

## Historical Consciousness as a Public Discourse: An Analysis of Malaysian Experience

### *Kesedaran Sejarah sebagai Wacana Awam: Analisis Pengalaman Malaysia*

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#### ABSTRACT

*Historical consciousness refers to one's ability to apply historical knowledge in life. In a social context, a society with historical consciousness will always take into account past experiences as a guide to deal with one another. This condition however does not exist naturally. Aside from nurturing 'the concern for history', a set of data should be available as a guideline for the public. Data organized as discourses will guide an individual or society through the initial historical consciousness process. This article attempts to conceptually highlight the process of empowering historical consciousness in Malaysia. The focus will be on surveys of discourses by several organizations or actors related to the country's history. These include schools, museums and non-governmental organizations such as the Persatuan Sejarah Malaysia (Malaysian Historical Society), The Patriots, the Pusat Sejarah Rakyat (People's History Center) and the Kempen Sejarah Malaysia Sebenar (Real Malaysia History Campaign [KemSMS]). Using qualitative data, this study employs content analysis on each of their selected historical discourses. Apart from exploring their efforts at increasing historical awareness, this article maps out each actor's inclination towards a set of historical information. Albeit that each of these actors strive to strengthen historical awareness within the community, the foundation of each discourse is different. Consequently, the essence of the historical awareness promoted becomes contradictory.*

*Keywords: Historical consciousness; schools; museums; NGOs; historical polemics.*

#### ABSTRAK

*Kesedaran sejarah secara umum merujuk kepada keupayaan seseorang mengaplikasi pengetahuan sejarah dalam mencorakkan kehidupan kini dan masa hadapan. Dalam konteks sosial, masyarakat yang mempunyai kesedaran sejarah akan sentiasa mengambilkira pengalaman masa lalu sebagai pedoman berurusan sesama sendiri. Keadaan ini bagaimanapun tidak muncul secara semulajadi. Selain sikap 'peduli sejarah' itu harus dipupuk, suatu set data untuk dijadikan pedoman juga harus dibentangkan kepada masyarakat. Data yang terorganisasi sebagai suatu wacana inilah kemudian akan memandu seseorang individu atau masyarakat melalui kesedaran sejarah tadi. Artikel ini cuba menyorot proses pemeraksanaan kesedaran sejarah di Malaysia secara konseptual. Sorotan itu akan terarah pada tinjauan peringkat makro ke atas wacana beberapa organisasi atau aktor berkaitan sejarah di negara ini. Sampel yang dipilih melibatkan sekolah, muzium dan badan bukan kerajaan seperti Persatuan Sejarah Malaysia, The Patriots, Pusat Sejarah Rakyat dan Kempen Sejarah Malaysia Sebenar (KemSMS). Dengan menggunakan data kualitatif, kajian ini membuat analisis kandungan ke atas wacana-wacana sejarah mereka. Bukan sahaja mengupas usaha mereka untuk memperkasa kesedaran sejarah, artikel juga akan memetakan kecenderungan masing-masing aktor terhadap sesuatu set maklumat sejarah. Artikel ini menghujahkan, walaupun setiap aktor tersebut berusaha memperkasa kesedaran sejarah dalam jiwa masyarakat, namun, tujahan wacana masing-masing saling berbeza. Keadaan ini secara tidak langsung telah menyebabkan intipati kesedaran yang dipromosi juga bercanggah.*

*Kata kunci: Kesedaran sejarah; sekolah; muzium; NGO; polemik sejarah.*

#### INTRODUCTION

History is supposed to be objective because the research methods employed within the field focus on interpretation of authentic sources. However, this is not the case today as history lends itself to being 'subjective'. This is evident especially in post-colonial countries causing historical polemics

to occur. In Malaysia, this polemic ensues from various angles, involving many issues. The research question raised in this article seeks to understand the reasons why historical polemics occur as well as the motivation behind them. This article conceptually considers 'historical consciousness' as an analytical tool to unravel the question. This

concept encourages history and the motivation for its articulation to be seen in a broader scope rather than merely as an academic matter in the university. It places importance in the dynamics and function of historical discourses in the public domain. As a concept, historical consciousness will help us comprehend the polemics and contradictions of historical articulations in Malaysia at a more fundamental level before understanding more complex notions such as post-colonial nationalism and so on. Therefore, it is the objective of this article to present, in an organised manner, how historical polemics among selected historical actors in Malaysia are actually rooted in the question of historical consciousness.

