

Understanding of Al-Quran amongst the Melanau Ethnic Group: toward Constructing a Translation Module of Al-Quran

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Abstract. In Malaysia, the Melanau ethnic or *a liko* (people of the river) form the largest Muslim group in Sarawak. This ethnic group has its own system of beliefs and traditional customs. This system of beliefs encompasses theories on nature, man's origin and way of life. Their traditional customs are frequently manifested in various gathering events including *Kaul* Festival. This ethnic group has its own merits as a fluid and harmonious society, a mini United Nations with leadership calibre. However, their system of beliefs and traditions at times presents a serious and big challenge to enhance understanding of al-Quran amongst them. This article therefore attempts to discuss this challenge as well as the effort to compile a translation of al-Quran in Melanau language as a *kaizen* (slow and steady effort) in *uslub dakwah* (preaching methodology) in Malaysia.

Keywords: Beliefs, Challenge, Custom, Ethnic, Understanding.

1. Introduction

Sarawak Bumi Kenyalang (Land of the Hornbills) is the largest state in Malaysia. Its population comprises of various tribal and ethnic groups with their respective unique cultural legacy. Among the ethnic groups in Sarawak are the Malays, Chinese, Indians, Iban, Bidayuh as well as Melanau. According to 2010 statistics taken from a 2010 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia issued by the Department of Statistics, the Melanau is the fifth largest tribal group in Sarawak constituting 5%, equivalent to 123,410 out of a total 2,471,140 people. Other than Christianity, most of them embrace Islam. The Melanau have many similarities with the Sarawak Malays in terms of way of life but they have their own traditions and customs. The non-Muslims among them continue to observe animistic traditional festivals such as the *Kaul* Festival as their main festive celebration. According to Aloysius J. Dris in *The Sarawak Museum Journal*, December Edition (1997) in which he quoted a statement from Melanau Seminar I, "The Melanaus are a definite and concrete group speaking different Melanau dialects, sharing a common custom and culture, mainly residing in coastal areas between Kuala Rejang in South-west and Kuala Baram in the North-east."

According to Morris (1978) the Melanau are related to *Kajang* people and Mac Donald (1958) refers to them as *Kayan* people while Edwards and Stevens (1971) ascribes to them as *Kanowit* people. According to Yasir Abd Rahman (1987) most of the main settlements of the Melanau community are located at river-mouths and tributaries in coastal areas in the districts of Rajang to Bintulu. In this area, there are particular settlement centres near the sea, such as in Rajang, Paloh, Balawei, Daro, Matu, Igan, Oya, Mukah, and Bintulu. Settlement centres in the interior are located at Dalat, Medong, Kut, Narub, Balingian and Tatau. The pattern of settlement for the whole community is 'lineal'. Their houses are situated on banks of rivers and tributaries in these areas. This pattern of settlement has to do with the form of their economic activity though it is more influenced by factors of nature such as the jungle and extensive wetlands. The two forms of

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economic activity the Melanau are most known for and which become their 'mark' are cultivation and processing of sago. As mentioned earlier, we know that the pattern of settlement for the Melanau society is along the coast and river-bank. This factor facilitates adequate water supply necessary for processing of sago. The platform to step on the bark of scraped sago content is built across from each house to the water surface so that the sago can be easily taken. This economic activity is perceived to be so interesting and important for the ethnic Melanau that H. S. Morris (1971) in his book entitled "Report on a Melanau Sago Producing Community in Sarawak" has explained in detail on the process of sago production. It cannot be denied that the ethnic Melanau are the main cultivators of sago palm and their skill in processing this ingredient to make starch and other foodstuffs (sago, biscuits) is unrivalled by any other community.

