

THE PERCEPTION OF CHARACTERISTICS, BEHAVIORS, CULTURES AND TRADITIONS TOWARD OWN AND OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS

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ABSTRACT: *Malaysia is a country famously known for its multiple unique cultural and ethnic diversities, particularly in Sabah and Sarawak. The state of Sabah consists of 35 ethnics and 215 sub-ethnics and each ethnicity can be identified by language, dialect or culture. Despite the diversity of culture, customs and beliefs, respectively, Sabah is generally perceived and reported by the mass media to still be able to stand as a harmonious state without the presence of the issues that may affect national unity. However, if there is an attitude of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination among ethnic, it may seriously affect the solidarity between people in Sabah. Thus, this study aims to explore the concept of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination among ethnic groups in Sabah by studying on how certain ethnic groups perceive their own ethnicity and of other ethnic groups. The respondents of this study are from 36 members of ethnic association which representing four groups of different ethnics in Sabah, Malaysia: Kadazandusun, Bajau, Chinese and Murut. These four groups of ethnic are the major ethnic groups in Sabah, Malaysia. This study is a qualitative study that using in-dept interview and focus group discussion method to collect the data. The results were discussed further in the text.*

KEYWORDS: Perception, Ethnic, Stereotype, Prejudice, Discrimination

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a country famously known for its multiple unique cultural and ethnic diversities, particularly in Sabah and Sarawak. Peace in this country has long existed and it is now expanding as the country in entering its post-modern era. This is a reality that cannot be denied and cannot be changed (Shamsul, 1997). Due to the diversity of the national identity of Malaysian society, the spirit of goodwill, mutual respect, cooperation, tolerance and understanding of national identity of communities, particularly between majority and minority groups is very important. This can occur through social interaction and prolonged ethnic relations among community members without any negativity involved.

One of the many challenges leading towards the formation of an integrated society is the focus of national identity, which is often featured in the current social media through the electronic media as it touches on the Malay, Chinese and Indian society. What about the level of understanding of national identity to the minority communities such as the Murut, Kelabit,

Rungus, Bidayuh, Penan, Orang Asli, Peranakan Baba Nyonya, Gurkha, and Jawi-town. The various understanding of national identity by Malaysian society has indirectly raised the issue on 'identity crisis' among minority communities about the formation of an integrated society, especially the construction of the Malaysian race. The lack of understanding of national identity may eventually cause prejudice, stereotypical, ethnocentric and ultimately lead to social discrimination.

Zaki (2010) claimed that many of Malaysian society are actually prejudice and they have stereotypes negativity of other ethnics without them realizing it. Several studies in the field of social psychology, in particular, have proven this phenomenon for instance in United States, there are nearly 80 percent of white people in American society who are unknowingly prejudice against the black people. This behavior is not necessarily shown in the form of an act or words being raised publicly, but in certain situations there is still evidence. In Malaysia, racial prejudice and stereotyping has become a sensitive issue. Events that occurred in May 13, 1969 in Malaysia are the event which reminds us that this issue can lead to a bad impression to all ethnic if it is magnified out of proportion. Therefore, not many scientific studies have been made to gauge the extent to which the various races in Malaysia, who are prejudice against each other (Zaki, 2010).

The state of Sabah consists of 35 ethnics and 215 sub-ethnics (Abdul Nassir & Abdul Nassir Mohammad Mahdi, 2010). Each ethnicity can be identified by language, dialect or culture. Previous researchers classify ethnic languages in Sabah into groups based on language family. The study includes the study of linguistics, socio-political, sociological and so on. Among the five largest ethnic in Sabah is the Kadazandusun, Murut, Bajau, Brunei Malay and Chinese. Despite the diversity of culture, customs and beliefs, respectively, Sabah is generally perceived and reported by the mass media to still be able to stand as a harmonious state without the presence of the issues that may affect national unity. For example, in the area of business in which two different ethnic may share the same premises selling the same goods even though they are of different religious and ethnic groups. Usually, the Muslims are going to sell food whereas the non-Muslim will sell drinks in the same premises. This situation can attract a variety of ethnic groups to sit and drink together in one premise. This situation has become a habit for locals in Tuaran, Sabah and Kota Belud, Sabah. In addition, interethnic marriage in Sabah has been a regular practice since years ago and has been one of the main contribution to the formation and maintenance of harmony and unity among the communities in Sabah (Chua et al., 2012). However, if there is an attitude of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination among ethnic, it may seriously affect the solidarity between people in Sabah. Indeed, the stereotype threat may explain the gap in achievement between individuals (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Therefore, this study aims to explore the concept of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination among ethnic groups in Sabah by studying on how certain ethnic groups perceive their own ethnicity and of other ethnic groups.