### HISTORY AND HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

History is a phenomenon of the past that must be remembered in the present. To understand a phenomenon that has passed, it needs to be rebuilt by humans based on the interpretation of sources, like artefacts or documents of past events. History is not able to speak for itself. It can only be expressed through discourse by scholars. For this reason, the history discussed within these discourses are never as objective as when they actually happened. Instead, they are subjective, depending on the researcher's findings, interpretations and understanding of past. In addition, the history description is selective as it depends heavily on what the researcher chooses to focus on, whether they be political, social aspects and so on and so fourth. This is the undelying reason for various versions of a particular historical discourse of a certain past phenomenon. Each version of the discourse produced will only be valid when it is accepted by the community of historians as authoritative through historical research methodologies that have been followed strictly and responsibly (Stanford, 1986).

In reality, since time immemorial, historical reconstructions have not only been made by scholars in the field of history alone. Parties from outside the academic domain have also paid close attention to the area of study (Mohd Adib, 2015). The emergence of this historical discourses in the form of public history makes this field colourful with various discoveries and interpretations that may sometimes contradict one another. The historical discourse in a society that is coloured with a complex background of mixed culture and religion is often diverse. This

complexity is a primary factor causing history to be polemical. Oftentimes, historical discourses not accepted as a comprehensive and conclusive. Existing discourses will be questioned and updated with other findings. Compared to other discourses in the group of Social Sciences and Humanities, it is rather apparent that historical polemics are the most talked about in society.

This is largely due to the fact that historical discourses will usually not remain in its form as mere discourses. Since it is a 'report' from the past, history is a proposition to legitimize any demands and decision-making process in this day and age. In the Malaysian context, for example, questions surrounding who the original inhabitants were, who were those fighting for independence and so on are important issues to juxtapose between priorities and rights in present life. Thus, historical discourse is not a rigid document, but rather an important instrument for building consciousness of the past. This awareness is what scholars refer to as 'historical consciousness.' The ultimate goal of historical discourse is not only to provide 'pure knowledge' of the past, but more importantly to build a certain historical consciousness. The meaning and importance of historical consciousness itself will be discussed in the next section.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical consciousness is a perspective built from the processing of historical data and used as a guide for life, for the present and for the future (Blanusa, 2005). In a more specific sense, Seixas (2004) refers to historical consciousness as a mental product, which involves an individual's or community's deep understanding and appreciation of history. This understanding and appreciation is formed by a particular set of thoughts or cultures, and because of its integrity in the human mind, it is used to determine the direction of life. For Rusen (2004), historical consciousness is a practical quality of history built into the human mind. All the historical information that comes to mind will not be left remaining in raw form, but will be processed to formulate a series of codes of ethics, moral lines and procedures for human life.

Thus, as Anohen (2005) stressed, historical consciousness is not just a form of general knowledge of history. Rather, it is a strategic tool that enables history to become a guide in life. From an individual's perspective for example,

historical consciousness is capable of influencing one's conception of code of ethics and morals. What is good and bad for the individual is strongly influenced by the way he or she sees and evaluates history. The behaviour of societies in the past that are accepted as good and pure will continue to be held and defended. Certainly, the entire conception of moral issues is also influenced by the idea of identity — which is reinforced by one's historical consciousness. Through the realisation that human beings have been hereditarily defined by their identity, then, a person's behavior, including in matters of morality, will become more bound and guided (Thorp, 2014). The historical awareness that influences the process of moral construction and identity will continuously shape the attitudes and tendencies of human beings (Mamoura, 2013).

