

The Ethos of State and Nation in Sarawak Malay Writings

Etos Negeri dan Bangsa dalam Karya Penulisan Melayu Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the concepts of state and nation formulated in Sarawak Malay writings produced from three different epochs. These concepts are framed in the notion of Malay identity located in the frontier situation. The basis of this framing is to reveal the connection between the historical experience of living together with non-Malay social groups with the ethos of localisation ingrained in the thoughts and lives of the authors. The expression of state and nation in the writings should be read simultaneously as normative and experiential, thus, making them an ideal entry point to explore the making of political identity which was to a large extent defined by the intertwining of lives across social and temporal dimensions. These writings, Hikayat Panglima Nikosa, Nafahat al-Ridwan and My Family and Other Anecdotes, were authored by eminent individuals in the traditional Malay society. The works are examined from humanistic perspective drawn from the Geertzian's interpretive anthropology to decode the ethos of writing expressed in the texts. The study found that the norms of localisation consistently appear in the Sarawak Malay writings. Specifically, the writing ethos demonstrates the incorporation of ideas exogenous to the Malay identity which were localised and hybridised into the thinking about state and nation. Hence, Sarawak Malay identity is deemed as unique, vibrant and moderate. The significance of this finding may give a constructive view to the contemporary discussion about political identity and nationalism founded on the ethos of heterogeneity and co-existence.

Keywords: Sarawak Malay; state; nation; political identity; localisation; 'frontier situation'

ABSTRAK

Makalah ini mengkaji konsep negara dan bangsa di dalam karya Melayu Sarawak yang dihasilkan di dalam tiga zaman yang berbeza. Konsep ini dikaji dari sudut identiti Melayu yang terletak di luar perbatasan kewilayahan Melayu. Tujuan perspektif ini dipilih ialah untuk menunjukkan hubungan antara pengalaman sejarah masyarakat yang hidup bersama antara Melayu dan bukan Melayu, serta etos lokalisasi yang mendasari pemikiran dan kehidupan para penulis. Ekspresi negara dan bangsa yang termaktub di dalam penulisan tersebut harus dibaca sekali gus sebagai mewakili norma-norma masyarakat dan pengalaman mereka, lantas menjadikan penulisan ini langkah pemula untuk memahami bagaimana identiti politik terbentuk daripada jalinan masyarakat dan kehidupan merentasi jurang sosial dan masa. Tiga karya penulisan daripada tokoh tempatan telah dipilih untuk kajian iaitu Hikayat Panglima Nikosa, Nafahat al-Ridwan dan My Family and Other Anecdotes. Karya-karya ini di tafsir melalui perspektif humanistik diambil daripada antropologi interpretif yang dipelopori oleh Clifford Geertz bagi mendalami etos di sebalik karya tersebut. Hasil daripada kajian interpretif ini mendapati bahawa norma-norma lokalisasi terbit secara konsisten di dalam penulisan tersebut. Etos yang termaktub di dalam karya-karya berkenaan menggambarkan penyerapan pengaruh luar budaya Melayu yang diolah menjadi lokal dan hibrid di dalam pemikiran berkenaan negara dan bangsa. Ini telah menumbang kepada identiti Melayu Sarawak yang unik, segar dan sederhana. Natiujahnya, penemuan ini boleh menyumbang secara konstruktif di dalam wacana kontemporari berkenaan identiti politik dan nasionalisme yang berteraskan norma-norma kepelbagaian dan kebersamaan.

Kata kunci: Melayu Sarawak; negara; bangsa; identiti politik; lokalisasi; situasi perbatasan

INTRODUCTION

For Clifford Geertz (2017), culture consists of two related dimensions. The symbolic, meaningful aspect which can be decoded through interpretation, and the other is behavioural, structural which appears to investigator as a pattern of iterative social actions. Certain schools of thought such as Marxism tend to focus heavily on the structural side, while cultural-symbolist school would be bogged down by “a search of all-too-deep lying turtles”, inevitably led to a disconnection from the lived experience of the people. Geertz argues that interpretive anthropology should aim for an analysis of symbolic meaning which place the thought and value of subject-participant “in a comprehensible, meaningful frame”. Thus, the purpose of interpretation is to represent the ethos of the natives, “to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said” (p. 30).

Clifford’s symbolic interpretation is applied in the current study to search for the ethos of state and nation in the Sarawak Malay writings. The symbolic representation is decoded from the multiple expressions of heterogeneity in the texts. It is argued that the concept of plurality and differences are normalised in the texts evident from the explicit preference in a shared historical experience which became a basis for political identity. The article intends to demonstrate the construction of this ethos in the Sarawak Malay texts in order to highlight their lesson in presenting a picture of a state and nation that is multicultural and pluralistic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The theoretical issue related to interpretation of ethos discussed earlier is relevant in the context of the discovery and reinterpretation of canonical writings in Malaysia some of which qualify as revisionist such as the works of Ahmat Adam (2017 and 2018). Sarawak have been fortunate in their moment to have discovered written texts which they could called their own. Some of them have been published and discussed, notable among them were *Hikayat Panglima Nikosa* which has been claimed as one of the earliest Malay novel (see Hamzah Hamdani, 2018); *Negeri Santubong*, a work that reconstructed an early ‘negeri’ based on a syair manuscript discovered by a historian Sanib Said (2021); *Syair Tarsilah Cetera Abang Godam*, a syair manuscript relating to the genealogy of the founder of ‘negeri’ Saribas, also discovered by Sanib Said; and *Nafahat al-Ridwan*, a biography based on the life of a Sarawak-born teacher in Masjid al Haram, Shaykh Uthman al-Sarawaqi, written by his son Shaykh Muhammad Zayn.

