Exploring Ethno-Religious Identity: Transition in Malay Muslim Culture and Practice
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Abstract: This article will explore the propensity of interpersonal communication in developing and maintaining Malay Muslims culture and identity. The research was conducted among Malaysian postgraduate students in Western Australia. Firstly, I will look into the importance of ethno-religious identity among the Malay student’s in relation to their current culture and practice. I will then examine how the Malay is reworking their identity in their daily encounter which then contributes to the alteration of their daily culture and practice in Australia. I then will consider how interpersonal communication aspect facilitates in these transitions. Hence, I will attempt to discuss the relationship between idea of situational and symbolic community in determining their ethno-religious identity in foreign land with respect to their ethno-religious identity. Finally, I will focus on how Malay students transform their culture and practice in different environment and contemplate on identifying the significance of this transition among the Malay student’s in Australia amidst returning to their own country upon completion of their study.

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Religious Identity, Culture, Interpersonal Communication

Introduction

The high number of Malay students in Australia provides the opportunity to explore the meaning of being Malay outside of Malaysia. Much has been written about the ethnic Malay in Southeast Asia, but the ambiguity of Malay identity persists. Despite being one of the major ethnic groups in this region, the Malay ethnic group has an obscure history that has yet to be seriously examined (Shamsul A.B., 1996:16). Malays are increasingly involved in international relations and world culture. According to Shamsul, identity formation, like most social phenomena, takes place simultaneously within two social realities: the “authority-defined” reality and the “everyday-defined” reality experienced by people in their daily life.

Most knowledge about the Malays has been constructed and elaborated in an Orientalist mould by colonial administrator-scholars, anthropologists, and other specialists in Malay studies (Shamsul A.B., 2001:356). According to Hannerz (2000:103), this knowledge may
involve a state of readiness and the ability to access other cultures by listening, looking, sensing, and reflecting, or the individual may choose from other cultures only those pieces that suit him or her. The cultural formations and constructions of Malay culture can be understood by exploring their “adat” (traditional norms). According to Zainal Kling (1997: 8), adat represents a “commonsense” construction of everyday life. Overall, Malay adat emphasizes peace and harmony based on the precepts of altruism (unselfishness) and proper respect for others’ feelings, status, and position. It acknowledges change, and it establishes the means by which change is incorporated, accommodated and reintegrated. Adat is the Malay folk model, and it provides the means by which identity is sustained.

**Objective and Methodology**

This paper discusses the broad fields of ethnic identity, Malay identity, ethnic relations, anthropology of culture, and sociology. In this paper, I will discuss the following questions: “How do Malay students adapt to a foreign environment, and how does interpersonal communication contribute to the maintenance of their ethno-religious identity?” This research focus was applied to the cultural aspects of students’ identity development. First, this study examined how Malay students settled and adapted into a new environment. The findings reveal issues related to the daily life of Malay students, such as interactions, consumption, gatherings, and culture, which represent their ethno-religious identity. Second, this study evaluated how interpersonal communications contribute to the maintenance of Malay students’ identity. In particular, this study reviewed the experiences of Malay students in relation to both their Malay identity and their Muslim identity, revealing how these experiences contribute to their awareness of what being Malay means to them. Some of the aspects of this identity include relationships with other Malays and with non-Malays (“the Others”), as well as cultural and religious activities. It is also worth noting that my involvement in this fieldwork placed me in the position of an insider researching my own culture. Thus, my experience and knowledge of the Malay adat and Islamic religion, which govern Malay students’ lives, is an advantage in my research. However, in dealings with one’s own culture, a tremendous amount of selecting out from the ethnographic fieldwork observations is involved. In this paper, I use examples obtained from interviews conducted during my fieldwork in Western Australia, including written notes from observations at public events and gatherings organized by Malay students in private homes.
Conceptual Theory

Ethnic Identity versus Religious Identity

In the anthropological and sociological domains, scholars focusing on ethnic identity use various political, cultural, and historical frameworks that emphasize ethnic identity, cultural identity, ethnic conflict and ethnic boundaries. Reviews of previous work would be incomplete without discussing the relationship between ethnic boundaries and ethnic identity formation. Barth’s (1969) work, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, analyzes ethnicity (or ethnic identity) as an aspect of social organization, not of culture. His critical focus for investigation is the ethnic boundary that defines a group rather than the cultural content that the group encloses or the characteristics that are self-ascribed or ascribed by others. Cohen (1994a) and Roosens (1994) build upon Barth’s work, but Cohen concentrates on collective and individual consciousness, and Roosens focuses on kinship metaphors, which are subjects that both authors feel that Barth neglected. Boundaries can be viewed in interactional terms or as boundaries of consciousness, as Cohen (1994a: 59-79) phrases it. Ethnic identities are products of classification, ascription and self-ascertainment and are related to ideologies of descent. The boundary itself is a social product, which may have variable importance and may change through time.

