

## THE CHANGES ON THE TRADITIONAL BELIEFS OF THE BRUNEI MALAY COMMUNITY IN THE NORTH BORNEO (1881- 1963)

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**Abstract.** Religion and traditional beliefs are important aspects of Brunei's Malay community's life. The influence of Islam on this community's traditional beliefs can be seen in almost every aspect of life, from birth to death. The expansion of Islam in North Borneo has altered not only the community's perception of superstitions but also their understanding of the application of true Islamic values in their everyday lives. The arrival of preachers in North Borneo changed the definition of the Bruneian Malay community's understanding and practice at the time. This paper will be discussed from two perspectives: the first is about the forms of practice and traditional beliefs of the Bruneian Malay community, and the second is about the influence of Islam on their traditional beliefs in North Borneo, especially on the west coast. This research will demonstrate that the influence of Islam brought by preachers has successfully changed the perspective and understanding of the Bruneian Malay community towards the guidelines and practices of true Islamic life. It is hoped that this study will be able to meet the objective of showing that, apart from political, economic, and social factors, aspects of religion and traditional beliefs also played a significant role in shaping the mentality and life pattern of the Bruneian Malay community after Sabah achieved independence.

**Keywords:** *religion, traditional practice, beliefs, Brunei Malay community, North Borneo*

### Introduction

The indigenous people of North Borneo were influenced by animism and Hinduism before the arrival of Islam, which provided a foundation for their beliefs. This is the case with the spread of Hindu-Buddhism to Southeast Asia, which strongly indicates to the region's population that various forms of decency exist. Through this collision of external religions and traditional beliefs, the community recognises parallels between spirits and Hindu deities, as both are supernatural and feared for their power (Yusoff, 2011). In this regard, the pre-Islamic Malay community was associated with the practice of invoking Hindu deities to cure illness and avoid harm. Indirectly, the merging of animism and traditional elements of the local and Hindu communities has led to various ceremonies, such as those aimed at increasing sustenance, avoiding disaster, healing,

etc. The same holds for other aspects of culture, including art, architecture, and taboos (Amin et al., 2014; Yusoff, 2011; Yousof, 2010; Sket, 1900).

According to the local community's traditional animism beliefs, every object has a spirit, a soul, and the capacity to have its own personality (Yusoff, 2011). As a result, the phrase "pantang larang" started to be used not just in Malay rituals but also by North Borneo's indigenous people, particularly the Brunei Malay community. This culture acknowledges the existence of powerful, subtle beings that can influence their lives. According to animism, various superstitions and shirks lead to the worship of spirits and subtle beings (jinn and bunian), who are believed to be able to cure various diseases caused by evil spirits or witchcraft. This obsessive belief in supernatural powers causes the community to be dominated by shamans through specific ritual forms. This mastery is either intended for one's own use or for a third party with a need for good or evil (Yusoff, 2011; Sket, 1900).

Between the 14th and 15th centuries A.D., the indigenous people of the northwestern coast of Borneo converted to Islam through the de jure Sultanate of Brunei and the de facto Sulu Sultanate, respectively (Jambol and Bee, 2021a). In the northwest coast region of Borneo, the migration of the Brunei Malay community to the north of Borneo has contributed to the spread of Islam among the locals (Yusin, 1990; Hughes-Hallett, 1940). However, numerous indigenous races in this region have resulted in racial differences in traditional and social practices. Although the Brunei Malay community was the first to accept Islam, they were not exempt from practicing various forms of traditional practices and beliefs passed down through generations based on the place's history and the original race before identifying as Brunei Malay. This practice and the traditional beliefs of this community are so important to its societal values that they have an impact on political and social institutions. Even though the community at the time professed Islam, the tenacity of their customs became their primary anchor. Due to the new environmental influences, the migration of the Brunei Malay community to North Borneo has also led to the evolution and modification of their lifestyles (Jambol and Bee, 2021b).

