

## **The Challenge of Identity, Education, and Citizenship for Muslims in a Pluralistic Society: A Case Study of Malaysia.<sup>1</sup>**

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This chapter examines the path the Malay-Muslims in Malaysia have travelled in establishing and maintaining their identity in the modern context. It examines the educational responses of Malaysia, with a predominantly Muslim population, in molding Muslim identity within the context and needs of a pluralistic society. The discussion proceeds within two contexts: the first is the most immediate context of colonization that bequeathed Malaysia an educational system that catered to the needs of a small elite group, and the second is the larger context of Muslim reform movements beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that made education of Muslims an issue. Malaysia is one of the very few countries in the Muslim world and in Asia that has, since gaining independence, tried to overhaul its educational system to make it more responsive to the needs of all its members while maintaining its Muslim identity.

### **Historical Context**

It is a tradition of Muslims to be able to read their holy book, the Qur'an. And wherever there are Muslims there is bound to be a mosque, which functions both as a place of congregational worship and a community centre. From the very early days of Islam one of the functions of a mosque as a community centre was for it to serve as a place of learning. Later mosques, or *jami' masjid*, served as institutions of higher learning, as in the Al-Azhar University where beside teaching Muslims to read, interpret and understand the Qur'an, Muslim laws, or *fiqh*, and the articles of faith, or *aqidah*, were discussed and taught. In Malaysia, Qur'an classes for the purpose of learning existed as early as the advent of Islam. The mosque or *pondok*, an

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter in Michael S Merry & J. A. Milligan (Eds.), *Citizenship, Identity, and Education in Muslim Communities: Essays on Attachment and Obligation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 167-88.

educational institution where students resided in small huts surrounding the teacher's house or mosque, was traditional in its methods. Students sat in a *halaqah* (semi-circle) facing the teacher who would read a text and elaborate on its meanings. The texts taught and discussed were time honored classics of traditional sciences such as *Kitab al-Hikam*, and *Ihya' Ulumuddin*; however, no studies except *ulum al-shari'ah* (religious sciences) were offered. Subjects such as mathematics, geography or history never made the list of subjects to be taught.

Thus, Muslim education always gravitated around the Qur'an, even though the vast majority of Malays did not understand the Arabic of the Qur'an. Because of this lack of understanding of Arabic, the role of the *ulama* (religious scholars) became significant because they had to be relied upon to elaborate and explain the traditional religious sciences in Malay, the mother tongue of the people. Among the famous *ulama* in the eighteenth century were Shaikh Daud al-Fatoni, Shaikh Abd al-Samad Palembani, Shaikh Abdul Rashid Banjar, and Tuan Tabal.

Malaya was colonized by the British beginning in 1786. As a result of the British policy of bringing in indentured laborers from China and India, Malaya became a plural society, defined by Furnivall (1944) as a society composed of "two or more elements or social classes who live side by side as parts of a single political unit without merging into each other" (p. xxii). As the British established themselves in Malaya, they opened up government English schools, in addition to missionary schools. Later they opened up Malay vernacular schools for the Malays, giving Malays a choice between the Malay vernacular or English school on the one hand, and the *pondok* on the other. Thus began the dualistic education system in Malaya, a system that ran along ideological lines between the liberal, secular and the traditional religious. This system, set in place by the British, provided opportunities for higher

education only to those attending English schools. The system was maintained even after national independence in 1957.

### **Modern Malaysian Education**

However, independence has enabled the Malays<sup>1</sup> in Malaya, to reflect on and make choices regarding their identity. They have to make a critical ethical choice regarding their identity in relationship to the world they are situated in, which has serious consequences for their life. They may choose to remain Muslims by virtue of the fact that they were accidentally born within a Muslim family, or they may choose to accept the responsibility of designing themselves in the light of the Qur'an and the Prophetic Tradition. They may choose to be shaped by the events surrounding them, which in this context means to accept secularization and the Western mode of life, or they may choose to design their lives to be consistent with the Qur'anic principles and goals of life. It is only by adopting and appropriately applying the latter that they will remain true to their faith and attain success in this life and the hereafter.

By the time Malaysia obtained its independence it had already been transformed into a multicultural, multifaith and multiethnic society. Malaysia's population in 2008 stood at 27.73 million with 65% Malays and other indigenous (*Bumiputera*) groups, 26% Chinese, 8% Indians and 1% others (Department of Statistics, 2008). It is comprised of 60.4% Muslims, 19.2% Buddhists, 9.1% Christians, 6.3% Hindus, 2.6% Confucianists/Taoist/other traditional Chinese religion, and 2.4% Others. This plurality could be considered positively as a factor that encourages Muslims to recreate their Islamic identity, or it could be viewed negatively as a threat to their identity. Hence the challenge for Muslim educationists in Malaysia is to design a system of education which not only helps to regain Muslims' identity but imbues them with a sufficiently robust historical consciousness

to be effective historical actors while simultaneously celebrating diversity without surrendering commonality. If this challenge is successfully met, then the issue of identity and citizenship in a plural society can be resolved.

