

The Effects of Assimilation on Ethnic Identity among Malays of Acehnese Descendent in Malaysia

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Abstract—This study empirically assesses the degree of assimilation and its implications on ethnic identification. It also examines the relational interplay of cultural assimilation, structural assimilation and marital assimilation to ethnic identification. The data of this study was derived from a questionnaire survey of 200 Malays of Acehnese descendent in Malaysia. The findings indicate that there is a high degree of assimilation with a moderate loss of ethnic identification. Furthermore, the findings of the study also show that structural assimilation positively and significantly related to cultural assimilation and marital assimilation, whereas cultural assimilation, structural assimilation, and marital assimilation are negatively and significantly correlated with ethnic identification. The study finds that marital assimilation is playing a pivotal intervening role in reducing the degree of ethnic identification.

Keywords—assimilation; ethnic identity; Malays of Acehnese descendent

I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of assimilation and ethnic identity has been one of the most demanding and challenging social issues in a culturally diverse society such as Malaysia. Malaysia has become an increasingly heterogeneous society, composes of a multitude of race and ethnic groups (Abdullah & Pedersen, 2006). The population of Malaysia predominantly consists of Malays, Chinese, and Indians. The rest is shared by some other groups, including Indonesian ethnic groups such as Javanese, Bugis, Acehnese, and Banjarese (Said, 1984; Abdullah & Pedersen, 2006).

The minority groups of Indonesian origin identified as sub-ethnic groups of Malays, (Said, 1984), and have been recorded as Malays *Bumiputera* (Othman, 1986). However, they disappeared in further population censuses in Malaysia (Othman, 1986). The religious and socio-cultural similarities are the major reason for this integration (Hussin, 1980; Said, 1984; Isa, 2001), even though these minority groups have their own distinct socio-cultural life. For example, Acehnese is said to have used their own language communicating among themselves which is not understood by Malays (Hussin, 1980).

Acehnese immigrants have been in contact with Malays for over one hundred years. In the course of this contract, the relationships between these two groups have significantly changed. At the earlier stage, the Acehnese are reported to show an unwillingness to assimilate (Mahmud, 1979). The location of the settlement was said as the major obstacle of this group to assimilate (Mahmud, 1979). Acehnese immigrants mostly interacted with their own communal group since their settlement was far away and separated from Malay's population center. The differences in economic activities also contributed to the slower process of assimilation. At that time the pepper plantation was Acehnese immigrants' monopoly in the region (Mahmud, 1979), before turning to be rubber smallholder (Ahmat, 1979). The local Malays who were self-reliant with their agricultural economy found fewer motives for interaction (Mahmud, 1979).

In the later stage, however, the relations of the Acehnese and the Malays have shown more attributes of social integration. With the expansion of settlements, cultivation and movement of young Acehnese immigrants away from their ancestral villages in striving toward better education and employment or as a result of marriage soon paved the way to an escalated interaction.

This, later, leads to a relatively high degree of social integration between the two groups (Mahmud, 1979; Hussin, 1980). Unfortunately, sizeable literature search shows that there is no systematic research has addressed this issue. Most studies on the issue of ethnicity in Malaysia mainly focused on Chinese and Indians (Said & Majid, 2004; Seong, 2002; Sivanantham & Suberamanian, 2014). The present study is carried out to empirically examine the relational interplay between the process of assimilation and ethnic identification of Acehnese descendants using Gordon's theory of Assimilation (Gordon, 1964).

Gordon (1964) identifies seven variables of assimilation namely cultural, structural, marital, identificational, attitude reception assimilation, behavioral reception assimilation, and civic assimilation. He defines cultural assimilation as the process of adopting cultural attributes of the host society during which the minority group embraces the cultural patterns of the host society. Nevertheless, for a group to fully assimilate, it is necessary for structural assimilation to happen. According to Gordon (1964), structural assimilation is the acceptance of ethnic minority members into the primary group of the majority group, namely, into the institutions and organizations of the host society and through primary contacts with them.