## Materials and Methods

This qualitative research examines the effect of Islam on the traditional beliefs of the Bruneian Malay community in North Borneo (1881-1963). This research will look closely at the practice, involvement, and acceptance of Islam among the Bruneian Malay community, as well as how Islam has successfully influenced their beliefs and customs passed down from previous generations. In this regard, the development of Islam in North Borneo has changed not only the community's perspective on the superstitions practiced by the community but also their understanding of the practice of true Islamic values in life. Primary sources are very limited in this study because most of the sources obtained are general in nature, and the reality encompasses the entire Islam community in North Borneo. As a result, identifying the position of the Brunei Malay community in the reports documented by the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBC) and the British Colonial is extremely difficult for the researcher because the Brunei Malay community is placed in the group of minority communities with the highest number of other races. However, some documents from primary sources were used to complete this study, such as the North Borneo Central Archives file, which contains the minutes of Native Chiefs Advisory Council Meetings from 1936

to 1941. In addition, secondary and oral sources were used to support the data discovered in primary sources. This study interviewed three informants, who were chosen based on their experience, family background, and level of education prior to Sabah's independence. Among those interviewed were Ampuan Mumin bin Ampuan Tuah, Ampuan Matiaman bin Ampuan Matali, and Awang Besar bin Pengiran Apong. They are proto-witnesses who lived during the administrations of BNBC, Japan, and the British.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Traditional practices and beliefs of the Brunei Malay community***

Traditional customs and beliefs are highly valued in the Brunei Malay community. This traditional belief is also commonly regarded as a rule and a belief that must be adhered to, believed in, and transmitted through informal socialisation processes such as family and community (Yusoff, 2011). Although this community has embraced Islam since the 14th century, it cannot be denied that a large number of its members still believe in animistic and superstitious practices. In this regard, the Bruneian Malay community is reluctant to abandon the practices and beliefs that have been passed down from their old generation, as it is common for these practices and beliefs to be maintained in order to avoid negative consequences for themselves and their families (Yusoff, 2011; Wilkinson, 1906). Among the well-known traditional forms of belief in the Brunei Malay community are those associated with taboos, causes of illness, obtaining something they desire, and increasing wealth and income. In this regard, the Bruneian Malay community believes that if a natural disaster or illness occurs, it is the result of a plague or a subtle creature. They also believe that "hujan panas" will cause a person to develop a fever because, according to their beliefs, delicate creatures will roam during "hujan panas". If these creatures reprimand a person, they will get a fever and need to consult a shaman (Awang Besar as informant, interviewed in 2010).

Additionally, this tradition is observed in their daily work. For the Brunei Malay community who work as farmers, the 'start of paddy' (memulai padi) ceremony is frequently performed, as they believe that paddy production will increase through this ceremony. Typically, the paddy "starting" ceremony will occur in the morning before the farmers begin their harvesting activities. Seven rice stalks will be wrapped in white cloth and burned with incense during the ceremony. The seven rice stalks burned with incense will then be transported throughout the rice fields and placed in each corner. The ceremony's primary objective is to ensure that the paddy will not be disturbed by pests or evil spirits feared to reduce the yield of the rice harvest. After the ceremony, the farmers will pound the young rice in mass, and a large-scale feast will be held at the nursery to welcome the first rice harvest. While the fishers in these communities' revere and believe in the existence of sea spirits or sea keepers who can increase fish catches (Amin et al., 2014) (Ampuan Mumin as informant, interviewed in 2016).

