

Tracing the Trajectories of History of Malaysia: Exploring Historical Consciousness in Sarawak

Norena Abd Karim Zamri^{1*}, Muhaimin Sulam¹ and Ahmad Murad Noor Merican²

¹*Department of Management and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS, 32610, Bandar Seri Iskandar, Perak, Malaysia*

²*Centre of Policy Research and International Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

National history often linked to national identity. The construction, erosion, and reconstruction of national histories are always subject to contestations. The struggle over collective memory of the colonial past is an object of concern for its impacts on national identity. In today's world, narratives of the past are often remediated and reinterpreted. This article examines how the natives of Sarawak view the history of Malaysia and see themselves as part of the narrative. The findings reveal that the natives see themselves as a distinct historical entity outside the national narrative.

Keywords: Historical consciousness, history, identity, national narrative, otherness, Sarawak

INTRODUCTION

History is a compilation of human experiences within a given culture. It serves as a frame of reference for people to appreciate their past in order to construct

the future. MacRaild and Black (2007) contend that history is not just about remembering the past, but function as a precedent for contemporary action, and against the repetition of the past mistakes. Thus, the study of history is vital where past experiences provide a perspective to the future in addition to provide moral fortitude, building one's identity, and developing good traits for good citizenship (Stearns, 1988).

In recent decades, there has been substantial research on history and memory. Studies which reveal myriad ways how people link their present with the past (Ebbrecht, 2007; Schwalbe, 2006; Seixas,

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E-mail addresses:

noreenakarim@yahoo.com;

norena.abdul_g03065@utp.edu.my (Norena Abd Karim Zamri),

muhaimin.sulam@petronas.com.my (Muhaimin Sulam),

ahmadmurad@usm.edu.my (Ahmad Murad Noor Merican)

* Corresponding author

2012a; Ting, 2014) and anxieties they face upon unravelling it, heated debates over national pasts as played out in museums, history syllabuses and official remembrance (Ahmad, 2008; Dellios, 2007; Kheng, 2003; Manickam, 2003; Rajandran, 2012; Ting, 2014; Worden, 2001). Concurrently, there is spotlight over the relationship between history and self-reflection; what does history mean to and how do we relate to it? Why do we need to know our history and how does the present relate to the past? Such inquiries create what we call 'historical consciousness'. The concept of historical consciousness or historical awareness is a fuzzy concept established by the Europeans and was not unfamiliar in North America in the olden days (Thorp, 2014). According to scholars and historians, historical consciousness is a nexus of relationship between the past, present, and the future. It helps people to comprehend the past to understand the present narrative (Seixas, 2012a; Thorp, 2014). This concept is premised on the fact that people not only appreciate their history but also consciously allow it to influence their actions.

Central to this process of daily making sense of history from the past with the significant research breaking into meaning and operation of historical consciousness (e.g. Rösen, 2006; Seixas, 2012b), there is still much to be understood. Even so, historical consciousness often parallels with collective memory. Again, collective memory is best understood as "broad popular understanding of the past" that is

produced in the intercourse and the dialogue between professional and popular practices of history (Seixas, 2004). Therefore, both collective memory and historical awareness may trigger anxiety. This study examines the process of historical consciousness and historical anxiety. Specifically, it sheds light into how the natives of Sarawak view the history of Malaysia and their role in its historical narrative.

Demographic Background of Sarawak

Sarawak became part of Federation of Malaysia in 1963. It is the largest state in Peninsular Malaysia. The population of Sarawak estimated at 2.74 million comprises three ethnic groups, namely Dayaks (40% whereby the Ibans account for 29.1%), Chinese (25.9%) and Malays (22.3%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2016). Other indigenous groups include Bidayuh, Kedayan, Murut, Penan, Kelabit, Berawan, Penan, Kenyah and Kayan (Malaysia & Ali, 2007).

It is a multicultural state with more than 40 sub-ethnic groups, where each group has its own distinct language, culture, and heritage reflecting the country's ethnic pluralism. Most Dayaks are either animist or Christian.

Thus, cultural pluralism is seen in their dance, food, architecture, life styles and practices. In fact, they have their own leadership structure and governance system, fought tribal wars from time to time, which includes headhunting.

