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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Malay-Muslim Identity and the Public Roles of non-Muslims: A Social Identity Approach

Rev. Dr. Wong Kee Sing¹

Abstract: Malays are increasingly referring to themselves as Muslims (religious identity) rather than Malay (ethnic identity). Despite the importance of their religious identity in understanding themselves, it is also significant in intergroup relations with others in Malaysia. This study identified the components of Malay-Muslim identity social-psychologically and examined their influences on non-Muslim public roles. Previous studies have not considered Malay-Muslim identity from an approach to social identity. The study involved questionnaire surveys. The data collected were analysed using statistical analysis.

The results indicate that the salient identity of Malay is Malay-Muslim, and the Malay religious identity displays substantial bias towards non-Muslims, especially when perceiving that non-Muslims should not participate in government employment and typically hold prominent positions. These responses, from the perspective of social identity, are due to in-group identification which creates differentiation or boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims. The study concludes that prejudicial acts towards non-Muslims are mainly due to religious identity which represented one of the main influences for the exclusion of non-Muslims in public roles. The study proposes that the communities should emphasise and promote Malaysian identity instead of religious identity because religious identity demonstrates prejudice and bias.

Keywords: Malay-Muslim; non-Muslim; public roles; social identity theory; identification.

Introduction

In Malaysia, Islam and Malay-Muslims have become increasingly dominant in almost every aspect of life. The progressive domination of Islam and Malay-Muslims influences the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims (Olivier, 2020, pp.194-211) and the roles of non-Muslims in the public sphere. Even in their own nation, non-Muslims face discrimination and inferiority in a variety of contexts, such as politics, government construction projects, employment opportunities in the public sector,

¹ Rev. Dr. Wong Kee Sing is a Pastor of Logos Methodist Church, Sibu, Sarawak, Malaysia and completed his PhD thesis in the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, South Africa in its partnership with OCRPL. <https://ocrpl.org/thesis-dev/>

and admission to public universities. In essence, since 1980, Malaysia's government has severely reduced the amount of space available for non-Muslims to work and participate in public life.

The US House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (2011, p.1) on inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia commented with strong negative remarks, for example, "The State sanctions racist and religious extreme laws and policies" and "The State explicitly and implicitly declares that the Malays are the masters (Malay Supremacy)". Along with it, Malaysia's recent political development has intensified the discrimination and marginalisation of non-Muslims in the country. The practice that non-Muslims should not hold critical public roles is no longer kept among Malay-Muslims but has become a public resolution (e.g., resolutions presented during Malay Dignity Congress, 2019) (see New Straits Times, 2019; The Rakyat Post, 2019).

Explicitly, non-Muslims have been left out, discriminated against, and marginalised (see Pietsch and Clark, 2014; Kuan 2015) in public participation and government employment that emphasises Malay race and religion (Nair, 1999, p. 60; Wade, 2009, p. 1). The problem of inclusion and exclusion of non-Muslims in public participation and services has been dealt with from various perspectives, such as historical, sociological, constitutional, and ethnographical perspectives. However, the situation (problem) has not been studied from the perspective of the social identity approach.

The inclusion and exclusion of non-Muslims in politics and policies are surrounded by identity and other factors (Lee, 2017, p.2; Wade, 2009). It is along this line, therefore, that this study will explore whether the discrimination against and marginalisation of non-Muslims in public offices is due to the social identity factor. The study applies a social identity theory to social identity and hopes that it will contribute to knowledge in social understanding of Malay-Muslim identity as one of the social identities.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Social Identity Theory

In order to explain how people perceive themselves and interact with others, social identity theory was developed (Tajfel and Turner, 2004). The idea aims to clarify how groups form, how members assess one another and themselves, and the social motivation behind group participation, engagement, and conflict (Hogg, 2016, p. 6). The central tenet of this theory is that social identity gives group members a shared identity using which they evaluate their own identities, beliefs, and appropriate

behaviour toward their group and other groups. Group formation, intragroup behaviour, and intergroup behaviour are all explained by a number of key theories and concepts in social identity theory. Despite each contributing to a distinct area of behavioural research, they work in tandem to create a cohesive framework for explanation (Russel, 2020, p. 12).

