



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**CHRISTIANITY AND THE WORLDVIEW OF THE KELABIT SOCIETY,  
SARAWAK, MALAYSIA**

**HEE CHAN JUNG  
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**CHRISTIANITY AND THE WORLDVIEW OF THE KELABIT SOCIETY,  
SARAWAK, MALAYSIA**

**By**

**HEE CHAN JUNG**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,  
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**September 2009**



## **DEDICATION**

*To My GOD, Wife, Three Daughters and the Kelabits*



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

**CHRISTIANITY AND THE WORLDVIEW OF THE KELABIT SOCIETY,  
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By

**HEE CHAN JUNG**

**September 2009**

**Chairman: Jayum Anak Jawan, PhD**

**Faculty: Human Ecology**

The purpose of this study was to examine Christianity and the worldview of Kelabit society, which is one of the small indigenous groups in Sarawak, East Malaysia. There were four objectives outlined in this study. Firstly, the study examined the spread of Christianity in the Kelabit highlands, Sarawak and Malaysia. Secondly, it was carried out to determine the religiosity of the Kelabit. Thirdly, it was done to identify the worldview of the Kelabit, and finally it was aimed at analyzing the social changes experienced by the Kelabit society and their worldview.

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were applied for this study. Data from the qualitative research were collected through in-depth interview with forty-one respondents who were selected from among social, religious and educational leaders of the Kelabit society. Participant observation was also conducted by the researcher in the villages in Bario, Sarawak. Meanwhile, qualitative data were arranged by encoding them into thirteen topics. The topics were classified by three



important themes, which included religiosity of Christianity, worldview and social changes of the Kelabit. The qualitative data were analyzed by interpreting according to the three main themes. In addition, the quantitative data were also obtained by distributing one hundred questionnaires among the Kelabits who are residing in Kelabit Highlands, Miri, Kuching and Kuala Lumpur. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 15.0.

There are four findings yielded in this research. Firstly, the Kelabit society has been influenced by the spread of Christianity through the Australian and American missionaries in the early stage. As a result, the Kelabits converted to Christianity and experienced the Christian revival. Secondly, the Kelabit has unique religious practices which include various church activities such as early morning prayers and worships. Moreover, their religiosity is strongly related to their social lifestyles. Thirdly, the present worldview of the Kelabits is influenced through the years by animism, Christianity and Christian revival. Finally, the study also revealed that the worldview of the Kelabits has shaped their society.

In conclusion, it can be said that the present worldview of the Kelabit has been strongly influenced by Christianity. More importantly, their Christianized worldview has brought positive changes and improvement in the life of the Kelabits.

Abstract tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**KRISTIANITI DAN PANDANGAN DUNIA MASYARAKAT KELABIT,  
SARAWAK, MALAYSIA**

Oleh

**HEE CHAN JUNG**

**September 2009**

**Pengerusi : Jayum Anak Jawan, PhD**

**Fakulti : Ekologi Manusia**

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji Kristianiti dan pandangan orang Kelabit terhadap dunia. Masyarakat Kelabit merupakan salah satu kaum peribumi yang terkecil yang terdapat di Sarawak, Malaysia Timur. Terdapat empat objektif dalam kajian ini. Objektif yang pertama ialah untuk mengkaji penyebaran Kristianiti di Dataran Tinggi Kelabit, Sarawak dan Malaysia. Objektif yang kedua adalah untuk mengenalpasti amalan keagamaan orang Kelabit. Objektif yang ketiga adalah untuk mengenal pasti pandangan dunia orang Kelabit. Objektif yang akhir ialah untuk menentukan perubahan sosial yang dipengaruhi oleh pandangan dunia masyarakat Kelabit.

