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**THE CHALLENGE OF DIVERSITY: ETHNIC LANGUAGE RETENTION  
AND THE SHAPING OF THE MALAY MUSLIM IDENTITY IN THE  
THREE SOUTHERN BORDER PROVINCES OF THAILAND****Abstract:**

Heritage language is a complex issue that affects Malay Muslims who live in bilingual environment. They may look different, speak a different language, practice different religions, and follow different cultural rituals from the larger Thai society. What is it like to be who they are? How does being linguistically different influence their sense of ethnic identity? It is important to pay attention to the extent mother tongue can play an important role in constructing the scene of ethnic identity among the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand whose language and culture are different from those of the monolingual Thai-speaking population. It is important to better understand how Malay Muslims perceive themselves and come to terms with their identity while living in a society that dichotomizes majority versus minority and Thai-speakers versus non-Thai speakers. Do they resolve conflicting identities resulting from living in two different cultures? Or do they identify themselves with one culture over the other? Therefore, this paper is an attempt to discuss how the Malay language was used as a symbol to preserve and sustain the Malay identity among the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand. It is important to examine the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of Malay Muslims about their native language and to observe whether Malay and Thai have different functions and context status from each other in their lives. This study serves the need for studies that analyze language as an essential component of nationalism, and not merely as a means of communication.

**Keywords:**

Heritage Language, Ethnic Identity, Culture, Malay Muslims.

## **1.0 Introduction**

This study highlights the significant role of language in everyday life, and how it comes to shape a person's ethnic identity. Besides, it will show in which way language is used, in order to support the theory that language can serve other purposes than just communicating, and that ethnic language is especially important in stating that ethnic groups, apart from the apparent means of expressing personal origin, can also use language as an ethnic marker, as a conflict marker, and to legitimize power and opposition. Language is intrinsically connected with ethnic identity and it interweaves the individual's personal identity with his or her collective ethnic identity. Among the multitude of markers of group identity, like age, sex, social class and religion, language is considered essential to the maintenance of the group identity. It is generally regarded as a salient dimension of ethnicity, and as such is one of the most important articulations of ethnic identity, both at an individual and at a group level. This belief has led Lambert (Lambert, 1980) to posit that communicating in a language other than that of one's own group can lead to a sense of not belonging to the same culture as one's own ethnic-heritage group. One's sense of ethnic identity may therefore be threatened or lessened in some way; this is reflected in particular among groups that occupy low-power positions in terms of socioeconomic status when their members use the dominant group's language (Lambert, 1980; Giles, H. & Johnson, 1981).

This is one of the many reasons why many ethnic groups consider the loss of their language as symbolizing the loss of their identity as a group. Wardhaugh (1983) warned that this aspect can have extreme results. For groups whose language has a profound value as a symbol of their ethnicity, or as a clear mark of ethnic identity, its loss is regarded as the loss of their most precious asset and may be followed by complete (not just linguistic) assimilation. It is in this situation the role of language becomes relevant and significant in maintaining one's ethnic group. In a nation such as Thailand, one such case of language conflict is found among the Malay Muslim population of southern Thailand, which is concentrated in the three predominantly Malay Muslim provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani, which represents only about 4 percent of the total population in Thailand.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

The Malay language, like other languages, includes a great amount of vocabulary linked to the most southern environment and traditional living circumstances, which makes it unique and untranslatable into Thai. The government always sees its educational systems as an effective mechanism for socializing and integrating the Malays into Thai national life, or as we call it, "Thaization" of the Malay ethnic group. It is through the Thai educational system that the Thai language has been able to penetrate into the daily life of the Malays, results in the frequent use of Thai among the younger generations, causing great concerns for the Malays, who fear that their endangered ethnic identity will eventually be faced with extinction. The apprehension that Malay ethnicity will be washed away by the mainstream Thai culture leads the Malay Muslims to make efforts and adopt strategies to defend their own cultural heritage and sustain their Malay ethnic identity.

Surin Pitsuwan (1985) gave an overall picture of the reactions of Malay Muslims according to the political changes over different historical eras. Pitsuwan summarized how the Malay Muslims were not willing to negotiate their identities in order for their language and ethnicity

to survive. It is worth noting, however, that some ethnic communities can, and have, survived over long periods without even political autonomy. This suggests that we need to give more attention to the subjective elements in ethnic survival, such as ethnic historical values, symbols and traditions. The reason is that, according to Anthony D. Smith (1992), the long-term ethnic survival depends, in the first place, on the active cultivation by specialists and others of a heightened sense of collective distinctiveness and mission. The members of an ethnic group must be made to feel, not only that they form a single "Super-family", but also that their language community is unique, and that they possess what Max Weber called "irreplaceable culture values", that their heritage and language must be preserved from external control, and that the community has a sacred duty to extend its cultural value to future generations (Brass, 1996: 85-90).

Anthony D. Smith (1992) had mentioned one pattern of ethnic survival, called the communal-demotic, which refers to a community that has usually been conquered and is struggling to preserve its former rights and way of life, claiming that its members are the original inhabitants and their culture is the vernacular. This pattern of ethnic persistence does not pretend to be exhaustive. However, they reveal the importance of beliefs in their culture, and symbols for ethnic survival. Similarly, the case of the Malay Muslims is quite unique, differing from other minorities in Thailand in that they are the indigenous population.

