The Disharmony Relation between Indonesia-Malaysia in Post-Colonial Era

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Abstract: The article describes a rather sensitive issue. Indonesia and Malaysia are two neighboring country experienced long colonization periods. Western countries colonized both countries for around 300 years and by Japan for around 3.5 years. Both countries had loss and wounds during the two colonization periods. Both countries also have historical backgrounds as parted kingdoms influenced by culture of Hindu, China and Islam. Both countries also used basic Malay language. Indonesia proclaimed the independence in 1945 while Malaysia in 1957. However, both countries experienced disharmony on their international relation in post-colonial era. The problem of the disharmony relation was elaborated from several perspectives, in historical approach

Keywords: Dutch Colonial; Britain Colonial; Japan Colonial; Civilization; Confrontation

1. Introduction

Colonialism was always about hegemony of a country over another country in form of political hegemony, economic exploitation, natural resources, ideas, language and culture especially by western countries to most Asian and African country. Japanese Imperial also implemented imperialism and colonialism to Asian countries. Japan, in short years, made Indonesia and Malaysia as their colony and mobilized basis over their economy and human for the purpose of Pacific War. On the other side, western countries occupied Asian and African countries 300 years before Pacific war broke out. The emerging military force of Japan with similar power with Western countries was shown through Japan victory over Russia in Japan-Russia war (1904-1905). Japan invaded neighboring countries such as China and Korea after the Meiji restoration, under the reason of preventing Western influence and liberating Asian countries from Western colonization. Did Japan implement colonialism in Asia? Based on theoretical framework, could Japan action conquering countries in south EastAsia and EastAsia be considered as colonialism? The concept of colonialism refers to total control of territory, political forces and exploitation on economic and human resources. However, based on cultural and civilization concept, Japan was doing occupation 2, because Japan used the culture of local country to fight against Western colonization. However, Japan had ambiguity in the mission because Japan used the campaign term to liberate Asian countries and occupation. The liberation term focused on the war against Western countries. Japan, during war against western countries, also used potential of south EastAsian countries by exploiting their economic and human resources to win Pacific War. So, in colonialism term, there were exploitation of political, economic, and social and ideology. Japan conducted political exploitation through mobilizing local people for winning the war, while at the same time controlling local economic resources such as oil, mining and cultivation products. Social exploitation was also conducted through mobilizing local people for infrastructure development to support war needs; and also cultural ideological exploitation using idea of Japan Imperium hakko ichiu (eight corners of the world are united under Great Japan Imperial) with triple A slogan: “Nippon The Light of Asia, Nippon The Protector of Asia, Nippon The Leader of Asia”. The implementation of the slogan is in form of prohibition to use Dutch language in government office and in official communication. Japan urged Indonesian people to use Malay language. The occupation policy actually had good impact in the development and use Bahasa Indonesia as the unitary national language.

Japan, at home, also prohibited the people to use English during war. In Malaysia, Japan used school buildings as administration office and prisons for British soldiers. The question was, did the use of school as administration office also worked to delegitimize Western civilization? Especially on the prohibition of English in Malay land? I have opinion that Japan used schools in Malaysia to delegitimize western culture and English language. The characteristic of Japan’s occupation in Korea since 1910 was that Japan implemented assimilation politic with Korean, known as 同化 (douka=assimilation) or 日本化 (nipponka=japanization). Author considered Japan conducted civilization war in Asia.

1 In Merriam Webster Dictionary, the definition of colonialism is as followed: colonialism is control by one power over a dependent area or people; also a policy advocating or based on such control.
2 Miriam Webster Dictionary: occupation is the taking possession property, also the taking possession of an area by a foreign military force.
3 Ibid. Liberate is to free from bondage or restrain; also: to rise to equal right and status.
where Japan adopted western civilization to improve them and fought against the western. Samuel P. Huntington stated that civilization war is known as “clash of civilization”⁶. Western products or copy of western products were manufactured and used as tools for war by Japan. The modern clash of civilization was in form of the manufactured and used of tools, including modern warfare, to fight against western colonization in Asia and Africa. Japan, on the other hand, adopted western civilization and used it against western countries to conquer Asian countries with campaign of liberating Asia from western colonization. 

