



## Defining Dusun Identity in Brunei



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[ *Abstract* ]

This qualitative study was designed to explore the definition of ethnic identity of the Dusuns in Brunei Darussalam from the perspective of Shamsul A.B.'s (1996) "everyday-defined" social reality. The purpose of this study was twofold. Firstly, by employing Phinney's (1996) formulation of ethnic identity, this study examined the existence of core components of ethnic identity, namely, ethnic self-identification, ethnic involvement, positive attitude towards ethnic group, and sense of belonging in the life of the Dusuns. Secondly, by utilizing Phinney's (1996) three-stage model of ethnic identity formation, this study investigated the relationship between core components and the formation process of ethnic identity. Twenty-six Dusun informants ranging in age from 8 to 80 years old were interviewed for the purpose of this study. The analysis of the interview data revealed that all core components exist and evolve in the life of the Dusuns. Different perspectives towards core components can also be identified across different age groups. Adult informants contested the relevance of ethnic involvement in view of socio-cultural transformations that occurred within

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the ethnic group, whereas younger Dusuns were not able to extend sense of belonging outside their family. These findings lead to the identification of family and historical contexts as influential factors that shape the ways the informants experienced the ethnic identity components. Further, the findings of this study indicate the relationship between core components and the formation process of ethnic identity. Sense of belonging and community is only evident in the experience of older informants, sufficient to help them reach the stage of achieving ethnic identity. This also shows a positive sequential relation between the stages in Phinney's ethnic identity model and the age of the informants. Interestingly, evidence on internalized sense of belonging reveals the fact that an individual could still attain ethnic identity achievement even without experiencing all components of ethnic identity. Once again, this study suggests contextual factors play a role in the stage progression of the Dusuns' ethnic identity.

**Keywords:** Brunei Darussalam, Brunei Dusuns, Malaynization, ethnic identity

## I . Introduction

In recent years, there have been studies examining the ethnic identity of Brunei people. The studies report an indication that, despite the legal recognition of the seven ethnic groups, the Brunei people have become increasingly homogeneous due to the adoption of and integration to dominant Brunei Malay ways of life. The studies also suggest the compatibility between the Malay Muslim way of life and that of the non-Muslim ethnic groups (King 1994; Berstein 1997; Abdul Latif 2001; Yabit 2007). The dimensions of homogeneity and compatibility existed in Brunei society are primarily the result of state formation processes and the ensuing socio-economic transformations underwent by Brunei in the twentieth century. The early phase of the state formation processes began with the promulgation of the 1959 Constitution which places Islam as the official religion of the country, besides *Bahasa Melayu*,

or Malay Language, as the national language. In relation to the Constitution, Nationality Law was passed in 1961 which apart from recognizing the status of the seven ethnic groups as the indigenous people of Brunei, the Law also spelled out a new classification where all ethnic people were to be considered Malays. This means all ethnic groups now belonged to a larger ethnic framework of Malay identity despite social, religious, and cultural differences among them. Accordingly, state efforts that can be identified by the Malaynization strategy (Asiyah az-Zahra 2011) were coordinated to homogenize the seven ethnic groups into the mainstream Malay society and build an image of a cohesive nation. King (1994) argued that the ethnic boundaries of the dominant Brunei Malay ethnic group softened, allowing the integration of the other ethnic groups into mainstream society.

On the other hand, recent studies on the Brunei Dusuns reveal distinctive sociocultural characteristics of the Dusuns (Ramazah 2007; Norrizah 2011; Nurhamizah 2011; Ronnie 2012) that set them apart from other ethnic groups. There are also studies on the efforts within the community to reconstruct and preserve Dusun culture and traditions for posterity (Kershaw and Kershaw 2011; Pudarno 2014, Fatimah and Najib 2015). Equally significant is the fact the Dusuns themselves confidently stand by their ethnic identity. This fact was revealed when the author interviewed a number of Dusuns for her PhD fieldwork in 2009 and 2010. The Dusuns argued that their ethnic identity remains solid despite substantial social and cultural transformations occurring within ethnic circle. Even the Muslim Dusuns themselves did not think their conversion to Islam have changed them ethnically.

The Dusun perception towards ethnic identity fits into Shamsul's (1996) "two social reality" framework of "authority-defined" and "everyday-defined" reality. The "authority-defined" social reality, as the name suggests, is "authoritatively defined by those who are part of the dominant power structure," whereas "everyday-defined" reality is "experienced by the people in the course of their everyday life" (Shamsul 1996: 477). To relate the binary social reality to Brunei context, the "authority-defined" identity geared the people towards the identity of Malayness through the promotion of the

mainstream societal ideals, values, attitudes, and behaviors. The opinion that Brunei society has become homogeneously Malay is a result of the observation from the authoritative side of the social reality. On the other hand, the Dusun notion of ethnic identity, as stated earlier, is framed by the “everyday-defined” reality based on their actual lived experiences, personal, and collective. The definition of Dusun identity from this angle may not be politically correct as it reflects a personal and communal inclination to remain ethnically distinct (Trigger and Siti Norkhalbi 2011: 78-79). Also, the meaning of ethnic identity may evolve due to the changing contexts within which their experience unfolds.

