AIMC 2017
Asia International Multidisciplinary Conference

ANOTHER HISTORY OF MALAYSIA? EXPRESSION FROM 'NEGARA' SARAWAK

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Abstract

National narratives are about the collective past as well as the future. It assumes the construction of a national identity and represents the central actors and peripheral actors orienting themselves towards the national story. However, the collective experience as part of constructing nation's history is occasionally challenged and subjugated by ethnicities, class, regions, and histories. Such forces are working on returning and reinterpreting the past. This paper presents the results of a focus group study exploring how the Sarawakian construct the history of Malaysia from a different point of view. Two focus groups (n=25) were conducted at Kuching and Miri, Sarawak. The results revealed that the most common constructs include violations of historical facts with regards to the representation of Malaysia's history. This sense of a 'Negara' Sarawak mapped out the constructivist notions of Orientalism by Edward Said in support of knowledge of the other global and regional developments over the last two decades. This configures upon the fabric of consciousness in the emergence of 'other' discourses in the history of Malaysia

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Keywords: Discourse, Historical Consciousness, Narrative, Otherness.

1. Introduction

Over a period of almost two decades, the mainstream version of the history of Malaysia has been challenged, subverted, undermined, and threatened (Kheng, 2003; Manickam, 2003; Rajandran, 2012; Santhiram, 1997; Ting, 2014). In fact, the trend of 'rewriting' the Malaysian history began in 1996 (Sharom, 2010). What has come to be known as the nation's history has grown and evolved over time through the public sphere until a certain time where the traditional narrative has been accepted as the mainstream history of Malaysia. The discourse constructed by colonial scholars, historians on the representation of the past, with each feeding information to the other has been quite stable until the advent of certain ideas and events which occurred in the 1990s. Two events of particular significance are the fall of the Berlin Wall which marked the end of the Cold War in 1990, and, the use of information and communication technologies in the social sphere during the mid-1990s (Christie, 1998; Halligan, 2014).

The former being the fall of an ideology, and the other rooted in technology. The end of the Cold War affected the Malaysian political and intellectual landscape in that it also marked the withdrawal of the Communist Party from Malaya in 1989. The Cold War formally ended in 1991. Hence the Communist ideology, no longer seen as a threat to the nation, was disbanded. Books on communism and the communist struggle became easily accessible in the market. During that time too, books by and about members of the Communist Party of Malaya, initially published elsewhere, were subsequently published locally and were celebrated by certain segments of the Malaysian society (Musa, 2013; Short, 1975) . This coincided with the ease in which society was able to produce and reproduce views and opinions through the internet. Hence, what had perhaps been taken as a Malay-centric, with some using the term UMNO-centric position, not to bring up the monolithic Eurocentric basis of history now has competitors. The Malay-centric view of Malaysia, as represented in school history textbooks and a number of histories and historiographical writings, could not be maintained unchallenged for much longer.

Towards the last few years of the 1990s, and transcending the decade that followed, the nation had been overwhelmed by many histories, rather many perspectives, that sought to maintain or strengthen, or lay claim to the nation-building and nationhood (Kheng, 2003; Manickam, 2003; Rajandran, 2012; Santhiram, 1997; Ting, 2014)(Kheng, 2003; Manickam, 2003; Rajandran, 2012; Santhiram, 1997; Ting, 2014). The Malay-centric (and UMNO-centric) perspective of the history of Malaysia was now being complemented and challenged by the versions held by the Chinese, Tamil, Islamic, PAS, DAP, Istana, Iban, Kadazan, Thai, and others.

Arising from such developments, criticisms were made accusing the Malaysian government, through the Ministry of Education, as being biased in the way history was represented in school textbooks (Ting, 2014). The volumes were written to be skewed toward Malay and Islamic civilization, giving scant attention towards other cultures such as Buddhism and Hinduism. As these issues penetrated the national consciousness, the social contract discourses also began to reappear. At the same time, the insensitive racist comments raved through new media implied a poor knowledge of the nation's history, and some even blamed the school curriculum. At this stage, all groups of people begin to realize what has been represented and misrepresented. Thus, this signifies that there is no single discourse of history, but come from many versions of history.

