Exploring Religious Practices and Religious Identity Among Yemeni Postgraduate Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

Many Arab Muslim students come to predominantly Muslim countries to pursue their education because they are drawn to these nations for their Islamic identity, in which they can share the same religious beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, these students still need to adapt to the differing cultural and religious aspects of the host country. This study aims to delve into the dynamics of intercultural communication among groups with similar religious identities but originating from distinct cultures. By utilizing data collected from Yemeni postgraduate students in four public universities in Malaysia, this article explores how these students manifest their religious identity through religious practices and how they establish both in-group and out-group mentalities to navigate the challenges of living in a foreign country. The findings reveal that Yemeni postgraduate students in Malaysia maintain a strong connection to their religious and cultural practices, suggesting minimal shifts in their overall religious identity. The analysis also indicates that the students who are more devout and frequent religious centers tend to assimilate more fully into Malay Muslim society.

Keywords: Muslims, Intercultural Communication, Arabs, students, Malaysia, Yemen

1.0 Introduction

International students entering a new cultural milieu often find themselves in an unfamiliar setting, surrounded by individuals from diverse backgrounds (Pacheco, 2020). Numerous factors shape the intercultural experiences of international students within the host society, and one of these factors is religious identity (Yu, 2019; Kollontai, 2016).

Religion and culture are considered influential factors that attract foreign students (Nadeem, Mohammed, Dalib, & Mumtaz, 2017). Culture is defined as the compilation of values or beliefs that a society deems significant, along with the accepted norms of behavior within that society (George, Jones, & Sharbrough, 2005). Embracing, comprehending, and adapting to these cultural norms, values, and behaviors are crucial for students to thrive in their new environment. Various studies have underscored the significance of religious identity in the process of cultural adaptation (Loo, Din, & Kumar, 2016; Hassan & Peters, 2017). Nonetheless, there exists a research gap in understanding the religious factors that influence the development of students' intercultural communication skills, especially among Arab students in predominantly Muslim countries. Many studies focus on the experiences of Arab Muslims living in foreign countries where Islam is a minority religion and culture (Sabbah & Heyd-Metzuyanim, 2020;

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Alhawsali, 2019; Abunab, Dator, Salvador, & Lacanaria, 2017; Jones, 2016; Hassen, 2013).

This article aims to investigate the intercultural experiences of Yemeni students in Malaysia from the perspective of religious identity. The article will explore the extent to which similarities and differences in religious practices contribute to effective intercultural communication among Yemeni postgraduate students in Malaysia. This paper seeks to deepen our comprehension of how Muslim students interact on a local level and employ religion to navigate their day-to-day interactions with other members of the Muslim community. The study acknowledges the complexity of defining various manifestations of Islam and the varying levels of religious practice. In this paper, we categorize our participants as practicing Muslims, emphasizing their commitment to a religious identity rooted in adherence to fundamental religious practices.

Malaysia is recognized as a preferred destination for students from Muslim-majority countries seeking to pursue their graduate education. Despite this, there is a scarcity of research that examines the experiences of Arab-Muslim students in countries with predominantly Muslim populations. It is crucial to undertake a study that delves into the experiences of Muslim students who share the same religion but differ in sociocultural and religious practices compared to the host country. This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of Yemeni students who find themselves in a foreign Muslim environment characterized by solitude, religious uniqueness, and distinct cultural attributes. The study focuses on their journey of adjustment as students. By drawing upon data collected from Yemeni postgraduate students in four public universities in Malaysia, this article examines how these Yemeni students at the postgraduate level manifest their religious identity through the prism of religious practices. It also delves into how they navigate the delicate balance between their distinct cultural and religious identities through their interactions with local Muslims. The study aims to investigate how Yemeni students manage both the shared and differing aspects of their religious identity in relation to their Malaysian Muslim counterparts. Additionally, it explores how these students develop an in-group and out-group mentality as a coping mechanism to address the challenges of adapting to life in a foreign country.