The only guarantees in the Malaysian constitution that the Malay-Muslims obtained from their colonial masters upon independence was the recognition of their right as the original owners of the land, and acknowledgment of Islam as the official religion of the state, the Malay language as the national language, and the special position of the Malay rulers for their sacrifices in giving up the civil administration of their states to pave the way for the birth of the Federation of Malaya in 1948. The Malays were accorded special rights in terms of education and economic opportunities—in view of their socio-economic backwardness resulting from the British colonial policy—in exchange for citizenship given to the Chinese and Indian communities. This became the unwritten social contract in Malaysian history. History has witnessed the significance of these constitutional articles in the development of the country after independence, especially in interethnic, intercultural and interfaith matters and the survival of the nation, in particular the Muslim community. Thus, one can truly appreciate the vision and insight of the architects of the constitution, namely Lord Reid (chair), Sir Ivor Jennings (Britain), Sir William McKell (Australia), Judge B Malik (India), and Judge A. Hamid (Pakistan).

Malaysia adopted cultural pluralism on the eve of its independence as the basic approach towards nation building. In this approach the “members of the different groups are permitted to retain many of their cultural ways, as long as they conform to those practices deemed necessary for the survival of the society as a whole” (Bennett, 1995, p. 86). The cultural pluralists argue that minority ethnic cultures generally contribute to and enrich the host society. Thus, the different groups

would retain their languages, customs, religions and artistic expressions. Upon Independence, the educational policy opted for a pluralistic *primary* education system, tolerating what is now called National-Type Chinese and Tamil primary schools having Mandarin and Tamil as the major medium of instruction respectively, alongside the supposedly premier Malay medium National Schools. It was decided in the Rahman Talib Report in 1961 that there should only be a single National *secondary* school system having Malay, the national language, as its medium of instruction as the most important instrument for national unity. However, alongside this national system there are 60 Independent Chinese secondary schools and about 161 *rakyat* religious secondary schools (BPPI Jakim, 2006) which provide school choice for the Chinese and Muslim communities respectively.

### **Muslim education and the revival of the integrated Muslim personality**

Ever since Muslim countries gained independence there have been various attempts at regenerating Muslims through education. The seeds of Muslims' reform and independence had been planted beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century through the efforts of Muslim reformers such as Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh in Egypt, Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Shah Waliyullah in India, and Mahmud Yunus and Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin in the Malay Archipelago. With the exception of al-Afghani, who had taken the political course for *islah* (reform) and independence, these other reformers desired change through what was perceived as a more gradual but more rooted means, which was education. They wanted to bring back the notion of Muslim education that is transformative and creative rather than just informative and passive. They desired to bring back the dynamism of Islam that had transformed the *ummah Islamiyya* in its glorious period of the ninth to the

thirteenth century (Kazmi, 2006). They aspired to revive the learning culture, the spirit of inquiry and the freedom of expression that were the trademarks of that period.

Thus Afghani and Abduh called for the reopening of the door of interpretation (*ijtihad*) and the end to blind imitation (*taqlid*). They criticized the *ulama* for being the root of the problem of *taqlid*, for not encouraging fresher solutions to contemporary problems, such as the issue of *halal* meat for Muslims living in non-Muslim lands, polygamy, and a woman's rights to choose her lifemate. Abduh attempted to reform the administration and curriculum of al-Azhar University, the mother of Islamic educational institutions then, but failed. His aspiration to see al-Azhar teach the *Muqaddimah* of Ibn Khaldun was dashed. Similarly, his hopes to see the teaching of the natural sciences failed, although he succeeded in minor administrative reforms. Despite these difficulties, the seeds of reform had been planted in his students, who subsequently went on to reform Islamic education throughout the Malay-Riau Archipelago, including Malaya (Othman, 2005).

Gradually the *pesantren* and *pondok* in the Malay-Riau Archipelago were transformed into formal *madrasah* or modern *pondok* where learning was more formal with regular schedules for the various subjects and the set up of modern classrooms. Several 'modern' subjects such as mathematics, geography and English language found their way into the curriculum. However, the content of the *madrasah* was still found wanting in terms of empowering Muslims to be able to write their own narratives and thus fortify their identities because it fell back on the old ways of traditional rote learning. For Muslims living in a majority Muslim nation the challenge would be how to exhort Muslims to go beyond the fact of being Muslim, that is, how to make the shift from 'who is a Muslim?' to 'what is it to be a Muslim?' (Kazmi and Hashim, 2010). This is to move from seeing their identity as a fact to

seeing their identity as a challenge. They would need an education that not only focused on the form but also more on the substance to transform their lives. This was badly needed because the tendency was and is for Islamic education to be taught in the manner of prescribing the rules of the game, rather than learning to be creative, and to construct new moves within the parameters allowed by the Qur'an. This was essential, in view of the fact that the informative mode of learning associated with traditional education resulted in an ossified identity, in taking the Qur'an literally and ignoring the historical context of being a Muslim, which ultimately endangers their own survival in a competitive, diverse social environment.

But the traditional *madrrasah* formed only a minor portion of Muslim education towards the end of the century, the major portion being taken up by the national system of education, which in most cases was the continuation of the education system set up by the colonial masters based on Western liberal, secular ideology. This colonial national education system offered only the acquired sciences without any Islamic religious sciences. That deficiency had to be taken up by supplementary classes offered by other agencies after school hours.

