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Fluid Ethnicity: The Dynamics of Javanese-Malay Identity Construction in Malaysia

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Abstract	This study explores the complex identity negotiation of Javanese Muslims in Malaysia, focusing on their dual identity as both Javanese and Malay. Employing an ethnographic approach, the research examines how Malaysian Javanese navigate their cultural identity while integrating into the Malay society. The study reveals that Javanese descendants in Malaysia maintain their Javanese cultural identity, particularly in language and traditions, while simultaneously adapting to the Malay culture and fulfilling their obligations as Malaysian citizens. The process of identity reconstruction has led to the emergence of a hybrid identity, which is influenced by the interactions between Javanese and Malay cultures, as well as the prevailing policies, religion, and nationalism in Malaysia. The findings contribute to the understanding of identity construction and negotiation among diaspora communities in multicultural societies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The construction and negotiation of cultural identity among diaspora communities has long been a topic of scholarly interest (Hall, 1990; Vertovec, 2001). In multicultural societies, individuals often navigate complex processes of identity formation as they balance their cultural heritage with the dominant national identity (Bhabha, 1994). The case of Javanese descendants in Malaysia presents a particularly intriguing example of this phenomenon, as they occupy a unique position straddling both Javanese and Malay identities within Malaysia's ethno-political landscape (Miyazaki, 2000; Sunarti and Fadeli, 2018).

While previous studies have examined the historical migration and initial settlement patterns of Javanese communities in Malaysia (Tamrin, 1984; Bohari, 1981), there remains a gap in understanding how subsequent generations negotiate their hybrid cultural identities in contemporary Malaysian society. The constitutional categorization of Javanese descendants as 'Malay' creates an interesting tension between

official ethnic classifications and lived cultural experiences (Milner, 1991; Reid, 2001). This research aims to explore how Malaysian Javanese navigate this duality, maintaining aspects of Javanese culture and tradition while also embracing their status as part of the Malay majority.

A key area of novelty in this study is its focus on the ongoing processes of identity construction and reconstruction among Javanese descendants, rather than viewing their assimilation as a completed historical event (Kahn, 2006). By examining how different generations engage with both Javanese and Malay cultural elements in their daily lives, this research provides insight into the dynamic nature of diasporic identities (Rofil, 2016). Additionally, the study considers how broader societal changes in Malaysia, including increasing urbanization and the rise of popular culture, influence identity formation among younger generations of Javanese descent (Nilan, 2017).

This research employs Stuart Hall's (1990) conceptualization of cultural identity as both 'being' and 'becoming' to analyze the experiences of Malaysian Javanese. It explores how individuals negotiate their identities through language use, cultural practices, and social interactions (Asmah, 2015). By utilizing an ethnographic approach, the study aims to capture the nuanced ways in which Javanese descendants position themselves within Malaysian society and how they reconcile potentially competing aspects of their heritage (Jandra et al., 2016).

Understanding these processes of identity negotiation has broader implications for multicultural societies grappling with questions of national identity and social cohesion (Hooker and Othman, 2003). By examining how the Javanese community has maintained cultural distinctiveness while also integrating into the broader Malay identity, this research offers insights into successful models of cultural pluralism (Dwijayanto, 2017). Moreover, it contributes to ongoing scholarly debates about the nature of ethnicity and race in post-colonial contexts, challenging essentialist notions of identity and highlighting the fluid, constructed nature of ethnic categories (Nagel, 1994; Gilroy, 1999).

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs an ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) to examine the identity negotiation of Javanese Muslims in Malaysia. Data were collected through participant observation (Spradley, 2016) and in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2006) with Javanese descendants in various regions of Malaysia, including Selangor, Johor, Melaka, and Kuala Lumpur. These areas were selected based on their significant Javanese populations, as identified in previous studies (Tamrin, 1984; Miyazaki, 2000).

The participants were selected using purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), targeting individuals of Javanese descent across different generations. This sampling strategy allowed for a diverse range of

perspectives and experiences to be captured, as recommended by Flick (2018) for qualitative research in multicultural contexts.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), focusing on the participants' experiences, perceptions, and practices related to their Javanese and Malay identities. This method was chosen for its flexibility and capacity to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset (Nowell et al., 2017). The analysis also considered the historical, social, and political context of Malaysia that influences the identity construction of Javanese descendants, following the approach advocated by Creswell and Poth (2018) for contextualised qualitative research.

