

**ISLAMISATION AND  
ETHNIC IDENTITY OF THE CHINESE  
MINORITY IN MALAYSIA**

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## ABSTRACT

This study of Chinese minority set out to provide a profile of the Chinese community in Kelantan situated at the northern-east coast of Peninsular Malaysia.

Kelantan is significantly peculiar in the study of Chinese minority's response towards Islamisation policies for two reasons. First, the state has been under the strong grip of an Islamic opposition party, i.e. Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) for four consecutive electoral terms (1990, 1995, 1999 and 2004). Second, Muslims constitute 95% of the total population in Kelantan whilst the Chinese constitutes merely 4% of the state population (*Census of Population, 2000*).

The 4% Chinese ethnic minority in Kelantan are constantly reminded of their ethnicity after many generations of co-existence and even mixed marriages with the local people. Despite their excellent proficiency in the Kelantanese dialect, their adaptation to the local culture and religious practices of the Muslims are not without tension. Controversies often arise whenever the state government intends to impose Islamic values on the Muslims as well as the non-Muslims. The Chinese still consciously draw and maintain ethnic boundaries with the local Malay Muslims, particularly with regard to conversion to Islam. However, such resistance was significant among the devoted Buddhists and Christians, but not the Chinese who think highly of Islamic way of life.

Given the primacy of Malay political hegemony and the constitutional status of Islam, the Chinese minority in Kelantan experienced both gradual and drastic changes incorporated in the state and national policies, particularly policies concerning religio-politics, socio-economy, education, language and culture. Alerted or alarmed by their deteriorating socio-political rights as well as the peripheral status of their cultural identity

as ethnic Chinese, the Chinese community consciously set up boundary that is used to differentiate the Chinese non-Muslims with the Malay-Muslims ('others') by means of safeguarding their religion, language and cultural identity in a Muslim dominated society.

Confining to survey and personal interview conducted with the Chinese respondents, preliminary findings showed that there were five significant factors, i.e. politics, religion, integration, understanding of Islam and ethnocentrism that determine the responses towards Islamisation policies, as well as the notion of Islamic State. The Chinese in Kelantan appreciate religious freedom thus far and they hope the state government would continue to respect cultural differences in both public and private domains. This study is particularly useful to help us understand the perceptions and feelings of the Chinese minority in Malaysia. It is hoped that such views are taken into consideration when strategising future state and national administrative policies.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since Malaya achieved Independence in 1957, and formed a new country with Sabah and Sarawak in 1964, Malaysia has been consistent and successful in portraying the image of a moderate, modern and progressive Muslim majority country. As the nation commemorates and celebrates 50 years of Independence in 2007, Malaysians are proud to demonstrate to the world that this Islamic governance has successfully promoted stability and harmony in this multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. Nevertheless, the Islamisation process in Malaysia is not without turbulences, tension or conflicts.

During the first two decades following Independence, major events in the Muslim world such as the Arab-Israeli war (1967), Islamisation in Pakistan (1977-1988) and Islamic revolution in Iran (1978-1979) have had profound impacts on the Islamic resurgence in the 1970s, when Malaysians were still struggling to fulfill the requirements of nation building. Islamic education, *dakwah* movement and the idea of establishing a true Islamic State captured the hearts and minds of the Malay Muslims in their aspirations to revive the spirit of Muslim Brotherhood (*Ummah*). On the other hand, the implementation of a series of affirmative actions through the New Economic Policy (NEP) has boosted the socio-economic status of the Malay Muslims, providing them with education, employment and business opportunities. Similar affirmative policies, such as the National Language Policy, the National Culture Policy, coupled with the rise of the Malay middle class have further intensified Islamic resurgence by uplifting the religious consciousness of the Malay Muslims through social reconstruct and Islamic resurgence forces within the bureaucrats in government as well as the grass root level.

At the national level, Islamisation policies have been endorsed, supported and systematically institutionalized by the ruling Malay-Muslim hegemony, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). Tun Mahathir's government that ruled for 22 years (1982–2003) has made Islamic practices an integral part of the governance, providing direction and content for Malaysia as a young and dynamic Islamic nation state. The Malaysian government under the leadership of Mahathir had been successful in social mobilisation via the Muslims' dominant political role in interpreting, influencing and implementation of the Islamisation policies at the national level. Islam has been significantly incorporated as a way of life in both the public and private spheres of this

multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. In fact, the entire Malaysian society has been educated and moulded towards believing that the ultimate goodness and values of Islam will eventually pave ways to help Malaysians possess a sustainable, harmonious and progressive way of life (*al-din*). Fundamental Islamic virtues and ideals such as belief in and piety to God, fairness and justice, welfare society, charity and generosity to the needy, humanity and kindness to others, are reflected in the first principle of *Rukunegara* (National Ideology) – Belief in God.