Anthony Giddens (1991) noted that all human action is defined by reflexivity, in which social practices are constantly examined and reformed in light of incoming information about those practices, thus constitutively altering their character. In addition to Barth’s work on boundaries and Giddens’ work on reflexivity, Anthony Cohen (1994b: 120), writing on the primacy of the self, pointed out that cultural identity does not merely depend on associating oneself with a set of characteristics; one also distances oneself from others. Therefore, part of the answer to what constructs ethnic identification must be culture. Phenomenologically, no culture – language, non-verbal interaction, dress, food, the structure of space, etc. – as we encounter it and live it is for us simply something that is (Jenkins, 1997: 76). Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Cooley, 1902; Mead 1934), concentrating on shared meaningful symbols as keys to the emergence of self or identity, regards both self and society as created, sustained, and changed through the process of symbolic communication. I propose that shared meaningful symbols are to be found in the interpersonal contacts between Malay students. This contact includes the use of the Malay language at social gatherings for Malay
students in Western Australia, where the Malay language is the norm for interaction. As Mead (1934) said, with symbols (language), one is able to not only classify, think about, and act toward meaningful social objects but also to reflect on oneself as a meaningful social object from the perspective of others.

Frith’s (2000) study has important bearing on the current study. Frith explored the way that urban Malays forge ethnic identity around the dialectic between being Muslim and being Malay. Using Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of *habitus* and Giddens’s (1991) notion of reflexivity, Frith concluded that the Malay experience requires the Malay/Islam dialectic to be resolved in different ways through individual perception on a day-to-day level and through face-to-face interactions with other ethnic groups. According to Kinnvall (2004: 741-67) in *Globalization and Religious Nationalism*, the combination of religion and nationalism (that is, pride in being Malaysian) is a particularly powerful response (“identity-signifier”) in times of rapid change and uncertain futures, and this combination is therefore more likely than other identity constructions to arise during times of crisis or insecurity. Malays have accepted the Islamic way of life, and Islam is considered a part of them, a part of their heritage, a part of their identity and a part of their possessions that needs to be protected (Mohamad Abu Bakar, 1994: 140-41).

**Discussion and Analysis**

**Interpersonal Communication and Identity Maintenance**

One of the main factors contributing to the closeness and constant contact between Malay students in Western Australia is interpersonal communication. Richmond and Buehler (1962) define interpersonal communication as follows:

*[It is] initiated by a signal act by an individual. The sequence of communicative acts which follow the initial signal act is the interpersonal communication process. These acts, including the initial signal act, may be described qualitatively and/or quantitatively depending upon many variables, such as: whether the signal act or the subsequent acts involved the use of mechanical devices; language plus motor gesture, language alone or motor gesture alone; and upon such additional factors as spatial, cultural, temporal, psychological, psychiatric, and so on. (1962:3)*
I argue that the interpersonal communication that thrives among Malay students contributes significantly to advancing their adaptation process amidst the transition of their cultural practice. Malay students enforce interpersonal communication among themselves. In addition to the use of the Malay language in their daily conversation, ‘non-verbal’ communication serves a number of purposes, depending upon the context in which it is utilized. The term ‘non-verbal’ is commonly used to distinguish all forms of human communication that are not controlled by the spoken word. Among its obvious functions, non-verbal communication replaces speech, complements the spoken word, emphasizes parts of verbal messages, helps to regulate the flow of communication between the speaker and listener and defines acceptable patterns of behavior in a variety of social settings (Hargie, O., 1981: 18-23). In other words, the ‘signal acts’ included in behaviors are gaze, postural rigidity, vocal cues such as sighing or groaning, smiling, looking at one’s watch and indirect body orientation such as crossed arms and body blocks (Knapp & Daly, 2002: 247).