Closer reading into the contents of the works provide an entry into exploring the meanings of ‘Sarawak’ and ‘Malay’ in the thinking of the authors. Our position is that both notions carried different meanings than our present. The two *syairs* mentioned earlier were describing events and spaces prior to the creation of the modern state of Sarawak. *Hikayat Panglima Nikosa* did not made reference to Sarawak, while the main characters ‘Nikosa’ and ‘Pilina’, were not typical names associated with Malay persons. In *Nafahat*, apart from the first 19 years spent growing up in Sarawak, Shaykh Uthman could be regarded a citizen of Mecca where he had domiciled for the most part of his adult life. Henceforth, what could be hoped to be a neatly packaged Sarawak identity was less pronounced in those writings. Although the samples are few to allow us to make

a neat generalisation, yet at the minimum, the thinking about ‘Sarawak’ writings must be prepared for an imagination which disposes the contemporary framing of nation-state.

The understatement of nation-state in the writings is not the only feature that betrays expectation. Malay identity that one hoped to have found in the Malay-language writings is rather scant and understated. Instead, one discovers the characters and the cultures described in the writings to be generalised ones that they did not advance an exclusive Malayness of identity. Virginia Matheson (1979) has examined Malay texts—*Sejarah Melayu*, *Peringatan Sejarah Negeri Johor*, *Misa Melayu*, *Hikayat Patani*, *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, *Kisah Pelayaran Abdullah* and *Hikayat Abdullah* which were properly ‘Malay’ texts because they “explicitly concerned with expressing concepts of Melayu” and, “accepted their Malay identity as obvious” (p. 352). However, the soft expressions of Malay in the Sarawak writings demand an understanding of how social identity works in the context of coexistence with a larger and various non-Muslim population. The relation between Malays and the non-Muslim groups occurred through a framework of cooperation, accommodation and assimilation had facilitated cultural exchange and transfers across generations. In the writings, the sociological experience was translated into a grammar of hybridity that embraces multiple identities and multiple locations.

The study of Sarawak Malay’s political identity is a topic that is relevant today in the context of emerging sub-state nationalist identities in Malaysia. This has reignited the question on what Malaysia nation consists of politically and discursively. In an article written by Shamsul and Chan (2024) the clarity about ‘nation’ matters at the level of social-scientific because researchers should be able to capture the nuances the nation entails. Hence, the category of nation must be understood not as static, “utopian collectivity” but a fluid concept which encapsulates “the existence of stratification, inequality” (p. 74).

The present article aims to examine the concepts of state and nation from the standpoint of Sarawak Malay. It seeks to highlight the concept of Sarawak Malay as a fluid category which does not emanate from singular, authoritative origin but one that constantly reinventing itself by integrating diverse elements, foreign and familiar, especially from its non-Malay Muslim neighbours. The construction of the Sarawak Malay identity can be understood primarily as a form of localisation, a strategy to co-exist, cooperate and thrive in a frontier of Malay civilization in the archipelago.

SARAWAK MALAY: LOCALISATION, COEXISTENCE AND COOPERATION

Historically, while the dominant culture and political power in the precolonial archipelagic Southeast Asia was Malay, the distribution of Malay groupings in Borneo was smaller than the other indigenous groups peopling the island. This was a unique historical feature especially if one is to revisit the ‘Borneo homeland thesis’ which argues that Malay originated from the west-coast of Borneo. K. Alexander Adelaar (2000) states that on a linguistic basis the homeland of Malay is probably in West Borneo. His theory argues that the speakers of Malay were more likely to have left Borneo in the prehistoric time and settled in South Sumatera, subsequently assimilating foreign influences such as writing, culture and polity from India which they later gained prominence until they were known as Srivijaya. In another article, Adelaar (2007) explains that presence of Malay people in the west coast of Borneo was more likely the result of “back-migration” of some groups of people from Sumatera who moved to Borneo and built their society and polities. Bernard Sellato (2006) has also found the Borneo homeland thesis credible. Sellato speculated that the early Malay originated from Sukadana on the basis of its enduring Malay maritime culture and the diffusion of

Malay language. The moving of the Malay Borneo kingdom to Sumatera might occurred around 5th or 6th century. Over long run, as trade for exotic, jungle products increased, the interaction between the upriver Dayaks and the coastal Malay kingdom became more frequent and that had allowed for a transfer of language and material culture.

For Malay groups who lived away from the centre of the Malay culture they survived in a scenario described by historian Jane Drakard (1986) “a frontier situation”, which necessitates the adaptation of Malay culture to accommodate local circumstances. Drakard describes a historical example of a Malay polity in Barus which was located far from the Malay heartland. The Malay political culture adapted to the local reality of being a minority Malay-Muslim surrounded by the non-Muslim Batak population in the upland. The need for trade between the downriver Malay and the various Batak groups meant that the polity had to improvise a different political culture as two rajas ruled the coast simultaneously, each had a working relationship with different Batak groups with access to varying commodities. The existence of dual-raja, according to Drakard, was “unthinkable” in a normative Malay polity but congruent to the survival of a political culture in the edge of archipelago. The historical insight offered in Drakard’s study served as a lens through which the Malay identity in Sarawak is conceived to have been forged historically, mainly through adaptation and assimilation from the other indigenous elements which they have been politically and sociologically linked.

