MARKERS OF ETHNIC AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES: PLACE OF LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

The study examined Malaysian university students’ perceptions of salient ethnic identity and national identity markers. A survey was conducted on 200 students from different ethnic groups in two Malaysian universities. The results revealed a similarity in views across ethnic groups. For the ethnic identity, the salient symbols of ethnic group membership are language and culture, particularly lifestyle and food. Parentage and physical appearance were also mentioned as ethnic markers. For the Malay and Indian students, religion is a part of their ethnic identity. For the national identity, the university students highlighted the national language, residence in Malaysia, Malaysian citizenship of parents as well as national symbols (flag, anthem, Rukun Negara) as salient markers. Culture was also an element but they were divided on whether Malaysians should know the culture of all races living in Malaysia or the Malay culture. The importance of language in signifying group distinctiveness shows that it can bind or divide. The findings suggest the national identity transcends the ethnic identities of groups that make up the plural Malaysian society.

Keywords: ethnic identity, ethnic markers, culture, national identity.

1. Introduction

Culture is shared by social groups or society (Ferraro, 1998). The social groups correspond to different levels of culture, which includes national groups, regional, ethnic, religious, linguistic, gender, generation, role category, social class, and occupational groups (Hofstede, 1991 cited in Spencer-Oatey, 2012). People can have multiple memberships in different cultures. Although culture is shared among members of the social groups, there are individual differences in adoption and expression of the culture. The different layers of culture are values, beliefs and behaviours.

In presenting their model of cultural dimensions, Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) discuss the difference between values and practices as layers of culture. In their terms, cultural values are acquired early in life and are the deepest and most enduring aspects of culture. Cultural practices, on the other hand, are the superficial rituals and norms that are more easily observed. While practices may be reflections of cultural values, they are more subject to change. (cited in Parrish & Linder-Van Berschot, 2010, para 16)

For example, people of a particular ethnic group may eat the traditional food or dress up in the traditional costumes of their group regardless of whether or not they believe this represents their group. Lustig and Koester (1999) use the term “subculture” to refer to ethnic groups that share a common nation-state with other cultures, and gave the example of Arab American, Asian American
and Native American being sub-cultures within the United States. In the present study, membership in ethnic subcultures is examined in relation to membership in the national culture.

2. Purpose of study

The study examined perceptions of salient ethnic identity and national identity markers among Malaysian university students who are Malay, Chinese, Indian, and from the Sabah and Sarawak indigenous groups. The specific aspects studied were the possible variations between ethnic groups on: (1) salient ethnic identity markers; and (2) salience of Malaysian identity markers. Sabah and Sarawak indigenous group is an ethnic category used in this paper to encompass indigenous groups such as Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau, Lun Bawang and so on from Sarawak, and Kadazandusun, Murut, Bajau and others from Sabah. These ethnic groups have their distinctive cultures and languages but as the numbers of the individual indigenous groups are too small for comparison purposes, they are grouped together as an ethnic category in this paper.

3. Method

A survey of 200 university students in two Malaysian public universities was conducted. The participants comprised 63% Malay; 24.5% Chinese; 9% Sabah and Sarawak Indigenous; and 3.5% Indian. The ethnic breakdown of the participants is more or less reflective of the Malaysian population. Out of the Malaysian population of 28.3 million, 91.8% are Malaysians comprising 67.4% Bumiputra which includes Malay and Sabah and Sarawak indigenous, 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indian, 0.7% Others, and 8.2% are non-Malaysians (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2014).

The salient ethnic and national identity markers were elicited using a questionnaire. The participants were asked to first write down their ethnic group, followed by a listing of the three most important criteria to be considered a member of their ethnic group. As for national identity, there were given 12 identity markers to rank in importance (0 for “not important”, 1, 2 to 3 for “very important”). The characteristics were categorised into:

- symbols of national identity which include knowing how to draw the national flag, knowing how to sing Negaraku, knowing how to recite Rukun Negara (the national principles), and ability to speak Bahasa Malaysia very well;
- culture which includes knowing the culture of all races living in Malaysia, wearing batik/baju Melayu/baju kurung, knowing Malay culture well, and living a Malay way of life;
- patriotic behaviour which includes watching RTM, supporting Malaysian players in world sports competition (e.g., badminton, football);
- descent - having parents who are Malaysians; and
- residence in Malaysia. (Ting, in press)

An average of these 12 identity markers was computed for each ethnic grouping for comparison purposes.