The government's efforts to incorporate the universal values of Islam into administration has led to the proclamation in 2001 that 'Malaysia was already an Islamic State' by the then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad. The declaration came as a shock to the nation. First, it had not been debated or approved by the Parliament or the Cabinet. Secondly, the announcement was made on the 29 September 2001, merely 18 days after the September 11 incident involving some alleged Islamists' revenge against the U.S. government. Thirdly, the social contract adopted in 1957 by the major ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese and Indians should not be overruled by the Executive. In other words, Islam was and will remain symbolic as official national religion, but not of supreme status such as the Federal Constitution. Fourthly, whilst the non-Muslims questioned the rationale of an Islamic State, the Islamic Party of PAS too questioned and depicted the declaration by arguing that Malaysia was never ever an Islamic State.

According to PAS, Malaysia was secular and there was little resemblance with the true Islamic State existed in 632 by Prophet Mohammad. Leaders of PAS strongly renounced the proclamation based on the ground that the Constitution of Malaysia in Article 3(1) declares that "Islam is the religion of the Federation" is primarily symbolic.

They also contended that the status of *Syariah* law that had limited jurisdiction over Muslims, but not non-Muslims. PAS constantly challenged the ruling party led by UMNO to establish a puritanical 'Islamic State' to bring forth fundamental changes to the legal and social order. PAS also contended that the Constitution was secular and made it clear that once in power, the party will amend the basic law to convert Malaysia into a truly Islamic State via the imposition of Islamic morality on society, while allowing non-Muslims to practice religious and cultural rights in accordance with the *Syariah*.

The preceding discussion on proclaimed status of Islamic State proves that the issue was controversial within the Muslims, as well as between Muslims and non-Muslims. In Malaysia, Islamisation process is often compounded by the fact that there is no prototype secular or Islamic State in the modern world for the Malaysians to uphold. Such uncertainty has resulted in a string of controversial issues coming to the foreground. For example, conflicts between the civil and *Syariah* courts cause Muslims in dilemma whether to accept values that uphold Islamic morality but at the same time restrict or infringe individual liberties at both public and personal domains. They are also doubtful whether the religious authority has the discretion to define and punish Muslims guilty of 'apostasy', 'infidelity', 'deviationism' and 'indecent behaviour'. The latest incident happened in the raid of a Malay female singer and other band members by the religious officers of Perak Religious Department in Ipoh (*The Sun*, 2007, July 2).

On the other hand, non-Muslim communities who stand firm in their beliefs and ideals are well aware of their peripheral status as compared with the Muslims who enjoy religious hegemony in the country. Hence, both Muslim and non-Muslim communities have to face the constant 'threat' of Islamisation policies simply because the power to

interpret, influence and implement state and national policies pertaining to their religious beliefs lies not in the hands of the *rakyat* (the people), but in the hands of a selected few. For example, the appointed *mufti*, *ulama* or other high-ranking religious authority associated with UMNO at the national level, and the similar religious authority appointed by PAS at the state level. Moreover, discourse on religious supremacy was not allowed in public or open debate, as the Constitution (Article?) prohibits the discussion of such sensitive issues.

From the minority's point of view, the Federal Constitution and most state constitutions (except Sabah and Sarawak) clearly uphold Islamic moral values than those of non-Islamic religions. The constitutional monarchs at federal and state levels are Muslims. The dominant political party, UMNO is predominantly Muslims. The political executive, the judiciary, the legislatures, the civil service, the police, the army, may seem multi-ethnic but in fact are under the control of Muslims (Shad Saleem Faruqi, 2002:13). Economic planning, banking, finance and business activities are replete with Islamic features, whilst Islamic value systems have been incorporated in policy making at all levels. Islam that is often regarded a religious faith and a fundamental political ideology, has been so deeply rooted in daily practices of the people, so much so that it gives the impression that allegiance to Islam is a prerequisite for obtaining high ranking government posts such as the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister in this multi-ethnic country.

