Negotiating Assimilation and Hybridity

The Identity of Chinese-Malays in Brunei Darussalam

同化和杂糅的协商

文莱华人－马来人的认同

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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 in the liminal space of inbetweenness. Considering the hegemonic force of assimilation enforced by various state apparatuses, the article critically discusses the ways in which Chinese-Malays negotiate the space between assimilation and hybridity. By examining the experience of between and betwixt among these biracial subjects, the article alludes to the different forces that define the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, belonging and non-belonging in Brunei Darussalam.

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Keywords

Chinese-Malays – Brunei – assimilation – identity – hybridity – biracialism

摘要

本文探讨出生在华人-马来人家庭的文莱人如何定义自己的身份，国家如何以"种族"来界定他们，他们如何处理自己的双重文化，以及他们在域限空间中成长所面临的挑战。基于各种国家机器所施加的同化强权力量，本文对华人-马来人如何在同化与杂糅间的协商进行了批判性的探讨。通过研究这些双种族群体的经历，文章也提及了在文莱定义排斥和包容、归属和不归属边界的不同力量。

关键词

华人-马来人 – 文莱 – 同化 – 认同 – 杂糅性 – 双种族性

1   Introduction

The population of Brunei Darussalam (hereafter Brunei) was estimated at 459,500 in 2019 (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics 2020). Comprising 65.7 percent of the population, the majority population is classified as Malay, while the second largest ethnic group – the Chinese – made up 10.3 percent of the population. The "Malays" are an internally diverse group. The Brunei Constitution recognizes seven "indigenous ethnic groups" (*puak jati*) – Belait, Bisaya, Brunei, Dusun, Kedayan, Murut and Tutong – as part of the "Malay race" (*bangsa Melayu*) that comprises the dominant population of Brunei (Maxwell 2001). The incorporation of these indigenous groups into one Malay "racial" category serves not just the purpose of census enumeration: it also involves the systematic assimilation of these diverse ethnicities into the dominant Malay Muslim culture. As Victor King (1994: 178) argues, "this process of ethnic change usually involves two important elements: conversion to Islam and broader cultural emulation of Brunei Malays." The assimilation or "Malayization" efforts are reinforced by various state apparatuses including the national ideology of Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB or Malay Islamic Monarchy), Islamic propagation activities (*da'wah*), Malay language campaigns, national education, and institutions of customs and traditions (*adat istiadat*) (De Vienne 2015: 217–8).

Notwithstanding its ethnic and cultural diversity, Brunei does not practice a policy of multiculturalism. This is manifest in its racially and religiously exclusive national philosophy, Melayu Islam Beraja – a mutually constitutive three-legged stool of race-religion-monarchy that was established as the bedrock of Brunei political structure after its independence in 1984. Enshrined in MIB is a unified national identity that guarantees the superior status of the Malay race, including its culture and language, and the safeguarding of the state religion of Islam by the monarch (Ho 2019). In the MIB philosophy, *Melayu* refers to the race that preserves the Malay culture that is foundational to Brunei, while *Islam* is the religion espoused by the *Beraja* (Monarchy) that founded and rules over the Islamic sultanate (Begawan Pehin Udana Hj Awang Umar 1992). Officially said to have been practiced for more than 600 years, the ideology is deemed to be an "authentic" definition of Bruneian identity: being Malay, Muslim and loyal to the monarch. Some scholars argue that the ideology of MIB only privileges the Malay Muslim majority, while excluding or marginalizing non-Muslim minorities (Poole 2009: 150; Talib 2002). However, in a royal speech commemorating an Islamic ceremony, the Sultan of Brunei reassured his people that MIB is a system that "preserves the rights of *all* residents regardless of their race or creed" (our emphasis, *The Scoop*, 3 April 2019). After decades of institutionalization, MIB has pervaded the whole public sector and is inculcated as a compulsory subject in every educational institution in Brunei.

