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The Cultural Identity of the Chinese-Malays in Brunei:

Acculturation and Hybridity

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Abstract:

This paper explores the ways in which Bruneians who are born into a Chinese-Malay family define their identity, how the state classifies them in terms of "race", how they negotiate their bicultural practices, and what challenges they face while growing up. It argues that possibly due to their relatively small population and due to the hegemonic force of assimilation, the Chinese-Malay community in Brunei has not developed a distinct hybrid identity like their Peranakan counterparts in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Nonetheless, by examining the experience of inbetweenness among these biracial subjects, the paper alludes to the power relations that define the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, belonging and non-belonging.

Keywords: *Chinese-Malay, Brunei, acculturation, identity, hybridity*

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INTRODUCTION

The population of Brunei Darussalam is estimated at 422,678 in 2016. Composing 65.7% of the population, the majority population are classified as Malays, while the second largest ethnic group – the Chinese – made up of 10.3% of the population (Department of Statistics and Department of Economic Planning and Development, 2016). The ethnic Chinese play an important role in Brunei's economic development by contributing to the country's growth and prosperity (Neo, 1995). The presence of the Chinese in this abode of peace has witnessed intermarriages between them and the Brunei-Malays, which can be traced back to the 13 Century (Malai Yunus bin Malai Yusof, 2013, pp. 76-8). While intermarriages have become an increasing trend in the globalized world, mixed-marriage couples often face challenges pertaining to reconciling differences in culture, religion, traditions, and social class. Traditionally within the Malay community in Brunei, positive acknowledgment of the mixed-marriage families were rare due to the community's need to maintain "pure" lineage and to prevent passing their inheritance to outsiders (Trigger and Siti Norkhalbi, 2011). However, such practices have become more accepted and more common in contemporary Brunei as long as the dominant religion – Islam – is embraced by the non-Malay/Muslim counterpart in the marriage.

In the present era of intense globalization, the phenomenon of intermarriage has proliferated, even in this region (Nagaraj, 2009). Because of the nature of experiencing growing up in two cultural worlds, intermarriage has the potential to raise a generation that will tolerate and accept differences across cultures. In addition, behavioural scientists have claimed that

intermarriage may produce offspring who are more advantageous in terms of intelligence, beauty, emotional and behavioural stability (Pue and Sulaiman, 2013; Tan, 2012; Zainon, 2005). Nevertheless, the identity conundrum of mixed-marriage children proves to be a complex issue. This is especially so when the state uses racial classification as a tool to impose the idea of national identity irrespective of the individual's behavioural choices.

Mixed-race children often find it challenging to identify themselves with only one race when it comes to filling out official forms that only allow for one racial identification. In Singapore for instance, the government tried to address this issue in 2010 by allowing "double-barrelled" race option for mixed children so that they can register both races (such as Chinese-Malay or Indian-Eurasian) in their identity card (Kor, 2010). However, these children (or their parents) are required to nominate a "dominant" race so that ethnic-based policies can still be applied to this population. In other words, while the new system allows for more flexibility in terms of cultural identification, it does very little to change the racial regime that Singapore inherited from the British colonial administration. As a British Protectorate from 1888 to 1984, Brunei shares a similar administrative system for racial classification. As children are expected to register the father's race, and double-barrelled racial identification is not available in Brunei, it is not possible to estimate the number of Chinese-Malays in Brunei.

This study explores the hybrid identity of the Chinese-Malays in Brunei with the objective of answering the following questions: How do people born into a Chinese-Malay family define their identity? What kind of challenges do they face while growing up? How does the state classify them in terms of "race"? What are the cultural practices of a Chinese-Malay in Brunei?

Identity, Hybridity and Acculturation

Identity is a complex concept. Some might see identity as an essence within an individual that can be invoked to distinguish oneself from others. For Foucault (1987), identity is a discourse, subject to power relations and unending constructs. It can never be fixed; it is always being (re)negotiated and can never be essentialized as they are the subject of unceasing "play" of history, culture and power (Hall, 1993). In the late modern world, individuals often have multiple identities that they choose to perform based on different situations. Cultural interaction and exchanges between different groups have further resulted in processes of hybridization and syncretism (King, 2012).