Kedua-dua kaedah kajian kualitatif dan kuantitatif telah digunakan di dalam kajian ini. Data kajian kualitatif diperolehi melalui temu bual yang mendalam dengan empat puluh satu orang responden yang telah dipilih dalam kalangan pemimpin sosial, agama dan pendidikan masyarakat Kelabit. Pemerhatian penyelidik juga telah

dilakukan di kampung-kampung di Bario, Sarawak. Data kualitatif berkenaan disusun dengan mengekodkan data tersebut ke dalam tiga belas topik. Topik tersebut telah diklasifikasikan oleh tiga tema yang penting iaitu amalan keagamaan Kristian, pandangan dunia dan perubahan sosial orang Kelabit. Data kualitatif telah dianalisis melalui pentafsiran berdasarkan ketiga-tiga tema utama itu. Data kajian kuantitatif pula diperolehi melalui seratus borang soal selidik yang dikumpul daripada orang Kelabit yang menetap di Dataran Tinggi Kelabit, Miri, Kuching dan Kuala Lumpur. Data kuantitatif ini telah dianalisis dengan menggunakan perisian window SPSS 15.0. untuk memperoleh hasil kajian.

Terdapat empat penemuan kajian ini. Penemuan yang pertama ialah masyarakat Kelabit telah dipengaruhi oleh penyebaran agama Kristian melalui dari Australia dan Amerika pada peringkat awal. Kesannya, masyarakat Kelabit telah memeluk agama Kristian dan mengalami pembangunan rohani. Penemuan yang kedua ialah Kelabit yang mempunyai keunikan beragama yang dipraktikkan dalam beberapa aktiviti gereja seperti doa pada waktu pagi awal dan beberapa penyembahan. Keagamaan sangat berkait rapat dengan cara hidup social masyarakat Kelabit. Penemuan yang ketiga ialah pandangan dunia Kelabit pada masa ini telah dipengaruhi oleh animisme, pertukaran kepada Kristianiti dan kebangunan rohani Kristian. Penemuan yang terakhir pula menunjukkan bahawa pandangan dunia suku kaum Kelabit telah membentuk masyarakat mereka.

Kesimpulannya, bolehlah dikatakan bahawa pandangan dunia Kelabit pada masa ini sangat dipengaruhi oleh Kristianiti. Pandangan dunia berasaskan Kristianiti ini telah membawa perubahan dan peningkatan tahap kehidupan masyarakat Kelabit.

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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 10 September 2009 to conduct the final examination of Hee Chan Jung on his thesis entitled “Christianity and the Worldview of the Kelabit Society, Sarawak, Malaysia” in accordance with Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

Members of the Thesis Examination Committee were as follows:

**Adlina Binti AB Halim, PhD**

Senior Lecturer  
Faculty Human Ecology  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Chairman)

**Zaid Bin Ahmad, PhD**

Associate Professor  
Faculty Human Ecology  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Internal Examiner)

**Zahid Bin Emby, PhD**

Senior Lecturer  
Faculty Human Ecology  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Internal Examiner)

**Azizan Binti Baharuddin, PhD**

Professor  
Centre for Civilizational Dialogue  
Universiti Malaya  
Malaysia  
(External Examiner)

---

**BUJANG BIN KIM HUAT, PhD**

Professor and Deputy Dean  
School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 15 January 2010



This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as a fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

**Jayum Anak Jawan, PhD**  
Professor and Deputy Dean  
Faculty Human Ecology  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Chairman)

**Nurdeng Deuraseh, PhD**  
Associate Professor  
Faculty Human Ecology  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)

**Sarjit Singh a/l Darshan Singh, PhD**  
Senior Lecturer  
Faculty Human Ecology  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)

---

**HASANAH MOHD GHAZALI, PhD**  
Professor and Dean  
School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 14 February 2010



## **DECLARATION**

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institutions.

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**HEE CHAN JUNG**

Date: 8<sup>th</sup> January 2010



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APPS	Assistance for Padi Planters Scheme
BEM	Borneo Evangelical Mission
C&MA	Christian and Missionary Alliance
CCM	Council of the Churches of Malaysia
EIC	East India Company
LMS	London Missionary Society
MAS	Malaysian Airlines System
MBS	Malaysia Bible Seminary
MEC	Malaysia Evangelical College
NECF	National Evangelical Christian Fellowship
SIB	Sidang Injil Borneo or Evangelical Church of Borneo
SMK	Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan
SPSS	The Statistical Package for the Social Science
UM	Universiti Malaya
UPM	Universiti Putra Malaysia
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia
UNIMAS	Universiti Malaysia Sarawak



## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

This study researched Christianity and the worldview of Kelabit that affected the society. The first chapter illustrates the general direction of the study by presenting the background of the study, statement of problem, objectives of the study, significance of the study, limitations of the study, definition of terms, and organization of the study.

