

วารสารวิชาการ
คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์

What it means to be Malay Muslims:
The Role of Language in Ethnic Identity Construction
and Ethnic Maintenance of Thai-Malay Muslims
อะไรคือความหมายของการเป็นมุสลิมมลายู:
บทบาทของภาษาในการสร้างอัตลักษณ์
และดำรงรักษาชาติพันธุ์ของชาวไทย-มุสลิมมลายู

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาค้นคว้าครั้งนี้มุ่งให้ความสนใจกับประเด็นของภาษาและอัตลักษณ์ซึ่งมีความซับซ้อนเป็นอย่างมาก โดยนักทฤษฎีกระแสหลักบางส่วนเห็นว่าภาษาไม่ได้ถูกมองว่าเป็นองค์ประกอบหลักของอัตลักษณ์ อย่างไรก็ตามมุมมองดังกล่าวมีความท้าทายเป็นอย่างยิ่งซึ่งมีการศึกษาหลากหลายที่ได้ชี้ให้เห็นความสำคัญของภาษาสำหรับกลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ที่เป็นชนกลุ่มน้อยต่างๆ และได้โต้แย้งให้เห็นถึงความสัมพันธ์ของภาษา อัตลักษณ์ และการเป็นสมาชิกของกลุ่ม ในมุมมองของนักวิชาการเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้เห็นว่าภาษามีความเชื่อมโยงกับวัฒนธรรมโดยเฉพาะการให้ความหมายของวัฒนธรรม อย่างไรก็ตามในประเทศไทยกลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ต่างๆ ซึ่งถือว่าภาษาเป็นค่านิยมหลักของชีวิต การไม่มีภาษาเป็นของตนเองจะส่งผลถึงการสูญเสียอัตลักษณ์ทางชาติพันธุ์ การเผยแพร่วัฒนธรรม และไม่สามารถระบุวัฒนธรรมที่แท้จริงของตนเองได้ ดังนั้นบทความชิ้นนี้จึงมุ่งถกเถียงเกี่ยวกับประเด็นของภาษามลายูซึ่งถูกใช้เป็นสัญลักษณ์และเป็นสิ่งสำคัญในการดำรงรักษาอัตลักษณ์ของชาวมุสลิมมลายูในภาคใต้ของไทยว่าชาวมุสลิมมลายูเหล่านั้นมีมุมมองหรือประสบการณ์และความรู้สึกเกี่ยวกับภาษาแม้ของตนอย่างไรและการเป็นคนชาติพันธุ์มลายูที่เป็นคนไทยส่งผลต่อการวิถีชีวิตหรือไม่อย่างไร

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A b s t r a c t

This study aims to shed light on the issue of language and identity which is greatly complex. Some mainstream theorists believe that language is not seen as an essential component of identity. However, this notion has been challenged, and various studies have shown the importance of language to many ethnic minorities as well as arguing for a strong link between language, identity, and group membership. From the Southeast Asian scholars' perspective, it is believed that language relate to culture, particularly in terms of maintaining the culture. In Thailand, some ethnic groups consider their language as a core value. Therefore, they believe that the language loss leads to the loss of their ethnic identity, the difficulties of diffusing their culture, and the inability to identify their true culture. Consequently, this paper is an attempt to discuss how the Malay language was used as a symbol to preserve and sustain the Malay identity among the Malay Muslims in southern Thailand. In addition, this study also intends to reflect points of view, thoughts, and feelings of Malay Muslims towards their mother tongue together with investigating the impact of being Thai Malay on their way of life.

Keywords : Language, ethnic identity, culture

Introduction

Thai is a mainstream language in Thailand. However, Malay has a different position since it does not have the same presence Thai has in this society. Malay is an ethnic minority language that functions within limited contexts. In a study using focus groups as a research method, the whole aim is to enable participants to discuss freely about their lives. The researcher does not intend to cultivate a set of fixed and repeated answers in order to be quantified and measured to arrive at statistical data. Alternatively, the goal is to establish a friendly environment where Malay Muslims, as the ethnic minority group the researcher is interested in exploring, can form a discussion group to share information about some features of their lives that they do not necessarily discuss often. As a Malay- Thai researcher, the destiny of Malayness is a main concern, and studying the relationship between language and identity in minority groups is no doubt a way of exploring the fate of a language whether it is maintenance, attrition, or loss.