As the second largest "racial" group, the Chinese play an important role in Brunei's economic development by contributing to the country's growth and prosperity (Neo 1995). Although some scholars claim that intermarriages between Chinese and Brunei-Malays can be traced back to the 13th Century (Malai 2013: 76–8), there is a dearth of historical documentation about the development of mixed marriages and whether a distinct hybrid Peranakan community ever emerged in Brunei. Thus, the present article focuses on the identity of the Chinese-Malays in contemporary Brunei. While intermarriages have become increasingly common in the region (Nagaraj 2009) including Brunei, mixed-marriage couples still face challenges pertaining to the reconciliation of differences in culture, religion, traditions, and social class. Traditionally within the Malay community in Brunei, mixed marriages were discouraged due to the community's need to maintain "pure" lineage and to prevent passing their inheritance to outsiders (Trigger and Wahsalfelah 2011). However, intermarriages have become more common and are increasingly accepted in contemporary Brunei, provided that the non-Malay/Muslim

counterpart in the marriage embraces the dominant religion and assimilates into the Malay Muslim identity promulgated by MIB.[3]

It is not possible to estimate the number of Chinese-Malays in Brunei because the state uses a patrilineal system that expects children to register the father's race. Mixed-race children are required to identify themselves with only one race when filling out official forms, for the forms only allow one racial identification. This system was inherited from the colonial administrative system for racial classification practised when Brunei was a British Protectorate from 1888 to 1984 (Maxwell 2001). A similar system is practised by the neighbouring countries of Singapore and Malaysia that share a similar colonial legacy, where "race is understood to be patrilineal and inherent in one's biological makeup … [and in] postcolonial governments of the two countries … race has retained its role as the prime apparatus of administration and control" (Reddy and Gleibs 2019). This article uses the term "race" instead of "ethnicity" to reflect the term used in official policy and public discourse, as well as in our informant's articulation of their own identity. However, we acknowledge that as a label for biological categorization, "race" is deeply problematic and has no scientific validity (Luke and Carrington 2000). We use the term with the understanding that race is socially and politically "constructed, situational and fluid, and not a biological fact" (Reddy and Gleibs 2019).

Given this background, our study explores the hybrid identity of the Chinese-Malays in Brunei with the aim of answering the following questions: How do people born into a Chinese-Malay family define their identity? How does the state classify them in terms of "race"? How do they negotiate their biracial and hybrid identity? What are the forces that influence the cultural practices of the Chinese-Malays in Brunei? What kinds of challenges do they face while growing up in a liminal space? The article begins with a conceptual discussion on notions of identity, assimilation and hybridity in the context of Brunei. After describing the research methodology, the article discusses the identity conundrum of the Chinese-Malays: how they respond to state

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3 Marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims is not permitted in Brunei and non-Muslims must convert to Islam if they wish to marry a Muslim (Library of Congress n.d.). This is similar to the case of Malaysia, where it is noted that "If one of the spouses in an intercultural marriage in Malaysia is Muslim, therefore, the other non-Muslim spouse is expected to convert to Islam in order to legalize the marriage, as marriage between a Muslim and a Non-Muslim is forbidden under the Islamic Family Law Act of 1984" (Tan 2008: 41). Most interracial couples in Malaysia also adhere to the dominant Muslim-Malay culture. Cultural elements derived from a non-Malay spouse can be integrated into the family's cultural practice if the elements do not conflict with Islamic teachings (Pue and Sulaiman 2013: 271).

classification, and how they articulate their hyphenated identity. The last two sections of the article critically interrogate the ways in which our informants negotiate their Chinese-Malay cultural practices given the assimilationist forces imposed by the state, and the challenges they face growing up in the liminal space of biracialism.

2   Conceptualizing Identity, Assimilation, and Hybridity

In the late modern world, individuals have multiple identities that they can choose to perform according to the different situations in which they might find themselves. For Foucault (1987), identity is a discourse, subject to power relations and unending constructs. Identity can never be fixed; it is always being negotiated and must not be essentialized, as it is the subject of the unceasing "play" of history, culture and power (Hall 1993). Referring to the context of Borneo, King (2012) argues that a long history of cultural interactions and exchanges among different ethnic groups has resulted in cultural hybridization and syncretism. However, in constructing national identities, politically dominant groups, powerholders or the state have invariably imposed on others "their notions of identity and what that identity from a national perspective comprises" (King 2017: 181). This is evident in the case of the MIB ideology in Brunei, which the state uses to maintain legitimacy and to promote cultural assimilation.