According to social identity theory, a social group consists of individuals who identify as belonging to the same social category both intellectually and through the attachment of values and emotions (Brewer, 2007, p. 698; Deaux, 1996, p. 778). When people belong to the same social category or group, they are driven to set their group apart from others in order to preserve their high self-esteem or improve themselves (Deaux, 1996, p. 778; Negy et al., 2003; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Ysseldyk, Matheson and Anisman, 2010, p. 61). The social environment that results from this self-categorisation or self-identification is made up of different out-groups and an in-group. It is important to note that belonging to the same religious group may increase or provide greater security and self-esteem than other identities (such as nationality and ethnicity), possibly as a result of well-organised support systems (Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman, 2010, p. 61).

However, discrimination and prejudice against members of one's own group and against those of other groups can be created simply by identifying and classifying people into arbitrary social categories, including religious groups (Jackson and Hunsberger, 1999, p. 521). Bias and derogation between groups, both in and out, can happen even in the absence of interactions with other group members or a history of rivalry or conflict between groups (Brewer, 2007, p. 697; Deaux, 1996, p. 779).

Bias stemming from differential "us" – "others" results from upholding from out-groups (others) favours and benefits that are extended only to the in-group (us) (Brewer, 1999, p. 438; 2007, pp. 696-697; Jackson and Hunsberger, 1999, p. 511). Bias can also arise from comparison or competition, where an out-group is perceived as a threat to the integrity, interests, or identity of oneself and the in-group as a whole. The threats may have appeared in the forms of competition for positions, political representation, limited resources, promotion of values, and protection of status (Brewer, 2007, p. 697; Jackson and Hunsberger, 1999, p. 510). Through the comparison process, individuals always differentiate their group from others and place their group in the more positively valued status (Deaux, 1996, p. 790).

Methodology

The study I undertook for my doctoral thesis '*The influence of the Malay religious identity on non-Muslim public roles: a social religious analysis*', sought to gain a deeper understanding of the exclusion of non-Muslims from public roles with a focus on understanding socially situated meanings, behaviours, and practices from the experiences of Muslims. The study also examined Malay-Muslim practices due to their social identity, considering their context/environment (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 9) and social psychological states (Krippendorff, 2004, pp. 11,46). Hence, Muslim students from a public university in Malaysia have been selected for the study. This study adopted a quantitative descriptive method.

66 students responded, 49 females and 17 males. They comprised 50 (76%) students from the Faculty of Islamic Studies and 16 (24%) from other faculties, mainly from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities and the Faculty of Built Environment. Rather than report all the figures and items here, the study only reproduces the wording of illustrative figures and items when discussing the results. The conclusions are based on conventional statistical analysis to test for the significance of differences between group means using the Chi-square test when discussing empirical findings. It also reports the 'effect size' of any differences in line with the latest statistical norms (Al Ramiah, Hewstone and Wolfer, 2017, p.16; Cumming, 2012; Hedges et al., 2023). Cohen's *w* is the effect size used in this study. Effect size shows whether a result is not merely 'statistically significant', but also 'practically significant' or 'substantial' (meaningful in the real world). It also provides a way of comparing variables with different scales.

Results and Discussion

In Malaysia, "the Malays" can be known as:

- (1) Ethnically, they are called Malays. Before and shortly after Independence, it carries the connotation of ethnic nationalism.
 - (2) Constitutionally, the hyphenated Malay-Muslims is the term or word used to refer to them. According to Article 160 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, Malays must be Muslims.
 - (3) Religiously, Malays and Muslims are synonymous. In Malaysia, calling the Malays Muslim is always acceptable in any situation. Calling them Muslim is to emphasise their faith.
- Last, (4) Citizenry, the Malays are Malaysians. However, when Malays choose to be recognised as Malaysians in the country, they are bringing the message that Malaysia is a home for all citizens, regardless of race and ethnicity. Nevertheless, 'the Malays'

will introduce themselves with a different identity depending on the context, location, circumstances, and purpose. Unlike the Chinese and Indians, ethnicity is always the marker and substance of their identities. Malaysian Chinese and Indians are not recognised by their faith unless filling in personal information about their religion which is a requirement.

Table 1 summarises their choice of identity. The results show that they identify mainly with Malay-Muslim identity, i.e. 65.2 per cent compared to other identities, namely, Malaysian, Malay, or Muslim. Put differently, the conflation of the identity of race and religion (ethno-religious) is the dominant or salient identity among them. Unexpectedly, none of them identify with race (Malay) identity as their salient identity. The computed value of the Chi-square test is 63.58. This value is compared to a critical value obtained from the Chi-square table. It is a 1-degree-of-freedom (*df*) test with a value of 3.84. The value exceeds 3.84, so participants were significantly more likely to identify with Malay-Muslim identity. The computed effect size is 0.98. The value is larger than 0.5, which means it has very large effects according to Cohen's *w*. In other words, the Malay population very significantly identifies with Malay-Muslim identity. In addition, the calculated 95% confidence interval is 16.86 per cent. Yet again, the confidence interval is more than 5% or $p > 0.05$. Therefore, it is suggested and concluded that the results are significant.

