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Multiculturalism and higher education in Malaysia

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Abstract

The study of multiculturalism relates to the understanding of various contexts and experiences of diversity. Multiculturalism can be described as a process that is contextualised to a particular country and it involves active management by the respective government. This active management requires a balancing act between respect for differences across society and efforts towards achieving a common ground, which is often translated as the realisation of the national identity. In this paper, we will illustrate the process of multiculturalism in Malaysia by focusing on the development of higher education and its relation to nation building. Our study is based on the review of relevant literature and documents related to the history and development of higher education in Malaysia and its connections to ethnic relation and nation building. In the Malaysian context, multicultural society is often portrayed by the three major ethnic groups namely the Malays, Chinese and Indians. Ethnicity is also an important aspect in the identification of one's religion as well as giving a clue of their affiliated political parties. This paper will highlight the various phases in the development of Malaysian higher education from the colonial times to the current globalisation era. We argue that this long history and negotiation between the government and ethnic groups in the country has provided the context and particularities of Malaysian multiculturalism.

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1. Introduction

‘Multiculturalism’ is a term that is widely used in contemporary academic and popular discourses. However the term can bring various meanings. In this paper, the term ‘multiculturalism’ refers to “the complex range of issues associated with cultural and religious diversity in a society, and the social management of the challenges and opportunities such diversity offers” (Nye, 2007 p. 110). Another related term that needs clarification is ‘multicultural’. In this regard, the explanation by Hall (2000) can be of help. Hall states that the term ‘multicultural’ is used adjectively to describe “the social characteristics and problems of governance posed by any society in which different cultural communities live together and attempt to build a common life while retaining something of their original identity” (Hall, 2000 p. 209). Hall (p. 210) also notes that multicultural “... is by definition plural. There are many kinds of multi-cultural society. The USA, Canada, Britain, France, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, New Zealand, Indonesia, South Africa, Nigeria all qualify. They are ‘multi-cultural’ in significantly different ways. However, they

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all share one characteristic. They are by definition culturally heterogeneous.” As for the word ‘multiculturalism’, Hall asserts that it “does not represent an already achieved state of affairs”, rather “it describes a variety of political strategies and processes which are everywhere incomplete. Just as there are different multi-cultural societies, there are very different ‘multiculturalisms’.” At this point, Hall’s argument comes in line with Nye’s assertion that in order to understand multiculturalism, it is necessary to understand the particularities of each country. He further states that the processes and challenges of multiculturalism require active management, to ensure that there are both respect for differences across society as well as a sense of common ground. In order to achieve this, Nye suggested that recognition, acknowledgement of differences, mutual tolerance and engagement serve as important bases for dealing with differences in a multicultural society.

In this paper, we will discuss the case of Malaysian multiculturalism. Malaysian multicultural society is often defined in terms of ethnicity and religious plurality (Zaid Ahmad, 2007). Malaysia, which is a developing country located in Southeast Asia has a total population of over 26 million people of various ethnicities and religions. The major ethnic groups are Malays (50.3%), Chinese (23.8%), non-Malay indigenous people (11.0%) and Indians (7.1%). The Malays and non-Malay indigenous people together make up the *Bumiputera* or ‘son-of-the-soil’ group, though they are made up of heterogeneous groups. In the Malaysian context, this *Bumiputera* and *non-Bumiputera* ethnic divide is crucial in the ‘authority-defined social reality’ and ‘everyday social reality’ in the country (Shamsul A.B., 2010a). The *Bumiputera* culture lies at the core of the Malaysian identity while other ethnic cultures are recognised too. Thus, while the official language in Malaysia is *Bahasa Melayu* or the Malay Language, other languages such as English, Chinese, Tamil and Punjabi are also spoken. Also, while the official religion is Islam which is practiced by about 60% of the population, the rest of the population practices Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and other religions freely. It is also important to note that the Federal Constitution stipulated that Malays are by definition Muslims. Ethnicity, apart from being an important aspect of identification of one’s religion, can also provide us with a clue of one’s affiliated political party. Thus, the aim of this paper is to illustrate the long process of negotiation between the diverse ethnic groups in Malaysia, by focusing on the case of Malaysian higher education development and policies. To begin with, we will provide a brief description on the history of Malaysian multicultural society and how education plays an important role in nation building.

