevitably made him to think more about his life and the way he lived his life. It was then that he realized how the Muslims have their life objectives, particularly for the afterlife; whereas as a Dusun, he did not know much about life and principles, nor what and which direction in life he should follow. He did not even know how to get a ticket to Heaven (personal communication with informant X, 25/9/2009).

Another informant, a 63 years-old retired teacher, also believed that his growing knowledge about Islam led him to question the viability of the Dusun religion as he never performed any ritual akin to that of the Muslim prayer or fasting (cited in Ahmad Kumpoh, 2011:129). These interview data, thus, show how an evaluation of the existing religion is a natural personal reaction to the acquisition of knowledge and information on Islam and that the informants were actually experiencing a religious crisis where they “raised fundamental questions about their existing religious orientation” (Ahmad Kumpoh, 2011:122).

While the above evidence shows how the deepening level of religious knowledge brought the individual Dusuns to have a religious crisis, some other informants experienced the crisis due to the persistent feeling emptiness and religious vagueness. These feelings represent another type of

religious crisis where the empty feeling equally brings an individual to experience religious comparison. For instance, a 63 years-old retired teacher mentioned above never felt contented in life, despite the fact that he had a very decent job as school headmaster, a lovely family, and a new home. His search for life contentment led him to seek beyond himself for meaning and purpose and frequently asked himself, “is that all there is?” (cited in Ahmad Kumpoh, 2011).

It was during the search for meaning in life that the informant realized the fact that his spiritual need has been long neglected. The Dusun religion had been very marginal in his life that he seldom oriented his daily life in the direction paralleled to his Dusun belief. It was at this stage that the familiarity with Islam, that he has forged since his school years convinced the informant that Islam was the right religious alternative for him (cited in Ahmad Kumpoh, 2011).

Similarly, a retired army personnel initially could not figure out why his new job as an army officer failed to give him a sense of contentment, despite the fact that this is the job he had dreamt about having since childhood. It was due to the failure of attaining inner sense of calmness and stability in his life that led him to search for the solution, and accordingly brought him closer to many Malay Muslims, many of whom he be friended during the years of his army training in Malaysia. Evidently, what they taught him about Islam sounded familiar and relatively easier for him to comprehend and remember as most of the information was identical to what he learnt at school ten years earlier. The only difference now is that the informant viewed the Islamic education in a much more appealing and positive light as it carried some weight and power of persuasion that supported the informant’s self-pursuit to understand Islam as a religious alternative. Retrospectively, it can be safely argued that it was the informant’s existing familiarity with Islam that supported his religious crisis which significantly contributed to the informed decision he made to eventually convert to Islam (cited in Ahmad Kumpoh, 2011).

What can be further said about the

conversion experience of the above informants is that the foundation of the religious education that both informants built during their school years magnified the weight of the anomalies they were experiencing before their conversion. As the Dusun religion failed to provide satisfying solutions to ease the burden of the accumulated anomalies, it further enhanced the severity of the religious crisis experienced by the informants. They consequently challenged the religious establishment of the Dusun religion and questioned the fundamental issues which could not be solved adequately by the religion. This caused them to lose confidence in their ancestor's religion, a stimulus for the informants to move away from the ethnic religion and eventually decided to convert to Islam instead.

Some informants, however, did not experience any observable religious crisis in their conversion experience. Such absence of crisis is evident in the conversion experience of the individuals whose academic background includes an attendance to a religious school until they graduated. As mentioned earlier, their enrolment to the religious education means they were not only learning about Islam through textbook, but, similar to their Muslim classmates, they also learnt Islam through practical actions in order to conform to the essential objectives of religious education in providing the school children with spiritual exercise and disciplines.

Consequently, the informants of this category admit the fact that Islam is the only religion that they have ever been exposed to and clearly, such foundation of Islamic knowledge was significantly at the expense of their ancestral religion that they essentially did not have any concrete knowledge about. For instance, the interview data reveals that many informants were grappled with problems in explaining the essential functions of the *Temarok* ceremony and that they had never actually witnessed, let alone participated in, the ceremony. Similarly, many of the informants also failed to explain the Dusun *adat* (customary laws) in general (cited in Ahmad Kumpoh, 2011).

Moreover, a closer inspection on the

conversion experience of the Dusuns to Islam reveals the fact that their family did not strictly prioritise religious observance and practice within their familial realm. In fact, in some cases, their parents did not really consider of passing down the Dusun ritualistic knowledge to the informants, principally due to the incompatibility that can be found between the Dusun rituals and the essence of the secular education as mentioned earlier. Thus, while the parents observed the Dusun rituals, the informants became increasingly disconnected from any definite types of religious participation within their own ethnic group. Accordingly, the informants essentially had no specific religion they needed to disengage themselves from or any religion to question its reliability which otherwise could trigger a religious crisis. What was left to be done is for the informants to take the public declaration of *Kalimah Syahadah* (the profession of faith that "there is no God other than Allah, and that the Prophet Muhammad is His messenger") in order to officiate the Islamic characteristics which they have acquired and thus become a true Muslim.

