

Thought Paper No. 6

Language and the Malay Muslim Identity: An Insight into Brunei¹

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Sitting at a government clinic, a conversation was overheard between a woman and a little girl. They looked characteristically Malay, and because of the hijab on the woman, it was easy to deduce that they are of the Muslim faith. The language used between the mother and her child, however, was unmistakably English with the child almost monolingually so. The mother's utterances, on the other hand, were dotted with some Malay words like the *bah* particle, but English was noticeably dominant. At a small café in a neighbourhood shopping complex, a group of impressionable young Bruneian ladies were animatedly talking about their driving experiences. Again, the conversation was mostly in English, with a few Malay words inserted every now and then. Like the mother in the previous scene, the ladies were all clad in hijabs, and the authors' assumptions that they are Malay and Muslims were unanimously confirmed by the subjects themselves.

What the above scenarios intended to exemplify is that English is now ubiquitous in Brunei, and as research has shown, is the most preferred language for interactions, particularly among young Bruneians.⁴ A truly monolingual English-speaking Bruneian may be a rarity, but bilingual Malay-English Bruneians are definitely in the majority. A series of surveys on language use and language preference was recently conducted on 830 Bruneians of Malay ethnicity of various ages.⁵ Although a majority claim to have Brunei Malay as their first language or mother tongue (734 or 88.4%), only 360 (43.4%) chose this language as they preferred to use or the one they mostly use for everyday communication. More selected the choice "Brunei Malay and English equally," albeit slightly so (383 or 46.0%), and a handful indicated that they use mostly or only English

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⁴ Salbrina, S., 'An English-centric monolingual Brunei? Predictions and reality,' Asian Englishes, 2(3), (2020). pp. 257-281.

⁵ English in Brunei. 'english_in_brunei' [Instagram]. 19 December (2020). Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ci9nwnPBZ8D/>

(66 or 8.0%) (see Figure 1). This is an intriguing development, especially since nearly 40 years ago, English was regarded as a foreign language by many in Brunei with a minority claiming it as their second language.¹ In the late 1990s, a survey on over 300 Bruneians discovered that a shift had occurred with a majority of Bruneians using English as their second language. However, the same study also concluded that English would never be acquired as a first language in Brunei.² As we saw from the findings of the recently-conducted surveys, the latter appears to have been debunked. So, what changed? One plausible explanation that has been offered has to do with Brunei's education system,³ the current one of which, *Sistem Pendidikan Negara Abad ke-21* or SPN21, is said to have placed a heavier emphasis on English than its predecessor,⁴ the Bilingual Education System (BES), or commonly known as the *Dwibahasa*.

