

The Melting Pot of the Malays as a Majority Group with Three Minority Muslim Ethnic Groups – The Indian Muslims, Chinese Muslims and Mirik people of Malaysia: An Evaluation of Ethnic Changes

Dr. Osman Chuah Abdullah

International Islamic University Malaysia
Department of Usuluddin and Comparative Religion
Sungei Busu, Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
osmanabdullah300@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This research is concerning the melting pot of three minority Muslim ethnic groups; namely the Indian Muslims, the Chinese Muslims and the Mirik people of Sarawak as well as the Malays as the majority group in Malaysia. The methodology makes use of the theory of assimilation and preservation of individual group identities in the dynamic changes of ethnic behaviours as applied to the USA in the 19th century. In Malaysia, a survey is conducted on the Indian Muslims, the Chinese Muslims and the Mirik people to find out the changes experienced by these three minority Muslim groups with regard to the Malays. The results show that Islam is a very important attribute of the Malays and it has the impact of pulling the minority Muslim groups into the ways of the Malays. When the Chinese, Indian and Mirik people embrace Islam, they acquire a common identity with the Malays. When they practise Islam, like performing the five daily prayers, fasting, paying alms and going on the pilgrimage, they are gradually integrating into the Malays' way of life. They also have common festivals with the Malays after conversion and the men frequently go to the mosque for Friday prayer. Assimilation is also accelerated by intermarriage between the Chinese and Indian Muslims with the Malays. As the sole medium of instruction in schools and universities, the Malay language also helps the Chinese and Indian Muslims to blend into the Malay's lifestyle. However, non-assimilation is also taking place when the Indian Muslims marry spouses from India and both the Chinese and Indian Muslims send their children to their ethnic schools and universities in Taiwan/China or India respectively to preserve their ethnicity. While the Mirik people have totally assimilated into the Malays' way of life, for the Chinese and Indian Muslims, both assimilation and preservation of their individual identity are still taking place.

Keywords: assimilation, plural society, Malay, Chinese, Mirik people

INTRODUCTION

How Ethnic Groups Interact and Integrate in the Malaysian Society

Malaysia consists of the Malaya Peninsula which is located south of Thailand and East Malaysia which consists of Sabah and Sarawak on the Borneo Island separated from Malay Peninsula by the South China Sea. It has a population of 27,750,037. There are approximately 13,875,000 Malay Muslims following the Shafii school of thought, 7,231,900 million Chinese following one "Chinese religion" or another and 2,310,521 Indian followers of Hinduism and others. (Malaysia Statistics Department 2010) The Malays belong to the largest ethnic group in Malaysia, whereas the Chinese is the second largest group. Actually there is no such term as "Chinese religion" but the Chinese worldview about religion is not exclusive to any religion and so it is not difficult to find the Chinese accepting other religions which are not ethnically defined. The religions of the Chinese include Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity of various

denominations and even Islam. (Tan Chee Beng 2000 p.282.) As for the Indians, they are mostly Hindu followers observing Hinduism with their idol worship and festivals. There are also Indian Muslims but they differ from the Malays in that they follow the Hanafi school of thought whereas the Malays follow the Shafii school of thought.

Most of the Indians originated from the Southern parts of India including Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Gujarat, Malabar, Uttar Pradesh and others. 90% of the Indians in Malaysia are Tamil and they mostly speak Tamil, the mother tongue of their homeland. Some speak Kerala, Malabar and others. The Indian Muslims in Malaysia too consist mostly of Tamil Nadu origin. There are also some Chinese Muslims consisting about one percent of the total Chinese population. These different ethnic groups follow different religions and their cultures, festivals and value systems are not the same from one another.

Thus, religions and cultures are much diversified in Malaysia. This country is the meeting place of nearly all world known religions, namely Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and Christianity. Even Sai Baba and Bahai followers can be found here.

In the past when Malaya was under the rule of the British coloniser, the Chinese were staying in towns and mining areas whereas the Malays were staying in rural kampong and the Indians in estates. The Indian Muslims were unique though; even during the colonial era, they were staying in towns and not in the estates or plantations as the Hindu Indians were. At that time, the Chinese were businessmen, mine owners or workers in tin mines. Indians were road builders or rubber tappers in rubber estates. In addition, the Malays were non-commercial farmers in rural areas. Therefore, there was a division of occupation according to the races of the people.