Gordon (1964) concludes that “once structural assimilation has occurred; all of the other types of assimilation will naturally follow” (Gordon, 1964, 81). With the breakdown of boundaries of minority groups, thus, gives rise to escalated intermarriages and eventually leads to identification assimilation. Exogamous marriage, according to him, represents the peak of the assimilation process where the minority groups lose their ethnic attributes and become indistinguishable from, and eventually adopt an identity of, the host. Gordon defines it as the development of a sense of peoplehood based exclusively on host society (Gordon, 1978, 169). Accomplished assimilation, however, happens when the various barriers to a harmonious and cooperative social relation are disappeared (see Gordon, 1964, for discussion).

The first three variables of Gordon’s assimilation model: cultural, structural, marital assimilations are defined as preconditions for, and determinant of assimilation. Complete assimilation only happens when attitude, behavior and civic assimilations prevail. Hence, these preconditions are considered relevant and appropriate to the study. The study has, therefore, used these preconditions as necessary measurements to assess their implication on the identificational pattern.

To further the discussion, some studies have indicated that assimilative processes do happen in mostly ethnically diverse societies with the loss of original identity (Noels & Clement, 1996; Umar, 2003; Said & Majid, 2004; Greenman & Xie, 2008). However, the assumption that ethnic distinctiveness and cultures would eventually disappear has not been supported. Ethnic identification, in one way or another, has prevailed and survived (Bubaker, 2001; Bracey, Mayra, & Umana, 2004; Golash-Boza, 2006; Song, 2009; Schimmele & Wu, 2015). Consistent with other factors such as ethnic composition and discrimination, ethnic identification may arise from the cultural continuity and lower level of assimilation (Ono, 2002).

As such, it is safe to conclude that the formation of ethnic identification is necessarily dependent on the pattern and the extent of assimilation. The study, therefore, attempts to examine this issue among Malays of Acehnese descent. It seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What is the degree of assimilation of Malays of Acehnese descent into the mainstream of Malay society?
2. How is cultural, structural marital assimilation correlated with ethnic identity?
3. How does the interplay of cultural assimilation, structural assimilation, and marital assimilation affect ethnic identity?

II. METHOD

A. *Participants*

The sample of the study is 200 Malays of Acehnese descent, consisting those who were born in Malaysia and the descendants of earliest Acehnese immigrants and those who are the descendants of the latest Acehnese immigrants and acquired Malaysian citizenship. The respondents are selected using a random sampling procedure. In view of the dispersion of the population under study, the snowball-sampling technique is used to determine the sample of the study.

B. *Measurement*

A self- structured questionnaire with close-ended questions is constructed and administered to the respondents either by face to face contact or by mail, considering the dispersion of the respondents. It is adapted from various models used to measure assimilation and ethnic identity (Tsai, Ying & Lee, 2000; Ponterotto, Gretchen, Utsey, Stracuzzi & Junior, 2003; Obasi, 2004). Items in the instrument are modified to suit the need of this study. The questionnaire is translated into the Malay language. To avoid sensitizing the respondents, there is no pre-testing of the measuring instrument undertaken.

The questionnaire draws responses using 5 point Likert-scale. Respondents are asked to indicate their degree of agreement, uncertainty, and disagreement by selecting the appropriate category of responses ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, uncertain, agree and strongly agree. The respondents’ perceptions are measured by one directional way through positive statements.

The structural, cultural and marital assimilation are measured to determine the degree of assimilation and its impact on the identificational pattern. The cultural assimilation is measured by the degree to which Malay of Acehnese descent has acculturated into the cultural life of Malay society. Sixteen items are set to gather information on respondent’s perception of cultural assimilation. These items aim at gathering information on the following four variables, namely, the use of Malay language, the adoption of Malay habit and custom, the acceptance of Malay attire and food. Four items are assigned to each variable.

The structural assimilation is assessed by the degree to which Acehese minority has been accepted at the primary group of host society as a result of out-group interaction. It is further indicated by socio-economic variables such as education and occupation. sixteen items are asked to determine the structural assimilation of respondents. It is divided into four variables namely primary interaction with Malays, the acceptance of the respondents at the core group of Malay society, educational and economic attainment and satisfaction of the respondents. Four items are also assigned to each variable

Marital assimilation is measured by the acceptance of Malays of Acehese descendent at the family institution in Malay society. Sixteen items are also formulated to accumulate information on four variables of ethnic identity, namely ethnic language maintenance, in-group interaction, the awareness of ethnic background, and the sense of belonging to the ethnic group. Four items are allocated for each variable respectively.