Literature Review

Language is generally regarded as a salient dimension of ethnicity, and as such is one of the most important articulations of ethnic identity both at an individual and at a group level (Giles & Johnson, 1987). This belief has led Lambert (1980) to posit

that communicating in a language other than that of one's own group can lead to a sense of not belonging to the same culture as one's own ethnic-heritage group. One's sense of ethnic identity may therefore be threatened or lessened in some way; this is reflected in particular among groups that occupy low-power positions in terms of socioeconomic status when their members use the dominant group's language (Lambert, 1979, 1980; Giles & Johnson, 1981). This is one of the many reasons why many ethnic groups consider the loss of their language as symbolizing the loss of their identity as a group. Wardhaugh (1983) warns that this aspect can have an extreme result.

For groups whose language has a profound value as a symbol of their ethnicity or as a clear mark of ethnic identity, its loss is regarded as the loss of their most precious asset and may be followed by complete (not just linguistic) assimilation. It is in this situation the role of language becomes relevant and significant in maintaining one's ethnic group and that language is so inextricably bound up with group culture and identity that an attack on a language would naturally be interpreted as an attack on the speakers.

As a minority people living in the political sphere of Thailand as a nation, it is inevitably that the Malay Muslims will come into contact with the culture and language of the majority, particularly when the central government exerts its control through its various

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institutions upon the Malay Muslim society. And because the official ethnic policy is always implicitly that of assimilation, educational language policy dictates a monolingual, and by the implication mono-cultural/ medium of instruction. The government always sees its educational systems as an effective mechanism for socializing and integrating the Malays into Thai national life or as we call (Thaization 'the Malay ethnic group. It is through the Thai educational system that the Thai language has been able to penetrate into the daily life of the Malays. Thai mass media such as TV play an important role in promoting Thai language and culture. So far the assimilation policy has not been well received nor has it been successful among the Malay Muslims who frequently look at the policy of Thai and even take it as a threat to their ethnic identity(Madmern 1999, Shurke 1970).

In spite of their persistence in maintaining their ethnic identity, the impact of the education coupled with the pressure of the need for the Thai language, results in the frequent use of Thai among the younger generations, causing great concerns for the Malays who fear that their endangered ethnic identity will eventually be face with extinction. The apprehension that Malay ethnicity will be washed away by the mainstream Thai culture leads the Malay Muslims to make efforts and adopt strategies to defend their own cultural heritage and sustain their Malay ethnic identity. It is the significant role of Malay language towards the preservation of Malay ethnicity in southern Thailand.

Minority and the Problem of Ethnic Identification

It is worth stating that there are different factors that can be attributed to the pattern of ethnic survival in the world. The most common factors are political in nature such as the degree of a community's autonomy, its political will to survive and its leadership qualities. A part from that there are also economic and ecological factors. Such as the possession of specific homeland, then location, population, and presence of various resources, facilities and skills for the support of a community. Yet another set of factors treat ethnics as networks of communication, and seeks to ascertain how custom, language and other symbolic codes bind the members of communities such as ethnic group and minorities, together over generations. Each of these approaches that derive from them, can contribute to valuable understanding to study of ethnic survival and these need further investigation.

It is worth noting however, that some ethnic communities can, and have, survived over long periods without even political autonomy. This suggests that we need to give more attention to the subjective elements in ethnic survival, such as ethnic historical values, symbols and traditions. The reason is that, according to Anthony D. Smith (Paul R. Brass, 1996: 85-90) the long term ethnic survival depends, in the first place, on the active cultivation by specialists and others of a heightened sense of collective

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distinctiveness and mission. The members of an ethnic group must be made to feel, not only that they form a single "Super-family", but also that their language community is unique, and that they possess what Max Weber called "irreplaceable culture values", that their heritage, language must be preserved from external control, and that the community has a sacred duty to extend its cultural value to next generations. Anthony D. Smith had mentioned one pattern of ethnic survival called the communal-demotic that refer to the community which usually been conquered and is struggling to preserve its former rights and way of life, claiming that its members are the original inhabitants and their culture is the vernacular.