The logic implied to the logic of modern civilization war between Japan and western countries. Japan adopted western civilization by modernizing military industry and liberal economy—showing that western civilization had given birth to clash of civilization against its own civilization. Japan’s aggression to Korea, China, Manchuria and south East Asian countries was no difference to what western countries had done. Western and Eastern imperialism and colonialism had emerged awareness of local people to unite their nation against long dark history since they were once kingdom or imperium, or from great respected ancestor as stated by Ernes Renant:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle...this spiritual principle. One is the past, the other is the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present consent, the desire to live together... The nation, like the individual, is the outcome of a long past of efforts, sacrifices, and devotions. Of all cults that of the ancestors are the most legitimate: our ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past with great men and glory (I mean true glory) is the social capital upon which the national idea rests. These are the essential conditions of being a people: having common glories in the past and a will to continue them in the present⁷.

The awakening and struggle of the oppressed Indonesian and Malaysian people were just like the philosophy of nation as mentioned by Renan. He stated that sentences in 1882 when European countries expanded their colony worldwide. In other words, western colonization has awakened the sense of fate of the oppressed people in Indonesia⁸.

There were many theories used for analyzes in historical research, where one of them was Post-colonial theory. This theory used literary works or written documents in colonial and post-colonial periods. Generally, writings in colonial period often focused on the colonial interest and distorted situation of the oppressed people, showing superiority of the imperialist and inferiority of the local people. The civilization concept used for colonization was to improve or civilize local people who were considered uneducated and savage. There were complex relations in the process over reasons of civilization, improvement, or exploitation. Civilization through education resulted in awakening of intellectual thoughts where exploitation should be fought back. In other words, it was a backfire as intellectuals who were educated at western schools and education system initiated many awakening struggles⁹.

2. Japan’s Occupation in Indonesia

Based on historical sources, there were few writings made in Indonesia during occupation period. Most writings found were propaganda of culture about how great eastern civilization was and how low the West was (especially Dutch). For example, Nur Sutan Iskandar wrote a novel entitled “Tjinta Tanah Air” in 1944. He wrote anti-western culture which was discriminative and controlled the social life of Indonesian while he also described on great eastern culture which against individualism¹⁰. In other words, there was an anomaly on the concept of great western civilization, which considered the eastern civilization is backward and savages. In novel of “Tjinta Tanah Air” western civilization was described as savages where author elaborated western leaders as crazy people who looked for personal advantages, selfish, and had become disgrace in the society. So, the western civilization was enemy¹¹.

There were foreign researchers who had interest in post-colonial history of Indonesia. Professor Harry J. Benda published his Doctoral thesis in a book titled “The Crescent and the Rising Sun”. Dr. M. A. Aziz’s wrote “Japan’s Colonialism and Indonesia” Professor W. H. Elsbree wrote “Japan’s Role in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements, 1940-1945”. Shigetada Nishijima, Koichi Kishi and their colleagues published a book titled インドネシア＞日本軍政の研究 (Indonesia ni okeru Nihon Gensei no Kenkyuu=Research on Japan Military Administration in Indonesia). They were considered pioneers in Indonesia historical researches. Their approaches were mostly focused on independence movement, ideology, political and role of the independence figures including their conflicts during the independence movement. At the time they published their works, I was a still student of Faculty of Literary of University of Indonesia in 1975. Nugroho Notosusanto – a history lecturer – ordered us to read Harry J. Benda books and also “Nishijima Collection”. I then understood that approaches made by Harry J. Benda were non-European approaches, he described the occupied areas. In Java, he elaborated the role of political leaders, intellectuals and the influence of Islam among people who fought for independence.

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⁶ Samuel P. Huntington (1996), Simon & Schuster
⁷ Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?”, text of a conference delivered th at the Sorbonne on March 11, 1882, in Ernest Renan, Qu’est-ce qu’une nation? Paris, Presses-Pocket, 1992. (translated by Ethan Rundell) donload June, 28 2017
D: uparis.fr/files/9313/6549/9943/What_is_a_Nation.pdf, 28

⁹ I Ketut Surajaya, ibid.
¹⁰ Nur Sutan Iskandar, Tjinta Tanah Air (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1944), page. 5-6.
¹¹ Nur Sutan Iskandar, op.cit, page. 67.
Nugroho Noto Susanto wrote a dissertation titled “The Peta Army during Japanese Occupation in Indonesia”12. His book was considered controversial among nationalist historians and national figures that fought for independence, because they considered his book as inappropriate. They stated that Nugroho Noto Susanto did not elaborate the role of nationalist in Indonesia. Nugroho was considered as a pro-Japan person since he only elaborated the role of Japan in development of PETA Army13.  