There are six Melanau dialect groups and these include smaller groups such as Bliun, Kanowit, Balingian, Orang Miriek, Seduan, Segalang, Rajang, Paloh, Igan, Matu (Matu-Daro), Tatau, Segahan/ Preban, Segan (Bintulu), Siuteng (Mukah), Oya and Dalat. In addition to pattern of settlement and economic activity, difference in dialect is another factor which causes multiple groups within the Melanau ethnic community. According to Yasir (1987) difference in dialect found in the Melanau community is a phenomenon which created the perception of disunity. This element of diversity is considered not unusual because it represents a social value reflected in matters or particular situations like marriage. When this happens, those who move out continue to speak in the same manner and original dialect. It is considered normal and socially acceptable to indicate their place of origin, indirectly and at the same time introducing their identity.

2. Challenge of Understanding al-Quran among Melanau Ethnic Society

According to the Borneo Post Online, in the year 2012 the number of Muslim converts in Sarawak reached almost 42,000 persons with an annual average of between 1000-1500 persons. The Muslim society in Sarawak is estimated to constitute 31% the majority of whom are Malays and Melanau (Muhtar, 2008). The Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) consistently endeavours to bring the Muslim community closer to understanding al-Quran whether through websites, pamphlets or preaching activities. In view of the differences between the Malay and the Melanau languages in terms of phonetics and morphology, the language factor presents difficulties in enhancing understanding of al-Quran. In addition, other bigger challenges include the system of beliefs and traditional customs which are still being observed.

Every ethnic group wherever they may be adhere to their own beliefs and traditions. The same goes with the Melanau. One of the important aspects in the daily life of the Melanau tribe is the system of beliefs which controls and influences their way of life and thinking. In going about daily duties, whether at home or outside, one may not escape contemplating the existence of the unseen world. According to Yasir Abd Rahman (1987), this tribe basically believes in animism and that important issues in life are subject to the supernatural. All natural phenomena which cannot be understood or explained are said to be supernatural. It is thus not surprising that this way of thinking seeps and permeates all realms of life and traditional customs.

There are many Melanau traditional beliefs whether related to nature, man's origin or way of life. The society's beliefs relating to nature have been found in four works by Jeniri Amir (1989), Jeniri Amir & Awang Azman Awang Pawi (2001), Hang Tuah Merawin (2000) and Morris (1991). These works discuss the same issues and only differ in details. According to Jeniri Amir (1989) in his article, in the Melanau traditional beliefs, this world has three layers: above, middle and underground. In his work, Hang Tuah Merawin (2000) gives details by naming three layers or zones as *Langit*, *Tana'* and *Iyang*. *Langit* is the *Samawi* or celestial zone or the heavens and is also known as the *kayangan*. *Tana'* is the terrestrial zone, earth or land which humans stand on, see, and feel with the normal human senses. *Tana'* is the transient place of mortals, fauna and flora. *Iyang* is the aquatic zone or aquatic territory or the territory in water under the earth zone. *Iyang* is, as described in the Melanau myths and legends, the physical and metaphysical zone inhabited by humans and animals of the land after they have undergone metamorphosis (complete physical transformation and other changes which happen in the life cycle of an organism). The statement that this world is divided into zones is also explained by Morris (1991) in his book entitled "The Oya Melanau" that the Melanau world has fifteen layers, seven layers above are called *likou langit* or *likou bah- bau*, and the lower seven layers *likou bah iba'*, while the middle layer is *likou dagen dua*, that is the earth inhabited by humans, fauna and flora. The *likou dagen dua* is also inhabited by other creations of God. This layer has

certain borders within it despite being a single layer. These borders serve as dividers to separate the territories between the different species of inhabitants. In *Likou bah iba'* the first layer closest to the earth is *liko pengamew*, followed by *liko kulum*, *liko belangan*, *liko yang*, *liko jin*, *liko raja jin* and the lowest layer is *liko baliw*.

