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ETHNICITY: MALAY STUDENTS ON AN AMERICAN CAMPUS

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National University of Malaysia

SINOPSIS

Kajian kes ini cuba memahami pola-pola hubungan sosial antara penuntut-penuntut Melayu dengan penuntut-penuntut Amerika di sebuah kampus di Amerika. Didapati bahawa penuntut-penuntut Melayu mempunyai hubungan yang rapat dengan penuntut-penuntut Melayu sahaja. Mereka tinggal bersama-sama di kawasan tempat tinggal yang sama, keluar berjalan, bermain, belajar dan membeli-belah sesama mereka. Hubungan antara mereka dengan penuntut-penuntut Amerika amat kurang sekali. Kajian ini telah menghuraikan bahawa wujudnya pola hubungan sosial seumpama ini disebabkan terdapat perasaan etnik yang tebal di kalangan penuntut-penuntut Melayu, yang seterusnya dapat difahami dengan melihat latarbelakang penuntut-penuntut Melayu itu sendiri semasa mereka berada di Malaysia.

SYNOPSIS

This case study attempts to understand patterns of social interaction of Malay students who are studying in an American campus. It was observed that Malay students have close relationship with students of their own ethnic group. They share apartments among themselves in areas which are heavily populated by other Malay students. They go out together for coffee break, shopping, play games and travell together. In contrast, they have little interaction with American students. In this study, the existence of such patterns of social interaction is explained in terms of Malay students' high feeling of ethnicity, which in turn can be understood by looking at their back-grounds in their home countries.

INTRODUCTION

This case study deals with persons from one culture (Malaysian) temporarily located in another culture (American). It is assumed that when a man moves from one cultural "place or context" to another he brings with him his established characteristics, habits, norms, values and attitudes (Sewell and Davidsen, 1961; Schwarzeweller and Brown, 1969; Zaidi 1975). Besides focuses attention on Malay students attitudes towards other ethnic groups in a

university campus, this study also attempts to reveal the factors that contribute to high feeling of ethnicity among the Malay students at Northern Illinois University (NIU), where the study was conducted in 1977.

Recently, the concept of ethnicity has received some attention from social anthropologists (Cohen 1974; Mitchell 1974; Barth 1969; DeVos and Romanucci-Ross 1975). The concept, however, has offered broad meanings. George DeVos for instance views ethnicity as including the attributes of membership in a group set off by racial, territorial, economic, religious, cultural, aesthetic, or linguistic uniqueness (1975: 10-16). Cohen, however, defines ethnicity essentially as a form of interaction between cultural groups operating within common social contexts (1974). Another social anthropologist defines ethnicity, "as the set of meanings which actors attribute to certain symbols, signs, or cues by means of which they are able to identify other persons as members of "cultural" set or categories" (Mitchell 1974:22). Looking at these definitions we may observe that social anthropologists tend to define ethnicity either in behavioral or in cognitive terms. In the former sense ethnicity is seen as a structural category based on a general principle that illuminates the behavior of persons in specified social institutions. Cognitively, ethnicity is seen as a cultural phenomenon which refers to a set of attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes that people hold about persons identified by some appropriate ethnic label. In this study ethnicity is viewed in terms of Malay students' recognition of the differences between them and other persons in terms of language, customs and practices. Malay student expressions of ethnicity will be examined in terms of their formal and informal ties, their selection of housemates or roommates, their selection of marriage and dating partners and their support of ethnic activities and organizations on the campus.

Factors Leading To Malay Exclusivism

A discussion on socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political differences is important for understanding Malay exclusivism, which in turn helps to explain Malay feelings of ethnicity. The Malaysian population is made up of three ethnic communities: the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. These main ethnic groups make up 90 percent of the population. According to the 1970 census the total population of peninsular Malaysia is 10 million, of which 47 percent are Malays, 34 percent are Chinese, nine percent are Indians (including Pakistanis), and the rest are composed of other ethnic groups such as European and Middle-eastern peoples. Because the three major ethnic groups coexist under one political system, Malaysian society has been characterized as a plural society.