The continuing secular nature of the education system even after independence could be traced to the Muslim political leaders' inability or unwillingness to break free from Western influence which, among other things, has had the debilitating effect of compartmentalizing the life of Muslims into a spiritual life that was becoming privatized and a public life that became secularized. In extreme cases it was reflected in their inability to reconcile what they believed in and what they knew, which rendered them *qua* Muslims intellectually inert. The identity their professions or roles conferred upon them had priority over their identity as Muslims. To put it more starkly, they exercised their intellect when they were not acting as Muslims, and when

acting as Muslims they saw no reason to exercise their intellect (Kazmi and Hashim, 2010).

### **Islamization of education to foster Muslim identity**

The 1970s witnessed the resurgence of Islam following the OPEC oil embargo of 1973, educational programmes to help the Malays through the New Economic Policy, the Malay urban movement, large scale movement of Malays into higher education, the Iranian revolution, and the role of *dakwah* organizations like ABIM, Darul Arqam and Jama'atul Tabligh (Hashim, 1996; Mutalib, 1990). This new wave saw Islam not only as religion for worship but also as a way of life. Soon after the First World Conference on Muslim Education in 1977 Muslim intellectuals began strategizing for concrete reform, even to the point of making it a national agenda. Thus, as most reformers of the past, such as Abduh and Sayyid Ahmad Khan resorted to schooling for change, a new generation of Muslim intellectuals, in particular Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, Ismail Al-Faruqi and Syed Ali Ashraf, called for changes in the education system, in particular the school curriculum, which was seen as the breeding ground for the secularization of Muslim minds. It was believed that Muslim minds were fed with knowledge that had lost its sacredness and had been secularized and westernized.

Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, a Malay scholar, concerned himself with trying to explain his diagnosis of the disease plaguing the *ummah Islamiyya* to the Muslim intellectuals (Al-Attas, 1978). Al-Attas saw the need to fortify Muslims with the proper Islamic worldview that emanates from the Qur'an, whose prescriptions and proscriptions define and express one's identity as a Muslim. It can be viewed as describing a circle within which Muslims are to create their respective narratives, that is, to be creative in the ways sanctioned by the Qur'an. Any transgression of the circle

would make their narratives as Muslims incoherent. This reflects the importance of the Qur'an for proper action; it helps to transform their minds and see themselves as Muslims before all other things, even their professions.

Al-Attas also argued that those who held political power in Muslim nations were themselves corrupted and confused, and propagated this confusion or “loss of *adab*,” that is the confusion in the hierarchy of knowledge and values, through the use of their power and the national education system. He emphasized the need to de-Westernize or Islamize contemporary knowledge in a curriculum where the *fard ‘ayn*, or the *shari’ah sciences*, form the core while the *fard kifayah*, or the philosophical-intellectual sciences, form the parts of the whole (Al-Attas, 1978; 1982). In this context, Al-Attas elaborated the needs and nature of the Islamic university, which would have this integrated curriculum as its unifying principle. This was a contrast to the views of the days in which the Islamic university only dealt with the religious, or *fard ‘ayn* sciences. He was ultimately able to translate his ideas into The International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), which he founded in 1993.

Ismail Al-Faruqi, an American scholar of Palestinian origin, identified the problems of the *ummah Islamiyya* in an education that is dualistic between religious, traditional education and secular, public education. It lacked, he argued, a clear vision. He called for reform towards integrating the Islamic and secular sciences to end the duality, thus creating an integrated knowledge and curriculum (Al-Faruqi, 1982). He also pointed out the inadequacy of the traditional methods of *ijtihad*<sup>2</sup>, which was either restricted to legalistic reasoning or eliminated all rational criteria and standards. But what was most significant about al-Faruqi’s work was his clarion call for the Islamization of knowledge, which he delineated in a flowchart designed to attain this end, including the production of Islamicized textbooks in various intellectual

disciplines. This effort became the mission of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), established in the U.S.A in Virginia in 1981, and later, the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), established in 1983. One prominent scholar of the period, however—Fazlur Rahman—disagreed with both al-Attas and al-Faruqi regarding Islamizing knowledge (*'ilm*) because he believed that *'ilm* is neutral (Rahman, 1988). He argued that one has to use knowledge with responsibility and that abandoning that responsibility has resulted in its misuse. He argued that one cannot map knowledge. For him what was more important was the creativity of Muslim minds in constructing knowledge, which he viewed as anything new to those minds.

In the context of Malaysia, however, Al-Attas' and Al-Faruqi's diagnoses of the problem and their remedies in the form of Islamization of contemporary knowledge and an integrated education have been more widely accepted than Fazlur Rahman's. Al-Attas seems to be more rooted in the Malay psyche, history, culture and tradition. In addition, he seems to be more rooted in al-Ghazali, whose influence in the Malay world is deep, especially in *tasawwuf*.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Al-Attas' effort has been described by certain scholars as a neo-Ghazalian Attasian project that

“represents a blueprint for a philosophical dimension of not only *tahafut* – deconstruction, but also *tajdid* – renaissance. This renaissance does not surrender to modernity or reject it utterly but understands it, confirms its positive aspects and rejects its excesses – just as al-Ghazali did in his engagement with the philosophical foundations of the Avicennian/Aristotelian worldview. With that paradigm well and truly established, change in the Muslim world need not be negotiated by means of western notions of modernity – but in a way that ultimately transcends them” (Al-Akiti and Hellyer, 2010, p. 134).