The Putatan district is one of the best examples cited in Sahari (2006) book on the Brunei Malay community's sea-related beliefs and fishing practices. He remembered that the community first held "feeding" ceremonies for the sea keepers to provide sustenance to the spirits while they descended to the sea. Typically, the ceremony is organised on a grand scale and occurs annually. Before the event, a meeting will be held to unite the Petagas village, the Tanah Runtuh village, the Meruntum village, the Ketiau village, the Tabongon village, the Taguli village, the Ulu village, and the Seberang

Putatan village. Typically, the ceremony will begin at the village river of Ulu Putatan. In this village, dozens of boats will be decorated with paper and real flowers. When all the boats have been decorated, they will take their seats and form a line to board. A leader who serves as a mantra reader during the boat parade will then be entrusted with the distribution of trays containing a variety of delectable foods. As the troupe's leader recites the mantra, he will serve the sea keeper a live chicken. While traversing the Gerongon coastline or Tanjung Dumpil area, they will also perform traditional dances accompanied by kulintangan, tambur, and gongs. Upon arriving at Tanjung Dumpil, the highlight of the ceremony will consist of inviting a shaman known as Embok Lipah to recite the mantra while releasing a tray with a bamboo basket (bangkar) into the river. In addition, trays will be placed on islands near Tanjung Dumpil. The ceremony is then combined with a religious ceremony in which another leader is instructed to pray for God's blessing. After the prayer recitation ceremony was concluded, they ate together at Tanjung Dumpil with the food they had brought from their homes. A chief assistant addressed the ceremony's taboo during the middle of the ceremony. The speech reads:

*No one is permitted to go fishing at sea for three days. Whoever violates the taboo and disobeys it will be fined (the penalty imposed if they violate the taboo is a buffalo fine)*

(Sahari, 2006)

As for the Brunei Malay community, which resides in other villages surrounding the Papar district, particularly in the villages of Benoni, Kimanis, Membakut, and Bongawan, they also believe in the existence of sea keepers and perform the "feeding" ceremony for them, though their practices vary. This ceremony is also known as a "makan kuala" by the Brunei Malay Community in the Benoni, Membakut, and Kimanis. The term "kuala" is derived from the Bruneian word for "sea." Therefore, it has become common for them to descend into the ocean and send yellow glutinous rice and hard-boiled eggs to the coastline. In addition, the Brunei Malay Community also refers to this ceremony as the ceremony of drifting a boat-shaped "anjung" to the river's mouth. The Brunei Malay community in Bongawan is extremely familiar with this ceremony. This ceremony has been passed down through generations and is performed by the Brunei Malay community engaged in marine activities (Sahari, 2006) (Ampuan Mumin as informant, interviewed in 2016). This is because they believe the existence of supernatural forces, such as ghosts, spirits, and elves, will have a negative impact on their socioeconomic status.

In addition, the Brunei Malay community also believes that traditional treatments administered by shamans can cure a variety of diseases, particularly those involving spirits. In addition, the Brunei Malay community conducts healing ceremonies that are believed to heal patients in a coma or critical condition. The "minggai" ceremony is one of the rituals. This ritual was performed for the terminally ill. In this ceremony, there will be yellow glutinous rice, five red-coloured hard-boiled eggs, a coconut core, a chicken or a black goat, five flags made of yellow fabric, and seven different types of colourful flowers. The items are typically placed in a basket lined with coconut fronds or banana leaves. After completing the mantra reading ceremony for minggai, the items will be placed in the forest on a platform known as "ancak" or swept into the sea to cure the patient's disease. On occasion, they will also wrap a white cloth containing ash

around the trunk of a specific tree for patients with swelling. This ritual is known as the "kebunduan" ceremony.

The Brunei Malay community also adheres to the ritual of "feeding the area" to prevent the disruption of the spirits or keepers of that area. Typically, the ceremony is conducted by the first individuals to visit the uninhabited area. The objective is to prevent the individual from getting ill or becoming injured during his visit. This community also believes in making wishes in the graves of the dead to obtain the desired outcome, such as a cure for a disease, the birth of children, and many others. Typically, this ceremony takes place on Tanjung Dumpil and Pungit Hill in the Papar district (Ampuan Mumin as informant, interviewed in 2016).