Historical consciousness plays a greater role in the context of a society. Rusen (2013) argues, historical consciousness at best is able to influence four elements namely, the identity of various social groups in society, public response to social diversity, public response to foreign culture, and response towards change or modernization. From the perspective of entity and power relations, Zanazanian (2009) argues that historical consciousness not only highlights the superiority of an ethnic identity. It is also able to outline what is appropriate as well as what should not be negotiated with other ethnicities. Historical consciousness embraces various segments of social life including aspects of power namely legitimacy, mobilization and even political domination. Emphasizing this further, Schieder (1978) stressed that historical consciousness plays a role in every space imaginable in the community.

Nonetheless, historical consciousness is not a quality that emerges naturally despite having a fundamental function for individuals as well as society. Instead, it has to go through the process of articulation and an individual's rational choice. According to Goetz (2001), historical consciousness will only emerge upon the existence of three interrelated elements. Firstly, there must be factual history -- the historical phenomenon being used as a guidance must have actually happened. Secondly, there must be the existence of historical discourse and a process for its dissemination and thirdly, the screening and interpretation of historical discourse in the human mind (decoding) must occur. The first element is beyond human control and thus is termed by Goetz as 'nature'. The other two elements are then critical variables in creating historical consciousness for individuals as well as the society.

However, historical consciousness is never free of values because a subjective element is heavily embedded in the two variables. This is parallel with Pihlainen's (2014) argument that ultimately historical consciousness is an ideological product of the mind.

Based on the arguments of the above-mentioned studies, ontologically, one of the main trends in contemporary historical consciousness research is to look into its relationship with advocacy. The moot question is, how is historical awareness nurtured? The main research question for researchers is who, or what are the agencies that would be responsible for this nurturing process? For example, Casey (2017), discusses the role of community history museums in Canada in efforts to foster historical consciousness in the country. Ibagon (2019) positioned history textbooks in Columbia as one of the important instruments in fostering historical consciousness. Birkner and Donk (2020) studied the potential of social media platforms as an important generator of historical consciousness in the increasingly digital world today. Sung (2020) demonstrated the importance of teachers and pedagogical processes in historical consciousness in Taiwan. In addition, Khardel, Vyzdryk and Melnyk (2020) highlighted the role of cinemas as a field of fostering historical consciousness in Russia and Ukraine.

Essentially, these studies have succeeded in highlighting an important fact and that is historical consciousness needs to be pursued and championed. Nonetheless, what seems to be revealed is that historical consciousness is growing on a one-way basis when in reality, it is always polemical, ideological and difficult to reach a consensus. This article intends to prove that when historical consciousness is communicated, inevitably there will be alternative discourses that will arise to counter the main medium of hegemony for historical discourses. This article also attempts to provide a macro perspective on the reality of advocacy of historical consciousness, in the Malaysian context, that is complicated by its subjective and contradictory nature.

## METHODOLOGY

To understand the question of historical consciousness in the Malaysian context, this paper applies a qualitative approach by scrutinising historical discourse collected through library research. The primary and secondary data were analysed using content analysis methods. The

main focus of this article is to understand the predispositions of these discourses within the framework of historical consciousness. Materials studied include books, scientific papers, websites and posts on Facebook. Although the data used is quite limited, it is considered sufficient to show the existence of a diversity of discourse in the construction of historical consciousness in Malaysia.

## BACKGROUND

In Malaysia, articulations about history in the form of scholarly discourse or public advocacy abound and alive whether in the academic realm or in the public domain. These articulations are driven by various parties, who, to some extent, contributed to the construction of historical consciousness in Malaysia. Further discussions try to highlight the process from an organizational perspective. Essentially, it involved surveys of government organizations as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Among them, schools were particularly forthcoming in the process of constructing historical consciousness. Schools have been responsible for providing formal history education since the mid-19th century (Kho 1992). During that time, history as a subject was not made compulsory. Only in 1989 did this policy organisations students had to take the subject at the secondary level. In 2013, the government made it compulsory for students to pass the subject in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia exams (Utusan Malaysia, 24 Oct 2010). A year later, history as a subject was made as a core subject at the primary school level (Utusan Malaysia, 25 Oct 2010). With this increase in recognition of the subject, schools now have a greater responsibility to implement the task of making history an important subject. Besides ensuring sophisticated and effective delivery of the subject, schools must ensure that the educational process moves within the framework, philosophy and ultimate goal set by the state which is to instill the values of national identity, loyalty and love for the country as well as to cultivate a sense of pride in being a Malaysian. (Omar, 1992, Anuar, 2004 & Rodzi, 2009).