Among the Muslim countries, Malaysia was at the forefront of educational reforms in response to the deliberations of the First World Conference on Muslim

Education, first by addressing the proper Islamic concept of education, which resulted in the change in the name of the Ministry of Education from *Kementerian Pelajaran* to *Kementerian Pendidikan*. This was in accordance with Al-Attas' concept of *ta'dib*, instead of *tarbiyah*, to mean education in the true sense of *adab*, that is the discipline of the mind and the soul rather than just the body (Al-Attas, 1990). A second key reform involved the formulation, in 1987, of a National Philosophy of Education that is integrated and holistic, and which includes the development of moral and spiritual potential consistent with the spirit of Islamic and universal education and appropriate for a plural society. Yet another reform transformed the basic education curriculum by integrating Islamic and universal moral values beginning in 1989. Other reforms also experimented with transforming university curricula to encompass the perennial and acquired knowledge in all disciplines of studies through the establishment of the IIUM and ISTAC. This move inspired local existing universities to follow suit in some ways, for example in offering a compulsory course on Islamic civilization which has now been changed to Islamic and Asian Civilizations.

In this fashion, the Muslims in Malaysia have made their choice of identity. This can be clearly discerned in the mission and vision of IIUM<sup>4</sup> which attempts to integrate Islamic Revealed Knowledge and values in all academic disciplines and educational activities and restore the leading role of the Muslim *ummah* in all branches of knowledge, thereby contributing to the improvement and upgrading of the qualities of human life and civilization. Islamicization of contemporary human knowledge, which proponents of Islamization argue has been tainted with a secular worldview to the point of losing its sacredness, has become the next important mission. Another significant mission of the university is the cultivation of an *ummatic* vision in representatives of the *ummah islamiyya* studying together and thus

potentially exemplifying an international community of dedicated intellectuals, scholars, professionals, officers and workers who are motivated by the Islamic world view and code of ethics as an integral part of their work culture (S.A. Idid, 2009).

### **Education reform and non-Muslim Malaysians**

But being a plural society, the Malay community's re-assertion of its Muslim identity has raised some tensions with other ethnic communities. Its attempt, since 1987, to put in place an integrated system of education where Islamic values permeate the knowledge and educational ambience faced some complications. Earlier, in 1961, when Islamic Religious Knowledge was seriously introduced into the system for the first time after independence, it did not meet any opposition from the other communities because it was treated as just any other subject. Religion was viewed from the secular perspective as worship and thus, a private matter. The nature of the system, which was still secular and compartmentalized knowledge easily allowed for this arrangement. Thus, in a sense, although religious knowledge was taught, it was not comprehensive and the system was still secular.

However, the reform that began in 1987 was of a different nature. It was a stronger challenge to the secular nature of the school. It moved toward a system based on a philosophy rooted in the people's tradition and thus would dethrone secularization completely. Tensions were, perhaps, inevitable for, as Amy Gutmann (1987) has argued, "we cannot make good educational policy by avoiding political controversy; nor can we make principled educational policy without exposing our principles and investigating their implications" (p. 6). Thus the formulation of the National Philosophy of Education itself deliberately involved representatives of all faiths.<sup>5</sup> It is worded in such a manner that the phrase "based on a firm belief in and devotion to God" is acceptable to all faiths and reaffirms the *Rukun Negara*, that is the

nation's ideology drawn up in 1970, the first pillar of which is Belief in God.<sup>6</sup> Due to the differences in their conceptions of God, for the benefit of all Malaysians, the phrase "belief in and devotion to God" had to be interpreted with some latitude to refer to each citizen's conception of god.

### **Implementation and practical challenges**

The next issue confronted by educational reformers in Malaysia was how to translate this integrated curriculum within the National school system? What were the elements that needed to change? In general, the translation of the philosophy into the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary School intended the permeation of 16 universal values recognized by all the religious faiths. From the Islamic perspective, the integrated curriculum would mean the integration of revealed knowledge with acquired knowledge. This means that faith in Allah ought to be one of the learning outcomes because, as Muslims believe, He is the source of all the sciences – whether revealed or acquired. His signs are manifest in the natural world and also in the Holy Book. Studying these sciences, Muslims believe, provides a means to recognize and consequently obey His Way. Therefore, integrated education and an integrated curriculum from the Islamic perspective would also mean that the Qur'an and the Prophetic Traditions are relevant in all sciences—including acquired sciences such as natural science, mathematics, the social studies and the humanities—and thus should be spelled out in the textbooks. This would be consistent with the effort of Islamicization of knowledge propounded by Muslim scholars. This would be one of the important ways for Muslim students to see the relationship between knowledge and faith, which is one of the major goals of Islamic education. But in practice this has been avoided because the textbooks are meant for all children regardless of faith. Thus the textbook remains faith neutral, emphasizing the concept of a universal God

and universal values. It is left to Muslim teachers' personal effort, and the informal and hidden curricula, to do the job of instilling Islamic values in other subjects beside Islamic Education (Islamic Studies). Thus, in a sense, the mission of Islamicization and integration of knowledge has been left hanging due to the plural nature of the society.