The cultural pluralism in Sarawak is reflected through the diversity of their dance, food, architecture, lifestyles, and practices. The Dayaks are the indigenous group who collectively account for approximately 40 % of Sarawak's population; they practice animism and some are also Christians. The Dayaks consist of two large ethnic groups which make up 31% of the population, namely the Ibans and Bidayuhs. Other indigenous groups include Kedayan, Murut, Penan, Kelabit, Berawan, Kenyah and Kayan (Malaysia & Ali, 2007).

In fact, each ethnic group is also practicing own governance system, and they fought tribal wars from time to time, which included head-hunting. This multi-ethnic demography makes Sarawak unique and distinct from other parts of Malaysia. The most common justifications about nation's history include distortion of historical facts with regards to the depiction of Malaysia's history. The distortion of historical facts is also known as 'subjugated knowledge' as contended by Michel Foucault (1989). This sense of a 'Negara' Sarawak mapped out the constructivist notions of Orientalism by Edward Said in support of knowledge of the Other global and regional developments over the last two decades, which configure upon the fabric of consciousness in the emergence of alternative discourses in the history of Malaysia

2. Problem Statement

2.1. "Us" vs "Them"

Forging the nation's collective memory is hard work and is also an integral process of nation building. Hence, the strong relationships between history and memory are somewhat new to be explored in new media. Nevertheless, if the completion of this task is successful, it may turn people into loyal citizens and help towards instilling a shared national identity.

When writing news that includes history, the construction of the past often involves the use of stereotypes and prejudice in describing the 'other'. The news media eventually helps us as humans, to construct our perception and judgment towards the 'other'. News in the media sometimes contains issues and present images that represent ethnic diversity and group identification. The media constructs the view of its audience by highlighting our perception of 'us' and 'them' (Bakhshandeh, 2014; Castañeda, Fuentes-Bautista, & Baruch, 2015; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016). Said (1978) in his work also mentioned the 'other', the dominant Occident and the inferior Orient. In his book titled *Orientalism*, he displays the chauvinism of westerner scholars and the 'us' versus 'them' Orientals' paradigm. It is important to understand the dichotomy between the West and the Orient and subsequently apply it in the context of stereotyping. Thus, Said (1978) in his research also referenced various forms of media to show evidence of the 'other'. As such, *Orientalism* has become a pertinent frame in presenting the nationality of people, race, and ethnicity.

With regards to stereotyping, various studies have been conducted in a paradigm of cultural-critique (Harding, 2006; Trivundza, 2004). Often, the media stereotypes non-white, non-elite groups and minorities by excluding them from coverage and giving them only limited representations. As a result, the media seems to have created a homogeneous perception of the 'other', which may affect society. According to Hall (1997), *"stereotyping reduces people to a few simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by nature"* (p.257). Stereotyping makes people ignore the differences between individuals and tend

to generalize. Since it creates a barrier between individuals of the other group, the labelling of 'other' has become a system of classification in maintaining social and symbolic order.

Ironically, the repertoire of representations of another group of minorities is likely related to elements of past history, for example, slavery, colonialism, and orientalism(Fürsich, 2010). In the context of Malaysia, various versions of history have come into question ever since the emergence of the Internet. It seems like the new media technology has opened up space for audiences to throw their thoughts and views, while at the same time to oppress a front-stage position in Malaysian society. Previous studies conducted on Malaysia highlighting national identity and nationalism include Milner (2005) and Shamsul (1996, 2001) who looked back at the root of history to present the historical facts. The Malaysian society is unique in ways that sometimes contradict its policies. However, if we cannot combat the widespread influence of the Internet and technology in Malaysia, it somehow may have the tendency to revoke the unity and patriotic nationalism espoused by the government and thus create racial turbulence in the future

3.   Research Questions

It is interesting to explore and delves into different perspectives and views of minorities on national narratives, hence this study questions on how do the people in Sarawak view the Malaysia history? More specifically, what do they think about Malaysia history and their ideas about the past that reflect social reality?

4.   Purpose of the Study

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive method to look into how people in Sarawak perceive the history of Malaysia from a different point of view. At the same time, this study aims at exploring whether the binary opposition of "us" vs "them" is embedded in representation of Malaysia history.