The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research with human subjects, obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was employed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), allowing participants to review and comment on the preliminary analysis.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Identity Problem

The evolution of identity among Javanese migrants in Malaysia presents a complex and dynamic process that has unfolded since the early 20th century (Sunarti, 2018; Jandra, 2016). This phenomenon is evident in the retention of Javanese elements in Malaysian identity cards, such as names like H. Taib bin Parto and H. Jalil bin Surowirio, reflecting a persistent socio-cultural attachment to Javanese identity within the Malay community, leading to the emergence of the term "Malay-Javanese" (Miyazaki, 2000).

The categorization of Javanese descendants as "second-class citizens" prompted subsequent generations to adopt Malay names, often with Arabic influences, particularly after performing the Hajj. This trend has resulted in a scarcity of traditional Javanese names among younger generations in Malaysia today (De Grave, 2011; Kuipers, 2017). These changes underscore the fluid and ambiguous nature of identity within communities, highlighting how individual and group identities evolve through processes of absorption and adaptation to new values over time (Maiwan, 2011).

Intergenerational changes within the Javanese Muslim community in Malaysia extend beyond social status, encompassing shifts in cultural and religious identities, particularly in urban areas. Third and fourth-generation Javanese descendants often experience a form of moral panic regarding their cultural identity, leading to a shift towards aligning with the Bumiputera (Malay) ethnic identity. This shift is further influenced by popular culture, resulting in a younger generation that embraces fashion, trends, and

religious piety simultaneously. The interplay between popular culture and religious devotion has significantly shaped the religious identity of young Javanese descendants in Malaysia (Nilan, 2017).

In contrast, certain rural areas in Selangor, Perak, and Johor maintain a stronger sense of Javanese cultural identity. This preservation is attributed to the ability of earlier generations to maintain Javanese cultural continuity while accommodating local influences. Despite inevitable interactions and contestations with other cultures, core values have been retained. Javanese Muslims in Malaysia have generally prioritized consensus and conflict avoidance, facilitating their acceptance across various social contexts (Jandra et al., 2016; Sunarti & Fadeli, 2018; Maiwan, 2011).

Drawing on Hall's perspective, the cultural identity of Javanese Muslims in Malaysia can be categorized into a primary type, characterized by the adherence to Javanese traditions and ways of life. These cultural ties remain particularly strong in areas with significant Javanese populations, such as certain settlements in Selangor and Johor, due to shared cultural heritage and ancestry. This conceptualization provides a framework for understanding the complex and multifaceted nature of Javanese-Malaysian identity, which continues to evolve in response to social, cultural, and political factors.

A Dual Identity

The cultural identity of Javanese migrants in Malaysia is a complex phenomenon shaped by both official policies and lived experiences. Under Malaysian law, Javanese migrants granted citizenship are officially categorized as Malays, despite their distinct ethnic origins (Reid, 2001). This classification allows them to enjoy the privileges associated with Malay status while maintaining aspects of their Javanese heritage (Kahn, 2006). The construction of cultural identity in this context can be understood through two lenses: the structural reality imposed by authorities, and the cultural reality formed through everyday practices (Vickers, 1997).

Research indicates that the maintenance of Javanese cultural identity varies significantly across different regions of Malaysia. In areas such as Johor and Selangor, Javanese language and customs persist, albeit in modified forms, contributing to a hybrid Malay-Javanese identity (Sunarti & Fadeli, 2018). This cultural retention is particularly evident in traditional practices such as 'rewang' (communal work during weddings) and 'slametan' (ceremonial meals), which continue to play important roles in community life (Yana & Yew, 2017).

However, the strength of Javanese cultural identity appears to diminish in more urbanized areas like Melaka and Kuala Lumpur. Even among second and third-generation descendants, there is a noticeable loss of Javanese language skills and cultural practices (Maiwan, 2011). This variation in cultural retention

highlights the complex processes of identity negotiation and reconstruction that occur within diaspora communities (Hall, 1990).

The formation of a hybrid Malay-Javanese identity, particularly evident in Johor and Selangor, can be seen as a strategic response to the challenges of integration. This hybrid identity allows Javanese descendants to maintain a connection to their cultural roots while also embracing their status as Malaysian citizens (Rofil, 2016). The daily practices of Javanese Muslims in Malaysia, encompassing both religious and cultural activities, serve to reinforce both their cultural distinctiveness and their national identity (Jandra et al., 2016).