For a balanced understanding of identity formation in a society, the two sides of social reality should be properly examined (Shamsul 1996: 479). Thus, this paper aims to develop a critical analysis from the “everyday-defined” social reality perspectives to balance the existing literature on the issues of ethnicity and ethnic identity in Brunei. This mode of analysis also allows the author to examine the formation of ethnic identity across different age groups. This accordingly defines the sampling process of this study, as to be discussed later.

The main research subject of this study is the Dusun ethnic group. Because the Malay ethnicity framework encompasses all seven ethnic groups, the exact number of Dusuns from the 65.8% of Malays in the 2014 National Census it is not known (Economic Planning and Development 2016). The Dusuns mostly live in Tutong District where this study was primarily conducted. The Dusuns identify themselves as “*Sang Jati*” (native people) or “*Iddeh Kitah*” (our people). They are close-knit, with family and kinship as core values of the community. The Dusuns traditionally are animists with *Derato* as the main god in their cosmology. As the Dusuns are traditionally rice farmers, they believe that *Derato* provides them with good harvest and to show appreciation, the *Temarok* ceremony is conducted by the Dusuns at the end of a harvesting season. A *belian*, a female Dusun who possesses special knowledge about the supernatural world, takes the role as the mediator between human beings and *Derato*. *Temarok* also acts as a healing medium for the ethnic group as *Derato* is seen as having the divine strength to cure

illnesses. Linguistically, the Dusuns use their own native languages which belong to the Austronesian language family (Yabit 1994: 3).

## **II . Theoretical Background**

An ethnic group is generally defined as a group of people which believe in a common history, ancestry, and kinship, speak the same language or dialect, observe ancestral religion, and live in a common territory (Mackerras 2003: 11; Cokley 2007: 225). Existing research however revealed the multidimensionality of ethnicity and it is challenging to construct a generic theory that can be applied across ethnic groups differing in ideological orientation, political experiences, historical context, and values (Cokley 2007).

Phinney (1996) also noted the diverse elements of ethnicity and its flexible boundaries. In constructing the meanings of ethnicity, Phinney suggested the examination of three fundamental dimensions of difference intricately linked to ethnicity: ethnicity as culture, ethnicity as identity, and ethnicity as minority status. The examination of ethnicity as culture focuses on distinctive cultural behaviors and practices that characterize an ethnic group. Whereas embedded in the construct of ethnicity as identity are four core components, namely, ethnic self-identification, a sense of belonging, positive attitudes and involvement in ethnic practices and activities. The concept of ethnicity as minority status implies the experience of an ethnic group of color whose members are experiencing unequal relationship with a larger society and subjected to discrimination and negative stereotypes (Pinney 1996: 920-923).

The above formulation has significance for the discussion of ethnicity in Brunei context. The aspect of ethnicity as culture refers to the mainstream Brunei Malay culture that influence and impinge upon people's lives, including the Dusuns. As a result, the Brunei people, regardless of their ascribed ethnic identification, share similar societal ideals, values, attitudes, and behaviors with the mainstream society. This definition of ethnicity also structurally determines rights, opportunities, and distribution of resources for members of the society. This dimension of ethnicity as culture can

also be contextualized in Shamsul's (1996) "authority-defined" social reality. The adoption of mainstream culture by the Dusuns has considerably affected their language, behavior, dress and appearances, cultural practices, and ethnic knowledge that resulted in the observed cultural homogeneity.

With the above definition of ethnicity as culture in view, the meaning of ethnicity as identity thus presents itself. As stated earlier, ethnic identity is associated with four core components: ethnic self-identification, ethnic involvement, positive attitude, and sense of belonging (Phinney 1990: 503). This means ethnic identity is conceptualized at the individual level within the perspective of "everyday-defined" social reality.

In addition, based on Erikson's (1968) theory on identity formation and Marcia's (1980) empirical work on the operationalization of identity statuses, Phinney (1992; 1993) suggested that the essence of ethnic identity may change and develop over time as people explore the meaning of their ethnic identity. To illustrate such change and development of ethnic identity, Phinney proposed a three-stage model. The first stage is unexamined ethnic identity; the second is ethnic identity search; and the third is ethnic identity achievement. During the first stage, an individual lacks ethnic awareness, and observes any culture, ethnic or mainstream, without question. The exploration of ethnic identity starts at the second stage as ethnic awareness grows through experience and observation. Ethnic identity exploration eventually reaches the final stage which is characterized by a confident sense of one's identity as the individual becomes appreciative of ethnic membership.

This study employs Phinney's process approach in examining the formation process of ethnic identity of the Dusuns, primarily because the approach allows this study to examine the formation process within specific contexts where it unfolds. Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, and Bamaca-Gomez (2004), Cokley (2007), and Phinney and Ong (2007) all propose for future research to specifically examine the role of context in the process of ethnic identity formation. Abdul Latif (2001), Noor Azam (2005), Yabit (2007), and Asiyah az-Zahra (2011) all argue the pervasive influence of the

unique context of Brunei on many aspects of life in the country. Such findings comply well with the aims and the direction of this study.