The degree of assimilation in all variables is assessed by the average Mean and Standard Deviation scores of the four measures, with a minimum value of 1 and maximum 2. The higher the score of Mean with a low score of Standard Deviation is the higher and the stronger cultural, structural marital and identificational assimilation. The reliability test using Cronbach Alpha coefficient of four measures of the study confirmed strong statistical reliability (Cultural Assimilation Scale: 0.907, Structural Assimilation Scale 0.821, Marital Assimilation Scale 0.844, Ethnic Identity Scale 0.924).

C. Analysis

The data are statistically interpreted into frequencies, percentages, cumulative percentages, minimum and maximum scores, mean, standard deviation. Independent samples t-test is used to compare the magnitude of the mean differences of the degree of assimilation and ethnic identity. In order to test the relationship among variables and to test the relational among variables, bivariate analysis of Pearson Product Moment Correlation is employed. It is used to analyze the data and find out the relation, if any, among the variables. Where necessary, Partial Correlation is also utilized to test a relationship between two variables by controlling the effects of the other variables.

III. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

A. The Degree of Assimilation

The findings of the study show that Malays of Acehese descendent have well assimilated into Malay society with a high degree of assimilation. The study found that there is a statistically high degree of assimilation (M: 3.785) with a deviation of scores around the Mean by approximately 1 (SD: 0.920).

These findings are in support of previous literature theorizing that the minority groups, controlling other factors, are inclined to assimilate into majority ones (Gordon, 1964; Park, 1950). This implies that a high degree of assimilation may not necessarily be influenced by the generational advancement of a minority group.

1) The Degree of Cultural Assimilation

The finding shows that there is a high statistical degree of cultural assimilation of Malay of Acehese descendent in Malaysia with Mean of 3.540 and the spread of score varies around the Mean by Standard Deviation of 0.972.

TABLE I. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTIC OF DEGREE OF ASSIMILATION

	N=200	
	M*	SD*
Cultural Assimilation	3.540	0.972
Structural Assimilation	3.961	0.794
Marital Assimilation	3.854	0.993
Ethnic Identification	2.967	0.913
Assimilation	3.785	0.920

* Decimal has been round off. M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation, N=Total Respondents

2) The Degree of Structural Assimilation

The finding statistically signifies a strong and high degree of structural assimilation among Malays of Acehese descendent (M: 3.961. SD: 0.794)

3) The Degree of Marital Assimilation

The study indicates that Malays of Acehese descendent are well accepted into the family institution of Malay society (M: 3.854 SD: 0.993)

4) *The Degree of Ethnic Identification*

The finding shows that the ethnic identity of this group has moderately reduced. It could clearly be noticed from the average Mean of all measures, that is, 2.967. With Standard Deviation of 0.913, it indicates a significant variability of the respondents' responses to all the items which only confirms that there is a moderate loss of ethnic identity of this ethnic group.

However, the study finds that there is no a statistically strong ground to assume a total loss of ethnic identification of this group because the majority of respondents still sustain their awareness of ethnic background and sense of belonging to their ethnic group. Thus, it may be well assumed that the assimilation process contributes to a reducing degree, but does not necessarily lead to a total loss of ethnic identification. Indeed, studies have found that the identification of many minority immigrant groups have, in one way or another, persisted and been maintained (Ono, 2002)

B. *The Correlation Between Cultural, Structural Marital Assimilation And Ethnic Identity*

1) *Cultural Assimilation and Ethnic Identification*

Bivariate analysis of Pearson Product Moment Correlation has been performed to identify and analyze the nature of the relationship, if any, among the variables of the study. The study finds that there exists a strong negative significant relationship between cultural assimilation score and ethnic identification score. Pearson correlation between the two is [$r(198) = -0.621$ $p < 0.01$, $r^2=0.386$ (38.6%)].