5.   Research Methods

5.1.   Data collection

Focus group interviews were used to provide an in-depth and rich understanding of communities in Sarawak, how they view the history of Malaysia and how they see themselves as part of the historical narrative (mainstream history). By using focus groups, participants' perspectives from their lives experiences were emphasized as a collective explore, thus the gathered data are more meaningful and insightful compared to one-one interview (Rabiee, 2004).

Interviews with two focus groups comprising a total of 25 participants were conducted at Miri and Kuching, Sarawak. The participants were selected based on purposiveness in each subject rather than representativeness. The rationale behind this is that they would be able to furnish relevant information on the topic given to provide insights that are personally significant to them. The participants were chosen based on sociodemographic characteristics, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and profession. The sampling is purposive, with the cohorts mainly comprising those between 15 to 40 years old, broken up into major

ethnic groups as to express a different point of views. An email outlining the objectives of the research was sent out to the participants before the discussion.

During the discussion, participants were informed about anonymity and confidentiality. Written informed consents were obtained from all participants. The focus group questions were developed based on a review of the literature on historical consciousness and studies related to history trajectories were designed to look at how communities in Sarawak viewed the national narrative (mainstream history), and also how they see themselves as part of it. The questions and statements were used to guide the discussion, but probes were also used to further explore certain comments or ideas. The discussions were audio recorded with permission. The group discussion lasted for about two hours.

5.2. Data analysis

All collected data (recorded dialogue) were transcribed in verbatim in two languages, Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) and English. The data analysis was facilitated using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQCAS), ATLAS.ti version 7.0. All the data were saved in PDF format and placed in one single file called hermeneutic unit (HU). Both inductive and deductive process were implemented when analyzing the transcripts (Strauss, & Corbin, 1990).

After the open coding process was completed, the researcher regrouped the data and critically analysed them again by selecting the main codes that described the real phenomenon of the study. Due to the vast amount of interpretations involved in this qualitative study, a 'reflexivity' process was involved in capturing and interpreting the real meaning of the data. However, since the researcher is often the collector as well as an interpreter of data, it is sometimes inevitable for confusion and bias to enter the data analysis process. Hence, to enhance reflexivity and to improve trustworthiness in the research, a peer de-briefer who was also a member of the research project was recruited to provide valuable second opinion on the meaning of the data as well as the proposed components and sub-components. Through a process of comparative analysis, similar codes were classified into categories from which themes were abstracted. Since ATLAS.ti was used, all data (primary documents, codes, memos) were compiled in a neat HU and this process was done in an organised manner (refer to Figure 0.1).
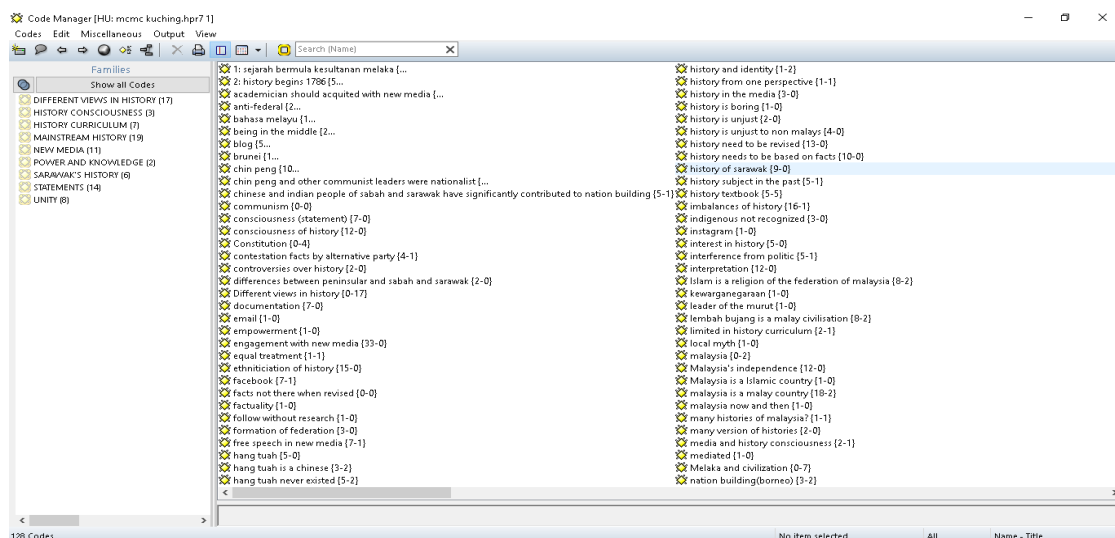