2. Setting the scene – education and nation building in multicultural Malaysia

Historically speaking, before the European came to the Southeast Asia, the area had always been characterised by plurality (Shamsul A.B., 2010b). Plurality refers to the natural process of migration, and cultural borrowings and adaptations that resulted from different ethnic encounters that happened in the region. In terms of the society’s political order, “a flexible non-bureaucratic style of management focusing on management and ceremony by a demonstrative ruler. States, governments and nation-states, which constitute an elaborate system of bureaucratic institutions, did not really exist until Europeans came and dismantled the traditional polities of Southeast Asia and, subsequently, installed their systems of governance, using ‘colonial knowledge’, which gave rise to the plural society complex” (p. 149). In the case of Malaysia, then known as Malaya, colonial occupancy was a long one starting with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1511, followed by the Dutch in 1641 and later by the British in 1874. Also, there was a short period of Japanese occupation from 1941 to 1945, which was later taken over by the British again. In terms of influences, it was the British that brought about most changes that happened in Malaysia in terms of social, political and economics. It is important to note that while these changes came during the British era, they were built from the plural society context that was mentioned by Shamsul above.

One of the major changes during the British era came in the form of foreign workers who were brought in to develop the economic sector. A huge number of foreign immigrants came in from mainland China and the Indian subcontinent. The Chinese were located in the urban areas to work in the commercial and mining sectors while the Indians worked in the plantation areas especially at the rubber estates. The Malays who were the native people of Malaya were mainly farmers and fishermen who lived in the rural areas. This trend in population based on economic

activities and place of residence were prevalent at the time when Malaysia gained independence. Then, the Malaysian society was comprised of three major ethnic groups where the Malays accounted for almost 50 percent of the population while the Chinese made up 37 percent and the Indians, 11 percent. The British ‘divide and rule’ policy had resulted in economic and social imbalance amongst these major ethnic groups in the newly independent country and this is also apparent in the field of education. Thus, this is the area that we wish to discuss further in this paper.

The British colonial policies and attitudes towards education were determined by the economic roles of the Malays, Chinese and Indians. Hence different types of schools were established for these ethnic groups. Generally speaking, the objectives of British education system were to provide most children with basic education in their own languages so as to prepare them to work in the respective economic sectors associated with their ethnicities. Thus, for the Malays, schools were established in the rural areas aiming at providing basic education. Abdul Rahman Ismail & Mahani Musa (2010, p. 3) quote the statement by a senior British officer for the Federated Malay States in 1920: “The aim of the government is not to turn out a few well-educated youths, nor yet numbers of less well-educated boys; rather it is to improve the bulk of the people and to make the son of the fishermen or peasant a more intelligent fisherman or peasant than his father had been, and a man whose education will enable him to understand how his own lot in life fits in with the scheme of life around him”. For the Chinese, education was meant to maintain ties with China, while for those studying at the English medium schools, the aim was to pass the Cambridge Overseas Certificate examinations. These English medium schools were of higher standards and were located in urban areas. Obviously this only benefited a small number of Malay elites and the Chinese and Indians who lived in those urban areas. This “pyramidal colonial education system in the period of 1786-1957 had created a grave imbalance in the distribution of opportunities for education” (Selvaratnam, 1988). Therefore, in the years prior to independence, there was a wide gap in income distribution that can be associated with ethnicities and geographical locations between the majority of the Malays and the non-Malays. Besides that, there were no common goals between these ethnic groups that would soon live together in independent Malaysia. Thus, it was clear to both British colonials and Malaya’s new elites who were preparing to take over administration of the country, that nation building was a necessity and education was central towards this end. Nevertheless, there were disagreements on language issues (Brown, 2007 p. 321), where “... the non-Malay elites predominantly favouring English (or English and Malay) as the national language and the Malay nationalist of UMNO favouring Malay only. The compromise that was eventually struck was for Malay to be adopted as the national language with provisions for English to be used for 10 years after full independence was attained in 1957”.

