

# Preserving Ethnic Identity through Native Language and Religion: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims in Southern Thailand

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## Abstract

The Malay language as an ethnic minority language for the Malay-Muslims in southern Thailand appears to have a religious meaning besides its cultural and ethnic significance indications. In a context of language contact like the one in Thailand, minority languages of ethnic groups are prone to change, attrition, and loss. The studies reviewed provide rich data illustrating an interdependent relationship between language and identity. The maintenance of an ethnic minority language plays a vital role in the maintenance of ethnicity, cultural identification, and religious conventions for many communities and vice versa. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to discuss how Malay as a native language and Islam as a religion are two main factors to preserve and sustain the Malay ethnic 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

**Keywords:** Ethnic identity, Southern Thailand, Malay Muslims

## Introduction

As a minority people living in the political sphere of Thailand as a nation, it is inevitably that the Malay Muslims will come into contact with the culture and language of the majority, particularly when the central government exerts its control through its various institutions upon

ethnic groups. The government always sees its educational systems as an effective mechanism for socializing and integrating ethnic groups including Malay-Muslims into Thai national life or as is call (*Thaisezation*). It is through the Thai educational system that the Thai language has been able to penetrate into the daily life of the Malays. Thai mass media such as TV play an important role in promoting Thai language and culture. So far, the assimilation policy has not been well received nor has it been successful among the Malay Muslims who frequently look at the policy of Thai and even take it as a threat to their ethnic identity (Madmern, 1988; Shurke, 1970). 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 ethno-religious 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 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).

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.

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. Malay terms for matters related especially to livelihood had already, however, formed a Malay dialectal vocabulary at an early date. The language is the element that best distinguishes the Malay Muslims from other Thai groups. Personal proficiency in the Malay language and passing it on to children ensures continuation of the Malay identity and propagates optimism concerning the future of the culture in the southern provinces. The continuation of identity can be caused by other means as well, for example, by the passing on of the means of livelihood from one generation to another. Many characteristics related to traditionally Malay means of livelihood and ways of life nevertheless change and disappear. The language, however, remains as long as new speakers are born into the society. Methods of supporting the Malay language are therefore possibly the simplest forms of preserving Malay Muslim culture and Malay Muslim ethnic identity. Although the national official language is Thai, the 1960 census for the provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat show that approximately 75 percent of the

total population in that area, which is older than 5 years, was unable to speak Thai (Madmarn, 1999:4).

## Literature Review

Identity is “an internalized, self-selected concept based on experiences inside the family and outside of the family.” We form our identity by selecting values, beliefs, and concepts that better define our sense of self (Adams, Gullotta, and Montemayor, 1992: 2). Ethnicity refers to a specific characteristic of shared unique cultural traditions, and a heritage that persists across generations. Ethnic identification is defined as a real awareness of self within a specific group, which is followed by a great sense of respect and pride, and it constitutes a base for the development of a healthy self-concept (DeVos & Romanucci-Ross, 1982). Identity cannot be separated from the culture(s) that build and structure it. The identity of the individual develops and crystallizes across one’s lifespan, beginning with a young child’s awareness of significant others and an initial sense of self and extending to the older adults’ summation, integration and evaluation of one’s life accomplishments (Erikson, 1993).

Discussing the conditions that promote the formation and survival of an ethnic group, Smith pointed out that in the pre-modern times; four factors favor ethnic crystallization and survival. The first was the “acquisition” (or later the loss) of a particular piece of territory that was felt to belong to a people as they belonged to it. Second, a history of struggle with various enemies not only led to a sense of community but also served as a source of inspiration for future generations. Third, some sort of organized religion was necessary “for producing specialists in communications and record-keeping as well as for generating the rituals and traditions that formed the channels of continuity of ethnic communities”. Finally, the proximate cause of ethnic durability and survival was the rise and power of the myth of “ethnic choosiness” (Smith, 1991:52-

53). Smith concluded that the factors that promote one's sense of ethnic identity have become more influential in modern times. Of crucial importance have been the increasing cultural activities of the modern state, and the development of the ideology of nationalism – particularly ethnic nationalism.