However, with industrialization and development, the division of occupation according to race or ethnicity had changed after Independence. Today, occupations are no longer divided or defined according to racial or ethnic groups in Malaysia. Now, you can find all people – Malays, Chinese and Indians – engaged in all kinds of occupations not categorized according to race as it was during the colonial era. However, we still categorize the various races or ethnic groups into two main groups; namely *bumiputra* and *non-bumiputra*. *Bumiputra* means Prince of the soil, it refers to the Malay and native people.

The *bumiputra* consists of the Malays and the native peoples, the *orang asli* and also the native tribes in Sabah and Sarawak. However, the Chinese and Indians and others are *non-bumiputra*. The Malays consist of about 50% of the total population and they are the dominant group politically. It is the only ethnic group that is defined in the Malaysian constitution as speaking Malay (language), following Islam and practicing Malay customs. Currently, the Malays are a very important component of the ruling party. Since Independence, the Prime Minister or Deputy Prime Minister and many important ministers have been Malays.

It is under these conditions that all the ethnic groups interact and integrate, causing changes to take place with the identity of various ethnic groups. However, this study only probes the ethnic situation of the Malays as an ethnic majority group and its influences over three minority Muslim groups; namely the Chinese Muslims, the Indian Muslims and the Mirik people in the state of Sarawak, Malaysia.

Introduction of the Concept of Assimilation and Pluralistic Theories

The assimilation theory was crystallized in the 19th century when the USA was industrialized and many immigrants with diversified religious and ethnic backgrounds arrived in the country. Earlier on, Park (Robert E Park, 1914; 1950) provided the theory of "Race Relation Cycle – contact, accommodation and assimilation – involving different degrees of absorption by the dominant culture." He was the origin and earliest advocator of assimilation. Later, it was followed by Gordon (1964), Newman (1973) and others. Gordon acknowledges that there is a massive trend towards acculturation of groups, particularly the natives born to an American pattern. Newman (1973 p.54.) observes the institutionalization of the assimilation theory as follows:

... here for the first time, in the American experience, major social groups and movements began to declare that a dominant group culture existed and that incoming groups would be expected to conform to this majority culture

Just as there are advocators of assimilation and believers of assimilation to the dominant culture, there are also scholars who believe in the prominent adherence of minority culture and identity. These are advocators of pluralism who believe that minority ethnicity should be maintained and retained. Among these are Kallen (1924), Schrag (1971), Auden (1972) and others. Kallen exploits the theory of cultural pluralism representing an alternative to Americanization. Instead of being reviled for the differences between minority culture and the dominant influences, he advocates a nation of nations. Schrag also mentions ethnic fever while Auden describes the non-changing ethnic immigrants.

There are two opposite perspectives of the melting theory of ethnicity. While the assimilation ideology advocates national unity or homogeneity through the elimination of ethnic boundaries, the pluralist ideology insists on diversity or heterogeneity of the national life by maintaining such boundaries. Gambino, Richard. (1975). In the USA, the assimilation of the minority culture is towards the Anglo-Saxon as the dominant culture of the nation. There are also scholars who discover that assimilation and pluralism are not excluded in the changes of each other. Kwang and Won (1993), in their studies of immigrant Koreans in the USA, conclude that both assimilation and pluralism had taken place in them. Some had assimilated while some retained their ethnicity. (Kwang and Won 1993)

While assimilation and pluralism are ethnic theories crystallised from the USA, they have a very influential impact on nationalism in South East Asia. In Malaysia, some scholars have disagreed with the assimilation of one ethnic group into another. For example, Judith Nagata (1974) studies the ethnicity of the Malays; she illustrates several examples of ethnicity whereby a Malay would respond that he is an Arab when mixing with an Arab but claims to be a Malay when mixing with a Malay. However, when one is pointed out by a non-Malay that the Malays are a lazy race, he would answer that he is not a Malay.

Some scholars disagree with Nagata as historically, many Malays defended the Malaccan Sultanate and died as Malay heroes when Malacca fell to the Portuguese in 1511. However, there are also scholars who support the assimilation of the melting pot in Malaysia. For example, Wan Abdul Halim's (1978) in-depth study discusses the various stages of which minority Muslim groups are assimilated into the Malay world.