This pattern of ethnic persistence does not pretend to be exhaustive. However they reveal the importance of believe in their culture, and symbols for ethnic survival. Similarly to the case of the Malay Muslims which is quite unique, differing from other minorities in Thailand in that they are indigenous. Their territorial concentration is adjacent to their linguistically and culturally related majority group across the border (Wolck, 1983). An often cited phrase in referring to the Malay Muslims as an ethnic minority is that "they did not come to Thailand, rather, Thailand come to them" (Forber 1982; 1053, Madmarn 1988, 3). They have been attempting to preserve their ethnic identity and cultural autonomy

in the midst of systematic waves of repression and assimilations policies induced by the Thai government, they also been offended by the government's policy over six decades to force them-in the name of creating one Thai national identity-to adopt the language, dress code and cultural practices of the Buddhist majority Thais.

One of the primary conclusions of the last three decades of sociological identity studies is that identity is formed as a process of communication with others (Collier & Thomas, 1988; Shotter & Gergen, 1989; Gans, 1979, as cited in Hecht, 1993). In addition, communication is an enactment of identity and even when group identification is not the primary purpose of the communicative act. In the course of everyday life speakers unconsciously utilize communication rituals (i.e. norms, mores) that create and express the group identity, and for Malay Muslims this means communicating in *Bahasa Melayu*. According to Hecht (1993), "not all messages are about identity, but identity is part of all messages." Members of the Malay Muslim community have together defined a general identity as the indigenous people of southern most provinces and have taught successive generations this ethnic identity through enactment, i.e. through communication in *Bahasa Melayu*.

Language is at the core of national identity, and it is a commonly held idea among Malay Muslims that language is

at the core of their ethnicity. From this debate there has emerged a wider concern for the elements of both ethnic and national identities. The importance of ethnic identity in coping with a variety of life situations, particularly those of a stressful nature, has been a major focus of current literature. While competing between two identities-national identity and ethnic identity-is a complex task for most minorities; it is particularly complicated for minority belonging to ethnic groups.

The Malay Muslim community, unlike other minority groups in the north and the ethnic Lao community in the northeast, has somewhat strong resistance to national integration. There are essential elements of incompatibility between Malay Muslims and the Thai Buddhist, which can not be easily reconciled by the process of development and modernization. These incompatibilities include the historical reality of the existence of independent Malay kingdom of Patani (1457-1902) and the differences in culture, particularly language, which are frequently used as "symbolic cultural markers" to reinforce their claim to sub-national uniqueness. One of the main resistances that make the integration of ethnic Malays difficult has been - among others- the persistence of their mother tongue.

The broad process of modernization - the spread of market economy, increased of literacy, and improved social communication- does not lead to a cultural diffusion that produces

a homogenous culture within a given territory. As Clifford Geertz argued, “modernization does not do away with ethnocentrism, it merely modernizes it”. Indeed, modernization proves to be less helpful in lessening ethnocentrism. But to what extent does Malay language (mother tongue) ability is significantly attributes to the sustenance of Malay ethnic identity till the present day?

Objective of the Study

1. To explore the extent to which Malay language constitutes a vital element in the shaping of Malay identity in southern Thailand.
2. To examine the contradiction confronted by Malay language vis a vis Thai national Identity.