Figure 01. Codes in ATLAS.ti

6. Findings

6.1. 'Negara' Sarawak

Although Malaysia has gained independence for more than half a century, yet, for the Sarawakians, they believe that they only achieved independence for only six years later after 1957. Sarawak has become part of Malaysia since the formation of Malaysia took place on 16 September 1963. Thus, 16 September has been marked as a public holiday since 2010 in commemoration of ethnic integration and unity. However, the significance of golden jubilee of the Malaysia Day celebration does not seem to cheer by the people in Sarawak. The South China Sea which separates Sarawak from Peninsular Malaysia does not just split the nations geographically but also weakens integration and wholeness. Through the focus group discussions, it was revealed that most of the participants think that 'Sarawak is for Sarawakians' and claimed that Sarawak is a 'negara' (country) on its own. The idea that Sarawak was not actually part of Malaysia was brought up, hence the discussion led to a few 'unofficial' facts being unearthed, facts which were not noted in the mainstream history textbook. The following describes this conception and further illustrated in (figure 0.2):

Participant N: "… Sabah belongs to the Sabahans, Sarawak belongs to Sarawakians.

Participant E: "Sarawak for Sarawakians. They are very loud, apparently, they are very loud talking in the mass media, in the internet. But if you ask the people in Sarawak."

Participant G: "Ah yes. We do not see that we are part of the whole Malaysia set-up thingy. It's like western Malaya, Malaya, I used to hear Malaya, Malaya. People from Malaya."

Participant A: "I think generally Sarawakians and Sabahans strongly feel they can do much better. But there's no problem of being part of Malaysia. But the real problem now is the atmosphere because of the feelings of bias, feelings of prejudice. People, what do you call this, expressing their frustration. Because I think people blame politicians.
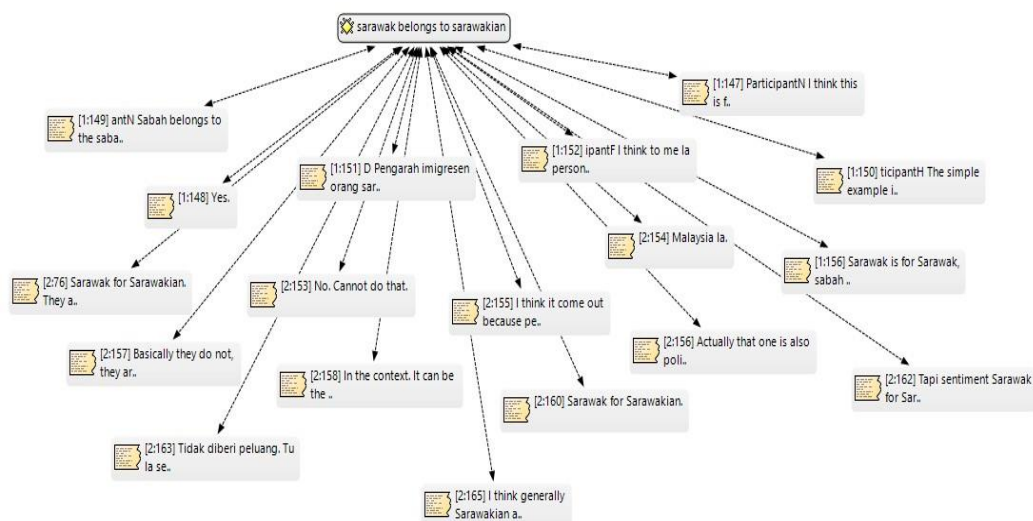
Figure 02. Graphic Illustration of 'Sarawak for Sarawakian'

As we observe in above exceptions, the vast South China Sea has become a barrier between Sarawak and peninsular. As observed above, the vast South China Sea has become a barrier between Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia, where the multi-ethnic Malaysians from the two geographical locations do not share the same hopes and aspirations. The stereotyped constructions towards the people of Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia created a sense of 'us' vs 'them'. It is a power which is held in today's global cultural dynamics that raises issues about how people view 'other' people. In this situation, the differences in culture and language between Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia suppressed the idea of integration, thus creating binaries such as 'negara' Sarawak and 'Sarawak for Sarawakian', evidencing their struggle in finding their real identity. The suppression was due to psychological subjugation where language plays a role in constructing individual ideologies.