TABLE II. CORRELATION MATRIX CULTURAL ASSIMILATION AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Cultural Assimilation	Ethnic Identity
Pearson Correlation	-.621(**)
Sig.(2-Tailed)	.000
N	200

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As such, the results suggest that a higher degree in cultural assimilation paves the way to lower ethnic identification. It might help in to predict about the ethnic identification

2) *Structural assimilation and ethnic identity*

An examination of bivariate analysis of Pearson Product Moment Correlation indicates that there is a statistically and negatively significant relationship between structural assimilation and ethnic identity both [$r(197) = -0.360$ $p < 0.01$].

TABLE III. CORRELATION MATRIX STRUCTURAL ASSIMILATION AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Structural Assimilation	Ethnic Identity
Pearson Correlation	-.360(**)
Sig.(2-Tailed)	.000
N	200

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Despite a significant relationship, however, the strength of the negative correlation between the two variables is low [$r^2 = 0.130$ (13%)]. This means that the correlation is not very strong. Structural assimilation is only accounted for 15.6 % for ethnic identity 13 %. This, too, implies that in certain circumstances ethnic identification would not be affected by a high degree of structural assimilation. A chance of a statistically significant correlation between the two is, thus, not always well guaranteed.

3) *Marital Assimilation and Ethnic Identification*

The data indicates a moderate negative significant relationship between marital assimilation and ethnic identity [$r(186) = -0.494$ $p < 0.01$], with Pearson coefficient of determination accounted by 24.4 % ($r^2= 0.244$). The result statistically suggests that those who have married Malay man/women are more likely to lose their ethnic identification. In other words, the more the number of exogamous marriage with Malays, the lesser ethnic identification.

TABLE IV. CORRELATION MATRIX BETWEEN MARITAL ASSIMILATION AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Marital Assimilation	Ethnic Identity
Pearson Correlation	-.494(**)
Sig.(2-Tailed)	.000
N	200

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The finding of this study indicates that the lower degree of ethnic identity is influenced by a high degree of marital assimilation. In this case, a moderate loss of ethnic identity of Malays of Acehnese descent in Malaysia has something to do with them being married to Malay men and/or women. Therefore, this finding is in agreement with Gordon's assumption (1964) that when a minority group is experiencing an exogamous marriage with the host, it would soon be followed by a reducing degree of ethnic distinctiveness. The minority group will, therefore, associate itself with the identity of the host.

C. *The Interplay of Structural Assimilation, Cultural Assimilation, and Marital Assimilation and its effects on Ethnic Identification*

A Pearson product-moment correlation is used to examine the relationship between scores on structural assimilation scale and scores in cultural assimilation and marital assimilation scale. A positively and statistically significant relationship is found between the two variables with [$r(198) = 0.548 p < 0.01$]. The findings indicate a strong relationship between structural assimilation and cultural assimilation with the Pearson Coefficient of Determination (r^2) of 0.300 (30). It means that structural assimilation is accounted for 30 % for cultural assimilation

TABLE V. CORRELATION MATRIX BETWEEN STRUCTURAL ASSIMILATION, CULTURAL ASSIMILATION AS WELL AS MARITAL ASSIMILATION

Structural Assimilation	Cultural Assimilation	Marital Assimilation
Pearson Correlation	.548(**)	.459(**)
Sig.(2-Tailed)	.000	.000
N	200	200

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The study, too, discovers that a positively significant relationship exists between structural assimilation and marital assimilation [$r(198) = 0.459 p < 0.01$] where structural assimilation accounted by only 21.1 % ($r^2=0.211$) for marital assimilation. As a result, a high degree in structural assimilation might help in to predict a high degree in both cultural and marital assimilation. It implies that those who have structurally assimilated into Malay society will culturally assimilate as well. The chance of marital assimilation will, at the same time, increase which is indicated by a high number of intermarriage and the acceptance of them at the core unit (family institution) of Malay society.

Nevertheless, this study finds that cultural assimilation, rather than structural assimilation, has a stronger influence on the decrease in ethnic distinction and identification, as indicated by the Pearson Correlation test. It was found that cultural assimilation is accounted for 38.6 % for ethnic identification while structural assimilation is only by 13 %. Consequently, ethnic identification would not necessarily be affected by a high degree of structural assimilation.

