

Asia in Transition 20

Lian Kwen Fee
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(Re)presenting Brunei Darussalam

A Sociology of the Everyday

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*Dedicated to our late friend and colleague
Zawawi Ibrahim (1947–2022)*

Preface and Acknowledgements

This volume's seed was planted in the early days of the Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Darussalam Brunei, when several staff were recruited in 2012. One of the first tasks of the institute was to set up a Working Paper series and, after some deliberation on whether they should appear online or in hard copies, it was decided that the former would better serve the rapid publication and ready accessibility of work done by local and foreign scholars on Borneo and the region. The first paper came online in 2012, and 10 years later over 70 contributions have been published. It has served as a repository of research conducted in the region and on Brunei Darussalam in particular, and a ready reference for scholars and students in the social sciences.

Over time, as the papers accumulated, the hope grew that selected and relevant pieces on Brunei would eventually be revised and updated in a published volume. After much cultivation and coffee break musing, that hope finally sprouted into life in early 2020. An editorial team coalesced around the idea to articulate composite and interior views of everyday life in contemporary Brunei in order to reveal its nuances and diversity. We were able to identify a blend of local early career and more established scholars from different disciplines currently working on contemporary Brunei who embraced and reflected 'sociology of the everyday' sensibilities. Our aim was to provide a volume of self-selected, grounded and disaggregated case studies with the potential to achieve a level of polyphonic resonance—one that gives voice to a spectrum of lived experiences and varying aspects of everyday Brunei in context. These ranged from wedding practices, halal certification and youth religiosity to homeownership, migrant experiences, aging and hybrid identities.

The contributions in this book will hopefully encourage a more critical reflection on the ways in which we approach the social science study of contemporary Brunei and the utility of a sociology of the everyday for that task. The editors wish to express sincere thanks to both the Institute of Asian Studies and Universiti Brunei Darussalam for their ongoing support in making the volume possible. A debt of gratitude is owed not only to all the contributors for their fulsome support of this

project but also to our ever-reliable editorial team at Impress Creative and Editorial—Gareth Richards, Helena Dodge-Wan, Eryn Tan and Aoife Sacker Ooi—and to the editorial and administrative staff at both Springer and the Institute of Asian Studies for their efforts and patience.

Gadong, Brunei Darussalam
December 2022

Lian Kwen Fee
Paul J. Carnegie
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Prologue

Victor T. King

I responded willingly to the editors' request to write a foreword for this volume. It was a task I took to with alacrity as the chapter contributions demonstrate some of the current exciting research accomplished by young and early career researchers in Brunei Darussalam. However, sometimes we do not exercise immediate control over what we write, and it extended way beyond my original remit. My foreword expanded subsequently into what I chose to refer to as a foreword essay. In discussion with the editors, it transmuted into a prologue. In defence of my extravagant essay, I would suggest that it is a product of my long association with Brunei Darussalam, the Brunei Museum (Muzium Brunei) and Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) going back to the 1980s. The key impetus for writing such a long piece is that this volume on everyday life in Brunei attracted my intense interest. It reignited memories which I have of reading into the literature on everyday life in the 1970s and 1980s as well as the work of Georg Simmel in particular. In this regard, I wish to commend the editors for bringing this volume to fruition. It is an important book in the context of Southeast Asian sociology and even more important for the development of our social, geographical, cultural and historical knowledge of Brunei. It provides a wide range of dimensions of everyday life in the sultanate and demonstrates cogently how rapid the increase of research has been in the social sciences and humanities at UBD and within other neighbouring institutions. It is worth noting that all the contributors to this volume are based in Brunei and the majority are local scholars.

In addition, it is important to emphasise that, in capturing the complexities and diversities in people's everyday lives, this task cannot be achieved solely within the disciplinary framework of sociology. The day-to-day activities, behaviours and situations, and the meanings, understandings and perspectives which people bring to and take from their experiences, cultural encounters and expressions, and their social interactions require a range of multidisciplinary approaches. This realisation is evidenced in the interests and varied disciplinary backgrounds of the contributors to this edited collection. While the volume is positioned within a field of studies whose

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rubric is the ‘sociology of the everyday’, it also draws on the knowledge, expertise and insight of a range of disciplines, among them: sociology, anthropology, geography, psychology, history, language and linguistics, political science and economics, as well as other multidisciplinary fields of study, including area studies (in this case Brunei and Southeast Asian studies), and studies of gender, migration, development, environment, media and education.

The editors, in their incisive, thoughtful and wide-ranging introduction, draw attention to the main issues which have been and continue to be addressed in studying everyday life, and they skilfully place these in a Brunei context. A major focus is the relationship and interaction between social structures and institutions, on the one hand, and individuals in their everyday lives, on the other, and the ways in which individuals respond, adapt to, negotiate with and live with overarching structures of power, authority, control and inequality. In this regard, it was Michel de Certeau who made the distinction between the ‘strategies’ used by those in power who wish for obedience and discipline and ordinary people who adopt ‘tactics’ to manipulate, negotiate and resist, or adapt and respond positively to, or acquiesce in the face of those whose goals are to define, categorise, administer, control and discipline (Foucault 1977; Rabinow 1984). In any case, de Certeau (1984) suggests that even acceptance and acquiescence are a tactic, and those who are subject to the exercise of power and control are never entirely passive but make decisions in their everyday lives about how they engage, respond, behave and interact. In other words, they have agency. As Willem (Wim) Wertheim (1974) argued many years ago, there are always ‘counterpoints’ and ‘conflicting value systems’ in any given social formation. I should add a qualification here that although analytically useful, the construction of binaries between those above and those below, between those who have power and the ability to apply sanctions and those who do not is never as crisp and clear-cut as they might first appear. These analytical devices are useful in addressing complexities. Once we delve into everyday lives, we have to acknowledge the predictable and translate these into patterns and structures. In popular terms, we might refer to these as the ‘habitual’ and ‘routine’, but we then have to grapple with the unexpected, the imagined, the innovative and the exercise of agency.

In the Brunei context, and more widely, the editors of this volume point to the continuing influence of colonial (Western-based) discourses and the preoccupation with classification, categories, constructing boundaries around territories and ethnic groups, essentialising and reifying groups and communities, and rationalising, structuring, determining and fixing complex and changing social and cultural realities. But it should be noted here that, from some 70 years ago, social scientists in the West were in search of ways to analyse social and cultural change. In the British social structuralism of the 1950s, which was preoccupied with order, system and structure, it was established figures like Raymond Firth (1951a, 1951b, 1964), in his distinction between social structure and social organisation, and that between the arrangement of social persons and the arrangement of activities, who sought to understand mechanisms of change in individual choice and decision-making. Edmund Leach did the same in his analysis of the relationships between the political organisation of the Shan and Kachin in highland Burma. He argued that the ‘larger total system in flux’

was ‘too full of inherent inconsistencies’ in which there were ‘violent and very rapid shifts in the overall distribution of political power’ (Leach 1954: 6, 9). In the political realm, at least, individuals were increasingly seen as not the victims of structures but as agents of change; they made their own futures in their everyday lives. And as Fredrik Barth also argued in his early 1950s study of Swat Pathans, structures and corporate bodies are borne out of ‘personal relations’ and ‘individual actors’; in doing so he promoted the concept of ‘transactions’ (Barth 1959, 1966; see also Nader 2020: 342). Yet the preoccupations seemed to rest with the ways in which structures and systems are created and reproduced rather than examining individuals and the everyday lives of ordinary people in their own right. Nevertheless, it is difficult to escape context. How do we work out the respective influences of structures of power and inequality, on the one hand, and Barth’s view that individuals, in pursuing their self-interest as freely consenting individuals, make decisions and choices in weighing personal as against group advantage, on the other? Talal Asad (1972), in his criticism of Barth’s Swat Pathan study, focused on class structure and inequalities and the ways in which caste, lineage and kinship gave some Pashtuns advantages over others in such fields as land tenure and property rights. It was not a level playing field and, as Asad argues, some individuals have greater leverage than others. In weighing these issues, where would we place Brunei along the spectrum of structure/system/control and individual autonomy and the freedom to make one’s own futures?

Nevertheless, the study of day-to-day existence has redressed the balance to some degree and brought individual action and agency to the fore, demonstrating that rather than fixed and determined social and cultural forms and identities, everyday life also injects fluidity, flexibility and movement into what we refer to as society and culture. It examines on-the-ground agency, understandings, perspectives and identity formation, and the ways in which social structures and institutions are changed by the continuous passage and interactions of everyday life. It addresses the contents, conditions and contexts of social experience. As Patricia Adler et al. (1987) propose, everyday life sociology comprises a wide range of ‘micro perspectives’, but because of this diversity there remains a ‘lack of systematic integration’ among the multidisciplinary approaches and perspectives which address everyday life. In this regard, differences of view are revealed in Thomas Luckmann’s review (1972) of Jack Douglas’s (1970) ethnomethodological excursion into everyday life. However, there have been attempts to bring coherence to the sociology of the everyday. A very good example is that by Josée Johnston et al. in *Introducing sociology using the stuff of everyday life* (2016). It is designed as a student textbook and introduces sociology through the medium of what is familiar to students, and this applies to both students in the West and those beyond. The hook they use to hang sociology on is oriented to consumer culture and the objective is to see and understand ‘the strange in the familiar’. The ‘stuff’ for the authors comprises everyday objects and material expressions of modernity: jeans, coffee, food, mobile phones, cars, the internet and so on.

The editors of this volume on everyday life in Brunei also refer to sensibilities, subjectivities and narratives in the engagement between people on the ground among themselves and with powerful others. This enterprise also requires us to tease out the

ways in which people express, make sense of and give meaning to their ‘lifeworld’, a term coined by Edmund Husserl (1970 [1936]) in the 1930s, but given greater exposure subsequently by Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987; and see Baxter 1987), Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann (1973, 1983; and Schütz 1967) and Peter Berger (Berger and Luckmann 1966). These interventions in the debates about the lifeworld are not without criticism (see, for example, Habermas 1982). Even David Carr (1970: 331), who translated Husserl’s *The crisis in European sciences and transcendental phenomenology* (1970), is not sparing of his criticisms of Husserl, in that his influential volume has ‘many faults and confusions’. Carr takes issue with some followers of Husserl, since ‘some have come to see the investigation of the life-world as either synonymous with phenomenology itself or as forming its most profound stratum’ (Carr 1970: 331). I do not think that, in this current volume, we are straying into these more complex philosophical fields, but only to point out that even at the level of ethnography we do not necessarily enjoy shared views of the lifeworld or lived experiences.

Habermas in particular captures the dilemmas researchers face in understanding relationships, sometimes complementary and reciprocal, sometimes tense and in conflict, at the micro and macro levels in his twin concepts of ‘lifeworld’ and ‘system’. The lifeworld in Habermas’s work is far from ordinary. Yet we have to recognise that Habermas is one among many who have contributed ideas or concepts—I hesitate to refer to them as theories—that have fed into the enterprise which we now label the sociology of everyday life. Devorah Kalekin-Fishman (2013: 714) points out that ‘[a]lthough everyday life is the core focus of anthropology, it is relatively new as an explicit concern to sociologists’. The major influences, it seems to me, and some of them are referred to in the introduction of this book, derive from a number of sources: Erving Goffman (1956) and his dramaturgical analyses; Harold Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodology; the phenomenology of Schütz, Luckmann and Berger referred to above; and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) and his phenomenology of perception and his concept of the body-subject. All of these scholars had gained inspiration from Husserl. Then there is Habermas’s work on the dual perspective of lifeworld and system; Anthony Giddens (1981, 1987, 1990) on the sociological importance of time and space/place in identity formation and his work on modernisation and structuration; and perhaps forgotten, but I would include Zygmunt Bauman’s (1976, 2000a, 2000b) examination of hierarchical bureaucracy, the desire for control and order, for obedience, and the imposition of rules and regulations at the macro level, and, at the local level, the ways in which individuals, including ‘strangers’, address these constraints in the context of ambivalence, uncertainty and insecurity in the age of ‘liquid modernity’. Bauman also delves into the issue of the relationship between time and space. Finally, Henri Lefebvre (1991 [1974]), in his study of space/place, demonstrates how people in their everyday lives engage with, construct and give meaning to space. In other words, it is a social construction that forms part of local identities and it is one that is renewed day by day, but, at crucial points, it is also subject to change (see also Foucault 1986).

As this book reveals, the interest in the sociology of the everyday is only just emerging in published form in Brunei, hence the importance of this collection of multidisciplinary case studies. Having said this, recently we have also witnessed research undertaken by early career Brunei academics working in the disciplines of geography and history (some of whom are contributors to this volume). These include Noor Hasharina Hassan's coauthored study of the quality of life and consumerism in Brunei which draws attention to aspects of everyday life (Gweshengwe et al. 2020; see also Noor Hasharina 2017). Likewise, Asiyah Az-Zahra Ahmad Kumpoh et al. (2017) have published on the sociocultural dynamics of Brunei society, while others have studied migrant workers (Ullah and Asiyah 2019). These are but a few examples, and there are several others. It also raises our awareness of a significant resource in Brunei, generated primarily within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) at UBD. This is expressed in the final year undergraduate research project in such areas of FASS as sociology and anthropology; geography, environment and development; English language and linguistics, and historical and international studies; and in neighbouring areas of business and economics, and policy studies, and at the Academy of Brunei Studies. Obviously, there is a range of academic performance in this student exercise, but it marks a steady increase in empirical data collection and on-the-ground research in Brunei. It also demonstrates a learning experience between students and supervisors over some two decades. Much of the work remains unpublished, though in this volume on everyday life there is visible evidence of student achievement in their final year research projects, even though these authors, when they embarked on their research, may not have explicitly situated themselves in the field of the sociology of everyday life.

To elaborate, some years ago a detailed paper by Anthony R. Walker (2010), the then Professor of Anthropology at UBD (1999–2011), gave us a comprehensive account of the origins of student research in sociology and anthropology there from 1999 up to 2010 and established an important catalogue of this repository of local knowledge (although it must be said that other social science and humanities programmes at UBD have longer antecedents). Walker says that the intention of the final year research project is to encourage 'first-hand ethnographic reporting' (*ibid.*: 11). Walker is candid and critical in his evaluation of much of this early work. This is hardly surprising when we consider that the sociology and anthropology unit, originally set in motion by Frank Fanselow in 1997, only offered minor programmes in a three-year degree (see Fanselow 2014). It was not until 2005–2006 that a fully fledged Department of Sociology and Anthropology was established with its own four-year degree, and a two-semester ethnographic research workshop was launched in 2007–2008.

Allen Maxwell (1980), who had conducted fieldwork among the Kedayan of the Labu Valley for four years from the late 1960s, and as a visiting professor at UBD in 1999, set up the ethnographic workshop, which was then taken over by Walker from 2000 to 2006. With its own degree programme, the department then developed a full-year ethnographic workshop and the number of students increased, as did the quality of their work. I was privileged to serve as external examiner in 1999–2000 and 2009–2010 to witness the growth of the programme and to read a spread of final year

projects over that decade. In my view it would be productive to undertake a follow-up survey of what has been done since 2011 across the social sciences at UBD as a sequel to Walker's study. I am convinced it would reveal very promising work in the second decade of the development of on-the-ground research at UBD, not only in sociology and anthropology through the efforts of past and present scholars such as Zawawi Ibrahim, Bianca J. Smith, Lian Kwen Fee, Magne Knudsen, Muhammad Arafat bin Mohamad and Paul J. Carnegie, but also in the geography and development, language and history programmes.

Walker provides us with summaries of what he saw as some of the most interesting and well-presented essays. Perhaps his choice also reflected his position as a strongly committed fieldwork anthropologist interested in rural communities and minorities. In his long career he mainly studied in rural areas, undertaking research among the Toda of southern India, the Lahu and Akha and other hill populations in northern Thailand, communities in Fiji and the Indian minority in Singapore. Interestingly, as an anthropologist he also coauthored a book on everyday life in Fiji (Biturogoiwas and Walker 2001). From the 75 pieces of work produced from the academic years 1999–2000 to 2009–2010 at UBD, Walker selected five examples from the earlier three-year minor programme and five cases from projects undertaken by final year students in the later four-year integrated sociology and anthropology degree. It is worth listing these because they demonstrate not only the breadth of what was being undertaken in student research but also an interesting shift in focus and priorities. The three-year degree projects comprised: 'Transvestites in Bandar Seri Begawan'; 'Growing up in Kedayan society'; 'A Chinese temple in Muara'; 'A village of Hakka vegetable growers'; and 'Youth dress culture in modern Brunei'. The later four-year degree projects selected were: 'Traditional medical practices'; 'Two village studies' (one on Kedayan and the other a comparative study of Dusun and Bisaya); 'A village-based community study (Kedayan)'; and 'From musical instrument to raucous party: The *gambus* in Brunei'. The themes make no direct reference to the national ideology nor do they refer in any substantial way to the majority Brunei Malay culture. As we shall see, in the current book on everyday life in Brunei, preoccupations have changed and the national ideology and its requirements and effects have become increasingly important in on-the-ground research. We can see how structures have consequences for everyday lives. But in my experience of supervising and assessing final year projects from 2017 to 2021 students still retain a range of interests in Brunei multiculturalism, minorities and transformations in Brunei society and culture which are not always in line with the national ideology. They also continue to demonstrate a high degree of imagination in exploring the interstices and margins of Malay identity, Islam and monarchy.

I would wish to argue strongly that the work of young and talented researchers at UBD should be celebrated. Around two-thirds of the chapters in this book have been produced by social science students whose work is grounded and based primarily on qualitative research methods. The remaining chapters have been contributed by academic staff in the university who also work at the local level. The range of topics and issues that the contributors embrace is wide. Yet we can anticipate some of the main themes that they address in a Brunei context which have become increasingly

important during the last decade. Everyday life in Brunei has now to engage with and respond to the national ideology, Malay Islamic monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*), and within that context issues of the construction, maintenance and adaptation of Malay identity come to the fore. The following themes are pursued in the volume: the increasing importance of Islam, Islamic law (*syariah*) and halal-certified food and drink products; the negotiation, tensions and accommodation between Islam and tradition embodied in custom (*adat*) in such areas of Malay life as wedding ceremonies and the role of female ritual specialists (*pengangun*); the effects of the internet and social media on young people's identity and their perspectives on Islam; the learning process among Malay primary schoolchildren on gender and male–female characteristics and behaviour; the orientation of older Malay women to their aging and to Islam; the language use by young bilingual Bruneians, specifically the increasing intermingling of Malay and English; the position of Indonesian female domestic workers in Malay households; the transformations in the architecture, physical space and demographic composition of the material symbol and embodiment of Brunei Malay history and culture, Kampong Ayer; the role played by place and space in identity formation exemplified by notions of belonging and unbelonging in Kampong Ayer and the attitudes of Malays to homeownership, given the importance of state-owned housing in resettlement accommodation for those moving from Kampong Ayer; and the position and response of minority populations and migrant workers in Brunei to the dominant Malay Muslim culture; other case studies comprise the hybrid Chinese-Malay population, the Iban of Melilas, Belait and migrant workers residing in Kampong Ayer.

This book is most welcome. It brings Brunei into the fold of the sociology of everyday life from multiple disciplinary directions. Although the field of studies is now well established in the discipline of sociology and others, it seems to have previously eluded explicit framing in Brunei terms, which this current volume helps remedy in a judicious and rewarding way. Despite considerable research having been done in the past, there has been very little in the way of the deployment of this research in a particular direction and the provision of a degree of integration. Having read this book, I am suitably convinced that attention to everyday life in Brunei is an appropriate umbrella to cover a significant proportion of the sociological (anthropological and other social sciences) on-the-ground research that has been undertaken by students and staff at UBD. It also offers an effective framework and promising direction which has already been worked out, as I have indicated, in a substantial literature in this field of studies.

I would like to end this prologue with an observation and one which this book might help to acknowledge and promote. The history of sociological thought, as it has been taught in higher education institutions both in the West and the non-West, has focused on certain 'founding fathers' of sociology, among them Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. Of course, none of them was involved in the sociology of the everyday. How could they be? However, they did use evidence from that everyday world that they could garner to develop theories of society and social change. In my view, a social philosopher who tends to be left out of consideration is Georg Simmel. He was also not a grounded researcher, but

he seems to me to be firmly located in the spirit of the everyday. Donald N. Levine (1971: ix) says of Simmel:

Of those who created the intellectual capital used to launch the enterprise of professional sociology, Georg Simmel was perhaps the most original and fecund. In search of a subject matter for sociology that would distinguish it from all other social sciences and humanistic disciplines, he charted a new field for discovery and proceeded to explore a world of novel topics in works that have guided and anticipated the thinking of generations of sociologists. Such distinctive concepts of contemporary sociology as social distance, marginality, urbanism as a way of life, role-playing, social behavior as exchange, conflict as an integrating process, dyadic encounter, circular interaction, reference groups as perspectives, and sociological ambivalence embody ideas which Simmel adumbrated more than six decades ago.

When we list the topics and issues which Simmel (1971) had decided to study and explain we can ascertain how close he was to realising some of the later projects in the sociology of everyday life. Importantly, he always returns to the individual and he examines the relationship between the subjective experience of the individual and what he refers to as 'objective culture'. As we have seen, Habermas phrases this in terms of the twin concepts of 'lifeworld' and 'system', and de Certeau in terms of 'strategies' and 'tactics'. It is worth listing Simmel's themes in his collected writings: how is history possible? how is society possible? the problem of sociology; the categories of human experience; forms of social interaction: exchange, conflict, domination, prostitution, sociability; social types: the stranger, the poor, the miser and spendthrift, the adventurer, the nobility; forms of individuality: freedom and the individual; subjective culture; Eros, platonic and modern; individuality and social structure: group expansion and the development of individuality; fashion; metropolis and mental life; subordination and personal fulfilment; forms versus life progress: the dialectics of change; social forms and inner needs; the transcendent character of life; and conflict in modern culture (Rabinow 1984; and see Kaern et al. 1990).

Within Simmel's work there are most emphatically the seeds of a sociology of everyday life and several of the themes that exercised him are to be found, in a Brunei context, in this book. I am also placing some confidence in Weber's *verstehen* (to understand in a deep way) because is this not what we are doing as social scientists in engaging in the sociology of everyday life? (Weber 1930, 1968; see also Oakes 1977; Faught 1985; Scaff 1988). We want to understand through direct observation and, in empathy with the motivations of the actors, why they are doing what they are doing. And investigate if, why and how they make sense of and give meaning to their actions. I tend to think in everyday life we do play roles, embedded as we are in structures of power and control.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

AMBD	Autoriti Monetari Brunei Darussalam (Monetary Authority of Brunei Darussalam, now Brunei Darussalam Central Bank)
AMLA	Administration of Muslim Law Act
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BCG 1	Guideline for Halal Certification
BCG 2	Guideline for Halal Compliance Audit
BDCB	Brunei Darussalam Central Bank
BIMP-EAGA	Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area
BKMH	Bahagian Kawalan Makanan Halal (Halal Food Control Division)
BP2MI	Badan Pelindungan Pekerja Migrant Indonesia (Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Board)
BruHAS	Brunei Halal Showcase
FASS	Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (Universiti Brunei Darussalam)
GDP	gross domestic product
HCHLO	Halal Certificate and Halal Label (Amendment) Order 2017
HDD	Housing Development Department (Jabatan Kemajuan Perumahan)
HGTV	Home and Garden Television
ICT	information and communication technology
ILO	International Labour Organisation
JAKIM	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia)
LGBTQI	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex
LSI	language and social interaction
MCD	membership categorisation device
MIB	<i>Melayu Islam Beraja</i> (Malay Islamic monarchy)
MORA	Ministry of Religious Affairs (Brunei)
MPK	Majlis Perundingan Kampung (Village Consultative Council)
MSME	micro, small and medium enterprise
MUIB	Majlis Ugama Islam Brunei (Islamic Religious Council of Brunei)

MUIS	Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore)
PAS	Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party)
PBD	Piawai Brunei Darussalam (Brunei Darussalam Standard)
QCA	qualitative content analysis
RPN	Rancangan Perumahan Negara (National Housing Programme)
SAPPHAT II	Second International Seminar on Halalan Thayyiban Products and Services
SCP	Supplemental Contributory Pension
SK	<i>sekolah kebangsaan</i> (national school)
STKRJ	Skim Tanah Kurnia Rakyat Jati (Landless Indigenous Citizens' Housing Scheme)
TAP	Tabung Amanah Pekerja (Employees' Trust Fund)
TDSR	total debt service ratio
3D	demanding, dirty and dangerous
UBD	Universiti Brunei Darussalam
UMNO	United Malays National Organisation

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Towards a Sociology of the Everyday in Brunei Darussalam



Lian Kwen Fee, Paul J. Carnegie, and Noor Hasharina Hassan

Abstract To borrow Bourdieu's (1990) terminology, the habitus of everyday life is a lifeworld simultaneously constrained by and resistant of more powerful social structures and institutions. It alerts us to the idea that everyday life and 'ordinariness' can serve to mask extraordinary levels of adaptability, fortitude and reciprocity. This introductory chapter details a sociology of the everyday and its utility for developing our understanding of the ways in which people and communities in Brunei Darussalam perceive and interpret their contemporary reality. It considers the new angles of vision and scale that such an approach may offer on this most discrete of countries.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Ethnic identity · Knowledge production · Positionality · Sociology of the everyday

Nestled on the northern shores of the island of Borneo, Brunei Darussalam has often been portrayed by overseas scholarship as one of the most self-contained, circumspect and resolutely monarchical countries in Southeast Asia. Over the years, international scholars from history, politics, sociology and anthropology have got to 'know' Brunei (Tarling 1971; Nicholl 1975, 1980; Ranjit Singh 1984; Sutlive et al. 1987; Siddique 1992; Saunders 1994; Cleary and Wong 1994; Kershaw 1998, 2001; Fanselow 2014). Several have achieved remarkable clarity and detail on aspects of its history, traditions, culture, ethnic make-up, social structure, system of government, economy and nation-state-(ness) (Brown 1970, 1980; Kimball 1979; Maxwell 1980; King 1994; Hussainmiya 1995; de Vienne 2012, 2015; Ooi 2016; King and Druce 2021a, 2021b; Ooi and King 2022).

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As one of the few remaining absolute monarchies to persist in an age of modern nation-states, it is fairly unsurprising that quite a few scholars (from the perspective of ‘outsiders’) have turned their attention to the efficacy of a monarchical state (Krause and Krause 1988; Leake 1989; Braighlinn 1992; Gunn 1997; Naimah 2002; Schottmann 2006; Lindsey and Steiner 2016; Müller 2017). This has produced a tendency to focus variously on the ruling national ideology of Malay Islamic monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*) as the lynchpin of social cohesion that commands the support of the sultanate’s subjects, the challenges of the Islamisation process, or economic issues associated with tradition, modernisation and globalisation. Yet apart from its natural resource wealth and Malay Islamic monarchy, the everyday life of this microstate remains relatively unfamiliar to the outside world. Despite several selective ethnographic studies and collective thesis contributions from students at Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD), as detailed by Anthony Walker (2010), the ways in which its contemporary everyday plays out are little documented (see Maxwell 1980, 1996; Chi et al. 1994; Kershaw 2000; Pudarno 2004; Fanselow 2014; Mahirah and Lian 2020; King and Knudsen 2021).

Indeed, when we think and talk about Brunei, so much of what we think we know sociologically about it, its people and places has often been refracted inadvertently through layers of knowledge production entangled with colonial era discourse and its broad and ready use of classification and categories (see Noakes 1950; Leach 1950). As Victor T. King (2021) remarks, ‘many Borneo specialists have tended to conform to the boundaries that had been set by the colonial powers’. Benedict Anderson (1991: 165–166) also presaged this epistemological limitation in his reflections on British and Dutch East Indies colonies:

These ‘identities’, imagined by the (confusedly) classifying mind of the colonial state, still awaited a reification which imperial administrative penetration would soon make possible....
The fiction of the census is that everyone is in it, and that everyone has one—and only one—extremely clear place. No fractions.

It is a legacy of colonial rule and governance that has not infrequently influenced the lenses of social scientists working on both Sarawak and Brunei. There are notable contemporary exceptions and things are changing, but a not insignificant amount of what has been produced, circulated and given credence to is enmeshed in intellectual traditions and political legacies of that past.¹ And for the editors at least, one of the consequences of this process of epistemological sedimentation and entanglement is that, to varying degrees, a rather essentialised view of local groups and communities has emerged and gained purchase (for notable exceptions on Brunei, see Maxwell 2001; Yabit 2004; Siti Norkhalbi 2005; Kershaw 2010; Asiyah 2015, 2016; Fatimah and Najib 2015; Pudarno 2016; Tassim 2018; Noor Hasharina and Yong 2019; Awang et al. 2020; Asiyah and Nani Suryani 2021; King and Druce 2021a, 2021b; Ho and Deterding 2021; Ooi and King 2022). It is probably fair to say that past and present asymmetries in the production and consumption of knowledge have shaped,

¹ This enmeshment is traceable in J.L. Noakes (1950) and E.R. Leach (1950) through to Nicholas Tarling’s *Britain, the Brookes and Brunei* (1971) and Robert Pringle’s *Rajahs and rebels* (1970), and tangentially in seminal works such as Derek Freeman’s *Report on the Iban* (1970).

consciously or unconsciously, the way we make sense of everyday life in this part of the world (see also Alatas 2000; Heryanto 2002; Zawawi 2008, 2017). As such, the intent of our volume is not to denigrate the quality of past scholarship on Brunei (far from it), but rather to unsettle the genealogies of previous preoccupations and positionalities relative to the study of contemporary Brunei.

Anthropologists working in the region since the 1990s have judiciously highlighted the significance of fluidity in identity formation through day-to-day activities (Rousseau 1990; King 2001a, 2001b; Chua 2007; Sillander 2016). ‘Identity’, as Janet Carsten (1995: 329) notes, ‘is not fixed at birth; people become who they are gradually through life as they acquire different attributes derived from the activities in which they engage and the people with whom they live’. The cultural boundaries and markers that may have seemed so apparent to the outsider in the colonial period have over the years since been denuded in a practical sense, and undergone a thoroughgoing (if ambivalent) process of acculturation and deculturation. What is more significant is the situatedness of place and locality to how people make sense of their lives and their identity (*ibid.*). Why does place matter? Simply put, it is where ‘people congregate for culturally valorized, focussed activity’ (Rosaldo 1988: 167). In this sense, contemporary place becomes a more movable and less fixed site under modern conditions. Viewed from such a perspective, the manifestations of ‘ethnicity’ are ‘at once arbitrary, external, and material’ (*ibid.*: 165–166). Moulded by everyday concerns, the exercise of ethnicity is imbued with a sense of pragmatic performativity. Where and when people gather at a place to share or celebrate life events such as births, deaths, coming of age and marriages, they are doing so not only as an act of recounting the past but as a process of selecting, discarding and improvising in response to situational demands (*ibid.*: 169). Nonetheless, despite these conceptual and interpretive advances, there is still a tendency in mainstream social science to underplay the intersubjective ways in which individuals manage social and cultural material within the context of everyday life (Gardiner 2000). Together with the other concerns noted above, the unintended consequence has been to elide more contemporary and nuanced appreciations of Brunei and its people from the ground level up.

Which brings us to the gradual emergence of what we could loosely term a third generation sociology of the everyday and its utility for studying contemporary Brunei. In short, a sociology of the everyday comprises a wide range of micro-perspectives that focus on day-to-day social existence of various scales. And in a broad schematic sense, this differs from a first generation sociology with a predisposition towards social organisms, functions and systems, or a second generation geared to unpacking social behaviour and action. While everyday life is and has been a focus of anthropology, it is comparatively new as an explicit matter to sociologists (Kalekin-Fishman 2013: 714). Often everyday life was taken for granted in abstract thinking about the social and remained largely hidden in plain sight. There was a tendency in mainstream sociology to overlook it and give greater credence to studying and explaining the existence, structures and behaviours of societies. Drawing on earlier work of the likes of Georg Simmel (1858–1918) (1971), the term does crop up in the late 1940s in Henri Lefebvre’s *Critique of everyday life* (1991a [1947]) and in the 1950s with

Erving Goffman's *Presentation of self in everyday life* (1956), alongside further elaborations by various scholars such as Guy Debord (1994 [1967]), Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987) and Pierre Bourdieu (1990). But as a trend of sociological inquiry, it only began to gain serious purchase in the early 1990s in the wake of the so-called postmodern turn. This shift in the sociological imagination loosened an exclusive fixation and focus on classification, social organisms, systems and behaviour, and opened the way for new avenues of less schematic and less deterministic renderings of social existence and events (Sztompka 2008). In turn, everyday life became a particularly relevant site of inquiry.

Underpinning a sociology of the everyday is the view that humans are at the forefront of their experience. Furthermore, if people construct their perception about the world they live in through their embodied activity and interactions, then that requires scholarly articulation. It is important to understand the ways in which they perceive and interpret any given reality even if it is shaped to varying degrees by forms of political ordering. Cultivating a sensibility of the everyday is by extension a way to appreciate human beings as complex social animals and further decode the contours and structures of meaning that give shape to their day-to-day lifescapes. What it does emphasise is a relational sensibility that draws attention to attachment, affective belonging and narratives of place-identity alongside reflections upon space as material and symbolic. However, recognising beliefs, desires and values and interpreting the ways these structures of meaning unfold in the circumstances in which they arise is not straightforward. As Lefebvre (1991b: 26) notes, '(social) space is a (social) product', it 'serves as a tool of thought and of action'. For Lefebvre, contemporary everyday life may be inhabited by the commodity and tinged with inauthenticity, but it also remains the site of resistance and change. To borrow Bourdieu's (1990) terminology, the habitus of everyday life is a lifeworld simultaneously constrained by and resistant of more powerful social structures and institutions. Here we begin to grasp that everyday life is full of extraordinary levels of adaptability, fortitude and reciprocity. It is the ways in which its very 'ordinariness' serves to mask the latter aspects that require unpacking. In this sense, the task of a sociology of the everyday is to illuminate the nuanced complexity of 'ordinary' lifeworlds (Kalekin-Fishman 2013).

The attempt to decode the social logics and interests that constitute life as ordinary reality does, however, present certain phenomenological and ethnomethodological puzzles. In large part this is due to the fact that the ideas and meanings through which individuals construct their worldviews are steeped in the contingencies of their everyday lives. We are led to considerations of the ways they understand their location, the norms that affect them and their own interests, beliefs and desires. Further, it may involve (but is not limited to) unravelling how mundane social reality is constructed as a meaningful experience and how social interaction works at the level of face-to-face communication and even delving into the ways in which social life is 'performed' in an everyday context, as in Goffman's (1956) dramaturgy or Clifford Geertz's (1973) symbolic interaction. Our attention may also turn to the ways social space and time are constituted and operationalised or how people deal

with social stigmas, the formation and reproduction of social identities, and finally, the ways ordinary life can pose extraordinary challenges for people (Swingewood 1991: 252–274).

If we are to articulate ‘everydayness’ in the taken for granted sensibilities, traits and ‘ways of doing things’ that are embedded in ties of kinship, authority and senses of (un)belonging, we must remain open to a range and combination of qualitative methods and data collection techniques from the social sciences. This can include (but not be limited to) participant observation, reflective accounts of personal experience, photo-elicitation or detailed descriptors of events or places. Being open to a suite of qualitative methods on data collection is a way to traverse the restrictive boundaries that patrol and control the disciplinary terrains of who is qualified to speak about what. It is a way to retain a level of reflexivity in the embeddedness of the encounter and a certain intellectual discretion when working out how best to animate and lend visceral immediacy to the extraordinary behind the ‘ordinariness’ of everyday lifeworlds. The plural data collection techniques embraced in this volume form an amalgam or collage of research related to the everyday.

* * *

By investigating the everyday in Brunei, there is an opportunity to bring into focus the various ways Bruneians perceive their lives and construct rationales to support their perceptions. It invites us to explore new and different angles of vision and scale. The lives and goings-on portrayed in this volume are relatively undocumented and underappreciated. In a first of its kind, each of the contributions to the volume constitutes a distinct but interrelated case study of the everyday, whose lead authors are local Bruneian scholars, embedded in Brunei society and having access to informants in their social networks. We could say their work represents the interior views of ‘insiders’ with well-honed social science sensibilities. Collectively, the chapters thread together scholarly observations and experiences of life at a range of sites across Brunei over the last 10 years into a weave of continuity, contestation, negotiation and transformation that lends fine-grained texture to our understanding of Brunei society.

The volume is divided into four distinct but interrelated parts covering religious life, gender expression, interpreting space and place, and identity formation in the everyday life of Bruneians, with a total of 14 chapters. The contributions on the social organisation of religious life capture changes in Brunei society and culture as consequences of modernity, bureaucratisation and globalisation. Custom (*adat*) has been an important cultural marker in Brunei but some of its practices in Malay traditional marriage customs have declined, giving way to different forms of accommodation. Somewhat similarly, the formal regulation of what is permissible (*halal*) through the introduction of certification and compliance has meant a period of adjustment for small- and medium-sized enterprises—the mainstay of the domestic economy. The ubiquitous presence of the internet and social media in everyday life is also examined and its impact on the ways in which young Bruneians perform religiosity. Finally, the consumption and choice of food by the Malay Muslim middle class reveal a cosmopolitan lifestyle that is grounded in families influenced by Islamic practices.

The section on gender begins with an ethnographic account of how Malay primary schoolchildren understand gender and become gendered. The work on aging in Brunei illustrates how, as a gendered process, older Malay Muslim women maintain their identity by extending their roles in the traditional family, at the same time finding in religious activity a comforting experience to ameliorate the negative consequences of growing old. The lives of the sultanate's female domestic workers (who play such a significant role in many middle-class Bruneian families) remain largely underappreciated and undocumented. In the chapter on domestic workers from East Java in the Bruneian household, interview data suggest that such work is not only a menial or exclusively oppressive experience but contains aspects of determination, agency, value and empowerment. The discussion of ritual specialists in marriage ceremonies (*pengangun*) highlights the role of women in performing the rituals alongside men; but both have had to adapt to the introduction of Islamic law (*syariah*).

Space and place are a taken for granted reality in everyone's lives, yet they belie a significance that is often given scant attention. In the chapter on Kampong Ayer, the reference point for Brunei's origin, history and culture, they have seen their fair share of embellishment through narratives of national identity largely constructed after Brunei became independent in 1984. Fires, resettlement and development over the years have resulted in displacement and the mobility of its inhabitants. Migrant workers have moved in, attracted by low rents and accessibility to the city. As home and neighbourhood, Kampong Ayer provokes an ambivalent reaction from older generations of Bruneians who have lived there: nostalgia and regret. This leads us to our next piece that examines the significance of homeownership to Bruneians and its links to housing policies, cultural practices and consumption behaviour. In the last chapter of the section, the narratives of Javanese migrants are recounted. By analysing their worldview, captured in the concept of the rite of passage when someone leaves home (*merantau*), these migrants are able to make sense of the uncertainties and challenges that they put themselves through away from home.

No volume on everyday life would be complete without contributions on how ethnic and social identity formation occurs in the sultanate. While official and many academic narratives tend to gloss over the diversity of the local population on the ground, the study of the lived experiences of the offspring of mixed Chinese-Malay marriages foregrounds bicultural practices and the ways in which boundaries and belonging are negotiated. Significantly, for the authors the influence of assimilation has largely precluded the formation of hybrid identities as expressed in other parts of the region. Rather, the bicultural subjects under investigation have to contend more with the 'inbetweenness' of their lives. It is easy to overlook that Bruneians who have been born around the millennium, Generation Z or the zoomers, have a high degree of exposure to the influence and interactions of the internet and social media. In this chapter, a case study of female undergraduates uncovers how their identities are shaped by both bilingual practices and social media language. To conclude the section, a case study of the Iban of Melilas documents how one particular community has negotiated and managed their acceptance as full citizens of Brunei while retaining their Iban identity.

Given the comparatively limited attention Brunei has received from mainstream social scientists working on Southeast Asian societies, the contributions in this volume draw attention to how structures, institutions and processes work their way into and reflect in the lives of ordinary people. They animate the ways in which religion, gender, place, ethnicity, nation-state formation, migration and economic activity operate through complex processes to influence the lives of inhabitants. As mentioned at the beginning, we contend that the ability of a sociology of the everyday to document the banal and daily routine embodied in people's lives—microsocial processes—can mitigate mainstream social science's preoccupation with establishing macrosocial processes and its tendency to privilege prior categorisations and explanatory abstraction. Much gets overlooked. Detailed, grounded fieldwork and engagement with the lives of informants can assist in further deciphering the varied peoples and communities in Brunei.

Our volume does not pretend to provide a definitive or conclusive analysis of Brunei, but rather speaks to contemporary day-to-day existence: its nuance, diversity and ambiguity. This is something that we can inadvertently overlook if we focus too much on social structure and categorisation rather than the everyday relations that form in particular settings. Having engaged and amplified local scholars to speak their truth on everyday affairs that matter to them (not us), the hope is that a window will be opened on interior renderings of life in Brunei that were previously neglected or simply considered unworthy of inquiry. For the editors, it is vitally important to encourage such endeavours, especially when you consider that in the past Bruneians (with notable exceptions as mentioned) were largely omitted from the production and consumption of the very knowledge that putatively sought to represent them. Much of what was deemed important areas of sociological inquiry and thus 'relevant' to and about Brunei and Bruneians was set, for want of a better word, by outsiders. By taking the reader into the lives of Bruneians, we hope the contributions in this volume will allow their everyday reality to speak from more disaggregated and grounded standpoints. The aim is to stimulate thinking on the complexity of contemporary Brunei, at the same time as emphasising the significance of a sociology of the everyday for that task.

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Part I
Everyday Social Organisation
of Religious Life

Chapter 2

Traditional Malay Marriage Ceremonies in Brunei Darussalam: Between *Adat* and *Syariah*



Nur E'zzati Rasyidah Samad

Abstract Brunei Darussalam is an Islamic Malay state well known for its local cultural heritage and *adat* (customs and traditions) that have been steadfastly maintained to this day. *Adat* is considered to be one of the most significant practices that reflects the unique identity and foundation of Brunei Malay society and culture. It is part of what is referred to as '*calak* Brunei', the Brunei mould or way, and has been practised and passed down from one generation to another. *Adat* functions as a social, political and cultural marker of Brunei Malay society. However, with increasing Islamisation, there has been a decline in the performance and practice of *adat*, especially in traditional Malay marriage customs which are in part regarded as religiously incompatible with *adat*. This chapter explores the tensions and contestations between *adat* and Islam in the practices of marriage customs, and documents the various changes and negotiations made to accommodate *adat* within Islamic practices and values.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · *Adat* · Islam · Marriage ceremonies · Contestation · Negotiations · Accommodation

2.1 Introduction

In Brunei Darussalam, culture and religion are intimately connected. *Adat* and Islam act as defining mechanisms for Brunei Malay identity and function as a stable source of reference and a framework to regulate society against the constant shift of modernisation. According to the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports (2017b), *adat* forms an important core component of Brunei Malay history, culture and way of life. *Adat* is regarded as the manifestation of what is referred to locally as '*calak* Brunei', the Brunei mould or way, and has a long history. The importance of *adat* in Malay society can be further illustrated through a well-known proverb, '*Biar mati anak, jangan mati adat*', which means that it is acceptable to let a child die so long as

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long-standing customs and traditions still live on and are upheld by society. This proverb illustrates how deeply rooted and prized *adat* is in Malay norms and values.

According to Badaruddin Othman (2018), Brunei is a '*negara zikir; negara beradat*', which captures the idea of a nation centred on both Islamic devotional acts and the remembrance of God as well as its customs and traditions. Clearly, *adat* is a central element of its national self-image and culture, helping to define its identity, boundaries and morality. However, as a consequence of Islamisation in Brunei, many elements of the traditional lifestyle have been revised and modified to be compatible and aligned with the nation's values and philosophy of being a Malay Islamic monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*), the guiding national principle. Islamisation was further intensified by the implementation of *syariah* law in 2014, which followed on from the proclamation made by the Sultan of Brunei at the time of independence in 1984: 'We are determined to continue to modernise our country while also still keeping faith with the principles and values of Islam' (Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports 2017a). With the implementation of *syariah* law there has been more pressure to reconsider the practice of *adat*. In particular, *adat* has been modified in some significant ways and this has led to a decline of the cultural traditions of the past and ushered in social transformation.

This chapter addresses the tensions and conflict between *adat* and Islam by focusing on traditional Brunei Malay marriage ceremonies. It also takes into account the influence of animism and Hinduism in the performance of cultural traditions. In short, the discussion analyses processes of change, adaptation and negotiation in *adat* in the context of deepening Islamisation.

2.2 Data Collection

This research presented here mainly uses a qualitative approach and draws from both primary and secondary data. This approach was deployed to gain a closer insight into the perceptions and issues raised concerning the practices of *adat* in traditional Malay marriage ceremonies. The primary data and information were collected through a series of interviews with respondents from two generations, representing older and younger groups. Three respondents from the older generation and two respondents from the younger generation participated in the study. Interviews were carried out from December 2017 to February 2018 in three different districts: Brunei-Muara, Tutong and Belait. The locations were strategically selected to identify the differences and variations of marital practices and customs between the different districts. Accessibility to respondents was obtained through snowballing, in which study subjects recruit other subjects from among their acquaintances. In addition, I interviewed two female ritual specialists or wedding attendants (*pengangun*) from Brunei-Muara and Tutong who provided valuable insights regarding the significance of the marital customs practised in the past and present. Participant observation was also conducted in December 2017 and January 2018, mainly in Brunei-Muara and Tutong which were

the two main locations for many wedding ceremonies. Access to fieldwork sites was obtained through wedding invitations. The fieldwork was conducted through social interaction and informal interviews with the people attending the ceremonies.

2.3 Understanding *Adat* and Its Practices

In a pioneering study, Taufik Abdullah (1966) discusses the potential conflict between *adat* and Islam in the context of Minangkabau society in West Sumatra, Indonesia. He argues that the conflict is not a struggle between two distinct social forces, but as a tension within a single social system. Abdullah's work is relevant to Brunei as it deals directly with similar conflicts, and pinpoints the somewhat ambiguous position of *adat* in society. Prior to exploring the conflict between *adat* and Islam, it is necessary to examine the meaning and importance of *adat* in Brunei Malay society.

Based on the research findings, the respondents interviewed had different understandings and interpretations of what they regarded as *adat*. Generally, it could be concluded that defining *adat* does not only refer to the guidelines and regulations of ideal patterns of behaviour, but it also functions as a basic foundation of society which shapes all ethical, legal and social judgments. According to Muhammadrorfee-E Musor (2013: 267), *adat* is referred to as the 'norm in Malay society, being the living law at a certain time in a certain place'. It is therefore considered flexible and 'adaptable to social needs' and context and should not be regarded as fixed and permanent (*ibid.*: 367). This claim is also endorsed by Nurhalimatusyahrah (2015), who argues that *adat* in Malay society does not necessarily only refer to social and cultural habits, usage and traditions but also to rules, decrees and guidelines that control and organise society. Therefore, 'the primary purpose of *adat* is threefold [as it functions for] the protection, regulation and preservation of the society' (Muhammadrorfee-E 2013: 267).

Given the apparent differences in defining the meanings of *adat* and its practices as integral to society, I conceptualise *adat* as a form of 'words in motion'. This term is used by Carol Gluck (2009) to suggest that the meanings and definitions placed upon certain usages of words tend to shift contextually across different times, spaces and societies depending on how they are being circulated in that period. As Gluck suggests, 'Words are always in motion, and as they move across space and time, they inscribe arcs of our past and present' (*ibid.*: 3). In this sense, the term *adat* originally derives from the Arabic word *'āda*, which refers to the ordinary habits, customs and practices that are often not addressed in Islamic laws. In Southeast Asia, the term is used to refer to the variation of local traditions and customs that is usually found in Malay and analogous societies. Muhammad Takari (2014: 1) proposes that *adat* is frequently "synonymous" with the culture as [a] whole'. It is something that could or should not be separated from the Malay way of life as it is considered a stable framework comprising guidelines and reference points for cultural identity, history and everyday behaviour, as in the case of Brunei.

Performing *adat* in society is reinforced through the practice of passing it down from one generation to another. Local customary practices are regulated by the act of conformity to the normative rules, obligations and consequences in order to ensure their continuity and persistence within the society. According to Zainal Kling (1987), the generational concept involved in a cultural practice will eventually become the society's tradition, history and way of living.

According to Mohd Jamil al-Sufri (2003), one of the main contributing factors to a decline in awareness of the importance and structure of *adat* in Brunei is because it is usually not written but is instead passed down directly or indirectly to the community. This view is supported by Muhammadrorfee-E's (2013) study of Sarawak, where *adat* is an oral tradition communicated within the community. As a result, the traditions and practices vary over time so that what is practised is subject to interpretation. Due to its fluidity and variation, misinterpretation and confusion often arise. Mohd Jamil al-Sufri (2003) argues that it is inevitable for new interpretations and assumptions to develop as *adat* is passed down. Shifting meanings and interpretations of practices have an impact in cultivating a sense of appreciation, awareness and importance of performing *adat*.

Norazit Selat et al. (1997: 36) place *adat* as a form of practice that exercises, unites and cultivates kinship relations, while kinship itself is one of the most important bases for social relations. It is through the similarity of culture and practice that individuals are able to create and cultivate a sense of unity and community which will ensure harmony in society. Therefore, in a collectivist society such as Brunei, the Malays accept the importance of performing *adat* in order to maintain and unite family relations. The family is highly regarded and valued as the focal point of the overall social structure. Within the kinship community, the older generation and elite groups take an active interest in maintaining local cultural practices from one generation to the next. One of the respondents, Nor (aged 55), stated:

In the past, those who dared to break or abandon the rules of *adat* and its practices would be subjected to punishment. The punishment was often in a form of a heavy payment such as a dagger [*keris*], a large jar for storing water or paddy [*tajau*], a thin gong [*canang*] and a gong. At that point of time, these items were very difficult to own and therefore were often high in value. Thus the Malay proverb, '*Biar mati anak, jangan mati adat*', illustrates the value of *adat* as equally important and valuable as having children.

In general, according to Hashim Hamid (2003: 67), any Malay family that tries to reduce or abandon any of the customary practices, especially in marriage ceremonies, will have to face the negative judgment and hostile perceptions of the wider community. Many claim that societal pressures and expectations are often what drive people to practise *adat* customs. In particular, social pressure is often felt by those who have or those who wish to acquire high social status. This view was supported by the account of Suria (aged 60), in which she shared that those with a high social status and background often insist on holding and performing all the *adat* in an orderly way to maintain their standing. Being highly regarded by the community, it is expected that their status should also reflect their knowledge, respect and value for Malay practices, manners and identity. Thus, according to Suria, there are no excuses for them to neglect performing *adat* as they are financially able to do so.

In this sense, this observation can be linked to Gluck's (2009) argument that certain uses of words—such as *adat*—have social and political implications that function as a way to organise, mobilise, inspire or exclude. The use of *adat* is thus a form of recognition and used to identify different social groupings. Zainal Kling (1987) argues that Malay identity is contentious. However, through identification with cultural practices and their historical context, one can establish group identity and a sense of belonging. Being one of the most significant of local customary practices, the traditional Brunei Malay marriage ceremony both reflects and distinguishes the identity of the Brunei Malays from other Malay societies. There is thus a strong emphasis on the importance of performing and maintaining *adat* as it is regarded as a core criterion for performing 'calak Brunei', the Brunei mould or way (Hashim 2004: 92). In addition, based on the research findings, the practice of *adat* distinguishes between being a person with culture (*orang yang beradat*) as opposed to a person without a culture (*orang yang tidak beradat*) in Malay society. Being perceived as someone without a culture connotes a negative stigma compared to being labelled as having a culture, which reflects the good morality, knowledge, character and wisdom of a person. Hence, *adat* basically serves to carry significance, symbolic meanings, representations and functions in society. Taking into account its practicality, positive values and acceptance in society, it continues to be practised and is accepted as normative.

In sum, it is relevant to conceptualise *adat* as a 'word in motion' in order to understand the importance and meanings of the practice which shift contextually and culturally. To some extent, the meanings and structure of its practices may also become localised. Based on my observations during the research, many Bruneians do not have knowledge and understanding of local customary practices. As a consequence, *adat* has gradually lost its essence and meaning. However, some groups still insist on retaining these customs and practices out of respect and concern for the wishes of their family and ancestors. Therefore, it could be suggested that the social significance of *adat* in daily life is dependent on the degree of cultural reinforcement and understanding of *adat* in the community.

2.4 The Assimilation of Ideas and Culture

It has been suggested that prior to the arrival of Islam in Brunei in the fourteenth century there were three major ideologies that have shaped and influenced Brunei Malay culture and society: animism, Hinduism and Buddhism. The Malay Archipelago during that period was a centre of significant trading routes and, as a result, there was a great deal of migration and many intercultural marriages. Nor noted:

At that period of time, there were no religious beliefs or institutions. Hence, when other religions came to Brunei, it was relatively easy for the people to passively accept what was being circulated as the degree of exposure and knowledge from other religions at that period of time was also low.

Cultural assimilation and diffusion occurred and influenced many Malay customs and traditions. Victor T. King (1994) argues that between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, Brunei was a historically and politically significant power incorporating and influencing various populations. Hence, various cultural practices and customs from other sources were introduced, incorporated and further modified into the practices of Brunei Malay society. In light of this history of assimilation and adaptation, Yussof (aged 72) suggested:

Logically, no one would actually have any idea on how to perform *adat* or a particular marriage ceremony properly. Thus, through observation and exposure to other cultures, *adat* was created, modified and claimed as belonging to the society. Moreover, it is part of human nature to observe and imitate what they see. Through this lens, individuals are able to learn and understand the consequences of their actions. And to some extent, maybe this is part of the reason why there are similarities and resemblances with other cultures. It is inevitable.

The arrival of Islam in Brunei clearly had a great impact, influencing and challenging the pre-existing beliefs, customs and attitudes of the local population. Islam introduced new values, ideals and perspectives, including concepts of rationality and intellectualism, as well as a community-based system in which individuals had equal status as opposed to a caste-based system of Hindu society. According to Mohd Taib Osman (1984), Islam transformed the lives of the Malays in the archipelago. Most importantly, the transformation was seen to be necessary as Islam should not only be practised on the basis of beliefs and faith but also through all aspects of life including customs and traditions. This view was articulated by the Sultan of Brunei on the occasion of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday in 1984: 'Islam should be practised as a complete guide to the way of living in reference to the prescriptions and proscriptions that have been set by Islamic teachings and values' (Information Department 2018).

Other external influences and interactions have also constantly challenged the cultural heritage and practices of the past, and these interactions have shaped how individuals rationalise their practices. They expose people to the idea that local customary practices and traditions are part of 'backward' cultural practices that are not aligned with the present context and are seen as being old-fashioned.

2.5 *Adat* in Traditional Brunei Malay Marriage Ceremonies

In this section, I illustrate the long-term processes of assimilation by discussing traditional Brunei Malay marriage ceremonies, locally referred to as *adat istiadat perkahwinan Brunei*, one of the most significant customary practices of the Brunei Malays. Yussof remarked:

Marriage is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that should be celebrated with joy and traditions with all members of the family. Marriage marks the end of the responsibility held by the parents which is further passed down onto the husband.

The traditional marriage rites consist of 10 ceremonies:

- *Berjarum-jarum*: the start of the wedding process when parents from both sides meet each other.
- *Menghantar tanda pertunangan*: the groom's side goes to the bride's side and offers rings to signal his real interest, the beginning of a formal engagement.
- *Menghantar berian*: delivering of gifts from the groom's side; the bride may reciprocate in kind.
- *Berbedak siang/mandi*: blessing of the soon-to-be bride and groom, and cleansing of the whole body.
- *Akad nikah*: solemnisation ceremony.
- *Malam berbedak*: the night of applying coloured powders in which family members anoint the bride and groom with a special ointment.
- *Berinai/berpacar*: ceremony of the application of henna.
- *Bersanding*: wedding reception where the couple are recognised by the wider public.
- *Berambil-ambilan*: post-wedding reception where both families get to know each other better.
- *Mulih tiga atau tujuh hari*: the couple move to the bride's home and stay there for three days or seven days, and then to the groom's home and stay for another three days.

These ceremonies illustrate the three important elements that shape Brunei Malay customs and traditions: the ideology or expressions; the cultural materials; and the proper ethics and manners adopted in performing each of the ceremonies. Before the process of entering married life, there are certain rites of passage embodied in local *adat* that should be conducted in order to fully prepare the couple for their wedding day and future life. The Malays believe that for the duration of their marriage ceremonies, both the bride and groom are in a state of 'sweet blood' (*darah manis*) in which they are vulnerable to various sources of harm. *Adat* was therefore created to protect these individuals from harm—either by humans (purposely or otherwise) or by spiritual beings. For this reason, it is strongly asserted that the ceremonies should be practised in the proper order.

Here, I focus on five ceremonies: *berbedak siang/mandi*; *malam berbedak*; *berinailberpacar*; *bersanding*; and *mulih tiga atau tujuh hari*. The details illustrated here are based on Norazah Muhammad and Masnah Amit's *Adat perkahwinan etnik-etnik di negara Brunei Darussalam* (Ethnic marriage customs in Brunei Darussalam, 2014) and an unpublished study by Ahmad Daudy and Syamsul Bahri Tanrere (1993) which provide descriptive overviews of traditional marriage ceremonies. The information on details, functionality and symbolic meanings of customs and materials involved in these ceremonies were mainly gathered from my field observations and interviews with the older generation respondents and *pengangun*.

2.5.1 Berbedak Siang/Mandi

Berbedak siang/mandi is considered to be the opening ceremony of the official wedding week. The ceremony is usually held separately for the bride and groom. It is this ceremony that indicates that the bride and groom have successfully entered into the precautionary (*berjaga-jaga*) phase that often signals the start of their prohibition (*pantang larang*) week. At the start of the week, both the bride and groom are not allowed to go outside of their home. Suria noted that it is the *pengangun* who has full control of the couple. In addition, during this week, the bride and groom will be required to dress in white until the end of the ceremony. Curious to understand the symbolic meaning of dressing in white, I asked my informants the motives and reasons behind this practice. According to Yussof:

It is a must for the bride and groom to wear white during this week. It functions as a way to mark which [ones] are the bride or groom of the house. White is also symbolic, it represents purity and cleanliness. Marriage is regarded as similar to stepping into a new rite of passage. Another way to explain is that dressing in white is symbolically similar to how women veil themselves in a white prayer cloth [*telekung*] to pray.

Suria added:

White represents purity and cleanliness. Many brides and grooms are encouraged to keep track of their food intake during this week. It is preferable that they eat enough eggs and milk. Actually, it's not only the way they dress, but food intakes, interactions and movements of the bride and groom will all be regulated and controlled.

From the *berbedak siang/mandi* ceremony onwards, the bride and groom are regarded as the king and queen of the day (*raja permaisuri sehari*) during which time they are pampered by the *pengangun* and their family members, and strict disciplines and regulations are imposed on them.

During the *berbedak siang/mandi* ceremony, the bride or groom are called out to the centre of the room and asked to sit on a special woven patterned fabric known as *jongsarat*, used most often for royal occasions and weddings. The bride or groom are surrounded by four candles that are lit prior to the start of the ceremony. The act of applying aromatic powder (*memaliti bedak*) is first given to the elders of the family (*orang tua keluarga*) as it is considered an act of paying respects to them and receiving blessings from them. This is followed by other family members who attend the ceremony. Later, the *pengangun* finishes the ceremony by taking the bride and groom back to their room to complete the act of cleansing, scrubbing and bathing the whole body. This act is regarded as a symbolical way to replenish the individual's blessings, happiness and fertility upon entering a new phase of life with their spouse. According to Suria, the residue of the scrub (*lulut*) from the bodies of the bride and groom is collected and mixed, and then kept by the representative of the family until the end of the wedding ceremony. In some practices, it is believed that the residue of the bride or groom could be used in many harmful ways against the couple and so should be dispersed or buried. In a different practice, the residue is collected and mixed together at the end of the ceremony as it is believed this will strengthen the relationship of the couple for a lifetime.

Later, the bride or groom proceed with the bathing ritual performed by the *pengangun* who are accompanied by five or seven children dressed in colourful shawls (*selendang*) on their shoulders, each holding a lit candle. The candles are then collected by the *pengangun* to be blown out by the bride or groom after the bathing rituals. The bathing rituals include water that is mixed with wood of the whiteflower albizia (*langir*), Key lime (*limau nipis*), and different kinds of flowers such as jasmine (*bunga melur*) and gambier (*bunga gambir*), which have been properly mixed and recited over by the *pengangun* prior to the bathing ceremony. While bathing the bride or groom, the *pengangun* also recites spells (*bacaan jampi*) as part of completing the ritual act to cleanse the outer and inner parts of the body.

2.5.2 Malam Berbedak

A similar ceremony to the *berbedak siang/mandi* called the *malam berbedak* is also held at night. On this occasion the bride and groom are dressed in traditional Brunei Malay clothing and adorned with ornaments made from gold, such as headdresses (*tajok* and *ayam-ayam*), which are tied with a black cloth or to the hair to prevent them from falling, decoration for the nape of the neck (*karong tembusa*), a comb (*sisir*) that is slipped into the hair, an elaborate, butterfly-shaped necklace (*kancing*) and many others. In addition, most brides are dressed in red and often their faces are covered with a cloth until they reach the wedding stage (*pelaminan*). The bride and groom are asked to sit on the stage as the powdering ceremony takes place.

According to Yussof, seven coloured powders and a potpourri of flowers (*bunga rampai*) are prepared for the *malam berbedak* ceremony. These seven colours symbolise the seven layers of the sky, earth and rainbows. The powdering ceremony is usually initiated by the elders, followed by the other invited guests. Suria said that proper ethics and manners are observed during the powdering act. This refers to the importance of using the ring finger to dip into the seven powders and applying them to the forehead of the bride and groom as a way of increase their glow (*menaikkan seri muka pengantin*).

Later, the potpourri of flowers is scattered all over the bride or groom signifying a form of blessing and the end of the powdering act. The bride or groom are then brought back to their room. Specifically for the bride, the *pengangun* proceeds to perform the phase called *adat masuk pengangunan* in which the bride is seated in the middle of the elders. A candle is lit by the *pengangun* and passed to those surrounding the bride. The bride is later asked to put her arms around the *pengangun* and she is led around the bridal bed three times. To signify the end of the initiation, the bride then blows out the lit candle. This *masuk pengangunan* phase is strictly observed to signify a period of control and regulation for both the bride and groom. This is mainly because they have completed all the initiation rituals and customs and are regarded as being in a state of purity. According to Suria:

In the past, the bride or groom would be restricted from leaving their rooms. This is because the *pengangun* feared the risks of harmful things that may happen to them. Many individuals were devoted to black magic practices back then. There was even a competition between them to display their skills and knowledge to the public. The wider society often feared these people which thus offered them some kind of status, privileges and respect from the community. Marriage is often one of the most common occasions in which these practices are tested out. In addition, as the initiation and customs are completed, leaving the home or room is also believed to be able to cause the bride or groom miserable consequences [*libas* in the Bruneian dialect] as they are often regarded as 'attractive' and 'sweet' to be followed and harmed by spiritual beings.

2.5.3 Berinai/Berpacar

The *berinai* or *berpacar* ceremony is usually held in a small gathering attended by close family and friends. In this ceremony, the bride and groom are pampered by their family members when each of them take turns to put henna (*inai*) on their hands and feet. Applying henna is considered to be a significant part of the wedding practices as it is regarded by many as an indication to others that they are married. According to my informant Emah (aged 62):

Other than to cleanse and purify the bride and groom, applying a mixture of henna is also regarded as a form of protection. This is because the bride and groom are considered to be in a state of 'sweet blood' [*darah manis*] and therefore often an attraction to be followed or harmed by spirits.

According to Nor, the application of henna is similar to that found in Indian cultural practices. Today, many brides add decorations to their hands making it even more similar to the Indian wedding style. These decorations, according to Nor, might cause religious issues as the practice is closely associated with Hindu society and culture. However, Osman (aged 45) disagreed, believing that wearing henna is similar to the practice of Arab society and he regarded this as part of the beautification and decoration permissible to Muslim women.

2.5.4 Bersanding

The wedding reception itself (*bersanding*) is usually a grand affair attended by both families, relatives and friends. It is considered to be the second main event after the solemnisation ceremony (*akad nikah*) as this is the time when the bride and groom are united and presented together in front of all their families. Both are dressed in full traditional Brunei clothing and walk together to the wedding stage (*pelaminan*). Then a spiritual man guides the groom and performs the three circles of a dragon (*pusing naga*) ritual before he goes onto the stage towards his wife. According to Yussof, this ritual has its significance in the practices of the past since, as already noted, the bride and groom are believed to be in a state of sweet blood. By performing

this ritual, the harmful things that have been following them will eventually disappear as they are distracted. In another respect, Osman said that this practice is performed to give extra time for the bride to prepare herself before meeting the groom. On the other hand, Nor compared the similarity between this ritual and the Hindu practice in which both the bride and groom walk around circling a fire.

2.5.5 *Mulih Tiga atau Tujuh Hari*

The Malay term '*mulih*' refers to going or returning back home. In this context, the *mulih tiga atau tujuh hari* ceremony refers to the day that the groom is expected to bring home his wife after their third or seventh day of staying at his wife's house. According to Suria:

In the past, the purpose of this ceremony was often used to mark the third or seventh day of the newlyweds' marriage. It is the day that the family members await as the main highlight of this ceremony is to announce the state of purity of the wife publicly to the other family members through the use of a white cloth (*kain lapik pinang*) that is delivered along during the previous exchange of gifts (*menghantar berian*).

2.5.6 *Summarising Wedding Customs*

There are a number of interim conclusions that can be drawn from this description of some of the most important traditional Malay ceremonies. First, the ideas and ideologies adopted in the marriage customs and ceremonies very much relate to the natural environment and spiritual beings. This can be witnessed in the need to follow the prohibition (*pantang larang*) week, the recital of spells (*bacaan jampi*), the use of henna (*inai*), the practice of scrubbing the body (*lulut*) and many other examples. The main purpose of these customs and rituals is to safeguard those individuals, notably the bride and groom, from any sources of harm through the natural and spiritual callings. In earlier times, a large proportion of the Brunei Malay community lived near to forests and rivers (Ramlee 2009). In such circumstances, they learned to adapt, survive and reason with their spiritual interactions with nature. This helps explain why the ideology, expressions and rituals involved in the *adat* of traditional marriage ceremonies seem to relate to nature and spiritual beliefs in significant ways.

It is true that the ideas adopted in these customs do, to a certain extent, resemble the pre-existing beliefs of animism and Hinduism. Animism is based on a belief in the efficacy of supernatural and magical powers in nature such those contained in plants, animals, the weather and other phenomenon. According to Mohammad Rahman (2001: 23), in such a small-scale community, these beliefs were functional as they provided a sense of direction and purpose for the community to live their lives. Therefore, with the existing knowledge and beliefs acquired by the community in the past, such practices and traditions were created to safeguard the individuals involved

in marriage ceremonies with the assistance of the *pengangun*. As Mufidah Abdul Hakim (2014) stresses, *pengangun* hold an important role in performing as well as maintaining rituals and customs involved in marriage ceremonies. They acquire knowledge and skills that guard and protect the bride and groom from any source of harm. Their acquired knowledge and beliefs, drawn from the ancestors, have formed the basis of customs and rituals performed in marital ceremonies today. Nonetheless, some question whether such traditions, derived from a pre-Islamic past, are still relevant in a contemporary society that is now thoroughly Islamicised. In this regard, Osman commented:

The knowledge, purpose and rationality of past practices may not be relevant at present as the contents and structures were often formed on the basis and reasoning of the state of society and its conditions. Therefore, it might be difficult to justify and rationalise everything with reason as the past practices rely heavily on the knowledge, purpose and values held by our ancestors and they may no longer apply or fit into our present context.

2.6 *Adat* and Islam in Brunei Darussalam

Given the ambiguities expressed in relation to some of the rituals, there are a number of *adat* in the marriage ceremonies that are regarded as irrelevant and incompatible with current Islamic practices (Ahmad and Syamsul 1993). This section examines the potential and actual conflicts and tensions between traditional customs and Islam in contemporary Brunei.

There is a remarkable quotation cited in an article written by a representative of the Office of the Secretariat of the Malay Islamic Monarchy Supreme Council that proposes that local customs should cause no conflict with the practices and beliefs of Islam: '*Adat bersendikan syarak, syarak bersendikan Kitabullah*' (*Adat* is based on and united by Islamic teachings and laws, Islamic teachings and laws are based on and united by the Qur'an) (Muhammad Melayong 2016). At present, this is the principle held by many individuals concerning *adat* and its practices, and receives endorsement by the official state agency authorised to regulate Islamic affairs. According to Ahmad Dusuki Abdul Rani (n.d.), specifically in a Malaysian context, the understanding and usage of this *adat* have caused confusion and have helped create diverse views and interpretations. He makes the case that Islam does not entirely prohibit what is considered as *adat*.

Nonetheless, from a religious perspective, some of the customs and rituals performed during the marriage ceremonies are regarded as sensitive and even incompatible with Islam. As we have seen, rituals and customs performed by the *pengangun* are considered to be the most important in the entire marriage ceremony as they serve not only to protect the bride and groom from harm but are also a manifestation of the knowledge and ritual power of the *pengangun* (Mufidah 2014). As Syed Husin Ali (2008) points out, this could partly explain the reason for conflict as some individuals may put their faith in the supernatural world and depend heavily on the power of the *pengangun* for assistance and protection.

In addition, the recitation of spells during the initiation process in most marriage customs is also regarded as deviating from and being incompatible with the beliefs and teachings of Islam. This is because the recitation involves a form of worship in acquiring protection from spiritual beings. Furthermore, there is also constant physical contact between the *pengangun* and the bride and groom. In Islam, it is strictly prohibited for Muslims to have intimate contact with non-family members, particularly between those of the opposite sex. Rituals such as bathing involve such contact.

Amran Kasimin (1989) notes that Malay marriage customs have similarities to practices found in India. These similarities were fully acknowledged by my informants, especially those associated with the exchange of gifts (*menghantar berian*) and the wedding reception (*bersanding*). For instance, Indian Muslims also apply henna as part of their marriage beautification customs. On the same day as this ritual, the foreheads of the bride and groom are also dabbed with turmeric powder which signifies fertility and protection from any harm. As part of the rituals, the elders also assist in cleansing the body of the couple using turmeric and scented powders; this is usually done in front of all the family members. This practice is similar to that of *berbedak siang/mandi* as, for Indians, it also marks the beginning of the prohibition week.

From an Islamic perspective, the application of henna for men is regarded as no longer acceptable, as beautification is only permitted for women. Suria also noted that the use of henna in the past was believed to be a form of identification of marriage in the hereafter, which contradicts the values and teachings of Islam. Other practices such as publicly announcing the state of virginity of the bride are also abandoned as they may put the couple and their families at risk of shame and humiliation. Such personal and private matters are now kept confidential.

According to Syed Husin Ali (2008), the Malays do acknowledge the incompatibility and consequences of their actions and beliefs. However, they justify such cultural practices as a means of assistance and protection. Further, any potential conflict between *adat* and Islam may only arise if the belief in the supernatural world supersedes the belief in Allah. In any case, Ahmad Dusuki (n.d.) contends that one of the basic assumptions about *adat* and Islam is that they are closely connected and basically synonymous with one another. As a consequence, many Malays believe that performing these cultural practices is compulsory (*wajib*) and must be fulfilled as part of their duty as Muslims. To reinforce the point, Syed Husin (2008) argues that these practices are deeply embedded in Malay life and organisation, part of the normative worldview. Many of my respondents pointed out that their main concern is not with the possible conflict between *adat* and Islam, but with the decline in *adat* practices which may weaken the bonds of kinship relations and social institutions.

Some scholars suggest that modifying or redefining of *adat* may not necessarily be negative since it could help to preserve the cultural heritage of Brunei. *Adat* is no longer regarded as fixed and permanent but is actually the product of a process of negotiation between religious and cultural practices as well as between traditional and modern practices. In the course of time, modern practices of wedding rituals have been transformed in response to economic and social conditions. This issue was

raised by the State Mufti Department which warned that the extended celebration of marital customs and ceremonies was too lavish, and should be avoided from an Islamic perspective, since they could lead to waste (*membazir*) and may also encourage haughtiness (*riak*) among the individuals involved (Syed Husin 2008: 59; Hasrulaizan 2013). On this issue, Amirah (aged 30) said:

One of the main reasons why many young couples today decide to delay their marriage intentions and plans is due to the high financial expenses involved in a Brunei Malay marriage. The costs involved in the preparation, completion as well as the list of dowry exchanges could also be impractical. In addition, most of the financial burden and responsibility is largely placed on the groom. Besides this, the groom has to also worry about paying special requests such as *adat tabus bangsa* [dowry from the groom to the bride if the bride's family is of a higher rank/title than the groom] or *adat langkah dulang* [payment from the groom to the bride's unmarried older siblings]!