The newly independent Malaysia was also faced with the problems of socio-economic imbalances between the *Bumiputera* and *non-Bumiputera* that resulted in an ethnic riot in May 1969. This incident forced the government to introduce an affirmative action for the *Bumiputera* through the New Economic Policy (NEP). Another important response was to promote national integration and unity through the education system, as education was seen as an important medium for upward social mobility, thus, helping to rectify the problems of *Bumiputera* backwardness. In this regard, the Malay language was made the medium of instruction at state-assisted secondary schools and state examinations were restricted in the same language too. However, while private secondary Chinese schools were allowed to continue, their examinations were not recognised by the government, thus, denying entrance into public universities and getting jobs in the public sectors. As for primary schools, Chinese and Indians were allowed to continue having their mother tongue as the medium of instructions at vernacular or national-type schools, while a common curriculum was instituted by the government. The changes that took place after the ethnic riot in 1969 were accepted by the Malays and non-Malays but it was never without contestations. Issues related to ethnic preferences and demands, sometimes inter-ethnic and at other times intra-ethnic, remain crucial in multicultural Malaysia (Rozita Ibrahim, 2007). However, in this paper we are interested in discussing the development of education at tertiary level. What happen to students from various types of schools upon finishing their secondary education? How does development at school level influence higher education in Malaysia? These are among the questions that we seek to address in the following sections.

3. Phases in the development of higher education in Malaysia

In this section, we will discuss the three phases of development in higher education in Malaysia. First, from the colonial period up to independence in 1957; second, the period after the ethnic riot in 1969, and third, the present period of globalisation. All three phases have changed the Malaysian higher education landscape and impacted upon, as well as being shaped by, ethnic relations in the country.

3.1. Higher education in Malaysia: Colonial period to independence

Higher education was not a priority in the British colonial education policy. Those privileged few who enjoyed good English education in Malaya gained their higher education in Singapore, or enrolled in matriculation courses at universities in Hong Kong or the United Kingdom (Abdul Rahman Ismail & Mahani Musa, 2010). Also, there were some Malays from rich families who enjoyed the rise in rubber prices at that time, who had the chance to further their studies in the Arab countries, especially in Mecca in Saudi Arabia and Al-Azhar University in Egypt. They were mainly students from Islamic oriented schools or *madrasah*, e.g. Madrasah al-Masyhur in Penang, Madrasah Muhammadiyah, Kota Bahru and al-Ihya al Syarif, Perak (Abdullah Muhammad Zain et al., 2005). As for higher education development in the then Malaysia, Abdul Rahman Ismail & Mahani Musa (2010 p. 7) stated that "... formal education in Malaysia before independence can be examined from two aspects: English education and Malay education. Higher education in the English medium began with the setting up of two colleges in Singapore: King Edward VII College in 1905 and Raffles College in 1928. Higher education in the Malay medium, on the other hand, began with the establishment of the Malacca Training College in 1901, the Matang Training College in 1913, and the SITC (Sultan Idris Teaching College) in 1922". King Edward VII College is a Medical College which was developed following the petition by Chinese Leaders in Singapore with the objective of training assistant surgeons and doctors. Later, the initial Diploma level was upgraded and the students were trained for a professional career. Raffles College, on the other hand, catered for fields other than medicine. The College also provided training for teachers as well as offering scholarships for postgraduate studies for selected students. In the area of Malay higher education, all of the colleges were focusing on teacher training.

