Accounts of religio-cultural identity in Singapore and Malaysia

Abstract: Singapore and Malaysia shared a similar history until 1965. They continue to share a similar spread of religions, ethnicities and languages. Even though Chinese are much the largest community in Singapore, and Malays the majority group in Malaysia, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism are widely practised in both, while Malay, English, Tamil and several forms of Chinese are widely spoken – and frequently mixed with each other. To identify the range of perceptions of culture and identity in each society, discussion was observed among an ethnically-diverse focus group of Singaporeans and compared with similar discussion among a group of Malaysians. Discursive analysis was used to examine the construction of religious and ethnic identity emerging from the spoken data. The research focus was not only on the content of the discussions itself but also on the speech strategies employed by the participants. Findings suggest the existence of competing perceptions of what a multicultural society is or should be, not only across different ethnic and religious groups but also between the two countries.

Keywords: identity, accounts, Malaysia, Singapore, politeness

1 Introduction

In an earlier study of multiculturalism in Malaysia, religion appeared in accounts for a growing social distance between Malays and non-Malays (Buttny, Azirah and Kaur 2013). This article seeks to explore how religion is used discursively among some Malaysians as well as among some Singaporeans. We were interested in how diverse groups of articulate Singaporeans and Malaysians would discuss religio-cultural identity and multiculturalism in their countries and how

*Corresponding author: Lim Beng Soon: SIM University, Singapore. E-mail: bslim@unisim.edu.sg
Azirah Hashim: University of Malaya, Malaysia. E-mail: azirahh@um.edu.my
Richard Buttny: Syracuse University, USA. E-mail: rbuttny@syr.edu
they would make sense of multiculturalism in their own terms. Our key focus was
on the kinds of accounts participants draw on to interpret or articulate the cur-
rent situation.

2 Historical and sociocultural background

The focus on Singapore and Malaysia was motivated by the fact that both nations
share a common history and common political constructs through the old Malay
kingdoms of Johore-Riau and in the more recent past through colonial British
Malaya. In fact, before 1965, Singapore was part of Malaysia. Both nations have
similar dominant ethnic groups – Malays, Chinese and Indians – although in dif-
ferent proportions. Since 1965, however, Singapore and Malaysia have been sepa-
rate politically and have pursued different policies in managing race relations.

Ethnicity in Singapore has been closely tied to language, especially with theour official languages of Mandarin Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English (Zarine
2011). According to the 2010 census, 22% of Chinese, the largest ethnic group
and 1% of Indians professed no religious affiliation (Government of Singapore
2010). However, 99% of Singaporean Malays declared themselves as Muslim. Sin-
gaporean authorities have always stressed the secular nature of the country and
have repeatedly emphasized the equality of all religions in Singapore with no re-
ligion having primacy over the others. In fact, the Maintenance of Religious Har-
mony Act (Government of Singapore 2001) has established a Presidential Council
for Religious Harmony to regulate the conduct and minimize friction amongst the
different religions. Furthermore the state in Singapore has established a Presiden-
tial Council for Minority Rights to protect the rights of minorities in Singapore.

In contrast, in Malaysia, Muslim identity has become increasingly important
for most Malays, who comprise the largest ethnic group there. According to a
recent survey, when Malays were asked to choose their primary identity among
Malay, Muslim, or Malaysian, 72% chose Muslim (Centre for Public Policy Studies
[2006] as cited in Furlow [2009: 223]). Indeed, “Malay” is defined by the 1957 Con-
stitution as one who professes Islam, speaks Malay, and follows Malay customs.
For Malays, ethnicity is directly tied to religion (Mutalib 2007).