Aiko Kuroswa published his research titled 日本占領下のジャワ農村の変容(Nihon sentyooaka no java noson no hennyo =the change of Peasant Villages in Java during Japan’s Occupation (1992). Kurosawa described in details and elaborated facts in balanced analysis about the influence of Japan in Java villages during Japan’s occupation. He described structure and culture of peasants in Java during the time of occupation. Kurosawa also researched historical sources on Japan’s military campaign to the south entitled 南方軍政関係資料 (Nanpo gunseki kankei shiryō=Historical Sources over Military Administration in the South) in 1994. Another Kuroswa book in 1997 was 南方特別留学生が見た戦時下の日本人 (Nanpo tokubetsu jukushou no senjika no nihonjin=Japanese in War Time: Students Opinion over War Tributes). Kurosawa books have given great contribution on historical sources as comparison to Dutch historical sources. 

A complete and detail post-colonial approaches made by Kuroswa had given a balance perspective for academic review. Kuroswa stated criticism to policy maker including Japanese who took part in occupation era and stated his sympathy to Indonesian people, Javanese people and also freedom movement in Indonesia.

Eiichi Hayashi 14, wrote a book “Those Who Were Forgotten: Memoir of Rahmat Sigeru Ono, Japanese Soldier Who favored The Republic=Mereka yang Tertumpak: Memoar Rahmat Shigeru Ono, Bekas Tentara Jepang yang Memihak Republik” (2011). A memoir usually described data and fact as it was. There were some Japanese soldiers who had sympathy to Indonesia during occupation period. They support Indonesia quietly and decided to stay in Indonesia after the war was over and married to Indonesian women.

3. Japan’s Occupation in Malaysia

The presence of western countries in Malaysia was related to the trade war among European countries. The first western people landed in Malaysia were Portuguese led by Alfonso de Albuquerque who landed on Melaka in 1511. Three European countries and Japan occupied Malaysia nation between 1511 and 1957 (around 446 years). Portuguese occupied Malaysia area in 1511 to 1641, Dutch came and occupied in 1641 to 1824, Britain occupied Malaysia in 1786 to 1941, Japan in 1941 to 1945 and Britain occupied the region again until the freedom of Malaya in 1957.

Britain built transportation infrastructures such as roads, railway and economic hub to tin mining area in order to “civilize” the Malay people. The development of infrastructure had flourished tin mining and rubber plantation to meet world demand. Malaya was the highest exporter of tin and rubber during World War II and it became source of financial income for Britain16. Britain also developed education system with ideology to improve the strength of colony with superiority of western civilization, rather than backward eastern civilization. Humanity was considered as the need to support the need of Western civilization. Britain introduced education system to formulate the idealism of Malay people.

Japan occupied Malaya in 15 February 1942. The key policy implemented by Japan was introduction to Asian culture and spirit to overcome western colonialism civilization. Japan promised to liberate Asia countries from western colonization. However, freedom movement and anti-Japan acts emerged in Korea and China. In early occupation era, anti-western campaign had big impact to social, political and economic life of people in Malaya. People were enlightened that Malaya had potential in economy and natural resources, especially tin and rubber, which had been exploited only to the welfare of Britain. Wigmore stated that Japan was different compare to western countries that prefer peaceful approaches for three centuries, Japan conducted what was called authoritarian occupation not western-type colonization 17. Authorstated that Indonesiawas under military occupation, not colonization, aside of acts of colonizing, oppression and even “brain wash” to support the movement of “Asian Economic Co-Prosperity Sphere” and “Asia for the Asians”18. The movements were anti-thesis.