All in all, a significant number of informants agree with the fact the exposure towards Islamic education had led them to see Islam as an appealing option and the right religious alternative for them. Moreover, the inclination to see Islam as a viable religious option is more visible in the experience of those who constantly encountered Muslim family members, friends, neighbours, work colleagues, and other Muslim individuals within their personal network. Through such constant encounters, close interactions and observation, the seemingly every day conduct of the Muslims within their personal network could effectively transform into an instrumentally influential behaviour that embody a strong sense of persuasion (Ahmad Kumpoh, 2012:594). Thus, when the schooling experience together with the personal encounter promote a strong sense of recognition towards Islam, the condition could easily sway the Dusuns' religious preference towards Islam and even more so within the circumstances, where the engagement with the ethnic religion is challenged and can no

longer be sustained.

As the Dusuns increasingly questioned the feasibility of adhering to their ethnic religion, they began to prepare themselves to break from the religion and such preparation normally involve the utilisation of the previously acquired Islamic education. The interview data of the informants reveal that their preparation for conversion to Islam includes a ritual experimentation or ritual-testing, such as fasting and performing the *sholat* (prayer), that effectively helped them to prepare their psyche for the conversion as well as to remove the scepticism of those around them who doubted their ability, particularly of those within their family network (cited in Ahmad Kumpoh, 2011:142).

For instance, a 39 years-old mosque officer utilised the knowledge about *sholat* that she learnt from school to carry out the prayer in order to convince her elder brother who doubted her ability to be an observant Muslim if she converted to Islam. Similarly, a 23 years-old student also performed *sholat* before her conversion in order to convince her family that she did not make the decision out of nothing. Apparently, the informant did not find it difficult to carry out the religious duty as she already acquired the practical knowledge about the Muslim prayer during her schooling years (cited in Ahmad Kumpoh, 2011).

This, therefore, indicates a natural progression in religious knowledge, where the informants had developed new perspectives about themselves as the ritual experimentation, provides them with convincing evidence of their ability to become a proper Muslim. Based on the Islamic knowledge, which was somewhat innocently acquired from school before, these Dusuns essentially made an educated decision to break from their ethnic religion and to convert to Islam accordingly.

All in all, it can be safely argued that the profound reliance on the Islamic education, that the Dusuns primarily gained from school curriculum, provides the sufficient foundation which supports their conversion to Islam. This is clearly an apparent impact of the Islamic education on the Dusuns. Moreover, as the acquisition of the Islamic education

feeds the Dusuns with necessary information about Islam, the need to carry out a religious quest which is normally experienced by potential converts to the prospective faith (Rambo, 1993:56) becomes redundant and unnecessary. Instead, the converts would make an adjustment from having a mere casual familiarity with Islam to a tentative religious attachment which later led them to the desirable direction of religious conversion.

## CONCLUSION

The resilient image of an Islamic country that Brunei has been projecting is a long-established fact. The findings of this study is yet another evidence to illustrate the ways how an individual living in Brunei has been instinctively imbued with Islamic influence and ideas to the extent that it would be surprising to come across with a non-Muslim local who never heard anything related to the religion. Moreover, Islam not only impacts and influences significantly the political, social, and economic policies of the country, but it is also a vehicle for the advancement of the dominant Malay cultural and social life among the population. The advent and the further deepening of the religion has essentially elevated the awareness among the non-Muslim population, including the Dusuns as discussed in this paper, towards Islam as the state religion and as one of the integral elements of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Malay Islamic Monarchy).

As evident from the discussion in this paper, those who receive formal Islamic education through school system had the tendency to develop a rather strong familiarity with Islam, although many of them considered the Islamic education at this point as facts-and-figures type of learning rather than the theological representation of the religion. In other words, the Dusuns might question the principles of Islam as compared to those of their ethnic religion, but the Islamic education they acquired does not necessarily imply their sense of belief in Islam and its teachings.

It was only when the Dusun individual has the intention to learn further about the religion after experiencing a religious crisis that the Islamic knowledge will be utilised to

support the individual's religious experience. Consequently, the initial curiosity that they might have at the beginning has now been transformed into trust and mutual respect they developed towards Islam. This is when a religious conversion is considered and recognised as an option, clearly a significant step forward in forging a closer identification with the official religion of the country, and ultimately with Brunei's national philosophy.

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