

# The Impact of Filipino Muslim Ethnic Migration into Sabah on ASEAN Integration

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**Abstract:** Migration among ASEAN countries is not new and Sabah is one of the states in Malaysia that faces this phenomenon. Even prior to independence, Sabah had already been receiving immigrants from ASEAN countries. This study aims at analysing Muslim ethnic migration from the Philippines into Sabah and its impact onto ASEAN integration. This study was qualitatively conducted using content analysis instrument and found that the migration has created a multi-ethnic Muslim community in Sabah, making Sabah as an exemplary multi-ethnic state where the different ethnics can live in harmony. Indirectly, Sabah can become a model to other ASEAN countries which have a multiracial population. This is in line with the desirable declaration to form the ASEAN Community. Simultaneously, Sabah can become a link or medium that foster ASEAN inter-member relations, especially between the Philippines and Malaysia in line with the ASEAN community integration agenda.

**Index Terms:** Migration, ethnicity, Filipino Muslims, Sabah, integration, ASEAN.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The migration phenomenon between ASEAN countries had been occurring long before the establishment of nation-state border system. As a state in Malaysia, Sabah has been facing this phenomenon, receiving immigrants from ASEAN countries such as Brunei, Indonesia and the Philippines. Prior to independence, the state already had historical relation with the Philippines as one of the closest neighbours particularly during the rule of the Sultanate of Sulu. After independence, the relationship was further strengthened through the establishment of The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. The centuries-old relationship rendered migration of Filipinos to Sabah as something not peculiar. The migration took place due to various factors such as trade, *da'wah*, political crisis, family ties and so on. As a result, it left an impact on almost

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all aspects of Sabah's development either in politics, economy, society and others (Lasimbang, Tong & Low 2016: 116-117). Sabah population, originally comprising only a few ethnic groups, grew following the migration process. Consequently, Sabah's Muslim community itself became diverse to include ethnicities whose origin are from the Philippines, making it enriched in terms of race, customs and cultural diversity. However, this diversity does not prevent Sabahans from living peacefully and harmoniously. The unity in diversity is in line with the ASEAN Charter to form the 'ASEAN Community'. This makes Malaysia in general and Sabah in particular a model to other ASEAN countries which has a population of various cultures, race, religions and traditions. This study aims to analyse the impact of the Filipino Muslim ethnic migration to Sabah on the integration of ASEAN Muslim ethnics. Therefore, the issue is still on debate. Hence, studies relating to the excellence of contemporary issues in Islamic civilization and Shariah studies are also assayed by local scholars, covering various issues such as discussion of the legality of using ketum leaves according to Shariah perspective (Kashim et al 2019), the rights and protection of Filipino Muslim (Hajimin & Ibrahim 2017a), the refugees and Islamic education (Hajimin et al. 2017), the migration and its impact on Muslim ethnic diversity (Hajimin & Ibrahim 2017b; Hajimin, Ibrahim & Kassim 2016a; Hajimin, Ibrahim & Kassim 2016b), the continuity of *astrolabe* as a multipurpose *astrofiqh* instrument (Safiai et al. 2016), as well as the functions of *astrofiqh* observatories in solving *astrofiqh* issues (Ibrahim, Safiai & Jamsari 2015).

## II. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was conducted using instruments of content analysis. Data were obtained from authoritative sources such as journal articles, seminar papers, conference proceedings, colloquia, books, government and non-governmental reports and so on. In addition, with the advancement of information technology, data and information were also sourced from relevant websites. The data obtained were examined and analysed using a thematic approach.

## III. RESULT ANALYSIS

**A. Migration of Filipino Muslim Ethnic into Sabah**

Tracing the history of Islam itself, the migration of the Prophet and the Muslims from Mecca to Medina was in fact recognised as the earliest migration that impacted the formation of a multiracial Muslim society (Abu Basir n.d.: 21; al-Mubarakfuri n.d.: 161-162). This can be seen when Islam was initially accepted by the tribe of Quraysh of Mecca and later grew and integrate the people of Medina of Aws and Khazraj tribes (Ibn Sa’d 1985: 220). Through migration a multi-ethnic Muslim society was formed thus highlighting how Islam plays a role in integrating a society which consists of a variety of ethnicities. This conforms to the nature of Islam itself, being a universal religion. Migration did not only occur during the time of the Messenger of Allah SWT but it continues until today, becoming a phenomenon all over the world be it in developed nations, developing countries or even in less developed countries. Sabah, a state in Malaysia, also faces the migration phenomenon and has been receiving immigrants from various countries such as Yemen, India, China, Brunei, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The migration of Filipinos to Sabah has been going on even before the establishment of modern day border system. The Muslim community in the Philippines is concentrated in country’s southern region, particularly the region of Mindanao. The area is also known as the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). It covers Basilan, Tawi-tawi, Sulu, Maguindanao and Lanao Del Sur. These provinces are close to Sabah’s borders. Ethnic groups in the region which are synonymous to Islam are Bajau, Visaya, Iranun, and Sulu (Russell, Davide-Ong & Ty 2007: 11-15). Migration during that time has become a life routine due to the close proximity, and the sharing of common socio-culture and language. It is therefore not surprising that family ties are commonly established involving the two regions. Apart from that, economic factors also bring Filipino migrants to Sabah. This is because Sabah, since the 11<sup>th</sup> century, has been a booming commercial centre particularly in the exchange of goods. This was evident in trading activities along the coastline of Sabah pioneered by the Bajau people and led by the Datu elites of Sulu ethnic group (Lokin 2007: 27-28; Manan 2006: 76). This was also explained by Djohari (2002) in his statement that: “the migrant labour flow in the East ASEAN region is a very old one, harking back to the old empires and sultanates and continuing into the age of colonialism, well before the concept of nationhood emerged. Historically, Filipino migration into Sabah started ever since barter trade ties in the Philippines and Tawau and Lahad Datu in Sabah”.