Religious Identity among Muslim

As argued by Peek (2005), being Muslim becomes a public identity. The public expression of Muslim identity and life, through lifestyles and religious practices, has emerged as a way to define identity, particularly within the religious community. Although Muslims' everyday lives encompass more than just their religious identity, daily religious practices can be considered a significant aspect of their social identity (Melucci, 1985). These practices extend beyond the private sphere and seamlessly integrate into Muslims' daily lives, playing a crucial role in shaping their identity (Soares and Osella, 2009).

Previous studies have predominantly explored how Muslim students negotiate their identity in Muslim-majority contexts from non-religious angles, such as socio-cultural dynamics, language, ethnocentrism, and other factors (Nadeem, Mohammed, Dalib, 2020; Stephenson & Rajendram, 2019; Nadeem, Muhammad, Daleb & Mumtaz, 2017). Unlike these studies, the Muslims under investigation in this study do not distinguish between Islam and culture; instead, it examines how religious practices and culture intertwine. The study delves into the expression and negotiation of individualization concerning religion, culture, and identity among Muslims.

The construction of Islamic identity among Muslim youth in diasporic settings has been extensively explored in relation to topics such as entertainment, radicalization/deradicalization, and political participation (Gazzah, 2010; Kühle and Lindekilde, 2010). However, the expression and negotiation of religious identity among Muslims within different cultural contexts represent a relatively recent field of inquiry.

Religion, as a marker of identity, is considered a complex and dynamic process (Jacobson, 1998). Discussions on the importance of religion as a component of Muslim identity often align the term "religious identity" with concepts like ethnicity and religiosity. Defining religious identity is thus a challenging task. Browne, Carbonell, and Merrill (2003) describe religious identity as encompassing the ways individuals relate to their religion, involving membership in a religious community, alignment with beliefs, and the embodiment of those beliefs in daily life. It constitutes an individual's affirmation of faith as part of their identity narrative (Bischoff, 2006). Consequently, religious identity pertains to the choices individuals make to publicly assert their religiosity, making it visible to others (Hassen, 2013).

The literature underscores the inseparability of religious identity from culture. An empirical study by Jacobson (1997) that investigated the religious identity of British youth of Pakistani origin unveiled a sense of ambivalence. These individuals not only navigated their religious identity but also grappled with cultural hybridity. Jacobson (1997) emphasized that religious identity develops within the intricate and mutable social fabric of identity. She regarded religious identity as a stabilizing factor, anchoring Muslim youth amidst the complex flexibility of contemporary identity politics.

Similarly, McGown's (1999) study on Somali Muslims in Toronto and London depicted religion as a stabilizing force that offers certainty amid the bewildering experience of displacement and integration into a new society. Consequently, both studies highlight the significance of religious identification in diasporic settings as a means to navigate the discord and challenges posed by environments influenced by conflicting cultural values and practices.

Barth (1969) argued that maintaining social-group boundaries and cultural persistence occurs through interaction rather than isolation, allowing for the ongoing categorization of insiders and outsiders. In contrast, Shaffir (1979) found that the continuity of distinctive religious identities and lifestyles often arises from isolation and social distance as mechanisms of social control. Consequently, many religious communities seek isolation from the surrounding culture to thwart assimilation (Zine, 2001). These communities likely perceive assimilation into other groups as a threat to their religious identities and thus opt for isolation.

Previous research has primarily examined the relationship between religion and ethnic identity. These studies have highlighted religion's role in upholding cultural and ethnic traditions, aiding first-generation immigrants' adaptation to a new host society, and offering a source of identity for the second generation (Bankston & Zhou, 1996; Chong, 1998; Kurien, 1998). Williams (1988) notes that although religion frequently contributes to ethnic culture, the precise connection between the two remains elusive. It remains uncertain whether religious affiliation is integral to ethnic identity or whether religious orientation influences ethnic identity. Immigrant groups adopt various approaches to prioritize and integrate their religious and ethnic identities. While many immigrant religious communities emphasize their members' religious identity over their ethnic foundation, others underscore ethnic identity and rely on religious foundations to sustain cultural and ethnic traditions (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001).

