

A Note on Malaysians of Mixed Parentage

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Abstract: Because Malaysia has a diverse population, intermarriages among Malaysians are not uncommon; Malaysians of mixed parentage are a familiar sight in many parts of the country. This note reports on the experiences of Malaysian undergraduates with parents from different ethnic backgrounds. Malaysians still identify themselves more with their race as being Malay or Chinese or Indian or mixed, rather than being Malaysian. As a result, Malaysians of mixed parentage feel at times that they do not belong. Stripping down racism and altering the mentality of some Malaysians would definitely be a positive step and long called for.

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1. Introduction

The population of Malaysia is diverse, with the Malays, combined with the indigenous people of Malaysia, who are mostly concentrated in Sabah and Sarawak (the states in East Malaysia) making the majority of the population. They are collectively referred to as *Bumiputera*. The second largest ethnic group is the Chinese, followed by Indians and other Malaysians of other descent (these groups are mostly in West or Peninsular Malaysia). Intermarriages among Malaysians are not as uncommon as official statistics indicate; Malaysians of mixed parentage are a familiar sight in many parts of the country. This note on the experiences of persons with parents from different ethnic backgrounds incorporates the views of young undergraduates of mixed parentage from both Peninsular and East Malaysia.

2. Mixed Parentage in Malaysia

There is no general consensus to describe or profile Malaysians of mixed parentage. Most would identify themselves according to paternal ethnicity, mainly because Malaysians see it as a legal obligation, though they may not feel that that category of race describes them accurately. In many cases, they feel that they belong more in the category of Others. In the case of Malays and other *Bumiputera*, due to the legal definition of *Bumiputera*, most Malaysians of mixed parentage would choose to identify themselves either as being Malay or *Bumiputera* as long as either parent is of that race.

There is a growing usage of terms to describe Malaysians of mixed parentage in society nowadays. Chinese-Indians are called Chindians or Indinese. In East Malaysia, where mixed marriages are rather common, the Chinese-Ibans are called Chibans, Lumbawang-Chinese are known as BawangCina, Chinese-Kadazans are known as SinoKadazans and the list goes on and on. These categories of races are not recognised legally, of course; it is just how society categorises them.

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3. Race and Mixed Parentage

Race is a serious issue in Malaysia. Malaysians seem to be obsessed with the issue of race; it is ingrained so deep that we seem to connect it to everything we do. This is one of the reasons Malaysians of mixed parentage feel at times that they do not belong. Many Malaysians with rigid mind sets prefer to be confined to a category, as many seek comfort and security in their own ethnic community. The truth of the matter is that Malaysians are not as united as travel brochures promote their racial harmony to be. In fact, Malaysians are still very much separated by the issue of race, and racial polarisation is still an issue of concern in the country. Due to this situation, people still tend to see someone, perhaps even stereotyping, according to skin colour. In many cases, Malaysians of mixed parentage do not feel accepted by the racial community of either of their parents.

There is quite a distinction in perception between people in West Malaysia and East Malaysia in relation to Malaysians of mixed parentage. Perhaps because there is such a diversity of races in East Malaysia, East Malaysians are more accustomed to having someone mixed in the community especially as intermarriages are getting more and more common there. East Malaysians of mixed parentage who are currently living in West Malaysia are particularly sensitive towards the difference in treatment which they receive from the community in West Malaysia, observing that they feel more accepted back in East Malaysia.

Grace Miriam Purait and Dyg Hazwani Abg Ishak shared their experience on this matter. Grace is a Lumbawang-Chinese while Dyg Hazwani is of Chinese, Malay and Punjabi descent. They are both East Malaysians and understand some Chinese. They were on the Light Rail Transit (LRT) in Kuala Lumpur and a Chinese woman, who assumed they were Chinese sat with them. She made racist comments about not wanting to sit with people of other races. But after the two girls who were sitting nearby pointed out to her that both Grace and Dyg Hazwani were not Chinese, she got up immediately to sit elsewhere.

Samantha Joseph, also an East Malaysian who is Melanau-Indian, is facing a rather difficult time in a university in West Malaysia. In public universities, there is strong peer pressure for a student to affiliate with his or her own ethnic community but Samantha is not accepted by the Indians because she does not speak Tamil and she is a Catholic. However, she feels she does not fit in with any other group either because she looks more Indian than any other race.

These East Malaysians recall many such experiences as students living in West Malaysia. In particular, they are constantly questioned about their race, a situation they do not experience in East Malaysia. Consequently, they feel less accepted in West Malaysia. West Malaysians of mixed parentage however are less sensitive to the situation of not being accepted all the time, perhaps because they have already grown accustomed to this, being brought up in West Malaysia.

On another note, there are also cases of Malaysians of mixed parentage being elevated to a higher position on the social ladder due to their status. For example, the communities of indigenous races tend to feel inferior to those who are half indigenous and half Chinese. Those who are Iban-Chinese in Sarawak will automatically not have Iban as their first language because one parent happens to be Chinese. They tend to speak English as it is probably their parents' medium of communication with each other. Most Ibans normally have Iban or Bahasa Melayu as their first language and they feel inferior to half Ibans who

speak English. Another reason may be related to skin colour. Many Malaysians and Asians in general seem to equate fair skin with superiority. Perhaps this perception is so ingrained that people tend to associate fairer skin with being better looking as well. So, those who are half Chinese tend to be fairer than those who are purely Bumiputera or Indians. This situation is similar for those who are half European and so on.

4. Concluding Remarks

It is people, whether of mixed parentage or otherwise, that make Malaysia truly beautiful although there are imperfections in terms of our relations. Malaysians of mixed parentage may be affected by these imperfections a little more than those who are only associated with one race. Many Malaysians still do not necessarily feel like Malaysians. They still identify themselves more with their race as being Malay or Chinese or Indian or mixed, rather than being Malaysian. However, Malaysians should stress the most important thing they have in common, which is, they have Malaysia as their home. Racism and ignorance are the issues behind the difficulties in what Malaysians of mixed parentage are going through in society. So, a step into stripping down racism and altering the mentality of some Malaysians would definitely be a positive step and long called for.