

Malaysian Community in New Zealand: Assimilation and Cultural Identity

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INTRODUCTION

This paper gives a brief profile of Malaysian community in New Zealand. Specific reference is made to the Malaysian community residing in the capital city of Wellington. The discussion falls under the following sub-topics: population structure and size, occupations and economic activities, student profiles, and assimilation process and cultural identity.

Population, Structure and Size

Information on Malaysians living in New Zealand is limited. According to New Zealand Census of Population and Dwelling 2001, there are 11,463 people who claim to be born in Malaysia and now reside in New Zealand either permanently with permanent resident status (PR), or temporarily on work permits, student visas, and tourist visas. On the whole, Malaysians in New Zealand can be categorized under the following groups: diplomats (government officers) and their families; private entrepreneurs and their families; students; Malaysians who take Kiwi (New Zealander) spouses and their families; and individual workers.

About 24% of the 11,463 Malaysians reported in the 2001 Census arrive in New Zealand in the last four years from the date of the Census, 21% arrive between five to nine years, 36.5% arrive between 10 to 19 years, and another 13.6% arrive in New Zealand more than 20 years from the date of the Census (Table 1). The Census also states that there are 2052 ethnic Malays in New Zealand in 2001. Nevertheless, we could not ascertain where these Malays come from. Other than those who come from Malaysia, there are also Malays who come from other regions in the Malay world specifically from countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and Cambodia.

The number of Malaysian Chinese staying in New Zealand is more difficult to gauge. The Census of Population and Dwelling 2001 reports there are 100,680 Chinese living in New Zealand in the census year. These people come from various countries in Asia namely from China, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. The number of those who come from The People's Republic of China alone is 38,949, from

Taiwan 12,486 and from Hong Kong 11,301. The remaining 11,301 people of Chinese descent come from the other Asian countries mentioned above, i.e. from Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. My estimation is that there are about 8,000 Malaysian Chinese residing in New Zealand in 2001. It is also difficult to determine the number of Malaysian Indians living in New Zealand. The Indian ethnic group who live in New Zealand numbering 60,213 may have come from various countries in Asia and the Pacific, including India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia and Fiji. I think the number of Malaysian Indians residing in New Zealand in 2001 is between 1500 and 2000.

Table 1: Country of Origin (Malaysia), Sex and Years of Migration to New Zealand

YEARS OF MIGRATION	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	%
> one year	366	426	792	06.90
1 year	246	309	555	04.84
2 years	216	279	495	04.31
3 years	195	219	414	03.61
4 years	225	270	495	04.31
5-9 years	1107	1311	2418	21.09
10-19 years	2013	2175	4188	36.53
< 20 years	780	789	1569	13.68
No Response	267	270	537	04.68
Total	5415	6048	11463	99.95

Source: New Zealand Census of Population and Dwelling 2001

During my four year's stay in Wellington (Jan. 2001 – Dec. 2004), my family and I establish close relationships with about 50 Malaysian families there. Mainly, they are families of the Malaysian High Commission's staff, and of those who have secured PR status in New Zealand. A point to note is that, those who have secured PR status still retain their Malaysian citizenship. For most of them New Zealand is just a second home. They come from various states in Malaysia – from Kedah, Penang, Pahang, Johor, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Kelantan, Terengganu and Sarawak. Some of them live in New Zealand for more than 30 years since the time of the Colombo Plan in the 60s. Quite a number of them have taken Kiwi spouses (Table 2).

Occupation and Economic Activities

My brief research on Malaysian community in New Zealand (2001-2004) shows that Malaysians are involved in a variety of occupations. These include: diplomats, legal officers, managers of companies, ICT consultants, architects, veterinary officers, university professors, college lecturers, bank officers, administration assistants, freelance writers, food suppliers, waitresses, cooks, cashiers, hair stylists, sales promoters and general workers (Table 3).

Table 2: Malaysians with Kiwi Spouses/Partners in Wellington by Occupation and Sex (2001-2004)

OCCUPATION	Male	Female
Administration assistant	1	
Business & trading	1	1
Freelance journalist		1
Immigration officer		1
Home maker	2	4
Lecturer	1	
Manager of companies	3	
Restaurant operator	1	
Veterinary officer		1
TOTAL	9	8

Source: Field Notes (2001-2004)

Table 3: Malaysians* in Wellington by Occupation and Sex (2001-2004)