Table 1: Determining Identity

| | Malaysian | Malay | Muslim | Malay-Muslim | Total |
|-------------|-----------|-------|--------|--------------|-------|
| Students | 15 | 0 | 8 | 43 | 66 |
| Student (%) | 22.7 | 0 | 12.1 | 65.2 | 100 |

Malay-Muslim as the preferred/chosen identity is further significant if it were to be studied carefully from the data. Many studies informed about the conflation of Malay and religious identity. So far, there are four suggestions for conflating Malay and Islam identity.

First, Mauzy (2006, p. 50) claims that Islam is more substantial than ethnicity as an identity marker for Malays. In this aspect, Islam serves as a marker of Muslim identity (Lee, 2010, p. 19) and is regarded as a chief component and definitive criterion of Malay identity (Abdul Hamid, 2018, p. 62; Ratnam. 1985, p. 143).

Second, Barr and Govindasamy (2010), Ufen (2009), Miller (2004), and Frith (2000) argue that Islam holds only a subservient position. Islam is used to manifest ethnic identity and Malay supremacy. Third, Lee (1990, p. 483) gives the view that religion is

as significant as ethnicity, that is to say, Malay-Muslim is inseparable, and both identities are salient.

Lastly, Yahaya (2012, p. 256) concludes that Malay identity is constantly wavering between ethnicity and religion depending on political interests. In other words, their identities are elusive, continually corresponding to the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) ideologies (Yahaya, 2012, p. 257). He suggests that the Malays are a contradiction of race and religion, competing for dominance (Yahaya, 2012, p. 265).

Standing on the ground of instability of identity and also on the increasing legibility of religion, the state engineers accentuate the religious identity rather than ethnic identity to differentiate and exert social control (Brown, 2009). Thus, it is hard to determine which identity will prevail: ethnic alone, ethno-religious or religious only.

However, the data collected enables one to explore this complexity of identity in more depth. Table 2 shows the responses of those students who view that the Malay-Muslim identity can be separated and either one will take precedence. There were 32 respondents, and 25 chose Muslim. Put differently, 78 per cent of the responses take Muslim as the identity of precedence. To comprehend it more accurately, Muslim identity comprised 33 (25 + 8) out of 66. It means that half of the students identified with religious identity, eight directly and 25 indirectly. Accordingly, the computed value of the Chi-square test is 10.12, which exceeded 3.84, so it suggests that “Malay-Muslim” participants were significantly more likely to identify with religious identity. The computed effect size is 0.57. This value is larger than 0.5, which denotes very large effects. In other words, it can be concluded that the Malay-Muslim population is very significant in identifying with religious identity. Moreover, the calculated 95% confidence interval is 17.3 per cent, where it is more than 5% or $p > 0.05$. Hence, the results are significant.

Table 2: Islam as Malay Identity Marker

| | Malay | Muslim | Total |
|----------------|-------|--------|-------|
| Students | 7 | 25 | 32 |
| Percentage (%) | 22 | 78 | 100 |

As shown, the results of this study tend to agree with the views of Mauzy (2006) and Lee (2010), where religion is more substantial than ethnicity as an identity marker. In the same line, the survey result shows that 89.4 per cent of Muslims are strongly and very strongly attached to and identify with each other. A strong identification with

other *ummah* is predicted to act prejudicially against non-Muslims (see Ysseldyk, Matheson and Anisman, 2010, p. 61). Findings of Al Ramiah, Hewstone and Wolfer (2017, pp. 45-46) on *Attitudes and Ethnoreligious Integration: Meeting the Challenge and Maximising the Promise of Multicultural Malaysia* confirmed it. They concluded that greater religious identification was associated with a more negative attitude towards religious out-groups, where Muslims have the most potent identification with religion compared to Buddhists and Hindus.

In sum, the data thus provide a good ground for the following analysis, and the results or findings are therefore statistically and practically significant. Also, it can now be confidently established that Muslim (religious identity) is the (indirect or unseen) salient identity for “Malay-Muslim” even though they usually choose Malay-Muslim as their first identity. Muslims are said to be more likely to, but may not always, identify themselves religiously; they can sometimes do so politically or by ethnicity where it is normally situational (Berggren, 2007, p. 72).