Numerous theories have emerged to explain why individuals and minorities often emphasize and cultivate religious identities over other aspects of personal and social identity, such as race, ethnicity, or nationality. According to Smith (1998), immigrants frequently turn to religion in response to the isolation and disorientation accompanying their arrival in a new country. As they navigate issues of adjustment, they establish religious institutions and reinstate customary social and cultural activities in their new host societies (Kurien, 1998; Rayaprol, 1997). Consequently, religion can assume a greater significance in immigrants' self-identification and group affiliations compared to their homelands, where religion might have been taken for granted.

A closely related perspective on why religion assumes a crucial role in identity centers on the functions religion serves in society. Beyond fulfilling spiritual needs, membership in a religious organization offers numerous non-religious material, psychological, and social advantages, including community networks, economic opportunities, educational resources, and peer trust and support (Chen, 2003; Hurh & Kim, 1990). Consequently, the more positive benefits individuals perceive, the more likely they are to affiliate religiously. Another explanation posits that religious identity and expression alleviate tensions stemming from complex identities (Feher, 1998; Yang, 1999) and help individuals cope with social alienation (Kwon, 2000).

Sullivan (2000) underscores that when church members primarily define themselves in religious terms, ethnic and national differences become less problematic, and diverse communities unite through shared worship. Rayaprol (1997) argues that religion may be employed to maintain personal and social distinctiveness within a multicultural context. As religion becomes less taken for granted in today's pluralistic and secular world, adherents become more conscious of their traditions and are more inclined to transmit these beliefs, values, and behaviors (Warner & Wittner, 1998). Religious attire, practices, and affiliations serve as critical identity markers that promote self-awareness and preserve group unity (Williams, 1988), allowing for the display and maintenance of ethnic and national heritage (Kurien, 1998). In summary, for numerous individuals and groups, religion remains a vital organizing factor within their

identity hierarchy.

This research seeks to explore how religious practices among Yemeni postgraduate students in Malaysia contribute to the formation of in-group and out-group identities. This exploration is important as both Yemeni and Malaysian Muslims share similar religious tenets, primarily adhering to the Mazhab Shafie school of Islam. Mazhab Shafie is prominent in various parts of the Islamic world, including Egypt, Yemen, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and East Africa (Sharif & Ijaz, 2015). Consequently, religious aspects like prayers, festivals, and other religious duties are largely analogous between Yemeni and Malaysian Muslims.

Despite sharing common religious principles, Yemeni and Malaysian Muslims possess distinct experiences, needs, customs, and attitudes concerning religious practices. Even among Yemeni students originating from the same geographical region, variations in cultural values and behaviors persist. Abukhattala (2004) elucidates that while Muslims share the same religion, their interpretations may differ, leading to misinterpretations and misunderstandings among Muslims from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, the inquiry is centered on how postgraduate Yemeni students express their religious identity through the lens of religious practices and how they navigate their varying cultural and religious identities in interactions with Malaysian Muslims. The investigation aims to elucidate how Yemeni students address the commonalities and disparities in their religious identity compared to Malaysian Muslims and how this dynamic contributes to the emergence of in-group and out-group mentalities.

Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner (1986) explain that people tend to interact and communicate primarily with individuals from the same culture who share similar values and language. As a result, opportunities for interaction with those outside their immediate circle or individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds are often limited. Typically, international students prefer to engage with fellow students from their home country due to the comfort and reduced challenge and stress associated with such interactions. This preference is facilitated by the lack of support from universities, which fails to encourage their engagement with the local society (Chin, Zabidi, & Hassan, 2017).