In its moral aspects, the integrated curriculum was also interpreted as acknowledging good universal values across all subject matter, not only in the Islamic education or moral education classes, in order to promote the internalization of these values in students' lives. On the practical side, the integrated curriculum also means the consistency between theory and practice. This means translating the theoretical understanding of Islam into practice: simply knowing that a Muslim prays five times a day is not adequate. It is important that schools also facilitate its practice. Thus, it became important for a school to have *musalla* (prayer rooms) or a prayer hall. Supplication or Qur'anic verses are sometimes recited in school assemblies or functions. Consequently, the ambience of the National Malay medium schools, especially the primary schools which are populated mostly by Muslim children, was transformed to absorb the Islamic ethos, just as the National-Type primary Chinese and Tamil schools absorbed theirs.

The integrated curriculum also allows for complete compliance with the modest Islamic dress code, which is more obvious for the girls than the boys, whose attires are already in keeping with it. The female dress code now allows female students to cover their head with the *tudung* (head cover), in contrast to the earlier period when it was shunned by the schools. Consequently, as a natural course, sports attire has also changed from shorts to slacks for both boys and girls. But in all these changes students are given the right to choose. Thus, in a sense, the integrated

curriculum has succeeded in laying the foundation of a Muslim identity that had been diluted almost to the point of non-existence during the colonial period.

Even more significant was the establishment of National Religious Secondary Schools (*Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama*), which offer foundations for specialization in both the acquired and Islamic sciences for higher education and Arabic language. Unlike the other national schools, teachers in these schools are more free to integrate Islamic religious principles with the other sciences. Thus, the system succeeded in producing professionals who are Muslims first and professionals second rather than the other way around, as it was in the past.

The integrated curriculum is not only confined to basic schooling, however, but is also implemented at the university level, especially at the IIUM, which has adopted it as one of its missions. Thus, many of the courses taught in the various disciplines such as Medicine, Natural Sciences, and Engineering offer Islamic and western perspectives, especially in the social sciences. The Qur'an, the Prophet's Tradition and classic works of Muslim scholars of the past are included in the readings as part of the effort to reclaim the conversation with the Islamic tradition. Arabic and English are the media of instruction and students are required to be competent in at least one language. The university is open to all Malaysian students—Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

### **Revitalizing and empowering the Islamic Education curriculum**

In line with the education reform of the 1980s, the Islamic education syllabus was revised and empowered. The Islamic worldview that forms the core of Al-Attas' ideas was introduced in the curriculum so that Muslim students would better appreciate Islam as a way of life and not just go through the physical motion of worship thoughtlessly as mute performers of rites and rituals. With the proper

*weltanschauung*, they would be able to understand Islam as a whole, understand the concept of God, the Prophet, knowledge, the universe, the Qur'an and man himself, and also the human-God, human-Creation and human-human relationship. The history of Muslim scholars such as al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina and the four *Imam* of the schools of jurisprudence, and reformers such as Jamaluddin Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, became part of the curriculum in order to acquaint students with the greater Islamic heritage and civilization.

The Qur'anic verses that form the content of the syllabus were also revised so that those that call for Muslims to be transformative rather than passive recipients were selected. The spirit of the Qur'an that elevates the possessor of knowledge and exhorts Muslims to think creatively and be of service to mankind were disseminated. The idea is to inform students of the role of the Qur'an in spurring Muslims to seek knowledge. The importance of spirituality in Islamic education was also given consideration when the practice of prayers was incorporated in schools along with the recitation and understanding of the Qur'an. *Jawi* (Malay language written in the Arabic alphabets), *al-Qur'an*, Arabic and *Fard 'Ayn* or J-QAF was introduced in primary schools to ensure that pupils really grasp the fundamentals of the religion.

Despite the curricular changes above, there has been no emphasis on pedagogical changes. Teaching is still subject-centred, especially among graduates from Middle Eastern universities such as al-Azhar in Cairo. Information and communication technologies which could make teaching more interesting through the use of materials such as video clips of real phenomena and also the internet have not been attempted. More importantly, the pedagogy of philosophical inquiry, which involves examination of central and common concepts, especially those found in the Qur'an, such as *halal* (allowable), *haram* (forbidden), *fikr* (contemplation) and *iqra'*

(read) through deliberation and discussion have not been applied. This important pedagogical tool, which is based on wondering and questioning, a legacy of Islamic learning of the past and also consistent with the spirit of the Qur'an, ought to be revived (Hashim, 2009). This is crucial if Muslims are to create their own narratives that are relevant to their own historical context in the future.

### **Non-Muslims' response to the reassertion of Muslim identity in education**

What are the non-Muslims' response to these gradual changes in the education curriculum? At the level of basic education, due to the universal nature of the moral values to be inculcated in the curriculum, the integrated curriculum did not face much criticism. Moral education is offered to the non-Muslims. In fact, the National-Type primary schools—Chinese and Tamil—have more freedom to inculcate their cultural values in addition to the moral values prescribed in the curriculum than the National Malay Medium primary schools because of the homogeneity of their student population. This is a unique aspect of Malaysian education with regard to transmission of values. Each ethnic group has the right to inculcate its culture and values among its children during primary education due to the plural and segregated primary education system.

However, the secondary school is more heterogenous and thus the reassertion of Muslim identity can only be done within a certain limitation so as not to offend non-Muslim communities. The nature of discussion and inculcation of values is quite dependent on the context – whether it is an all Muslim or a mixed class. But being in a Muslim society and being in schools with Muslim children has sensitized most non-Muslim students to the activities and requirements of Muslims, such as their five daily prayers, and manner of greeting and dress codes and this is evident in adult social lives.