After Malaysia achieved its Independence, Malay became the official language and Islam the state religion. (This is part of Malaysian Constitution.) This was the policy on the national identity of the people and it was ideal as all citizens must be of one identity after Independence. This situation is similar to that in the USA of the 19th century at the beginning of

nation building where anything Anglo-Saxon must be upheld.

This study uses the theory of assimilation and pluralism from the USA to evaluate whether the minority Muslim groups have assimilated into the Malay ethnicity or retained their individual group ethnicity. The three groups; the Indian Muslims, the Chinese Muslims and the Mirik people are earmarked for this study. The Indian Muslims and the Chinese Muslims are spread out throughout the whole of Malaysia whereas the Mirik live only in Miri, Sarawak in East Malaysia. In the melting pot of Malaysia, the Chinese Muslims and the Indian Muslims mix socially with the Malays and their non-Muslim Chinese and Indian people while the tribal people of Mirik have all converted to Islam so there is no influence of non-Muslims from their own tribe. The research is interested in finding out the changes in the ethnic characteristics of the Chinese Muslims, the Indian Muslims and the Mirik people. Moreover, it attempts to find out whether these people are changing towards the Malay way of life or they are retaining their own ethnicity.

The Identity of the Malays, Indian Muslims, Chinese Muslims and the Mirik people of Sarawak

The Malays are perhaps the only ethnic group defined in the constitution of an independent nation in the world. It is defined in Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution that a Malay person is one who speaks the Malay language, practises Malay customs and adheres to the Islamic way of life. This definition can be very problematic. Since Independence, Malay has been the official language and medium of instruction at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. Because of this, nearly all the young people in Malaysia can speak Malay. Second, practising the Malay customs could be problematic. Among the sub-ethnic groups of Malay, there could be different kinds of customs. However, there are also common customs such as the wearing of *baju Melayu* and *kebaya* and marriage rituals. As for adhering to Islam, there is no boundary among all sub-ethnic Malay groups. Generally, all the Malays in Malaysia adhere to Islam. Thus, Islam is the most important of all three attributes mentioned regarding the Malays in the Malaysian constitution.

The Malays are also part of the majority group in Malaysia. More Parliament Members come from this ethnic group than any other. Besides, most of the state governments are under their control. The Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and most of the state Chief Ministers have been Malays since Independence.

Indian Muslims in Malaysia are defined as local born Indian Muslims or Indians who have converted to Islam in Malaysia or descendants of Muslims from India who migrated to Malaysia. Generally, most Indian Muslims are Tamil as 90% of them speak Tamil and they originally came from Tamil Nadu. There are also Indian Muslims who came from Kerala, and they are known as the Malabaris. There are also Indian Muslims who arrived from other places such as Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and other places with Indian speaking languages like Malayalam, Urdu and Gujarati. Before the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, all Indian Muslims were known as Indian Muslims. After the creation of Pakistan, there were some who were referred to as Pakistan Muslims. Today, there is also a mosque known as Pakistan Mosque in Kuala Lumpur. (Osman Abdullah Chuah, 2011) Nobody can give the exact figure of the Indian Muslim population in Malaysia. According to a PERMIN (Gabungan Persatuan Muslimim Indian) is an afflicted association of all Indian Muslim associations in Malaysia, according to an officer, the figure is about 500,000 in Malaysia. However, a JAKIM (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia or Malaysia Islam Development Corporation is a federal Islamic Authority to co-ordinate the affairs of Islam in all the states in Malaysia) officer suggests that

the number of Indian Muslims is close to 800,000. (Both figures were obtained by interviewing JAKIM and PERMIN officers.

