

# 'ETHNICIZATION' OF ISLAM IN MALAYSIA AND ITS EFFECT ON THE MALAYSIAN CHINESE MUSLIMS

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## ABSTRACT

Malaysia is a colorful country. The nature, the flora and fauna, the food, the clothes, and most of all, the people exhibit a multitude of colors and diversity. The population of 25 million is composed of peoples of various ethnic groups, led by the majority Malays, around 27% Chinese, and less than 10% Indians, followed by other small minority ethnic groups. Islam is the official religion in Malaysia. By constitutional definition, Malays are Muslim. Peoples of other ethnic descents share a diversity of religion. The Constitution grants and protects the non-Malays' individual right to religious belief and practice. Chinese may be Buddhist, Christian, Taoist, or ancestor worshippers. Very few are Muslim. In Malaysian politics and everyday life, identities are usually defined according to ethnic background which, in turn, is closely related to religion, especially where Malay and Muslim is concerned. Officially and popularly, being Muslim is generally assumed to be synonymous with being Malay, and vice-versa. The acceptance of this notion heavily influences political, economic, social, educational policies in the country, and especially the inter-ethnic relationships. This paper will not attempt to give a detailed account on the historical, political and social basis of the appropriation of Islam by the Malay Muslims. Rather, it will present the cultural characteristics of 'glocal' Islam perpetuated by the local Malay Muslims. It will also highlight the corresponding rejection from the religion of anything Chinese -- the people, names, language, culture, without, however, intending to discuss any inference on the other minority races brought by the 'ethnicization' of Islam in the Malay society. Personal observation and experience, information obtained from interviews, grievances voiced by Malaysian Chinese Muslims, as well as a few literary reviews constitute the main sources of information for this paper.

**Keywords:** Malay culture, Islam in Malaysia, Malaysian Chinese Muslims, ethnicization, Institutionalization of Islam

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## I. FACE OF ISLAM IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, the two nouns Muslim and Malay are almost interchangeable. In Mohamad Abu Bakar’s words: “Ever since the Malays succumbed to Islam, religion has played a definitive role in their life. Islamic values permeated their philosophy, shaped their economic outlook and governed their cultural ties.”<sup>1</sup> Ismael bin Mat also asserts that:

..... as Islam spread through Peninsula Malaysia and the entire area of the Malay basin, ....., it accumulated a distinctive cultural phenomenon, so what was disseminated was not religion in the narrow sense of the term, but a comprehensive Islamic cultural reality.....<sup>2</sup>

The above statements sum up how Islam permeated the everyday lifestyle of the Malay people, incorporating the practice, customs, language, clothing, values, superstitions and other aspects of their cultures. At the same time, many aspects of Malay culture, as well as customs and traditions of Malaysians of other ethnicities have made their way into the religious practice, so much so that it is hard to distinguish the thin line between religion and cultural traditions.

### 1) Institutionalization of Islam

Islam in Malaysia is very much a government matter. Since more than three decades now, the global religious resurgence and the strengthening of an opposition Islamic political party has brought the Malay component of the ruling party in Malaysia to play the political game along the same religious line. Having to show the Malay Muslim voters that the government is indeed Islamic, an Islamization program has been put forward resulting in the founding of many Islamic institutions. One of the first was an International Islamic University, followed by more than a dozen other Muslim higher learning institutions. Islamic banking and Islamic insurance schemes followed suit. The Tabong Haji of Malaysia has become a worldwide respected brand name as a most successful and efficient institution dealing with Haj matters.<sup>3</sup>

1 Mohamad Abu Bakar. “Islam, Malaysia and Europe”, *Al-Nahdah*, 18, no.1&2 (1997), 38-42.

2 Ismail bin Mat. *Adat and Islam in Malaysia: A Study in Legal Conflict and Resolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 8.

3 Chandra Muzaffar. “Islam in Malaysia: Resurgence and Response” in *Islam in South and Southeast Asia*, Ashgar Ali Engineer, ed. (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1985), 5-38.

### 2) Household practice & state responsibility

The learning and practice of Islam is taken seriously and with much loyalty by most Malays. Parents in both rural and urban areas send their children, boys and girls, to religious classes at the mosques after school hours or provide private classes at home, concentrating primarily on reading the Holy Qur’an. When the child finishes the reading of the entire book, a ceremony is held where he has to show his competency and fluency in front of relatives and invited guests, after which he receives presents.