We rarely hear of cases where Islamic norms are imposed on non-Muslim students. At most it would be having to maintain silence as the short supplication (*doa*) is being recited in the school assembly or in the beginning of the class. However, we do hear of Muslim students being compelled by school regulations to adhere to the Islamic dress code and perform other duties. The curtailment of Muslim students' rights is sometimes much worse, such as forbidding Muslim male students from putting on the *serban* (headgear) or *jubah* (long flowing garment) in emulation of the tradition of the Prophet, which is allowable in the private or *rakyat* (community) religious schools. Though parents did take the MoE to court on this matter, they lost the case.

Some non-Muslim parents could not tolerate the Islamic ethos of the National Malay medium primary schools, especially recitation of the *doa* and the Qur'an and the lack of the use of Mandarin and thus prefer to send their children to the National-Type Primary schools, Independent Chinese or private secondary schools. But it is also equally true that many prefer the National Type Primary schools because they are assured that these schools will instill their own cultural ethos, rather than any antagonism to the Islamic ethos (Ye, 2003).

At the tertiary level, with the existence of many private and public universities and colleges since the Private Higher Education Institution Act of 1996, Malaysians do not face a problem in acquiring higher education. Thus, there is no longer a problem related to the reassertion of Muslim identity as, there was in the past when a quota system was applied for admission into public universities. Ethnic rather than religious groupings are still distinct, probably due to differences of cultural, language and school background as well as racial prejudices. However, Malay and Chinese students do mix freely and easily with other international students in the campuses.

### **Reassertion of Muslim identity in the larger Malaysian society**

School mirrors society; therefore, it is important to examine the reassertion of Muslim identity in the larger Malaysian social context. Living in a plural society is not, theoretically, a problem for Muslims because Islam is by nature plural, that is Muslims are comprised people of different nationalities, languages and races. The annual assembly in Makkah for the pilgrimage is a true manifestation of the plurality of Islam as is also manifested in the Qur'an.<sup>7</sup> Islam has also taught Muslims to live among people of various faiths with an attitude of mutual respect and tolerance, and to respect all houses of worship, even those belonging to other faiths, just as it expects others to respect the Muslim's house of worship.

However in practice, living together with people of different races, languages and faiths are bound to meet with conflict. This certainly is true for Malaysia, where many intricate and complex cases involving both parties – Muslims and non-Muslims—have been brought to court in an attempt to find a fair resolution. Among them are cases of *khalwat*, that is close proximity between unwed men and women one of whom is a Muslim, where only the Muslim is charged because the court has no jurisdiction over non-Muslims. Others involve interfaith marriages where problems arise when the marriage does not work and the partner who converts desires to return to his or her original faith. Non-Muslims civil marriage in which the husband converts to Islam but his wife decided otherwise have also wound up in court. Cases involving the death of converts who did not inform spouses, parents or children of their conversion for fear of threats to their lives have resulted in a commotion when their burials are claimed by two parties, as have cases of Muslim women who would like to apostate in order to marry non-Muslim men as in the famous case of Azlina Jailani (Lina Joy).<sup>8</sup> One of the most recent and most explosive controversies involves the use

of the word “Allah” for God by the *Herald*, a Borneo Catholic Church publication, despite several prior prohibitions of its use by the Ministry of Home Affairs.<sup>9</sup> These cases drew a lot of sentiment from the general public, each side giving arguments and debates and had there been no self-restraints, it could have developed into serious conflicts.

However, there are also religion-related cases involving only Muslims such as moral policing done by officials from the Islamic Religious Department to prevent social ills and moral crimes which have been rising by policing certain premises such as hotels and nightclubs, based on tips given by members of the public who are upset by immoral behaviors, *khalwat*, adultery and illicit premarital sex. Even recently, the Shari’ah court has implemented the Islamic law of *hudud*, that is caning, for adultery. These cases drew criticisms and debates especially, between the moderate and liberal Muslims, to the extent that the latter are often regarded as anti-Islam, as in the case of Dr M.Asri, the former *Mufti* of Perlis, Farish Noor, and the Sisters-in-Islam. Instead of using such opportunities for dialogue, Muslim authorities often prefer to appeal to the authority of the law or the King, violating the spirit of freedom of expression in Islam. Sometimes non-Muslim organizations, such as Woman’s Aid Organization (WAO) and non-Muslim political party such as Malayan/Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Democratic Action Party (DAP) criticized these issues as infringing on the individual’s rights despite the actor being a Muslim. In such cases these organizations are often put off by asking them not to interfere in Muslims’ affairs. One consequence therefore of the reassertion of Muslim identity seems to heighten the fear of non-Muslims towards Islam and affirm their perceptions, which have been influenced by the already biased and prejudiced Western media, especially after September 11, 2001.

## **Discussion on Malaysian citizenship and communal identity**

Despite the good intentions and efforts of the Ministry of Education, several weaknesses were evident from the reforms for an integrated and holistic education. The role of the National Philosophy of Education (NPE) would be to provide direction for the National Education system based on the type of citizens envisaged. It is clear that the NPE desires to produce a Malaysian citizen who is knowledgeable, competent and possess excellent moral character and is of service to him/herself, society and humanity at large. However, the NPE fails to give any attention to the goal of national unity as has been emphasized in the Razak Report of 1956 and the Education Act of 1961 which formed the foundation of the Malaysian system of education. Not much has been done in this area, except for the Vision primary schools where the three types of National schools are built in adjoining areas and share the same canteen, sports field and some school activities. But this does not look like a practical solution because learning is still segregated and one cannot find a multiple of three such schools in every locality. Even the spirit of the Vision school seems to be waning.