### ***The changes in traditional beliefs***

Prior to the arrival of Western powers, North Borneo's general populace had low recognition for and adherence to Islamic teachings. The situation continued until the colonisation of North Borneo by Western powers. The community in North Borneo has more freedom to adhere to various traditional practices and beliefs because of colonial policies being implemented that do not interfere with religious affairs or local customs. This is also true of the Brunei Malay community, which openly engages in various practices that are initially thought to reflect Islamic teachings but which contain elements of superstition and *syirik* because they are performed to obtain something desired. In this context, it has been determined that a lack of knowledge and comprehension of the teachings of Islam was a major contributor to the problem within the Muslim community, particularly within the Brunei Malay community. This is because the teaching of Islam was limited to its fundamentals and was conducted informally. In the absence of particular and in-depth guidance from religious scholars, the process of expanding Islam's teachings was consequently constrained. This was a result of the extremely limited preaching activities, which were only concentrated in certain regions, such as the coastal regions. Moreover, the limitations of preaching activities were not only due to transportation issues and a lack of preachers but also to financial issues that restricted the preachers' mobility, particularly during the colonial period. During the colonial period, most preaching efforts were led only by individuals with limited abilities. In the absence of certain preaching organisations, not only has the Islamic religion not spread widely, but there has also been a dearth of Islamic education. (Yusin, 1990).

During the presence of the British North Borneo Company (BNBC) in North Borneo, it was difficult to convince the Brunei Malay community to believe in modern medicine rather than traditional medicine for the treatment of diseases. This was not uncommon at the time, as most of the indigenous people in North Borneo also rejected modern medicine in favour of traditional medicine practitioners, who were viewed as simpler and more effective. Although such practices and beliefs have been criticised by the West, the situation is extremely advantageous for the West, as they do not have to provide health and medical services to the local community (Yusoff, 2011; Greaves, 2004). Native Chiefs (NC) such as O.K.K. Yahaya, O.K.K. Osman, and H.C. Haji Taki proposed to the administration of the BNBC to create stricter laws for traditional medicine practitioners, particularly within the Muslim community, in recognition of the problems that occur within the Muslim community. Traditional medicine practitioners, particularly those engaged in *berasik* activities, are required by law to possess a \$5 licence issued by the government. The Muslims who practice "*berasik*" acts with

elements of syirik and superstition should be punished because the act is forbidden in the Qur'an (Minutes of the Native Chiefs Advisory Council Meeting, May 11, 1937; NBCA 73 C, Native Chief's Advisory Council Meetings, which happen in 1937). Although Muslim representatives of Native Chiefs have raised this issue at the Native Chiefs Advisory Council (NCAC) level, it has not received adequate attention from the administrators. It has been passed on to the village heads for their own consideration. This is because Western administrators prefer to discuss economic and administrative issues at meetings because they are more critical than Islamic religious issues. Thus, throughout the administration of BNBC and Japan in North Borneo, religious issues within the Muslim community persisted until the end of World War II.

When the British Colonial government took over administration in North Borneo, problems associated with the practice of matters that contradicted Islamic teachings were resolved by strengthening Islamic teachings through the establishment of special organisations, such as Islamic associations, by local leaders. Nationalist developments in Malaya and Singapore also inspired the formation of these Islamic organisations. Although Islamic preaching was still active, the movement was limited because it was carried out by individuals and voluntary groups; unlike Christianity, no specific body or organisation was responsible for carrying out preaching activities. Compared to the growth of Islam during the colonial era, Christianity's advancements were seen as having occurred much more quickly in politics, economics, education, legislation, missionaries, and other areas (Yusin, 1990). After establishing a special organisation whose mission was to make the Muslim community aware of religious and social problems, particularly regarding the Muslim community's practice of syirik and superstitions, Islam began to gain a strong foothold in North Borneo. In the 1930s, members of the Persatuan Sahabat Pena (PSPM) in North Borneo came together with the intention of uniting the Muslim community through the formation of this organisation. Through these organisations, all Muslim community problems would be confronted and resolved collectively. However, such desired institutions could not be established until after World War II.