Chinese Muslims in Malaysia consist mostly of converted Muslims and their children. The total number of Chinese Muslims in Malaysia is approximately 57,221 which make up just 1% of the total Chinese population of 5,691,908. Selangor, with 17,246, has the highest number of Chinese Muslims, followed by Sabah (8,589), Kuala Lumpur (7,991) and Sarawak (7,287). There are more females than males, numbering 32,271 and 21,850 respectively. (Malaysian Population Census 2000) Most of them are descendents of Chinese from the Southern parts of China such as Canton or Hokkien. They can speak the Chinese local languages from which they originated such as Hokkien or Cantonese. If they go to Chinese vernacular schools, then they can speak Mandarin. Most of them converted to Islam in Malaysia. Only a few Chinese Muslim families migrated from China and they are known as Hui Hui. (Rosey Ma 2009. p.1)

The Mirik in Sarawak were originally a people living in the interior parts of Sarawak, North Borneo, in places such as Padang Liku and Ulu Taniku. They were forced to move downriver into their sub-coastal habitat in order to seek refuge from the depredations of their head-hunting Kayan neighbours. They came to the new habitat area of Mirik and met the Brunei Muslim Malays and later converted to Islam. (Tunku Zainah Ibrahim 1977)

Methodology of Research

This study applies library research in finding out not only the background of Malaysia but also the theory of assimilation and pluralism from American and Malaysian scholars. The information on Malaysian background and population are collected from the Statistics Department of Malaysia. As for the theory of assimilation and pluralism, this is also garnered from USA and overseas scholars coming to Malaysia to teach Malay ethnicity in Malaysian universities such as Judith Nagata and others. Their theory for assimilation and pluralism, their interaction and integration of all the ethnic groups mentioned or their melting pot are used to evaluate the assimilation and pluralism of Chinese Muslims, Indian Muslims and the Mirik people towards the Malay world.

Besides relying on library research, fieldwork is also conducted on Chinese Muslims and Indian Muslims by the writer and co-researchers. The secondary data collected in the Master's thesis of Tunku Zainah Ibrahim on the ethnicity of Sarawak were very useful as they provided very rich insights on the changes experienced by the Mirik people. (Tunku Zainah Ibrahim 1977) The researchers of the present study also confirm the assimilation of the Mirik people into the Malay lifestyle after interviewing students from Miri, Sarawak studying in Peninsula Malaysia and paying a visit to Miri in Sarawak.

Assimilation of the Indian Muslims into the Malay World in Malaysia

There are more Indian Muslims in Malaysia than Chinese Muslims. Historically, Indian Muslims came to the Malay Peninsula for trade and they were responsible for spreading Islam to the native people. (T.W. Arnold 2000 p.336.) At first, the Indian Muslims were highly respected by the local Malays who might not be Muslims yet and were followers of Hinduism. They entered the elite circle of the Malay royalty freely and met royal family members. While trading, they were also Muslim preachers; in fact, they were responsible for Malacca Sultan Parameswara to marry the princess of Pasai from Sumatra. The Sultan of Malacca embraced Islam and changed his name to Megat Iskandar Shah. (Khoo Kay Kim 2006. pp. 266-287) Another Indian merchant, Kapitan Keling Cauder Muhideen Merican from Penang was asked by the royal family of Kedah to marry a royal member, Tunku Maheran or Tunku Wan Chik Taiboo. (Yamin Merican 2007. P. 220-221.)The Indian Muslims were very influential and was responsible for

building many mosques throughout the nation in Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Kuching and others. (Osman Chuah Abdullah et.al 2011 pp. 220-221) In the past, with Arab Muslim merchants, the Indian Muslims were responsible for spreading Islam to the Malays in Malaysia. (There is no historical evidences but the opinion of the present researchers)

In the melting pot of Malaysia, several ethnic changes have taken place. The following are the results of a survey done by the researchers in 2008 through a grant by Jabatan Dakwah Islam Malaysia: (Malaysia Islamic Da`wah Department)