Being at the periphery, the Sarawak Malay identity survived and expanded through cooperation with their non-Malay Muslim neighbours. From the oral narratives gathered by a former British district officer in Sarawak Anthony J.N. Richards (1914-2000) we found such interaction and cooperation taking place. One of the stories mentioned a joint-trading voyage to Sabah between the Iban warriors from Paku namely Grasi, Kandau and Kumpang Pali with Abang Tek, a son of Laksamana Amir of Spaoh and Abang Chek, a son of Laksamana Omar of Rimbas. Together, they sailed to Sintang to purchase a valuable jar from the Dayaks in the upper Malawi and brought the jar to Sabah to trade. It was said that the venture was profitable that it had spurred interest among the young man of Iban in Saribas to trade in foreign lands. As the boat trade in coastal Sarawak was dominated by Malay-Muslim groups, the oral stories reported that Iban had been purchasing boat from Malay and had joined Malay trading boats as a crew. This was one of the instances where the downriver culture and the interior made peaceful contact and cooperated.

While most of the Malay canonical texts describes the supremacy of the royal-derived polity, pre-Brooke Sarawak Malay did not fall under a single, direct suzerainty of a Malay raja. Although Brunei royal text *Silsilah Raja-Raja Brunei* mentioned Sarawak as one of its dominions (*tanah kerajaan*), the river-based polities where Brunei had claims for such as Sarawak, Samarahan, Sadong and Saribas were ruled by downriver chiefs who had little pretension of ruling the upriver group. The difficulty in accessing the interior and the relative mobility of the groups meant that a direct rule and subjugation of people was expensive and a riskier undertaking. The Sarawak Malay aristocrats, being the Brunei appointees, often came into conflict with Brunei over the control of strategic revenues, illustrated in the well-known rebellion between two centres of power the Lidah Tanah-based Datu Patinggi Ali and the Brunei governor Pengiran Indera Mahkota Mohamad Salleh (see St John, 1994).

Oral sources from Iban and Malay confirmed similar pattern of contest between local chiefs of Sarawak and the Brunei overlord. The oral narrative from Saribas compiled by Benedict Sandin (1968) told a story about a trader from Minangkabau Abang Godam who sailed in his boat from Brunei to Pusa to trade where he met a former Brunei officer Temenggong Kadir. He was told that the Temenggong had sought permission from a chief of the Dayak in Pusa named Manggi to start

a settlement in Semaruang in the lower Saribas. Abang Godam was asked to rescue the daughter of the Temenggong named Dayang Chi who was kept in captivity in the Sultan's palace in Brunei. Abang Godam was successful in his quest and as a reward he was invited to settle in Semaruang and married the rescued daughter. Temenggong Kadir and Abang Godam applied permission from Manggi to farm padi lands in and around Semaruang. Over time, the kampong expanded into what is known as Negeri Saribas.

The narratives presented earlier are laden with values associated not only with Sarawak Malay localisation but also applied to the general fact of coexistence between the Dayak groups and the Malay-Muslim kingdoms in Borneo. The Iban sources compiled by Anthony Richards had also described the journey made by the Iban rubber tappers from Saribas led by Penghulu Kedit to the Muslim kingdoms of Banjarmasin and Sukadana. The Penghulu had asked approval from the rulers to work the wild rubber in their territory. It was said that the Sultan of Banjarmasin was reluctant for he wished not to offend his Malay and Dayak populations. However, the Sukadana ruler allowed the working party in exchange for a one tenth of the sale. This is an instance of cooperation between the Muslim raja and Dayaks to serve mutual economic advantages. In Brunei kingdom, the co-optation of the non-Muslim was a known political strategy. Anji, a son of Iban warrior Linggi of the Bukit Sadok fame, offered his service to the Brunei Sultan to break the rebellions in the upper Belait and Tutong rivers. Upon success he was rewarded with the title 'Panglima' and converted to Islam and given a new name Radin. Panglima Radin acquired some reputation for mercenary service. He was hired by the Borneo Chartered Company to defeat the uprising in Sabah in 1895 with the help of the other Sarawak Dayaks.