The advent of globalization has given rise to a new "hyphenated", "diasporic" and "syncretic" form of identities which can be referred to as hybridity (Bhatia, 2012). Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha (cited in Bhatia, 2012) argue that the concept of hybridity is inseparable from the structures and patterns of power and resistance, which had occurred after colonialism. In the past, the term "hybrid" or "hybridity" was often associated with being "impure", "racially contaminated" and genetically "deviant" in social evolution theory. Hence, hybridity can be seen as an anti-thesis to identity as it challenges the idea of an essentialist identity and blurs boundaries demarcated by cultural gatekeepers (Hoon, 2017). While cultural purists might consider hybridity as loss of one's identity, we argue that it can be a platform to create new opportunities and permutations for the existing identities. In using the concept of hybridity, this study endeavours to demonstrate the ways in which culture can take many forms and variations, including the borrowing of words and the adoption of social practices and beliefs, and the adaptation of dress and food (Lee, 2008).

Hybridity is sometimes seen as "a rhetoric of emancipation, optimism and celebration" (Bhatia, 2011). As globalization indulges in the celebration of diversity, some people have mistakenly assume that the society can readily accept differences without any struggle. Lo (2000) refers to such uncritical celebration of diversity as "happy hybridity". She maintains that as a highly politicised process of negotiation, interrogation and contestation between cultures, hybridity is never happy. Cultural translation always involves conflict and tension. Therefore, hybridity is constantly in the process of negotiation and should not be uncritically assumed to be an antidote to the fragmentation of the society.

Acculturation – a closely related concept to hybridity – refers to the cultural alterations that occur when different individuals or groups interact and exchange cultural features. This often results in the formation of a new existence which combines different customs and cultural elements from the different groups into one (Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936). These exchanges can take place through various ways whether it is from language, behaviour, beliefs and customs. Acculturation can also be defined as a way of adapting one's culture into another by familiarising oneself into another culture, and the formation of a combined culture from both group's cultural background (Thurnwald, 1932). In some society, acculturation might lead to the emergence of a new community and even a new ethnic group. A case in point would be the Peranakan community

in Southeast Asia, formed as a result of intermarriage between early Chinese migrants and the local Malay population. This community can be described as a blend of two dominant cultures – Malay and Chinese – with some elements from Javanese, Batak, Siamese and European cultures (Lee, 2008, p. 163). The Peranakans can be distinguished by their spoken language (Baba Malay), and unique customs, mainly derived from the Chinese culture, and their fusion cuisine that features a combination of Malay and Chinese food.

Nonetheless, it has to be noted that there may not always be equal representation of cultures in the process of acculturation (Badris, 1979). The tyranny of the majority means that the dominant culture in the society will always have privilege over minority cultures. In the case of the present study, this is exemplified by the fact that most Chinese-Malay families privilege Malay cultural practices because of its status as the prevailing culture in the country. Therefore, some elements of the Chinese culture have to be altered to be compatible with Malay/Muslim culture or might eventually disappear especially if they go against the religious teachings in Islam. The process of cultural negotiation is the central focus of this paper.

Research Approach

This study deploys a qualitative approach of auto-ethnography and in-depth interviews. The research was initiated by the first author who is a female Bruneian with a Malay-Chinese background. According to Chang (2016):

> autoethnography embraces a broad scope of writings such as (1) "native anthropology", in which members of previously studied cultural groups become ethnographers of their own groups, (2) "ethnic autobiography", in which personal narratives are written by members of ethnic minority groups; (3) "autobiographical ethnography" in which anthropologists interject personal experience into ethnographic writing. (p.47)

Referring to "autobiographical ethnography", the researcher occasionally inserts her own personal and subjective interpretation based on her own identity into the research process. The aim, however, is not to emphasise her own experience per se, but to gain a better understanding of the community through the prism of the researcher's experience (Chang, 2016).

Although the first author identifies herself culturally as a Malay, the state has officially classified her as a Chinese on her Identification Card, which reflects her father's ethnicity. Upon marrying her Malay mother, her father converted to Islam, and gradually left behind some of his Chinese cultural practices in order to embrace the Malay culture. Consequently, the first author was raised in a predominantly Malay culture. She attended an English-Malay school, spoke the Malay language with family and friends, and celebrated Malay/Muslim events. Nonetheless, her father still identifies culturally as Chinese and has been preserving some Chinese practices as long as they do not contradict the Islamic faith.

Even if her cultural affinity is Malay, the first author sometimes identifies herself as a Chinese depending on the occasion, and depending on whom she is interacting. Her bicultural upbringing allows her to reflexively empathize with the Chinese-Malay informants and add another layer of insights into the complex experience of hybridity and acculturation among mixed-marriage informants. In order to prevent personal bias and subjectivity affecting the validity of the data collected for the research, the researcher exercised high level of reflexivity and distancing when collecting and analysing the data (Salzman, 2002).