- For all the Indians in Malaysia, their names in birth certificates and identity cards are frequently inserted with A/L (*anak lelaki*) or 'son of' and A/P (*anak perempuan*) or 'daughter of'. This used to be the identity of the Indians in Malaysia whether they are Hindus or Muslims. This is still applicable to the Indian Hindus in Malaysia. However, the Malay name in the birth certificate is given a *bin* for 'son of' and *binti* for 'daughter of'. Therefore, now many Indian Muslims are dropping the A/L and the A/P in their birth certificates and identity cards and using *bin* for 'son of' and *binti* for 'daughter of' as many of them desire to be like the Malays in Malaysia. As the Malays are *bumiputra*, a political status that entitled them privileges to easily get into public universities, buying a new house with a discount, buying *Amanah Saham Bumiputra* (a trust fund only for the *bumiputra*) with three-fold profit than ordinary trust funds and other benefits.
- Many Indian Muslims are married to Malays in Malaysia, producing a *peranakan* race (a mixed race) known as *Mamak*. Many *Mamak* could not speak any of the Indian languages like Tamil but they can very well speak the Malay language. Their ways of living is the same as the Malays. Even in attitude, they regard themselves as Malays. The number of *Mamak* is quite substantial but it is difficult to survey them as some claim to be Malays rather than Indian Muslims. In the population census, they are categorized as Malays. This shows the assimilation from Indian Muslims to Malays has taken place in Malaysia.
- The Indian Muslims are allowed to become members of the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the most influential political party in Malaysia and the dominating political force since Independence. All past and present Prime Ministers, Deputy Prime Ministers and important ministers like the Minister of Defence and Minister of Education have been and are from this party. Many Indian Muslims join this party and become very important ministers and some have also become Chief Ministers of several states. For example, Dr Mahathir Muhammad, the longest serving Prime Minister or the fourth Prime Minister of the nation is originally an Indian Muslim. Dr Zambry Abdul Kadeer, the *Menteri Besar* (Chief Minister) of the state of Perak is another Indian Muslim. They are not the exception. The list of Indian Muslims holding ministerial posts through joining this political party is quite long.
- However, non-assimilation is taking place too. Many Indian Muslim men desire to marry women from their own race who can speak their mother tongue and understand their own culture and customs. Because of this, they return to their places of origin in India like Tamil Nadu and marry Tamil wives. Besides, they send their children to Tamil speaking *madrrasah* (Islamic religious school) and even send their children to universities in India.
- In the past, many mosques and *madrrasah* (school) had been built by Indian Muslims. However, most of them have since been taken over by state Islamic departments. In Kuala Lumpur, Masjid India is still being managed by the Indian Muslim Committee and the *khutbah* (Friday sermon) is given in Tamil. In Kuching, Masjid India is still being run by the Indian Muslim Committee even though the state religious department has taken over. There are two *Imams* (one who leads the five daily prayers); one is an Indian

Muslim while the other is a Malay. The Friday sermon is alternately given in Tamil and Malay languages. In Penang, most of the *madrasah* have been taken over by the state religious department. The medium of instruction has been changed from Tamil to Malay. However, in Kuala Lumpur, near Masjid India and in Pandan Indah, Selangor, there are *madrasah* still using Tamil as the language to teach Islam. They also import religious books in Tamil from India for the *madrasah*. They slaughter goats instead of cows for their Sacrifice Festival as recent as Sunday, 6th October 2011. Slaughtering cows is a sensitive issue in India for this festival. When the Indian Muslims migrated to Malaysia, they continued with this custom of slaughtering goats or sheep only.

Assimilation of the Chinese Muslims into the Malay World in Malaysia

According to the population census of 1900, Malaya including Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak had 17,927 Chinese Muslimsⁱ out of a population of 581,598 Chinese. (Rosey Ma, 2009. p.3) Meanwhile, the total Muslim population of other races was 661,216, most of whom were Malay Muslims. However, it is not possible to trace the authenticity of the number of Chinese Muslims mentioned and their descendents at this time. Two reasons are given by Rosey Ma (2009):

- Within a large number of Chinese immigrants who arrived in Malaysia, the Chinese Muslims among them married non-Muslim Chinese women who did not convert to Islam, and with time and living in a majority Chinese community, they gradually left their Islamic practice. An example is the Kuok clan in Penang. In this case, they have assimilated into the non-Muslim Chinese lifestyle.
- They have assimilated through intermarriage with the local Muslim community, mainly the Malays, and the Chinese blood and characteristics have diluted after a few generations, such as the Terengganu Yunani clan.ⁱⁱ

Thus, in colonial time before 1957 or much earlier, there were two trends of assimilation. In Penang, for instance, Chinese Muslims married non-Muslim women, stayed in Chinese areas and were consequently assimilated into the ways of the non-Muslim Chinese. Other Muslim Chinese were assimilated into the ways of the Malay Muslims as they married Malays and stayed in Malay areas. The assimilation was accelerated through marriage with the Malays.