To achieve these goals, the philosophy and framework of historical education currently utilised must be directed towards the mobilization of efforts to find meanings of past phenomena. Such is required so that history is seen as meaningful and significant in the current context. According to Omar (1992),

students should be trained to make interpretations rather than merely be exposed to historical facts. The input gained from history education should be a guide for them in the future. From an academic perspective, planning and educational orientation such as this are closely tied to the process of political socialization (Rupawan & Zubaidah, 1998; Yong et. al. 2018; Yong & Ku Hasnita 2019). Students are not merely exposed to the knowledge of history for academic reasons alone but it should be used as a means to form positive attitudes and political acquiescence. Abd. Ghapa (2011) suggested that historical education should not be analysed through the educational framework alone. Due to its function as a medium of political socialization, the subject matter should be seen from a broader perspective, and that is, as part of the government's public policy.

To ensure that this aspiration is implemented smoothly, schools have organised a process of teaching and learning based on a prescribed curriculum. The curriculum is uniformed and it applies to all primary and secondary schools. In the effort of constructing a curriculum, not all historical topics will be presented to students. Instead, priority will be given to issues considered parallel with the students' comprehension and the ultimate goal of history education (Mohd Samsudin & Shahizan 2012). With all the instruments available, schools have played a substantially structured and strategic role in articulating history to the community, especially for young adults.

In addition to schools, the other government organisation that is prominent in the process of historical articulation is the museum. Much like the education system in Malaysia, museums are also a colonial product. The British established the first museum in Taiping in 1886 (Dellios, 1999). In 1888, a second museum was established in Kuala Lumpur. Three years later, Charles Brooke set up a similar institution in Sarawak. Beginning from the three basic establishments mentioned earlier, the number of museums began increasing, especially during the post-independence era. As of 2013, 189 museums are actively operating throughout Malaysia (Abu Talib, 2015). The various types of these museums can be categorized into four, them being general (emphasizing on history-culture), thematic (specific on themes such as archeology, forest, rice, art etc.), royal galleries (focusing on royal treasures) and memorial (focusing on the commemoration of certain events or figures) (Abu Talib, 2012).

Despite the various academic categories these museums belong to, operationally they still perform the same function and that is to provide education related to history and culture to the wider community (Norashikin, Siti Norlizaiha & Salwa, 2020). According to Mohd Azmi (2013), museums operate through three main activities and they are firstly collecting, researching and also preserving the historical, cultural and natural heritage that is important to the country. Secondly, documenting and publishing research results; and thirdly, providing knowledge development services through exhibitions, talks, workshops, seminars, forums, conferences and guided tour services to exhibition galleries. Although the museum carries out various activities in its operations, however, it is the knowledge development activities that are arguably the most prominent — especially in terms of exhibitions (Jennifer & Eileen, 2010). If schools use the curriculum to channel formal history education to students, the museums utilise the exhibition galleries to educate members of the community on similar matters through informal methods. The National Museum of Kuala Lumpur for example, exhibited in detail the development of the country's history to visitors throughout the four eras them being the pre-historic era, the Malay state of the pre-19th century, as well as the colonial and the contemporary Malaysia (Abu Talib, 2013). This is considerably a comprehensive and concise scope for something presented visually and informally to museum visitors.

Although the formalities of historical articulation in museums are a bit relaxed compared to schools, the narrative of the exhibition is still under control — especially in government-sponsored museums. For Abu Talib Ahmad (2018), museums are always a part of the apparatus used by the government to cultivate the spirit of nationhood in the framework of nation-building. What will be prioritized in the exhibition is decided based on the extent to which a historical issue is able to contribute to efforts to strengthen the nation-building agenda. Thus, although the orientation is different, museum narratives can be said to be parallel with what is common in schools. Therefore, it places the function of museums just as important as schools in terms of historical articulation.