Tajfel (1982) also emphasizes the significance of social identity in the context of international students and their well-being while studying abroad. He asserts that social identity is an integral aspect of an individual's self-concept, originating from their awareness of belonging to one or more social groups, coupled with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.

The theory of social identity underscores the importance of communication and the sense of belonging to a particular social group or groups among international students, bearing relevance to their overall well-being. However, it is widely acknowledged that international students tend to avoid integrating with the local population to shield themselves from culture shock, which, unfortunately, hampers their development of intercultural literacy necessary for effective communication. Berry (1997) echoes this notion, noting that people from diverse cultures often confine their interactions to those who share their values. Similarly, Rienties and Nolan (2014) argue that international students maintain strong ties with individuals of their cultural background. Consequently, international students are more likely to be influenced by those within their group and view their own group in a favorable light due to the need to preserve their social identity (Li & Gasser, 2005).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed that the groups to which people belong, whether they are religious or ethnic, constitute a significant source of pride and self-esteem. These groups offer a sense of social identity, instilling a feeling of belonging within the broader social context. To bolster our self-image, we often elevate the status of our affiliated group. For instance, some Muslims may believe themselves to be more devout and religious than others within their own religious community. Consequently, these individuals may seek to enhance their self-image by displaying discriminatory and prejudiced attitudes towards the out-group, those who do not belong to their own group.

This tendency often leads people to divide the world into "them" and "us," employing the process of social categorization, which involves classifying individuals into distinct social groups. This classification results in the formation of in-groups (to which they belong) and out-groups (comprising others). The social identity theory posits that in-groups may discriminate against out-groups as a means to elevate their self-

image. Haslam et al. (1996) suggest that stereotyping, the practice of categorizing individuals into groups, is rooted in a natural cognitive process—our inclination to classify. This process frequently causes people to exaggerate differences between groups and highlight similarities among entities within the same group.

2.0 Methodology

The primary objective of this study is to delve into the religious identity of Yemeni postgraduate students. It seeks to examine the in-group and out-group dynamics among postgraduate Yemeni students, specifically focusing on their religious practices and their impact on intercultural communication experiences. The participant observation method was employed to investigate the religious practices of these students. This approach allowed for data collection within authentic social contexts. Moreover, participant observation provides researchers with a fresh perspective on everyday behaviors that might otherwise go unnoticed (Cooper & Schindler, 2001), facilitating data collection from both the physical and interactional settings (Halualani et al., 2004).

The participant observation was conducted among Yemeni postgraduate students residing in the vicinity of university campuses across four public universities in the Klang Valley, an urban area centered around Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The observation period, spanning approximately a year from November 2017 to November 2018, involved interviews with participants. The study meticulously observed daily religious practices and religious events, covering around 10 events primarily held at mosques and religious centers within and outside the universities, located near students' residential areas.

Drawing from the field notes, the observations encapsulate the most significant and recurrent events, recounting exploratory and pertinent occurrences within each thematic aspect of the data. Following thorough and repetitive analysis of the field notes, the data underwent coding and organization, culminating in a comprehensive narrative observation.

3.0 Result and Discussion

Findings of Ethnography: Observations

In addition to the five universally acknowledged pillars of Islam—the declaration of faith (Shahadah), prayer, charity or almsgiving (Zakat), fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca (Kamal-ud-Din, 2010)—certain aspects bear cultural influences yet are considered religious practices by both Malaysian Muslims and Yemenis.

A segment of the observation occurred during the holy month of Ramadan, a period when Muslims abstain from eating, drinking, and engage in distinct religious practices specific to this month (Bin Haji Ishak, 2010). On May 18, 2018, around 3 pm, an observation was conducted within the residential apartment area known as Serdang Skyville, situated in the vicinity of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), where numerous Yemeni postgraduate students reside. During this time, no Yemenis were present at the shops they typically frequent on non-fasting days. In the notes:

"…before Ramadan, this area typically full of activities at the Yemeni shops frequented by customers among them Yemeni students ".