For her part, Sarah (aged 23) said: 'This form of ceremony is seen as burdensome as some families may not be financially qualified or stable to present such expected gifts'.

2.7 Negotiating *Adat* and Islam in Traditional Marriage Ceremonies

In this section, I highlight the changes that have occurred in traditional marriage ceremonies which reflect the processes of negotiation and adaptation that have taken place between *adat* and Islam in Brunei.

2.7.1 Berbedak Siang/Mandi

Noted as being the opening ceremony of the official wedding week, many families today include a recitation of the Qur'an (*khatam al-Qur'an*) as part of the *berbedak siang/mandi*. This ceremony indicates the completion of the recitation of the Qur'an by the bride or groom, with members of the family also participating. Amirah commented:

At first, I was quite against the wishes of my parents as there are already so many ceremonies to go through. However, when my mother explained that this ceremony holds an Islamic significance, I complied with their wishes as the main purpose of this event is to ask for Allah's blessings and mercy upon the completion of my ceremonies.

In addition, since the *berbedak siang/mandi* is often held on Friday, it seems appropriate to include the recitation of the Qur'an, since Friday is significant in Islam as being the best day of the week (*penghulu segala hari*).

Referring back to the main practices of this ceremony which involve the act of powdering and cleansing of the body, the respondents were in favour. Most of them

understood and accepted the positive function that this ceremony holds, which is to pamper and prepare the bride and groom before their big day. The act of cleansing the bodies is regarded as acceptable as long as the *pengangun* avoids skin contact. However, according to Suria: 'Some families now also take the initiative to take over the role of the *pengangun* and perform it. The *pengangun* will only assist and guide from afar'. Suria further explained that the items used during the initiation, such as the mixture of waters and aromatic materials, were the only ones readily available in the past and were believed to be beneficial in cleansing, scrubbing and giving a pleasant scent to the bodies of the bride and groom. Therefore, due to the benefit that they hold, the materials are still widely used today.

In addition, Emah noted that after the recent implementation of *syariah* law, many *pengangun* are also advised that it is best to avoid the reading of spells as their recital is incompatible with the beliefs and teachings of Islam. *Pengangun* are recommended to replace spells with verses from the Qur'an. Furthermore, according to Amirah, the order of initiation often depends on the decisions made by the *pengangun*. She said:

Based on my experience, the *pengangun* I had did not request any children to accompany me during my bathing or cleansing rituals. The reason was because, according to my *pengangun*, it is not important to perform such practices today as it is believed that such practices were done due to the lack of electricity in the past and therefore children were needed to accompany such custom.

However, Suria presented a different view. She said the participation of children was regarded as crucial as it could indirectly function as a way of passing down the knowledge and experiences of local Malay customs as a way reviving the cultural memories. Sarah stated that a few of the *berbedak siang/mandi* that she attended were held at night instead of the afternoon. One practical reason is that most individuals have to work in the afternoon and thus it is more convenient to hold the ceremony at night.

2.7.2 Malam Berbedak

Adaptive practices are also found in the *malam berbedak* ceremony. Based on my fieldwork, many families today consider chanting phrases or prayers in order to remember God (*zikir*) and salutations to the Prophet Muhammad (*selawat Nabi*) to accompany the whole initiation ceremony. Invited guests no longer have to apply powder to the foreheads of the bride and groom but do so on the palms of their hands as this is seen to be more practical and appropriate. In addition, Yussof noted that many families today prepare brushes made out of screw pine (*pandan*) or lemongrass (*serai*) leaves which are used to dip into the powders and apply them on the bride's or groom's palms, thus avoiding skin contact.

2.7.3 Berinai/Berpacar

According to Amirah and Suria, the *berinai/berpacar* ceremony is still being actively practised. Amirah said that, although this ceremony is similar to some Hindu and Buddhist practices, the application of henna to women is still widely accepted as part of the marriage ceremony as it is believed to cause no conflict with Islam. Sarah commented:

I think it is partially because there was no such thing as a nail polish back in the olden days. I think this might be the closest that we can adorn and beautify ourselves on our special day.

Suria said:

Although it is not mentioned anywhere in the Qur'an, it is stated in the hadith that Islam encourages women to wear henna as a form of gender identification that distinguishes men and women. However, it is important to note that men are not allowed such practices, as beautification is peculiar to women and Islam prohibits its followers to imitate the opposite gender. Therefore, many men today do not wish to participate in such practices anymore.

In other words, the *berinai/berpacar* ceremony is only practised by women at present. Men no longer associate themselves with the application of henna.

2.7.4 Bersanding

Based on the number of wedding invitations received, the *bersanding* ceremony still holds its importance as the closing of the wedding week. It is the only day when all family members, relatives and friends have the opportunity to see the couple officially as husband and wife, so everyone invited tries to attend. Brides are advised to cover themselves with a *hijab* and not wear revealing clothes that might upset religious sensitivities.

Many *bersanding* today are held in rented halls, with ceremonies modified to fit the surroundings. According to Nor, some families still perform the three circles of a dragon (*pusing naga*) ritual, particularly when the ceremony is held at home. However, the practice has changed in that the groom is no longer required to recite spells when performing the act. The groom is advised to replace these with the readings of verses from the Qur'an and praises to Allah. Based on my observation, when the ceremony is held at a rented hall, many families no longer perform the three circles of a dragon ritual. In addition, many respondents also emphasised the importance of having a pure motive in performing these customs and rituals. For as long as the intention is clear, for the sake of Allah and none other, it is acceptable to perform such customary practices.

2.7.5 *Mulih Tiga atau Tujuh Hari*

The *mulih tiga atau tujuh hari* ceremony has lost importance. It is seen as inappropriate and irrational to announce such personal and private matters to the public. For example, Nor stated that this could cause harm and shame for the family. Moreover, many of the newlywed couples go for a honeymoon right after their *bersanding* and so such a ceremony is no longer relevant. Nor, however, disagreed on the timing of the honeymoon:

By right, it is not appropriate to leave your family right after the end of your wedding ceremony. It is important to be considerate of your family's feelings, and most importantly, those of your parents. My advice is to return back to the parents' house first and then go for your honeymoon. This is the reason why *adat* is important. It helps to hold, nurture and educate the character of an individual.

2.8 Conclusion

The research presented here addresses the issue of the resilience or decline of *adat* in traditional Malay marriage ceremonies. Traditional customs and traditions in Brunei have been shaped historically by a number of external influences, including those of animism and Hinduism, so that there were three stages of change and adaptation. First, the early influence of animism left an impact on Brunei Malay culture and society. Second, the arrival of Hinduism in the first millennium CE helped to cement the basis of existing belief and structure. And third, the arrival of Islam in the fourteenth century initiated changes in and negotiation between *adat* and Islam, so that they have been able to coexist to some extent.

Two well-known Malay proverbs—‘*Biar mati anak, jangan mati adat*’ and ‘*Adat bersendikan syarak, syarak bersendikan Kitabullah*’—offer a rationale for the need to maintain both culture and religion. It is clear that Islam has become the most important contributor to the transformation of culture in Brunei and, as a result, *adat* has in some senses gradually lost its significance. This is because Islam encourages right conduct and correct practices that should reflect and be aligned with the prescriptions and proscriptions of the religion. However, not all cultural practices associated with *adat* are prohibited in Islam. Indeed, *adat* still retains its own social significance. In other words, Bruneian Muslims at present live by the idea that local customs should cause no conflict with the practices and beliefs of Islam, a notion that reminds them to keep their actions and practices aligned with their Islamic religious faith. In relation to traditional marriage ceremonies, they are governed and practised today by dynamic processes of negotiation and adaptation between the traditions associated with *adat* and the practices authorised by Islam.

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Chapter 3

Halal Certification in Brunei Darussalam: Bureaucratisation in Everyday Life



Siti Norfadzilah Kiffi

Abstract This chapter examines the ways in which halal is regulated and practised in Brunei Darussalam by highlighting the process of halal certification and the recent enforcement of the Halal Certificate and Halal Label (Amendment) Order 2017. The analysis considers the impact this has had on the local food and beverage industry, particularly micro, small and medium enterprises. By comparing halal certification in Brunei with Singapore and Malaysia, the chapter identifies the operational concept used to regulate halal in Brunei, namely permissible, good and hygienic food through *halalan thayyiban*.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Halal certification · *Halalan thayyiban* · Micro, small and medium enterprises

3.1 Introduction

Hygiene and cleanliness are both strongly emphasised values in Islam. These values comprise every aspect of personal hygiene, dress, and the equipment and premises where food is manufactured and processed (Wahab 2004). Halal means ‘permissible’ and ‘lawful’ in Arabic, and halal is commonly understood to entail the ritual slaughter of animals and a prohibition of the consumption of pork (Fischer 2011: 1). According to Baker Ahmad Alserhan (2011: 54), halal ‘indicates a product that is prepared according to the Shariah principles and using Shariah-compliant ingredients and processes’. Moreover, the term *tayyibat* refers to ‘purity, wholesomeness and lawfulness’ (*ibid.*). It can also be defined as the goods and services that are *syariah*-compliant by which the consumption of these commodities will lead to the ethical and spiritual wellbeing of consumers.

Since the 1990s the increasing significance of food preparation and prohibitions in Muslim societies reflect the interplay of Islam, politics and markets (Fischer 2011: 4).

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In recent years, Brunei Darussalam has taken serious measures towards the certification of food products as halal, and standardisation has been introduced in phases since a speech by the Sultan of Brunei in 1998 on the importance of halal. The significance of the most recent legal framework, the Halal Certificate and Halal Label (Amendment) Order 2017 (HCHLO), is that it emphasises the compulsory participation of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to apply for halal certificates and the use of correct labelling and logos (Brunei Darussalam 2017). This chapter examines the ways in which the regulation and practice of halal in Brunei compares to Malaysia and Singapore. It pays particular attention to implementation and enforcement under the 2017 order. The discussion suggests that halal certification and labelling are not only part of a local food quality and hygiene standardisation process but also a means to compete in the lucrative high-end international halal industry.

3.2 Methodology and Data Collection

This chapter adopts a broadly qualitative approach to garner respondents' perceptions and experiences of current halal regulation and practice in Brunei. Respondent data were collected from a range of sites including relevant authorities, professional experts on halal and interviews with owners of MSMEs. I also attended several local halal seminars and roadshows and collected further information from news outlets and government publicity on the HCHLO. Interviews with six MSME respondents were conducted predominantly based on semi-structured interviews. The questions for the MSME respondents focused primarily on their views about the enforcement of the order and the challenges they encountered in complying with the procedures to obtain halal certificates, labels and logos. All the respondents are name-coded with pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity.

3.3 Halal Certificate and Halal Label (Amendment) Order 2017

The implementation of compulsory halal standardisation on all food and beverage businesses forms part of a development strategy towards Brunei Vision 2035 (Wawasan Brunei 2035) (Izni Azrein 2016: 79). In 2017 the halal certification and labelling provisions targeted MSMEs. The HCHLO announced in May of that year requires all food and beverage business operators—specifically those who produce, supply and serve food—to apply for halal certification. They were given a grace period until November 2017 to comply (Azli 2017). The HCHLO covers all businesses 'dealing with consumption products ... such as restaurants, food factories or home-based food [businesses]' for Muslim customers (Azaraimy 2017). The halal

Table 3.1 Amended halal permit charges according to business scale classification

No	Classification/industry	New rate
1	Micro	BND5 for each product
2	Small	BND150 for every 20 products
3	Medium	BND300 for every 20 products
4	Macro	BND700 for every 20 products
5	Multinational	BND1,000 for every 20 products

Source Rasidah (2017)

certification is separated into two categories: the halal permit (label) applies to businesses that manufacture and produce food for supply; and the halal certificate applies to those who prepare and serve food in establishments or premises, hawker stalls and restaurants. The HCHLO also imposes a penalty for failure to comply within the grace period of up to BND8,000 or two years' imprisonment. The key difference between the HCHLO and the previous Halal Certificate and Halal Label Order 2005 is that the latter introduced voluntary compliance while the former is now compulsory for businesses engaged in the preparation, production and distribution of food. A BND90 fee is charged for the halal certificate which is valid for three years, while the cost for the halal permit was initially BND50 per product. With the amendment, the validity of the permits also changed to only three years while previously they were valid for life so long as no changes were made to the products. Businesses are now required to reapply when the permit expires. In December 2017 an official announcement by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) revised the charges for halal certification and the halal permit in order to accommodate the size and scale of businesses that manufacture and produce food (Rasidah 2017). The fee charged for certification remains at BND90, while the revised fees structure for permits is shown in Table 3.1.

3.4 Situating Brunei's Halal Certification Comparatively

Southeast Asia is home to more than 260 million Muslim consumers. Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia are at the forefront of halal certification and other countries in the region like Thailand and the Philippines accept their certification (Riaz and Chaudry 2003: 169). According to Florence Bergeaud-Blackler et al. (2016: 9), Brunei's neighbours, Malaysia and Singapore, are examples of model countries that are leading in the halal market globally, and their governments 'have become increasingly and explicitly committed to an indirect supervisory role in halal and audit [that] is both a solution to a technical problem as well as a way of redesigning

the practice of government'. The certification process involved in halal food and food products requires the implementation of new standards for halal production, preparation, storage and enforcement in keeping up with the demands of a globalised market for halal products. Standards and standardisation cover production, preparation, handling, storage and relevant authorities. It also includes 'persons with certain qualifications, knowledge or skills' (*ibid.*). As such, the process of standardisation involves an interplay between the tenets of Islam, state certification and markets.

The discussion here on standardisation and the involvement of state authorities is drawn from Malaysia and Singapore, two countries leading the rest of Southeast Asia in the global expansion of the halal market. The state in each of these countries is responsible as the halal-certifying authority, meaning that they have largely 'certified, standardized and bureaucratized halal production, trade and consumption' (*ibid.*: 8). To do so, Malaysia and Singapore have passed and implemented certain laws and guidelines for halal food production applicable not only to imported products but also food products manufactured for domestic sale (Riaz and Chaudry 2003: 51). The following sections detail similarities and differences between the current systems in operation in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei.

3.4.1 Halal Certification System: Malaysia

In the 1970s global food establishments such as franchised outlets and imported food producers started to become established in Malaysia, exposing Muslim consumers to more options. This led to consumer demands for halal assurances on all the products they consumed. As a result, the Malaysian government enacted laws and established procedures and guidelines with regard to halal food, and applied these to both domestic and imported items. Under the Trade Description Order (Usage of the Term 'Halal') 1975, it was an offence for any company to falsely display signs and other labels claiming the food sold was halal. Such enactments were gradually instituted over the next few years, until a general agreement to gazette a proper halal certification scheme was reached. This had been preceded by the Research Centre of the Islamic Affairs Division of the Prime Minister's Office issuing halal certification letters from 1974, with the authority to monitor food suppliers, the producers, distributors and importers. The importance of the work of the division was then given recognition in 1997 with the establishment of a new Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, JAKIM). Under its authority, all halal certificates for meat and poultry must be issued and signed by any Islamic organisation approved by JAKIM. In addition, prior to the importation of all processed food products to Malaysia, the halal certificates for products must first be recognised by JAKIM (*ibid.*: 52).

As Johan Fischer (2011: 2) points out, JAKIM regulates halal at the interfaces between consumer culture, the institutions of the state and Islamic revivalism. Among the deeper structural reasons for the rapid increase of halal certification were steady economic growth over the past 30 years and the increasing number of Malay Muslim middle-class consumers with higher disposable incomes. Moreover, by having its

own certifying bodies Malaysia has unequivocally elevated halal production, trade and consumption (*ibid.*: 41). The transformation of halal in Malaysia can also be traced back to the Islamic revivalism movement in the late 1970s. The rise of divergent proselytisation (*dakwah*, literally ‘invitation to salvation’) groups, together with the criticisms of the Islamic opposition party Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), contested the secular foundations of the state and challenged the ruling United Malays National Organisation’s (UMNO) policies that leaned towards secularism (*ibid.*: 35). The emergence of the Darul Arqam religious sect in the mid-1970s, which was later labelled ‘deviant’, was also seen as a threat to the establishment. Darul Arqam ‘followers ... [engaged] in an ascetic’, self-sufficient lifestyle that renounced Western luxuries and modern amenities (*ibid.*: 34). They cultivated a range of halal food products in several parts of the country. However, since Darul Arqam was regarded as a sectarian organisation, it was banned in 1994 by the National Fatwa Council. The UMNO government then took an alternative way to ‘aggressively [engage] in a reconceptualization of consumption that [envisioned] the amalgamation of Malay ethnicity, consumption practices, and Islam’ to pre-empt these Islamic revivalists (*ibid.*: 34–35). In other words, the activities of Islamic revivalists provoked the state to ‘nationalise’ Islam. As a consequence, Malaysia has strategically employed halal as ‘a material sign of Islamic credentials and to allay concerns of excessive secularisation. In fact, halal is promoted as bridging the religious and the secular, as an example of the compatibility of the ethnicized state, modern Islam, business, and proper Islamic consumption’ (*ibid.*: 36).

In establishing its own halal-certifying authority and standardised practices, Malaysia aspired to become a world leader in the expanding global halal market. In accordance with the country’s halal vision, the former prime minister, Abdullah Badawi, claimed that Malaysia aimed to become a global halal hub and so the standard MS 1500:2004 was introduced as ‘an international benchmark for the certification of halal products’ (*ibid.*: 37). Moreover, Malaysia is portrayed as a model country in having drafted procedures in food processing and the export-import trade, represented in its systemization and standardisation of halal certification (*ibid.*: 38). At present, there is considerable political will to promote Malaysia as a producer of halal food internationally, and this indicates a major shift towards an expanding global market.

3.4.2 *Halal Certification System: Singapore*

As Fischer (2016) and Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir et al. (2010) both detail, Singapore has also successfully penetrated the global halal market over several decades. Although Singapore’s domestic market for halal products and services is relatively small compared to that of Malaysia, its ambitions were to become a leader in the global halal market. As Fischer (2016: 36) notes, ‘the marketing and regulation of halal in Singapore is to a large extent [driven] ... by transformations in the global market for halal that took place from the 1990s onwards’. Like Malaysia, Singapore

passed specific laws and established halal guidelines and agencies to certify halal products. Halal services are usually organised by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, MUIS) which was established in 1968 (Faizah *n.d.*). Issuing its first halal certificate in 1978, MUIS is the sole authoritative body in Singapore in monitoring imported meat (including poultry) and meat products whose halal certification it must approve.

Other than ensuring that imported products are halal-certified, MUIS is involved in facilitating the halal food trade through other activities such as certifying local exporters prior to exportation of their products to the global halal market. MUIS is also entitled to certify local establishments as well as participating in forums on the standardisation of halal certification (Fischer 2016: 175). MUIS's role was enhanced in 1999 when the Singapore parliament passed an amendment to the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA). Through this amendment, MUIS was given sole authority to regulate, promote and enhance the halal business: 'to administer matters relating to the Muslim religion and Muslims in Singapore including any matter relating to the Haj or halal certification' (Singapore 1999). There are a number of government agencies liaising with MUIS in halal enforcement, most notably the Singapore Food Agency in the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment. In 2009 a further amendment to the AMLA was passed with specific reference to halal certification in which the false display of halal logos or fake MUIS logos is considered a violation of the law (Fischer 2016: 180). Under Section 88A (1) of the AMLA, for example, any person who misuses the halal certificate or falsely displays halal certification without being approved by MUIS is guilty of an offence that carries a significant fine of up to SGD10,000 or one year's imprisonment (Kamaludeen et al. 2010).

Despite Muslims constituting a relatively small minority in Singapore, state regulation through the authority of MUIS to ensure the 'halalness' of particular food is efficient with a high degree of compliance. As Fischer (2016: 190) notes, halal training plays a crucial role as it helps embed awareness, understanding and knowledge of standards and standardisation in halal practices.

3.5 Halal in Brunei

3.5.1 Halal Food Control Division

In Brunei, the Halal Food Control Division (Bahagian Kawalan Makanan Halal, BKMH) is one of the units under the Syariah Affairs Department of MORA. Its role is to control and handle the oversight of halal food products in the country, including for restaurants, the food and beverage industry, food stalls and other similar establishments. This includes products intended for the local market, imports and exports that want to use the official halal logo of the Islamic Religious Council of Brunei (Majlis Ugama Islam Brunei, MUIB).

The BKMh was established in response to a speech by the Sultan of Brunei in 1997 in which he stressed the importance of halal and instructed relevant governmental bodies to take action (Prime Minister's Office 1997). Initially, the BKMh was primarily concerned with meat regulation under the enactment of the Halal Meat (Chapter 183) law of 1998 (Brunei 2014). The promotion of halal led to the Halal Certificate and Halal Label Order 2005 but it took almost three years to complete the standard guidelines with the first audit operation in 2008 (Brunei Darussalam 2005). Halal-related matters in terms of preparation, food handling and site auditing are carried out solely by the BKMh except if relevant officers from other departments are needed for audit efficacy purposes. For instance, members from the Department of Agriculture and Agrifood can be called to join the audit if it involves inspecting premises involved in food production. If the audit is of pharmaceutical products or cosmetics, both the BKMh and the Pharmacy Section from the Ministry of Health will be involved.

3.5.2 *Piawai Brunei Darussalam*

National standards are covered by the Brunei Darussalam Standard (Piawai Brunei Darussalam, PBD) (on the Brunei Standard, see Ministry of Finance and Economy n.d.). This aims to provide comprehensive national guidelines in areas such as performance, service, systems, processes and products. The national standard on halal food—PBD 24:2007—is the general guideline or manual for halal food, that is, what is permitted under the authority of MUIB (MUIB 2007a). The standard covers general guidelines on the production, preparation, handling, distribution and storage of halal food, and makes clear that in its preparation references were made to a range of other national and regional best practices, including: the Halal Certificate and Halal Label Order 2005, Malaysian Standard MS 1500:2004 on halal food, the State Mufti's *fatwa* of Brunei Darussalam, the Halal Meat Act, the ASEAN General Guidelines on the Preparation and the Handling of Halal Food, and the Guidelines on the Control of Muslim Consumption Goods and Foods, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore.

The PBD 24:2007 manual provides mostly practical guidelines for the food industry on the preparation and handling of halal food and also some essential definitions. The standards are used in conjunction with the laws of Islam (*hukum syara'*) and *mazhab Shafi'i* (Shafi'i jurisprudence) implemented in Brunei and any other relevant standards and guidelines recognised and passed by the then Energy and Industry Department of the Prime Minister's Office.¹ Under PBD 24:2007, halal

¹ The Energy and Industry Department was upgraded to the Ministry of Energy and Industry in 2018, and then restructured in the same year, and renamed the Ministry of Energy, Manpower and Industry. In 2019, the non-energy industry portfolio—including the food and beverage industry—was subsumed under the restructured Ministry of Finance and Economy.

food is defined as that which is fit for human consumption and permitted by law. The necessary conditions to follow include:

- (a) the food or its ingredients that do not contain any parts or products of animals that are non-halal to Muslims according to *Hukum Syara'* or products of animals which are not slaughtered according to *Hukum Syara'*;
- (b) the food does not contain any ingredients that are *najis* [polluted] according to *Hukum Syara'*;
- (c) the food that is safe and not harmful;
- (d) the food that is not prepared, processed or manufactured using equipment that is contaminated with things that are *najis* according to *Hukum Syara'*. (*ibid.*: 7)

The manual emphasises the importance of hygiene, sanitation, sanitisation and food safety in preparing halal food, while inspectors to oversee compliance are appointed by MORA. Much of the content of PBD 24:2007 is fairly similar to that of Malaysia's standard inscribed in MS 1500:2004. Having said that, respondents indicated that although PBD 24:2007 may function as the national standard for Brunei, the Guideline for Halal Certification (BCG 1) and Guideline for Halal Compliance Audit (BCG 2) are the most accurate standards for the BKMh to follow (MUIB 2007b).² These documents specify precise guidelines on the proper procedure and conduct of audits along with the preparation requirements for all applicants. PBD 24:2007 is more applicable to food factories and industrial production, whereas food establishments such as food premises and restaurants largely come under the auspices of both BCG 1 and BCG 2.

3.6 Impacts of Halal Certification on the Food and Beverage Industry

3.6.1 The Respondents

There are limited studies on the effects of halal food standards implementation for the food and beverage industry in Brunei (Izni Azrein 2016). This section examines the impact of the HCHLO in particular by drawing on interview data from a range of respondents who work in the industry. Diana's company was among the first companies to be officially certified as halal in 2008. She has established six restaurants and her food production includes both packaged products and specialist traditional crackers. Diana had experience of applying for both the halal permit and halal label. Anita is an employee of the Brunei Halal Foods brand of Ghanim International Corporation and a forerunner of the halal food industry in Brunei. The brand was established in 2009 with the aim of becoming the platform for the development of local MSMEs and providing market access support internationally. Kevin is a local

² Interviews were conducted with several officers of the BKMh who deal with halal certification and halal labelling from application and site auditing to certification and follow-up audit.

Chinese business operator selling ice cream in the Brunei-Muara district. He runs a showroom at a local hypermarket. The business manufactures ice cream products at their kitchen near their showroom in Gadong. Rose is a home-based online seller who supplies desserts and cakes to shops. She applied for both the halal logo and halal certification in 2017. Alique works for a government agency during the week and operates a stall on weekends to generate extra income. He had not yet applied for halal certification.

3.6.2 Halal Certification and the Halal Logo

According to Diana, although halal certification and the halal logo are new, the process associated with them has been gradually developing over the past 10 years. She expressed support for both initiatives in that they prioritise cleanliness and hygiene regulation for food handling and preparation. For Diana, food-related businesses have been expanding in Brunei, and this has raised concerns over hygiene and cleanliness and the responsibilities of vendors. She noted that halal certification would help reduce doubts among consumers. She explained that the function of certification is similar to barcode verification, in which products from overseas can be traced to the manufacturer.

Anita agreed that the production of halal food by vendors at the moment is fairly open and unrestricted. The HCHLO is the first phase in regulating the food industry. Its aim is to facilitate its development and not to burden people. According to her, this is necessary because the value of the Brunei Halal Foods brand is reliant on its ability to ensure the trustworthiness of the process. Nonetheless, Anita was aware that enforcement does present challenges:

I do think it is a good idea. However, of course as usual the government has limited resources. So sometimes when it is implemented, it is not implemented in phases, they just directly announce and expect people to comply immediately. But so far, I heard, people were initially unclear about what this means for their business. But I think now in the past few months that MORA has done a little bit more of communication in terms of what this means for their businesses. It has got a lot clearer. For us, as food manufacturers, we always have to follow the standards, the process of having our products certified within 45 days and the fact that we have to follow. So, it's not been a problem but it's not also a problem for our MSMEs, because we work with a lot of MSMEs where we take a lot of their products.

Anita also noted that many local MSMEs were not ready to expand overseas, and Brunei food industries were still largely reliant on imports.

3.6.3 What is Halal? Between Practice and Certification

For BKMH officers, halal in Brunei encompasses the notion of *halalan thayyiban*, which encapsulates what is permissible, good and hygienic in food products. Halal,

accordingly to Alique, involves ritual slaughter of products like poultry and meat and it is easily identified from the label and logo commonly on display in local shops. Alique and his wife sell traditional delicacies and asserted that everything they sell is entirely halal starting from the raw ingredients and meat used in cooking and preparing the food. Alique claimed to only purchase necessary items for food and consumption in local shops unlike other vendors who might use items smuggled across the border from Limbang or Miri in Sarawak. Although there are significant price differences between the two, Alique insisted that it is his responsibility to provide customers with the same halal food he consumes. He prefers to purchase things from local markets as he trusts the control of halal in Brunei:

Since our business is entirely based on halal, we do not buy things from outside. Besides, the question on the halalness of the things we buy from outside is doubted. We buy things locally, and we keep the receipts of our purchases in case there is a sudden inspection. If so, we can justify to the inspectors where we get our things from, they are from local stores. But there are some among the same vendors like us who would just go for easy option. I don't want to be nosy and it's their business, but some would actually just sneak them here. Yes, I do acknowledge the price is cheaper there compared to the local markets. Well, you're lucky if you don't get caught, otherwise you'll be fined. So rather than risking fines, the efficient way is just to buy things here where the halalness and cleanliness are guaranteed.

Similar to Alique, Kevin expressed that applying for halal certification is not only about the ritual slaughter of products, but also concerns hygiene and cleanliness of the premises as denoted under *halalan thayyiban*.

Somewhat differently, for Rose, halal is not only about hygiene but the processing and production of halal food entirely by Muslims. She cited several cafes that display halal certification but their cooks are non-Muslims. She maintained that this makes people question whether halalness is linked exclusively to certification or actual ethical practices. From Rose's perspective, if food is produced by Muslims, it is halal even though it is not officially certified. Having said that, for Rose halal is well regulated in Brunei. The authorities encourage people to sell food that is halal and maintain the quality and hygiene of consumer products.

3.6.4 Limitations of Halal Certification

As Diana noted, prior to the announcement of the new pricing structure for halal certification, she had only paid BND50 per product. She thought the new pricing scheme is costly because food sellers still need to renew their certificate once every three years. According to Diana:

This is what I face at the moment, the ingredients we had applied previously had already been approved, and imagine after three years they inform you that 'we have to reject this ingredient because it's not approved' and it's a bit of a hassle for us because we have to find the ingredient to replace the declined one, and of course it's a bit tedious work and time-consuming. Why do I say so? Because for us business operators, we have to entertain the government agencies, yet some of the procedures need to be improved because we have to go to the stores again and do several investigations on our own.

Diana supported the introduction of more stringent requirements in halal certification, but she had some reservations regarding the government's aim of encouraging business start-ups through the 'ease of doing business' initiative:

Ease of doing business means not really too much of leniency but you can give-and-take. Don't be like 'die die you must do it, die die you have to change'. Same goes for halal certification. Well, for me it's good, but it's supposed to be more friendly and easy for users. We can apply for it online so that we don't have to go here and there to apply, we can just check in the system, and the payment procedure too. The payment procedure for me is very ridiculous, once you get a call to receive the letter that your application is approved, you are told to come to the old building to get the letter and go upstairs and make payment and ... for me it's just not convenient for senior citizens, they would complain. Why don't they just make it easy to do payment via online? Moreover, if they are planning to upgrade the system, just make sure the server is not slow.

Kevin also expressed concerns about the way new certification requirements will pose considerable difficulties for those involved in micro businesses such as hawkers:

My opinion is, I mean it's good for the people so we don't have to worry and it's just that I thought the process could have been done a little more efficiently and helpful. For our products, I'm not worried, because we go and do it and we apply for it. We adhere to what is advised and required and even did the amendments that are necessitated. But other thing on my mind, although it is none of my business, but I worry about those hawkers in Brunei, how are they going to survive? Just look at the night market [*pasar malam*]. You can't possibly ask them to list down all the ingredients. To ask them to apply, yes they can when someone is doing it for them and that means money, right? So I mean, to us it's not inconvenient, because we want our products to be halal certified so we went to do it, but for them they might have this mindset 'I'm already a Muslim, I know what I buy is definitely halal so what we prepare is indeed halal, so why do you want me to apply for the halal cert?'

The use of a halal certification logo that identifies the country of origin of the product is welcomed throughout the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region. However, having been in the business both locally and internationally, Diana mentioned that the Brunei halal logo has not yet achieved the same level of international 'brand' recognition as other more well-established logos (Fig. 3.1).

Fig. 3.1 Brunei's halal logo.
Source World Halal Authority (www.wha-halal.org/de/)



For Diana, it would be a real achievement if Brunei were able to penetrate overseas markets, but brand recognition of the Brunei halal logo remains limited:

Our Brunei halal logo is not well known unfortunately. If you bring our Brunei halal logo to the European market, they won't be able to recognise it, but if you bring our Brunei halal logo to Indonesia and Malaysia, they would definitely know that the marking indicates Brunei. So for me, the halal logo in Brunei is still lacking in comprehensive awareness. The government authority should develop awareness to the global [market], not only Asia or throughout the region of BIMP-EAGA [Brunei Darussalam–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area] because I could say Brunei is already strong in the archipelago region area. We should cater the Muslims outside and let the taste of Asia be known outside our region when, in fact, Brunei is among the first countries to regulate halal in the ASEAN region.

Diana was nonetheless more positive that Brunei would actually stand to gain a lot if its halal logo and products were brought to the international market. She highlighted a lack of awareness and the practice of international markets to place more emphasis on Good Manufacturing Practice certification and the Halal Compliance Critical Control Point analyses.

For Anita, the halal standard of Brunei is quite strong, but she also recounted an example of when Ghanim International tried to penetrate Middle Eastern markets where they thought the Brunei halal logo would have traction. When they promoted the Brunei Halal Foods brand, problems arose in dealing with the rules and regulations of particular countries. Anita noted:

Some countries do not accept our company's brand because it has not been registered, for example, so those are the impediments that we find in terms of market access. For example, in Dubai, it took us one year to penetrate into the Middle East because of all the regulations for the recognition of Brunei Halal Foods brands officially into their system. It's not there yet. So, like what Malaysia did or JAKIM, they are very aggressive in terms of the registration of their logo's recognition. So we haven't done that yet, so we feedback this to the government agencies because we are backed by government, and we are a government company anyway, and now they are taking note on where are the target markets for Brunei, not just Ghanim itself, but the whole of Brunei. So they are looking at the registration process into these countries for recognition so that companies who wanted to go and trade, it makes it easy for them to trade—it's all about money. Our halal is accepted, it's just the recognition is not there yet, the official recognition. Our halal brand, the Korean and Chinese are interested with our halal brand because they know our halal is trustworthy, and it gives them peace of mind so they don't mind paying millions for it. That is the value of our halal actually.

According to Anita, halal certification in Brunei was previously not particularly profit oriented. However, she believed that the authorities are paying more attention to the halal market as a lucrative investment:

Comparing our halal certification in Brunei and the process to other countries, I would love to say our country doesn't take ours seriously. Because for us we don't have commercial interest towards it. So in a way it gives you as a Muslim a peace of mind, that what I eat is safe for my consumption. Whereas for other countries, there is an urgency to grow so in a way leniency is there. Malaysia has a different way of approaching it; they understand business. But in Brunei, our government to be honest has just begun learning how to understand business. How to understand the difficulties that businesses faced, and only now are we having dialogues on business. Formerly we didn't.

3.7 *Halalan Thayyiban*: A Question of Quality and Hygiene

And eat of what Allah has provided for you [which is] lawful and good. And fear Allah, in whom you are believers. [Qur'an, Al-Mā'idah 5:88]

O mankind, eat from whatever is on earth [that is] lawful and good. [Qur'an, Al-Baqarah 2:168]

During the Second International Seminar on Halalan Thayyiban Products and Services in 2017 (SAPPAT II), co-organised by the then Energy and Industry Department at the Prime Minister's Office and concurrently held with the annual Brunei Halal Showcase (BruHAS) at Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali, one of the invited keynote speakers stated that halal must go hand in hand with *tayyib* (Prime Minister's Office 2017). He defined *halalan thayyiban* as pure and good, respectively, and said that these two aspects are inseparable in achieving a general standard or system for halal products. As Bergeaud-Blackler et al. (2016) note on standards and standardisation, the terms are associated with several meanings, including the qualities of products comprising production, preparation, handling, storage of halal and the authorities involved. In this sense, *halalan thayyiban* is about ensuring high-quality products for the halal market. Respondents from the BKMH viewed *halalan thayyiban* as generally relevant and applicable to Brunei. Several officers highlighted the BKMH's initiatives to exclude certain items that are passed and certified as halal by JAKIM but not by the BKMH. Some commodities may be considered halal but remain unhygienic as clearly indicated in PBD 24:2007, which emphasises hygiene, sanitation and food safety. According to the respondent Rose, *halalan thayyiban* is relevant to vendors. She claimed that 'halal is more to hygiene terms', especially in handling food. She believed that cleanliness comes first in terms of food preparation. Once the halal certificate and halal logo are approved, continual surveillance audits of the applicants' premises will also be carried out at regular intervals. In short, the halal certificate and halal logo are part of standards and standardisation, while *halalan thayyiban* acts as a medium for the halal quality required in the market.

3.8 Conclusion

Although halal is not new in the Bruneian context, the emergence of an officially regulated halal industry is a fairly recent development supported by the government's compulsory halal certification and halal logo or permit scheme where halal quality is demanded. Data findings reveal that religion, state involvement and markets are closely interlinked in understanding the emergence of halal certification in Brunei. As this chapter highlights, halal is now viewed as a profitable investment. Brunei has begun to follow Malaysia and Singapore into the multibillion dollar global halal industry and compete with other Muslim and non-Muslim countries for a market share of this lucrative industry. Enforcement of the halal certification and halal logo scheme not only serves as a means for Brunei to tap into the global halal market, but it has also

‘provided a systematic way of strengthening food security and safety’ (Bergeaud-Blackler 2016: 107). Although implementation has not been without challenges for local vendors, Brunei’s adherence to and incorporation of *halalan thayyiban* into its standards and guidelines are allowing the country and its businesses to carve a niche market position as a purveyor of high-end quality products.

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Chapter 4

Youth Religiosity and Social Media in Brunei Darussalam



Siti Mazidah Mohamad

Abstract The development of digital technology has led to transformations in our everyday lives and, as a result, produced new practices and new spatialities. Young people at the heart of these transformations display unique forms of religiosity that are somewhat different from that of their parents' generation. This chapter examines young Malay Muslim Bruneians' lived religiosities in the context of their everyday engagements on social media. They question markers of religiosities, are cautious about self-disclosures, and negotiate and challenge intergenerational and intragenerational pressures. Their lived religiosities offer up microgeographies of young people's religiosities, and throw new light on contemporary youth religious culture and the broader sociocultural and religious development facilitated by digital technology.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Young people · Lived religiosity · Islam · Social media

4.1 Introduction

Intensification in the use of digital technology has led to the creation of new communication practices and new religious spaces, and has transformed religious practices globally. There has been a growing interest in the intersections between digital media and religion in the work of scholars in the humanities and social sciences since the late 1990s, and among the earlier studies is an analysis of engagement with virtual spaces or cyberspace that has altered our understanding and practice of religion (see, for example, Hoover and Clark 2002; Lawrence 2002; Højsgaard and Warburg 2005; Lövheim 2007; Horsfield and Teusner 2007; Campbell 2007; Teusner 2015; Campbell and Teusner 2015; Cloete 2016). During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the introduction and rapid rise of social media sites created new spaces and contexts where users have framed their religiosities, understanding what being religious means and modifying their religious landscapes. At the centre of these

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transformations are young people, who are the predominant users of these digital media and technology, particularly social media sites. Young people are seen to have consumed and shared religious resources and expressed their (non)religious self on social mediascapes. Such media practices facilitate the religious expressions of young people. Despite these observations of the active engagements of young people, their online religiosities are underexplored, particularly within the subfield of geographies of young people and geographies of religion (van Blerk 2019; Olson and Reddy 2019).

The examination of young people's everyday lived religiosities through the circulation, exchange and reproduction of religious content in new spaces created by social media is more pertinent today. It is particularly relevant in Brunei Darussalam, a Muslim-majority country where Islam as the official religion is institutionalised and embedded in everyday social and cultural practices. Being a Muslim is closely tied to the ethnic identity of being Malay. The country has a remarkable internet and social media penetration rate: 95% and 99% of the total population respectively in 2021 (Kemp 2021). The high rate of participation in social media has impacted on the lives of young people, including their religiosities. Religiosities are understood as the 'embodied experience of religion or the belief, practices, and relationships that individuals or collectives produce while constituting the sacred and the secular' (Olson and Reddy 2019: 459), and are expressed through behaviour and practices. This contemporary youth religious social mediascape begs the question of what form of youth religiosities can be observed in these new communication practices and spaces. Are these religiosities in contestation with the practices of existing predigital religious institutions? Can we expect to see fewer performances of religious identity in exchange for more secular everyday practices? What form will youth religious culture take in these new spaces?

This chapter examines Malay Muslim Bruneian lived religiosities in the context of their everyday engagements on social media. It offers a microgeography of young people's religiosities influenced by both local and global developments, and how contemporary youth religious culture is shaped. Despite observing more religious expressions of young people in the country through their self-disclosure on social media sites, many others are reluctant to reveal their religious identity and are questioning the markers of religiosities. As Malay Muslims in Brunei, they must negotiate the expectations of their peers, parents and the wider Malay Muslim community. In this regard, religiosities are both individual and communal. Their portrayal of religiosities depends on their aspirations, their negotiation with the community's expectations (intergenerational and intragenerational), and the infrastructure of and accessibility to social mediascapes, which can be liberating yet confining. I argue that despite the common observation that young people are less religious and the growing displays of religious transgressions on their social mediascapes, they shape their religiosities in ways relevant to their lives, which do not necessarily indicate a lack of piety. In the penultimate section of this chapter, I offer a reflection of youth religiosities and youth religious culture of Malay Muslims and the sociocultural and religious transformations of Brunei society.

4.2 Young People's Lived Religiosity and Digital Media Engagement

New religious practices have been discussed extensively in growing scholarly engagements on religion and digital media from ritual studies, geographies of religion, material culture, studies focusing on the representation of religion, to performance of religiosities. Morten T. Højsgaard and Martin Warburg's (2005) edited volume *Religion and cyberspace* was one of the first to examine interactions in cyberspace, covering broad religious traditions, diverse apps and methodologies. Meanwhile, Heidi Campbell's (2013) edited collection *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*, although not focusing specifically on young people, offers an overview of young Muslim and Christian individuals' engagements with the new media. Geographers have recently called for more studies on young people's religiosities in the online context (van Blerk 2019; Olson and Reddy 2019) to add to the already existing body of literature on geographies of youth and religion (Holloway and Valins 2002; Hopkins and Pain 2007; Vanderbeck 2007; Hopkins et al. 2011; Siti Mazidah 2014; Hemming 2016). There is also a strong presence of research on young people, religion, and popular culture and digital media from other disciplines (Weintraub 2011; Lyden and Mazur 2015; Janmohamed 2016; Kamaludeen 2016).

New religious practices and presentations of religious identity, particularly on social media sites, are intricately linked with the notion of self-identity development, self-exploration and self-expression through active or passive self-disclosure. With the growing use of social media sites, young people are sharing religious-related information and self-reflections, which may be intended as personal reflections (Siti Mazidah 2018a, 2018b). While analysing such changes in young people's religious practices, we need to consider the transformation beyond the individual to the institutional and micro level to meso level. One example is the transfer of authority of religious sharing from institutions to individuals (Campbell 2007; Campbell and Teusner 2011). In the pre-social media era, the public relied on officially appointed individuals from religious institutions to disseminate information. However, the power to create and circulate content, including religious content, is now in the hands of the users, made possible by Web 2.0, which began to be developed around 2003–2004, which enabled user-generated content and facilitated a more participatory culture.

Globalisation, transcultural flows and the consumption of popular culture are continuing to transform young people's understanding and practice of religiosities. With the rise of digital content creators (such as social media influencers and micro-celebrities), a different landscape of youth religious culture has surfaced, piquing academic and public interest in how religiosities are (re)produced (Islam 2019; Siti Mazidah and Nurzihan 2021). Within the Southeast Asian region, the rise of young qualified Islamic scholars (*ustaz, ustazah*) and women who wear head coverings (*hijabi*) as microcelebrities or religious influencers using digital media exemplifies the transfer of religious authority, young Muslims' performance of religiosity, and their engagement with digital media and popular culture. These *hijabi* and religious

microcelebrities/influencers use their everyday lives, struggles and engagements with their audiences to create religious content relevant to young Muslims, rather than any formal religious education.

Eva F. Nisa (2018) and Annisa R. Beta (2019) have demonstrated how religious social media influencers in Indonesia, through their everyday sharing of religious content in the form of self-reminders and proselytisation (*dakwah*), can influence the religious landscape of the country. Elsewhere I have argued that *hijabi* celebrities such as Vivy Yusof, although not a religious influencer herself, are able to promote *hijab* wearing among the Muslim women in the region (Siti Mazidah and Nurzihan 2021; Siti Mazidah 2021). In contrast to the expectation of Muslim women to maintain modesty, *hijabi* microcelebrities/influencers are reframing what modesty and the *hijab* mean for them. This reveals different forms of religious practices which are embedded in the everyday life of social media users. From the audience's perspective, we can observe a different form of religious consumption. The audience does not rely solely on mass-produced information by religious institutions or bodies (such as schools or religious classes), but instead look to material they willingly consume by following these (non)celebrated religious individuals. In such a situation, one's religious or spiritual journey is relatively individualised through the selective consumption of religious content.

Brunei's youth religious landscape is a good example of the changing demographics of religious agents and the transfer of religious authority. We continue to observe and appreciate young Bruneians as new (certified) religious agents such as Ustazah Hanisah Othman and Ustaz Khairul Nazif. Their *dakwah*, delivered in English and Brunei Malay, and sometimes with humour, are relatable to everyday contexts and young people's experiences. For example, Ustazah Hanisah, using her personal Instagram profile, performs relatable *dakwah* between her everyday postings. There are also young people who work individually and collectively on Instagram to remind Muslims of their responsibilities and duties: @nashihat4qalby, @matters.oc and @cm.adam. Similarly, young globalised Muslims in Singapore and Sydney are circumventing local constraints and contesting the religious and cultural teachings and expectations of the older generation. Their rereading of Islam does not render them 'as either "liberal" or "conservative"', but represents their lived and everyday experiences (Kamaludeen 2016: 4). These young Muslims offer lay and lived everyday religion, which may or may not be in contestation with the official institutionalised religious practices. Consequently, young people's engagement with religion today markedly contrasts with that of the older generation and the expectations of official institutions. I am not suggesting a decline in the authority of religious institutions, but rather wish to draw attention to the diversification of the sources of religious information, transmission and consumption, as well as a rethinking of religion and religiosities and religious expression enabled by the new digital communication spaces.

As I have noted elsewhere, it is essential to study individual religious experiences at a micro level, particularly in the online context (Siti Mazidah 2014). The use of those sites and experiences is individualised. These analyses offer more nuanced insights into young people's religiosities, spatialities and cultures. Over two decades

ago, Lily Kong (2001: 408, 410) asked three questions that are still relevant today, concerning technology, religion and space. First, how has technology changed and facilitated new religious practices? Second, how has religion harnessed technology? And third, ‘how will geography and place [contribute to] ... the reproduction of religion as rituals’ transform? The first and third questions are relevant to the discussion in this chapter on young people’s lived religiosity and digital media engagement. The current practices we observe on social media sites, websites, blogs and video-sharing sites are examples of how technology has changed and facilitated new religious practices. They are utilised to share religious knowledge, portray a religious self and create new religions.

As these new practices become rituals conducted day in and day out, sometimes subconsciously, what we understand as religious space/sacred space is no longer the same. Digital media provide the spaces that Kong (*ibid.*: 405) calls techno-religious spaces: ‘Technological developments have opened up new spaces of religious practice—or “techno-religious spaces”’. For scholars of geographies of religion, mass broadcasting via television and radio as well as physical offline spaces are considered to be these new religious spaces. However, virtual or online spaces in their sociocultural and religious contexts have yet to be conceptualised as a techno-religious and lived space. Lived space is usually examined in the context of social, cultural and political concerns of everyday life (Worth 2015), and by geographers studying young people’s offline spaces and what it means to be young in specific locations (Hopkins 2010). The notion of lived space is relevant to how technology has changed religious practices and how geography and place figure in the reproduction of religion, and what youth religiosities have emerged from these new communication practices and spaces. Youth religiosities may be further examined by focusing on space and place as the site of self and identity—fluid, relational and contingent (Valentine 2007; Worth 2015; Hemming 2016; Olson and Reddy 2019). As mentioned in the introduction, young people’s digital media use and their online spaces have not been unpacked well enough yet to fully understand their religiosities.

4.3 Researching Young People’s Religiosities

Since 2014 I have developed an interest in the religiosity of young Muslims in Brunei. This was sparked by the PhD research I conducted from 2010 to 2014 on the cultivation and performance of the cosmopolitan self on Facebook by Malaysian Malay Muslim students while studying in Britain. The complexities and nuances of the respondents’ everyday lives revealed interesting conceptions of the religious self, online and offline lived religiosities, and their embeddedness in cosmopolitanism (Siti Mazidah 2014). The insights from this research led me to question what forms of religiosities could be observed in Brunei. In this Muslim-majority state, Islam is accepted as a way of life visible in the day-to-day practices of Malay Muslims, particularly in light of the implementation of *syariah* law introduced in 2014 (Department of Information 2014).

Although I concentrated predominantly on the online space, the mutually constitutive aspects of online and offline environments require both spaces to be analysed. The observations conducted on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and, very recently, TikTok are guided by a number of factors: what young people post on social media; the specific religious content they post; how the audience responds to the religious content young people share; what is shared on different social media sites; and the changes in the content shared over time. Over the years, I have observed a growing number of religious postings by young Bruneians and dedicated profiles, which have contributed to the sharing of religious content and creating a religious communal presence on the social mediascape. To further obtain insights into the young people's thoughts, practices and experiences, I discussed my observations with students in my undergraduate modules. I used an online discussion, qualitative content analysis (QCA) and conversations with a few young people to inform my investigation.

An online discussion page was created on Canvas, a learning management system, for students enrolled in one of my undergraduate modules. These students are young people between the ages of 21 and 25. Several key questions guided the discussion: What are the students' thoughts of young people's religiosities? Do they portray their Muslim identity in the online space? What are their reasons for (not) sharing religious content or displaying the religious self on their social media sites? Fifty-three discussion entries were recorded, and only entries from Malay Muslim Bruneians are included in the analysis. Permission to use their entries was obtained before the discussion was posted online. While facilitating this online discussion, I was concerned that the presence of other Malay Muslims in the discussion space may discourage them from freely expressing their views. However, I found the students to be upfront and open with their opinions and experiences. Forum discussions have been used in religion and digital media studies (Tsuria et al. 2017), and such platforms have also been known to offer respondents a relatively accessible space to examine personal issues (Im and Chee 2006). Respondents have more time to formulate their opinions and contribute to what others have shared on the site. The key findings from the online discussions include their search for a religious identity and its markers, realisation that social and worldly matters distract young people from dedicating themselves to Islam, intergenerational and intragenerational tensions that need to be negotiated, and a lack of in-depth Islamic knowledge affecting their portrayal of a religious self.

The findings from the observation and discussion are used as guides for the QCA. The QCA was conducted to obtain content specific to religious sharing and how young people (individuals and groups) portray their religious self online and was categorised into three parts. The first was on individual and community Instagram and Twitter profiles dedicated to spreading Islamic belief and practices. The second was on random young people's profiles to obtain an idea of what content is circulated on the sites while the third was on random postings that are relevant to young people's thoughts on religious practices online. Conversations with a few young people to obtain deeper insights into their online practices and religiosities have also been conducted to supplement the two main methods.

While observing the burgeoning sharing of religious views by young people on social media sites, I have found that there are Malay Muslims who have never shared religious content on social media and others who have kept it to a minimum. My research findings do point to a growing religiosity among young people, while noticing young people who openly display religious transgression. Living in a country where the majority of society are Malay Muslims, I expected greater expression of a religious self. Interestingly, my respondents indicated that they are quite reluctant and cautious with sharing religious practices or portraying a religious self for several reasons. The reluctance or caution in expressing their religious selves on social mediascapes are important issues discussed in the next section. This reluctance to openly portray their Muslim identity online is linked to the growing uncertainty with what religiosity entails today, the differences in intergenerational and intragenerational religious expectations and practices, the opportunities social mediascapes offer for their presentation of identity, and their everyday social interactions with others on the sites and in the offline environment.

4.4 Questioning Religiosity and Managing Moral Policing

These young people's online presence becomes performative with the growing intensity of self-disclosure evident in the amount of information posted on social media sites. Their social media presence is not just about disclosing their everyday activities, likes or dislikes, and what they think. Instead, these disclosures collectively become their identity markers of how other people view them. In this context, being a good Muslim is not an individual and personal matter that remains only between oneself and Allah. The notion of a good Muslim is linked with the idea of maintaining one's religious identity in both online and offline spaces. One cannot present a self that is religious online but portray a different self offline or vice versa. The nature of the online spaces such as the persistence of information on the sites, the social reach of the information, the search functionality of the internet allowing for one's information to be located, and the replicability of data through copying, pasting and screen capture makes one's online presence permanent (Boyd 2008). Unlike offline and face-to-face self-presentation, which are temporal, the online self remains accessible indefinitely. Information shared on these sites can be retrieved later.

Apart from the nature of the online space, their audience, predominantly Malay Muslims, expects their image to be consistent in both spaces. Constructing and maintaining one's identity in the online space is not a straightforward task. Brunei is a Muslim-majority country with a close-knit community where people consider themselves related to one another via marriage or blood. There is a strong connection between culture and religion in which Islam is embedded in Bruneians' everyday social and cultural practices. A Muslim religious identity is often conflated with a Malay ethnic identity. Religious transgressions are often taken as culturally transgressive behaviour. In such a context, religiosities that should be personal become a collective and cultural concern. An individual is thus conscious of a consistent

self-presentation. The respondents expressed concern about being criticised as hypocritical. Such expectations from the audience and the sites' accessibility discourage these young people from sharing religious information and presenting their Muslim selves on the sites. One's online presence becomes interpersonal and must be carefully managed to avoid misunderstanding and judgment, especially by other Malay Muslims.

What arises from this concern of maintaining one's religious identity is the question of what religiosities entail. To this end, self-comparison, assessing what other Muslims are doing, and questioning markers of religiosity and piety are common. When asked what these young people think about their religiosities, one respondent replied by asking what is needed to present oneself as a Muslim. If we are not sure of what religious practices are used to measure religiosity, what does it mean to be religious? Often, the expectations of being a good Muslim are questioned and contested.

Despite knowing the audience's expectations in one's presentation of the Muslim self, they insist on not displaying their religious identity for several reasons. First, there is a fear of being judged in case they are unable to maintain their religious or Muslim identity, as the following discussants disclose.

In my opinion, yes most young people are expected to be less religious. But *what does being religious mean?* Is praying five times a day considered as religious? What if someone does fewer religious activities such as looking at inappropriate things online but still prays five times a day? Would that be religious or not? (Discussant, male)

I didn't want to be seen and categorised by people as being a more religious or less religious type of person. It is very complicated to me because being seen as either could make people misunderstood, make assumptions or treat me differently. Mainly because *the fear of being judged* too. If I seem to look or act religious, someone might say 'You did [these] religious activities, praying and all these but you forgot to cover your intimate parts of the body that must be hidden from the view of others [*aurat*], etc., how could you not know these things? Are you being fake religious?' or they pointed out some of my actions or flaws that could affect my self-esteem. (Discussant, female)

The answer is no, I don't really see me portraying myself as a religious figure on the internet. There is no definite reason behind it. However, one of the reasons that I can think of is that to be someone who is 'religious' I need to be someone who is perfect in every aspect. Because, in the eyes of society, these religious people are regarded as [perfect beings], someone who doesn't make mistakes, someone who does good in every action, etc. One small mistake and these people are already *clicking in their phone, bashing the keyboard on these people's weaknesses*. We live in a judgmental society and we are bound by it. In the end I just keep a religious image of me for myself to see. (Discussant, male)

Second, they are conscious of their lack of knowledge about Islam and being called out. Admitting their lack of in-depth knowledge of Islam, the respondents are not ready to show their religious self or at least their understanding of Islam for fear of being criticised as ignorant and lacking in religious knowledge. The young people I spoke to commonly say or write, '*I'm not religious*'. This declaration acts as a defence mechanism to safeguard themselves from the scrutiny and expectations of their peers.

I don't usually portray myself online as I felt that it *is an act of showing-off* that I'm a good or pious person, far better than anyone else. Back then, I used to share religious postings online. However, I felt that *I'm not fit to do so as there are still spiritual flaws* that require me to improve myself first before advising or influencing others.... I used to share and show my Muslim identity through postings which included hadiths, religious inspirational quotes, etc. (Discussant, male)

Third, presenting oneself as a devout Muslim could lead to arrogance, a behaviour that is disapproved in Islam. The narrative of 'learning to be a better Muslim' is commonly used to justify not portraying a Muslim self online. Some felt that religiosity is not something that should be openly demonstrated for fear of showing good deeds to others for attention or praise (*riak, riya'* or *riyaa'*), which could lead to arrogance and haughtiness. Muslims have to carefully tread their performance of piousness due to the likelihood of committing *riak*. Keeping one's good deeds and religiosity hidden from the public could help avoid *riak*, maintain a desirable image, and side-step possible contestations and negative responses from their audiences and the Muslim community. Sharing religious-related information on their social media sites is thus more of a self-reminder and self-reflection rather than showing off religious piety. Self-reminders are made evident through the use of dedicated hashtags such as #selfreminder and #selfreflection in their captions which helps to neutralise the posts, justify their sharing of such information and negate any potential negative overtones. Preaching or explicitly reminding others to do good deeds and refraining from sinning may be negatively misconstrued. Similarly, in Indonesia, Muslims have to renegotiate *riak* potentially caused by online charity (*sedekah*) and Qur'an reading in various ways, such as by emphasising one's intention and reassuring themselves that Allah forgives those who seek forgiveness (Husein and Slama 2018). Several of my informants commented in the following terms:

No, I don't portray a religious self online. I don't dare to call myself religious because it can cause me *to develop riyaa'* [the act of showing off that you are religious]. Usually, whenever I posted something religious, actually it is an act to reflect on myself rather than to preach to my audiences. I don't think the way I portray myself can be called religious when my attitude or character shown in my social media are the opposite. (Discussant, female)

First, I am a *hijabi*, that already shows that I am a Muslim. Second, sometimes I posted religious quotes or hadith which, as I mentioned above, is as a *self-reflection*. Third, I think the way how I show my friends or family, or my surroundings also can tell my Muslim identity online, such as how I celebrate Ramadan, Eid-ul-Fitr and attending some mosque events. Finally, the most obvious one is I also put words of the Qur'an in my [Instagram] bio-profile which obviously tells everyone that I am a Muslim. (Discussant, female)

Personally, I have no interest in portraying a religious self online, as I feel that my religiosity *is a personal matter that should be kept out of the public eye*. However, my usual online activities often consist of posts on [Instagram] stories or [WhatsApp] status updates, and occasionally they will feature words of advice or motivational quotes from religious scholars and preachers, supplications for various needs and situations, as well as news reports and social media posts which highlight the ongoing oppression against Muslims around the world. These habits of mine may be perceived by some as my efforts to portray or affirm my Muslim identity online, but in actual fact I'm just doing it out of habit. I'm in the rhythm, so to speak. (Discussant, male)

Fourth, the discussants shared that displaying a religious self is unnecessary as their audience is already aware of their Muslim identity. I expect such a view coming from young people who are comfortable with their Muslim identity. However, a few young people expressed the relevance of displaying one's religious identity as religious beliefs and practices are embedded in one's everyday life, both online and offline. Regardless of the time and space, as a Muslim, one's religious self should be visible and performed. Another mainstream practice among the respondents is avoiding moral policing by fellow Malay Muslims on the sites by not disclosing religious identity and practices and not blatantly displaying religious offences.

For the question on how I show my Muslim identity/religiousities online, I honestly found this question puzzling. This is because the first thing that popped in my mind is 'Why should I show my Muslim identity when my followers already know I am a Muslim?'.... I am not interested to show my Muslim identity online, since it's *already quite obvious to my followers*. (Discussant, female)

I never thought of this, to be honest. We live in a Muslim country and the majority of the people are Muslims, so I think it's *not really necessary to 'show your Muslim identity online'*. (Discussant, female)

Young people's everyday concerns and strategies to avoid contestation is a complex matter. Their social media presence is often monitored, scrutinised and, if seen as offensive, contested by their audience. Consequently, it is more common to hear young people refusing to share religious information and make known their religious practices or opinions.

4.5 Challenging Intergenerational Religiousities and Status Quo

I have argued that being a good Muslim is not simply a private matter but a collective and cultural concern. The audience, usually other Malay Muslims, has a say in other Malay Muslims' social practices or lack of religious display. Surveillance and moral policing put pressure on some young people to conform to expectations. Some others insisted on not performing their religious self online in order to present a neutral identity. Notwithstanding the surveillance and self-censorship in Brunei society (Siti Mazidah 2019: 53), I observed more young people daring to disclose sensitive practices to the Malay Muslim community.

It is common to hear young people say, 'It's between me and Allah' when they negotiate their religious identity offline and on social media sites, and sometimes when justifying the act of not disclosing their religious views. Interestingly, the same statement has also been used to justify actions questioned and contested by Islam, such as defending religious transgressions. The religious transgressions here include Muslims not covering their *aurat*, public displays of affection between unmarried couples, cross-dressing and showing effeminate tendencies. Young Muslims

are expected to be religious and portray their religious identity and faith through Muslim sartorial presentation such as wearing a long robe or dress for males and females (*jubah*, *gamis* or *kurta*) and using Islamic phrases such as ‘*Inshallah*’ (if God wills), ‘*Mashallah*’ (what God has willed) and ‘*Alhamdulillah*’ (praise be to God). Their refusal or reluctance to conform to such expectations are often met with disapproval. These young people contest the restrictions that limit their religious expressions.

The image that I have [of] what a religious man and women would look and act like ... would be [a man] wearing a *jubah* or *kurta* with something to cover the top of their head [*topi haji*], while for women the attire would be a *gamis*. This will also be coupled with how they behave and interact with people using ‘*Insyaa’Allah*’ instead of ‘maybe’ or ‘*Masya’Allah*’ instead of ‘wow’ and so on. Although this may not be in the theme of what people perceive as being a religious person. Many of my friends and people I know who are considered as youth, including myself, do not really act and dress like a religious [individual] as often as people in the older generation do, but it does not mean the youths are not religious just a bit below what the devout [*warak*] would be. (Discussant, male)

The expectation of youth being less religious comes from the elders and I think it is because they expect that for one to be religious they would need to cover up, pray five times a day, be knowledgeable about the religion and follow the dos and don’ts. However, things are different now, as mentioned before one can dress up as how they please [against the religion] but still pray and worship their God. (Discussant, female)

It’s because a lot of old people believe and think and see us young people as immature who don’t know the consequences of our own actions and need constant [reminders] of what’s right and wrong. Also due to the fact that old people seeing the generalised nature of the young people being actively involved in things related to this temporary world [*dunia*], such as playing games and whatnot. (Discussant, female)

Many old people might think, ‘These kids need to do something more beneficial to them like doing prayers, etc., instead of [doing whatever we might be doing; playing games/going on social media/engaging in our hobbies/hanging out with friends] those things’. Other young people could be annoyed by this as they listen to this kind of religious talk [*ceramah*] often and could made them disobey and refuse to listen the old people. (Discussant, female)

In the respondents’ opinions, being caught doing an action deemed wrong by older Muslims and the religious authorities does not render them lacking piety. The broad spectrum of religiosities is often used to defend one’s behaviour. As observed in the captions and comment sections of social media sites, religious transgressions and cultural offences such as not dressing according to *syariah* code, proudly and openly discussing premarital intercourse and disclosing their non-heteronormative identities are commonly justified and normalised by other Malay Muslims’ display of religious offences. Young people are actively working on creating or justifying their religious identities in a changing sociocultural and religious landscape.

A case in point is a young fitness influencer justifying his body transformation by displaying it on social media. With the growing fitness community in the country and the concern for a positive body image appropriated from the West, we observed males and females sharing their bodybuilding practices, struggles to achieve their

goals, success stories, body transformations and physical displays. Any Muslim knows that one's sartorial presentation and modest coverings are important markers of religiosity. Hence, their physical appearance and bodily display are commonly scrutinised by other Muslims. Religious transgressions in this situation are justified and compensated by the greater good that their body display could encourage, in terms of a healthy lifestyle and positive self-esteem.

Social media have increasingly shed light on the growing presence of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) community in Brunei. Even though non-heteronormative identities are not openly embraced, we could observe openness towards the LGBTQI community among Malay Muslims. Exploration of sexual identities, posts about coming out and cross-dressing are gradually being seen on Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. Young adults and teenagers openly support freedom of sexuality, evident in their affirmative responses to the social media sharing of the individuals. Although homosexuality (and other non-heteronormative practices) is prohibited in Islam, the audience justifies its acceptance of an LGBTQI presence by citing Islam as a religion of peace and justice. Brunei is a nation devoted to God (*negara zikir*), a state that accepts 'Islam as the religion of Allah the Almighty whose teachings were conveyed through His messenger Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)' (Izah 2021). As such, this involves 'the practice and dissemination of Islamic teachings by respecting and dignifying the *Syi'ar* [and] ... institutionalising Islam into the system of government, customs and society' (*ibid.*). As a consequence, such sexual awareness and presence are a matter of concern to Malay Muslims in the country.

The experiences of these young people do share similarities with other young people in other contexts. For instance, Malay Muslim performance of religiosities in Malaysia is shaped by their community. Presenting a neutral self and avoiding displaying religious transgressions online are strategic responses to their community's surveillance (Siti Mazidah 2014). Similarly, Peter E. Hopkins et al.'s (2011: 319–325) findings on young Scottish Christians' religiosities reveal correspondence (the transmission of religion and religious practices from parents to children), compliance, conflict and challenges in intergenerational religiosities. These similarities in the religiosities of young Bruneian Malay Muslims, Malaysian Malay Muslims and Scottish Christians are significant. Regardless of their religion and contexts, the general concerns the young people have are quite similar.

4.6 Young People's Religious Culture and Lived Religiosities: A Reflection

This chapter examines the individual, social and spatial construction of youth religiosity. Questions about the markers of religious identity, lack of religious knowledge, social representation and fact-checking by their peers are among their concerns in portraying their religiosity, especially in social mediascapes. The lived religiosities of the young people are shown to be relational and contingent on the space they

take place in. The nature and infrastructure of social mediascapes, such as their searchability function, social reach, replicability through copying and pasting, and the presence of an audience, influence young people's self-disclosure and presentation of the self. The online space is a lived space where these young people's identities and everyday practices are actively shaped. Their religious self-disclosure is always negotiated in consideration of their audience, who are predominantly Malay Muslims. We expect users to be more comfortable portraying their religious self in this Malay Muslim context and environment. However, this is not the case for most of the respondents. Their audience is a significant influence on these young people's expression of their religious views. It is important to note that not displaying an acceptable moral identity does not render them less religious but reveals a different form of religiosity that is sensitive and relevant to their lives.

Digital technology (games, social media, the internet) and popular culture are some of the factors that are thought to have distracted young people from religious practices, with which the respondents agree. As one discussant wrote, 'young people are seen to be spending more time on *dunia* [world] matters than *akhirah* [afterlife] ... [p]eople are naturally curious and we can be easily influenced with what we see on social media'. Exposure to other cultures from social media results in what a respondent called a 'crisis in faith'. One respondent noted: 'Now in a social media age youths have more questions regarding the restrictions within Islam when they compare their lives with those of non-Muslim backgrounds'. Similarly, another respondent said: 'With technology the youth is exposed to different cultures and religions, the youth are curious and can question the ethics and morals of the religion'.

Digital media, as shared by the respondents, expose young people to social practices that are different and may be incompatible with their own. The vast amount of information and resources available on social media has opened up questions on what religion is, the markers of religiosity, who sets the markers and what religious piety means. The respondents emphasised that an individual should not be assessed by visible religious markers such as sartorial display, posting religious content, and reciting Islamic phrases and supplication. It is interesting to note that most young people in this study consider their group to be less pious according to the expectations of the older generation or religious institutions. It is more appropriate to say that they are making sense of piety and piousness in their own terms and challenging conventional expectations.

The emergence of (new) youth religiosities and religious culture needs to be considered in the context of alternative sites of everyday interactions and communication. Everyday youth rituals have been transferred to the online space, a space with its own modus operandi and infrastructures that could alter religious meanings and practices. Combining each of those individual users' practices on social media could create a religious landscape unique to the community (young people, Muslim and ethnicity) they are representing. This is evident in the landscapes shaped by different groups of young people such as the religious community through their social media postings, the fitness community justifying their body display practices and an online

LGBTQI presence challenging the country's social norms as a nation devoted to Islam. Young people as active creators of (religious) content are individually and collectively utilising the social mediascape as a platform for empowerment, transformation and possibly resistance. What these young people are doing is 'develop[ing] their own complex religious identities that often challenge dominant representations and discourses' (Hemming 2016: 59).

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has offered an examination of Malay Muslim Bruneian lived religiosities through an understanding and portrayal of religiosities in respondents' everyday engagements on social media. Young people's religiosities are complex and are an outcome of different processes at play: sociospatial constraints and negotiations, intergenerational and intragenerational pressures and challenging the status quo. I have argued that young people shape their religiosities in ways relevant to themselves in the face of real constraints imposed by the communal expectations of Brunei society. Questioning religiosities and their markers, coping with moral policing, and challenging and managing intergenerational pressures are some of these young people's responses in making sense of their religiosities. I have only highlighted one facet of their religiosity—their reluctance to display religious identities on the social mediascape. Further investigation into different aspects of their religiosities is necessary. To this end, I offer three potential research issues to unpack young people's religiosities. First, an investigation of the acceptance and normalisation of religious transgression among young people. Second, studying how young people behave in different online spaces, and how the sites' affordances and the audiences enable and constrain religious self-expression. And third, examining the intergenerational tension that exists between younger and older Muslims. Such research would reveal the specific practices that are contested and negotiated, the ever-changing lived religiosities and religious cultures of today's youth, and would shed light on what it means to be a young Malay Muslim in a Muslim-majority country.

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Chapter 5

Food Choices and the Malay Muslim Middle Class in Brunei Darussalam



Faizul Ibrahim

Abstract This chapter examines the middle class in Brunei Darussalam through an exploration of their everyday food choices. In doing so, I investigate middle-class food consumption and eating habits both at home and when eating out. While Brunei is a socially stratified society, this research suggests that being middle class is more than just expressing status-seeking behaviour or material aspirations. Rather, the analysis proposes that a middle-class status is also reflected in food-related behaviour, attitudes and feelings such as nostalgia, fondness and affection for meals and mealtimes. A significant middle class certainly exists and it continues to shape the fabric of Brunei society.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Social class · Middle class · Habitus · Food choices

5.1 Introduction

Brunei Darussalam has a population of only 429,999 people (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics 2021: 1–2), more than half of whom are considered middle class.¹ The discussion in this chapter deals with this significant proportion of the population to explore how the middle class can be better understood. To date, the middle class has largely been measured and defined only on an ‘objective’ and quantitative basis. By contrast, the subject of food consumption habits was chosen because this research aims to look at the middle-class ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1984, 1990)—comprising the attitudes, behaviours and feelings of representative informants in order to illustrate their subjective traits. In order to do so, the research delves into mealtimes at home and the feelings that come from these experiences,

¹ This statement is based on the Bruneians who own homes and who earn between BND3,000 and BND8,999 per household per month. See Department of Economic Planning and Development (2019).

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dining out routines where one can witness middle-class affluence on display, and the prevalent behaviours and attitudes about the preparation and consumption of food. The discussion elucidates just how complex middle-class experiences can be—they always begin by expressing their joy and memories of food at home and then identify several reasons for eating out. The analysis begins with an overview of the complex history and ever-evolving meaning of the middle class.

5.2 The Brunei Middle Class

The class-based nature of Brunei society has been well established in the scholarly literature. Donald Brown (1970: 31, 168), for example, describes Brunei as a stratified society with a stringent social hierarchy. Victor T. King (1994: 181) goes further and coins the term ‘rank consciousness’ to explain how it shapes the Bruneian way of thinking. For his part, Pudarno Binchin (2004: 175) reveals the influence of ruling-class Malays who introduced social hierarchy to other ethnic groups in the country, such as the Dusun. Class, social hierarchy and social stratification are arguably deeply rooted in Brunei history and society. As for more everyday practices, Pengembara (C.H. Gallop) (2016: 116) mentions that car ownership is part of the Bruneian makeup, with the personalisation of number plates and the make of car indicating someone’s social class.

While Brunei is clearly a stratified society, this begs the question as to whether there is a distinctive middle class and, if there is, what its key characteristics are. Geoffrey Gunn (1997: 228) makes the questionable assumption that Brunei has no middle class. In order to interrogate this claim, I make some general observations about the middle class in postcolonial societies, and then refer to the work of Abdul Rahman Embong on the Malaysian middle class and discuss its relevance to Brunei. I then proceed to identify the ways I approached the examination of the respondents who helped frame the object of this study.

The formation of a middle class in the non-Western world, such as in Brunei and Malaysia, is mainly a postcolonial phenomenon. This should immediately indicate some differences in the historic experience of class formation between the Western and non-Western worlds. While the middle class in the former emerged from the advance of capitalist society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the much smaller middle class in colonised countries consisted of government administrators working in the state sector. In his study of modern elites in Indonesia, for example, Robert van Neil (1960) shows that an emerging middle class was almost exclusively a post-independence development, again dominated by those attached to employment by the state (see also Sutherland 1979).