Interestingly, a few facts about Sarawak were also uncovered during the discussion sessions. The somewhat rebellious expression 'Sarawak for Sarawakians' showed the uneven powers embedded in history, culture and linguistics, as the peninsular dominated the whole 'system of thought' of how Malaysia's history should be presented. The following extracts explain this more clearly:

Participant C: "… But before this only 31st August 1957, Sarawak Merdeka dalam Malaysia but we must remember Sarawak is not Merdeka dalam Malaysia. Before that Malaysia is not form yet. Sabah and Sarawak and Semenanjung form Malaysia not Merdeka 'dalam' Malaysia. The term is 'dalam' is not correct".

Participant D: "… I think even in Sarawak even in 1841 when in Sarawak it was only Kuching, my place Lawas is not part of Sarawak at that time. So, people cannot celebrate say we should celebrate 1841, I am Lawasian, I don't agree with that. Lawas came in Sarawak in 1905, so people forget that.

	People want to celebrate 1841. It's quite complex, you cannot assume that Sarawak as one capital at that time. So, that's why I said we had no history yet."
Participant H:	"But we have to thank the new media, we Sarawakian and Sabahan alert about our Independence Day is not 1957. Malaysia form 1963 but before this we only celebrate 1957 and then after that baru PM declare our Malaysia day is 1963 and don't want to call it 'Hari Kemerdekaan', 'Hari Kebangsaan'. That is the power of social media. But before this only 31st August 1957 and then dingkahnya Sarawak merdeka dalam Malaysia but we must remember Sarawak is not merdeka dalam Malaysia. Before that Malaysia is not form yet. Sabah and Sarawak and semanjung form Malaysia not merdeka dalam Malaysia. The term is dalam is not correct. That's why after the social media keep it viral viral viral everybody knows not dalam Malaysia, not Sarawak merdeka dalam Malaysia."

This gives an indication that Sarawak was a fully independent state before it became part of Malaysia, along with Sabah. The wave of patriotism of Sarawakians across the new media paints the 'unofficial' history of Sarawak, where the British granted Sarawak full independence on 22 July 1963. The ceremony of becoming a sovereign state in its own has been forgotten, perhaps even unknown by the average Malaysian. However, one of the participants revealed that information about the independence of Sarawak was written in the old version of history textbook in the 1970s. The following illustrates this conception:

Participant F:	"I think it is stated in our history book. I am not sure about that but during my time in 1970s, dekat sekolah. It is stated in the history book just that nobody bothers about that. It is stated there, but I am not sure about the history book now because history book Semarang DIA dah revised. So, the old history book is stated just that we don't see that as significant."

7. Conclusion

This discussion is very important to show that the dominant national authority has the ability to influence the discourse of the nation's history; what should and what should not be included in it. It is also in a concordance of other previous studies (Gabriel, 2014; Harding, 2006), where in the knowledge production, it always rooted with power. Therefore, the dominant discourses are presented as the true reality, elucidating the important facts, which is significantly important to the Sarawak natives, lay the seeds of the 'othering' discourses. Ultimately, the new media have become the medium facilitating the emergence of a new wave of historical consciousness, where the Sarawak natives retrieve their history and

cultural identity not just for their individual and collective experience framed within the 'Negara', but also through adopting practices and strategies to resist the mainstream national ideology, generally assumed as being imposed upon them by '*Orang Semenanjung*'. Thus, this idea of an alternative contestation or better known as 'subjugated knowledge' contended by Foucault (1989) runs parallel to the urban based thinking of cosmopolitans and the idea of multiculturalism (Ang, 2010). This 'subjugated knowledge' should be emancipated, celebrated, and accepted in the open spirit. This focus group study is restricted exclusively to explore the perspectives of Sarawakian on Malaysia's history. Given that this study only deliberates on a certain part of consciousness, it is hoped that in future, to expand on all ages of Malaysia's citizen.

Acknowledgments

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