During the Colonial British administration, it was believed that the Youth Front (BARIP) and the Malay Nationalist Party had gained the support of all Muslims, particularly within the Brunei Malay community. The participation of many Brunei Malay communities in the BARIP Party has indirectly altered the Brunei Malay community's perspective on their inherited traditional practices and beliefs. The fundamental causes for BARIP and the Malay Nationalist Party's existence were connected to Islam and the issues its adherents faced at the time, despite the fact that they were considered to be secular organisations (Yusin, 1990). According to Sahari (2006), in addition to the BARIP and Malay Nationalist Party organisations, there were also social organisations that served as the driving force behind the preaching activity in North Borneo to address religious and community issues. The participation of nationalist figures from Malaysia and Indonesia in the BARIP and Malay Nationalist Party also bolstered the movement. This change in the form of movement and the delivery of more organised and targeted preaching has indirectly succeeded in enhancing the Muslim community's knowledge and understanding of the true teachings of Islam.

As local figures joined and participated in the establishment of Islamic associations from the 1950s to the 1960s, the struggle to protect and strengthen the teachings of Islam intensified. The establishment of these Islamic associations was motivated by the

desire to provide formal Islamic education and instruction to the entire Muslim community. Khairat Jumaat Muslimin (K.J.M.) is one of the renowned Islamic organisations. The association was founded in Jesselton during the late 1940s, and its current president is Haji Suhaili. In addition, the incorporation of the Islamic spirit from Malaya and Singapore via print media played a significant role in the writing, publishing, and distribution of newspapers and magazines in North Borneo. The Johor Government Religious Department Gazette and the Kalam Magazine are two examples. Kalam magazine was the most popular publication among young Muslims, particularly in Brunei's Malay community. The magazine published numerous articles about Persatuan Ikhwan Muslimin (P.I.M.), founded in Singapore by Abdullah Bastani. As a result, a greater number of young Muslims filled out the membership forms published in the magazine and became indirect P.I.M. members. As their numbers grew, these young Muslims began to meet and discuss the current issues facing the Muslim community, which led to the establishment of Persatuan Ikhwan in North Borneo on December 27, 1957. The primary goal of this organisation is to encourage its members to adhere to Islam's pillars and to elevate the Islamic Eminence (Sahari, 2006; Yusin, 1990).

Awang Sahari Bin Abdul Latif's (1960 establishment of the Putatan Islamic Association (P.I.P.) also strengthened Islamic education within the Brunei Malay community. Most of this association's members are Brunei Malay residents of the Papar district area. Madrasah Tahzibiyah, an Islamic school, was one of the contributions of this organisation to the Muslim community in the vicinity. The madrasah was constructed in the 1960s, and the building was renovated only in 1967. It was found that P.I.P.'s role and efforts in addressing the issue of superstition and syirik practice among the Brunei Malay community were more successful because it quickly established itself in the area primarily populated by the Brunei Malay community experiencing religious upheaval and problems. Most places established by Islamic associations, such as Papar, Putatan, Jesselton, Tawau, and Labuan Island, are not only areas with religious upheaval but also areas with special laws prohibiting the community from engaging in superstitious and syirik activities, such as performing rituals at the graves of the sharif, feeding ceremonies of the sea keepers, minggai, and so forth. The creation of the special law also stipulates that the villagers may not work on Fridays. It should also be noted that the impetus to form the law was not only the association's desire but also the result of making the village chief aware of the significance of the application and implementation of Islamic values in Muslims' daily lives. Undoubtedly, there were also some villagers who refused to comply with the law. In this case, the village elders (Orang Tua) would act decisively by issuing a warning letter and encouraging the villagers to follow the rules. The Village Head of Kampung Buang Sayang, O.T. Taim Bin Sagap, also issued a warning letter to the villagers who refused to comply with the rules, and if they persisted, they would be fined according to the prescribed rate (Yusin, 1990).