Tan Chee Beng 1989ⁱⁱⁱ, Head of Sociology Department of Hong Kong Chinese University, studied the Chinese Muslims' migration from China to Trengganu. These Chinese Muslims were labelled by the Malays and called themselves Yunani Hui Hui. He traced four generations of these small groups of Yunani Hui Hui in Trengganu. Prior to him, Mansor^{iv} 1976 had also done a study of the Yunani Hui Hui group which provided him with the data that there were 120 Yunnani Hui Hui in Kuala Trengganu [39 in Jalan Air Jenih, 28 in Simpang Tok Ku, six in Batu Buruk, 16 in Jalan Bangol, 24 in Kampong China and seven in Gong Kapas].

Tan's (1989) study was more detailed as he could converse in Mandarin and speak with the Yunanni Hui Hui directly in the Chinese language. However, Mansor's (1976) study was a BA academic exercise that provided raw facts. Both studies indicate that acculturation and assimilation into the Malay way of living did take place among the Yunnani Hui Hui. With only 120 Yunnani Hui Hui living among thousands of Malays, it was only natural that the Hui Hui would be assimilated to the Malay lifestyle especially when the Hui Hui was married to a Malay. According to Ma (2010), the assimilation is completed in four generations.^v (Rosey Ma 2009)

As for the probable assimilation of the Chinese Muslims in Penang into the ways of non-Muslim Chinese, it was only in the past or after Independence when a non-Muslim desiring to marry a

Muslim had to embrace Islam first. With this law, it was not possible for a non-Muslim man to marry a Muslim woman or a Muslim woman to be married to a non-Muslim man. Among the Hui Hui, only a few of them can be traced back as having originally migrated from China.

The majority of Chinese Muslim converts were first generation of Muslims in Malaysia. A survey of 200 Chinese Muslims was done in 1992^{vi} and on another 200 in 1998. There is not much difference between the two surveys except that the former covered Chinese Muslims only while the latter covered all Muslim converts. During the time of the surveys, most of the Chinese Muslims were generally converts and many of them had married and had children who became the second generation. The second survey embraced all races that converted to Islam in Malaysia.^{vii} (Osman Chuah Abdullah and Abdul Salam Muhammad Shukri 2008) The result of the survey is discussed below.

First, about 10% (n=24) of the Chinese Muslim converts in the states of Trengganu and Kelantan surveyed had very much assimilated after they embraced Islam. This is because in those states, the non-Muslim Chinese were already very much acculturated into the Malays' way of living in terms of language, clothing and other non-religious affairs. They went to the temple to worship their idols. After Islam, their assimilation was fully Malay. The Chinese converts frequently wore shirts and trousers interchanged with *baju Melayu* and *kebaya*. Shirts and trousers are ethnically neutral as all ethnic groups in Malaysia wear them. However, *baju Melayu* and *kebaya* are parts of the Malay identity. The converts also abandoned pork which is a taboo to the Muslims.^{viii}

Another 20% (n=40) were graduates of Institute of Da'wah Islamiyyah PERKIM, a Muslim missionary institute. In any Christian seminary, graduates are well-versed with the gospel, can understand the Original Sin and believe that Jesus was crucified to erase sins and save mankind. Similarly, the graduates of the Islamic missionary school know very well how to perform the five daily prayers, fast in the month of Ramadhan, pay *al-zakat*, explain Islam and narrate the life of Prophet Muhammad. They frequently wear the skull cap and the *jubah* in their daily prayers or while reading Al-Qur'an. All these are Islamic identities associated with the Malays.^{ix}

There were also five Muslim Chinese converts who joined the Jamal Tabligh and a larger number of them had joined the *sufi* movement. Jamal Tabligh is a religious movement that started in India; the followers move from mosque to mosque to motivate people to follow Islam and the way of the Prophet. Meanwhile, those in the *sufi* group practise their faith by mentioning God's name over and over and praying for peace for Prophet Muhammad. Many converts join the *sufi* movement because it gives them spiritual happiness and internal peace. They also eat, sleep and practice Islam together. In Malaysia, the *sufi* movements include the Nasanbandiyah, Qadiriah, Christi, Shaitariah and others. The practices of the *sufi*, by mentioning the name of God, praising and glorifying Him also enhance the Malay identity. Besides this, there were also graduates of Institute Da'wah Islamiyyah PERKIM who went to further their studies, gaining their Master's and PhD degrees in Islamic studies.^x (Our survey indicates there are five convert academicians in the universities in Malaysia) They can quote and refer to Al-Qur'an and *al-hadith*. These too are parts of the Malay identity.

