



## [NATIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN MALAYSIA BASED ON AL-SHAHRASTANI'S PROPOSITION OF TOLERANCE IN AL-MILAL WA AL-NIHAL]

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### Abstract

The general framework of national identity embraces the acknowledgment and identification of ethnic, sectarian, and religious identities. The struggle to understand national identity due to its complexities, most of the time was generated by the socio-political condition. Malaysia, in particular, experiences countless socio-political provocations involving every inter-related difference embodied within the societal fragments. In this context, this study argues that the construction of national identity should be based on universal values that are worth for all people. In line with this argumentation, this study attempts to elaborate the extend of tolerance according to Al-Shahrastānī's proposition implicitly expressed in al-Milal wa al-Nihal in complementing the national identity construction as a practical mechanism without jeopardizing societal ethnicity, nationality, and religiosity. This paper used the qualitative approach which included extensive reviews on literatures and observations. The finding shows that Al-Shahrastānī's propositional attitude towards diversity is objective yet still managed to maintain his identity without unnecessary intimidation and provocations which proving the relevant of its undertaking in Malaysia's context.

**Keywords:** Al-Milal wa al-Nihal, national identity, tolerance, universal values.

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## INTRODUCTION

The construction of national identity arises alongside societal development. Throughout the years, history demonstrates multiculturalism as a prominent factor in contributing to the increase of identity differences. Even though religious identity was considered more influential

and determinant, the process of modernization within societies creates a progressive transition and significant value towards national identity through shared universal characters (İnaç & Ünal, 2013). In Malaysia, history and social structure act as the grassroots for the construction of national identity. Society has always lived as plural and diverse social units created diverse identities. The complicated social structure is not necessarily initiating complications. Assimilations between different ethnicity and religion were common. Even though ethnicity is fixed in nature, religion, however, is not. In the 13th and 14th centuries, religious conversion resulted from interpersonal activities with the locals intensify the identity differences in the most welcoming ways with the spread of Islam in the archipelago, which has existed since way before the arrival of the outside traders. Since the relationship was based mostly on economic activities such as trade and business, ethnicities and religions are harmoniously residing in the background (Lee, 2015).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology of this research was based on primary resources such as kitab al-Milal wa al-Nihal as well as the other secondary sources such as article journals etc on the topic related. Mass media was also used to study the historical events related to religious tolerance in Malaysia context. This study used observational method to view the reality of religious tolerance to ensure the relevance of its worldview with al-Shahrastānī's proposition in al-Milal wa al-Nihal.

## **ETYMOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING ON NATIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCT IN MALAYSIA**

The modernization process within societies requires an elaborate understanding of the etymological dimension of national identity itself. While the other parts of the globe are struggling to reconcile national identities circulating immigration discourses, Malaysia strived to construct the sociable parameters through the criteria that are actively achievable by individuals to recognize national membership as a function of sharing cultural profundity and ascribing to certain civic norms and values (Lindstam et al., 2021), which in case of Malaysia, are highly encircling ethnicity and religion. This study attempts to construct a national identity framework to prevent potentially susceptible manipulation to either ambivalent attitudes or even the unequivocal individuals by protecting and recognizing identities through diversity incorporation maintaining ethnicity, religiosity, and nationality as positively compatible. As ethnic and civic elements comprehended in cultural embodiment frame of national identity discourse, sustainability of national identity as part of social identification processes in a holistic idea of nation is maintained (Dix, 2014). Baumann (1999) explains:

“Instead of viewing society as a patchwork of five or fifty cultural groups, it views social life as an elastic and crisscrossing web of multiple identifications. People make choices whom to identify with when and where, and they even make choices when to engage the reifying discourse of culture and when to engage the processual discourse. We have thus progressed from a reified through

a processual to a discursive understanding of culture”.

Multiculturalism in Malaysia denotes a humble understanding of societal identity structure, in which multiculturalism can flourish in a broad-minded society, where the diversity and improvement of a global nation are celebrated with harmony, as opposed to fear and misunderstanding. In another word, Malaysia craved to end the fear. However, the routes are typically impassable with ethnicity and religiosity differences and the repetitive fiasco of attacking either ethnicity and religion for a simple, example, littering or anything unethical – sometimes even illegal. In comparison with Indonesia as a neighbouring country that shares similarities – a Muslim majority country and mutually intelligible in national language standardized as the variety of Malay, Malaysia faltered in the indoctrination process of inculcating malaysianization which includes the enforcement of laws and national policies upon the people (Abd Aziz A’zmi et al., 2017). Liu et al. (2002) in a study on ethnic identities between Malaysia and Singapore reported that Malaysians tends to identify themselves according to ethnicity, in comparison with Singaporeans’ tendency to identify themselves with regard to nationality.