As a result, Gordon's assumption that structural assimilation as a pivotal core of the assimilation process is not exhaustively supported by the findings of this study. However, the findings of the study are in line with the study of Cuellar, Nyberg, and Maldonado (1997) who found that ethnic identity scores are strongly positively correlated with traditional orientation scores on an acculturation measure.

This finding was further confirmed by Partial Correlation test. The assumption of Partial Correlation analysis is that the relationship between two variables will be affected by third variables (Levin & Fox, 2000). It is, therefore, necessary to control the third variable to ascertain a relationship between two variables tested. In this case, it is necessary to control any possible influence of marital assimilation and cultural assimilation to find out the relationship between structural and ethnic identity.

The result of the Partial Correlation test shows that there is no statistical correlation between structural assimilation and ethnic identity [partial $r = 0.49 p > 0.05$]. This confirms the finding that structural assimilation has little effect on ethnic identification [$r(197) = -0.360 p < 0.01, r^2 = -0.130$ (13%)], and a chance of a statistically significant correlation between the two is not always well guaranteed. In contrast, when controlling structural and marital assimilation to determine the relationship between cultural assimilation and ethnic identity, the result confirms the finding of the study which shows a negatively significant relationship between cultural assimilation and ethnic identity [$r = -0.481 p < 0.01$].

Furthermore, the interplay between marital assimilation and cultural assimilation shows that there is a positive and significant relationship between the two [$r(198) = 0.481 p < 0.01$, with a coefficient of determination (r^2) of 0.231 (23.1 %)]. It indicates that the higher the number of exogamous marriage with Malays is the higher cultural assimilation. As such, the role of intermarriage is threefold. It reduces the loss of ethnic identification and influences the rise of cultural assimilation as well as structural assimilation. This finding contradicts Gordon's assumption (1964) that structural assimilation, rather than marital assimilation, is a core process of assimilation. However, it is in agreement with the result of the previous study indicating that the level of exogamy related to a successful process of assimilation. In contrast, high rate of endogamy is an indication that the group preserves itself as a separate entity in that society (Peach, 2005).

In a nutshell, it is statistically sound to argue that Malays of Acehnese descent have well assimilated into Malays majority at cultural, structural and marital level. This ethnic group has also experienced a continual process of losing its ethnic identity.

This finding is confirmative to the linear model of assimilation theory that advocates a linear process of assimilation whereby an ethnic group will eventually lose its ethnic identification (see Gordon, 1964; Park, 1950; Park & Burgess, 1969, for discussion).

This finding is also affirmative to the previous study that reports a significant correlation between assimilation and ethnic identity (Cuellar, Nyberg, & Maldonado, 1997). It is also consistent with some other research findings that assimilated groups tend to lose their ethnic identification. Said & Majid (2004) find that Malays of *Jawi Peranakan* in Penang have a high degree of assimilation with a strong tendency to adopt the host society's socio-cultural life at the expense of losing their own ethnic identity. Similarly, Umar (2003) also discovers that Bangkok-Melayu Communities of Bangkok have a high degree of assimilation accompanied by a loss of any cohesion as a distinct group.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Malays of Acehnese descent have experienced a high degree of assimilation with a moderate loss of their ethnic identification. The interaction of cultural assimilation, structural assimilation, and marital assimilation would have affected the higher degree of assimilation of this ethnic group into Malay society. The study finds that structural assimilation is positively and significantly related to cultural assimilation and marital assimilation. In other words, the higher level of cultural and marital assimilation of Malays of Acehnese descent might have been influenced by their assimilation at the structural level of Malay society.

Furthermore, the findings of the study also show that cultural assimilation, structural assimilation as well as marital assimilation are negatively and significantly correlated with ethnic identification. It signifies that the higher the degree of assimilation at the cultural, structural and marital level the lower the ethnic identification. As such, a reducing degree of ethnic identification of Malays of Acehnese descent in Malaysia might have been the outcomes of their high degree of assimilation at the cultural, structural and marital level into Malay society. Finally, the study indicates that marital assimilation is playing a rather pivotal intervening role in reducing the degree of ethnic identification.

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