Other forms of identity exist alongside Islamic identity, and other factors may even influence which identity or identities come to the fore. Possibly, the self-declared identities are numerous and remarkably fluid, and the *ummah* (religious identity) is far from ideal (Berggren, 2007, p. 88). The participants’ representation of the Malay and Muslim categories demonstrated a seemingly high level of complexity and reflexivity, which allowed them to examine critically the validity of the perceived low complexity of the Malay-Muslim identity and evaluate potential implications for their in-group (Fernandez and Coyle, 2019, p. 49).

Table 3 shows the implications of Malay-Muslim identity in relation to non-Muslims in Malaysia. Five areas are examined and compared within three identities: Malaysian, Malay-Muslim and Muslim. These five areas are (1) Malaysia is not owned by Malaysians, (2) non-Muslims should not hold any position in government without reservation, (3) do not encourage a multiracial and multireligious government, (4) non-Muslims holding important public offices is a threat to Muslims, and (5) do not promote national (Malaysian) identity. Though the first area seems not directly related to non-Muslim public roles, it is worth paying attention to because this is linked with the notion of Malay Land.

Malays perceive that the land is their heritage and that their identity (“owner” of the land) is strongly linked to it. As the land “owner”, there is a difference between Malay and not Malay or “us” and “not-us”. The owner has the description of who should be in civil services. Malay identity is not included because there was no student who identified with it. The comparison is made intra-identity, not inter-identity, i.e. among

each identity itself; for example, 75 per cent of Muslims agree that Malaysia does not belong to Malaysians, and only 25 per cent would concur that Malaysia belongs to her citizens.

On the other hand, only 37 per cent of Muslims would promote national identity compared to 63 per cent who would instead promote ethnic and religious identities. Similarly, 60 per cent of “Malay-Muslim” see that ethnic and religious identities are worth pursuing. It is noted that among the three identities, the religious identity (Muslim) always shows higher levels of negative responses to non-Muslims.

It is also noted that there is a consistency of negative responses (63%) among Muslims towards non-Muslims in areas of (2), (3) and (5) (see Table 3). This indicates that their negative responses are substantial and practically significant (see Chi-square test and effect sizes). In other words, it means 63 per cent of Malaysian Muslims will have a similar negative response towards non-Muslims in these areas of (2), (3), and (5). There is another area that must not be overlooked. The refusal of non-Muslims to be government officials by all three identities is generally high. All three identities display rejection, and all are more than the majority, with Muslim identity being the highest, nearly two-thirds.

Table 3: Identity and non-Muslims (Figures are in percentage)

| Description | Malaysian | Malay-Muslim | Muslim |
|--|-----------|--------------|--------|
| 1. Malaysia is not owned by Malaysians. | 38 | 42 | 75 |
| 2. non-Muslims should not hold any position in government without reservation. | 53 | 59 | 63 |
| 3. Do not encourage a multiracial and multireligious government. | 47 | 51 | 63 |
| 4. non-Muslims holding important public offices is a threat to Muslims. | 47 | 70 | 37 |
| 5. Do not promote national (Malaysian) identity. | 27 | 60 | 63 |

Unexpectedly, non-Muslims holding important public offices pose a lesser threat to Muslims but a significant threat to Malay-Muslims (70%). All three identities feel apprehensive if non-Muslims were to be employed as public servants, but the Malay-Muslim identity demonstrates the highest. It could be because the competition for the position is based on expertise, knowledge, and experience. In other words, the

competition is amongst races with faiths, not merely on faith alone. This could be seen from the responses of participants – 37 out of 43 “Malay-Muslim” view that “Malay-Muslim” identity is inseparable. In this regard, 24 out of 43 (56%) chose not to respond. At the same time, 49 out of 66 (74.2%) see it as inseparable. Obviously, “Malay-Muslim” takes race as equal or as significant as religion.