In addition to religious issues, the district with Islamic associations faced controversies regarding the problem of determining the date of Hari Raya Aidilfitri. This was also published in the North Borneo Times and the Sabah Times, which frequently publish news, commentary, and debates on religious issues, particularly on this topic. The development of Islamic school construction was carried out more actively in these west coast regions of North Borneo than in others (Sahari, 2006). In addition, the role of the media, such as North Borneo News and Sabah Times, frequently emphasised the significance of Muslims returning to the Qur'an and Hadith

guidance. The call also included a discussion of how to calculate the beginning of Ramadan and the date of Hari Raya Aidilfitri. In 1960, when the Muslim community in North Borneo did not celebrate Hari Raya Aidilfitri on the same date, the escalation of the controversies between these two factors reached its zenith. For instance, in 1961, there were two Muslim communities, one celebrating Hari Raya on March 18 and the other on March 19. The North Borneo News and Sabah Times published an opinion that emphasised that the method for determining the beginning of Ramadan and the date of Hari Raya Aidilfitri should be based on a hadith from the prophet Rukyah. On the other hand, the second viewpoint argued that the counting method based on science should be conducted because it is more appropriate in the modern era. Some suggested that the Muslim community in North Borneo should follow the Sarawak radio announcement. In the meantime, some have demanded that the Muslim community adhere to the decision made by the Central Imam in Jesselton, as there is no religious affairs authority in North Borneo.

Muslims with a high and deep understanding of Islam were attempting to defend Islamic truth by voicing their opinions in a Muslim community that does not have a deep understanding of Islam, resulting in this disagreement among various Islamic groups. Therefore, various perspectives have been expressed individually through newspapers and associations. This is demonstrated by numerous Islamic organisations dedicated to improving public understanding of the true Islamic law based on the Qur'an and Hadith guidance. Overall, it can be stated that, as a result of the efforts of native chief figures, village chiefs, and later the establishment of Islamic associations that advocated the elimination of traditional beliefs at the grassroots level in areas where the majority of the population is Muslim, there has been a significant shift in attitude among the Brunei Malay community, particularly in terms of basing daily life on the Islam teachings' values of following the Quran and Sunnah. In this regard, the Brunei Malay community's acceptance of preaching, whether delivered by individuals or associations, has successfully influenced their perceptions and views on traditional beliefs, which contain numerous elements of *syirik* and superstition that ultimately lead to error.

## Conclusion

Customs, culture, and religion are inextricable components of the belief system of the Muslim community, particularly the Brunei Malay community. This is due to the fact that traditional belief systems typically incorporate elements of animism, Hinduism, and Islam, which eventually assimilate and influence the customs of their respective communities. The question of how far the influence of Islam can change the perception of the Bruneian Malay community towards traditional beliefs can be answered by re-establishing Islamic values with the help of the Native Chief, the Village Chief, and the preaching movement of the Islamic associations that were well-established in the west coast region of North Borneo. Indirectly, the Brunei Malay Community's participation in establishing these Islamic associations has altered their mindset and way of life to reflect the true values of Islamic guidance. This study demonstrates that the Brunei Malay community has a positive response to the preaching movements that focused on the restoration of the Muslim community and were brought to Brunei in the 1940s by Islamic associations. Although, in the beginning, there were obstacles to spreading the preaching to the Muslim community in North Borneo due to financial factors, transportation issues, and others, positive changes began to be observed in terms of



feedback and participation from the Muslim community, particularly among the Brunei Malay youth in association activities and the preaching movement. The village chief supports the efforts of Islamic associations that actively restore the lives of the Muslim community with the guidance of the Qur'an and Hadith, thereby strengthening the guidelines of Islam among this community. Although this community had converted to Islam before migrating to North Borneo and was referred to as "Muslims" by other indigenous communities, they were exposed to the continuous practice of traditional beliefs because of the assimilation of various elements of animism, Hinduism, and Islam. This situation eventually led to syirik and superstition due to a lack of appreciation, guidance, and deep knowledge of Islam.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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