Out of the 200 Chinese Muslim converts, 25 were married to Malay spouses. These marriages further accelerated the assimilation process into the Malay way of life, as proven in the study in University Malaya.^{xi} (Lee How Lan 1989) For example, when a Chinese man marries a Malay wife, he would definitely get used to eating Malay food. If the wife buys him Malay attire such

as *baju Melayu* or *songket*, he will certainly wear it and get used to it; this is part and parcel of the Malay identity.

From the above data and analysis, there is strong evidence to indicate that the Chinese Muslims, either original Muslims, Yunnani Hui Hui or Chinese Muslim converts, have all assimilated into the Malay world. There are several factors leading to this. First, to the Malays, Islam is one of their identities. When a Chinese embraces Islam, he shares this common identity with the Malays. The same is true of the Yunnani Hui Hui. Thus, when they marry, join a missionary institute, Islamic movements or study and practice Islam, all these bring them in line with the Malay identity. Another reason is caused by government policy. Since Malay is the medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools as well as most universities in Malaysia, all people in Malaysia learn and speak the Malay language. Thus, all non-Malay children and Muslims are acculturated and assimilated into the Malay language.

However, there is also non-assimilation of Chinese Muslims toward the Malays in Malaysia. This is very much dependent on the intention of the converts; for example, the convert may intend to get worldly goals like hoping to gain favour from the Malays by getting a licence for fishing or hawker licence for trading. After getting the licence, he stays in the non-Muslim Chinese area and does not learn nor practice Islam. No change will take place and the possibility for him to return to his former religion is there.^{xii} (Osman Chuah Abdullah and Abdul Salam Muhammad Shukri 2008. p.104)

The very rich Muslim converts also do not make drastic changes except they learn to pray and perform it, fast and go on a pilgrimage. They still keep to their way of life like playing golf and frequenting five star hotels. There is also another group of converts who have not changed much. These are converts from Chinese primary schools and independent secondary schools. This group always read Chinese newspapers and Chinese books. If they go to Taiwan or China to pursue a university degree, then it is very hard for them to be assimilated into the Malay way of life.

The Mirik Identity or Malay Identity in Sarawak

The Mirik people are the indigenous inhabitants of Miri in North Western part of Sarawak and originally they were non-Muslims and non-Malays. Tunku Zainah Tunku Ibrahim (1972) conducted a field study of the ethnicity of this group of people.^{xiii} (Tunku Zainah Ibrahim 1972, 1986) In Sarawak, these native people initially stayed in the interior areas at Padang Liku. They were threatened by the then head-hunting tribe of Kayan so they moved down stream to the present area known as Miri. There they came into contact with the Brunei Muslims, a dominant political force at that time. Finally, all of the people of Mirik embraced Islam.^{xiv} (*ibid.*,) Tunku Zainah Tunku Ibrahim 1972 did the study of the Mirik people in 1970-1971. She found that they were originally non-Malay and non-Muslim. Having embraced Islam, the younger Mirik people claimed themselves to be *orang Melayu* (Malay people) but the old people said that they were Malays and Mirik people in one. The historical heritage of the Mirik people was their bravery to fight against the Kayan people. This was not in the memory of the young people.^{xv} (*ibid.*,)

After 40 years, the researchers conducted a study on the Mirik students at the International Islamic University Malaysia and the National University Malaysia. We also paid a visit to Miri in June 2010 and talked to 30 older Mirik people. These could be the young people Tunku Zainah Tunku Ibrahim targeted in her study 40 years ago. The response was that they considered themselves as Malays. We also enquire from the Malaysian Statistics Department about the Mirik people and the department told us that there is no record of the Mirik people. This

indicates that the very rich heritage of the Mirik people had been lost after they embraced Islam. They have totally assimilated into the Malays' way of living.

CONCLUSION

In the melting pot of three ethnic groups; the Chinese Muslims, the Indian Muslims and the Mirik people with the Malays, there is a strong indication that these minority Muslim groups in Malaysia have acculturated and assimilated into the ways of the Malays. This phenomenon of changes of ethnicity of a minority ethnic group into the Malays' way of life has been taking place because of the following reasons.