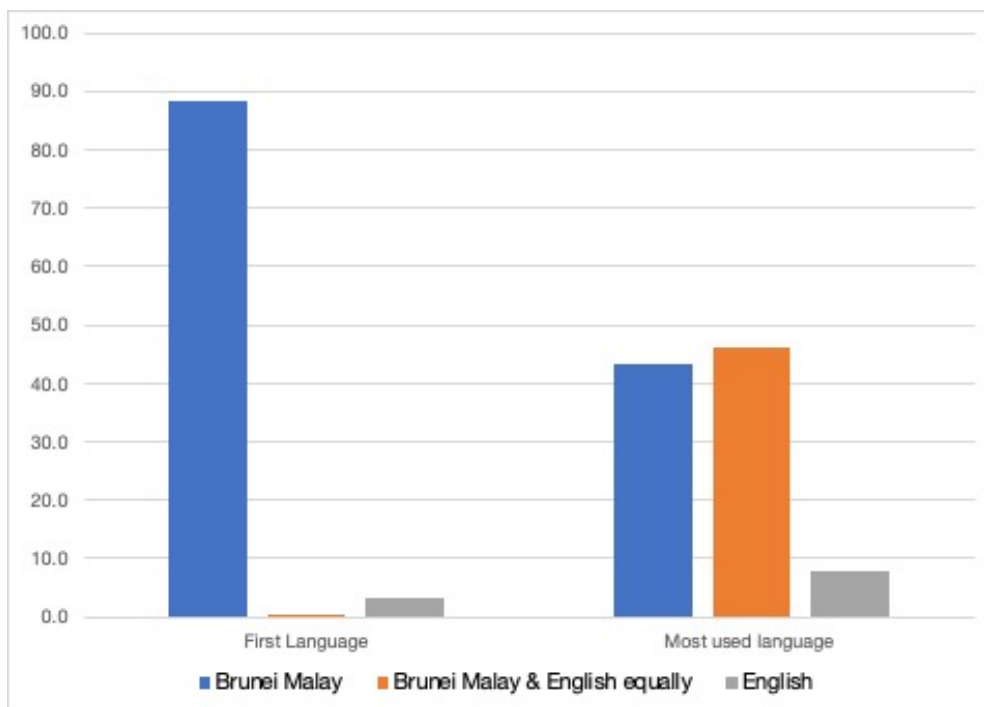


Figure 1. First language and language most used

In the *Dwibahasa*, which was implemented post-independence in 1984,⁵ primary education began with Malay as the medium of instruction. Upon entering their fourth year of primary schooling, pupils were then taught using English for several subjects, viz. Mathematics, Science, Geography, History and of course, English. When SPN21 was rolled out in 2009, there was a change of policy in terms of when English was first introduced in the education system. It is now

¹ Hill, G., 'English in Brunei: Second language or foreign language?', *World Language English*, 1(4), (1982), pp. 240-242.

² Ozóg, C., 'The unplanned use of English', in Martin, P. W., Ozóg, C., & Poedjosoedarmo, G. (eds.) *Language use and language change in Brunei*. Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1996, pp. 156-172.

³ Salbrina, S., & Hasharina, H. (forthcoming) 'The Malays of Brunei: An investigation of their family language policies'.

⁴ Haji-Othman, N. A., 'It's not always English: Duelling aunties in Brunei Darussalam,' in Rapatahana, V., & Bunce, P. (eds.) *English language as hydra: Its impacts on non-English language cultures*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2012, pp. 175-190.

⁵ *The National Education System for the 21st Century 2013*, 2nd edn. Brunei Darussalam: Ministry of Education.

the instructional language when pupils are in their first year of primary school education, with only four subjects taught in the nation's official language, *Bahasa Melayu*. This move has not been well-received by some educators and scholars, with Gary Jones recommending delaying the use of English until pupils have "a firmer initial grasp of Malay."¹ However, an investigation on the English language-in-education policy revealed some form of resistance to any plans, should there be, to revert to the old ways with more than half of the pupils surveyed preferring English to Malay for the teaching of Mathematics and Science.²

To assess the extent to which the education system is responsible for widespread bilingualism in Brunei and the increasing inclination towards day-to-day English use, the data from the 830 Brunei Malays was examined further by grouping the respondents according to the education system they had been in.³ Those born from 2003 onwards would have had their education under the SPN21 whilst those born from 1975 until 2002 would be of the *Dwibahasa* or BES generation. Those born before 1975 were categorised as pre-BES; the education system then was streamed into separate Malay and English mediums. It had been noted in the early 1980s, however, that even those in the English stream were 'reluctant to undertake any oral practice outside the class'⁴ and that speaking English was seen as 'unpatriotic'.⁵

Once the respondents were sorted into the three groups outlined above, the results are then analysed and presented as Figures 2 (i.e., education system against claimed first language) and 3 (i.e., education system against language most preferred for daily use). A closer inspection of the figures reveals an apparent relationship between the Bruneians' first language, language preference and the education system that they had been in. The following observations are made:

1. The number of Bruneians who claimed to have Brunei Malay as their first language decreases with each educational-generation, whilst the number of English-as-a-first language speakers sees a slight increase.
2. The number of Bruneians who claimed to prefer the use of Brunei Malay for daily interactions decreases with age, that is, the younger the Bruneians, the less likely they would use Brunei Malay only.
3. Conversely, the number of English-inclined Bruneians, that is, those who prefer communicating in English, increases with age.
4. The number of Malay-English bilingual Bruneians increases considerably following the implementation of the BES.

¹ Jones, G. M., 'Policy and practice in the use of English in Brunei primary school classes', *World Englishes*, 35(4), 2016, pp. 509-518.

² Salbrina, S., & Jaidin, J. H., 'Brunei's SPN21 English language-in-education policy: A macro-to-micro evaluation', *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 21(2), 2019, pp. 175-201.

³ English in Brunei. 'english_in_brunei' [Instagram]. 18 December 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ci8Mi9sBQtG/>

⁴ Hill, 'English in Brunei: Second language or foreign language?', pg. 241

⁵ Ibid.