Zygmunt Bauman describes assimilation as a process that seeks to make the different like oneself through "annihilating the strangers by devouring them and then metabolically transforming them into a tissue indistinguishable from one's own" (1997: 47). Cultural assimilation forces the "outsiders" (often minorities) to give up their cultural identity and be absorbed into the culture of the majority. In fact, the ideology of monocultural assimilation was the dominant discourse in the West before the policy of multiculturalism was introduced in the 1960s and fundamentally shifted the ways in which identity is constructed within Western modernity (Agger 1998).

As Brunei has never adopted a multicultural policy, the state promotes an assimilationist agenda by conflating Bruneian identity with MIB. However, Ho argues that the "exclusive, fixed, and cohesive narrative of Malayness" propounded by MIB does not always correspond to the social reality in Brunei, where "an inclusive, changing, and hybrid discourse of Malayness" is practiced by most Malay Bruneians (2019: 148). Hence, it can be argued that in Brunei, assimilation does not only apply to non-Malay minorities but also to the

Malays who "endorse an inclusive idea of Malayness (where Malay is divorced from being Muslim)" or who embrace "a hybrid notion of Malayness" like some of their counterparts in Singapore, Indonesia and, to some extent, Malaysia (Ho 2019: 148).

The advent of globalization and the proliferation of intermarriage have given rise to a new hyphenated, diasporic and syncretic form of identity that can be referred to as hybridity (Bhatia 2012). The concept of hybridity is inseparable from the structures and patterns of power and resistance that have occurred after colonialism (Bhatia 2012). In the past, the term "hybrid" or "hybridity" was often associated in social evolution theory with being "impure," "racially contaminated" and genetically "deviant" (Papastergiadis 2000). Hence, hybridity is an "anti-thesis" to identity as it challenges the idea of an essentialist identity and blurs boundaries demarcated by cultural gatekeepers (Hoon 2017). For instance, Pue and Sulaiman's study of interracial marriages in Malaysia shows that their children were often not accepted as members of an ethnic group by fellow members because they were perceived to be "not 'pure' enough in terms of physical appearance or cultural practices" (2013: 274).

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 some societies, hybridity has led to the emergence of new communities and even new ethnic groups. 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: 163). The Peranakans can be distinguished by their spoken language (Baba Malay), and unique customs, mainly derived from Chinese culture, and their fusion cuisine that features a combination of Malay and Chinese food. 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, 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 assumed that society can readily accept differences without a struggle. Jacqueline 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.

Furthermore, there may not always be equal representation of cultures in the process of hybridity. The tyranny of the majority means that the dominant culture in society will always be privileged in regard to minority cultures. In the case of the present study, this is exemplified in the fact that most Chinese-Malay families privilege Malay cultural practices because of their status as the prevailing culture of the country. Therefore, some elements of Chinese culture must be altered to be compatible with Malay/Muslim culture or they might eventually disappear, especially if they go against the religious teachings of Islam. The process of cultural negotiation is the central focus of this article.

3   Research Approach

This study deploys a qualitative approach that combines auto-ethnography and in-depth interviews. The data was collected by the second author, who is a female Bruneian with a Chinese-Malay background. Referring to the notion of "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 second 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 race. Upon marrying her Malay mother, her father converted to Islam, and gradually left behind some of his Chinese cultural practices in order to embrace Malay culture. Consequently, the second 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 to the extent that they do not contradict the Islamic faith. Even if her cultural affinity is Malay, the second author sometimes identifies herself as a Chinese depending on the occasion and depending on the person she is interacting with. Her bicultural upbringing allows her to reflexively empathize with Chinese-Malay informants and add another layer of insight into the complex experience of hybridity among mixed-marriage informants. In order to prevent personal bias and subjectivity from affecting the validity of the data collected for the research, the

researcher exercised a high level of reflexivity and distancing when collecting and analysing the data (Salzman 2002).