Apart from the auto-ethnography approach, this study also involved primary data collection, which includes semi-formal, open-ended, face-to-face interview sessions with 15 informants between the ages of 19 to 30 years old. The informants came from a Chinese-Malay interracial background eight of whom are classified as Chinese in their identification card while the remaining seven informants were stated as Malay. The informants are mostly college and university students (11 out of 15), one in-service student, and three are already employed. The interview sessions were carried out from the middle of January until March of 2018. A digital voice recorder was used to record the interview sessions. The researcher was flexible with the language used in the interviews, according to the preference of the informants. The interlocutors responded in Malay, English or a mixture of both languages, as well as a bit of Mandarin. Most of the informants had code-switched between English and Malay while Mandarin was only used when asked to be given examples of what Chinese words they had used in their daily conversations at home and in public. To protect the anonymity of the informants, all the names used in this articles are pseudonyms.

This research uses two different kinds of sampling methods: purposive and snowball sampling. The former involved making a list of qualifications and key factors to identify key informants (Allen, 1971). Informants are members from the community with whom the researchers are studying, and are chosen due to their lived experience and bicultural knowledge (Bernard, 2002; Campbell, 1955; Seidler, 1974; Tremblay, 1957). For this research, the criteria and qualifications are: (1) the informants will need to have a Chinese-Malay background, (2) where either one of the parents is a Chinese Muslim convert, (3) one of the parents must be a Bruneian citizen, permanent resident or has lived in Brunei for a long period of time, and (4) The family of the informants should observe at least a some Chinese and Malay cultural practices such as Chinese New Year or Hari Raya (Eid). The snowball sampling, on the other hand, refers to a technique of gathering informants through personal recommendation from individual informants' social network (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). The same list of criteria and qualifications apply to the snowball sampling.

The Identity Politics of the Chinese-Malay in Brunei

Brunei practices a patrilineal system for its official racial policy, which means that children will automatically inherit their father's ethnicity. This is evidently stated on the identification card under the mandatory *bangsa* or "race" category (Trigger & Siti Norkhalbi, 2011). Such practice notwithstanding, the social and cultural identification of these mixed-race children may or may not reflect what is recorded on their identification card. In this study, we have found that nine out of fifteen informants tend to associate themselves with the hyphenated "Chinese-Malay" identity rather than identifying or privileging one particular race over the other. All nine informants thought that the mono-cultural racial category imposed on them by the state is too limiting as it does not reflect their biracial parentage and does not allow the individual to decide their own racial identification. One particular informant stated during the interview that,

> I tend to identify myself as a Chinese-Malay or vice versa because I believe that I should embrace both of my parents' ethnicity out of respect not only to them but also to my ancestor. This is important for me because my identity is a reminder of where I come from and so it should not be forgotten. (Haqimah, 27, 26/01/2018).

Nevertheless, there are a few informants who preferred to identify themselves with one racial identity only. For example, two informants want to be identified only as Chinese while the other four preferred to identify only as Malay. Ironically, two of the four the informants who preferred to be identified as Malay are racially stated as "Chinese" in their identity card.

Welda, a 22 year old student currently studying in the United Kingdom was back in Brunei for a short winter break in January, she mentioned about her racial background in detail:

> My father was adopted by a Malay Muslim family since he was a baby. However, everything on his document states his race as Chinese only. So technically, he is an ethnic Chinese with a purely Malay cultural background. My mother on the other hand is a Malay-Chinese as my maternal grandmother is a pure Chinese while her husband is a pure Malay. Therefore, that makes my siblings and I biologically as three-quarter Chinese and one-quarter Malay. Despite the fact that our appearance are more towards the Chinese genes, we do not associate ourselves as one. In addition, due to some family complications, we have cut off connections with our Chinese side of the family and have entirely devote ourselves as Malay Muslims. (Welda, 22, 26/01/2018).

A similar narrative is recounted by Anna:

> My father's background is quite complicated, he is racially stated as a Chinese Hokkien in his identification certificates and documents. However, at the age of 15 years old, he was adopted by an Arabic-Malay family and therefore he grew up practicing the Malay-Muslim culture and I believe that he has very much forgotten about his past identity as a Chinese because he does not really tell us anything about them. (Anna, 22, 02/03/2018).