4. Results & Discussion

(1) Salient ethnic identity markers

Table 1 shows that language is the most salient ethnic identity marker for participants from all the four ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, Sabah and Sarawak Indigenous and Indian). The second most
important ethnic symbol is culture, with the exception of the Indian. Culture here includes way of life, as well as the customs and traditions but does not include language, food, ethnic festivals and attire because the participants specifically mentioned them as if they were distinct ethnic symbols. Hence, these are counted separately to identify the cultural elements important to a particular ethnic group.

Table 1. Frequency and ranking of importance of ethnic identity markers for participants from four ethnic groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic identity markers</th>
<th>Indian (n=7)</th>
<th>Chinese (n=49)</th>
<th>Sabah and Sarawak Indigenous (n=18)</th>
<th>Malay (n=126)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freq</td>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>Freq</td>
<td>Rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norms</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical appearance</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parentage</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Festival celebration</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriotic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live among own community</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support BN</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Following mathematical practices, if there is a tie in the rank, the next rank is omitted

Apart from language and culture, the importance of other ethnic symbols varies with the ethnic group. Therefore, the results will now be described according to ethnic groups. To the seven Indian university students in this study, certain virtues and having Indian parents mark them as members of the Indian community, although these are not as important as language, religion and culture. Virtues are at the value layer of the culture and are not easily observable but Indian descent is often obvious from the physical appearance (e.g., darker skin colour, big eyes, sharp nose). One participant mentioned the pottu (marking on the forehead of Hindu women to indicate their marital status) as a sign of being Indian.

For the Chinese university students, the ethnic identity markers that come after language and culture are physical appearance, celebration of Chinese festivals particularly the Lunar Chinese New Year, and eating typical Chinese food. Less than 20% of the 49 Chinese university students mentioned the following as Chinese identity markers: having certain values, wearing certain types of clothing, norms, religious practices, Chinese parentage, and carrying a Chinese name or surname. Interestingly, most of the Chinese ethnic markers are elements of culture. In other words, it is important for the Chinese to live a Chinese lifestyle to be considered a member of their community. The three ethnic identity markers which are not learned aspects of culture are physical appearance.
(rank of 5), name (rank of 3), and Chinese parentage (rank of 10) — these are descent related. It is not surprising that physical appearance is considered a distinctive ethnic marker because the Chinese have typical facial features such as slanted and slit eyes and yellow skin which are written about in children’s literature (e.g., Aoki, 1981; Cai, 1994; Kim & Yeh, 2002). The Chinese also announce their ethnic group membership through their surnames (e.g., Ting, Wong, Lau, Lee, Lim) which are easily identifiable as Chinese names, distinct from other orientals such as the Korean (examples of common surnames are Kim and Park). In the present study, Chinese parentage ranked low among the Chinese identity markers but studies on the Chinese diaspora in Western settings have shown that having Chinese blood makes one Chinese, more than other cultural elements, including language (e.g., Kang, 2004 in New Jersey; Mah, 2005 in Toronto). In these Western settings, the younger generations of the Chinese immigrants may no longer speak Chinese and they need to speak English to be part of the predominantly white community but their physical appearance sets them apart from the white community. As for the Malaysians of Chinese descent, almost all of them can speak Chinese and use the language on a daily basis, and this would differentiate them from non-Chinese. Speaking Mandarin is also considered the most salient ethnic marker for the 40 Chinese students in Ting and Ooi’s (2014) study on another group of university students. On the other hand, sometimes it is difficult to tell whether someone is a Chinese or not based on physical appearance, which makes it a less salient ethnic marker compared to Chinese language in the Malaysian setting.

For the intricacies of how Mandarin symbolises the supra-Chinese identity and Chinese dialects symbolise membership in Chinese sub-groups such as Foochow and Hokkien, see Puah and Ting (2014).