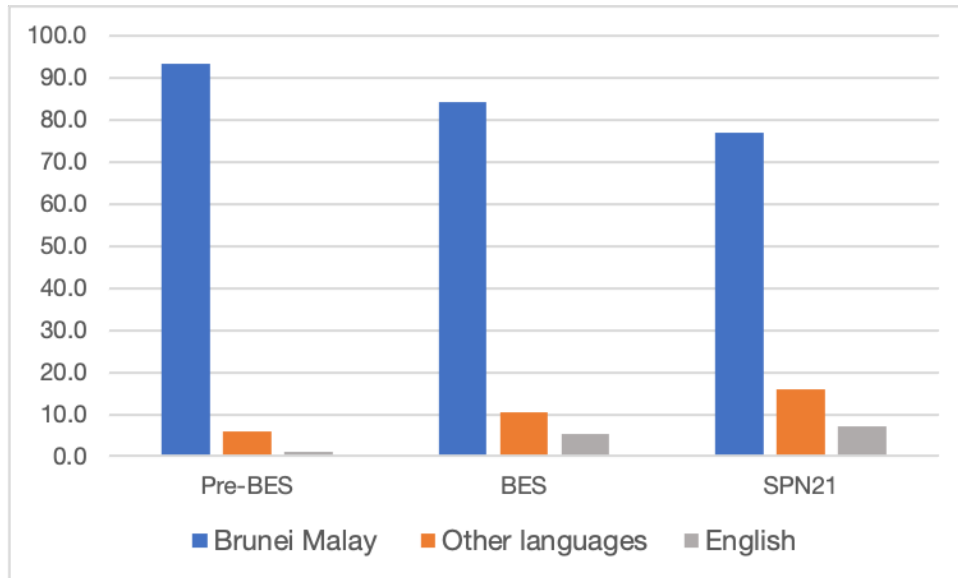


Figure 2. Claimed first language of the Bruneians according to the education system they were enrolled in

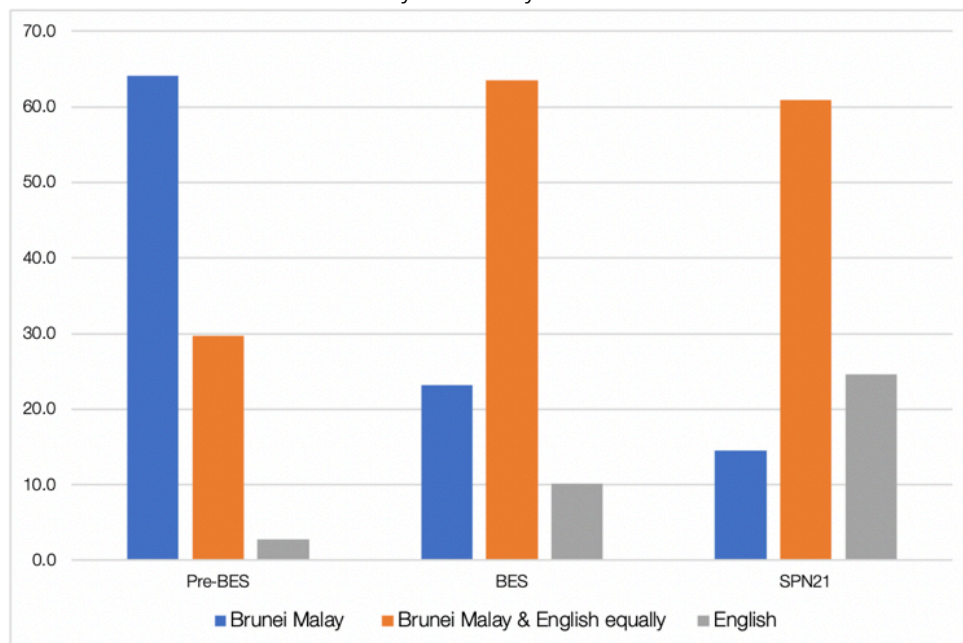


Figure 3. Preferred language use of the Bruneians according to the education system they were enrolled in

In order to assess whether the education system is a factor in the Bruneians' first language as well as their preferred language, a chi-square test was carried out. The chi-square of independence test for the relationship between the education system and the respondents' first language reveals that the relation between these variables is significant, $\chi^2(5, n=830) = 26.87$, $p < 0.05$, whilst the result for the education system variable and the Bruneians' language preference return a highly significant value, $\chi^2(5, n=805) = 178.30$, $p < 0.00001$.¹