Brunei and Malaysia are neighbouring states, with some obvious sociocultural comparisons and similarities. Abdul Rahman is the leading scholar of the emergence of the Malaysian middle class through a series of critical interventions (1995, 1996, 1998, 2001). He identifies the growth of a middle class over the course of a century, initially a product of colonial capitalism and the expansion of the British

colonial state, with the most dramatic changes taking place during the last three decades of the twentieth century. Abdul Rahman calls this later phenomenon the ‘new’ Malaysian middle class. This new middle class includes ‘those in administrative, executive, managerial, clerical, sales and service jobs’, and who crucially received higher education or obtained university degrees (Abdul Rahman 2001: 88, 266). Because of their occupational privileges and rapidly rising incomes, the middle class has been able to provide better education for their children, enabling the class to reproduce itself (*ibid.*: 266). This middle class was and remains particularly conspicuous as consumers, who purchase cars, televisions and household appliances. In this regard, Homi Kharas (2010: 8–9) stresses that consumerism rather than wealth alone provides a workable definition of the middle class. Similarly, Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo (2008) also define the middle class as comprising those having a stable job with a regular income and oriented towards consumerism. And in his detailed study of Thai politics, James Ockey (2004) makes the same point that the middle class has been driven more by consumerism than ideology.

I first identified my informants for this research on the middle class in Brunei at an ‘objective’ level—looking at occupation, annual income, education, family size, homeownership, geographic mobility and parents’ self-described employment (see Faizul 2020). I conducted interviews with Ain F. (female, aged 22), Amirol (male, 22), Anwar (male, 21), Ani B. (female, 20), Fatimah (female, 35), Hazirah (female, 24), Izzati (female, 20) and Munirah (female, 23). Only Hazirah and Fatimah were working in full-time jobs at the time, while the others were still university students. The parents of all the respondents were either civil servants or directors of private companies. Income is one major indicator of middle-class status, and obviously may vary according to the sociocultural context of a country. According to the government’s household expenditure survey for 2015–2016, 54.2% of the population own their own homes, a key measure of middle-class status, and have an income range of BND3,000 to BND8,999 per household per month (Department of Economic Planning and Development 2019: 10–11). All my informants met these criteria. Also counterintuitively when compared with Western social structures, the evidence suggests that Brunei’s middle class prefers larger families. My informants all had family households of between five and 10 people (for a comparison with Thailand, see Jumbala and Banpasirichote 2001).

Social class is a cultural phenomenon as well as an economic one. Cultural forces are at work in maintaining a class society and class distinctions. Variations in values, beliefs and practices make it difficult to define the middle class as having a homogeneous culture. To date, there is no significant scholarly literature in Brunei that examines the relationship between the middle class and its food consumption and eating habits. This makes the current research both challenging and innovative. I have therefore drawn on the secondary literature to some extent to make comparisons with social, economic and cultural similarities and patterns to those of Brunei’s middle class. In the next section, I discuss the cultural forces at work during mealtimes. This is where middle-class values and beliefs are apparent and where it all begins—at home.

5.3 Mealtimes at Home

Amirol was the first respondent to be deemed middle class according to my objective markers. Amirol, whose relationship with his family is strained, did not often eat together with them nor did they communicate easily over the dining table. However, when they did, he accepted that mealtimes were an opportunity that allowed for the family to come together:

So this is the usual dinner: fried fish, boiled fish and stir-fried vegetables which are all cooked by my mother. And this [*shows a photo of a fusion dish*] is one of the experiments by my sister. It is my mother, my father and my oldest sister who are always around [at mealtimes].

Amirol expanded on the family dynamics around the dining table which revealed a difficult relationship with his family:

They were not talking to me [during dinner], but they did talk to my sister. It is usually about work. It is usually my dad who starts the conversation. ‘How is work?’ The typical housework question [and] work-related questions. When he asked me questions, I [give him an] answer.

In contrast, Anwar felt positive about mealtimes which typically consisted of Western-style food at home:

For us, it depends on our taste that day. To me, I like Western [food] because the portions are big. Most of them are Western food.

Table talk influenced his dining experience and this was comparable to the other informants:

My mum always starts with some of the family issues at first and then we change it up a bit to make the conversation less moody. So we will bring in movies. We will talk about what is new, what is coming, and what [film] is available now that we can watch later. It is pretty much personal; I cannot go into details. Yeah, it is a family thing. Dad plans for us. He would ask us about what we are doing first.

While Amirol had a distant relationship with his parents, Anwar loved to spend time eating with the family:

Whatever my mum cooks, it is always the same thing that is on my mind every morning when I wake up. Yeah, because it is better to eat with [the] family.

Izzati lived with nine other family members in a single house. She described her family relationship as follows:

I think it is the way we talk and stuff [over the dining table]. The traditional stuff we do. Like eating together every single night [with] the whole family. Then, I think the fact that [our] grandparents like to make traditional pastries or delicacies [*kueh*] [when they are also there]. We usually cook them together. So each of us plan. Oh, you cook this and that. I usually cook modern ones [dishes]. The older ones usually cook traditional stuff.

When I asked if mealtimes are important, she replied:

They eat together. They discuss together. Get people together. [I try to dine in] every day. Yeah, lunch and dinner. If I am out, no. Kind of because everyone goes home at different times. I am sure I will be out more too once I work.

Izzati described the scene at the dining table:

Usually, it is just my dad sitting there and waits for everything to be served. Then the siblings just sit around. And then they talk about work. Events happening. The rest talk about school and stuff. [The] daily ‘what [did] you do [today]?’ , that kind of thing. But when we eat, we just focus on eating. The quietest would be my parents. Sometimes they would talk more if the topic [was] engaging for them. But usually the siblings [are the ones] who talk the most. Though my dad starts [the conversation]. My dad eats [first]. But if he knows everyone is going to eat together, like everyone, then he waits [for everyone].

Ani B., who also lived in a large household and is the middle child of a family of nine, struggled to remember her meals at home with the family but remembered who was present:

If dinner, it is usually everyone except my older sister. Because she works at night. Usually, it is just a dish, vegetables, the usual, and then fish for my dad, I think there are different things. My second [sister] is [working] in China [for] Hengyi Industries.² Not really at home anymore [for mealtimes]. I am sure I will be busy working too.

She continued to shed more light on table talk around the dinner table:

My mum first starts with her religious talk [*ceramah*]. And then, usually, my dad would ask ‘what time [do] you go home tomorrow?’ because he must arrange [the schedule]. Because we are a lot [of people], right? So he must arrange everyone’s schedule and whatnot. And then basically ask about homework I guess, studies and all, not much. Oh, I do not know. Maybe every afternoon he plays badminton and so he sometimes talks about badminton, and even his work occasionally. Yeah, not [an] emotional [person], I think.

The informant seemed to feel agitated with her mother’s *ceramah* even though she claimed to be closer to her mother than her father. This might be because she felt that her father controlled their schedule to certain extent as the family’s planner and did not express his emotions easily. She continued to vent her vexation about the shared mealtimes:

It is a long table, with two chairs at the edges, my dad [is] in the middle and then my mum and then everyone else, the siblings, it is [a] fixed [seating]. We do not change [seats]. If my brother had his seat taken, he would get angry and say, ‘This is my seat!’ I would reply like, ‘I do not see your name on it’. Because the girls always like to tease the boys. For me, it is annoying though. It is specific already every time. Usually, [the environment] is noisy at times. It is quiet at first when my parents are around. Usually, my parents are the ones that start up [conversations] or occasionally my little sister. She likes to talk about school and what the teacher said that day. She likes to talk. We [older siblings] do not talk about our personal lives [to] our parents.

Ain F. only had her mother who raised her and all her siblings in a single-parent household. Her notion of mealtimes at home was different:

² Hengyi Industries owns and operates an oil refinery in Brunei.

I think it is very important for family bonding. It is important. It is a way for us to communicate especially when right now, where each of us is in our rooms especially with their technology. So I think eating with the family is a great way to bond, and then when my mother cooks, she usually urges us to be in one room together [so that] we eat together. I have a big family.

Ain F. continued to mention how important communication over mealtime was:

Yes, when we sit together. When we eat [at the dining table], [it] is the perfect time to communicate. Because most of the time we are on our own. So even my mother is now on her own most of the time with [her] technology. She has Facebook to watch those proselytisation talks [*dakwah*]. Sometimes she shares them [*dakwah*] with us when we eat together too.

Ceramah and *dakwah* are significant activities in the everyday lives of many Malay Muslim families in Brunei and they are usually conducted at the dining table. Ani B. revealed her annoyance at this type of religious propagation. Islamic teachings are widespread in middle-class families. This echoes the Malaysian middle class which is generally conservative by faith but has easy access to the internet and other media (Abdul Rahman 2001: 88). Izzati noted having a good relationship with her parents and family members while the rest of the informants had issues or tension with their parents. Though in other societies larger families have historically been more common among the lower classes, having a big family is commonplace in the Bruneian middle class. The middle-class habitus is evident around the dining table when Ani B. and Ain F. both described the environment of having a big family as 'noisy at times' and 'everyone is always shouting here and there'. Being in a large family in a single household can result in some members feeling 'lost in the shuffle', while others, like Anwar, felt a sense of closeness. Meanwhile, Izzati mentioned how the household members came to the dinner table late too. Food consumption and eating habits at home have exposed the 'hidden obvious'. For Amirol, every mealtime routine ended with 'everyone just going back to their rooms' and with his mother feeling that 'she is used to it. I am just used to it [too]'. The Bruneian middle class seems to be conscious of the importance of family. It tries to uphold certain ideals such as saying how it is 'very important for family bonding' when talking about it daily meals and its mealtime routine, in which it willingly participates.

Regardless of the indifferent relationships with their families, the respondents stressed the value of mealtimes with the family at home; they needed to partake in the activity irrespective of how they felt about it. Eating together is one of those practices that may overstate 'the unity' of the middle-class family which is absent in much of 'real' daily life. Amirol not communicating with his family, Ani B. trying to dine out more and Ain F. feeling strained are examples of what 'real' daily life presents in comparison to what is propagated and imagined during mealtimes. Dining in with the family is about self-presentation and self-preservation. Nevertheless, whatever image they present, as an 'idealised family' or not, may not be the most important matter. More fundamentally, their food consumption and eating habits have made me realise that they are 'conscious' about the state of the family.

The habitus reflects this consciousness and we can observe this in table talk. In this respect, the 'habitus bounds a set of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours which belong to

a particular group of people; it is a series of systems which ... is the “milieu” in which individuals live with a collective (un)consciousness’ (Wills et al. 2011: 727; see also Bourdieu 1984, 1990). Amirol noted that his father, mother and oldest sister were the mainstays and table talk centred mostly around these three while he was usually passive. Ani B. shared this sentiment with her description of her father sitting in the middle of a long dining table, which showed who is the head of the household, while everyone else’s seats were also fixed, presumably according to seniority. In general, Malay families in Malaysia used to sit together on the floor as the preferred style of eating (Koh and Zainurul 2017), which is atypical of the Bruneian Malay middle class who sit at big tables as described by Ani B. and Ain F. Ani B. also claimed that her mother talked about shopping while her father asked about school and sports, topics which she considered ‘superficial’. Izzati also agreed with this fact as her father usually initiated the sequence of family reporting. The interchanging of roles between father and mother and between the parents and children during table talks was not uncommon.³ Ani B. continued to call her father the ‘planner’ and Anwar similarly claimed that ‘Dad plans for us’. These roles resemble a structure or framework to adhere to at the dining table because they are developed over time and between generations; each member of the family unconsciously follows them. However, as each family member enacts these roles, they are conscious of the organisation of the family.

One of the earliest studies of the social significance of table talk is that of James Bossard (1943), who argues that this is the site where reputations and impressions are formed. Parents construct themselves in the ethics and ideals of parenthood and children are constructed as subjects who must be trained, watched over and disciplined—parental reputations are built over the dining table. There is also a class dimension to the dining table. Robin Jarrett et al. (2014: 2), for example, note that middle-class families are more likely to have mealtimes at home and engage in table talk in comparison to those with a lower socioeconomic status. The Bruneian middle class reflects this with ample mealtime activities at home. The father is regarded as the ‘planner’ which is essentially a ‘leadership role’, much like his role as the perceived head of the household. This is comparable to Wendy Wills et al.’s (2011) study of family food and eating practices of British working- and middle-class families, which are patriarchal and the imagined representation of the idealised family.

Ordinary questions are designed to elicit information about the day’s events in the form of ‘stories’ (events that have a central problem) or ‘reports’ (accounts of an activity). Bossard (1943) claims this type of family reporting has two functions: ‘family interaction’ and ‘the transmission of family culture’. There are imagined benefits for the middle class to overplay the significance of their family mealtimes. Bossard suggests that the family meal is seen as a homecoming; an affirmation of family unity—something Ain F. and Izzati asserted, while the others did not share the same view. Pat Caplan (1997) argues that family reporting can also create social order (while it may have not worked in every case like Amirol and Ani B.) and

³ One instance of this that was provided was when Anwar took up the role of the planner in the absence of his father.

boundaries within families. In other words, we should not be surprised that these cultural forces are at work in the presence of food. Food is the most elementary but simultaneously the most social level of interaction. For Anwar, it was not the type of food that identified a social class, it was how it was experienced. This provides the basis for looking at the habitus within the context of food. The Bruneian middle-class family tries to shape self-identity through table talk, mannerisms, relationships, rituals, seating arrangements and performances during everyday mealtimes. Practices and rituals of the typical family are performed repeatedly, and roles and reputations are built repetitively—these actions are passed down continually from parents to their children.

It can be argued that Izzati happily participated in mealtimes along with the performative activities that went with them to create a positive image. However, as John Gillis (1996: xv) suggests, the families we live with are '[o]ften fragmented and impermanent ... [and] much less reliable than the imagined families we live by'. This seems to be evident when Izzati talked about the cynical future of mealtimes at home. The most telling and arguably common feature found is the belief that these shared mealtimes will end. Like the rest of the informants, Ain F. resonated the same view of moving away from shared and fixed mealtimes at home. My informants expressed different attitudes, behaviours and feelings. For some, there was affection and eagerness for a big family meal together and enthusiasm for being part of a noisy conversation, while others like Amirol felt uneasiness at the inevitability of leaving his family household after marriage without consequences. Izzati talked about uncertainty because of the demands of the workplace and spending more time dining out. Ani B. used higher education as an excuse to be out of the house more often while Ain F. feared leaving home after witnessing her sister-in-law moving out. These are telling signs of what is to come. Whether their reasons are attributed to work, recreation or marriage, they reveal some anxiety over the decline or end of the family meal.

Every interview began with expressions of fondness for food on the table but ended with revealing experiences that exposed the habitus of the Bruneian middle class. Through the observation of food consumption and eating habits, the family has taken centre stage: middle-class families are concerned about 'looking the part' (Morgan 1996: 157). However, I have come to realise that while there is uncertainty looming over the family mealtimes, there is also uncertainty about what family life means to each of the respondents. What I did observe was the *awareness* of participating in food consumption and eating habits over the dining table—the Bruneian middle class is *conscious* of the state of the family. In the next section, I suggest that the middle-class habitus is not just exclusive to mealtimes at home but also when eating out.

5.4 Eating Out

Anwar was one of the informants who shared his experiences of eating out because he and his family frequently do so together:

We love it [eating out]. Especially the restaurant [that we recently went to]. The service that they give us was good. They are friendly, they are not that distracted. The last time when I went to this one restaurant it was all too, how do you say, let us say moody. Everyone has emotional issues. I do not really like that kind of thing so that is why I picked Modesto. I like the service there—friendly and approachable.

The Bruneian middle class also likes to treat others and they like to indulge:

It is [the Thai restaurant] at Jerudong. Supposedly, we were having a steamboat but then my uncle said he is the one who is paying for everything. He said that we can have any individual food that we want.

Going to a variety of restaurants and eating an assortment of dishes are noticeable trends now, but it is easy to overlook the act of dining out when we look at the middle-class family. When dining out, we may see familiar performances around the dining table that reflect the middle-class habitus. Ang Shu-Zhen (2010: 3) reminds us that the middle-class family in Singapore, for example, is far from static; it is instead a unit that is continuously produced and reproduced through social practices such as family meals. Among the middle class, family meals have long been considered an important setting where friends and families can gather over food, and it is an experience widely shared and firmly embedded in individual memory. However, family meals are not only confined to home (*ibid.*: 16). The family also seeks to project a positive image of itself to non-family members. The representation of family is even more evident when dining out, as this family activity is now conducted in the visible presence of strangers in public in what Gillis (1996: 72) refers to as the family ‘[putting] itself on display’.

Dining out becomes a stage for family members to present an image of unity and it is another means of self-presentation and self-preservation that is performed outside the home. This finds echoes in Abdul Rahman’s (1995, 1996, 1998, 2001) observation that the Malaysian middle class possesses a culture of conspicuous consumption. Similarly, Solvay Gerke (2000: 143) highlights the fact that the middle class in Indonesia ‘earn enough to participate in a modern consumer culture’, while Antonio Graceffo (2016: 8) supports this idea and notes that the middle class in China likes to express their affluence—‘conspicuous spending on luxury goods’ and dining out are considered ‘necessary to achieve true middle class standing’.

Food has been a social status symbol for the modern middle class in many parts of Asia, and conspicuous spending on food, especially on family members and friends, amplifies that as is the case in Brunei. This middle class enjoys eating in restaurants, while in China for example, ‘eating at western restaurants ... [has] also become a status symbol’ as ‘aspiring ... elites with a fair amount of disposable income’ consider particular restaurants ‘as the ultimate place to be seen’ (Zhou 2008: 176). However, it should also be noted that middle-class individuals also dine out more

often for several reasons aside from family gatherings, including work, pleasure and the ‘search for varied experience’ (Martens and Warde 1997: 140–141). Ang (2010: 1) notes that family meals are a ‘must-have’ in the eyes of the family, but that entering the workforce leaves little time for some individuals to spend with the family at home. As a result, Frances Short (2006: 51) projects that the urban middle-class family will use a busy work life to give up the mealtimes at home—seeking fast and ready-made food outside. In a similar vein, Frances Fraikue (2016: 3) notes that the consumption of food outside of the home has become a necessity out of convenience for the work–life balance of the middle class. However, the middle-class attachment to memories about food will always call them back home. After all, nostalgia acts as an anchor in an ever-changing world. In the current era, there is no question that modern family life is marked by a busy schedule, multiple demands and, at times, a sense of urgency to get the most done.

The informants in this study had much to say about the variety of reasons behind eating out. Munirah, for example, said that the family made the decision to eat out when they were not keen to cook, and there was always a variety to where she and her family ate:

[We] eat out when everyone is lazy to cook. I do not know [why], usually my mum will say she is lazy to cook, and I will be lazy to cook too. Usually, we go to Jerudong Park Food Court. There are choices.

When asked if eating out is similar to eating at home, she replied:

I think so. It is the same people. [Of course], eating at home is better. The food is better. It is [still] quality time [when eating out].

It is apparent that the informants negotiated between eating in and out—they began with noting their fondness for and memories of food at home and then admitted to the joy of eating out. Munirah said that there were two reasons for eating out: laziness to cook and treating other family members. She and her family had an option to cook or not to cook. Being free to make this choice is a distinctly middle-class trait, and not afforded to many of the working class (Wills et al. 2011; Jarrett et al. 2014: 2). The Bruneian middle class can easily seek food outside the home. This echoes what others have noted about the middle class in China, which is ‘determined to display ... independence through their consumption’ (Barton et al. 2013).

Much of the appeal of spending money on food consumed outside the home is to be seen in the right places. In China, global companies like Häagen-Dazs and Starbucks have begun focusing more on ‘outdoor consumption’ where it is considered impressive to be seen at ‘exclusively expensive indulgent [venues]’ (Doctoroff 2010). Similarly, the Bruneian middle class can afford to spend a large amount of its disposable income on treating other family members, distant relatives, friends and colleagues at their favourite restaurants. Variety is also not an uncommon feature of eating out for them. Munirah shared this too when she said, ‘There are choices’. With the choice not to cook comes a large number of eatery options that Brunei has to offer. Hazirah was also one of the informants who frequently ate out since she

had just entered the workforce. She first shared a glimpse of her domestic life and noted that it was a woman's responsibility when it came to preparing meals at home:

Because being a daughter, I think [because] I am the only daughter, that's my role. So I would do a lot of kitchen work. That means cooking, washing the dishes, buying groceries, [it] includes that.

Hazirah's complaint about the gendered division of labour at home reveals the ideology of the patriarchal middle class (see Wills et al. 2011). A patriarchal ideology within the Malay middle-class family is necessary to create an imagined representation of the idealised family. Hazirah emphasised the joy of eating at steamboat restaurants with eating out being an excuse to get away from her chores at home: 'It is just so exhausting to have to do real cooking. I am already working'. At 35 years, Fatimah was the oldest informant that I interviewed. She talked about her love for sushi and eating out:

My taste palate is, I think, totally different from them. I am a regular [sushi eater], so my cuisine is 'higher'. I am mostly on Japanese food. Less oily than Westernised steak. So if I do dine out with my parents sometimes, they do not have the appetite. I forced them to come to eat with me at the latest one—I brought them to Kaizen. It is my favourite place here.

Eating out can be considered a social obligation for informants like Anwar and Munirah. According to them, they did not see it as just a superficial form of enjoyment. Anwar, Hazirah and Fatimah enthusiastically explained at great length the food they consumed; they either savoured or critiqued the cuisines. From American dishes to Indian cuisine, a wealth of options that are available to them as part of what Gerke (2000: 146, 153–155) calls 'lifestyling' behaviour. According to Brunei's household expenditure survey, on average Bruneians spent 12.5% of their monthly income on food and another 9.9% on restaurants and hotels (Department of Economic Planning and Development 2019: 13). These are the third- and fourth-highest items, with only housing and utilities (water, electricity and gas) and transport accounting for more.

Munirah and Anwar revealed that some mannerisms and practices from home are also incorporated into the experience of eating out. The 'planner' is interchangeable not only as a generic role but also in the context of eating out too; when eating out, the mother can plan and report, like what is normally done at home. Anwar's mother did the family reporting to him, and he claimed that she even got more face-to-face time with family members when eating outside compared to at home. A recollection of home (and its mealtime rituals) is no surprise because reminiscing about food can take us back to the idealised mealtime routines and the idea that homemade food is 'always the best'. According to C. Blake et al. (2007), mealtimes at home are already idealised as an important regular event in the lives of many individuals and families—attachment of memories and meanings of food from home strengthen these shared moments further. The Bruneian middle class frequently refers to 'food memories'. Even when informants such as Hazirah did not like the gendered kitchen role that she had to return to, she looked back and idealised the curry she cooked, the spices she mixed and the 'much better' mealtimes with family. Family meals

have long been considered as an important setting where friends and families gather over a meal and are an experience widely shared and firmly embedded in individual memories.

Nostalgia always plays an important role as a reminder of what is at home and how to act as a family. Anwar often ate outside of the household setting and he claimed that it was always because of a family event or a special occasion. In fact, in many instances he contradicted himself and revealed instead his enthusiasm for eating at restaurants. He never failed to recommend the places he went to by praising the great service, the friendliness and approachability of the staff, the general ambience and the variety of food on offer. All the while, he harked back to his affection for his mother's cooking. While the narratives suggest that eating out has become an important social fixture, it mostly involves young adults who are 'globally minded' and are influenced to want to eat non-local dishes (Barton et al. 2013; Graceffo 2016: 8). They, in turn, may have influenced their parents as well. While all the informants provided examples of this, none exemplified that term more than Fatimah. Fatimah called herself a 'foodie', a self-proclamation that she enthusiastically pointed out several times during our interview. She spoke at great length of her food adventures both in Brunei and abroad. She followed the *MasterChef* television show and had visited restaurants around the world that have appeared on the show. The Bruneian middle class obviously connects with and compares itself to the outside world through their access to the internet and other media. Fatimah even said she had a privilege card, so she could visit her favourite sushi restaurants every day, with the staff already knowing her usual order. Travelling to get to the food they want is not a rarity for this social class. Even Hazirah, who was a less conspicuous spender, regularly went on road trips with her fiancé to another district to pursue recommended food.

My informants reported eating out at least two to three times a week. They expressed many reasons for eating out, such as to try something new (Izzati), to spend time with friends (Munirah), to treat other family members (Anwar) and the simple ease and convenience of it. In such settings, the Bruneian middle class puts itself 'on display' to create a positive image, and the appearance of being well-off. Hazirah provided the perfect symbolic representation of middle-class consumption culture—the steamboat. The steamboat restaurant (and other similar buffet-style dining options) gives the customer the choice to add whatever they want to their plate in an easy manner: from simple vegetable dishes, eggs or chicken to expensive beef and seafood options. These types of eateries allow for an even greater variety of food options and novelty. The middle class enjoys the ability to eat wherever and whatever they want. While Fatimah pursued food as a form of indulgence, there are still limitations, especially when eating out abroad. For her, one of these limitations was halal food, which is permissible or lawful in Islam:

It just clicks them in a sense that when you are out of [the] country, I think they would still look for halal food. That's the thing, I think my dad would recognise that it is hard to find halal [food]. Halal food where you can see the certificate—restaurants that butcher the meat in a halal way are hard to find.

Just like the rest of the informants, Fatimah was in the same age group and was ‘globally minded’, and whether intentionally or not she ‘showed it off’ the most. The middle class indulges in the food and lifestyle choices that they glean from the media and the internet. Finally, Munirah made several claims about her eating out as well. She and her family went out when the occasion called for it:

If it is a birthday, we would usually eat out. It was a surprise. So we picked it up for him [father]. If it is my youngest sister, she likes sushi, but my mum does not like sushi. But for her birthday, we treat her with something else.

Munirah said that there were memorable events that were always worth celebrating. She offered a different perspective when she ate out with her friends. The Bruneian middle class always finds a reason to want to eat out: work, celebrating birthdays and graduations, as a hobby, being too lazy to cook or even simply for the sake of convenience. All the while, they always look back to the homemade food that they claim is better. Ani B. and Munirah were candid in their interviews. Ani B. talked about price, ambience and variety as her reasons to dine out. She was also one of my informants who had an estranged relationship with the family. On the other end of the spectrum, Munirah had a closer relationship with her family, and she claimed to eat out more often because the occasion called for it. Munirah had also reported having groups of friends who were ready to accompany her to try all the new eateries and to satisfy her cravings.

Even a busy work schedule does not stop the middle class from travelling for food. Whether it is to travel to another country or just another district, they can afford the time and have the means to do so. Abdul Rahman calls this an indulgence in lifestyles of material comfort, which is reflected, for example, in overseas holidays and leisure time. As a self-proclaimed foodie, Fatimah spoke at great length of her travels abroad and food adventures. She shared her pleasant experiences in numerous countries and in trying their ‘exotic’ foods. Fatimah was living a life of indulgence. She was also one of the first informants to bring up the discussion of halal food when eating out. Indulgence has its limitations—food is negotiated when it is halal. This is especially true for older relatives or parents of the Bruneian middle class, as mentioned by Fatimah.

‘Halal knowledge and practice [are] generated in families’, whether that means at home or outside the family household (Fischer 2011: 83, 101, 154). Fatimah shared her annoyance about her parents wanting to stick to halal food when dining out in a foreign country. Previously, Ani B. and Ain F. noted the religious practice of *ceramah* and *dakwah* over the dining table. While it is not the initial focus of this research, it is worth mentioning that the Bruneian middle class may be conflicted over halal food when eating out. According to Farzana Quoquab Habib et al. (2011: 19), in their study of Malaysian consumers, halal status is of primary concern for Muslims. The Bruneian middle class keeps a very keen eye on halal food due to their religiosity. I suggest that food and faith are constantly in flux, a point discussed in the conclusion.

While the Bruneian middle class works hard and claims that they would eat out because of the convenience of location and cost, the reality is that eating out acts as a reward system. They eat out not only because of the satisfaction of the effort they put

into working life, but simply because they can afford it. While eating out does offer some benefits, the middle class always has the option to eat at home. Even when they do not, they can still opt for take-away food. Does this mean that the mealtimes at home will end one day? In neighbouring Malaysia, research shows that ‘[a]lmost 40% of all ... meals are consumed outside the home’ with over ‘64 percent of Malaysians [eating] at least one meal per day outside of home’ (Tan 2014; Taylor’s University 2015). Ani B., Amirol, Izzati and Ain F., in one way or another, all suggested the end of mealtimes. Poulina Koh and Zainurul Rahman (2017) claim that eating out is no longer a trend; it has become an important social activity. Ultimately, eating out has unavoidably become important. The narratives of my informants on eating in and eating out paint a fascinating picture that is rich in meanings and emotions.

5.5 Conclusion

Defining the middle class is a challenge. King (2008: 95–98) admits to this in his comparative study of the middle class in Southeast Asia. I first started with the exploration of family life and mealtimes at home because I initially hypothesised that middle-class families could simply shape and affirm their identity around the dining table (Warde 1994: 877). While seeking certainty in the family unit, I found uncertainty in variations in family dynamics. While some informants described their closeness with their parents and siblings, others were exasperated with family life. Some informants even talked about abandoning mealtimes at home altogether in the future. The last thing I want to do is to exaggerate that the family is indispensable, if not the most important institution of the Bruneian middle class.

I have observed a myriad of behaviours, feelings and attitudes towards both food and the dynamics within the family at mealtimes. All things considered, food practices are not automatically transmitted from one generation to the next; they are adapted, adopted, transformed or generated in the practices of everyday life (Forero and Smith 2010: 79). The narratives have also shown that the middle class values dining out with friends and coworkers. However, the family is more than just a familiar sight to Bruneians. Unmarried children live with their parents until they are married and move to their own homes. Nonetheless, the married still divide time between their new home and staying with the family over the weekends. Even though there is a paucity of research on this topic, especially with young and married middle-class couples, it is clear that the Bruneian middle class is family conscious. They willingly participate in mealtimes at home while upholding certain ideals, such as saying how it is ‘very important for family bonding’ and that ‘it builds a relationship at home with your family’. There is a fixed seating arrangement where the ‘dad [is] in the middle’ and takes up the role of the planner and adviser, and there are rituals and religiosity such as planning and *ceramah* over the dining table, though the latter is a source of trepidation and stress for some family members. Regardless of the size of the family, dynamics and affluence, the respondents in this study did seem to be conscious of the value of the family in their lives.

Food and social class have a unique relationship—the former can draw out behaviours, attitudes and feelings of an identifiable social group. It is not just about the food served but the experience that comes from it. Food choices help to draw out the middle-class habitus, whether that is over the dining table at home or outside. The typical food that middle-class Bruneians prepare nowadays is inspired by recipes and posts on online platforms such as Instagram and YouTube as well as international cooking personalities. As a result, there are intergenerational differences particularly because of the influence of social media.

I suggest that the Bruneian middle class is aspirational and that eating out brings out this trait, an attribute which on the surface appears unremarkable. They are spoiled for choice and treat others generously, especially their immediate family. They travel great distances to eat exotic and/or favourite foods. They also eat out for celebrations and special events which may act as a kind of reward system. They work hard in their offices and claim that they would eat out because of convenience. The narratives suggest that there are several factors that influence eating out, such as an increase in working hours, the distance of workplace from home, exhaustion from work, time constraints when cooking, a growing number of food eateries operating around the clock which offer places to hang out late at night, and a wide range of convenience food. Eating out has become an important fixture for the Bruneian middle-class lifestyle, and they unconsciously display their aspirational pursuit of success and respect in the community in this manner.

Nostalgia should not be overlooked. The informants perpetuated the idea that there is always good food at home. Homemade food is romanticised; the vision of the mother or other women in the household being responsible for its preparation and serving is upheld. This material objectification provides an imagined sense of unity in family life as well (Moisio et al. 2004: 366, 379). Nostalgia is expressed when eating out because this allows the middle class to look back: ‘something we associate with growing up’, ‘eating at home is better. The food is better’, and ‘it [homemade] is just better’. This brings me to another trait I want to identify, which is sentimentality. I argue that the Bruneian middle class is ‘sentimental’—they convey emotional attachments to homemade food and the memories of a happy past such as quality time spent with their families at home.

I was also able to observe religiosity. Islam plays a big role as informants have mentioned the practice of *ceramah* and *dakwah* during mealtimes, and especially the pursuit of halal food when eating out. Johan Fischer (2011: 83, 101, 154) calls this phenomenon ‘ethical food intake’, and states that halal knowledge and religiosity are nurtured in families. However, I find that the religiosity of the Bruneian middle class is both fluid and shifting. Their faith comes into question because of the limitations of halal when eating out. The challenge of maintaining halal in the consumption of food is negotiated. None of my informants were parents themselves and so halal knowledge transfer was not a prime concern. The perception around halal status may be changing and more situational among the younger generation. I suggest that food and faith will be negotiated in the years to come.

My original research was about the preparation and consumption of food in Brunei, but my intellectual journey led me to consider the changing dynamics of the middle

class. Eating is a sociable and social act and what one eats has been closely tied with one's social class throughout history (Higgs 2015). Nearly 200 years ago, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1828: 18, my translation) claimed: 'Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are'. This observation still holds today. Food is not only the expression of an individual's personality and character but also a matter of where we 'belong' in a stratified society.

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Part II
Negotiating Gender Expressions

Chapter 6

Learning Gender in Malay Muslim Society in Brunei Darussalam



Shariza Wahyuna Shahrin

Abstract This chapter explores how Malay primary schoolchildren in Brunei Darussalam understand gender and become gendered. Through ethnographic accounts and data collected from pupils aged from five to 12 years old in a suburban state school, the study demonstrates that children have strict ideas and expectations of what it means to be masculine and feminine, which they inadvertently reinforce and are regulated in their interactions with others. The discussion also deals with children's associations and dissociations with certain objects in order to understand how they navigate the social world. Besides children, interviews with adults reveal the extent to which masculine and feminine traits are reinforced according to religious and social expectations. The analysis provides insights into children's understanding of gender, highlights their ideas of what a Brunei Malay person should be, and offers a glimpse of the importance of children as valid informants for anthropological research.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Malay society · Muslims · Gender relations · Childhood learning

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is based on a larger anthropological study of how primary schoolchildren learn the meaning of Malay (*Melayu*) and what it means to be a Malay person in Brunei Darussalam.¹ In the study, I documented how primary schoolchildren establish for themselves the plethora of concepts and ideas that are taken for granted

¹ The title of my original PhD study is 'Making sense of *Melayu*: An ethnographic study of primary schoolchildren in Brunei Darussalam' (Shariza 2021). The major themes that form the research are personhood, Malay, morality and respect. In the study, I suggest that children come to understand the concept of Malay, and what it means to be a Brunei Malay Muslim person, through the different ideas and understandings of respect, which are inextricably linked with moral values and hierarchical relations, against a backdrop of state ideology and the Islamic religion.

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by adults, such as culture, nature, identity and gender, in order to understand how social relations—in the school and at home—inform schoolchildren’s understanding of Malay. Through ethnographic case studies, I came to the conclusion that respect plays an important role in how children (as well as adults) learn and comprehend ideas of gender, filial duty, deference, ‘correct’ knowledge, ‘normal’ behaviour, hierarchy as well as disrespect. The fieldwork for the study took place at a suburban state school in Brunei Darussalam from January 2016 to March 2017. In 2016 a total of 406 pupils (194 males and 212 females) were enrolled in the school. They were mostly Malays from different socioeconomic (mainly middle-income and low-income households) and ethnic backgrounds, with some of mixed ethnicity.² While I was not privy to the exact number of foreign pupils in the school, I was informed that they were mainly from Bangladesh and the Philippines. The methods used to collect data were a combination of participant observation, interviews and casual conversations with both children and adults. Although pupils were the main focus of the study, teachers, parents and guardians were also interviewed in order to document their experiences when they were primary schoolchildren themselves as well as to compare the differences in ideas—with regard to respect—due to changing historical circumstances.

In the following discussion, I examine how primary schoolchildren learn and understand the differences in what it means to be male and female from daily interactions with their friends and their teachers. I also investigate important texts that detail the ‘correct way’ of being male and female, and look at how adults view gender and how children of different age groups understand and practise gender. I attempt to show how children’s expression of personhood is through the complementary processes of gendering and being gendered. My study demonstrates that children are not passive recipients of personhood but that they themselves are also actively appropriating what is expected of them based on societal expectations.

6.2 Gendering Colours

When I asked a year three pupil, Azy (female, eight years old), why she refused to give in to her male classmate’s relentless request to borrow a red coloured pencil, she told me that it was because boys should not be using ‘colours meant for girls’ (girl *punya* colour) for their art drawings. She then proceeded to explain and showed me—from her box of 24 Staedtler colouring pencils—what ‘girl colours’ are: white, yellow, cream, orange, red, pink, purple and light blue. She then pointed to the right side of the colouring box and differentiated that dark blue, green, brown, grey and black are ‘colours meant for boys’ (boy *punya* colour). Azy further added that while

² Inter-marriages between Malays and those from minority ethnic groups—native groups (*puak-puak Melayu*)—including the Chinese have resulted in a large number of Bruneians with mixed ethnic backgrounds. For clarity, under the Brunei Nationality Enactment 1961, the ethnic groups legally recognised as Malays are Belait, Bisaya, Brunei (Brunei Malays), Dusun, Kedayan, Murut and Tutong.

she did sometimes use boys' colours, she found those colours particularly ugly (*bida*) while girls' colours are pretty (*lawā*). Thinking that she had clarified her actions to me, she was frustrated when I repeated my question as to why she would not lend her male classmate the red coloured pencil. Azy reasoned that it was because both she and her male classmate were different: 'It's because we're different, he is a boy and I am a girl!' (*Pasal kami lain bah, ia laki-laki aku bini-bini!*).

Azy's response can be written off as trivial while her actions towards her male classmate can be rationalised as just being selfish. In actuality, her way of thinking is an essential window that sheds light on how children perceive their world and differentiate themselves from one another, and most importantly this is just one way that children talk about gender. Younger children are also—at some level—aware of this gendering process. In a reception class (*pra*),³ when I asked the girls what the 'pretty' objects in the classroom were, I was impressed by how they unanimously pointed to their school bags, something I had not noticed before. Evidently, all the girls had pink or purple schoolbags (mostly pink) with pictures on them depicting Elsa (from *Frozen*) or Barbie or were brightly patterned Smiggle bags with typically feminine designs like rainbows or unicorns. The schoolbags for boys were either blue or black with superhero pictures on them such as Captain America, Superman and Spider-Man. Furthermore, over the course of my fieldwork in the school, there were numerous occasions when the responses I gathered from the children—when our chit-chat revolved around boys and girls—were the typical: 'He is a boy, I am a girl' (*Ia lelaki/laki-laki, aku bini-bini*) or 'She is a girl, I am a boy' (*Ia bini-bini, aku lelaki/laki-laki*).⁴ In a similar vein, for adults (teachers, parents, grandparents and guardians), their habitual responses when questioned about the differences between males and females were: 'Because he is a man/boy' (*Pasal ia lelaki*) or 'Because she is a woman/girl' (*Pasal ia bini-bini*). While the schoolchildren were not able to explain to me the complexities of what it means to be a boy or a girl in Brunei Malay society, all the children I spoke with were, in some ways, informed of their sense of personhood from what had been 'dictated' to them by others. I am not saying that children are seen as full persons yet or have obtained full personhood status, rather they are learning how and what it means to be a Brunei Malay person.

Almost all of the adults interviewed referenced religion (*agama*) and the Malay culture (*budaya*) when detailing their ideas about males and females. Conspicuously, almost every answer was followed with the saying, 'It is much better or proper to do so/this/that' (*Lagi bisai kalau dibuat cemani/cematu*),⁵ which emphasises that a certain type of act or behaviour should be performed correctly, thus normalising it. Moreover, when one acts in the correct manner, one is also showing respect to others. At the same time, this reflects that a particular person only acts or behaves in a certain

³ *Pra*, the suffix for pre-, is the Malay word for reception class or kindergarten class, a shortening of *prasekolah*; all state schools in Brunei typically use the term *pra*, unlike private and international schools.

⁴ Both *lelaki* and *laki-laki* mean man or male. In Brunei, both terms are interchangeable and while the former is the standard Malay-language term, the latter is an informal term.

⁵ Sometimes the responses are: 'It is not good or proper to do so/this/that' (*Inda bisai kalau dibuat cemani/cematu*).

way because of his or her biological makeup—it is ‘natural’. Males and females are told and trained on how to dress, react and view ‘things’ differently, which results in that person developing and acquiring certain traits and a particular way of thinking.

6.3 Male, Female and Clothing According to Malay Islamic Monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*)

Malay Islamic monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*, MIB) textbooks are necessary tools in the facilitation of learning, since the knowledge presented is deemed to be ideologically legitimate and the true way of living as a Brunei Malay person.⁶ Fundamentally, they draw children’s attention to certain ‘forms of identification’ with their family, community and the nation (Stafford 1995: 6, 59). At the same time, this symbolic form of identification is part of children’s personhood. For Malay children in primary schools, MIB is a model to aspire to. For example, in MIB textbooks, one of the interesting topics is on clothing etiquette and appropriate dress codes (*adab berpakaian*) and the portrayal of male and female characters illustrated in cartoon form. The topic on clothing etiquette appears in both year one and year two textbooks; while the year one book demonstrates how one should dress in everyday life, the year two book shows the appropriate way of dressing according to the Islamic religion and the Malay culture. Both books advise that one’s modesty (*aurat*) must be covered and one must ensure that one’s attire is neat, clean and not see-through or tight. In Islam, the *aurat* for males begins at the navel and continues to the lower part of the knee; for females, the *aurat* takes in the whole body, which has to be covered except for the face and hands. According to MIB textbooks, the correct attire for males is to ensure that one wears either long trousers or shorts that come down to the knees and a long-sleeved shirt is preferred. The types of clothing seen as inappropriate are short-sleeved shirts with inappropriate pictures and ripped jeans. Furthermore, not wearing a traditional Islamic hat/headress (*songkok*) while attending an Islamic activity or event is also considered improper.⁷

⁶ *Melayu Islam Beraja* is the national philosophy of Brunei Darussalam. All primary and secondary pupils are taught MIB lessons (promoting Malay, Islam and monarchy) as it is a compulsory component of the educational curriculum. In brief, MIB was officially introduced during the declaration of Brunei’s independence on 1 January 1984. Generally viewed as a historic innovation by staunch conservatives, ‘the three distinct components of MIB; Malay cultural values, Islam as a way of life, and the traditional political system of Malay monarchy’ arguably have ‘formed the basis of the Brunei Sultanate from time immemorial’ (Naimah Talib 2002: 141, 142).

⁷ The *songkok* is usually made from velvet material and is often worn during formal occasions such as wedding functions. Some workplaces in Brunei also include the *songkok* as part of the work attire, such as Islamic banks and the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

All the cartoon illustrations of female characters in the books are drawn as modestly clothed in either a full-length loose-fitting traditional dress (*baju kurung*)⁸ or loose attire, and their hair is either covered with a headscarf (*tudung*) or a *hijab*. The inappropriate way of dressing for females is not wearing the *tudung* when one is outside the house or wearing tight clothes, including attire that attracts attention due to embellishments (such as jewellery) or vibrant colours. Apart from the emphasis of ensuring that one's *aurat* is covered, the other significant value that one should adhere to is the fact that 'attention-grabbing clothing is sinful and is not deemed as good when viewed by others'. Inappropriate dressing is recognised by many as part of Western influences which go against the values of what it means to be modest in the Islamic tradition as well as in Malay culture. Furthermore, in Islam, when one covers up, not only is one respecting the religion—including the community at large—but one is also respecting others (by not causing offence with one's outfit) and oneself (by protecting one's modesty). What can be seen here is that the idea of the Brunei Malay person is someone who is Muslim and is dressed appropriately, and failing to do so is not only disrespectful but can be damaging to one's social relationships with others since one's personhood is relational.

However, many have argued that such attire is restrictive, particularly for women, and reflects the values of a patriarchal society. In the reception class, when a female substitute teacher took over the class, she admonished a six-year-old female pupil—in front of the whole class—for not wearing her *tudung*. Not only did she make an example of the pupil, she even asked the pupil if her own mother wore one, to which the pupil, scared at this point, just looked down and shook her head to indicate 'no'. The substitute teacher then questioned what type of mother she was for not wearing one and that it was wrong and sinful (*berdosa*) for her not to cover up and for allowing her child to go out 'showing her *aurat*'. Sternly, the teacher told the pupil to start wearing one from the next day onwards and to relay the warning message to her mother. In this case, even women—on both conscious and unconscious levels—are upholders of the patriarchal system and more often than not, with regard to inappropriate clothing, would resort to ensuring that their disapproval and criticism are heard.

This is where the idea of patriarchy, within the Bruneian context, varies from the standard definition. Both males and females have been trained into patriarchy, and I argue here that it is a strategy that exists because it meets some needs and is not necessarily thought of as a wholly negative ideological system. Generally, patriarchy is viewed as a negative system that either limits opportunities for women or oppresses them (or a combination of both). Within the Bruneian context, patriarchy is, to some extent, detrimental to females. However, many have accepted the normalisation of such a system in the society due to the nation's stance on the importance of cultural values and the Islamic religion. This is not to argue or imply that women in Brunei passively accept patriarchy. Rather, this is a claim that is yet to be supported by

⁸ The *baju kurung* is a loose-fitting dress consisting of a long blouse (usually down to the knees) and a long skirt. It is the traditional national, as well as work, attire for females in Brunei. Its name can be loosely translated as 'caged dress' or 'enclosed dress'.

empirical research since there are not many, if any, local studies on patriarchy and the traditional roles of males and females in Brunei. Given the fact that the nation has become more Islamic, men are generally accepted as the dominant sex because in Islam men's designated role is to lead and be responsible for their family. As Tania Murray Li (1998: 679) notes of feminist research in Southeast Asia,

men's greater prestige relates to the meanings attached to the particular practices in which they engage. Errington (1990: 7) argues that the busyness of Southeast Asian women in economic matters and their concern with money are signs not of power (a Western reading) but of weakness. Real power is derived from the spiritual domain, and there men have the advantage.

Evidently, then, traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity are supported by the state ideology and the women who support such a system are typically older females who are also religiously minded. Furthermore, the practice of the welfare state in Brunei helps to promote and reinforce patriarchal values. A large number of Bruneian Malays are afforded privileges as citizens and feel secure enough in their roles as male and female as expected in society. In line with this, many are compelled to be, and are 'supposed to feel', thankful (*bersyukur*) for what they have as the state provides free education and affordable health care, and there is no income tax.⁹

In an article on women in history textbooks, Annie Chiponda and Johan Wasserman (2011: 14) argue 'that the youth are likely to consider the way men and women are portrayed in textbooks to be unquestionable or beyond dispute', and that women 'are largely portrayed in stereotypically traditional feminine roles in a domestic environment. It is only on rare occasions that they are shown in more traditionally masculine roles outside the home' (*ibid.*: 15). This argument is applicable to the MIB books. While reading the six MIB textbooks for year one to year six students, I found that most depictions of females within the home show them washing dishes, doing housework and looking after younger siblings. As for pictures of female activity outside the home, one shows a woman shopping while others are shown tending the garden (watering flowers). One other glaring gender distinction represented in the books bears on what roles males and females take up during preparations for a function at home. Males are pictured as being busy with the table and chairs outside the house while females are shown preparing food in the kitchen. This distinction of gender roles reflects a gendered division of labour that is seen as functional for the community as well as conforming to the norms of a collectivist nation.

⁹ In my larger study, I discuss the ideas of what it means to become a useful person in Brunei Malay society by attempting to liken this behaviour of gratitude and being 'thankful to the sultan and state' to a type of culture of dependency. In the study of poverty in sociology and economics, many have utilised the term culture of dependency (or dependency culture) to refer to poor people who rely on government welfare provision. In turn, the welfare state itself creates a community that undermines personal ambition and capacity for self-help. Although the term cannot be fully applied to the Bruneian context, since even those who are privileged and wealthy also receive similar provisions (and perhaps to an even greater extent) from the government, I argue that there is a type of dependency culture that exists in the community which encourages people to be respectful (and thankful) to the authorities while staying deferential. Citizens are dependent on the authorities while the authorities are also dependent on the citizens.

According to the official Brunei education statistics from 2012 to 2016, female undergraduate enrolment outnumbered that of males across all four major national universities: Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali, Universiti Teknologi Brunei and Kolej Universiti Perguruan Ugama Seri Begawan (Seri Begawan Religious Teachers University College) with some cohorts having almost twice as many female students than male students (Department of Planning, Research and Development 2016: 11). While this is a phenomenon seen in many parts of the world, the capabilities of females are not regarded as the same as those of males. In the MIB textbooks, most of the teachers are female and there is an interesting illustration of two girls—dressed in the standard school uniform typical of Brunei state schools—imagining that they would eventually graduate from university. Their imagination pictures them wearing graduation attire; however, there is no context or accompanying caption to indicate which university they will be graduating from. This is in stark contrast to another example of a male student—dressed in winter clothing—writing a letter to his parents describing his experience of studying in a university abroad. On the other hand, while there are some male figures depicted as teachers, many of the illustrations of males show them washing the car or mowing the lawn or engaged in sporting activities (particularly football). This representation, on some level, reinforces the idea that males are allowed more freedom while females, no matter how good they are academically, are resigned to domestic and local settings. Simply put, this reflects the public and private spheres that both males and females are supposedly a part of. In the social sciences, particularly in feminist writing, there have been numerous arguments pertaining to the fact that males dominate the public sphere while females are associated with the private sphere (see Wischermann and Mueller 2004; Rotman 2006; Chiappari 2008; Hagemann 2013).

Apart from the different roles that represent male and female in the MIB textbooks, there is also the description of the type of good and bad behaviour one should internalise and avoid. While males and females are already portrayed in traditional masculine and feminine roles in the textbooks, the bad behaviour listed is gendered from the Malay Muslim perspective. Good behaviour for girls is represented in a cartoon of two girls disposing of rubbish properly in the bin which signifies that the domestic sphere is the place for females. On the other hand, bad behaviour for females is mostly relational, such as selecting friends based on beauty and wealth, spending too much money while out shopping, and being boastful (for example, a married woman talking of her good fortune and the number of her children in the presence of an unmarried/childless woman). For males, bad behaviour is physical and anti-social such as littering, kicking the rubbish bin, writing on school desks, drawing graffiti on school walls and so on. While there is evidence that boys are more physical when demonstrating bad behaviour, there are also studies that show girls resorting to indirect aggression (see Crick et al. 1999; Woods 2013). Burglars and kidnappers are also depicted as typically male in the textbooks, and in one example their victim is a young schoolgirl. This depiction reflects the pervading notion that victims are commonly powerless females while their perpetrators are powerful males. While this is for the benefit of the pupil (reading the MIB textbook) or community to be extra vigilant, it stereotypes females as being weaker compared to males.

6.4 Proper Conduct and Proper Toys

From a young age, pupils are already taught to internalise what proper conduct is according to their gender through the influence of adults. Not only do they come to understand and participate in the activities of what is proper in their culture, they are also eager to do so with guidance (Rogoff 1990: 111). Children's participation is also dependent on the approval of their parents, such as in the choice of toys. One of the reasons for this is the shared meaning and social approval that young children seek from their parents as well as from their teachers and friends.

In the primary school I studied, there were two reception classes and the class I was assigned to had 23 pupils: 12 males and 11 females. Their ages ranged from four to six years old, although a majority were five at the time of observation (all the children were born either in 2010 or 2011 and had not yet turned six).¹⁰ The class teacher was Cikgu (Teacher) Suna and she had taught at the reception level for three years. During my first observation, I saw that Cikgu Suna was trying her best to get the children's attention in order to start the first lesson of the day. All the children were sitting on the floor facing her and the whiteboard. The boys and girls were divided into two rows each, with the boys sitting in front and the girls behind them since it is considered the Islamic way to do so. When the children were tasked with writing, drawing and colouring, boys were assigned to sit with other male pupils at their designated tables while female pupils were also placed next to each other. There were altogether four big tables shaped into a big square that were shared between five or six pupils. I asked Cikgu Suna if this was her own decision to separate the children according to gender or if she was adhering to the school's instructions to do so. She told me that she had always done so since it was the MIB way of doing things. She further said that she avoided mixing the boys and girls together as 'it is not nice if outsiders (specifically parents and guardians) see (the mixing of boys and girls) and especially if there is an impromptu visit from the minister of education or any high-ranking officials including school inspectors [*nazir*] from the ministry'. The inspectors, she added, were very strict when it came to proper rules of conduct and always tried to find fault.

In my interview with Cikgu Suna, which was conducted over a year later, she told me that this was common practice for her as boys and girls were also seated separately when she was in primary school in the early 1990s. When pupils lined up heading out to their next class, both boys and girls already knew that they had to do so in two rows and this was a common sight too during morning assemblies, the weekly recitation of the *Yā' Sīn* chapter from the Qur'an (on Thursday mornings in the multipurpose hall) as well as during physical education lessons. Although this is seen as the proper or correct way of doing things according to MIB and Brunei Malay parents, not all teachers followed this rule strictly. In a few of the other classes

¹⁰ According to Brunei's Ministry of Education's website under the tab 'Primary Education', 'formal schooling begins at the preschool level at the age of five years' (Ministry of Education 2018). For pupils to be admitted from the preschool level onwards, they should turn five years of age by March/April of their first year of schooling.

I attended, boys were seated next to the girls and their teachers told me that it was their preference. Sometimes, academically weaker pupils were placed together at a shared table or a mix of weaker and cleverer pupils so that the cleverer ones could assist their struggling classmates. And while reception pupils sat separately from each other according to gender, it was a completely different scenario during English lessons when they were made to mix together and, sometimes according to their own choice, particularly when they were completing a workbook exercise.

At times, Cikgu Suna would struggle to get the children's attention and as a last resort she started telling the class a story about how she met the superhero figure Ultraman while out shopping with her daughters. Ultraman is a fictional Japanese superhero who defends the Earth against aliens and monsters.¹¹ During one of those occasions, all the pupils suddenly became focused on her at the mention of Ultraman, while two of the boys got up on their knees and excitedly started to add to Cikgu Suna's story of how they also met the superhero in person at a recent live show. Others, mainly the boys, began talking about how they regularly watched the television series, including cartoons, and boasted that the superheroes went to visit them in their own homes. The girls, on the other hand, were quiet and did not join in on the conversation at all. One pupil, Ifa (female, five years old), turned to her friend and said, 'He is lying', while her classmate, Ista (female, five years old), looked annoyed and shouted to the teacher, 'Those are toys for boys!' During recess, Ista told me that 'Girls should not play with those toys [Ultraman]' and when I asked her why, she looked down and shrugged her shoulder then quietly replied, 'My mother told me that it is not allowed'. In her study of preschoolers, Nancy Freeman (2007: 363) notes that parents' approval plays a huge part in young children's preferences for gender-specific toys. Although Freeman's preliminary investigation into preschoolers' perceptions of toys and their parents' attitudes and beliefs is small scale, it is striking how it is also relevant to the pupils in the school I studied. In Brunei, parents are to be respected unquestioningly, which makes their approval all the more important because going against one's parents is akin to committing sin in Islam. While Freeman's investigation involves three- and five-year-old children, I argue that it is also the same for older children, particularly for those who have been bestowed with an authoritative status (such as monitors and school prefects).

During one of my observation sessions in year one, I overheard some of the girls chatting about what they liked about Ultraman, and I decided to sit with them and listen in. On behalf of the girls in the group, Tali (female, six years old) told me that they were 'not allowed' to like Ultraman since it was meant for boys only. She then added that there were also female characters in Ultraman 'but we like Princess Elsa and Barbie because they are pretty'. It is clear that girls tended to only like 'pretty' objects, and what they perceived as 'pretty' was the result of what they had been told

¹¹ Ultraman began as a television series in the 1960s in Japan. Over the decades, the superhuman character was serialised into comic books and films and gained a massive pan-Asian following. In Malaysia, it led to a localised version of the television series and comic books which were also imported to Brunei.

by parents and peers. However, at the same time, there was the underlying system at work that generated these traditional feminine traits, that is the ideological dominant value system of MIB and particularly Islam.

Besides knowing what children liked and did not like as a means of getting their full attention, Cikgu Suna also tried to adhere rigidly to what she deemed ‘the proper way of doing things’. Nevertheless, there were times when she told the pupils that it was ‘all right to not follow the rules sometimes’. The following exchange is an example of this:

- Cikgu *Kalau gambar perempuan, beg pensel untuk?* [If the picture is of a female, whose pencil case is it?]
 Pupils *Perempuan!* [Girls!]
 Cikgu *Transformer ani perempuan atau lelaki?* [Is Transformer female or male?]
 Pupils *Lelaki!* [Male!]
 Cikgu *Kenapa lelaki?* [Why male?]
 Pupils *Pasal Transformer lelaki!* [Because Transformer is male!]
 Cikgu *Kalau yang gambar Barbie? Boy or girl?* [If the picture is of Barbie? Boy or girl?]
 Pupils *Girl!*
 Cikgu *Boleh pulang untuk lelaki tapi inda sesuai pasal ia lelaki.* [It can be for boys, but it is not suitable or proper.]

What is interesting in the exchange is that Cikgu Suna, while stating that it was all right for male pupils to have a pencil case with a picture of Barbie on it, it was still not ‘suitable’. When children hear this, their internalisation of stereotypical definitions of gender is further reinforced by the perception of others. During her interview, Cikgu Suna revealed that she did not restrict the toys her daughters wanted to buy since it should be their choice. While there seems to be a contradiction in Cikgu Suna’s actions and beliefs, she was actually being careful not to be seen teaching the ‘wrong’ thing or allowing pupils to play the ‘wrong’ toys. Moreover, being in school, pupils had to be taught right from wrong and it was not fitting to teach them the wrong things (whether sitting, learning or playing, by themselves and with others).

6.5 Males First, Females Afterwards

When male and female pupils lined up in the school, whether for assembly or to switch to another classroom, the males were expected to proceed first. This was also evident in the roles of class leaders, in which the class monitors (*ketua darjah*) were always boys while assistant class monitors (*penolong ketua darjah*) were typically girls. In many ways, this reflected the superior–subordinate system that was in place in which pupils were being trained to internalise and replicate.

In the earlier discussion, I mentioned how Cikgu Suna ensured that she separated the seating arrangements for boys and girls in order to gender train the children, but also to avoid attracting any complaints or criticisms from others and unconsciously,

as well, to perpetuate the idea that it was normal to do so. From year one onwards, pupils were already expected to internalise this idea of ‘normality’. There were three classes for year one with fewer than 20 pupils in each, and the ages of the pupils were six and seven year olds. The class I was assigned to observe had 17 pupils: 10 females and 7 males.

Being in year one meant that pupils should already have known what was expected of them and what the rules were since they had been trained since reception class. Once they were in their respective classes after the morning assembly, pupils had to remember to tidy up their classroom by sweeping, clearing any rubbish from the floor and organising the reading books (placed on four adjoining desks at the back of classroom which is where I sat during my observations) neatly into the allocated boxes. Both the class and assistant class monitors had to ensure that pupils assigned for class duty on that day completed their cleaning task. In year one, the monitor was Hai (male, seven years old) while the assistant class monitor was Nur (female, six years old). In almost every class in the school, a boy was always elected as the class monitor while the assistant class monitor was typically a girl. While there were some classes in which only females or only males were elected for class leader roles, it was not common (see below).

Throughout my observation of year one, I noticed that when pupils lined up and waited to enter the classroom for their next lesson, it was always the boys who entered the classroom first before the girls. From the example of the upper primary classes, even though there were times when it was the females who entered the room first, more often than not it was males who were first. Indeed, on many occasions when the teacher was already waiting inside the classroom, they ordered the males to enter the room before the females. Nur, the assistant class monitor, told me, ‘It has to be like that. In religious lessons, we are taught that males should be first. During prayer times, males are the ones in front [leading the prayer]’.

I referred to how it was not common for girls to be elected as the class monitor over the male pupils. However, this did not apply to the year three class that I observed. In that class, the class monitor was Sofi (female, eight years old) while the assistant class monitor was Qam (female, eight years old). Both were chosen to lead and take care of matters within the classroom on the teacher’s behalf. I asked their homeroom teacher, Cikgu Juha, about her decision-making process in the selection and she revealed that the boys were not mature or responsible enough, and that she did not need to abide by the conventional gender rules. She also told me that she was training the girls to become leaders because it was her job to do so. While this was a positive decision on her part, she did not like the fact that the two teachers attached to her class (for teacher training) who took over her lessons had mixed the boys and girls in groups and had also placed a girl in front of a boy in a line. I found Cikgu Juha’s stance on this quite contradictory and I suggest that this comes down to the differences in status between the attachment teachers and her. Elsewhere in my research, I have outlined how rank is an important feature of Brunei Malay society which is still very much part of everyday consciousness (see Brown 1970; King 1994). Cikgu Juha believed that attachment teachers were still learning to become qualified teachers and were lower in status (in terms of teaching experience), and

therefore should follow the rules of gender segregation. Only when they are full-fledged teachers would they be able to 'do as they please'. Even so, Cikgu Juha did not dare to reprimand or advise the attachment teachers and this was because of their difference in qualifications; while Cikgu Juha's highest qualification is a diploma, the attachment teachers would graduate with a master's degree. Therefore, the junior/senior rank was not as important, as their qualifications mitigated against it.

In year four, Cikgu Ahi followed the conventional route of choosing male pupils, Irz (10 years old) and Waz (nine years old), for the class monitor and cleanliness monitor roles respectively. The assistant class monitor was Ireen (female, 10 years old) while the assistant cleanliness monitor was Hara (female, nine years old), and both were more outspoken and authoritative compared to their male counterparts. Furthermore, Ireen was a visibly domineering pupil and ordered her classmates around which made me—and her classmates—forget that Irz was the monitor. I asked Irz if he enjoyed being the monitor when Waz immediately interrupted and told us that Ireen was always the one in charge (she greeted the teachers while the rest repeated after her and gave orders on the teacher's behalf). 'Girls behave like this?' questioned Waz half-laughing and half-annoyed. Irz defended himself by saying that he liked being the monitor but was not sure why he did not take charge as much nor was as visible as Ireen. I concluded that because Ireen was a very confident pupil—and also the top pupil in the class who preferred to converse more in English than in Malay—she was able to take charge more than Irz. In this context, fluency in English then became an advantage and bequeathed authority over others, particularly in a state school where a large number of pupils were not fluent in English. In certain contexts, therefore, while the conventional notion of 'males first and females afterwards' was preferred, when girls were more equipped with assets such as responsibility, authority and language ability (which most of their male counterparts lacked), they were rewarded. In practice, this was not always the case as evident with Waz's bewilderment towards Ireen's domineering attitude.

In some ways, this example is almost comparable to the 'gender diss' that Philippe Bourgois documents, in which lower-income males resort to hurling racist or sexist expletives towards women who are more successful and have authority over them as a means to not feel emasculated: 'Ultimately the gender disses respond to economic inequality and power hierarchies. The crack dealers' experience of powerlessness is usually expressed in a racist and sexist idiom' (Bourgois 2003: 147). In the context of Waz, although he did not use sexist language to criticise Ireen, his questioning of her domineering behaviour—which for him was not a feminine characteristic—was indicative of his (and Irz's) powerlessness even though they were the ones who occupied positions of authority in the classroom.

6.6 How Gender Can Be Disgusting (*Barigali*)

Males are not the only ones who participate in gender disses to make fun of and criticise females. Females were also known to engage in this behaviour in the school where I conducted my fieldwork. Between lessons and during recess, I noticed how year one boys and girls made fun of each other. The very fact that they were of different sexes with different physical attributes was seen as funny and ‘disgusting’. Boys and girls also made fun of each other by pointing out that they would soon marry someone of the opposite or of the same gender. They viewed the other sex as ‘disgusting’ (*barigali*) and called out any touching or holding the other sex as ‘sinful’ (*haram*).¹² On the way back to their main classroom one day, a special needs pupil, Muz (male, six years old), held my hand to guide me back to the class and I told him that we should wait for Ame (female, six years old) since she was trailing behind the rest of her classmates. Muz then went over to Ame and grabbed her hand, but Andi (female, seven years old) and a few other girls apprehended him saying, ‘Boys should not be holding girls’ hands!’, and they pulled Ame away from him. Despite ganging up on him at times, the girls were more accepting of Muz. Compellingly, Nur, the assistant class monitor, said this to him one day: ‘You like milk that’s why you are like a girl’. It appeared that Muz was not viewed like the other boys and this was attributed to his special needs disability, yet he was viewed as a boy when he started to touch girls.

Compared to the girls, the boys were more aggressive in their attitude towards Muz. During recess period one day, Riz (male, six years old)—the smallest boy in class—warned Muz to not disturb the other boys playing. The class monitor, Hai, who was holding a pair of scissors, threatened Muz that if he continued to bother them he would cut his face.¹³ Unlike the girls who seem to view Muz’s gender in a fluid-like state, transitioning from male to female depending on the situation, the boys saw Muz as a girl. Muz was effeminate in his behaviour and this was not seen as likeable, and to a large extent viewed as ‘disgusting’ by his male classmates.

There was one gripping conversation between Muz and Riz in an information and communication technology (ICT) class that further demonstrated boys’ dislike for female-oriented objects and female characteristics. Compared to a large portion of the year one class, Riz was the most talkative pupil, had a good command of English and could read any English books for the year one level without difficulty. While all the other male classmates adored Ultraman, he told them that ‘it sucks’ because it was an old superhero and he preferred Ironman. There were many times in class when his group of friends would get him to demonstrate different character

¹² Engaging in any act or behaviour that is forbidden under Islamic law such as sexual relations before marriage.

¹³ This is one of those times when, as a researcher, I was forced to intervene by confiscating the scissors from Hai. In fact, the scissors belonged to their homeroom teacher and were tucked away in her desk drawer. Pupils were not allowed to go through her things. However, Hai habitually did so, taking advantage of his role as a class monitor thus justifying his actions (and power over his classmates).

voices when reading some of the story books because he was the only one who could effortlessly do so. During that ICT lesson, while all the pupils were sitting on the floor in front of the teacher's desk, the boys started to chat about Ultraman, Batman, Superman and Spider-Man. Muz suddenly stood up and told everyone loudly that he preferred the princesses from the film *Frozen*. His sudden outburst was met with roaring laughter from all the boys while the girls had a look of confusion on their faces. Riz then stood up and stated that he now knew why Muz had a tendency to act up or to be naughty (*beulah*); it was because he only watched 'princess movies' that have underwear (*spendet*) in them. Riz's own analysis of why Muz behaved in such a way was due to his fondness for female-oriented films, which was therefore the supposed reason—in Riz's eyes—for his effeminate behaviour.

Further, Riz saw Muz's acting out or being naughty as a result of his feminine qualities which further reinforced the idea that what is female is seen as bad or negative. Another point that Riz made was the idea of *spendet* as a form of a female object. Children commonly made fun of each other by calling their friends *spendet* or making fun of their *spendet* since the clothing article was generally viewed as dirty and disgusting (by children themselves) even though it is a garment worn every day. Their association and dissociation with certain objects were their way of navigating the social world in which they lived as well as a tool in negotiating social relations with others. Already at this juncture, it was clear that Riz—at his young age—viewed femaleness as inferior to his own gender as a male, a viewpoint that I believe was also shared by his fellow male classmates (except for Muz).

On another occasion, while sitting at the back of the year one classroom with Riz and Hai, where all the reading books were kept, both boys pretended that the books had 'genders'. Using the book as a prop, Riz playfully said to Hai, 'I am a boy, I'm perfect ... you are like that girl', to which he pointed to a book with an image of cooking on it (which was the 'girl' that Riz was referring to). He then laughed it off and started to talk about cooking pasta with salad. Hai had no clue what pasta and salad were, so he grabbed the cooking book and hit Riz with it. Riz retorted, 'Whatever! I've got the woo, it's my woo, the woo is mine, give me back my woo!' I asked Riz how to spell 'woo' and what it meant, to which he replied, 'It's an invisible power!' I also asked if girls were perfect too and he disagreed, saying that only boys were perfect as he was one. I asked why he came to that conclusion and he said that it was because of 'looks'. Evidently, Riz was informed of the traditional roles that males and females take up within the home even though there are variations in the Brunei Malay family. He also talked about cooking pasta with salad, which are not traditional Malay cuisine but Western dishes, and perhaps he regarded all that is Western as superior to what is local. To clarify, in Riz's way of thinking, it was fine to be known for cooking Western food but if it was local cuisine then it borders on inferior which he associated with females. Significantly as well, he saw that being a boy was 'perfect' compared to being a girl due to 'looks' and 'invisible power' (seen as male qualities).

6.7 How Adults View Children

During the last three months of my fieldwork, I conducted a number of in-depth interviews with teachers—whom I had had casual conversations with and whose classes I had observed—as well as with kitchen staff, cleaners, and with the parents and guardians who waited to pick up their children on the school grounds in designated areas. Adults have influence—whether it is positive or negative—on children’s ideas of the world. One of the female teachers I spoke with, Cikgu Sho, who is a parent herself with three young children, saw adults as having to guide their children into adulthood. And once children themselves become adults, it is their turn to look after their parents: ‘When they are already working and married with children, it is then their turn to look after us’. For a number of the parents and guardians I interviewed, more often than not they highlighted the idea that the more children one had the more one’s blessing (*rezeki*) increased.¹⁴ Having more children is generally desirable in Malay Muslim families.

Overall, whether children are seen as carers or divine blessings, it can be argued that having more children is an economic investment. In her anthropological study of childhood, Heather Montgomery (2009: 64) suggests that ‘[c]hildren are also status-givers and the way in which proper families are formed. In some places, prolific child-bearing is honored and respected’. In Brunei, a woman is expected to bear children soon after marriage. And if the child that she bears is the first grandchild (whether on the maternal or paternal side), this not only gives status to the mother but also to the child since the child’s younger cousins will look up to them. This provides that child with a great deal of power and authority. By having children, therefore, the married couple are elevated to the status of full adults. On the other hand, married couples who have difficulty in conceiving are commonly bombarded with questions about having children. While the issue of fertility is a sensitive and indeed a taboo topic in Brunei, more often than not it is the wife who is seen as the ‘problem’, not the husband. In one of my conversations with a female teacher about the difficulties of conceiving, she acknowledged that ‘it is always the women who are considered as the root of the problem’. In fact, her mother told her that the reason why her ‘eggs would not stick’ was because she either washed her hair during menstruation or she exercised too much, hence her difficulty in conceiving.

The status of women in Brunei Malay society increases on having children, whether socially or economically. And by becoming mothers, women are considered the gatekeepers of their children’s path to heaven in the afterlife, thus also achieving a higher status within the community and in the religious context.¹⁵ However, an

¹⁴ *Rezeki* is derived from the Arabic word *rizq* which can mean spiritual blessings or one’s good fate/fortune. It can also refer to sustenance that is granted by God in the form of material provisions such as food, money, livelihoods as well as physical (health), intellectual and spiritual needs. In Brunei, *rezeki* can come in many different forms, from having a child to landing a job to receiving gifts, among others.

¹⁵ In Malay culture, the saying ‘heaven lies at the soles of the mother’s feet’ (*syurga di tapak kaki ibu*) means that children are required to unconditionally obey, respect and be filial to their mother by putting her first, before themselves.

inability to have children can bring about a great deal of emotional suffering because of how they are perceived and pitied by others. In comparing the various ethnographies on the value placed on children, and drawing on her 'research among the Rungus Momogun' of Sabah, Malaysia, Laura P. Appell-Warren (2014: 19) argues that 'in cultures where there is high value placed on children, children are perceived to achieve full personhood at an earlier age than in cultures where there is low value placed on children'. Her analysis differs from Signe Howell's (1984, 1989) studies of the development from child to adult among the Chewong indigenous people, and Janet Carsten's (1991, 1995) work on kinship in Langkawi, Malaysia, both of whom argue that personhood involves a process of becoming, and to become a complete person is processual. Hence children are not yet seen as complete persons since they are constantly in the process of *becoming*. In agreement with Appell-Warren's argument, I would argue that within the context of Brunei, full personhood status can also be achieved once parents marry off their children and have grandchildren themselves; a point that Carsten also makes.