There have been debates in the mass media for a single national school system but so far there has been no action, strategy or development. We have to heed Guttman (1987)'s advice that sometimes the interest of the state precedes the interest of parents and education professionals. The state has the right to plan for a long term solution even if it is controversial instead of sweeping it under the carpet. Ethnic relations, especially prejudice and mistrust in Malaysia, do not seem to improve despite the fifty years of Independence and improved economic conditions. In this context, the authoritarian Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore was probably more successful

than the Malay leaders in his firmness. This also reveals how tolerant or weak the Malay-Muslim leaders have been.

In 2005 Civics and Citizenship education was reintroduced as a core school subject for all so that it provides the space for discussing 'sensitive' yet crucial matters, such as the social contract, Malay special rights and citizenship. However, the way this subject is taught defeats its purpose because there is little meaningful discussion on the pretext of fear of being misconstrued. Ethnic relations are also being introduced in the university as a compulsory course, but the sensitivity to the content is evident when the textbook used in Universiti Putra Malaysia had to be withdrawn upon the denial of the Chinese community of certain historical facts.

What is evident from the discussion above is that a common Malaysian identity has not yet been formed despite fifty years of Independence, but what has developed is a form of a hyphenated ethnic-national identity (Hashim & C. Tan, 2009). The education system has not been able to forge a national identity due to many factors. Basically, due to historical reasons, the political parties in Malaysia are communal-based where each major party represents an ethnic community and loosely unites in an alliance. The concept of power-sharing has been successful in the past due to its ability to bargain and contain its members.

In addition, the pluralistic primary school system strengthens communal allegiance, racial stereotypes and prejudices, especially communal identities which weaken national identity. The idea of a single school system failed because the bulk of the Chinese community has a very strong affiliation to their language and cultural identity, and from the perspective of many Malays, harbors feelings of cultural superiority. Ye (2003) argues that many in the Chinese community look down upon the National Malay-medium schools and the Malays in general asserting that, "in

Malaysia, Chinese superiority also rests on the notion that the Malays are culturally inferior, but this is an unfounded belief based on ignorance of Malay History.... They consistently underestimate Malay capability” (111).

Furthermore, the affirmative actions taken under the New Economic Policy in the aftermath of the May 13, 1969 racial conflicts, has sharpened the wedge between these two major ethnic groups.<sup>10</sup> The NEP was to improve the social and economic conditions of the Malay-Muslims through eradicating rural poverty and restructuring society by breaking job identification according to ethnic group. To achieve this the government established the Malay-medium Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for students from the Malay-medium secondary schools, science colleges and schools, university matriculation programs, awarded scholarships to deserving Malay students to pursue their studies overseas and set up a quota system based on population ratio for admission into the local universities and colleges. Economically, all private companies were required to have at least 30 percent Bumiputra participation. The Chinese felt that asserting the Malay special rights as assured in the constitution has made them now the second class citizens. The generation that experienced these policies definitely felt bitter.

In actual fact, the affirmative actions have been more successful in Malaysia than in many other countries, including the U.S. Statistically, these policies did not deprive the Chinese of their economic share, and it also helped in giving upward mobility to the Malays, which also resulted in an increase in their self-confidence (Hashim, 2005; Ye Lin-Sheng, 2003). However, as Ye (2003) argues, many Chinese reject these positive views of affirmative action policies..

## **Conclusion**

Malaysia has come a long way in dismantling the educational system it inherited from the colonial rulers, a system that preeminently served the social, political and economic needs of an elite group, and putting in place a system that is more responsive to the socio-economic and religious needs of the masses. Aside from the tensions that arise due to its plural nature, and with the exception of the May 13, 1969 Crisis, the Malaysian communities have been able to live in relative harmony ever since their independence. The relatively harmonious co-existence of Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia is testament to Malaysia's successful Muslim leadership and principles of tolerance and mutual respect guided by its *Rukun Negara*. The existence of a plural system of Chinese and Tamil National-Type vernacular schools<sup>11</sup>, the freedom of worship, the freedom to acquire economic wealth, freedom to establish private schools, colleges and universities have all helped to stabilize this spirit of co-existence. In this regard the Malay-Muslims have most conspicuously shown an attitude of accommodation and tolerance which is actually embedded in their Islamic culture and worldview. It is hoped that non-Muslim citizens will take notice of the positive effect Islam has on the Malays and thus reject efforts to equate them with the actions of other Muslims in other parts of the world, for Islam is not monolithic. Nonetheless, the rise of Muslim identity has triggered two kinds of responses from among the non-Muslim citizens. For some there is a feeling of optimism because it means the Malays have set a higher Islamic standard of performance, behaviour and tolerance in order to become a model Islamic country . For others, however, it has triggered pessimism due to the bad press Islam has been getting, especially post September 11. Widespread Western prejudice against Islam lessens its appeal to the Chinese community (Ye 2003: 145).

