Towards ethnic identity and ethnic consciousness: Perceptions of minority groups towards social integration

Yeok Meng Ngeow [1] , Karen Y. H. Ngeow [2]
[1]Senior Lecturer, Section for Co-curricular Studies (SKET), University of Malaya
[2] Assistant Professor, The University of Hong Kong

Abstract. This study provides insights into how a Chinese minority in a Malay-dominated community is situated at the crossroad, having to choose between two spectrums of Islamic governance. In this ethnography
study that focused on ethnic Chinese minority's perceptions, the authors raised discussions on social integration and expanded on the understanding of "functional" ethnic identity and a critical level of ethnic consciousness that serve to enhance social integration in a pluralistic society.

Keywords: ethnic identity, ethnic consciousness, minority group, Islamisation governance, social integration

1. Malaysia as an Islamised nation

Since Malaya achieved Independence in 1957, the nation has been consistent and successful in portraying the image of a moderate, modern and progressive Muslim country.

The institutionalization of Islam has been significant and thorough in both the public and private spheres of the Malaysian society. The Federal Constitution and most state constitutions 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 and the armed forces may appear multi-ethnic but
in fact are under the control of Muslims (Shad Saleem Faruqi, 2002).

In the private sphere, the Malaysian government consistently promotes a sustainable, harmonious
and progressive way of life (*al-din*) through the implementation of fundamental Islamic virtues. Values such
as submission to God, fairness and justice, welfare, charity, humanity and kindness to others are highly
regarded in the governance, as stipulated in the first principle of *Rukunegara* (National Ideology) – Belief in
God.

1.1. Status of communities

While their standing or position in the country is very clear to the Muslim Malays in Malaysia, the non-Muslim communities of predominantly Chinese and less predominantly Indians are in turn very much
aware of their peripheral status in the country. The general feeling is, they fully realise that their political (or
economic) survival and economic (or political) well-being in this country strongly depend on their reactions
and attitudes towards the Islamisation processes and ideologies they are subject to from time to time from the

dominant ruling political party of this nation.

· Ngeow, Yeok Meng. Tel.: + 603 7967 5430; fax: + 603 7967 5427.
E-mail address: ymngeow@yahoo.com.

This study provides insights into how a Chinese minority in a Malay dominated community is situated at the crossroad, having to choose between two spectrums of Islamic governance, i.e., a
fundamentalist's approach adopted by the ruling Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) and a mild modernist's
approach adopted by the ruling coalition government intended on winning over minority voters.

1.2. Ethnic identity and ethnic consciousness

'Ethnicity' is a concept that has been deliberately placed vis-à-vis racism. Derived from the Greek
word *ethnos*, ethnicity indicates self-identification, whilst race is often used as characterization or classification of people. The concept of ethnicity has been debated in sociology for decades due to
interpretations couched in ambiguity and complexity.

The problem of ethnic differentiation is compounded by the very critical issue of whether ethnic identity is real or imagined. For Geertz (1973), ethnic identity contains 'imagined commonness' where each
member of an ethnic group imagines that others in the community adopt certain identity and reject certain.
Geertz argued that whatever 'commonality' sensed by an individual is mere illusion or imagination, although
by so doing, his conceptualization of identity can be enforced and his actions and thoughts reaffirmed.
Anderson (1983) later added that ethnic is generally 'imagined' as members of this imagined community
have no idea of all the other members because the concept exists only in their 'imagination'.
Identity refers to the characteristics – either viewed individuality or collectivity, with tangible commonalities and difference among individuals and groups, as "all identity is constructed across
differences" Wang (2004:7). In regard to ethnic boundary, Wang (1998) observes that the Chinese are deeply
rooted in their multi-layered cultures, something they have recognized as their civilization. They speak of
identity by referring to cultural identification rather than identification with any state. Such cultural
identification has no territorial boundaries but is based on the integration of various religious beliefs or
philosophies such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and less commonly known folk beliefs.
It is noteworthy that the heightening of one's ethnic consciousness in a pluralistic society can bring
forth inter-ethnic conflict, or result in a constant power struggle process between the dominant and
subordinate groups, particularly in efforts to compete for socio-economic advantages. In a multi-ethnic
society, for example, ethnic differentiation is commonly manipulated by their governments to determine
which ethnic group could be granted ruling power and which group could be denied privileges like civil

liberties and constitutional rights. Viewed in this manner, ethnic consciousness thus refers to awareness of
one's own ethnic identity and its accompanying rights to privileges and liberties.