¹ For language preference, only the three responses (Brunei Malay, Brunei Malay and English equally, and English) were entered for statistical test as the number of responses marked 'Other' is considered too small ($n=25$) to make an impact on the overall analysis

Why would these findings be of interest to anyone, notably to Brunei and the Bruneians? Is it not a sign of prosperity and advancement when a nation's population is becoming more competent in the global language, especially in today's world which sees English as the primary language for communication? One thing that may be of concern, particularly to the purveyors of nationalism, is the effect 'Englishisation' may have on the Bruneian national identity, notably that of the Malay and Muslim identities, which are two of the three tenets of the country's national ideology; the *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Malay Islam and Monarchy, generally called MIB). This concept will be revisited and elaborated further later.

It is an undisputed fact that identity and language are closely intertwined. 'Identity is a linguistic phenomenon,'¹ and that the different facets of identity, be it national, ethnic, cultural, or religious, are shaped by and through language. This notion is best reflected in the popular Malay adage *bahasa jiwa bangsa* translated to mean 'language is the soul of the nation.'² Just as a body is considered lifeless without its soul, a nation, and by extension, a nation's identity, is deemed to be dead should it loses its language. In the case of Brunei, that language is Malay, but references to 'the language of the soul'^{3,4} did not make explicit whether they meant the standardised variety, *Bahasa Melayu*, or Brunei's very own local variety, Brunei Malay.

Brunei Malay is one of the country's seven indigenous languages⁵ and is extensively spoken not only in Brunei but also in the surrounding areas of East Malaysia.⁶ Brunei Malay has frequently been described in scholarly works as the country's lingua franca.^{7,8} It is markedly different from the standardised *Bahasa Melayu* which has been sanctioned as the country's official language.⁹ For instance, whilst *Bahasa Melayu* possesses an inventory of 6 vowels, Brunei Malay is a three-vowel system, /a i u/, therefore giving rise to words which are pronounced differently in the two

¹ Joseph, J. E., *Language and identity: National, ethnic, religious*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2004

² Australia Research Council 2014, *Bahasa jiwa bangsa* —Language is the soul of a nation*, ARCHway, viewed 19 December 2020, <<https://w.ww.arc.gov.au/news-publications/media/feature-articles/bahasa-jiwa-bangsa-language-soul-nation>>

³ Haji-Othman, N.O., 'Bilingual Education Revisited: The Role of Ugama Schools in the Spread of Bilingualism', in Haji-Othman, N.O., McLellan, J., & Deterding, D. (eds.) *The use and status of language in Brunei Darussalam: A kingdom of unexpected linguistic diversity*. Singapore: Springer, 2016, pp. 253-265.

⁴ Jones, G.M., Martin, P.W., & O'zóg, C. K., 'Multilingualism and bilingual education in Brunei Darussalam', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 14(1), 1993, pp. 39-58.

⁵ Government of Brunei, 'Undang2 Taraf Kebangsaan Brunei. Undang2 No. 4'. In *Surat2 Perlembagaan Negeri Brunei*. Kuala Belait: Government Printer, 1961, pp. 115-135 (Brunei Nationality Act, No. 4, in Constitutional Letters of the State of Brunei).

⁶ Deterding, D., & Ishamina, A., 'Brunei Malay,' *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, 47(1), 2017, pp. 99-108.

⁷ Haji-Othman, N.O., McLellan, J., & Deterding, D., *The use and status of language in Brunei Darussalam: A kingdom of unexpected linguistic diversity*. Singapore: Springer. 2016.

⁸ Clynes, A., 'Brunei Malay: An overview,' *Occasional Papers in Language Studies*, (7), 2001, pp. 11-43.

⁹ Clynes, A., & Deterding, D., 'Standard Malay (Brunei),' *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, 41(2), 2011, pp. 259-268.

varieties and in some cases, having an additional meaning in Brunei Malay.¹ The Malay linguistic situation in Brunei is, therefore, rather complex as the two varieties have separate functions and occupy two distinct domains. Whilst *Bahasa Melayu* is dominant in official or formal settings such as education and administration, Brunei Malay, as mentioned above, is used in inter-ethnic communication and also strongly favoured in informal contexts. Gary Jones went further by stating that to Bruneian children, *Bahasa Melayu* is a 'new language'² and 'vaguely familiar',³ and his assertion is not baseless. As a matter of fact, this is the sentiment of the local Malay population. For instance, when asked for her opinion on changing the language of educational instruction from English to *Bahasa Melayu*, one primary school headmistress, who is ethnically Brunei Malay, expressed reticence and said that many of her teachers would not be in favour of this because 'explaining mathematical concepts such as 'multiplication' and 'average' is easier in English as the Bahasa Melayu equivalents of those terms (*darab* and *purata*) are unheard of and hardly ever used in the local Malay dialect.'⁴ Based on this information, and the survey findings on the Bruneians' first language/mother tongue (Figure 1), it seems only reasonable to say that the language considered the language of the soul, one that is close to the hearts of the Bruneians, and one that is reflective of the Bruneian identity, is Brunei Malay.