In Malaysia, the migration of the non-Malays to the country, whether caused by colonial rule or because of political unrest in their country of origin has created a plural society (Wan Husin, 2011). However, before the formation of ethnic-based political ideology in the colonial era, people from different ethnicities and religions have already lived together harmoniously with tolerance uncritically embedded in their daily relationships. Malik (1996) explains that the concept of a nation until late 18th century allowed individuals to identify themselves collectively across community and each individual or group of communities was part of a universal society. In this context, the nation is a collective agreement that rejects certain privileges and does not emphasize specific ethnicities and historical continuity (Maharam et al., 2020). The transformation of the concept of nationhood that is understood today were due to, besides modernization progress and changes in political ideology, the world economy that has been a prominent component that mould the societal repercussions in Malaysia.

In history, ethnic-based social identification in east Malaysia profoundly commenced during the Brunei Sultanate through the introduction of several social categories based on Muslim and non-Muslim identities in the late 15th century (Ationg et al., 2021). However, such differentiation has not impacted the social relations since ethnic labels is not as significant (Barlocco 2013; Scott 2009) and particularly free from political manipulations at the moment. In the west Malaysia, the formation of ethnic-based social identifications was heavily affected by the ‘divide and rule’ policy brought by the British Colonial government, created a huge separation gap in economy, education and geography. The categorization was made official by the British on ethnic-based categories and social classifications which later shifted to the division of Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera. While west Malaysia hold economy as a major factor in ethnic-based divisions, the formation of political party in east Malaysia has made the divisions become apparent.

## **Identity**

The discourse on identity emerged mainly from the work of psychologist Erik Erikson, with his

coining on the term ‘identity crisis’ in 1954. The word identity is derived from French *identité* in 14th century denotes sameness, oneness, state of being the same, from Medieval Latin *identitatem* (nominative *identitas*) and ultimately from Latin *idem* (neuter) which the early form of the word in English was *idemptitie* (1560s), from Medieval Latin *idemptitas* (Online Etymology Dictionary). However, the definition has failed to capture the current meanings of the word in social context. According to Fearon (1999), the modern formulation of identity is defined through social category with two linked senses termed as social and personal, which reflects and conjures social categories as bound up with the bases of an individual’s self-respect. Hogg & Abrams (2006) in their study referred identity as “people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others”. In social context, identity is used to describe how individuals and groups are defined on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture (O’Brien & Deng, 1997).

National identity, on the other hand, entails an idea of temporal and spatial continuity of a nation where it refers to a social category marked off by a membership rule and social content (Fearon, 1999), which considered as a strong term in social identification process that evokes strong emotional reactions (Lewicka, 2011). Chin (2017) in a study mentioned national identity as commonly in relation to nationality and citizenship which emphasized on state membership. The differences in understanding on national membership would affect citizens’ preferences on a range of issues (Lindstam et al., 2021). While Fakhri R. Khader (2012) emphasized that national identity is seen as “a blend of compound cultural mixtures, overlaps, and interactions”. Most of the existing discourses links national identity with ethnicity. John (2015) emphasized that co-existing identities is possible with discursive features of national identity. Similarities and common attributes structured in national identity could be a major strengthening features in national bonding; blood ties, race, language, region, religion and custom (I. Stebelsky, 1994). The evolvement and accumulation of national identity is part of a natural process developed through good cultural and political mentality (McCrone & Bechhofer, 2010).

The discussion on national identity is also heavily correlated with language usage. The issue on national language usage; Bahasa Melayu is incredibly current. In early 2021, Netflix Malaysia sparks commotion and strong response from Malaysians with its usage of English in the social media Twitter, with demands for it to use national language, in comparison to other countries such as Japan, Indonesia, Thailand and Brazil are tweeting with their respective national languages (Naim, 2021). Even with Bahasa Melayu as national language of federation, society seem to still think of it as a language that belongs to the Malays, while a sense of belonging in national context does not restrict to only nationality or citizenship but the content belongs to the essence of national entity. Ying et al. (2015) suggested that national identity and language are inextricably intertwined, where language functions as a unifying symbol in establishing national identity without making a dominant language as the only emblem of national identity by taking multilingualism into consideration. It is further emphasized that the reconciliation between the differences in society should involve the embodiment of ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity for an accurate and all-inclusive construction of national identity.