The Sarawak Malay's co-existence and cooperation with their non-Malay Muslim counterparts were critical aspects to the localisation as they ensured the proses of assimilation and acculturation proceeded peacefully and bearing impacts over a course of time. This localisation has also found its place in the ethos relating to the political culture of the Sarawak Malay. Such localisation is found in the Sarawak Malay writings pertaining to the ideas of state and nation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Three writings from Sarawak Malay are examined here: *Hikayat Panglima Nikosa* (1876), *Nafahat al-Ridwan* (1922) and *My Family and Other Anecdotes* (1966). These writings are selected because they were written by personalities who were prominent during their time in order to ascertain what considered as normative by the dominant class. The method for the selection of the texts were based on the theory of distinction by Pierre Bourdieu (2010). He argues that a study of ethos can reveal the way in which the dominant group in society reproduces culture by advocating their values as a given standard for society. Hence, when distinction is applied to the readings of the Sarawak Malay texts, two of the assumed facts came to light. First the authors of these writings were socially prominent. HPN was written by Ahmad Syawal Abdul Hamid who was a scribe served in the first Brooke's government; the *Nafahat* was written by a Meccan-based religious scholar of Sarawak origin Shaykh Muhammad Zayn and *My Family* was a work of an illustrious government officer Tun Tuanku Bujang Tuanku Othman who was later a head of Sarawak from 1969 to 1977. All of these writings articulate a worldview pertaining to the state and nation which exemplified the thoughts of the elites in the Sarawak Malay society. On the other hand, to whom the works were addressed to was an interesting question. The context of the audience was substantially different from the authors as for the most part of the milieu they were economically

traditional and received limited education. Nonetheless, the urbane culture communicated in the writings presented the audience as being open and broadminded.

The writings are composed in the modern Malay style which were different from the traditional Malay prose and literature in characteristics and forms. Structurally, the sentences are shorter, direct and consistent. The values advocated in the writings were also different. The emphasis on economy, education and religion are obvious in *Hikayat Nikosa* and *Nafahat*, while *My Family* presented a notion of state which was modern, heterogeneous and changing.

HIKAYAT PANGLIMA NIKOSA (HPN)

Hikayat Panglima Nikosa was printed in 1876 by the author Ahmad Syawal Abdul Hamid. He was of Minangkabau origin and was brought to Sarawak by the first Brooke's rajah James as a scribe and translator for his government. He was also a head-teacher for a Malay school in Kuching located in the house of Datu Bandar Abang Muhammad Kassim. He was known to have taught Malay language and writing to European officers and Anglican padres.

HPN was a fictional work that tells a story of Nikosa, a young man from an unnamed negeri in the east who was given a task by the council of elders to assemble young men for an expedition to fight the enemies who had been attacking the people. The expedition was successful, peace was restored. Nikosa was rewarded with a title Panglima and appointed as the new leader. Then, Nikosa, along with his followers, left the negeri to start a new one which he called Jalanan Baharu. Over the course of time, Jalanan Baru became renowned for its prosperity and peace. Nikosa led the negeri conscientiously, managing the affairs of the growing population and made himself available for people to come for advice and guidance. The story ends by reinstating the ethos of Jalanan Baharu through a character Pilina, who was transformed from an abject poverty to a successful man after following Nikosa's advice on farming and prudence.

Past reviews of the text noted its modern and progressive messages (Reece 1983 and Hamdani 2018). John Walker (2005) goes to a length in describing that *Hikayat* is proposing for a "transformation political culture in Sarawak" (p. 428). The text sought to change the mentality of the common rakyat from "supernatural" and "metaphysical" to the one that rationally explained "the world, of relationships among humans and their environment". Walker elaborates the new political culture advanced in the text in the following terms: the force of change came from human will and not a supernatural intervention; the presentation of leadership and authority in a rational logic; and the avoidance of the canonical term "kerajaan" in favour of "perintah". In Walker's final analysis, the changes put forward by Ahmad Syawal can be traced to the modern approach in authority and government by the second Brooke rajah Charles who, unlike his predecessor, disengaged from the ritualistic and symbolic display of power. Of late, HPN received a new lease of life, notably from the publication of an edited volume by Fatimah Subet (2022) which contained fifteen articles written from researchers from the disciplines of language, literature, history, thought, performing arts and social theory. The recent appraisal of HPN was sparked by the effort championed by a socio-cultural group Yayasan Budaya Melayu Sarawak (YBMS) to uplift the status of the text into a national and global literary significance.

NAFAHAT AL-RIDWAN

Nafahat was a biography (“manaqib”) about a Mecca-based ulama who was born in Sarawak Shaykh Uthman Abdul Wahab al-Sarawaqi written by his son Shaykh Muhammad Zayn. It was printed in Singapore in 1922. It was written after the passing of Shaykh Uthman in Mecca on 29 July 1921. The book consisted of three parts, the life-story or “cetera”; a syair eulogizing Syaikh Uthman; and the prayer (“doa manaqib”). The story of Syaikh Uthman’s early life in Kuching began with the passing of his mother and his adoption by Datu Imam Haji Abdul Karim, the Datu Imam of Sarawak appointed Captain Brooke Johnson who was a former successor to rajah James Brooke. Uthman was sent to Mecca to further his study by Datu Hakim Abdul Rahman, where he went on to climb up in his status from a student to a teacher at the Masjid al-Haram. He taught and lived in Mecca continuously and had only made three return trips to Sarawak. The destruction of his house by fire in Mecca resulted to the loss of his written works. He was a scholar mastering in a wide breadth of knowledge in Arabic grammar, rhetoric, interpretation, geography and astronomy. After he died, Uthman was survived by two wives, six sons and a daughter.