#### **1.2 Background of the Study**

Society has been built upon the foundation of religions throughout human history. Therefore, whenever a society's religions were changed by any influence from outside or from within, the society itself would change. There are various societies which are influenced by different religious views; the western countries are influenced by the Christianity, while the Islamic countries are impacted by the

Islamic view. Historically, countries in Asia had been mostly influenced by Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. Huntington (2003) suggested how to live in peace in his work entitled, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. In his writing, Huntington insisted that nations, especially strong governments, should refrain from intervening in conflicts by involving other civilizations. Obviously, every religion needs to be respected by each other. Similarly, each civilization needs to learn from others in order to develop into a better society. Max Weber, a well-known sociologist, insisted that economy is strongly related to religions. In *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* which was written in 1904, Weber (1967) argued that capitalism was formed by the Christian doctrines. Weber also argued that China was influenced by Confucianism and Taoism (1968), while India was impacted by Hinduism and Buddhism (1958). The lifestyle of people cannot be separated from their religions since their behaviours are governed by their worldviews which are influenced by their own religions. In specific, Christian view was deeply embedded by the Christian history and the Bible which included both the Old and the New Testaments. The Christian view can influence the beliefs, values, and behaviour of individuals and societies.



Malaysia is a country which has been developed on the multi-ethnic society. Thus, the country needs to play a crucial role in managing the tension and reconciliation among the different ethnic groups. M. Shamsul Haque (2003) described the formation of the country as basically found upon ethnic politics and characterized as an “ethnocratic state”, or “ethnic democracy”. Thus, Tunku, who was the first Prime Minister called as the “Father of Malaysia’s Independence”, which set a pattern of administration to achieve political stability and multi-racial harmony for the country’s survival until 1969 (Kheng, 2002). However, the country continued to face political tensions, particularly among the different ethnicities. Therefore, various efforts were done with the hope to achieve unity and harmony in Malaysia. Later, Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad developed several *terms* such as *Bangsa Malaysia*, *Wawasan 2020*, and *Melayu Baru* (Beng, 2006). He presented a vision or direction to move forward for a better Malaysia by working together, although Malaysia comes with plural-societal nature in life and in politics. As a result, Malaysia could achieve the needed economic growth which could help to achieve general satisfaction and narrow down the ethnic divisions. The inter-ethnic relations were being redefined by the Islamic perspective from *Bangsa Malaysia* or United Malaysian Race to *Islam Hadhari* or Civilisational Islam so as to propose a model for modernizing Islamic nations (Beng, 2006). In addition, Beng also described that while *Bumiputera*

involved ethnic exclusion and *Bangsa Malaysia* suggested ethnic inclusion, *Islam Hadhari* focused on the relationship of Islam and the Malays with other ethnic groups, as well as economic growth, urbanism and scientific thought. In relation to *Islam Hadhari*, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2006) stated that:

Inter-civilisation dialogues can take place at the official level between governments as well as along the ‘second track’, in other words, at the non-governmental level. This is possible because the subject of the dialogue concerns human relations between peoples of different creeds and religions (Badawi, 2006, p. 126).

Badawi had an assurance that *Islam Hadhari* seemed to have been entirely consistent with peace and harmony since *Islam Hadhari* was all about living peacefully and respecting each other. Moreover, the approach of *Islam Hadhari* would bring excellence, distinction and glory to all Malaysians, including Muslims and non-Muslims (Badawi, 2006). This study is relatable to the inter-civilisational dialogues Badawi stated about *Islam Hadhari*. Even though Malaysia is an Islamic country, there are several other religions which have existed in the society such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity. Malaysia has a multi-cultural society which comprises various races, tribes, culture, languages, and embraces different religions. Therefore, it is extremely significant to have a national identity for the whole Malaysians. This identity could be accomplished by the developments of education, economy, politics and culture. However, one of important issues for the people would be their religions.