Malaysia has experienced a rise in Islamic identity that has been character-
ized as an “ethnoreligious resurgence” (Hefner 2001; Haque 2003; Husin 2008).
Islamic resurgence can be seen as part of a Malay “cultural assertiveness” sup-
ported by state funding for mosque construction and also Islamic-style architec-
ture (Peletz 1997; Lee 2000). Malaysia is generally regarded as practicing a “mod-
erate Islam” (Aziz and Shamsul 2004), yet the government’s championing of
Islam and special privileges for Malays has been seen by some as an impediment
to ethnic relations (Hooker 2004: 160). Mutalib (2007: 40) argues that Malaysia is not really a “plural society” but a “bi-modal society” between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The official racialization categories recognized by the Malaysian State – Malay, Chinese, Indian and Other (CMIO) – are the same as those inherited from British colonial rule (Hirshman 1986). A problem with these official categories is that they are socio-historical constructions that have changed over time and most likely will continue to change. There are competing assessments of how Malaysia has fared as a multicultural society. Malaysia is said to be “among the most successful countries in postcolonial management of ethnic pluralism” (Goh 2008: 234); for most of the 50-plus years since independence, the country has been at peace and has grown economically such that today Malaysia is no longer considered a third-world country (Aziz and Shamsul 2004). On the other hand, Malaysia is said to be deeply divided along ethnic lines with race/ethnicity influencing how Malaysians conduct themselves at all levels (Haque 2003; Hooker 2004; Fee 2006; Husin 2008). Generally people identify more with their ethnic or religious affiliation than as Malaysian.

This same official racial categorization (i.e. CMIO) exists in Singapore as a leftover from the same colonial past, but the government of Singapore has of late allowed some blurring of the categorizations by introducing double-barreled races for children of mixed descent, for example, Indian-Chinese for a child with parents from the two racial groups. In fact, with regard to this policy change the Prime Minister of Singapore was quoted as commenting: “I think it is a liberalisation . . .” (in Ee 2010).

There is a need to consider multicultural societies such as Malaysia and Singapore in their postcolonial, South East Asian context. The special privileges for Malays or the role of Islam in Malaysian society are considered to be “sensitive topics” to the extent that public discussion of them is prohibited by law (Haque 2003; Ganeson 2005; Gomez 2009). In Singapore, the same sensitive topics exist and extend beyond the religion of Islam to other principal religions in the city state. Nevertheless, talk about sensitive topics or complaints about other ethnic/religious groups generally only occur within one’s own group. Despite these obstacles, we wondered how a discussion of multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore would unfold. How would a mixed group of articulate Malaysians and Singaporeans from different ethno-religious backgrounds address one another’s issues and concerns? What aspects of culture would be most salient in participants’ discourse and how would these vocabularies be used in constructing identities? Given the above-mentioned issues of ethnicity, religion, identity and nation we also wondered, what is the vision that participants have for Malaysia and Singapore? How do their various accounts stake out identities or positions?
3 Data and methodology

Our first set of data comes from an audio recording of a focus group conducted in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in April 2009. Our findings on the increase in ethno-religious awareness and sensitivities in Malaysia prompted a similar study in Singapore in December 2010. Given that the two countries share a similar history but have diverged politically, socially and economically in a number of ways, some contrast in attitudes towards religion and identity was anticipated. What would be the outcome of the discussions of the focus group participants given the differences in ethnic composition, policies and experiences in the two countries? What and how are the racial, cultural, religious and national identification expressed?

For the initial study, eight Malaysians of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds living in the capital area comprised the focus group. The participants were all middle-aged, evenly divided by gender, and included three Malays, two Chinese, two Indians, and one who described herself as “hybrid” of mixed ethnicity. A brief sketch of the participants’ ethno-religious backgrounds is provided using pseudonyms:

- James: Chinese-Malaysian Muslim man
- Jennifer: Chinese-Malaysian Buddhist woman
- Ibrahim: Malay-Muslim man
- Norazam: Malay-Muslim man
- Dorothy: self-described hybrid woman from Sabah
- Peter: Indian-Malaysian Christian man
- Shanthi: Indian-Malaysian Hindu woman
- Ramlah: Malay-Muslim woman

Participants spoke in English with some code-switching with Malay. The meeting lasted for two hours and twenty minutes. The meeting was audio-recorded and relevant portions were transcribed.

About one and a half years later we organized a comparable focus group of Singaporeans of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. The group comprised eight participants who worked at a local university as administrators or academics. There were two males and six females in the group, comprising four Chinese, two Malays, one Hindu Tamil and one Muslim Tamil. They were:

- Thiru: Indian-Hindu man
- Chew: Chinese-Buddhist man
- Saliha: Indian-Muslim woman
- Nora: Malay-Muslim woman
- Has: Malay-Muslim man
The participants and discussion facilitators sat around a large table and the meeting lasted an hour and a half and two hours respectively. The meeting was recorded and transcribed. The data was examined for aspects of multiculturalism and religio-cultural identity.