Apart from the auto-ethnographic 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 in Bandar Seri Begawan, the capital city of Brunei Darussalam. The informants came from a Chinese-Malay interracial background: eight of them are classified as Chinese on their identification card while the remaining seven informants were stated as Malay. Eleven of 15 informants are college and university students, one is an in-service student, and three are working professionals. The interview sessions were carried out from January to March in 2018 using a digital voice recorder. The researcher was flexible with the language used in the interviews, depending on the preference of the informants. The interlocutors responded in Malay, English or a mixture of both, as well as a bit of Mandarin. Most of the informants 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 article are pseudonyms.

This research uses two different kinds of sampling method, purposive and snowball sampling. Informants are chosen for purposive sampling due to their lived experience and bicultural knowledge (Bernard 2002; Seidler 1974). Snowball sampling, on the other hand, refers to a technique of gathering informants from individual informants' social network through personal recommendation (Atkinson and Flint 2001). Both samplings use the following qualifications and criteria to identify key informants (Allen 1971): (1) the informants will need to have a Chinese-Malay background, (2) either one of the parents is a Chinese Muslim convert, (3) one of the parents must be a Bruneian citizen, permanent resident or have lived in Brunei for a long period of time, and (4) the family of the informants should observe at least some Chinese and Malay cultural practices such as Chinese New Year or Hari Raya Celebration (Eid).

4   The Identity of Chinese-Malays in Brunei

The identity conundrum of the progenies of interracial marriage is a complex issue especially when the state uses racial classification as a tool to impose the idea of national identity irrespective of an individual's behavioural choice. Like Singapore and Malaysia, Brunei practices a patrilineal system in its racial

policy, which means that children automatically inherit their father's race. To be specific, when a child is born of a Malay father and a Chinese mother, the child will be officially classified as a Malay in the mandatory *bangsa* or "race" category on his/her official documents such as identification card, birth certificate and passport (Trigger and Wahsalfelah 2011). However, the social and cultural identification of these mixed-race children may or may not reflect what is recorded on their official documents. Cognizant of such limitation, the Singapore government tried to address this issue in 2010 by allowing a "double-barrelled" race option for mixed children so that they can register both races (such as Chinese-Malay or Indian-Eurasian) on their identity card (Kor 2010). This is possible for Singapore due to its official policy of multiracialism, which aims to promote an inclusive society, fundamentally different from Brunei's national MIB philosophy.[4]

In this study, we found that nine out of fifteen informants associated themselves with the hyphenated "Chinese-Malay" identity instead of identifying with or privileging one 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 his or her 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 ancestors. This is important for me because my identity is a reminder of where I came from, which should not be forgotten.
>
> HAQIMAH, 27 years old, 26 January 2018

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

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4 Nonetheless, mixed-raced children (or their parents) in Singapore are still required to nominate a "dominant" race so that race-based policies can continue to be applied to the population. This shows that while the new system allows for more flexibility for mixed-race individuals to choose their cultural identification, it does very little to change the racial regime Singapore inherited from the British colonial administration.

Welda, a student currently studying in the United Kingdom, was back in Brunei for a winter break in January 2008. She narrated her racial background in detail:

> My father was adopted by a Malay Muslim family as 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 me biologically three-quarter Chinese and one-quarter Malay. Despite the fact that our appearance tends more toward the Chinese genes, we do not associate ourselves as Chinese. In addition, due to some family complications, we have cut off the connections with our Chinese side of the family and have entirely devoted ourselves as Malay Muslims.
>
> WELDA, 22 years old, 26 January 2018

A similar narrative is recounted by Anna:

> My father's background is quite complicated, he is racially stated as a Chinese Hokkien on his identification certificates and documents. However, at the age of 15, 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 it.
>
> ANNA, 22 years old, 02 March 2018

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

Identity can also be circumstantial depending on when and how an individual chooses to perform different façades of their race, religion, ethnicity, gender and other identities (Cohen and Kennedy 2013). Such choices are sometimes contingent on instrumental needs at a particular moment. As Tong and Chan (2001: 16) explain:

> 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.