This paper presents the position that ethnic identity and ethnic consciousness can be viewed as either
"functional" or "dysfunctional". It is functional when its community's perception is non-hostile (even
receptive to a certain extent) and its members view ethnic differentiation as part and parcel of a political state
of affairs; by the same token, it is deemed dysfunctional when its community's perception is that a lower
stature has been accorded to their community's members and this warrants hostility and reactions against
prejudice.

2. Context of the study

In Malaysia, Kelantan is the only Malay governance that has been under the strong grip of Islamic
Party of Malaysia (PAS), for five consecutive electoral terms since 1990. The Malay Muslims constitute a
vast majority (94%) of the total population in Kelantan, whilst the non-Muslims, predominantly the Chinese,
constitute about 4%, followed by 2% of other ethnic groups, i.e. the Siamese, the Indians and the aborigines
Orang Asli.

After many generations of co-existence, acculturation and even mixed marriages with the local Malays, the majority of Chinese non-Muslims in Kelantan today have excellent proficiency in the Kelantanese dialect and of the "local" culture. Chinese born and bred in Kelantan have adapted well to the
local culture and religious practices of the Muslims but the assimilation process has not been without tension.

Controversies arise whenever the state government proposes to impose Islamic values and practices on *all*
the people of Kelantan, *irrespective of religion*. In these situations, one finds that the Chinese ethnic minority
constantly has to consciously draw the line that separates adherence to Islamisation governing policies and
allegiance to their non-Islamic religions; for the Chinese minority, there exist attempts at resistance amidst
attempts to maintain ethnic boundaries with their local Malay Muslim counterparts and neighbours.

With these socio-political conflicts, the social reality of being an insignificant ethno-religious minority has created anxiety and enigma amongst the Chinese.

3. Data collection

This study uses a qualitative design that encompasses two methods of data collection, i.e. participation observation and interview survey. Participation took place over three years (2004-2006) with
some follow-ups in 2008 and 2009. Using personal interviews guided by a structured and open-ended
questionnaire, this study reached out to members of the Chinese (non-Muslim) community in Kelantan, a
Muslim dominant state in Malaysia. A total of 60 respondents from six districts of Kelantan were

interviewed. The analysis focused on identifying what constituted ethnic identity for this Chinese community
members, and what significant determining factors played a part in facilitating Chinese community members
to understand and to a certain extent, adapt to the ruling party's practices and Islamisation policies linked to
establishing an Islamic State in their place of residence.

4. Findings and discussion

The study's findings indicated that four factors, i.e. politics, religion, ethnocentrism and social integration were significant in characterizing the ethnic identity of the Chinese minority.

4.1. Politics

Interviews and surveys revealed that in the study context, the local Chinese community realized their
peripheral identity was being marginalized due to their status as ethno-religious minority. For example, they
were under-represented with only one Chinese Executive Committee (Exco) Member representing the
Chinese minority in the state council. The sensitivity of the Chinese minority was further challenged when
the state government allowed the local authorities to impose rules and regulations that might affect their
economic livelihood and threaten their way of life.

In order to gain better political mileage, a small number of Chinese affiliated themselves with PAS.
Some converted to Islam and joined PAS as active party members and leaders. Most Chinese, however,
decided not to engage in party politics, in particular PAS, because they did not want to be "neither here nor
there". They wanted to safeguard their "Chineseness" more than they wished to protect political interests. By
not participating in politics, 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 a
certain extent, to stay neutral and feel they were free to voice their support for either the ruling Islamic party
or the National Coalition (depending on when the situation suited their interests).