Apart from government agencies, historical articulation activities in Malaysia also run through the efforts of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Among the most active organizations in

this framework for a long time is the Persatuan Sejarah Malaysia (Malaysian Historical Society [PSM]). It was established in 1953 with the goal of disseminating information about the history of Malaya. Implicitly, its existence at the time was to participate in a campaign to win the hearts and minds of the people in order to prevent them inclining towards the communist movement (Mohd Adib, 2015). With these two fundamental ideas, PSM has been making efforts to bring history closer to society until today. Their historical articulation work is usually more popular and channeled through four periodic programs, namely, exhibitions, competitions, writings and historical talks (Mohd Adib, Abdul Ghapa & Zubaidah 2014). Although these events are managed by PSM, however, the content is always the responsibility of either the appointed panel of consultants (consisting of members and activists) or individuals with authority on a special issue. In line with its position as an NGO, the historical articulation activities of PSM are quite flexible and not too rigid as is common with government agencies.

Beginning in 2010, it can be observed that there is a tendency for various groups to use the internet as a medium of historical articulation. Among the NGOs actively using this medium is the youth group called The Patriots. They often use social media platforms such as Facebook to make postings related to historical issues. On the social media site, it is noted that one of the missions of this group is to “develop the importance of knowledge through examples and the teaching of the Malaysian history.” Despite having this novel intention of spreading knowledge, The Patriots do not seem to make it their ultimate goal. Instead, what they are trying to achieve through their historical articulation movement is, helping to overcome the nine challenges of Vision 2020. This is the objective of their movement in their social media platform. In line with that goal, the Patriots are concerned about historical issues that are closely related to the question of identity, culture, language and heritage on their social sites. These issues are very fundamental to shaping the identity and social capital of the community, so that all nine challenges of Vision 2020 can be effectively addressed.

Apart from The Patriots, the other NGO utilising the social media platform is Pusat Sejarah Rakyat (People's History Center). Pusat Sejarah Rakyat was officially established on 14 September 2011. On their social media site, it is stated that the objective of their movement is to “... update, classify and

preserve records - written, oral and visual - in relation to personalities, groups and communities, events and struggles, especially those that have never been recorded, or set aside, excluded or falsified in official history." Calling themselves an independent archive, the organization's posts on Facebook page are unique as they are not narrative in nature, but rather a display of past records of various historical events. Visitors to these social media sites are allowed to refer to historical information for themselves, directly from the source. This approach is thought to be commensurate with their deconstructive goals -- the group hopes to instill confidence in the society's with regards to 'protected history' when users are allowed to refer directly to a particular source,

Another NGO that has been relatively active in cyberspace is the Kempen Sejarah Malaysia Sebenar (Real Malaysia History Campaign [KemSMS]) which was established on May 15, 2011 with limited membership (Sivachandralingam, 2013). This group is not an organisation in the ordinary sense. Rather, it is a joint entity with various other NGOs and individuals interested in national history issues. It is named as a 'campaign' because the purpose the group was formed was to gain support from the community in an effort at raising awareness that the school history curriculum requires reform. The historical articulation activities championed by this group are quite different. Instead of paying attention to historical narratives, the group attempts to create awareness among the community that there are other versions of history that can be highlighted in the school curriculum. They support the idea that the historical narrative of the nation in schools should be a combination of the various accounts within the mixed social diversity of the country. KemSMS hopes that the 'real Malaysian history' project will be received well both by the community in general as well as the government.

Once further research is done, the number of agencies revolving within this historical articulation framework, whether or not they are government related, will certainly increase. This article attempts to prove that within the Malaysian scene, these activities are steadily burgeoning. The motivation to articulate history for this society is guided by the ideal that society must be educated and made aware of its roots. The activities described thus far have contributed to a marked level of historical consciousness.

According to Goetz (2001), the articulation of history through discourses itself is an important platform in the construction of historical

consciousness. The activities of various agencies should be seen as the most basic effort to ensure that members of the community have access to historical information. Knowledge can only be processed and made to function as a practical instrument in life once there is a library of historical information set in the minds of the members of society. For this reason, the historical articulation activities of the various agencies mentioned earlier in this article do not necessarily lead to academic inquiries arbitrarily. Instead, history is articulated by them for a more functional purpose — to steer the society within the framework of nation-building, to win their hearts and minds, to overcome the nine challenges of Vision 2020, and even to challenge the dominant interpretation of Malaysia's key historical narratives.