Geographically, the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians are spatially separated. The Malays are overwhelmingly *kampong* (rural/village) dwellers, while Chinese are generally *bandar* (urban/town) dwellers. On the other hand,

the Indians are concentrated in estates. If we were to further analyse the ethnic distribution by states, we may find that the states in the east coast of the peninsula are predominantly Malay in composition as compared to the much more multiethnic west coast states. As a rule, the urban areas are heavily populated by the Chinese, and the rural areas by the Malays. According to the 1970 census 58.5 percent of the Chinese, 12.8 percent of the Indians and 27.6 percent of the Malays live in the urban areas. In contrast, in the rural areas 64 percent are Malays, 26 percent Chinese and ten percent Indians.

The Malays, the Chinese and the Indians follow different modes of livelihood. The Malays who are rural-based engage in small farming, fishing, and rubber-tapping. In recent years, however, a few Malays have migrated to the cities, being attracted to urban opportunities. The Chinese are mainly in the modern sector of the economy such as banking, commerce and industry, while some English-educated Chinese are found in the medical and technical professions. Indians are mainly estate workers, but a few who live in the cities have become shopkeepers, businessmen and civil servants.

Culturally the Malays practice Islam, primarily speak *Bahasa Melayu* (now known as Bahasa Malaysia), the national language of the country, and maintain their own traditional custom and practices. The Chinese on one hand are Buddhists, Confucianists or Christians, speak a variety of Chinese dialects, and maintain traditional Chinese custom and practices. Some of these practices such as the eating of pork, the keeping of dogs in homes, and the propensity for gambling are extremely distasteful to the Malays. The Indians mainly practice the Hindu faith, speak numerous Indian dialects, and maintain customs and practices of their own, some of which (such as the penchant for alcoholic drink) are also distasteful to the Malays.

As far as marriage is concerned, it is of some importance to note that less than one percent of registered marriages are interethnic, and the majority of these are probably between Malays and Indo-Pakistani Muslims. Religion is undoubtedly the biggest obstacle to interethnic marriage. As all Malays are Muslims, they believe that they should marry other Muslims. If they wish to marry outside their ethnic group, they should first convert the other party to the Islamic faith. This process is evidently unacceptable to most Chinese and Indians who are Buddhists, Taoists, Hindus, or Christians. Because of the lack of interethnic marriages, different ethnic groups have kept their family systems intact.

It has been observed by political and social scientists that political and social issues frequently follow ethnic lines in Malaysian society (Esman 1972; Rabushka 1972; Scott 1968; Freedman 1960). All observers noted that ethnicity plays an important role in mustering political support and strength. The major party in the National Front, the Alliance party, which claims to be non-ethnic, was in fact an interethnic party. It consists of three major ethnic political parties, namely the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malayan Indian Congress

(MIC). The UMNO is the most important political party in Malaysia. As its name suggests, it draws its membership from the Malay community. The MCA attracts its membership from the Chinese community who make up the business class. The MIC claims its membership from those Indians who are mainly from the middle class.

In the opposition, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic party (PMIP) is a specifically Malay ethnic party. Similarly the Democratic Action Party (DAP) attracts most of its membership from the Chinese, although a few Malays and Indians are known to join in.

The case of Malaysia has suggested that the fact of living in a plural society has generated little interaction between ethnic groups. It was shown that ethnic origins, cultural background, and demographic distribution are factors that hinder ethnic interaction in Malaysia. The socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic differences within the Malaysian plural society encourages ethnic parochialism and exclusivism.

The foregoing brief discussion of socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-political differences in Malaysia is very important for understanding the special nature of its plural society. It is the division of labor by ethnic groups, the struggle for resources, and the intensity of political mobilization that has resulted in a strong feeling of ethnicity among Malaysian ethnic groups. This socio-political and historical background defines the kind of experiences Malay students have before leaving their home country. Hopefully it will help us to understand Malay parochialism and exclusivism. These attitudes are carried over to the American community when Malay students come to study in the United States.

Malay students' expression of ethnicity

In the Malaysian context, the separation of these ethnic groups has an effect on the patterns of social interaction of Malay parents and children with the Chinese and Indians. These three groups are separated by region, economics, politics and values. As a consequence there is little interaction between them. Presumably because of limited interaction intergroup conceptions of each other has tended to be stereotypic and relationships which they develop are mainly based on suspicion and fears. In Malaysia, Malay feelings of ethnicity are most strongly expressed toward the Chinese. But, this is not surprising as Rabushka has found out that the Chinese on the other hand, are more ethnocentric than the Malays (1973:60).