For the 18 Sabah and Sarawak indigenous university students, the top three salient ethnic markers are language, culture and food — in fact, they are all elements of culture. This suggests that for most of the indigenous students, the way of life is very important to mark them as belonging to their ethnic group. Physical appearance and parentage are not as important to a majority of them, as indicated by the frequencies in Table 1. In the present study, the participants were asked to list three most important criteria to be a member of their ethnic group. Another study conducted using a similar open-ended question to elicit ethnic markers found that parentage is more important than ethnic language for the 24 Sabah and Sarawak Indigenous students in the study (Ting & Ooi, 2014). The relative salience of language and parentage as ethnic markers for the Indigenous participants differ in these two studies. In Ting and Campbell’s (2013) survey of 151 Bidayuh of different age groups (secondary school students, university students, working adults), the top three salient ethnic markers are the Bidayuh language, Bidayuh parentage and celebration of Gawai Dayak, the harvest festival. In this study, they were given 12 ethnic markers to rank in importance. As the Sabah and Sarawak indigenous category comprises many different ethnic groups, the results will probably be more meaningful if they are not grouped together in future studies as they are distinctively different ethnic groups and may have different perceptions of ethnic group membership criteria.

Finally, for the 126 Malay university students, the top seven ethnic group markers are cultural elements (language, culture, religion, food, clothing, norms), with the exception of values (ranked fifth in importance). Descent related characteristics, notably physical appearance and Malay parentage, were ranked 8th and 9th respectively. Because of this, the same conclusion is reached, that is, the way of life defines a Malay as being Malay or not — similar to the Sabah and Sabah indigenous category. Some may see religion as separate from culture, but for the Malays in Malaysia, being Muslim goes together with being Malay. The Malaysian Federal Constitution defines Malay as one who speaks Malay and is a Muslim (Article 152, Malaysia Legal Research Board, 1997, pp. 186-188).

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(2014) study although they also used an open-ended question similar to that used in the present study. The values characteristic of Malays are being polite, respectful, united, creative, cooperative, gentle, tolerant, helpful, caring, and there was also one negative characteristic: not punctual. The participants from other ethnic groups were less inclined to list defining values of their ethnic group but there were some: the Sabah and Sarawak indigenous students saw themselves as polite, kind and skilled in craft work; the Chinese students viewed themselves as hardworking, intelligent, respectful towards the elderly, and kia su (do not want to lose out); but the Indian students did not specifically mention the virtues. Based on the range of characteristics listed, it can be surmised that the Malay participants placed more importance on values than other ethnic groups, and this could set apart the Malay from the other groups. Another distinctive characteristic of being Malay is patriotism, including allegiance to the present ruling party, Barisan Nasional (BN) (Table 1). Patriotic behavior includes ability to draw the Malaysian flag, sing the national anthem and loving Malaysia. Shamsul (2001) who writes extensively about the Malay refers to language, ruler and nation as the three pillars of Malayness. Indeed the data in this study provide empirical support for Shamsul’s notion that allegiance to the nation is part and parcel of being Malay in Malaysia.

Taken together, the results show that the four ethnic groups are indeed subcultures because they have different perceptions on the defining characteristics of being a member of their ethnic group. What they share in common is the paramount place accorded to language as an ethnic symbol, and the emphasis on living a particular way of life to be considered part of the ethnic group.

(2) Salience of Malaysian identity markers

Out of the 12 national identity markers, the five markers considered important by all the ethnic groups are: ability to speak the national language, residence in Malaysia, ability to sing the national anthem, ability to recite Rukun Negara, and having parents who are Malaysians (Table 2). These average of the group means for these five national identity markers are above 2 on a 4-point Likert scale of 0, 1, 2 and 3. As the mid-point is 1.5, means above 2 indicate agreement but groups with means below 2 for these five identity markers are as follows:

- The Chinese participants felt that the ability to speak the national language (mean of 1.76) and recite Rukun Negara (mean of 1.54) is of marginal importance;
- The Indian participants considered residence in Malaysia as being of marginal importance in making them Malaysians (mean of 1.71); and
- The Indian (1.71) and Sabah and Sarawak indigenous (1.78) are inclined to consider having Malaysian parents as having marginal importance.

Table 2. Importance of national identity markers by ethnic group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National identity markers</th>
<th>Indian (n=7)</th>
<th>Chinese (n=49)</th>
<th>Sabah &amp; Sarawak indigenous (n=18)</th>
<th>Malay (n=126)</th>
<th>Total (n=200)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Can speak Bahasa Melayu very well</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>2.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Live in Malaysia</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Know how to sing Negaraku</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>2.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Know how to recite Rukun Negara</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>2.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The marker that the four ethnic groups unanimously agreed as salient is ability to sing the national anthem. The national language, the national anthem, and the national ideology (Rukun Negara) are emblems of the sovereignty of a nation.