In examining the components of ethnic identity, Phinney (1992; 1999) developed the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), whereas Umāna-Taylor et al (2004) devised the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) to measure the extent at which individuals have explored their ethnicity and the extent at which they have resolved what their ethnic identity means to them (Umāna-Taylor et al 2004: 13-14). It is worthwhile to note that this study does not aim to develop a measure of ethnic identity as established by the empirical works of Phinney and Umāna-Taylor, et. al. However, the questionnaire measure developed in MEIM and EIS and relevant literature on ethnic identity formation guided the formulation of interview questions for this study. The section below further explains the methodology of this study.

### **III. Methods**

#### **3.1. Aims**

By employing a qualitative approach, the first aim of this paper is to examine the existence of the core components of ethnic identity in the life experiences of the Dusuns. The second is to investigate the relationship between core components and the formation process of ethnic identity. Findings from interview data are discussed within relevant socio-cultural contexts of Brunei that influence the nature of the components and identity formation process, as experienced by the Dusuns.

#### **3.2. Procedures**

This study employs a qualitative technique of analytic induction to generate quality data. Hypotheses were developed and informant selection criteria was established after a careful examination of relevant literature. The selection of the informants was based on age and educational level, as previous research also showed a strong

relationship between ethnic identity formation, adulthood, and school context (Umaña-Taylor et al 2004; Maramba and Velasquez 2012; Syed and Juang 2014). A recent study on the ethnic identity of Brunei Dusuns also demonstrates the correlation between self-awareness of the Dusuns and school environment (Faizul 2015: 25). This study also specifically recruited adult informants, based on the recommendations of previous researches that pointed out the need to include adult population in order to examine the ethnic identity formation process beyond adolescence (Ong, Fuller-Rowell, and Phinney 2010; Umaña-Taylor 2011).

Data was first collected from information-rich informants which was then coded based on Phinney's components of ethnic identity. The snowball and purposeful sampling techniques were also employed to identify subsequent informants. In view of the sampling methods and the analytical induction technique, there was no neat separation between data collection and data analysis. It was until the data collection reached its data saturation where new informants no longer provided different findings from the existing ones that the sampling was concluded.

In total, the data were gathered from 26 Dusun informants through face-to-face interviews. 5 of them were young informants aged 8 to 12 years old; 8 were youth informants attending secondary school, technical education, and university with age range between 17 to 28 years old; and there were 13 adult informants aged from 48 to 80 years old. The raw interview data were transcribed and subsequently sorted into relevant codes or themes in order to facilitate the analysis and interpretation of the data (Boyatzis 1998: 3). As Phinney's components of ethnic identity provide the theoretical framework of this study, the master codes in organizing the data are self-identification, ethnic involvement, attitudes toward ethnic group, and sense of belonging. In order to ensure the coding process is in line with the analytic induction technique, a careful scrutiny of the data is important to avoid unfortunate dismissal of data which seemingly did not fit into any of the established codes (Bodgan and Taylor 1975: 83). Consequently, the data was ready for further utilization and analysis. The outcome of the data analysis is presented in the following section.



## IV. Discussion

### 4.1. ETHNICITY AS AN IDENTITY

#### 4.1.1. Ethnic Self-Identification

The informants' data highlight that family and community made an impact on ethnic self-identification. The informants identified themselves correctly as a Dusun and their identification corresponds to the ethnicity of their parents. It is interesting to listen to an 8-year-old boy without any hesitation identifying himself as a Dusun. He affiliated his sense of identity with his parents as well as his place of origin, Kampong Bukit Udal in Tutong District. He talked about his grandparents who live with his family, and that they spoke to him in the Dusun language though he did not really understand. At school, he can distinguish friends who are Dusun from those who are not.

Youth informants aged between 18 to 28 years old also underwent similar experiences as they grew up. Their parents and extended family evidently contributed to the construction of their ethnic identity as a Dusun. Because of such strong influence from their personal network, they developed a stable ethnic identity although they no longer reside in their birthplace as they attend technical and higher education institutions in another district. Their ethnic identity remains salient when responding to questions on the ways they define and navigate themselves in modern Brunei society strongly imbued by Malay and Islamic influences. Many of them agreed that the Malay identity is for national purposes, but ethnically, they are essentially Dusun.

Many adult informants also indicated the influence of family institution on one's definition of ethnic identity. In a Dusun community, family-oriented values are passed down from generation to generation, especially the value of respecting family members and elders of the community. The Dusuns perceive the stability of family structure as not only serving an important cornerstone of their community but it also giving them a sense of identity through genealogical links (Chong 1996: 4). Thus, for the Dusuns, ethnic identity is an ethnic strength that allows an individual to be

accepted by one's family and community. As a 77-year-old retired municipal staff put it, "you are no one in the eyes of the people [the community] if you fail to identify yourself with your family."