OCCUPATION	Male	Female
Accountant	1	1
Administration assistant	1	2
Architect	2	
Bank officers	2	
Business & trading		2
Cooks	8	
College lecturer	1	
Doctor		2
Education consultant	1	
Freelance journalist		1
Diplomatic service	8	5
Hair stylist		1
Hotel operator	1	
ICT consultant	2	
Immigration officer		1
Legal officer	2	
Manager of companies	3	
Restaurant operator	3	4
Restaurant manager	2	
Sales promoter	6	

University professors	3	1
Veterinary officer		1
TOTAL	46	21

* Personal acquaintances

Source: Field Notes (2001-2004)

However, the most visible type of business activity among Malaysians in New Zealand particularly in Wellington is the food business. In Wellington city alone, there are more than 20 Malaysian restaurants. (Table 4). A walk along the streets in Courtney Place for example, one notices at least four Malaysian restaurants there, i.e. Satay Malaysia, Istana Malaysia, Satay Kampong, and Cinta Malaysian Restaurant. Situated in Ghuznee Street is the KK Malaysian Restaurant, and in Dixon Street is the Satay Kajang Restaurant. A visitor from Malaysia who comes to New Zealand, particularly to Wellington for the first time would feel very much at home on noticing signboards of restaurants prominently displayed in *Bahasa Malaysia*. Most of the menus of Malaysian cuisines served at these restaurants too are displayed in *Bahasa Malaysia* (Table 5).

Table 4: Malaysian Restaurants in Wellington (2001-2004)

NO	NAME OF RESTAURANT	ADDRESS
1	Asian Kitchen	138A Lambton Quay, City
2	Bandong Country Food	134 Cuba St, City
3	Bays Curry Cottage	28 Rimu St, Rona Bay
4	Cinta Restaurant	Courtney Place, City
5	Givas Malaysian Cuisines	114 Johnsonville Road
6	Istana Malaysia	1-5 Allen St, City
7	KK Malaysian Restaurant	54 Ghuznee Street, City
8	Kopi Malaysian Espresso Café	103 Willis St, City
9	Malacca Restaurant & Bar	41 Vivian St, City
10	Malaya Village Restaurant	17-19 Majoribanks St Mt Victoria, City
11	Malaysian Café	264 Jackson St, Petone
12	Malaysian Platter	501 Hutt Rd, Lower Hutt
13	Roti Chennai Café	120 Victoria St, City
14	Roti Café	149 Willis Street, City
15	Satay Kajang	39 Dixon St, City
16	Satay Kampong	262 Wakefield Street, City
17	Siows Malaysian Curry & Grill	41 Vivian St Central Wellington
18	Satay Malaysia Restaurant	18-24 Allen St Central Wellington
19	Satay Village	58 Ghuznee St, City
20	Sungai Wang Malaysian Café	68 Dixon St, City

21	Sungai Wang Malaysian Restaurant	18 Bunny St, Lower Hutt
22	Taste of Malaysia	241 High St, Lower Hutt
23	The Long Bar On Brandon	22 Brandon St, City
24	The Malaysian Kitchen Restaurant	200 Cuba St Central Wellington

Source: Telecom NZ 2002/03, Yellow Pages (Pg.896); see also <http://www.edine.co.nz/asian.htm>

Table 5: Selected Menus of Malaysian Cuisines: Kopi Malaysian Restaurant, Wellington

Food Items	Price (NZ\$)	Food Items	Price (NZ\$)
Ayam Panggang	13.50	Kerang Masak Lemak	15.50
Sambal Pedas Ayam	13.50	Sambal Udang Chilli	16.50
Daging Kicap Manis	13.50	Sambal Sotong Lemak	14.00
Sayur Goreng Udang	12.50	Ikan Kukus Kicap	14.50
Gado-Gado	12.50	Ikan Panggang	14.40
Tofu Bakar Kerabu	14.50	Nasi Lemak	13.50
Mee Goreng	13.50	Nasi Goreng	13.50
Mee Goreng Mamak	15.00	Nasi Kandar	15.00
Asam Manis Laksa	14.00	Nasi Daging Kambing	15.50
Gulai Ikan	13.50	Nasi Kari Ikan	15.50

Source: Field Notes (2001-2004).

If one were satisfied for not missing Malaysian food while in New Zealand, he or she would be taken aback on noticing the pricing of the dishes, which is two or three times higher than the pricing of similar dishes in Malaysia. For example, the price of a plate of *mi goreng* in Wellington is about NZ\$13.00, while for a similar plate it only costs about RM4.00 in Kuala Lumpur. A piece of plain *roti canai* with gravy, costs about NZ\$5.00 in Wellington, whereas in Malaysia, we could get five pieces of that for the same price. However, the high pricing of Malaysian food is not an issue for most Malaysians in New Zealand, particularly for those who have secured jobs and permanent residency (PR) status. They would have to pay about the same price or more for a plate of Indian or Western cuisines as they have paid for the Malaysian dishes.