Government school curriculum includes religious class for Muslim students, 6 sessions per week, at par with mathematics. The learning of the Jawi script – Arabic writing of the Malay language – constitutes a heavy content of the religious class. Religious class is a compulsory subject to pass in the unified government exams at the end of high school. However, all this individual and state efforts have not kept the young Malays from figuring highly in the statistics on drug addicts and juvenile delinquents in the country.

All Muslim couples intending to get married have to attend pre-marriage religious courses sanctioned by the government and offered by various religious bodies. The classes are intended to teach the new couple their spousal responsibilities and duties according to Islamic principles.

### 3) Natural blending of religious devotion and leisure activities

Malaysia must be one Muslim country where women’s Islamic attire depicts the most variety and color.<sup>4</sup> Responding to the Islamic resurgence worldwide, in the last two to three decades, more women started to use the head covering. Even though majority stick to the usual pattern of a scarf extending over the chest, many ladies spend a lot of money and effort to come up with intricate headgears matching the color and style of their costume, and wear them such that their earrings or necklace will show. It is not unusual to see young girls with a scarf over their head, but attired in T-shirts and blue-jeans.

This may also be one rare Muslim country where large crowds of women wearing hijab can be seen among the fans attending a Linkin Park or Mariah Carey concert, and hanging out late at night with friends at trendy places like Starbucks Coffee shops. This is not exclusive to young people only. The very costly recent solo performance by Engelbert Humperdinck was attended by many over middle age ladies in their classy Malay dresses and scarves respectably

4 The two other Muslim countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Brunei share many characteristics of the Malays.

accompanied by their husband. Many of these people go back home after midnight and still perform their last *salat* of the day. At the recent nationwide singing talent contest, the overwhelming winner was a Malay young man with a reputable religious background, and also who, among popular songs, delivered a few Islamic '*nashid*' (religious song).

Malays, by nature, are a fun-loving, easy-going people, and have an inborn affinity towards music and creative art. There is no barrier or controversy between their fun-loving lifestyle and their religious devotion. Malaysia is also unique in its food culture, where a large variety of halal food representing hundreds of different cultures and cuisines can be found.

#### 4) Religiously believing in occult charms

One other characteristic of Malay Muslims is their penchant towards the supernatural imbued in religion. Even though stories of *jinns* and black magic involving Qur'anic verses exist in many other Islamic societies, in Malaysia, somehow it has reached rather excessive extent. Somerset Maugham has written countless short stories about the '*Bomohs*' who put curses on people, wreck or save a marriage, take unimaginable revenge on the 'white master'.

Many people, especially in rural areas, still seek cures from *bomohs* rather than seeing a doctor. There are also special prayers to recite when passing through a jungle. Ghost story movies are well attended, and fiction novels with ghost and supernatural themes make to the best sellers list. So very often one hears about a spell put on somebody, then the search for another bomoh who has to be more powerful than the previous one to break or reverse the spell.

One other amusing twist in Malaysia corroborating the spilling over of religion into Malaysian culture can be seen in the fact that many non-Muslims have no qualms in using these essentially religious services, such as trying to locate a missing person for example. Rumors also have it that the reason why it never rains in the evenings on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July when the French Embassy holds their annual garden party for the Bastille Day, is because they have under their payroll a powerful bomoh.

#### 5) Acquiring a blend of multiethnic rituals

Malay weddings are a sight to behold in all the splendor of a ceremony entwining religion and customs. Usually the religious nikah and the exchange of gifts are finalized on the eve or a few days before the wedding ceremony. The highlight of the wedding is the arrival of the groom to the bride's house announced by the playing of *kompang*, a kind of small hand held

drum, accompanied by the chanting of religious verses at the entrance. The new couple is led to an elevated dais and is seated in two elaborately decorated chairs, awaiting the start of the 'bersanding' consisting of blessing the couple with colored rice and scented water, a ceremony that is a remnant of a Hindu ritual. The number of gifts exchanged, in fives, sevens, or nines, is also inherited from Hindu traditions. These have long been incorporated into Malay culture and are religiously followed by most Malays.

