

# RELIGIOUS AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES REPRESENTED IN THE NARRATIVES OF MIGRANT FILIPINO MUSLIMS IN MALAYSIA

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## **Abstract**

National identity in the Philippines can be associated with religious identity due to the strong religious influence in this country. In fact, some places, events, names and celebrations are influenced by the Catholic faith. Despite the Christian domination, Muslims particularly in the Southern part of the country have stronger attachment towards Islam. Consequently, the issue of religious versus national identity has become complex particularly to those who migrated to other countries for various reasons. This study examines the national and religious identities more particularly by examining how the migrant Filipino Muslims in Malaysia construct their identities. Moreover, this study is anchored from Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) which explains that the construction of group or individual identities could be identified in different levels of self-categorization. To carry out the study, 15 interview narratives from migrant Filipino Muslims in Kuala Lumpur and Sabah, Malaysia were collected through individual interviews. The findings of the study show that the religious identity of migrant Filipino Muslims shows greater value than that of their national identity. The construction of such identity is highly political in the sense that the religious identity is seen to be instrumental rather than integrative.

*Keywords: Self Categorization Theory, religious identity, national identity, Christian, Muslim, Philippines, Malaysia*

## **Introduction**

To understand the religious and national identity of Filipino Muslims in Malaysia, it is important to foreground the religious background of the Philippines particularly the existence of Islam in the country. The Philippines is a country where almost 81% of the population is Catholic, 7.3% Protestants, 2.3% Iglesia ni Kristo, 2.0% Aglipayans and the rest of the population includes 5.1% Muslims, and 0.1% Buddhists (Dumanig, 2010). Islam is widely practiced in the Southern part of the Philippines (Sakili, 2003) which gained a significant start in Sulu during the 13th century (Majul, 1974, p. 3).

The Filipino Muslims inhabit in the Southern part of the Philippines. They consist of thirteen ethnolinguistic groups including the Iranun, Magindanaon, Maranao, Tao-Sug, Sama, Yakan, Jama Mapun, Ka'agan, Kalibugan, Sangil, Molbog, Palawani and Badjao (Lingga, 2004). The languages spoken by these different Muslim ethnic groups are sometimes used to distinguish themselves from one another. Culturally and linguistically, Filipino Muslims ethnic groups have similarities and differences particularly in constructing their identities. The Maranaos and Maguindanaos for instance, share some similarities specifically in their languages with the Samas and Badjao of Mindanao but the Tausug differs from the other ethnic groups (Jubilado, Ingilan & Dumanig, 2015). The Muslims in Mindanao are categorized into five major groups; the Tausugs of Lupah Sulu, the Samas of Tawi-Tawi, the Yakans of Basilan, the Maranaos in Central Mindanao, the Maguindanaos in the Cotabato region and the Muslim indigenous people such as the Teduray, Manobo, Bla-an, Higaonon, Subanen, and T'boli (Lingga, 2004).

Although these Muslim ethnic groups share some common cultural knowledge, they somehow differ in their cultural practices, and they occupy certain territories like the Maranaos who are predominant in Lanao del Sur and the Maguindanaos in Cotabato region. On the other hand, the Badjaos comprise the smallest Muslim ethnic group and live as sea gypsies in their houseboats in Sulu, Tawi-Tawi and Zamboanga.

Due to close affiliation to their ethnic groups, Filipino Muslims have been able to retain their culture and traditions. Consequently, they are easily identified by their ethnic affiliation like the Maranao, Maguindanao and Tausog. Notwithstanding the ethnic differences among the Muslims in Mindanao, the Muslim identity is reflected in their manner of dressing, ethnic languages, and religious activities. Such unique culture of Filipino Muslims is part and parcel of Filipino Muslim identity.