Arising Consciousness

The historiography of Sarawak during the reign of Brooke's family was written mainly by Western historians, who were intrigued with and often sympathised with Brooke's rule (Lockard, 1973; Pringle, 1970). The orientalist images perpetuated in the history books written by Western scholars (Pringle, 1970; Walker, 2002, Steven Ruciman, 1960) is a strain of imperialism, by imparting a set of orientalist discourses and representations on less developed and non-Western countries (Philip, 2012). The national narrative (mainstream history) therefore, uses the same discourses and does not focusing on indigenous people of Sarawak and Sabah (Kheng, 2003) and the focus has been on the West Malaysia.

The history of Sarawak began as a colony when an English adventurer, Captain James Brooke, arrived in Sarawak in 1840. During that period, the indigenous communities lived along the coasts, rivers, forests and plateaus with their own ecological niche and culture. The Sultan of Brunei surrounded the Borneo territory to Brooke in return for his assistance in subduing 'pirates'. James Brooke was installed as the first Rajah of Sarawak that led the reign of White Rajah under the Brooke's family for more than a century (Barley, 2002). The end of the Pacific War led Sarawak being ceded to the British and achieved its independence as part of Malaysia Federation in 1963.

Few studies looked at Sarawak history from local perspectives, to counter the master discourse of the West (Langub &

Chew, 2014). Chew and Langub for instance look at personal narratives in examining the Chinese-Iban intermarriages in Engkelili and Lubuk Antu (Langub & Chew, 2014).

Efforts to link with the past by studying local perspectives were taken seriously by The Society for Rights of Indigenous People of Sarawak (SCRIPS). Telling the history of Sarawak through the lens of native's collective memory is deeply significant to contemporary social and political aspect. Thus, series of oral histories Lepo' Kenyah, Tebalau, Iban, Malay, Bisaya, and Bidayuh communities were published to provide an opportunity for communities to narrate their stories (Then, 2015).

How communities make sense of the past is a key component of historical awareness and historical interpretation introduced by Jorn Rüsen (Rüsen, 2006). When history becomes an issue of concern, the fundamental operation of making sense of history becomes a logic, and it is manifested based on your own self-interpretation. Thus, (Rüsen, 2006).

Aims and Objectives

National history is understood as a specific form of historical representation. In other words, the discourses are aimed at influencing national consciousness. In this study, national narrative (mainstream history) plays its role to reflect questions related to historical consciousness. The aim of this study is to address how the natives of Sarawak view the history of Malaysia and see themselves as part of the historical

narrative (mainstream history), central to the historical consciousness, as part of explaining the history anxiety.

METHODS

The study is inductive and exploratory in nature without specific hypotheses to be examined. This is a qualitative descriptive study and 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 discover themselves as part of the historical narrative (mainstream history). By using focus groups, self-disclosure is emphasised to assist participants as a collective to explore and clarify perspectives on a subject with which they are familiar with, thus data obtained is far richer and deeper than one-to-one interviews (Rabiee, 2004).

Two focus groups were conducted at Miri and Kuching, Sarawak. The participants were selected along the basis of purposiveness in each subject rather than representativeness as they can provide relevant information on the given topic and insights that are personally important to them. There are between five and ten people in each session. A Research collaborator was appointed in selecting and recruiting the focus group participants. The participants were chosen based on socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, knowledge about Malaysia's history, ethnicity and profession. An email outlining the objectives of the research was sent out to the participants before the discussion was initiated.

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; studies related to history trajectories and the constitution were designed to look at how communities in Sarawak view national narrative (mainstream history), and 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. Data were audio-recorded with permission of respondents. Each group discussion lasted approximately two hours.

Data Analysis

The focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim in two languages, Bahasa Melayu and English. The transcripts were analysed in an inductive process which began with open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through a process of comparative analysis, similar codes were classified into categories from which themes were abstracted. Data analysis was facilitated using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQCAS), ATLAS.ti version 7.

RESULTS

Data analysis revealed two major themes: the first theme (Historical Consciousness) embraces the understanding of history, linking personal connection to the past, having a historical inquiry, and making

sense of history with the present. The second theme (Different Views in History) deals with several aspects of experience in national narratives (mainstream history), incorporating new perspectives and experience of the past, conflicting with the current national narrative.

Historical Consciousness/Awareness

Why and how humans construct narratives, making sense of the past, and tying it to the present, is a uniquely human activity. During the discussion, most of the participants were aware of the meaning of history:

“History is formations of the concrete and also the formation of a foundation of the countries... when we talk about history we have to go back to those who are the one that originates the formation of the country, the traditions, the politics, the traditions and also the religions of the country so I think our history is based on the formations of the country in Malaysia in 1963”.