This study also convincingly found that ethnic self-identification is the result of contexts shaped by state policies. Being in a Muslim country, the population are constantly exposed to Islam. For instance, those who attended state education were introduced to religious education as national education policies since the 1950's, and even more so after 1984, needed the inclusion of the Islamic Religious Knowledge subject in the school curriculum (Asiyah az-Zahra 2014: 161). There are also Dusun parents who send their children to religious school. In 2014, there were 680 non-Muslim Dusun, Murut, and Iban children enrolled in religious schools nationwide, with 52.2 percent of them coming from Tutong District (Rabiatul Kamit 2014). While there are young Dusuns who have an undefined theological understanding of Islam as they simply studied Islamic subjects just like any other subjects (Asiyah az-Zahra 2014:168), there were informants who revealed that their schooling experience served as a means to identify themselves as ethnically distinct from their friends who are from the Malay and Muslim ethnic groups. A 58-year-old informant shared his schooling experience attending a primary school in the late 1960's where non-Muslim children were given an option to take recess during the teaching of religious subjects. From there, his awareness grew towards the fact that his ethnicity as a Dusun and a non-Muslim was different from other ethnicities. On the other hand, a 22-year-old informant who briefly attended a religious school in the 1990's talked about Quran classes where non-Muslim pupils used copies of the Quran that had Arabic scripts and a Malay translation for studying. Muslim pupils used copies of the Quran without the translation. Such simple arrangement not only signifies religious differences between the informant and his Muslim friends; it also contributed to a clearer ethnic self-identification.

Regular contact with mass media also facilitates one's ethnic self-identification. Rapid development of mass communication in Brunei resulted in regular broadcasting of Islamic programs. 10- and 12-year-old informants shared their experience of getting scolded by

their parents after being reminded to perform Muslim prayers upon hearing the broadcast of the *azan* (call for prayer). Similarly, a 51-year-old informant spoke about his then-7-year-old son's question about fasting during the month of *Ramadhan*. His son innocently asked why the family did not fast and break the fast for *iftar* as broadcasted by radio stations. The informant simply told his son that they are Dusuns and not obliged to fast or pray.

Apart from being ethnically strong parents, many adult informants also think that it is imperative for young Dusuns to connect with their ethnic community as such connection profoundly impact on their sense of identity. For instance, engagement and involvement in communal activities provide experiences that shape the way the Dusuns see themselves as part of the ethnic group.

#### **4.1.2. Ethnic Involvement**

The most cited ethnic participation among the young and youth Dusuns is their participation in cultural events at school and those organized by communal bodies. Since the 1990's, government agencies such as Ministry of Education of Brunei have actively encouraged young people to learn and practice ethnic cultures by organizing, for instance, national traditional dance and song competitions. Outside school, many Dusun villages have their own village consultative councils or cultural bodies such as *Pakatan Sang Jati Dusun* which also aim to provide an avenue for young members to learn ethnic traditions. Such initiatives are considered effective strategies to promote and raise cultural heritage awareness (Coluzzi 2011: 19). Many young and youth informants have been part of folk dancing troupes to represent their schools in national dance competitions or their villages in annual festival celebrations for His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah and the monarch's traditional meet-the-people ceremony in Tutong District.

It can also be observed that youth informants were able to name and describe Dusun traditional dances and music as well as the stories behind the dances and music, mostly as told by their elders. In addition, two of them shared stories of how they were pushed to learn traditional musical instruments such as the *gong* and *gulintangan* after the elders in their family repeatedly expressed

concern on the difficulty in finding young Dusuns who can play traditional music.

Adult informants revealed a specific theme that can demonstrate one's involvement within the community: attendance in social gatherings, specifically wedding ceremonies and funeral feasts after burials. These gatherings have always been considered important and require financial support and time. Even relatives from far away come together to assist host families in preparing wedding ceremonies or in organizing feasts held on the seventh, fourteenth, and the fortieth day after funeral. The fulfillment of the obligation is seen as practical support to the members of family and thus, as an expression of commitment to the family and community. As highlighted by a 60-year-old informant, the way the Dusuns come together to rejoice or grieve defines the distinctive feature of the Dusun people, and this is what distinguishes them from other ethnicities.

This study also involved adult Dusun Muslims to find out whether they still engage in ethnic activities after their conversion to Islam. Evidently, they continue to participate in Dusun activities that are not in conflict with Islamic teaching. A 53-year-old Dusun Muslim believes that Dusuns who converted to Islam should continue to uphold and practice Dusun *adat* (customary law) so long as it is not in conflict with Islam:

When there is death in this village and a funeral feast is being prepared, I still donate food to the family of the deceased. Dusuns might maintain the belief that the food being served is for family members who passed away. But for me, as a Muslim, my donation is purely to help lessen the burden of the family of the deceased in preparing the funeral feast.