Malaysians, be they Muslims or non-Muslims, would have to choose between two spectrums of Islamic governance, i.e. fundamentalist's approach of PAS, or a modernist's approach of the ruling coalition government. Given the preponderant status of Islam in

the mainstream politics, Muslim leaders from both the ruling and the opposition parties are conscious to give an impression that they are devoted to the fundamental teachings and precepts of the Islamic faith. On the other hand, orthodox religious leaders aggressively attempt to convince Malaysians and the Muslim world that the struggle for an Islamic State was indeed noble and suitable for a multi-religious country like Malaysia. At the international level, the intensified tensions and conflicts between the Western and the Muslim world aroused even more speculations towards the direction and pace of Islamisation process in this country.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Ethnicity vs. Ethnic Identity**

‘Ethnicity’ is a concept that has been deliberately placed vis-à-vis racism. Derived from the Greek word *ethnos*, ethnicity means ‘group’, ‘race’ or ‘people’, which indicates self-identification, whilst race is often used as characterisation or classification of people (Eriksen, 1993:4). The concept of ethnicity has been debated in sociology for decades due to its ambiguity, complexity and flexibility. Towards the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, assimilation of subordinate ethno-cultural groups by the dominant majority group, like in the case of Chinese in Thailand and Indonesia, was thought to be a highly effective mechanism, if not the best way to achieve national unity. Political leaders often use government machineries such as education and cultural policies to facilitate the process of nation building. This is obvious during the early years of Independence, where a common goal or ‘national identity’ was created and constructed through a series of imperatives such as propaganda and policy making. In the meantime, minority groups

were concerned about whether their respective primordial cultures would be discriminated to give way to the dominant culture. Hence, when the National Language Policy and the National Culture Policy were enacted, the minority groups reacted to it by resisting such ideas or their implementation (Kua, 1998).

The problem of ethnic differentiation is compounded by another issue of whether ethnic identity is real or imagined. Cohen (1975:x-xii) argued that cultural apparatuses were powerful tools to form ethnic identity. Therefore, tangible or noticeable symbols of culture were used to determine the content of culture. In the Malaysian context, Malay Muslims as an ethnic group use cultural symbols such as attire, cultural artifacts and collective appearance to enhance their Muslim identity. It is real in the sense that ethnic differentiation is tangible and well manifested in cultural artifacts to different one group from another.

Geertz (1973) earlier noted that ethnic identity contains 'imagined commonness' where each member of an ethnic group imagines that others in the community adopt certain identity and reject certain. Nevertheless, since it is impossible for an individual to know all members in the same community, it is thus not likely for an individual to choose or prescribe certain qualities based on commonality endorsed by *all* members in the community. One can only imagine such commonality based on his own judgment, discretion and imagination. For that reason, Geertz argued that whatever 'commonality' sensed by an individual is mere illusion or imagination, although by so doing, his conceptualisation of identity can be enforced and his actions and thoughts reaffirmed. Anderson (1983) later added that ethnic was merely 'imagined' as members of this

imagined community have no idea of all the other members because it exists only in his own 'imagination'.

Identity often refers to the characteristics individuality or collectivity, with tangible commonalities and difference among individuals and groups, as Stuart (1987:44) rightly concluded, "All identity is constructed across differences." At the individual level, identity refers to a person's essential, continuous self, i.e. the internal and subjective concept of oneself as an individual. It is assumed that there is a static and unitary trait that lies within social groups. An individual can and often possess multiple identities, based on ethnic group, nationality, gender, language, religion, education and livelihood. Intra-group individuals who possess the same or similar identities are likely to stay or work together, as they have a common goal to achieve.

At the community level, identity is a dynamic force in the construct of social relationships. Identity of a group or a community is often reproduced through social structure or socio-political agency. With today's borderless world, no ethnic group can claim to have maintained a monolithic culture, or that it has never been influenced by other cultures. Each ethnic group may seem homogeneous, but the diversities among ethnic groups can be very distinctive. This is due to frequent exchanges of cultural productions and cultural entities, as well as hybridisation of ideas and values. As identity is dynamic in the sense that it is constantly changing and evolving, it can no longer be monolithic but heterogeneous in nature.

Ethnic identity often refers to self-definition and self-identification of what a community entails, or what it should be. In the case of Chinese Malaysians, the search in self-definition or their subjective identity often begins with a conscious comparison by

contrasting their 'Chineseness' with non-Chinese groups such as the Malays, Indians, Indonesians, etc. Chinese Malaysians are distinctive from Chinese of other countries, particularly their national identity and their sense of belonging to their home country. Indeed, what 'Chineseness' entails is actually a subjective question determined by, but not limited to one's language, education, culture, belief system and values pertaining to the heritage of a Chinese descendant. It must be noted that cultural entity which is foreign to the Chinese, for instance, Christianity, Western culture and the English language alike, are also non-threatening to the Chinese ethnic identity.