Having children allows married couples to 'create kinship not only between parents and offspring but also in wider social relationships' (Fortes in Montgomery 2009: 63). The Brunei Malay person can be understood as part of a system of social relationships. For many Brunei Malay families, while extended kin play an important role in a person's life, affinal kin can also bring about privileges and/or benefits. Through having children and eventually marrying the children off, networks are formed in terms of support and connection with the new in-laws, including their relatives and perhaps friends as well. In terms of the number of children one has, there is no right number, but generally many will try to have at least three or more children. The sex of the children is not so much an issue, but families do want to have at least one male child because, according to Islamic law, a large portion of the inheritance (*waris*) is passed down through the male line. In a study of mortuary rituals among Chinese Singaporeans, Tong Chee Kiong (1993: 148) suggests the concept of personhood also emerges when the 'charismatic authority of the deceased [father] legitimates the authority of the [living] sons', thus also emphasising the importance of filial duty. This is similar to the Brunei context in which the authority of the male is further enhanced, but at the same time males are also *burdened* after marriage with responsibilities as they have to be physically, spiritually and financially capable of taking care of the family. And according to Cikgu Sho, the more male children one has the more money one has to accumulate. But she insisted that she (and her husband) would benefit in the long run in the form of blessings or good fortune.¹⁶

While some of the teachers showed more understanding and could see the importance of children themselves being regarded as valid informants, parents seemed to be confused as to how I could 'find things out' from children. They saw the significance accorded to children from their own traditional culture and religious belief,

¹⁶ Although many of my interlocutors agreed that having daughters is more expensive than raising sons, when sons marry, they are expected to provide a bride price to the bride's kin, known as *belanja hangus/angus* or *belanja serbaguna*. The amount varies and the money is used by the bride and her kin to pay for wedding expenses, hence the financial responsibility for men.

but were bemused at my own ethnographic endeavour. The common response when explaining my research to them was: ‘They are only children. It is hard to believe what they are saying!’ This suggests perhaps that as human beings, children are only receptacles for adult teaching and their views are not to be treated seriously. It is also the same when the teachers scold or punish the pupils; some would be resigned to the fact that the pupils were just children (*kanak-kanak*) and could not be expected to fully heed the teacher’s instructions or advice. Similarly, Carsten’s (1991: 439) study of kinship notes that children are incomplete as ‘young children, in particular, are not considered to be fully in control of their desires’, and asserts that the ‘incompleteness of children relates to the fact that they have not yet married or had sex’. I agree with this assertion to some extent. However, when they experience the physiological transition of going through puberty (*baligh*), they would begin to mature, signalling the beginning of the process of becoming a person in his or her own right. According to Islam, the signs of *baligh* for males start from the age of 15 (possibly earlier), when underarm and pubic hair start to develop, and the boy experiences the expulsion of seminal fluid, whether voluntary or involuntary. This signals the male child’s transition into adolescence. In marked contrast, females are understood to experience *baligh* from the age of nine onwards, irrespective of whether its signs are present such as the growth of underarm and pubic hair, breast development and menstruation (which usually occurs about two years after the emergence of other *baligh* signs). Once a child goes through *baligh* then fasting during Ramadan becomes a compulsory (*wajib*) act. The person is viewed as being on the road to adolescence and is generally no longer viewed as a child.¹⁷ Some of the labels attached to someone who has reached maturity or adolescence include stripling (*teruna*) for males and virgin (*anak dara*) for females.

According to Appell-Warren (2014: 19), while gender is a culturally recognised marker of personhood since ‘it is also integrally related to one’s status and role’, the body cannot be ignored when talking about gender since ‘[h]aving a physical body is a prerequisite in many cultures to making one eligible for personhood’. The body itself, as it transitions through physiological changes, marks the beginning of the development of either male or female personhood. The individual moving from the child stage to the maturity stage should change their behaviour as they become more in tune with their duties and responsibilities. Physiological changes should therefore supposedly go hand in hand with acquiring the ‘correct’ knowledge, norms and values. Once children develop into adolescents, they should know what

¹⁷ It is important to note that before males and females reach *baligh*, they go through circumcision which is also considered as a form of ritual transition of cleanliness (see Alahmad and Dekkers 2012). In Brunei, male children are typically circumcised between the ages six to 12 (primary school age), whereas for females the ritual is usually performed soon after birth. Globally, the act of circumcision on females is highly controversial and is termed female genital mutilation or female genital cutting. And while the practice is prevalent in Muslim communities across Southeast Asia, Abdul Rashid and Yufu Iguchi (2019: 2) note that ‘the extent and type of cutting is not the same in different communities. Communities in the African countries practise the most traumatic and damaging kind as compared with that in Southeast Asia’. Nevertheless, the practice itself has attracted many criticisms regardless of the extent and type of cutting.

is expected of them as male or female persons in Brunei Malay society: ‘You should know them already by yourselves’ (*tau-tau sendiri*) or ‘You should understand it yourself’ (*paham-paham sendiri*). At this point, the child transitions from one who is incompetent into a competent person who should already know ‘how things work’ and understand what is considered as ‘normal’. As noted by Appell-Warren (*ibid.*: 25), one’s ability to learn and understand the rules that govern behaviour are deemed a person’s way to achieve personhood, and ‘[c]hildren who do not “understand” are not considered responsible for their behaviors, and are not yet considered full members of their culture group as they do not understand the rules that govern behavior’. Even though the child who has reached adolescence has learned the rules of behaviour, they are still subordinate to their parents, their older siblings, older cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, older peers and teachers. Though they appear powerless, there are in fact a number of occasions in which their ‘power’, that is the autonomy of their self, materialises through the ideas of respect and disrespect.¹⁸

When asked to list what they think the differences between male and female children are, common answers from parents with regard to boys were: self-indulgent or full of oneself (*siok sendiri*); enjoys fighting (*suka berintai*); bothersome or disruptive (*kuat beulah*); and must be strong (*mesti kuat*). The standard response to why boys typically acquire these characteristics is, ‘It is because they are boys’ (*Andang nya jua lelaki namanya*). For parents, it is ‘only natural’ for boys to acquire masculine qualities because it is *dictated* by culture and religion. One of the grandfathers who is related to the group of parents/guardians I had interviewed adamantly stated that male children must not grow up to be ‘transvestites’ or transgender (*pundan/pondan*), because this would mean that the person is not seen as male (*bukan lelaki tu namanya*) in spite of his sex. He then proceeded to ‘complain’ that persons who are *pundan* were mostly from the inner-city housing settlement areas or from the Tutong district.¹⁹ And his reasoning for this was ‘because there were more females than males these days’ (*masa ani banyak lagi bini-bini daripada lelaki, patut tah banyak pundan*).

On the other hand, parents viewed girls as typically spoiled or pampered (*manja*) and reliable (*dapat diharapkan*) and must be trained to be able to do housework (*mesti dicungkil supaya pandai bekraja di rumah*). When I asked male adults about their view of female adults, they were quick to point out that they were prone to gossiping (*suka mengumpat*) and to picking and choosing who to be friends with. They then pointed to the two groups of mothers/female guardians sitting by the multipurpose

¹⁸ In my research, I discussed the importance of power relations with regard to the ideas of respect and disrespect through various ethnographic accounts. Ultimately, respect is central to one’s responsibility as a Brunei Malay person because it is part and parcel of Bruneian manners (*adab-adab orang Brunei*) that one is expected to internalise. I also argue that, for children, the basis of all social interaction centres on respect since it figures powerfully in the maintenance of kinship relations and negotiation of social relationships.

¹⁹ Apart from the grandfather, I did not come across any other interlocutor who claimed that those who are *pundan* are from inner-city areas although some are in agreement that many come from the Tutong district. This is a compelling admission, however, it goes beyond the scope and intent of my research. As of now, to speculate why the grandfather made the claim may come down to his own perception that those from other districts are seen as different or deviant from those in the Brunei-Muara district.

hall explaining that the two groups had never and would not mix with each other. I pointed out that they, the male adults, were also sitting in two groups as there was another makeshift bench nearer to the multipurpose hall where another group of men was sitting. They then reasoned that the two groups had already marked their territory in these two different makeshift sections a while back; hence there was no need to mix since they always acknowledged each other. After laughing this off, they then told me that their wives were the more involved parent because it was in their nature. I also posed the same question to the two groups of female adults and while each group disagreed that they liked to gossip, they told me it was true of other women but not of themselves. They also said that men's lack of concern at home with regard to their children frustrated them but they would shift the responsibility to their husbands when it came to scolding their children: 'They are afraid of their father because he is a man' (*Andang dorang takut bapa/babah dorang pasal ia lelaki*).

During an interview with Cikgu Rif, a senior male teacher, he revealed that male teachers generally had a happy-go-lucky or oblivious attitude while 'females are always fighting' (*bini-bini kuat berkelai*). For him, male teachers in general were easier to work with and would tackle any tasks or issues presented to them while female teachers had a tendency to complain about almost anything related to work. He gave an example of the teachers' duty roster, explaining that females would typically fight for a timetable that fitted their own personal schedules. This idea that male teachers were oblivious holds some truth according to what I witnessed in the school. For example, during year three's science lesson, pupils were tasked with completing a section in their workbook; however, they were arguing and hurling insults at each other. Their male teacher, Cikgu Jof, was distracted by his mobile phone and even though he looked up a few times to reprimand the class, he was not strict enough to get everyone's attention. Mat (male, eight years old) suddenly laid down on the floor as he was too lazy to do anything while his best friend Muji (male, eight years old) shouted out the expletive, 'Fuck!', as he argued with a few of his female classmates. All this happened in front of the teacher but he was too busy to notice. This 'oblivious' attitude in some way enabled male teachers to shift responsibility for scolding the pupils to female teachers. For instance, when Cikgu Juha, a female teacher, was on sick leave, Cikgu Iran, a male physical education teacher, took over her class as a substitute and instructed the class to sit down and read a story book instead: 'Don't disturb your friends, read your own books instead' (*Bah, jangan kacau kawan, baca buku sendiri*). Similar to Cikgu Jof, he was also too engrossed with his phone that he occasionally shouted, 'It's too noisy!' (*Bising wah!*), but returned to his phone. As the noise level became louder, instead of being strict or reprimanding the pupils again, he threatened them that he would inform their homeroom teacher, Cikgu Juha, so that she could scold them for being noisy since they were more afraid of her: 'I don't know what will happen to all of you if she gets angry!' (*Kalau ia marah, anda ku tau eh!*). This did not quieten down the pupils at all.

6.8 Conclusion

Social relations that structure children's everyday lives are embedded in the learning and identification of the Malay ideals of masculinity and femininity. Based on the findings of my research, there are strict ideas and expectations of what it means to be masculine and feminine in Brunei with regard to correct dress and social behaviour and responsibilities, although this is not rigidly practised at times (such as the case in having female pupils as class monitors or allowing male and female students to mix). These strict ideas and expectations could be defined as part of the developmental process of becoming a competent person, and thus inform children what it means to be a Brunei Malay person. What is also salient here is the inherent belief that males are valued (superior) above females (inferior) though this is not to say that females are not valued at all. In fact, as I have shown in my discussion, males rely a lot on females, particularly in taking up the responsibility for caring or disciplining children. At the same time, when women are at odds, they shift the responsibility to men for scolding children just because of their gender (being male) that supposedly warrants respect. Furthermore, females are also respected when their status is elevated through conceiving children and thus achieving personhood status. However, an inability to conceive is blamed on females rather than males, and consequently personhood is then considered as not fully formed, as the mother status is not achieved.

In his book expounding the connection between Malay culture and nationalism from an Islamic perspective, Haji Hashim (2004: 51–52) succinctly outlines that a Brunei Malay person must be one who possesses unwavering loyalty to the monarchy (and by extension the state), must be a Muslim, and must practise Malay culture and speak the Malay language. These characteristics are also extensively detailed in the MIB textbooks for primary schoolchildren. My findings clearly show that the learning of gender centres heavily around religion (Islam), behaviour that governs everyday life (specifically Malay culture) and the ability to understand (language). Although language is not addressed in this chapter, in my original research I found that the Malay language is a marker that focuses children's attention on the monarchy and, to some extent, the desire to become a useful Malay person. And so, while Malay and religion are two different concepts, over time both are fused together as one entity. In Brunei this is largely due to the amalgamation of MIB and the strengthening of religious fervour over the last few decades. In essence, this fusion effectively structures and cements children's way of thinking about gender, in which the right way is to follow the teachings of Islam. The messages that the MIB textbooks convey—including those repeated by pupils, teachers, parents and guardians—place males on a higher pedestal than females. At the same time, males are generally associated with positive traits and characterised as empowered while females are associated with negative traits and supposedly disempowered. Ultimately, the belief in maintaining the traditional gender roles between males and females is a result of the dominant patriarchal ideology which is reinforced by the Islamic religion.

My research is one of the few in-depth ethnographic studies that explores how primary schoolchildren understand gender and become gendered in Brunei. This study also reveals the nature of childhood in Brunei, including an anthropological insight into how children make sense of Malayness. I must emphasise, as have other anthropologists (see Toren 1993, 1999; Emond 2005; Montgomery 2009), that while children may not occupy any political or economic role in the community, they are active contributors to their social relations with others.

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Chapter 7

Older Malay Muslim Women in Brunei Darussalam: A Non-Western Conception of Aging



Izzati Jaidin

Abstract This chapter examines older Muslim women from a postcolonial perspective and details the relevance of spirituality to aging in Brunei Darussalam. Ten Malay Muslim women aged 60–76 were interviewed in conjunction with photo-elicitation to gauge their everyday experiences of aging. Participant data indicate that aging among these women is largely viewed as a gift from God but that in practice embracing this gift is not always straightforward. The discussion considers the ways in which these women’s experience of aging is mediated by societal influences, such as Malay cultural and religious values, interdependence of familial organisation through expectations of filial piety, social rapport and networks. Recounting their experiences provides a nuanced appreciation of aging among Malay Muslim women that adds further texture to our understanding of aging in non-Western contexts.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Malay · Women · Aging · Postcolonial perspective · Spirituality · Islam

7.1 Introduction

Malays constitute the largest demographic of Brunei Darussalam’s population (66%) and comprise seven indigenous groups (*puak*) as stipulated in the Brunei Nationality Enactment 1961—Brunei Malay, Kedayan, Tutong, Belait, Dusun, Bisaya and Murut. Malays represent the dominant population group and are especially concentrated in the district of Brunei-Muara. As a Malay Muslim majority country, Brunei ascribes to the values of Malay Islamic monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*) that underpin the

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national aspiration of a nation devoted to God (*negara zikir*).¹ These values influence norms, behaviour and attitudes such as good manners, respect for the elderly, close-knit kinship practice, family values and adherence to religious obligations and practices (*Borneo Bulletin* 2017).

Brunei's substantial resource wealth has also allowed it to achieve the second-highest ranking in the Human Development Index in Southeast Asia (UNDP 2022). As a result, the majority of the population enjoys a relatively high standard of living with free access to health care and education. Those aged 60 and over account for 8% of the population and this is expected to increase to 28.7% by 2050 with a longer life expectancy for females (currently 77 years) than males (75 years) (UN DESA 2019; Azlan 2020; World Bank 2022). Aside from these macro indicators, there is limited documented research on the impact of aging on the lives of Brunei's older women. Investigating their experiences and perceptions is an initial step to understanding the specific needs and challenges faced by Malay Muslim women.

This chapter investigates gendered and spiritual dimensions of aging among a group of older women in Brunei. As a starting point, it views age as a gendered construct both sociologically and culturally (Biggs 1997; Covan 2005; Wray 2007; Andersen and Hysock 2008; Twigg 2013). Female aging, in particular, remains under-theorised and largely Western-centric (Dolan and Tincknell 2012; Al-Sarrani and Alghamdi 2014). As such, the chapter adopts a postcolonial feminist lens to examine the gendered embodiment of aging and to consider the different perceptions and attitudes towards spirituality and religious and moral values outside of Western contexts. It identifies the spiritual dimension as a significant feature of the feminisation of aging in Brunei and underscores aging as an active and dynamic process embodied within subjective identity and lived experiences.

7.2 Methodology

This chapter adopts a qualitative approach for rendering a contextualised portrait of the everyday aging experience of Malay Muslim women in Brunei and the ways in which they give meaning to their experience. Data collection carried out by the author included in-depth semi-structured interviews facilitated by a photo-elicitation method. Participants were purposively selected through snowball sampling and networks of family and friends. Interviews were conducted with 10 women aged 60–76 years; six were married, one was married but separated, two widowed and one divorced, and they were from different backgrounds with an equal number of homemakers and retirees. More than half the participants were affiliated with Kumpulan Muslimah, a religious-spiritual community for women. A majority relied on government pension allowances as their primary source of income. Only one

¹ This is a concept promoting the active congenial pursuit of social, economic and spiritual goals under the rule of a monarchy with the remembrances and blessings of God (Thambipillai 2012: 94).

participant had a service pension allowance and another had additional income from rental properties. Nine of the 10 participants coresided with their children. The age range of 60 and above places the participants within the pensionable age (60 years old) and average life expectancy (77 years) for Bruneian women.² All participants lived through the country's early period of modernisation and Islamisation from the 1960s to the 1980s and their accounts speak to the experiences that have shaped their personal narratives on spirituality and aging. All interviews were conducted at the residence of the participants for convenience and to ensure a relaxing environment for participants. Interview sessions were conducted in Malay and lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. Interviews were recorded with participant consent and later transcribed and translated.

Photo-elicitation was utilised as a complimentary method to facilitate unexpected recollection and further a non-predetermined discussion of the aging experience. According to Gillian Rose (2007), visual images can prompt the conveying of meanings. Prior to each interview, participants were asked to choose two photos they considered meaningful as they grow older. Many chose photos with their family, some presented passport photos and student cards, and others showed photos of themselves with their friends. The use of the photo vignettes enhanced rapport in the interview sessions as the participants voluntarily enjoyed reminiscing about their youth and the changes they experienced over the years. It enabled the participants to narrate as well as visually represent the diverse meanings of their aging, especially on sensitive or less tangible aspects of their everyday lives and practices. During the photo-elicitation sessions, participants talked about their transition from childhood and single life to marriage, and from motherhood to family, old age and grandparenthood. This encapsulated how their social relationships that shift and accumulate over time (being wife, mother and grandmother) relate to the aging discourse of their daily lives. As Chris Wieneke et al. (1999) note, social connections shape the aging experience and form an important aspect of empowerment for older women. Towards the end of each session, five visual images were shown to participants to elicit thoughts and feelings. These images were carefully selected as specifically relevant to the Bruneian context. There are, of course, limitations to the effectiveness and appropriateness of photo-elicitation concerning visual impairment, subjective bias and manipulation (Rose 2007; Walent 2008; Martin 2012; Schwandt 2014). However, none of the participants were visually impaired and the participants could voluntarily interpret the socially constructed nature of the images without pressure or inducement and, in turn, gave unique views on their daily realities. Maintaining a high degree of reflexivity in interviews and the author's own familiarity with local customs and cultural values helped alleviate ethical overreach concerns.

Recorded interviews were transcribed and coded using anonymous pseudonyms for each participant. Once transcribed, collected data were collated into preliminary themes to begin a systematic and contextualised analysis (Patton 1990; Boyatzis

² In Brunei, a common indicator of old age is associated with qualification for and entitlement to the universal old age pension.

1998; Braun and Clarke 2006). The preliminary findings were then further refined into three major themes: the gendered constructions of aging, the development of spirituality and the negotiation of aging.

7.3 Conceptualising Aging: A Postcolonial Turn

The positionality of many Western studies on aging and later life tends to focus on white female aging at the expense of those from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds (Henry and Cumming 1959; Laslett 1987; Chatzitheochari and Arber 2011; Berk 2018). An often unintended consequence of this is a silencing of elderly female voices that do not necessarily correspond to predominant Anglocentric viewpoints. On a conceptual level, this is reinforced and reproduced by an overreliance on various predominant schools of thought. For instance, disengagement theory asserts that disengagement is universal among the elderly (Henry and Cumming 1959). Major critiques have rejected this stance as a universalistic and ethnocentric assumption framed by the biases of Western contemporary industrial societies (Moberg 2001: 35). It also largely ignores the gendered impact of an individual's aging experience. Moreover, the influential denial of death thesis portrays aging as a disease and discomfort with old age being seen as period of decrepitude associated with fear of death (Becker 1973; Ariès 1974; Mellor 1992; Wink 2006). The Western popular media is saturated with ageist images of 'agelessness'. The aesthetic exploitation of agelessness reproduces and institutionalises an implicit form of ageism (Zhang 2013). Elderly people are often prone to stigmatisation and situated at the periphery of cultural commodification and capitalist globalisation (Neuberger 2009; Kunow 2016). Arguably, this suggests that old age is an exclusionary rather than inclusive experience. Furthermore, negative and reductive stereotypes of old age implicitly ignore the diversity of individual aging experiences.

In aging studies, there is a tendency to represent definitions of old age and aging as universal and this leads to an essentialisation based on the Western experience of aging (Henry and Cumming 1959; Laslett 1987; Berk 2018). The framing is often in terms of frailty, disengagement and isolation. Arguably, these narratives overlook the diversity of the aging experience in different ethnic, religious and cultural contexts. They assume that the experiences of all aging women are similar and mirror a 'standard' Western understanding of it. Although rarely explicit, the assumption is implicit and inferable. But according to Bahira Sherif Trask (2006), the aging of Muslim women in Europe is bounded by the religious contexts of Islam itself. Although her discussion reflects a rather dated and traditional view of Muslim women, it does highlight generational differences in priorities and privileges.³ Similarly, Maria Zubair et al.'s (2012) fieldwork study on the identity work of older Pakistani Muslim women highlights the ways in which the female aging experience varies despite a Western

³ The study of aging of Muslim women in non-Arab societies is currently an under-researched area thereby contributing to misleading representations of diverse Muslim women.

setting. Their experiences were significantly affected by their migration and cultural contexts. These studies underscore the social and cultural intersubjective dimensions of age and aging.

The cross-comparative work of Jin Kuan Kok and Yuet Ngor Yap (2014) on the aging experience of Chinese Malaysian and Japanese women aged 65–75 also reveals additional material factors at play. Despite having a similar culture of communal and familial interdependence, their data indicate that the aging experiences of women are affected by different socioeconomic environments such as access to pensions and medical insurance plans. Nonetheless, both groups embrace an optimistic perspective of old age—‘aging gracefully’. It is a notion that intersects with sociocultural attitudes of reverence and honour towards the elderly. Similarly, other studies on non-Western societies portray positive views and attitudes around aging (Musaiger and D’Souza 2009; Tsuno and Homma 2009; Devasahayam 2014).

Somewhat differently, Simone de Beauvoir’s *The coming of age* (1972) reflects on the alterity of old age and its manifestation in the lived experience of senior people. For de Beauvoir, otherness in old age is more of the battle within one’s concept of self, in the sense that ‘I’ becomes ‘Other’ to oneself. She contends that the refusal to perceive oneself as becoming old reflects alterity and otherness in old age. The work of Simon Biggs (2004: 103) also draws our attention to the hegemony of ‘age imperialism’. In an interesting turn for the study of aging, this concept attributes the expression and ‘imposition of the ... priorities and agendas of one age group onto and into the lives of other age groups’ (*ibid.*). What it indicates is the formation of a hierarchical disposition of young and old age. Of course, deconstructing this binary distinction has its merits, but there is a risk in exaggerating the essentialist agenda (van Dyk 2016). The dualistic old age distinction should not merely be treated in a simplistic way. Conceivably, without a basic distinction, research on old age may not be possible (Zimmermann 2016). The task is to foreground the nuanced diversity of aging rather than deny its existence.

As such, postcolonial lenses remain important in critically considering the diversity and alterity submerged in the study of old age (Kunow 2016). For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999: 270), the compelling concept of ‘subaltern’ represents the ‘irretrievably heterogeneous’ whose spatial difference ‘is subordinate but also resistant’ to the power hegemonies (Kunow 2016: 104). A crucial contribution of postcolonial studies is to bring into focus daily practices that undermine hegemonic standards and legacies. A micro-person-centred approach as advocated by Thomas R. Cole et al. (1993) represents a step in that direction by giving voice to those on the periphery and their ‘otherness’. As Paul Gilroy (2005) notes, it is a mature way of looking at the plurality and diversity of female aging experiences in the context of contemporary globalisation.

Previous studies have also noted that spirituality tends to heighten as one advances to old age (Mohan 2004; Krause 2004; Nygren et al. 2005; Koenig 2006; Atchley 2008). Growing spirituality is seen as a subjective aspect of self-identity and wellbeing in the aging process (Krause 2004; Koenig 2006; Flanagan and Jupp 2007; Atchley 2008; Gall et al. 2011; Manning 2012). However, the link between spirituality and religion remains open to contestation and debate. Various scholars

argue that religion and spirituality are synonymous. In these terms, both arise from a search for the sacred that corresponds to the presence of a Divine Being or Ultimate Truth (Principe 1983; Hill et al. 2000). In contrast, for other scholars, religion and spirituality are distinct and separate. For instance, in the largely secular societies of the West, spirituality is viewed as not necessarily coterminous with organised religious frameworks (Schneiders 2003). Furthermore, spirituality in aging studies often revolves around Western settings (Blieszner and Ramsey 2003; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Gall et al. 2011; Manning 2012; Shaw et al. 2016). Significantly, according to Krishna Mohan (2004), a Western secular framework for understanding the spiritual dimensions of aging may be inapplicable to non-Western settings in terms of the way spirituality is interpreted. It may have a closer relation to a worldview (*Weltanschauung*) that is embedded in collective religious and cultural beliefs and traditions (Varga 2007; Aguilan 2013).

As a majority Malay Muslim society, Islam is imbricated in many aspects of everyday life in Brunei (Cleary and Hairuni 2002). As such, spirituality is also predominantly framed in the context of Islam. God consciousness (*taqwa*) is the Islamic version of spirituality (Maqsood 2003; Abdalla and Patel 2010; Ahmad and Khan 2015). This indicates a gap between the ways spirituality and aging in the West are framed and understood and the ways in which Islamic spirituality influences the aging experience of Malay Muslim women in Brunei.

This brief overview of the literature in the field highlights that the predominant Western theoretical and conceptual rendering of aging contains the potential to reproduce and reinforce forms of bias and misperception in non-Western settings. If we are to mitigate such bias in the study of aging, it is important to develop a sensitivity and appreciation towards the diversity of older women's aging experience in non-Western settings. The following sections seek to address that imbalance. The collected data and analysis underscore the socially constructed and gendered aspects of aging and detail the subjective experiences and the ways in which aging identity is negotiated from the perspective of women of colour outside of a Western context, namely Brunei Malay Muslim women.

7.4 Gendered Discourses of Aging

A 76-year-old homemaker and the eldest child in her family, Pengiran Hajah Mastura chose a group family photograph from 2012 of 300 members of her extended family (including children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren). She noted, 'I feel really happy looking at it. I recognise everyone in the picture'. Similarly, Dayang Zainab, a 60-year-old homemaker, was explicit about her insights into her own life. She also chose a family group photo which was particularly meaningful to her elder years and how much she enjoyed grandparenthood.

This is my favourite because I'm sitting next to my first grandson. I feel so happy being seated next to him.... He is four years old now, this was when he was two years old [*looking at the picture*]. I'm most cheerful around my grandchildren ... most happy.... I love my grandchildren because I struggle to take care of them day and night ... even when they are sick ... I really love them so much.

According to Dayabati Devi and Amrita Bagga (2006), the arrival of a grandchild or grandparenthood is seen as a social and cultural marker of old age. For Pengiran Hajah Mastura, the value of extended family was strongly apparent. Meanwhile, Dayang Zainab expressed that her grandchildren were the love of her life. It is not surprising that these women chose family photos with their grandchildren and extended family as representations of their old age. As Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) argue, the family often becomes a proxy of women's primary identity. It is well documented that family is at the heart of many women's lives in Asian societies (Mehta 1997; Devasahayam 2014). Childrearing and familial roles are not necessarily viewed as emasculating but act as means of empowerment. Contributing to the informal caring and nurturing of their grandchildren adds to the social and economic wellbeing of the family. Arguably, this provides an outlet for them to negotiate their 'old' identity and also highlights gender-specific dimensions of aging.

Somewhat differently, as much as Hajah Timbang (retired senior architecture officer, aged 66) appreciated the experience of grandparenthood, the label 'grandma' did not impress her. Although she repeatedly admitted to her acceptance of old age 'as a gift from God', the refrain was less than wholehearted. As she asserted, 'I don't want to be called "*nini*" [grandma] by my grandchildren, it would be weird'. In this respect, she openly admitted how the status of being a grandmother is somewhat synonymous as being seen as 'old'. By not adopting the label, she was actively 'othering' herself from the social identity of 'old' that is associated with grandparenthood. It is what de Beauvoir (1972) refers to as alterity in old age. Evidently, being 'old' does not always coincide with chronological age, but rather one engages in an intersubjective contestation and negotiating with what it means to be 'old'.

Significantly, meanings of old age are often implicitly conveyed through how people view their own lives. A middle-class homemaker, Hajah Fatimah (aged 74), conveyed that her husband was a fundamental part of her life. When asked to present two photos of her choice, she showed her wedding photo and a couple portrait displayed in her living room. Due to predominant patriarchal norms in Brunei Malay society, the husband is usually regarded as the symbol of authority and leadership in many families (Ramlee Haji Tinkong 2009). It is not uncommon to hear women, especially homemakers, frame their old age experience as relative to their husband. Hajah Fatimah's narrative below reflects an emotional and physical dependence on her husband, but also expresses a sense of empowerment and a meaningful aging experience.

I married my husband since 1958, we never had [disagreements] for a long time. As we grow older, we grow fonder with each other. We are still in love with one another; I take care of his food and drink. Wherever I go, he will be my company. He drives, we shop together. He does not even know these things, he would not know what [is] needed in the kitchen [*laughing*].

If I want to shop for clothes and scarves, he accompanies me. Yes, only two of us. It's a pity actually, only two of us. So ... it is just like this, always with my husband [*laughing*]. Go to the market, with my husband, then go grocery shopping, with my husband [*laughing*].

The narratives of Hajah Fatimah, Hajah Timbang, Pengiran Hajah Mastura and Dayang Zainab challenge assumptions about disengagement and social isolation being two interrelated 'natural' outcomes of old age. As Anne-Marie Barry and Chris Yuill (2008: 216) note, there is also a combination of certain social practices and cultural values of a particular society to consider. Due to their strong social networks and roles as informal carers for their grandchildren and devoted partners, these women experienced a relatively higher social reverence and cultural visibility. Family empowers and fulfils their aging experience and ultimately shapes their concept of selfhood. Nonetheless, as Pirjo Nikander (2009: 863) notes, '[c]hronological age functions as a significant means of categorisation of one's self and of others throughout' one's aging experience. Several participants viewed retirement and receiving pensions as the objective marker of old age. For Dayang Junaidah, a homemaker, 'The thought of being ... [60] reminds me that I have become an old person, because only at 60, you will receive your old age pension allowance'. Meanwhile for the retiree Hajah Rosmah (retired religious officer, aged 60), reaching 55 was considered old: 'When you reached 55, you retired, you are old already. Your service is no longer needed'. Entitlement to an old age pension based on chronological age creates an objective reality for these women. The formal identity of a 'golden citizen' (*warga emas*) is seen as rather more congenial than the blunt term 'old person' (*orang tua*). It reflects the value placed on politeness in Brunei Malay society and a face-saving gesture in a status-oriented society. As Rüdiger Kunow (2016: 104) notes, such a congenial term conveys a 'publicly mandated age identity'. Several participants praised the old age pension scheme as a gracious gesture from the government. Inherently, the scheme reinforces the differentiation of old age. The 'elderly' person is viewed as the object rather than subject of governmental development policies. In reality, the term promotes affinity towards this differential identity in the public sphere which subsequently masks ageist attitudes of the mandatory state retirement policy.

According to Carroll Estes and Chris Phillipson (2002), Western stereotypes of old age represent older people as dependent beings who are biologically, socially and psychologically limited in their daily lives. As a result, they are assumed to lack the agility and capacity to participate in the productive workforce. This conceivably draws the elderly citizen onto the map of subalternity within political and governmental landscapes. In Althusserian terms, official retirement age and pension schemes are 'ideological state apparatuses' of socioeconomic and political subalternity which structure and systematise people of a specific age (elderly) at the periphery of political and sociocultural participation (Althusser 1970). Although participants acknowledged their leisure time, several did view retirement in less favourable terms. They considered themselves as still healthy and able to contribute to society.

Overall, participants articulated subjective gendered discourses of aging within multilayered alterities of social identity, including grandparenthood, retirement (aged

55) and entitlement to the old age pension scheme (aged 60). Their narratives suggest that the negotiation of age identity and aging involves a rather complex and dynamic combination of selfhood, lived experience and interrelated embodiment within social circles.

7.5 Acceptance of Aging

As Mohan (2004) argues, understanding the spiritual dimension of aging through a Western framework of spirituality may be inapplicable in a non-Western culture. During interviews, allusions to spiritual development and the implication for their aging were observed from participants. In general, participants framed Islamic spirituality of God consciousness as a central element in their aging discourse (Maqsood 2003: 10). Some of the elements of Islamic spirituality's precepts—acceptance of fate or contentment (*redha*), gratitude (*syukur*) and sincerity (*ikhlas*)—played a paramount role in their understanding and acceptance of spiritual concepts of aging. As Hajah Rosmah observed about *redha*:

We shouldn't care [about] ... things that have passed. We are content and accept our aging moments that have been written by God. Because in the Qur'an it has stated the process of aging, from baby, youth and to old age. Live it with a contented heart. There is no need to worry about being old.

On *syukur*, Hajah Aspalela (retired clerk, aged 62) noted:

Whatever God has given to me, I feel gratitude for my good health. What is the point of being young if you were only to waste your time with worldly things? What God has decreed to you, you should feel grateful. Accept the fact that we are going to be old and we are old.

On *ikhlas*, Hajah Timbang stated:

The truth is sincere. Have a sincere heart. Once you're old, then you're old. Take it as it is whatever Allah has given to you. If he gives you old age, then accept it with an open heart.

From the interview data, all participants acknowledged aging and old age as 'a gift of God' that should be positively embraced. The passage of time is constructed in the realm of divine power and humans should not contest such a fate. Arguably, the socialisation of Islamic spirituality as a way of life (politically, economically, socially and culturally) in Brunei may contribute to such holistic attitudes towards and acceptance of aging.⁴

Interestingly, while aging is often conceptualised in the discourse of avoidance and fear in Western settings (Neuberger 2009; Higgs and Gilleard 2015; Kunow 2016), aging in the Brunei context takes on meaning as a divine gift to be accepted with profound gratitude. In other words, religious beliefs enabled the participants to

⁴ In Brunei, spirituality is not detached from religion but rather induced by the attachment to it. This context matters in defining spirituality in Brunei.

embrace their identity as aging women. Nonetheless, in practice some participants, particularly the early sixties cohort, expressed a rather more reluctant acceptance of their aging. For instance, the excerpt on sincerity is drawn from Hajah Timbang who previously rejected the label ‘grandma’ in her narratives to distance herself from an ‘old age’ identity.

7.5.1 *Becoming Spiritual*

Previous studies have shown that spirituality is often heightened as one advances into old age (Mohan 2004; Manning 2012). As Terry Lynn Gall et al. (2011) note, growing spiritual is central to an aging individual’s concept of self. Similarly, Kieran Flanagan (2007: 5) contends that spirituality illuminates the subjective dimensions of self-identity. Arguably, spirituality provides a greater existential meaning to life and enhances wellbeing. During reflections on the old and youthful aspects of their self-identity in the photos they chose, participants expressed a growing sense of spiritual affinity as they aged. They started to adopt headscarves, wear looser clothing, endorse extra spiritual practice (such as the night prayer [*tahajjud*] and voluntary morning prayer [*dhuha*]), go to mosques and become more informed about religious teachings. Reflecting on their own morality was also common. In many ways, this growing awareness of God and reflecting on one’s own mortality reaffirm previous research (Krause 2004; Koenig 2006; Atchley 2008; Manning 2012). It suggests that aging is an invitation to deeper contemplation and indicates that age may be a factor in stimulating greater spirituality.

Nonetheless, mortality awareness is not only mediated by increasing age. This study also finds that Islam as a religion plays a significant role in spreading awareness about death in contradistinction to a more Western construction of the female aging experience. Participants suggested that the influence of age on spiritual growth is both personal and relational. The data indicate that spiritual affinity is not only induced by chronological age but also through circumstances experienced while growing old. This was reflected in Hajah Maimunah’s (retiree-turned-businesswoman, aged 63) narrative about how the death of her mother partially triggered the pursuit of a more emotional and spiritual engagement with God:

My mum passed away when she was 50 plus, so I thought to myself, ‘Hmm, will I die at 50 plus too?’ But thank God, God gave me longer life and He keeps on adding the number to my age. So as my age increases from time to time, I am becoming more concerned about myself and death. Ironically, I never thought of this before. I am more concerned about my deeds and prayers. I don’t want to sin anymore. I’m scared already to do bad things. I just want to do more good deeds for myself. I also do more almsgiving to people. I want to collect as many [good] deeds as I can.

The death of Hajah Maimunah’s mother caused her to contemplate deeply about life and deepen her spiritual understanding. This suggests death awareness is also mediated by loss of a loved one regardless of one’s chronological age. If death invokes the search for meaning, it is a concept that is foreign yet familiar, precisely because of one’s limited knowledge and lack of spatial and temporal control over it. For all the

interviewees, the discussion of death was often extended to the spiritual narratives of afterlife. For instance, when shown the last photo vignette, Hajah Timbang shared her previous fear of graveyards. She recalled, 'I used to be so scared every time I pass by this place [grave]. I felt it was a scary place. I was worried about my sins, I was worried if I am prepared to go "there" and see Him [to die]'.

It also often induced sadness by reminding them of the loss of their loved ones. For example, Hajah Rogayah (homemaker, aged 70) shared how much her husband's death impacted on her both emotionally and spiritually. She prayed and recited words from the Qur'an to comfort herself whenever she was reminded of her late husband. High levels of death awareness among the participants probably have a strong connection to Islamic notions of afterlife. As Ernest Becker (1973) notes, those who believe in the existence of an afterlife may have lower potentiality for death anxiety. As such, it may promote a greater acceptance towards aging and mortality.

From both Hajah Timbang's and Hajah Rogayah's accounts, the indication is that spirituality acts as a form of coping mechanism to deal with sadness and traumatic events (Atchley 2008; Woodhead 2008; Manning 2012). The respondents' spiritual values gave them succour and comfort as they aged. The data suggest that Brunei's strong socioreligious context influences understandings of death and aging among this group of Malay Muslim women.

7.5.2 *Kumpulan Muslimah*

The study also found that more than half of the participants ($n = 6$) joined Kumpulan Muslimah. This is a religious-spiritual community for women introduced under an initiative by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Its aim is to empower Muslim women and impart Islamic knowledge and skills. Many mosques in Brunei have their own Muslim women's groups. Their activities include religious classes run by qualified female religious teachers, mass prayers, reaching out to the community, charity runs, Qur'an recitation, and delegation or exchange visits with other Muslim women's groups from different districts. Most members are homemakers or elderly retired women. As Woodhead (2008: 156–157) argues, this preponderance of older women helps ensure an autonomous mode of personhood outside the familiar context of family and workplace and potentially promotes greater subjective wellbeing. Kumpulan Muslimah plays a role in their positive and healthy aging strategy. Participants revealed they were either members of the group or had heard about it from their friends or relatives.

Hajah Aspalela referred to Kumpulan Muslimah as her 'outside world' after retirement. Similarly, Hajah Seri (retired chef, aged 69) noted the positive impact of Kumpulan Muslimah and how it had helped her foster a greater spiritual connection with God:

I gained so much knowledge from Kumpulan Muslimah, knowledge for the next life most importantly. I learned about how to conduct prayers properly, read the Qur'an. I feel happy and my heart is at peace. Even when you feel not happy, but when you get to see your friends

and gather around, you feel happy. You get to exchange your thoughts, make new friends, from being illiterate to literate of the Qur'an. I feel happy. I get to learn something new, I get to go for trips overseas, visit so many places. All these make me happy. I know about the night prayer [*tahajjud*], voluntary morning prayer [*dhuha*] and optional prayer [*sunmah*] and so on, so with all this little knowledge I gained, I get to also teach my young grandchildren a little bit.

Interestingly, interview data also indicate that mobility was a motivating factor to enrol as a Kumpulan Muslimah member. Hajah Rogayah expressed her desire to join the group when she heard her relatives mention upcoming activities especially at wedding gatherings. However, she could only go to places depending on her son's availability as she did not drive. Similarly, Pengiran Hajah Mastura also voiced a similar concern and her preference to spend free time with her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. For more middle-class participants such as Hajah Timbang and Hajah Rosmah, mobility was not a problem since they had domestic helpers, cars and their own driving licences.

Interview data also reveal that some participants felt that spiritual growth needs to be facilitated earlier. Hajah Rosmah expressed how spiritual enhancement among elderly women at a later age may be seen as culturally mediated:

Well, from what I see among the aging members of Kumpulan Muslimah, most of them are those women who weren't concerned for their spiritual connection with God until their later life. They were like, 'Wait till I get old'. So, when you delay it until later life, they were clueless on how to do the proper prayers and what not. Even through my observation, they were still ignorant of spiritual-religious knowledge from the questions they asked me in classes. Prayers should be our daily routine and daily obligation; there should be no excuse for us as Muslims to neglect it until later life.

Arguably, Kumpulan Muslimah is a product of the state's aspiration to be a nation devoted to God. Kumpulan Muslimah reflects the state's efforts to promote an inclusive positive aging platform among the female members of the elderly community. On the other hand, membership of Kumpulan Muslimah not only serves as a vehicle of spiritual growth but also as an expression of their identity as practising Muslims and their faith community.

7.6 (Re)-Imagining Future Aging: Needs, Aspirations and Expectations

Data from the study indicate that filial piety and elderly care are two interrelated aspects of the participants' narratives in their aging experience, especially when discussing photo vignette number two. In Brunei, respect for the elderly is one of the core values instilled from an early age socially, culturally and religiously. It creates a strong sense of community in Brunei society that also shapes women's aging experience. Most participants expressed the hope that their children would take care of them as they grew older. Hajah Aspaleta reflected on her impression of the above photo:

We wish that one day, our children would also do the same to us, taking care and loving us when we're old. She seems to love her mother so much. I feel touched. It reminded me of my late mother. I am grateful I am able to take care of my late old mother, fed her and the likes, I hope my children will also do that to us.

Hajah Aspalela's narrative encapsulated traditional caring roles associated with women and notions of filial piety. She talked about how she felt honoured to be given the opportunity to take care of her late mother when she was old and expected the same experience from her children. The opportunity to serve and care for parents and the elderly is considered a great honour and blessing in Islam:

Your Lord has commanded that you worship none but Him, and be kind to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, do not say 'uff' to them or chide them, but speak to them in terms of honour and kindness. Treat them with humility and say 'My Lord, have mercy on them, for they did care for me when I was little'. (Qur'an, Al-Isra 17:23–24)

Most participants also admitted that they preferred to be cared for by daughters rather than sons. In Brunei, women are often prescribed with the responsibility of being the nurturer and caregiver of the household. Most participants had devoted their lives to caring for and nurturing their children, and evidently they expected their care to be reciprocated by their adult children. In Brunei Malay society, filial piety, community, reciprocal care and affection from the children towards elderly parents are expected. In contrast, certain Western feminists view the family as a key site for women's oppression (Oakley 1974; Abbott et al. 2005). They argue that domestic and caregiving labour provided by women is actually a form of 'hidden labour' within capitalist society. However, Hajah Aspalela's narrative reveals that the informal social contract between the elderly parents and their adult children serves to benefit older women in a close-knit society like Brunei.

The data suggest that isolation and disengagement are not overly significant issues. They indicate that Brunei's prevalent practice of interdependent living with children, the strong cultural expectation of filial piety and family values are contributing factors in diminishing isolation and disengagement. Nine of the participants coresided with their children. The exchange of intergenerational living in a family-oriented society reflects material reciprocity and social support between aging parents and their children. Adult children perform roles of informal elderly care at the physical, financial and emotional levels. They are their 'assurance of care' (Devasahayam 2014: 14). The reciprocal link is maintained as these elderly mothers also act as informal carers for their children's children. Nevertheless, two of the homemakers—Hajah Rogayah, who has no biological children, and Hajah Fatimah, who lives independently from her children—did indicate some feelings of isolation. They voiced concern and fear of isolation and abandonment by their children in hard times.

I'd ask myself, how would I die? How would I look like? Especially remembering I am alone. If I am sick who would take care of me? Who would feed me? It has been playing on my mind as I grow older. If there is someone who would take care of me, *Alhamdulillah* [praise be to God]. (Hajah Rogayah)

The biggest challenge during old age is health. Imagine, if I were to fall sick, I will be just there lying on my bed, I need somebody to accompany me when going to [the] toilet, feeling all weak and have to be dependent on others. Oh nooo ... please God I don't want that to happen to me. I wish I would never have to trouble a soul for this. The last thing I would like is troubling others, even when they are my children. (Hajah Timbang)

These narratives reflect two differing aspirations among many of the participants: the first is to remain independent and self-reliant; and the second is to maintain interdependence with their children and social networks. It is important to note that in Brunei society, the idea of an old people's home is uncommon, primarily due to a strong sense of community, collective identity and expectations of filial piety. This suggests the degree to which the cultural context is significant in influencing perceptions of old age among these women. On the other hand, awareness about eating well to ensure a healthy and active body was also prominent throughout interviews and shows a respect for their selfhood and wellbeing. The findings of the study suggest that, for these participants, a balance between self-reliance and interdependence is key to healthy aging.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter highlights the everyday gendered and spiritual dimensions of a group of older Malay Muslim women in Brunei. Adopting a postcolonial feminist lens and a photo-elicitation method to investigate gendered embodiments of aging allowed for a consideration of different perceptions and attitudes towards spirituality, and religious and moral values outside of a Western context. The findings reveal that spirituality is a significant feature of the feminisation of aging in Brunei but it is not always a straightforward process. The experience of female aging is negotiated and mediated by sociocultural factors and influences, notably Malay cultural and religious values, interdependence of familial organisation (expectations of filial piety), social rapport and networks. Moreover, the findings underscore that aging is an active and dynamic process embodied within subjective identity and day-to-day lived experiences. The gendered discourses of aging among these women involve a diverse articulation of meaning within the multilayered alterity of their social identities such as mother, wife and grandmother. The participants' experiences spoke to nuanced appreciations of aging.

The study further reveals the importance of familial connections among Malay Muslim women and the ways in which they maintain their feminine differences through roles performed within the family setting. The gender dimension of aging shapes the lived experience of these older women. They were not only actively participating domestically but also engaging outside of their traditional roles. Some joined Kumpulan Muslimah, while most invested their time with their social networks and as active grandparents. This suggests that Malay Muslim women adopt a more holistic

acceptance of aging promoted by Islamic teaching in contrast to some Western viewpoints that portray aging as a time of an increasing fear of mortality and disengagement. Their religious identity was prominent but it also intersected with other factors such as age, gender, class and ethnocultural values to condition their view and experience of aging.

There is evidence to infer that conformity towards Malay values and Islamic teaching coupled with state-level policies and initiatives underpin core social characteristics of Brunei Malay older women. For this author, the often-tearful insights of their personal reflections and spiritual aspirations remain a powerful memory. It was a privilege to listen to these older women unfold the weave of their personal spiritual journeys. Their generous participation in this study provides further texture to our understanding of aging in non-Western contexts.

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Chapter 8

Domestic Maids (*Amah*) in Malay Households in Brunei Darussalam



Nurul Umillah Razak, Adira Rehafizzan Anuar, Siti Nurul Islam Sahar, and Nur Hidayah Matsuni

Abstract This chapter is a case study of the everyday lives of Indonesian domestic maids (*amah*) working in Brunei Darussalam. It gives an account of the lives, hardships and dreams of five Javanese women employed in Malay households. The chapter also reveals the ways in which their roles as domestic maids abroad have altered the dynamics of gender and power relations in their own traditionally patriarchal households back home in Java, albeit by degrees.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Domestic maids (*amah*) · Gender · Indonesia · Migration · Power relations

8.1 Introduction

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO 2022a), more than 75 million people are currently employed as domestic workers around the world. A large proportion are migrants from developing countries and over three-quarters are women. They are employed to assist in or take charge of domestic work in the

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households of others, and are expected to perform tasks that range from cooking and cleaning to childcare or looking after older household members (*ibid.*). In the case of Brunei Darussalam, most of the domestic workers employed are from either Indonesia or the Philippines. Moreover, given that a majority of the Bruneian population identify as Malay, there is a preference towards hiring Indonesian maids (mostly from Java) who share some cultural and linguistic similarities with Malays; perhaps most importantly though, Indonesian maids are invariably Muslim.

Domestic workers are often called and addressed as ‘*amah*’ in Brunei.¹ Most, if not all, are female migrants and come from low-income families. The following case study examines the day-to-day experience of five Indonesian domestic workers employed in Brunei—their hardships, aspirations and motivations—to reveal a nuanced account of fortitude, adaptability and agency behind the ordinariness of their everyday lives.

8.2 Methodology

For the purposes of the study, a domestic worker is defined as someone who works in and for a household, and performs a wide range of (mostly household) tasks ranging from cooking, cleaning, childcare, elder care, guarding the premises and driving the family car either on a full or part-time basis, and may either live in or live out.

Data collection was conducted through a series of informal sessions and observation, often engaging respondents in a conversational manner to make them more comfortable and at ease. The process of talking to respondents rather than interviewing them lessened some of the barriers and opposition they had to sharing. As trust and consent are major ethical considerations in this type of study, the sample was carefully selected. A decision was made to focus on Indonesian maids due to the preference towards hiring them in Brunei and access considerations. Most domestic workers in Brunei work as live-in maids which restricts their movements beyond the private sphere of their place of employment. Some of the maids in the study already had frequent prior contact with us due to existing relationships with their employers and facilitated participation consent. An attempt at snowball sampling was made through gaining further introductions by the respondents to their friends or acquaintances. However, this proved difficult as most were wary and could not be interviewed outside of their workplaces.

Of the five respondents, only one was unmarried. While one of the respondent’s age remained unverified, the other maids were in their late twenties to late thirties. They all came from the environs of different cities in Java, Indonesia, namely Malang, Subang, Bogor and Yogyakarta. All respondents and their responses have been anonymised.

¹ See Ooi Keat Gin (2013: 405) on the historical etymology of the word ‘*amah*’ and its link to migrant domestic workers in Southeast Asia. In Brunei, an *amah* is largely seen as someone who is passive, humble, loyal and compliant.

8.3 Situating Gendered Migration and Domestic Work

Forms of patriarchy shape the experiences of migration differently for men and women, especially in developing countries (Ullah et al. 2016; Baird et al. 2017). While men often migrate to achieve personal success and fulfil their dreams, the decisions of women to migrate are more often tied to their marital or familial obligations. Rarely do their motivations include self-gratification. Women are either compelled to follow their husbands and leave familial and social support behind or driven to migrate to seek additional financial aid for their families (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). An assumption in much of the literature is that women often play a passive role in migration decisions—their paths are chosen for them and their decisions are mostly not their own. The gendered dimensions of labour migration are also apparent in the types of work undertaken. Male migrants tend to seek out employment that is considered ‘masculine’, as construction labourers, security guards and so on, while female migrants engage in more ‘menial’ tasks (McAuliffe et al. 2017). This is related to societal expectations and pressure that women perform work that complements their ‘feminine abilities’ in childcare and other domestic chores.

8.3.1 *Female Migrant Domestic Workers in Southeast Asia*

There are an estimated 11.6 million migrant workers in the Southeast Asian region, of whom a little under half—5.2 million—are women (ILO 2020a; Spotlight Initiative 2020: 5). Large numbers of women have entered the low-skilled labour force, ranging from domestic work and care work to the entertainment sector and manual factory work (Ong 1991; Hugo 2006; Baird et al. 2017; McAuliffe and Khadria 2019). Due to the fact that many receiving countries in Southeast Asia do not have adequate social policies or legal protections in place to support them, these women often find themselves in vulnerable situations (both mentally and physically) where the potential for abuse, poor working conditions and low or withheld wages is high (Piper and Uhlin 2002; Picos 2021). For instance, in Singapore migrants are exempted from social benefits and face a lack of protection, which means they often suffer under conditions that amount to forced labour even after multiple complaints to local agencies (Human Rights Watch 2005: 3, 11, 99–100). This situation is replicated in many other countries in the region (ILO 2022b).

According to Lenore Lyons (2005: 3), ‘[w]omen are kept marginalised and vulnerable by tacit state support for practices that determine how they are allocated to employers’, how they are treated ‘and what work they do within the private space of their employers’ homes’. An indication of their subjugated status is when employers insist that their maids address them as either ‘Madam’ or ‘Sir’ (ibid.: 12). ‘In many cases, [they] ... may be given separate items that are visibly marked as different to those used by other members of the household, including plastic plates and cups for eating, or cheap brands of soap or shampoo’ (ibid.: 11–12). Strict curfews are

common even when they go out to buy groceries and drop off or pick up employers' children from school. Lateness is chastised and disciplinary action can occur in the form of financial penalties or loss of day-off privileges (*ibid.*). Disciplinary surveillance extends to the maid's physical appearance; some employers in Singapore, for example, dictate what these women can and cannot wear with 'knee-length shorts and long T-shirts' being the 'de-facto uniform' of most domestic workers (*ibid.*: 12). The isolation of domestic maids is also maintained 'by separating [them] ... from [the other] members of the household' (*ibid.*).

Having situated the gendered dimensions of migration and domestic work in Southeast Asia and the challenges these workers face, we now turn to the locus of this study and the day-to-day experiences of five Indonesian domestic maids working in Brunei, their hardships, aspirations, motivations and agency.

8.4 Domestic Maids in Brunei Malay Households

8.4.1 Interview Sessions

While Bruneians and Indonesians speak a similar Malay language, dialect differences sometimes make mutual understanding difficult. During conversations there was often a need to translate, repeat and reassure for ease of understanding. For example:

Malay	<i>Tidak mengapa, kami hanya berbual di sini.</i>
English	It is okay, we are just chatting here.
Indonesian	<i>Engak apa-apa, iyaa kita ngobrol aja.</i>

Malay	<i>Sekiranya anda merindui keluarga, apa yang anda lakukan?</i>
English	If you miss your family, what do you do?
Indonesian	<i>Kalau mbak kangen sama keluarga gimana?</i>

Interview sessions with respondents were carried out within the confines of their workplace. This allowed them greater discretion over where and when they would talk. Some of the sessions were not completed in one sitting and the time spent with each respondent varied. Care was taken to ensure interview sessions did not impinge too much on their time as they were busy working (as will be elaborated later). There were times when some conversations unfolded while we helped the respondents to fold fresh laundry, prepare food or wash dishes. This afforded us a level of intimacy and trust that relaxed the respondents and shifted the tone of the session from one of interviewer and respondent to something more akin to two people having a chat. Some respondents had more to talk about than others. Conversations ranged from under one hour to those that continued throughout the day. Removing time restrictions was a way to mitigate the constraints and stress of a formal interview and elicit more spontaneous and honest responses.

While we worked hard to create a more natural and unrestrained interview environment for our respondents, there were times where our presence as researchers did

affect the interviews. As Darren Davis and Brian Silver (2003) note, interviewees tend to project, consciously or unconsciously, a certain image—of what they think would be favourable to them—towards the interviewer. Such a presentation is called the ‘interviewer effect’. This was reflected in some of the responses we obtained. These answers seemed to be carefully thought out by the respondents according to what they wanted us to hear. For instance, one of the respondents was initially reluctant to give any negative views about her employer and how she was treated by the members of the household. Another respondent immediately became tense and alert once she saw a household member entering and passing by where we were having our conversation. If there were any sudden movements, she immediately sat up straight and became more rigid and responded in quick short sentences with her voice lowered to a whisper. Moreover, a noticeable change in tone tended to occur when they were recalling their families and their lives back home. Respondents often became teary-eyed and gave sad smiles, making it hard to continue due to the highly emotional nature of the conversations. However, with time, patience and relating our own personal experiences and anecdotes to them or steering conversation to lighter territory, they gradually lowered their barriers further into conversation on certain issues. This allowed us to obtain quite in-depth information. It became apparent fairly quickly that while the respondents experienced forms of employee exploitation to varying degrees, each of them was further enmeshed in difficulties that extended far beyond the workplace. In turn, this moved the inquiry more towards unpacking and interpreting their life stories, their migratory journeys, and their feelings and aspirations as live-in domestic maids. Doing so revealed hitherto largely invisible and underlying levels of strength and determination in their everyday lives, as detailed in the next section.

8.5 Findings

Data collection revealed certain common characteristics in the difficulties the respondents faced, but also the effects that migrating and becoming domestic maids had had on their class status and gender roles back in Indonesia. While all of the women were working as domestic maids in Brunei at the time of the interviews, some had previously worked in other homes and taken on other jobs prior to their current employment. Their stories of determination provided insights into their characters and strengths, the roles they played in their respective families and the significance their occupation had for these women. It certainly altered our preconceptions and unstated assumptions about the work of domestic maids as a form of demeaning, low-class and oppressive employment.

In Bruneian society, there is a stigma associated with domestic maids and this power imbalance is made more obvious when we consider that many of their tasks could easily be performed by members of the household. Initially, our assumption was that working as domestic maids would keep these women locked into a lower status. While this is the case in Brunei, their status—and that of their families too—in

Indonesia had altered. Yet most of the respondents had been unaware of the extent to which their employment would change their gender and social roles and status back home in Java. Data indicated contradictory dynamics at play in the ways domestic work can both empower and subjugate women. For some of the respondents, their domestic work empowered them as it gave them a degree of freedom and control over patriarchal forces at home. On the other hand, domestic work was stigmatised and they inhabited an environment where considerable restraints were imposed on them, especially as live-in maids.

8.5.1 Challenges of Working as a Domestic Maid

While migration offers these women opportunities to better their lives and improve their economic, gender and social status, it also exposes them to potential abuse and exploitation as they are under the total control of their household employers. Before coming to Brunei, most of the respondents were told they would be helping with domestic tasks; their respective employment agencies indicated that they would only need to attend to the family's wellbeing, including cooking, cleaning and taking care of the family. Once they settled in Brunei, however, these domestic maids found that their tasks extended far beyond what had initially been agreed upon.

Some instances where they were given tasks that were not in their original contracts included helping their employers who were engaged in small businesses such as tailoring, selling snacks and catering. Some of these businesses were set up mainly because the domestic maids were there to help since they did not exist prior to their arrival. On top of performing the tasks that they were expected to do in the house, the maids also had to work double duty. Depending on the nature of the employers' small business, they were expected to cook the food or snacks and package them according to their employers' instructions; they had to measure customers and tailor as well as sew their clothes; they had to clean and set up the trays for the catering business. All of this was expected while also taking care of the needs of the entire family in the house. The respondents were often expected to perform these additional tasks without proper guidance. Sometimes they were taught how to do the basics but mostly they learned by doing, and they indicated that they had to be constantly careful to avoid potential mistakes and being scolded. Most were not compensated for these additional tasks, and they rarely received any commissions from the profits earned by their employers' small businesses. Although two respondents were eventually compensated for this double duty after years of dutiful service and loyalty, the situation did not change for one of them. In fact, she claimed that she was also sometimes sent to help out extended family members with domestic tasks for family events and other sporadic occasions for very little pay. Another respondent had to learn how to sew and tailor in her early months in service and stayed up late to practise with old fabrics and clothes that she had with her, and this led to sleep deprivation. Sleep deprivation was a common experience among the respondents who did double duty.

Cooking and packaging large amounts of food often took up much of their time, and these tasks were usually performed late at night or in the very early morning.

Cold treatment on the part of the family and conflicting dynamics within the household were also common challenges faced by the respondents. One mentioned that even though she had been working for her employer's family for six years, she was frequently depressed due to their rudeness and coldness towards her. She felt isolated in the household and had yet to fit in. This sense of isolation led her to control her movements within the household as she felt restricted and suffocated. It was difficult for her to enjoy even basic day-to-day activities such as cooking for herself. She also claimed there were times when she only ate rice with soy sauce as there was no leftover food for her to eat.

Respondents were also occasionally subjected to other unnecessary and unrealistic demands by their employers. A respondent recounted an episode when she was given a whole chicken to cook for the week and each member of the household became difficult and kept demanding different chicken dishes in the course of one mealtime. In order to meet their demands, she had to ration and cook various chicken dishes in one go. As a result, some dishes were not finished and thrown away. She was scolded and blamed by her employer for wasting the chicken even though she was following the orders of other household members.

8.5.2 *Familial Separation*

Despite sharing similar values with their employers, as they are all Muslims, respondents experienced challenges in relation to fitting in and gaining a sense of belonging in Brunei. A common reason behind this issue was that many were homesick; for some it was their first time spending an extended period away from their family. Their situation was exacerbated by the difficulty in maintaining frequent contact with their families as they had to manage their expenses carefully while working in Brunei. The cost of international calls from Brunei to Indonesia was quite high—around BND0.5 per minute for Easi and DST users. Pay phones and Hello cards were considerably cheaper, but respondents could only access them during their days off at the weekend (if they were given any) and in any case there are very few pay phones in Brunei.

8.5.3 *Managing Financial Expenditure*

All the respondents came from families with limited assets and very low incomes. While maids are often perceived as minimally educated and low skilled, the interviews revealed that they were astute and intelligent, especially in managing their expenses. Many had developed such skills prior to migration in having to deal with their respective employment agencies, sorting out work permits and other expenses to facilitate their move. The amount they had to pay ranged from IDR1 million to

IDR5 million (BND95–480), depending on the destination country. According to one respondent, the further the distance they travelled the more expensive it was. Another stated that in the case of Brunei, she had to pay over IDR2 million (nearly BND200) just for her work permit. Most of the respondents had to pay for the greater part of their expenses themselves prior to coming to Brunei as they were first-timers. They carefully managed their expenditure to pay back their employment agents. This often proved challenging for many as they were married with families, and had to account not only for their own day-to-day expenses but various additional family expenses and needs for their children's schooling.

The data indicated no shortage of ingenuity and determination in dealing with these challenges. Most respondents had also previously worked in stores, helped with domestic chores in other homes and performed menial tasks on farms for minimal pay. Others resorted to selling food and snacks. One respondent mentioned that she and her husband owned a small rice plot, and she was able to set up a savings account where she kept some of the profit obtained from the harvest in order to pay for agency expenses, although it took years to save enough money. Several of the respondents had to rely on obtaining loans from acquaintances or family members to cover their expenses in full. Another respondent had to redraft her contract and borrowed money from her employer in Brunei. As a result, she had to sacrifice the first few months of her salary; about 50% of her pay was deducted for each month until she had settled her debt. Most of the respondents indicated that they preferred to keep their savings with them as they claimed that setting up a personal bank account in Brunei was not straightforward for them. Some sent remittances via MoneyGram, Western Union and other similar agencies to their family members (mostly female) to help pay for both loans and expenses for their families. Significantly, respondents rarely spent money on themselves during their stay in Brunei. They limited their own expenses to food and calling cards, with the largest portion of their monthly wages either sent to their family back home or saved for the future, mostly in order to start a small business when they would return.

8.5.4 Occupational Empowerment

Given the difficulties these women faced in their day-to-day employment, it is important to glean some insight on what motivated them to keep going. When respondents recounted a lack of control and freedom in their own homes in Java, they began to disclose how aspects of their experience as domestic maids can also be empowering. As most of the respondents come from small villages with traditional family norms, they were subordinate to the head of the household—either their husbands or fathers. Some claimed their situation was suffocating for them and this motivated them to migrate overseas.

One respondent had been badly mistreated by her husband. He was addicted to gambling and most of her income was drained by her husband as he had control over the family's finances and savings. In order to get by, she took on various jobs to

support her children's schooling and daily expenses in addition to all her household work. At home she was constantly stressed as her husband did little to help out, only doing minor repairs and work with tools. She found this emotionally and physically exhausting. Given their traditional backgrounds, marital problems do not result in divorce because of the familial shame attached to publicly declaring a failed marriage. Her only recourse was to move away for work in another country. As such, she felt she was able to gain some control over her own life and that of her children.

The data indicated that many of the respondents felt trapped and undervalued in their own homes in Indonesia. Some complained that if they had not migrated, they would have had to perform double duty regardless, working outside and working at home. The imbalance of their gender roles was so prescribed that if they stayed in Indonesia, they would have worked far more hours for less money and little or no appreciation. The data suggested that reminders of these situational contexts allowed respondents to tolerate and endure the hardships they experienced as domestic maids in Brunei.

For instance, as one of the oldest in her family, one respondent claimed she had limited freedom and she was not even able to finish high school as her parents prioritised her younger siblings. Her lack of education reduced her employment opportunities, and whatever work she found met with the disapproval or dismissal of her father. Matters came to a head when her father forced her to marry a man she barely knew, claiming that he would be able to help support her and her family. Instead, she got a friend to connect her with a maid agency in Yogyakarta. Initially, her father was furious and castigated her for being an unfilial daughter. However, their relationship improved once she started sending money home. Neither of her parents worked as her father was too old to work in the fields, and her younger siblings were still in school. Her remittances and those of her older sister, who worked in Yogyakarta, were the only means of supporting the entire family. This example indicates a shifting power balance within family dynamics at home in Java. Three out of the five maids claimed that they bore the full burden for their family's finances. The men in their families who were previously the main breadwinners in the family were now being supported by their wives or daughters.

8.5.5 Finding Job Value

Respondent data also suggested that some of the domestic maids felt they had something to prove. Although they had received little in the way of education, they believed they could offer their families better opportunities in the future and gain more by working as domestic maids abroad than if they stayed in Indonesia where their life chances and prospects for gainful employment were limited. For instance, one of the respondents claimed that becoming an overseas domestic worker was quite an achievement in her village as the majority of village girls with a similar background ended up doing menial agricultural jobs in the fields, unemployed or married off early. This was echoed by another respondent who coveted her position. Being a

maid had given her the opportunity to travel out of Indonesia and gain life experience; she had worked in Taiwan and learned to speak Mandarin. She viewed these as important skills that she could use to open a restaurant on her return home. The interviews demonstrated that entrepreneurial aspirations were quite common among the respondents, with several having accumulated reasonable if modest savings from their years as domestic maids.

8.6 Conclusion

Despite the common perception of domestic maids as mostly passive and largely invisible, this chapter has revealed significant levels of fortitude, strength, emotional resilience and ingenuity in their everyday lives. While they face many challenges in Brunei, their agency has also brought about slight shifts in circumstances at home in Java through their new role as the dominant breadwinners. Although becoming a domestic maid is a rather bounded choice, it is one they are confident in and have tried to make the best of. Others may view their skills as basic and the jobs as menial, but the respondents of this study have managed to find degrees of value and even empowerment in what they do. That is to say, it seems as though there is value where they create it and meaning where you see it.

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Chapter 9

***Pengangun*: Female Ritual Specialists for Malay Weddings in Brunei Darussalam**



Mufidah Abdul Hakim

Abstract This chapter is an ethnographic account of the spiritual function of female wedding attendants and ritual experts (*pengangun*) in the Brunei-Muara district, Brunei Darussalam. It details and examines the important role of women in these wedding rituals. The discussion then further considers the ways in which their role has changed in contemporary Brunei and the everyday challenges they face.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Brunei-Muara · Wedding attendants · Malay Muslims · Rituals · Islamisation

9.1 Introduction

Pengangun is a Malay term that refers to wedding attendants with ritual spiritual knowledge who are women aged 40 years and above (Mohtar 1977). This chapter documents distinctions in the spiritual knowledge of *pengangun*, their significance, and the ways in which their role has changed in contemporary Brunei Darussalam. It then goes on to consider the everyday challenges they face in remaining relevant for Bruneian wedding ceremonies.

Brunei is known for its national Malay Islamic monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*) ideology that permeates the culture and traditions of the country (Shukri 1998; Schelander 1998; Mansurnoor 2009). The contemporary practice of many *pengangun* now incorporates Qur'anic verses in an attempt to remain a relevant part of Bruneian tradition (Osman 2001; Mansurnoor 2009). In 2009 a course was introduced at the prayer house (*balai ibadat*) in Kampong Sengkarai, Tutong, specifically for *pengangun*.¹ Its aim was to educate *pengangun* by teaching them the proper way to carry out their role according to Islam using Qur'anic verses. Significantly, the use of mantra is discouraged when conducting the wedding rituals as they are deemed

¹ A *balai ibadat* is also known as a *surau*. It is a place of worship smaller than a mosque where Muslims carry out prayers and other spiritual activities or gatherings.

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to run contrary to Islamic teachings. In Brunei, *pengangun* also consider themselves as less in demand during weddings now than they previously had been due to the changing attitudes of the younger generation (Ramlee 2009). Young people tend to view their services as being against Islamic teachings and largely part of Brunei Malay customary law (*adat*). In fact, a central role of *pengangun* is to give a glow or light (*cahaya*) to the bride during her wedding, but the ready availability of hair-dressers and make-up artists has further reduced the importance of *pengangun* in this regard. *Pengangun* also face difficulties in transferring their knowledge to the next generation due to a perception of their ‘backward’ cultural practice and an apprehension over so-called ‘black magic’ and its consequences. *Pengangun* rituals such as dabbing seven coloured powders on the bride (*malam berbedak*), the henna ceremony (*berinailberpacar*) and taking the bride to her husband’s house and vice versa (*berambil-ambilan* or *mulih tiga atau tujuh hari*) are now less common than hitherto.

9.2 Methodology

This study is based on interviews with six *pengangun* and participant observation of the services conducted by them at wedding ceremonies. Fieldwork was carried out in Brunei-Muara district, and the study informants were *pengangun* who were in their mid-forties to 80 years old. Some acquired knowledge (*ilmu*) from their grandmothers or mothers while others are *pengangun* without legitimate spiritual power (*tidak mempunyai ilmu kebatinan*). For the purposes of the chapter, a *pengangun* without legitimate spiritual power is someone who acquired knowledge through studying and observing *pengangun* services as opposed to a ‘legitimate’ *pengangun* who derives knowledge from the matriline or through dreams (*mimpi*). Studying these two groups is a way to discern changes in the roles of *pengangun* over time and the emergence of a new generation of wedding attendants. In some cases, pseudonyms are used to protect the informants’ identities.

9.3 Distinctions and Legitimacy

The *pengangun* in Brunei can be differentiated into two categories, broadly the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’. The following sections discuss the traditional *pengangun* and then compares them with the modern in order to highlight aspects of continuity and change in their role, thereby better understanding the emergence of a new generation of wedding attendants.

As noted, the term traditional in this context refers to *pengangun* I view as having credibility in assisting marriage ceremonies and displaying what could be termed ‘genuine’ characteristics, one of which is that *pengangun* are gendered and restricted to females. (The characteristics apply to both traditional and modern *pengangun*.) There is a belief among Bruneians that only women are suitable to guide the bride

and groom in marriage. In a certain sense it is a cultural form of empowerment of women through ritual activities in a predominantly patriarchal society. Wedding rituals afford societal status with a high level of respect accorded to *pengangun* during wedding ceremonies. This reflects a tendency Susan Starr Sered (1994: 3–6, 11–12) identifies of women in cultures where male domination in religion is apparent. They “domesticate” religion by emphasizing rituals and symbols that give spiritual meaning to their everyday lives’ (*ibid.*: 6; see also Puntowati 1992; Smith 2009). As Rozy Susilawati (2001: 31) notes, the *pengangun* is an important figure in wedding ceremonies and without their presence the ceremonies would be incomplete.

Another important feature of a *pengangun* is knowledge transfer through the female line. Ritual or magical knowledge and spells (*jampi*) and techniques regarding dressing the bride are taught either by a mother to her daughters or a grandmother to her granddaughters. This was confirmed in my interactions with some of the traditional *pengangun*. The matrilineal feature of transference confers an embodied familial reliability and authenticity to the acquisition of knowledge and spells. Some *pengangun* even refuse to share their spells with strangers. In this sense, the transfer of spells could be considered a form of embodied cultural capital, the value of which is reproduced for future generations. Legitimate *pengangun* with knowledge are known to reside or originate from Kampong Ayer, the water village historically associated with Bruneian customs and traditions. However, given the changing demographics of Kampong Ayer, there are also traditional *pengangun* who reside on land. They offer their services in the village communities to protect and give light to the bride or groom.

By contrast, *pengangun* without legitimate spiritual power are viewed as less knowledgeable, having acquired their knowledge only by observing other *pengangun*. They also lack credibility when they ask for payment for their services as a legitimate *pengangun* does not ask for payment. For the latter, the exchange rests upon the bride’s or groom’s mother voluntarily giving alms (*sedekah*) if they wish to. Having said this, there is also a category of *pengangun* who do possess legitimate spiritual power but also commercialise their skills. Nonetheless, it is those *pengangun* who do not possess legitimate spiritual power and seek monetary compensation who are increasing in number today.

Much of the legitimacy of a *pengangun* is linked to an acknowledgement from their village community that they possess spiritual knowledge (*orang yang berilmu*) through their ability to give a glow or light and protect those getting married from black magic (*sihir*). Although there are no monetary fees charged for their services, a gold ring is given by the mother of the bride or groom as evidence (*pikaras*) in the afterlife that the *pengangun* has protected the individual. Aside from a ring, the bride’s or groom’s mother presents four yards of white silk to the *pengangun* in exchange for a cloth used during the first night of the marriage to identify the virginity of the bride (*kain lapik pinang*, literally ‘betel nut cloth’).