Perhaps Azlan Yahaya (2012, p. 256) is correct in concluding that Malay identity is constantly wavering between ethnicity and religion depending on circumstances, i.e., political interests. He suggests that the Malays are a contradiction of race and religion, conflicting for dominance (Yahaya, 2012, p. 265). Another indicator is that the survey shows that the “Malay-Muslim” 100 per cent will compare themselves with non-Muslims regarding education, occupation, and income, but only 38 per cent “Muslim” will make the comparison. This explains why non-Muslims holding important public offices threaten “Malay-Muslims” rather than “Muslims”. Therefore, it shows that the “Malay-Muslim” identity manifested more than religious identity on encountering comparison, competition, and threat. In other words, in the comparison, competition, and threats posed by other ethnic groups (out-groups), the ethno-religious identity becomes more substantial than national or religious identity. In this sense, the ethnicity of “Malay-Muslim” appears more extensive than religiosity. It also appears more substantial than ethnic identity alone (though no informants identified with only ethnic identity).

Again, one can turn to social identity theory to understand better the above implications/meanings. Prejudice (negative responses) can arise from comparison and competition in which the out-group is regarded as a threat not only to the individual but also to the in-group’s integrity, interests, or identity as a whole. Threats may be shown as competition for a position, representation in power and limited resources, promotion of one’s values, and protection of one’s standing (Brewer, 2007, p. 697; Jackson and Hunsberger, 1999, p. 510). In this case, there is always comparison and competition between Muslims and non-Muslims (non-Malays), particularly in government employment. Furthermore, individuals always differentiate their group from others throughout the comparison process and place their group in the more positively assessed status (Deaux, 1996, p. 790).

Religious groups are more inclined to make intergroup comparisons and place their group in a higher or better position due to religious belief and content (Ysseldyk, Matheson and Anisman, 2010, p. 60; Jackson and Hunsberger, 1999, p. 511). This esteem-enhancing role could be served by stereotyping in-group members as superior and out-group members as inferior, such as infidels, immoral, and/or adversaries (Jackson and Hunsberger, 1999, pp. 511, 521). These valuations (theories) are valid

and applicable to this section of the study. As explained in Chapter Three and Chapter Four of my thesis, there is some evidence that Muslims see themselves as superior to non-Muslims, especially when calling non-Muslims infidels (*kāfir*).

In a nutshell, as Table 3 shows, Malay religious identity displayed higher levels of undesirable responses towards non-Muslims, especially when perceiving that non-Muslims should not participate in the government sector and typically hold prominent positions. Although the Quran may not be the primary source or basis of exclusion, as far as this study is concerned, it seems that the social identity's psychological reaction is more than religious teachings, and the dimensions involved are strong self-identification as *ummah*, differentiation between Muslims and non-Muslims ("us" – "not us" or "us" – "them"), and comparison between Muslims and non-Muslims. This resonates with Mutalib's (2007, p. 40) claim when he characterises Malaysian society as a "bi-modal" rather than a "plural" society. The society is consistently drawn between "Muslims" and "non-Muslims" in intergroup boundaries, relations, and settings (Fernandez and Coyle, 2019, pp. 38, 49). Notably, Mutalib previously delineated that Malaysian society's "bi-modal" is between ethnic landscape, not religion (1990, p. 890).

Key Findings

There are two key findings of the study: it found that Malay-Muslim identity is the most prominent identity among Malay people, but religion is a more significant identity marker than ethnicity. Malay-Muslims' identities are flexible, though. It may alternate between the identities of religion and ethnicity based on circumstances and settings. Regardless of whether it is Malay or Muslim, it established boundaries and differentiated between Malay/Muslim and non-Malay/non-Muslim. According to the social identity theory, in-group bias and out-group favouritism are unavoidable when it comes to classifying or identifying as Malay or Muslim.

Second, Muslim identity showed significant negative reactions to non-Muslims, particularly when it came to the belief that non-Muslims should not work for the government or normally occupy high positions. Compared to national and religious identity, ethno-religious identity was more significant due to the comparison, competition, and threats posed by non-Muslims. Because of their strong self-identification as *ummah*, Muslims and non-Muslims are differentiated ("us" – "not us" or "us" – "them"), and Muslims and non-Muslims are compared, which leads to undesirable responses (excluding non-Muslims from state employment).

Conclusion

One of the significant impacts of the Malay-Muslim identity (socially or collectively) is in excluding non-Muslims from playing and holding public roles in Malaysia. Although it may not be the primary source of exclusion, as far as this study is concerned, it seems that the social identity's psychological reaction is more than religious teachings, and the dimensions involved are strong self-identification as ummah, differentiation between Muslims and non-Muslims ("us" – "not us" or "us" – "them"), and comparison between Muslims and non-Muslims. Fortunately, the findings suggested that Malaysian identity demonstrated prejudice and bias in the slightest. Therefore, Malaysian identity is what policymakers or communities should emphasise and promote.

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