The Eid-il-Fitr, called Hari Raya is the most celebrated Muslim festival in Malaysia. The festive invitations and visiting last one whole month and mainly consist of serving varieties of food depending on the regions. In big cities the dates of invitations nowadays depend on the caterer's calendar. One newly acquired custom is the giving of money to children, (not only one's own children), in a small size, green color paper envelope. This is a custom adopted from the Chinese who use small red packets.

## II. EXCLUSIVITY OF THE MAJORITY

Islam being a way of life, this blend of religion and culture may be true of most Islamic communities, but in multiethnic Malaysia, this phenomenon has culminated into a claim of not only cultural and religious, but also political and economic exclusivity by the Malays, leading to some sort of exclusion from Islam many things with a Chinese epithet.

As was said earlier, in Malaysia, the generally accepted notion of 'Muslim is Malay', at the same time gives legitimacy to one other view of 'Malaysians of other races are non-Muslim', especially when it comes to the Chinese.

The linking of Islam to Malay ethnicity is described by Chandra Muzaffar in these words:

Islam defines the Malay. .... In all the things that matter in the cultural life of a person – from food to dress, to social intercourse, at one end, to birth, marriage and death, at the other end – Islamic forms and rituals provide convenient channels for distinguishing the Malay from the non-Malay within the Malaysian milieu.<sup>5</sup>

Zambry Abdul Kadir also argues that despite the character of the nation being defined

<sup>5</sup> Muzaffar, op.cit.

after the 'secular' Constitution, Islam has permeated all Malay social institutions and states functionaries, and the Malay psyche remains one that absorbs and internalizes Islamic tenets and teachings.<sup>6</sup>

The fusion of Malay and Muslim identities, one religious and the other ethnic, are openly manifested in the country's social, political, economic and religious interpretations. This 'exclusivity of the majority', to borrow Gladney's (1998) words, somehow, has put the almost 60.000 Malaysian Chinese Muslims, most of them converts, into a cultural identity dilemma.

### 1) Ethnic appearance

Starting from the physical looks that distinguish a Malay from a Chinese, we already see how Malays define Islam in their own ethnic appearance. Many a times, on his way to his prayers, a Chinese has been stopped at the entrance to the mosque, and asked if he is Muslim, because in Malaysia a Chinese face simply does not 'look' Muslim. Is there a Muslim look? "How do you sift a Muslim from a non-Muslim?" Laments Zaharah Razak<sup>7</sup>, as she vents on "If they look Malay, Arab, dressed like a Muslim, must they be Muslims? How about Chinese Muslims from China?" ...?

My young son, in the midst of his prayers at a mosque, heard from the Malay children standing a few steps away from him: "Orang Cina tak boleh sembahyang sini, tahu?" (Chinese people cannot pray here you know.)

It also happened that my greeting of *Assalamualaikum* was met with silence and a blank stare, especially by Malay officials in government agencies, who sometimes even show a look of irritation because the Muslim salam comes from a Chinese face. On the other hand, Malaysian Chinese have also long taken for granted that Muslims in this country can only be Malay. They think that a Chinese who is Muslim (more so if he/she is a convert), has to become Malay, therefore the misnomer '*masuk Melayu*'. A few decades ago, and even today, albeit to a lesser extent, Many Chinese treat the convert as having betrayed their race, and look down upon them. Countless parents have rejected their sons and daughters upon their embracing Islam because they felt humiliated and ridiculed.<sup>8</sup>

Chinese and Muslim somehow feels mutually exclusive to many Malaysian Chinese who

6 Zambry Abdul Kadir. "Islam & Politics in Malaysia: A Changing Scenario", Conference paper delivered at Center for Leadership & Development Studies, May 2000, Taipei.

7 *New Straits Times*, Malaysian daily newspaper 'Letters'. July 5, 2000, 13.

8 See Rosey Ma, *Difficulties faced by Chinese Muslim Converts in Malaysia*, 1996 for a detailed analysis of this matter.

habitually refer to Islam as the Malay religion. My children of both Chinese Hui parentage have been asked by their Chinese teacher that if both his parents are Chinese, how come he is Malay. Another one commented in surprise: "*You are Muslim and speak such good Chinese!*"

### 2) Language and reading material

In Malaysia, Malay is the official language, but English may still be considered as the most socially used spoken language. The different ethnic groups conserve their mother tongue. The attachment of religion to Malay ethnicity has resulted in Islam almost forcefully taking Malay as the language used by Muslims, and more so, in the information media and when teaching religious knowledge.