The services offered by *pengangun* are not only restricted to the bride; the groom must also have a *pengangun*. This is because the role of a mother, which is to protect and educate her child about marriage, is replaced by a *pengangun*. Hence, this is the moment when the mother hands over her daughter or son to the *pengangun*

with trust in her child's life protection. Further, the bride and groom must have a separate *pengangun* throughout the ceremonial process because it would be difficult for one *pengangun* to attend to and look after two persons at the same time. Some *pengangun* also have the skills of a circumciser (*penyunat*), diener or mortuary assistant (*pengapai*) and traditional midwife (*pengulin*).

A credible *pengangun* acquires her knowledge not only from her ancestors but also through dreams (*mimpi*). Although there is outsider scepticism towards such claims, dream knowledge is contextually regarded as a special gift and marks an individual as spiritual. One informant, Minah, claimed that a few months after her mother passed away when she was 17 years old, a woman came into her dreams and said 'Do not forget me' (*Ingat-ingat kau kan kediaku*) and shook her hand. Minah did not believe the woman was her mother but rather a spirit. Since then, the spirit has been helping her during ritual activities such as curing illnesses and protecting the groom from black magic. The spirit comes by itself when she conducts a ritual. Interestingly, she has been a *pengangun* since 1995 and did not acquire her knowledge from anyone else. Although her ancestors were *pengangun*, their knowledge was not transferred to Minah and her sister, Hajah Rosnah, who is also a *pengangun*. Despite Minah being reluctant to claim herself as a *pengangun*, the villagers acknowledge her spiritual credibility. The spirit tells her what spells to use, but when asked to decipher the spells she could not because the spirit only appears when she performs a ritual. Minah made the point that learning spells from another person differs from learning them from a spirit; significantly, her spells are shorter than those learned through person-to-person communication.

According to Minah, the spirit 'informs' her by giving her a signal. She reported feeling a tic or intuition in her heart when this happens. For instance, if asked to be a *pengangun* during a wedding, she requires a few days to decide. When the spirit 'tells' her that she can, she agrees and throughout the ritual the spirit then helps Minah by providing her with spells. She added that when the spirit helps her, all sorts of spells may arise and she is always astonished when it happens.

Another informant, Hajah Ainah, is a more traditional *pengangun* compared to Minah. Interestingly, although her mother was a *pengangun*, she acquired her knowledge from a tutor teaching how to read the Qur'an (*cikgu mengaji*). Her tutor had learned the ways of a *pengangun* from a shaman (*dukun*). Hajah Ainah has been a *pengangun* for 22 years and during this time she related that she had come across incidents caused by black magic. One of them was when there were hundreds of flies in the bride's room and she had to utter a few spells to disperse them. In Malay folklore, flies are associated with being a servant (*suruhan*) of a sorcerer who does harm to people. The bride's family also saw a tall black figure in their house throughout the wedding ceremony. The bride's mother believed it was the doing of her daughter's ex-fiancé. In such circumstances, a *pengangun* with powerful knowledge is viewed as being able to prevent unwanted incidents and most importantly to protect the bride from harm or evildoers.

As noted earlier, the age and appearance of a *pengangun* also has significant bearing on their perceived genuineness. According to one informant, Haji Bakar, a *pengangun* must be a woman who has gone through the phase of married life,

someone who has aged (*berumur*) and become well versed with spells for both the married couples and herself (*tau bacaan-bacaan untuk pengantin dan dirinya*). Another informant from Kampong Sengkurong confirmed these remarks. They are often regarded as a mother (*indung*) who guides a bride, especially about the proper way of serving her husband. Mothers, as Sered (1994: 77) notes, ‘understand love, relationship, and spirituality in ways that men do not’. The nurturing and affectionate qualities of women, in particular mothers, are relatable to *pengangun*. Sered (*ibid.*: 72) further highlights the ways motherhood gives women power and, in some cultures, it ‘is believed to bestow upon women deep spiritual insights’. *Pengangun* teach the bride methods of purifying herself when taking a bath with whiteflower-infused water (*mandi langir*), beautifying herself to look good in her husband’s eyes, and, most importantly, spells for sexual intercourse to pleasure her husband.

Gaining access to *pengangun* with spiritual knowledge is not straightforward because many of them have passed away and often the knowledge is not transferred. According to several informants, they found it difficult to teach their knowledge of spells to their children because the young generation are not keen to learn them since these traditional practices are not seen as useful. Furthermore, the use of spells is viewed as not conforming with Islamic religious practices primarily because most spells used by the elderly invoke spirits for help and such a practice is seen as superstitious (*khurafat*). The younger generation tend to dismiss the power of the spells and prefer to rely on conventional Western medicine. However, several informants stated that spells were important in their daily life because they protected them from black magic and bad spirits (*orang halus*) in the past when medical facilities were not available. As Hajah Silmi explained:

It is difficult to teach the spells that I have learned to the younger generation today; I would not force them to learn if they refused. Spells are useful for us, and it was my grandmother who taught me.

The *pengangun* defined here as traditional and legitimate perform roles willingly, but the modern *pengangun* are different. A major difference between *pengangun* in the past and today is the request for payment. A genuine *pengangun* conducts her role on the basis of free will and sincerity (*ikhlas*) and there is no payment in return because her role is to accompany and protect the bride from harm. As noted, a traditional *pengangun* asks for a symbolic object as proof in the afterlife that she had taken care of the bride or groom. The bride’s mother gives a gold ring and she has the right to set the weight of the gold. This is related to almsgiving, a cultural and religious practice that is done willingly with money or objects used during such occasions. While a traditional *pengangun* may sometimes receive money from the bride’s or groom’s mother, it is done voluntarily and to convey appreciation for taking care of her child, and the amount can vary.

Hajah Ainah viewed monetary exchange for helping the bride as inappropriate as the *pengangun*’s role in society is to accompany and look after the bride and groom. Other *pengangun* (Minah, Hajah Jamilah, Rokiah, Hajah Arfah and Hajah Siau) held similar views. Several emphasised the significance of the gold ring. According to Hajah Jamilah, a gold ring and a piece of cloth are required from the bride’s family.

The gold ring is for the present world (*dunia*) and the hereafter (*akhirat*) as proof of service. Similarly, Minah contended that only a true *pengangun* asks for a gold ring and white cloth to be used in the hereafter.

Traditionally, a *pengangun* starts her work two weeks before the wedding ceremony, with her role ending after the ceremony during which the couple move to the bride's home and stay there for three days and then to the groom's home for another three days (*mulih tiga hari*). The start marks the period of strict supervision by the *pengangun* when the bride and groom are required to obey her rules. In the past, there were precautionary steps that the bride and her family took. Necessities such as the bride's food and attire were prepared exclusively by the *pengangun*. Moreover, it was important to ask the *pengangun*'s permission when entering the bride's bedroom as a means to prevent the maltreatment of the *pengangun*, the bride or her family (Kipli 2004: 16).

According to Hajah Ainah, weddings require constant supervision, especially for the bride:

There are different kinds of taboos during weddings and the bride is the most important individual to be looked after ... her blood is considered 'sweet' [*darah manis*], thus she is not allowed to step out of the house ... as a precaution against bad spirits.

Brides are regarded as being more prone to black magic and disturbance from evil spirits. For instance, Minah noted, 'It is only the bride's body that needs to be protected'. If the bride's spirit (*semangat*) is weak, she will be targeted by evil spirits. According to Hajah Silmi, she came across an incident during which a bride who had been disturbed by evil spirits had suffered from fever and tonsillitis for two weeks. The bride was advised by her *pengangun* not to leave the house until the wedding ceremonies ended. It is during dusk that evil spirits are presumed to start roaming.

Pengangun also serve noble families in Brunei. Hajah Ainah is an eminent *pengangun* among the royalty and attends circumcision rites in the palace because of her specialism in that area as well as performing the *pengangun* role.

Informants could not elaborate when posed with questions such as 'to whom do you need to prove yourself?' and 'is the afterlife as in heaven?' because they reproduce the customs without understanding their function. The cultural practices have become 'routine patterns of behaviour' and the *pengangun* are 'withdrawn from consciousness' (Elliot 2009: 146). Most often, they gave similar responses to queries about the reason for doing certain things they could not explain—it is a custom and their ancestors have done it. The traditional *pengangun* do differ slightly from the *pengangun* in the past. The latter were experts in their role because they knew the reason for using certain words and objects. The *pengangun* in this study are more orthopraxic—grounded in correct conduct as opposed to faith—because the significance of objects and words incorporated in the spells are less well known. They are inclined to reproduce the customs without understanding much of their previous function. However, although some practices have become routine patterns of behaviour, believing in the spells is viewed as vitally important for the informants highlighted this chapter. As Hajah Arfah stated: 'As long as we trust the spells' (*Asalkan kitani yakin dengan bacaan atu*).

9.4 Islamised *Pengangun*

Previous scholarly work on *pengangun* in Brunei has often overlooked another category of *pengangun* that has gradually assumed the role of traditional *pengangun*. They fall under what could be termed ‘Islamised’ *pengangun* and differ markedly from the traditional *pengangun* in terms of how they reproduce the various marriage rituals.² Throughout the fieldwork, I encountered more Islamised *pengangun* than traditional ones. Some do not refer to the spells as ‘*jampi*’ anymore, and instead they use the simple term ‘*bacaan*’. It was suggested that this change was due to the negative connotations attaching to the word *jampi* and its association with shamans and sorcerers.

Significantly, the new type of *pengangun* differs from the traditional *pengangun* in terms of how knowledge is acquired. Although some of the Islamised informants’ mothers or grandmothers were *pengangun*, their knowledge was not derived directly from their matriline. Hajah Siau, Hajah Arfah and Hajah Hasma stated that they did not have any interest in becoming *pengangun* initially and had not seen the importance in learning the knowledge from their mothers or grandmothers. However, as they grew older they began to observe other *pengangun* and started to learn how to assist and beautify brides. As Hajah Hasma noted:

If you are serious about being a *pengangun*, you need to learn the spells. Without the spells, the groom will not have a glow. To get the spells from a *pengangun*, you need to provide a gift in return.

Hajah Arfah had been a *pengangun* for 19 years and gained her knowledge from assisting other *pengangun*. Although she was familiar with spells, she preferred not to use them when conducting the rituals because they are seen as deviating from Islam. However, according to Hajah Arfah, ‘Spells that are useful and are not against the Islamic teachings, we can use them’. Hajah Arfah also acquired spells by keeping those that were given to her by her *pengangun* during her own wedding. When assisting the bride, she still uses some of the spells received from her *pengangun* and passes them on. She added that it is up to the wedding couple if they want to use the spells.

Two of the informants, Hajah Arfah and Rokiah, noted they have encountered many brides who now prefer a *pengangun* who uses Islamic verses instead of the non-Islamic spells. In the past, there was no preference in choosing a *pengangun* and the bride simply followed the *pengangun*’s instructions. Today, couples are more independent in terms of expressing their opinion and prefer an Islamic *pengangun* over the traditional ones who use the old spells. During interviews, Islamised *pengangun* also indicated an openness in sharing spells that are not against Islamic teachings. One reason for this could be that using Islamised spells is seen as proper and not held up to scrutiny by the public and authorities.

² The use of the term ‘Islamised’ does not exclusively refer to *pengangun* who have been influenced by Islam but also includes those who have modernised their role and modified it to fit within the Malay Islamic monarchy philosophy. The terms ‘modern’ and ‘Islamised’ are used interchangeably to refer to the new type of *pengangun*.

Another informant, Hajah Siau, became a *pengangun* in 1996 after her husband died and learned the role by observing other *pengangun*. She is an example of an Islamised *pengangun*. For Hajah Siau, 'It is better to use the Islamic verses than the old spells'. She indicated that she regards old spells as inappropriate for use today because they are against Islamic teachings. To replace the old spells, she had been using verses from the Qur'an such as Surah Empat Qul, Ayat Al-Kursi and most importantly the invocation to the Prophet Muhammad (*selawat ke atas Nabi Muhammad*). The preference for Islamic spells is common among the modern *pengangun*. According to one informant, Siti, 'It is not proper to use the old spells because they can interfere with our Islamic belief and teachings that cause us to be superstitious'. For Hajah Hasma, 'It is not appropriate to use the old spells to avoid unlawful heresy' and 'I am afraid to use the old spells, thus I prefer to use verses from the Qur'an'.³

However, instead of abandoning entirely non-Islamic spells, most Islamised informants continue to use the spells by incorporating Allah and the names of prophets as well as verses from the Qur'an in an effort to make them more publicly acceptable. An anonymous informant indicated that if she was suspected of using old spells, she would use Islamic spells as follows:

*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim, Ibuku bumi bapaku langit
Mandi roh mandi jasad, Mandiku di dalam kandang kandil Siti Fatimah
Tebunikan tilamku, Urikan kainku, Tangkai pusat kan tungkatku
Allahu Allah
Mandi roh, Mandi kalam, Mandiku bersuci di dalam kandang Siti Fatimah
Allahu Allah*

In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate, My mother is the earth and my father is the sky
Cleansing the body and soul, I am showering inside Siti Fatimah's protection
Placenta as my bed, amniotic water as my blanket, my bellybutton as my staff
I praise you Allah
Cleansing the soul and Allah's realm, I am showering inside Siti Fatimah's protection
I praise you Allah

This is an example of a shower spell (*mantera mandi*) used by both modern and traditional *pengangun* to give an everlasting glow or radiance to the groom. This is used only when showering the groom and the spell is cast over a bucket of water.⁴

³ Although some of the Islamised informants are familiar with the old spells, they choose to adhere to Islamic teachings.

⁴ This spell does not connote or invoke the name of spirits and is therefore viewed as acceptable. There are several invocations of Allah's name and the spell begins with the words that preface all except one of the verses of the Qur'an: '*Bismillahirrahmanirrahim*' (In the name of God, the most merciful and most compassionate).

The most common verse that is used among the Islamised *pengangun* is Surah Yusuf. Pious Islamic scholars (*ustaz* and *ustazah*) in Brunei encourage this verse because it is written in the Qur'an that Prophet Yusuf had a good-looking face. According to Hajah Rubayah, who had attended a course for *pengangun*, they were taught to abandon the old spells and replace them with verses from the Qur'an. Although there are a few spells that are acceptable, the *pengangun* must accept that they are not responsible for the spell's effectiveness since that power resides with Allah. In other words, everything that the *pengangun* does is based on Allah's will.

Most of the spells used by the *pengangun* involve the use of Prophet Muhammad's wife's name, Siti Aisha, and the Prophet's daughter, Siti Fatimah, whose name is widely used in spells. Both traditional and Islamised informants share a similar belief in Siti Fatimah, as representative of the divine feminine, and according to them by using her name the bride will be blessed and appear different (beyond beautiful) from her usual face.

As mentioned earlier, genuine *pengangun* do not ask for payment for the services they provide but there has been a gradual change towards commercialisation of the role especially among modern *pengangun*. One informant requested BND250 for her services and her reason for doing so was because she drives her own car and provides all of the materials used during the rituals. In addition, she asks for extra money, usually BND30, if the groom's house is in Kuala Belait or Temburong district and too far from her own house. According to Munah and Hajah Jalihah who were married in 1991 and 1995 respectively, their *pengangun* provided all the necessities for conducting rituals—gambier (*bunga gambir*), wood of the whiteflower albizia (*langir*), Key lime (*limau nipis*), rice powder scrub (*baras lulut* in Brunei Malay, *beras lulur* in standard Malay) and henna (*inailpacar*)—and their families were not allowed to touch any of the materials.

Hajah Jamilah, a legitimate *pengangun*, noted that her mother's sister with whom she trained forbade anyone, including the groom's family, to touch or prepare the ingredients for ritual activities. She recalled one incident when her aunt refused to be a *pengangun* for a bride just because her mother had prepared aromatic powder, seven coloured powders and henna. Hajah Jamilah added that the reason behind this is to prevent black magic items being added surreptitiously and mixed into the materials that are used for the rituals. From her experience, these culprits can be anyone, including close family members, and so it is better to err on the side of caution. For instance, Hajah Ainah (a modern *pengangun*) shared her experience of a bride who had been haunted with bad spirits at night. The bride heard sounds of a woman crying outside her window, dogs barking along with howling and scratching sounds on the walls. According to Hajah Ainah, this was the work of black magic to make the bride go insane. Unfortunately, the *pengangun* could not stop the disturbances and had to call an Islamic scholar to prevent harm to the bride. A traditional *pengangun* would know the proper rituals and spells to get rid of the spirits, and in the past an Islamic scholar was not widely used to 'help' the *pengangun*.

9.5 Wedding Rituals

As noted, the *pengangun* is the key figure in wedding ceremonies and their presence helps to complete the festivities. The following section details particular examples of wedding rituals gathered during fieldwork. As Edmund Leach (1968) argues, ritual is primarily a medium of communication. In this vein, wedding rituals not only present Malay customs but spells also act as a medium to communicate with unseen realms or the divine. *Pengangun* are present for up to a month before the wedding starts. According to Kipli Bulat (2004: 13–16), *pengangun* are important when it comes to wedding festivities as someone with spiritual power is needed to protect against unwanted events. As Hajah Ainah noted, ‘Unwanted things happen and the wedding couple must be protected before the wedding’. The *pengangun* featured in this study performed services one week before the wedding festivities. They began with the ceremony of the night vigil (*istiadat malam berjaga-jaga*) and followed with a blessing of the soon-to-be bride and groom and cleansing of the whole body (*berbedak siang/mandi*). This ceremony takes place a week before the actual wedding ceremony (*bersanding*), and the highlight of the cleansing ceremony is the dabbing of aromatic powder (*bedak lulut*) that has been diluted with water. As Hajah Ainah detailed, the aromatic powder consists of various ingredients that have been dried and blended including: rose (*bunga mawar*), gambier, aromatic ginger (*caker/cekur*), yellow turmeric (*tamu lawak*), Chinese ginger (*tamu kunci*), curcuma (*tamu kuning*), white turmeric (*tamu putih*), ginger (*banglai*), patchouli (*daun nilam*) and sandalwood (*kayu cendana*). She noted that many of today’s *pengangun* lack the knowledge and ability to make the aromatic powder. Both Hajah Ainah and Hajah Jamilah were taught how to make the aromatic powder by their mothers, but it requires much effort and even traditional informants prefer to buy the ingredients at Kianggeh market. This blessing ceremony usually takes place on a Friday morning when the bride or groom are seated on a cushion. Close family members are then invited to dab the aromatic powder onto the bride’s or groom’s palms (Fig. 9.1).

Fig. 9.1 The bride’s grandmother dabbing wet aromatic powder (*bedak lulut*) during the ceremony of cleansing of the whole body (*berbedak siang/mandi*). Source Courtesy of the author



According to Hajah Ainah, in the past this ceremony was strictly for married elders who had grandchildren. It is believed that a blessing from the elders is crucial for happiness. Today this custom has changed with young families lacking the knowledge of how to apply the aromatic powder correctly. The ring finger must be used to dab the powder (*membadaki*) because there is an aura from the finger that can awaken the inner glow (*bangkit cahaya*) of the wedded couple.

When it comes to the groom, Hajah Jamilah stated that she uses a spell for the glow of Allah (*jampi cahaya Allah*) before she proceeds to the wedding stage (*pelaminan*) and the spell is believed to bring out the inner glow.

Cahaya Muhammad namanya Nur cahaya

Cahaya Allah kan cahayamu

Cahaya Muhammad kan cahayamu

Berkat memakai lailahaillah, Berkat memakai bangkit cahaya dari Allah

Muhammad's radiance is called Allah's radiance

Your radiance is from Allah's radiance

Your radiance is from Muhammad's radiance

There is no god but Allah (thank you), the rise of radiance from Allah (thank you)

Following the blessing of the bride and groom ceremony, a ritual takes place during which the *pengangun* scrubs the bride's body (*lulut*) from head to toe using the aromatic powder followed by Siamese rice powder (*pirasang*) (Figs. 9.2 and 9.3). The purpose of this ritual is to cleanse the body from dirt, and remove dead skin so that the body smells good (*badan sentiasa berbau harum*).

It is crucial for the residue of the scrub to be kept by the *pengangun* and during the wedding reception the groom's *pengangun* hands this to the bride's *pengangun*. The bride's and groom's residue is mixed together and, according to informants, it is believed that uniting these elements ensures the couple's everlasting happiness.



Fig. 9.2 The bride scrubbed with aromatic powder (*bedak lulut*) and Siamese rice powder (*pirasang*); at the end of the ritual, the *pengangun* collects the scrubbed remains to be kept until the wedding reception (*bersanding*). Source Courtesy of the author

Fig. 9.3 Materials such as candles, Key lime (*limau nipis*), whiteflower albizia (*langir*), gambier (*bunga gambir*) and a shawl for the ceremony of cleansing of the whole body (*berbedak siang/mandi*). Source Courtesy of the author



Once the residue is mixed, it must be buried or dispersed into rivers to prevent harm from black magic.

After the scrubbing ritual, the *pengangun* conducts a showering ritual to bring out the bride's inner glow. This ritual is called the whiteflower bath (*mandi langir*) and it takes place in the morning of the solemnisation day and the actual wedding reception. In the past, the bride or groom would be seated facing the sunrise, i.e. east (*matahari hidup*). However, this act has changed because Muslims should not turn their back on the direction towards the Kaaba in the Great Mosque in Mecca (*kiblat*) as it is considered a sin. Significantly, the informants of this study have changed their style of showering the groom by facing the *kiblat*.

At first, the bride or groom is seated at the centre and five or seven children stand in a circle surrounding the bride or groom. Odd numbers are common in ritual activities as they are believed to have a greater effect than using even numbers. The children hold lighted candles and each of them wears a different coloured shawl (*selendang*) on their right shoulder. The candle is a symbol that helps to bring out the inner glow or radiance and some informants believe that the light from the candles is transferred to the bride or groom.

The bride and groom are then showered at the top of their heads with water containing whiteflower albizia (*mandi langir*, Fig. 9.4). According to informants, the holy spirit (*roh suci*) from within will emerge from the forehead. It is important for the whiteflower to produce bubbles and villagers believe that only a spiritual *pengangun* can achieve this because there is a specific spell for it. One informant, Minah, said the whiteflower is the *pengangun*'s saliva, its leaves are the *pengangun*'s ears and its roots are from the blood vessels of the *pengangun*'s heart (*akar jantung*). The right and left shoulders are showered next and this is where Allah is believed to bless the individual. Afterwards, water infused with squeezed limes is poured over the body.

Finally, a container of water is then mixed with seven different kinds of flowers and gambier in order to produce a good aroma and this is then poured from the forehead



Fig. 9.4 The bride being showered with water mixed with whiteflower albizia (*mandi langir*); note the bubbles. *Source* Courtesy of the author

to the toes (Fig. 9.5). The lighted candles are then given to the *pengangun* and the bride extinguishes them with water from her mouth (Fig. 9.6). Once the candles have been extinguished, they are then dabbed onto the right and left shoulders and then the chest as this ritual is believed to make the groom physically strong.

There are different kinds of spells associated with ritual bathing (*mandi*) that Hajah Ainah used when showering the groom:

*Eh Nur Alifah! Nur suci nama nyawaku
Bersikor sani nama tulangku
Aku mandi di dalam kandang kalimah Allah
Allah kan cahayaku, Muhammad kan wujudku
Lailahaillah Muhammadurrasulullah*

Excuse me, the radiance of Allah!

Allah's holy radiance is my soul's name

I am showering inside the name of Allah

Allah is my radiance, Muhammad is my existence

There is no god but Allah. Muhammad is the messenger of God

Fig. 9.5 The bride being showered with water containing gambier to provide a good aroma.
Source Courtesy of the author



Fig. 9.6 The bride blowing out the lighted candles with water from her mouth.
Source Courtesy of the author



Kandang kandil
Bandang kalimah
Cahayamu di dalam kandang Allah
Yang maha suci
Tikar putih akan ... permaidani akan lapikmu
Kau di dalam kandang Allah
Maha suci Ya Allah, Lailahaillah Muhammadurrasulullah

The fence of five holy evenings in the Muslim calendar⁵
 Allah's radiance
 Your inner glow is from Allah's radiance
 The holy divine
 White mat as your ... the carpet as your pedestal
 You are inside the protection of Allah
 Allah the holy divine
 There is no god but Allah. Muhammad is the messenger of God

Another example of spells used by Siti when showering the bride is as follows:

Bismillahirrahmanirrahim
Ujud mandi Adam mandi Nur
Mandi cahaya aku menyalam di lautan rahmat
Aku timbul di lautan cahaya
Wujud Allah akan wujudku
Kudarat Allah kan kudaratku
Berkat ku memakai dua kata wujud daripada Allah
Wa'ashaduallah Allah Wa'Ashadu Anna Muhammadarusulullah

In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate
 I am showering using Adam's radiance
 I am diving inside the grace sea to get radiance
 I arise from the radiance sea
 Allah exists and I exist
 Allah's power is my power
 I am using the two word that exist from Allah (thank you)
 I bear witness that there is no god worthy of worship except Allah and I bear witness that
 Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah

⁵ Maulud Nabi or Maulidur Rasul (birthday of the Prophet Muhammad), Israk dan Mi'raj (two parts of a journey the Prophet Muhammad took during a single night), Nisfu Sha'ban (the fifteenth night of the last lunar month before Ramadan), Lailatul Qadar (the night when the Qur'an was first sent down from Heaven to the world) and the first night of Rejab or Rajab (one of the four sacred months in Islam).

This spell illustrates the incorporation of words such as Allah, Adam and Qur'anic verses.

After the showering ritual, a *pengangun* conducts a herbal steam bath ritual (*bertangas*) for the bride. It uses a brassware filled with benzoin resin (*kemenyan*) and dried longevity spinach (*daun sambung*) and turn-in-the-wind (*daun balik angin*) leaves, and alum powder (*tawas*) that have been cast with spells. The bride is surrounded with a mat and covered with cloth from her neck to toes. The brassware is then placed at the centre while the bride stands with her legs open to allow the smoke to enter her vagina. This ritual is to ensure the bride's vagina remains intact for sexual pleasure. According to H.H. Zaleha (2004: 50), several special twig stems and leaves are boiled and the water is given to the bride to be consumed. Some older people believe that drinking the water can create everlasting pleasure for the wedded couple.

According to Hajah Ainah and Hajah Siau, such a ritual is rarely practised today as most brides regard it as being against Islamic teachings. It is believed that the benzoin resin smoke invites the devil and its use is often associated with shamans. Moreover, the *pengangun* course conducted in Tutong emphasised that the herbal steam bath ritual is forbidden and must not be practised as it violates Islamic teachings. However, there are other *pengangun* who continue to offer the ritual if the bride agrees to it.

Next, the solemnisation ceremony (*akad nikah*) is the occasion when the *pengangun* must be seated beside the bride at all times. One informant recounted how she had come across brides who burst into tears and grooms who could not pronounce 'I promise and accept her to be my wedded wife for a certain amount of dowry' (*Aku terima nikahnya dengan ... tunai*). To overcome such a situation, Hajah Ainah casts a spell over a glass of water and asks the bride to drink. The spell is as follows:

*Kunung kanang, daun dadap tumbuh di batu
Walaupun ku mundur bumi peperangan
Namun hatiku tetap seperti batu
Batu yang di tetapkan Allah
Berkatku memakai dua penantap
Lailahaillah Muhammadarusulullah*

Range of mountains, tiger's claw leaves grow on a rock
Even though I retreat in war
My heart remains firm as a rock
Rock that is created by Allah
I am using the two kinds of rigid word
There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah (thank you)

The subsequent night of applying coloured powders (*malam berbedak*) ceremony usually takes place on Saturday night and this ceremony differs slightly from the cleansing ceremony in terms of the materials used for dabbing the wet powder. Seven

Fig. 9.7 Seven coloured powders used during the applying coloured powders (*malam berbedak*) ceremony; water is provided to clean the fingers. *Source* Courtesy of the author



coloured powders (red, orange, green, yellow, white, blue and purple) are used during the ceremony (Fig. 9.7). Hajah Ainah noted that individuals with spiritual knowledge of the ceremony only use white, green and yellow powders; white symbolises purity, green symbolises Islam, while yellow is the colour of Bruneian nobility.

During this ceremony, the *pengangun* stands beside the bride while uttering a few spells to shield her from black magic. Several informants indicated that the bride, groom and the *pengangun* herself are prone to be tested by other spiritualists using black magic. They added that the moment when people start dabbing the coloured powder is when a sorcerer is ‘sending’ something to make the bride sick, unhappy and so on. According to Minah, most of the time a *pengangun* is the culprit and it occurs through shaking hands. Hajah Hasma recounted that she felt strong heat behind her back when she was on the wedding stage with the bride and for her it is important to equip oneself with mystical protective knowledge (*ilmu pendinding*) during the application of the powders ceremony (*malam berbedak*). In the past, this ceremony was conducted by the bride’s family and the groom’s family were invited to dab the coloured powders (Fig. 9.8). The very next day, similar practices were repeated by the groom’s family at his house. According to informants, most believed

Fig. 9.8 The bride's mother applying coloured powder during the *malam berbedak* ceremony. *Source* Courtesy of the author



that black magic is usually done by the opposite side of the family and the other *pengangun* to test the extent of their spiritual power.

Following the ceremony, another important ritual that signals the entrance of the spiritual/ritual experts (*adat masuk pengangunan*) takes place and this marks the start of the bride or groom being grounded by the *pengangun*. The groom dresses up in a white garment adorned with traditional Malay accessories. The groom lays his hands over the *pengangun's* shoulders (Fig. 9.9). The groom and the *pengangun* make three rounds around the bridal bed. During each round, the *pengangun* utters spells or verses from the Qur'an with the purpose of creating an unseen barrier around the area (*guris*) to prevent the groom from being disturbed by the devil, spirits (jinn) and black magic. Typically, an amulet is used and placed at the bridal bed. The bridal bed must also be supervised to prevent people from sitting on it.

Fig. 9.9 The groom lays his hands on the shoulders of the *pengangun* during the *masuk pengangunan* ceremony. *Source* Courtesy of the author



Fig. 9.10 The groom sits with his family after being invited by his mother, while the *pengangun* reads a prayer to bless the groom. *Source* Courtesy of the author



In the last round, the *pengangun* gives greetings (*Assalamualaikum*) to the bride's mother and she responds appropriately and invites her child to sit on the bed with her. One person will hold a lighted candle behind the bride, and the grandmother, father and mother of the wedded couple sit on the bridal bed holding a lit candle (Fig. 9.10).

People involved in the ritual sit together on the bridal bed and the *pengangun* asks Allah's help to bless and protect the bride throughout the wedding ceremonies. In addition, a spell is recited, as narrated by Hajah Siau:

*Bukan salam sebarang salam,
Salam empat penjuru alamku,
Bukan kata sebarang kataku katakan,
Kata-kata Allah dan Rasulallahku,
Ku berindung di dalam kandang,
Ku bersembunyi di tiang,
Ku tidur di pasak bumi,
Ku berdiri di kaki langit,
Tiada siapa yang memandang dan terpanchang,
kecuali Allah hu Allah
Lailahaillallah ... Muhammadarrasulullah*

This is not an ordinary greeting,
Greetings to the four corners of my realm
This is not an ordinary saying,
It is the words of Allah and Prophet Muhammad
I am protecting myself within a fence
I am hiding inside/behind a post/column
I am sleeping in the core of the earth

I am standing at the top of the sky
 No one is able to see except Allah the Almighty
 There is no god but Allah. Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah

Following this is the *berinai* or *berpacar* ceremony that involves applying henna on the palms, fingers, feet and toes of the groom (Fig. 9.11). The henna is made from a plant that has been crushed and mixed with tea and the fruit of *kundong* (*asam aur-aur*). According to Minah, she came across an incident when a bride felt a burning sensation from the henna that was put onto her palm. As such, henna is often kept safe by the *pengangun* from others so that no one will cast a spell on it.

Hajah Ainah said that the circular shape on the groom's palm symbolises the full moon while the oval shape on the bride's palm symbolises a crab that is waiting for its eggs to hatch. For Malays, these are signs of fertility. In the past, the *pengangun* prepared the henna that had been subjected to a spell to give an orange colour when applied to the groom's palm.

The long-awaited day is the wedding reception (*bersanding*). The *pengangun* conducts the scrubbing of the body (*berlulut*) and bathing the body ritual before the bride is dressed. Once dressed, Hajah Ainah advises the bride to consume a small amount of salt using the ring finger, as salt is believed to prevent the bride from evil disturbances. Finally, the *pengangun* conducts a concluding ritual for the bride called

Fig. 9.11 The groom waiting for henna to dry during the *berinai/berpacar* ceremony. Source Courtesy of the author



Fig. 9.12 *Pengangun* fusing seven coloured threads together around the bride's neck for the *pengarusan* ritual. *Source* Courtesy of the author



pengarusan with the use of three candles and seven coloured threads. The candles are lit while the threads are circled around the bride's head three times and tied to her neck (Fig. 9.12). Once tied, they are then fused with the candle wax and the bride is asked to blow out the candles (Figs. 9.13 and 9.14). The ritual is significant to ensure that the bride will be protected before departing to the wedding stage and if it takes several attempts to extinguish the candles then it is a sign that the marriage will not last forever.

In addition, the groom is escorted by the *pengangun* and upon arrival at the bride's house a spiritual man (*orang pandai*) guides the groom and conducts the three circles of a dragon (*pusing naga*) ritual (see also Chapter 2).⁶ The groom walks three circles and a prayer or spell is read by the spiritual man. Generally, yellow coloured rice grains are then sprinkled on the groom to signify prosperity and long life.⁷ The groom then annuls the bride's ablution by placing his hand on the right and left shoulders of the bride and kisses her forehead. The ceremony ends with the bride and groom seated together on the wedding stage with their respective *pengangun* standing side by side.

⁶ In Brunei, a spiritual man is not referred to as *dukun* or *bomoh*, but someone who is *orang pandai* (knowledgeable person) who knows how to defend others from black magic and the disturbance of spirits.

⁷ Officially, this practice is forbidden by the state as it is associated with Hinduism and should not be practised by Brunei Muslims.

Fig. 9.13 The bride being asked to blow out the candles that have been fused with the seven coloured threads.
Source Courtesy of the author



Fig. 9.14 The *pengarusan* ritual ends with the bride blowing out the lighted candles. *Source* Courtesy of the author



9.6 *Syariah* Law and *Pengangun*

A *fatwa* on forbidden spells (*jampi yang dilarang*) was passed by the State Mufti in 2001 (Jabatan Mufti Kerajaan 2002), and further to the *Syariah* Penal Code Order 2013 *syariah* implementation was formally introduced in Brunei in May 2014 in three phases. Although the *fatwa* was directed at traditional medicine practitioners (*bomoh*) who use spells for curing illnesses, the examples of forbidden spells are also sometimes used by *pengangun*. Currently, there are no laws specifically directed at *pengangun* and to my knowledge no cases of using illegal spells have been reported. Informants also indicated that they had not been reported to the Islamic Da'wah Centre (Pusat Da'wah Islamiah) for using spells. *Syariah* law would only affect *pengangun* if they use illegal spells that cause harm to others and if they use an amulet or talisman (*azimat*) that has been cast with spells with non-Islamic verses.⁸ Two of the traditional informants were adamant that they were not shamans and claimed that only shamans use black magic to inflict harm on others; all they do is help beautify and protect the bride from evil spirits and they have no intention to cause harm.

Any case involving the use of illegal spells or black magic is a complex matter and unlikely to be investigated unless a report is made. Minah did recount that a female spiritualist in her village was arrested and the materials she used for curing illnesses were inspected by officials. The villagers believed that someone must have reported her to the religious officials. Nonetheless, she was released because of a lack of evidence. Hajah Rokiah suggested that the Ministry of Religious Affairs should conduct a course especially for *pengangun* so that their practices during wedding rituals are based on Islamic teachings rather than using the old traditions. In addition, two other informants expressed concern that they could be affected if their services were not seen as following Islam.

9.7 Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the spiritual functions and role of traditional and modern *pengangun* in wedding ceremonies in Brunei Darussalam. It highlighted both a gradual transformation in the traditional role and its adaptation to Islamisation. The collected data indicated that some *pengangun* hold to their 'little tradition' because of a strong commitment to preserving the Brunei Malay customs and traditions which make use of spells. Having said this, the data also revealed that these women spiritualists are significant cocreators of Islamic religiosity in ritualistic practices reserved for women. Many *pengangun* now incorporate Qur'anic verses into their everyday practice as a way to remain a relevant part of Bruneian tradition in the present.

⁸ An activity defined as a 'threat' refers directly to shamans or traditional medicine practitioners as they are viewed as 'un-Islamic'.

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Part III
Interpreting Space and Place

Chapter 10

Belonging and Unbelonging in Kampong Ayer, Brunei Darussalam



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Abstract This chapter examines Kampong Ayer from a human geography perspective and the social construction of space over time. Kampong Ayer was and is a historically and culturally significant place in Brunei Darussalam. However, years of resettlement programmes, episodic fire destruction, and movements of people in and out of the area have resulted in significant reorientations. The chapter pays close attention to the ways in which increased migration over the last 30 years has played a role in reshaping everyday senses of belonging for the residents of Kampong Ayer.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Kampong Ayer · Migration · Belonging · Place · Space

10.1 Introduction

In the 1970s, Michel Foucault reflected on the largely neglected place of ‘space’ in the social sciences: ‘Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic’ (Foucault 1980: 70). Over the last few decades, however, the study of space has gained increasing purchase. Having said this, our current era of globalisation has shifted the frames

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of space/place, a shift profound enough for enthusiastic advocates of a globalised borderless world to claim the ‘end of geography’ (Omhae 1990; O’Brien 1992). They view the compression of space–time brought about by economic integration and technological advancements as sufficient enough to render distance and geopolitical borders as almost inconsequential. Many geographers, on the other hand, have challenged the validity of such claims (Deudney 1997; Yeung 1998; Dalby 1999; Andreas 2003; Morgan 2004; Kalm 2008). Indeed, the consequences of economic globalisation and its impact on social inequality and migration have arguably made the study of space and place more important.

This brings us to the study of this chapter, namely Kampong Ayer in Brunei Darussalam (Figs. 10.1 and 10.2). Located at the mouth of the Brunei River, it is a place of great historical and cultural significance in the life of the country. For centuries, Bruneian people have lived in Kampong Ayer—a collection of over 30 stilted water villages—and their cultural roots are entwined with the river that flows through the heart of Brunei. It is part of the country’s social fabric, with many of the practices and rituals that developed in Kampong Ayer having continued even as its residents moved on to land. Yet much of the study of Kampong Ayer has focused on its history rather than the ways it is conceived as space and place, especially among newer residents and their relationship with the state. It has faced various challenges to its character and identity over the years. From 1952 onwards, the Brunei government pursued resettlement programmes to shift the population inland (Rozaan 2008). Modernisation and population growth placed increasing pressure on Kampong Ayer with numerous fires gutting interlinked households and communities and, in some cases, entire villages being destroyed. Patterns of international migration also brought changes to the character and demographics of Kampong Ayer. All of which have influenced the symbolic and material place it holds in the social imaginaries of Bruneians. This chapter investigates continuity and change in Kampong Ayer and further considers the implications of migration and the disjuncture between the reality of everyday life there and the ways it is imagined by Bruneians. This allows the chapter to delve into the ways place changes people and how people change place.

10.2 Methodology

Data for this chapter derive from a triangulated series of unstructured individual and group interviews. They were carried out by the three lead authors from a purposive sample of three groups to gauge a varied set of lived experiences: Indonesian migrants who have moved into Kampong Ayer; local residents who still live in Kampong Ayer; and local residents who have migrated out of Kampong Ayer. The first group consists of five Indonesians who live in Kampong Ayer with ages ranging from 22 to 45 years; second, three local residents who reside in Kampong Ayer; and lastly, five former local residents of Kampong Ayer with ages ranging from 23 to 25 years. The different backgrounds of the three groups provide a set of contending narratives to analyse the various ways residents construct a sense of place in the contested spaces of lived

Map Of Kampong Ayer in 2016

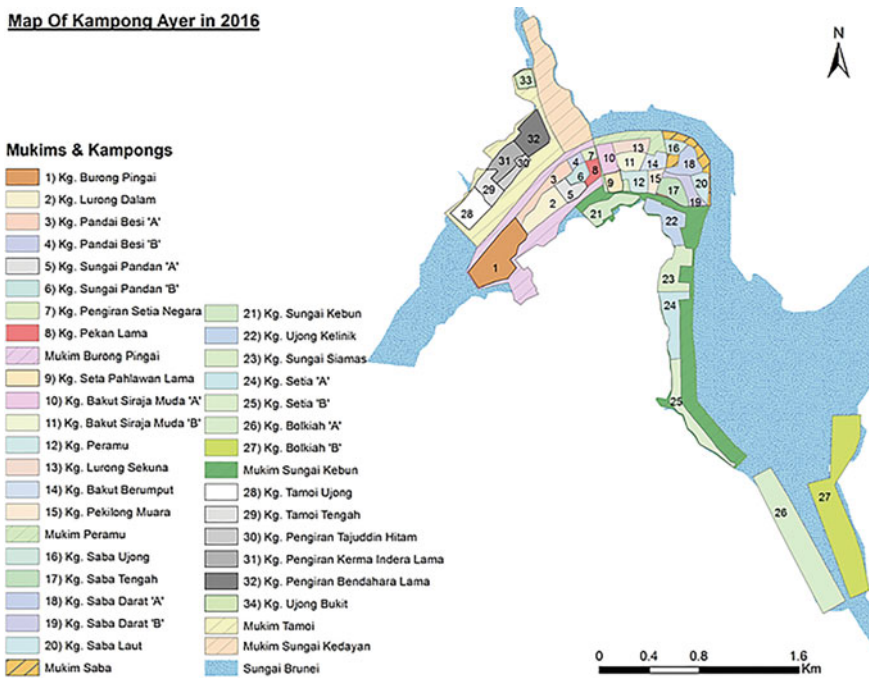


Fig. 10.1 Map showing the scale and subdivisions of contemporary Kampong Ayer. *Source* Courtesy of Shafi Noor Islam (2021: 168)

mobility in and out of Kampong Ayer. The analysis of these narratives is informed by thematic conceptions of space and identity highlighted in the next section.

10.3 Conceptualising Space and Identity

Various scholars argue that globalisation’s compression of time–space significantly deterritorialises geographical space and our emotional bonds to it (Virilio 1986; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Bauman 2000). It becomes all too easy to conflate spatial reach with social depth (Morgan 2004). Others prefer to underscore the ways existing patterns of territory and inequity have reconfigured rather than dissolved from the impact of globalisation (Dalby 1999; Stiglitz 2002; Elden 2005; Murray and Overton 2015). Technologies and the velocity of financial capital may have altered the space–time relationship and socioeconomic activity, but they have also simultaneously generated new forms of inequality and substantially widened the wealth gap within and between countries. As Doreen Massey (1994) cautions, in a globalising world characterised by inequality and a sense of anomie, place provides security and assurance: a point of orientation in a rapidly changing and disorientating



Fig. 10.2 [Top] Kampong Ayer seen from Bandar Seri Begawan; [bottom] looking back up the Brunei River with Bandar Seri Begawan in the distance. *Source* Courtesy of Paul J. Carnegie

world. Indeed, some have gone as far as to argue that the power of places remains a predominant factor in identity creation (Massey 1995; Rose 1995).

Moreover, for Henri Lefebvre (1991) space and place are not apolitical. Space and place not only reflect but are constitutive of power relations. The production of space is infused with political agendas propagated by the state and dominant culture. Lefebvre further argues that the exercise of domination over place normalises sociospatial relations and reinforces unequal power relations. Space is not ‘the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile’, but it is dynamic and subject to contestation, competition and negotiation (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). It is an arena where politics and structures of meaning play out. As such, rootedness or belonging in a particular place is a form of agency where individuals assert degrees of control over spaces by constructing images that reflect their particular realities (Rodman 2003). Their imagined communities and imagined geographies of place and space evoke strong emotions and bonds especially in times of uncertainty. As Olivia Harris

(1996: 11) emphasises, in response to uncertainty, social groups ‘defend continuity, and their rights to claim and express particular links with the past’.

In this sense, places have unique realities, full of meanings, experiences and memories, both individual and shared and of various scales. These symbolic assemblages, discourses and representations create a distinctive character that distinguishes one place from another. According to Susan Mayhew (2015: 448), the distinctiveness of a place can create emotional attachment for its residents: a ‘sense of place’. Yet migratory patterns generated by a globalised division of labour and ever more variegated production and supply chains make ‘sense of place’ a complex thing to discern. Heightened mobility and migratory deracination transform understandings of ‘sense of place’. For Massey (1994), there is little utility in viewing ‘sense of place’ in a singular, parochial perspective. Mobility and migration infuse degrees of cultural multiplicity into sites that are no longer isolated from other places. However, this simultaneously begins to circumvent and unravel the imaginaries nurtured and cultivated by local populaces. The migration in and onto space introduces new disruptive elements into particular spaces and intensifies the very negotiations over what that space means. Such patterns fold into ideas of identity and what Erving Goffman (1959) terms the dramaturgy of everyday life. For Goffman, individuals form conceptions of self through performance and social interaction with their surroundings. Indeed, identity is a negotiation in our interactions with the ‘other’. Although individuals are active agents in this process it is bounded by societal forces and pressures. Individuals must rely on others to complete their idea of ‘self’ through reaffirmation of their identity—either positively or negatively. This can be reinforced through performative acting out of perceived identifications. If individuals are labelled in a way that directly contradicts their conception of themselves, they might act out differently as a way to disassociate from the label.

While Goffman’s formulation is useful, it gives little attention to cross-cultural interactions between migrants and original settlers. As Marta Rabikowska (2010) points out, normality is subjective across cultures; what is normal in one part of the world may not be so in another part of the world. It varies. Having said that, heightened migration has resulted in transplacement of population groups from one place to another with different norms, values and culture. It positions place and identity in a context whereby migration becomes an important determinant in the construction of the meaning of the place (Lawson 1999).

Culturally speaking, space can have specific connotations attached to it. It may be viewed as belonging to a certain culture or implying the inclusion of certain ‘people’ and excluding others. Indeed, in a cultural space, racialised bodies that are not accepted as part of the imagined community residing within that space often evoke a sense of unease among locals (Puwar 2006). A burden of doubt is invariably placed upon the outsider and transgressions are often exaggerated as evidence of unbelonging (Girard 1979). The mere presence of ‘foreigners’ can raise suspicion and disrupts the predictability of routine. Having said that, acceptance as ‘normal’ is often seen as an achievement for migrants. It implicitly means that they are included within invisible crowds and their presence no longer poses threats to the public

(Goffman 1971). Rabikowska (2010) further argues that migrants often perceive normalcy in a symbolic sense which signifies a stabilisation of their lives. To have that sense of normalcy implies that they have managed to succeed in forming a new version of normalcy that differs from their homeland but still manages to imitate by degree certain aspects of it. Achieving normalcy is a form of order-making after the uprooting of their lives from their homeland. From this perspective, migrant adaptation to new surroundings influences the way interactions are conducted and subsequently, identity formation.

10.4 Situating Kampong Ayer

Having outlined the conceptual underpinnings of the chapter's qualitative data analysis, the following section further situates our study by way of a brief history of Kampong Ayer. Situating the study historically allows us to trace the evolution and transformation of Kampong Ayer and consider more fully the implications of migrant–local interactions and what it means to belong in Bruneian society.

Kampong Ayer is commonly regarded as the cradle of Brunei civilisation. The longstanding existence of Kampong Ayer embodies collective memories of Brunei histories. Nonetheless, Kampong Ayer has undergone significant changes over the centuries. During the fifteenth century under the reign of Sultan Bolkiah, several historians suggest that Kampong Ayer was situated closer to the mouth of the Brunei Bay than its current location, as Robert Nicholl (1975: 85) notes, 'three miles from the coast along a river' (see also Chi et al. 1996: 117–123; Abdul Latif 2012: 21–68). The settlement's location reflected the kingdom of the time. Yet, as Brunei's regional influence waned, Kampong Ayer's position gradually receded. When James Brooke became rajah of Sarawak, Kampong Ayer was firmly situated on the bank of Bandar Seri Begawan. By the time the British residency developed a firm hold over Brunei under the protectorate system, Kampong Ayer was a shell of its former self. British authorities decided to resettle Kampong Ayer's population, and the policy began a downward spiral that gradually chipped away at the essence of the place. The then British resident, M.S.H. McArthur, claimed that its current condition and environment were unfit for habitation. He argued that the development of Brunei could not be undertaken without mass migration inland. This was disputed by the British-appointed health officer in 1921, who claimed that Bruneians were naturally 'riverine dweller[s]' and any effort to relocate them inland would be misguided (cited in Leake 1989: 42). Why did McArthur recommend relocation inland? One explanation could be British imperial rule's long history of 'pacification' and forcefully moving inhabitants from settlements deemed 'hotbeds' of 'suspicious activities'. Whatever the underlying motivations and interests in play, Kampong Ayer certainly began to lose political and cultural influence over Brunei. For most modern Bruneians, the idea of Brunei as Kampong Ayer and Kampong Ayer as Brunei seems like a distant legacy of the past. Interestingly, the policies of relocation instigated by the British were

continued under Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien III (r. 1950–1967) who is seen by many as the ‘architect of modern Brunei’.

The Second World War further influenced developments with the Japanese driving the British out of Brunei. The geostrategic struggle over Borneo took its toll on the built environment of inland Brunei, but Kampong Ayer remained relatively unscathed. In the postwar period, Kampong Ayer’s size grew. By 1971 it comprised 60% of the entire population of Bandar Seri Begawan despite government resettlement efforts in the 1950s (Mansurnoor 1997: 201–202). This revitalisation of its fortunes was in some ways linked to Brunei’s changing political situation and Cold War exigencies. To elaborate, in an effort to shore up its political hegemony and counter communist threats, the British were adamant that Brunei and Singapore would not fall to insurgencies, especially during the Indonesia–Malaysia *Konfrontasi* period in the early to mid-1960s (Emmers 2003: 73). When the British indicated their intention to leave Brunei, it was met with opposition from Malaysia and ambivalence from the Brunei government itself. For Malaysia, if Brunei became independent, it would make its *de jure* claims over Brunei invalid and heighten calls for greater autonomy from Sarawak and Sabah; while on the Bruneian side, the impetus for liberation was tempered with caution over geopolitical threats once separated from British protection and support. However, by 1975, both Indonesia and Malaysia recognised Brunei’s independence as a *fait accompli*. In a conciliatory gesture, both countries agreed to enlarge membership of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Although Brunei initially distanced itself from ASEAN and preferred to rely on its external association with the British, by 1979 the tides had turned. The British Conservative government of the time formally withdrew from the region and an agreement was reached between Brunei and the British. A Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was signed in 1979 in which the sultan would be granted full sovereignty of Brunei by the British. By way of compromise, the British would also provide a battalion (the Gurkha Rifles) for security purposes to the sultanate. In 1984 Brunei gained full independence and joined ASEAN.

Concurrently, Brunei had already begun to develop a state ideology in the 1960s to distinguish itself from other states in the region. According to Asbol bin Haji Mail (2012), monarchical rule based on religion and Malay cultural traditions is an inherent aspect of Brunei’s political configuration. However, the development of a formal ideology in the form of Malay Islamic monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*) only began to gain purchase after the suppression of the Brunei revolt (*pemberontakan Brunei*) by the British in 1962. Quelling of political unrest bolstered the monarchical system and legitimated the political formation of the nation-state along racial and religious lines (Mohd Jamil al-Sufri 1997; Naimah 2002; Emmers 2003: 70–72). Subsequently, Brunei elevated Kampong Ayer as a cultural space central to its national identity. Its narratives and myths would help forge an imagined community in which Bruneian identity was promoted. The role of Kampong Ayer as the cultural hearth was highlighted in the political discourses of Brunei at the time. It enjoyed a renaissance bolstered by modern infrastructural developments initiated by the government (Mansurnoor 1997).

Nonetheless, Kampong Ayer was not immune to the effects of globalisation and modernisation. By the 1980s, despite only Bruneians being able to own properties there, longstanding inhabitants were moving out in significant numbers while at the same time external migration into Brunei increased. Indonesian migrants in particular were attracted to the low-rental accommodation Kampong Ayer offered (Rozan 2008). House prices and economic activity in Kampong Ayer also started to decline. It was relatively isolated from the material benefits of the mainland and the availability of affordable cars provided further incentive to resettle. Moreover, the wooden stilts of the houses were ill-suited to bear the increasing electrical usage of the modernising population. Frequent incidents of fire and the development of affordable housing estates inland witnessed more and more residents leaving for the mainland. Despite these developments, the government has continued to promote Kampong Ayer as the cradle of Bruneian culture and identity.

10.5 Three Narratives on Place, Identity and Belonging in Kampong Ayer

Given its history, notions of place, identity and belonging are significant parts of Kampong Ayer's story. This section brings together perceptions and reflections of three different groups of respondents to articulate a triangulated and interior view of everyday lived experience in Kampong Ayer. From their personal accounts and the ways in which they have constructed meaning from their experience, a variety of thematic factors emerge that speak to the ways in which senses of place, identity and (un)belonging are imagined, contested, negotiated and transformed.

According to a local respondent who migrated out of Kampong Ayer, his experiences and recollections of the place were positive and largely reflected nostalgic sentiment and a strong sense of communal ties:

The sense of community in Kampong Ayer is very strong. For example, any daily necessities such as salt, sugar, even gas tanks are shared among the neighbours. It is normal for the neighbours to come in and hang out with us. This is not just limited to any celebratory activities such as weddings and Hari Raya, but also in the everyday life of a resident in Kampong Ayer. However, that sense of community is even more pronounced during weddings or any celebrations in Kampong Ayer. Verandas are shared to accommodate visitors for the weddings. Essentially, ownership of any properties is very communal. Any deeds are reciprocated by the neighbours. For example, if you help me with this, I'll help you with that. In spite of anything that might occur, or whatever might occur, happiness and sadness are shared among the community. The burdens of loss are shared by the whole neighbourhood. This is because I consider my neighbours as my own blood, and they consider me as their blood. Any loss that might have been inflicted to them we feel that sense of loss also.

Objectively, living on land is more suitable for modern life; but I find that living in Kampong Ayer is in my body and my soul. Sometimes, late at night, I would wake up and just start thinking about my childhood in Kampong Ayer; just the crowd coming into your [house] and exchanging pleasantries. The sound of their voices overwhelmed by the sound of the engines of the [boats] running and the chatter of the people outside, the river crashing

onto the wooden planks of the stilts: it almost sounds very musical to my ears. If there is an opportunity [for] living back in Kampong Ayer, I think I would.

Another local respondent further echoed the sense of belonging:

I was born here, and I've lived here for 60 something years. I lived inland for a brief period of time, but it was completely different. My heart is in this place. I did apply for the housing scheme on land, but I was rejected. Instead, I got a placement in one of the new housing [schemes] in Kampong Ayer. I think it is a sign from God that I am meant stay in this place all my life. *Alhamdulillah*.

Data suggest that the general sentiment among local residents towards Kampong Ayer was one of affection. However, when asked about recent developments in Kampong Ayer, several of them compared it to 'living in a refugee camp that you see in the news every day'. One respondent added:

I feel like the condition of Kampong Ayer then and now is a little bit like a ghetto. You would see a lot of kids involved in shady practices. Drug trades in Kampong Ayer are quite the problem. Kids were used as runners for their drug dealing friends or family. *Syabu* [crystal methamphetamine] is a real problem just as much as glue sniffing is. When I was in my schooldays, fights would break out almost every day. And the stench is just unbearable at times, especially during low tide.

There were also mixed sentiments expressed by local residents about the influx of migrant workers into Kampong Ayer. Several respondents were generally positive about Indonesian migrants, while some were more cautious, and others took a negative view. However, those local respondents still living in Kampong Ayer were generally cordial with Indonesians. As one local respondent noted:

What if your relative from Limbang [in Sarawak] came to Brunei and wanted to move into Kampong Ayer, would you stop them? Then there's your answer. Nationality does not matter in living. We as a Bruneian should show them the way of life of people in Brunei: live as a family, live in harmony. It should not apply differently when migrants want to live here, because here is better for them.

In contrast, Bruneians who have left Kampong Ayer were generally more cautious or negative towards the Indonesian migrants. One former resident reflected on this caution:

There's nothing wrong with migrants living in Kampong Ayer. Of course, at first, we were quite suspicious of them. We really do not know what to expect from them. So we were a bit cautious with how we interacted with them. Only after they settled down, and came to ceremonies, religious events and social gatherings and made themselves known to us that they weren't a threat where we started to warm up to them. It also helps that they started coming to the mosque on a regular basis. In our eyes, they weren't a threat as soon as they adopt the Bruneian lifestyle. Though in Kampong Setia, they are very hostile to migrants selling stuff [in] their *kampong*. They want people to buy their products, rather than outsiders.

Another former resident expressed concern that migrants were undermining Kampong Ayer's identity:

For me, I find the idea of non-Bruneians living in Kampong Ayer to be absolutely inappropriate. I am in a state of unease in the presence of these migrants. Not because I hate Indonesians or anything, but to allow them to come in and live here is like fundamentally changing the identity of Kampong Ayer itself. They should live on land and make a living for themselves. It is just absurd for them to live there [referring to Kampong Ayer].

During group discussions, issues of how people adapted on land were heated. Respondents became emotional about the way the mainland population view them. Our own positionality of not having roots in Kampong Ayer was also called into question. As a courtesy, this necessitated a shift in discussion to other less contentious issues before asking respondents to summarise how they feel about Kampong Ayer and also settling elsewhere. Two responses encapsulated a range of emotions associated with belonging and unbelonging, stereotyping and defiance:

Some of the Kampong Ayer people are very ashamed of their roots. We don't. We are very proud of the fact that we come from Kampong Ayer. Kampong Ayer has made us the way we are. There were a lot of instances when people straight up insulted us, and that has led to some fights. When we play football, you can hear a lot of whispers saying, 'Oh, they are from Kampong Ayer', of course they are this and that. It is as if our behaviour is being looked at and then generalised to every Kampong Ayer resident currently living on land. But, whatever.

I mean, there wasn't anything we did differently. Of course, we had to tone down everything that we did. From our reaction, the way we speak, the way we dress. But that's about it. People on land view us in a negative manner because they have this perception that people from Kampong Ayer are unruly, uncivilised, low class and *poklen*.¹ That is really unfair on a lot of us. *Poklen* doesn't really represent us anyway. You see *poklen* originating from land also, but because we are from Kampong Ayer, suddenly it is expected of us to behave that way.

Differently, an Indonesian migrant respondent expressed other concerns and the relativity of circumstance in their adaptation to Kampong Ayer:

I don't have any problems with living in Kampong Ayer. In fact, I love it for the unique environment that I am not used to back in Indonesia. The people have been very welcoming of me. They would come to my house and hang out on my front porch and have a conversation. In one sense, Kampong Ayer is better than what I am used to in Indonesia. It is cheaper, my house is very near to where I work [a logging company] and it is convenient because it is near to retail stores. I don't really have to pay much because it is sponsored by my employers. The pay is also quite nice compared to that back in Indonesia. It is dangerous and exhausting but it pays the bills and pays for my family back home. I have a lot of mouths to feed especially after one of my sister's husband passed away a few years ago. She has two children and no means of providing a livelihood for her family. So, as a man, I have to provide for all my kin. I keep in contact with them through WhatsApp. I am very anxious at times, just because I don't really know how to swim. When I ride a boat, I sometimes can imagine that I would fall into the river and drown.

The logging company that employs me also employs some of my friends back in Sulawesi. We have the exact arrangement: as in housing and bills provided. I worked with them [the Indonesians] and I feel very close to them because they are the only Indonesians living here. They helped me settle down in this country.

¹ *Poklen* is a derogatory term that implies one is dirty, uneducated, aggressive, uncultured and unsophisticated.

Interestingly, when one Indonesian respondent was asked, 'Are you Indonesian?' he replied, 'Yes, I am Indon.' This was unusual because the term 'Indon' is considered derogatory back in Indonesia. It is also used as form of insult by Malaysians towards Indonesian migrants. When asked why he referred to himself as 'Indon', he replied that it was normal in this society for Indonesians to be referred as such. He indicated that the negative connotation does not attach in the same way in Brunei as it does in Indonesia or Malaysia.

Respondent data indicate that the people of Kampong Ayer feel degrees of root-ness to the place, whether those who have remained, others who have left and the many more who can claim a migratory association with the place. But as Margaret Rodman (2003) cautions, we should be wary of 'natives' who assert their dominance by suggesting that they have a primordial connection or oneness with place. This is often accompanied by actions that are taken to guard carefully constructed identities and normalise social ordering hierarchies for migratory incomers.

Collected data suggest that interactions between migrants and local residents are largely guided by Bruneian culture and tradition. Indeed, the presence of 'foreigners' raises suspicion and disrupts the predictability of the lives of the local residents. Migrants are often racialised and regarded with suspicion and any transgressions they commit act as further proof that they do not belong in Kampong Ayer. The discourses of Kampong Ayer as 'homeland' of the Bruneian people also burden migrants with a sense of responsibility to fit into the pre-existing communities and recalibrate their identities accordingly. What is normal in a migrant's homeland may not correspond in Kampong Ayer. As a result, the migrant desire to establish a level of everyday normalcy after the uprooting of their lives has often led them to accept and internalise their subordinate status in Kampong Ayer. In a sense, it is a social space stratified by race. For Indonesian respondents, having stability in their lives helped them survive in a new environment despite facing various iniquities. Their primary motivations were to provide for their families and interactions with locals were much more reserved. However, there is a disconnection between what is real and what is imagined. The image of Kampong Ayer inhabited by Brunei Malays is betrayed by the presence of large numbers of migrants. There are also differences in the ways Kampong Ayer émigrés make sense of the place they have left. While Indonesian migrants might accept their subordinate status, this differs greatly from the way émigrés negotiate their status. Many Bruneians who live on the mainland hold negative stereotypes of people from Kampong Ayer. Our local respondents displayed a defiant rejection of the imposition of such labels on their sense of self-worth and identity, and celebrated their roots as a source of pride.

10.6 Conclusion

As this chapter highlights, the evolution and status of Kampong Ayer are rather curious. It is, at one and the same time, a place of great historical and cultural importance but also unimportance. In the minds of many Bruneians, Kampong Ayer

represents a national treasure that persists even in diminished form. It is part of the national imaginary and heritage of the nation-state but also a migrant ghetto, a subaltern place largely avoided by broader society. Developmental forces and a modern lifestyle may have rendered Kampong Ayer a functionally unenviable place for locals to set up home, but, conversely, increased labour migration has also breathed new life into the place.

The chapter draws attention to how migration as an aspect of globalisation is changing the ways in which we conceptualise, use and understand space and place. It underscores how place changes people, and how people change place by detailing the various ways in which senses of place, identity and (un)belonging are being imagined, contested, negotiated and transformed in Kampong Ayer. Although our notions of place have become more fluid in an age of globalisation, place still exerts an ability to influence migrants and émigrés alike. A bit like gravity, you can't see it, but it exerts a pull, nonetheless.

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Chapter 11

The Sociocultural Significance of Homeownership in Brunei Darussalam



Noor Hasharina Hassan

Abstract Houses matter to Bruneians. However, there are varying values and meanings attached to a house depending on spatial and cultural differences, which influence people's urgency to become homeowners. Governance, consumption patterns and sociocultural institutions shape how consumers value housing and influence their desire to become homeowners. This chapter suggests that Brunei Darussalam's housing development and culture are unique compared to societies that have undergone significant financial liberalisation such as Britain and the United States. Financial liberalisation or financialisation involve governments reducing their restrictions on financial institutions and the financial markets. Based on qualitative research that involved 210 structured interviews, six in-depth interviews and secondary data, this study identifies the variables that influence the culture of homeownership in Brunei.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Housing · Homeownership · Value · Financialisation · Consumption

11.1 Introduction

The housing system acts as a marker distinguishing socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds (Forrest and Hirayama 2015; Haffner et al. 2017). One case study puts this succinctly: 'The desire to own one's home is overwhelmingly strong in all classes and all regions of England, and this cannot simply or even principally be explained by financial considerations. The home is the core of most people's lives, and to own that home is at the centre of most people's aspirations and values' (Saunders 1989: 191). Owning, creating and maintaining an attractive home are unmistakably important. This is evident in the financial restructuring and liberalisation that have improved consumers' access to mortgage lending and in the diverse publicity through the mass media (Instagram, television programmes and magazines) on home furnishing and

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interior design (Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielson 2004). According to the celebrated modernist architect, Le Corbusier, writing in 1923, ‘[a] house is a machine for living in’ rather than just a functional basic shelter (Le Corbusier 2007: 151). This involves financiers, property developers, governments, architects, designers and consumers attaching meanings and values to homes, including the material objects bought that boost the value of the home. Consumption enables people to invent and reinvent their identities, express their personalities, and develop lifestyle cultures around their preferences including diet, fashion, music and taste for leisure (Featherstone 1987: 55). The same can be applied to houses that are purchased or even rented. The expansion in the number of homeowners and of homeowners renting out their property has resulted in a financial divide in investment (wealth accumulation via rentals) and consumption (Haffner et al. 2017).

Consumption draws various socioeconomic groups together in a common housing market while accentuating differences and individuality (Illouz 2009: 378). However, consumption also creates insecurities as consumer desires and needs are constantly changing (Bauman 2001). The durability of commodities can be short-lived due to changing fashions influenced by the unprecedented multiplicity of material objects and brands produced. Past studies have shown that the desire for material objects is insatiable and consumers often indulge in consumption that emulates the behaviour of higher socioeconomic classes and that can be unattainable (see Veblen 2003; Mansvelt 2005; Illouz 2009). Consumerism encourages utilitarian hedonism and requires high levels of self-management as well as discipline by consumers (Illouz 2009: 378).

The rise of ‘new consumerism’ involves excessive and competitive spending because financial liberalisation enables borrowing and equity usage for consumers (Manning 2000; Schor 2004; Langley 2008). Unlike Thorstein Veblen’s theory of emulation or ‘keeping up with the Joneses’, new consumerism involves financialisation which stimulates a sense of false affluence or a form of ‘affluenza’, resulting in excessive consumption and debt (De Graaf et al. 2001; James 2007).¹ It also fuels consumers’ upscaling of identity through emulation of the super-rich (Schor 1998, 2004). Excessive borrowing and consumption drive production (Bauman 2001). Like producers utilising or exploiting natural resources to create, consumers also play significant roles in creating or modifying the things they consume, leading to what has been termed ‘prosumption’ (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; see also Toffler 1980). Both producers and consumers play active roles in curating values attached to commodities, including houses. A considerable amount of literature has documented the flaws of consumers solely investing in their house as money pits for spending, particularly during the global financial crisis of 2007–2008. The overheating and bursting of the housing market bubble undermined economies, bankrupted individuals and pressured governments to reconsider financial liberalisation (see Aalbers 2015; Smith 2015; Murphy and Rehm 2016; Haffner et al. 2017).

¹ Financialisation involves the deregulation and the liberalisation of financial institutions, financial markets and capitalism by governments. This has led to more access to borrowing and credit to fund private consumption.

This chapter focuses on Brunei Darussalam and the values that Bruneians (particularly the working population) attribute to housing. A total of 216 consumers were interviewed about their values in relation to housing. I first explore the existing literature that examines the significance of housing and values people attach to housing. I then analyse the realities in Brunei by discussing the existing government structures such as financial facilities welfare provisions, housing policies that shape Bruneians' perceptions and values attached to the housing. I continue by assessing how access to these structures as well as other sociocultural intermediaries such as the family shape Bruneians' consumption choices. This includes their priority to become homeowners and the values they attribute to housing.

11.2 Attaching Values to Houses

A house can carry with it several values including its use value where it is seen as a necessary material structure to shelter people from the environment and dangers. Consumers also perceive houses as carrying other values including economic and financial values through which the house becomes a source for wealth creation and capital (Guyer 2015). This was evident when the British and United States governments decided to deregulate and improve consumers' access to finances, creating a new consumerism (Mohan 1995; Muellbauer 2002; French and Leyshon 2004; Palley 2007; Langley 2008; French and Kneale 2009; Lee et al. 2009; Montgomerie 2009; Christophers 2009; Pike and Pollard 2009). John Mohan (1995) and John Muellbauer (2002) affirm that financial liberalisation was already evident in Britain in the 1980s with the implementation of Thatcherite policies when strict controls on credit flow and interest rates were relaxed along with the departure of the stern 10% down payment policies for house mortgages.

The last two decades saw the privatisation of social welfare including housing, forcing consumers to be more responsible for their wellbeing, which contributed towards a paradigm shift in finance and consumption culture. The rise of residential capitalism brought about economic, political and social reforms (Broome 2008; Smith 2015). The state's role as providers of social welfare or safety nets in countries like Britain, the United States and Australia is slowly diminishing while welfare switching has been greatly advocated, encouraging more homeownership or owner occupation (Wood et al. 2013; Smith 2015).² Housing becomes a form of precautionary saving that enables consumers to use secured loans as a financial buffer (Wood et al. 2013). Evolution in residential capitalism saw countries with liberalised economies phasing out their tradition of welfarism by encouraging the expansion of homeownership as a social right while simultaneously valuing housing as a wealth

² This involves substituting or replacing people's dependency on welfare and consumption supplied by the state or government. It encourages 'self-provisioning in which individuals accept greater responsibility for their own welfare by investing in financial products and property assets' including homeownership (Wood et al. 2013: 2589).

generator and ensuring future financial security (Broome 2008). As a result, the house is considered more and more as an intertwined space of security, insurance, enforced savings, investment and consumption (Smith 2015).

When housing prices soared, an influx of consumers borrowed on their housing equity while a majority of lower-income consumers used mortgage loans to pay off existing debts (Smith and Searle 2008; Cook et al. 2009). Others reinvested more in their homes by spending on extensions and renovations. This shift in consumer culture transformed the meanings and values attached to houses; they are now seen as assets and sources of wealth creation to consumers (Langley 2008; Smith and Searle 2008; Cook et al. 2009; Lee et al. 2009). As the value of houses increases through market valuation, equity leakage occurs when money is cashed and spent on travel, family and other consumables (Sjørsvlev 2012: 386). Susan Smith and Beverley Searle (2008) stress that a large part of mortgage loans found their way into the hands of British retailers and importers resulting in a consumer boom, 'identifying a trend away from reinvestment into housing' (*ibid.*: 21). They establish that between 1991 and 2003, money from mortgage equity withdrawals spent on home improvements decreased by about 20%, spending on home extensions declined by 8%, while spending on cars, other consumer goods and other specific (but unrecoverable) consumption all increased. This leakage, which involves spending on family needs and desires, is deemed permissible and justified when the money is used to strengthen relationships with their loved ones, involving the interlocking between economic and social values of housing (Sjørsvlev 2012: 393). Hence, social scientists place more value on the house as a 'meaningful' place in which consumers have a sense of belonging (Tuan 1971; Cresswell 2004).

Houses have social and emotional values and meanings attached to them. Peter Saunders (1989: 177–178) defines the home 'as an object of consumption' that 'is also the container within which much consumption takes place', and a locus where people's experiences and cultural significance are located. A home signifies the social relations between the consumers with others in their homes as well as their relations to their domestic spaces (Noor Hasharina 2010; Sobh and Welk 2011; Seo 2012). It has nodes where affective bonds between people and place evolve (Easthope 2004), contributing to the creation of consumers' sense of place (Rose 1995). The consumers' sense of place is influenced by their access to different types of capital, whether economic, social or cultural (see Bourdieu 1984). A home, therefore, is a space that is meaningful to consumers and where consumers feel safe to carry out their everyday activities and maintain their cultural norms.

The value of social connection or the sociality of objects becomes prevalent in consumption at home and integrated into the daily living of the consumers (Riggins 1994; Mansvelt 2005; Money 2007). Most studies on home consumption examine goods and identity as well as the identity conflicts that may arise through the home designs and décor imposed by different cohabiting consumers (Leslie and Reimer 2003; Miller 2009). In most affluent societies, spending on the home is becoming as conspicuous as shopping for fashion (Shove and Southerton 2000; Noor Hasharina 2010).

Like any commodity, the design, size, space and facilities found within the house are identity signifiers or social markers (Jayne 2006; Noor Hasharina 2010). The meanings attached to an object, including houses, are subjective and may vary from one social group to another (Kleine and Kernan 1991). Paul Du Gay et al. (1997) and Pierre Bourdieu (1984) affirm the significance of cultural intermediaries in influencing both the supply and demand of consumption. In capitalist society, advertisers exploit consumers by constantly changing fashions or trends and developing designer labels that influence consumers to participate in a yuppie lifestyle in which consumers buy the most expensive version of a product not because it has a higher use value but because it signifies status and exclusivity (Slater 1997: 158).

Household consumption patterns vary depending on social relations. The house goes through a personalisation process to promote security and identity through modification and the use of recreation spaces at home (Easthope 2004; Gram-Hanssen and Bech-Danielsen 2004). This was made possible for many through financialisation and residential capitalism via equity leakage, as outlined in the previous section. Consumers in many societies suffer from what has been dubbed 'luxury fever' or 'affluenza' under which conditions they are unable to discipline themselves financially (De Graaf et al. 2001). This urge to splurge is contagious, disseminating globally as consumers take part not just in defensive consumerism but also 'competitive spending'.