The accounts above show that the identity stated in the official identification card may not reflect the cultural identity of the informants, especially in cases of adoption or for those who are fostered and brought up in a different cultural surrounding from their biological origins.

Identity is can be circumstantial depending on when and how an individual choose to perform different facades of their race, religion, ethnicity, gender and other identities (Cohen and

Kennedy, 2012). Such choices are sometimes contingent on instrumental needs at a particular moment. As Tong and Chan (2001) explains:

> At one moment, the person may want to temporarily submerge [his/her identity] in favour of a façade closer to and, therefore, more readily identifiable with his interactant. At another moment, he [sic] may even decide to be deliberately expressive of his ethnicity when emblematic usage of language, clothing, culture and customs of his own ethnic group is judged to favour him in the transaction. (p.16)

In the same vein, our informants expressed their situational identity through language, appearance, dress code, and behaviour depending on who they come into contact with, i.e. either their Chinese or Malay group of family and friends as revealed in the following excerpts:

> When I was in secondary school in St. George, the school was filled with different people who came from different racial groups: there were the Malays, Chinese, Indians as well as other different races. Most of the time these races did not really try to mingle with each other and are very exclusive unless you are one of them. However, due to my mixed-race background I was able to interact not only with the Malay group but also the Chinese group in that school. I think that in a way I tried to adapt myself depending on the different groups I am with. For example, when I was with the Chinese group, I would usually speak in Mandarin. Most of the time my Chinese accent would just automatically change [to an English mode] when I was speaking in English. Then when I was with the Malays, I would just naturally speak and interact with them in the Malay language. (Naim, 30, 10/02/2018)

> My identity can be situational especially in terms of how I dress myself. [My choice of dress] usually depends on who I am going to be with. My family in Brunei are mostly the Malay side therefore, here I would have to cover myself if not with a hijab then at least cover my body parts appropriately. However, when I am in Indonesia with my Chinese family, I will not have to cover myself to that extent as

> they are very open minded so I am able to wear whatever dresses or skirts I want. (Azura, 22, 10/03/2018)

Identities are constructed through difference – it is only through a relation to the "Other", a relation to what is not and to what is lacking, that identity can be constructed. (Hoon, 2008). Some informants had expressed the dialogical aspect of their identity when they are outside of the country interacting with the "Other", and when negotiating their own Otherness away from home. The following informants reveal:

> I believe that my identity is more situational when I am overseas. For instance, I used to study in Australia for my Bachelor degree and in the U.K for my Masters. I was able to change my identity depending on the group I was with at that time. When I was in Australia, people there were more exposed to the Malay racial groups hence I did not have to explain myself what the Malay culture is. However, when I was in the UK, the people there lacked knowledge about the Malays and most of the time they would identify myself as Chinese due to my Chinese-like features. It was quite bothersome to have to explain myself to people about myself and so I would just admit to them that yes I was in fact Chinese. (Sawfi, 28, 01/02/2018).

> Despite the fact that I do not associate myself with anything that has anything to do with Chinese in terms of identity or culture, I do believe that my identity have become situational when I am overseas. I think that this is mainly due to my strong racial [read: Chinese] appearance. I say this because I am currently studying in Essex, United Kingdom. People often mistake me as a Chinese person and most of the time I would just say that I am Chinese. I personally chose to use my Chinese racial card for my own personal security due to the whole political issue that is going on right now with Islamophobia [in Europe]. (Welda, 22, 26/01/2018).

These two excerpts demonstrate that identity can be at play not only based on the corresponding "Other" but also due to identity markers such as "race", cultural behaviour and appearance. For these informants, their biracial background renders them a "Chinese look", which they could

strategically use either to prevent endless questions about their identity or to avoid being identified as a Muslim when such identification is deemed unsafe in places where Islamophobia is prevalent.

The Acculturation of Chinese-Malay Cultural Practices

Acculturation is a common reality among the Chinese-Malays in Brunei as almost all of our informants practice Malay cultural customs and traditions. Unlike the Straits-born Chinese-Malays in Singapore, Malaysia or Indonesia, also known as the Peranakan, who have developed a distinct hybrid culture famously characterized by the creole Peranakan Malay language, Nyonya cuisine, kebaya dresses, beaded footwear and exquisite ornaments (Suryadinata, 2010); the Chinese-Malays in Brunei do not have such a culture. Besides the palpable historical, social, political and geographical differences between the Peranakans in the Malay Archipelago and the Chinese-Malays in Brunei, the other main distinguishing factor is religion: while most Peranakans are Christians, Bruneian Chinese-Malays have mostly converted to Islam and subsequently been absorbed into the majority Malay community.