Developing a sense of self is an essential part of every individual becoming a mature person. Each person's self-conception is a unique combination of many identifications, identifications as broad as *woman* or *man*, *Catholic* or *Muslim*, or as narrow as being a member of one particular family. Although self-identity may seem to coincide with a particular human being, identities are actually much wider than that. They are also collective identities that extend to countries and ethnic communities, so that people feel injured when other persons sharing their identity are injured or killed. Sometimes people are even willing to sacrifice their individual lives to preserve the identity of their group. Palestinian suicide bombers are a well-publicized example. People who share the same collective identity think of themselves as having a common interest and a common fate.

Similarly, some analysts speak of ethnicity as a primordial phenomenon, relatively ancient and unchanging. Other analysts stress that ethnicity is socially constructed, with people choosing a history and common ancestry and creating, as much as discovering, differences from others (Benedict, 1991). In this study, ethnicity is considered to be largely socially constructed, while it is recognized that some traits of ethnicity are not easily modified by social processes. For instance, some traits are fixed at birth, such as parental ethnicity and religion, place of birth, and skin colour. Other traits may be acquired or modified later, such as language spoken, religion practiced, clothing worn, or food eaten. Insofar as the traits chosen to define membership in an ethnicity are determined at birth, ethnic status is ascribed; and insofar as they are modified or acquired in

later life, ethnic status is achieved.

Many identities, then, are not based on ascribed traits but on shared values, beliefs, or concerns, which are varyingly open to acquisition by choice. This includes shared religious adherence indeed, members of many religious communities proselytize to win converts to their faith. This is also true for political ideologies, attachment to particular pieces of land, or practicing a particular way of life. Language is intrinsically connected with ethnic identity (Fishman, 1985, 1999) and it 'interweaves the individual's personal identity with his or her collective ethnic identity' (Liebkind, 1999:143). Among the multitude of markers of group identity, like age, sex, social class and religion, language is considered essential to the maintenance of group identity. The issue of language and identity is extremely complex: the terms *language* and *identity* are open to discussion and their relationship fraught with difficulties (Edwards, 1985). Liebkind observes that in the mainstream perspective, language is not seen as an 'essential component of identity. But language and ethnicity are seen as negotiable commodities to the extent that they hinder a person's security and well-being' (Liebkind, 1999: 150). From the early 1980s, however, this notion has been challenged and different studies have shown the importance of language for many ethnic minorities (Liebkind, 1999).

Several theories have been developed to account for the relationship between language and ethnic identity. One is the Ethno-linguistic Identity Theory (Giles and Byrne, 1982:17-40), according to which members of a minority group strive for a positive ethnic identity by emphasizing their in-group speech style. That is, members of a minority group tend to speak their own language more than any other language. Giles and Byrne argue that these group members not only are likely to maintain their ethnic identity, and keep at some distance from out-group speakers, but that they also are less motivated to acquire native-like proficiency

in the dominant language and wish to maintain the knowledge of their ethnic tongue.

## Methodology

This paper tends 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). 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 municipality areas. 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.

## Results and Discussion

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 ethno-religious 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 directly 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 to preserve their ethnic Malay identity, for them to be a Malay is to be a Muslim. Malay as an ethnic minority language appears to have a religious meaning besides its cultural and ethnic significance. Most of the informants agreed on the way they defined themselves when it comes to ethnic identity and self-identification, starting with their ethnic origin, Malay, and their religious beliefs, where a language teacher, for instance, bravely affirmed that:

*"I am a Malay Muslim of southern Thailand province, which in other words, I am a Malay by ethnicity means I speak Malay as my first language, I wear a Malay costume (baju kurung and sarung) I behave in a Malay way of life (Following a Malay culture tradition), Islam is my religion and I live here in Yala"*

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".