There were few things unique about this biography. First, the key moments were dated such as his birth (1863); death of his step-father (1877); trade with his uncle (1879); return trips to Sarawak (1894, 1916, 1920); the fire of his house in Mecca (1919); his final visit to the prophet’s tomb (May 1921); and his death (29 July 1921). Next, the reference of places such as “Sarawak”, “Pulau Borneo” and “al-Jawi” shows how the identity of the global Muslim community was communicated and distinguished. Third, the reference to authority of the author Shaykh Zayn was done by drawing attention to his credential (“ijazah”). The authority of his father was testified by the praises (“*taqriz*”) given by various shaykhs in Mecca confirming his character, knowledge and reputation. Finally, we may be able to entertain a speculation that the main source of the biography might come from Shaykh Uthman’s personal diary or journal because it was more likely that the events of his life were recorded by himself rather than by his son. In a detail review of the book by Mohd. Shazani (2021), he claims that one of the aspects that the *Nafahat* can shed a light on is the concept of state which he suspected may carry a substantial meaning. He argues that the attachment ‘al-Sarawaqi’ shows the substance of a state-derived political identity amongst southeast Asian Muslims in the Middle East.

MY FAMILY AND OTHER ANECDOTES

Tuanku Bujang Tuanku Othman spent 33 years of his adult life working for Sarawak. He had done most of the roles in the service: policeman, army, native officer, magistrate, district officer; he served the Brookes, the Japanese and the British. Out of the many roles that he had before, it was in the native officer service that he spent 25 years of his career. His recruitment was not incidental but follows a familiar pattern of distinction understood by the Brooke rajahs. His native officers were selected on the basis of family prestige and a history of loyalty. It was common to find a generation after another inheriting the role left vacant by the father or the elder sibling, to the extent that the families of Perabangan and Tuanku monopolised the junior administrative posts.

My Family appears like a narration in a Malay language told by Tuanku Bujang. His story was probably translated into English and printed in an article format. It was published in a magazine *The Sarawak Teacher* which ran a special edition of the history of Sibu, a place where he was born. The article retold a story of an Arab-descent family who found their home in Sarawak. Tuanku’s Arab-kinsmen occupied the entire archipelago, following the footprints of their ancestors in their trading voyages, sojourning from one port-city to another, cultivating ties with the host

community, economic and familial. That was the time when maritime trading culture recognised little boundary. Back to his present, politics unbind those cherished ties, “I do not know much about these people now because since confrontation my contacts with them have ceased”. Tuanku shared fond memories of a well-known Brooke’s resident Charles Hose who was spending the few remaining years of his career in Sibul, filling his time watching boys playing football on a field across the District Office, “Hose would jeer at us in a friendly manner, calling us all sorts of names...”. Tuanku described the changes he witnessed happening to the old Malay villages, the arrival of the Chinese people and the flourishing of Christian missions. He presented himself as an observer to events he witnessed. In his worldview, history consisted of time (pre-1930), people (the Sayyid family, Chinese, European and missionary), and space (village, trade, communication, government).

We speculated that the article might originate from an oral narration because the structure of the sentences seemed close to a translated dictation. Furthermore, the story ran in a fragmented manner usually as a result of a thought transition following an oral speech form. Altogether, our assessment fit into a personality of a native officer belonging to a pre-war, gentleman type. Most of his contemporary preferred to write in Jawi, although some native officers who received modern education was able to read and write in Romanised form. In the Brooke’s district-level administration literacy was considered important insofar that the skill allowed for accurate record keeping and revenue counting. However, the larger reality in running government affairs in the rural district consists in having a right personality and common sense. Most of the officers were confident in their role, knowing the arts of dealing with people who were often not of their own culture, nevertheless, each recognizing the unwritten rules that guided the interaction. There were instances where the native officers showed greater acceptance to the people more than what was allowed by their white officer; their independence was often rebuked. The dealings between the native officer and the people assumed the form of ‘*bicara*’, consists of listening, getting information and deciding a course of action for any problem or dispute presented to them. This was especially pertinent in the context of a largely rural, illiterate society such as Iban and Malays in which the access to education was limited.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

EXPRESSIONS OF STATE AND NATION IN SARAWAK MALAY WRITINGS

The expressions of state and nation demonstrates the different vocabularies used to describe them. State referred in the texts as “*negeri*” and also used in parallel with “*kampung*”. State was also marked as an identifier of a place of origin like al-Sarawaqi and in other usage, referred in a regional sense such as “Borneo”. The use of nation was also differentiated, a common folk or “*orang bumi*”, a collective mass “*sekalian orang*” and also foreigners, “Arab” and “sayyid”. The variation of usage shows the understanding of the concept of state and nation was not homogenous or static but fluid and open.

The reference to state is expressed by ‘negeri’. The construction of a negeri was founded on the basis of a contract between the ruler and the people. In proposing for a creation of a new negeri *Jalanan Baharu* to his family and followers, Nikosa was seeking consent from his own inner circle. The latter reciprocated by lending their support to be part of his new negeri on the understanding that Nikosa’s reputation for wisdom and bravery would be able to provide them with a good life. The concept of good life can be read in the two examples in the text. First, the ability of a negeri to support its inhabitants to make a decent living. The arrangement of houses and walking paths were to facilitate access to livelihood sources like farming gardens, rivers and woods. The other standard of a good life is the provision of security from enemy threats and attacks. When the inhabitants of the eastern negeri fleeing to escape enemy Nikosa’s father felt sad and alarmed. He took the issue to the state’s council who subsequently appointed Nikosa to lead a fighting expedition against the enemies.