In fact, the migration of Filipinos continued when a part of Sabah came under the rule of the Sulu Sultanate (Mohamad & Mohamad 2009: 2). Therefore, it is not surprising that areas which came under the Sultanate rule especially the east coast region of Sabah were largely inhabited by ethnics of Filipino origin. The Iranun ethnic concentrated in Kudat, Kota Belud and Tungku, Lahad Datu while the Bajau ethnic populated Semporna, Sandakan, Tawau, Kota Belud, Tuaran, Kota Kinabalu, Putatan and Papar. The ethnic of

Sulu or Suluk or Tausug were largely in Sandakan, Tawau, Lahad Datu, Semporna, Kunak, Kudat and Kota Kinabalu.

The arrival of Filipinos in Sabah continued to increase but no census records existed at that time until the colonial era of the North Borneo Chartered Company (NBCC) (1881 until 1942) during which censuses were made. The earliest census was conducted in 1911, which NBCC classified Bajau as people of Filipino origin. In 1911, the Bajau numbered 24,228 out of a total population of 172,584 (Jones 1953).

In 1951, when Sabah was under the British administration as the Crown Colony of North Borneo, another survey was made gathering ethnic groups from the Philippines specifically as shown in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Filipino Ethnic Census of Sabah in 1951**

Filipino Ethnic	Number of Population
Bajau	41421
Iranun	3307
Sulu	7866
Bisaya	7866
<b>Total</b>	<b>60460</b>

Source: Retrieved from the North Borneo Census 1951

Migration of Muslims from southern Philippines was more significant in the 1970s when President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines declared an emergency rule which led to fighting between the military and the people of southern Philippines. Clashes between the two caused large-scale Mindanao Muslim refugee migration into Sabah (Kassim & Imang 2005: 91-93). However, no accurate figure of their number was available. Based on the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Illegal Immigrants of Sabah (Kiong et al. 2014), between the 1970s and 1980s, it was estimated that between 70,000 up to 150,000 refugees had entered Sabah. Although the crisis is over, migration of Filipinos into Sabah continues until today in search of economic opportunities and because of chain migration following the footsteps of family members and contacts who are already in Sabah. The specific numbers of the ethnicities, except for Bajau, are difficult to determine because they are grouped together and categorized in a single category as ‘other bumiputera’. Bajau is one of the main Sabahan bumiputera ethnic besides Kadazandusun and Murut

**B. Impact on ASEAN Integration**

History has shown that the Philippines and Sabah had an inseparable relationship, not only from the standpoint of existing family ties. It was strengthened through the Sulu Sultanate rule over Sabah. In fact, after independence, this relationship continued to strengthen through the formation of ASEAN or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1967. ASEAN now consists of all Southeast Asian countries except East Timor and Papua New Guinea. It was established to forge cooperation among member states in the affairs of economic growth, social and

cultural development, security and stability. In line with these goals, there are three main thrusts in the establishment of ASEAN namely ASEAN Security, ASEAN Economic Community and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. The establishment of ASEAN further strengthened diplomatic relation between The Philippines and Sabah.

Sabah population which originally consisted of only a few ethnic groups, grew with the influx of ethnicities from neighbouring countries such as Brunei, Indonesia and the Philippines. Their presence to settle in Sabah, and became assimilated into the population either through marriage or by social interaction, indirectly increased the number of Muslims and formed a multi-ethnic Muslim community in Sabah. Beside Bajau as the main Muslim ethnic, the Muslim population is made up of ethnics Sulu, Iranun, Visaya, Kegayan and others. At the same time ethnics from Brunei and Indonesia such as the Malays, Kedayan, Bugis, Java and others also contribute to the ethnic diversity of Muslims in Sabah.

Although Kadazandusun is the largest native ethnic, it is not the largest contributor to the number of Muslim population of Sabah. Bajau is the largest ethnic group and contributor to the number of Muslims, followed by ethnic Malays and Bumiputera (native) ethnics. Censuses in 1970 and 1991 also showed that Indonesian ethnics (citizen) also contributed significantly to that number after Bajau, the Malays and other Bumiputera ethnics. Censuses of 1991, 2000 and 2010 attracted attention when non-citizens represented about 30% to 40% of the Muslim population composition. Other ethnic groups like Murut, Chinese and Indians, despite being relatively small, undeniably contributed to the Islamic ethnic diversity of and thereby increasing the number of believers in Sabah.

Sabah is now composed of 33 indigenous groups who communicate more than 50 languages and 80 dialects. The ethnic diversity and the unity and harmony among Sabahans have been crowned as the best example of the 1Malaysia concept mooted by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia (Anon 2014). Indirectly it becomes a model for all ASEAN member states which have population made up of diverse ethnicity and race.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The history of Islam has proven that *Hijrah* has been a pioneering event, not only to the formation of multiracial Islam, but also to the proof of Islam as a universal religion whose people can live harmoniously despite the fact of different ethnicities. This can also be deciphered in the phenomenon of Muslim ethnic migration from Brunei, Indonesia, the Philippines and others to Sabah. Sabah has become an exemplary model in forming the bond of unity among people of various ethnic, religious, linguistic, traditional and cultural backgrounds. It is an example for other ASEAN member states who also face the issue of people of various race, ethnicities and nations. This is in line with the declaration of the ASEAN Charter for forming an ASEAN community and thereby indirectly strengthening ties

and establish a harmonious coexistence among ASEAN countries.

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