However, when it comes to the question of language, the respondents introduced the notion of providing the right atmosphere for a language to grow. Huda Abdul Rashid, a Malay

Language teacher in a government high school of Yala Municipality confirmed the importance of the Malay language and regarded it as a valuable heritage, she reaffirmed herself and her identity as a Malay Muslim. Her love for the Malay language and culture emerged so strongly during her Bachelor's degree at PSU (Prince of Songkhla University) that it leads her to change her major to Malay Studies. She decided to become a Malay language teacher and dedicate her life to revitalizing the Malay language, which had almost become extinct. The other friend of her (who was there during the interview) also had positive experiences regarding exploring, reaffirming, and expressing their Malay identity through language. She answered with a flashback of her background:

*“As I was the first born, Bahasa Melayu was the only language that I was initially exposed to. My parents had always insisted we speak Malay at home (I can learn Thai for sure at school) and to our relatives but this became increasingly difficult to enforce (once she started school). I began to speak Thai to my peers, my brother, and occasionally to my parents.”*

This affirms that the Malay language will always be an important part of their identities. However, the case of Malay Muslims who are not able to understand or speak Malay does not indicate a loss of ethnic/cultural pride. Nikmalee, a Communication for Business lecturer at Yala Rajabhat University, gives a similar view as Dolah when she clarified that Malay identity and pride can exist regardless of knowing the Malay language or not knowing it:

*“Language is important to express yourself and to indicate of who you are, but not knowing your ethnic language does not mean that you are ignoring or losing your ethnicity. Because as you know the domain language here in Thailand is Thai and we as a government officers have to be fluent*

*and use Thai most of the times which put Malay language as a language that I understand most than I speak”*

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.

Thailand's concept of nationalism is a unique blend of the French, German and liberal ideal types, by seeking to be ethnically blind. This reflects Thailand's unique brand of nationalism. As Brubaker described French nationalism as simultaneously assimilationist and exclusionary. Thai nationalism has been both accepting and repressive of ethnic differences. European colonial landscape led Thai leaders to mimic (to adopt) the political systems and social forms of control being established among their colonized neighbors. In reaction to the threat of Western colonial powers at the end of the nineteenth century, King Vajiravudh strongly promoted the concept of 'nation, religion and king'. These concepts characterize Thai nationalism and came to mean being able to speak Bangkok Thai, to emulate the cultural traits of Bangkok Thais, and to follow the Buddhist religion.

Moreover, these ideas were enforced through the state led education system, the media, the bureaucracy and the military. Additionally, the Thai government has discouraged the use of ethnic labels such as 'Lao', 'Khmer' and 'Malay' for Thailand's one category, 'Thai'. State imposed education system required Central Thai to be spoken and a Central Thai view of history to be taught in all schools. It was *assimilationist* in that anyone could become Thai if they learned to speak Thai language and act as a Central Thai. The conceptualization of Thai identity based upon three pillars as formulated by King Rama VI, (1) the nation, including people, land, and language (*chat*); (2) Buddhism, the religious dimension (*satsana*); and (3) the King, or monarchy (*phramahakesat*), this represented in the nation's flag colour, which construct a unified national identity in Thailand.

Interestingly, ethnic group in Thailand were given the label showing their ethnic origin,

such as Thai- Chin (Thai-Chinese). But it is a different for the Malays, they were not allowed to recognize as Thai Malay which denotes their ethnic origin, instead they were given the title of Thai Islam or Thai Muslim, with a hope to integrate all Muslims into the Thai nation, so that the differences of race and culture are mitigated. However, for the Malay Muslims the word

"Thai" is synonymous with "Buddhism", and "Muslim" for them means "Malay." So how can they be both "Thai" and "Islam"? The Malays of Thailand face a real problem of appellation, if not of identification.