This section will discuss the nuanced incorporation and negotiation of cultural elements from both the Chinese and Malay practices by the Chinese-Malays in Brunei in their everyday life ranging from language, cultural traditions, beliefs and even their choice of cuisine. The first element under consideration is language. Six out of fifteen of our informants are able to speak both Mandarin and Malay. The other six are able to understand Mandarin but unable to speak it fluently, and the remaining three have no knowledge of Mandarin at all. Those who are able to speak and understand Mandarin mentioned the linguistic practice of code-switching at home with family and outside of their home with friends. Unlike their Peranakan counterparts, there is no distinct creole language developed and used specifically by the Chinese-Malays community in Brunei. Our informants revealed that they usually borrow words from either Malay or Chinese to express themselves when they are unable to find the right word in one particular language.

One particular informant, Dalina, mentioned that she grew up speaking three different languages at home specifically Hokkien (a Chinese dialect), Malay and English. Due to this mixing of languages she revealed that she grew up not knowing the differences among the language:

> I am used to calling my brother using the Hokkien terms *Ah Hia*. I have never called him *abang* (Malay for "brother") this entire time, and so I have always thought that

> was how you were supposed to address your brother. Even when I was a kid, every time I wanted to go to the toilet my mom would always say "You need to go *pang sai*?" (Hokkien for "take a dump"), and I remember getting into trouble in school for using the phrase as it is considered unrefined. I think because of the interchange among English, Malay and Chinese in my family made us believe that they are the terms we used are normal because we have integrated them into our everyday vocabulary without knowing (Dalina, 23, 05/02/2018).

As a means for communication, language is an important tool for the transition from one culture to another (Schumann, 1986). This study found that those informants who are able to speak both Chinese and Malay tend to speak a certain language to fit themselves into one particular group as they perform situational identity. This is revealed by the following informant:

> I would talk in Malay when I am with my Malay friends or with my Malay family from my mother side. Usually in school I am always with my Chinese friends and therefore in order for us to communicate expressively, I would speak in Mandarin or Hokkien with them. (Lyle, 22, 26/01/2018).

Badris (1979) argues that when a particular group experiences two kinds of culture, there is a tendency that the group will privilege the dominant culture in the society while the minority culture plays a lesser role. In such cases, the children of interracial marriage tend to absorb only one fixed racial identity influenced by their surroundings and the constant practice of one particular culture only (Noor Azam, 2005). This is exemplified particularly by our informants who have almost completely assimilated themselves into the Malay culture. This might have been the result of their parents having to "*Masuk Islam*" and "*Masuk Melayu*" meaning that after converting to Islam they were expected to completely assimilate themselves into Malay Muslim identity. Saunders (2013) stated that Islam is the national religion and the official religion among the Malays in Brunei and therefore, when non-Malay converts to Islam one would then accept the social customs and dress code of the Malays, so converting to Islam is a colloquially known as *Masuk Melayu* or becoming Malay. They see identity as a zero sum game: one can either be Chinese or Malay, but not both (c.f. Hoon, 2006). As Osman Abdullah and Abdul Salam Muhammad Shukri (2008) argue, "One of the expectations of someone embracing Islam is *masuk* Melayu, i.e, becoming Malay or synonymous of being Muslim. Thus embracing Islam would mean entering

the ‘Malay way’ ….they are usually branded as entering the ‘Malayhood’” (p. 42). This is illustrated in the case of our informant below:

> My family and I are more accustomed to our Malay culture from the way we speak, our Islamic dress code, our food and probably even how we behave. This is because my Chinese mother was brought up in a very Malay environment as she had to live with her sister and Malay brother-in-law. Thus, she has pretty much brought up all of us as Malay rather than Chinese. I also think that most of my Chinese extended families such as my grandparents and other relatives have absorbed and adapted to the Malay surrounding in Brunei because most of them have either converted to Islam for marriage or associated themselves with the Malay people. Therefore I do think that there has been a shift in almost all of my family members’ identity into becoming Malay. (Hadirah, 30, 28/02/2018)

For informants who see themselves as just Malay, there is no need learn the Chinese language or to preserve Chinese culture:

> I do not think it matters if you are not able to speak Chinese in Brunei because as a Malay living in Brunei we are often told to prioritize our philosophy on speaking the Malay language *“Utamakan Bahasa Melayu”* and so I think speaking in Chinese would be the least of my concern. (Haalib, 23, 20/01/2018)

> I come from a background where we do not practice any of the Chinese cultural values because my parents are devoted Muslims and therefore, anything that has to do with the Chinese culture are not being taught and are disregarded to us since we were at a young age and there I know no knowledge of it. (Welda, 22, 26/01/2018)

Nevertheless, the concept of *Masuk Islam* and *Masuk Melayu* can be contested; for some, embracing Islam as their religion does not automatically make them Malay. Hoffstaedter (2011) argues that Islam is a universal religion, which is not tied to any particular ethnic culture nor is it exclusively owned by the Malays. Similarly, Hew (2013) challenged the idea that embracing Islam requires one to abandon their Chineseness and to become Malay, as he demonstrates that Chinese culture and Islam is not incompatible. In his recent book, *Chinese Ways of Being Muslim: Negotiating Ethnicity and Religiosity in Indonesia*, Hew (2018) emphasizes that “one can be ‘more

Islamic, but no less Chinese', as well as 'more Chinese, but no less Indonesian'" to show that the marriage between Islamic identity and Chineseness is not a zero sum game (p. 270). However, the longstanding fusing of Malay/Muslim identity and culture in Southeast Asia means that in reality it is not always possible to separate the two. For instance, a particular informant revealed that her family privileges Islamic culture over Malay culture but has not been clear on the difference between the two:

> My parents sees the Islamic teaching and culture as a priority for our upbringing and therefore in my family, we try not to go overboard or cross any boundaries when practicing the Malay culture. We tend to only practice the Islamic customs such as Ramadhan or Eid which are already being incorporated into the Malay culture in Brunei. (Welda, 22, 26/01/2018).

In the process of acculturation, a crucial area that most Chinese-Malays in Brunei have to negotiate is between their Islamic religion and Chinese culture, which might not be readily compatible with each other. This is because the main foundation of the Chinese culture is foregrounded by an amalgamation of three religions: Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism (Fan, 2000). The practice of some Chinese cultural elements, especially those that have originated from these religions are deemed impermissible in Islam. Hence it is not surprising that some of our informants' family are concerned that the practice of Chinese culture might compromise their Muslim faith or undermine the dominant Malay culture in Brunei.

However, all cultures are arguably influenced by religions and vice versa, a clear cut differentiation between the two is not only impossible but also unrealistic. For example, while Chinese New Year is widely practice as a cultural festival, some practices in the celebration might have been adopted from elements of folk religions or superstitions, and could be seen as contrary to the teachings of Islam. Hence, individual actors practices agency by going through a process of negotiation and discretion when they pick and choose whether to discard or retain certain cultural practices (see Hoon, 2009; Hew, 2018).

In his study of Chinese Muslims in Indonesia, Hew (2018) argues that contestations on what is considered *halal* (permissible) or *haram* (prohibited) according to Islamic principles can be expected in any process of religious hybridization because textual interpretations, social

conditions and everyday practices do not always meet in harmony. In the case of the Chinese-Malays in Brunei, while cultural negotiation is inevitable, practices that might constitute idol worship or what is known as *syirik* in Islam is non-negotiable and have to be avoided at all costs.

It has been argued that sometimes Muslims engage in non-Islamic cultural activities with the intention of "Islamising" them or to carry out "cultural *dakwah*" or Islamic outreach through a cultural approach – a familiar method in the spread of Islam in Java (Daniels, 2009; Hew, 2018). This was the case with some of our informants, who stated that rather than subscribing to the symbolic meanings behind Chinese cultural practices, they would instead practice the culture with a different intention (*niat*). As cited from the following interviews:

> Yes my cultural practice and my religion can be quite debateable. However for me, I understand my religion more because of my Chinese culture. I do not agree with, from a practical standpoint, about the whole incense burning and such but whenever I hear a big issue about it I would often try to remember my own intention about what I am doing and who I am doing it for. The action is one thing but the intention (*niat)* is what is important. Just because I burn incense, does that mean I am not a worthy Muslim? I can counter that by saying that I am doing it as a sign of respect to my grandfather and my ancestor rather than praying to Buddha or any other gods, and therefore I do not see any problem with it. (Zaim, 23, 13/02/2018).