The relational dynamics model developed by Knapp (1984) is one of the main theoretical frameworks that indicate the relevance of the excerpts discussed in this article. The relational dynamics of communication are intended to keep relationships operating smoothly and satisfactorily (Adler, R., 2007: 240). This model presumes that interpersonal communication is developed through certain stages: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, bonding, differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding and terminating (Knapp, 1984). In this paper, I attempt to relate interpersonal communication to one’s efforts in maintaining his or her socially approved identity. Goffman (1959, 1971) has used the word face to describe on one’s socially approved identity. He argued that each person can be viewed as a kind of playwright who creates roles that he or she wants others to believe and as a performer who acts out these roles. I highlight the various issues the Malay students encountered in relation to alterations or maintenance of Malay students’ daily culture and practice in Western Australia.

**Settling Upon Arrival**

It is never easy to adapt oneself to a new environment. Things eventually become difficult if one is not familiar with the place or knows no one of a similar culture and background. The following interview excerpts reveal different experiences faced by Malay students upon their
arrival in Western Australia. When asked about whether he knew someone in Australia before his arrival, Farhan answered:

*Translated interview excerpts with Farhan*¹

> I came here alone, but before that I contacted a friend I had known since we were undergraduates. He came and picked me up. I had difficulties finding a house. Since his wife is coming, I decided to share a house with anyone, whether they are Muslim or not. I met with three Chinese students to share a house, but I had difficulties sharing. It all goes back to the issue of food, cultures, and different ways of life. Luckily, after that I got an offer to stay in a studio apartment.

In this case, Farhan knew someone in the unfamiliar area before his arrival, which made arrival easier for him. However, because Farhan was single, he was hesitant to stay with his friend for a long period of time because his friend’s wife was coming soon. This hesitance shows that Farhan, as a Muslim, considers it inappropriate to stay in the same house with a woman if her husband is not present. As a Malay and a Muslim, Farhan understood his friend well, and there were no hard feelings involved. In his effort to get a house, he found it difficult to share a house with other foreign students due to issues concerning cultures, food and different ways of life. It is possible that his Chinese housemates also found it difficult to share a house with Farhan because of his different ethnic and religious background. I argue that the same situation would have occurred if Malay students were the ones looking for housemates. One finds that the cultural difference is under-communicated by the parties in the transaction (Goffman, 1959). As Goffman propose, all social interactions require a kind of performance. Humans attempt to control a situation and the impression of the audience through behaviour or actions through communication. Therefore, facts that are conflicting with a situation are generally under-communicated. In other words, the public sphere can be defined with reference to group behavior, such as the use of Malay language and other actions that are part of Malay or Muslim identity.

¹ All names has been changed for privacy purpose.
Daily Life Encounters

Goffman (1967:13) suggested that “Each person, subculture and society seems to have its own characteristic repertoire of face-saving practices, yet these are all drawn from a single logically coherent framework of possible practices.” Here, face\textsuperscript{2} is used by Malay students in terms of persons and societies, not just individuals, in their encounters with other Malays and the Others. In exploring Malay students’ mutual encounters, the students are the perceived self, the person they believe themselves to be at that moment. While it may not be accurate in every respect, the perceived self is in contrast to the presenting self, which is a public image – the way the person wants to appear to others (Adler, 2007: 69-70). While a speaker may “keep close tabs” on his words, he is less able to consciously control other signaling behaviors. Thus, in face-to-face encounters, we re-establish eye contact with the listener at periodic intervals to verify whether we are being perceived as we wish to be perceived. If not, certain adjustments in our self-presentation are in order (Harris & Rubinstein, 1975: 254-55).

When a question was raised on the importance of interpersonal communication among other Malays or with students of the same ethnic group and background, Maya answered:

Translated interview excerpts with Maya

\textit{Communication among Malays is important. If it does not occur, we will start to “melt” eventually because we do not have someone to talk to. It also depends on situations. Even a simple hello and greetings (salam) is good enough. At least when we have friends, we have hope. When we are in need, we can hang on to the people of the same group, who understand our adat, our needs and the way we think. There was one time—in fact, two times—I had to take my child to a hospital Emergency Department. My friends here willingly helped and supported us spiritually. Then, we became close friends and eventually we became like family. If they were in need, we helped. If we were in need, they helped. Twice I had to take one of my kids to the Emergency and leave the others with my friends, and they looked after them and had them sleep over at their house.}

The importance of interpersonal communication among Malays is highlighted in Maya’s experience. The importance of communication emerged when she needed to take one of her