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### **Islam and its impact on the Malay Muslims identity**

The religion, a geographical location and common ancestors may be the characteristics responsible for initial growth of the Malay Muslim community but, there is a stronger element which is valid as binding force for the

community. They do have a common religion but that is part of a greater Muslim *Ummah* and they cannot claim a separate identity by virtue of belonging to Sunni school of thought. They cannot claim over selves as belonging to a particular race. The color & physical features of the members of Malay Muslim community are also not identical. In present times, the only common binding force and the factor of their identity as a separate ethnic group is Malay language.

The Malay Muslim community is like any other ethnic minority group in Thailand when it comes to language change, attrition, or loss. This shows that language and ethnic identity is interrelated with each other. For them, speaking the Malay language means preserving their ethnic cultural identity, whereas speaking Thai was needed to acquire better jobs in government sectors, which obliged a person to be fluent in Thai language. Malay language is highly valued by most of its speakers, both as the easiest way to express their feelings and inner thoughts, and as a symbol of who they really are.

The Malay language is also regarded as a vital element in the traditional Malay family structure facilitates in strengthening the Malay ethnicity among the Malays. Malay Muslim families, for various reasons, are more likely to be organized in a complex form than Thai families. The traditional joint and extended families are still common among Malay Muslims. In these families, the older generations, who usually speak only Malay or use Malay mainly in daily communication, “force” the younger generations to learn Malay in order to communicate with them and this was evident by the agreement by most of the respondents. It is also interesting to find that ethnic identity is more sustain and strong in families whose Malay language is used as medium of instruction among its family members. That is why the Malay ethnicity and culture are preserved more effectively and more successfully in a more complex Malay family than in a simpler one. German nationalist ideology, also located to

language as the defining characteristics of the nation. The German people is defined by its use of the German language, and the ancient origins of that language denote the ancient origins of the German folk or nations Pride in one’s language is a natural feeling, and is equally pride in one’s nation.

If there is a concerted effort to increase the use and visibility of Malay language at the regional and, even, national levels, and then the ethnic language should regain some measure of social power besides Thai. In this way, it would be perceived as laden with both identity and practicality. The Malays, traditionally emphasize collectivity. This tradition has made them, for the most part; rely upon institutions/organizations for their social, political, and economic life. These institutions/organizations perform various kinds of functions as an example The Majlis (The Islamic religious Center) helping the maintenance of order in Malay communities, protecting the rights and interests of the Malay Muslims, doing charity work, and organizing religious activities, whereas Ibnu Affan Cooperation provides financial facilities, etc. All these Malay Muslim organizations play an important role in strengthening Malay Muslim inter-group-interaction in which the Malay language is used dominantly in communication. In this way, the Malays propensity for an organized life has helped the maintenance of its Malay ethnicity in Southern Thailand.

It has also been argued that strong ethnic sentiments may affect the linguistic behavior of Malay Muslims in relation to their children. In this respect, it has been suggested that linguistic behavior of using exclusively the Malay language by a number of Malay Muslims parents, notably from Yala Municipality areas, where the dominant language is Thai, in relation to their children, indicates that there is intense allegiance to the respective linguistic code, probably caused by their strong ethnic feelings. In other words, the ethno-linguistic imposed by one’s group membership, especially

in minority contexts, is a crucial factor in identity maintenance. In this relation, the symbolic character of the Malay language functions as the bridge of the respective ethnic identity of these parents, who make every effort, primarily on a linguistic level, to get across specific messages concerning their “Malayness”. Therefore, language in this particular case is used as a symbolic identity marker.

Therefore, it was suggested that the majority of Malay Muslims recognizing their Malay roots by ethnically associating themselves with “Malayness”, wish to retain some Malay vestige of their broader identity which is reflected in their linguistic behavior as well as in the ethnic labels they self-identify in Thailand. It is a discovery of how Malay Muslims in the municipality area of Yala province perceive their ethnic identity and native tongue, the Malay language. The data was analyzed and the results were reported in an ethnographic manner. Informants in each interview discussed the same topics, yet the emphasis of topics varied between some informants. They talked about their identity as Malay Muslims, defining it and explaining what it means to be a minority. They also talked about the important role of Malay language and the role of Jawi writing in understanding Islam as well as its significance in their ethnic/cultural identity. Malay language, to them, is a bridge that connects them to their ethnic origin and to the Malay world.