Stereotype threat is defined as "the anxiety felt by a person when he or his group is at risk of given the negative stereotype" (Steele & Davies, 2003). Stereotypes are defined as general statements against an ethnic group negative (McLemore, 1994; Healey, 2009). For example, exaggerated picture of something good or bad behavior directed at an ethnic group by other

ethnic groups, especially the ethnic minorities. It is produced when there is a clash of two or more ethnic communities. This kind of stereotypical understanding this will cause negative effects in the community, particularly in Malaysia's multicultural society. This is because stereotypical belief will result in underestimating of an ethnic group of other ethnic groups and thus limiting the interaction between ethnic which causes the rise of racism (Mohd Amar, Hazri & Najeemah, 2013).

Prejudice is a component of the sense of attitude towards members of a group based on membership. It can be triggered automatically and implicitly shaped or explicitly. According to social identity theory, prejudice comes from the tendency to divide the world into 'us' and 'them' and see that their own group is better than the other groups (Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1999). Ethnic prejudice occurs when a negative view is being project from one ethnic group to the other ethnic groups (Healey, 2009). According to Oakes et al. (1994), when the social world is divided into 'us' and 'them', this implies in terms of the emotional understanding. The study of (Glick, 2002; Mackie & Smith, 2002; Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005) shows that prejudice may reflect a certain emotional responses which are specific to other groups. Those emotional responses may include fear, anger, guilt, pity and disgust.

This study aims to uncover the conceptual understanding of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination among ethnic groups in Sabah by studying on how certain ethnic groups perceive on their own ethnicity and the ethnic perceptions of other ethnic groups. There are four major ethnic groups involved in this study, namely, Kadazandusun, Bajau, Murut and Chinese.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study is a qualitative study that using in-dept interview and focus group discussion method to collect the data. This study aims to explore the concept of stereotype, prejudice and discrimination among the major ethnics in Sabah.

Respondents

The respondents of this study are from 36 members of ethnic association which representing four groups of different ethnics: Kadazandusun (9 members from Kadazandusun Association), Bajau (9 members from Bajau Association), Chinese (6 members from Chinese Association) and Murut (12 members from Murut Association).

Location

This study is conducted around Kota Kinabalu, Tenom and Kota Marudu, Sabah which has the center of the association for these four ethnic groups (Kadazandusun, Bajau, Chinese and Murut).

Measurement

The measurement of this research consists of one set of open ended question which formed by the researchers in exploring the understanding of stereotype, prejudice and discrimination

concept among the major ethnics. Twelve (12) questions have been formed to collect information related to stereotype. The examples of the questions are as follow: “Could you please tell me about your ethnic in detail?”, “What are the prominent features of your ethnic?”, “What are the prominent features of those ethnic (Bajau/Kadazandusun/Melayu Brunei/Murut/Cina)?” and “Is there any incident happened between you and other ethnic (Bajau/Kadazandusun/Melayu Brunei/Murut/Cina)?” There are 10 questions that have been formed in measuring the prejudice concept among the ethnic. The examples are “What are the not good things about your ethnic?”; “Could you please explain further on why you have such view?” (refer to question 2)” and “What is not good about that ethnic?”. The understanding in regards to discrimination also measured by 10 formed questions. The examples of the questions as follow: “What did you do if others (other ethnic) talk bad about your ethnic?”; “What is your opinion, if you work together with your same ethnic colleagues?” and “What is your experience on how other ethnic treated your ethnic?”

Data Analysis

The data of this study are analyzed by using the theme analysis steps that proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This analysis involved the search patterns of repeated meaning from the gathered information. The data analysis are started with data transcription, familiarize oneself with the data by repetitive reading, and then doing coding to the identified data. The step in providing initial codes is conducted to all the gather data. The codes are later been categorized into certain themes. Identified themes are restudied for the determination so that they are suitable for the individual extract and for the overall data set.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ethnics’ Perception towards Their Ethnics and Other Ethnics

From the content analysis results, how an ethnic group identifies oneself can be seen from two main aspects namely behavior and character aspect as well as cultural and tradition aspect which been practiced by an ethnic group. Qualitative research has been conducted on four major ethnic groups in Sabah namely Kadazandusun, Bajau, Chinese and Murut. The findings on how these four ethnic groups perceive themselves are shown in Table 1.