The Filipino Muslims, particularly in the Southern tip of the Philippines, have experienced issues related to peace and order and

employment opportunities. Consequently, they started to migrate either to the urban cities of the Philippines like Davao, Cebu and Manila or other foreign countries like Malaysia. This resulted in the migration of a large number of Filipino Muslims to Malaysia, particularly in Sabah. In 1998 there were 500,000 Filipino Muslims in Sabah (U.S. Committee for Refugees World Refugee Survey 1998 – Malaysia, 1998) but in 2011 the number had increased to 800,000. Due to its proximity to Mindanao where Filipino Muslims predominantly reside, Sabah is the point of entry for most Muslims from the Southern part of the Philippines.

However, it must be noted that other Filipino Muslims who came to Malaysia are converted (Balik Islam). Balik Islam means revert to Islam; it is the term used by Filipino Muslims to describe those Filipinos who converted to Islam (Adio, 2008). Such term is associated with the Muslim idea that all Filipinos were Muslims before they accepted Christianity. However, during the Spanish occupation of the Philippines, most Filipinos became Christians. From then on until now, the majority of Filipinos are Catholics, and most Filipino Muslim converts were originally Christians who came from the various parts of the Philippines. After conversion, some of the converts affiliate themselves with Filipino Muslim majority in Mindanao and eventually establish a better relationship with them and slowly acquire the Maranaw, Maguindanao or Tausug languages and the Filipino Muslim culture. In fact, such affiliation with the ethnic minorities helps in enhancing their identity as Filipino Muslims.

On the other hand, when Filipino Muslims migrated to Malaysia the ethnicity and language differences have a lesser impact for them to be united, but their ethnic identification is seen to be prevalent. Their religious affiliation as Muslims plays a major role for their unity rather than their nationality as Filipinos and they have assimilated with the mainstream Malays. In fact, they are sometimes identified as locals because of the similar physical features with the Malays and their ability to speak Bahasa Malaysia. Consequently, the identity of Filipino Muslims has become complex particularly in reconciling their religious identity as Muslims and their national identity as Filipinos.

The construction of religious and national identities can be complicated sometimes because they can be individually or institutionally constructed and it is manifested through one's talk or discourse. Such identities can be constructed individually or collectively which means that a person can portray both his individual and group identity (Thomas, Singh and Stilwell Peccei, 2004). Blommaert's (2005) view of identity is that who and what one is; depends on context, occasion and purpose. The construction of identity in every human activity becomes a part of everyday life. The daily rituals that involve the use of language occur in the way people interact with each other,

dress and act, write, and project themselves to others which can all be considered as identity rituals. Blommaert (2005) explained further that identity involves many things and can be described as a semiotic process of representation which includes symbols, narratives and textual genres.

Identity has to be enacted and performed in order to be socially salient (Blommaert, 2005). This means that to establish an identity, it has to be recognized first by others. As a result, people tend to label themselves and others as religious, fanatics, friendly, kind, helpful, etc. Identity, whether in an individual, the social or institutional level is something that people are constantly building and negotiating throughout their lives through their interaction with others (Thornborrow, 2004). This means that every time people interact with others, they frequently negotiate their identities. Consequently, people may create multiple identities in one event because they are concerned about how others may perceive them (Goffman, 1997). The emphasis on identities is not essentially given but is actively produced through deliberate, strategic manipulation or out-of-awareness practices (Kroskrity, 2000).

It is, therefore, the purpose of this study to examine how the Filipino Muslims in Malaysia construct their religious identity as Muslim and their national identity as Filipino. Also, we would like to examine if any of these two identities is prominent and argue why one identity is becoming more prevalent than that of the other. To further understand the concept of identity about the Filipino Muslims in Malaysia, the next section of this paper discusses the notion of identity and its relevance to Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) in the construction of religious and national identities. The construction of identity can be explained by varieties of identity theories, however, in this particular paper, self-categorization theory (SCT) is used as its theoretical framework to explain how the Filipino Muslims construct their national and religious identities in a foreign country like Malaysia.