Around 4 pm, the Yemeni crowd in the area began to grow, with students appearing either in groups or accompanied by their families. The notes describe:

"These situations made me feel like I was in Yemen where business life in Ramadan only start in the afternoon".

In Yemen and among Arabs in general, it is customary to commence work later and conclude earlier during Ramadan to provide additional rest for fasting individuals (Caton, 1986; Postill, 2002). However, in Malaysia, working hours during Ramadan are largely the same as non-fasting months, excluding lunch hour in some organizations to allow Muslims to leave an hour earlier (Smith, 1998).

Similarly, during an observation on May 22, 2018, within the hostel of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) campus, it was noted:

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"Just the same as in the apartment area, it was again rare to see any Yemeni student moving around the university campus before Zuhur prayer".

When queried about the situation, a Yemeni student explained,

"It is Ramadan. They would be sleeping at their rooms…they only come out around 1 pm, except for those
who have classes to attend".

A Yemeni female student, questioned about managing classes and other activities during Ramadan, responded:

"It is very hot and humid here. I sweat a lot and get thirsty and tired very fast. I'm not used to doing anything in Ramadan before 2 pm, better I skip class rather than losing my fasting".

An English lecturer at IIUM, asked about Yemeni students' punctuality for class attendance during Ramadan, shared:

"It is an examination period at this time in IIUM and thus, it is compulsory for
every student to attend. But in the last Ramadan many Arabs include Yemenis
skip classes".

Another IIUM lecturer was also well-aware of the working-time practices among Yemeni students during Ramadan:

"There was a significant drop in class attendance among Yemeni students inRamadan, they would apologize to me and say sorry because they are fasting".

This indicates that the Yemeni cultural practice of beginning work late during Ramadan and sleeping for
extended hours in the daytime is notably prevalent among Yemenis in Malaysia. The findings suggest that the observed Yemenis seem to embody the Yemeni custom of waking up late in Ramadan, which has become an integral part of their religious identity.

On June 11, 2018, an observation was made at an iftar (breakfasting) event hosted by a postgraduate Yemeni student's residence in Kajang, near Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Initially, the researcher was invited to break the fast at a mosque where the students brought dates, beverages, and light meals to share with Malay Muslims and other Muslims from various nations.

After the Maghrib prayer, we proceeded to the Yemeni student's residence with two Malay friends, who were also invited. In the notes:

"These Yemeni postgraduate students are frequent visitors to the mosque and have developed closer connections with Malays, fostering friendships they formed during religious functions."

These Yemenis, who frequently attend the mosque and participate in religious sermons, appear to have solidified their bonds of friendship with their Malay counterparts. These religious practices play a pivotal role in fostering camaraderie between Yemenis and Malays. During the iftar, one Yemeni student confirmed this sentiment:

"Some Yemeni students, known for their religious devotion, engage in part-time teaching at religious schools and mosques, offering classes in Arabic language, Tahfiz (Quran memorization), Tajweed (Quranic
pronunciation), and other subjects."

This observation aligns with another instance on September 24, 2018. The researcher visited a small religious center in Petaling Jaya, partly operated by a Yemeni individual. He is a former Yemeni postgraduate student who recently completed his Ph.D. at the University of Malaya (UM). The center

provides Arabic language lessons for school children. He is also well-regarded among local Malays in the area, with people frequently seeking his guidance on religious matters.

Upon meeting him, it was apparent he was engrossed in assisting people with their religious and academic inquiries, primarily involving Malays. In the notes:

"Despite not being entirely fluent in English or Malay, people seemed to comprehend him. His attire resembles that of a Malay Ustaz (religious preacher) – a white robe and a Kufiyah (head covering). Initially, he resembles Malaysian Ustaz who have studied in Arab countries, as they sometimes blend Arabic with Malay when conversing. His appearance even bears resemblance to Malays... It's intriguing to witness how he adeptly
addresses numerous queries, despite not being completely fluent in Malay."