The Melanau ethnic society also believes that different species of creation including humans are created by Allah Ta'ala or pronounced as Alaataala' in Melanau terminology. However this term Alaataala' in Melanau belief is conceptually different from Allah in Islam. According to the views of Dzilfawati Haji Hassan (2006) this term was probably taken from Islam in the transformation process of the society and while socialising with Muslims. Further according to him, the Melanau ethnic society believes that in the beginning Alataala' created man from earth. The first to be created as His servant was named *Buah*. According to the original story, *Buah* was sent down to earth and he resided at the upper course of the river, Sungai Mukah, in a place called Sungai *Buah*. According to Jeniri (1989), the Melanau ethnic society believes that there are four elements which form the basis of a creation, namely, body, soul (*bedua*), feelings (*naseng*) and spirit. When these four elements are combined to give life to the creation, equilibrium must be maintained to ensure good health. This is because the body is the most vulnerable to disease and disturbances. If the body loses balance then the feelings (*naseng*) will weaken. It is believed that instability of the elements may result in one falling sick or even death.

Amran & Hamidah (1993) in their work entitled "Adat Resam" (Traditional Customs) described some methods of traditional healing or treatment usually practised by the Melanau society such as spiking, fogging/fumigation, *baguda'* and using *Dakan*. Spiking is the easiest method using only a nail. It is practised for illness such as sharp pains in toothache. The painful tooth is touched three times with a small nail followed by chanting a specific mantra. Then the nail is hammered on a pole while saying that the toothache will disappear completely. Fumigation or fogging is used especially for children who cry without pausing for lengthy periods. Treatment consists of using coconut husk, charcoal and incense to heat up a small fire in a covered receptacle and blowing on it to cause heavy smoke to come forth. The smoky receptacle is then carried around the bed of the child by the healer who chants specific mantra to dispel demons from disturbing the child. Finally the receptacle with all in it are thrown out through the window. Fogging or fumigation is used to treat those who frequently lose consciousness. By this method, cobwebs taken from the ceiling, a used broom and a handful of thatching are placed in a coconut shell and lit up with fire. The patient is laid down near a black cloth. The healer then chants a mantra by calling on the names of the *tow-tow* to cease disturbing the patient. The importance lies in the act of fanning the fumes at a certain rate on the patient's body and burning the cobwebs because the *tow-tow* are believed to hang down from the ceiling by the cobwebs. After the final fanning of the fumes with the black cloth, the things burnt are disposed of in a corner of the room. *Baguda'* is used by the *a-bayoh* to chase off the *tow-tow*. By this method, the *a-bayoh* will scan the patient using a candle called *pesilok*. Then incense will be burnt so that the *a-bayoh* can use the smoke to rub the patient's body. If his scanning is accurate, the patient's body will shiver each time the incense smoke is rubbed on his body, indicating that the incantation is working effectively on the patient and rubbing is continued until the body ceases shivering. According to Jeniri, Rosline & Rudi (2007), treatment through *dakan* uses figurines of certain *tow-tow*. *Dakan* is a figurine carved from branches of the sago palm tree by a person skilled in this field. Persons who practise this method need not necessarily be an *a-bayoh* or traditional healer. The *dakan* carving skill and knowledge of the illness to be cured is passed down spiritually through dreams. Such persons are able to know the illness caused by *tow-tow* and determine the type of *dakan* suitable for cure.

Further, the challenge to enhance understanding of Islam or al-Quran is the observance of traditional festivals in contradiction with Islamic aqidah. Among other Melanau beliefs in the power of the supernatural is the honouring of guardian spirits in festive gatherings such as the Kaul (cleansing or purification) Festival. According to Jeniri & Awang Azman (2001) this festival is an annual event celebrated by the Melanau community. Kaul is one of the oldest customs which is still being practised. It was very important in the past in terms of Melanau beliefs. It represents honouring and thanksgiving the guardian spirits, *ipok kala*. *Kala* in Melanau dialect means river-mouth while *ipok kala* means the guardian spirits of the place. The *kaul* festival is held on the right of the river-mouth because it is considered an important place where the land, sea and