### ***Self-Categorization Theory***

This study is based on Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) which explains that a person's identity is constructed or formed through the process of self-categorization. SCT aims to describe and explain the specific nature of the relationships between the self, social norms, and social context (Stets and Burke 2000). The theory originated from Social Identity Theory (SIT) which argues that social identity refers to a person's understanding of the group or social category where he or she belongs to (Stets and Burke, 2000). Individuals can categorize themselves as group members and consequently act similarly with other members with a common identity, group orientation, and behaviour

(Turner 1991, p. 155; Turner & Onorato, 1999). This means that social influence contributes to the process of self-categorization because the way individuals categorize themselves is based on their social and group membership. According to Turner and Onorato (1999, p. 20), the process of self-categorization results in self-stereotyping as well as depersonalization. In self-categorization, the individual accentuates by emphasizing the self and group differences. In fact, it is evident that in each categorization, the concept of self comes from the perception of similarities and differences between classes of stimuli (Turner, Hogg, Oakes & Wetherell, 1987). Turner and Onorato (1999) and Mummendey and Otten (2002) explained further that an individual's social and personal identities represent various levels of self-categorization in which the personal identity is directly dependent on one's social identity. This is the reason why people of the same religious or national affiliation can specifically identify who they are and how they differ from the other members. This means that at the personal level of self-categorization occurs by emphasizing intra-group similarities and differences. Consequently, through common group orientations, personal and individual differences are achieved and evaluated. Similarly, social identity is also influenced by personal and individual distinctiveness because they are the product of various intergroup and interpersonal differences (Turner & Oakes, 1989). At the social level, self-categorization accentuates the similarities and differences within the in-group as well as the out-group. As a result, social group comparison may lead to stereotyping of one group as against another.

When social identity like the religious or national identity becomes more apparent than that of personal identity, this process is known as depersonalization of the self. Depersonalization is described as the possibility of perceiving increased identity between self and in-group members and difference from out-group members, to perceive oneself more as the identical representative of a social category and less as a unique personality, defined by one's personal differences from other in-group members (Turner & Oakes, 1989, p. 245). Consequently, self-categorization of the social self-enhances group behaviour due to the commonalities of their collective self-concept which is transformed into collective self-interests (Mummendey & Otten, 2002; Turner & Onorato, 1999; Turner, 1991). In general, self-categorization is believed to provide the primary source for people's social orientation toward others.

This study is anchored from self-categorization which explains that the construction of religious and national identities of Filipino migrant Filipino Muslims in Malaysia is closely associated on how they categorize their individual or group membership. It is therefore argued in this paper that either

the religious or national identities of the Filipino Muslims are influenced by their identities and their group membership which resulted to multiple and hybrid identities.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative approach was used to collect and analyse the data in this study. To critically examine how the migrant Filipino Muslims construct their identities in Malaysia, a phenomenological research design was used to describe and interpret the personal experiences of the Filipino migrant Muslims particularly in constructing their identities.

Fifteen (15) interview narratives of migrant Filipino Muslims from Kuala Lumpur and Sabah, Malaysia were collected and analyzed. They were selected through referral by other Filipino Muslims and based on the number of years of residence in Malaysia. Only those participants who had stayed in Malaysia for at least a year were interviewed and asked to narrate their personal experiences during their stay either in Kuala Lumpur or Sabah. The interviews were recorded at home and others were in the coffee shop depending on the participants' preference. The interviews vary in time and length. However, the shortest lasted only for 10 minutes, and the longest interview lasted for an hour. The interview narratives were guided by asking the participants about their stay in Malaysia and their group affiliations as Filipino Muslims.

The data collected were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis as proposed by Williams (1984) and Cain (1991). The analysis examined closely how the participants constructed their identities as Filipino Muslims in Malaysia and their preferred identities such as religious identity versus their national identity.

## **Findings**

The findings of the study reveal that Filipino Muslims who are currently staying in Malaysia feel comfortable because of the country's Muslim dominance. It is evident when one participant says:

FMP1: In Malaysia, I feel proud, free and safe that I am a Muslim. In the Philippines, I feel sometimes discriminated, ostracised (a little), and cannot conveniently perform our duties as Muslim in most places.