The data extracts below were selected after multiple listenings of the recordings and readings of the transcripts. We selected data extracts which contained accounts of ethno-religious discourse. The framework for analysis considers how participants account for events that purport to describe, explain or assess the state of multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore. Accounts can take the form of a narrative or of propositions. We are interested in how different categories of persons and their actions get represented in these accounts. Such accounts work to position the self and the other in evaluating events.

4 Malaysians discursive construction of religion, boundaries and communication

A prior study showed how religion was used discursively as a marker of identity and cultural difference, especially for the Malays in Malaysia (Buttny, Azirah and Kaur 2013). Becoming more knowledgeable of Islam’s “rules and regulations” was said to lead to restrictions in the free and open contact between groups. In this article we examine how participants portray various aspects of religion as part of talk about identity and contact between groups.

During the focus group interview, one of the discussion leaders raised the question about which of the various identities matters most for participants (transcript conventions are listed in the Appendix):

(1)

(RB is one of the discussion leaders)

RB: We have these different kind of terms put on the table about religion or ethnicity or race or nationality I mean what about in terms of your own identity I mean is there something that comes first? ((skip eight lines))
Norazam: a good Muslim he will **always react** as a Muslim [above Malaysian above Malay]

Norazam: The true participating Muslim will react first as a Muslim . . . .

Norazam: so you asked the question of me? I’m a teacher to my son and his friends Muslims first then the Malays then Malaysians . . . then of course we’re members of one whole family

Here Norazam implies that for Malay Muslims, religious identity matters more than ethnic identity or national Malaysian identity. He presents his answer using the evaluative membership terms, the “good Muslim” or “the true participating Muslim”. He uses the extreme-case formulation, they “will always react as a Muslim”, said emphatically. Then again, they “will react first as a Muslim”. His final summation states his own view which he identifies as a response to the question. He presents the identities hierarchically: Muslim religious identity first, followed by Malay ethnic identity, then Malaysian national identity.

A bit later in the discussion there is a similar kind of answer from another participant about the hierarchy of Malay identities. Here a common Malay slogan is drawn upon to articulate this hierarchy of identities.

(2)

Ibrahim: I would say the majority so the majority of the Malay mind-set you can get a clue there is an often oft-quoted Malay phrase *demi agama, bangsa, negara* you know already the priority which means for the sake of religion race and nation that’s a standard Malay phrase you know it’s a (priority) religion race and nation I’m- you’ve gone to school you heard this whenever there’s speeches you mention the three if it’s a Malay speaking it is *agama bangsa negara* so you got the answer

These two extracts underscore the importance of religion in Malay discourse to the extent that being Muslim comes before ethnicity and nationality. This hierarchy of identities gets encapsulated in this “oft-quoted Malay phrase”. It is inter-
esting how certain utterances become crystallized as phrases or slogans and become quoted by others. Here Ibrahim labels this phrase as an answer which captures the “mind-set” of the Malays. From this hierarchy of identities it may also be inferred that the connectedness between Muslims and non-Muslims appears rather thin. Shared religion is presented as a primary form of connectivity and community in these Malays’ discourse.

A rather different view of religion and difference is offered by another participant in the following; here James comments on the communicative aspects of religion in both a positive and a negative sense.

(3)
James:  as one Quranic verse say invite people by your good- good- by your good action by your good deeds so that people see:: your (works) and >ask what religion< but by seeing your action? they are interested what religion are you? and then you can share with them then °that’s beautiful° but I’m a Muslim do- do whatever I do and so forth ( ) avoid this and avoid that and how I dress and so forth >see< °but as what we see inside the papers (.) how many of these people are corrupt, how many people do a lot of abuses and so forth
((skip 4 lines))
so:: for example I’m attached with this group services international we are a small group of people but what we do is very interactive whenever we meet we do community work (.) they do services and (do things for) people and when we talk about religion we talk about religion but we try to understand other people and then you your view you your opinion and so forth I may disagree with you but (then) I respect you ( )

Here James invokes a Quranic verse about the power of good deeds and actions which he claims others will see and then ask one about one’s religion. James uses indirect speech in summarizing the Quranic verse; his summary seems to blend into his own imagining of an action scenario. Here is the implicit contrast between words and deeds, prescriptions/proscriptions and actions. This °words
versus deeds” is a familiar trope; words are easy while actions reveal who you really are and will move others to ask your religion, something “you can share with them”.