The British educational development in Malaysia was disrupted during the short period of Japanese occupation. The education policy was revised after World War II ended, and the policy outlined three main principles (Abdul Rahman Ismail & Mahani Musa, 2010). First, education should be directed at instilling, encouraging and increasing the capacity of self-rule, apart from loyalty and responsibility. Second, equal opportunity should be given to all children, both boys and girls irrespective of race. Third, there was also a need to develop secondary, vocational and higher education that is capable of meeting the needs of the country. The outcome of this policy was manifested with the establishment of University of Malaya (UM) in Singapore, in October 1949 through the merging of King Edward VII College of Medicine and Raffles College. In terms of ethnic relations, it is interesting to note that a total of four pro-chancellors were appointed. They were the High Commissioner of Malaya, the Governor of Singapore, Sir Han Hoe Lim who was a member of Carr-Saunders Commission (the commission that suggested the merging) and Dato' Onn Jaafar who was a Malay leader at that time. This was to show that the establishment of University of Malaya will not cause any loss for the Malays and that the university is open to all ethnicities. This was echoed in an article written by Silcock, as quoted by Abdul Rahman Ismail & Mahani Musa (2010), stating that a university must demonstrate the multicultural lives of its students as well as maintaining a high academic standard and not only producing graduates like a factory. Later, upon independence in 1957, political and educational considerations brought about the establishment of UM in Kuala Lumpur in 1959 which was then separated as an entity on its own in 1962. Following that, the Singapore UM came to be known as University of Singapore.

As a newly independent country, efforts were taken to develop education that balanced between vocational studies and overall intellectual development. Hence, in 1962, the Higher Education Planning Committee was formed with the aims to identify the workforce needed in a 20-year period and also to plan the educational facilities towards producing the required workforce (Sharom Ahmat, 1980). This is clearly seen in the First Malaysia Plan (1966–1970). In years to come, the establishments of new universities in Malaysia would be focusing on providing the much-needed human resources requirements.

3.2. Higher education in Malaysia: After May 13th 1969

After the May 13th incident, as mentioned earlier, the NEP was introduced to address the problems of socio-economic imbalances between the *Bumiputera* and *non-Bumiputera*. Higher education was regarded as one of the most important ways towards restructuring Malaysian society (Zailan Moris & Sh. Azad Sh. Attar, 2010). The NEP introduced the quota system in student admission in order to ensure a balanced ethnic composition, not only in the total population of students but also in the distributions of students according to faculties (Selvaratnam, 1988). Besides, scholarships, special assistance and tuition as well as pre-medical, pre-science and pre-engineering programmes were established for rural students. The government also opened the MARA Institute of Technology (ITM) in 1967 to cater for the higher education needs of the Malays and *Bumiputera*. In terms of national language as an important tool towards ethnic integration and promotion of national identity, the universities in the country were directed to employ the Malay language as the medium of instruction for all courses by 1983.

Selvaratnam (1988) notes that the affirmative action that favours the *Bumiputera* community brought about considerable discontent among the *non-Bumiputera*, especially the Chinese population of the country. They were of the opinion that the policy discriminated against them and denied them access into local universities. However, according to Brown (2007 p. 321), "... through the early years of the NEP, Chinese discontent was relatively contained, largely due to the acceptance across most ethnic groups that some form of affirmative action was necessary for lasting stability and the high growth rates of the period, which mitigated any potential 'loss' by the non-bumiputera communities. In the mid-80s however, against a backdrop of economic downturn, increased societal protest and tensions within the BN coalition, education issues became the focus of more vociferous ethnic discontent and mobilisation". Brown further stated that this dissatisfaction had brought about ethnic protests, starting with a local issue in UM, but later expanding to become a national level dispute. The dispute was intensified by a series of counter-demonstrations organised by various political groups representing the Malays and non-Malays. The ethnic discontents and demonstrations came to a critical level in 1987 and eventually forced the government to detain a number of people under the Internal Security Act (ISA), as well as closing several newspapers and imposing bans on all public demonstrations and rallies. This has effectively silenced the social discontent for years to come.

From the late 1980s onwards, the Malaysian higher education sector saw changes with a reduction in the *Bumiputera* interests, although, the quota system was still practised. During this period, the country embarked on democratising higher education (Zailan Moris & Sh. Azad Sh. Attar, 2010). This meant that the opportunity to gain higher education was extended to the masses, regardless of their socio-economic background. Higher education is, thus, no longer elitist in nature and does not privilege certain sectors of the community. The 1980s and early 1990s saw the establishment of new government universities such as the International Islamic University (1980), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (1992) and Universiti Malaysia Sabah (1994). Besides that, the government started to allow for the establishment of private tertiary education institutions. This was driven by the limited number of places at public universities combined with the increasing education rates of the population as a whole, and the increasing costs of overseas education (Brown, 2007). However, this growth was limited by the fact that private colleges were obliged to accept the Malay language as the medium of instruction. Hence, many Chinese students opted for education in English or Chinese abroad. Later in 1996, the Education Act greatly liberalised the tertiary education sector by allowing for instruction in English language, thus, promoting more private universities starting with Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR) and Universiti Tun Abdul Rahman (UTAR).