The effects of the educational reform that began in the late 1980s to address Muslim identity through an integrated curriculum are beginning to bear fruit. Muslims have a better understanding of their faith, the language of the Qur'an, their identity and thus, their responsibility. This is important, especially for their progress in this world and to help avoid blind indoctrination, religious deviation and blind imitation. Progress has also been made in the economic field with the introduction of Islamic banking, insurance and other investment tools which have also benefited non-Muslims. The duality that still bothers Muslims in their aspiration to realize Islam as a way of life in Malaysia lies in the dualistic legal system—having shari'ah and civil courts—which has resulted in inter-faith problems such as those mentioned earlier. Justice is a very important virtue in Islam, which it equates to piety. Peace is another important attribute of Islam as indicated by the meaning of the word '*aslam*,' from the same root as *Islam*. In this sense the shari'ah courts have yet to transform themselves to be non-Muslims friendly and win their confidence as a better system. In living in a diverse community, "what is to be a Muslim" should be emphasized more than "who is a Muslim" so that Muslims are cognizant of others around them and the social context. Despite the progress that has been made in this regard many Chinese continue to feel that their opportunities are restricted, while many Malay-Muslims feel that they have given so much.

Clearly, Malaysia has yet a long way to go in developing an educational system that would be responsive and speak to the cultural diversity of the Malaysian people by helping to create a national consciousness which primes cultural communities to see each other as neighbors, and although different, not aliens. An educational system that is inspired by the Islamic culture of learning encourages learning from and about each other to knit a unitary nation out of

multicultural strands in order to be true to its celebrated advertisement, “Malaysia, truly Asia”. It also encourages *husn al-zann* (good thoughts) instead of *su’u al-zann* (bad thoughts) regarding others’ actions.<sup>12</sup> Malaysia has progressed well in economic prosperity and its people do live a relatively comfortable life. Thus, this should be the right time for the government to really foster a Malaysian identity. In this context, it should think of educational reform for fostering the concept of “1Malaysia,” which is the slogan of the present administration, instead of merely economics and physical development which, if based on greed alone, will never succeed in forging a national identity. The government should continue social restructuring so that more non-Malays can participate in the public sector while more Malays should participate in the private sector to allow for interethnic interaction and the breakdown of stereotypes. It is thus imperative for the diverse communities to look to moral, spiritual and religious values that transcend racialistic and materialistic values in the aspiration to achieve lasting good, justice and peace.

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of Malaysia, the Malays are synonymous with Muslims. The member of the race is defined as one who professes Islam and adopts the Malay language and customs in his or her daily life. There are of course a growing number of Muslims of Chinese and Indian origins.

<sup>2</sup> *Ijtihad* is interpretation of the Qur'an through exerting one's reason.

<sup>3</sup> *Tasawwuf* is the Arabic term for the inner, mystical dimension of Islam, also known as sufism. It is a science whose objective is the purification of the heart and turning it away from all else but God through *dhikir* or remembrance and asceticism.

<sup>4</sup> The mission is well known as IIIICE or Triple ICE, that is Islamization, Integration, Internationalization and Comprehensive Excellence.

<sup>5</sup> The National Philosophy of Education states: Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the society and the nation at large. See Rosnani Hashim, *Educational Dualism in Malaysia*, 159.

<sup>6</sup> The other four pillars of *Rukun Negara* are (2) Loyalty to King and Nation; (3) Upholding the Constitution; (4) Rule of Law; and (5) Good behavior and morality.

<sup>7</sup> See al-Qur'an 49:13 states: "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you."

<sup>8</sup> Her case was brought to civil court instead of the Shari'ah court but was rejected by the civil judges since it was determined to be under the jurisdiction of the Shari'ah court. Questions of intention were raised because of the international attention it drew, including that of the US Congress.

<sup>9</sup> This drew objections from Muslim Religious Departments and NGOs who desire to maintain the purity of Allah and the faith, arguing that Allah is not the Malay term for God, *Tuhan* is. In the view of Muslims, Allah is reserved for the One God. Many

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Muslims were not happy with the court decision allowing *Herald* to use the term on the ground that it does not pose a problem to national security. Consequently, several youth who cannot restraint themselves attacked three churches and have been arrested. Probably, that was enough evidence on national security and the decision has been suspended.

<sup>10</sup> The May 13, 1969 racial conflict occurred after the May 10 General Election during which the DAP won more seats than the MCA which has traditionally been representing the Chinese constituencies due to Chinese chauvinistic issue. The Malay had suppressed their grievances against the government especially the lack of opportunity for higher education in the national language and this incident provided an avenue to vent out their anger especially after being provoked by the DAP victory procession which turned into a bloodshed killing approximately 190. An emergency was declared, the parliament was suspended and democracy was only restored in 1971.

<sup>11</sup> According to the Minority Rights Group Report on the Chinese in South-East Asia (1992), "Malaysia has Southeast Asia's most comprehensive Chinese-language system of education" (p. 2). Tan (1997) argues that the Chinese schools in Malaysia are unique because "Even in Singapore, where the Chinese constitute more than 75 percent of the population and where Mandarin as a language is taught more extensively than before, schools teaching entirely in Chinese no longer exist" (p. 1).

<sup>12</sup> Refer to the Qur'an 49:12 which states: "O ye who believe! Avoid suspicion as much (as possible), for suspicion in some cases is a sin; and spy not on each other, nor speak ill of each other behind their back...".