Significance and contribution of the Study:

The literature on language maintenance can be divided into two types: theoretical and empirical. Empirical studies can be further divided into two, first, and more commonly, those which examine language transmission, maintenance and loss in terms of contextual factors (residential pattern, length of residence, presence of co - ethnic friends or peers, nativity, family type, etc.); and second, those few that look to internal or identity-related factors (relationship with family members, self-reliance, perceptions of self in relation to mother tongue and the other

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language groups). Much of the theoretical literature, in contrast, focuses on the issues raised in the latter type; language is seen as a marker of ethnicity, a vehicle of identity, an indicator and a result of group membership

Fishman (1972) reiterates the need to apply the ideas expressed in his essays on nationalism and language to "the vast amount of documentary research" and also the need for more studies that analyze language as an essential component of nationalism and not as merely a means of mass communication. In addition to contributing to knowledge in the above mentioned areas, by examining the case of Malay Muslims, general factors that have influenced ethnic identity maintenance may be identified that will provide a more scientific basis for decision-making related to linguistic policies and language planning that will permit linguistic pluralism and coexistence rather than assimilationist or mono-linguistic policies currently in force in Thailand as well as in other countries as Bangkok post - a Thai English daily newspaper - put it in one of its head line: "Language is a key to Southern Stability".

In addition, the study of the ethnic Malay as a majority group at the center of the Malay world has been and is still being done extensively. However, the study of them as a minority group at the periphery of that world, where the Malays of southern Thailand belongs, is rather limited. Moreover, today, the subject of

“identity”, national or ethnic identity, is considered a classic field of social psychology and minority sociology. One branch of researching minorities is to investigate the linguistic characteristics of one specific group. Apart from raising self-consciousness and achievement, the importance of such studies can be found in communicating the characteristics of a minority group toward the majority society. Therefore, the study of language as a cultural marker towards the continuity of the Malay identity among the Malay Muslims of Yala is justified because of the increasing importance played by this language in creating a heterogeneous Thai society. Sociologically, the Malays of Southern Thailand have until now been less explored in research or in a book-length study, therefore, this study is designed to fill this large gap in our knowledge of the sociology and ethno-linguistic study. Most approaches to an understanding of Malay Muslims in Thailand are related to economic, demographic, and political conflicts, exclusive of ethnicity.

Methodology

This research study is based on a qualitative method using focus group as an instrument in collecting data that related to feelings, experiences and ideas of the informants.

1. Why focus group?

There are a number of reasons behind choosing focus groups as a qualitative research method for the study. First, focus groups are good for collecting a concentrated set of interactions in a short time span (Morgan 1988: 17). Second, it is good for topics on attitudes and ideologies (Morgan 1988: 17). This study was specifically interested in what the participants think, believe, and feel about topics such as language, culture, and identity. Third, focus groups have an ability to produce participant involvement. The researcher aims for the participants to engage themselves in the topics of discussion, to raise opinions and perspectives, and to share life stories and experiences, so she can arrive at a rich understanding of their unique experiences as Malay-Thai reconciling two languages and possibly two identities. The focus groups are meant to enable participants to freely share with each other creating a group dialogue rather than an interviewing session. There was a set of questions prepared for discussion; but still there were no rigid time limits when discussing question-by-question or a fixed turn taking routine.

2. Questions and Procedures

Two focus groups were conducted. Each group consisted of Malay Muslims who reside in Yala city. The groups vary in terms of two variables: age and generation. Six members was the size of each group, three males and three females. One group was

intended to include first generation in their thirties and above, while the other group was intended to consist of subsequent generations at the age of eighteen to twenty-five years old. The participants chose not to use their real names. The researcher took on the role of a moderator in the groups, but not as an active participant in an attempt to avoid influencing the participants' views and attitudes. The role of the researcher did not exceed that of a moderator who made sure that the discussion did not redirect itself to irrelevant topics. A few questions were raised starting with the general or macro level to more specific micro level inquiries. The focus groups were both audio and written and transcribed verbatim.

It is confident that these interpretations in some way reflect the "true" meaning of the respondents. Since the language and identity issues discussed in this study were present and consistent in Malay Muslim community, I believe it is reasonable to argue that these findings reflect a more generalized phenomena that exists within the Malay community in the southern most provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat.