Language is not a static process. It is the primary instrument in the expression, transmission, and adoption of culture. Language is used to maintain one's own culture and to acquire a new culture and new knowledge. The learning of a second or foreign language enables one to view life through another cultural lens (Trueba, 1993)

Accordingly, the study is an exploration of language significance for ethnic identity sustenance among the Malay-Muslim community in southern Thailand. Therefore, the aim is to explain to what extent does language has played a vital role in determining the preservation of ethnic identity among the Malay-Muslim minority of southern Thailand.

### **3.0 Significance and contribution of the Study**

Very few studies have concentrated on the role of native language as a determining factor in this processes, and even fewer studies have been made considering this factor in developing countries. Joshua Fishman states "there are pitifully few studies that focus on a vernacular as a substantive hub of nationalism"(1972:75) and where "...only slight progress in systematizing knowledge of the social processes that facilitate or inhibit LMLS (Language Maintenance Language Shift)" has been made (Fishman, Cooper, and Conrad, 1977). But more importantly, by examining how native language became a symbol of ethno-cultural uniqueness for Malay Muslims,

### **4.0 Methodology**

This paper tend to explore the relationship of language in the preservation of ethnic identity among the Malay Muslims of southern Thailand, and since questions of language and identity are related to people's subjective experiences and feelings, a qualitative methodology is especially appropriate for arriving at a better understanding of these questions (Weiss, 1994:3-14; Lane, 1969, 1972; Blauner, 1989). Thus, it seemed necessary to ask the subjects explicitly about how they define their group, how important the Malay language is to their ethnicity and

identity. The findings of this study are based on 38 in-depth interviews conducted with Malay Muslims from Yala province. The interview subjects were chosen mainly from the population of Yala city. The selection of the informants was made based on several different criteria including status, experience, expertise as well as their respected position as perceived by the community.

The results of in-depth interview: transcribe and/or review data and analyze all interview data. Transcribing involves creating a written text of the interviews. This step involves bringing together all the information-gathering approaches into one written form. Whereas analyzing all the interview data is an important step, it involves determining the meaning in the information gathered in relation to the purpose of the study.

### **5.0 Findings and Conclusion**

As expected from the sociolinguistic literature, language was an important part of these Malays' understanding of their identity. This was clear in how the respondents talked about the terms they used to identify themselves. Ethnic identification was strong among the respondents. They also lay strong emphasis on being the Malay-speaking citizens of Thailand. Thus ethno-linguistic identification tied with adherence to the religion of Islam is very strong. There is a dynamic interdependent relationship between language and ethnic/cultural identity in which one influences the other. Interestingly, this relationship extends beyond the ethnic and cultural aspects to the religious dimension of identity, at least for ethnic groups of Malay Muslims in the southernmost provinces such as Yala.

In the in-depth interviews conducted, even though the subject of religion did not introduce as a topic to discuss, it emerged as a recurring theme by the informants, who found it represents a meaningful system to interpret ethnic cultural identity. Religion might not be a significant factor to some ethnic groups in defining their ethnic/cultural identity, or in preserving their ethnic language, yet it is important to the Malay Muslims who believe in the role of Islam. Malay as an ethnic minority language appears to have a religious meaning besides its cultural and ethnic significance.

According to Imtiyaz Yosuf (2007), religion is the strongest foundation for group identity among Malay Muslims in southern Thailand. There is a reciprocal relationship between the native language and values. As Walbridge (1992:193) puts it, "The use of the native language should assist the group in maintaining its traditional values, and that at least for some groups, this desire to maintain values will serve as a great motivation in working to keep a language alive".

The mother tongue of Malay Muslims in Yala municipal city generally, becomes the means of reinforcing and perpetuating the Malay ethnic identity by virtue of their ascribed ethno linguistic are considered a distinct ethnic group within the larger society. This is where ethnicity for the Malays relates to and identifies with the ideological and cultural entity. Malay language in the Malay perception becomes the symbolic and cultural marker differentiating them from the Thais, while identification with the Malay culture at large differentiates them from the Thai. The persistence of a Malay ethnic identity is embodied in the very concept of being Muslims and in the concept of a Malay ethnic boundary which is maintained by "continual expression and validation". The fact of being Malay and the fact of

identifying with the Malay ethnicity are themselves absolute phenomena which are consciously accepted and stressed in the interactive pattern between the Malay Muslims and the Thai.

The trend is so strong that we can claim that language for Malay Muslims has more than just a symbolic, unifying value and its abandoning would certainly affect the preservation of Malay ethnic identity itself. Therefore, the connection between identity and language among these Malay Muslims features the concept of ethno linguistic identity, which, in this study, is based on the cognitive definition of ethnic group membership where individuals identify themselves as being part of an ethnic group.

The study on ethnic cultural identity in southern Thailand have shown the way in which ethnic groups focus predominantly upon one or two particular aspects of their culture more strongly than upon any other. It is possible to identify two important foci, with their chances of survival enhanced through mutually supportive core values, such as language and religion.

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