Going back to the findings of the recent surveys, it appears that the linguistic path Brunei is on is one that is predisposed to English. This is not to say that Brunei Malay will be replaced in its entirety by English because there is still a considerable number of Bruneians who use Brunei Malay, albeit alongside English (Figure 3). However, comparing the responses of those educated in the BES against those from the SPN21, it is apparent that, whilst the number of bilingual Malay-English usage remains relatively the same, the number of Bruneians who claimed to use only Brunei Malay has shrunk, from 23.1% (BES) to 14.5% (SPN21). Conversely, those who claimed to use only English has risen (BES: 10.1%; SPN21: 24.6%). The same pattern is observed in the respondents' responses to their first language.

As stated earlier, the language-identity nexus is uncontested - language constructs identities. Research on multilingual Malaysia, for instance, have attested the central role of the Malay⁵ language in enhancing the collective Malay identity, while Mandarin is central to the Chinese identity, and Tamil is crucial to the identity of the Indian community.^{6, 7} To create a sense of national unity, a national identity is constructed through the use of the term *Bangsa Malaysia*

¹ 'Peacock' is *burung merak* in Malay but the second word is pronounced [mə'raʔ] in Bahasa Melayu and *marak* [ma'raʔ] in Brunei Malay. *Marak* also has another meaning in Brunei Malay, which is 'bright' when used as an adjective.

² Jones, Policy and practice in the use of English in Brunei primary school classes. Pg. 517

³ Ibid. Pg. 512

⁴ Salbrina & Jaidin, Brunei's SPN21 English language-in-education policy: A macro-to-micro evaluation. Pg. 19.

⁵ Malay in Malaysia is Bahasa Malaysia, of which the standardised Bahasa Melayu of Brunei would be more similar to.

⁶ López, C. C., 'Language is the soul of the nation: Language, education, identity, and national unity in Malaysia,' *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 13(3), 2014, pp. 217-223.

⁷ Asmah, H.O., 'Bilingualism and biculturalism,' Conference on Bilingualism and National Development, Brunei, 9-12 December 1991.

(Malaysian race)¹ whilst the national language is often referred to as *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malaysian language) instead of *Bahasa Melayu*, because the latter insinuates that the language belongs to one particular race instead of to the whole nation.²

In the case of Brunei, the national identity is deeply entrenched in the MIB philosophy.³ The creation of a single national identity, that is, the process of *Bruneisation*,⁴ is said to have been initiated through the categorisation of the seven indigenous groups under one common label – the Malays.⁵ This inevitably kick-started the process of linguistic assimilation in which Brunei Malay soon became the shared language for the different ethnic groups. By the 1980s, it was reported that Brunei Malay had displaced the indigenous languages and was considered the mother tongue for a majority of the Bruneians.⁶ Thus, the effort to unite the Bruneians to create a single identity proved to be a success given the central role a mother tongue plays in the creation of one's identity. As John E. Joseph pointed out: "mother tongue is itself a 'claim' about national, ethnic or religious identity (or any combination of the three) that speakers may make and hearers will certainly interpret."⁷ Taking his cue from the Whorfian view, he further added that the way human beings perceive the reality of the world is somewhat tied to the language which they have an allegiance to. Framing this argument in the context of Brunei, we can postulate, although simplistically, that Bruneians who profess their mother tongue to be Brunei Malay will share the same beliefs and values, as well as a sense of identity. Taken this way, the shift from the indigenous languages to Brunei Malay is seen as cementing the latter's role as a marker of the Bruneian identity. Thus, the Malay arm of the MIB ideology is not tied to a particular ethnicity, but rather, a group of people who share a common language – that of Malay.