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12 Nugroho Noto Susanto, (1979), The Peta Army during Japanese Occupation in Indonesia, Tokyo, Waseda University Press  
13 Author underwent Doctoral study in Japan when polemic over books written by Nugroho Noto Susanto happened in Indonesia. A Japanese reporter from Mainichi Shinbun asked author’s opinions on book written by Nugroho. Author stated that, the book was published base on his doctoral thesis. If a person or group dissipated with the content of the book (one of them was General A.H. Nasution), it was merely because the little elaboration on the role of the person who lived at the time …. And the role of General Nasution was not explained much in the book.  
14 Eiichi Hayashi (2011) Mereka yang Tertumpak: Memoar Rahmat Shigeru Ono, Bekas Tentara Jepang yang Memihak Republik, Yogyakarta, Ombak  
18 I Ketut Surajaya, op.cit.
to western colonization, where western colonization had created suffering and duping. Japan had also introduced school based on ideology of Tennoism. Japan ordered the use of Japanese language and prohibited English at schools and official administration in Malaya. Japan administration offered promotion and big salary for those who had mastered Japanese language.

Japan worried that anti-Japan struggles that grew stronger in China may affect Chinese descendants support to Japan in Malaysia. Japan administration held tight monitoring over Chinese descendants in Malaysia so they could not make contact or even sent support to Chinese struggle that had started since 1937. Japan worked hard to stop the support from Chinese descendants in Malaysia to China. Japan had ambition to become new master replacing Britain in Malayan Peninsula.

4. Discussion of Disharmony

Disharmony is the opposite of harmony. This article elaborated disharmony as acts, feeling, emotion that means: unsuitable, unequal, conflicting, hatred, demeaning, tension. Each disharmony word in this article referred to this meaning. Why there was disharmony between Indonesia and Malaysia when D.G.E. Hall (1981) stated that the culture and political history of nations in South East Asia were influenced by the same power of China and India in building their imperium in south East Asia. Linda Sunarti in her published dissertation titled “Relatives till the End? =Persaudaraan Sepanjang Hayat?“ (2014)stated that:

Many similarity aspects do not ensure strong bounds between Indonesia and Malaysia. The relation of two countries with close race relation is just like a roller coaster, going up (harmony/positive) and suddenly going down and turns international tension among them. The concept of similarity relationship is only political words among elites and not implemented in real action. It is such unfortunate, as the concept was actually key to peace to put an end of confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia in 1966 peacefully.

Colonialism created old wounds and new wounds. Indonesia and Malaysia experienced almost similar good and bad experiences. Bad experience being oppressed, occupied, insults and exploitation. However they also had positive experience as western colonialists introduced basic science, laws, government administration and logic through education and experiences during Western and Japan’s occupation. Once old and new wounds were over with the independence of Indonesia and Malaysia, both countries were trapped in disharmony relation during cold war. It was strange as both countries experienced similar situation during war and occupation era, including struggle to become independent country free from occupation. The cold war has dragged many countries into the Eastern or Western block, Communism or Capitalism. Asian African on Bandung in 1955 focused on the importance of non-block organization against neo-colonialism in the cold war. It was not strange then when Britain urged Malaysia to take over Sabah, Serawak and Brunei into the Malaysian Federation; Indonesia considered the move as part of neo-colonialism. Malaysia on the other hand, considered Britain’s advice as decolonization of the territory.

The different perspective triggered disharmony between Indonesia and Malaysia, lasted in three years (1963-1966), which became confrontation movement of “Destroy Malaysia=Ganyang Malaysia”21. The movement also stated Tengku Abdul Rachman as “apartheide of Neo-colonialism”. Indonesia and Malaysia, in international level, agreed to reduce the conflict through diplomacy. There was “Maphilindo Summit” in Manila at 31 July 1963. The meeting concluded on urgency to hold referendum for people of North Kalimantan, whether they preferred to join Malaysia or not. The Summit also proposed UN supervision over the referendum for people of North Kalimantan. Unfortunately, before the referendum, Malaysia announced the independence of Federation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963. The announcement was made before the UN survey team arrived in North Kalimantan22. Soekarno, after the proclamation of Malaysia Federation, accused Malaysia have violated the Manila Agreement. He, in his speech at 23 September 1963, officially declared military confrontation of “Destroy Malaysia=Ganyang Malaysia”. The disharmony of Indonesia and Malaysia cooled down when Sukarno administration was busy dealing with internal political conflict in 1965. The confrontation with Malaysia finally ended with peace treaty signed at 12 August 1966.