This negotiation not only allows the informant to adhere to his new religion but also also maintains his supportive relationship with his Dusun family and relatives. It can also be argued that such ethnic participation is to maintain what is defined as a "tit-for-tat" relationship between family members (Clarks and Mills 1979: 17). In this kind of relationship, mutual responsiveness to the needs of

family members is crucial in order to bring the family members into a state of interdependence. The significance of the “tit-for-tat” relationship is particularly reinforced when dealing with a community, like the Dusuns, which put the highest value on familial relationship, and perceive the family as a fundamental unit of community.

There are also informants who pointed out the decline of ethnic knowledge, particularly among younger Dusuns. This inevitably leads to the decreasing frequency of ethnic involvement. The decline in ethnic knowledge, as argued by the informants, is due to Brunei’s historical context. A 48-year-old teacher talked about the incompatibility between *Temarok* and modern education. According to Dusun belief, it is disrespectful for a *belian* to possess secular knowledge while practicing the divine knowledge of the *Temarok* ritual and the *Derato* language (Asiyah az-Zahra 2011: 32). There is no doubt that such ritualistic taboo is incompatible with the national education policy which necessitates the attendance of nine years of compulsory education for children aged 5- to 16-years old. The failure of parents to comply to the policy could result in legal actions (Zaim 2008: 1). Thus, the incompatibility of the *Temarok* ritual practices and secular knowledge is partly the reason why it is difficult nowadays to find a young Dusun willing to commit her time and life to learn the rituals and to master the craft of mediating humans and divine powers.

In addition, a 49-year-old office assistant maintained that residential and occupational mobility has unintended consequences on ethnic involvement. Previous research has shown that occupational mobility caused the Dusuns to become geographically dispersed, with many of them residing in Brunei-Muara District, the center of government and business activities (Saxena 2007: 151). In the case of younger Dusuns, their educational needs had made them to be “brought up in boarding school(s) detached from parental guidance (and from) Dusun cultural values” (Pudarno 2005: 8). Because of this, the informant admitted that he can only be minimally involved in communal activities as he was working outside his home village.

Previous research identifies language and linguistic behavior as one of the domains of ethnic identity (Phinney 1996; Tsai, Chentsova-

Dutton, and Wong 2002; House, Stiffman, and Brown 2006; Phinney and Ong 2007). Evidently, the Dusuns also associate traditional language with ethnic identity and acknowledge the importance of preserving the language. However, this study found that only adult informants and two youth informants could converse in Dusun language fluently. Other informants do not have the adults' linguistic fluency. They admit that they can understand the language more than they can speak it.

However, to straightforwardly argue that the young and youth Dusuns fail to fulfill this particular domain of ethnic identity is not entirely accurate. Many adult informants put forward an interesting argument as to why they did not teach their children and younger Dusuns the ethnic language. Reflecting on their childhood experience, the informants remembered the difficulty they faced at school in the 1960's and 1970's, when they knew little of *Bahasa Melayu*, the medium of teaching in schools specified by 1954 Brunei Education Policy (Asbol 2006). A 60-year-old informant spoke about a particular school experience where his classmates laughed at him when he blurted some Dusun words to answer a question from his teacher; he could not immediately recall the Malay word for "allergy". A 68-year-old housewife failed several times the class tests for Mathematics as she could not understand what her teacher taught in class. She admitted that Mathematics is itself difficult but because she was struggling to understand what was taught, it was even more distressing for her. Thus, due to the discomfort they experienced at school, many Dusuns decided to silence the linguistic aspect of their ethnicity and consciously taught *Bahasa Melayu* to their children.

The above finding enables this study to develop an understanding of the contextual influences derived from state formation processes that Brunei underwent in the 1950's and the ensuing decades and the ways the influences impact on the components of ethnic identity. Interestingly, interviews with youth informants revealed their experience of experimenting with the Dusun language. Almost all youth informants involved in this study have *Bahasa Melayu* as their home language. Two of them began to learn and acquire the ethnic language as they experienced more the ethnic culture and

communicated more frequently with other Dusuns. A 16-year-old secondary school student believed that the unified cultural environment of the Dusun association that she has joined since primary school pushed her to speak the language as the elders in the association kept talking in Dusun with her. A 23-year-old university student initially acquired the Dusun language in order to please her grandfather. She continued learning the language as she somehow felt special and proud that she now can speak what her university professors considered as an endangered language.

In all circumstances, the preference among the informants to learn the ethnic language is enhanced by their experience of ethnic involvement, which allowed them to have greater familiarity with the Dusun culture and ethnic knowledge. As a result, the ethnic identity of youth informants become more salient with the transformed linguistic behavior. They consequently developed a sense of uniqueness when comparing themselves with others. This eventually produced positive attitudes towards their ethnic community, as to be discussed below.

#### **4.1.3. Attitudes Towards Ethnic Group**

With regard to attitudes towards ethnic group, the informants' engagement in cultural events is already a reflection of the positive attitude the Dusuns developed towards their community. For instance, youth informants revealed their pride when they were selected by their school or Dusun organization to participate in national events. They used the words such as "excited," "proud," and "honored" when they talked about their experience participating in cultural events.