For some people this may go to the extreme as told by one informer who married a Malay: "My mother-in-law told me not to retain any Chinese culture, to the extent of forbidding me to have any Chinese friend or even speaking Chinese with the shopkeepers, and later to my children".<sup>9</sup> Her children were not allowed to learn their mother's mother tongue. Now that her mother-in-law has passed away, she speaks Chinese with her grandchildren. The reason for not allowing her to speak Chinese was "because my mother-in-law was convinced that continuing to speak Chinese may corrupt my new religion."

Many Malays have also talked about this problem and condemned the linguistic attachment to Islam. Mohideen (1994) wrote: "Can we categorize languages as Muslim and non-Muslim? .... A language is only to help us communicate. For that reason Arabic does not become a Muslim language, .... For the same reason, non-Malay Muslims do not have to interact socially in Bahasa Melayu if that is not their first language."<sup>10</sup> But it is difficult to change the mindset of many people, and a Chinese Muslim is just expected to be fluent in Malay, by virtue of having embraced Islam.

### 3) The name issue

In Malaysia, names will easily tell the ethnic origins, as well as, very often, the religion of a person. Malays used to have more Arabic rooted Muslim names both for males and females. Now many parents give their children names in Malay, or names made up of syllabus from the parents' names without any particular meaning.

9 "Oral history", 2001, Terengganu.

10 Haja Mohideen bin Mohamed Ali. "Muslim converts in Malaysia: Do we make them feel comfortable?" In *Islamic Herald*, Vol.1 February 1994, Kuala Lumpur.

When a person becomes Muslim in Malaysia, he has to register this officially. Without an official record stating his/her new religious status, the person is not allowed to marry a Muslim. Upon registration the new Muslim is asked to have a change of name. He/she is given a choice of a Muslim name adding *bin / binte Abdullah* (son / daughter of Abdullah) at the end. Usually there is no strong objection to acquiring a Muslim name. But for a long time, they were also asked to discard their former name and surname.

For Chinese who have a historical tradition of genealogy, the family surname is very important, particularly for a male. And the first name is carefully chosen by the elders in the family either according to clan tradition or a significant meaning. To replace the family surname with *bin Abdullah* which literally means 'son of Abdullah' (servant of Allah) has created unduly unhappiness and grievances for Chinese families in which a member has converted to Islam. The person known formerly as Gao Yong An or Chen Fang Lan suddenly, officially becomes Kamal bin Abdullah and Fawziah binte Abdullah. Among many reasons given for this name change was 'It's pleasing to Allah for you to have a good name with good meaning.' How come *Yong An* (*forever in peace*), and *Fang Lan* (*fragrant orchid*) would not be considered names with good meanings is most puzzling to the bearers.

In the early days, when Chinese converts were few and apart, and thinking that this was a compulsory condition of becoming Muslim, the name change was accepted, willingly or reluctantly. But it led to many Chinese sons and daughters to be rejected by the parents.

Many Chinese converts expressed their dissatisfaction at this rule that often was one of the root causes of family opposition. When they learn that this is not a religious requirement but is an administrative rule, their frustration and anger is diverted to the Malays' high-handedness. Many of them think that the addition of *bin / binti Abdullah* is compelled upon them with the purpose of ethnic identification, and the intention of letting it be known that they are converts, specifically on official documents. "...they [would-be converts] are humiliated by the imposition of a fictitious father by annexing to their name 'bin' or 'binti' Abdullah. I cannot help but feel that this label is precisely meant to isolate and alienate us from the born-Muslims (Malays), as if we new believers are second-class Muslims".<sup>11</sup>

In Kelantan, the Chief Minister Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz came out publicly to denounce this administrative ruling: "In Islam any name is allowed. Changing one's name upon conversion is a new culture in Malaysia, a practice adopted from somewhere." According to the new rulings from the Religious Department, which came into effect in 1999, the person

11 Oral history.

can choose how he wishes to have his name on the new identity card. Now, some of the better informed converts keep their own name, only adding on a new Muslim name of their choice.