Brief Review on the Malay Muslims of Southern Provinces

Muslims in Thailand form the second largest ethnic minority after the Chinese. Numbering between four and six million in a population of about 62 million citizens and maintaining around

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2,700 to 2,900 mosques, Muslims make up the largest religious minority in Theravada Buddhist Thailand (Scupin 1998: 229; Gilquin 2005). Thai Muslims comprise two broadly defined categories. First, there are the Malay Muslims who speak the Malay language and reside primarily in the three southern Thailand provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. Malay-speaking Muslims comprise more than 70 percent of the total Muslim population in Thailand. The other category of Muslims is the Thai-speaking Muslims who reside in Central, North and Northeast Thailand (Scupin 1998; McCargo 2006: 3).

Although Muslims are a minority in Thailand, Malay Muslims of the south make up over 70 percent of the population in the four southern provinces. Most of the Malay Muslims in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat speak several local varieties of the Malay language while many in Satun have begun using the local southern Thai dialect as their mother tongue. The present-day Thai provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat comprise an ancient Malay kingdom named Patani. The question of 'Malay' is a highly contested one in academic scholarship. Summing up these contradictions is a recent edited volume *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identities across Boundaries* (Barnard 2004).

The authors in this volume refer to the nature of Malay-ness as 'one of the most challenging and confusing terms of Southeast Asia' (p. xiii). Since it is difficult to pinpoint the precise meanings

and origins of 'Malay', the authors say that we should focus at the level of everyday life where people in various parts of Southeast Asia explain Malayness as they live it. This very anthropological understanding of the term 'Malay' can be applied to southern Thailand as well where the provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Satun, as well as the three districts of Songkhla bordering the province of Pattani, are seen by the local Malay-speaking southern Thais as Malay-dominated areas. The inhabitants of this geographical-cultural space are seen by both Thais and Malays alike as speaking Malay, practicing Malay culture and espousing Islam. Though the Malay language is one of the principal markers of Malay identity in this region, Thai is increasingly spoken among the urban Malays. Yet, the Malay language is predominantly spoken amongst Malays themselves, especially in the rural areas of the four provinces. This self-perception of Malay-ness marked by language, cultural practices, religion and an important shared sense of history of being a people conquered by the Siamese and as a distinct ethnic group vis-à-vis Thai Buddhists

1. The Dominance of Standard Thai

Since King Vajiravudh's initial directives that standard Thai should be used in schooling throughout the country, eighty years of efforts in national language promotion have resulted in standard Thai coming to hold an extremely prominent and dominant position within Thailand. Standard Thai is a form of central Thai

based on the variety of Thai spoken earlier by the elite and now by the educated middle and upper classes in Bangkok. Currently standard Thai is widely understood, primarily due to its dominance in various areas of life. In the domain of education, it is officially decreed that all public schooling has to be provided via the medium of standard Thai, throughout the country. Standard Thai also dominates the media, with the vast majority of television and radio programs being broadcast in standard Thai, reinforcing its national presence. It is also the official language of government, business, public speaking and functions as the language of economic development and social prestige (Diller 1991). Because of its dominant presence and continual promotion through the media and education, standard Thai is also perceived as an important national symbol, and alongside Theravada Buddhism and the king is suggested to be one of the strongest symbols of national identity present in the country (Smalley 1994 : 14)

2. Tai Languages

While standard Thai is indeed heavily dominant in education, the media, commerce and officialdom, many other languages are also widely spoken in Thailand in other domains of daily life. They can be usefully divided into the major regional languages, which are also Tai languages and various other non-Tai languages spoken by about 10 percent of the population in more scattered areas. Standard Thai being a language which is primarily learned

in school or via the media (television and radio), the vast majority of the population actually grew up speaking some other language at homes, and for nearly 90 percent, this will be a form of one of the four main regional languages. These are central Thai, spoken in the area of the central plains (including Bangkok), Northern Thai (the language of the old kingdom of Lan Na), northeastern Thai known as Isaan language, and southern Thai.

