Multi-Culturalism at the Fringe: Christianity and the Indigenous Communities in Malaysia

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Abstract: The indigenous communities in Malaysia are found in both East and West Malaysia. In West Malaysia, they are represented by the Orang Asli Community who are a very small community, found mainly in the highlands of the country. In contrast, indigenous people form the majority of the population in the East Malaysian state of Sabah. However, when set against the main population set up of the country, namely, the Malays, Chinese and Indians, these indigenous communities seemed to be given less importance. Hence in the discourse on multiculturalism, much of the concern was on the equilibrium of the three major ethnic groups. But this process has largely ignored very significant communities in the country. The communities generally ignored in this discourse are the Orang Asli and, to an extent, the other indigenous tribes in Sabah and Sarawak. These indigenous communities have their distinctive beliefs and way of life. Over the years however, they were also susceptible to external influences including the Christian religion. This paper looks into the interaction of the indigenous community in their interaction with Christianity as a way to demonstrate another dimension of multiculturalism in Malaysia. It focuses on the experience of the Orang Asli in Peninsula Malaysia and the indigenous people in Sabah.

Key Terms: Christianity, Indigenous communities, Orang Asli, Kadazandusun, identity
Introduction

Academic discourse and national debates on multi-culturalism and identity in Malaysia tend to focus on the major and large communities such as the Malays, Chinese and Indians. Thus in discussions on the integration or assimilation process in the country, much of the concern is on creating a framework able to accommodate the cultural elements of the three major ethnic groups. But this process has largely ignored very significant communities in the country. The communities generally ignored in this discourse are the Orang Asli and, to an extent, the other indigenous tribes in Sabah and Sarawak. These indigenous communities have their distinctive beliefs and way of life. Christianity arrived in the Peninsula with the Portuguese began to exert influence on the respective communities—though in different ways. In Sabah and Sarawak, contacts between the Christian missionaries resulted in Christianity playing the role of agent of change in the transforming and lifting of the indigenous people to higher education and towards modernity. While the spread of Christianity was not confined to the indigenous people, its outreach to the non-indigenous people—in this case mainly the Chinese—was different, and therefore provides room for comparison.

The reach of Christianity within the indigenous communities also varied between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. In the case of Sabah and Sarawak, for instance, there were no traditional Islamic rulers, therefore fewer barriers. But it was also influenced by demography; in places with sizeable non-Muslim indigenous groups the Muslim groups did not have the political structure and mechanism they did in the Peninsula.

Apart from attempting to answer the above questions, this paper will also compare the development of the indigenous communities in Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah—why the efforts in the Peninsula seemed slow and half-hearted compared to Sabah. Only recently have there been some efforts to bring the Orang Asli into the mainstream of society and consequently into the discourse. These developments will have some impact on the identity and the idea of multi-culturalism in Malaysia. Finally, this paper will examine the role of Christianity in shaping the identity of the indigenous people.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first is an investigation of the co-relations