The Malay experience of living in a plural society seems to be linked to feelings of suspicion towards other ethnic groups. It also explains the nature of Malay parochialism and exclusivism. These patterns are now transferred to the American University setting. Americans, in the Malay student's image, are similar in their attributes with that of the Chinese. Such similarities are best described by one student, thus:

“A Chinese is not the same as a Malay because he has different religion; eats forbidden foods; keeps dogs and pigs; supports capitalistic ideas. An American, is also not the same as a Malay, because an American has different religion; eats forbidden foods; keeps dogs and pigs; supports capitalistic ideas”.

The logic of these statements is that in a Malay mind, there are many attributes commonly shared between the Chinese and the American. With these identities a Malay is thus able to identify the Chinese and the American. A Muslim person, however, is viewed as having similar attributes with the Malays, except that he may speak a different language.

In NIU, the population of the Malay students is significantly large, and they have tended to identify themselves as one cohesive group. This group is bound together by the formal and informal ties that arise from the educational process, social activities, religious functions and from the fact that all Malays share a common culture derived from the structure of the peasantry and Islamic traditions. This manifests itself in a number of ways. But the most significant is the concept through which differences in attributes of ethnicity are articulated.

Within the Malay student community in NIU, as throughout rural Malaysia, there is an intense support of ethnic activities and organization. The support for a Malay political party, and the tendency to marry into one's own ethnic group are two such examples. Also in the case of Malay students in NIU factors like where he lives, with whom he lives, what he consumes, and how he behaves, are also very important.

A Malay student at NIU expresses his ethnic identity in several ways. Speaking Malay, reading Malay newspapers and periodicals occasionally, listening to Malay records and preferring Malay food are in themselves affirmations of Malay ethnicity. Islam also offers a number of visual signals that carry on the Malay ethnic message, such as uttering *assalammualaikum* when meeting Islamic coreligionists, and addressing their members as “brothers” or “sisters”. More obvious are dressing patterns especially for Malay girls who are expected to wear *tudung* (veil) so as not to reveal any parts of their body to strangers. A person identified as Malay is also expected to behave in particular ways, such as participating in compulsory institutions of *gotong royong* and *ummah*.

Therefore, as a Malay there are a number of expectations that he has to fulfill, such as observing the spirit of *gotong royong*, that is helping fellow Malays; propagating the concept of *ummah*; observing the five pillars of Islam; attending all religious functions; observing the strict rules of Islam (such as not to drink alcoholic drink or eating improperly slaughtered animals); and observing the codes of behavior appropriate for particular relationships. Ignoring any of these expectations may result in one being labelled, at NIU, as *bukan Melayu* (not a Malay person), or *bukan Islam* (infidel). Being

labelled as *bukan Melayu* or *bukan Islam* while one is geneologically a Malay and culturally a bearer of Islamic tradition, is insulting. One therefore tries as much as one could to be with one ethnic group for fear of these sanctions. It should be emphasised that an ethnic group is not simply the sum total of its individual members, and its culture is not the sum total of the strategies adopted by independent individuals. Norms, beliefs, and values are effective and have their own constraining power only because they are the collective representations of a group and are backed by the pressure of that group (Cohen 1974: xiii). Thus, there are expectations about the appropriate behavior in the relationship between the Malays and the Americans; and a series of stereotypes which are thought to indicate the personalities of those different ethnic groups.

One of the expressions of ethnicity by the Malay students is their maintenance of ethnic boundary. With respect to this, one of the question we asked is: did the respondent stay among his own ethnic affiliates or did he cross ethnic boundaries in his daily living patterns? It is found that Malays are committed to living with their own people. Malay students studying at NIU spend their first year together in a house arranged by the International Student Office. The International Student Office did not encourage the Malay students to live in the dormitories. In their second year these students moved to rented apartments in the same areas which have been heavily occupied by Malay students. Such an arrangement is encouraged by senior Malay students. In this way it is hoped they have close contact with their fellow members. In other words, intra-ethnic interaction is stronger than inter-ethnic interaction. The residential patterns i.e. who the informant lives with and whether he is willing to share a room with an American, become an expression of ethnicity. Table I shows that 95.5 percent of the respondents share rooms or apartments with fellow Malays, only 2.7 percent have American roommates.