In addition, family relations is also a factor that triggers positive attitude. A 49-year-old office assistant, whose two sons are regularly involved in cultural events, expressed support for her children's cultural participation. According to her, her husband believes their children's involvement is not only to support school activities but also to help the children to know better their own culture. In addition, as the aim of cultural activities and exhibition is to inform outsiders unfamiliar with the Dusun culture, the informant felt that her children are fortunate to be given the

opportunity to share their culture with people of different backgrounds.

The aforementioned interview of the 23-year-old university student indicates the positive relationship between ethnic involvement and positive attitude towards ethnic group. The informant felt that her cultural participation mattered particularly when she considered the sad fact that many traditional culture and ethnic languages are on the verge of extinction. She further shared her childhood experience when she at first thought her grandfather was being unkind for pushing her to speak the difficult Dusun language. She now considers herself and her siblings as among the privileged young Dusuns who speak the language fluently. Such privilege can be interpreted not only as a clear ethnic self-identification; it also shows how she considers her identity as Dusun never inferior.

This study identifies two recurring themes among adult informants closely associated with the said positive attitude. The themes are kinship relations and community. Many informants expressed that the notion of kinship and community are highly valued by the Dusuns to the extent that family and kinship easily include Dusuns who have no ascribed kinship relations with one's family. An 80-year-old retired civil servant considered it a privilege to be a *Sang Jati*:

If you go to the other side of the world and there are Dusuns living there, your *Sang Jati* blood will connect you with them. Don't be surprised if they welcome you as if you are part of their family.

Such extent of kinship and community means that an individual can activate the Dusun identity as useful resource in any contexts. Without doubt, kinship and community values are the sources of pride for the Dusuns. In fact, a 67-year-old retired teacher commented that the Dusun culture, by nature, is very welcoming even towards an individual who is half-Dusun, or has converted to Christianity or Islam.

The pride of being a Dusun was even made more evident when informants touched on the subject of multilinguality. Adult informants are mostly linguistically competent, fluent in speaking Dusun, *Bahasa Melayu* and to some extent, English. In addition, the



Dusuns can also understand and/or speak other native languages such as Tutong, Iban, and Kedayan (Fatimah 1996; Noor Azam 2005). The Dusun language itself has variant dialects (the standard Dusun and Metting) as well as different manners of speech according to geographical areas. All informants of this study can speak the standard Dusun and only some of them are fluent in the Metting dialect.

The informants agree that, being linguistically competent, the Dusuns not only feel secure within their own community. They have also utilized their linguistic skills as resource in creating and sustaining connections with people within and outside communities. Such view illustrates the informants' positive attitude and hence, confirms their Dusun identity.

#### **4.1.4. Sense of belonging**

This study found that the surge in positive attitude and support towards Dusun identity activates a sense of belonging particularly among adult informants. They repeatedly highlighted issues of the disappearance of linguistic and cultural identity of the Dusuns. Interview data revealed the pattern where many adult informants, after talking about pride for being multilingual, stressed the need to preserve the ethnic language. They were all of the opinion that only with the survival of language will their ethnic identity be maintained. A 58-year-old retired civil servant believed that “when the Dusun language vanishes, so does our ethnic identity.” Even the informants who taught *Bahasa Melayu* to their children are also against the total abandonment of the ethnic language. They all referred to contextual factors like state policies on education to explain what influenced their judgment. They wanted the best for their children.

The obvious concern shown by the Dusuns towards the survival of the ethnic language is unmistakably a symbolic representation of their sense of belonging. The concern grew much more when they talked about Malay identity which has been imposed on the ethnic group since the 1961 Nationality Act. A 49-year-old teacher is clearly not keen on what he saw as the growing adoption of Malay-like cultural behavior among the Dusuns.

He argued that the transition towards mainstream culture in recent times has gradually wiped out what is unique about the ethnic group. If the Dusuns continue the cultural trend without a second thought, future generations will not be able to distinguish the differences between the ethnic groups anymore. He further argued that if this happens, the names of the seven ethnic groups will be read on paper only.

The Dusun Muslims are also concerned with the survival of Dusuns' ethnic identity vis-à-vis the Malay Muslim identity. In fact, their conversion to Islam put the converts in a somewhat delicate position. Conversion to Islam has always been seen as generating a subtle force onto the ethnic identity of the converts to be increasingly turned towards the ethnic identity of the Malays. In this context, the term "*Masuk Melayu*", literally means "becoming Malay", is generally used to indicate such ethnic identity transitions (Brown 1970; Tunku Zainah 1982; Horton 1984; King 1989; Bantong 1995; Pudarno 1992; Roff 1994; Abdul Latif 2011).

Many Dusun Muslims admit that, after their conversion, there were people who threw the "*Masuk Melayu*" questions at them. They strongly felt that the notion "*Masuk Melayu*" is an inevitable assumption, simply because they now adopted Islamic lifestyle and have involved themselves more in Islamic activities and Muslim communities (Asiyah az-Zahra 2015). The Dusun Muslims however have not forgotten their ethnic roots and identity. Converts have always ensured that their family relationship remains intact and such is clearly a protective mechanism of social belonging that promotes bonds of solidarity from generation to generation (Clark and Dubash 1998: 248). It is safe to argue that Dusun Muslims are essentially still Dusun despite the change in religious belief and practice.