#### 4) Culture and festivities

The 'ethnicization' of the religion as a defense mechanism towards the Chinese who form the largest minority community in Malaysia, culminates in the way Chinese culture and traditions are ostracized in the name of Islam by quite a segment of Malay Muslims. "I am a convert. May I still celebrate Chinese New year with my family?" asks a distressed Mohkzani Tan bin Abdullah.<sup>12</sup> He goes on to say that his Malay religious teacher told him that it would be haram for him to celebrate the Chinese festivals now that he is Muslim. Mohkzani is not alone in this dilemma. He is not well informed yet about Islam, therefore he relies on his religious teacher. If the religious teacher is of the type defined above, then anything Chinese becomes 'haram'.

In Malaysia, cultural and religious festivals representing various ethnic groups are celebrated in a national scale. But for many Malaysians, apart from partaking of the food, and enjoying the music and dances, the true meaning of the festivals of other ethnic groups is quite unknown to most people. Not many Chinese understand the significance of the celebration at the end of Ramadhan, or the *Eid-il-Adha*. For them these are times '*the Malays are free now to eat all they can*' after one month of abstinence, and the time when they 'slaughter' animals and go back to their villages.

In the same way, not many Malays realize that behind the few major Chinese festivals celebrated in Malaysia, there are historical traditions rather than religious significance. The Chinese New Year started as a celebration of the end of the harvest season in the Chinese peasant society. After winter had settled in, people now look forward to the new spring on earth, manifested by a renewal of all living things in nature. In fact this festive day is called 'Spring Festival' in Chinese. As a minority community intense on keeping their cultures alive, this is the most celebrated event of the year by the Chinese. This is the time when all family members gather at the patriarch's home for a reunion dinner on the eve of the Chinese New Year. Traditional food with auspicious meanings is served, respects are paid to the elderly and children receive gift money in red packets. Everybody wear new clothes, preferably with something red in color. There are lion dance shows and Chinese martial arts presentations, and many more events reflecting Chinese culture and food. The festivities last fifteen days,

12 Names have been changed to ensure privacy.

probably the only non-working days in the year for many Chinese businesses. There is no religious connotation to all these celebrations, even though some families will take the opportunity to make offerings to their ancestors or gods, for protection, good fortune and prosperity.

As is the custom in Malaysia, the government celebrates Chinese New Year on a big scale as it does for festive days of the other major races or religions (Eid-il Fitr for the Muslims, Deepavali or Festival of light for the Indians, Christmas for the Christians, Festival of Harvest for the Ibans, etc.). Chinese families will hold 'open house' for many days for friends of all ethnicities, as will the other races on their festive days. Many Malays go to their Chinese friends' house to visit and will attend the 'open house' of Chinese ministers. Yet, a big number of Malays in religious authoritative positions still go on telling the Chinese converts that, since they are Muslim now, they should not go back to their family for the New Year celebration.

My children have been asked by their religious teacher at school about our eating habits at home, and were specifically asked if we use chopsticks. When my children said yes, the teacher told them to inform us (the parents) that it is haram for Muslims to eat with chopsticks because it is Chinese.

One informant was utterly distressed because she was told by her Malay ustaz that as a Muslim, it would be improper for her to attend her (Chinese, non-Muslim) father's funeral. Filial piety is an utmost duty for Chinese, and seven years after her father's death, this young woman was still feeling very remorseful for not having paid the last respects to her father when he died. What could be the answer to her question: "If attending a Chinese funeral, even for one's own parent, where there are more traditional customary rites than religious, is deemed conflicting for a Muslim, how come it is alright for Malay state dignitaries to attend the late Pope's Christian funeral in Vatican?"

There is also the case of a Chinese girl who converted to marry a Malay boy. After the nikah, the girl invited the Imam to come to the wedding dinner given by her widowed mother. When the Imam saw that the table clothes at the wedding dinner were red color he was very disturbed and decreed that since using red was a Chinese custom, it was most inappropriate, and demanded the red tablecloths to be changed. (Red color symbolizes happiness and prosperity in Chinese tradition, and is habitually used on auspicious occasions).