The other important component of the Bruneian identity is linked to the second tenet of the MIB - Islam. Given that the ethnic Brunei Malays are traditionally Muslims,⁸ and that three of the remaining seven indigenous groups making up the Brunei society are also Muslim-majority, the term 'Malay' in Brunei has been taken to be synonymous with being Muslim. That the official religion of Brunei, as per the constitution, is Islam, provides another basis for this association. The Malay-Muslim alignment is further evidenced from the authorised use of Malay as the

¹ Ishak, M. M., 'Managing ethnicity and constructing the 'Bangsa Malaysia' (A United Malaysian Nation),' *Malaysian Management Journal*, 6(1&2), 2002, pp. 99-115.

² Hornbill Unleashed, 2015, Which should it be? Bahasa Malaysia or Bahasa Melayu?. Available at: <<https://hornbillunleashed.wordpress.com/2015/08/12/which-should-it-be-bahasa-malaysia-or-bahasa-melayu/>> [Accessed 21 December 2020].

³ Muhammad Hadi, M.M. 2017, MIB, living foundation of every Bruneian. MTMIB. Available at: <https://mtmib.moe.gov.bn/mib-living-foundation-of-every-bruneian/> [Accessed 21 December 2020]

⁴ Haji-Othman, 'It's not always English: Duelling aunties in Brunei Darussalam. Pg. 176

⁵ The first reported instance of this was in the 1961 census. (See Haji-Othman 2012).

⁶ Martin, P. W., 'Brunei Malay and Bahasa Melayu: A sociolinguistic perspective,' in Martin, P. W., Ozóg, C., & Poedjosoedarmo, G. (eds.) *Language use and language change in Brunei*. Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1996, pp. 27-36.

⁷ Joseph, *Language and identity: National, ethnic, religious*. Pg. 185

⁸ Kumpoh, A. A. Z. A., Wahsalfelah, S. N., & Haji-Othman, N. O., 'Socio-cultural dynamics in Bruneian society,' in *Comparative studies in ASEAN cultures and societies*. Bangkok: National Institute of Development Administration, ASEAN and Asia Studies Center, 2017, pp. 1-44

instructional language in the teaching of the subject *Pengetahuan Ugama Islam* (Islam Religious Knowledge) in the mainstream schools. Malay is also the medium of instruction for the *Ugama* (religious) schools¹ under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which all Bruneian children of the Muslim faith are required to attend under the Compulsory Islamic Religious Education Act of 2012.² Even the two Islamic institutes of higher education, UNISSA³ and KUPU SB,⁴ utilise Malay alongside Arabic as their main languages for teaching. Further evidence of the strong association between Malay and Islam can be seen in Islamic religious gatherings and *ceramah* (talks) as well as the Friday sermons, which are more often than not delivered in Malay.

As seen from the scenarios offered in the introduction and the surveys discussed earlier, present-day Bruneians have shown a penchant for English for their day-to-day interactions, either using it solely or alongside Brunei Malay. There is also evidence of a growing number of Bruneian Malays who regard English their mother tongue. The spread of and preference for English are, in a way, inevitable given the global dominance of, and the economic value attached to the language. A few questions that beg to be answered now include: how does this predilection to English affect the Bruneians' percept of their identity? As it has been alleged that there is a connection between the mother tongue and a speaker's identity and his viewpoints of the world, what does that make of the Bruneian Malays who claim that their mother tongue is English? What about the Muslim identity in the Brunei context? Would a Bruneian's language preference have an effect on his Muslim identity? Would a Bruneian Malay who is English-centric be able to retain his Muslim identity? More specifically, would a predominantly English-speaking Bruneian be viewed as less of a Muslim than his Malay-speaking counterpart? Or could it be that in 21st century Brunei, the Bruneian identity has evolved to include English as one of the crucial ingredients making up the Brunei Malay and Muslim identities? In order to begin to answer these questions, another study would have to be conducted to thoroughly investigate the Bruneians' contemporaneous thoughts on language and identity, particularly of how they locate English in their identity construction. It would also be interesting to investigate whether, why or how the processes of religious identity development are different, if any, between the English-speaking Bruneians and their Malay-oriented peers. These issues will be explored in the second part of this paper, inshā Allah.

¹ Haji-Othman, 'Bilingual Education Revisited: The Role of Ugama Schools in the Spread of Bilingualism. 2016, Pg. 254

² Azlan, O., 'Perintah wajib pendidikan agama', Borneo Bulletin, 2 January 2013.

³ Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali or Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University

⁴ Universiti Perguruan Ugama Seri Begawan or Seri Begawan Religious Teachers University