Such statement may imply that they feel free to exercise their religious faith in Malaysia as compared in the Philippines. However, this is somehow

understandable because Malaysia is predominantly Muslim. Having similar religious culture and identity, they feel a sense of belongingness, and they felt valued and accommodated, which manifests in the halal food that they can find anywhere in the country. Another participant mentioned: FMP5 “Here in Malaysia we are safe for almost all of the foods are halal.”

In the interviews conducted, the participants mentioned:

#### Narrative 3.1

FMP3: "In Malaysia, I feel proud, free and safe that I am a Muslim. In the Philippines, I feel sometimes discriminated, ostracised (a little), and cannot conveniently perform our duties as Muslim in most places. In fact, the surau (mosque) are few, and sometimes you cannot find in most places around the country. They can be found mostly, in Muslim dominated areas."

FMP5: "Here in Malaysia we are safe for almost all of the foods are halal but in the Philippines, there are few halal restaurants, and seldom you can find in most places. We have to clarify sometimes if the food that we want to order is halal."

The data reflects the Filipino Muslims' experiences in Malaysia and the Philippines. Their narratives construct certain identities both personally and socially. The interview narratives show the indirectness of their statements, but the underlying message reflects that their religious identities are more prominent than their national identities. They categorize their identities to reflect the group identity as Muslims which could be a reflection of their self-categorization (Turner & Onorato, 1999; Mummendey & Otten, 2002).

The construction of the identity of the Filipino Muslims is identified by categorizing themselves as group members. As a result, they act similarly with other members with a common identity, group orientation and behaviour (Turner, 1991, p. 155; Turner & Onorato, 1999). The Filipino Muslims construct their identity in three major themes such as the sense of belongingness, Muslims with no ethnic affiliation, membership of the Malay community,

#### *Sense of belongingness*

The Filipino Muslims who live in Malaysia, which is a Muslim dominated society, feel a sense of belongingness because their religious practices are highly valued. They do not feel neglected and excluded, unlike in the Philippines where the Muslims feel neglected because they are considered a minority (Luga, 2002). Consequently, they tend to categorize their religious

practices in Malaysia differently as compared to the Philippines. Their self-categorization enhances their group behaviour due to the commonalities of their collective self-concept which is transformed into collective self-interests (Mummendey & Otten 2002; Turner & Onorato, 1999; Turner 1991).

As Filipino Muslims who come from a Christian dominated society, they describe themselves as "blessed" in Malaysia because they can fulfil their religious duties. This is evident when one participant said: "To be able to live in a Muslim country is a blessing." Moreover, they receive strong support from the society and their Malaysian Muslim brothers and sisters. They are surrounded by mosques, and it is easy for them to find such places of worship. Due to the strong support, they receive in practicing Islam in Malaysia, they have started to feel that they are part of the Malay Muslim majority. Five participants made comments to support this theme:

### Narrative 3.2

FMP1: "As a Muslim from a non-Muslim majority, I am grateful that to be able to live in a Muslim country like Malaysia is already a blessing."

FMP10: "I feel like complete, in the sense that I'm able to do my obligations as a Muslim. I have no fear of what other people will say about me."

FMP3: "I feel free and confident everywhere I go. There are fewer worries wherever you go."

FMP15: "You feel safe and have peace of mind. I am more encouraged and motivated to do my religious duties."

FMP6: "I find it easy to perform my Islamic obligations here in Malaysia."

FMP14: "Malaysia supports the Muslims to perform their obligatory prayers by having surau [prayer room] with ablution area in most of the buildings and establishments unlike in the Philippines where prayer rooms are only available at home."

FMP5: "Malaysian Muslims encourage the Filipino Muslims to enhance their faith. In a way, I could feel their support to other Muslims."