Student profiles

Malaysia-New Zealand's relationship in the field of education could be traced back from the time of the Colombo Plan in the 50s and 60s. Until now, it has always been the policy of Malaysian government to send students abroad to pursue their studies, and also it has always been the aspirations of (wealthy) Malaysian parents to have their children educated overseas (Table 6). New Zealand seems to be one of the popular countries for Malaysians to get a degree from – in the field of medicine, dentistry, accountancy, law, ICT, architecture and others.

The number of Malaysian students enrolled in New Zealand's institutions of higher learning ranges from year to year. Based on July 2000 Report issued by Trade

New Zealand Malaysia, there are 2063 Malaysian students studying in New Zealand in 1995, 2500 in 1997, and 2359 in 1999 (Table 6). However, in 2001 there are only 1185 Malaysians studying in New Zealand institutions of higher learning as shown in Table 7. With the twinning programs going on between private institutions in Malaysia and Victoria University, for instance, the number of Malaysian students in New Zealand is expected to be on the increase. Nevertheless, at Victoria University in the years before 2000 it never exceeds 200 students per year, except for 2001 when the number is 210 (Table 8).

Table 6: Number of Malaysian Students Studying Overseas

COUNTRY	1995	1997	1999
United Kingdom	12,000	8,500	17,800
Australia	11,121	12,500	15,700
USA	13,617	14,000	14,597
New Zealand	2,063	2,500	2,359
Canada	2,000	1,500	2,000
TOTAL	40,801	39,000	52,456

Source: www.tradenz.govt.nz/page_Article/0,1300,1030%252D814%252D814,00.html

Table 7: Number of Malaysian Formal Tertiary Students in New Zealand in 2001

INSTITUTION	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Polytechnics	169	113	282
Colleges of Education	02	02	04
Universities	389	481	870
Private Tertiary Education Provider	11	18	29
TOTAL	571	614	1185

Source: http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/document/document_page.cfm?id=5925#P21_778

Table 8: Number of Malaysian Students at Victoria University of Wellington for the Years 1996 – 2002 by Degree

Year	BA	BCA	BSC	LLB	BARCH	Post- Grad	Others*	Total
1996	14	62	04	02	02	07	15	106
1997	10	69	03	04	07	07	24	124
1998	13	52	03	06	09	07	21	111
1999	13	85	04	05	05	07	05	124
2000	10	140	01	09	04	02	08	174
2001	08	156	08	08	-	08	22	210
2002	09	78	10	09	-	05	17	128

Source: System Support, Central Student Administration, Victoria University of Wellington

A glance at Table 8, we notice that a big proportion of Malaysian students studying at Victoria are pursuing a degree in Commerce and Administration. In 2000 and 2001 for instance, the percentages of Malaysian students who enroll for BCA degree are 80.45% and 74.28% respectively. This is mainly due to the twinning programs arranged by the Faculty of Commerce and Administration, VUW with a few private institutions in Malaysia such as Nilai College, Sedaya College and Inti College.

A majority of Malaysian students in New Zealand universities in 2001-2004 are private students. Very few of them are on scholarships, except for PETRONAS sponsored students in Canterbury. In terms of ethnicity, a majority of these private students, especially on twinning programs are Chinese. Less than 3 percent are Malays and Indians. In Victoria, for example, in 2001-2004 there are a few government sponsored students that I come to know of, all of them are post-graduate students. They are sent by their respective universities in Malaysia, specifically by University of Malaya (UM), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) under SLAB (*Skim Latihan Akademik Bumiputera*) to pursue either Masters or Doctorate programs.

From 2005 until now, there are more government sponsored students in Victoria University of Wellington, which is the outcome of the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Ministry of Education Malaysia and the School of Linguistics and Applied Languages, for the twinning program on TESL (Teaching of English as a Second Language). The first batch of about 50 TESL students enrolled in Victoria in 2005.

Assimilation and Cultural Identity

Generally, when a person lives in a foreign country, he has to adjust and to accommodate himself to the physical and social milieus of that country. Although initially he may experience some kind of culture shock but over the years of interacting and mixing with the local people he would unconsciously find himself assimilated with the new culture. This is what happened to Malaysians who have stayed in New Zealand for more than 20 years. Most of them have adopted lifestyles similar to those of the people in the host country. For example, the language they use to communicate with one another including with fellow Malaysians is English. Bahasa Malaysia would probably be used as a medium of communication at home by families when both spouses are from the Malay ethnic group. Nonetheless, they would still use English to communicate with their children who are born and raised up in New Zealand. (In one of Wellington Malaysian Association's (WELMA) meetings that I attend, all discussions are in English even though all those present are Malays).

