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Minorities in Brunei Darussalam: Intersecting Religion and Ethnicity

*Chang-Yau Hoon and Asiyah Kumpoh**



This picture taken on 10 January 2024 shows a church in Belait district in Brunei Darussalam. (Photo by Mohd RASFAN/AFP).

**Chang-Yau Hoon is Professor of Anthropology at the Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), and Visiting Senior Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. He was formerly Director of Centre for Advanced Research, UBD. Asiyah Kumpoh is Senior Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), Universiti Brunei Darussalam and Director of Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Advancement, UBD. She was formerly Dean of FASS at UBD.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This Perspective offers a nuanced understanding of the interplay between religion and ethnicity among minority groups in Brunei Darussalam, a nation where Islam constitutes the majority religion and where religious proselytisation, except for Islam, is strictly forbidden.
- The discussion focuses on two minority groups within the nation: the Christians and the ethnic Dusuns who uphold traditional faiths.
- An examination of the two groups reveals that the Christian community maintains mutual respect and understanding, fostering peaceful coexistence with the dominant religion, while the Dusuns' experience highlights the mutual tolerance between the community and the state. In effect, the Dusuns are given considerable autonomy to manage their religious matters and engage in ethnic rituals without apparent interference from the state.
- This Perspective also delves into the interconnectedness of faith practices and ethnic culture, which often results in certain ethnic ceremonies, like Adu Gayoh, being publicly celebrated in communal spaces.
- By examining how religion and ethnicity intersect and how religious minorities negotiate their space to practise their religions in Muslim-majority Brunei, this Perspective unveils the agency of religious minorities in navigating state-society relations.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1959, when Brunei Darussalam's Constitution was established, Islam was formally declared the state religion. While Article 3(1) of the Constitution allows for the peaceful practice of other religions,¹ certain groups like the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, the Baha'i Faith, and Jehovah's Witnesses are labelled "deviant" and are banned by the government.² The Sultan of Brunei holds the title of the head of the Islamic faith, granting the government significant leverage in utilising Islam for nation-building purposes.³ This role highlights Islam's pervasive influence across all levels of domestic governance, serving as a moral and ethical compass.

The enactment of the Nationality Act in 1961 united seven indigenous ethnic groups (*puak jati*), including Brunei, Kedayan, Murut, Tutong, Dusun, Bisaya, and Belait, under the broader Malay race, symbolising a consolidation of national identity. As a result, the Muruts, Dusuns, Bisayas and Belaits, who were originally non-Muslims, are now officially identified as Malay 'by race' by the constitutional provision. Over time, this reclassification defines the multifaceted character of Brunei Malayness and integrates diverse ethnic culture into a cohesive Malay identity.⁴ Thus, as of 2021, the population of Brunei formally consists of Malays (67.4%), Chinese (9.6%), and others (23%).⁵

The term "religious minorities" carries considerable weight in Brunei, where Islam dominates. Christians and Buddhists form significant minority groups, alongside non-Muslim ethnic communities like the Dusun, Bisaya, Belait, and Murut, who uphold traditional beliefs. Despite conversions and intermarriage, many members of these groups maintain ties to their ancestral customs. Differential treatment towards religious minorities exists in Brunei, but the majority religion does not necessarily dictate people's interactions with their surroundings.⁶ Understanding the agency of minorities and the complexity of historical context is vital in exploring how they navigate their space in a Muslim-majority state.