Kadazandusun ethnic group stated themselves as an ethnic group with characters such as sociable, tender-hearted, sense of belonging, like to help each other, respect other ethnic but full of jealousy. In cultural and tradition aspect, this ethnic is identifiable from the aspect of their dialect, life style, custom, ways of clothing, food and traditional way of home-made alcohol. The home-made alcohol by using traditional way has few local names such as *tapai*, *lihing* or *bahar*. Most of this ethnic group is farmer. In the term of look and physical, this ethnic has the Chinese look, slanted eyes, pretty, less sharp nose and robust body.

Table1: The Perception of Ethnic towards Their Own Ethnic Groups in Term of Their Characteristics, Behaviors, Culture and Tradition

Character and Behavior			
BAJAU	CHINESE	KADAZANDUSUN	MURUT
Respect others	Respect other ethnics	Respect other ethnics	Respect others
Work	Open minded	Love to drink	Helpful
Help	Hardworking	Decent	Brave
Mannerly	Emphasizing on family values	Sociable, tender-hearted	Up-to-date
Open minded	Selfish	Sense of belonging	Open
Brave	Stingy	Jealousy, humiliating other people	Sociable, tender-hearted, Sense of belonging, Loyal and Unite
Leadership	Calculative		Lazy to make efforts
Hot-tempered, rowdy	Less helpful		Like to drink alcohol
Lazy, less self-developed			Less self-confidence
Sense of belonging			
Easily give up			
Jealousy- flint, like to latent feelings			
Perfunctory			
Cultural and Tradition			
Origin from sea, from the Philippines	Origin – city		Origin – rural
Religion – Islam			
Language – slang and communication	Language – dialect	Language – dialect/accents	Language - speech
Tradition – life style and arts & culture, food, love to travel, dance		Tradition – life style and custom, <i>tapai</i> (type of alcohol) food, clothing	Tradition – dance, attire, dare to die, head hunter
Living – ill-equip of business knowledge, small scale business	Living - business	Living – farming	Living – farming and wage earners
Education – low	Education – more advanced		Education – advanced and prioritizing education
	Physical – fair skin	Physical – look alike Chinese/Dusun, pretty, less sharp nose, slanted eyes, robust body	Physical - fair

How does other ethnic perceive Kadazandusun ethnic group? From the statement made by Bajau ethnic group, Kadazandusun ethnic group is a sociable group and can keep the profits they earned. As the parable says if this Kadazandusun group is given a fruit with seed, the seed will be planted so that they could gain the same fruit at the end of the day. Other than that, Kadazandusun ethnic group is also identified as less commitment and like to drink alcohol. This is maybe because the home-made alcohol is easily gained due to it is self-made and don't have to buy from shop such as other alcohol drink. Besides that, this ethnic has traditional festive such as harvest festival which they always drink the traditional drink namely *tapai* or *lihing* to celebrate the festival. This cultural has inherited from generation to generation for the purpose of worshiping the spirit of paddy. The statement mentioned on they like to drink alcohol is self-confessed by Kadazandusun ethnic group. The summary of the results shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Other Ethnic Groups' Perception towards Certain Ethnic Groups in Term of Their Characteristics, Behaviors, Culture and Tradition

BAJAU	CHINESE	KADAZANDUSUN	MURUT
Characters and Behavior			
Respect others	High-spirited	Save the profits	detrude each other
Hardworking	Straight forward	Sociable/ tender-hearted	
Decent	Do not easily admit defeat	Like to drink alcohol	Like to drink alcohol
Socialize with others	Stingy	Less commitment	
Hot-tempered –cannot be challenged	Less helpful		
Lazy to make effort	Calculative		
	Noisy and talkative		
Cultural and tradition			
Religion – Islam	Living – rich, doing business, monopoly Sabah economy, bring development	Origin from hilly areas	
Living – fisherman	Language- dialect, slang, way of talking	Tradition - food	
	Physical – fair skin, slanted eyes, look like Kadazan		

Chinese ethnic group disclosed that they are stingy, selfish, less helpful, but they have hardworking character, open-minded, emphasizing on family values and respecting other ethnics. Most of them are staying in city and doing business. They admitted that they have more advanced education level. From the physical aspect, normally they have fair skin and easily identified from the dialect used.