3. Non- Thai languages in Thailand

In addition to the Thai majority population (90 percent), a large number of non-Tai languages are spoken by the remaining 10 percent of the population of Thailand. Two non-Tai language group residing in Thailand which deserve mention because of their links to “none” assimilation and identity issues are the mainly urban Chinese and the Southern Malay speakers

4. The Thai Chinese

Both King Vajiravodh and Phibul saw the growing identity of this economically dominant Chinese population with nationalism in China rather than Siam as a potential threat to national unity, and moved to force greater integration of the Chinese into the emerging Thai nation. This was essentially achieved in two ways, first, by economic measures which made it significantly more difficult and costly for non- Thai to engage in commerce in Thailand, and second through the effective control of Chinese language in education, a longer term but nevertheless highly effective means of stimulating integration.

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Following the decree that all schools follow the standard Thai curriculum, there was mass closure of private Chinese schools in the Phibun era, and new generation of ethnically Chinese children began to experience their daily education in standard Thai, being presented with images of Thai culture and history rather than learning Chinese (language, culture and history). The result of so much sustained pressure on the Chinese community has been a dramatic assimilation of the Chinese into Thai society. From the Phibun era onwards there was increased intermarriage of Chinese men with Thai women, thus producing off spring who grew up hearing and learning Thai than Chinese (Simpson, 2004 : 403).

In order to maintain their prominence in business, many Chinese adopted Thai names and manners. Now sine the economic and educational measures to encourage integration were put in place, the Chinese in Thailand have evolved into a much blurred community referred to as Sino-Thai, with 15-20 percent of the total Thai population being estimated to have significant Chinese heritage. The Sino-Thai are people who have a memory of being partly Chinese, but whose daily life may involve Thai language and culture significantly more than Chinese , and there has been a significant and clear loss in the ability of younger generations to speak Chinese (Morita:2004).

The comparative terms, the 'Chinese 'in Thailand are commonly described as showing the highest degree of assimilation that a Chinese community has undergone anywhere in Southeast Asia (Simspon, 2004)

5. The Malay Speaking Muslims of the South

A strong contrast to the extension assimilation of the Chinese is represented by the weakly - integrated status of the Malay speaking Muslim population living in Thailand's three southern most provinces near the border with Malaysia. Numbering approximately one million, the Malay Muslims inhabit a set of territories which were previously independent Malay states, and which were fully incorporated into Siam only in the 19th century. Being ethnically, historically, and linguistically Malay rather than Tai, and by religion Muslim rather than Buddhist, the population here continues to be significantly distinct in many ways from that of the rest of Thailand, and many amongst the Malay speakers feel that they have much more in common with the inhabitants of Malaysia to the south than with the Thais to the north.

Being very much aware of the obvious differences between the Malay speaking community of the south and the national identity promoted elsewhere in the country , the Thai government of Phibun era made vigorous, heavy-handed attempts to assimilate the Malay speakers during the 1940's and 1950's.

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This however, was met with strong resistance and little success, unlike the successful assimilation of the Chinese. Since the 1960's a more sensitive approach to the Malay Muslims has been adopted, but there has nevertheless been continual government pressure on both language and schooling in the region, and a refusal to accept the existence of the term "Malay" as one ethno-linguistic label for reference to this group, officially replacing the term "Malay-Thai" with "Muslim-Thai" as a designation of the population there.

Paralleling their approach to private Chinese school, the government also insisted that education in the Malay speaking area to carry out in Standard Thai by teachers with state recognized teaching qualifications. However, despite the institutionalization of the Thai language in the Malay areas, there has been only mixed success in the government's hoped for integration of the Malay Muslim population. However, there is still a wide spread feeling of not properly belonging to the Thai nation and its dominant culture, and there is also a resentment at the attempts of the government to control the use of Malay in schools. Malay language being perceived by the Malay Muslims as an important component of their identity, a long side Islam and a Malay ethnic social structuring different from that of Thai society.