The data show that the Filipino Muslims in Malaysia have fully immersed themselves in the Muslim mainstream community as reflected from the narratives of FMP1, FMP10, FMP3, FMP3, FMP15 FMP6 and FMP14. Having similar religious beliefs and faith as the majority makes them feel at ease and facilitates their becoming part of the larger Islamic family and community. They categorize themselves as part of the society, and they feel that they are given importance in the group. These are evident when they say: "I feel like complete, in the sense that I'm able to do my obligations as a



Muslim," "I find easy to perform my Islamic obligations here in Malaysia" and "I feel free and confident everywhere I go."

It is evident from the narratives that the Islamic identity of Filipino Muslims in Malaysia has been enhanced due to the strong support they receive from the Malaysian Muslim majority. Such a support enhances their group membership. Thus, they tend to categorize the group to be different from what they experience in the Philippines. As they can practice their faith freely, they are confident and proud of identifying themselves as Muslims and are glad that they can perform their religious duties without restriction or fear. This categorization is reflected in the narratives of FMP1, FMP10, FMP3, FMP3, FMP15 FMP6 and FMP14.

### *Muslims with no ethnic affiliation*

The Filipino Muslims in Malaysia categorized themselves as Muslims rather than being a Filipino. They feel that being a Muslim is sufficient and there is no necessity to be identified with their nationality as for them religion knows no boundary. In the interviews conducted, the participants responded:

#### Narrative 3.3

FMP7: "I am comfortable with being identified as Muslim with no ethnic affiliation because my religion knows no boundary."

FMP13: "It is important to be identified as a Muslim. I maintain my stance as to what Islam teaches us."

FMP5: "My identity as a Muslim is more important than my identity as Filipino."

FMP6: "Islam is a complete way of life hence being a Muslim as a follower of Islam.....Being a Filipino doesn't count."

FMP2: "My identity as a Muslim is more important because a true Muslim is a way of life. Islam is my life."

Being a Muslim is already part of their lives. They value their religion more than their nationality as they believe that religion knows no boundary and it is a way of life which is evident when a participant said: "My identity as a Muslim is more important than my identity as Filipino". They have a very strong loyalty towards their religion thus categorizing their identity as Muslims rather than their national identity as Filipino seems favourable. They categorize their group membership according to their religious affiliation in Islam or (Muslims) rather than categorizing as citizens of a country (Filipinos).

One participant has even a very strong indication as to how the Muslim identity is valued which is reflected in the interview, "Islam is a complete way of life hence being a Muslim as a follower of Islam.....Being a Filipino doesn't count that much." Stating, "being a Filipino doesn't count that much" indicates that their religious identity surpasses their national identity. This does not necessarily mean that Filipino Muslims denounce their nationality, but this is a mere reflection of how much they value their religious affiliation as compared to their nationality.

Such group categorization is at the same time a representation of themselves as individual Filipino Muslims. This is evident when a participant said: "my identity as a Muslim is more important than my identity as Filipino." The strong religious identity that they project enhances their strong affiliation to the Muslims in Malaysia. Consequently, they do not have difficulties when joining the Malay community. In fact, clinging to the common religion makes them feel safer in Malaysia. In this way, they feel that Malaysians will not discriminate against them because they are Muslim brothers.

### ***Membership of the Malay community***

Islam in Malaysia is always associated with being Malay. This means that the terms Muslim and Malay in the Malaysian context are seen to be identical. On the other hand, the Filipino Muslims in Malaysia feel that they are part of the Malay society and have started to assimilate with the Malay culture.

As Muslims, they categorize themselves as part of the majority's religious community in Malaysia and enjoy the religious opportunities available to them as compared to the scarce and limited opportunities in the Philippines. They feel that they have more freedom to practice their faith; and such a positive environment, they believe, helps them enhance their Islamic faith.

In the interviews conducted, the Filipino Muslims in Malaysia stated:

#### **Narrative 3.4**

FMP4: "Yes, I'm happy because I belong to the Muslim Ummah, the largest group."

