Islamization of the Sama Dilaut in Sabah, Malaysia

The Sama Dilaut (lit: ‘maritime’ Sama), or the Bajau, are a subgroup of the Sama-speaking people. The Sama Dilaut of Kallong village, Semporna District, Sabah, Malaysia, are migrants from Sallang Island, Sulu Archipelago, the Philippines, approximately 100 km away. Until the 1960s-1970s, the Sama Dilaut in both countries were politically and religiously marginalized. In the late 1950s, the Sama Dilaut of Sallang remained marginalized, disregarded in local politics and considered impious Muslims, even kafirs (non-Muslims) despite the fact that most of them professed Islam. The Sama Dilaut in Kallong, however, had improved their status. They occupied village political posts and enjoyed their own district representatives; their status as Muslims was acknowledged by local society. This essay discusses the historical dynamics of the Sama Dilaut’s Islamization, the process by which they gained acceptance as Muslims in post-colonial Malaysia. The discussion is based on historical and ethnographic data collected between 1997 and 1999 in Semporna District, Sabah.

By Negatu Kazeefumi

Follower independence, Islam increasingly became a pillar of identity for Malaysia’s dominant Malay population. With Islamic revivalism (da’wah) prevailing in the 1970s, the government began to directly involve itself in Islamic affairs. Local and state governments alike strengthened their commitment to the administration of Islam through religious institutions. Islam was thus made official throughout Malaysia.

Sabah gained independence as a state within Malaysia in 1963. Direct government involvement in Islamic affairs here started relatively late. It was not until 1971 that the first official Islamic institution, the Sabah Islamic Council, or MUIS (Majlis Ugama Islam Sabah), was established. Since it emulated the system already organized in Peninsular Malaysia, MUIS was able to institutionalize its administrative system effectively and rapidly. Through its branches it began to administer religious activities at district and village levels. MUIS also assumed the management of religious schools in the state.

Incorporation

At the end of the British colonial period in Semporna, local Muslims attributed Islamic legitimacy to the Sulu Muslim society, heirs to the once flourishing Islamic Sulu Sultanate. Muslim intellectuals of Sulu origin thus held prominence in religious affairs. This situation changed dramatically in the post-colonial period. In 1960, a native political leader built the first religious school in Semporna. He appointed a Malagasy imam, or mufti, to head the mosque. In running religious schools, it employed as religious leaders and a mosque. The Sama Dilaut thereby became a mosque. The Sama Dilaut thereby officially acquired symbols of a Muslim community, namely, religious leaders and a mosque.

Beginning Muslim

Until the 1970s, the Sama Dilaut believed in supernatural or ancestral spirits and held rituals for these spirits. In the mid-1960s, a government-appointed district mufti (Islamic preacher) invited a Sama Dilaut leader to convert to Islam. The leader accepted the mufti’s invitation and, together with some Sama Dilaut young men, learned the prayers. This marked the beginning of their Islamization. In the late 1960s, he built a simple prayer house, a surau, in the village. Meanwhile, the young people studied Islam at the local mosque. They were invited to deliver religious lectures and became religious leaders and a mosque.

The research area

The Sama Dilaut’s Islamization was intrinsically linked to socio-religious change in Semporna, brought on by the officialization of Islam in Malaysia. Essential to their Islamization was the separation of local Muslim society from the conventional Islamic order of Sulu, from which the Sama Dilaut had been stigmatized as outcasts. As official – state sanctioned – religious personnel and institutions came to represent Islam, local Muslims had no choice but to accept as legitimate the Melayu teacher’s claims and Islamic symbols that MUIS authorized. As the official-unofficial dichotomy of Islamic legitimacy reformed the district’s socio-religious order, the presence of the surau was proof of the ‘correctness’ of the Sama Dilaut’s religious practice.

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