One interesting example on the acceptance of culture would be the English-medium school which cut across all groups before 1970s in Malaysia. None of the ethnic groups rejected English school system in defense of their respective ethnic identity. All ethnic groups accepted the English language as their first or second language without hesitation. The impact of English schools upon Chinese is still vivid as many Chinese Malaysians still adopt an 'English name' or 'Christian name' and identified with it for a lifetime as a self-selected name. Ironically, Chinese Malaysians who feel comfortable with English names or Western dress code are unlikely to identify themselves with a Malay or Muslim name. For the Chinese, ethnic boundary is outlined with the Malay Muslim culture but less so with the English cultural traits of the colonial government.

Extensive scholarly research on the Chinese Malaysians shows that despite vast differences in locality, interest, scope and focus of attention, these research works are of the consensus that the Chinese community is marginalised in the political arena of Malaysia, vis-a-vis the Malay dominant group. The deterioration of the political power of Chinese Malaysians has resulted in decreasing interest to participate in the political

parties, but an increasing interest to identity with own ethnic identity. Chinese Malaysians who face socio-political discrimination that eventually deteriorated their rights in the areas of politics, economy and personal development in the country have shifted their focus of attention from politics to education and culture.

As rightly observed by Wang Gungwu (2004:7), Chinese are deeply rooted in their multi-layered cultures, something they have recognised as their civilisation. They have always talked in terms of cultural identification rather than identification with any state. Such cultural identification has no territorial boundaries but based on the integration of various religions and philosophy such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and other folk beliefs. Besides, the Chinese tried to maintain their traditional values and lifestyles as much as possible, although they also make an effort to adapt to local conditions where necessary. However, it is common for them to stay loyal to their primordial cultural practices and religion of their ancestors. The parochial community of the Chinese often possess primordial attachment or loyalties towards own culture, ethnic identity, religion, language, tribe or region. Suppression of the minority group, if any, may occur by means of discrimination, assimilation, deportation or even annihilation.

Looking at the nature and structure of communal politics of Malaysia, identification with ethnicity – being a Malay, Chinese, Indian, Sikh, Iban, Bidayuh or Dayak – often supersedes other attachments, particularly identification with Malaysia, or the nation state . When given a choice between the national and the parochial community, people of different origins would easily permit ethnicity to command allegiance. From a political standpoint, unification through a shared, common identity is thought to be essential and necessary for nation building , and it was indeed ideal, at least theoretically,

for a nation to form a monolithic cultural content to cater for the needs of different communities. However, such unification has proven unrealistic

### **Ethnic Minority**

Understandably, ethnic minority of a shared common descent would usually reject assimilation, and by all means insist on retaining their right to use their mother tongues and their right to practice distinctive cultures and religions. Ethnicity thus provides material, spiritual and emotional support for individuals in the society and a sense of belonging between them. This sense of belonging is further enhanced via a strong sense of ethnocentrism or a natural self-defense mechanism to protect own identity from diminishing or deteriorating. As contended by Rapoport (1981:12),

All forms of identity, whether ethnic, religious, individual or whatever, depend on setting up a contrast with those who are different, i.e. have a different identity. These differences both separate and distinguish these social units and also lead to various forms of interaction or communication.

However, over emphasis and over reaction on ethnic identity would result in extreme ethnocentrism that could pose dangerous threat to national unity, security and stability before achieving desired equilibrium in the society. Ethnic differentiation policy may create undesirable elements such as suspicion, tension, hatred, biases, prejudice, discrimination and stereotype that generate dissatisfaction and distrust among the varying groups. The heightening of ethnic consciousness due to unfair treatment such as social discrimination can become a major source of inter-ethnic conflict, or a constant power struggle process between dominant and subordinate groups, particularly in their effort to compete for socio-economic advantages. In a multi-ethnic society, ethnic differentiation is commonly manipulated to determine which of the ethnic group will be granted power

and which group will be denied access to the country's resources. In other words, awareness towards one's ethnic identity can be functional when handled constructively; and dysfunctional when it generates hostility.

The effectiveness of government in regulating a peaceful solution in ethnic politics through integration, accommodation and/or assimilation will eventually pay off when the society is rewarded with peaceful co-existence. On the contrary, inappropriate government policies would lead to disintegration if each political party only supports its own strategies and struggles. In an apparently united but in actual fact deeply divided society, disintegration that is inherent in the multi-ethnic character of current dominant nation state formation may cause suspicion, polarisation, tension, conflicts and even violence in the country.