FMP5: "I feel grateful for having a chance to live in Islamic dominated society for evidence are very visual through the development of the country that truly proves that Muslim leaders are good leaders."

FMP8: "In the Philippines, I am being pressured to conform and adopt the lifestyle which disagrees with my belief but living in Malaysia took that pressure off."

When Filipino Muslims categorize themselves as part of the Malay community, they feel happy and comfortable because of the support they receive from a larger group. Moreover, they are no longer pressured to conform to other religious practices as reflected in Narrative 3.4. Consequently, such a setting enables them to practice their faith easily and influences the way they construct their identities. For instance, when a participant said, “Yes, I’m happy because I belong to the Muslim Ummah, the largest group” it indicates a more positive attitude towards their religious affiliation. The attitude of an individual is a strong factor that leads to self-categorization of one’s identity as part of the group identity. This is further supported when another participant said, “I feel grateful for having a chance to live in Islamic dominated society.”

The positive attitude of the Filipino Muslims in Malaysia towards their religion is a sign of their relief that being in a Muslim-dominated country they can fully enjoy their religious rights. This is evident when a participant said, “In the Philippines, I am being pressured to conform and adopt the lifestyle which disagrees with my belief but living in Malaysia took that pressure off.”

The way the Filipino Muslims categorize themselves leads to a clearer picture as to how they construct their national and religious identities. The identity of being a Filipino is less evident than that of being a Muslim.

### ***National identity versus Muslim identity***

The data show Filipino Muslims in Malaysia construct the dual identities. They categorize themselves more as Muslims, but at the same time, their being Filipinos are reflected in their narratives. This is inevitable that one identity, which is the religious identity, can become more dominant than the other, which is the national identity. Studies show that in most cases immigrants tend to construct more of their national identity, but in the case of Filipino Muslims in Malaysia, religious identity overrides other identities including the national identity as reflected in Narratives 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4. Being a Muslim for them has become an important identity marker because they believe that it is something that they should be proud of, and being a Muslim in this transplanted environment facilitates the practice of their faith in a peaceful setting. Their identities are evident in the way they view about Islam such as taking pride in Islam, being a Muslim has no geographical boundary, Islam is a way of life, and Islam provides peace.

### ***Taking pride in Islam***

What emerges from the narratives is the importance of being a Muslim. Taking pride in being Muslim results in blessings. Such faith is reflected in one of the participants' statement, "I'm proud of being a Muslim because Muslims believe in Allah and Mohammad who provide guidance how to live a successful life." As a believer of Islam, their pride in Islam is seen by them as an individual blessing from Allah. In addition, they also believe that taking pride in Islam is a way of thanking Allah (see Narrative 3.5). As can be seen in the data collected, the participants commented:

#### Narrative 3.5

FMP3: "I'm very much proud as a Muslim, and I am thankful to Allah for whatever He made us."

FMP12: "I'm proud being a Muslim because Muslims believe in Allah and Mohammad who provide guidance how to live a successful life."

FMP4: "I feel proud, free and safe as a Muslim in Malaysia. However, in the Philippines, it's a bit different."

Taking pride in Islam is associated with the good things that the Filipino Muslims experience in Malaysia. Being part of the minority religious group in the Philippines, Filipino Muslims do not enjoy similar benefits and support that they receive in Malaysia. As a result, they take pride of Islam. This strong belief towards Islam leads them to categorize more of their religious identity rather than the national identity. The way, they show themselves of who they are, clearly explains that their national identity is secondary because they are more proud of being a Muslim rather than being a Filipino. Such narratives, "I'm very much proud as a Muslim...", "I'm proud [of] being a Muslim because Muslims believe in Allah and Mohammad...", "I feel proud, free and safe as a Muslim" are manifestations on how they categorize their identities as Muslims.

### ***Being a Muslim has no geographical boundary***

Muslim identity in Islamic Malaysia presents no geographical boundaries for Filipino Muslims. As their identity as a Muslim is understood, they prefer to be identified as Muslims (see Narrative 3.6). This implies that their religious affiliation has no boundaries. Therefore, their primary identity is based on their religion, where in Islamic Malaysia results in many advantages. Other identities are just secondary.