### **Ethnicity, Religiosity and Nationality**

Historically, the Malay world in the early AD coexists with the influence of Hinduism and Buddhism through trading and business activities. It was then developed with the advent of Muslim traders in the 13th century AD resulted in the spread of Islam in the archipelago. Over time, the Malays practice openness and welcomed the traders and immigrants to be part of the local community through interpersonal interactions, collective activities, and marriage. The arrival of colonialism English disrupted not only good relationships between people with different backgrounds but creating dissenting atmosphere through geographical separation, as well as education which notably resulted in the economic gap between ethnicities. This, as referred by many researchers, is the ultimate pinnacle in ethnic disunity where society adopted a coping mechanism through ethnocentrism which leads to physical disapproval, as can be observed in ethnic riots throughout the history of Malaysia. The intensity of entanglements between nationality, ethnicity, and religiosity has become significant to the point that it affected societal functions, for example, Rahim (2018) mentioned ethnic media as the affected tool in providing service, even though it flourished well into independent years, due to the influence of ethnocentrism that disrupted unity and integration between people of different backgrounds.

Berry et al. (2019) considered ethnicity and religiosity as the major factors in shaping the ethnic identities with shared values and cultures. The theoretical framework for collective identity formation is thus proposed through universal shared values in ethnically diverse setting. Religion as the critical intersection of ethnicity and culture hold responsibility to maintain the collective identity in society. In Malaysia, ethnicity and religiosity are deeply rooted in the societal structure. The Malay is officially associated with Islam, while the Chinese is commonly associated with Buddhism, creating a specific ethnic identity. Therefore, Chinese Muslims have a complicated position in Malaysian society. According to the Malaysian Racial Discrimination Report 2018, the exploitation of ethnicity and religiosity increases significantly as a political tool to gain support from the community (Pusat KOMAS, 2019). The report also discusses issues involving religion. Ethnic and racial discussions are mostly inseparable from religious setting. It is further emphasized by Priest & Edwards (2019) that the subjectivity and complexity of race and ethnicity is noticeable in intergroup contexts with subsistence of potential competition over significant resources.

The complexity of ethnicity and religiosity positions in Malaysia complicates the national identity outlook since the notion of national belonging is highly racialized. Walton et al. (2020) emphasized the “importance of close attention to how people navigate differences and commonalities in local and trans-local contexts”. The interpretation of such differences and divergences are frequently includes a conflicting sentiment as a response towards the diversity and multiplicity that unnecessarily seen as a challenge in human life. Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) reported to have been receiving 21,296 complaints related to race, religion, and royalty in the period of six weeks (The Star, 11/11/2019). Racist statements encircled among the society, mostly emerged from political provocations, have long existed. As a matter of fact, May 13, 1969 racial riot was closely linked to the current political circumstances involving provocations related to races and religions, which finally has greatly influenced the society in unprecedented way resulted mass killings and injured thousands of people (Sinar Harian, 13/5/2019). Barisan Nasional (BN) Member of

Parliament was also suspended from the Dewan Rakyat for two days after associating the ashes (bhasmam) worn by RSN Rayer (PH Jelutong) on his forehead with the ashes of communist leader Chin Peng. Bhasmam has a significant position in the Hindu religious lifestyle. The act of insulting the symbols of other religions triggers negative provocations among the community, especially when it comes from an elected representative (The Star, 4/12/2019).

The emphasis on inclusiveness in most policies, while that is considered effective, could also cause imposition. Since religion and ethnic hold an important position among the society, particularly in a place where a religion is established as official in federation, religious inclusivism denotes a clashing definition to religious beliefs, referring it as the worldview that explains one's religion is not the sole and exclusive truth that there is at least some truth existed in other religions. While tolerance has been the focus of many discourses, this study highlighted tolerance to what it originally is, in comparison to what secular humanism, for example, has explained it which also focusing on human values such as tolerance, freedom, and love by diminishing religion from everything and letting man to make decision which can be observed very much reflected in John Dewey's theory of A Common Faith. Religious disputes have been the utmost concern of many scholars resulted in many middle ground solutions as can be seen in Hick's theory of pluralism or Smith's theory of global theology that recognize religion as problematic and as the reason for disunity based on existential differences that could have been viewed as diversity instead of a problem. Therefore, it is crucial to highlight the fact that those differences are inevitable and perhaps celebrating its existence without inaccurately redefining it is the solution to the claimed 'problem'.