He contrasts this power of good actions and deeds from the Quran with the hypothetical example of the proselytizing Muslim who is discovered to be “corrupt”. Instead of just describing the hypocritical Muslim, he takes on and performs that prototypical voice, “do whatever I do and so forth ( ) avoid this and avoid that and how I dress”. So we have the portrayal of the corrupt Muslim who prescribes/proscribes in contrast to the “beauty” of “good action” and “good deeds” as expressed in the Quran. Earlier in recounting his background, James described himself as a Chinese-Malaysian who converted to Islam in order to marry a Malay. Being a Muslim himself perhaps gives him more licence to criticize “the corrupt Muslim”.

James illustrates further the power of good deeds and actions with an account about his community group that does community service. As he tells it, they do discuss religion but they try to understand one another; even if they disagree, they “respect” one another. His recounting of community work and service leads into talk about religion. Religion, of course, can be one of the most sensitive topics between different groups. Notice the connection he draws between “talk about religion but we try to understand” and “I may disagree with you but (then) I respect you”. James invokes the meta-discursive notions, “trying to understand” and “respect”, as possible solutions to managing talk about religious difference.

In extract (4) we can see another ecumenical view of religion which is contrasted to a dominant Malay version of Islam.

(4)
John: You know the reason that I’m interested is because I have friends from Sabah Sarawak they are way: ahead of us in race (.) and religious traditions and they have been so because of history in the same families you may not have heard of it in the same family you might have a Christian[ a Hindu you have a =

Dorothy: [a Christian

John: = Muslim you may even have a Buddhist and they=

Dorothy: Yes

John: = intermarry no question (.) they interpret the Quranic verses no (comparison) to religion in a way to do that and be ( ) so they are
Religio-cultural identity in Singapore and Malaysia

One way that participants discuss multicultural relations is to cite times or places when or where such contact has been successful. Such temporal or geographic reference allows for a comparison or contrasts with the current time or place. In our previous study we observed this practice of noting more successful times of multicultural contact through narratives of “the good-old-days” (Buttny, Azirah and Kaur 2013). In this excerpt John cites a place, Sabah and Sarawak (the states of East Malaysia), and contrasts them as their being “way ahead of us in race (.) and religious traditions”. Dorothy’s active reception of John’s descriptions and assessments displays her alignment with him.

John proceeds to describe how in a family there may be members of different religions. He lays out the different religions by listing the four main faiths of the region. Then he says people of these different religions “they intermarry” immediately followed by the emphatic, “no question”. Intermarriage, of course, is probably the most intimate form of multicultural contact. John then moves from this account of multiculturalism to his favourable assessment, calling it “a model for the rest of Malaysia”.

John continues by conveying what he heard from “the personal experience of people there”. He narrates the tale of a judge from Malaysia who tells Christian-Muslim couples, “you cannot”. But these couples, as he puts it, take “a stand” and reply, “look we’ve been practicing this all along”. In this exchange between the judge’s admonishment and the couple’s justification of their behaviour, John uses direct speech in performing the couple’s constructed dialogue. The implication in this narrative is that the judge is a Malay Muslim from peninsular Malaysia. Sabah and Sarawak are not majority Muslim
states and consequently allow for more liberal interpretations of “the Quranic verses”.

5 Singaporeans discursive construction of religion, boundaries and communication

The Singapore focus group interview began with a question on multiculturalism in Singapore: how participants characterise multiculturalism. In the data, participants talk about the current situation and at the beginning emphasize accommodation and acceptance of differences between ethnic groups. They describe how multicultural Singapore is emphasizing that this is something everyone has accepted, highlighting in particular the common practices of “give and take”. Initially, they provide accounts of accommodation to one another irrespective of race and religion but later on in the discussion, dissatisfaction is expressed with regard to the lack of understanding of one another’s cultures, religions and the continuation of some form of separation. Various explanations are given both for peaceful co-existence and for problematic relations.