\footnote{The term ‘face’, sometimes known as ‘jaga air muka’ by the Malays, refers to practices of saving face.}
children to the hospital’s Emergency Department. Maya anticipated that her friends were like her family members and that she could trust them to look after her kids. On the other hand, her friends could not have refused to help Maya because she claimed that they were like family, and they felt obliged to assist and support her in whatever ways they could. Furthermore, Maya’s statements about how Malays start to “melt” if they do not communicate with other Malays highlight the importance of communication among Malays. Maya’s idea of “melting” is substantially related to the symbolic idea of people losing their sense of “Malayness” or Malay identity if they do not communicate with other Malays. The term ‘melting’ according to Bauman (2000) is due to the new experiences resulting from instantaneous communication and global travel, which have produced a new, more flexible or fluid social condition. He terms this condition ‘liquid modernity’ (in contrast to the relative stability of the old ‘solid’ containers of nation, class and ethnicity), and he extends the ‘liquid’ metaphor to characterize the ‘melting’ of collective identity. Here, “melting” could occur if someone were to become engaged in practices that are against the Malay or Islamic culture and way of life. The religious practice among others refers to the practice of praying and fasting as a Muslim or practicing Malay customs in their everyday life, revolving around the use of the Malay language, consumption and what is considered proper behavior. In other words, according to Giddens (1999: 65), self-identity has to be created and recreated on a more active basis than before. Therefore, interpersonal communication can be regarded as a platform for ensuring proper cultural and religious practices among Malay students overseas.

When a similar question on the importance of interpersonal communication was posed to Linda, she answered:

_Translated interview excerpts with Linda_

*I think interpersonal communication gives you a sense of security being away from home. I think they are like your big family. By keeping in touch with your own ethnic group, you feel a sense of support in that way. So it is like maintaining your interpersonal communication with other Malays. I would rather say that may be preserving your ethnic identity, and things like that are an outcome of the things (interpersonal communication) rather than your intention. I have a strong feeling that people come together to have the sense of security and social support. Doing a PhD in three years is a challenge; if you do not have real support, you can simply feel lost in your own journey. To*
have face-to-face communication, to let things out, to whine, to let it all out—it really helped to have this circle of friends to help and to listen, but it again depends on your personality.

Here, we see how interpersonal communication provided a sense of security for Linda. Linda has studied overseas before. She pursued her Masters in the United Kingdom and is now completing her PhD in Western Australia. Her previous experience living overseas provided her with insights that emphasize the importance of interpersonal communication for students’ sense of togetherness. First, she claimed that her ethnic identity was preserved because of her communication with other Malays. Second, Linda’s communication with other Malays is a form of emotional support for her when facing the outside world. Finally, her encounters with other Malay friends and the ability to share her feelings suggest that her Malay friends would have felt and expected the same from Linda. Ting-Toomey (1999:13) pointed out that within our own group; we experience safety, inclusion and acceptance. Therefore, the need to share something similar propels us to identify with salient membership groups and enables the general process of group-based inclusion.

Another important platform for Malay students to get involved in communication is encounters in formal and informal gatherings. Thus, communication also includes the important processes of relating, weaving and reweaving, which constitute and reconstitute matter and ideation as humans, discourse, and other beings (Condit, 2006:3). Furthermore, when people come together and interact, they not only transmit their personal emotions vocally, but they also convey a sense of how they are related (Harris and Rubinstein, 1975: 263). Malay students regulate their contact through formal and informal gatherings to enhance their ethno-religious identity. As Mitchell (2006) argued, “Religion can be a very effective facilitator of community.” When asked a question on how Malay students maintain their ethno-religious identity, Aisha retold her experience at one of the gatherings she attended. According to her:

*Translated interview excerpts with Aisha*

*Even though we went outside our country (Malaysia), we have been socialized in our country, our culture and values as Malays. I had attended a Christmas*
Aisha noted some interesting issues. The first issue involved her contact with “Others” at a Christmas party organized by the company where her husband worked. She hesitated to attend the party in the first place because of her concerns about food and alcohol-based drinks that might be served, but she was reassured by her husband. Second, at the party Aisha was attuned to the way people viewed her because she wore a head scarf. Barth (1969:14) noted that the cultural characteristics of members may be transformed, yet the continuing dichotomization between members and outsiders allows us observe continuity and investigate the cultural form and content. Third, when Aisha mentioned her swimming clothes that are designed for Muslim women, she was describing the transformation of a cultural aspect within the Malay-Muslim community. The difference established to separate the Malays (self) from the Others contributes to the maintenance of Malay group identity. Finally, the fact that this was highlighted in front of Others greatly affected the outcome of the interaction. The Others’ ability to converse with Aisha made her feel more assured of her “presented” Muslim identity (wearing a head scarf) and her Malay attitude in communicating with the Others.