Table I
Nationality of housemates or roommates

Living With	Respondents	Percentage
Malays	107	95.5
Americans	3	2.7
Asians	2	2.8
	112	100

When we probed further on the question of roommate selection the tone of ethnic feeling is clearly articulated. The different attributes mentioned previously were quoted again, but with more specificity. One senior male student explained:

“I don’t mind sharing room with another race, if he is a Muslim. There are a lot of differences between a Muslim and a non-Muslim..... Living together means that we have to share a lot of things: refrigerator, cooking utensels, etc. I’m not willing to share these things with the Americans. He may want to keep pork in the refrigerator, which I’ll never like to see there. He may also want to drink beer which I don’t..... I don’t like to have a roommate who drinks, even though he is an American. I don’t like to share an apartment with someone who keeps a dog..... Also, I can’t stand someone entering a house with his shoes on. I have to keep the house clean, because I pray here.....”

It is mainly for these differences that a Malay student is reluctant to share a room with an American or a non-Muslim. For an American or a non-Muslim to share a room with a Malay means he has to change some of his behavior. This is told by a graduate student:

“When P.....wants to move ‘in, I outlined certain conditions, that he will not bring home pork, beer or dog.....I told him I’m a Muslim and all those things are proscribed by my religion. I also told him that he may come in to my room, provided he takes off his shoes. Well, he seems to understand our religion and he respects it”

It seems that Malay girls are more rigid in accepting Americans. Their views are not much different from Malay boys. In addition, they are worried if their American roommates bring their boys to stay with them.

Thus, even from the time of their arrival Malay students have established their ethnic ties. When we asked: Did you try in the beginning to contact fellow Malays in order to be with them? all respondents overwhelmingly replied “yes”, and a majority of them maintained close relationship with them.

The marriage and dating patterns of Malay students at NIU were between members of the same group. Only one marriage reported to have occurred between a Malay boy and an American girl. Inter-ethnic dating was also infrequent, as shown in table 2 below:

Table 2
Frequency of Dating by Nationality

Nationality of Dates	Frequency	Percentage
Malaysian	63	56.3
American	10	8.9
Asian	1	0.9
Middle Eastern	1	0.9
Others	1	0.9
Never gone out dating	36	32.1
Total	112	100

Student participation in certain activities are enforced by the formal organization based on ethnic associations. The respondents indicated that they overwhelmingly supported their ethnic associations. Table 3 shows that 98.3 percent of the respondents belong to ethnic associations, namely the Northern Illinois Malaysian Student Association (NIMSA) and Islamic Students of Northern Illinois University (ISNIU). Only 1.8 percent are members of the International club.

Table 3
Organizations In Which Malay Students Are Members

Organization	Responents	Percentage
ISNIU	67	59.8
NISMA	43	38.4
International Club	2	1.8
Total	112	100

It is also interesting to note the kinds of friends that Malay students choose to associate with in leisure-time activities. A Malay student on the campus has many kinds of contacts, e.g. his classmates, his friends, people of his own nationality, his neighbours and his host families. Friends are also gained through other sources such as sports' clubs. He can select a few among these people to be his close friends. It was observed that Malay students do establish close contact with associates who frequently meet together to form a small group or clique. Again, these cliques are mainly recruited on the basis of ethnicity and regionalism. They are seen by the students themselves as a socially significant phenomenon. Together they go out for coffee break, shopping, games, football and basketball matches and travelling. Between the members there is often a complex network of debt and credit, and there may be common ownership of property, e.g. sharing in owning a car or stereo-sets. The group frequently operates as a decision-making unit and a force of social control.

Why Malay students a NIU have a high feeling of ethnicity?

Based on the data of this case study several explanations may be advanced in suggesting why Malay students at NIU have a high level of ethnic consciousness.

First, Malay students at NIU are fairly large in number, and are thus able to operate as a community observing their own religious, social, political and economic practices and values. They are strongly opposed to interaction with non-Muslims. Their leaders dutifully enforce the rule of fasting, and act strictly against those who commit religious crimes such as practising premarital sex, absence from Friday prayers, or frequenting discos and bars. A majority of them who are from rural areas faithfully observe Islamic traditions.

They appoint some members to buy beef and chicken slaughtered by fellow Muslims. They also elect among themselves tutors to guide younger students in their studies. A cooperative and loan society is also formed to enable members to apply for loans.

Secondly, it is closely related to the Malay students' past experience of living in a highly charged multi-ethnic or plural society which resulted in Malay parochialism and withdrawal from non-Muslim ethnic groups. As discussed earlier in this paper Malaysian society is divided ethnically according to economic and political activities, cultural practices and geographical location. With such divisions, little social interaction occurs between ethnic groups. Thus the Malay ethnic group, for instance, is not informed of other cultures. It is also true for other ethnic groups.