One participant, Thiru, an Indian, provokes discussion (extract 5) by saying that “… Singapore is a multicultural country in the sense (.) yes different groups (.) …” and that “… in the recent years we have other nationalists coming to Singapore”.

(Aren’t) we supposed we are all: kind of used to each other in our sense=
=for instance >in particular< in this particular school (.) I mean with four languages proven in four different languages and:: so: so >I mean< it means that whenever we hang out together (.) erm:
there are certain: level of a:: accommodation that you need to (.) make for each other (.) because like a:: its its sometimes it’s not even about race sometimes its about lifestyles (.)
er:: the last >is it< this week? This week we have the: staff lunch at the vegetarian [restaurant] because >because< =

[vegetarian]
[restaurant]

=because that we have Chinese Malay Indian (.) but we also have vegetarians and meat eaters=

= heh heh
Religio-cultural identity in Singapore and Malaysia

Chew: so (. ) so (. ) so (. ) it >it< (. ) it (. ) means different things >and then< so of course> (. ) so >so yeah< whenever we a: I mean: whoever is organising them it make SURE that it accommodate to all (1) [to] (. ) to all those differences (. ) I think you (kind of) get used to that

There appears to be an awareness of multiculturalism in terms of religious differences and practices in the Singapore data. Personal narratives are used by the participants to illustrate this acceptance of multiculturalism. There is an emphasis on accommodation and understanding and how this is illustrated in the talk between the participants or in personal narratives.

In extract (6), Chew, a Chinese participant, was recalling his own experience of how he glibly asked why a fellow trainee in national service did not have to carry a heavy backpack whilst running through a field, to be told by his other friends that the person was fasting (“hello fasting la”) whereupon he immediately understood: “immediately you’ll shut up” and “… you kind of understand (stressed) that the minute someone reminded you”. Reported speech “hello fasting la” is used to emphasise this religious practice. It is used to capture the most crucial information here about understanding another’s religion.

(6)

Chew: =among us I mean in some >sometimes< of course we (. ) on and off we do forget remember there’s one time I was attending a: a leadership training camp (. ) whereby the name is nice >nicely< called leadership >but actually< what you do is those are adventure camp which you carry: all the full pack and everything from one part of the island to the other part of the island going all the (.) muddy road I remembered there’s one times: while are going through the training (. ) and then I remembered everybody was carrying full pack heavy: and then of course at some point and there’s pouring rain: so I started to complain I was looking around and eh! (.) That guy is not carry anything leh >how< come you not carrying anything?

All: (heh heh)

Thiru: Upset and (say eh!) More heavy la with all the equipment with the rain becomes heavier (. ) and then someone next to me say Hello fasting la (1)

All: (heh heh)

Thiru: [Immediately you’ll shut up. Oh ok] ok no questions asked move on heavy but (. ) okay[(.]because] that’s the fasting month

All: (heh heh)
This understanding was reflected by Thiru who remarked that over time people get used to the different customs of the different communities. This mingling or “co-existence” of the different racial groups is also seen as promoted by government policies in terms of housing quotas to ensure that there are no racial enclaves.

Another personal narrative can be found in Saliha’s explanation that “everyone is conscious about everything” and that her non-Muslim friends will ensure that they obtain halal food for her at parties or will cook using halal meats as long as they know they are inviting Muslims friends. It is significant that Saliha believes that this awareness is widespread with the use of “everyone”. Here, Saliha expresses the voice of multiculturalism similar to the preceding voice of understanding by Thiru and Chew.