Participant B

The idea of what is history was interpreted by one of the participants as the formation, the base foundation of the country's history. In this sense, historical consciousness was used, in positioning themselves as part of the historical narrative (mainstream history). Although the explanation given was general, the expression of thought shows they were nevertheless trying to relate the past event (collective memory) to the present.

The link between a remote past and present is due to a common identity. There was a need to step away from the dominant discourse that dominated history which carried for centuries due to the hybridization of idea, urban-based reckoning. Therefore, when the moderator asked about how the participants engaged with the new media, some participants said:

“...I see many young people read the documents, took pictures and post it on Facebook and interestingly this young people interpreted the documents as they read the documents. And another group of young people will interpret, will give the counter interpretation. So, I agree with the fact that the new media has given the opportunity for everyone to look at the document to space and to interpret the documents as their wish. But again, is their interpretation right or wrong. But again, I don't know in history is there any such thing as right or wrong interpretation”.

Participant D

Findings revealed that these groups of youngsters do have a sense of historical consciousness. Equally, they are mindful of their surroundings and being a responsible citizen. Their knowledge of the past, the intimacy between the past and the present led to their participation in history with the help of the new media, a medium that reunited historical societies -avidly consumed and

shared by the public. However, concerns were raised with regards to interpretation. How to justify and validate the facts based on self-interpretation.

Similarly, some participant expressed their concern towards young adults' historical consciousness which led to anxiety:

"Most young people strongly fight for Sabah and Sarawak rights. I ask a question in my class...How many of you want Sabah and Sarawak will be out of Malaysia? The majority of my student said that I want Sarawak to be out of the Federation and I said why? Because they look at Brunei and Singapore".

Participant F

Clearly, the youngsters in Sarawak sees themselves as not part of the Malaysians. They want their rights to be recognised. Hence, it is important to view critically the issue of rights of Sabah and Sarawak in the development of historical consciousness.

Different Views of History

Understanding history and relating to it is part of the national narrative and it is linked to national identity. The history textbook is central to the national narrative. The study showed the contrasting facts of the national narrative (mainstream history). Most respondents understood Sarawak was not part of Malaysia until the formation of Federation of Malaysia in 1963:

"... even in 1841 when in Sarawak it was only Kuching, my place Lawas is not part of Sarawak at that time..."

Participant B

Likewise, other participants also expressed the same sentiment about the Federation and the issue of independence. In this context, the fundamental difference is the views of people of Sarawak with regards to their history:

"...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 'dalam' is not correct".

Participant C

The phrase 'Sarawak Merdeka dalam Malaysia' shows different interpretation of the natives. It transformed into a nostalgic rendition of the past for the respondents, questioning the right use of wording. Most of the participants have shared similar perspectives with regards to the Federation of Malaysia formed in 1963. Most respondents felt threatened and insecure. However, collective memory and oral history contribute to how they construe the past and connect it to the current situation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Ethnic diversity and interethnic relations posed a major challenge to post-colonial nation-states like Malaysia. Since the nation's independence in 1957, good inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia have been seen as vital in establishing national unity and social stability (Yang & Ishak Ahmad, 2012).

The analysis of this study has revealed differences in views and perspectives of national history (mainstream history) by the people of Sarawak. The Internet had given an opportunity and accessibility to the people to share the concept of historical consciousness. Young adults, for example, are aware of their cultural and ethnic history. Thus, it created anxiety and generated new ideas and perspectives of history. Thus, this idea of alternative contestation of history is parallel with the idea of how young adults imagining- based on cosmopolitanism and the idea of multiculturalism (Ang, 2010).

This paper has suggested the need to acknowledge different ethnic groups' contribution and revise the national narrative accordingly, developing more critical interpretations of previous studies (Kheng, 2003; Manickam, 2003; Rajandran, 2012; Santhiram, 1997; Ting, 2014). Thus, being faithful to the facts without serving political or social interest is vital moreover, our 'unofficial' history, critical to our historical sensibility.

This study has revealed overlooking history is part and parcel of historical consciousness, and gaps in memory noted by respondents of this study are

critical reminders of history's capacity to define our sense of self. Indeed, historical consciousness reflects anxiety.

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