Another term used in parallel with negeri was “kampung”. It was elicited internally by the inhabitants of the negeri, for example, in describing Nikosa’s search for enemies (“berjalanlah berkeliling kampung”); when the elders in the village deliberated over who should rule on all the villages; and when Nikosa was appointed a leader to rule. The centre of the kampung was conceived as a public space. Nikosa called for every inhabitant (“sekalian orang”) to assemble in the centre of the kampung (“berkumpul di tengah-tengah kampung”) to announce the triumph of his expedition and the defeat of his enemies. He also showcased the spoils of before the women and men in the middle of the kampung (“di muka orang-orang perempuan dan laki di tengah kampung”).

The reference to nation can be interpreted through the text’s presentation of a social hierarchy as a normalised condition for “orang bumi”. In the eastern negeri, Nikosa’s father was presented as the first among equals who ruled the negeri based on a collective decision with the elders (“orang tua-tua dan orang besar-besar”). Nikosa was appointed by the collective as their eminent leader with the title ‘Panglima Besar’ as a reward for the successful fighting expeditions that he led. In a new negeri that he founded with his family and followers, Nikosa was described as ‘Penghulu Besar’. Both of the titles referred to a functional figurehead (“menjadi kepala”; “menjadi teladan”) and also a magistrate (“memegang bicara: “memegang segala pasal-pasal”). Some groups of people were presented in affiliative term to denote a link with the ruling class, for example, the family (“terlalu baik kepada segala kaum keluarganya yang ada diam di dalam negeri”) and friends (“Ayahanda Nikosa itu tiadalah suka melepaskan kawan-kawannya lari ke negeri lain”). Because of their closeness, they constituted the inner circle to the leader. Nikosa consulted with his family and followers about opening a new negeri and they in turn, lend their support to his plan (“Sekalian mereka tu pun berfikir serta suka mengikut yang mana-mana aturan Nikosa itu”). The affiliative group is contrasted to the group who stood outside the inner circle and who was referred to in a neutral manner as people (“sekalian orang”; “manusia”), women and men (“orang-orang perempuan dan laki”), and outsiders who came to trade (“orang dagang”).

The text referenced negeri in two ways. The first as a descriptor of a place, specifically one that highlights the interconnection between a state to a larger geographical space. It wrote that Shaykh Uthman was born in Sarawak, one of the states in Borneo (“diperanakan dia pada negeri Sarawak iaitu sebuah negeri daripada Pulau Borneo”). Shaykh Uthman’s uncle Haji Karim was a judge in Sarawak (“qadi negerinya”) and his other uncle Haji Abdul Rahman was a religious scholar with a Borneo-wide reputation (“pendeta benuanya”). Negeri was also invoked as a marker of identity by scholars of Nusantara origin sojourning and domiciled in Mekah, such as Uthman (“al-Sarawaqi”), Shaykh Abdul Karim (“orang Banten”), Shaykh Ahmad Khatib (“orang Sambas”) and Shaykh Ahmad (“orang Lingga”).

The term Malay was used specifically in a reputational context to place Uthman among a distinguished line of Sarawak Malay (“orang Melayu Sarawak”) and of whom became a source of pride for the Malay people (“masyhurlah namanya dan tinggilah sebutannya, istimewa pula pada bangsa-bangsa Melayu”).

MY FAMILY

The reference to state in *My Family* was to emphasise its significance in the author’s family history. Pontianak was the focal point for his sayyid’s clan dispersion across Borneo and into Sarawak. Maritime trades brought members of his family to various ports in Borneo and Java. There was also enforced migration, for example, where his uncles Tuanku Zain and Tuanku Hossain were ordered to leave Sarawak for Brunei by rajah Charles. The author’s distant cousin, Abdullah Sukran was born to a Eurasian woman in Bawean Island and was sent away to Singapore for adoption and in his adult life, settled in Lawas.

The nation was indicated on two subjects: the author’s family and the people in Sibul. The author placed his family’s history to be representative of the early history of population and settlement in Sarawak. The expansion of the sayyid’s clan was associated with the maritime trade in the archipelago coupled with the diffusion of Islam and their participation in statemaking and diplomacy in the region. The author’s clan of Alaydrus was the founder of the states of Kubu and Pontianak. It also became the ruling family in the kingdom of Matan since the 19th century. Despite not being the ‘native’ to the island of Borneo, the Alaydrus had successfully forged their pan-Arab identity to thrive and to be accepted in leadership position locally. Hence, in Tuanku’s Bujang recollection of Sibul in the old days, he was able to draw on his family’s history in underlining the sense of strangers building their life in a new situation such as the Europeans, the Foochow Chinese and the Methodist preachers within the development and expansion of Sibul.

DISCUSSION

LOCALISATION OF STATE AND NATION

From the expressions of state and nation in the writings, we discover a persistent ethos for localisation motivated by an ambition to thrive in a new and peripheral situation. Furthermore, localisation ethos was ingrained in the historical experience of living among diverse people and in multiple contexts. It was underlined by strategies of adaptation, co-existence and assimilation.

ADAPTATION

The Sarawak Malay writings attribute significant emphasis on adaptation as a strategy to excel in a new situation. The HPN text described the making of negeri Jalanan Baharu to consist of the laborious efforts in levelling trees, constructing permanent houses and lining the grounds between the houses, the river and the jungle with strong wooden planks. After few years Jalanan Baharu became prosperous as the houses and the people expanded. The transformation had triggered excitement and wonder among visitors who remembered the place previously filled with old forest. The negeri became famous, known to people near and far and drew traders and visitors in seeking for better livelihood.