4.2. Religion

As Islam plays a dominant role in the state of Kelantan, the Chinese minority had learnt over the
years to adapt to the Islamic way of life (*al-din*), particularly in observing the Muslims' daily prayers routine,
like the Friday's prayer (*sembahyang Jumaat*). Muslims in Kelantan were not permitted prohibited acts
(*halal haram*) like gambling and social taboos in Islamic teachings, and non-Muslims were expected to
refrain from the same. However, the Chinese in Kelantan were not denied any fundamental religious rights.
They enjoy religious freedom in that they have the right to practise Chinese culture, the right for economic
activities, as well as the right to form associations and to join political parties.
In many other ways, the Chinese minority found it necessary to create a "distinctiveness" to

differentiate themselves from the Muslim population there. In an ironic way, the strict Islamic faith
enforcement became the very reason that compelled the Chinese minority to preserve their ethnic (Chinese)
identity.

4.3. Ethnocentrism

In establishing their ethnic identity, the Chinese minority constantly and consciously used symbolic
cultural artifacts to establish a stronger sense of belonging. This involved engaging themselves in activities
related to an "imagined idealistic community" - Chinese education, Buddhist temples, Siamese idols,
Christian churches, Peranakan culture and other non-Islamic elements. In all these ways, the Chinese strove
to exhibit their exclusivity in regard to Chinese ethnic identity. The preservation of Chinese culture was
perceived as the ideal way to resist Islamisation process and policies in Kelantan. Such uncompromised
stances were also evident when Chinese businesses rejected policies that had profound impacts on the
livelihood and lifestyle of the Chinese minority, more for fear of loss of such identity than for fear of loss of
income. The Chinese community's interest in preserving Chinese education (mother tongue language and
culturally-guided learning activities) was perceived to be of utmost importance and could not be
compromised at any price. For example, the Chinese Peranakan in Kelantan who used to send their children
to national (i.e., Malay-medium) schools had since enrolled their children in Chinese schools for fear of
losing their Chinese identity.

4.4. Social integration

Living side by side with the Malay-Muslims, the Chinese minority in Kelantan could be said to be
socially and culturally integrated with their Malay Muslim neighbours. The best example lies in the
Peranakan Chinese, who possessed a very good understanding of the Malay culture, and a relatively good
understanding of Islam. For most Chinese non-Muslims, Islam signifies a way of life or a culture with which
Muslims identify; this is in contrast to the minority society's religions and thus creates a segregation of
'them" versus "us'. For instance, when the Chinese talk about 'our' religion, it does not refer to one
particular religion but rather to *any* religion other than Islam. Hence, Islam is the 'other' religion that
exclusively belongs to the Malays. The Chinese strongly believe that becoming a Muslim is the same as
acquiring a Malay identity, and consequently means losing their Chinese identity. In the long term, the
Chinese minority's perception (i.e., acceptance or rejection) of "them" versus "us" - be it real or imagined –
needs to be addressed with regard to considering a national identity for Malaysia.

5. Conclusion

This study on Chinese minority in Kelantan, a pre-dominantly Muslim state ruled by an Islamic political party, PAS highlights the various issues – ethnic identity and ethnic consciousness of minority
groups – are essential discussions for the social integration of different ethnic groups. Findings show that
ethnic identity is established via ethnic differentiation when ethnic minority groups view themselves as
different from other groups; these differences could be attributed to ideological, political, societal, cultural,
linguistic, and religious diversities. Cultural artifacts and lingua franca are clear reminders to ethnic groups
about who they are, what ethnic identity they possess and how they should behave. Ethnic identity is
maintained when members of an ethnic group perceive that they have something in common with other
members of the same ethnic group. This is particularly so when each ethnic group is obliged to safeguard
their own rights in the existing communal political system.

Although ethnic identity is essential for the identification of an ethnic group, the strong bonding within the in-group in the form of ethnocentrism is potentially a major source of inter-ethnic conflict. This is
particularly true if inter-ethnic conflicts threaten the existing equilibrium or pose greater tension to the multiethnic
society concerned. In many ways and situations, ethnic identity is functional when handled constructively; and dysfunctional when it creates a "them vs. us" mentality. It is hoped that this ethnography
study that focused on ethnic Chinese minority's perceptions can induce further discussions on promoting a
clear understanding of a "functional" ethnic identity and a critical level of ethnic consciousness that can
serve to enhance social integration in a pluralistic society.

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