In the Malaysian context, 'ethnic Chinese minority' may imply three connotations – culture, religion and socio-politics. The first connotation derives from a cultural perspective. Members of a cultural minority group are well aware of their particular cultural identity characterised by language and dialect, religious practices, cultural origins, customs and traditions which are different from that of the dominant majority. The second connotation derives from a religious perspective. Members of a religious minority in Malaysia refer to the non-Muslim groups including the Christians, Catholics, Buddhists, Confucians, Taoists, Hindus, Sikhs, atheists, monotheists (except the Muslims), polytheists and other ancient worshippers such as animists. In addition, the religious minority views Islam as a dominant religion due to its official status and prestige stipulated in the Federal and State Constitutions. The non-Muslim minorities in Malaysia often regard Islam as 'other' religion that is of higher and privileged status than

their own religious beliefs. The third connotation derives from a socio-political perspective. As compared with the Malay Muslim majority, members of political minority are usually granted less power in decision-making, social status, political power and wealth distribution due to their relatively small number or less significant representation. In Malaysia, the *Bumiputra* concept created as a result of NEP since 1970, allows the aborigines of Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak to be the socio-political majority who are 'supposed' to dominate the current political scenario. In other words, the term 'minority' thus implies peripheral status due to (1) a lesser number (2) a peripheral status in the society such as culture, ethnic identity, religion, language, politics as well as economy or the distribution of wealth and resources. Ironically, the non-Malay non-Muslim *Bumiputras* are religious and cultural minority who simultaneously enjoy the majority status of *Bumiputras* in the country. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the Malays, instead of other aborigines from Peninsular, Sabah and Sarawak, are dominating the socio-political scenario in Malaysia.

In the post-Independence discourse of national identity and nation building, the National Language Policy and the National Culture Policy clearly suggested that the Malay language and Malay culture are essential elements in the nation building process of Malaysia. At the public domain, preference was given to many aspects of *bumiputera* culture as the "core" of the Malaysian "national" identity while other ethnic cultural symbols were acknowledged as peripheral (as cited in Shamsul A.B., 1996: 483). At least three groups contested the official definition of national identity. The first group was the non-Muslim and non-*bumiputera* group who preferred a more "pluralised" national identity, in which all ethnic cultures should be treated as equal. The second and third

groups were the non-Muslim *bumiputera* group, who proposed that Christianity and “native religions” be given equal status as Islam (Kitingan, 1987; Loh Kok Wah, 1992), and the radical Islamic *bumiputera* group, who stated their preference for a “truer and purer” Islam (Alias Mohamed, 1991).

In 1991, the declaration of Vision 2020 by Mahathir Mohamed once again raised the conflict of ethnic identity and national identity. The Vision envisaged that Malaysia would become a fully developed nation status by ensuring “ethnic cooperation in the interests of Malaysia as a united nation” (Vision 2020). The Vision was no doubt noble in nature but many people questioned about the means to achieve a truly “united nation”. Will social harmony prevail in a plural society with vast diversities in background of descent, language, culture and religious faith? If each ethnic group safeguards its own interests, how can its members agree on a common goal such as Vision 2020?

The modernist conceptions and social construct of national identity and nation building has been continually challenged since Independence. Shamsul A.B. (1996) noted that social categories such as “race” and “nation” were introduced by the British colonial administrators into the local cosmology and worldview. The bureaucratic practice of census-taking, for example, has aided in the invention, evolution and consolidation of “racial categories”, such as Malay, Chinese and Indian in Malaysia (Hirschman, 1985, 1986; Milner, 1994). The institution of laws such as the Malay Reservation Act, the establishment of a Department of Chinese Affairs and the presence of government-approved toddy shops exclusively for Indians defined and reinforced the significance of racial categories in their dealings with the colonial bureaucracy. At the same time, a pluralistic Western-style vernacular education system helped the development of race-

based ideas about nation, questions of identity, and its political-economic ramifications. It was thus ‘difference’, not ‘homogeneity’, which defined and dominated the people’s mind and everyday-lived experience.

The people of different background and government have outlined ‘ethnic boundary’ by assuming differences rather than similarities between various ethnic groups. Besides inter-group differences, ethnic identity is enhanced with intra-group similarities, particularly when each member views himself as belonging to and/or sharing common characteristics with other members of the same group. This proves to be true in the case of Malaysian sub-national groups, where each ethnic group safeguards its own rights under the current communal political system, similar to that of ‘divide and rule’ policy during the British colonial period.