Historically, the Javanese in Malaysia are descendants of pre-independence migrants who were primarily middle-class individuals involved in Straits of Malacca commerce (King, 2008). Today, their descendants are dispersed throughout Peninsular Malaysia, with significant concentrations in Johor, Perak, and Selangor (Kamil & Mohamed, 2016). It's important to distinguish this established Javanese diaspora from more recent Indonesian labor migrants, as the two groups have distinct historical experiences and social positions (Garcés-Mascareñas, 2015).

The integration of Javanese descendants into Malaysian society has been facilitated by their official classification as Malays, allowing them access to various sectors of society including academia, social institutions, and politics (Dwijayanto, 2020). However, their cultural identity remains influenced by broader processes of Malay identity redefinition, which have been shaped by policies such as the National Economic Policy (NEP) and the Islamic revival of the 1970s and 1990s (Sofjan, 2007; Haque, 2003).

This complex interplay between ethnicity, religion, and national identity is further exemplified by the conflation of Islamic conversion with "becoming Malay" in Malaysian discourse. This phenomenon has implications not only for Javanese descendants but also for other non-Malay groups, highlighting the intricate relationship between religious and ethnic identities in Malaysia's multicultural landscape (Hooker & Othman, 2003).

Identity Reconstruction

The concept of identity in multicultural societies is complex and often ambiguous, particularly when it comes to definitions of ethnicity and race. Jenkins (2014) defines ethnicity as a set of collective situations linked by a shared belief in common ancestry, while Nagel (1994) emphasizes the shared cultural and material aspects that define ethnic groups. Both scholars agree that ethnicity is socially constructed, a view that aligns with modern anthropological perspectives on race and ethnicity.

Anthropologists distinguish between biological and cultural approaches to race. While biological anthropologists focus on physical traits, cultural anthropologists view race as an ideological construct that shapes social relationships (MacEachern, 2012). Gilroy (1999) further argues that race is a product of modern politics, linked to power structures and systems of classification.

In Malaysia, the conceptualization of race and ethnicity has been significantly influenced by its colonial history and diverse migrant populations. The 1891 colonial census introduced racial categories that have shaped subsequent understandings of ethnicity in the country (Hirschman, 1986). Post-independence, Malaysia adopted more neutral terms like "community" and "ethnicity" to classify its population, reflecting a shift towards a more inclusive approach to national identity (Reid, 2001).

The construction of Malay identity, central to Malaysia's ethnic politics, has its roots in the 19th century colonial period. The term "Bangsa Melayu" or Malay race emerged as a modernized concept, distinct from European and Chinese identities (Milner, 1991). This conception of Malay identity was further codified in the Malay Reservation Act of 1913, which defined Malays based on religion, language, and customs (Andaya & Andaya, 2017).

The relationship between Malay and Javanese identities in Malaysia is particularly complex. While distinct in Indonesia, these identities are often conflated in the Malaysian context. The Malaysian constitution considers Javanese as part of the Malay racial category, based on shared cultural and religious practices (Miyazaki, 2000). This inclusive definition of "Malayness" is enshrined in Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution, which defines Malays as those who profess Islam, speak Malay, and observe Malay customs (Milner, 1991).

Today, Malaysian Javanese continue to negotiate their identity within this framework. While maintaining aspects of Javanese culture, such as language use and traditional practices, they are also integrated into the broader Malay community (Sekimoto, 1988). This dual identity is evident in various cultural practices, including traditional dances, shadow puppet plays, and communal activities like rewang (Yana & Yew, 2017).

The presence of Javanese descendants in contemporary Malaysian politics and society demonstrates their successful integration and the evolving nature of their identity. As Hall (1990) argues, identity is not fixed but constantly in process, shaped by representation and positioning within social and cultural contexts. This fluid conception of identity is particularly relevant in understanding the experiences of Javanese Malaysians.

The ongoing construction and reconstruction of identity is a central theme in cultural studies. Researchers in this field often focus on how marginalized groups resist hegemonic cultural norms and

political ideologies (Durham & Kellner, 2012). This approach understands culture as a field of representation that produces meanings and images related to various aspects of identity, including gender, class, race, and religion.

In conclusion, the identity of Javanese Malaysians exemplifies the complex, dynamic nature of ethnicity and race in multicultural societies. Their experience demonstrates how identity is continually redefined through interactions with historical, political, and cultural forces. As Malaysia continues to negotiate its national identity, the experiences of groups like the Javanese Malaysians offer valuable insights into the processes of cultural adaptation, integration, and identity formation in diverse societies.