Shane Frederick's (2012) study of consumers' willingness to pay shows the incongruence between how much retailers think consumers are willing to pay versus the actual amount consumers would pay for a commodity. Consumers who are unable to afford it are willing to live above their means and pay for goods and services through financial borrowing and credit. Not all consumers are rational and solely influenced by optimum economic decisions. This applies to commodities including housing as some consumers take into consideration factors such as addresses and access to schooling, distance to workplace or access to retail and entertainment, environmental concerns and safe neighbourhoods as part of their decision to locate or buy houses, apart from price. In addition, the values of housing perceived by consumers vary geographically. Age, income, race and family size also influence housing choices and willingness to pay (Gross 1988).

This overview of the literature in the field highlights the economic value of homes at the individual level and its influence on consumption and wellbeing, and impact of homeownership on the economy of some Western societies. There is, however, a scarcity of literature examining the social functions of homes. In Brunei, a different pattern of homeownership can be seen with the high supply of public housing to Bruneians. The next section illustrates the role government has in influencing housing values through the national housing scheme and financial regulation. While public housing is preferred by many Bruneians, the policy states that such houses cannot be sold or used as collateral. This results in public housing lacking economic value, making residential capitalism and its possible leakage for consuming needs or wants impossible. Rather, houses in Brunei are seen to have social and cultural significance, with homeownership patterns differing from those in the West. In Sect. 11.4, I address these differences in values attached to housing and the lack of priority

given to housing as part of their consumption. This section also highlights the important role of the government and family, relative to economic value, in influencing homeownership.

11.3 Study Participants

I recruited 216 Bruneians from various income groups consisting of 111 males and 105 females. The research employed a qualitative approach which consisted of mixed methods: (1) structured interviews; (2) semi-structured interviews; (3) observations (of both the physical landscape and online related to housing and consumption); and (4) secondary data research. The main fieldwork involved conducting structured and semi-structured interviews with employed respondents aged from 20 to 55 years and from various marital backgrounds. The salary range of respondents was between BND358 and BND10,000 a month. The reason for the selective sample was to examine whether different socioeconomic classes have different consumption desires and values placed on housing and homeownership. The research also documented consumer living arrangements, housing trends and willingness to spend. The structured interviews were qualitative in nature, involving more open-ended questions to allow consumers to avoid bias or leading answers as would be the case in multiple choice questions. In addition, as part of a mixed methods and triangulation strategy, the semi-structured interviews were also conducted with officers from Brunei's Housing Development Department (HDD, Jabatan Kemajuan Perumahan) and six consumers. Both types of interviews lasted from 45 minutes to two hours. Secondary data were useful to show trends in lending by private financial institutions for property ownership, consumption patterns and income distribution, and included government policies on housing. Observations enabled me to take note of behaviours and attitudes occurring during private house-selling expositions as well as online advertisements and people's reactions to these advertisements.

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and structured interview data tabled or coded using Microsoft Excel. The main analysis method used was content analysis and thematic analysis, coding of common meanings such as words, word sense, phrases and sentences. This also generated frequency of answers or codes. The conversation during the interview involved code-switching between English and Malay. A challenge for researching a society that is bilingual, and particularly code-switching during a conversation, lies in choosing the right word during the interview and in subsequently transcribing it. I wanted to avoid any misinterpretation or loss of meaning and used simple direct translation. My research found that a majority of consumers interviewed (53%) lived in their family-owned homes (often with parents or parents-in-law). The remainder were either renting under the government scheme or were private renters. Only 12% were married homeowners living on their own. The study found that family and social relations followed by government policies are significant intermediaries that affect consumption in homeownership in Brunei.

11.4 The Brunei Way

Brunei is located on the island of Borneo and has a population of 429,999 with 353,313 being Bruneian citizens and permanent residents (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics 2021a: 1–2). It has one of the highest gross domestic product (GDP) per capita rates in Southeast Asia at BND39,989 (USD30,967) in 2019 (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics 2021b). The government continues to pay for social welfare and protection for Bruneians: free or subsidised education, primary health and medical services, energy including car fuel and electricity, basic foodstuffs such as rice and sugar, and subsidised housing including via the national housing scheme. Other forms of social protection and social security include those that cater for the retirement of employees such as the pension schemes, the Employees' Trust Fund (Tabung Amanah Pekerja, TAP) and the Supplemental Contributory Pension (SCP).³ The SCP was implemented in 2010 to cover all employees in every sector as an additional savings provision for their retirement via a minimum 3.5% monthly deduction from their income (TAP 2018). In addition, full-time government employees have access to other benefits including an annual performance bonus, a fixed leave and passage allowance, an educational allowance (as it is subsidised by the government for parents employed in the public sector who send their children to private schools rather than to free government schools), an interest-free loan to purchase a car, and an interest-free housing loan where the amount of credit given depends on years of service left and monthly income (Hajah Sainah 2010; Rabiatul 2012; Ministry of Finance and Economy 2020a). All these social provisions are relevant to understanding the culture of consumption in Brunei, particularly in relation to homeownership.

Most housing markets are influenced by the invisible economic hand, but Brunei has a unique housing market due to the dominance of public housing for citizens (Oxford Business Group 2013). This public housing provision is heavily subsidised by the government mainly through oil and gas revenues. The housing scheme was initially introduced to move people living in Kampong Ayer onto land to improve their quality of life, due to problems of overcrowding, outbreaks of fire and disease (Jones 1997; Noor Hasharina and Yong 2019). The HDD under the Ministry of Development was set up in 1984 to provide housing for Bruneians. Local people who fulfil the criteria—including being 18 years of age at the date of application, not owning land or residential property, earning between BND445 and BND3,030, and having not disposed of any private land or residential property—are eligible to apply in two different national housing schemes: the National Housing Programme (Rancangan Perumahan Negara, RPN) which is accessible to all Bruneians regardless of race; and the Landless Indigenous Citizens' Housing Scheme (Skim Tanah Kurnia Rakyat Jati, STKRJ) which is exclusively for the indigenous Brunei Malays.

³ The TAP involves a deduction of at least 10% of the monthly income of all Brunei employees as part of their long-term savings for retirement. Employers are expected to contribute at least half of this monthly deduction. This scheme replaced the pension scheme and was introduced in 1993 (TAP 2018).

The types of public housing provision have evolved from detached houses on large parcels of land (0.25 ha) to a design that ensures land maximisation and optimisation including semi-detached, terrace and butterfly or cluster houses as well as vertical living spaces such as town houses and flats (Rozan 2008). From 1971 to 2016, the average household size for Brunei remained at about five to six people (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics 2017a: 58–59). Despite the changes in public housing types to smaller units (three bedrooms and three bathrooms), there is still a demand for public housing for social security, in other words, a roof over people's heads. Applications for public housing grew tenfold from 1980 (8,565 applications) to 2015 (81,066 applicants), which saw the HDD struggling to cope with housing demands (Noor Hasharina and Yong 2019) as 'public housing [makes] up 40% of Brunei's total residential market' (Oxford Business Group 2014). As of 2019, the homeownership rate was 65% with a target of 85% by 2035 (*BruDirect* 2019). To achieve this target, the Ministry of Development is working to ensure the long-term financial viability of the RPN, in order to deliver a more cost-effective and sustainable financial model (Ministry of Finance and Economy 2020b).

According to one HDD officer, the smaller the unit the lower the price. A terrace unit costs about BND36,000–55,000 while a detached house varies between BND70,000 and about BND95,000 depending on location (Ministry of Development n.d.). The repayment period varies from 15 to 30 years depending on the applicant's and/or guarantor's balance of service in the public sector. No interest rate is charged for the public housing instalments or any default payments despite the government subsidising the construction of the houses and their amenities.

There are several challenges faced by the government with regard to national housing. First, the biggest challenge in housing provision is the increasingly limited land available, with less than 10% of 'the country's total landmass' available for real estate development (Oxford Business Group 2014) and only about 5% of the total land being free of development constraints such as hills or peat swamps which make it costly and difficult to develop (Oxford Business Group 2012). Second, there is the mounting cost of national housing subsidies which cover more than 70% of the total housing cost (land is awarded by the sultan) (Rosli and Mohd Don 2019: 21). Third, there are concerns over some people defaulting on their house repayments. And fourth, the waiting period for a public housing unit is between 15 and 20 years, which shortens the payment period but increases the monthly mortgage. The long wait times are not helpful both to homeowners and the government. Hence the government has tried to shorten the waiting period by building high-density and smaller but affordable housing. According to a finance officer from the HDD, the issue of affordability is important as about 70% of applicants for the national housing scheme earn less than BND1,200 a month and by 2010 the total default of payment owed to the government by some homeowners of this scheme amounted to BND20 million. In 2013, a national target was set to reduce the waiting time to just 5 years by 2021, however, due to challenges faced by the government, in 2016, the waiting time was reduced to approximately 12 years (Izah 2013; Rabiatul 2016).

In contrast to many Western societies that underwent the housing bubble burst in 2007–2008 that contributed to the global financial crisis, the financial culture in Brunei is different. The government closely monitors and regulates the financial structures and services through the Brunei Darussalam Central Bank (BDCB), formerly the Monetary Authority of Brunei Darussalam (Autoriti Monetari Brunei Darussalam, AMBD). This institution merges the authority previously held by the Financial Institution Department, under the Ministry of Finance and Economy, to monitor, implement existing regulations, formulate and enforce new monetary and financing policies including banking policies and processes. Bruneians have a different financial and consumption culture compared to the West. The average monthly household income was about BND7,009 in 2015–2016, with the main income sources coming from paid employment while income from property (imputed rent of owner-occupied housing) was only BND878.00 (12.5% of monthly income) (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics 2017b). The government reported that consumers surveyed spent 40–60% of their income on monthly expenses, saved 10–20% and allocated 10–19% for debt repayments. My study found that the main forms of borrowing among respondents were car loans or hire purchase (67%), personal loans (18%) and housing loans (9%). A third of respondents with housing loans were repaying for home renovations. Only a quarter of respondents' monthly expenditure was spent on themselves and the remainder was spent on family needs, a prominent feature of many Asian societies (Wong and Ahuvia 1998; Chua 2000). On the other hand, active savings for future security and welfare have been an issue for many Bruneians and is acknowledged by the government. Most respondents are passive savers relying on monthly deductions and contributions from their income into the government-led TAP and SCP (Noor Hasharina 2017). Any savings by respondents are for short-term emergency funds such as car repairs and family expenses while some have no specific use for their savings.

The government, through the BDCB, acts as an intermediary in Brunei's financial network, regulates financial access and influences consumer consumption culture through regulation reforms and policy. Brunei promotes and prioritises homeownership over renting by offering the public housing scheme and subsidising housing construction (Sarimah et al. 2019; Noor Hasharina and Yong 2019). In 2020 there were 216,886 Bruneians actively employed (32.7% in the public sector) with the total fertility rate in 2020 at only 1.8 births per woman (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics 2021b: 17; World Bank 2022). The average number of persons per household was reported to be 5.5 in 2016 (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics 2017a: 58). Another means of encouraging homeownership is through the government's policy of providing access to home loans at a zero interest rate through the Ministry of Finance and Economy. Furthermore, the government introduced the housing fund scheme to encourage local TAP members to own houses by dipping into their savings from their monthly contributions. Another quicker option for homeownership for those who prefer a more customised house design that meets their desires is via bank loans (as prime lenders) which are monitored closely by the BDCB. The BDCB observes that the interest rates charged are based on global prime lending rates of 4.5% and it has set up a credit bureau to monitor and identify

high-risk consumers. In addition, the implementation of the total debt service ratio (TDSR) in June 2015 appears to have caused borrowers to modify their behaviour by concentrating on appreciating assets such as housing, which saw an increase of over BND50 million (AMBD 2015a).

My study found that people tend to delay being homeowners due to the welfare schemes and social benefits provided by the government; hence consumers spend on other more short-term luxuries. In addition, people are highly dependent on the government for housing, through homeownership either under the national housing scheme or living in government-rented properties if they are in public service. It is therefore obvious that the economic value attached to homeownership among Bruneians is not the same as in other free market economies, because the rules and conditions of the national housing scheme stipulate that homeowners are not allowed to sell or use the national housing scheme houses or land as collateral for any form of mortgage or loan. Furthermore, the house cannot be rented out or used as premises for any business activity. This is different from welfare switching or social reform in Britain where people are encouraged to buy homes and use their homes as collateral for consumption and social wellbeing, for example to purchase health insurance or pay for children's education resulting in less dependency on state welfare (Smith 2015).

11.5 The Value of Housing in Brunei

Although Bruneians put less priority on homeownership and perceive its economic value differently, this is not to say that those surveyed for this study saw homeownership as insignificant. These respondents would like to be homeowners eventually when they have saved sufficient funds or when they receive public housing. Some 47% of the consumers surveyed, regardless of age, preferred to wait for public housing compared to purchasing from private agents; these were mainly men. The main reason for preferring public housing was affordability while the justification given for choosing private homes was the space limitation and the standard design of public housing. Generally, public housing provision are landed properties (121.5 m² per house) in the form of terrace or semi-detached houses comprising three or four bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living space and kitchen, and costing about BND45,000. Recently, the government has built a few high-rise residential schemes with unit sizes of 170 m², consisting of a master bedroom, three other bedrooms, three bathrooms, a living room, dining room, kitchen and store, a balcony and laundry space. Yet most homeowners prefer landed properties compared to condominiums, apartments and flats (Sarimah et al. 2019). This pattern was also evident among the respondents surveyed, although a few did not mind living in a serviced apartment with proper maintenance. Surveys conducted by the Ministry of Development—75% in 2015—and for the Bandar Seri Begawan Development Masterplan—95% in 2010—indicate a majority was ready for high-rise living (*BruDirect* 2016). My study found that the younger age group (mainly single or just married without children) preferred

apartment-style housing as their first home. They would upgrade to landed detached property when their family grows as public housing is limited in size and lacks privacy.

My study found that those who preferred to purchase and build their own house (46%) were highly represented by female consumers, while 7% would opt for whatever came first. Those who preferred a customised private house would still apply for the national housing scheme as a safety net. The Oxford Business Group (2013) found that young professionals or executives (often graduates) earning at least BND2,500 a month often purchase or construct homes through private developers. Interestingly, my findings suggest that consumers with an income bracket of BND1,000–1,999 preferred applying for public housing while those earning below BND1,000 and the higher bracket of those earning BND2,000 and above had a greater desire to build or purchase their own house rather than opt for government public housing. This is the case despite the price for a private detached house being on average at least triple that of a detached house under the public housing schemes (depending on location). The Oxford Business Group (2013: 145) identified several factors that have ‘push[ed] the average prices of properties to the BN\$250,000–300,000 (\$194,700–233,640) range’:

1. ‘growth of the economy’ (*ibid.*: 145);
2. ‘restrictions on land development’ (*ibid.*: 145) (5% in Brunei-Muara district);
3. ‘increased financing options’ (*ibid.*: 145) (prime lending packages from financial institutions, particularly banks regulated by the government);
4. interest-free government housing loan for government workers;
5. government-led schemes include the housing fund by the TAP to improve homeownership through public housing or purchase or construction via private developers (*ibid.*: 145).

In addition, the stringent requirements for bank loans, particularly for big purchases such as a house, and an oversupply in residential properties are believed to have affected the price of residential properties.⁴ The government reformed the TDSR regulations in 2005 to limit an individual’s total monthly debt obligations and ensure individuals have sufficient disposable income (AMBD 2015b). By setting 60% as the TDSR for borrowers with a monthly income of more than BND1,750 individuals will be discouraged from misusing their credit facilities.⁵

As stated earlier, my interviews with respondents suggest that the priority of homeownership was delayed and deflected towards spending for short-term consumer durables and services (Noor Hasharina 2010, 2017). This consumption pattern is further supported as the majority of consumers interviewed (60%) lived in parental homes, including houses lent or rented to them by their parents or parents-in-laws. The presence of an extended family is commonplace among those living in parental

⁴ Housing prices dropped 3.9% in Q3 2020, a record low amid the Covid-19 pandemic (*The Scoop* 2020).

⁵ The figure of 60% is the maximum a consumer can utilise from their monthly income to service monthly loan repayments (secured and unsecured loans). The remaining 40% is available to consumers as their take-home pay to meet their monthly living expenses and other financial requirements (AMBD 2015b).

homes, influencing their consumption patterns as monthly expenses are shared. The extended family thus becomes a safety net for its members. The majority of the respondents also attached emotional and social value to the house:

It's [house] a blanket which keeps me safe.... Referring to the physical building and people at home [parents] ... it's a place where you feel a sense of belonging. (Rina, 23, single)

Its where memories are created ... we don't see our old house to be let for rent. There's just too much memories there of when we were younger ... there's no urgency for me to build a house and they [parents] aren't forcing me to move out. (Saiful, 25, single)

It's a space of refuge ... it's a place you come home and leave your worries behind ... have quality time with your husband and children ... to just be yourself ... to chill after a long day at work. (Nur, 42, married)

I have a piece of land I bought from my brother a few years ago but I have not started building a house yet.... I live with my family [sibling and parents] ... my sibling is building a house and we will all move to the new house soon. There is no urgency for me to build one at the moment. I'm not getting married anytime soon ... I will pay off my personal loan and car loan first then think of constructing the house. I pay for the utilities at home and will continue to do so when we move while my sibling and parents pay for the house loan. (Mohd, 35, single)

Those who lived independently were in government-provided or rented houses allocated for government employees or were renting privately for those working in the private sector. My research found that those interviewed were more willing to purchase a car first and this was mainly due to a society so dependent on cars; Bruneians depend on their privately owned cars to move about for comfort and reliability.⁶ Nevertheless, there is some indication that consumption has shifted as reported by the AMBD (2015a) on a decline in car hire purchases as more people opt for home loans. This is because consumers are purchasing more affordable cars with monthly repayments or instalments of BND290–1,300 as opposed to those car owners who owned more luxurious cars requiring instalments of BND1,000 and more before the 2005 financial loan directive (Noor Hasharina 2017).

The respondents' willingness to pay for their desired house reflected the value they place on their home. The majority wanted a double-storey detached house; they were willing to pay for a house that costs BND1,000–1,499 in monthly repayments with a total cost of about BND200,000–299,000 (Table 11.1). Those earning below BND1,000 were willing to pay less than BND500 a month for a detached house with the total cost of BND149,000–249,000. Generally, married couples were willing to pay more for their desired house compared to singles due to their combined dual income and sharing of household expenses.

The value the respondents placed on their desired housing, whether through monthly repayments or the total cost of the house, reflected current housing market prices and loan repayments to banks. According to the BDCB, and based on mortgage data from banks, the median purchase price for all private residential properties

⁶ Public transportation in Brunei, especially bus routes, is not comprehensive and does not cover much of the suburban and residential areas.

Table 11.1 Respondents' willingness to pay for a detached house

Monthly income (BND)	Monthly repayment (BND)	Total value (BND)
Below 1,000	500 and below	150,000–199,000
1,000–1,999	1,000–1,499	200,000–249,000
2,000–2,999	1,000–1,499	300,000–349,000
3,000–3,999	1,000–1,499	300,000–349,000
4,000–4,999	1,000–1,499	300,000 and below
5,000 and above	1,000–1,499	350,000 and above

Source Fieldwork

in Q4 2021 was BND264,000, with detached houses being the most popular choice (62.5%), followed by terrace houses (18.7%), semi-detached houses (11.7%), apartments (5.5%) and land (1.6%) (*Borneo Bulletin* 2022). This demonstrates an awareness of current market prices of their desired houses. Examining the consumption patterns of respondents closely, the majority used 40–59% of their income for cash payments, comprising utilities, phone bills, food, petrol, and financial contributions for family members including parents, spouses, siblings and children. This reflects a combination of individual and collective consumption and the position of the family as a significant cultural intermediary, both in relation to consumer durables and in housing matters. My respondents found it hard to recall monthly spending during the interviews and based on their current monthly consumption patterns they did not have a sufficient balance in their accounts to purchase a house or to pay for monthly housing loan repayments, indicating that an overhaul of their consumption pattern was needed. A few consumers admitted not knowing the processes in applying for a house loan, the amount of deposit needed, and charges including interest rates they would incur. This indicates a lack of financial management and knowledge among respondents (Noor Hasharina 2010, 2017). This is something the government is addressing today with financial literacy and knowledge taught in schools (Ministry of Education 2021).

As already noted, the majority of the respondents lived with their extended families: 73% in multiple-storey detached houses, 11% in bungalows, 8% in terraces, 5% in semi-detached houses and 3% in flats. Those staying in flats were mainly in government-owned housing or barracks for civil servants. The findings show that popular desired homes were multiple-storey (commonly double-storey) homes (60%), bungalows (38%) and stilt houses (2%). This preference for a detached house is currently not on offer in the public housing scheme, whose properties are commonly in the form of terrace and semi-detached houses with three bedrooms and two bathrooms. Hence respondents largely favoured houses with four bedrooms, three bathrooms, a living space and kitchen. The reason for this preference is rooted in their socialisation and upbringing by their parents. Larger spaces, the symbolic value of the house, and the need for space for family and cultural events to maintain social relations have been embedded in their lives. The house is thus their source of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1984). Living in a detached double-storey house has

Table 11.2 Intermediaries influencing consumers' housing choice

Intermediaries	Family	Self	External (e.g. friends and media)	Budget
Amount (%)	54	31	13	2

Source Fieldwork

been a norm and indeed a way of life for many Bruneians. More than 90% stated that their current houses, whether their parents' house or a rented house, were detached and accommodated their extended families.

Relationships, education, levels of financial independence, labour market conditions, the cost of housing and cost of living are all factors that determine the age at which a young person moves out. On average, Europeans leave their parental home in their early twenties (Jezard 2018). The majority of my respondents will only leave their parental home and become homeowners when they have started working with a stable and good income, and get married or start a family. A minority would consider moving out earlier from their parental home for some freedom from their responsibilities at home, such as taking care of siblings and wanting to have time for themselves. Some stated that though they might become homeowners prior to marriage, they would still live in their parental home until they start a family:

I will apply for the national housing scheme first and consider buying a house, whichever comes first, if I am not married yet I will continue staying with my parents and maybe rent out my house. Once I am married, I will move into my house with my wife.... I think the current house will be given to my youngest sibling as they will be last to be married and will have to take care of my parents as they get older. (Saiful, 25, single)

A majority of respondents stated that the family (54%) is the main intermediary that shapes their housing preferences (Table 11.2). They valued the home as a form of social security—a roof over their heads out of necessity—and for the comfort and approval of their family to visit or stay. Also, they grew up in their parents' detached houses, which has influenced their housing preference. This is followed by individual choice (31%) where respondents preferred a certain kind of design and space different from their parents' tastes. Therefore, consumption involves a combination of individualistic but predominantly collectivist consumption (see Chua 2000; Noor Hasharina 2010). The house preference represents a fusion between consumer desires and needs; therefore a house does not have only one value attached to it but can have several. Recent trends have seen Bruneian consumers exposed to numerous house designs through satellite television, in particular Home and Garden Television,⁷ and also the social media accounts of well-known home designers and celebrities who share their home interiors. The preference is for a more open concept of detached homes.

⁷ HGTV is a well-known channel focusing on home design, decorating and remodelling of homes and gardens in the United States and Canada. The channel can be viewed in Southeast Asia and is popular among members of Generation Y interested in home designs.

It is evident that Bruneians prioritise social and emotional attachments to houses rather than their economic value as investments. Unlike consumers in Britain, for example, where people gradually move up the housing ladder, the majority of respondents stated they would purchase their permanent home when they decide to be homeowners. The culture of first homes as a step up the housing ladder is uncommon in Brunei. Only one respondent was considering buying an apartment unit as her first home (a five-year home) and will progress onto her permanent home (a detached double-storey house) once she gets married. Investing in a house is also not the norm for many younger Bruneians except for those coming from wealthier family backgrounds:

It [buying more than one property for rent] is not something taught to us by my parents; they build their house close to retiring. So the only advice or lesson to be learned from that was to build your house sooner.... I built mine in my late thirties ... even at that age I felt the monthly instalments were expensive.... It was a scary decision to make [to get loan for a house construction] ... but my parents help out where they can financially. I won't be able to afford to buy a second home to be rented out ... only those coming from a rich family or with a lot of property can do that. Not me! (Ema, 40, married)

My father gave me a piece of property [house and land] as he did with my other siblings; I am renting it out because I have my own house I am building with my husband. I wouldn't be able to afford purchasing another property on my own due to other expenses ... children's school fees, car loans, other monthly expenses and so on. I moved out when I got married and lived in a government rented house. We only started building the house quite late in our working years, so yes, paying for a mortgage is expensive but hopefully the little bungalow my father is giving me will help. (Nur, 42, married)

The house me and my family currently live in was passed down to us by my father. I bought a house using my bank loan.... I'm currently renting it out to pay for my monthly bank loan. It's an old house I bought from my cousin at a discounted rate. (Zul, 38, married)

Another factor influencing the selection of a detached house was the availability of space within the home and privacy, especially of the living room as a social space, the interface where social relations are strengthened and practised. Frequent descriptions of this space given by respondents were 'for family bonding' and 'for gathering', denoting the social meanings and values attached to the house. This social relationship involved the consumers and their families living under the same roof and their guests. The house, and especially the living room and the kitchen, should be big enough to allow for cultural and religious family events, which might involve anything from 20 to 1,500 family and friends. The choice of housing type also indicates the importance of privacy for consumers and the availability of space for further renovation or for cultural and religious functions. Maintaining social relations in order to 'save face' is a significant trait of many Southeast Asian communities including Bruneians (Wong and Ahuvia 1998; Noor Hasharina 2017).

The majority of respondents stated that privacy was important when selecting an ideal home, including national housing scheme houses. They preferred to have some distance from their neighbours in order to maintain privacy. The house should also be flexible enough to allow for renovations and extensions. The home is a contested

space between individuals and community as well as between private and public. This study demonstrates that the home has multiple values. The home is not just functional but is also important for the comfort and privacy of family, maintaining social relations that include visitors, and the expression of social identities.

11.6 Conclusion

The culture of homeownership in many Western societies is based on owner occupation, where people consider the home as an investment possibility and home equity leakage has been normalised, especially in the current century, and promoted by governments as safer forms of investment and as asset bases have shifted (Smith 2015). Though it inspires welfare switching, particularly in Britain and the United States, by lessening the burden of government and improving homeownership, it has a significant bearing on the economic and social sustainability of consumers. Houses should not only be seen as assets to be used as collateral for borrowing and consumption but also as a means to expand consumers' financial portfolios. Thus, after the global financial crisis in 2008, governments highlighted the need for some form of monitoring and reform of financial liberalisation. Brunei has a different financial and consumer culture in which financial markets and institutions are regulated by the government. This means borrowing is controlled and monitored, less predatory, and uses the Brunei prime lending rate (about 5.5%) which should encourage borrowing and homeownership due to the lower interest rates.

Changes in perspective on home values is observed with Susan Smith suggesting that home buyers or mortgagors 'can insulate themselves from risk: rather than bet on the fortune of a single property, you can buy an index of, London or Tokyo home prices' (cited in Brauman 2010). Nicole Cook and Kristian Ruming (2020: 2026) highlight the presence of second property buyers as part of consumers' investment portfolios, which are seen as means to secure people against risks such as a property slump. Based on the findings of my research, homeownership is not the highest priority for younger working Bruneians. Brunei is still a welfarist state with many citizens having access to various forms of social protection, including public housing for those earning from BND445 to BND3,030 but who do not own property. The reluctance to move out of the family home is embedded in Bruneian culture, where living with one's extended family is the norm. Most people only leave their family homes to live independently once they get married and start families of their own. Nevertheless, housing matters and is still important, but the value placed on houses is more functional, emotional and social than economic. Very few of those interviewed considered owning a house for its potential rental value or as a source of income. Homes are meaningful places where people seek to create a sense of belonging with their social groups. It is the 'hearth ... through which human beings are centred' and a place to which social meanings or values are attached (Rubenstein 2001; Easthope 2004; Blunt and Dowling 2006: 11). According to Nikos Papastergiadis (1996: 2),

‘The ideal home is not just a house which offers shelter, or a repository that contains material objects. Apart from its physical protection and market value, a home is a place where personal and social meaning are grounded’.

To be a homeowner in the national housing scheme offers no economic value due to the regulations which forbid the sale, rent or use of the house as collateral. Yet there is a high demand for houses due to lower repayment costs and their functional and social value. A paradigm shift in the way we see housing is needed. This study finds that more Bruneians are looking for alternatives for investment (Noor Hasharina 2010, 2017). As Brunei gears up to meet its Bandar Seri Begawan Development Masterplan targets in 2035, the government has identified an optimum population size in the city centre to be about 302,800 (Municipal Department 2011a: x). Based on the executive summary of the masterplan (drafted in 2010), the total number of dwellings needed is about 44,000 with an average size of nearly 122 m² (Municipal Department 2011b: 10). The question of housing supply will arise. Bruneians should see this as investment potential. This population increase puts pressure on available land, and therefore the creation of strata titles and high-density housing (in particular high-rise living) by the government is the future of housing. The problem of housing supply in Brunei will be as bad as that Britain is experiencing where the economic value of housing is high and has skyrocketed especially in cities like London. The delay in homeownership by Bruneians is influenced by the provision of public housing and subsidised rents provided to government employees of any income. Nevertheless, this delay results in higher loan repayments and becomes a burden, especially when people reach their forties and have to look after a growing family. Capitalising on cheaper loan rates at an early stage of employment should be considered by the young working population, whether through prime lending from banks or at a zero interest rate from the government.

Finally, this study shows the complex nature of how housing as a home is valued. Some may prioritise the economic value of the house over its emotional, social and functional values. For Bruneians, the house is not usually viewed as an investment. Because the policy of the national housing scheme prioritises social security and sustainability, houses are more likely to be seen as a safe haven to maintain the social relations and cultural practices unique to the Brunei community.

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Chapter 12

***Merantau*: The Worldview and Praxis of Javanese Migrants in Brunei Darussalam**



Westly Lo Siong Wei and Lian Kwen Fee

Abstract The phenomenon and experiences of Indonesians who leave their villages of origin to seek a life of improvement have been examined by local scholars in the past using the concept of *merantau*. In this chapter, we document the extended narratives of nine Javanese migrant workers in Brunei Darussalam from the conversations we had about their lives in Java, Indonesia and Brunei connected through the social process of migration. Every individual had a unique account of the migration story and how it relates to their experiences. However, we suggest that they share something in common. We argue that *merantau* is a worldview with which these young Javanese make sense of their lives and future, empower them, and help them overcome the existential condition of uncertainty and insecurity of life in densely populated Java. For them *merantau* is a way of life that sustains their adulthood.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · *Merantau* · Javanese · Migrants · Narratives

12.1 Introduction

Indonesian migrant workers who are employed outside of Indonesia are no strangers to other countries in the Southeast Asia region and the rest of the world. According to the World Bank (2017: x–xi), 89.5% of all Indonesian migrant workers are employed as caregivers, domestic workers, agricultural and factory workers, service providers and manual labourers including in construction. Such employment can be characterised as 3D jobs—demanding, dirty and dangerous (Rahman 2012: 21). Those who are employed in white-collar posts make up a very small proportion of the total number of these workers. The presence of Indonesian workers is significant

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in Middle Eastern and other Asian countries such as Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan. The Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Board (Badan Pelindungan Pekerja Migrant Indonesia, BP2MI) calculates that the total number of registered workers outside of Indonesia in 2018 (before the Covid-19 pandemic) was 283,640, with the largest proportion originating from West Java (57,230), Central Java (61,434) and East Java (70,381). Among the top 10 destination countries of these workers were Malaysia (90,671), Taiwan (72,373), Hong Kong (73,917), Singapore (18,324) and Brunei (5,707) (BP2MI 2019: 4, 6).

International migration for work is generally seen as beneficial for all the stakeholders involved: the host nation, sending nations and migrants themselves. However, the outcome of such movements varies across the spectrum from positive to negative. Scholars such as Rachel Silvey (2004), Anne Loveband (2004), Kayoko Ueno (2009), Amy Sim and Vivienne Wee (2010), and Arisman Arisman and Ratnawati Kusuma Jaya (2020) have studied Indonesian migrant workers in Singapore, Malaysia, Macau, Taiwan and Saudi Arabia, and draw attention to the negative consequences of the migration experience. Realities such as left-behind children, divorce, resistance, illegal migration, trafficking, overstaying, poor working condition, abuses and deaths are recurrent narratives in both scholarly and mass media inquiries. Despite such potential risks, the number of Indonesians migrating overseas for work has persisted and grown, at least until the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic which disrupted international labour flows. One common feature in these studies is that they focus only at one point of the migration process, either at the origin or destination. The migration process begins with their life at a city, town or village of origin in Indonesia and proceeds through a period of work before eventually returning home. Confining a study to a single location enables the researcher to discuss the migrant workers' experience in rich detail. For example, Loveband (2004: 345) elaborates on the experience of Indonesian caregivers employed in Taiwan and their cultural incompatibility with Taiwanese employers. However, such studies do not capture the entire migration process. Two exceptions are Carol Chan's (2017, 2018) studies of Indonesian migrant workers who return to their homes in Central Java, and Olivia Killias's (2018) book on Javanese domestic workers who migrate to Malaysia and return to Java. These studies present a thorough account of Indonesian migrant workers' experiences, describing how they came to decide to move, return, move again and finally return to their homes in Indonesia. This series of decision-making and migration choices involves the migrant's interactions with other social actors.

In this chapter, we trace a group of Indonesian migrant workers at both ends of the migration process, examining their living experience in Java and in their workplace in Brunei. As elaborated later, we argue that the act of migrating with a purpose for a limited duration (*merantau*) became an important and inevitable social practice in these migrants' everyday experience. *Merantau*, as a concept first introduced by Mochtar Naim (1971) to refer to the customary movements of Minangkabau in Sumatra, has largely been transformed and internalised in the lives of Indonesian migrant workers overseas. Their life courses revolve around *merantau*.

The next section discusses the contemporary understanding of *merantau* as a 'quest', taking into account the compelling circumstances in Indonesia to migrate,

relevant studies on Indonesian migrant workers in other host societies, and labour shortage conditions in Brunei. Subsequently, statistical data of formally employed Indonesian nationals in Brunei for 2019 are presented. Finally, we document and discuss the narratives of Indonesian migrant workers about their lives in their home villages and Jakarta, and their working and living experiences in Brunei.

12.2 *Merantau*: Worldview and Praxis

Merantau is an important term that our informants frequently used to describe their experiences of working abroad. Before proceeding to examine contemporary interpretations of *merantau*, it is useful to refer to Naim (1971: 6–11) who first applied it to Minangkabau society. In a later work, he shows how *merantau* is used in a specific context, in contrast to migration. There are six characteristics of *merantau*: (1) it involves a movement away from the migrant's village or hometown; (2) the movement has to be voluntary; (3) the movement is of limited duration, whether long term or short term; (4) the movement is carried out to seek a better livelihood, more knowledge or novel experiences; (5) the movement starts with an intention to return to the place of origin; and (6) *merantau* is a social practice that is culturally specific (Naim 1984: 2–5). Subsequent studies have built on Naim's definition and the notion of *merantau* has been applied to migrations of different communities and social groups within Indonesia, such as Acehnese and Boyanese (Salazar 2016: 26), Madurese (Lücking 2017: 254) and Javanese (Chan 2017: 249). In the Malay world, Mohamad Hanif Abdul Wahab and Azizi Bahauddin (2018: 169) argue that *merantau* is interpreted differently depending on factors such as period, locality, ethnicity and social class.

Merantau as a process, which Johan Lindquist (2009: 7) refers to as 'circular migration', has evolved from a heterogeneous cultural form associated with ethnic groups to a pan-Indonesian phenomenon since the early 1900s, when migration surged as people looked for new livelihood opportunities (*ibid.*: 11, 29). Lindquist elaborates that while this development referred to migration of a selected minority in the earlier phase, the trend gradually grew to encompass the widespread movement of unskilled migrants (*ibid.*: 30). The shift from an agricultural peasant economy to a capitalist-driven cash economy influenced the perceptions of unskilled workers in rural regions. This eventually led to the homogenisation of *merantau* across Indonesia (*ibid.*: 29, 52). Applying the concept to Javanese society, Traci Smith (2008: 2) suggests that the act of migration has become a rite of passage for male Javanese, distinguishing the transition from 'childhood' to 'adulthood'. Smith (*ibid.*: 4) emphasises that *merantau* facilitates the separation of Javanese youth from their parents and their home villages. Since the acceleration of migration under conditions of globalisation in the 1980s, and especially female migration, *merantau* may also be relevant to female Javanese migration (Lindquist 2013: 124).

Our respondents, who all originated from different parts of Java, saw *merantau* as a temporary migration project undertaken to improve their lives but not always or

necessarily for economic benefit. All of them hoped to improve their living standard in their home village by the time they returned permanently. In this regard, Kathleen Adams (2020) interprets *merantau* as a ‘quest’ that captures the social significance of migration for our informants:

Indonesians use the term *merantau* to cover a wide array of mobilities, encompassing not only migration, but studying abroad and even long-term around-the-world type travels to gain experience and knowledge.... I believe the notion of the ‘quest’ better conveys this cultural notion of travel as involving (a) undertaking movement in order to achieve some sort of transformation and (b) a vision of a final, permanent return home following achievement of the goal. (*ibid.*: 12)

In this chapter, we argue that *merantau* is a worldview or *Weltanschauung*, which Jerome Ashmore (1966: 215) delineates as ‘a perspective and interpretation of the universe and its events’ and is ‘held in a sustained way by an individual or by a group. The perspective functions normatively, and as a point of articulation’. What is important to note is that it is a worldview that has evolved over time by people of peasant origins living in rural society as they grapple with the challenges of a capitalist economy, which has for the most part impoverished them relatively speaking. More than that, *merantau* is a plan for action to improve one’s life and hence also a praxis.

12.3 International Migration in the Indonesian Context

Indonesia has long been one of the main suppliers of migrant workers in the international labour market. Graeme Hugo (2012: 192) distinguishes between migrant workers as coolie labour in the 1900s and unskilled temporary migrants in the 2000s. Many Javanese were pushed to look outside of Indonesia for better livelihoods due to overpopulation and limited economic opportunities. Wayne Palmer (2016: 165–168) examines the emergence and organisation of the overseas labour migration programme in Indonesia as a response to help eradicate rural poverty and improve living standards.

The work of Chan (2018) and Killias (2018) accounts for the lives of Indonesian migrant workers and their experiences of the migration process. Chan (2018: 177) highlights that Indonesian migrant workers do not simply move to earn money, but rather that the *merantau* process is enmeshed in various local and cultural regimes of value and morality. For her part, Killias (2018: 201) argues that Indonesian domestic workers view *merantau* as holding ‘the promise of changing one’s fate, of building a house of one’s own, and to catch up with what is perceived to be development and progress’. Killias draws on her respondents’ belief in ‘changing your fate’ (*ubahlah nasib*), who think fate can be influenced if effort is put into it.

Looking more closely at the migration process, migrant workers’ pre-existing overseas networks or social capital are influential in determining what country and type of work the migrant has access to (Paul 2019: 19–20). In a quantitative study of Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers, Anju Mary Paul (2019) finds that Indonesian migrants are comparatively disadvantaged in securing better jobs.

They know fewer existing migrants in the host country, have a less geographically widespread network of key contacts and a less middle-class composition. In addition, Hugo (1995: 289–290) finds that Indonesian migrant workers' decision to undertake *merantau* is often made with family members and existing migrant networks. Maruja Asis (2004: 219–220) calls this a 'migration trail' which provides some certainty to the migrants and reduces risk and vulnerability. As such, the quantity and quality of pre-existing networks matter. However, previous migrant workers' trails do not perfectly inform new migrant workers' expectations or experiences. Stacey Yuen Xin Er and Anju Mary Paul (2019: 128), for example, show that Indonesian domestic workers are not informed about their workplace entitlements in Singapore. Similarly, in Hong Kong, they have little knowledge of their entitlements to maternity leave, a weekly rest day and regular wages, or their right to retain their personal documents.

Despite that, a typical pattern in managing the fruits of their labour is observable. Md Mizanur Rahman and Lian Kwen Fee (2009: 117–118) demonstrate that Indonesian migrant workers and their recipients manage remittances differently according to gender. Female migrants tend to remit more money in real terms, preferring to send remittances to female relatives in their home villages, who then use the money to develop human capital and create savings rather than spending it on physical capital and immediate consumption (see also Chapter 8). Our respondents' narratives presented in this chapter demonstrate similar features in Indonesian migrant workers' experiences in Brunei.

12.4 The Brunei Context

Brunei is widely known for its affluent oil-based economy which has historically been responsible in raising its gross domestic product (GDP) per capita to very high levels. This source of wealth has made Brunei a rentier state, similar to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and offers Brunei citizens a socioeconomic system characterised by minimal taxation, generous welfare assistance and comprehensive provision of education (Asato 2019: 136). Wako Asato elaborates that due to high female participation in the labour market, foreign domestic workers are needed to do the housework and provide care for children and the elderly. Two decades ago, Parvez Azim (2002: 53–54) highlighted that Brunei was already experiencing an aging population and declining fertility levels. A rising trend in general educational qualification of Bruneians also meant that local people would be less attracted to the idea of taking up 3D jobs, resulting in a pressing need for migrant workers in the local economy.

The Employment Order 2009 (Department of Labour 2017: 4, 6) requires employers to ensure labour standards and conditions for workers, for example on working hours, rest days, overtime payments, paid leave and maternity leave for all local and migrant workers. However, it has been found that foreign domestic workers continue to be exploited today (Asato 2019: 145). Such violations include prolonged working hours, unpaid tasks that are not related to housekeeping and insufficient

food (see also Chapter 8). Away from domestic work, Djoen San Santoso (2009: 536) reveals that construction workers of Indonesian origin are often exploited and not paid in order to reduce costs. Like many other countries, the Brunei state has refrained from making an effective effort to protect migrant workers and ensure proper working conditions.

12.5 Indonesian Migrant Workers in Brunei

12.5.1 *Statistical Data*

Table 12.1 shows the number of formally registered Indonesians living in Brunei in 2019, and does not cover Indonesian nationals who did not apply for a new identification card or renew an existing one that year. Exclusions also include undocumented migrant workers who are in Brunei illegally. Although this data set does not represent all Indonesian nationals, it provides a fair representation of the migrant population. Since the working age group constitutes 95% of the total number of registered Indonesian nationals and they are overwhelmingly employed in 3D and service jobs, it is clear that they represent a large manual labour group which cannot be supplied by the local labour force.

12.5.2 *Respondents' Profile*

In this research, we interviewed nine Indonesian migrant workers in Brunei (Table 12.2). We came to know a few of them initially through the first author's involvement in delivering fresh vegetables to the kitchen of a canteen that served non-halal Chinese

Table 12.1 Data of registered Indonesian nationals in Brunei, 2019

Details	Number
Formally employed (aged 18–55, excluding students, dependants, homemakers, housemen, and employed above age 55)	24983
Males	16668
Females	8315
Type of employment:	
Manual labour and service	24233
White-collar and managerial	750
Total registered Indonesian nationals	26292

Source National Immigration and Registration Department, Brunei Darussalam (2019)

food. He met and became friends with them through daily interactions at the canteen they were working at; the canteen is a subsidiary business of a large plywood and furniture manufacturing company. Other than walk-in customers, the canteen mainly catered for other Indonesian migrant workers as well as migrant workers of different ethnic and national origins employed in the huge furniture workshop next door. The migrant workers employed in the kitchen and the workshop stayed in the same staff quarters above the canteen. The workshop, canteen and hostel are located on industrial land that is far from commercial services and shops.

The respondents introduced us to their friends who worked in the workshop and then during the conversations they introduced us to others and helped with translation whenever needed, and, most importantly, made the interviewees more at ease by sharing accounts of their lives. We interviewed in a mix of Indonesian and standard Malay but quite often they mixed this with Javanese. Such switches between languages did not make the conversation difficult for us to understand. Quick translations or explanations were either done on the spot or after transcribing their narratives. In rare cases, the respondents used specific English phrases. Johari, who had been working as a labourer in the workshop since 2013, was the only respondent who spoke more English. All the respondents originated from Java. Other than Hartono and Johari who are from West Java and East Java respectively, the remaining interviewees are from Cilacap regency in Central Java. Their backgrounds and experiences are very much related to the majority of Indonesian workers in Brunei because they belonged to a similar age group and employment status as those shown in Table 12.1.

Surprisingly, the respondents' accounts contradicted the negative impression we held that Indonesian migrant workers are badly treated by their employers. Other than being assigned to work that was not in their contracts, the overall experience of working in the company was generally not bad. The company was committed to the punctual payment of wages, gradual wage increments and the proper handling of legal documents. Nevertheless, both the furniture and canteen businesses were labour-intensive enterprises to begin with, and the company was concerned with cutting the costs of production. For instance, workers in the canteen were entitled to two days off per month but this had been discontinued since a few workers had left and the company took its time to employ new workers. On the other hand, workshop workers earned more than their canteen counterparts, but they had to pay for their own food in the canteen. The furniture workers often worked long and extended hours each day, from 7.00 a.m. to 9.00 p.m. without compensation for the extra hours.

Table 12.2 Profile of Indonesian migrant workers interviewed

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Siblings (position)	Status	Partner	Children	Origins	School	First year in Brunei	Employment type
Malisa	19	F	3 (1st)	In relationship	In home village	-	Cilacap, Central Java	Secondary	2018	Waitress
Suniarti	25	F	2 (1st)	Married	Brunei (cook)	-	Cilacap, Central Java	Secondary	2015	Waitress
Azizah	21	F	6 (2nd)	Single	-	-	Central Java	Secondary	2018	Waitress
Johani	37	M	5 (2nd)	Married	In home village	1	East Java	Diploma (not complete)	2013	Workshop labourer
Pribadi	28	M	2 (2nd)	Single	-	-	Cilacap, Central Java	Secondary	2014	Workshop labourer
Sidik	27	M	12 (6th)	Widower	-	1 (Adopted)	Cilacap, Central Java	Secondary	2018	Kitchen helper
Hartono	31	M	2 (1st)	Married	Taiwan (maid)	1	Subang, West Java	Secondary	2013	Kitchen helper
Yulianto	26	M	6 (5th)	Married	Brunei (waitress)	-	Cilacap, Central Java	Secondary	2013	Cook
Suparno	27	M	4 (2nd)	Married	Singapore (maid)	1	Cilacap, Central Java	Diploma	2019	Workshop labourer

12.6 Conversations and Narratives

The people who stay in Indonesia always see us [migrant workers] as enjoying an easy life working in a foreign country such as Malaysia or elsewhere. Easy work and a high salary. In truth, the work is exhausting and not easy to do at all. All work that we do is not easy. I know that the people here [Bruneians] don't like to work although there are many vacancies for them. They want to work but want to have a big salary. They don't want to say that they only want an easy job.

This quote from Pribadi highlights three important and recurrent elements in the following story. First, Brunei society requires the service of foreign workers like Pribadi to do manual jobs. Second, Pribadi commented that the act of migrating out of Indonesia to work has been positively promoted and that other Indonesians considered it desirable. And third, the reality is that this work is 'exhausting' and 'not easy', in contrast to what the recruiters promised them. However, in the end, can the money that these migrant workers earn from their exhausting work compensate for the selling of their hard labour? As Lian Kwen Fee et al. (2016: 6) argue, researchers must not only look into the 'push and pull pressures' and the monetary benefits of migration. The following narratives of these migrants' lives show the significance of *merantau* in helping them make sense of the need to migrate and make a living—a life journey—despite the hardships they face.

12.6.1 *The Village and Jakarta*

12.6.1.1 Family Backgrounds, Responsibility and Aspirations

The majority of our informants come from simple (*sederhana*) family backgrounds. In Hartono's terms, this means 'just right, not having too little or extra'. The division of roles in their families was characterised by a working father and a homemaker mother. The type of work that their fathers did varied. It included petty commercial farming, rearing goats, cottage industries such as making brown sugar (a local delicacy), retailing electronic goods, working in poultry farms and government schoolteachers. Although few of these livelihoods involved fathers moving from one place to another within Indonesia, none of them had experienced working abroad. Mothers were rarely in paid employment or ran a petty enterprise to help earn money. The case that stood out from the rest was that of Johari's father, who worked as a government teacher and had a stable income before retirement, while his mother was a full-time homemaker. Johari put it this way:

I studied what you might call here [in Brunei] a diploma for two years before I decided to drop out and not graduate. The reason was economic. The reason is 'standard' [common]. Since I still have three younger brothers, I can't push myself to reach my dreams. I could not pursue my degree to improve my life because I needed to support my three younger brothers.

Although Johari's father's employment stood out from the rest, limited mobility continued to restrict his aspirations. Johari explained that he had an obligation towards his three younger brothers. He felt compelled to help pay for their education and provide a better quality of life for them. Johari elaborated:

When I was young, our family's finances were deeply affected by the economy [financial] crisis that happened in 1998 and my father was just a teacher. It was very bad. At the time, everything had a price increase but his salary remained small. It was not enough. It was very bad. Crime everywhere, chaos, there were many killings. Who was to stop them? Who could stop them? Robbery looked as if it was very easy and did not need any plan. For example, in the supermarket a few thousand people grabbing things as they wish inside the building. The police could only watch. Don't go back again, don't let it happen again. A pity [*kesian*].

Our respondents and their family members all suffered from the impact of the financial crisis of 1998. This shows that even in better-off families such as Johari's, the declining economy and the need to support both their parents and younger siblings had put a burden on them. Sidik came to work in Brunei in 2018 as he believed the country has a stronger sense of Islamic identity. He elaborated:

I am the sixth of 12 siblings. The 12 of us lived together when we were young. Although I liked the experience, it was tough. Conflict was inevitable because there were so many children. Luckily all of us grew up and could help our parents out today. In the past, my parents always failed to deliver their promises. They always asked us to wait whenever we asked them for something. I remember that it was very difficult to get things that I wanted. I asked for a motorcycle, it was difficult too. Regardless, it is easier now. It will not be as difficult as in the past. So the 12 of us should never abandon each other.

Limited resources plagued the growing-up experience of the respondents. Although they clarified that their parents' earnings were sufficient for everyday living, they lived through their adolescent years with no prospect of realising their aspirations, as shown in Johari's foregoing of further studies and Sidik's limited life chances.

12.6.1.2 Working Experience

All the informants began working almost immediately after finishing or dropping out of school. Not a single thought of further education was mentioned throughout the conversations, as if this was a point of no return. As Pribadi said:

I studied primary and secondary level in SK [*sekolah kebangsaan*, national school] from 1997 to 2009 [aged 18] and started working in sales [and] marketing. I was selling electronic devices that people use for health purposes. The company's main office was located in Jakarta but the job required me to travel from Jakarta to Yogyakarta, Bandung and Bogor, so it was always about 'rolling' work. The employment ended around mid-2013. I got a new job in a garment enterprise for about six months before I decided to come to Brunei in 2014.

Jakarta seemed to be a viable alternative for these respondents to earn a living without having to undertake *merantau*. In addition, the remaining respondents also took on vacancies in Jakarta for some time before deciding to return to their home villages. Suniarti, the wife of Yulianto, who came to work in the canteen as a waitress in 2015 and eventually became a cashier, said:

After passing upper secondary studies, I did a job as a cashier of a supermarket in Jakarta for more than one year. I could not stand the job because there was only one-hour rest in between. After that, I went back to the village and picked a new job as a Honda motorcycle sales attendant. I quit the new job after two weeks. I am a lazy person. At home, I woke up around 6.00 a.m. to shower, do cleaning, help with cooking. I don't do much at home, I like to play.

As Suniarti noted, the conditions of her work in Indonesia were unfavourable because of the long hours. These Indonesian migrant workers shared a common response in their idea of working in their home villages and Jakarta. Pribadi, who went to work as a labourer at the furniture workshop in Brunei, said:

I became bored with my job in Jakarta. The salary was never enough. It could only pay for my daily spending on food. In terms of supporting my parents or leisure activities such as going to a movie, it was not enough.

With the words, 'I became bored with my job in Jakarta', Pribadi highlighted that the income he received from his work in Jakarta could not support anything other than his own immediate living expenses. This also meant that he could not save up for other purposes, to improve his parents' living conditions or indeed his own life. What he earned in Jakarta offered him no prospects.

Our informants returned to their home villages and continued to work in jobs with low wages and with no security. They calculated that a change was needed but had no good options in their own locality. Hartono said:

Even if I found a job in Indonesia, the money would not be saved as well. Work for one day, finish in one day. Like that. Because the salary I earned was too small and only enough to meet my living expenses. I went from here and there to work. I wasn't yet married at that time. So I followed to work in the construction site whenever there was a vacancy, including a job that reserves motorcycle parking spots. I earned a little bit of money only. My life did not have a clear direction at that time. I did not think about the future or plan to get married or save money. After some time, my parents talked with me about it and recommended that I go abroad and said, 'You can find more money there, and eventually you will have your savings and be capable of getting married'. I should have my own money, to build my own house using my own money. I agreed with my mother and believed that my life would not improve if I continued working in Indonesia. I would not able to make a difference. So I took my parents' advice and *merantau*.

Because of their experience of underemployment in Jakarta and their home villages, the respondents were resigned to a precarious livelihood. Suparno, who came to Brunei in 2019 to work as a labourer in the furniture workshop, said:

I started working in Jakarta immediately after I finished school for almost nine years. I worked in the garment industry first. I did not have any experience in the field to begin with but I was promoted to become foreman after one year. I had 45 workers under my supervision. My boss told me to study for a diploma for two months and become a manager after finishing the programme. I completed the study and worked as a manager for a few years before the business closed down. I changed to work in a shop for one year and changed back to coolie work again in Jakarta. Before I entered my last job as a construction worker in Jakarta, I tried to work in the garment business again. All these jobs did not last more than two months.

Employment in Indonesia did not help to improve the lives of the respondents and made them pessimistic about their futures in the country. Subsequently, they resigned themselves to drifting along with their precarious work and everyday routines; as Suniarti remarked, ‘I am a lazy person’, and Hartono said, ‘Work for one day, finish in one day’. There was simply no employment that was satisfying or promising for them in Java. As a result, they lived a lifestyle that was seemingly carefree but actually hopeless. As a consequence, the respondents and their family members contemplated *merantau* to not only earn more money but also to take an important step in ‘growing up’—to be capable of being independent and handling their own lives. For this reason, Hartono’s parents encouraged him to work abroad. The informants and their parents believed that this would enable them to earn a living, save up, have their own house and family and lead their own lives. These aspirations could not be realised as long as they remained in Java. To undertake *merantau* is to make sense of a situation with no future and security and to overcome it in a tangible way.

12.6.1.3 *Merantau* and the Recruitment Process

As a result of their existing realities, the thought of *merantau* gradually dawned on the respondents. It is at this point that a pre-existing social network that could facilitate migration became relevant in this study. We refer to this network as a mix of different social actors, inclusive of family members, neighbours, friends of friends, friends’ family members, sponsors, middlemen brokers, labour agencies and the operatives of labour agencies. These social connections also served as an important source of information. Yulianto first approached a labour agency to look for employment overseas (see method 1 in Fig. 12.1):

With the situation of Indonesia in mind, I thought of going to work in Malaysia. I looked for an agent and asked if there are any jobs in Malaysia. The agent said ‘Yes, there is a vacancy to work with wood in Malaysia’. Two months later, the agent told me that the vacancy was already full. Then I replied to him saying I would do any job that he could find. So the agent told me about the same type of job in Brunei. There were no other options. So I came to Brunei. The agent always makes fake promises and sweet talk. Like salary, in Indonesia, we have this training period for the first three months of employment and the salary would be increased after that. My salary was BND390 in Brunei at that time. After working for the first and second year, it stayed the same. The agent said that I will be working with wood in the furniture factory but the boss assigned me to do cleaning jobs instead for about one month plus. After that, the boss shifted me to work in the canteen as a kitchen helper. My job became a dishwasher. I was disappointed that the job turned out to be different from what the agent has promised. I went on with it. This is my fate [*nasib*].

In addition to the recruitment process shown in method 1, Suparno added:

At that time, many of my friends went abroad so I thought they must be successful here [Brunei], but I did not look at their experience. So a friend who originated from the same village [*tetangga*], who used to work in Brunei, told me about a vacancy there. He sweet-talked about working in Brunei and introduced me to an agent, covering all the bitter stories.

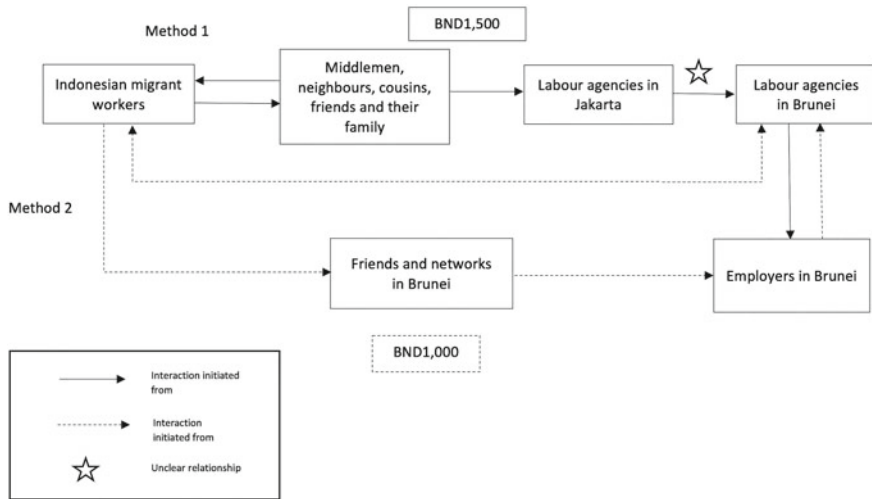


Fig. 12.1 Indonesian migrant workers’ recruitment process

Sidik’s experience also vouches for the role of middlemen and labour agencies as an important source of information and assistance in the application process. The expression of dissatisfaction and disappointment with the middlemen’s ‘fake promises’ and ‘sweet talk’ and promise of unlimited opportunities was common among other respondents. The middlemen and labour agencies have almost absolute influence in the choice of destination, jobs, pay and employer. It is also common that these middlemen take advantage of applicants by deceiving them into paying more than needed or misleading them about the jobs that are available. Desperate to *merantau*, their unfamiliarity and the difficulty in getting accurate information from these middlemen in the villages and labour agencies in Jakarta made these respondents vulnerable to exploitation. Johari added that the distance from his village to Jakarta, where passports, visas and medical check-ups are arranged, is about 1000 km. Alternatively, it takes a huge effort and risk to travel to Jakarta to meet with an agent face to face and get all the paperwork done. Under these circumstances, the first vacancy the agency offered them was almost always the final choice for all the respondents.

Other than approaching middlemen or labour agencies first, Hartono, Suniarti and Suparno were told about the idea of *merantau* by family members and friends. This means that, in contrast to Yulianto’s and Sidik’s experiences, the idea of *merantau* is not always self-initiated. All our respondents were unclear about the relationship between the labour agency in Brunei and its counterpart in Indonesia. After inquiring, they were not even sure whether the agency was based in Indonesia or Brunei. According to common knowledge, this labour agency or a freelance agent travels between Brunei and Indonesia, is in direct contact with the employer, and has a broad network helping them to recruit migrant workers from several selected locations in Java. The majority of our respondents came from Cilacap in Central Java and only

met each other for the first time at their workplace in Brunei although they were all connected to the same agent.

In contrast, Johari's experience in the recruitment process was different from the others (see method 2 in Fig. 12.1). Johari referred to a friend who was already employed in the furniture workshop in Brunei. He said:

My friend has been working here [the workshop] since 2005 and recommended me to his boss. He told me that there would not be a problem for me to work here but the salary would be low at the start. My friend and the boss might have been in contact with some agent to do the application but in the end it was my friend who faxed the working visa to me. The visa application is actually simple and not as confusing as I thought. It is not like me having to go to an agent [in Jakarta] to ask for work and [the] process to go to Brunei. My friend had a good connection here so the process was easy. I only needed to look for an agent to help process the application. I followed what the agent told me to do and did everything from the medical check, passport and travel myself. The last thing I knew was that my visa was already there and the application was successful. I saved a lot because I did everything myself. The difference is about BND400–500 compared to what they [who used method 1] paid for. I waited for about six months. I think my agent wants to play me, he wants to take much more money from me, he dragged out the application process.

The respondents also became aware of the possibility to *merantau* by referring to cases of friends who had worked abroad or by consulting friends or trusted people in their villages.

12.6.1.4 *Merantau*: A Collective Decision

The decision and choice of the destination country involve many factors. It is rarely the case that migrant workers made choices by themselves throughout the migration process. Family members were the most important influencers in the final decision to work abroad. Hartono said:

My mother told me to go to Malaysia so I went to an agent and told him that I wanted to go to Malaysia. I signed a contract that binds me to a restaurant business [another company to the canteen] in Brunei. I thought that I would be going to Malaysia at first, but in the end the agent told me it is Brunei and not Malaysia. I didn't know what Brunei was like. I knew about Malaysia because I have neighbours there in Malaysia, working in an oil palm field.

Similarly, Pribadi said:

My choice was to go to Malaysia at first. Although the Malaysian currency is smaller, I had friends from the village [working] in Malaysia. But my mother didn't like the idea and so didn't permit me to go to Malaysia. She said, 'You cannot go to Malaysia; it would be better if you stay in Indonesia if you want to work in Malaysia. Because Malaysia has many illegal cases, those who didn't have a visa went to Malaysia with their passport but without a visa'. I wanted to follow my friend to work at a poultry farm in Malaysia but my mother didn't allow me to do it. Someone told her there was a vacancy in Brunei. According to my principles, if I proceeded to do something that my mother didn't allow or discouraged me from doing, it would always end up [with] many problems, like arguing. She was supportive of me coming to Brunei because she had an impression at home that Brunei has a good government, and the most important thing is that Brunei's Islam [Islamic identity] is very strong. Anyone outside of this country knows that this is a Muslim country.

Sidik's narrative also showed different factors that influenced his choice of country to work abroad:

My mother challenged my intention when I was thinking of leaving Indonesia. She said 'You already have enough to eat and live comfortably in Indonesia so why do you still want to leave?' I told her that God has a plan for me. I am already here [in Brunei] for two months and still healthy. I have a phone with me too. I would do Friday prayers in the mosque whenever I can. I did not have a problem with money in my life in Java. It was more than enough. I never had to be concerned about insufficiency. It was enough for food and living. So what is my objective for leaving the country if it was not to look for money? Because Brunei is a Muslim country and it is most faithful to Islam. Even Indonesia loses to Brunei in this aspect.

12.6.2 Brunei

Suniarti described how Brunei was promoted as an attractive destination and her disappointment with the promises on arrival.

I thought this [Brunei] would be like a city but it turned out that there are many trees. It differed too much from what I imagined. I thought it would be similar to Jakarta. After arriving here, I found this place very quiet.

Pribadi had similar sentiments:

My neighbour who used to work in Brunei told me to just watch programmes about Brunei on television and I can learn about the country. I thought that Brunei is a good place, good government, Islam is strong, they ban cigarettes, no alcohol, like that. After arriving here then I found out that the government's law is meant to be like that, same as Indonesia, although it prohibits, it can still be done.

12.6.2.1 Arrival and Working Experience

After arriving, the reality of living and working in Brunei began to hit home with the respondents. They soon realised how much control the employer had over their lives. Yulianto said:

The agent prepared all the travel documents and flight tickets. The boss paid the agent, the agent paid for us, we paid the boss. It is our debt to the boss. I am always here at the canteen. I don't usually go out from this place because I have no day off. When I first arrived in 2013, I was assigned cleaning jobs in the workshop for one month before being shifted here to the kitchen [canteen].

Indebtedness increased the control the employer had over the migrant workers. Yulianto was shifted from working in the workshop to the canteen without any choice in the matter. Similarly, the labour agency also promised Sidik that he would be working in the workshop but he ended up washing dishes in the canteen a few months after his arrival:

I think we have to be responsible in doing what we were supposed to do. Here and there, ordered by the boss. Of course, I should like them [the orders]. Before my visa finishes, I want to learn as much as I can. I can learn how the business works and how to cook. I learned bit by bit by preparing ingredients like prawns and cooking a popular local noodle dish [*kolo mee*]. What if Indonesia doesn't have *kolo mee*? Although I started as a dishwasher, slowly I might be able to become a chef one day. The money that I earned here can be saved and make up my capital to start my own business in Indonesia. Just have to bear with it first.

Although Sidik gave a somewhat positive response to his new job as a dishwasher, it was done reluctantly and with some disappointment that he was not offered the job he was initially promised.

By contrast, Hartono had a more positive *merantau* experience prior to joining the canteen because he had been employed at a restaurant in another district of Brunei many years before:

I worked in that restaurant for one contract [two years] in 2013 and went back to the village to get married and then went back to that restaurant again for another contract. After about a year, my wife told me that she wanted to have a baby. So what could I do? I had to discontinue the contract and fly back to Indonesia in 2017. But I really liked the job in that restaurant. I stayed in Indonesia for three years and felt unsatisfied living there. My colleagues in that restaurant still wanted me to go back to work but it was too late because I had already signed up for work with the canteen. It was already on my visa. The work in the restaurant was very enjoyable because the pay was good, we got four days off a month, sometimes, within eight hours of work per day, we got to rest for one to two hours. We got a double salary during the Chinese New Year month.

We asked about his thoughts on working in the canteen. Hartono said:

Still okay. At least I get to fill my stomach [*laughs*]. The experience here is okay. I can learn to cook, with skills and experience, I can look for other jobs.

Hartono described his disappointment after joining the canteen, comparing the benefits that he received at the previous restaurant to his current position where days off, rest hours, bonuses and other perks were not guaranteed.

Other than being bound by their contracts and debts to the employer, the workers were resigned to the conditions offered. Johari said:

I have been working in the workshop since January 2013. Four years later, I went back to the village to get married and came back here in January 2020. My experience here is 'so far so good'. If you meant to say emotional, of course, there was a period of time when I was emotional about working here. The work is tough. But we have to be professional. We were pressed by the fact that we are here to look for money so we have to accept the job. Give the best you can do lah. I have a purpose here, I have a goal. If I cannot bear the work, I would not be deserving. Think of it this way: if I go back to Indonesia, what can I do there? Everything is difficult there. The income would be so little even if I continued to farm. Everything [income] is small. I would not earn enough. So I might as well motivate myself to do the work here. My parents are already old, I have a child and wife that I have to support. If not me, who else would it be?

Johari felt obliged to keep with his current employment because he could not risk going back to Indonesia and not earning enough to support his family between quitting the current job and finding a new one.

For her part, Suniarti appreciated the stability in the current workplace and the fact that her husband Yulianto was also working in the canteen. All the informants passively accepted the conditions imposed by the employer and whatever free time they had revolved around people in their workplace. Social and leisure activities of these migrant workers were limited to their immediate social network and the nearby compound of their workplace and living quarters.

12.6.2.2 Social Activities and Leisure Hours

In relation to social activities and the use of leisure time, Malisa, who joined the canteen as a waitress and eventually shifted to making beverages in 2018, said:

We usually go to an Indonesian restaurant that is beside the bus station in Bandar [town centre] to eat and chat when we used to have day off. Two days off in a month. I met many new Indonesian friends there. The Indonesian food here [Brunei] tastes too different from that in the village. The taste is stronger in my village. We usually go to this place in Bandar because we don't have a car. It is difficult to go anywhere in Brunei.

When the workers were no longer entitled to days off, they could only get free time late at night, but public transport in Brunei stops running by 7.00 p.m. and commercial areas close around 9.00 p.m. Sidik said:

I haven't been anywhere other than Bandar since arriving here because there is no day off for kitchen people in the canteen. I could only go out after work late at night and there would not be any public transport. I could have called an illegal taxi [*kereta sapu*] but everyone would already be sleeping or shops would already be closed. There are no people I could meet or place where I could go.

Most social activities were confined within or around the staff quarters. Azizah, who also started to work as a waitress in 2018, said that her off-work activities were mostly audio and video calls with her family members in her village. Smartphones and applications such as WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook were common tools that the workers used to communicate with family members. Suniarti said:

Usually, I would go to my cousin's place [workplace and hostel] or we would go to the Indonesian restaurant beside the bus station in Bandar. I don't usually make new friends there, only when new workers arrive here [at the canteen] to work. We eat and take selfies then upload them to Facebook and other platforms. I don't always go out. I only go when I have the time and mood. I usually only rest at the hostel.

For Johari:

There is no time [to meet with friends]. Why would there be time anyway? We're working in the workshop from 7.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. Sometimes we work overtime and would only finish between 6.00 p.m. and 9.00 p.m. Also, we don't have a car to move around. We might be able to go out if we had a car. At most, I would be eating and calling my wife only after work. I would like to have more quality time with my family. I don't usually go out on days off. Even if I go, the trip would be short, maybe going to a shopping centre, Bandar or to watch a film.

Johari's narrative was similar to the others who engaged in social activities only late at night after work. According to Hartono:

I still have the time to meet my friends now. But it has to be late at night, around 9.00 p.m., 8.00 p.m. I also have friends here in this workplace. We went out to eat somewhere nearby last night. We chat about things that are going on in the village and ate grilled fish. The food here doesn't [taste] so strong. I have met many friends here [canteen]. We usually hang around in the staff house, sitting over there at the front late at night, drinking coffee, smoking and chatting. My village neighbour who stays in a different place would come over frequently at night. He has a car. He came to pick me up to go to their hostel in Jerudong, you know the place where the fishermen usually stay. We don't go to other places, just stay in the hostel and chat. We talk in the same language because all of us came from West Java.

Sidik said:

We [canteen workers] only get days off during Chinese New Year. Other than that, I usually only hang around with Indonesian friends in the hostel. At most, we would only go out to fish. I know there is a village neighbour working in some other place, so I asked him to meet outside. For those people who work in [the] front [workshop], they get to go out twice every month [two days off]. At night, some of them would go to play table tennis too. I followed my friend to Bandar for the first time last night. It reminded me of the food in Indonesia. I cook some water spinach [*kangkong*] and fried rice whenever I miss food from home.

I would call random people who are outside the workplace, in the government, and my friends while enjoying the breeze inside my room, pretending it to be like an office. All I did was talk. For leisure, we would sing karaoke, play with electronics, find out what is wrong with it and fix it bit by bit. There is one device my friend got from a hair salon, but many of them could not be fixed. I just want to track [keep up with] electronics things only. I am fixing a broken laptop now, haven't complete it yet because I haven't found out what is broken inside. I already painted it anew as if it could be used but nothing is showing up on the screen yet.

When the workers do go out to eat or chat, it is more often with colleagues and to places that are run by Indonesians. A common place for gathering is either their living quarters or those of friends and relatives. Deriving from their persistent homesickness, audio and video calling with family members took up a large share of their time after work. An important topic of their conversations with their families was undoubtedly remittances.

12.6.2.3 Remittances

The workers remit part of their wages to their families in their villages. Although each informant sent remittances differently, there was a common pattern in the method used, the recipients and how the money was spent. Pribadi said:

I only send money back to my older sister if my mother asks for it. She would ask for a certain amount. After sending that amount, I would keep the remainder for myself. My sister has to be the receiver because our parents don't know how to work with the services at the bank. My parents only know that when they need the money they can take it from my older sister. They spend the money buying things needed for farming like seeds and fertilisers. They buy whatever they need or want in their daily life. For example, they spent money to

buy lamb and sometimes they need the money to see a doctor. They don't make savings for me. I do that myself. So I only send them money after they ask for it.

Johari said:

I send back money every two weeks. Like this, we work, the company [gives] the salary, they give it twice a month [every fourteenth and twenty-eighth day of the month]. I cannot wait for the next half, so I would send this half right after I got it. I only leave a bit of the salary for myself to buy food. I send the rest to my wife. She is much better at saving money. She bought a piece of land after working in Taiwan for nine years. So I trust her to control our money. We have some targets; this year, we want to improve our house to make it prettier and happy. We want to make it look nicer. Add tiling. My kid is still very young, so I don't want him to get scratched from falling on a rough cemented floor. I use the remittance [service] provided by my cousin to send money back to my wife. I give the money to my cousin, then my cousin tells his wife in Indonesia to send money to this number, like this. He charges me BND10–12 for each transaction. Many of my friends who are working here use that too. I didn't use my cousin's service when I used to have the time to go shopping. I did both the shopping and the remittance at one go. I use my cousin's service because I got lazier now. BND10 would not be enough if I do the shopping and remittance outside. I would spend more money than otherwise. I spent less after I got married. I think it is wise to give all my money to my wife. I want to give my son a good place to stay, a large place to stay and to farm.