Prediction of how identity would transform is difficult but not impossible. First, it is possible to identify certain objective characteristics of an ethnic group such as population, occupation, income distribution, social standing, education background, gender, territory or class can also be used to exemplify ‘ethnic identity’ in a meaningful way to establish ethnic boundary. Second, it is also possible to identify subjective characteristics of an ethnic group by examining the collective cultural reproductions and certain symbols of the community, such as literary works, folk songs, rituals and customs produced by members of the society. Third, at a highly sophisticated level, identity can also be measured based on behavioural, ideological, psychological, spiritual and even metaphysical level by studying the perceptions, prejudices and stereotypes commonly held by members of the society.

Based on social identity theory originally formulated by Tajfel, cited in Martyn Barrett (2007:269), individuals belong to not one but many different social groups, i.e. gender, ethnic, social class, medium of instruction. These social group memberships can be internalised as part of an individual's self-concept. Hence, individuals strive to form construct representation of in-group to obtain a sense of positive self-esteem from these social identities. Such positive distinctiveness is constantly and consciously constructed by individuals, strengthening one's subjective identification of a particularly group and resulting in in-group favouritism and out-group denigration. Hence, (Barrett, 2007:296) contended that any empirically adequate theory must incorporate reference to at least four different sets of factors, namely societal, social, cognitive and motivational factors.

### METHODOLOGY

This study uses two qualitative methods, namely participation observation and interview survey. Based on personal interviews guided by a structured and open-ended questionnaire, this study focuses on a case study of the Chinese community in Kelantan.

Kelantan recorded a total population of 1,313,014 or 5.6% of the total national population, of which 95% were Malays, 3.8% were Chinese, 0.3% were Indians and 0.9% were other ethnic groups (mostly Siamese and *Orang Asli*).

Table 1: Distribution of Chinese population in ten districts of Kelantan in 2002

Kota Bharu	23,499*
Tumpat	5,109*
Tanah Merah	4,017*
Gua Musang	4,096*
Kuala Krai	4,011*
Pasir Mas	3,612*
Machang	2,801
Bachok	1,043
Pasir Putih	814
Jeli	65
Total	49,067

During the four-year fieldwork throughout this study (2001-2003), participation observation was conducted throughout all the ten administrative districts of Kelantan, i.e. Kota Bharu, Tumpat, Tanah Merah, Gua Musang, Kuala Krai, Pasir Mas, Machang Bachok, Pasir Putih and Jeli. The interviews were conducted randomly between April 2001 and March 2004 during my visits to six districts of Kelantan, namely the districts of Kota Bharu, Tumpat, Kuala Krai, Tanah Merah, Pasir Mas and Gua Musang. In four other districts i.e. Bachok, Machang, Pasir Putih and Jeli, where there was low percentage of Chinese descendents (less than 1%), I conducted only casual conversations with the local Chinese businessmen and their respective family members, while participant observation was carried out in the town centres of the four districts.

Due to the scarcity of Chinese minority in some districts, the researcher carried out only sixty interview survey, a relatively small sample size than that of a quantitative research, but large enough for the researcher to draw conclusions on. Without the requirement of prohibitively large samples, statistical strategies are withheld and hence only descriptive method is used in the analysis of data and findings. The mode of analysis is to find out the determining factors that have an impact on the response of the Chinese community towards Islamisation policies and Islamic State.

Table 4: Proclaimed Religions of the Chinese in Kelantan

Islam	335
Buddhism	45,965
Confucianism/Taoism	1,159
Christian	1,191
Tribal/Folk Religion	12
Others	83
Hinduism	82
Atheist/No Religion	215
<u>Unknown</u>	<u>74</u>
Total:	49,067

With regard to religion, 94.5% of the Kelantanese embraced Islam, 4.4% embraced Buddhism, 0.5% embraced tribal/folk religion, 0.2% embraced Christianity, 0.2% embraced Hinduism and 0.1% embraced Confucianism/Taoism/other traditional Chinese religion. Kelantan experienced an average annual population growth rate of 0.9% over the period of 1991-2000 that was relatively low compared to other states. Kelantan was also a state with low urbanization level (34.2%), where 65.8% of the population stays in rural areas.