In short, historiography and efforts at articulating them have the motive of driving history as a practical asset in the minds of society. Nonetheless, are their versions of historiography able to penetrate the minds and influence the rational choices of the society? It can be said that these various versions are a kind of 'soft lobbying' through the discourses of each actor – all done in the name of dominating, steering and influencing society's historical consciousness.

## DISCUSSION

Historical consciousness in Malaysia is not constructed by a single party. The diversity of actors is the reason why historical discourses are often inconsistent. Society is offered with a chain of historical information that is considered important and meaningful albeit originating from competing points of view. Thus, historical consciousness in this country is notably dependant on whose constructed discourse is viewed as the most dominant.

As important government 'extensions' in the construction of historical consciousness, schools are pertinent examples of agencies that have been disseminating discourses prominently based on primordial perspectives in historiography. History textbooks in schools reflect this phenomenon as they immensely revolve around aspects of the nation-state. Sandra (2005) argues that the discourse of the History textbook emphasises the narrative about the original nature of the country but is less prominent in describing the changes and continuity of history. She argued that there is a discernable inconsistency in the use of the terms 'race' (kaum) and 'people' (rakyat) in the textbook discourse. When textbooks

refer to the contemporary era of Malaysia, 'race' and 'people' are referred to all citizens. However, the same expression in historical context seems to be exclusive to the indigenous community only. For Sandra, textbooks can be seen as fostering ideas of national unity towards members of the public. However, the focal point of unity is mainly oriented to "Malayness". Similarly, the writings of other scholars like Santhiram (1997) and Helen (2009) describe the special symbiotic relationship between textbooks and the Malay narrative.

This is akin to museum exhibitions which display resembling discourses. Abu Talib (2015) summed up, in terms of volume, the National Museum of Malaysia - the main historical repository of the country - has given priority to the narratives related to the Malay communities and the institutions, especially the sultanate. Of the four main galleries, one is fully provided for the discourse of Malay history. While the other three galleries are infused with other elements, Malay history remains as the main focus. Nonetheless, this does not mean that museums deny the display of historical discourses of other communities. Though given evident attention, the display is often made through primordial interpretations and perspectives. In this case, Chang (2012) stressed that there is a description in Gallery C of the National Museum describing how a diverse society in this country would have a detrimental effect on the natives. It is as if the rise of Malay nationalism in colonial times was driven by an uneasiness toward the migrant communities in Malaya. To Chang, statements like this are capable of breaking down 'Malaysian society' into different layers.

The tendency to articulate historical narratives from a primordial perspective is also a trait of NGOs such as PSM. As explained earlier, the trajectory of PSM programs, including historical writing, is often determined by a panel of consultants or individuals. PSM itself in their capacity as a historical organization does not publish discourses on themselves. What can be observed is that ideas about historical discourses are often expressed by their leaders during meetings with members. This is evident from the documents of Tan Sri Dr. Omar Mohd Hashim, who was the former Chairman of the Executive Committee of PSM. In his speeches, Omar frequently reminded historians and history enthusiasts to actively explore various aspects of Malay history. Among his main concerns were issues of the collective response of society towards the contribution of the Malays regarding

the construction of the Malaysian nation-state. He was worried that if Malay history is not studied and documented thoroughly, the future generation will perceive contributions by the said ethnic group as something of a 'periphery' (Omar, 2013). Operationally, he also urged Malay NGOs to be more active to help influence decisions that involve public policy. According to him, PSM is already actively voicing their views to the government. This is made in an orderly and prudent fashion, because the main focus of PSM is to educate the community and not merely spread reckless emotional sentiments.