Here, Johari described an alternative and informal method to remit his money to his wife in Indonesia (Fig. 12.2). This service had been available since he arrived in Brunei in 2013. It was usually provided by colleagues, friends, friends of friends or relatives in Brunei. After inquiring why he decided to switch from method 1 (licensed provider) to method 2 (informal provider), Johari answered that although both methods charged the same fee, method 1 would eventually cost him more money and time because he needed to travel a fair distance from the workplace to where the licensed remittance service provider was located. Method 2 appeared to be more convenient, saved on costs and was a straightforward way to send money to his wife. The informal method was used by all the migrant workers we interviewed. In most cases, they pooled all their remittance money together and had the informal service provider send it to one recipient in Indonesia in one transaction. The recipient, a family member of one of the workers, then transferred specific amounts from the pooled remittance to other senders' family bank accounts. The fee charged in Brunei was shared.

The remittance recipient and purpose changed after some of the informants got married. Suniarti said:

I send most of my salary back to my mother in the village every month because I would finish all the money to do shopping if I kept it here. Difficult to control. After getting married, I passed all my money to my husband [Yulianto] to send to his mother in the village because she would use the money to pay for our own house. We started construction of the house about a year ago.

Hartono dealt with his remittance in a similar manner:

I sent my money back to my mother before I got married because my mother is good at holding the money. As in the money that she holds would not 'go out'. If I send this amount,

Sidik said:

Working here [in the canteen] means if I accidentally committed the offence [by eating pork], people may ask. ‘You could always go to other places to work, why do you still want to stay here?’, but I have been locked [*dikuncikan*] to the boss and this company. So instead of cancelling everything and going back to Indonesia, I should continue to work as long as I don’t willingly commit an offence.

Sidik learned to deal with non-halal food by opting to avoid it. In cases of eating non-halal food accidentally, Sidik replied that this was the most important reason he would pray every time before eating. Other than that, if he found out that he did consume non-halal food, he would perform longer prayers in his room to confess his guilt.

We asked the respondents about going to the mosque after noticing that there was no mosque located within walking distance of the canteen and workshop. Johari said:

I rarely go to the mosque here but I would go to the mosque every Friday back in Indonesia. The mosque is too far away from here [workshop]. At least it is not close enough to walk there. There is no prayer room [*surau*] here. I could only go when I carpool in someone’s car. I calculated the time of leaving and coming back here, the trip would take one and a half hours. It would leave me a very little time for a break. What about having to continue work again later? I would feel shameful to go the mosque because I spent my time earning money all day. God gave me the money but I didn’t go to the mosque for such a long time.

In addition, Hartono said:

I could not go although I have the intention to go. I have not yet seen the big mosque whose dome is covered in gold. The work shift here makes it difficult for me. I come in at 8.00 a.m., rest at 2.00 p.m., then come back to work again at 6.00 p.m., then finish at 10.00 p.m.

The ability of Sidik, Johari and Hartono to perform their religious faith while working in Brunei is restricted, particularly in relation to food prohibitions and in going to the mosques on a daily basis.

These narratives have thus far highlighted that our informants’ lives were built around *merantau*. The lack of opportunities in Indonesia made them think of an alternative solution. The long history of *merantau* and the presence of social actors such as former migrants, middlemen and labour agencies all served as a consistent point of reference to migrate. The stability of the income they could earn from working in Brunei and the pressure to support their families in Indonesia have compelled them to stay despite the hardships and emotional challenges. The constant contact with family, dreams of a better and attainable future, and what little social time spent with other Indonesian colleagues and friends had kept these migrant workers motivated. In our everyday conversations with the male workers about phones, gadgets, speakers, music, the lottery, football, cigarettes, Joko Widodo (Jokowi), Java and family, none of our discussions mentioned their work. Nor were they happy or excited to talk about it.

A few of the respondents talked enthusiastically about the petty trades they did outside of their employment. Hartono was involved in trading secondhand smart-phones. Sidik bought, fixed and then sold broken karaoke sets and speakers. Yulianto

took up side work as a middleman for lottery bookings and debt collecting from other migrant workers in the compound. On another occasion, Suniarti and Malisa asked the first author to help drive them to buy contact lenses and backpacks. They said that although they did not have the time or means to meet with friends, they would be more prepared to dress up and go out whenever an opportunity arose. Dressing up was important because they took photos and shared them on their social media accounts. When asked how they learned about contact lenses and how to wear them, Malisa replied that she saw her friends wearing them and that they looked nice on social media so she wanted to try them too.

In their everyday conversations between work, the respondents readily shared their thoughts and feelings about what mattered to them, knowing that they would shortly have to go back to work again. Several found the work routine repetitive, meaningless, unpromising and exploitative. Malisa and Sidik went back to Indonesia in 2020 while Sidik undertook *merantau* again to work in Sarawak. Suniarti, Yulianto and Johari found the work satisfying. They had been working in the same company in Brunei for more than five years. They planned to stay as long as they were required by the company. For all of our informants—those who had left and those who remained—it was uncertain when the cycle of migration would end before they could finally return and settle down in their villages, their homes. Meanwhile, it appears that *merantau* as a worldview and praxis will continue to be an important part of their lives.

12.7 Conclusion

For the informants who so readily and generously shared their lives and experiences with us, migration is an existential condition. It was a state of mind that began not when they arrived in the country of destination, Brunei, but when they took their first steps as working adults back in the village looking for a better life, mostly in the rural and semi-rural parts of Cilacap, Central Java. The economic livelihoods of their parents revolved around cash crop cultivation, cottage industries and petty retailing. The uncertainty and insecurity of the livelihoods of their parents, so tied to external economic fluctuations, were passed on to our informants as they sought to establish a secure future when they moved to Jakarta, only to return to the village shortly afterwards because of a downturn. While resigned to a carefree but hopeless lifestyle when they came back, they were aware that the only way out was to move from the village and go overseas. In the village, there was no shortage of stories and information from friends, friends of friends and relatives who had temporarily migrated for work. These social connections are enmeshed in a well-established migration network of sub-agents and agents linked to labour agencies in Jakarta and individual brokers overseas, including Brunei. The agents and middlemen promoted and embellished the attractions and rewards of work opportunities, taking advantage of the vulnerability of prospective young Javanese eager to seek their fortune. Usually based on incomplete and misleading information, they took the plunge to go overseas, moving onto the next stage of the migration process. In short, *merantau* has been

normalised for and expected of these young migrant workers. It is a way of life for young Javanese seeking to improve themselves.

In this chapter we have deliberately drawn on extended excerpts from the interviews and conversations to let the nine Javanese migrants in Brunei speak for themselves, to give voice to them so that they could articulate their hopes, anxieties and resignations as they navigated their way around the obstacles, insecurities and misfortunes that inevitably accompany *merantau*. The existential uncertainty of being a migrant stemmed from several sources. Although they were legal migrants they had minimal rights and even less room to negotiate their grievances. They were at the mercy of the employer who held their passports to prevent them from absconding. They had no legal means to seek better employment in other places. On arrival, they were given jobs they did not expect and varied from those promised to them by the agents. The work they did at the canteen kitchen was repetitive, boring and did not always allow them to acquire new skills. Those who worked at the furniture workshop were able to improve themselves to a greater extent. However, as the company they worked for is a large one, they were given housing in dormitories and their wages were paid regularly. For these they were thankful in comparison to the experiences of other migrant workers.

Between the routine compulsion of wage labour, they found moments of reprieve in visiting friends and village neighbours after work, stopped at the nearest cafe to have a smoke or coffee, sing karaoke, connect with their loved ones from their villages back home through social media, and even sought out opportunities to make some extra cash from fixing used electronic equipment to sell. Remitting money to Java to take care of family expenses such as the school fees of siblings and looking forward to the possibilities of achieving a better living or changing their fate were timely reminders of why they were in Brunei and why they should stick it out.

Merantau is the worldview of Javanese migrant workers. It encapsulates all these elements discussed above, from the time they decide to seek a livelihood outside the village to landing and working in Brunei. It informs their everyday lives, motivates them and sustains them in their coming of age. In the praxis of migration they feel empowered. And when they finally return to their villages, they hope to find the home they left and the certainty they yearned for. Johari's answer to our question about his dreams is a fitting conclusion to the narratives of these Javanese migrants in Brunei:

I can't push myself to reach my dreams. I could not pursue my degree to improve my life because I needed to support my three younger brothers. [My dream is] to own my house, especially to protect my family. I think money is not everything but everything needs money [laughs].

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Part IV
Contemporary Ethnic and
Social Identity Formation

Chapter 13

Negotiating Assimilation and Hybridity: The Identity of Chinese-Malays in Brunei Darussalam



Chang-Yau Hoon and Nur Shawatriqah Sahrifulhafiz

Abstract This chapter explores the ways in which Bruneians who are born into a Chinese-Malay family define their identity. It details how the state classifies them in terms of ‘race’, how they negotiate their bicultural practices, and the day-to-day challenges they face while growing up in what we could term a liminal space of in-betweenness. Situated against the backdrop of state-level assimilation influence, the chapter discusses the ways in which Chinese-Malays negotiate between assimilation and hybridity. By articulating the everyday experiences of between and betwixt among these biracial subjects, the chapter reveals the various forces shaping the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, belonging and non-belonging in Brunei Darussalam.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Chinese-Malays · Assimilation · Identity · Hybridity · Biracialism

13.1 Introduction

The population of Brunei Darussalam is estimated at 453,600 in 2020 (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics 2021). Comprising 65.8% of the population, the majority are classified as Malay, while the second largest ethnic group—the Chinese—make up 10.2% of the population. The Malays are an internally diverse group. The Brunei Constitution and the Brunei Nationality Enactment 1961 recognises seven indigenous ethnic groups (*puak jati* or *puak-puak Melayu*)—Belait, Bisaya, Brunei (Brunei Malays), Dusun, Kedayan, Murut and Tutong—as part of

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the Malay race (*bangsa Melayu*) that comprises the dominant population of Brunei (Maxwell 2001). The incorporation of these indigenous groups into one Malay ‘racial’ category goes beyond the purpose of simply enumeration in a population census; it also involves the systematic assimilation of these diverse ethnicities into the dominant Malay Muslim culture. As Victor T. King (1994: 178) argues, ‘This process of ethnic change usually involves two important elements: conversion to Islam and broader cultural emulation of Brunei Malays’. The assimilation or ‘Malayisation’ efforts are reinforced by various state-level assemblages including the national ideology of Malay Islamic monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*, MIB), Islamic propagation activities (*dakwah*), Malay-language promotion, national education and institutions of customs and traditions (*adat istiadat*) (de Vienne 2015: 217–218).

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

As the second largest ‘racial’ group, the Chinese play an important role in Brunei’s economic development by contributing to the country’s growth and prosperity (Niew 1995). Although some scholars claim that intermarriages between Chinese and Brunei Malays can be traced back to the thirteenth century (Malai Yunus 2013: 76–78), there is a dearth of historical documentation about the development of mixed marriages, and whether a distinct hybrid Peranakan community has ever emerged in Brunei. As such, this chapter focuses on the identity of Chinese-Malays in contemporary Brunei. While intermarriages have become increasingly common in the region (Nagaraj 2009), including Brunei, mixed-marriage couples still face challenges pertaining to the reconciliation of differences in culture, religion, traditions and social class. Traditionally, within the Malay community in Brunei, mixed marriages were discouraged due to the community’s need to maintain a ‘pure’ lineage and to prevent passing on their inheritance to outsiders (Trigger and Siti Norkhalbi 2011).

However, intermarriages have become more common and increasingly accepted in contemporary Brunei provided that the non-Malay Muslim counterpart in the marriage embraces the dominant religion and assimilates into the Malay Muslim identity promulgated by MIB.¹

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

Considering this background, this study explores the hybrid identity of the Chinese-Malays in Brunei with the objective of answering the following questions. How do people born into a Chinese-Malay family define their identity? How does the state classify them in terms of 'race'? How do they negotiate their biracial and hybrid identity? What are the forces that influence the cultural practices of Chinese-Malays in Brunei? What kind of challenges do they face while growing up living in a liminal space? The chapter begins with a conceptual discussion on notions of identity, assimilation and hybridity in the context of Brunei. After describing the research methodology, we discuss the identity conundrum of Chinese-Malays with regard to how they respond to state classification and how they articulate their hyphenated identity. The last two sections consider the ways in which our informants negotiate their Chinese-Malay cultural practices vis-à-vis assimilation policies of the state and the challenges they face growing up in the liminal space of biracialism.

¹ 'Marriage between Muslims and [non-Muslims] is not permitted, and non-Muslims must convert to Islam if they wish to marry a Muslim' (US Department of State 2006). This is similar to the case of Malaysia where it is noted that '[i]f one of the spouses in an intercultural marriage in Malaysia is Muslim, therefore, the other non-Muslim spouse is expected to convert to Islam in order to legalize the marriage, as marriage between a Muslim and a Non-Muslim is forbidden under the Islamic Family Law Act of 1984' (Tan et al. 2008: 41). Furthermore, most interracial couples in Malaysia also adhere to the dominant Malay Muslim culture. '[C]ultural elements from [a] non-Malay spouse [can be] integrated ... into their family's cultural practice, provided that the elements [do] not conflict with Islamic teachings' (Pue and Nidzam 2013: 271).

13.2 Conceptualising Identity, Assimilation and Hybridity

In the late modern world, individuals have multiple identities that they can choose to perform according to different situations. For Michel Foucault (1987), identity is a discourse, subject to power relations and unending constructs. Identity can never be fixed; it is always being negotiated and must not be essentialised as it is the subject of the unceasing ‘play’ of history, culture and power (Hall 1993). Referring to the context of Borneo, King (2013: 19) argues that a long history of cultural interactions and exchanges among different ethnic groups has resulted in what Chua Beng Huat (1995: 1) calls ‘cultural hybridisation and syncretism’. However, in constructing national identities, politically dominant groups, powerholders or the state have invariably imposed on others ‘their notions of identity and what that identity from a national perspective comprises’ (King 2017: 181). This is evident in the case of the MIB ideology in Brunei, which the state uses to maintain legitimacy and to promote cultural assimilation.

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

As Brunei has never adopted a multicultural policy, the state promotes an assimilation agenda by conflating Bruneian identity with MIB. However, Hannah Ho (2019: 148) argues that the ‘exclusive, fixed, and cohesive narrative of Malayness’ propounded by MIB does not correspond to the social reality in Brunei where ‘an inclusive, changing, and hybrid discourse of Malayness’ is practised by most Malay Bruneians. Hence, it can be argued that in Brunei, assimilation does not only apply to non-Malay minorities but also to the Malays who ‘endorse an inclusive idea of Malayness (where [being] Malay is divorced from being Muslim)’ or who embrace ‘a hybrid notion of Malayness’ like some of their counterparts in Singapore, Indonesia and, to some extent, Malaysia (*ibid.*).

The advent of globalisation and the proliferation of intermarriage have given rise to new hyphenated, diasporic and syncretic forms of identity that can be referred to as hybridity. The concept of hybridity is inseparable from the structures and patterns of power and resistance that occurred after colonialism (Bhatia 2011). In the past, the term ‘hybrid’ or ‘hybridity’ was often associated with being ‘impure’, ‘racially contaminated’ and genetically ‘deviant’ in social evolution theory (Ang 2001). Hence, hybridity is an ‘anti-thesis’ to identity as it challenges the idea of an essentialist identity and blurs boundaries demarcated by cultural gatekeepers (Hoon 2017). For instance, Giok Hun Pue and Nidzam Sulaiman’s (2013: 274) study of

interracial marriages in Malaysia shows that their children were often not accepted as members of an ethnic group by fellow members because they were perceived to be ‘not “pure” enough in terms of physical appearance or cultural practices’.

While cultural purists might consider hybridity as a loss of one’s identity, we argue that it can be a platform to create new opportunities and permutations for the existing identities. In some societies, hybridity has led to the emergence of new communities and even new ethnic groups. A case in point would be the Peranakan community in Southeast Asia, formed as a result of intermarriage between early Chinese migrants and the local Malay population. This community can be described as ‘a “rare and beautiful blend” of two dominant cultures—Malay and Chinese—with some elements from Javanese, Batak, Siamese and European ... cultures’ (Lee 2008: 163). The Peranakans can be distinguished by their spoken language (Baba Malay) and unique customs, mainly derived from Chinese culture, and their fusion cuisine that features a combination of Malay and Chinese food. Using the concept of hybridity, this study endeavours to demonstrate the ways in which culture ‘can take many forms and [variations], including the borrowing of words and the adoption of social practices and beliefs, and the adaptation of dress and food’ (*ibid.*: 162).

Hybridity is sometimes seen as ‘a rhetoric of emancipation, optimism, and celebration’ (Bhatia 2011: 405). As globalisation indulges in the celebration of diversity, some people have mistakenly assumed that society can readily accept differences without any struggle. Jacqueline Lo (2000) refers to such uncritical celebration of diversity as ‘happy hybridity’. She maintains that as a highly politicised process of negotiation, interrogation and contestation between cultures, hybridity is never happy. Cultural translation always involves conflict and tension. Therefore, hybridity is constantly in the process of negotiation and should not be uncritically assumed to be an antidote to the fragmentation of the society.

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

13.3 Methodological Approach

This study deploys a qualitative approach of autoethnography and in-depth interviews. The data was collected by the second author who is a female Bruneian with a Malay-Chinese background. Referring to the notion of ‘autobiographical ethnography’, the researcher occasionally inserts her own personal and subjective interpretation based on her own identity into the research process. The aim, however, is not

to emphasise her own experience *per se*, but to gain a better understanding of the community through the prism of the researcher's experience (Chang 2016). Although the second author identifies herself culturally as a Malay, the state has officially classified her as a Chinese on her identification card, which reflects her father's race. Upon marrying her Malay mother, her father converted to Islam, and gradually left behind some of his Chinese cultural practices in order to embrace the Malay culture. Consequently, the second author was raised in a predominantly Malay culture. She attended an English–Malay school, speaks the Malay language with family and friends, and celebrates Malay Muslim events. Nonetheless, her father still identifies culturally as Chinese and has been preserving some Chinese practices as long as they do not contradict the Islamic faith. Even if her cultural affinity is Malay, the second author sometimes identifies herself as Chinese depending on the occasion and depending on the person she is interacting with. Her bicultural upbringing allows her to reflexively empathise with the Chinese–Malay informants and adds another layer of insights into the complex experience of hybridity among mixed-marriage informants. In order to prevent personal bias and subjectivity in affecting the validity of the data collected for the research, the researcher exercised a high level of reflexivity and distancing when collecting and analysing the data (Salzman 2002).

Apart from the autoethnographic approach, this study also involved primary data collection, which included semiformal, open-ended and face-to-face interview sessions with 15 informants between the ages of 19 and 30 years in Bandar Seri Begawan, the capital city of Brunei. The informants came from a Chinese–Malay interracial background: eight of them are classified as Chinese in their identification cards while the remaining seven informants are classified as Malay. Eleven out of 15 informants were college and university students, one was an in-service student and three were working professionals. The interview sessions were carried out in January to March 2018 using a digital voice recorder. The second author, who conducted the interviews, was flexible with the language used in the interviews, based on the preference of the informants. The interlocutors responded in Malay, English or a mixture of both languages, as well as a bit of Mandarin. Most of the informants code-switched between English and Malay while Mandarin was only used when they were asked to give examples of what Chinese words they had used in their daily conversations at home and in public. To protect the anonymity of the informants, all the names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

This research uses two different kinds of sampling methods: purposive and snowball sampling. Informants are chosen for purposive sampling due to their lived experience and bicultural knowledge (Bernard 2002; Seidler 1974). Snowball sampling, on the other hand, refers to a technique of gathering informants through personal recommendation from individual informants' social networks (Atkinson and Flint 2001). Both samplings use the following qualifications and criteria to identify key informants (Allen 1971): (1) the informants need to have a Chinese–Malay background; (2) either of the parents is a Chinese Muslim convert; (3) one of the parents is a Bruneian citizen, permanent resident or has lived in Brunei for at least 10 years; and (4) the family of the informants observes at least some Chinese and Malay cultural practices such as Chinese New Year or Hari Raya (Eid Aidilfitri).

13.4 Situating the Identity of the Chinese-Malays in Brunei

The identity conundrum of the descendants of interracial marriages is a complex issue especially when the state uses racial classification in its promulgation of 'national identity' irrespective of the individual's behavioural choice. Like Singapore and Malaysia, Brunei practises a patrilineal system in its racial policy, which means that children automatically inherit their father's race. To be specific, when a child is born from a Malay father and a Chinese mother, the child is officially classified as a Malay in the mandatory 'race' (*bangsa*) category on their official documents such as identification card, birth certificate and passport (Trigger and Siti Norkhalbi 2011). However, the social and cultural identification of these mixed-race children may or may not reflect what is recorded on their official documents. Cognisant of such limitations, the Singapore government has tried to address this issue in 2010 by allowing a 'double-barrelled' race option for mixed children so that they can register both races (such as Chinese-Malay or Indian-Eurasian) in their identity card (Kor 2010). This is possible for Singapore due to its official policy of multiracialism that aims to promote an inclusive society, which is fundamentally different from Brunei's national MIB philosophy.²

In this study, we found that nine out of 15 informants associated themselves with the hyphenated Chinese-Malay identity instead of identifying with or privileging one race over the other. All of these nine informants thought that the monocultural racial category imposed on them by the state was too limiting as it does not reflect their biracial parentage and does not allow the individual to decide their own racial identification. One particular informant stated during the interview:

I tend to identify myself as a Chinese-Malay or vice versa because I believe that I should embrace both of my parents' ethnicities out of respect, not only to them but also to my ancestors. This is important for me because my identity is a reminder of where I came from, which should not be forgotten. (Haqimah, 27 years old, 26 January 2018)

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

Welda, a 22-year-old student currently studying in Britain, was back in Brunei for a winter break in January 2018. She narrated her racial background in detail:

My father was adopted by a Malay Muslim family since he was a baby. However, everything on his documents states his race as Chinese only. So technically, he is an ethnic Chinese with a purely Malay cultural background. My mother on the other hand is a Malay-Chinese as my maternal grandmother is a pure Chinese while her husband is a pure Malay. Therefore, that

² Nonetheless, mixed-raced children (or their parents) in Singapore are still required to nominate a 'dominant' race so that race-based policies can continue to be applied to this population. This shows that while the new system allows for more flexibility for mixed-race individuals to choose their cultural identification, it does very little to change the racial regime Singapore inherited from the British colonial administration.

makes my siblings and I biologically ... three-quarters Chinese and a quarter Malay. Despite the fact that our appearances look more towards ... Chinese ..., we do not associate ourselves as [Chinese]. In addition, due to some family complications, we have cut off the connections with our Chinese side of the family and have entirely devoted ourselves as Malay Muslims. (Welda, 22 years old, 26 January 2018)

A similar narrative was recounted by Anna:

My father's background is quite complicated, he is racially stated as a Chinese Hokkien in his identification certificates and documents. However, at the age of 15, he was adopted by an Arabic-Malay family and therefore he grew up practising the Malay Muslim culture and I believe that he has very much forgotten about his past identity as a Chinese because he does not really tell us anything about it. (Anna, 22 years old, 2 March 2018)

The accounts above show that the racial identity stated in official documentation may not accurately reflect the cultural identity of the informants, especially in cases of adoption or for those who are fostered and brought up in a different cultural surrounding from their biological origins.

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

At one moment, the person may want to temporarily submerge [their identity] in favour of a façade closer to and, therefore, more readily identifiable with his interactant. At another moment, he [*sic*] may even decide to be deliberately expressive of his ethnicity when emblematic usage of language, clothing, culture and customs of his own ethnic group is judged to favour him in the transaction.

In the same vein, our informants expressed their situational identity through language, appearance, dress code and behaviour depending on who they came into contact with, that is, either their Chinese or Malay group of family and friends as revealed in the following excerpts:

When I was in [Catholic] secondary school at St George, the school was filled with different people who came from different racial groups: there were the Malays, Chinese, Indians as well as other different races. Most of the time, these races did not really try to mingle with each other and were very exclusive unless you were one of them. However, due to my mixed-race background I was able to interact not only with the Malay group but also the Chinese group in that school. I think that in a way I tried to adapt myself depending on the different groups I am with. For example, when I was with the Chinese group, I would usually speak in Mandarin. Most of the time my Chinese accent would just automatically change [to an English mode] when I was speaking in English. Then when I was with the Malays, I would just naturally speak and interact with them in the Malay language. (Naim, 30 years old, 10 February 2018)

My identity can be situational especially in terms of how I dress myself. [My choice of dress] usually depends on who I am going to be with. My family in Brunei are mostly the Malay side, therefore here I would have to cover myself ... with a *hijab* or at least cover my body parts appropriately. However, when I am in Indonesia with my Chinese family, I will not have to cover myself to that extent as they are very open-minded, so I am able to wear whatever dresses or skirts I want. (Azura, 22 years old, 10 March 2018)

Identities are constructed through difference—it is only through a relation to the ‘Other’, a relation to what is not and to what is lacking, that identity can be constructed (Hoon 2008). Some informants had expressed the dialogical aspect of their identity when they were outside of the country interacting with the Other, and when negotiating their own Otherness away from home as the following informants revealed:

I believe that my identity is more situational when I am overseas. For instance, I used to study in Australia for my bachelor’s degree and in the UK for my master’s. I was able to change my identity depending on the group I was with at that time. When I was in Australia, people there were more exposed to the Malay racial groups hence I did not have to explain myself what the Malay culture is. However, when I was in the UK, the people there lacked knowledge about the Malays and most of the time they would identify me as Chinese due to my Chinese-like features. It was quite bothersome to have to explain myself to people about myself and so I would just admit to them that yes, I was in fact Chinese. (Sawfi, 28 years old, 1 February 2018)

Despite the fact that I do not associate myself with anything that has to do with Chinese in terms of identity or culture, I do believe that my identity has become situational when I am overseas. I think that this is mainly due to my strong racial [read: Chinese] appearance. I say this because I am currently studying in Essex, United Kingdom. People often mistook me as a Chinese person and most of the time I would just say that I was Chinese. I personally chose to use my Chinese racial card for my own personal security due to the whole political issue that is going on right now with Islamophobia [in Europe]. (Welda, 22 years old, 26 January 2018)

These two excerpts demonstrate that identity can be at play not only based on the corresponding Other but also due to identity markers such as ‘race’, cultural behaviour and appearance. For these informants, their biracial background renders them a ‘Chinese look’, which they could strategically use either to prevent endless questions about their identity or to avoid being identified as a Muslim when such identification was deemed unsafe in places where Islamophobia is prevalent. Sultana Choudhry (2010) argues that multiracial individuals can choose to use their different racial identities depending on the benefits given to them according to the situation (see also Reddy 2019). The interviews show that our informants were not totally disempowered by their mixed racial background; instead, they regularly exercised agency by tactically using their multiple identities to their advantage (Rocha 2011).

13.5 Negotiating Chinese-Malay Cultural Practices

Cultural assimilation is a social reality for the Chinese-Malays in Brunei as almost all our informants practise Malay cultural customs and traditions. Unlike the Straits-born Chinese-Malays in colonial Singapore, Malaysia or Indonesia, also known as Peranakan, who had historically developed a distinct hybrid culture famously characterised by the creole Malay language, Nyonya cuisine, *kebaya* dresses, beaded footwear and exquisite ornaments (Suryadinata 2010), the Chinese-Malays in Brunei have never developed such a culture. In the absence of historical data on intermarriage

between Chinese and Malays in Brunei, we can only speculate that the population of such intermarriages might be too small for them to have developed a separate community. Apart from the palpable social, political and geographical differences between the Peranakans in the Malay Archipelago and the Chinese-Malays in Brunei, the other main distinguishing factor is religion: while most Peranakans are Christian, Chinese-Malays in Brunei have mostly converted to Islam and subsequently been absorbed into the majority Malay community.

This section discusses the nuanced incorporation and negotiation of cultural elements from both the Chinese and Malay practices by Chinese-Malays in Brunei in their everyday lives, ranging from language, cultural traditions and beliefs to their choice of cuisine. The first element under consideration is language. Six out of the 15 informants can speak both Mandarin and Malay. Another six are able to understand Mandarin but unable to speak it fluently, and the remaining three have no knowledge of Mandarin at all. Siti Hamin Stapa and Nurul Nadiyah Begum Sahabudin Khan (2016) argue that the linguistic practice of code-switching in the home domain is a common phenomenon among mixed Malay-Chinese families in Malaysia. This resonates with our informants who can speak and understand Mandarin as they frequently borrow words from either Malay or Chinese to express themselves when they are unable to find the right word in one language. One informant, Dalina, mentioned that she grew up speaking three different languages at home: Hokkien, Malay and English, and was unaware of the differences among these languages:

I am used to calling my brother using the Hokkien term '*ah hia*'. I have never called him *abang* [Malay for 'brother'] this entire time, and so I have always thought that was how you were supposed to address your brother. Even when I was a kid, every time I wanted to go to the toilet my mom would always say 'You need to go *pang sai*?' [Hokkien for 'take a dump'], and I remember getting into trouble in school for using the phrase as it is considered unrefined. I think because of the interchange among English, Malay and Chinese in my family made us believe that they are the terms we used are normal because we have integrated them into our everyday vocabulary without knowing. (Dalina, 23 years old, 5 February 2018)

As a means of communication, language is an important tool for an individual to traverse from one culture to another (Schumann 1986). Our study finds that those informants who can speak both Chinese and Malay tend to speak a certain language to fit themselves into one particular group as they perform situational identity. This is revealed by the following informant:

I would talk in Malay when I am with my Malay friends or with my Malay family from my mother side. Usually in school I am always with my Chinese friends and therefore for us to communicate expressively, I would speak in Mandarin or Hokkien with them. (Lyle, 22 years old, 26 February 2018)

Panos Bardis (1979) argues that when a group experiences two kinds of culture, there is a tendency that the group will privilege the dominant culture in the society while the minority culture plays a lesser role. This is exemplified by our informants who have assimilated into the Brunei Malay culture as a result of their Chinese parent having to '*masuk Islam*' and '*masuk Melayu*', which means that after converting to

Islam they were expected to completely assimilate themselves into the Malay Muslim identity.³ According to Ho, within the MIB national framework, Islamic conversion can be seen as a process of interpellation for one to enter into Malay identity. She asserts, 'In a marriage between a Muslim man and non-Muslim woman, a *shahadah* ("declaration") of intent to assume a Muslim identity involves the male granting his female bride entry into Malayness by hailing this newly converted recipient into the Malay society in the MIB nation' (Ho 2019: 150).

When non-Malays convert to Islam, they are expected to accept the social customs and dress code of the Malay Muslims. As Osman Chuah Abdullah and Abdul Salam Muhamad Shukri (2008: 42) observe, 'One of the expectations of someone embracing Islam is *masuk Melayu*, i.e., becoming Malay or synonymous of being Muslim. Thus, embracing Islam would mean entering the "Malay way" ... they are usually branded as entering the "Malayhood"'. Here, identity is seen as a zero-sum game: one can *either* be Chinese (or Iban, Filipino, Indian or any other ethnic identity) *or* Malay, but not both (see also Hoon 2006). This is illustrated in the case of our informant below:

My family and I are more accustomed to our Malay culture in the way we speak, our Islamic dress code, our food and probably even how we behave. This is because my Chinese mother was brought up in a very Malay environment as she had to live with her sister and Malay brother-in-law. Thus, she has pretty much brought all of us up as Malay rather than Chinese. I also think that most of my Chinese extended families such as my grandparents and other relatives have absorbed and adapted to the Malay surroundings in Brunei because most of them have either converted to Islam for marriage or associated themselves with the Malay people. Therefore, I do think that there has been a shift in almost all my family members' identity into becoming Malay. (Hadirah, 30 years old, 28 February 2018)

Our informants who only identify as Malay did not find a need to learn the Chinese language or to preserve Chinese culture:

I do not think it matters if you are not able to speak Chinese in Brunei because as a Malay living in Brunei, we are often told to prioritise our philosophy of speaking the Malay language [*utamakan bahasa Melayu*] and so I think the ability to speak in Chinese would be the least of my concerns. (Haalib, 23 years old, 20 January 2018)

I came from a background where we do not practise any of the Chinese cultural values because my parents are devoted Muslims and therefore anything that has to do with the Chinese culture is not being taught and is disregarded to us since we were at a young age and therefore I know no knowledge of it. (Welda, 22 years old, 26 January 2018)

Nevertheless, the concepts of *masuk Islam* and *masuk Melayu* can be contested. For some, embracing Islam as their religion does not automatically make them Malay (Pue and Nidzam 2013: 273). Gerhard Hoffstaedter (2011) argues that Islam is a

³ '*Masuk Islam*' refers to an individual converting from their previous religious belief to Islam when the new convert proclaims the *shahadah* which expresses the belief that there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. This process may take place in a mosque, a Muslim community centre or other places deemed appropriate by the religious authorities. The converted individual is expected to establish a new relationship with the Islamic *ummah* or Muslim community, which surpasses his or her national, racial, familial, linguistic and cultural identities (Nuradli Ridzwan Shah et al. 2016).

universal religion that is not tied to any particular ethnic culture, nor is it exclusively owned by the Malays. Similarly, Hew Wai Weng (2013) challenges the idea that embracing Islam requires one to abandon their Chineseness and to become Malay, as he demonstrates that Chinese culture and Islam are compatible. In his book, *Chinese ways of being Muslim: Negotiating ethnicity and religiosity in Indonesia*, Hew (2018: 270) emphasises that ‘one can be “more Islamic, but no less Chinese”, as well as “more Chinese, but no less Indonesian”’ to show that the marriage between Islamic identity and Chineseness is not a zero-sum game. However, the long history of fusing Malay Muslim identity and culture in Southeast Asia means that it is not always possible to separate the two. For instance, an informant revealed that her family privileges Islamic culture over Malay culture but has not been clear on the difference between the two:

My parents see Islamic teaching and culture as a priority for our upbringing and therefore in my family we try not to go overboard or cross any boundaries when practising the Malay culture. We tend to only practise the Islamic customs such as Ramadan or Eid which are already being incorporated into the Malay culture in Brunei. (Welda, 22 years old, 26 January 2018)

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

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

I do face some problems like why my parents decided to give me a rather English name with a Chinese surname instead of having an Islamic Malay name, and people often question me about that. (Anna, 22 years old, 2 March 2018)

Intermarriage between Chinese and Malays can be challenging in terms of their (in)compatibility ‘with regard to religion, ethnic identity and cultural traditions. Both ethnic groups have very strong family traditions and kinship ties’, and as well as religious practices and cultural heritage to preserve (Tan et al. 2008: 40). Our study on the Chinese-Malays in Brunei shows that the negotiation between Islamic religion and Chinese cultural practices is not an easy task. The main foundation of Chinese culture is foregrounded by an amalgamation of three religions: Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism (Fan 2000: 4). The practice of some Chinese cultural elements, especially those that have originated from these religions, is deemed impermissible in Islam. Hence it is not surprising that the families of some of our informants are concerned that the practice of Chinese culture might compromise their Muslim faith or undermine the dominant Malay culture in Brunei.

However, all cultures are arguably influenced by religions and vice versa, and a clear-cut differentiation between the culture and religion is not only impossible but also unrealistic (Roy 2010). For example, while Chinese New Year is widely practised as a cultural festival, various practices in the celebration might have been adapted from elements of Chinese folk religions or superstitious beliefs and could be seen as contrary to the teachings of Islam. Hence, individual actors practise agency by going through a process of negotiation and discretion when they pick and choose whether to discard or retain certain cultural practices (see Hoon 2009; Hew 2018). In his study of Chinese Muslims in Indonesia, Hew (2018) argues that contestations on what is considered halal (permissible) or haram (prohibited) according to Islamic principles can be expected in any process of religious hybridisation because textual interpretations, social conditions and everyday practices do not always meet in harmony. In the case of the Chinese-Malays in Brunei, while cultural negotiation is inevitable, practices that might constitute idol worship or what is known as *syirik* in Islam are non-negotiable and must be avoided at all costs.

It has been argued that sometimes Muslims engage in non-Islamic cultural activities with the intention of ‘Islamising’ the nonbelievers or to carry out *dakwah* (Islamic outreach) through a cultural approach—a familiar method in the spread of Islam in Java (Daniels 2009; Hew 2018). This was the case with some of our informants, who stated that rather than subscribing to the symbolic meanings behind Chinese cultural practices they would instead practise the culture with a different intention (*niat*):

Yes, my cultural practice and my religion can be quite debatable. However, for me, I understand my religion more because of my Chinese culture. I do not agree with, from a practical standpoint, about the whole incense burning and such, but whenever I hear a big issue about it, I would often try to remember my own intention [*niat*] about what I am doing and who I am doing it for. The action is one thing, but the intention is what is important. Just because I burn incense, does that mean I am not a worthy Muslim? I can counter that by saying that I am doing it as a sign of respect to my grandfather and my ancestors rather than praying to Buddha or any other gods, and therefore I do not see any problem with it. (Zaim, 23 years old, 13 February 2018)

Another informant believed that Chinese cultural practices do not go against the teachings of Islam, especially those values that focus on an individual’s moral behaviour and ethics or on human interactions such as building social relationships with other people:

To be honest, I think that Chinese culture is more towards teaching about the ethics of the individual rather than on religion-based teachings as compared to the Malay culture, which has incorporated the practice of Islamic teachings in their culture. Therefore, I do not think that practising Chinese culture goes against our religion but rather it goes along with Islam instead. (Haalib, 23 years old, 20 January 2018)

Yet another informant saw the value in diversity relating to her own background in a family with members who practise different religions and celebrate different festivals:

I believe the key to making things work is simply to keep an open mind about everything regardless of our religious and cultural differences. My family has a mix of Malay Muslims,

Chinese Buddhists and also Dusun Christians. We often practise different cultural traditions such as Eid, Christmas and Chinese New Year. So I think that it is crucial for us to be able to respect each other's culture and tradition without having any conflict due to our differences and this enables us to be able to build our [relationships] with families and friends. (Maylin, 24 years old, 14 January 2018)

Culture consists of traditions, values and beliefs that are developed and associated with a group of people, inherited and perpetuated by subsequent generations, providing people a sense of identity and belonging (Brumann 1999). Herbert Gans (1979) argues that traditional ethnic cultures may not be relevant to the third (or more) generation who lack experiential knowledge and ties with their cultural roots. Consequently, the younger generation sometimes 'resort to the use of ethnic symbols'—cultural practices abstracted from the older ethnic culture—to try to preserve their identity and reconnect with an imagined past (*ibid.*: 1).

Some of our informants regarded the preservation of Chinese-Malay cultural identity as an important practice to ensure they did not forget their roots. They mentioned how their parents or grandparents would teach and remind them of their cultural values and traditions even if they were not often practised. Our interviews reveal that it was not uncommon for our informants to incorporate some Chinese cultural practices into their everyday lives. For example, some parents would celebrate our informants' birthdays with the consumption of red eggs and noodles, which symbolise prosperity and longevity in Chinese culture. Some informants still celebrate Chinese festivals such as Chinese New Year, Mid-Autumn and Winter Solstice. For instance, one informant noted:

Despite the fact that some of the Chinese festivals are restricted in Brunei, we do celebrate them in private and usually at my grandmother's house. She is still a Chinese Buddhist. Therefore, most of the time we practise these traditions with her because of her strong beliefs. (Maylin, 24 years old, 14 January 2018)

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

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

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

The concept of liminality refers to the state of 'in between-ness' (or *tabula rasa*) during a rite of passage where people are neither here nor there (Turner 1969). Homi K. Bhabha (1994) further develops the notion to encapsulate the late-modern condition of a cultural hybrid's uncomfortable business of inhabiting interstitial social spaces,

belonging to both and neither. The concept of hybridity challenges one's idea that identity is an essence that is fixed and unchangeable. Hybridity blurs the boundaries between people and makes space for identity to multiply, where the individuals can be in between two or more groups according to the given situation (*ibid.*). This case study of Chinese-Malays provides us with insights into the ways in which this community straddles and negotiates differences in their two cultural worlds.

While cultural purists might argue that hybridity inevitably compromises the integrity of an identity, it can also be argued that hybridity can '[empower] existing identities through the opening of new possibilities' (Laclau 1996: 65). However, it must be recognised that these new possibilities are not detached from the constraints of existing boundaries. When asked about the benefits of being biracial, our informants answered enthusiastically:

Being Chinese-Malay means that we get to understand and experience not only one but two cultures together and see how the different values from both cultures can blend in our everyday lives. I get to celebrate two cultural events such as Chinese New Year and Hari Raya in a year. (Amzi, 19 years old, 5 March 2018)

It is quite unique to be able to experience different cultures when other people are only able to experience one. I get to speak both Malay and Chinese and so I can blend in with the different racial groups. As you know the Chinese and Malay groups here in Brunei do not exactly like to mix with each other, but I get to experience the best of both worlds. (Malia, 19 years old, 9 February 2018)

My family tends to incorporate the teachings of both Malay and Chinese together and [makes] it into something that we practise every day. (Aida, 21 years old, 23 January 2018)

However, such empowerment should not be taken for granted. There are moments when individuals with mixed heritage feel non-belonging to and non-acceptance by either culture, characterised by the liminal state of in-betweenness where they are neither here nor there. Even though these Chinese-Malays can fit into the two racial groups separately, they are constantly being reminded of their differences. These sentiments were expressed by two of our informants:

Actually, I do not feel as if I belong to any side of my racial groups. When I am with my Malay cousins, I believe that my Chinese side becomes more prominent. I often feel as if I am very different from them not only based on my obvious appearance of having fairer skin than them or from how I tend to code-switch between English and Malay and even to how I behave, and think is very different from them. Yet, when I am with my Chinese family, it is also the same case. I do not belong just for the fact that I am unable to speak the language itself which [makes] me distant from them. (Dalina, 23 years old, 5 February 2018)

I cannot speak or understand any Chinese or its dialects. I am always being joked around among my friends and relatives as this Chinese who cannot speak Chinese despite only being half the race. (Haqimah, 27 years old, 26 January 2018)

Hybridity can be empowering when one is able to traverse two or more cultural worlds. However, it can also be disempowering when 'authenticity' is invoked, especially when authentication is based on essentialist characteristics defined and guarded by cultural gatekeepers (Hoon 2017).

It is argued that among the biggest challenges faced by the offspring of mixed-race families are racial discrimination and stereotypes (Cheboud and Downing 2003). Interestingly, in this study, we found that most of the stereotypes of Chinese-Malays are targeted to either one of their racial groups' characteristics (that is, Chinese or Malay) rather than to Chinese-Malay as a category, perhaps because such a category does not officially exist. This is evident in the informants' responses on how they were often judged by others based on either of the races. While there were a few stereotypes made about their Malay characteristics, most of them targeted their Chinese identity. For example:

I own an online business shop that sells *hijab*, so most of the time my friends would comment that I am a 'typical Chinese' that does business. They would always assume that just because I am half-Chinese it automatically means that I am money-minded and stingy [*karit*]. (Aida, 21 years old, 23 January 2018)

I think one of the most typical stereotypes I [got], especially in high school, was about Chinese being smarter and more determined in their studies than other races. I grew up with straight As during high school and so people would associate my intelligence with my Chinese blood. However, I believe that it had nothing to do with my genes because it was my mother [Chinese] who would constantly push me to be good academically, she was the one who was trying to fill in the stereotypes of us having to be smart. (Dalina, 23 years old, 5 February 2018)

When I was studying in Chung Hwa [Chinese private school], there weren't really that many Malay students enrolled in a Chinese school so Malay students would normally hang out together in a group. We would be called the '*Ma lai ren*' which translates to Malay people. Chinese people see Malays as those who are less intelligent especially when compared to them. (Lyle, 22 years old, 26 January 2018)

Geetha Reddy and Ilka Gleibs (2019) argue that colonialism is not a thing of the past; it continues to influence our contemporary ways of being in both physical heritage and in our minds and psyche. Racial stereotypes like 'greedy Chinese' and 'lazy Malays' have a long history in the Malay Archipelago since the colonial era when the population was racially segregated by a divide-and-rule policy. Such segregation had led to the formation of prejudice and stereotypes constructed based on racial characteristics which persist until the present (Hirschman 1986; Kuntjara and Hoon 2020). Sometimes such stereotypes can be internalised and reproduced by the informants themselves, functioning as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Pue and Nidzam 2013; Tan 2012). This is exemplified in Dalina's interview when she claimed, 'I do have Malay traits as well, I can be lazy when I want to be'—invoking the 'lazy Malay' stereotype in a bid to self-essentialise. Stereotypes are unavoidable as they serve as part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. They perpetuate a needed sense of difference between the Self and the Other and establish an imaginary boundary between the 'normal' and the 'abnormal', the 'acceptable' and the 'unacceptable', and 'us' and 'them' (Hall 1997: 258). In the case of the Chinese-Malay informants, the racial stereotypes that they experienced based on one of their racial heritages highlight the endless struggles of a biracial subject in navigating the politics of belonging and exclusion, constantly trapped in the liminal space of in-betweenness and Otherness.

13.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a nuanced analysis of the cultural identity of Chinese-Malays in contemporary Brunei beyond the state-imposed racial label on their official documents. It has discussed the identity conundrum, including some of the challenges faced by our biracial informants, especially in their response to the restrictive official racial classification and contradictions in their hyphenated identity. The expressions and articulations of their identity are inevitably influenced by the state and institutional forces that define racial boundaries and bestow privilege to the dominant culture over other minorities, specifically the all-encompassing national philosophy of MIB. Amid the forces of assimilation promulgated by MIB and other state policies, we find that the notions of *masuk Islam* and *masuk Melayu* have characterised the experience of our informants whose families have opted to completely assimilate into the dominant Brunei Malay Muslim culture.

On the other hand, those who live in the liminal space of hybridity continue to negotiate the boundaries of difference between the two cultures which they inhabit. For them, their families attempt to preserve their Chineseness through the maintenance of certain ethnic symbols that do not contradict the teachings of Islam. Perhaps due to their relatively small population or due to the degree of assimilatory influence, or both, the Chinese-Malay community in Brunei has not developed a distinct hybrid identity like their Peranakan counterparts in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Nonetheless, the experience of in-betweenness is a shared feature in most biracial subjects. The interstitial cultural space that these subjects occupy can be empowering and disempowering at the same time depending on the power relations that define the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, belonging and non-belonging. It is hoped that this chapter can provide a basis for a more in-depth and nuanced study to be conducted, especially on the power dynamics that define identity politics within this understudied community.

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Chapter 14

Zoomers in Brunei Darussalam: Language Use, Social Interaction and Identity



Zayani Zainal Abidin and Salbrina Sharbawi

Abstract Recent findings on language use in Brunei Darussalam have indicated a growing inclination towards the co-use of Malay and English in both social and formal communication. Monolingual English use has also been reported, particularly among young Bruneians and in interactions with their peers. The exclusive use of English appears to be ubiquitous among Bruneians born around the time of the new millennium, the cohort known as Generation Z or zoomers. This chapter seeks to investigate the extent to which the claim of English exclusivity among Bruneian zoomers is true via audio recordings of social interactions between three young women. Informed by discussions of language and social interactions, we examine the zoomers' perception of social identity through their language practices.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Multilingualism · Generation Z · Identity · Brunei English · Social interaction

14.1 Introduction

Extract 1 is an excerpt of an actual conversation taking place between three young Bruneian and ethnically Malay women—Amal (aged 21), Fatin (21) and Rina (22)—who were having lunch at a cafe located in a suburb of Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam's capital city.¹ Specifically chosen as the opening to this chapter, the extract serves to illustrate the linguistic dynamism of social interactions that is prevalent among contemporary young Bruneians, in which alternations between Malay and English are the norm. The linguistic behaviour of moving from one language to another is referred to as code-switching, which we describe as language alternation

¹ Names have been changed for anonymity.

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Extract 1 Conversation between three Bruneian Malay women

1	Amal	girl, it's the candle
2	Fatin	[<i>laughs</i>]
3	Amal	stop playing around Fatin
4	Rina	it's the wax
5	Fatin	[<i>laughs</i>] I didn't realise there's a candle
6	Amal	what the hell do you think that was?
7	Fatin	why do they put it here?
8	Amal	aesthetic
9	Rina	maybe <i>macam</i> <like>, candlelight dinner you know?
10	Amal	<i>mana</i> dinner <i>nya</i> ? <where's the dinner?> [<i>laughs</i>] show me the dinner

in this study, and is common in multilingual communities. People code-switch for a variety of reasons, the most basic of which is for maintaining the flow of conversation. In other instances, code-switching may be a deliberate act meant to exclude people from an ongoing conversation or it may also be a strategy implemented to express feelings or ideas more clearly. It can also be interpreted as an expression of identity by the speaker (Baker 2000).

What this chapter seeks to investigate is the predilection of young Bruneians to use more English than Malay, which is evident in the first extract as well as throughout the entire 35-minute conversation between the three participants. Shifting in language use from Malay to English among young Bruneians has been documented in recent research (see Salbrina 2020; Salbrina and Noor Hasharina 2021; Salbrina and Zayani 2021a). However, only one study mentions that this propensity is particularly conspicuous among Bruneian females (Salbrina and Zayani 2021b).² From a sociolinguistic standpoint, this is not at all surprising given the stockpile of evidence showing women as leaders of language change (see Eckert 1989; Holmes 1995; Labov 2001; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003), with William Labov (2001: 501) making a strong assertion that '[a]ny theory of the causes of change must deal with the general finding that in the good majority of linguistic changes, women are a full generation ahead of men'. Extending this argument to the situation in Brunei, it could be adduced that what has been reported in recently conducted linguistic studies is evidence of a shift in language use and preference in favour of English.

What has not been discussed in the previous studies, however, are the motivations or the reasons behind Bruneians' language preference and the impact, if any, of this reported shift in language use on young Bruneians' perception of identity. Indeed, the second author's investigation of teenage Bruneians and those in their mid-twenties reveals that a majority (194 or 65.8%) regard English as part of the Bruneian identity (Salbrina 2023). The study, which investigates 295 young Bruneians' language use

² Strict linguistic tradition dictates that code and language are not interchangeable terms in research on bilingual interactions given that code encompasses both linguistic and paralinguistic cues. However, this practice is not adopted in this chapter and the two terms are used interchangeably.

in a variety of settings and explores their language beliefs and ideologies, shows that English is not only their most proficient language but is the language they consider to be most important, surpassing Malay by a considerable margin. Over 90% of those surveyed claimed that using English comes naturally to them, and almost all (290 or 98.3%) are in agreement with the statement ‘Young Bruneians must know English’. That English is seen as a component of the Bruneian identity is an unusual development according to the second author (*ibid.*), given that in the vast literature discussing the traditional Bruneian identity English is hardly ever mentioned as relevant to their identity (Ooi 2016; Muhammad Hadi 2017a, 2017b, 2018).

Breda O’Hara-Davies (2017), however, acknowledges the increasing influence of English as a potent identity marker for modern Bruneians and has carried out in-depth research on this very topic. Her findings, among others, reveal that young Bruneians ‘have created and activated their own voices in English, voices on and in the world that simultaneously construct Bruneianness in their locality’, in which the English language is very much an integral component of their linguistic repertoires (*ibid.*: 240–241). Noor Azam Haji-Othman and James McLellan (2000) note that whenever Bruneians use English, they employ a variety of strategies to signal their local identity. This is illustrated in their analysis of complaint letters written to the local newspaper, the *Borneo Bulletin*. Their investigation reveals that despite writing in English, the contributors incorporated elements of Malayness, such as Malay discursual patterns, in order to reflect their Bruneian identity. Buffering, an act of politeness, as opposed to being direct with the complaints, is one of the ways in which this was achieved. Taking our cue from this, the present study aims to explore further the concept of identity and its association with language use in Brunei. While Noor Azam and McLellan looked at evidence in the form of writing, our investigation entails analysing audio-recorded mealtime conversations between a group of young women to see how social identities are constructed and negotiated in their verbal interactions. Women were chosen because, as mentioned above, they appear to be at the forefront of using English in Brunei, and as this is highly prevalent among the younger generation (the participants of this study are born in or after 1997), that is, those who constitute the so-called Generation Z (Seemiller and Grace 2019). Also known by a variety of other monikers—Gen Zers, iGeneration, net-gen, digital natives and zoomers (Turner 2015; Dimock 2019; Strzemein 2019; Sung 2019; Willoughby 2020)—Generation Z Bruneians (henceforth zoomers) not only profess to using only, or at the very least mostly, English in their peer-to-peer communication, but have also claimed to have limited linguistic ability in Malay (Salbrina 2023). This generation is the product of the revolution in information technology, has ‘never experienced life before the Internet’ (Turner 2015: 104), and many do not remember a time of pre-social media (Williams 2015). They have seamlessly integrated technology into their lives, so much so that Generation Z youth are reported to be exposed to online media more than any other activity other than sleeping (Rideout et al. 2010: 1). That English is the most used language on the web, surpassing Chinese by close to a million (Internet World Stats 2021), and that zoomers spend most of their waking moments online, could explain why the Generation Z Bruneians in the second author’s research claim English to be their most proficient language (Salbrina 2023). On the linguistic and communication front, Generation Z have been described as ‘the “cut and paste”

generation' due to their propensity to include in their interactions 'phrases they've picked up from movies, YouTube clips and other media they consume' (McCrindle 2012). While it has long been established that young people are one of the main drivers of language variation and change (Chambers 1995), the innovations associated with zoomers have been said to be occurring at such a rapid pace that it has been a challenge for the other generations to keep up with them (Ledbetter 2018).

Drawing on insights from language and social interaction (LSI) research and utilising a sociolinguistic- and discourse-oriented approach, this study investigates the link between identity and language use in Brunei among zoomers through an analysis of the structure of conversations and the social context of Malay–English interactions. Before that, we briefly discuss what constitutes LSI research followed by an overview of the fundamental concepts underpinning the present study.

14.2 Language and Social Interaction (LSI)

LSI research is an umbrella term for a distinct and developing field of study that examines the intricacies of interactions as a means of understanding everyday human communication (LeBaron et al. 2003). LSI scholars come from diverse academic backgrounds, most notably from the field of communication, but research in LSI has always been known for its interdisciplinary nature including linguistics, sociology, psychology, philosophy and anthropology (Tracy and Haspel 2004). From the linguistic strand, LSI investigations have covered a wide area, ranging from language pragmatics to conversation and discourse analyses, and sociolinguistics to the ethnography of speaking. The common theme of this linguistic-oriented LSI research are analyses based on naturally occurring language samples. Through natural language use, a multitude of sociocultural cues can be discerned, including but not limited to who the interlocutors are, what they do and how they live their lives. To put it differently, the choice of language and how the language is used 'signal important information about aspects of speakers' social identity' (Eckert 1997: 64), which 'refers to a person's sense of belonging to a group and the attitudes and emotions that accompany this sense of belonging' (Vedder and Virta 2005: 319). Penelope Eckert (2008) posits that sociolinguistic variables, be they phonetic, lexical or syntactical, index a range of possible sociolinguistic meanings, and that when a speaker repeatedly indexes the same social meaning to a particular variable, the variable then becomes a permanent marker of the social attribute. An example of this can be seen in the discourse particle '*lah*', which, in the context of Singapore, is linguistically associated with Singlish and the use of which signals that the speakers belong to the 'social type' of 'being Singaporean' (Gupta 1992; Wee 2004).

When applied to a multilingual setting, the contention is that a bi- or multilingual speaker's language preference signals their social identity, is based on the society's structure (Milroy and Li 1995), and that alternating from one code to another is an instance of 'symbolic action' (Myers-Scotton 1993), which the speaker utilises to make meaning in interaction. An alternative approach that has been proposed is to consider code-switching as sequential positioning and that meaning-making is due

to ‘the contrast of the code-switch itself’ (Cashman 2008: 276). The seminal work of John J. Gumperz (1982) is often quoted in studies on code-switching, notably his usage of the ‘we code’ and ‘they code’ terms, which he inextricably links to the concept of identity:

The tendency is for the ethnically specific, minority language to be regarded as the ‘we code’ and become associated with in-group and informal activities, and for the majority language to serve as the ‘they code’ associated with the more formal, stiffer and less personal out-group relations. (*ibid.*: 66)

This view treats the ‘we code’ as the informal and familiar code that references closeness while the ‘they code’ is linked to formality, unfamiliarity and social distance. However, this perspective has been contested by other scholars who argue against simplifying the association between language choice and the social values attached to particular languages (see Auer 1984; Sebba and Wootton 1998; Li 1998). Mark Sebba and Tony Wootton (1998), for instance, show that in a group of London-based Caribbean youth, both London English and Caribbean Creole have the potential to function as a ‘we code’ and that it all depends on the situation or the context of interaction. In other words, the link between a language and an identity is not a straightforward one-to-one relationship and when it comes to analysing language alternation, researchers should attempt to do so from the speakers’ points of view, that is through the emic or participant-centred approach. As Joseph Gafaranga (2005: 292) succinctly puts it, the choice of the language used in a bi- or multilingual conversation is ‘an *activity* that bilingual speakers purportedly accomplish while talking’ (emphasis in original).

The current prevailing view in the field of interactional sociolinguistics regarding identity and language is that language is not a direct reflection of social identities, but rather it is used to establish them, and that ‘identities arise in interaction among people’ (Jørgensen 2010: 4). Multilingual speakers thus utilise their readily available multilingual resources and ‘go between and beyond different languages in a dynamic and flexible way’ (Zhu 2015: 109) to not only showcase their multiple identities but also to develop new sociocultural ones. Five principles are upheld in the study of identity in sociolinguistics, the common points of which are that identity is not static but malleable, that it undergoes construction and reconstruction throughout the interactional processes, and that a variety of social identities can materialise in a stretch of discourse (Bucholtz and Hall 2010: 19). In other words, rather than locating one’s social identity in the use of a particular linguistic feature, language and identity are described to be ‘co-constitutive’, with identity being the product of ‘language use in combination with other social practices’ (Drummond and Schlee 2016: 53–54). Thus, when an individual code-switches, what they are doing is constructing and negotiating their identity, drawing on one or more social groups of which they are a member. In the analysis of interactions vis-à-vis identity, rather than viewing the codes (or languages) as separate entities, ‘it is far more productive *analytically* to focus on the very variable ways in which linguistic features with identifiable social and cultural associations get clustered together whenever people

communicate’ (Blommaert and Rampton 2011: 4, emphasis in original). The postulation is that stereotypical social identities are associated with a set of emblematic features, be they linguistic or corporeal, and that in interactions, speakers orientate their discourses to signal their positions as either affiliating with or distancing from relevant identities. These positioning processes are dynamic and ‘involve conflict and contestation’, and the ‘emblematic features’, as posited by Jan Blommaert and Piia Varis (2013: 146–147), ‘rarely occur as a random or flexible complex’ but encompass distinct structures. What has been described thus far is an approach dubbed ‘linguistic ethnography’ where language is regarded as ‘communicative action functioning in social contexts in ongoing routines of people’s daily lives’ (Blackledge and Creese 2016: 277), which strives to explain why people do, say and think as they do while taking into account the impact of such acts on the social processes and vice versa.

Tied to this approach is the concept of membership categorisation device (MCD) that was formulated by Harvey Sacks (1972) and which theorises the ways members ‘package commonsense knowledge about category members and their actions’ (Stokoe 2012: 300). In short, ‘categories’ are how members name people while ‘predicates’ imply the categories even without explicitly stating them. Social relations between interactants are therefore expressed and reaffirmed through and by their talk, and through certain categories aspects of identity are invoked. One way of invoking a category is to explicitly name it, but another is to imply the category through mentioning its predicate, an activity that is definitive to members of that particular category (Vallis 2001). So, for example, when person A sees a *hijab*-wearing person, B, reading the Qur’an in a mosque, it would be justifiable for A to assume that B is a Muslim woman given that the activity the person is involved in is bound to the categories ‘Muslim’ (reading the Qur’an and being in a mosque) and ‘woman’ (wearing a *hijab*). ‘Students’ is another example of a broad category, which is related to the category-bound activities such as completing assignments and sitting for examinations. In the context of bi- and multilingual interactions, language preference is also claimed to function as an MCD (Gafaranga 2001; Torras and Gafaranga 2002) as ‘participants constantly categorise themselves and one another along language preference lines’ in their bid to attain ‘relevant-category bound activities’ (Gafaranga 2005: 294). To put it differently, in choosing the language that they are using, the speakers are actually claiming membership to the categories associated with or defined by the language concerned. Having discussed the concepts that we utilise in analysing our data, the next section provides background information on the subjects of the study and the methodology.

14.3 The Speakers and the Data

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, this study is based on an analysis of face-to-face social interaction between three young Bruneian women: Amal, Fatin and Rina. Born between 1999 and 2001, the three participants are of Malay ethnicity with Brunei Malay as their first language, that is, the first language they picked

up as children. All three, who are close friends, are fluent in English. They are currently in their second year of undergraduate study in English-medium programmes at Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD).

The recording took place at a relatively quiet cafe where the participants could interact comfortably while enjoying their meals. Prior to the recording of their interactions, they were informed that the recording would solely be for research purposes and that their information and any identifying markers would be kept confidential. Once their consent was obtained, the recording began using a Zoom H4n Handy Recorder. The recording's duration was 50 minutes but the transcribed conversation lasted 35 minutes of which the transcription of their interactions started at the 28-second mark. While transcribing and analysing the audio recordings, we paid close attention to instances of talk-in-interaction in which the interlocutors used language alternation to express certain aspects of their identities. The first author carried out the initial transcription, which was then checked by the second author for accuracy. In cases of unintelligibility and uncertainty with particular terms or phrases, assistance was sought from a zoomer who had no associations with the subjects of this study. We then verified our zoomer consultant's input by reaching out to Amal for her feedback and confirmation.

Given that the three women are friends, the interaction can be characterised as informal, which is also confirmed by the topics they discussed. The participants talked about a range of topics, beginning with an issue Amal had in one of her university assignments. The topic quickly shifted when Rina pointed out a familiar person in the cafe who she believed to be her former English teacher. From that point on, the conversation took on a more playful tone that is characteristic of talk-as-play (Holmes and Hay 1997), with laughter in most of the conversation. We begin the analysis by looking at the transcript data as a whole in order to present a general overview of the language use of young Bruneian women and how the interactions reveal certain aspects of their identity. We then delve into their language alternation practices to assess the interactants' demonstrations of localised understanding of self and other through situated talk.

14.4 General Observations and Salient Features

A general overview of the transcript reveals that the social interaction between Amal, Fatim and Rina involved three languages: English, Malay and Arabic. Out of the 5,410 words transcribed, 4,060 (75.0%) were identified as English and only 1,365 (25.2%) Malay. The remaining were identified as either Arabic (such as '*Astaghfirullah*', the Islamic supplication for redemption, and '*Subhanallah*', a general expression of praise), fillers such as '*hmm*' and '*wah*', or elements which we have labelled hybridised. The latter pertain to a word that has both Malay and English elements, some examples of which are '*tedetele*', '*testuck*', '*teclick*' and '*berlicence*' which comprise the Malay prefixes *te(r)-* and *ber-* and the English words 'delete', 'stuck', 'click' and 'licence'.

The fluidity of the language alternation in the conversation signals the hybridity of the young Bruneians' cultural and social identities. The prevalence of English in the 35-minute interaction is just one of many pieces of evidence of how dominant English is now in the linguistic repertoires of Bruneians, notably young adults, and demonstrates that English has acquired the function of indexing the modern Bruneian identity, specifically that of the young and educated (see Salbrina 2020; Salbrina and Noor Hasharina 2021; Salbrina and Zayani 2021b). English is associated with the identity 'educated' because it is acquired through the education system and a person's proficiency in the language more often than not reflects their level of education (Salbrina and Jainatul 2020; Salbrina and Zayani 2021a). While Amal and her friends' Malay identities are indexed through their use of Malay, their identity as Bruneians is reinforced through the use of words and particles which are known to be markers of membership of the Brunei speech community. These include words such as '*palui*' (literally 'stupid') and '*tuli*' (literally 'deaf') and the widely acknowledged Brunei Malay particle '*bah*' (Conrad et al. 1990). The occasional insertions of Arabic phrases, on the other hand, are taken to signal their identity as Muslims.

Various instances of 'Englishisation', which Lian-Hee Wee (2009: 47), in his analysis of Singapore English, defines as 'a bi-directional process where English is indigenized and where non-English elements are Anglicized', point to an emerging localised English identity in Brunei. In the current data, Englishisation occurs at the morphological level, such as in '*tedelete*' and '*teclick*' mentioned earlier, as well as at syntactical and phonetic levels. Examples of Englishisation in which Malay syntactic structure is shaping the English of the Bruneians are shown in Extract 2.

In pronunciation, one instance of Englishisation is exemplified when Amal uttered a Malay phrase '*kurang ajar*' (very rude) stylised with an English-like pronunciation in which the second component, *ajar*, was realised as [hædʒə.ɪ] (Extract 3, line 4). The pronunciation is identified as having been Englishised because of the English-like quality of the final [ɪ] as well as the presence of initial [h], which is not a phonological characteristic of Brunei Malay (Clynes 2001; Deterding and Ishamina 2016). This English-styled pronunciation of the Malay word '*ajar*' can be explained as an attempt by Amal to downplay the harshness associated with the phrase, traditionally used as derogatory, and consequently to signal to the intended recipient (Rina) that it was not to be taken seriously, and that she (Amal) was being humorous. The second occurrence of '*kurang ajar*' (Extract 4, line 15), however, was not realised in the

Extract 2 Grammatical Englishisation

1	Fatin	<i>gila</i> <that's crazy>
2	Rina	the wife is nice so pretty also ...
		[<i>lawa jua</i>]

3	Fatin	<i>gila berabis cam</i> <it was so crazy like>
4	Rina	mine one mine is even easy also
		[<i>aku punya sanang jua</i>]

same manner, but would still be construed as a joke due to the mock taunting tone followed by synchronised laughter by all three interactants.

The playfulness of their interactions is undoubtedly the most striking feature to come out of the analysis. This is evidenced throughout the entire conversation, from their shared laughter to the overlapping speech, none of which hindered the flow of their communication and all of which were indicative of group solidarity (Coates 2007). Also to be taken as an indicator of their status as more-than-casual friendship is the spontaneous conversational humour that relies on shared in-group knowledge (for example, from Extract 4, ‘embarrassing’ in lines 1–3, ‘Subway shirt’ in lines 6 and 9); the jibes and the trading of mock insults (for example, Rina calling Amal ‘arrogant’ in Extract 4, line 12 and Amal returning the insult by calling out Rina’s ‘rudeness’ in Extract 4, line 15) and the entertaining gossip (Morreall 1994), which is to be differentiated from moral gossip that is associated with norm enforcement and maintenance (Acuña Ferreira 2014). Entertaining gossip is when interlocutors criticise the affairs and personality traits of a third party in a joking manner and this is seen in their discussion of a common friend named Mirah (see Extract 5) whom the interactants repeatedly referred to as someone who is nonsensical. Another contextual cue of their close friendship can also be seen in the interactants mirroring of each other’s verbal responses through repetition of elements from preceding discourse, some of which are shown in bold in Extract 6.

There are also frequent allusions to various aspects of contemporary youth culture in the conversation, from the topics to their choice of vocabulary, and together these markers point to their shared identity as Generation Z youth. For instance, there are three separate instances in which they mentioned the word ‘thrift’ and talked about ‘thrifting’, an activity that is now synonymous with being trendy and is characteristic of the zoomers (Huber 2020; Hoffower 2021). To some of the older generations, however, thrifting, or second-hand apparel shopping, is stigmatised, mainly for hygienic reasons but also for its association with people from a low-income background (Nair 2019; Buckner 2019).

References to social media applications, such as to Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter, are characteristic of their identity as youth of the zoomer generation, as are their references to Netflix (for example, mentions of television programmes such as *Nymphomaniac* in Extract 5, line 5), a media streaming platform that has been touted as the replacement of traditional television. The references to Instagram and Snapchat are substantial as these two social media platforms have been highlighted

Extract 3 Englishisation of pronunciation

1	Rina	<i>kadang kadang suara mu macam lalat pulang</i> <your voice sounds like a fly sometimes>
2	Amal	there! there!
3	Rina	[laughs]
4	Amal	<i>kurang hajer</i> <very rude>
5	Rina	<i>kurang</i> <less>

Extract 4 In-group humour

1	Rina	I mean uh I mean uh I was (.) I was embarrassing I mean
2	Amal	she's really embarrassing
3	Rina	not as embarrassing as Mirah

4	Rina	<i>lawat? macam bida</i> <pretty? more like ugly>
5	Fatin	<i>diam tah kau eh</i> <just shut up>
6	Amal	that Subway shirt [<i>laughs</i>]
7	Fatin	<i>sial</i> <damn>
8	Rina	ya
9	Amal	Subway worker shirt

10	Rina	<i>ia sombong</i> <she's arrogant>
11	Amal	<i>banar</i> <right>
12	Rina	<i>eh kau pun sama jua jangan kau</i> <so are you, you're arrogant too>
13	Amal	<i>eh</i>
14	Fatin	[<i>laughs</i>]
15	Amal	<i>kurang ajar kau (.) siapa sombong ani?</i> <you're very rude, who's arrogant?>
16		
17	ALL	[<i>laugh</i>]
18	Rina	<i>inda inda inda</i> <no no no>

in a recent Pew Research Center study as having the most users from the zoomer generation (Auxier and Anderson 2021).

The three women's identity as social media users from Generation Z is also manifested by their persistent use of slang terms and phrases, some of which are references to popular contemporary internet memes. Memes, coined originally by Richard Dawkins (1976) as an idea, behaviour or style transmitted from one person to another via imitation, is defined in modern-day English as an internet terminology of 'an image, a video, a piece of text, etc. that is passed very quickly from one internet user to another, often with slight changes that make it humorous' (*Oxford Learner's Dictionaries n.d.*, definition 2). In the data, there are several instances of meme-derived slang terms and phrases (see Extract 7), many of which proved problematic during the process of transcribing as the terms were not familiar to the researchers. Initially transcribed as 'unintelligible', the slang terms and phrases were eventually identified after we consulted a zoomer. What is intriguing is that the zoomer whose help we sought had not participated in the conversation between Amal, Rina and Fatin; yet, upon listening to the audio recording, she was instantly able to identify the terms and phrases we had earlier deemed unintelligible. This appears to show that the zoomers have a shared 'we code' which may not be readily understood by 'outsiders', that is, those not from their generation.

Extract 5 Entertaining gossip on Mirah

1	Fatin	Rina <i>si</i> Mirah [<i>laughs</i>]
2	Amal	<i>kenapa? kenapa?</i> <why? why?>
3	Fatin	[<i>laughs</i>] <i>si</i> Mirah I asked Mirah <i>wah</i> (.) I asked Mirah
4	Amal	<i>apa? apa?</i> <what? what?>
5	Fatin	I'm like (.) Mirah have you watched <i>Nymphomaniac</i> ?
6	ALL	[<i>laughs</i>]
7	Amal	ya ya <i>yang talur berabis wah anak ani</i> <that was really silly of her>

8	Rina	<i>sama siapa saja?</i> <who will be joining us?> [<i>laughs</i>]
9	Amal	mm mm
10	Rina	and then Amir was on the phone <i>kali</i> <then>
11	Amal	mm
12	Rina	oh Rina (.) <i>kali</i> <then> Mirah (.) <i>kali</i> <then> huh? Mirah?
13		<i>si bangang</i> <the idiot?>
14	ALL	[<i>laughs</i>]
15	Rina	I was like well he ain't wrong [<i>laughs</i>]
16	Amal	ya ah

Extract 6 Repetitions and mirroring of preceding discourse

1	Amal	okay cool
2	Fatin	cool
3	Rina	let me drink
4	Amal	let me drink first

5	Amal	I'm like
6	Fatin	I'm like , <i>astaghfirullah al azim</i>

7	Rina	because I dipped it in and I was like why why is it so sweet
8	Amal	why is it sweet

The most puzzling of the slang terms was 'embarrassing' (Extract 7, lines 1–3), which was initially transcribed as '*amber razi*'. The word was in actual fact 'embarrassing', as pointed out by our zoomer consultant and confirmed by Amal in a post-recording interview. 'Embarrassing' is a play on the word 'embarrassing' that has been made popular through a YouTube clip that went viral at the end of 2020 (African Meme Center 2020). Another term which caused some confusion was 'deadass', which at the outset appeared vulgar but turned out to simply mean 'seriously'. 'Cray-cray', which means 'crazy', and the phrase 'I'm alive but I'm

Extract 7 Slang terms and phrases

1	Rina	I mean uh I mean uh I was, I was <i>embarrassing</i> I mean
2	Amal	she's really <i>embarrassing</i>
3	Rina	not as <i>embarrassing</i> as Mirah

4	Rina	ya (.) I mean the sister also right like she gots (.) home, pretty late
5		from work
6	Amal	that's cray-cray

7	Amal	I see, she copped the bag , she copped it
8	Rina	she's rich also so
9	Amal	oh okay they both copped it

10	Amal	I'm alive but I'm dead
11	Rina	I'm alive but I'm dead
12	Amal	[<i>laughs</i>]
13	Rina	I feel like I'm alive but I'm dead

14	Rina	you guys want jump scares <i>kah?</i>
15	Amal	<i>tapi awu tapi</i> <but yes but> <i>Get Out</i> was better (.) I M O

16	Amal	it's like a dirt road, it looks like that girl look at that, but with taller
17		grass
18	Rina	deadass
19	Amal	deadass , it looks like that
20	Rina	trees

dead' also did not make much sense at the beginning. Like 'embarrassing', these two started out as memes, were popularised through the American mass media and were then picked up by Generation Z as markers of their generational speech and youth identity. In addition to corroborating Mark McCrindle's (2012) claim that the zoomers are the 'cut and paste' generation, their utilisation of slang is an act of solidarity that affiliates them to their generation, and the meme-derived slang terms and phrases are features of their in-group language. Their use is a reflection of their awareness of the latest cultural, mainly American, catchphrases.