Similar ethos was found in *Nafahat*, where Shaykh Uthman and his cousins Abang Ashaari and Abang Azhari had made long sea voyages from Sarawak to Mekah to seek religious knowledge. They became prominent figures as a result of that. Shaykh Uthman became a renowned master in Mekah, with a range of repertoire in jurisprudence, Arabic grammar, sufism and astronomy and had attracted learners from the Nusantara region. Abang Ashaari moved on to become a Datu Hakim in the elitist institution the Datu Court in Sarawak, and also a member of the Supreme Council and Council Negeri during the reign of Charles Brooke. Abang Azhari was appointed a native officer in Mukah where he served for more than 15 years where he combined his duties as administrator in civil matters and in religious cases. In applying Islamic rules meant that he had to navigate the prevalence of *adat*-centric practices among the Melanau Muslims who lived in close proximity with their non-Muslim families. For instance, it was reported that Abang Azhari had recommended to the Resident of the 3rd Division in Rejang to punish some of the male-Muslims in Oya who had abandon Friday prayers to go fishing. His suggestion was dismissed by the Resident (Sarawak Gazette, 2 June 1903).

Furthermore, there was also resistance among some Malays and Muslims towards the attempt at changing *adat* in Sarawak. In 1931, Datu Shahbandar Abang Ali called for a meeting with the Malay datu and leaders of the kampungs in Kuching. He issued a proposal to reduce the extravagances associated to marriage, death and musicals. However, when no decision could be raised during the meeting, the Datu had to give the leaders 14 days to come up with their decision. Subsequently, only half of those who attended the discussion agreed with his proposal (Sarawak Gazette, 1 Aug 1931). In another example, a contributor to *Fajar Sarawak*, the first Jawi newspaper in Sarawak, has alluded to an attempt by the religious reformist group whom he believed wanted to sow confusion and quarrel among the ordinary Muslims. ‘Ahmad Syah’ rebuked the group who wanted to change the old ways, “For the laws of Allah one cannot claimed the people in the past as stupid because there were no laws and hadith revealed by Allah to the people in the present time” (Thomas 1984, 71). The writer proceeded to show why debates about different schools of thought in Islam would not produce tangible goods for the people, “Let us read one *kitab* only and that is suffice as long as we know clearly the content and practised it”.

In *My Family*, the story behind Tuanku Bujang’s grandfather Sayid Mohsen was an example of adapting to the changes in the power dynamics, specifically, by building a reputation as a reliable negotiator on behalf of the ruling elites. He represented the Datu Patinggi Ali’s faction in the negotiation with the Brunei governor which ended the civil war in 1840. As the gravity of power shifted from the Brunei to the Brooke’s dynasty, Mohsen availed himself to the new regime. In 1849, he participated in the Brooke’s war against the Dayaks in Skrang in which he was later rewarded with a role as the first native officer in the fort of Skrang. When he was sacked from the position for alleged incompetency, Mohsen was back in James Brooke’s good grace after he nursed

the rajah who suffered from serious small pox. Mohsen was appointed as an officer in charge of the fort in Belidah in 1854 probably as a gesture of thanks.

The pragmatic approach adopted by Sayid Mohsen was a familiar picture among the politically ambitious sayyid-adventurers in the southeast Asia. Kathirithamby-Wells (2009) explains that the sayyids, while were outsider to the archipelago, gained eminent reputation among the regional's ruling class because of their association with the holy land of Arabia, their extensive trading networks, and their Islamic, mystical aura facilitated their access to the courts of raja and sultan where they assumed roles as religious advisers, trade ambassador and diplomats. The presence of the sayyids in the ruler's court, argues Kathirithamby-Wells, was "to help to shore up the moral and material structures of statehood", at the age when indigenous rulers were facing pressure from the imperialist powers (p. 571). Not only the local elites, European officials and residents were similarly captivated by the persona of a sayyid. The sultan of Pontianak Syarif Kassim Syarif Abdulrahman was said to be a "sophisticated" and "cosmopolitan" ruler. The Dutch officials who met him noted that he "read widely and could discuss a broad range of issue" (Miller 2012, 79).

CO-EXISTENCE

The writings show awareness of the different groups living in the state or outside. HPN described the enemies ("musuh") who threatened the negeri as people who spoke different language and practised different adat.

In *Nafahat*, it appears that 'Malay' identity was given a prominent status in the writing. However, this should not be taken as a sign of an exclusivist tendency. *Fajar Sarawak*, a newspaper whose worldview was coloured by nationalist and reformist thought, had published an article called 'Kalimantan' written by its chief writer Rakawi Yusuf. He wrote that Pulau Kalimantan and Borneo was an island of the indigenous tribes in Sarawak. Specifically, he claimed that the Ukit, Bukitan and Punan were the earliest groups ("bangsa-bangsa yang terawal") and that was the received truth ("diyakinkan sajalah"). Nevertheless, Rakawi argued that to dwell heavily about the origin of the people was not a constructive matter when there already existed diversities and difference among the groups in Sarawak. Ultimately, people came from the same descent ("jikalau diselidiki adalah mereka itu seakar seumbi juga").