Sixty respondents from different socio-political backgrounds aided were interviewed based on structured and open-ended questionnaire. Target respondents must be Chinese who were residing and/or working in Kelantan at the point of interview; and who had stayed in Kelantan for more than 12 years since 1990, the year when PAS took over the power of the Kelantan state government. Technically, respondents must also be above 18 years of age and must be able to spare time comprehending as well as responding to all questions in the structured and open-ended questionnaire.

The total urban Chinese community was 35,951 whilst the rural Chinese constituted 13,116 people. This research took into consideration the basic demographic characteristics such as age distribution, gender, religion, education, language proficiency and information of households and living quarters. Besides, this research also examined and evaluated the experts' views on Islam such as those of *ustaz*, *ulama*, the local Islamic authority, Muslim scholars, researchers and politicians. Besides, interview survey and other first hand information gathered from participation observation method, were often compared with other secondary sources, i.e. academic exercises, statistical reports, newspaper commentaries and other related fields of study.

## **PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

Confining to surveys and personal interviews with the Chinese respondents, the preliminary finding of this exploratory study shows that four factors, i.e. politics, religion, ethnocentrism and social integration were significant in characterising the ethnic identity of the Chinese minority. Chinese in Kelantan experienced both gradual and drastic changes incorporated in the state and local government policies, i.e. religio-political, socio-economic, education and cultural policies. The social reality of being and becoming an insignificant ethno-religious minority has created anxiety and enigma amongst the Chinese, intensified by the proposition of PAS to establish an Islamic State in Kelantan.

With regard to the implicit factors which determine the response of Chinese minority towards Islamisation policies in Kelantan, the research findings showed that ethnic boundary was real and such social reality was consciously constructed to establish ethnic differentiation with the majority Malay Muslims in Kelantan.

### **Politics**

Local Chinese community that comprises merely 4% of its population has been peculiar due to their status as ethno-religious minority. They were at risk of being marginalised, first as an ethnic minority, secondly as a religious minority in the stronghold of Islamic Party. Due to the insignificant population, the Chinese minority under the rule of PAS in Kelantan were seldom consulted in the decision making process of state policies. With only one Chinese Executive Committee (Exco) Member representing the Chinese minority in the state council, issues concerning the Chinese minority had to be dealt with on a post-hoc basis. Their sensitivity as a minority is further challenged when the state government allowed the local authorities to impose rules and

regulations that might affect their livelihood and way of life. State policies and those of the local authorities were often decided without taking into consideration the feelings of the minority as there is rarely any non-Muslim representative in the local councils.

Chinese minority in Kelantan were aware of their peripheral status in politics dominated by Malay Muslims at the state and federal level. Chinese non-Muslims who chose to be active in politics joined Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) or Gerakan under the National Coalition. Chinese who affiliated themselves with PAS were either Muslims or those who sympathise with the political struggle or morality of the Islamic political party. Most Chinese, however, decided not to engage in party politics because they were “neither here nor there”. They preferred to be seen as “neutral” so that they were free to seek help from both PAS and UMNO. In other words, being non-partisan and apolitical enabled the Chinese minority to stay neutral and feel free to support either the ruling Islamic party or the National Coalition.

### **Religion**

Generally, the Chinese in Kelantan are not unified or united under one common religion. Unlike the Malays, the Chinese do not share the same faith and do not have the common feeling of Brotherhood (*Ummah*). The Chinese were not denied of any fundamental rights as a minority, particularly that of religious freedom, the right to practise Chinese culture, the right to carry out economic activities, as well as the right to join associations and political parties. In other words, despite UMNO-PAS political contestation in establishing Islamic State, inter-religious harmony existed in Kelantan. Majority Chinese whom I interviewed felt that there was no restriction for them to articulate their cultural expressions and to practise their religious obligation.

As Islam plays a dominant role in the state of Kelantan, Chinese minority has learnt to adapt to the Islamic way of life (*al-din*) particularly in observing the Muslims' daily prayers routine, Friday's prayer (*sembahyang Jumaat*), permitted and prohibited acts (*halal haram*) and social taboos. Nevertheless, the Chinese minority found it necessary to create distinctiveness to differ from the rest of the population. Islamic faith easily becomes the distinct boundary that helps the Chinese preserve their Chinese identity. Despite proficiency in Kelantanese Malay dialect and other successful acculturation outcomes into the Kelantanese way of life, Islam remained the major boundary between the Chinese and the Malays in Kelantan. In fact, Islam is consciously used as an ethnic boundary to preserve this sense of 'togetherness' among the Chinese minority, whilst embracing Islam becomes the bottom line for preserving such identity. This is because allegiance to Islam would mean the convert has to discard 'Chinese identity' by adopting 'Muslim identity' resembling that belongs to the Malays. Islam thus forms a taboo among Chinese in Kelantan and any attempt to convert them is highly depicted or simply rejected. For example, Chinese minority of all walks of life was alarmed by the PAS-UMNO political contestation over the passing of Hudud Bill and its intended implementation in Kelantan would change their way of life, even though they had indeed little say in the interpretation, implementation and interference of the Bill.