The notion of having Malaysian parents and living in Malaysia are related to the principles of *jus sanguinis* and *jus soli*. Parents’ nationality, which is more important to Malay participants than other ethnic groups, is anchored to the *jus sanguinis* principle which means that “a person’s nationality at birth is the same as that of his natural parents” (The Free Dictionary, n.d.). During the lead-up to the independence of Malaysia, the principle of citizenship that was contested by the non-Malay political parties was the *jus soli* principle which means that “the country of citizenship of a child is determined by its country of birth, irrespective of the nationality of its parents” (Muhammad Faisal bin Abdul Aziz, 2008). According to Cheah (2002, p. 37), the “MCA [Malaysia Chinese Association] had pressed for the principle of *jus soli* for all those born before, on or after Malaya’s independence” but UMNO [United Malays National Organisation] was only willing to grant citizenship to those born in the country “on or after the declaration of independence”. The UMNO stance was eventually adopted after much negotiation.

All the ethnic groups agree that it is not important for them to watch the national television channel (Radio Television Malaysia, RTM) to make them Malaysians. The free national television channels are RTM 1, RTM 2, TV3 and NTV7 (for some parts of Malaysia). These channels have more Malaysian productions than paid Astro channels which have more Hollywood movies and programmes in English and Mandarin. However, the choice of one over the other is not a marker of being Malaysian, in the eyes of the university students in this study.

As for the other national identity markers, there is a clear difference between the Malay and non-Malay participants. For the following markers, Table 1 shows that the mean for the Malay group is 2 or above but the other three ethnic groups had means below 2:
Knowing how to draw the national flag
- Supporting players in world sports competitions
- Knowing the culture of all races in Malaysia
- Wearing batik/baju Melayu/baju kurung
- Knowing Malay culture well
- Living a Malay way of life

The non-Malay participants were inclined to feel that it is not important for them to show these behaviours to be considered as Malaysians whereas the Malay participants felt that these are important. On the basis of these findings, it seems that the Malay participants are prone towards overt expressions of their national identity (e.g., demonstrating ability to draw the national flag and supporting Malaysian players), including embracing the Malaysian culture. To them, the Malaysian culture encompasses the culture of all races in Malaysia but the Malay culture takes predominance over the other cultures. The perceptions of the Malay participants reflect the spirit of a plural society where the cultures of the groups remain distinctive because they “mix but do not combine” (Furnivall, 1956, p. 304), while at the same time showing beliefs in the form of plural society known as assimilatory, integrationist or single-core society, where heritage is focused on “assimilating outsiders while affirming the cultural norms of the insiders” (Harrison, 2010, p. 171). Although the Sabah and Sarawak indigenous are classified with the Malay as Bumiputera (literally translated as “prince of the soil”), the views of the Sabah and Sarawak indigenous on these six national identity markers are more similar to those of the Chinese and Indians rather than the Malay. The results provide empirical support for the notion that the Sabah and Sarawak indigenous participants and Malay participants cannot be treated as a homogenous group. Ting and Jerome (2015), in their interviews, with four main ethnic groups in Sarawak on media representation of their ethnic group, found that the Malay participant did not feel comfortable with the use of the term “Bumiputra” to mean Malay if the intention is to refer to Malay only and not the indigenous groups. Although both the Malay and Sabah and Sarawak indigenous are native people of Malaysia, there is still a difference in their perceptions of what makes them Malaysian. What they can agree on are the following: People who call Malaysians should be able to speak the national language, sing the national anthem, recite Rukun Negara, have parents who are Malaysians, and live in Malaysia.

Although the four ethnic groups agreed that language is the most important ethnic identity marker, they did not select language as the most important national identity marker. Instead it is ability to sing the national anthem. The four groups differ in the salience attributed to these national identity markers but they agree that these five are the most important hallmark of being Malaysian: ability to speak the national language, reside in Malaysia, ability to sing the national anthem, ability to recite Rukun Negara, and having parents who are Malaysians.

5. Conclusion

The study shows that language signifies ethnic group distinctiveness and speaking the shared language creates a close bond among its members and serves to distance them from other ethnic groups. However, the national language along with the national anthem and the national ideology serve to bond Malaysians from different ethnic subcultures together as citizens of one nation state. These expressions of the national identity along with a shared experience of living in Malaysia, beginning with their parents, provides a shared historical past and present which defines what it means to be Malaysian. The findings suggest the national identity transcends the ethnic identities of groups that make up the plural Malaysian society, and it is possible to have unity in diversity.
References