## **TOLERANCE AS UNIVERSAL VALUE**

Malaysia as a country needs to be celebrated together regardless of differences. The expectation for the Malays, Chinese, and Indians to be united and together during the Independence is minimal since maintaining a harmonious society is a tricky responsibility. However, after 64 years of independence, Malaysia has maintained national harmony even though certain improvements are required. The acceptance of the democratic system with the understanding and overview of the majority is in control of the minority means rules are to be imposed by the majority. The other side of democracy is disturbing which would eventually lead to oppression of the majority towards the minority. However, Malaysia does not have that problem. In fact, diversity is well celebrated in Malaysia, mainly because Islam and Malays are inseparable. As religion holds an important role in shaping the identity of the Malays, according to Haslina Ibrahim (2016), diversity is viewed as a sign of the supremacy of Allah and His Almightyness. The Qur'an states that:

“And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Indeed, in that are signs for those of knowledge”

(al-Rum 30:22)

Hence, religion acts as the main control of democracy in Malaysia. It is to ensure that those in power are not abusing the power, particularly as the majority. Prior to the occupation,

colonization, and even the visit from travellers, the Malay world has already held a specific identity. Throughout the times, the identity has expanded with the involvements of various cultures, religions as well as races. The identity narrative for Malaysians as a society should be progressive instead of being set to the interpretation of independence 64 years ago. In addition, society needs to be able to interpret the nation-building process to the context of the present, without denying or jeopardizing the past interpretation, but instead, viewing such interpretations as the starting point to developing progress in other things that has yet to be achieved in holistic contexts such as economy, politics, and educations.

Societal values have also impacted national progress. Just like Nusantara in history, Malaysia is also built of diverse races which formed a greater entity. Each race is well recognized culturally and religiously. The formation of Malaysia did not oppress any minor identities or forcing them to sacrifice certain identities in order to be recognized as Malaysian citizens. However, excessive differences are creating a wall between each race. This wall is not necessarily affected by differences – since differences are inevitable – but mainly by political themes in Malaysia. Howard Zinn (1991) stated that:

“If patriotism were defined, not as blind obedience to government, nor as submissive worship to flags and anthems, but rather as love of one's country, one's fellow citizens (all over the world), as loyalty to the principles of justice and democracy, then patriotism would require us to disobey our government, when it violated those principles”.

Nation-state building is a national and societal identity. Hence, it may be simpler for a country with a shared culture, language, and background. However, for a country with extensive diversity, each individual identity has to be retained and recognized. For example, Indonesia is known for its set identity regardless of biological races where everyone would use a single language. The cost of having a national identity for such a case is the gradual disappearance of certain identities such as language for the Chinese and some other races.

Since differences are massive in the cultures of Malaysia for each race and religion, it is encouraging for Malaysians to use societal values as a shared entity to enhance national progress – in this case, tolerance is viewed as the most effective tool to understand each difference. Although tolerance is often considered a positive concept, it also has negative connotations. The term tolerance has been criticized for having an element of oppression. It was used as a weapon by the past government, hiding behind universal values in forcing society to follow orders. In a certain culture, tolerance is also associated with the weak as is the case with women and minorities. Nevertheless, the term tolerance in a generic sense expresses the idea of the existence of two parties who will either give or receive. Such was not the case in the early days when the word first emerged, where mostly, only one party gave, and the other party was forced to accept in the name of tolerance.

This also encourages academics to change or choose terms that are more appropriate to the context of society and the values they want to apply. Kamar Oniah (2010) emphasizes the value *muhibbah* as the soul of the nation and refers to tolerance as a sinful term under the connotation of oppression that exists in the context of who should be tolerant when it involves people with power and the powerless or between the majority and minority. Prof Syed

Muhammad Naquib al-Attas has suggested the application of the words *muhibbah* and *samahah* as opposed to tolerance in the proposal for interfaith cooperation (The Star, 19/11/2013). However, the development of its definition should also be taken into account. Despite having a negative background, the term tolerance has been used dominantly by multiracial, multi-cultural, and multi-religious societies.

### **AL-SHAHRASTANI'S PROPOSITIONAL ATTITUDES ON TOLERANCE IN AL-MILAL WA AL-NIHAL**

Al-Shahrastani in his approaches in *al-Milal wa al-Nihal* is ultimately portraying tolerance involving the subject matter of the book which is the people of religions. The study of religion involved people with different backgrounds and commonly people with a totally different view from each other. As Al-Shahrastānī converted to Islam as his religion, the methodology in gathering information regarding Islam or other religions is mainly circulated around Islamic philosophy. His approaches are motivated by a sincere interest in some specific information about, or insight into other people's religious activities to examine its relation to other cultural forms as well as establishing patterns and characteristics of humanity's religious life and activity that seem to have universal application.