This discussion specifically focuses on two minority groups: the Christians, and the Dusuns, an ethnic minority practising traditional faith. Christians are the second largest religious group in the country, while the Dusuns, being one of the most-studied ethnic groups in Brunei, present a unique illustrative example on the point of study. Past studies offer some valuable insights into the strategies employed by the Dusuns in balancing between their adherence to state policies and the preservation of their ethnic religion and culture. This Perspective examines how these groups manoeuvre their religious practices amidst state constraints within Brunei's perceived "coercive" environment.⁷

REGULATING RELIGION IN BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

The national philosophy of Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB), declared during independence in 1984, solidifies Islam's role in the governance of Brunei. Islam is enshrined in the constitution as the state religion, with separate Islamic courts overseeing family matters for Muslims.⁸ Despite maintaining a dual legal system, recent decades have seen the gradual strengthening of Shariah Law, culminating in the full implementation of the Shariah Penal Code Order (SPCO) in 2019.⁹ Brunei's institutions and sectors align their policies with Islamic principles, shaping various aspects of public life. State-sponsored broadcasting regularly features religious content, and workplaces provide opportunities for non-Muslims to engage with Islam. The pervasive presence of Islam in education further raises awareness, with Islamic Religious Knowledge and MIB being mandatory complementary subjects for primary and lower secondary levels.

Despite these measures, previous studies suggest non-Muslims perceive Islamic education as merely educational rather than theological.¹⁰ While religious minorities accept Islam's role in society, concerns about religious freedom persist, with critics highlighting the legal and political marginalisation of these groups.¹¹ However, many scholars have argued against this as an overgeneralisation, highlighting instead Brunei's unique approach to Islamic authority and religious tolerance.¹² Furthermore, in a royal speech at an Islamic ceremony, the Sultan reassured his people that MIB is a system that "preserves the rights of all residents regardless of their race or creed".¹³

Although the implementation of SPCO symbolises state power, its strict enforcement is rare. In their everyday reality, non-Muslims experience minimal impact on their religious practices, with Christmas celebrations in private spaces continuing unhindered.¹⁴ This challenges international negative perceptions of Brunei's religious policies, emphasising the nuanced reality within the country.

"A PERIPHERY WITHIN A PERIPHERY": THE CHRISTIANS IN BRUNEI

The Christian community in Brunei comprises the largest religious minority, constituting 6.7% of the population, with 3.7% identifying as Roman Catholics and 4% as Protestants. Catholicism was introduced in the 16th century by Spanish missionaries, who established historical ties with the Missionary Society of St. Joseph (Mill Hill Missionaries), and the Catholic church in Brunei had in earlier times been under the administration of various ecclesiastical jurisdictions based in Labuan, Jesselton (now Kota Kinabalu), Kuching and Miri. In 2004, the Apostolic Vicariate of Brunei Darussalam was established, led by Bishop Cornelius Sim until his passing in 2021.¹⁵

Approximately 16,000 Catholics reside in Brunei, mainly migrant workers, and expatriates, with around 10% being locals, including ethnic Chinese and indigenous Bruneians. The

government upholds the autonomy of non-Muslim religious institutions in clergy appointments. In 2020, Bishop Cornelius Sim, a former engineer of Chinese Bruneian descent, was elevated to the esteemed rank of cardinal by Pope Francis. Cardinal Sim interpreted his appointment as a deliberate gesture by the Pope to embrace marginalised communities, describing Brunei as “a periphery within the periphery” due to its small Christian population.¹⁶

The majority of Protestants in Brunei identify as Anglicans, followed by evangelical and charismatic Christians. This situation can be traced partly to the legacy of British colonialism, as evidenced by the official registration of only three Protestant churches, all of which are Anglican. These Anglican churches were established alongside mission schools to serve the expatriate community during the British administration era. The Borneo Church Mission, originally founded in England in 1846, had the goal of dispatching Anglican missionaries to Borneo. Brunei’s integration into the Diocese of Labuan, a British crown colony, occurred following the arrival of the first missionaries in 1848 at the invitation of James Brooke. Presently, Brunei remains part of the Anglican Communion Diocese within the Anglican Province of Southeast Asia.¹⁷

Despite Brunei’s geographical proximity to Sarawak, the country’s Christian community has evolved differently from that of its neighbouring state. In Sarawak, Christians represent the religious majority, comprising 42.4% of the population.¹⁸ The Methodist mission, which began in Sarawak in the early 20th century, experienced substantial growth among ethnic Chinese and Ibans but did not extend its presence to Brunei.¹⁹ Similarly, the establishment of the Borneo Evangelical Mission in Sarawak by Australian missionaries in 1928 led to the formation of the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB Church), which has expanded throughout Sarawak and Sabah but lacks legal presence in Brunei.²⁰