Conversely, awareness of different religious practices does sometimes generate a negative stance. For example, Thiru explained that he has worked for 15 years in the Ministry of Education and that he has observed that his Muslim colleagues pray several times during working hours and he thinks it encroaches upon their work. He indicates his disapproval through the use of emphasis in tone. He prefaces his comments by saying that it is “no harm to share with you” and he explains that on Friday his Muslim colleagues leave early and come back at 2.30 pm “but what happens is actually . . .”, and goes on to describe that prayers by his Muslim colleagues took place “everyday (. ) almost several times”. He explained his reaction by recounting “I was a bit taken aback I said this is a working hours”. Here he is reporting his own thoughts. He uses this to show his natural disapproval of this practice. Thiru believes that it is religion rather than culture that impinges on common space and describes how certain cultural practices which are considered central in the culture of the Tamils are seen as religious practices by others, for example music and astrology.
Thiru: we work in a common place (.) so what happens is every day (.) almost several times I >I< think it’s five times or what (.) and the whole lot will go to the toilet they wash their legs wash their hands face everything and then: they will have a mirror (.) and they wear the white robe and then they pray so I was a bit taken aback I said this is a working hours. It’s not the: what they called Fridays but this is a (.) daily practice and what sort of work they do >you see< so: I thought their work is strong (protect) ( ) enough you see so: when I brought up decisions about ( ) don’t even mention all these No! I’m not saying I’m against the religion not I say but they’re given Friday (.) but why do they make use of the office hour it’s a waste of time you have to do your work. You’re paid for it [>you see<]

Chew: [um: um:]

Chew supports Thiru by explaining “that religion (stressed) plays an important part” and gives a narration of a past incident in which tension within a family was resolved by the accommodation that each showed towards the other’s differing religious beliefs concerning death rites. She shares her personal experience involving family members who are Taoist, Buddhist or Christians and how after his late father’s death, his sister-in-law who is Christian was offended that there was an altar to remember his late father.

(9)

Chew: yet still there’s certain things that you don- don’t er . . . need to be very cautious about that you need to be very con- careful about it in order not to cross certain line er: and the I remembered (.) there was one point when ( ) my dad passed away (.) we had a Taoist ritual (.) Taoist ritual so in the Taoist tradition what you do is when the person passed away after the funeral (.) you put that (.) the picture with the: >with the< things and put all the [( ] joss

Thiru: [joss stick]

Chew: sticks in the house all rite. My: my in-laws my sis-in-laws is a bit offended (.) because she is a Christian you see why why: because (.) in Christian point of view you are worshipping ghost (1) but of course: (.) my >my mum< my perspective well: that’s my father=

Thiru: =um=

Chew: =and my mum perspectives is well that’s my [husband] allrite. So: at some point my brother he himself is a Christian (.) so he will basically pull his wife aside and say er: hello (.) this thing have to give and take a
little bit don’t push too far: after all we all live in the same house > so < there are a little bit of give and take in that sense even within the same household er: even even though

When the discussion reverts to the topic of a Muslim marrying a non-Muslim, Saliha claimed that the marriage does not go through the Syariah court but a civil registry of marriages and when asked if it is recognized she was surprised and said “Yea it is recognized by the country, what’s wrong?”. When asked by the moderators if the younger generation is more secular, Saliha replied that she has seen a few inter-faith marriages and in her opinion it is due to Westernization and one can’t help it if one falls in love with another from another religion and this was agreed by all. Saliha explains that we just “work it out in the family or in the society” and Chew explains this is like what he said earlier about “a little bit of give and take” and also depends on “whose will is stronger” and everyone laughs.

Chew also elaborates that he has attended a church wedding where the religious hymns might contain references to the Christian religion but being Buddhist he will still sing those hymns (although he is aware he does not subscribe to the Christian religion) deferring to the fact that he is there to celebrate the occasion of the wedding of the couple and does not have to take issue with singing Christian hymns. Finally, Chew mentions that the government is careful about maintaining religious harmony and related a recent incident in Singapore where a Christian Pastor made some “very offensive” and “nasty thing” statements about Taoists practice and the whistleblower was a Christian who uploaded the offending remark on Youtube. This event culminated in the government taking action and the pastor had to reconcile with the person in charge of the Taoist association.

In many of the above narratives, the accommodation in the form of “give and take” between the different ethnic groups are either explicitly stated or implied. Participants highlight that differences in religious beliefs can be overcome by showing respect towards others and by adopting this “give and take” attitude. While there are communal divisions and racial identifications, in general, the data shows participants striving for tolerance in dealing with different cultures.