Thirdly, in Malaysia, Islam has been propagated by some Malay political leaders as an ideology, based on the following criteria: that there is no law but Islamic law; that there is no state but an Islamic state; and that there is no guide to action but the Kuran. These tenets, have become the slogan of the Islamic ideology. Malay political leaders feel that fundamental teaching in Islam has been threatened by the non-Muslims. They realise that their country's wealth has gone to the British and the Chinese, while the government is being ruled by many non-Muslims. For this reason they are always suspicious of the Westerners and the Chinese. In addition, they are convinced that the Westerners and the Chinese are threatening and polluting their Islamic ways of life. For instance, when the first English school was introduced by the British in Malaysia many students were taught to read Christian scriptures. The Chinese in running their food stores were known to put in lard in most food they prepared for the Muslim. For this reason they feel that the fundamental teaching of Islam is being challenged. The Malay political leaders strongly advocate that the fundamental Islam is to be maintained, and that purity of the Islamic way of life is to be preserved. The Islamic religious elites always warn their members to be vigilant of "other" cultures, especially the Western and non-Muslim traditions, which have undermined many urban Malays. With the rapid process of modernization and Westernization taking place in the Malay society, they feel that their own life style is being threatened. The young people therefore are always reminded to be wary of the non-Muslims or else their heads will be filled with unislamic traditions. While in Malaysia, the Malays are suspicious of the Chinese because of economic, political and religious reasons; in the American university campus they are suspicious of the Americans who in their mind are disrupting their high standard of morality. In this way, it is not surprising to learn therefore that the feeling of ethnicity is high among the Malay students at NIU.

Fourthly, Malay students at NIU are sojourners who must return to Malaysia to work for the government. Thus to remain Malay and practice Malay customs is important for them. In this way they will easily reenter and

reintegrate into their society when they return to the home country. This study reveals that Malay students did not adjust and assimilate into the American culture. This observation contradicts Bruner's (1974) findings on the Bataks who migrated to Bandung. In this study he observed that for a Batak to be properly adjusted and assimilated into the local cultural environment he had to become "Sundanese-like"; that is, he "must discard his village ways" (Bruner 1974:265) and become "more refined and civilized (*halus*)", like the Sundanese. The difference in these findings probably lies in the different goals or motives of migrants and sojourners. The Bataks who migrated from Sumatra to Bandung wanted very much to be assimilated into the local society of Sundanese, who are the dominant group. On the other hand, the Malay students at NIU are only sojourners; do not wish to be assimilated into the local culture. In fact they feel that their culture is superior to that of the host culture and must be maintained. To discard his village ways and to become "American-like" means losing his Malay identity.

Finally, the fact that the majority of Malay student at NIU are from the rural areas seemed to have influenced the development of strong feelings of ethnicity. Because rural Malays are strictly confined to their own ethnic group their feeling of ethnicity is very strong. As already noted, Islam — the strongest element of Malay ethnicity — is strictly observed in rural Malaysia. Thus when Malay students who are mostly rural in background moved to DeKalb this strong feeling of ethnicity was preserved; and that feeling was redirected toward different groups, notably the Americans.

Conclusion

The discussion above has indicated that the Malay student community at NIU has a high level of ethnic consciousness. Factors that lead toward such feeling have also been suggested. Their strong ethnic sentiment and feeling of ethnic identity lead them to feel that it is necessary for them to live with each other as one group in harmonious relationships. Living in this manner seems to result in considerable emotional benefit to the individual members of the group. Because of this, the feelings of conflict and contention are muted within the group, and "whenever possible, hostilities are displaced onto individuals not belonging to a group (De Vos 1975: 385). In the case of the Malay students at NIU, the hostilities are directed toward the Americans and other non-Muslim. Because ethnic membership provides a field for the expression of benevolence, being a member of good standing in the Malay group means that one was in a position to receive care, help, and comfort from the other ethnic members in times of need. One was also in a position to receive care, help, and comfort — ideas emanating from the concepts of *gotong royong* and *ummah* — from the other Malays. Many Malay students find within themselves a need to care, help and comfort others. On the other hand, the cost of not affiliating with his own ethnic group is very high, involving severe psychological strain. One of the most severe social sanctions for avoiding his ethnic group is the threat of being separated from the group.

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