While this section has provided a general analysis through the realisation of identities according to social categorisation, we turn to a conversation analytic approach and examine language alternation as signalling and contextualisation cues (Auer 1984). As explained in Section 14.2, we use conversational analysis to identify social

interaction and identity formation, by viewing codes or languages simultaneously operating at multiple levels.

14.5 Language Alternation: Malay to English

LSI research shows us that regularly ‘displaying prior shared experiences’, knowledge and a ‘degree of familiarity’ are part of how friends and peers perform relationship maintenance (Pomerantz and Mandelbaum 2003: 165). As explained by Anita Pomerantz and Jenny Mandelbaum (*ibid.*: 162), it is through news updates that friends enact involvement in each other’s lives, maintain relationships and achieve closeness. A general observation of the three women’s conversation shows that all three were maintaining relational ties by updating each other on the latest news (see Extracts 8 and 9). In the first segment of Extract 8, for instance, Amal was updating her two friends about a problematic assignment which she had, on another occasion, told them about.

According to Peter Auer (1988), topic change is a type of discourse-related switching. This occurs when interactants switch between languages depending on the setting, message and, to some extent, the topic of conversation (Genesee 2000, 2002). As the participants updated each other on their news (Extracts 8 and 9), their topics of conversation changed as well as their language preference. In Extract 8, Amal’s choice of switching from Malay to English may be due to the words in bold (‘modules’ [line 1], ‘coursework’ [line 1], ‘assignment’ [lines 2 and 10], ‘web design’ [lines 3 and 8], ‘website’ [lines 9 and 10], ‘log in’ [line 15], ‘deadline’ and ‘links’ [line 17]), which are commonly used among students when talking about their university experience and education. Hence, these words not only prompted her to speak in English more than in Malay but also manifested her educational background. When she was praising herself on her academic achievement (line 10), she then downplayed it by referring to herself using a third person pronoun ‘she’ (line 12). That her self-compliment was meant as a joke and not to be taken seriously was signalled by the laughter accompanying her utterance. Fatin understood Amal’s intention and responded by imitating Amal’s use of ‘she’ (line 13) to praise Amal indirectly. Accommodating to Fatin and as a cue of their close friendship, Amal echoed ‘she was out there’ (line 14), referring to herself in the third person.

When the conversation turned to the topic of social media followers (Extract 8, lines 19–25), which is popular among Generation Z (Turner 2015), the women switched their language to English exclusively and retained the use of English throughout the topic of conversation. In line 23, Amal is teasing Rina about her supposed popularity on Instagram but she distanced herself from Rina by referring to her friend indirectly as ‘she’s’ instead of ‘you’re’. In doing this, Amal was both complimenting and mocking Rina, the latter of which was achieved through jest. That Amal was able to address Rina as ‘she’ even when they were talking directly to

Extract 8 Language switch as topic of conversation changes

1	Amal	ya all my modules were hundred percent coursework , <i>sekali</i> <so>
2		my very last assignment <i>yang</i> <the> eh did I eh sorry, did I tell you
3		<i>kah?</i> did I tell you? <i>yang</i> <the> my web design did I tell Mirah <i>kali?</i>
4		<maybe?>
5	Fatin	<i>yang</i> <the> (.) by the end, you told me, <i>kana</i> <it was> it's by the end
6		<i>macam mengajut</i> <like unexpectedly>
7	Rina	you told me briefly
8	Amal	by the end ya oh ya ya ya <i>yatah</i> <that's why> , like, my web design ,
		ugh
9		like usually like I have to make the the website <i>kan?</i> <right?> like
10		usually my first assignment <i>atu</i> <that> it was so good my my website like
11	Rina	ah
12	Amal	I'm not [<i>clicks</i>] I don't mean to brag really, she was like [<i>laughs</i>]
13	Fatin	she was seen out there [<i>laughs</i>]
14	Amal	ya she was out there so like I double checked like I think I checked
15		them like, seven times, like me on <i>macam</i> <like> log in and then log
16		back out and like what so everything <i>lah</i> , for this last one I submitted
17		it like seven minutes before the deadline , like five links weren't
18		working <i>wah</i>

19	Amal	have I followed you?
20	Rina	no, I don't, I don't keep track of my followers , thank you
21	Amal	she's-
22	Fatin	oh okay [<i>laughs</i>]
23	Amal	she's succeedin' you know she's succeedin'
24	Rina	I barely have three hundred followers what are you talking about?
25	Amal	you still have a lot of followers it's like people still ...

each other is another key indication of their close friendship, particularly since the flow of the conversation was not interrupted at all by Amal's teasing remark.

In Extract 9, the triologue turned its focus to Rina's mother. In this exchange, Rina was entertaining Amal and Fatin with her mother's witty yet hilarious act of sulking. Although Rina was imitating her mother's words in Malay to tell her story to Amal and Fatin, Rina switched to English to express her feelings towards her mother and her view of the event ('cons of being the only child' in line 3; 'I was like, just go without me' in lines 5 and 6; 'just go with my dad or something' in line 8). Her switches from Malay to English to express her own feelings may be interpreted as the right thing to do. Since it is clear that Rina and her mother speak Malay to each other,

Extract 9 Language switch to show attachment and detachment

1	Rina	my mum <i>menyamal pulang dimalam</i> <was sulking last night>
2	Amal	ya I saw on your Snapchat
3	Rina	ya (.) and then (.) 'cause I was like (.) cons of being the only child (.)
4		she was like, oh <i>anu nya, bah, jangan tah nya inda payah tah ku makan</i>
5		<i>sana</i> <fine, don't then, no need for me to eat there> I was like, just go
6		without me
7	Amal, Fatin	[<i>laugh</i>]
8	Rina	just go with my dad or something, then <i>nya</i> (.) <i>ah inda payah tak</i>
9		<i>kesian jua aku ani nya</i> <she said no need to go there then, poor me>
10	Amal	oh my god
11	Rina	I'm like oh no, then <i>kali</i> <then> but I was like <i>bah bah bah bersedia tah</i>
12		<i>ni</i> <alright alright alright I'm getting ready> (.) then she was like (.) oh
13		<i>kalau inda ikut inda payah</i> <if you don't want to come with me, don't
14		then>
15	Fatin	<i>menyamal jua</i> <she was really sulking>

she used English to simultaneously detach herself from her mother's disappointment and to connect with Amal and Fatin.

14.6 Language Alternation: English to Malay

Languages learned later in life are associated with instructed contexts of learning and formal relationships between speakers. Due to the formality of language learning, only a fraction of human emotions can be experienced, perceived and expressed (Ivaz et al. 2015). In contrast, mother tongues are acquired during childhood, in emotionally rich familiar contexts, where familiarity and intimacy provide security and understanding. All of these strengthen the attachment and emotional reactivity of the mother tongue or L1 (Pavlenko 2006; Dewaele 2010). In the context of language alternation, switches to L1 are observed when a speaker intends to display strong emotional or heartfelt responses.

Referring to Extract 9 when Rina was talking about her mother, her conversation initially started out in English (line 1) but it immediately switched to Malay, particularly when Rina was recapping her mother's utterances the night before. The use of Malay in her reported speech can be taken as the language Rina prefers whenever interacting with her mother. This also shows language preference as a categorisation device, specifically, the categorisation of parents as predominantly Malay speaking. That Rina used Malay instead of English in the familial setting is also indicative of Rina's emotional attachment to her L1 (that is, Malay), in addition to signalling her close relationship with her mother. The following extract is another example of

Extract 10 Malay as the language of attachment

1	Rina	<i>nya</i> Amir <Amir said> (.) he's so dumb
2	Amal	what did he say?
3	Rina	he said (.) oh, Rina <i>nya</i> <Rina, he said>, you can turn off the lights if
4		you want I was like, how am I gonna see <i>pasal utan jua sudah ujung</i>
5		<i>ujung atu telanggar apa kah apa kah, sekalinya macam tapi kalau</i>
6		<i>belampu karang tesuluh jua ah cam</i> <because it was clearly like a
7		forest and what if I hit something at the end of the road but he said like
8		if we switch on the headlights we might illuminate other things like> I
9		was like, [clicks] hmm contemplating
10	Amal	<i>buduh tu urang atu</i> <that person is an idiot> oh my god I hate him I
11		hate him so much

Malay serving as the language of primary emotional attachment for young Bruneian speakers (Extract 10).

The above conversation involved emotions such as fear, exasperation and aversion as Rina and Amal were talking about their mutual friend Amir, who had caused them to experience driving through a forest in the middle of the night. Rina's switch to Malay when she described her fearful experience (lines 4–6) again signifies that Malay is the language of emotional attachment. Amal's use of '*buduh*' to describe Amir (line 10) further strengthens this claim, while her reference to him as '*urang atu*' (that person) instead of simply using the pronoun 'he' not only indexes her reaction to Amir's rashness, but also dissociates her as Amir's friend and from Amir's actions.

Extract 11 is a segment of the interaction that had taken place at the start of the recording. The repetitions made by the speakers, which we earlier pointed out were contextual cues of their strong rapport, are also indications of them accommodating to each other's way of speaking and language choice. Their language accommodation is apparent when the 'first speaker reveals their language preference through language choice and [the] next speaker follows suit and adopts the proposed language' (Gafaranga 2001: 1919). We can see from the extract that because the interactions in lines 1–4 were in English, Rina maintained her convergence to Amal's and Fatin's use of English as she asked her question 'why do you keep on cleaning after me?' (line 5). Fatin displayed divergence as she responded to Rina's question by switching to Malay ('*basah ah*' in line 6) which was repeated by Amal ('*basah ah*' in line 7). When her question was answered by Fatin and Amal in Malay (lines 6 and 7), Rina also code-switched to Malay ('thank you, *banar*' in line 8).

Extract 11 Repetition as language accommodation

1	Amal	okay cool
2	Fatin	cool
3	Rina	let me drink
4	Amal	let me drink first
5	Rina	why do you keep on cleaning after me? [laughs]
6	Fatin	<i>basah ah</i> <it's wet>
7	Amal	<i>basah ah</i> <it's wet>
8	Rina	thank you <i>banar</i> <right>
9	Amal	there

14.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, we analysed the language interaction practices of female Brunei Malay zoomers. The participants in this study know each other very well, share common languages and have a common social background. The results show that whether the alternation was discourse- or participant-related (Auer 1988), the interactional approach demonstrates how identity is negotiated and constructed through switching between languages and that multilingual Bruneian zoomers creatively and strategically draw on one or more social situations or memberships. They perform and maintain identity at multiple levels: as Bruneians, as Malays, as English-educated multilinguals and, to a lesser extent (insofar as the conversation was analysed), as Muslims. This study also reinforces Joseph Gafaranga's (2001: 1918) and Maria-Carme Torras and Joseph Gafaranga's (2002) views that 'language preference is a categorisation device' in which participants in interaction identify themselves and others in terms of language preference. Language alternation is a social activity which reveals the speakers' variety of identities such as friends, daughter, university students and Generation Z youth. The alternation in both content and language is a reflection of the Bruneian zoomers living in a 'globalised' environment drawing on English, Malay and the internet (in contrast to the older generations such as the researchers) to express themselves and embody the variety of their life experiences. For these young Bruneians, identity is multifaceted and constantly negotiated in content, language and situation.

The second author's contention that modern-day young Bruneians are highly competent English-leaning multilinguals in which language alternation is the norm rather than an exception is also supported by the data from this study (Salbrina 2023). Collectively, the dominance of English in the interaction is evident in that English has acquired the function of indexing the modern identities of young and educated Bruneians (Salbrina and Jainatul 2020; Salbrina and Zayani 2021a). The English used by them, however, exhibits features that are localised, which are indicative of an emerging Bruneian variety of English. Perhaps this is what the young Bruneians mean when they claim that English is now part of the Bruneian identity (Salbrina 2023).

They are not referring to the language of the West, but rather to a localised variety that has evolved to create its own niche as a widely used code of communication in Brunei. In other words, there is a sense of ownership of English among young Bruneians.

While ethnic Malay identity is indexed through the use of Malay words, the specifically Bruneian identities are showcased in the words and particles known to be markers of membership to the Brunei speech community. The occasional insertions of Arabic phrases, on the other hand, are taken to linguistically signal the interlocutors' Muslim identities. Individually, this study supports that the subjects' language preference is a cue of their attitudes and behaviour (Ladegaard 2000), emotions (Pavlenko 2006; Lindquist et al. 2015), and attachment to member(s) of a group in the course of interaction (Hazan and Shaver 1994; Cassidy 2008). Using the LSI approach, it is possible to flesh out the particularities of Bruneian society and culture, through the interplay between languages, discourses, interactions and social contexts, and demonstrate how these elements are utilised by the speakers to construct and alternate between multiple identities.

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Chapter 15

From Migrants to Citizens: The Iban of Melilas Longhouse, Brunei Darussalam



Mahirah Nazatul Hazimah and Lian Kwen Fee

Abstract There are an estimated 14,000 to 20,000 Iban living in Brunei Darussalam, most of them in the Belait and Temburong districts. They migrated to Brunei from Sarawak just before the Second World War in search of new land and an opportunity to improve their livelihoods. Not recognised as one of the seven indigenous ethnic groups (*puak*) by the state, the common narrative is that they face challenges of incorporation into the sultanate. In the Sukang subdistrict in Belait, there are eight Iban longhouses. This case study of the Iban of the Melilas longhouse documents how one particular community has successfully negotiated and managed their acceptance as full citizens of Brunei while retaining their Iban identity.

Keywords Brunei Darussalam · Iban · Melilas longhouse · Identity · Ethnicity · Adaptation

15.1 Introduction

Estimates of the Iban population in Brunei Darussalam range from 14,000 to 20,000 or less than 5% of the total population of the country (Sercombe 1999: 606; Coluzzi 2010: 122; Pang 2018: 1–2). Most of them originally came from the Ulu Belait and Labi communes, with only 2,173 ‘other indigenous’, including Iban, in Temburong district in 2018 (Pang 2018: 2). The Iban are not considered indigenous to the sultanate under the terms of the Brunei Nationality Act 1961 and the Brunei Nationality Enactment 1961 and therefore not recognised as one of the seven indigenous ethnic communities (*puak*) that are entitled to the full benefits of citizenship. For this reason, the common narrative among some members of the community and observers is that the Iban have found it difficult to be fully accepted and incorporated

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into Bruneian society. This chapter examines how one particular group has managed and responded to the challenges of living as a non-*puak* community.

The Iban migrated ‘across Sarawak to the Baram River’, located near the border with Brunei, ‘between 1900 and 1941’ and ‘settled largely in the lower Baram’ region (Sercombe 1999: 597). The Iban of the Melilas longhouse (*rumah panjang*), the subject of this chapter, first entered Brunei in 1942 in search of a better life before finally settling in their present location in 1946. Melilas is in the isolated interior (*ulu*) of Belait district and is the most remote settlement of the district. This commune is occupied by just one Iban longhouse. According to the head of the longhouse, Melilas has 15 permanent residents and 10 households. Most reside in the towns of Kuala Belait and Seria because of work and education, but the numbers in the commune can increase from 50 to 70 during weekends or on public holidays, while on weekdays the population may decrease to fewer than 10. A large proportion of the inhabitants have ancestors who migrated to the district from Sarawak and their current descendants have benefited from the assistance the Brunei government has provided, such as education, welfare and health care, especially if they are citizens. Today the Iban of Melilas live what may be described as a ‘Bruneian life’ and their Iban-ness has changed compared to the period after they first arrived.

Melilas is one of several longhouses in Sukang subdistrict. The others are Kampong Sukang, Kampong Biadong Ulu, Kampong Bauu, Kampong Bang Taong (not currently occupied), Kampong Biadong Tengah, Kampong Kukub and Kampong Dungun (Norah 2017), while in Labi there are four longhouses: Kampong Mendaram Besar, Kampong Mendaram Kecil, Kampong Rampayoh and Kampong Teraja. There is no published information on how active these other longhouses are and their significance for the local communities. Until research is carried out on these longhouses, it is not possible to come to any conclusion about the more general position of the Iban in Brunei, how each community has responded and managed their sense of ethnic identity, and whether these circumstances are localised and specific. We hope that this study of Melilas is a first step towards that goal.

Why is the Melilas longhouse still standing and why has it become a focal point for the non-resident Iban community? What value does this longhouse hold for its people despite being exposed to modernity? Being the most remote village in the whole of Brunei, what comes to mind is that the longhouse has lost its purpose as a permanent and reliable safe haven most days of the week, but also that the longhouse is consistently inhabited and almost never empty. In 2017 the Sultan of Brunei sponsored a full rebuilding of Melilas, changing it from a wooden to a concrete longhouse. The original longhouse had deteriorated, especially its roof. While the inhabitants requested the Royal Brunei Armed Forces to help them fix the roof, they received more than they expected—a new and fully renovated longhouse.

Many studies of the Iban refer to the effects of modernity on this ethnic group in relation to the decline of or changes to cultural practices and traditions. Some examine the social institutions of the longhouse such as marriage and leadership while others look at migration, but overall there are few documented studies on the

Iban in Brunei. This chapter focuses on the social changes that the Iban of Melilas have experienced and how they cope with them, an especially important case study because they are located far from Brunei's urban areas.

The Iban in Brunei appear to be more flexible and open to change compared to the past and are somewhat different from the Iban in Sarawak, most notably in relation to conversion to Islam, so that the inhabitants of Melilas longhouse have a small prayer hall (*balai ibadat*) for themselves and the head of the longhouse is himself a Muslim. In other respects, there are similarities; for example, the longhouse in Melilas is now fully concrete and the same holds true for a number of longhouses in Sarawak. Growing up, the first author recalls that the typical Iban longhouse was made of wooden stilts decorated with traditional art on the walls, and the head of the longhouse was an elder with distinguished tattoos on his body. Wooden stilt houses were preferred so that they could be easily abandoned whenever the residents needed to move or migrate. Having a concrete house means that they will settle for the long term or for good. The Iban in Brunei have been exposed to modernity as early as 1960s and by the 1980s, many Iban were employed in government sectors and the oil and gas industry, but despite that the longhouse has not been abandoned.

15.2 Fieldwork and Interviews

Some of the data for this research was drawn from blog entries and the Melilas community's own Facebook page called 'Melilas Legend', while some were time-line entries from an old typewritten paper kept by a key informant. Gathering primary data through interviews was not an easy task. Although it was not difficult to look for respondents since the Iban community in Belait is small (and people are mostly related in some way), the key informants were more challenging to identify. The process of interviewing elders was also time-consuming as the respondents had difficulty recalling past events in their lives. Some answers were repetitive and vague, and some questions needed to be repeated and clarified.

Another limitation was the physical restriction of field research because it takes at least three hours to get to Melilas from the main highway on the way to Kuala Belait and the poor road conditions resulted in cars getting stuck in the mud in the middle of the jungle. There is also no cellular network in the area. However, there were no language barriers. Even though Malay is not their mother tongue and speaking in Malay can sound a little awkward for them, the first author grew up in the Iban community and had no difficulty communicating with the respondents in the Iban language. She is half-Iban and while interviewing one of the informants she found out that their fathers are related. In this way, and with others whom she discovered she is related to, trust and rapport were established quickly.

Establishing rapport was very important for this research. To do this there must first be descriptive conversations as William Foote Whyte (1984) notes. This helps to minimise evaluative questions that may contaminate the data. According to Tim May (2001), establishing rapport consists of four processes. First, the interviewer

should ask descriptive questions to open up the conversation. The second process is exploring what has been asked previously to ascertain what interests the informant has and their familiarity with the topic. The third stage is when both parties understand what to expect of one another to facilitate ease of communication. The final stage is participation when, according to May, informants fully cooperate with the researcher in providing information. At this stage informants reveal new information that was not forthcoming previously.

Another method used in this research is sequential interviewing. The interviewer asks about the events that the informants have experienced, just like a life history interview where the researcher is interested in the documentation of life events, experiences and meanings. Sequential interviews use a chronological format, where the informant recalls certain events that they have mentioned.

15.3 Background Literature

This research on the Iban of Melilas covers the period from 1942 to date. As noted earlier, there are few studies on the Iban in Brunei. However, this is not the case for the neighbouring Malaysian state of Sarawak. Most of the literature used in this research is drawn from Sarawak since much of the oral history of the Iban in Brunei is reliant on the memories of the people. Past studies of the Iban are primarily about their traditional way of life, language, migration and traditional crafts and most of these were conducted in Sarawak. One of the few studies of the Iban in Brunei is by Peter Sercombe (1999), a comparative study of Iban of the Teraja longhouse in Ulu Belait with the Iban of the Ridan longhouse in Marudi, Sarawak. His work focuses on language differences from a geographical perspective. He makes some attempt to address how being in Brunei has changed the lives of the Iban, transitioning from a traditional to a modern community.

Another study by Dominikus Riki Yonda (2016) analyses social change and the Iban of Sungai Utik in Kalimantan, Indonesia, and its consequences for traditional practices. The marriage ceremonies in the longhouses no longer follow the ancestral tradition since many of the ceremonies carried out are now based on Catholic practices, pointing to the critical impact of religious conversion. In a similar vein, in Brunei a relevant issue is to examine how Islam has affected the lives of the Iban and how they have responded to the dominant influence of Malay Muslim society.

In addition, Victor T. King (1994) refers to how the promotion of Malay Islamic monarchy (*Melayu Islam Beraja*) as a national ideology has contributed to the strengthening of Brunei Malay culture. Even though it is not explicitly stated that all ethnic groups should assimilate into the dominant Malay culture, G. Braighlinn (1992 cited in King 1994: 179, 186) notes that ‘assimilation . . . was definitely a long-term aim of political incorporation’ through various means. King argues, ‘[I]t does translate into active strategies to incorporate the non-Malay “sub-groups” into the dominant society and culture’. This chapter addresses how the Iban of Melilas have

managed to negotiate and adopt strategies to maintain their Iban identity even though they regard themselves as Brunei citizens loyal to the sultanate, without necessarily being assimilated into the dominant Malay culture.

Derek Freeman (1981: 7) views the Iban as a ‘pristine’ society, one untouched by the forces of migrant labour, administration, schooling and modern media—at least until the time when his work was published. However, his research focuses on the Iban in Sarawak (see also Freeman 1970). By the 1970s the Iban in Brunei had already been exposed to schooling and the modern economy. In fact, the Iban in Brunei had been exposed to modernity as early as 1960s, and by the 1980s many were employed in the government sector and the oil and gas industry.

Vinson H. Sutlive’s work is one of the most relevant studies for this research on the Iban of the Melilas longhouse. This was based on research he conducted among the Iban of Sibu district in Sarawak between 1969 and 1972, at a time when significant social and economic changes precipitated migration and mobility. In his discussion on Iban migration, Sutlive (1978: 22–24) notes that the practice of shifting cultivation by the Iban meant that they were constantly on the lookout for new or productive land to avoid overcultivation of the soil. In order to sustain such a livelihood, they had to maintain a low population density which resulted in the periodic hiving off of small groups. Much of Sarawak, including the division of Miri—where Marudi is located on the banks of the Baram River and is the original home of the Melilas Iban—has seen population growth for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This placed some pressure on the Iban to seek better land elsewhere. Furthermore, the establishment of colonial rule in Sarawak in the mid-nineteenth century, the restrictions on Iban movements and headhunting, and the imposition of taxes also contributed to their migration (*ibid.*: 32). For any group to survive and prosper in traditional Iban society, it was imperative for its leaders to be pioneers and demonstrate their competence in terms of economic livelihood and in rice cultivation (*ibid.*: 25–26; see also Rousseau 1980). We shall see later how these dynamics are relevant to the movement of the Iban to Melilas and their success in adapting to the conditions present in the Brunei sultanate.

15.4 The Iban: An Ethnic Profile

The majority of the Iban population in Brunei are located in Belait and Temburong districts. Most of their longhouses are located along riversides or in close proximity to roads since these facilitate an engagement in work activities and help communication between different communities. Their lifestyle practices are based on customary law (*adat*) and on the close ties of kinship.

In colonial Sarawak, the term ‘Dayak’ referred collectively to ‘the three ethnic categories of Bidayuh, Iban and Orang Ulu’, and was a means of distinguishing the ‘indigenous, non-Muslim peoples of the region’ (Boulanger 2002: 221–222). The designation Bumiputera (literally ‘sons of the soil’) refers to those considered the original inhabitants of the land, the autochthons, and is used in official Malaysian

discourse. In Brunei the officially recognised indigenous communities are the seven *puak jati* or *puak-puak Melayu*—Belait, Bisaya, Brunei (Brunei Malays), Dusun, Kedayan, Murut and Tutong. Together, these communities were reclassified under the common census category of ‘Malay’ in 1971 (de Vienne 2015: 213). For all intents and purposes, Malay Muslims are regarded as the majority population in Brunei. Essentially, those who do not identify themselves as belonging to a recognised indigenous groups are regarded as non-Bumiputeras—even though the term is not officially or unofficially used—and they are usually those who are of Iban, Kayan or Penan origins, among others.

The Iban are known for their mobility, a process they term ‘*bejalai*’, to walk or go on a journey, and are believed to have migrated from Sarawak to other parts of Borneo. Originally, they were mostly found along Sarawak’s coastline, especially in the Skrang and Saribas areas, and eventually went on expeditions southwards to the Kapuas River delta in West Kalimantan (Austin 1976: 64). The Iban are believed to have entered Brunei during the rule of the Brooke ‘white rajahs’, and it is possibly for this reason that they are not recognised as a *puak* by the Brunei sultanate and they are regarded as outsiders. This exclusion has consequences for the integration of Iban into Bruneian society, especially youths who have been born and raised in the country. As an unrecognised ethnic minority residing in a Malay-dominated society, this presents a barrier to being fully accepted as Bruneians.

Iban do benefit if they become Bruneian citizens, since these rights include free education in public schools from primary to tertiary levels, free health care, and the national housing scheme that ensures that every citizen has the right to own a house. In effect, the Iban are denied the privileges provided specifically for the Malays, including not having access to particular occupations such as enlisting in the Royal Brunei Armed Forces.

Gawai is the main Iban festival, with many iterations such as Gawai Dayak, Gawai Burung, Gawai Batu, Gawai Kenyalang, Gawai Panggul, Gawai Kelingkang, Gawai Tuah, Gawai Lelabi and Gawai Antu. Gawai Dayak, which is celebrated annually on 1–2 June, is an important occasion. Typically, a *ngajat* dance (*tarian ngajat*) is performed as thanksgiving for the rice harvest. The longhouse headman (*tuai rumah*) is responsible for managing this important celebration. The Gawai festivities are not complete unless an alcoholic beverage made from natural yeast and fermented rice (*tuak*) is served.

Some Iban still live in the longhouses scattered throughout the Belait River valley. They are engaged in agricultural activities such as cultivating paddy or upland rice. In the past, Iban were leading pioneers in opening up the forest for paddy planting. Exploration activities were carried out in suitable areas, with the goal of producing rich rice harvests, the main source of food. In the community, someone who can produce a rich harvest is considered a wealthy, respected, intelligent and hardworking person. Nowadays, most of the younger generation who have received a formal education and obtained qualifications work in the government and the private sector and not as rice farmers.

The Iban are mainly autonomous and unstratified communities, unlike those of many other Bornean groups which are generally more institutionally hierarchical

in their social organisation (Revel-Macdonald 1988: 80 cited in Sercombe 1999; see also Rousseau 1980). They are not necessarily egalitarian, however, and each longhouse settlement has a headman or, exceptionally, a headwoman. Since the arrival of European colonisers, the way an Iban longhouse leader is viewed, and the way in which he retains his position, has come to be more influenced by factors outside Iban society, particularly those relating to the state. As was recognised by Julian H. Steward (1955: 32) a long time ago, in trying to account for cultural change among traditional societies around the world, he argues that '[i]n states, nations and empires, the nature of the local group is determined by these larger institutions no less than by its local adaptations'.

15.5 Origins and Settlement of the Melilas Longhouse

One respondent, Sam, the son of Melilas's first chief (*penghulu*), explained how the Iban first arrived in Melilas.

It all began at Marudi, a settlement by the Baram River, southwest of Brunei's border. My father's family came from there [Marudi] to Brunei through the Belait River before the Second World War in search of a better life.... They paddled by boat. The journey took about a week.

His father, who previously worked in the Land Survey Department and was thus familiar with the route through Belait, drew on his connections with local grassroots leaders. They first arrived in Bukit Uding, building a temporary settlement. But after the war, their community split into what became four longhouses named Tempinak, Banggerang 1, Banggerang 2 and Melilas. Currently, the Melilas commune consists of one longhouse (Fig. 15.1). Many longhouses have been destroyed by massive floods and even the longhouse that is standing today has been rebuilt several times.

Another respondent, Azlin, told us that during that time there was no border between Sarawak and Brunei. 'You can even walk by foot', he said. The Iban of Melilas moved from Marudi because they wanted to find new land to live on and cultivate. The first longhouse was led by the headman Kena, who later became the chief of Melilas. Azlin had lived through several reconstructions of the Melilas longhouse. Its transition is explained in the next section.

Melilas is governed by a chief (*penghulu*), according to the arrangements for the administrative divisions of Brunei. The administrative divisions consist of districts (*daerah*), subdistricts (*mukim*) and/or villages (*kampung*), and they are organised hierarchically under the purview of the Ministry of Home Affairs. The administrative areas have limited or no autonomy, with the village having the most autonomy. Major sociopolitical provisions such as education and the law are centralised and managed through separate government ministries or departments.

Currently Melilas subdistrict is headed by a chief who is also the head of the longhouse and it has a Village Consultative Council (Majlis Perundingan Kampung, MPK). The MPK is the equivalent of a community association or organisation

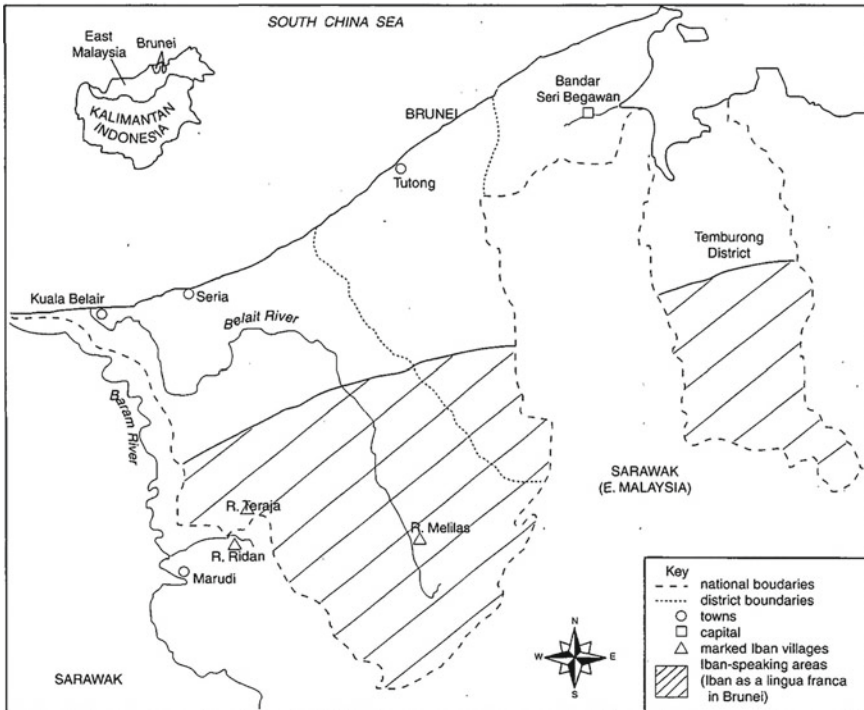


Fig. 15.1 Brunei, with particular reference to Melilas and Marudi, Sarawak. *Source* Peter G. Sercombe (1999: 600)

consisting of a deputy head, secretaries, treasurers and five committee members. The other committee members consist of the Women's Bureau (Biro Wanita) and also various village committees that organise events in the longhouse.

Currently, agricultural activities are mainly undertaken for leisure and are no longer the main source of income since many Iban are in urban employment. Some inhabitants of Melilas are well educated and have become educators themselves while others are civil servants. In addition, like most who reside in Belait district, working in the oil and gas industry is common while a few women engage in handicrafts and sell their products in local markets and also in Thailand and China.

15.6 Informants

Azlin is the key informant for this research (Fig. 15.2). He is a 66-year-old retired Malay-language schoolteacher. He was one of the first group of those to convert to Islam in 1992 and was also one of the very first students of Melilas Primary School. Azlin is from Ulu Belait and is a friend of a friend of the first author's father. The Iban

Muslim community is very small and that is how they know each other; moreover, the wider Iban community itself is close despite living in separate longhouses. Being educated, working for the government and often an active representative for the Melilas community, Azlin is the most knowledgeable person in the longhouse when it comes to Melilas's history and current progress. In the past he has accompanied many researchers studying the Melilas rainforest.

Bu Hajah is Azlin's wife. She is a 63-year-old homemaker and she converted to Islam together with her husband. Bu Hajah's father was the man who proposed that education be introduced in the community and encouraged young children to go to school. Bu Hajah helped Azlin in recalling the past when the interviews were conducted.

Aji is the *tuai rumah*, *penghulu* and village head (*ketua kampung*) of Melilas. He was one of the second group who converted to Islam in 1992. Aji manages the longhouse.

Sam is a 77-year-old retired Brunei Shell Petroleum worker. He is the son of the first *penghulu* of Melilas and he came to the longhouse from Marudi with his father by boat. He is knowledgeable about the locations of the interior area.

Sally, aged 60, is the first Iban from Melilas to study in Britain. She is a retired lecturer from Universiti Brunei Darussalam. Sally was also one of the high achievers at Melilas Primary School. She initially pursued a career as a nurse but she was offered a scholarship by the government to undertake a bachelor's degree instead.

Fig. 15.2 Azlin [middle top] and his family attending an event in the 1980s. *Source* Personal collection of Azlin



As soon as she graduated and came back to Brunei, she said, ‘I went back to Melilas straightaway by boat. Deep down, I know I will always be a person of the village [*orang kampung*]’.

15.7 Migration from Sarawak to Brunei, 1942–1960

The mobility of the Iban has been discussed in detail by Ryoji Soda and Logie Seman (2011). The institutionalised custom of the male’s journey in particular has been regarded as symbolic of Iban mobility. In the act called ‘*bejalai*’, adult males often leave their villages for a considerable period, lasting from a few months to a few years. Through this journey, they accumulate rich experiences in the outside world, so *bejalai* has played an important role for adult males to enhance their social prestige. Peter M. Kedit (1993: 2) explains that to *bejalai* is ‘to go on journeys with the view of acquiring wealth, material goods [and] social prestige’. Some Iban never return from their *bejalai* journey and settle somewhere else. Others return to improve their own community at home.

As noted earlier, the Iban of Melilas entered Brunei in 1942 looking for better land to ensure that they were able to cultivate and fish for survival, finally settling in 1946. It was definitely not an easy journey to find the most suitable land to settle on. There were many challenges that they had to face including natural disasters such as floods. It is important to highlight their first entry to Brunei as significant. By settling in Brunei for good, especially after the Second World War when the British were preparing to withdraw and grant independence to territories they had colonised, the Iban were faced with a new challenge. National boundaries were beginning to develop and the official identification of inhabitants became a pressing issue. The Iban had no choice but to come to terms with affirming their allegiance to the government since they had settled in Brunei. In other words, they needed to live by the laws of the state in return for official recognition. This meant they had to become Bruneians.

15.8 Being Bruneian after 1960: ‘We need a school’

The reason the Iban moved to the upper part of the Belait River in 1960 was to facilitate the entry of officials from the Brunei government to the village. This was their first exposure to the state and to Bruneians. The Iban of Melilas at that time wanted recognition of their existence, since they were already satisfied with the land they had settled on. Their crops and livestock farm prospered until 1974.

In the early 1960s, Bu Hajah’s father decided to *bejalai* and visit his relatives in Sibul, Sarawak, by foot. Although the borders were already drawn, going in and out of the country was not difficult. It took him seven years to *bejalai* just to trace long-lost relatives. Bu Hajah said: ‘My father was surprised when he reached there. The people lived in modern conditions and the children went to school. Some became nurses,

teachers, civil servants and so on. They were educated! We need a school!’ The impression that schools made on Bu Hajah’s father is well appreciated in Sutlive’s (1978: 161–162) account of the state of education in Sibu in the 1960s. By the mid-1950s, Sutlive comments, many Iban parents realised the importance of education to employment. Schools had been built in 16 Iban communities at a time when many other longhouse communities were also demanding them. In the urban areas where government-aided secondary schools were available, Iban parents were willing to pay fees to send their children there. Of the 143 Iban who went to secondary schools between 1960 and 1970 most were employed (*ibid.*: 161). Education had made it possible for the Iban to transition from rice cultivation to modern employment.

It finally occurred to Bu Hajah’s father how underdeveloped the Melilas community was. After seven years of his journey and when he returned to Melilas in the early 1970s, he consulted the community and proposed to the longhouse headman to build a small school hut for the children. The community gathered together, cleared a piece of land and built a temporary hut just big enough for 20 students. The small, temporary and newly built primary school was first run by a Bruneian Malay teacher, at the request of the longhouse headman to the District Office, which then forwarded the proposal to the Department of Education (now Ministry of Education). Azlin was one of the first students to study there, although he was older than the other children. He learned both Malay and English and also other subjects included in Brunei’s primary school syllabus. In the early 1970s the Department of Education decided to build a permanent and comfortable school for the community but it was regularly affected by floods. When a massive flood occurred in 1974 they had to move to the current location.

After 1975 Melilas Primary School was built on elevated land just a few hundred metres from the new longhouse at a budget of BND150,000 (Fig. 15.3). Students who passed the Primary Certificate of Education (now Primary School Assessment) were sent to a secondary school in the town area and stayed in the school hostel. Azlin and Sally were a few of the high achievers during that time. Azlin later became Melilas Primary School’s principal. Sally had the opportunity to study up to her National Diploma and later became a nurse before then being offered a scholarship to pursue her studies in Britain just after she started working. She eventually became a lecturer at Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

15.8.1 To Serve and Be Loyal to the King (*Daulat kepada Raja*)

In the early 1970s the Department of Immigration and National Registration went to Melilas and a nearby longhouse in Sukang to encourage the community to become Bruneian citizens. The two longhouses became an assessment centre for Ulu Belait. Other longhouse residents such as those from Kampong Buau and Kampong Biadong had to walk quite a distance to go for the assessment and some gave up their journey halfway.

Fig. 15.3 Melilas Primary School, built on stilts to avoid flooding. *Source* Personal collection of Azlin



Other ethnic groups that were not considered Malay and other people who had been living in Brunei for a while, and who wished to become citizens, could also apply. However, they had to fulfil the requirements stated in the Brunei Nationality Act 1961, which permits people to become citizens or subjects by registration or by naturalisation. As stated in the act (AGC 1961: 10–11), an applicant had to fulfil Malay-language proficiency in order to be eligible by naturalisation, and thus

- (e) has been examined by a Language Board and such Board is satisfied that he—
 - (i) has a knowledge of the Malay language to such a degree of proficiency as may be prescribed; and
 - (ii) is able to speak the Malay language with proficiency or is unable to speak such language with proficiency by reason of a physical impediment or an impediment of speech or hearing.

However, according to Aji, when the government officials came to Melilas, they were not strictly assessed and everyone was only given an oral assessment. As long as they could speak and understand a little Brunei Malay it was considered sufficient. What is interesting is that the community did not have to apply; instead they were offered citizenship. Many of the residents of Melilas became citizens of Brunei as a result.

‘The most important thing about being Bruneian, and what makes us Bruneian, is to serve and be loyal to our king [*daulat kepada raja*]’, said Sam. But being Bruneian does not mean that the Iban of Melilas have had to abandon their identity. They still maintain their language and culture as long as they do not contradict Islam. The younger generation can still communicate fluently in Iban, for example, Azlin and Bu Hajah taught their children and grandchildren to speak Iban. The current longhouse is a modern structure, even though some traditional elements have been lost. There is also some negotiation in terms of their traditional clothing. Being Muslim does not mean that the Iban dress as Malays. During national events such as National Day or the sultan’s birthday celebration, the Iban of Melilas still appear proudly wearing traditional Iban dress (Fig. 15.4).



Fig. 15.4 Iban of Melilas in traditional dress. *Source* Personal collection of Azlin

Sally emphasised that the younger generation should not forget their roots and should uphold the Iban saying, ‘*Agi idup agi ngelaban*’ (‘as long as one lives, one will continue to fight, seek challenges, strive to achieve and go all-out for improvements and overall success’) (Low 2018: 421). In fact, these words are held in the hearts of all Iban in Borneo and the Iban of Melilas take them to another level. They have proven that despite being a minority group, initially living far away in remote locations, they have not been left out or hindered from self-development.

15.9 Becoming Muslim in 1992

Some 85% of the Iban of Melilas are Muslim (around 40 families). The remaining 15% also live their everyday lives almost like Muslims. The only difference is that they have not officially embraced Islam.

After the government made it a policy to establish prayer rooms (*surau*) and a prayer hall (*balai ibadat*) in every subdistrict and village, the Ministry of Religious Affairs at that time offered a special course in religious instruction for the Iban of Melilas, especially those who were unemployed. The newly built prayer hall needed a few local residents to work there, especially assisting the imam in managing it. However, in order to join the course and be employed they had to convert to Islam first. The first batch attended the course and were sent to the Islamic Da’wah Centre (Pusat Da’wah Islamiah). In the 1990s, converting to Islam was initially frowned upon in the Iban community in Ulu Belait. This is because conversion resulted in

food prohibitions, the abandonment of ancestral practices and as far as the Iban were concerned a loss of identity.

After 20 years of formal education, the Iban of Brunei had been exposed to Malay culture and values but not so much to Islam. The earliest cohort to convert comprised four people and it was celebrated privately. Azlin and Bu Hajah were two of the first group. A year later, Azlin and Bu Hajah undertook the hajj to Mecca, fully funded by the government. The pre-pilgrimage event took place in the longhouse (Fig. 15.5).

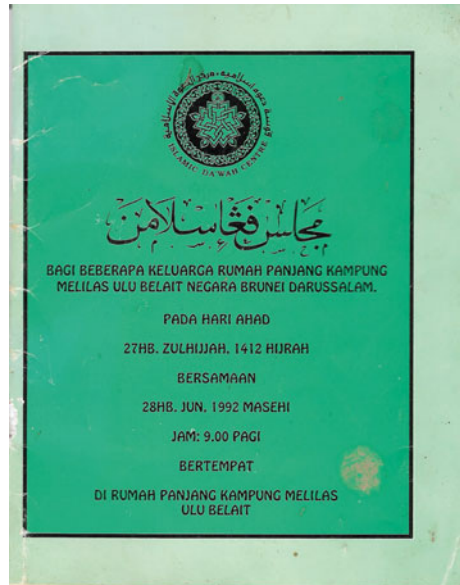
All new converts vowed to abandon all beliefs, cultures and traditions that were incompatible with Islamic values. Indeed, it was expected that the new converts would abandon their Iban values. The new Islamic values were brought into the longhouse by Azlin and Bu Hajah. And yet they believed that just because they had embraced Islam this did not mean that they had to become Malay and abandon their Iban identity. They could still be Iban and Muslim at the same time. ‘Whatever is forbidden [haram] in Islam, we abandon it. But whatever does not go against Islam, we maintain it as much as possible’, said Azlin. Azlin’s and Bu Hajah’s way of life attracted 32 new converts and it is the biggest conversion ceremony in Brunei to date (Fig. 15.6).

When Azlin and Bu Hajah first converted to Islam and then made their pilgrimage to Mecca they did not know much about Islam. All they knew was how to pray, do and consume things that were halal, and fast during Ramadan. They lived their lives based on guidelines prepared by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. It was only after the mass conversion in 1992 that they finally learned about being real Muslims. There were religious classes and religious events such as the chanting of phrases and prayers (*tahlil*) and thanksgiving ceremonies (*doa selamat*) held in the longhouse



Fig. 15.5 Azlin and Bu Hajah during a pre-pilgrimage ceremony. *Source* Personal collection of Azlin

Fig. 15.6 Front cover of the programme booklet for the Islamic conversion ceremony for families of the Melilas longhouse in Ulu Belait, held on 28 June 1992. *Source* Personal collection of Azlin



and prayer hall (Fig. 15.7). Melilas Primary School began religious classes (*kelas ugama*) in the afternoon. Non-Muslim children also attended the religious classes.

Every year since 1992 until the present, officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs have visited and stayed in the longhouse, especially during Ramadan and Hari Raya Aidilfitri (Eid), so that the Muslims and also non-Muslims in Melilas can



Fig. 15.7 Women sitting on the floor during one of the Islamic events held in the Melilas longhouse in the 1990s. *Source* Personal collection of Azlin



Fig. 15.8 Residents of Melilas celebrating their first Hari Raya in the new longhouse in 2017. *Source* Personal collection of Azlin

celebrate despite being far away from town (Fig. 15.8). It has helped in building an Islamic community in the longhouse.

Gawai is without doubt considered sinful or not permissible (haram) for Iban Muslims to celebrate. But this does not mean that they reject and isolate themselves every time Gawai is celebrated by non-Muslim residents (Fig. 15.9). Aji said:

Some of our [non-Muslim] residents still celebrate Gawai in the longhouse. But of course, with limitations in respect for those who are Muslims. They [non-Muslims] definitely can't serve pork if they want us [Muslims] to attend the Gawai celebration. We understand the limitations.



Fig. 15.9 A ritual dance during a Gawai celebration in Melilas in the early 1990s. *Source* Personal collection of Azlin

Sally explained, 'We won't let this divide the community just because we have different beliefs. The Iban community here is one big *family* that is inseparable'.

The Muslim and non-Muslim residents of Melilas try their best to maintain the integrity and unity of the community. It is strongly felt by the non-Muslim residents that they have to modify their traditional practices in order to adapt to the Muslim majority. However, modification of tradition does not mean that the tradition is lost. 'At the end of the day what makes you an Iban is your ancestral blood', Azlin said. 'You can be illiterate in Iban language, stop practising the culture and tradition and everything. But you can't deny what is in your blood and your ancestral roots'. The Iban are still Iban despite converting to Islam. For them, being Iban does not mean that they have to be Malay. Nonetheless, as observed, the Iban of Melilas have maintained their longhouse, language and the integrity and unity of the residents. Of all the longhouses in Ulu Belait, Melilas is the most optimistic and open to change as they find themselves trying their best to maintain their Iban identity.

15.10 The Making of a Longhouse

The longhouse is the traditional dwelling of many indigenous communities in Borneo such as the Iban, Bidayuh, Penan and other Orang Ulu (literally 'people of the interior'). This indigenous architecture is made up of a row of separate dwellings covered by one roof. In a typical longhouse, each family has its own separate room. Communal activities are carried out on the covered veranda (*ruai*). A small number of traditional longhouses in Ulu Belait are still inhabited today, such as those in Kampong Buau and Kampong Biadong. Even though some of the longhouses were built before the Second World War, they provide the basic need for shelter for the occupants. The use of local materials and the setting create harmony with the environment and climate conditions, and provide comfort for the residents. Local materials reduce energy consumption and lessen the environmental impact on the surrounding area. Some of the Iban longhouses in Ulu Belait have disappeared while others are being constructed mostly for tourists or are being maintained as cultural artefacts rather than as actual living spaces. There is a genuine concern that someday the distinctive identity of the longhouses may be lost.

15.10.1 *The Longhouse in Melilas*

As the first author was interviewing Azlin, a retired teacher and the key informant, he suddenly stood up from his living room sofa and rushed to the kitchen to call his wife, Bu Hajah. They had a muffled discussion in Iban, recalling what their old house (*rumah lama*) looked like. He came back, sat down and stared into space. Azlin said:

I don't know about other longhouses, but for us in Melilas it's like this. After we moved from Marudi to Bukit Uding in 1942, we only stayed for a while and established the first Melilas longhouse by the Belait River in 1944. It was during the Japanese occupation and the soldiers also established their small base at the opposite side of the river. The first longhouse that was built was only a temporary settlement to build a bigger and sturdier one. But we stayed for only a decade as a temporary settlement, still. By 1960 we moved to the upward side of the Belait River so that our house was accessible to government officials. It wasn't perfect, but it's habitable. We stayed there until 1974 and were then forced to move because there was a massive flood. It was difficult for us to do our activities. We even crossed the flood using rafts! Our properties, our farms, our ricefields and also our animals were destroyed.

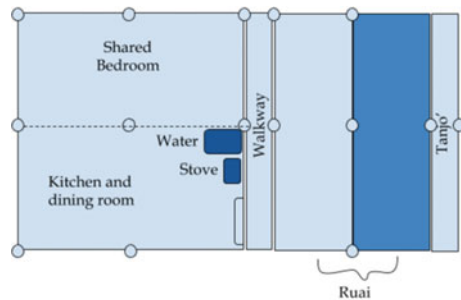
This account explains the reason why the Iban did not settle permanently because they were always looking for better places to live. They knew that living by a river could impose many environmental disadvantages, but the benefits of living by a river were very much needed for survival as well.

Azlin paused suddenly. He took out a blue pen from his pocket and began to draw a floor plan of how the first longhouse looked (Fig. 15.10). After a few minutes, he finished his drawing. He said: 'Sorry my child [*lai*], there are no photos of the first house. And drawing it in 3D is too difficult for me so this is all I can do for you'. He then chuckled to himself. It occurred to him how the house was so sturdy that its roof never leaked despite heavy rainfall. He remembered helping his people prepare the timber made of ironwood (*belian*) and meranti for the house. Ironwood is a rare and very valuable tree found only in Borneo and some Indonesian and Philippine islands, and helps explain how the longhouse was able to stand for more than a decade.

Structurally, each house consists of a series of family apartments arranged side by side. The term '*bilik*' refers to both the longhouse apartment and the family group that occupies it. The *bilik* family typically consists of three generations—grandparents, a son or daughter, their spouse and their children—with membership acquired by birth, marriage, incorporation or adoption (Freeman 1957: 15–52; see also Freeman 1970). Fronting the *bilik* is a covered, unpartitioned veranda (*ruai*) which runs the entire length of the house and, while divided into family sections (each built and maintained by an individual family), the whole area is available for communal use. This, in turn, is fronted by an uncovered veranda (*tanjo*). The wall that separates the *bilik* from the veranda bisects the structure into two equal halves. The darker shade of the veranda is covered with a woven mat (*tikai*) made of rattan. Each *bilik* apartment contains,

Fig. 15.10 Floor plan of a one-room apartment of the first Melilas longhouse.

Source Azlin



at its front upriver corner, a source foundation post (*tiang*) (Fig. 15.10). These posts or pillars are the first to be erected during construction and, when the longhouse is completed, they extend down its central axis to separate the *bilik* apartments from the unpartitioned veranda. A hearth (*dapur*) consists of an earth-filled firebox, supported in a frame (*para*) with posts extending through the floor directly into the earth below. Above the hearth is a rack for storing and drying firewood and for keeping the family's salt stores. Traditionally, the hearth was constructed immediately behind the front wall of the *bilik*, inside an area of the family apartment. Next we explain how the *bilik* are different between the first and second constructions of the longhouse.

15.10.2 *Permanent Resettlement*

In 1975 the second longhouse was built on a piece of land that seemed perfect and hopefully permanent (Fig. 15.11). Azlin held up another pen, coloured red, and made a few tweaks to the initial sketch. He called his wife again to come into the living room to sit with us, so that he could double-check his memory of the second house. He said:

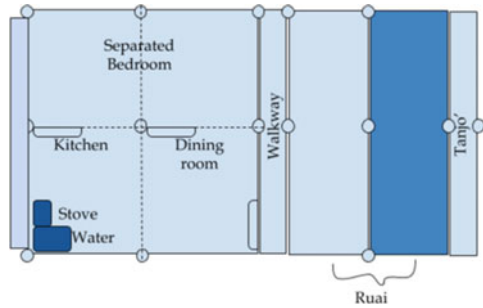
There's only a bit of difference between the first and second house. We added a back veranda for us to hang our clothes instead of the front at the uncovered veranda [*tanjo*]. Some people would extend it with stairs so they could go down through the back, but my father didn't. In the second house we finally had doors to our bedrooms. The kitchen was also finally at the back of the house instead of the middle.

Bu Hajah and another respondent, Yassin, giggled. 'It's funny how our elders couldn't think of the consequences of having a stove and a sink in the middle of the house!'



Fig. 15.11 The second longhouse after permanent settlement in Melilas. *Source* Personal collection of Azlin

Fig. 15.12 Floor plan of a one-room apartment of the second Melilas longhouse.
Source Azlin



Because if anything happen to the floor—burnt or wet—it will be very difficult to repair. The whole floor could collapse!’ Bu Hajah interrupted her husband: ‘Hygiene issues as well, *lai!* All that dirty water could get into our bedrooms and dining room floor but we were not aware of this back then’ (Fig. 15.12).

When the first informal classes were organised by the residents themselves in 1961, it showed that by this time people wanted to expose themselves to modernisation. ‘Without a school, we could have been stuck just like the old ways’, said Yassin. With education, they were able to improve their lives gradually so that they could live at the same standard as people in urban areas.

The second longhouse lasted for almost 40 years (Fig. 15.13). In 2015 the roof and floor started deteriorating. The house was at the end of its life. The residents tried to fix the roof and ordered the materials needed from Bandar Seri Begawan, but the truck carrying the materials was buried in mud on the way to the longhouse. Prior to 2017 the route to Melilas was fully off-road and hiring contractors would be expensive considering the transportation fees. The people requested help from the Royal Brunei Armed Forces instead, their only hope since they were always present in the interior. Officers and contractors inspected the place but realised that the house could not be fixed at all. In the end, the Sultan of Brunei decided that the old longhouse should be demolished and rebuilt as a modern concrete longhouse (Fig. 15.14).

Fig. 15.13 The second Melilas longhouse in 2011.
Source Personal collection of Azlin





Fig. 15.14 The current Melilas longhouse, built under the Julangan Titah project funded by the Sultan of Brunei. *Source* Personal collection of Azlin

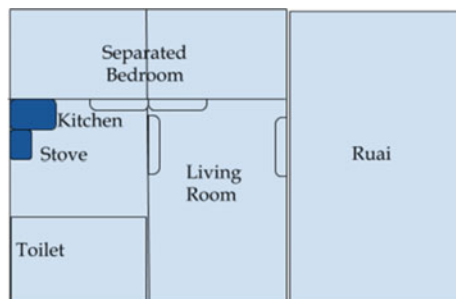
The second Melilas longhouse had gone through a lot of changes, while still maintaining its physical appearance. From 1990 onwards, the second longhouse could be seen with Astro satellite dishes on its zinc roof, television and radios inside the rooms, and a generator to power the fans and lights. The second longhouse had also witnessed changes, from the Iban who practised a more traditional way of life to exposure to modernity and conversion of its people from animists to Muslims. It is not surprising that the longhouse has a special place in their hearts.

The current longhouse is like a typical terrace house. In each *bilik* apartment, there is a living room with at least two bedrooms, two toilets and a kitchen combined with a dining room (Fig. 15.15). The veranda is now indoors surrounded by walls and there are no foundation posts supporting the veranda anymore. The veranda is more like a long hall and can accommodate wedding ceremonies as it is so spacious and convenient for big events.

Bu Hajah said:

It's not that we are not happy with the new house. We just love the old longhouse [second longhouse] more. We lived there for years, we grew up there, we got married and raised our children there. I wouldn't want it to be demolished, but the old house couldn't be saved. But I guess it's good to some extent. If there is no more Melilas, people wouldn't want to come

Fig. 15.15 Floor plan of a one-room apartment of the present Melilas longhouse. *Source* Azlin



back to the interior. The jungle, the river, the land and the animals—oh, I love them so dearly. When I wash the dishes at the back [in the kitchen], many rare animals can be sighted such as the crested fireback [*keruai*]. I take care of the rainforest with my husband, we volunteer to accompany the researchers to study the rainforest. We even stayed in the thick jungle for two weeks eating canned food every day!

Azlin regretted how the rare animals barely showed up anymore:

Sometimes I feel like the animals are running away. Their natural habitat is disturbed way too much by human activity. I feel sad for our jungle that sometimes when I catch a wild chicken or any other animals, I would feel sad and let them go instead. I'm worried that my great grandchildren won't be able to see these animals in Melilas again.

Even up until today, the Iban of Melilas are still connected emotionally to the jungle and they attach a high sentimental value on it. Apart from the longhouse, the nearby jungle has also witnessed the changes they had gone through and provided all the necessities for their survival since they first came to Brunei. The surrounding environment is indeed their home.

The head of the longhouse emphasised how the younger generation should always come back to Melilas every week and never leave it empty. 'I always advise the children of Melilas to come back, the sultan had given us a comfortable home and we should not leave it empty. That's why during weekends and holidays the number can reach over a hundred'. Other than the sentimental value of the longhouse for these people it is also a sign of gratitude to the sultan. Bu Hajah said, 'The sultan sponsored this house using his "pocket money". If it was up to us [to reconstruct], we were not able to pay for it. The elders are all retired, our children also have other commitments with their families. So we are thankful for the reconstruction'.

When the sultan directed the reconstruction of the BND2 million budget longhouse, it was reconstructed without the approval of the Ministry of Development. What was important was the safety and welfare of the people of Melilas. But there were other reasons why the longhouse was reconstructed on the same land and in the area, instead of moving the residents out of the interior and into towns. According to Aji and Azlin, the reconstruction was made for security purposes. Melilas is 30 km from the Brunei–Malaysia border. With increasing logging activity around Mulu in Sarawak, illegal crossover into Ulu Belait is bound to happen. 'Sometimes we can hear gunshots in the jungle and whenever I go for a short stroll I can usually pick up one or two empty bullet shells along the way', said Azlin. 'The sultan didn't want the interior area to be deserted', Aji explained. 'Our green jewel and the border need to be protected. The army is always here too' (Fig. 15.16).

15.11 Conclusion

Researchers who have written about indigenous communities in Sarawak, Malaysia, and Brunei, which have come under British colonial influence, have invariably resorted to classifications and census categories that have colonial origins. More



Fig. 15.16 The Royal Brunei Land Force visiting the Melilas longhouse in 2018. *Source* Personal collection of Azlin

often than not, official categories do not reflect the reality on the ground. The consequence of such aggregation is to essentialise the indigenous populations. Hence in the past the Iban were referred to as the Dayak population by the colonial administration. When Sarawak was incorporated into Malaysia in 1963, the politics of ethnicity practised by the federal government encouraged the Iban to distinguish themselves from other indigenes and led to its ethnic formation. Being late arrivals to Brunei just before the Second World War, the Iban have sought to maintain their identity in various ways.

However, the common reference to Iban-ness in Brunei as if it is a homogenous community belies differences and nuances that exist below the surface. In the absence of documented research of the Iban in Brunei, it is difficult to make sense of how the Iban communities have responded and adapted to the assimilationist policies implicit in how the government manages indigenous minorities in the state. This study of the Iban in Melilas is one step in demonstrating that Iban communities, usually identified with their symbolic attachment to the longhouse, do not always respond uniformly as they strive to settle in the sultanate over time.

From the 1940s, when they first entered Brunei through its porous borders, until the 1990s when they converted to Islam, the community had gone through many economic and social changes. Although located in one of the more remote parts of Brunei, they were impressed by the benefits of education for their Iban relatives in Sibuh and the leaders took it upon themselves to build a primary school. Their exposure to a bilingual education of Malay and English and their proximity to the oil and gas industry of Seria—the powerhouse of Brunei's economy—have changed their outlook. As a community known for their strong belief in their folk religion and pride in their identity (Jensen 1974; Metom 2013), the Iban of Melilas were the first to convert to Islam in significant numbers, yet were able to retain their Iban-ness to some degree. Their openness to change has brought benefits to the community.

One of the more visible milestones of the development of the community was the construction of the concrete longhouse with modern amenities in 2017 to replace the older wooden traditional structure that had deteriorated over the years as a result of floods. This was a notable departure from the temporary structures of the past and over the years—preceded by conversion to Islam and full citizenship—marked the milestone that the Iban of Melilas had finally found a permanent home in Brunei. Some of the local Iban had also found employment in the Brunei army. It is fortuitous that Melilas is located close to the southern Brunei–Malaysia border and for security purposes it is strategic to have a military presence there.

The Iban of Melilas, despite their conversion to Islam, have been able to maintain their identity separate from the Malays. The longhouse, which over the years has been transformed from a traditional construction to a modern structure, remains an important site and space for the periodic gathering of the local Iban who have been dispersed from their place of origin due to the increasing availability of opportunities for better education, livelihood and housing. Gawai, like other significant events in the life course, is an occasion for members of the kinship community to return to the longhouse to celebrate and to affirm their connections. The Iban of Melilas who have converted to Islam have adapted their traditional practices to the demands of *syariah*. On National Day and the public celebration of the sultan's birthday, the Iban wear their traditional dress to symbolically mark themselves out as a distinct ethnic community. Sociologically, this discussion of the ethnic formation of the Iban of Melilas illustrates the view that ethnic identity is both instrumental and expressive. The Iban are conscious of maintaining and retaining their unique identity, but at the same time aware that they have to do so to adapt to changing political and economic conditions. This chapter documents one instance of the Iban response.

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Glossary of Non-English Terms

- abang** brother
- ‘áda** ordinary habits, customs and practices that are often not addressed in Islamic laws
- adab berpakaian** clothing etiquette
- adab-adab orang Brunei** Bruneian manners
- adat** custom, tradition, customary law
- adat istiadat** customs and traditions
- adat istiadat perkahwinan Brunei** traditional Brunei Malay marriage ceremonies
- adat langkah dulang** payment from the groom to the bride’s unmarried older siblings
- adat masuk pengangunan** entrance of the spiritual/ritual experts
- adat tabus bangsa** dowry from the groom to the bride if the bride’s family is of a higher rank/title than the groom
- agama** religion
- ah hia** big brother
- akad nikah** solemnisation ceremony
- akar jantung** blood vessels of the heart
- akhirah, akhirat** afterlife, the hereafter
- Alhamdulillah, Alhamdulilah** expression of ‘praise be to God’ in Islam
- amah** domestic maid
- anak dara** virgin (female)
- angpao** monetary gift in a packet, given on special occasions
- asam aur-aur** *kundong* fruit, *Garcinia parvifolia*
- Assalamualaikum** greetings, literally ‘peace be upon you’
- Astaghfirullah** supplication for redemption in Islam
- aurat** intimate parts, parts of the body that must be hidden from the view of others, modesty
- ayam-ayam** type of traditional headdress/headpiece for wedding ceremonies
- azimat** amulet, talisman
- bacaan** euphemism for spells
- bacaan jampi** recite spells

- baju kurung*** loose-fitting dress consisting of a long blouse (usually down to the knees) and a long skirt
- balai ibadat*** prayer hall
- baligh*** physiological transition to puberty
- bangkit cahaya*** awaken the inner glow
- banglai*** ginger
- bangsa*** race
- bangsa Melayu*** Malay race
- baras lulut, beras lulur*** rice powder scrub
- barigali*** disgusting
- bedak lulut*** aromatic powder
- bejalai*** walk, go on a journey
- belanja hangus, angus*** bride price
- belanja serbaguna*** bride price
- belian*** ironwood
- Beraja*** monarch
- berambil-ambilan*** post-wedding reception where both families get to know each other better
- berbedak siang, berbedak mandi*** ceremony for blessing the soon-to-be bride and groom, and cleansing of the whole body
- berdosa*** sinful
- berinai, berpacar*** henna application ceremony
- berjaga-jaga*** precautionary
- berjarum-jarum*** start of the wedding process when parents from both sides meet each other
- berlulut*** scrubbing of the body
- bersanding*** wedding reception
- bersyukur*** thankful
- bertangas*** herbal steam bath ritual
- berumur*** aged
- beulah*** act up or be naughty
- bida*** ugly
- bilik*** longhouse apartment or room and the family group that occupies it
- bomoh*** traditional medicine practitioner
- budaya*** culture
- Bumiputera*** indigenous people, literally ‘sons of the soil’
- bunga gambir*** gambier
- bunga mawar*** rose
- bunga melur*** jasmine
- bunga rampai*** potpourri of flowers
- cahaya*** glow
- caker, cekur*** aromatic ginger
- calak Brunei*** Brunei mould, Brunei way
- canang*** thin gong
- ceramah*** religious talk

- cikgu* teacher
cikgu mengaji tutor who teaches one how to read the Qur'an
daerah district
dakwah Islamic proselytisation, outreach (literally 'invitation to salvation')
dapat diharapkan reliable
dapur hearth in a longhouse
darah manis sweet blood
daulat kepada raja to serve and be loyal to the king
daun balik angin turn-in-the-wind leaves
daun nilam patchouli
daun sambung longevity spinach
dhuha Muslim voluntary morning prayer
dikuncikan locked
doa selamat thanksgiving ceremony
dukun shaman
dunia temporary or present world
Eid, Eid Aidilfitri annual Muslim festival marking the end of Ramadan
fatwa religious order issued by a Muslim leader
gamis long robe worn by women
guris practice of uttering spells or verses from the Qur'an with the purpose of creating an unseen barrier, literally 'draw a line' or 'scratch'
halal in Islam, permissible or lawful
halalan thayyiban permissible, good and hygienic in relation to food
haram in Islam, sinful, not permissible, prohibited
Hari Raya, Hari Raya Aidilfitri annual Muslim festival marking the end of Ramadan, Eid Aidilfitri
hijab Muslim head covering for women
hijabi women who wear head coverings
hukum syara' laws of Islam
ikhlas sincerity
ilmu knowledge
ilmu pendinding mystical protective knowledge
inai, pacar henna
indung mother
Insyaa'Allah, Inshallah expression of 'if God wills' in Islam
istiadat malam berjaga-jaga ceremony of the night vigil
jampi spell, magical knowledge
jampi cahaya Allah spell for the glow of Allah
jampi yang dilarang spell that is forbidden
jongsarat woven patterned fabric used most often for royal occasions and weddings
jubah long robe worn by men
kain lapik pinang white cloth used to identify the virginity of a bride, literally 'betel nut cloth'
kampong, kampung village
kanak-kanak children

- kancing** elaborate butterfly-shaped necklace
kangkong water spinach
karit stingy
karong tembusa decoration for the nape of the neck
kayu cendana sandalwood
kebaya a type of traditional blouse
kelas agama religious class
kemenyan benzoin resin
kereta sapu illegal taxi
keris dagger
keruai crested fireback
kesian pity
ketua darjah class monitor
ketua kampung village head
khatam al-Qur'an recitation of the Qur'an
khurafat superstitious
kiblat direction towards the Kaaba in the Great Mosque in Mecca
kolo mee a type of noodle dish
Konfrontasi Indonesia–Malaysia armed conflict period
kuat beulah bothersome, disruptive
kueh bite-sized snacks or desserts
kurta loose collarless shirt worn by men
lai child
langir whiteflower albizia
lawa pretty
lelaki, laki-laki man or male
libas miserable consequences
limau nipis Key lime
lulut scrub, scrubbing the body
Ma lai ren Malay people
malam berbedak ceremony of the night of applying coloured powders on the bride and groom
mandi bathe
mandi langir method of a bride purifying herself when taking a whiteflower bath
manja spoiled, pampered
mantera mandi shower spell
masuk Islam become Muslim
masuk Melayu become Malay
masuk pengangunan entrance of spiritual/ritual experts
Masya'Allah, Mashallah expression of 'what God has willed' in Islam
matahari hidup facing the sunrise, i.e. east
mazhab Shafi'i Shafi'i jurisprudence
Melayu Malay
Melayu Islam Beraja Malay Islamic monarchy
memaliti bedak act of powdering during a wedding ceremony

- membadaki** dab aromatic powder during wedding ritual
- membazir** waste
- menaikkan seri muka pengantin** increase a newlywed couple's glow
- menghantar berian** exchange of gifts from the groom
- menghantar tanda pertunangan** the groom's side goes to the bride's side and offers rings to signal his real interest, the beginning of a formal engagement
- merantau** circular migration, wandering, rite of passage when someone leaves home
- mesti kuat** must be strong
- mimpi** dreams
- mulih** going or returning back home
- mulih tiga hari** when the groom brings home his wife after their third day of staying at his wife's house and then stays at the groom's home for another three days
- mulih tiga atau tujuh hari** when the groom brings home his wife after their third or seventh day of staying at his wife's house
- mukim** subdistrict
- najis** polluted
- nasib** fate
- nazir** school inspectors
- negara zikir, negara beradat** nation devoted to God and its customs and traditions
- ngajat** traditional Orang Ulu dance
- niat** intention
- nini** grandma
- orang halus** bad spirits
- orang kampung** villager
- orang pandai** spiritual man
- orang tua** old person
- orang tua keluarga** elders of the family
- Orang Ulu** indigenous upriver people, literally 'people of the interior'
- orang yang beradat** a person with culture
- orang yang berilmu** one who possesses spiritual knowledge
- orang yang tidak beradat** a person without culture
- palui** stupid
- pandan** screw pine
- pang sai** take a dump
- pantang larang** prohibition
- para** frame supporting a hearth in a longhouse
- pasar malam** night market
- pelaminan** wedding stage
- pemberontakan Brunei** Brunei revolt
- pengangun** female wedding attendant, ritual specialist
- pengapai** diener, mortuary assistant
- pengarusan** ritual using three candles to fuse seven coloured threads together around the bride
- penghulu** chief, headman
- penghulu segala hari** the best day of the week

- pengulin*** traditional midwife
penolong ketua darjah assistant class monitor
penyunat circumciser
pikaras ritual gift given to a *pengangun* such as a gold ring
pirasang Siamese rice powder
poklen dirty, uneducated, aggressive, unsophisticated (derogatory)
pra suffix for pre
pra, prasekolah reception class or kindergarten class
puak indigenous ethnic group
puak jati indigenous ethnic group
puak-puak Melayu seven indigenous native or ethnic groups in Brunei comprising Belait, Bisaya, Brunei (Brunei Malays), Dusun, Kedayan, Murut and Tutong
pundan, pondan transvestite, transgender
pusing naga three circles of a dragon ritual
raja permaisuri sehari king and queen of the day
redha contentment, acceptance of fate
rezeki fortune or blessing
riak, riya', riyaa' act of showing one's good deeds or religiosity which could lead to arrogance or haughtiness
rizq spiritual blessings, one's good fate/fortune
roh suci holy spirit
ruai covered and unpartitioned veranda
rumah lama old house
rumah panjang longhouse
sedekah charity, alms
sederhana simple
sekolah kebangsaan national school
selawat ke atas Nabi Muhammad invocation to the Prophet Muhammad
selawat Nabi salutations to the Prophet
selendang shawl
semangat spirit
serai lemongrass
shahadah declaration of Muslim faith
sihir black magic
siok sendiri self-indulgent, be full of oneself
sisir comb
spendet underwear
songkok traditional Islamic hat worn by men
Subhanallah general expression of praise in Islam
suka berintai enjoy fighting
suka mengumpat gossiping
sunnah Muslim optional prayer
surau prayer room
suruhan servant
syabu crystal methamphetamine

- syariah* Islamic canonical law
syirik idol worship
syukur gratitude
tahajjud Muslim night prayer
tahlil chanting of phrases and prayers
tajau large jar for storing water or paddy
tajok type of traditional headdress/headpiece for wedding ceremonies
tamu kunci Chinese ginger
tamu kuning curcuma
tamu lawak yellow turmeric
tamu putih white turmeric
tanjo uncovered veranda
taqwa God consciousness
tarian ngajat traditional dance performed by indigenous peoples of Borneo
tawas alum
tayyib wholesome, clean in Islam
tayyibat purity, wholesomeness and lawfulness in Islam
telekung white prayer cloth
teruna stripling
tetangga neighbour, someone who originated from the same village
tiang foundation post of a longhouse
tikai woven mat
topi haji prayer hat, skull cap
tuai rumah longhouse head
tuak alcoholic beverage made from natural yeast and fermented rice
tudung headscarf
tuli deaf
ubahlah nasib to change one's fate
ulu isolated interior
ummah Muslim community
ustaz, ustazah qualified Islamic scholar
utamakan bahasa Melayu prioritise the Malay language
verstehen to understand in a deep way
wajib compulsory
warak devout
warga emas senior, literally 'golden citizen'
waris inheritance
Weltanschauung worldview
zikir in Islam, chanted phrases or prayers to remember God

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