An incident that grabbed the attention is about a Chinese family in a tug of war with the Islamic Religious Department over the body of their son. The son had converted to Islam without the family's knowledge. When he died in an accident, his identity card revealed

his Muslim identity. The parents claimed the body and prepared for a Chinese funeral. The religious department interfered saying that the deceased should be buried the Islamic way. This incident made headlines for a long time even in the most serious Chinese newspapers in the country, mostly accusing the Islamic Religious Department of insensitiveness to family feelings.

One other recent inheritance case brought to public view the struggle of a Chinese widow and her three sons against the Shariah court. The husband had converted to Islam, but not the family. When the man died without leaving a will, the Shariah court took custody of the estate he left, and did not allocate anything to the widow and the three young children because they were not Muslims. This case went on for more than fifteen years. Only a few months ago the court decided on 'humanitarian grounds' to give one part of the estate to the family, still to the dissatisfaction of the family who was claiming for the full amount left by the father.

Any controversy of this sort is played upon by the Chinese media and incites racial feelings, destructive to interethnic relationship between the Chinese and Malays, and extends to blaming Islam as unfair. Alternatively I may also say, it feeds the disappointment the Chinese feel towards Islamic rulings, extending the same feelings of antipathy towards the Malays.

## II. THE MALAY PSYCHE

Shamsul talks about Islam being used as the last defense shield of Malays against compatriots of other ethnic descent in Malaysia.<sup>13</sup> He argues that, the reason the Malays cling to Islam as the concrete hold to their ethnicity is due to them having lost in the past few decades the cushioning comfort of their Sultan and the monopoly on their language. The Malay language, Bahasa Malaysia, is now the national language taught in schools; it is competently spoken and written by majority Malaysians including all other ethnic groups, and belongs to everybody. Therefore, Islam has become the only remaining element of Malayness for the Malays, a space in which they are reluctant to accept the intrusion of the non-Malays, especially the Chinese. "They (the Malays) don't welcome us in the religion. They want Islam only for themselves." This expression of lament from a Chinese convert points to the feeling of exclusion from Islam that many Chinese Muslims are made to experience.

13 A. B. Shamsul "Debating about Identity in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis", *Southeast Asian Studies*, 34, no.3 (1996), 476-499.

With the Malay and national political games focusing more on Islam in the last few decades, religion is being increasingly used in all kinds of social, economic, and state implementations. This creates a feeling of alienation in peoples of other races, especially the Chinese, who feel once Islam comes into the picture, they are naturally excluded, socially, politically, and economically. For the Chinese converts, having become Muslim does not necessarily entail their safeguard against this exclusion. State-defined new religious identity notwithstanding, many Chinese converts have expressed that “The Malays treat us as second-hand Muslims”.

## CONCLUSION

As in many other countries where Islam is the main religion, in Malaysia, the local, in this instance, not only Malay, but even the multiethnic Malaysian cultures have impregnated every aspect of its practice. And the Malays who are the dominant Muslim community have sort of claimed ownership of the religion, at the same time feeling that Islam only belongs to their ethnic group. The color of Islam is brought into economics, education, social functions, cultural activities and interethnic relations. It is increasingly shaping the Malay political parties, extending to dictate the direction of the national and foreign policies. Malaysia is a vibrant case of ‘glocalisation’ of the Islamic religion.

This creates some problems for the small minority of Chinese Muslims in Malaysia. (The current paper only focuses on the Chinese.) They are somehow forced either by relevant individuals or the environment they live in, to replace much of their Chinese customs and culture by the prevalent Malay way of life to be able to fit in as a Muslim, in the family and the society.

In the early 1960s the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman had pushed for proactive programs to have more Chinese convert to Islam in the wishful thought of securing nation building and better integration of all races, especially between Malays and Chinese. Today, conversion of Chinese has more or less taken a natural course through more equitable interaction among races leading to more interethnic marriages rather than through missionary movements.

This trend will benefit the country only if becoming Muslim is not necessarily packaged into becoming Malay as well. Only by recognizing Islam as the universal religion that it is, and accepting that one’s own ethnic culture is an integral part of one’s being, will Malaysia keep its reputation of a modern, multiethnic Muslim country that celebrates ‘harmony in diversity’.