The locals appeared at ease with him and greatly appreciated his religious classes, known as Halaqah. When asked about his communication approach with Malays:

"While my language skills aren't perfect, I understand the needs of my students and others. I teach Arabic, Fiqh, Tajweed, and more. Armed with my Arabic knowledge, I can use simple Malay expressions to explain concepts."

He also mentioned making a concerted effort to familiarize himself with Malay Muslim culture, enabling him to connect effectively with the locals. He added that his experiences living among Malays and his enthusiasm for learning Bahasa Melayu have empowered him to thrive and share his knowledge with the community.

"I'm learning alongside my students. Day by day, I learn about their traditions, culture, including language. As a result, I am continuously improving."

His experience with locals illustrates how Yemeni students can integrate with the local population through a shared foundation of religious knowledge. This demonstrates the significance of religious identity in fostering engagement with locals and, consequently, facilitating integration. Such integration offers advantages in terms of social security, employment prospects, and even potential marriage opportunities.

Another observation was conducted during Tarawih prayers in Ramadan on May 25, 2018, at a mosque in Gombak, an area where numerous Yemeni postgraduate students reside. Tarawih prayers are non-mandatory prayers performed during the month of Ramadan. There are varying opinions on the number of iterations, or rakat, to be performed during Tarawih. While many mosques in Malaysia practice 20 rakat, in most parts of Yemen, eight rakat are commonly observed for Tarawih. The Yemeni students were observed joining Malays in prayer, yet they often left after completing only eight rakat. In Malaysia, Tarawih prayers comprise not only 20 rakat but also include additional rituals like Tahlil and sometimes brief sermons in between prayers. In the notes:

"These supplementary rituals seemed to discourage Yemenis from participating in Tarawih prayers, especially in this mosque where such rituals extend the duration of the prayer."

At the mosque, after noticing many Yemenis departing early, I approached one of them and inquired about the reason for leaving prematurely. He responded:

"I attend the prayer for eight rakat only; that's enough for me. Malaysians follow a different practice, making the prayer longer. I'm not accustomed to this extended Tarawih."

This observation highlights that some respondents adhere to their customary religious practices and seem hesitant to adapt to variations in religious practices.

Ramadan can bring about differences due to the abundance of religious activities and rituals, prompting many Muslims to exhibit an inclination towards heightened religious devotion during this month. Consequently, throughout Ramadan, students living off-campus frequently visited and engaged in prayers at surrounding mosques. This suggests reduced interaction with Malay Muslims who regularly frequent these places of worship. However, Yemeni students residing on campus continued to attend the

mosque within the campus.

Observations were conducted at mosques near public universities after Ramadan. These observations spanned approximately four months, occurring at least three days per week. One aspect that captured the researcher's attention was the manner in which Yemeni students performed their prayers. In the notes:

"When Yemeni students hurriedly leave prayer, the facial expressions of some locals reflect a sense of curiosity regarding their early departure without engaging in du'a (supplication) or exchanging Salam (greeting)."

In Malaysia, it is customary to recite additional prayers, including Quranic verses, after the conclusion of the main prayer, followed by exchanging greetings with fellow worshipers. However, many of the observed Yemenis would promptly leave after completing their prayer.

When asked about the practice of swiftly departing after prayer, a Yemeni student mentioned:

"Every country has its own traditions in religious activities. Malays tend to be more serene and unhurried in their actions. This extends to their prayers. In contrast, Yemenis are often in a hurry. It's a cultural trait. This
could explain why we spend less time in the mosque."

The subsequent observation pertains to the participation of Yemeni individuals in religious gatherings held in mosques, which go beyond regular prayers and are typically organized by Malays. This event, known as Tahlil, involves zikr (spiritual remembrance) in the form of praising God, reciting Quranic verses, and is accompanied by serving food to the attendees. It is a distinct form of prayer seeking forgiveness and blessings for the deceased, commonly organized by Malay Muslims, often on Thursday nights or weekends (Rani, 2014).