The Patriots, who are slightly different from the PSM, often publish their discourses under the brand of the organization. Thus, their inclinations can be measured based on the discourses they have been spreading over the years. The Patriots have already published at least two books that illustrate the articulation tendencies of their historical consciousness. These books are a compilation of their posts on the Facebook page. The first book is *Kitab Tamadun Melayu* (The Book of Malay Civilization) (2015) and the second book is *Jangan Selewang Sejarah Melayu* (Do Not Deviate Malay History) (2016). The first book encompasses discourses about the superiority of the Malays. This book also discussed the origins, civilization and the Malay Kingdom, the Malay government and its international relations (Helmy, 2015). The second book is more of a polemic about the history of Malay, which to them has been distorted in cyberspace. In this book, the Patriots criticised netizens both Malays and non-Malays, who were deemed trying to belittle Malay history (Helmy, 2016). Based on the title and content of these books, The Patriots seemed more inclined to articulate history to the public from a Malay-centric perspective.

In contrast to the discourse orientations that have just been discussed, the Pusat Sejarah Rakyat is more interested in highlighting narratives on the struggle of the peripheral class or 'subaltern' in the process of nation-building in Malaysia. In their post on Facebook, 'subalterns' are referred to either in terms of class, ideological group or ethnic group that has no place in the dominant narrative of Malaysian history, in other words, history textbooks. Based on a survey of their posts on Facebook throughout August 2016, the emphasis on these three aspects is obviously clear. Among the things they emphasised were related to the Festival Day of Indigenous Peoples, news about the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965, the launch

of the People’s Constitution of 1947, news about 1,000 maids who went on strike in Kuala Lumpur in 1963, discussions about the difference between Independence Day, National Day and Malaysia Day, the independence day of Sabah that was said to be earlier than September 1963, regarding the Brunei People’s Party movement that fought for the independence of North Kalimantan, and eventually things ended with a narrative on the struggle of Ishak Hj Muhammad (Pak Sako) in the pre-Merdeka era. Despite being just a sample of the myriad of posts on their Facebook page, however, it can be observed in general that the discourse they propose usually encapsulate narrations of marginalized groups.

In terms of approach, the discourse of the Pusat Sejarah Rakyat is evidently different from what KemSMS advocates. The Pusat Sejarah Rakyat is more inclined to present narratives, while KemSMS shows interest in advocacy directly through consultative proposal papers to the government. Proposal papers similar to memorandums have been disseminated in cyberspace, to attract the attention of the community as well as the government. Although the approach is different, the discourse supported by KemSMS can be said to be similar to what is expressed by the People’s History Center, especially in terms of the emphasis of the representation of ethnic history and minority culture in Malaysia. In a paper written by A. Bakar Sulaiman on behalf of KemSMS (2011), he generally suggested that the history curriculum should be revised, so that a more scientific narrative could be introduced. To him, the

emphasis on the history of Islam and the Malays in existing textbooks are very subjective and should be revamped. He suggested for textbooks to be written from a broader perspective, on the principle that all religions encourage people to do good deeds and that all ethnicities should contribute to the process of nation-building. The same thing can be seen in the paper prepared by the Center for Policy Initiatives (CPI) on behalf of KemSMS (2011). On average, the paper hopes that history textbooks will be written with consideration regarding perspectives on multiculturalism and globalization. These papers were not only submitted to seek the government’s attention, but also for the community to support their petition.

The tendency of the Pusat Sejarah Rakyat and KemSMS on narratives that deconstruct the dominant discourse of Malaysian history should be seen within the framework of competitive point of view or rather, the soft lobbying mentioned earlier in this paper. These groups significantly disagree with the dominant point of view of the group that puts too much focus on the history of the Malays. They propose different perspectives that are considered more inclusive for a multiethnic state like Malaysia. On the other hand, agencies inclined towards the Malay-centric discourse seek to defend and reinforce their point of view, believing that it should be the foundation of modern history for Malaysia. In a nutshell, efforts to raise awareness of Malaysia’s history are indeed a complex matter.