river meet, a natural place important for the economic activity of this community. *Ipok kala* are considered as very potent guardian spirits. During the *kaul* ceremony, invocations are directed towards the *ipok kala* to preserve peace and increase the catch or harvest of the following year. The *kaul* ceremony is held every year in the month of March, after the monsoon period. The traditional Melanau society in Mukah uses the lunar calendar. One ‘year’ in the lunar calendar has twelve units called months. The first month in the annual cycle is called the month of *pengejin* (*spirits*) during which the *kaul* ceremony is held. Early preparations for this ceremony by the people include preparing certain foodstuffs as offerings to be laid on trays or baskets made of nipah palm leaves. These are placed on poles (*seraheng*) decorated with small flags (according to ranking of the person), birds and so on. Among the dishes prepared are *papit* (glutinous rice cooked in leaves), *belen* (betel nut) and *apung* (leaf cigarettes). On the festive day, after sessions of chants and incantations, the *seraheng-seraheng* (decorated poles) are brought upriver in a boat procession and planted around the river-mouth with food served on the trays or baskets. Next, the *kaul* father will scatter yellow rice around the food offerings and invite the *ipok kala* to eat it. Then the *kaul* father will make invocations to the *ipok kala* to increase providence for the following year. After the invocations, there is entertainment such as martial art (*silat, kutaw, mengalai*), canoe race, *tibou* (giant swing) and so on. Participants are encouraged to share their food they brought as it is believed that such a thing is favoured by the *ipok kala* who will increase providence in the community.

3. Building a Module for Translation of al-Quran in Melanau Language

In order to assist the Melanau ethnic society in understanding the contents of al-Qur’an, a module for translation of al-Quran to the Melanau ethnic language is being conducted by a group of researchers at the Faculty of Islamic Studies, National University of Malaysia (UKM) sponsored under the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) 2014. This research is entitled “Constructing a Module for Translation of al-Quran in Melanau Ethnic Language: Study of Surah al-Fatihah and Juz Amma”. This project has completed a draft translation in cooperation with the Sarawak Department of Islamic Religion. Translations such as this serve as the basic premise in enhancing the Melanau’s understanding of al-Quran. This study assumes that language obstacle is not the main challenge in preserving the harmony of the meaning or translation of al-Quran itself. Nevertheless, the Department of Islamic Development of Malaysia (JAKIM) has undeniably made effective efforts such as publication of 314 pamphlet titles in several ethnic languages.

An example of translation in Melanau ethnic language is a translation of surah al Fatihah as follows:

Dengan nama Allah Wak Maha Pemurah agei Maha Penyayang.

Segala puji gak Allah Tuhan semesta alam.

Wak Maha Pemurah agei Maha Penyayang.

Pemilik lau pembalasan (Hereafter)

Hanya gak Kaau (Allah) melevu sembah jegam hanya gak Kaau (Allah) melevu menyabik pertolongan.

Tijunkanlah melevu jalan wak lurus.

Yenlah jalan wak ngak Kaau (Allah) pidok nikmat gak loyen bukan jalan wak dimurkai jegam bukan kawak jalan loyen wak sesat.

4. Conclusion

Based on the above evidence, it can be concluded that the challenges posed toward enhancing understanding of al-Quran is not just in terms of language difficulty but also the system of beliefs and traditional customs of the ethnic Melanau society which deviate from the facts as mentioned in al-Qur’an. This kind of belief system shows a vacuum in terms of authentic aqidah and knowledge of their society. Therefore, a multiple approach is required to explain this error including preparation of scholarly materials and continuous preaching programs. The traditional Melanau ethnic society needs to be exposed to al-Qur’an and its sciences which should be conveyed in their own ethnic language. The compilation of a translation of al-Qur’an in Melanau language is seen as an initiative towards solving this problem. Further, the commitment

and support of the authorities towards this society would, God willing, ensure the success of the effort to bring the ethnic Melanau closer to understanding al-Qur'an.

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