Observations reveal that many Yemenis display a lack of enthusiasm in attending such gatherings or making arrangements to participate. This is primarily due to the infrequent nature of these events, particularly the practice of serving food following Tahlil, which some view as Bida'ah or an innovation in religious practices.

Two instances illustrate Yemenis' avoidance of Tahlil events. The first observation occurred on May 13, 2018, at a mosque near Serdang, where numerous Yemeni students reside and pray. However, none of them were observed taking part in the Tahlil or partaking in the meal afterward. Typically, they depart after Maghrib prayer and return only for Isha'a prayer. At one point, the researcher overheard a student cautioning his children who were attempting to partake in the food:

"This food is intended for the poor and needy. Be cautious not to consume something that doesn't belong to you."

Conversely, in Malay culture, it is customary for all attendees to partake in the food following Tahlil events, regardless of their economic or social status.

The second observation on May 3, 2018, at a small mosque frequently visited by Yemeni students, witnessed a Tahlil prayer gathering. The attendees included several Yemeni postgraduate students from IIUM and UM, with the religious leader or Imam also being a Yemeni postgraduate student at UM. He informed us:

"There will be a Tahlil at the mosque after the Maghrib prayer, and food will be served after the Isha'a prayer, should you be interested in joining."

None of the Yemeni students participated in the Tahlil, which included the recitation of Quranic verses after Maghrib prayer. However, they all returned for the Isha'a prayer. After Isha'a, two of them engaged in eating, a behavior that deviates from their usual practice. The rest returned to their homes. When asked if they had ever participated in Tahlil before, one of them responded:

"I'm not accustomed to seeing such functions in Yemen; it's new to me. I'm obliged to attend obligatory prayers only; Tahlil doesn't concern me."

According to the imam, it's not uncommon for Yemenis to abstain from Tahlil prayers:

"Many Yemenis choose not to partake in Tahlil or consume food afterward, as they consider it to be religiously incorrect. In Yemen, Tahlil isn't prevalent and might be perceived as Bida'ah."

When questioned about his perspective on the ritual, he stated:

"I'm not well-informed about the origins of Tahlil or its affiliation with any Islamic school of thought. However, I view it as a commendable practice that unites people and fosters values of tolerance and affection among Muslims."

He expressed enjoyment in these gatherings, which subsequently gained him recognition among Malays and led to his selection as the mosque's Imam. He proposed:

"If Yemenis were to at least join in the meal during Tahlil events, they could interact with Malays and gain a better understanding of Malay culture."

His proficiency in Bahasa Melayu affirmed his argument, as he was able to communicate comfortably with Malay Muslims.

4.0 Conclusion

This study highlights the uniqueness of Yemeni socio-cultural and religious practices in comparison to the broader Malaysian Muslim population. Yemeni students pursuing higher education in Muslim-majority countries might not experience the same level of cultural and religious isolation as they would in non-Muslim countries. However, they still encounter significant adjustments (Abunab, Dator, Salvador & Lacanaria, 2017). These adaptations encompass socio-cultural adjustments that encompass the behavioral and cognitive aspects necessary for effective cross-cultural transitions (Coles and Swami, 2012). Navigating life in a foreign land, even when sharing similar religious practices, can prove challenging for international students.

Islam serves as a binding factor between Yemeni and Malay individuals, playing a crucial role in shaping the identity of Yemeni postgraduate students in Malaysia. Their journey to Malaysia is not solely for education; it is also driven by the attraction to an Islamic nation, where they share a common religious identity with the majority of the population. Within themselves, Yemeni students might feel a spiritual connection to Malay Muslims, rooted in a sense of religious brotherhood, especially since both follow the Shafie school of Islam.