#### **Authoritative Sources as Reliable References**

Since Islamic methodology can be viewed in many study approaches by the Muslim scholars in the past across study fields, for example, the study of *hadith*, the study of *kalam*, etc. The study of *hadith* expressed the importance of authenticity and its process. Since the study of *kalam* could have differences in interpretation and understanding, authenticity is considered a decision under the sincerity of the researcher to be fair on the subject matter. Besides being religiously encouraged, the study of diversity ultimately is to establish mutual coexistence. In this regard, Allah (s.w.t.) says:

“O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware”

(al-Hujurat, 49:13)

This verse clearly indicates not only encouragement to learn about differences but also an assertion that people with variations are all created by Allah and His Almightyness. This eradicates any form of superiority and should be taken as the basis of tolerance. Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) in his last sermon emphasized the righteousness of a Muslim, reported in a *hadith* collected by Imam Ahmad:

"O humanity! Your Lord is one, and your ancestry is one. No Arab is superior to a non-Arab, nor is any non-Arab superior to any Arab. No white is superior to any black, nor is any black superior to any white except on account of their

righteousness."

The study of religions involved assessing and evaluating the great religions of the world featuring the belief system of each religion in a perfectly scientific spirit. As Islam extremely emphasized trustworthiness as one of the major factors in determining the authenticity of a source, those values should be able to shape a tolerant character. In his approach, Al Shahrastānī plainly stated at the beginning of his book, emphasizing the writing process of the book is revolving around original sources in order to avoid doubts and uncertainties (al-Shahrastani, 2005).

He emphasized his intention clearly which is to "present the history of the religious leaders along with their teachings taken from one of their books by using the terms used in those books. All of this has been through in-depth research on the basic teachings of each religion and based on findings on the source of its teachings" (al-Shahrastani, 2005). The objective and the methodology of his study show his intention to be fair and present each religion in its own framework. Since he was well-recognized as a scholar of religion at the time, Al-Shahrastānī seems to be tolerating his discussions on religions, knowing that the book would greatly influence people across backgrounds and hold that as a responsibility according to his religious encouragement.

### **Limiting open-mindedness and free-thinking**

In conjunction with the establishment of national identity, the recognition of identity regardless of race, culture, and religion should not jeopardize the Islamic worldview in any way. Islam is the official religion of Malaysia, hence even though tolerance generally means acceptance, there is a limit to it. This does not mean Islam is forcing religion or religious worldview towards other people with different religions. Allah (s.w.t.) says:

"There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become distinct from the wrong. So whoever disbelieves in *ṭāghūt* and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing"

(al-Baqarah, 2:256).

Through this verse, Islam established a fundamental principle in which people with a religion other than Islam should not be intimidated or threatened to accept the whole Islamic belief system. In this regard, Al-Shahrastānī acknowledges the importance to leave intimidation when it comes to the description of other religions. He started the discussion in accordance with the mathematical approach by escaping opportunity for comments (al-Shahrastani, 2005).

However, the limitation for openness is crucial to reflect the author's identity. This clearly shows in his explanation of the Indian thoughts. Al-Shahrastānī explained that each group of Indian thought and belief he mentioned belongs to the category of idol worshipers. They created monuments of special persons in the society whose memories the people want to keep alive. The main reason for the construction of statues, even for groups of spiritualists or planet worshipers is intended as a personification of the god and considers the statue as a

substitute. At the end of this section, Al-Shahrastānī explains that such thinking has also been expressed in the Qur'an and reflects on the concept of the mediator in such beliefs. He stated that "If they realize that everything, they have created is intermediary with God, why they do not just worship the true God" (al-Shahrastani, 2005). Al-Bīrūnī explained that the construction of statues is due to the uncultured minds within many communities that find it very difficult to understand the abstract and as such believe in the sensible (Biruni, 1971).

## CONCLUSION

Malaysia and its nation-state development revolved around the mixture of thoughts and understanding in culture, religion, and race. In this regard, Al-Shahrastānī's propositional attitude towards such a mixture is objective yet still managed to maintain his identity without unnecessary intimidation and provocations towards explaining the belief system of other religions as well as the other philosophical thoughts. Malaysia could be a country that holds such values and identity without harming and sacrificing certain cultures, religions, and races of society. The richness of diversity should be celebrated under one nation-state by maintaining the differences of individual and societal identities. This reflection should be well received by at least Muslims as the majority in Malaysia as it reflects the teaching of Islam and has been used by many Muslim scholars throughout the time.

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