The Malay language is strongly associated with the notion of Malay ethnicity and the religion of Islam. The Malay language functions as a boundary marker between those who are Malay and those who are not. For the Malay Muslims, the Malay language not only serves as their means of inter group communication, but also links their present existence with their glorious past, reminding them of their history as a separate sovereign polity. Furthermore, Malay is considered a source of cultural heritage, positive value and pride for the Malay Muslims. The close – link between the Malay language and Malay identity can perhaps best

be exemplified in the Malay phrase “*Bahasa jiwa Bangsa*” literally translated as “Language is the essence of a race”. The Malay language is the most important attribute defining the Malay Muslims community in southern Thailand. Malay language acts as a source of emotional identification and the connection between the members of this ethnic group, this strong sense of linguistic identity has characterized the Malays from the Thais. Language is a crucial and dynamic factor plays a major role in creating a sense of separateness. Another function of the Malay language is the close association with the religion of Islam. The potent force behind the equation of the Malay language with Islam was the Islamization of the Malay Peninsula in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is a universal fact that whenever Islam goes, it carries with it the message of the Quran and its Arabic script. With the adoption of the Arabic script for their writing system, the Malay language written in the *Jawi* (Arabic) script became a language associated not only with the communicative and symbolic aspects of the Malay culture but also with Islamic learning, propagation and rituals.

### **Bahasa Melayu and Religious Identity**

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 southern provinces such as Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat. In the in-depth interviews conducted, even though the researcher did not introduce religion 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. According to Imtiyaz Yusuf (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".

Malay as an ethnic minority language appears to have a religious meaning besides its cultural and ethnic significance. The studies reviewed provide rich data illustrating an interdependent relationship between language and identity. The maintenance of an ethnic minority language plays a role in the maintenance of ethnicity, cultural identification, and religious conventions for many communities and vice versa. For the purpose of reaching a deeper understanding of the formation of the Malay Muslims ethnic identity in relation to language attitudes and practices, the researcher believes that listening to the members of the community will serve to give a closer look into their lives. Therefore, the idea of in-depth interviews comes into action, since it is a method to hear what Malay Muslims want to say about their language and identity - whether they are interdependent factors or not.

Naturally enough, some individuals were able to read in Jawi (the Arabic alphabetical written script for the Malay language), mostly books and religious texts, as their knowledge of Jawi was admittedly basic. When invited to voice their opinions about the relative weight of the two languages (Malay and Thai) in their community, informants' answers stressed the contrasted position of each tongue. All respondents, for instance, stated that Malay language was important, as a symbol of Malay identity; the importance of Malay lies primarily in its power as an agent and symbol of identity, as the principal conveyor of native culture; as a tool to communicate with elders, Malay is a privileged instrument for conveying traditional culture, and thus helping preserve one's own deepest identity; and as the preferred way to

express one's inner feelings. The respondents thus considered their native language as a weighty element of self-definition.

As important as it was, however, this element was deemed essential to Malay identity. Most of the twenty respondents stated that any person whose parents were Malay, and/or who was himself or herself living the Malay way, should be considered Malay, and should have knowledge of Malay language. The respondents nevertheless thought that it was legitimate to teach Malay language at school, as it could help the children to preserve their language. Some of them even added that the Malay curriculum should be improved and extended to all grades and topics. All respondents during in-depth interviews declared that Thai language was also important, but for different reasons: to learn new things in order not to be left out; to be more competitive and to find a suitable job; it is rather seen as a tool, necessary to compete efficiently in the Thai modern world, but not good enough for the adequate expression of one's inner feelings. One respondent expressed that unilingual Malays should be able to gain access to all of the opportunities offered in the south, without having to know Thai to do so. Such a contrast between the two languages indicates some ambiguities.