Thus, the inquiry arises: How do these students, after their time in Malaysia and interactions with Malay Muslims, manage the equilibrium between their cultural and religious identity and the practices of their Malaysian counterparts? This study utilizes the social identity theory, as it is highly relevant in delineating identity categorization and negotiation. While prior intercultural research related to Islam often focused on terrorism, extremism, and gender disparities, this study concentrates on the intercultural communication aspects among groups with shared religious identity but differing cultural origins. Additionally, it adds to the literature on social identity theory by exploring religious facets of identity, beyond cultural dimensions such as language, traditions, and behaviors.

Observational findings indicate that Yemeni postgraduate students in Malaysia maintain a strong connection to their cultural and religious practices, indicating limited shifts in their overall religious identity. Observations underscore that Yemenis exhibit less participation in certain religious and social activities prevalent among Malay Muslims. Their resolute attachment to their culture aligns with prior research demonstrating that Arabs tend to uphold their cultural norms (Adra, 2016; Makhlouf, 2016), sticking to in-group attributes like language, attire, and values (Mandal, 2014). This echoes Howard (2000) and Shively (2016), suggesting that a stronger attachment to one's own culture than to the host culture signifies reduced interaction and negotiation within the host community.

This correlates with earlier literature emphasizing the role of religion in preserving group identity and unity (Peek, 2005). Expressing religious identity serves to mitigate tensions arising from incongruent

values and identities, aiding individuals in overcoming social isolation (Kwon, 2000). Religion functions to sustain personal and communal distinctiveness. Practitioners become more conscious of their traditions, demonstrating greater determination to preserve those beliefs, values, and behaviors (Warner & Wittner, 1998). Religious attire, practices, and affiliations serve as significant markers of identity that bolster individual self-awareness and maintain group cohesion (Williams, 1988), thereby showcasing ethnic and national heritage and ensuring its continuity (Kurien, 1998).

However, a minority demonstrate an affinity towards the out-group identity of Malaysian Muslims. Some respondents exhibit openness toward Malay culture and seem to assimilate into Malay society. These Yemeni individuals find it easier to integrate within the Malay community, accommodating divergent religious practices compared to those adhered to by Yemeni Muslims back home. In addition to embracing variations in religious practices, the findings reveal that students who are more devout and regularly engage with religious centers that host various events tend to assimilate more seamlessly into Malay Muslim society.

Local Muslims appear more receptive, particularly to those willing to align with the local religious practices. This is unsurprising, considering the intimate connection between the Arab world and the local culture due to the shared Islamic faith (Mandal, 2011). Arabs, predominantly originating from the Hadhramaut region, have played a significant role in the Malay world for the past five centuries, becoming an integral part of the Muslim community's social fabric.

Future research could delve into the religious dimensions of other Arab-Muslim international students in Malaysia. Many Arab Muslims share fundamental beliefs and values that transcend national and social class boundaries. Their steadfast attitudes remain unchanged due to the conservative nature of Arab society, which demands conformity and is steeped in traditional Islamic culture, active in their daily lives (Abunab, Dator, Salvador & Lacanaria, 2017). In contrast, Malaysia is perceived as modern and less conservative compared to certain Arab Muslim nations. Aziz and Shamsul (2004) attribute this contrast to the process of Islamization, through which Islam and its adherents in Malaysia evolved under the influence of sociological realities such as a plural society, secularism, and modernity.

The study's findings underscore the importance for higher education institutions in Malaysia, which predominantly cater to international Muslim students, not to assume that the similarity in religious identity between Arab-Muslim students and local Muslims equates to a seamless integration. Concurrently, the education ministries in both the home and host countries should offer ample support to students, ensuring their successful assimilation despite disparities in religious practices and cultural norms. These fundamental values of respect and awareness toward religious and cultural diversity are indispensable aspects that institutions of higher learning should address, not just among locals but also among their international students.

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