Although, there had been signs that more of the younger generation were beginning to develop less negative attitude towards Thai language and culture than in the past, presently there is still a considerable feeling amongst much of the Malay Muslims that they are generally not treated as equal partners in the Thai nation and its ongoing development, and are discriminated against on the basis of their language, culture and religion. The situation in the borderlands of the far south of Thailand therefore, continues to pose a challenge to the promotion and portrayal of a unified Thai identity based on language, religion and culture.

Findings and Conclusion

The major objective of this study has been the exploration on the role of ethnic language and its significant effect towards the shaping of ethnic identity to an ethnic group minority, with a Malay Muslim of Yala municipal city as a case study. The relationship between language and identity is an intriguing one. There is a lacuna of research on how language impacts one's identity. Culture is inextricably linked to language. Without language, culture cannot be completely acquired nor can it be effectively expressed and transmitted. Without culture, language cannot exist. The investigation of the role of language was carried out by probing the relationship between the respondents' ethnolinguistic characteristics towards their ethnic identity.

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Many sociologists have considered language as an essential pillar for maintaining group identity. Even when language has receded to a purely symbolic role, it can still have an important part in group identity. Rokiah Ismail, a language teacher in a well-known private school here in Yala, said that:

“We have seen the importance of language in maintaining & preserving the identity of an ethnic group. If we wish to maintain the present distinct identity of our community, we shall have to make conscious efforts to encourage the members of our community to speak Malay within their respective homes and outside as well when communicating with members of our own community”. She added, “But this is not enough. We have to build interest of the new generation into Malay. They should feel proud that they have a language of their own and this feeling of pride can only arise if they know Malay as full-fledged language”

This also points out several implications and significant aspects of this study. The religion, a geographical location and common ancestors may be the characteristics responsible for initial growth of the Malay Muslim community but, there is a stronger element which is valid as binding force for the community. They do have a common religion but that is part of a greater Muslim Ummah and they cannot claim a separate identity by virtue of belonging

to Sunni school of thought. In present times, the only common binding force and the factor of their identity as a separate ethnic group is Malay language. Language is one of the cornerstones of any culture. It cements the unique identity of a group and expresses the particular concerns and needs of that group. Mansour Salleh, the former president of the Young Muslim Association of Thailand says, the fact that Thai is now the official language is also a sensitive issue.

“We are Malay and we have Malay language as mother tongue. We want to practice our language freely here and promote by the government. We need government open minded and tolerance about this issue. Even though there is no harassment on this policy but they try to stop our language and campaign Thai. According to human dignity, I think it is very wrong.” He continued by asserting that “.....because there is Thai as official language. This is Nationalism, Thai Nationalism.”

The Malay language is also regarded as a vital element in the traditional Malay family structure facilitates in strengthening the Malay ethnicity among the Malays. Malay Muslim families, for various reasons, are more likely to be organized in a complex form than Thai families. The traditional joint and extended families are still common among Malay Muslims. In these families, the older generations, who usually speak only Malay or use Malay

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mainly in daily communication, "force" the younger generations to learn Malay in order to communicate with them and this was evident by the agreement by most of the respondents. It is also interesting to find that ethnic identity is more sustain and strong in families whose Malay language is used as medium of instruction among its family members. That is why the Malay ethnicity and culture are preserved more effectively and more successfully in a more complex Malay family than in a simpler one.

Most of the informants agreed on the way they defined themselves when it comes to ethnic identity and self-identification, starting with their ethnic origin, Malay, and their religious beliefs, where a language teacher, for instance, bravely affirmed that:

"I am a Malay Muslim of southern Thailand province, which in other words, I am a Malay by ethnicity means I speak Malay as my first language, I wear a Malay costume (baju kurung and sarung) I behave in a Malay way of life (Following a Malay culture tradition), Islam is my religion and I live here in Yala."