### **Ethnocentrism**

As a small minority group, the Chinese in Kelantan are interdependent among themselves in search for a shared ethnic identity. The Chinese minority constantly and consciously uses symbolic cultural artifacts such as Chinese education, Buddhist temples, Siamese idols, Christian churches, Peranakan culture and other non-Islamic elements to

represent their exclusivity in terms of Chinese ethnic identity. However, they do possess strong interests in Chinese education and language and regard these elements as utmost important. Chinese Peranakan who used to send their children to the national schools has enrolled their children in the Chinese schools for fear of losing Chinese identity.

The preservation of Chinese culture is seen as the best way to resist Islamisation process and policies in Kelantan. Such uncompromised stance is indeed equilibrium to the imposition of Islamic values into the public sphere of the Kelantanese society. Policies that have profound impacts on the livelihood and lifestyle of the Chinese minority are rejected for fear of loss of such identity.

### **Social integration**

Living side by side with the Malay-Muslims, the Chinese minority in Kelantan tended to judge Islam based on their observation of the behaviours of the Muslims in the state, as well as the performance of the Islamic governance of PAS. Their Chinese epistemological background, coupled with biased towards Islam often hinder them from understanding Islam based on intellectual thoughts or theoretical basis. Hence, for the Chinese, it does not matter whether a policy is for or against Islamic values, it is utmost important for a policy to be useful and pragmatic in achieving its goals and bring forth advantages or produces desirable outcomes to the society. It was observed that Chinese who were socially and culturally integrated with the Malay Muslims, such as the Peranakan Chinese, had a better understanding of the Malay culture and Muslim ideals such as Islamic State.

Most Chinese informants viewed themselves as different, but also adversary, from the Malay-Muslim community. For Chinese non-Muslim, Islam signifies a way of life or

a culture with which the Muslims identify in contrast to the minority society in a pattern of ‘them and us’. On the other hand, Chinese are well aware that becoming a Muslim can mean acquiring more Malay identity, and hence losing some part of Chinese identity. For instance, when the Chinese talk about ‘our’ religion, it does not refer to one particular religion but rather *any* religion other than Islam. Hence, Islam is the ‘other’ religion that exclusively belongs to the Malays who constitute the largest in number and politically dominant ethnic community. For most Chinese respondents, their perception (acceptance and rejection) towards the notion of Islamic State, whether real, mythical or imagined, should not be ignored or suppressed prior to instituting any drastic political change in this country.

## CONCLUSION

This study on Chinese minority in Kelantan, a pre-dominantly Muslim state ruled by an Islamic political party clearly shows the interplay between issues such as ethnicity, religion and minority. The findings show that ethnic identity is established via ethnic differentiation when ethnic minority view themselves as different from the other groups, be it ideological, political, societal, cultural, linguistic, and religious diversities. Cultural artifacts and *lingua franca* often remind different ethnic groups about who they are, what ethnic identity they possess and how they should behave. Ethnic identity is safeguarded when members of an ethnic group see and think that they have something in common with his ethnic group. This is particularly so when each ethnic group is obliged to safeguard their own rights in the existing communal political system.

It is observed in the response of the Chinese minority towards Islamisation policies that, social interaction does not necessarily result in better understanding of another ethnic group. Integration without deep-rooted understanding and mutual respect for other ethnic group proves to be unpleasant experience. The lack of understanding towards another group may eventually result in a strong sense of ethnocentrism or a natural self-defense mechanism to protect own ethnic identity. Ethnic minority group of a shared common descent would usually reject assimilation, and hold on to primordial values, such as their right to use mother tongue, to practice distinctive cultures and religions from the majority, as well as to establish ethnic differences with the others.

Although ethnic identity is essential for the identification of an ethnic group, the strong bond within the in-group is also potential to become a major source of inter-ethnic conflict. In other words, ethnic identity is functional when handled constructively; and dysfunctional when it creates “them vs. us” hostility. Since it is impossible to eliminate conflicts in all human relations, it becomes conducive for act proactively by finding out in advance the causes of conflicts, so that they can be managed successfully.

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