First, Islam is the common identity of Malay Muslims as well as Indian Muslims, Chinese Muslims and the Mirik people. This allows the four ethnic groups to practice similar things as Muslims; the praying of five times a day, fasting in Ramadhan, going to the mosque for congregational prayers, avoiding the consumption of pork and celebrating common festivals like the birth of Prophet Muhammad, *Aid al-fitri* and *Aid al-adha*. This creates a common identity shared by them. Besides, intermarriages between Malays and Indian Muslims or Chinese Muslims bring social coherence with the Malay identity and produce a *peranakan* or a mixed race like *Mamak* to easily change into the Malay way. The Malay spouses begin to buy Malay attires and cook Malay food for their other half-offs. This has transformed their life into that of the Malays and finally the converts of Indian and Chinese origins 'become' Malay.

The environment too has an impact on changing the three ethnicities into Malays; while the Chinese Muslims and the Indian Muslims do not stay in a concentrated area but are dispersed throughout the nation, they are not the majority groups. Thus they naturally assimilate into the ethnicity of the majority group which is the Malays. In Kelantan and Kuala Trengganu, non-Muslim Chinese speak and wear as the Malays; the only difference between them and the Malays is religion. When they embrace Islam, the converts become Malay in totality in these two states.

The Malay people, as the majority group, have made an impact on the assimilation policy. As the majority group, they are the most important political ruling component of the *Alliance* (the ruling parties) in the past and presently in *Barisan Nasional* (the National Front). The Malays, as the most important political force, are able to impose the Malay language as the only medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools and even up to the tertiary levels in Malaysia. After 60 years of enforcing this policy, all the young people are able to speak and write in Malay. Some Chinese cannot speak Mandarin nor write Chinese. Some Indians cannot write Tamil while some Mamak cannot write and speak Tamil but can do so only in Malay. Thus, even before embracing Islam, the Chinese and Indians have changed into Malay speaking people. Islam has become the most important feature of the Malay identity. Thus the changes towards the Malay world are already there.

Another feature is that the Indian Muslims can join the political party of UMNO (United Malay Nasional Organisation). Many Muslim Indians join this party, win elections and become ministers. Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Muhammad, is an Indian Muslim who became the fourth and longest serving Prime Minister in Malaysia. He has retired but his son is currently a deputy minister. There are also many other Indian Muslims who have become Ministers or Chief Minister of certain states after joining this political party.

However, non-assimilation does take place. It is a norm for man to love his attributes of ethnic identity. Many Chinese in Malaysia have sent their children to primary Chinese school and

independent secondary Chinese schools. Some even go to foreign universities in Taiwan and China. The original Chinese Muslim or converted Chinese Muslims from this category would not be assimilated in terms of language and culture into the Malay world especially if they also stay in Chinese concentrated areas like Pulau Ketam in Selangor.

Similarly, among the Indian Muslims, the men return to Tamil Nadu in India to marry Tamil wives and then they send their children to Tamil *madrrasah* (Indian Muslim schools) to study religion. Thus, their children would be able to speak Tamil and it would be hard for them to assimilate into the Malay way. The number of Indian Muslims going back to India to acquire Tamil wives is quite substantial. Thus, non-assimilation is also taking place.

As for the Mirik people, conversion to Islam had taken place more than 70 years ago. When Tunku Zainah Tunku Ibrahim carried out the studies in 1970-1971, there were still traces of the Mirik heritage passed from the previous generation. Now, 40 years after her study, the researchers of this article found that assimilation is complete as the older generations of Mirik have passed away. The young generations of Mirik only regard themselves as *orang Melayu* who speak only the Malay language, follow the Islamic way of life and celebrate festivals like the rest of the Malay people.

Finally, except for the Mirik people who are totally assimilated, the Chinese and Indian Muslims are facing what Kwang and Won (1993) study of assimilation and maintenance of the ethnic identity without excluding each other. They referred to the Koreans in the USA. Our research shows that while assimilation into the Malay world does take place among Chinese and Indian Muslims in Malaysia, preserving the ethnic identities by the two ethnic groups and attempting not to be assimilated is also happening.

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