Participants also described a lack of awareness of cultural/religious practices, a lack of integration and an increase in social distance. Thiru’s narrative about the ignorance of other ethnic groups about the cultural practices of the Indians indicates that this multiethnic living environment may be only superficial and that an understanding of each other’s cultural practices has not yet been achieved. For example, he explained that even though he has lived in a council
flat for 24 years he doesn’t talk to his Chinese neighbors and explained that the children “never mix when they were young”. He was also upset when his neighbor’s children asked for a family photograph of his family to do a school project as “they never even talked to me . . .”. He also recounted how in his friend’s sister’s flat the neighbors called the fire brigade when she lighted oil lamps around her flat not knowing that this is a religious practice. Thiru’s claim (extract 10) of being “very shocked” and use of the vivid present in “you mean you don’t understand that it is part of the festival” indicate his negative attitude to inadequate cross-cultural understanding.

(10)
Thiru: like for example I am in the private council living in that particular for almost 24 years (. ) I don’t talk to my neighbors. Both are Chinese [(.)] and ( ) two children actually: they were in (recep) school and: I’ve three children. They never mix when they were young so one day we came at last (.) haven’t get a family photo because I’m doing a project in the school (.) Then my children came to ask >they< asked me (for) my coming can I show what should they ask? I mean they didn’t saw me yes they never even talked with me=

All: =(heh heh)=

Thiru: Now what they want to get photo for? So (.) recently there was a:: one incident one might a: son’s class that a: campus make for me (.) ( ) that they call some sort of festival (.) in their house a bit a: my friend’ssister’s place you know they light up the ( . ) lights they put around the house? And then the neighbor immediately call the civil defense=

All: =(heh heh)=

Thiru: there was a fire. ((Someone laughing)) And I was very shocked (.) you mean you don’t understand that it is part of the ( . ) festival that you’re lighting up and looking at the lights around how can they say it’s a fire there? ((Laughter)) and then they say they can’t see ( ) enquire what ( . ) what is happening around there you see. I mean of course like they said the major festivals they know because it’s public [holidays]

All: yeah

Thiru: you see ( . ) but a part from that to: going into: the [details] (dual) access and all: I don’t think so but ( ) talk much of understanding

Jenny, a Chinese in her early 50s, similarly lamented that her children are in a school that is attended by mainly Chinese children and her children can’t even differentiate between Malays and Indians let alone be aware of cultural and religious differences between the majority Chinese and the minorities. She feels that
this is because there is very little chance for them to interact with children from the other races.

Saliha agrees about this lack of awareness of other ethnicities and religions and gives an account (extract 11) of an incident with a taxi driver indicating ignorance of ethnicity, religion and language. In Singapore, Islam and Malayness are often taken to coincide even though there are several other non-Malay Muslim groups, notably Indian Muslims but also some Chinese. As in other examples which showed differences between ethnic groups, participants often inject humor into these accounts, thus downplaying the seriousness of ethnic problems.

(11)
Saliha: and then I: he was trying to make a conversation with me so he started speaking to me in Malay then I told him I'm not a: I can't speak Malay. Oh! How come you can't speak Malay? They say ar: because I'm um: my a: second language is actually Tamil so I can only speak Tamil I >I< hardly (. ) speak Malay. Oh:: so ar: you're a Malay? They say ((crowd laughs)) I mentioning ar: Indian Muslim. Oh Indian Muslim: so you celebrate Deepavali? ((crowd laughs)) I was like (. ) no:: I celebrate Hari Raya. Ah: so why do you wear these (sissy (. ) CLOTHES WHEN DID) ( )! ((crowd laughs)) I always have this problem explaining to them but I think um: I got immune to it so:: ((crowd laughs))

The question of which of the various identities matters most for participants was put to the Singaporean participants. When asked by moderators to choose between identifying with one’s nationality or one’s ethnicity or religion, Nora categorically answers “Singaporean”.