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 their Malay family and friends, as the following excerpts show:

> When I was in secondary school at St. George, the school was filled with different people who came from different racial groups: there were the Malays, Chinese, and Indians as well as other different races. Most of the time, these races did not really try to mingle with each other and were very exclusive unless you were one of them. However, due to my mixed-race background I was able to interact not only with the Malay group but also with the Chinese group in that school. I think that in a way I tried to adapt myself depending on the group I was with. For example, when I was with the Chinese group, I would usually speak in Mandarin. Most of the time my Chinese accent would simply change automatically [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 years old, 10 February 2018

> My identity can be situational especially in terms of how I dress. [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 either to cover myself with a hijab or 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 years old, 10 March 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 were outside of the country interacting with the "Other," and when negotiating their own Otherness away from home. As 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's degree and in the UK for my Masters. I was able to change my identity depending on the group I was with at the time. When I was in Australia, people there were more exposed to the Malay racial group, so I myself did not have to explain what 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 me as Chinese due to my Chinese-like features. It was quite bothersome to have to explain myself to people, so I would just admit to them that yes, I was in fact Chinese.
>
> SAWFI, 28 years old, 01 February 2018

> Despite the fact that I do not associate myself with anything that has to do with Chinese in terms of identity or culture, I do believe that my identity has 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, in the United Kingdom. People often mistook me for a Chinese person and most of the time I would just say that I was 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 years old, 26 January 2018

These two excerpts demonstrate that identity can be at play not only on the basis of the corresponding "Other" but also due to identity markers such as "race," cultural behaviour and appearance. These informants' biracial background gives them a "Chinese look," which they can strategically use if they wish 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. Choudry (2010) argues that multi-racial individuals can choose to use their different racial identities depending on the benefits given to them according to the situation. The interviews have shown that our informants are not totally disempowered by their mixed racial background; instead, they regularly exercise agency by tactically using their multiple identities to their own advantage (Rocha 2011).

5   Negotiating Chinese-Malay Cultural Practices

Cultural assimilation is a social reality for the Chinese-Malays in Brunei, since almost all our informants practice Malay cultural customs and traditions. Unlike

the Straits-born Chinese-Malays in colonial Singapore, Malaysia or Indonesia, also known as Peranakan, who historically developed a distinct hybrid culture famously characterized by the creole Malay language, Nyonya cuisine, kebaya dresses, beaded footwear and exquisite ornaments (Suryadinata, 2010), Chinese-Malays in Brunei have never developed such a culture. In the absence of historical data on intermarriage between Chinese and Malays in Brunei, we can only speculate that the population of intermarriage might be too small for them to develop as a separate community. Apart from the palpable social, political and geographic 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, Chinese-Malays in Brunei 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 Chinese and Malay practices by the Chinese-Malays in Brunei in their everyday life, ranging from language, cultural traditions, beliefs and choice of cuisine. The first element under consideration is language. Six out of fifteen of our informants can 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. Stapa and Khan (2016) argue that the linguistic practice of code-switching in the home domain is common in mixed Malay-Chinese families in Malaysia. This resonates with our informants, who can speak and understand Mandarin and frequently borrow words from either Malay or Chinese to express themselves when they are unable to find the right word in the other language.

One informant, Dalina, mentioned that she grew up speaking three different languages at home, Hokkien, Malay and English; and was unaware of the differences between these languages:

> I am used to calling my brother by the Hokkien term *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 that this happened because of the interchange among English, Malay and Chinese in my family, which made us believe that the terms we used are normal – we integrated them into our everyday vocabulary without knowing.
>
> DALINA, 23 years old, 05 February 2018

As a means of communication, language is an important tool for an individual to move from one culture to another (Schumann 1986). Our study finds that those informants who can speak both Chinese and Malay tend to speak a certain language to fit into a particular group whenever 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 for us to communicate expressively, I would speak in Mandarin or Hokkien with them.
>
>   LYLE, 22 years old, 26 February 2018