Other ethnics viewed Chinese ethnic from the aspect of behavior and characters as stingy, less helpful, and calculative (these three characters was self-confessed by Chinese ethnic group), straight forward and highly-spirited, do not easily admit defeat, noisy and talkative. The statement stated calculative means Chinese ethnic always used profit and loss concept because most of this ethnic is businessman. In terms of cultural and tradition, other ethnics labeled Chinese ethnic as a rich ethnic, involved in business and monopoly Sabah economy. However, there is view on Chinese ethnic as an ethnic who brought development to Sabah. In terms of physical, Chinese ethnic group has fair skin, slanted eyes, and look alike Kadazandusun ethnic, way of talking and language slang as well as the way they dress up.

Bajau ethnic group identify themselves as an ethnic group which respects other ethnic groups, open-minded, helpful, having sense of belonging, mannerly, and brave. They also admitted their weaknesses such as lazy to make effort, hot-tempered, rowdy, easily give up, perfunctory, and full of jealousy among themselves as well as towards other ethnics. In terms of cultural and tradition, this ethnic can be identified by religion and origin. According to this group, many of them are originated from the on-water residence located at the seafront of Semporna district and also originated from The Philippines. Those who are the resident of the on-water residence stayed on a huge boat and they do exist until today. Other than that, this ethnic group is known by their language slang and communication manner, life style, food, dance cultural, style of living with small scale business and the level of education is rather backwards.

From the perspective of other ethnic groups, Bajau ethnic group is known as a hardworking ethnic, decent, sociable with other ethnics, respecting others, but have quite an outdated thought, cannot be challenged and lazy to make effort. The last two characters are admitted by Bajau ethnic. In terms of tradition, their religion is Islam and many of them work as fisherman. Meanwhile, in terms of physical, they have dark skin.

Murut ethnic group identified themselves as an ethnic group who respect other ethnic groups, open, brave, sociable, tender-hearted, helpful, having sense of belonging, but they are lacking of confidence, lazy to make effort, and like to drink alcohol. From the view of other ethnic groups towards Murut ethnic group, not many ethnic groups provided their responds. This scenario is because of the geographical aspect of Murut ethnic that stay far away from other ethnic groups. This ethnic group is mostly located at Tenom district in Sabah. Based on the interview, one of the respondents from this ethnic group mentioned that the total numbers of Murut ethnic who received higher education is very low. This is because the awareness of education is still insufficient and also the factors of the villages are located in interior area. However, there are respondents stated that this ethnic like to detruide each other among themselves. This statement has been observed from the respond by one of the respondents who said “they like to detruide

each other among themselves". This is maybe because their residence is located far in the interior area causing them being competitive among themselves only.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, it is found that these four ethnic group respondents can provide insight and sufficient comments on ethnic themselves. However, the knowledge of other ethnic groups is somewhat less. This may be due to ethnic settlements in certain areas which cause communication among ethnics to be limited. Ethnic identification with others are only occurs when ethnic groups are working in the same workplace, or while socializing at school and if they live in the school hostel.

Perception of their own ethnic groups or their ethnic toward another ethnic group contains many positive views than negative form of perception. An interesting finding from the interviews of the four ethnic groups, there are two consistent statements given by ethnic group toward themselves i.e., they claiming that they are ethnic groups who respect other ethnic groups and have an open mind or attitude.

Whether negative perceptions of their own ethnic group or other ethnic groups, the nature of prejudice and stereotyping that observed from the interview are as a result, the Bajau have been labeled as the hot-tempered and rowdy ethnic, the Chinese are said to be a stingy ethnic group and offered less help to people, people labeled the ethnic of Kadazandusun to be a heavy drinker of alcohol, lack of commitment and like to hold grudges. Meanwhile, the Murut ethnic are believed to be the group that is less confidence and lazy at work. However, the element of prejudice and negative stereotypes of ethnic or inter-ethnic fellow is not obvious. Although in previous studies as reported by Zaki (2010) shows that many people in Malaysia tend to be prejudiced against other races unnoticed, but there is no significant sign found in the state of Sabah.

The findings also show that many statements against ethnic discrimination may not be associated with inter-ethnic. From the responses in the interviews, many of the respondents indicated that there is no ethnic discrimination and perceived discrimination is a result of administrative procedures and systems. In terms of culture and tradition, overall features of an ethnic group can be identified by the place of origin, religion, language, source of living, traditions such as dance types, types of clothing, foods and customs and practices of their respective traditions, as well as the physical body such as skin color and height and eyes.

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