Unlike Sarawak, where Christianity thrives, Brunei’s historical ties to Islam and the approach taken by the British administration had likely limited missionary influence there. While the majority of Christians in Brunei attend Anglican churches, independent congregations are emerging. Some of these share premises with Anglican churches for worship, while others meet in private homes or non-official locations. These unofficial churches face challenges due to their precarious legal status; often registered as secular organisations, they are vulnerable to raids by the authorities.²¹ Despite governmental commitment to religious harmony, strict laws prohibit proselytisation and restrict religious practices. Foreign clergy entry is denied, and non-Islamic religious organisations face limitations in establishing places of worship.²² Despite these challenges, the Christian community in Brunei upholds mutual respect and understanding, fostering peaceful coexistence among religious groups.²³

MUTUAL TOLERANCE: THE DUSUNS AND THEIR PRACTICES

The Dusuns, primarily concentrated in Brunei's Tutong District, historically practised animism although many have converted to Islam and Christianity.²⁴ Various terms like Bisaya, Bukit, and Kedayan were used in historical writings to refer to them, highlighting their tight-knit community and unique characteristics.²⁵ Unlike established religions, Dusun belief does not involve proselytisation; individuals are born into it but are not obliged to practise. However, those who do adhere to ethnic rites, show a strong attachment to their traditional beliefs.

At the core of Dusun faith is animism, where reality is perceived to be closely connected with spirit beings, particularly Derato, their cosmic god of prosperity and serves as mediator between humans and the supernatural world. The Dusuns traditionally worship Derato for abundant paddy harvests and conduct what is called the Temarok ritual, led by Belians, after the harvest season. This ritual involves food preparation and traditional music, and has become a significant communal ceremony among the Dusuns.

Despite modern influences, Temarok is still practised, albeit on a small scale. Even Dusuns who have converted to Islam participate in the celebration, as long as it aligns with their new religious teachings. The Dusuns encounter minimal discriminatory barriers when practising Temarok, and the only requirement is that the ritual takes place in private settings. This condition ensures the ritual's stability and continuity, contrasting with stricter prohibitions faced by other religions in Brunei.

Another significant event in the Dusun calendar is Adau Gayoh, which signifies the conclusion of the paddy harvesting season. While it once overlapped with Temarok, it is now annually observed on 1 May. Adau Gayoh gatherings typically occur in private residences, with attendees often comprising family members. Remarkably, even individuals who have embraced other religions, such as Islam and Christianity, actively partake in Adau Gayoh, highlighting the acceptance of religious diversity within Dusun culture.

The dynamics between the Muslim-majority state and the Dusun minority is one of mutual religious tolerance and reciprocal acceptance. This symbiotic relationship is evident in the majority's embrace of ethnic religious practices and festivals, which corresponds to the minority's acceptance of Islam-centric policies outlined in MIB. The Dusuns' tolerance is cultivated through their daily interactions with Muslims and exposure to Islamic teachings within the country's educational framework. With Islam deeply integrated into the educational system, the Dusuns have developed a natural familiarity and tolerance towards Islam, considering it an integral part of their lives. This widespread exposure to Islamic information ensures that virtually all individuals in Brunei encounter aspects of Islam; this contributes to a broad understanding of the religion even without direct consultation of religious texts.²⁶

Such exposure has wittingly or unwittingly shaped Dusun perception of the Sharia Penal Code Order announced in 2013. While initial apprehensions existed among the Dusuns regarding the SPCO's impact on non-Muslims, additional information from mass media and communal gatherings has allayed their fears by clarifying that the policy primarily pertains to Muslims and is unlikely to substantially disrupt their daily lives.