New disharmony between Indonesia and Malaysia emerged again between 1979 and 2002 on territorial claim over Sipadan and Ligitan islands. Malaysia won the dispute through International court of settlement. In February 2005, another disharmony emerged on oil exploration benefits provided by foreign companies to Indonesia and Malaysia.23 Both countries were even at the brink of open war. In 2009, another disharmony emerged on territorial

22Jones, ibid.
24More on Soekarno’s speech, on 23 September 1963 he officially and publicly declared military confrontation campaign named “Ganyang Malaysia”. See, Khoridatul Anissa, Malaysia Macan Asia, Yogyakarta, GARASL, 2009, page 190
25Joseph Chinyong Liow, op cit., page.103
violation around Ambalat coral islands by Tentera Laut Diraja Malaysia (Malaysian Navy) and also the arrest of Indonesian fishermen by Malaysian coastguards at the same area.

Dr. Linda Sunarti in her book “Why Are We Angry At Them” stated that,

…searching through conflict of culture heritages in Indonesia…cultural issue was seen as potential threat over society identity of both countries… stressing more on the importance of identity and society values of Indonesia-Malaysia, found in each historical sequences, not to be conflicted but for conservation and maintain as the archipelagicultural preservation.

Based on Linda’s statement, author analyzed that disharmonies between Indonesia and Malaysia for the last ten years were based on cultural conflict. Johan Galtung stated, “that the major causal direction for violence is from cultural via structural to direct violence”.

5. Conclusion

Old wounds by old master; new wounds by new master; and disharmony were not meant to elaborate all problems in colonial and occupation era. The article only focused on major problem of two different timelines in order to find out how approaches were made in the development of research theory and methodology, especially on approaches of culture, civilization and post-colonial history. The main answer was approaches of culture and civilization should have extra notes where there are content of anthropology (race), politic (domination), economy-industry (liberalism) under the big civilization theory as legitimation for colonialism (white race supremacy and inferior color race). In other words, “civilizing” terminology used to determine the advanced western civilization compare to backward eastern civilization. Japan raised the “yellow peril” anxiety among western countries when Japan has successfully modernized military technology and industry. Japan has proved their superiority by winning the war against Russia in Japan-Russia war in 1904-1905. Author considered the war was not just race war but war of civilization.

Japan’s expansion to Korea, China and South East Asia should be noted as clash of civilization. It was the result of modernization implemented in Japan after adopting western technology and science in the eastern part of the world. Modern Japan had emerged a sub-civilization, especially in military technology and capitalism. China and Korea, with lower civilization technology and industry, became target of Japan’s imperialism policy. War for colonies in Asia region was actually based on the need to meet imperialist need of resources and ended in global war: World War I, World War II, Pacific War and Battle for Independence in occupied Asian and African nations.

Post World War II ideology conflict emerged in term of Western and Eastern Blocks, decolonization and re-colonization were formulated in new term of neo-colonialism in Asian and African countries. Post-colonial approaches made by researchers have resulted in-depth, objective and substantive researches where researches could be conducted using more data documents and facts, including literary works that once were not used by Occidentalism researchers. How about disharmony between Indonesia and Malaysia? Where is the dimension of the research?

Disharmony between Indonesia and Malaysia started in the cold war and still emerged in the post-cold war era in global context. Could we use globalization approach to elaborate world disharmonies including the one between Indonesia and Malaysia? Author considered globalization has erased the local culture identity through popular culture since 1970s. Popular culture has raised new dimension of imbalance between traditional culture and popular culture, old generation and youth generation, including preservation of traditional values (old generation) and ideal values (youth generation). The current generation enjoyed “zeitgeist” of popular culture and studded with information, products and popular show. The situation has emerged anti-tradition or national identity movement. The potential of culture claim may arise just like Malaysia claiming Indonesia traditional arts. Disharmony may rise and fall when a civilization sensed crisis of cultural identity.

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