Bardis (1979) argues that when a group experiences two kinds of culture, there is a tendency for the group to privilege the dominant culture in society while the minority culture plays a lesser role. This is exemplified by our informants who have assimilated into the Brunei Malay culture as a result of their Chinese parent's having to "*Masuk Islam*" and "*Masuk Melayu*," which means that after converting to Islam they are expected to assimilate into the Malay Muslim identity.[5] According to Ho, within the MIB national framework, Islamic conversion can be seen as process of interpellation by means of which a person can obtain a Malay identity. She asserts: "In a marriage between a Muslim man and non-Muslim woman, a *Shahadah* ('declaration') of intent to assume a Muslim identity involves the male granting his female bride entry into Malayness by hailing this newly converted recipient into the Malay society in the MIB nation" (Ho 2019: 150).

When non-Malays convert to Islam, they are expected to accept the social customs and dress code of the Malay/Muslims. As Abdullah and Shukri observe, "One of the expectations of someone embracing Islam is *masuk Melayu*, i.e, becoming Malay or synonymous with being Muslim. Thus embracing Islam would mean entering the 'Malay way'.... [T]hey are usually branded as entering into 'Malayhood'" (2008, 42). Here, identity is seen as a zero-sum game: one can be *either* Chinese (or Iban, Filipino, Indian or any other ethnic

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5 "*Masuk Islam*" refers to an individual converting from their previous religious belief to Islam when the new convert proclaims the *shahādah* which expresses the belief that there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. This process may take place in a mosque, a Muslim community centre or other places deemed appropriate by the religious authorities. The converted individual is expected to establish a new relationship with the Islamic Ummah or Muslim community, which supercedes his or her national, racial, familial, linguistic and cultural identities (Nuradli Ridzwan Shah et al. 2016).

identity) *or* Malay, but not both (c.f. Hoon 2006). This is illustrated in the case of our informant:

> My family and I are more accustomed to our Malay culture in 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 all of us up as Malay rather than as Chinese. I also think that most of my Chinese extended family members such as my grandparents and other relatives have absorbed and adapted to the Malay surroundings 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 my family members' identity toward becoming Malay.
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> HADIRAH, 30 years old, 28 February 2018

Our informants who identified only as Malay experience no need to 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 of speaking the Malay language ("*Utamakan Bahasa Melayu*") and so I think the ability to speak in Chinese would be the least of my concern.
>
> HAALIB, 23 years old, 20 January 2018

> I came 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 Chinese culture is not taught and has been disregarded by us since we were at a young age and therefore I have no knowledge of it.
>
> WELDA, 22 years old, 26 January 2018

Nevertheless, the concept of *Masuk Islam* and *Masuk Melayu* can be contested: for some people, embracing Islam as one's religion does not automatically make one Malay (Pue and Sulaiman 2013: 273). Hoffstaedter (2011) argues that Islam is a universal religion that is not tied to any particular ethnic culture or exclusively owned by Malays. Similarly, Hew (2013) challenged the idea that embracing Islam requires one to abandon Chineseness and to become Malay, as he demonstrates that Chinese culture and Islam are compatible. In his

recent book *Chinese Ways of Being Muslim: Negotiating Ethnicity and Religiosity in Indonesia*, Hew (2018: 270) 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. However, the long history of fusing Malay/Muslim identity and culture in Southeast Asia means that it is not always possible to separate the two. For instance, an informant reveals that her family privileges Islamic culture over Malay culture but has not been clear on the difference between the two:

> My parents see 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 Islamic customs such as Ramadhan or Eid, which are already being incorporated into the Malay culture in Brunei.
>
> WELDA, 22 years old, 26 January 2018

There has been an Arabization of Islam in Asia in the past few decades, including an increasing trend toward giving children Arabized names (Ghoshal 2010). This trend is also observed in Brunei, where Islamic names are increasingly preferred among Malays over traditional Malay names. Two of our informants, whose parents had not given them Islamic names, struggled to explain to others about their names:

> One very common problem that we always experience however would have something to do with my name. As you can tell, mine is more like a Chinese name than a common Islamic name of the sort that Malays have. These questions would usually come from Malays though, as some would ask why I have such a name and why not pick a Malay or Islamic name. I don't exactly know how to respond to this type of question since yeah my parents or perhaps my grandparents were the one who actually gave me the name.
>
> MAYLIN, 24 years old, 14 January 2018

> I do face some problems like why my parents decided to give me a rather English name with a Chinese surname instead of an Islamic Malay name, and people often question me about that.
>
> ANNA, 22 years old, 02 March 2018

Intermarriage between Chinese and Malays can be challenging in terms of their (in)compatibility with regards to religion, ethnic identity and cultural

traditions, as both groups have very strong family traditions and kinship ties, as well as religious practices and cultural heritage to preserve (Tan et al. 2008: 40). Our study on the Chinese-Malays in Brunei shows that negotiating between Islamic religion and Chinese cultural practices is not easy. The main foundation of 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 the families of some of our informants 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, so a clear-cut differentiation between the culture and religion is not only impossible but also unrealistic (Roy 2010). For example, while Chinese New Year is widely practiced as a cultural festival, various practices in the celebration might have been adapted from elements of Chinese folk religions or superstitious beliefs and could be seen as contrary to the teachings of Islam. Hence, individual actors practice agency by going through a process of negotiation and discretion when choosing 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 regarding what is considered *halal* (permissible) or *haram* (prohibited) according to Islamic principles can be expected in any process of religious hybridization, given that textual interpretations, social conditions and everyday practices do not always harmonize. 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 are non-negotiable and must be avoided at all costs.

It has been argued that sometimes Muslims engage in non-Islamic cultural activities with the intention of "Islamizing" the nonbelievers or carrying out "*da'wah*" (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 subscribe to the symbolic meanings behind Chinese cultural practices, they would instead practice the culture with a different intention (*niat*). One informant said:

> Yes, my cultural practice and my religion can be quite debatable. However, for me, I understand my religion more because of my Chinese culture. I do not agree, from a practical standpoint, with the whole thing about 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 years old, 13 February 2018

Another informant believes 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 relationships with other people:

To be honest, I think that Chinese culture is more toward the teaching about the ethics of an individual rather than about religion-based teachings as compared to Malay culture, which has incorporated Islamic teachings. Therefore, I do not think that practicing Chinese culture goes against our religion but rather goes along with Islam instead.

HAALIB, 23 years old, 20 January 2018

Yet another informant sees 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 celebrate different cultural festivals 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 build our relationship with families and friends.

MAYLIN, 24 years old, 14 January 2018

Culture consists of traditions, values and beliefs that are developed and associated with a group of people and is inherited and perpetuated by subsequent generations, providing people with 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 that lacks experiential knowledge of and ties with their cultural roots. Consequently, the younger generation sometimes resort to "ethnic symbols" – cultural practices abstracted

from the older ethnic culture – to try to preserve their identity and reconnect with an imagined past.

Some of our informants regard the preservation of Chinese-Malay cultural identity as an important practice to ensure that 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 reveal 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-dyed eggs and noodles, which symbolize prosperity and longevity in Chinese culture. Some informants still celebrate Chinese festivals such as Chinese New Year, the Mooncake Festival and the Winter Solstice. For instance, one informant notes:

> 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 years old, 14 January 2018

As most Chinese-Malays have assimilated into Malay cultural and religious lifestyle, some of their parents fear that their Chinese cultural heritage might fade away or completely disappear, as expressed by our informant:

> I think he [father] wants to preserve the Chinese culture in our family and he probably wants us to acknowledge that we are Chinese as part of our identity, and not just Malay. The reason is probably because he doesn't want his Chinese identity to fade. Just because he is married to a Malay does not mean that he and his children or the future generation of his family must forget their roots.
>
> AIDA, 21, 23 January 2018