Therefore, it is important for the people to respect other religions by knowing and understanding them. Moreover, they could learn some valuable thoughts and practices, to develop the society by having good and balanced relationship with other religions.

The aforementioned considerations specifically presented a case to introduce the influence of Christianity and the worldview for social development. For this case, the Kelabit tribe was chosen since the tribe had already experienced considerable social changes caused by Christianity and the worldview in the society. The Kelabit, a tribe of more than 6,000 people, whose settlers were located 3,280 feet above sea level, is one of the minor ethnic groups in Sarawak, Malaysia. Prior to the ruling of James Brooke's Government in Sarawak, the Kelabit had been involved in animism and head hunting raids. They lived under the fear of spirits, omens, taboos and head hunting raids of other tribes.

However, they had significantly changed ever since they were converted to Christianity during a mass conversion in the 1940s. After their conversion, the community started to change dramatically in various areas such as in education, economy, politics and culture.



Although they have been living in the remote areas of the highlands in Sarawak, the Kelabits are successful in education. In 1946, the first school was opened in the Kelabit society. At present, approximately 90 percent of the Kelabits are literate, with ten percent having various qualifications such as diplomas, degrees, post-graduate degrees and professional qualifications. Furthermore, the Bario community was chosen by the World Teleport Association as one of the top seven intelligent communities in 2001, together with the Ennis in Ireland, LaGrange in Georgia, Nevada in Missouri, New York City in New York, Singapore and Sunderland in England (Bulan and Bulan-Dorai, 2004).

The economy of the Kelabit has also been well developed since they were converted to Christianity, i.e. from the traditional lives which were controlled by their taboos, omens and spirits. In the past, they drank large quantities of rice-wine or *borak* and this caused them not being able to harvest their crops properly, due to the lack of working hours. After this society accepted Christianity, the people have become liberated from the burdens of spirits, taboos, omens, and rice-wine. As expected, their economy has also been improved as they started to achieve higher levels of efficiency in work by releasing themselves from destructive traits and beliefs.



The political patterns of the Kelabit have also been advancing since their conversion to Christianity. According to the Kelabit interviewees, the majority of the Kelabits became Christians in the 1940s. At the moment, 99 percent of the Kelabits remain Christians. The political leaders of the society such as the *Pemanca*, *Penghulu*, *Ketua Kampung* have also embraced Christianity. Even though they have their own laws such as *Adat* Kelabit, they are able to reconcile some matters in church. However, if these matters cannot be reconciled in church, *Ketua Kampung* or *Penghulu* or *Pemanca* will solve them according to their laws or *Adat*. Among the Kelabit community, there is no significant gap between religion and the social leadership because they have been cooperating together for the development of the society by having the same religion, i.e. Christianity.

It is important to note that the Kelabits also have unique rituals and culture, such as having tattoos, extended earlobes, dances, foods, songs and games. During the pre-Christian period in particular, the people practiced the traditional rituals for head hunting, changing names, and funerals. However, they forbid all the rituals and culture which are related to spirits, taboos, and omens ever since they converted to Christianity. Interestingly, they have also modified some of their traditional cultural practices by adapting them to suit the teachings of Christianity such as in the



changing names ceremony. Besides, they managed to develop their own traditional customs such as dances, games, beaded hats, beaded necklaces and clothes. At the same time, they have completely accepted some new rituals such as wedding ceremonies and other religious practices which are commonly conducted by the western people or in the Christian ways. The Kelabits have also been successful in adapting and working together in the multi-cultural society of Malaysia by producing educated Kelabits such as medical doctors, highly-placed government officers, professors and businessmen. They cooperate with with the people of other races and believers of other religions while engaging themselves in the Malaysian multi-ethnic society. Even though the population is exceptionally small, their community has been increasing because a number of the Kelabits have inter-marriages with people of other races such as Malaysian Chinese, Malaysian Indians, other neighbouring tribes, and westerners. Nonetheless, they have successfully been maintaining their identity and community by accepting the non-Kelabits into their family fold. Therefore, this study focused to identifying Christianity among the Kelabit, their worldview, and the causes of their social change in order to understand their society. Thus, this research will present some insights or ideas for other societies to develop into a better society.