The increasing foregrounding of the Dusun ethnic identity can also be seen as the outcome of the positive change that has characterized developments in more recent decades. Witnessing rapid socio-cultural transformation and the increasing concern over the fact that the Dusuns face imminent cultural discontinuity and heritage loss, there were prompt responses from Dusun cultural

enthusiasts and researchers (Pudarno 2005: 11). It is this group of researchers who pioneered research on the Dusun community since the late 1980's. Accordingly, the group's research generated positive impact and a greater awareness not only among the Dusuns but also with the wider community about the survival of the increasingly endangered culture and ethnic identity of the Dusuns. Moreover, many adult informants were previously involved in research projects organized by university students, as well as initiatives of government agencies to study forgotten traditions and less spoken languages of the Dusuns. Thus, the informants have become more aware of the critical issues of survival facing their ethnic group. This explains why the adult informants expressed a clear sense of belonging more than the younger informants. Whether the difference of awareness is relevant to the development of ethnic identity, the following discussion analyzes the identity formation process among the Dusuns.

#### **4.2. Phinney'S Stage Model of Ethnic Identity**

Phinney (1990) postulates that an individual develops an achieved status with age. The findings of this study are generally consistent with such postulation. Examining the variations of themes found in the informants' responses, this study found that, while all informants have a childhood identification of their Dusun identity, young informants only associate their ethnic identity with family and friends. Youth informants explore more of their ethnic identity through regular participation in activities that allow them to acquire ethnic knowledge. Adult informants evidently have a committed sense of identity, even an internalized one, as they have reached the advanced status of ethnic identity.

##### **4.2.1. Stage 1: Unexamined ethnic identity**

This stage characterizes one's lack of exploration of ethnicity either due to a lack of interest or reliance to others' view of ethnicity (Phinney 1990; Umaña-Taylor 2011). This study classify the young informants under this stage. The informants' family and school environments provide the immediate context of their identification with the Dusun identity. As explained earlier, these young

informants identify themselves as Dusun because their family does. Moreover, the density of ethnic self-identification is primarily defined by the density of family values upheld by one's family. In addition, school environment also provides the young informants with a context which allow them to observe ethnic differences. Evidently, all young informants, except one, can identify their classmates based their ethnicity.

Ethnic involvement of the young informants is however limited. They have not grasped well ethnic history, for instance, the folklore stories behind the *Temarok* ceremony. In addition, some young informants in the past participated in cultural activities at their schools, though further investigation suggest that the reason for participation is mainly peer pressure. Predictably, they felt happy to be part of the ethnic activities because they were with their friends. Thus, such involvement and positive responses cannot be considered because the motives behind the participation and the positive feeling are not associated with ethnic identity.

The above findings illustrate that the children have not explored their ethnic identity beyond what they have gathered from their personal milieu and school setting. The family without doubt has a significant influence on the informants' sense of ethnic identity, but the informants have not invested any effort to learn about the history or culture of their ethnic group. In addition, they are yet to be aware of their neighborhood and be part of a wider community. This illustrates the fact that the young informants have not extended the connection of their ethnic identity to that of the outside world. Accordingly, their sense of belonging is limited to their families. They have not been able to relate such sense to the ethnic community.

#### **4.2.2. Stage 2: Ethnic Identity Search**

The main notion of the second stage is exploration and the search for the meaning of the ethnic identity that one has identified with (Phinney 1990: 503). Phinney and Ong (2007) also postulate that the exploration of ethnic identity requires a certain level of commitment that gets stronger when an individual intensifies the efforts to know better. All youth informants fit Phinney's description of the stage.

The informants' commitment to the Dusun identity is derived from their childhood ethnic identification, and as they attended secondary and tertiary education, they experienced relationship with peers of diverse ethnicity and were exposed to stronger Islamic environments. Such exposure highlighted ethnic and religious differences between the informants and their Muslim friends. This exposure consequently led to a parallel growth of awareness, not only towards their ethnic identity but also to the mainstream identity and culture. The growing awareness accordingly became the basis of this stage and it initiated further search for the meaning of Dusun ethnic identity among the youth informants.

As discussed earlier, government agencies and ethnic associations have played supportive roles to accommodate young people in cultural activities and advance the preservation of traditions and cultures. A study on Chinese American youth found that “cultural resources was positively related to ethnic engagement and clarity such that youth who perceived greater availability of cultural resources reported a greater involvement, understanding of, and commitment to, their ethnic group” (Juang and Nguyen 2010: 31). Similarly, this study found that the opportunities given by the aforementioned institutions allowed youth in the country to engage in cultural events. Thus, informants who experienced active ethnic involvement have better grasp of ethnic knowledge. In addition, some informants felt obliged to learn the Dusun culture as the elders in their family wanted them to learn the Dusun language and to play traditional musical instrument. Nevertheless, family obligation then became the basis for ethnic identity search for the informants that eventually resulted in a positive perception. They felt doing their part to retain cultural heritage. A 28-year-old informant saw another positive side of the experience. He has grown closer to his grandfather; they now talk to each other more about folklore, neighborhood, food, music, and other aspects of the Dusun culture.