Others believe that Chinese cultural practices do not go against the teachings of Islam, especially those values that focus on an individual's moral behavior and ethics or on human interaction such as building social relationship with other people. As mentioned by one of the informants:

> To be honest, I think that Chinese culture are more towards the teaching about ethics of individual rather than on religion-based teachings as compared to the Malay culture, which has incorporated the practice Islamic teachings in their culture. Therefore, I do not think that practicing Chinese culture goes against our religion but rather it goes along with Islam instead. (Haalib, 23, 20/01/2018).

Yet another informant see the value in diversity relating to her own background in a family with members that practice different religions and celebrate different festivals:

> I believe the key to making things work is simply to keep an open mind about everything regardless of our religious and cultural differences. My family has a mix of Malay Muslims, Chinese Buddhists and also Dusun Christians. We often practice different cultural traditions such as Eid, Christmas and Chinese New Year. So I think that it is crucial for us to be able to respect each other's culture and tradition without having any conflict due to our differences and this enables us to be able to build our relationship with families and friends. (Maylin, 24, 14/01/2018)

Culture consists of traditions, values and beliefs that are developed and associated with one particular group of people, inherited and perpetuated by subsequent generations, providing people a sense of identity and belonging (Brumann, 1999). Herbert Gans (1979) argues that traditional ethnic cultures may not be relevant to the third (or more) generation who lack experiential knowledge and ties with their cultural roots. Consequently, the younger generation sometimes resorts to "ethnic symbols" – cultural practices abstracted from the older ethnic culture – to try to preserve their identity and reconnect with an imagined past (Gans, 1979).

Some of our informants regard the preservation of Chinese-Malay cultural identity as an important practice to ensure they do not forget their roots. They mentioned how their parents or grandparents would teach and remind them of their cultural values and traditions even if they are not often practiced. Our interviews revealed that it is not uncommon for our informants to incorporate some Chinese cultural practices into their everyday lives. For example, some parents would celebrate our informant's birthdays with the consumption of red eggs and noodles, which symbolize prosperity and longevity in Chinese culture. Some informants still celebrate Chinese festivals such as Chinese New Year, Mooncake Festival and Winter Solstice, such as the following:

> Despite the fact that some of the Chinese festivals are restricted in Brunei, we do celebrate them in private and usually at my grandmother's house. She is still a Buddhist Chinese. Therefore most of the time we practice these traditions with her because of her strong beliefs. (Maylin, 24, 14/01/2018)

Due to the fact that most Chinese-Malays have assimilated into the Malay cultural and religious lifestyle, some of their parents fear that their non-Malay cultural heritage might fade or completely disappear.

Between & Betwixt: The Challenges of Living in a Liminal Space

The concept of liminality refers to the state of "in between-ness" during a rite of passage where people are either or neither one (Turner, 1969). Homi Bhabha (1994) developed the notion to encapsulate the late-modern condition of a cultural hybrid's uncomfortable business of inhabiting interstitial social spaces, belonging to both and neither. The concept of hybridity challenges one's idea that identity is an essence that is fixed and unchangeable. Hybridity blurs out the boundaries between people and makes space for identity to multiple, where the individuals are able to be in between two or more groups according to the situation given (Bhabha, 1994). The case study of Chinese-Malay provides us insight into the ways in which this community straddles and negotiate differences in their two cultural worlds.

While cultural purists might argue that hybridity inevitably compromises the integrity of an identity, it can also be argued that hybridity can empower existing identities through the opening of new possibilities (Hall, 2000, p. 236). However, it is has to be recognised that these new possibilities are not detached from the constraints of existing boundaries. When asked what the benefits of being biracial are, our informants answered enthusiastically that:

> Being Chinese-Malay means that we get to understand and experience not only one but two cultures together and see how the different values from both cultures are able blend in our everyday lives. I get to celebrate two cultural events such as Chinese New Year and Hari Raya in a year (Amzi, 19, 05/03/2018).

> It is quite unique to be able to experience different cultures when other people are only able to experience one. I get to speak both Malay and Chinese and so I am able to blend in with the different racial groups. As you know the Chinese and Malay groups here do not exactly like to mix with each other here in Brunei as so I get to experience the best of both world. (Malia, 19, 09/02/2018).

> My family tend to incorporate the teachings of both Malay and Chinese together and making it into something that we practice every day. (Aida, 21, 23/01/2018).