As seen above, the actual language practices, influenced by a great part by the overwhelming presence of Thai at school, in the media and in public life, seem to disclose, at least among the younger generations, a neat predominance of the non-native language. There thus exists some degree of conflict between what people do (Thai is increasingly used in the community) and what they think (Malay is greatly valued, and most respondents are confident that it will survive into future generations).

Malay, however, still retains its status as the principal language among the families of the community in the southernmost provinces of Thailand such as Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat (Mudmarn, 1988). It is almost the exclusive

means of communication in all Malay Muslim homes, at the village, as well as during festivals or religious functions such as marriage ceremonies, Prophet's birthday (*Maulid al-Rasul*) festival, etc. Malay language is also commonly heard in the workplace, mostly in private Malay Muslim institutions, except in the case of linguistic interchanges with non-Malay co-workers, when Thai is used irregardless of the mother tongue of the interlocutor. Some of the respondents who were schooled exclusively in Thai tended to mix this language with Malay when speaking to their peers. This is not the case with the older generation who attended schools where Malay was taught. Most of the respondents stressed the fact that most of the Malay Muslim society has now become bilingual.

Informants insist, however, on the fact that Malay language must remain the first language of the Malay Muslims, and that Thai should be learned as a second language, because Malay is the language of identity; most of the respondents even asserted that one cannot be a real Malay Muslim without speaking the language, while Thais draw their importance from their practicality and usefulness. Such assertions about the respective weight of native and non-native languages reflect underlying assumptions about the interface between traditional culture and contemporary life. For some respondents who are working in governmental sectors confirm that, as a Malay Muslim living in Thailand nowadays, only speaking Malay does not enable economic survival. Thus, one must also learn about Thai, the "means for making a better life", i.e., the qualifications necessary to obtain good waged work. These do not stem from Malay culture. This is why the best place to learn them is at school, whose prime function is the transmission of a Thai education with Thai as the medium of instruction. Thai is one of the most useful "means for making a better life" if you are living in city areas, in contrast to the situation in the villages, where the Malay Muslims are primarily involved in agricultural

activities, such as rubber plantations and so on, in which the Thai language is not necessary. It is thus considered normal that the main school be those of the government school. But like the Malay Muslims in the village, the Malay Muslims who reside at Yala Municipality also agree that Malay language should be taught in the schools. We are thus brought back to our original dilemma: the conflicts between identity and practicality, representations and practices, traditional culture and contemporary life. Education stands at a crossroads in this dilemma, as one of its principal loci of occurrence, but also, hopefully, as the place where the conflict may be resolved.

### **Language and Religious Education**

As language is an integral part of a culture, retaining their ethnic mother tongue is considered by the Malay Muslims as an important medium for maintaining their culture and marking their ethnic identity. In achieving this, religious education is playing a primary role. Religious education has become an urgent need for the Malay Muslim children. To meet this need, more and more religious schools have been set up in the past few years. Now it is estimated that there are about four hundred religious schools in southern Thailand, in which Malay Muslim children can learn Malay language, Islamic history, Malay culture, and related subjects. Malay parents want their children to learn Malay and the religion of Islam so that they can know more about religion and culture. It is interestingly to note that some parents who want their children to succeed academically will still send their kids to *Tadika* school (kindergarten), which is in a religious school system. They think that speaking Malay is an essential mark of being Malay Muslim. Malay younger generations also consider learning and speaking Malay as an expression of their cultural heritage and ethnic identity.

These make them more conscious of cultural maintenance and ethnic identity, as Nik Asea put it: "Language is as a central value of our

Malay culture". They expose their children more to Malay culture by sending them to religious school, giving them a Malay education at home, and deliberately creating situations in which Malay is used. All these efforts made toward ethnic cultural maintenance have enabled the subsequent generations of Malay Muslims in Thailand to continue thinking of themselves in ethnic terms and to maintain positive attitudes and strong interests with respect to their Malay heritage and traditions.