The participants commented:

### Narrative 3.6

FMP4: "As a Filipino living in Malaysia. I'm happy because I belong to the Muslim, the largest group."

FMP7: "There is no boundary, and we are equal regardless of race, ethnicity and nationality. Whether you are a Filipino or Malay everyone is the same"

FMP9: "As a Muslim, I believe that religion knows no boundary. My being a Filipino does not matter much."

The sense of equality felt by Filipino Muslims can perhaps be attributed to the acceptance of the Malays of who they are. They do not feel that they belong to a different race which can be said that is historically true since Filipinos are of the Malay race (Curaming, 2011). However, it must be noted that due to the strong support they get from Malaysian Muslims (see Narrative 3.2) they feel that despite being immigrants they receive strong support. Consequently, they think that Islam has no geographical boundaries as they narrated in Narrative 3.6.

The narratives show their unified identity as Muslims. This means that wherever they go, their Muslim identity remains the same which is evident in this statement, "As a Muslim, I believe that religion knows no boundary. My being a Filipino does not matter much". Therefore, it is already expected that they will categorize their religious identity than that of their national identity.

### *Islam is a way of life*

Muslims consider Islam as a way of life. Every Muslim ought to abide by the Quran which dictates what they can and cannot do in their daily lives. This means that being a Muslim is always associated with everything that they do. The participants narrated:

### Narrative 3.7

FMP1: "As a Filipino Muslim believer, I must follow and do my obligation according to what is written in the Holy Quran."

FMP5: "Muslim is a way of life and Islam is my life. This is what Filipino Muslims believe that if we go to different places or countries, we still have to hold on to Islam."

FMP6: "Islam is a way of life hence being a Filipino Muslim is a follower of Islam."

Being a Muslim is already part of the daily activities among Filipino Muslims. This can be seen in their daily rituals and activities where they pray at least five times a day, visit the Mosque every Friday, eat the halal food and perform other Islamic duties. In short, the identity of the Filipino Muslim in Malaysia is already associated with their daily rituals in life. Saying "Islam is our way of life" impliedly shows that they already categorize their identity as Muslims. Although, it is also evident that they have not forgotten their national identity, categorizing themselves as "Filipino Muslims" indicates that they also acknowledge their national identity, but more emphasis is given to their religious identity.

### *Islam provides peace*

Muslims in the Philippines value the importance of peace. Their experiences of being always exposed to some political problems in the Philippines have motivated them to seek peace. They believe that they are peaceful people and Islam values peace. Part of their identity as Muslims is to feel at peace. They said:

FMP14: "In Islam, you will feel safe and have peace of mind. In the Philippines, I guess we Filipino Muslims are stereotyped as troublemakers but in reality we are peace-makers."

FMP6: "We Muslims can live happily and peacefully. This is contrary to what other Filipinos perceive us. That's why I like Malaysia because we believe in similar things."

In the context of the Filipino Muslims in Malaysia, they find peace staying in a country where there are no bombings and wars, since the Filipino Muslim community particularly in Mindanao area experience war and bombings. They feel the urge of having peaceful and happy life. The idea of saying "Islam provides peace" indicates how the Filipino Muslims assert their identity as peacemakers rather than trouble makers. Contrary to the stereotyped identity labelled to them in the Philippines. It is clear in their narratives that being a Filipino Muslim, they are peace makers. Consequently, they categorize themselves impliedly as people who value more peace.

### **Discussion**

The narratives of Filipino Muslims in Malaysia reveal some aspects of their identities particularly on how they categorize their identities. Being a Filipino

and a Muslim are the two contesting identities that they construct. From the interview narratives collected, it can be concluded that being a Filipino is not seen as their dominant identity. The primary identity that they construct is that of being a Muslim which reflects the religious identity while the national identity becomes secondary. This is the reason why they prefer to be identified as Muslims rather than as Filipinos. According to Turner (1991) and Turner and Onorato (1999), individuals can categorize themselves as group members and consequently act similarly with other members with a common identity, group orientation, and behaviour.