The state's acceptance of Dusun beliefs is rooted in their traditional presence and in Brunei's historical narrative. Accounts from the inaugural British Resident at the turn of the 20th century vividly illustrate the Dusuns' role and status in Brunei society. As agricultural practitioners, they cultivated various lands, encompassing both private domains and state-owned territories. They were governed by their own appointed headmen entrusted with tax collection duties. Their contribution to state governance highlights their historical prominence and integral role in the socio-economic fabric of Brunei.²⁷

In recent years, there has been a notable shift in the practice of Dusun cultural rituals towards public spaces as their venues. Tamarok and Adau Gayoh, once private events, are now celebrated as communal and national heritage occasions. For instance, in 2022, an event in Belait District saw the joint celebration of Eid Fitr and Adau Gayoh, emphasising their importance in preserving Bruneian identity and promoting unity. Similarly, in May 2024, the National Adau Gayoh Festival was held in Tutong District aimed at preserving Dusun cultural values for the new generation.

Tamarok's performative aspect has also permeated national celebrations, local festivals, and even the state visits of foreign dignitaries. Recently, Tamarok was embraced as a representation of Brunei's national culture on international platforms, such as the Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program.²⁸ In these contexts, Tamarok is regarded more as an ethnic ritual than a purely religious practice, owing to the role of official media outlets like Radio Television Brunei and Pelita Brunei in documenting and promoting it as a vital component of Brunei's cultural heritage.²⁹

There is a growing movement for ethnic preservation and the promotion of distinct ethno-cultural identities among the Dusuns and other ethnic groups. State recognition and endorsement of practices such as Tamarok and Adau Gayoh indicate that Dusuns can freely engage in their ethnoreligious festivals without fear of oppression or prejudice. Additionally, the increasing integration of faith practices with ethnic culture has contributed to greater state tolerance toward the Dusuns. Consequently, ethno-religious gatherings, once private affairs, are now acknowledged as national expressions of ethnic representation and Brunei's cultural heritage.³⁰

This shift may stem from the state's realisation that its cultural homogenisation efforts for nation-building have been largely successful and possibly reached their natural limit, and the saturation point. With such stability, the state can endorse public celebrations and the

preservation of the diverse cultural heritage of the ethnic groups.³¹ In Brunei, where formal interfaith dialogues are not extensively pursued, the state's recognition through the public celebration of Dusun festivals gains special significance. These acts of recognition align with the objectives of interfaith dialogues, promoting positive community interactions grounded in principles of tolerance, respect, and goodwill.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the government of Brunei demonstrates a degree of respect for minority religions, albeit with imposed limitations. Despite these restrictions, the current religious diversity in Brunei appears unlikely to cause significant social friction, as adherents of the majority religion generally exhibit tolerance towards other faiths. Reports indicate that religious minorities do not express significant dissatisfaction with the state's treatment.

The government's strict laws aimed at safeguarding Islam's sanctity pose challenges for missionary religions like Christianity. However, the Christian community has shown adaptability and coexistence, exemplified by their innovative approach of sharing Anglican church premises with other Christian congregations for worship services and gatherings. This proactive response enables the Christian community to navigate state restrictions while maintaining their faith within governmental boundaries.

In the case of ethnic minorities like the Dusuns, limited research has led to misconceptions about their religious constraints, which have assumed that they face similar challenges to minorities in other Muslim-majority nations. However, the relationship between the Dusuns and the state reflects a two-way tolerance shaped by historical intricacies. Long-standing state tolerance of Dusun beliefs and ethnic rituals enriches Brunei's ethno-cultural diversity, underscoring the significant role of religious minorities like the Dusuns in shaping the multifaceted nature of "Malayness" in Brunei.

Overall, while challenges and restrictions persist for religious and ethnic minorities in Brunei, current conditions suggest a stable coexistence between them. As Brunei progresses, further research and comprehension of these dynamics will be essential for fostering religious harmony and upholding principles of tolerance and respect.

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