In Yala Municipality, many Malay Muslim residents perceive a neat dichotomy between traditional learning and the modern schools. For them, Malay and religious education are or were a history or ethno-religious affair. The school is seen as a place where religion and the Malay way of life is being taught in Malay as a medium of instruction. This kind of school, known as a *pondok* or traditional religious school, were prevalent when the Thai government introduced its education programs, so some of these *pondok* schools were transformed into modern religious schools, or *Madrrasah*, where both religious and academic studies were taught.

For Malay Muslims, both types of knowledge religious and academic, are equally essential. A few people even think that it would be better if these religious schools were the only choice for parents to send their children, as it would facilitate the learning of culture, the Malay language and traditional values besides religious teachings. For many Malay Muslims then, education seems to have a double function. On the one hand, it is meant to explain the present-day world to the young people and, hopefully, to help them acquire the skills necessary to earn a decent living in the midst of this world. On the other hand, though education is also perceived as being geared toward the transmission of what are deemed to be traditional Malay moral values and social customs. Modern religious education thus seems to be perceived as a combination of both formal (academic) teaching and informal (religious). It is this combination that should ensure the

preservation of Malay culture and identity, in the context of the present-day world.

As for the role of the school, Fishman (1980) says that a main function of ethnic-community mother-tongue schools is to teach children about their ethnic identity; this was true with most of the informants, for instance, Huda Rashid shared her own experience with the researcher. Besides home, parents also support efforts to teach the language outside the home, as is evident by the large number of Malay-type afternoon schools (*Tadika*) and many types of private religious schools. A key expression that captures the school's role as fostering ethnic identity is "ethnic group membership". Tse (2001) says:

*"While researchers have looked quite extensively at the language exposure we need to learn a new language, a second set of factors that are equally important has received far less attention. These factors are related to "group membership," or the allegiances we feel with particular-language-speaking groups and the attitudes and feelings that flow from being associated with them. In other words, group membership is important because we tend to learn language better when we feel like a member of the group of people who speak that language."*

Tse (2001) additionally claimed that group membership is important because it promotes efficient language development. Her claim may be extended to say that group membership promotes not only efficient language development but also ethnic-identity enhancement. This extension of Tse's idea is based on Giles and Byrne's (1982) 'Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory', according to which the members of a subordinate ethnic group strive for a positive ethnic identity by emphasizing their in-group speech style (Giles & Byrne, 1982:17-40). Giles and Byrne argued that members of a subordinate ethnic group

are likely to maintain their ethnic identity. Therefore, members who emphasize their in-group speech style (i.e., Malay Muslims who develop Malay proficiency) by attaining group membership are likely to maintain or enhance their Malay ethnic identity. The relationship between ethnic identity and language can therefore be understood as reciprocal. Language can be an extremely important feature of identity.

Giles and Johnson (1981: 199) remarked that the social psychological approach to language and inter-ethnic behaviour allows us to predict who is in an ethnic group uses which language strategy. According to Giles and Johnson (1987: 69), the ethno linguistic identity theory is strongly related to Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory on intergroup behaviour. Giles' social identity, according to Tajfel and Turner (1979), is built around our social categorisation of the world and the values attached to the category memberships. Ethnic group identity is important for individuals, and they may attempt to make themselves favourably distinct on valued dimensions such as language. This process of achieving a satisfactory and secure social identity for individuals can enhance their self-esteem. In terms of cultural or linguistic pluralism, the conditions are likely to depend on relative parity in status and power between the in group and the out groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Many sociologists have considered language as an essential pillar for maintaining group identity. Even when language has receded to a purely symbolic role, it can still have an important part in group identity. Rokiah Ismail, a Malay language teacher in a well-known private school here in Yala, said that:

*"We have seen the importance of language in maintaining and preserving the identity of an ethnic group. If we wish to maintain the present distinct identity of our community, we shall have to make conscious efforts to encourage the members of our community to speak Malay within their respective homes and outside as well when communicating with members of our own community". She added, "But this is not enough. We have to build interest of the new generation into Malay. They should feel proud that they have a language of their own and this feeling of pride can only arise if they know Malay as full-fledged language".*

Language is one of the cornerstones of any culture. It cements the unique identity of a group and expresses the particular concerns and needs of that group. Mansour Salleh, the former president of the Young Muslim Association of Thailand says, the fact that Thai is now the official language is also a sensitive issue.