3.3. Higher education in Malaysia: Globalisation era

In the era of globalisation, the role of higher education is closely linked to the emergence of a post-industrial economy, in which productivity relies predominantly on science, technology, and management (Lee 2004). Thus, universities all over the world started their restructuring practices in order to respond to this new development. In Malaysia, this first came in the form of corporatisation of public universities. The aim was to develop corporate culture and practices that enabled universities to compete in the market place. Lee (2004 p. 36-37) asserts that, "... instead of producing and transmitting knowledge as social good, the universities are placing emphasis on the production of knowledge as a marketable good and saleable commodity. Universities are engaged with market-related activities". In the country, Lee stated that these changes have also expanded the role of the government from being the main provider to a regulator and protector of higher education. This is in line with the establishment of The Ministry of Higher Education in 2004. Higher education in Malaysia is no longer designed to fulfil the needs of Malaysians only. In this era of globalisation, education is fast becoming an industry, and knowledge is seen as a commodity. Promotions and campaigns were carried out in foreign countries to attract students to enrol in local universities. This has resulted in an increasing number of foreign students, especially from developing countries in Asia and Africa. All these new development will certainly bring about a new phase of multicultural encounter to the various ethnicities in Malaysia.

4. Ethnic relations and higher education in Malaysia

The above discussion shows how nation building and promoting unity among the diverse ethnic groups in Malaysia have always been central to the aims and roles of local universities. However, the question of whether or not these noble intentions are evident in the 'everyday social reality' (Shamsul A.B. 2010b) of our university students is yet to be answered. Studies by local scholars indicate two opposing views. First, ethnic polarisation is widening between Malay and non-Malay students (Sanusi Osman, 1984 & Agoes Salim, 1983). Abdul Samad Hadi (2003) found that 80% of his respondents agree that they still have negative prejudices towards other ethnic groups. Though at the outer surface, relations between different ethnicities seem pleasant, students found it difficult to spend time together for social activities such as having meals, studying as a group, and even more apparent, many disagree to sharing accomodation as roommates. We suggest that, the issues of ethnic polarisation at the universities is partly a result of the lack of clear policies on nation building at higher education level. For example, the Strategic Plan for Higher Education does not provide specific objectives towards this end. Most of the policies on education focus on the primary and secondary levels. However, on a positive note, the second view states that, though ethnic polarisation seems to exist, it is getting less and less (Mansor Mat Noor, 2000), due to the shared norms related to contemporary life that focusses on individual needs for material gain, social status and connection, that he contends have succeeded in overtaking the significance of political and ethnic differences. Another study by Zaharah Hassan et al. (2010) suggests that university activities have successfully helped in creating awareness and increasing students' motivation to interact with other ethnic groups. One of the most important contributions is the introduction of the Ethnic Relations Module as a compulsory course for all public universities starting in year 2005/2006. For private higher institutions, the compulsory course with similar objective is called Malaysian Studies. This can be seen as a positive step towards inculcating awareness and knowledge of Malaysian multicultural society. Other than having a compulsory course in university curricula, co-curricular activities at the faculties and residential colleges are identified as potential sites where inter-ethnic understanding and relationships can be fostered.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper discussed the long process of negotiation between the government and the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia by taking the case of higher education. We suggest that what we see in today's ethnic relations at local universities is very much a result of the history and development of education policies as a whole. We can expect that education will continue to be a contestation site for multicultural Malaysia for many years to come. This shows that multiculturalism is never a finished project. And, as has been illustrated above, the particularities of the Malaysian multicultural society have an important bearing on the efforts taken by the government in providing a common ground for the people of this country. For us, the fact that the effort in promoting unity through education has now reached higher education and not only concentrated in the school level is a sign that the process of multiculturalism in the Malaysian education system is moving forward towards a new height.

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