My Family was also replete with instances of co-existence. Tuanku Bujang's memory of Sibu remembered the diversity such as the Malay and Melanau kampungs, the European officers, the American preachers and the Chinese Foochow migrants. His reflection of a changing geography of Sibu from quaint Malay-Melanau villages to a port town with multi-ethnic population was a memory of the collective existence of people coming from different group identities and origins.

ASSIMILATION

In HPN the specific mention of ethnic or culture was not available making it difficult to make speculation of the identity of Nikosa and Jalan Baharu. It may also be difficult to say convincingly that it was a 'Malay' text, other than the use of Malay language as the medium of writing. Otherwise, the characters, the system of leadership and the livelihood strategy can be generalised to those of the downriver, rural, agricultural society in the 19th century Sarawak. This points to a case of assimilation of the common traits of society living in a ruralize setting, namely,

a socio-political organisation that was kin-based; a chiefdom leadership consisted of a charismatic leader and a council of elders; and the agrarian ethos of harmony, moderation and social conservatism.

In *Nafahat*, the author presented a form of writing that assimilated the Arabic tradition. The *manaqib* genre or hagiography was a common form of Arabic history-writing (Robinson 2003). The intent was obvious: to underline the prestige associated with Islamic learning and scholarship among the Malay-Muslim communities in the archipelago. The sending of sons to Mecca for study was a symbol of prestige for the Perabangan class in Sarawak. In addition, the pilgrimage to Mecca was also a mark of status. The pilgrims were feasted on a large scale upon return. *Fajar Sarawak* printed a report in 1 June 1930 about the grand celebration of the return of Datu Bentara and his entourage from Mekah where they were received with fanfare in his flag-decorated house, musical performance and fireworks. The editor of *Fajar* conveyed the joyful sprits eloquently in his piece, "... to honour those who return from the holy site after performing the obligatory hajj because it is a right thing to honour and respect those who have completed the pilgrimage" (Thomas 1984).

My Family told a story of assimilation of a pan-Arab identity into the local context. Being maritime traders, the Sayyids travelled to distant lands and stayed for months in their layover. Their diasporic experience taught them the value of making connection with the host community. They developed network with the locals either through goods exchange and marriage, thereby, providing access to the local markets and establishing base for their kinsmen to tap into. Tuanku Bujang wrote of his uncles who had children in many parts of the islands in the region. This transnational kinship was a known maritime trading culture, described by Kenneth Hall (2004) as the culture of "sojourning merchants". In addition, Ahmad Fauzi and Shaikh Abdullah (2021) emphasised how indigenization played a crucial role for the expansion of the importance of the sayyids in the local community. The sayyids were conscious about making themselves useful to the host community by contributing in diverse roles as religious scholars, tradesmen and diplomat. They taught a non-confrontational version of Islam which respects the *adat* of the local community; provided economic guidance as well as expanding trade opportunity, and; donated a large part of their wealth to the pursuance of Islamic welfare (p. 55).

CONCLUSION

The ethos of state and nation in Sarawak Malay writings exemplifies a thought system emerging from a frontier situation. They revealed the belief system about state and nation moulded by the pragmatism for localisation in which the strategies of adaptation, co-existence and assimilation were key.

As a result, the idea about negeri took a 'frontier' form. A negeri with no raja to unite the Malays politically and spiritually was nonetheless, relate to one another through a shared sense of being different from the mainstream Malay of the *kerajaan*-states. Sarawak Malay innovated the concepts of raja-based state and nation in order to excel and thrive at the frontier. Therefore, 'negeri' was divested of symbolism and mysticism linked with 'kerajaan'; in its place, a kampung was fashioned as a microcosmic of negeri. Kampung elicits a sense of community, an abode for kinsfolk and a life of moderation. It is the core and the soul of the people. On the other hand, 'negeri' was conceived in material forms identifiable through political leadership, economy, multitudes of people and multiple spaces. There seemed to be a construction of dual-political

identities. In this regard, the negeri-based identity, as opposed to the kampung-based, appeared to be better attuned to a “civic political community”, a metaphor used by Clifford Geertz (1994) to describe a community formed by “realization of the practical advantages of the wider ranging pattern of social integration” (p. 32).

In addition, the concept of nation was also shaped by the frontier context. The people were not presented as subjects of the state but persons and groups who were drawn to negeri for the main reason to seek better lives and opportunities. This was an ethos for Sarawak Malays who themselves were travellers and sojourners in the maritime setting and also inland where they made journey from the coast to the upriver exchanging products with the indigenous tribes. This rational interaction which was occurring over a long period in history formed a basis for imagining a broader political community that came to be recognised today.

There are several topics linked to the subject of localisation can be pursued for future studies. The structure of traditional Sarawak Malay leadership exhibits a hybrid feature of Javanese and Sumatran cultures. The localisation of Islam in the context of plural society in Sarawak is also a promising topic to explore the expand the knowledge about the distinctive Sarawak Malay culture relative to Sumatra and Peninsula Malaya.

The Sarawak Malay writings contributed to the creation of an ethos about state and nation which normalises coexistence as the basis of political identity. At present, whether the value remains true in spirits or a captive of sorts is a matter beyond the scope of the article.

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