"We are Malay and we have Malay language as mother tongue. We want to practice our language freely here and promote by the government. We need government open minded and tolerance about this issue. Even though there is no harassment on this policy but they try to stop our language and campaign Thai. According to human dignity, I think it is very wrong." He continued by asserting that "... because there is Thai as official language. This is Nationalism, Thai Nationalism," (Quoted from Ronald Aung Nai, 2007).

For indigenous peoples the threat to their cultures presented by the intrusion of outside influences may be a major contributing factor to their loss of identity. Loss of language undermines social structures and aids the disappearance of group culture, especially where this is dependent on an oral history and tradition.

## 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. The interview surveys about the identity and language conducted for this research revealed that Malay Muslims of the Deep South of Thailand prefer to view their identity as being that of Malays who are living in Thailand. 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. On the other hand, in a research study conducted by Imtiyaz Yusuf (2007), provides an analysis of Thailand's Muslims, where he found that the ethnically Malay, but Thai-speaking Muslims of the upper South, who are the descendants of Malays from the south, while recognizing themselves as belonging to the Malay ethnic stock view themselves more as Thai Muslims and see no contradiction in their identities of being a Muslim and a Thai citizen. Similar views about identity are found in the Thai Muslims of the Central, Northeast and Northern regions of Thailand. Nearly all of them refer to themselves as Thais who follow the religion of Islam and speak the Thai language in spite of ethnic diversity within their group. Only one of the respondents defined herself as simply "Thai." The rest preferred to use some kind of ethnic identifier. According to Berry alternative acculturation strategies' theory (Berry, 1990: 201- 235), there are demonstrated two variants of strategy: integration and strategic combinations. In the first case (integration), the Malays identify themselves with their ethnic group and do not reject their historical, ethnic and cultural heritage. They have learned new cultural knowledge (first of all, the majority language) for successful integration into the Thai society and have selected relevant ethnic-cultural markers. If the language is such a relevant marker it is preserved. In this case

we have as a result a bilingual person. But if language is not included in the relevant marker set, we have the phenomenon when a person identifies himself or herself as Malay without knowing the Malay language. The fact proves that an ethnic group in general, and every single person, can maintain their ethnic identity when an original cultural base and conception of unity with their ancestors who spoke the same language is preserved.

In the second case of strategic combinations, the Thai as a rule try to have economic assimilation (in a job), and linguistic integration (through bilingualism). As far as one wants to gain benefits such as good education, good job perspectives and integration into a greater socio-economic space of Thailand, one has to master Thai. Hence, the proficiency in Thai is a vital necessity. Interestingly, the influence of Islamic resurgence in global level has pulled Muslims to struggle for their space in a non-Muslim majority state and society in particular. Islam in Thailand is relatively pluralistic in character than in much of the neighbouring country, Malaysia. This plurality stems in part of the way Islam evolve in the secular state and law. However, the global Islamic revival that infused by the contemporary politicization of religious and political arenas have awoken a vast number of the local in Thailand, especially young Muslims, to adopt new forms of *pure Islam*. The phenomenon brings back Islamic values, practices, and institutions into the lives of Muslims. The resurgence emphasizes on Islamic identity and adherence with regards to belief and practice. There is no study has been done on the Islamic identity of the Malay Muslims in southern Thailand with its focus to its role in the preservation of their ethnic identity. It is believed that studying the relationship between religion of Islam and Malay ethnicity through the lens of Malay Muslims in southern Thailand is a crucial method to understand the dynamics of their ethno- religious identity.

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