Children of Malaysian families who are born and raised up in New Zealand or who are born in Malaysia but raised up in New Zealand, especially those of mixed Malaysian-New Zealand parentage would hardly know or able to speak the Malaysian national language. They would feel awkward to claim themselves to be Malaysians due to their ignorance as well as their unfamiliarity with many aspects of Malaysian culture, notably with the Malaysian national language.

It has always been a challenging task for Malaysian families, and even so for families of mixed marriages to raise children in a country with different social and

cultural milieus. Physical and social environments in New Zealand are so much different from those found in Malaysia. The issues of language, custom, food, dressing, religious rituals, etc., are pertinent issues in socialization process of children not only at the family level, but also at the school, peer group, and community levels. The external forces (school, peer group and community) are much stronger than those that operate within the family, such that efforts taken by the family to instill Malaysian social and cultural values in child upbringing become less effective.

In relation to the above, Jenny Ang in a workshop on Malaysian community in New Zealand held at the Malaysian High Commission in 2003 speaks on the challenges faced by Malaysian parents in raising children in New Zealand. In her deliberation she says:

It was brought to my attention that in the Kiwi culture, some girls and boys lost their virginity when they are twelve. They boast about it at school telling everyone whom they liked, whom they slept with and what they are up to. I remembered my daughter telling me about her friend, how her mum took her to the family planning clinic so that she can go on the pill. I was very shocked to hear about it... If I were to tell my children not to do it, they will do it, as it is human nature to try it out. However, I believe that if I told them the consequences, they will then decide for themselves whether to do it or not. This, I believe is a more effective way than constant nagging telling them what to do and what not to do... (Jenny Ang in Yaacob Harun, 2004).

One interesting phenomenon that I observe while in New Zealand is the indifference attitude shown by Malaysians towards their fellow country men and women who engage in “unethical” or rather “immoral” activities gauged by Malaysian value standards. These activities include: cohabitation, civil union (which is legal and accepted as a new kind of ‘family living’ in New Zealand), adoption of western lifestyles and even utterances of words which are perceived by any Malaysian to be improper. Ironically, these peoples still claim themselves to be Malaysians in their own right although culturally they are not.

Despite incidences of a few losing their culture and identity, Malaysians in New Zealand in general still want to identify themselves as Malaysians. They still proudly portray their allegiance and loyalty to their motherland. At the very least, they become members of Malaysia-based associations and organizations and actively engage in various socio-cultural and religious activities organized by these associations. In Wellington alone, there are three Malaysia-based associations namely, Malaysia-New Zealand Society (MNZS), Wellington Malaysian Association (WELMA), and Wellington Malaysian Student Organization (WMSO). At the national level with Chapters in major cities in New Zealand is the Malaysia-New Zealand Business Council formed mainly by those who are in the business sector particularly by those who are involved in joint business enterprises between the two countries, i.e. Malaysia and New Zealand.

Malaysians like other foreign nationals in New Zealand have a focal point – the Malaysian High Commission – where they could refer and go to with regards to securing visas, passports, and other matters in the event of emergencies, deaths etc. The Malaysian High Commission not only provides the link between Malaysia and New Zealand in matters that involve relationships between the two countries,

but also provides the meeting place for all Malaysians in New Zealand. It is through activities organized by the High Commission such as Merdeka day celebration, Yang Di Pertuan Agong's birthday celebration, Hari Raya, Chinese New Year and Deepavali celebrations that Malaysians would be able to meet, to get to know and to establish relationships and contacts with one another. On personal capacity, H.E. the High Commissioner also from time to time organizes functions and dinners at his official residence in Wellington, and Malaysians who stay in the vicinity of capital city are the most frequent invitees to these functions.

Conclusion

To sum up, let me quote a Malay saying which says, "*masuk kandang kerbau menguak, masuk kandang kambing menggembek*" which literally means "in a buffalo's stable, moo like a buffalo, likewise in a goat's stable, bleat like a goat". In other words, one has to adjust, adapt and accommodate to any new situation or culture he is in, in order to survive. The same applies to people who are in foreign lands including Malaysians in New Zealand. However, taking or adopting an alien culture is a trade-off, which consciously or unconsciously leads one to lose his sooner or later.

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