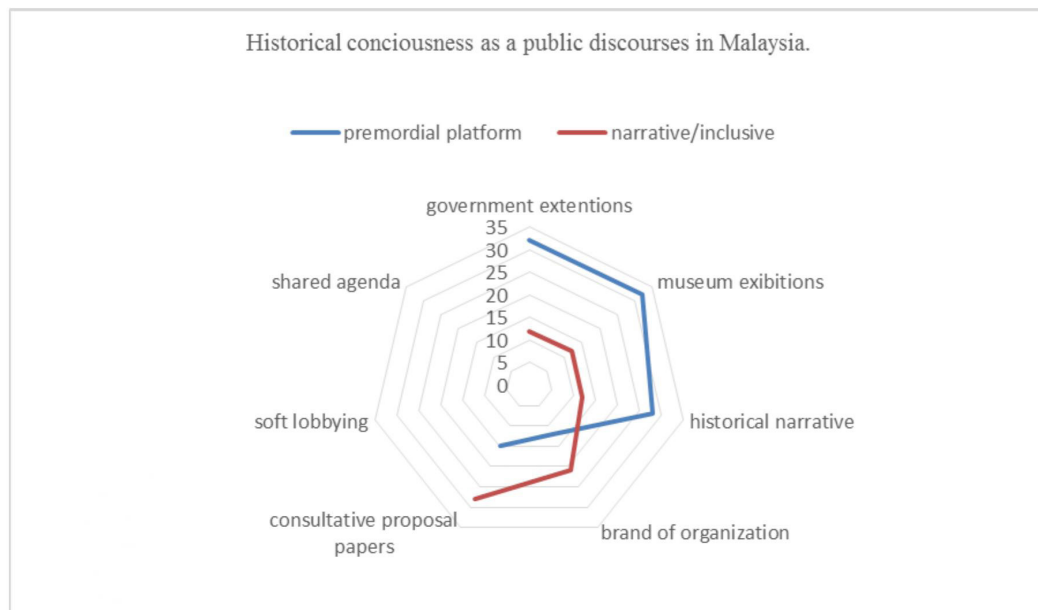


FIGURE 1. The Mapping of historical consciousness discussions in Malaysia.



This complexity explicitly reveals how actors who basically have a shared agenda may actually aim for different objectives. Sharing an agenda does not promise unified and aligned outcomes. The contradictions in the discourses clearly show that there are different points of view, perceptions, and beliefs in the history of this country. As a modern country that is relatively young, Malaysia is still looking for a rhythm in the process of nation building. For Shamsul (2011), the existence of an independent state automatically does not mean that Malaysia already has a nation. Bangsa Malaysia is still an ongoing work-in-progress that continues to be pursued - in this effort to create a nation-of-intent, collective identity is of utmost importance. The question remains, what type of nation would be most suitable for this post-colonial state? (Sheila, 1999). In Malaysia, various social groups have their own imagination about the ideal form of nation that the state wants to create. Imagination about this nation can be traced through the various forms of social action shown in society (Shazlin & Adil, 2020). According to Rustam (1976), these imaginations have been around since Malay-lefts have been proposing the concept of 'Melayu Raya'. They intended to create a pluralistic nation that is defined by the Malay identity. As diversity and multiethnicity increase rapidly within Malaysian society post the independence era, the imagination of this nation-of-intent becomes more intense and colourful. Some are adamant about elevating the Malay identity as the core of the nation, while others disagree. Opposing groups tend to demand that other ethnic identities, including those in Sabah and Sarawak, be taken into account (Shamsul, 1996). The parties with vested interests will make every effort necessary to defend a particular ethnic symbol in order to ensure their imagination of a nation is kept alive. Differences between the aspirations of each actors as per discussed in this article, are never free from the desires and passion that may either mar or assist in the commitment to shape the Malaysian nation.

### CONCLUSION

Based on the discussions put forward thus far, the mapping of historical consciousness discourses in Malaysia is located at two different extremes. On one hand, there are actors who articulate discourse on a primordial platform focusing their discussions on indigenous narratives. On the other hand, there

are attempts to expand the historical consciousness of the community by calling for interested groups to collaborate so as to keep the narratives inclusive rather than exclusive. In this way, narratives on the periphery may have the opportunity to be included into the mainstream. The complexity of this is as obvious as it is inevitable, especially when Malaysia is still in the process of building its nation. The nature of history being subjective lends itself open to the possibility of unavoidable polemics.

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Received: 26 January 2021  
Accepted: 1 September 2021