6   Between and Betwixt: The Challenges of Living in a Liminal Space

The concept of liminality refers to the state of "in between-ness" (or *tabula rasa*) during a rite of passage in which people are neither here nor there (Turner 1969). Homi Bhabha (1994) further 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 multiply, so that individuals can be in between two or more groups according to the given situation (Bhabha 1994). The case study of Chinese-Malays provides us with an insight into the ways in which this community straddles and negotiates 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 up of new possibilities (Hall 2000: 236). However, it must be recognised that these new possibilities are not detached from the constraints of existing boundaries. When asked about the benefits of being biracial, 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 can 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 years old, 05 March 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 can blend in with the different racial groups. As you know, the Chinese and Malay groups here in Brunei do not exactly like to mix with each other, but I get to experience the best of both worlds.
>
>   MALIA, 19 years old, 09 February 2018

> My family tends to incorporate the teachings of both Malay and Chinese together and make it into something that we practice every day.
>
>   AIDA, 21, 23 January 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 inbetween-ness, where they are neither here nor there. Even though these Chinese-Malays can fit into the two racial groups separately, they are 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 either one 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 or even on the fact that 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 simply because of the fact that I am unable to speak the language itself, which makes me distant from them.

DALINA, 23 years old, 05 February 2018

I cannot speak or understand any Chinese or its dialects. I am always being joked about among my friends and relatives as this Chinese who cannot speak Chinese despite only being half-race.

HAQIMAH, 27 years old, 26 January 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 essentialized characteristics defined and guarded by cultural gatekeepers (Hoon 2017).

It is argued that one of the biggest challenges faced by the offspring of mixed-racial families is racial discrimination and stereotypes (Cheboud and Downing 2003). Interestingly, in this study, we found that most of the stereotypes about Chinese-Malays are targeted on either one of the characteristics of their racial groups (i.e. Chinese or Malay) rather than on Chinese-Malay as a category, perhaps because such a category does not officially exist. This is evident in informants' responses to questions about how they are 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 hijabs, 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 years old, 23 January 2018

I think one of the most typical stereotypes I got, especially in high school, was 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] who 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.

<div align="right">DALINA, 23 years old, 05 February 2018</div>

When I was studying in Chung Hwa (a Chinese private school), there weren't really that many Malay students enrolled in a Chinese school so Malay students would normally hang out together in a group. We would be called the "Malai Ren" which translates as Malay people. Chinese people see Malays as those who are less intelligent, especially when compared to them.

<div align="right">LYLE, 22 years old, 26 January 2018</div>

Reddy and Gleibs (2019) argue that colonialism is not a thing of the past; it continues to influence our contemporary ways of being in terms of both physical heritage and of our minds and psyche. Racial stereotypes like "greedy Chinese" and "lazy Malays" have a long history in the Malay Archipelago since the colonial era, when the population was racially segregated under the divide-and-rule policy. Such segregation had led to the formation of prejudices and stereotypes based on racial characteristics which persist until the present day (Hirschman 1986; Kuntjara and Hoon 2019).

Sometimes such stereotypes can be internalized and reproduced by the informants themselves, functioning as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy (Pue and Sulaiman 2013; Tan 2012). This is exemplified in Dalina's interview, in which 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-essentialize. 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-Malay informants, the racial stereotypes that they experienced based on one or the other 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.

7   Conclusion

This article has presented a nuanced analysis of the cultural identity of the Chinese-Malays in Brunei beyond the state imposed racial label on their

official documents. It has discussed the identity conundrum including some of the challenges faced by our biracial informants, especially in their response to the restrictive official racial classification and contradictions in their hyphenated identity. The expression and articulation of their identity is inevitably influenced by the state and institutional forces that define racial boundaries and bestow privilege on the dominant culture over other minorities through various state apparatuses, specifically the all-encompassing national philosophy of MIB. Amidst the forces of assimilation promulgated by MIB and other state policies, we found that the notions of "*Masuk Islam*" and "*Masuk Melayu*" have characterized the experience of our informants whose families have opted to completely assimilate into the dominant Brunei Malay/ Muslim culture.

On the other hand, those who live in the liminal space of hybridity continue to negotiate the boundaries of difference between the two cultures that they inhabit. Their families attempt 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 to both, the Chinese-Malay community in Brunei has not developed a distinct hybrid identity like that of 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 article 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 understudied community.

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