However, such empowerment should not be taken for granted. There are moments when individuals with mixed heritage feel non-belonging to, and non-acceptance by either culture, characterised by the liminal state of inbetweenness where they are neither here nor there. Despite the fact that these Chinese-Malays are able to fit into the two racial groups separately, they are, however, constantly being reminded of their differences. Such sentiment was expressed by one of our informants:

> Actually, I do not feel as if I belong to any side of my racial groups. When I am with my Malay cousins, I believe that my Chinese side becomes more prominent. I often feel as if I am very different from them not only based on my obvious appearance of having fairer skin than them or from how I tend to code switch between English and Malay and even to how I behave and think is very different from them. Yet, when I am with my Chinese family it is also the same case. I do not belong just for the fact that I am unable to speak the language itself which made me distant from them. (Dalina, 23, 05/02/2018)

> I cannot speak or understand any Chinese or its dialects. I am always being joked around among my friends and relatives as this Chinese who cannot speak Chinese despite only being half the race. (Haqimah, 27, 26/01/2018).

As discussed above, hybridity can be empowering when one is able to traverse two or more cultural worlds. However, it can also be disempowering when "authenticity" is concerned, especially when authentication is based on essentialist characteristics defined and guarded by cultural gatekeepers (Hoon, 2017).

It is argued that the biggest challenges faced by the offspring of intermarriage or mixed-racial families are racial discrimination and stereotyping (Cheboud & Downing, 2003). Interestingly, in this study, we found that most of the stereotypes on Chinese-Malays are targeted on either one of their racial groups' characteristics (i.e. Chinese or Malay) rather than on Chinese-Malay as a category, perhaps because such category does not exist officially. This is evident in the informants' responses on how they are often being judged by others based on either one of the

races. While there were a few stereotypes made on their Malay characteristics, most of them targeted their Chinese identity. For example:

> I own an online business shop that sells hijab and so most of the time my friends would comment that I am a "typical Chinese that does business". They would always assume that just because I am half Chinese it automatically means that I am money-minded and *karit* (stingy). (Aida, 21, 23/01/2018)

> I think one of the most typical stereotypes I get, especially in high school, was definitely about Chinese being smarter and more determined in their studies than other races. I grew up with straight A's during high school and so people would associate my intelligence with my Chinese blood. However, I believe that it had nothing to do with my genes because it was my mother [racially Chinese], would constantly push me to be good academically, she was the one who was trying to fill in the stereotypes of us having to be smart. (Dalina, 23, 05/02/2018)

Sometimes such stereotypes might be internalized and reproduced by the informants themselves, functioning as self-fulfilling prophecy (Pue & Sulaiman, 2013; Tan, 2012; Zainon, 2005). This is exemplified in Dalina's interview when she claims, "I do have Malay traits as well, I can be lazy when I want to be"; invoking the "lazy Malay" stereotype in a bid to self-essentialise. Stereotypes are unavoidable as they serve as part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. They perpetuate a needed sense of difference between the "Self" and the "Other", and establish an imaginary boundary between the "normal" and the "abnormal", the "acceptable" and the "unacceptable", and "Us" and "Them" (Hoon, 2008). In the case of our Chinese-Malays informants, the racial stereotypes that they experienced based on one of their racial heritage highlight the endless struggles of a biracial subject in navigating the politics of belonging and exclusion, constantly trapped in the liminal space of inbetweenness and Otherness.

Conclusion

This paper is a preliminary attempt to understand the cultural identity of the Chinese-Malays in Brunei beyond the racial label imposed on their official identity card. The paper has discussed some of the challenges and contradictions faced by our bicultural informants. While we found that the notion of "*Masuk Islam*" and "*Masuk Melayu*" characterizes the experience of some of our

informants whose family have opted to completely assimilate into the dominant Brunei Malay/Muslim majority culture, there are others who continue to negotiate the boundaries of difference between the two cultures in which they inhibit. For the latter, their family attempts to preserve their Chineseness through the maintenance of certain ethnic symbols that do not contradict the teachings of Islam. Perhaps due to their relatively small population or due to the hegemonic force of assimilation, or both, the Chinese-Malay community in Brunei has not developed a distinct hybrid identity like their Peranakan counterparts in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Nonetheless, the experience of inbetweenness is a shared feature in most biracial subjects. The interstitial cultural space that these subjects occupy can be empowering and disempowering at the same time depending on the power relations that define the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, belonging and non-belonging. It is hoped that this paper can provide a basis for a more in-depth and nuanced study to be conducted especially on the power dynamics that define identity politics within this community.

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