Voluntary participation of youth Dusuns in cultural events and their alliance with ethnic organizations and knowledgeable elders are testimonies to the emergence of ethnic consciousness among the youth. The positive attitude in the form of affiliation and ethnic

pride is a legitimate sentiment grounded in the informants' ethnic involvement. However, the growing positive attitude may also turn them to become somewhat protective, if not defensive, of their ethnic identity. They started to be involved in discussing ethnic issues such as the inevitable impact of mainstream culture and the preservation of ethnic culture and language. This explains why a university student admitted that she felt offended by stereotypes that imply the Dusuns as "village people" or "backward". This situation may prompt the individual to explore further in order to gain self-confidence and a better feeling of personal worth. Such exploration efforts fit the description of the stage, and the findings are consistent with Phinney and Ong's (2007) argument that positive attitudes towards ethnic identity can also be felt by individuals who have not attained an achieved status of ethnic identity.

#### **4.2.3. Stage 3: Ethnic Identity Achieved**

Informants who have the clearest sense of themselves as Dusuns and have already developed a way of dealing with ethnic issues are considered to have reached the third and final stage of ethnic identity formation process. Interview data reveal that all adult informants have a clear understanding of their ethnic identity. Elder Dusuns are inclined to take the role of carrier of ethnic tradition, as illustrated by the experiences of the youth informants who learned the Dusun culture after their elders pushed them. Informants were obliged to follow the elders' words out of respect and reverence for them. Phinney (1990) and Tsai, et. Al. (2002) argued that younger members of an ethnic group expect elders of the group to function as carriers of ethnic identity and culture. Accordingly, the elders assume a central role in keeping family and community values in tact.

This study also found that an intensification of ethnic sentiment is more evident in the interviews with adult informants. As ethnicity plays a more positive role at the later stage of life, it provides an individual a secure sense of belonging to his or her ethnic group which is the essence of ethnic sentiment. Such mature sense of identity thus becomes a sufficient ground for committing oneself to the vitality of an ethnic community. This explains the

reason why adult informants conspicuously concerned themselves with the survival of ethnic identity, after observing the gradual disappearance of ethnic cultures, traditions, and languages.

An achieved ethnic identity can also lead to the internalization of one's ethnicity. An individual may not be seemingly too concerned with retaining ethnic language or customs and may not actively engage with ethnic activities (Phinney 1990: 503; Phinney and Ong 2005: 275-6). Internally however, the individual may have already developed a secure sense of belonging derived from strong family ties and deep feelings of family obligation. As mentioned earlier, there are two adult informants who talked about the lack of ethnic involvement and the dwindling use of the Dusun language. The emphasis on *Bahasa Melayu* in the Brunei education system since the 1950's and the dispersion of the Dusuns due to education and occupation pushed the members of the ethnic group away from caring for the Dusun language and ethnic activities respectively. Because of this, it is not fair to expect the Dusuns to embody all the components of ethnic identity. It is evident from this study that there are adult informants who are clear about their ethnic identity without advocating a proactive attitude towards the preservation of and engagement with ethnic cultures. There are also adult informants who do not use the Dusun language in their everyday interactions, or necessarily befriend with other Dusuns; however, they still consider themselves part of the ethnic group. This accounts for the internalized feeling of ethnicity which equally provide the Dusuns a sense of purpose and meaningful identity.

## V. Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to provide an understanding of the Dusun ethnic identity from the "everyday-defined" social reality. Based on the personal stories of the informants, this study provided competent evidence that the Dusun ethnic identity has not been lost. The core components of ethnic identity all exist and evolve in the life of the Dusuns.

The above discussion also showed that the core components

of the Dusun ethnic identity are influenced significantly by contextual factors. The context of family and kinship allowed the Dusuns to experience all four core components, especially ethnic self-identification. Contextual factors outside family life however pose challenges to the relevance of ethnic involvement. The findings of this study shown that ethnic involvement should not be independently taken as a measure of one's Dusun-ness, as surrounding contexts shaped by national needs and priorities affect the significance of ethnic involvement in cultural practices and language. Despite the inactive participation within community, kinship relations nevertheless continue to be functionally important in the lives of the Dusuns, particularly within the realm of immediate family, and thus defines the strength of their ethnic identity.

The analysis of the influence of contextual factors on the core components of ethnic identity is crucial in understanding the nature of the progression of ethnic identity of the Dusuns. The differences in the extent to which the core components develop and are experienced by the Dusuns reflect the stage of ethnic identity. The findings of this study are consistent with Phinney's (1996) formulation of ethnic identity formation and the description of each stage. This study also revealed sound findings where, among others, positive attitude and sense of belonging are notably absent in the first stage of ethnic identity, and an internalized sense of belonging only occurs to adult informants.

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