The Filipino Muslims could have capitalized more their religious affiliation since it involves the majority and it helps them economically. This means chances of getting a job is higher and chances of being questioned of their documents as legal or illegal is lesser because sometimes they can be categorized as locals. As mentioned by one participant "as a Filipino living in Malaysia. I'm happy because I belong to the Muslim, the largest group" indicates their affiliation in the mainstream Muslim community. Because of this, the Filipino Muslims in Malaysia feel a sense of belongingness, and they believe that they do not experience ethnic boundaries. Consequently, they take pride in Islam, and they view Islam as a way of life which provides peace. Having such views, they easily assimilate with the Malay community, and they develop the sense of belongingness with the Malays because of their similar religious faith. Their assimilation to the Malay community particularly the use of Malay language and immersion to the cultural practices may lead the Filipino Muslims to be part of the Malay culture in due time. One advantage for the Filipino Muslims is their Malay race in which they have similar physical features with the Malays, so they cannot be easily recognized as Filipinos since they look similar and they can speak the Malay language.

Being part of the mainstream group in Malaysia, they somehow feel that they are becoming more empowered particularly in practicing their religious beliefs as compared to their previous experiences when they were in the Philippines. With such strong sense of belongingness, they eventually highlight their religious affiliation as Muslims rather than their national identity as Filipinos. This is expected since through self-categorization of the social self of the Filipino Muslims it enhances their group behaviour due to the commonalities of their collective self-concept of their religious faith which is transformed into collective self-interest (Mummendey & Otten, 2002; Turner & Onorato, 1999; Turner, 1991).

Based on the narratives of the Filipino Muslims, the occurrence of conflicting identities are prevalent. Part of them assimilate with the Malay culture, but another part of them retains their Philippine ethnic identity, for

instance as Tausug, Maranaw or Maguindanao. Although they assimilate well with the Malay community, they are still categorized by the Malays as Filipino Muslims. However, such conflicting identities are highly polarized by the marking of inclusion-exclusion or insider-outsider. Polarization is becoming more evident by highlighting the similarities and differences in the individual and social levels. From the narratives, it is clear that Filipino Muslims emphasize the similarity of religious faith with the Malays which distinguishes them from the Filipino Christian majority. This religious faith also influences their cultural practices such as the food they eat, their life style and the way of thinking. As a result, Muslim identity becomes more evident than their national identity.

The strong emphasis of the religious identity of Filipino Muslims in Malaysia rather than their national identities is also related to their economic needs. Based on their narratives, they feel more comfortable with their lives in Malaysia as compared to their lives when they were in the Philippines (see Narrative. 3.4). Consequently, staying longer in Malaysia could be one of their goals because it has uplifted their economic status. Categorizing themselves as part of the Muslim majority, they feel that they have the edge when it comes to job opportunities because of the strong support that they get from the Malay community.

Such a categorization results in no distinction being made between the group and individual identities. As a group, being part of the Muslim community, they feel more comfortable, and as individuals, they have a sense of belongingness since they feel that the Muslims of Malaysia accept them as fellow Muslim brothers. The strong influence of their religious belief is seen to be a dominant factor that determines their identity.

## **Conclusion**

The findings reveal that Filipino Muslims in Malaysia tend to construct their religious identity. Although they do not deny the fact that they are Filipinos by nationality, but they prefer to categorize themselves as Muslims. Their self-identity tries to accommodate the mainstream identity (Muslim identity) and not their national identity as Filipinos. Consequently, their religious affiliation is seen to be more dominant than their national identity. Filipino Muslims in Malaysia feel a sense of belongingness with fellow Malaysian Muslims. They take pride in Islam and feel that Islam is a way of life which they can practice peacefully in Malaysia.



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