Identity Negotiation

Identity formation is a complex social construct that occurs within the realm of subjectivity, shaping how individuals become cultural subjects and members of society (Jenkins, 2014). People develop both self and collective identities that reflect their gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality. This process involves negotiating personal identity within the context of societal expectations that form social identity (Barker et al., 2014).

Cultural identity, as defined by Hall (1990), is rooted in shared culture, history, and ancestry. It encompasses a sense of belonging to a particular culture, language, and religion, which establishes social boundaries and criteria for group membership. Hall argues that cultural identity reflects shared historical experiences and culture that unite people as 'one nation'. Lawrence Grossberg posits that cultural identities in the modern multicultural world should be examined through three forms of modern logic: difference, individuality, and temporality (Grossberg, 1996). Modernity encourages difference as a fundamental aspect of identity and modern power structures. The production of cultural identity involves processes of individuation, emphasizing human agency in defining one's social identity. Additionally, cultural identity exists within the logic of temporality, as modern power operates in specific times and spaces.

The concept of hybrid identities has gained prominence in identity studies, particularly in the context of diaspora communities. Hybridity emerges from the interaction of different cultural groups within regional boundaries and often relies on imbalanced power relations in culture, place, and descent (Smith & Leavy, 2008). The Malay-Javanese hybrid identity in Malaysia exemplifies this phenomenon, resulting from interactions between distinct cultural groups within the nation's borders. Hybrid identity construction is a nuanced process that depends on the individual's social, cultural, and political context. It involves a process of cultural acceptance that tends to lead to positive outcomes. In the case of Javanese

migrants and their descendants in Malaysia, this research examines the "process of becoming," where bi-national and ethnic influences play crucial roles in hybrid identity formation (Rofil, 2016).

The Javanese diaspora in Malaysia presents a unique case study of identity negotiation. As part of the Malay population, Javanese descendants maintain aspects of their cultural identity while integrating into the broader Malay society (Sunarti & Fadeli, 2018). This diaspora community has carved out a space to observe their ethnic origins within the discourse of Malaysian ethnic politics, creating a hybrid identity negotiation space (Hill & Wilson, 2003). John Berry's acculturation model provides a framework for understanding the integration process of Malaysian Javanese into Malay society. Integration, as Berry (2013) argues, is an acculturation strategy where a cultural group merges with another while maintaining its original culture and adapting to the host culture.

In contemporary Malaysia, despite claims of ethnic purity by some Malays, cultural heterogeneity within Malay society persists. The presence of Javanese communities alongside other Malaysian communities of Indonesian origin demonstrates this diversity (Vickers, 1997). National identities are continually reconstructed and redefined in response to local and global social and cultural changes. Religious affiliation often intertwines with cultural and national identity, with religion functioning as a cultural system (Geertz, 2013). In Malaysia, where Islam is the dominant religion, the promotion of Islamic morality as a national ethical code encourages Muslim diaspora communities, including Javanese migrants, to negotiate their personal and collective identities (Hooker & Othman, 2003).

The hybridization process for Malaysian Javanese typically involves normativization, homogenization, and adaptation, blending elements from different cultures into a new form. This is evident in their bilingualism, speaking both Malay (the national language) and Javanese (their cultural language) in different contexts (Asmah Haji Omar, 2015). In conclusion, the identity formation of Javanese descendants in Malaysia illustrates the complex interplay between cultural heritage, national identity, and religious affiliation. Their experience provides valuable insights into the processes of cultural adaptation and identity negotiation in multicultural societies, contributing to our understanding of hybrid identities in an increasingly globalized world.

4.   CONCLUSION

This study has explored the complex identity negotiation of Javanese Muslims in Malaysia, focusing on their dual identity as both Javanese and Malay. The findings reveal that Javanese descendants in Malaysia maintain their Javanese cultural identity, particularly in language and traditions, while simultaneously adapting to the Malay culture and fulfilling their obligations as Malaysian citizens. The

process of identity reconstruction has led to the emergence of a hybrid identity, which is influenced by the interactions between Javanese and Malay cultures, as well as the prevailing policies, religion, and nationalism in Malaysia.

The study contributes to the understanding of identity construction and negotiation among diaspora communities in multicultural societies. The case of Javanese Muslims in Malaysia highlights the dynamic and fluid nature of identity, which is constantly reconstructed and redefined in response to social, cultural, and political changes. Future research could further explore the intergenerational differences in identity negotiation and the impact of globalization on the identity construction of diaspora communities.

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