(12)
Nora: I’m [more] I’m more of a Singaporean than a Muslim (. ) Malay:: uh: (it’ll be following) my parents their tradition all of that my kids: are more modernized than me: ((crowd laughs)) so: therefore er well like fasting months and Hari Raya they must do but other than that the rest why do I need to do that why do I need to do this they question that yeah so my: fam- my: er: younger generation my: is more modern than (. ) whereas I stayed with my parents and my mother in law they’re more traditional so: can see that there are some (. ) gap there (. ) between me and my er: in-laws and mother: because er:: we: we are basically because I suppose of all education or mix with people and my neighbors are mainly all Chinese er: as I that’s what Thiru say in fact
my daughter and my maid knows my neighbors better than me: and they can tell me [oh that one is staying here that one] is.

Here, we see evidence of differences between people within the same ethnic group, for example across different generations, with the young ones being “more modernized” and the older ones “more traditional”. In contrast to the Malaysian data, which suggested that people look back to what were apparently better integrated days, the Singapore group seemed to imply that the younger generation is more accepting of ethnic differences than the older generation and more inclined to see themselves and others as Singaporeans first. This attitude has been linked to public dialogues organized by Malay Members of Parliament asserting that Malay rights were protected by the state and “that Malays must recognize that they are Singaporeans above all other forms of identification” (Syed Muhd Khairuddin Aljunied 2011: 157).

6 Conclusion

This article focused on the accounts of religio-cultural identity of two small groups of Malaysians and Singaporeans. Participants told narratives, gave explanations or made assessments of events, relations and the current situation. They discursively portrayed religion in terms of difference. Avowals of Islamic identity emerged as especially important for Malays in Malaysia. Religious difference discursively appeared to create boundaries between groups while unifying people within those boundaries, and for the Malaysian-Muslim participants, religion was avowed as the primary signifier of identity. There was an emphasis by the Malay participants that being a Muslim came first and foremost and national identification was secondary. Differences among Malaysians were nevertheless argued to be surmountable by showing “respect” for others or by doing “good actions”, or in more integrated places such as the states of Sabah and Sarawak, by “intermarriage”.

Though based on a small qualitative sample, it is interesting that these findings accord with many of those in a large-scale survey of Malaysian youth conducted a few years earlier (Merdeka Centre 2006), which showed a clear majority of Malays seeing themselves primarily as Muslims, with the Chinese split fairly evenly between those putting their nationality first and those who put their ethnicity first. Only 3% of Malays wanted religions and government kept separate, in contrast to two thirds of Chinese. In the same survey, the smaller Indian and non-Malay bumiputra ‘indigenous’ groups were more likely than either the Malays or Chinese to identify themselves primarily as Malaysians.
In Singapore, religion was addressed by participants from all communities in a more ecumenical way, with people generally of the opinion that multiculturalism is accepted and quite the norm in the country and that race relations are generally fine. However, a change in footing could be observed halfway through the focus group interview, with some dissatisfaction and grouses expressed by the Malay and Indian participants about ignorance of their religious and cultural differences. However, there was no indication of any intense conflict between the different ethnic groups. The Singaporeans generally saw themselves first as Singaporeans, wore their national identity with pride, and only after this identified with whatever ethnic group they belong to.

It must be borne in mind that this study is an exploratory one with a small number of participants and therefore we acknowledge the limits of any generalizability. However, as far as we know, no similar study has been carried out comparing how Singaporeans and Malaysians articulate religio-cultural identity and multiculturalism.

Funding: This study was partly supported by the University of Malaya Research grant “Multiculturalism in Malaysia” RPO04-2012c and SIM University research grant “Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore” RFIISASOI.

Appendix

The transcription system used here is adapted from the Gail Jefferson system (Jefferson 2004).

[ ] Marks overlapping utterances.
( ) A short untimed pause or gap within or between utterances.
: Colons mark the extension of a sound or syllable it follows. The more colons, the longer the sound stretch.
? Marks a rising intonation.
- Marks a halting abrupt cutoff.
word Underlining marks a word or passage said with emphasis.
°word° Degree signs mark a passage that is said more quietly than surrounding talk.
>word< Chevrons marks a passage delivered at a quicker pace than surrounding talk.

hhh Audible outbreaths including laughter.

hhh Audible inhalations.
( ) Unsure of what is transcribed.
((word)) Scenic details or description of the context.
References