These interview excerpts acknowledge that interactions with others are also important for Malays in signifying their Malayness and also provide a sense of security and social responsibility and act as reminders to them. Their first language serves as an important identity marker (Zuengler, 1989). As suggested by Ting-Toomey, “Individuals in all cultures
or ethnic groups have the basic motivation needs for identity security, inclusion, predictability, connection, and consistency on both group-based and person-based identity level, too much emotional insecurity (or vulnerability) will lead to fear of out groups or unfamiliar strangers” (2005:218). In relation to this, Barth (1981: 207) argued that because identities are signaled as well as embraced, role constraints could be expected. Thus, a person would be reluctant to act in new ways out of fear that such behavior might be inappropriate for a person of their identity. Moreover, people are quick to associate activities with a particular cluster of ethnic characteristics. In addition to Malay identity, religious identity is an important part of Malay students’ identity and is related to the continuous communication with other Malays as they carry out their Islamic beliefs and practices.

Raha, on the other hand, has developed a heightened awareness of her “Self” and “Others.” When asked about the importance of her ethnic and religious identity, Raha stated:

*Translated interview excerpts with Raha*

> Religion is very important to me and since we are in a non-Islamic country, being Muslim is more important. As Malay, if you wanted to feel safe, you can seek assistance from someone you are close to and try not to isolate yourself. There was once where I came across an Indonesian--Rita and I went out with her. She wanted to eat KFC chicken. I told her that I would not eat it because it might not be properly slaughtered (according to the Islamic way). However, I was also quite aware that some people, they are not too serious about some related Islamic practices like some Malays. So I told her that she could eat it if she wanted to, but I will not. She did not eat it that day because she was concerned about how I felt, I guess. I was not forcing her not to do so, but I was holding on to my faith. If we take for granted small things like this and we do not perform them according to our religious faith here, nobody will know and nobody cares. However, as for me, it all goes back to the person themselves. If they can feel comfortable not performing them [religious practices], then it is between that person and God.

Being in a foreign environment provided a significant trigger for Raha. Feeling different increased her appreciation of her own cultural roots and ethnic identity and, gradually and much to her surprise, she developed a more balanced, positive view of her home culture. She displayed empathy and personal growth. Instead of criticizing and rejecting other ways of
communicating, she was open to adjusting her own style. She developed this awareness through the Islamic ideas of good and bad. At the same time, she also illustrated her understanding of different cultures, and she did not make a statement about what is right or wrong from her point of view. In addition, she agreed that some people take for granted the acceptability of overlooking religious demands when they are in a foreign environment. Thus, we see that religious beliefs appear more open to personal variation and modification. Different individuals in the same religious community may have varying beliefs on a given topic (Firth, 1996: 15). Therefore, Raha has managed to maintain her religious identity despite her encounters with people of different views from the same religion.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have explored situations that emphasize the contributions of interpersonal communication in maintaining Malay students’ ethno-religious identities overseas. As long as the person speaks our language and appears to be from our culture, we can make certain assumptions concerning how to interact with that person (Berger and Bradac, 1982:10). On the pragmatic level, this research attempted to document and analyzes some of the Malay student’s experiences and problems when adapting to a different culture, setting and environment and how these experiences and problems nurture the Malay cosmopolite in the globalized world. In the process, some students became more aware of existing contradictions within Malay culture and *adat*. Such awareness is a necessary precondition for the valuing of culture and community (Cohen, 1985: 69). In other words, according to Hall (1959, 1966), we encounter considerable difficulties in trying to interact with persons from other cultures because we fail to recognize that these persons employ a different set of communication conventions and norms. I have also argued that their reworking of their identity through interpersonal communication assists them in determining their identity in a foreign land. Therefore, the idea of melting discussed also shows that stable identities may be no longer tenable in the current world (Appadurai, 2000; Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1999). What I have discussed in this paper are efforts taken to maintain ethno-religious identity. However, this identify can be flexible to a large extent at some point, as long as the changes do not go against religious practices.
References