However, when it comes to the question of language, the respondents introduced the notion of providing the right atmosphere for a language to grow. Huda Abdul Rashid, a Malay Language teacher in a government high school of Yala Municipality confirmed the importance of the Malay language and regarded it as a valuable heritage, She reaffirmed herself

and her identity as a Malay Muslim. Her love for the Malay language and culture emerged so strongly during her Bachelor's degree at PSU (Prince of Songkhla University) that it leads her to change her major to Malay Studies. She decided to become a Malay language teacher and dedicate her life to revitalizing the Malay language, which had almost become extinct. The other friend of her (who was there during the interview) also had positive experiences regarding exploring, reaffirming, and expressing their Malay identity through language. She answered my question with a flashback of her background:

“As I was the first born, Bahasa Melayu was the only language that I was initially exposed to. My parents had always insisted we speak Malay at home (I can learn Thai for sure at school) and to our relatives but this became increasingly difficult to enforce (once she started school). I began to speak Thai to my peers, my brother, and occasionally to my parents “

A basic value of the culture of the Malay people is that of language, which is viewed as a central part of their self-identity. A member of the Malay Muslim community is expected to speak Malay. Malay Muslims therefore stress to their children the importance of learning their ethnic language and insist on it being used in the home. They also support efforts to teach the language outside the home, as is evident by the large number of Malay-type afternoon schools (Tadika).

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As expected from the sociolinguistic literature, language was an important part of these Malays' understanding of their identity. This was clear in how the respondents talked about the terms they used to identify themselves. Ethnic identification was strong among these respondents. Only one of the respondents, a woman, defined herself as simply "Thai." Whereas other respondents preferred to use some kind of ethnic identifier. The question regarding personal identification was open - ended - respondents could answer however they chose. The elite groups which included religious teachers tended to define "Malay" as a person who speaks Melayu (Malay). A few also defined "Thai" as those who spoke Thai and believe in Buddhism. The students group defined "Malay" as being those who spoke Malay and Thai as well. This is in part reflective of their general desire to find a term that described their bilingual experience being under the Thai system. Meanwhile two respondents who work in government sectors were more likely to define "Malay" as meaning of Muslim Thai, rarely making direct reference to language ability.

This could be in part due to the fact that all except for two of these respondents had a strong ethnic identity, but the majority of them did not consider themselves fluent in Malay. All these respondents are struggling to find an appropriate definition for themselves, and are using language use as a symbolic marker. This process could be seen as a form of "cultural hybridity,"

that is a response to the diversity of experiences among Malays in southern Thailand (García Canclini, 1, 1995). The respondents' discussion of the importance of Malay is consistent with findings for other sociolinguistic groups: Malay language is key to Malay ethnic identity but, because it is stigmatized by the dominant, their relationship to it is paradoxical. Because these Malay Muslims were aware of their position as a subordinate group in society, for them speaking Malay and Thai is a strength, but speaking only Malay is seen as a weakness.

It also, confirmed the vitality of Malay language in the sustenance of Malay ethnicity. The history of the Malay Muslim shows that the use of Malay has been the key factor in maintaining ties with the Malay world, ties that were the most significant in the area of religious education. However, due to the political sensitivities of being surrounded by Malay Muslim speaking nations, the Malay language remains to be the important language of the province. Within the Malay community, the Malay language has been a language of communication. The language is so interwoven with the society that it is regarded as the core element in cultural identification of the Malay Muslims here creating fear within the community that Malay Muslims lose their cultural identity with less usage of Malay. The Malay Muslims have several institutions within the mainstream population, which allows for the use of language as a cultural tool for maintaining family values and

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religious instructions. Many religious subjects are taught in Malay (especially in private religious schools). The Malay language is still regarded also as a tool for the transfer of religious values. The continued existence of 'madrasahs' or religious schools are also an avenue where Malay language is used widely. To a large degree, religious instruction helps to perpetuate the use of Malay language.

Recommendations

It is hoped that this study will stimulate interest in the community of Malay Muslims in Thailand as well as contribute to the ongoing research into Malay culture and Identity. Research possibilities can be seen in the use of Jawi in all areas of life, how Malay Muslims still preserve the Malay language in Jawi written form. Islam and its role in preserving Malay ethnicity in South Thailand is another topic for future exploration.

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