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**MALAY STUDENTS PATTERNS
OF SOCIAL INTERACTION WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO MALAY STUDENTS AT
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY (De Kalb)***

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SINOPSIS

Kertas ini cuba menunjukkan bahawa perbezaan norma-norma kebudayaan serta nilai-nilai telah menyebabkan kurangnya berlaku interaksi sosial antara penuntut-penuntut Melayu dengan penuntut-penuntut Amerika. Dari segi teorinya Northern Illinois University, di mana kajian ini telah dilakukan, merupakan sebuah universiti yang sederhana besarnya dan terletak di sebuah pekan kecil, dapat memberikan potensi hubungan sosial yang rapat. Namun demikian, penuntut-penuntut Melayu di kampus ini hanya berhubung rapat sesama mereka sahaja. Keengganan dan tiada keinginan bagi penuntut-penuntut Melayu untuk berinteraksi dengan masyarakat Amerika ialah disebabkan mereka menganggap cara hidup orang Amerika merupakan ancaman kepada cara hidup mereka. Norma-norma kebudayaan dan nilai-nilai orang Amerika adalah bertentangan dengan nilai-nilai dan norma-norma kebudayaan Melayu. Oleh itu untuk mengelakkan dari pencemaran oleh kebudayaan Amerika tadi menyebabkan penuntut-penuntut Melayu kurang minat untuk menceburkan diri dalam kehidupan sehari-hari orang Amerika.

SYNOPSIS

This paper attempts to show that differences in cultural norms and values resulted in little interaction between Malay and American students. Theoretically, Northern Illinois University (NIU) provides a high interaction potential, in view of the size of the university and of the city. NIU is a medium sized university located in a small city. Despite this fact, Malay students on the campus only interacted amongst themselves. The reluctance and unwillingness of Malay students to interact with Americans are due to the fact that they consider the American way of life a threat to their way of life. American cultural norms and values are in direct contrast to Malay cultural norms and values. It is in order to avoid

* This paper is based on my fieldwork research in NIU in 1977 and also my short field trips to several Malay student centers in the United States. Also, this paper is related to my paper published in this journal entitled "Ethnicity: Malay Students on An American Campus" I would like to thank my colleagues in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology who read through the draft of this paper. My special thanks go to Dr. Hood Hj. Mohd Salleh who commented and criticized on certain issues. However, errors found in this paper remain my responsibility.

“contamination” by this culture that caused Malay students to withdraw from participating in American life.

Introduction

This is a case study of the Malay students community at Northern Illinois University (NIU), De Kalb, Illinois. The study provides a general account of the behavior of Malay students attending an American university, and is specifically concerned with Malay students' patterns of social interaction.

The study is also an attempt to understand Malay students' attitudes toward American culture, which in turn influence their patterns of social interaction with the Americans. I am therefore not merely interested in Malay student's interaction with American students, professors, administrators, host families and the general public, but also their interaction within their own ethnic group.

One of the most important reasons for studying overseas, besides getting a degree, is to gain new experiences through living in different societies. Various agencies and organizations concerned with educational exchange hope that when a student returns home he will be able to relate his experiences to his relatives, friends and to the institutions where he is employed (Lambert and Bressler 1956; Goldsen 1956; Morris 1960). Thus, knowing the people, the country and the culture in the university are altogether considered to be an ideal experience for a student while studying overseas. To have these experiences, the Malay student must interact and communicate with American — both students and non-students — as well as with other foreign students, to the extent that is permitted and to the extent that these interactions do not disturb his academic performance.

Cross-cultural social interaction may broaden the student's experience and help him gain new insights into himself and other people. He may exhibit a deep sense of the essential similarity of people all over the world, and an interest in the different ways they have worked out to meet their needs. Or he may judge that other people are different, that the ways of his homeland and his people are best, that there is no ground for true communication and sharing (Selltiz et al., 1963). On the other hand, the student's residence abroad may not add new experiences because his social interaction is limited to students from his own country only. He may be too busy involving himself with ethnic politics and cultural activities which are an extension of life in his homeland.

Social Interaction

Social interaction is a relationship between persons such that the behavior of either one is a stimulus to the behavior of the other (English and English, 1958: 270). Sears defines it in terms of a dyadic unit, as “one that describes the combined actions of two or more persons” (1951: 479). In this study, social interaction is defined in terms of Malay students' participation in American life and their participation in their own ethnic group activities. Their dyadic relationships are viewed in terms of the

proportion of time they spend with people of other cultures and with members of their own ethnic group, and the frequency, variety and intimacy of their interaction with the two groups. A number of questions about how the student spent his free time, the kind of activities in which he is engaged, the nationality of the people with whom he associates were asked in order to discover the patterns of social interaction. In sum, the indicators used in this study are: the proportion of free time spent with Americans; the variety of roles in which Americans had been seen (visits to their homes, dates, etc.); whether the student felt that he had at least one close American friend; the frequency with which he engaged in certain activities with Americans (eating meals, going to the movies, talking about his life at home, etc.); and the variety of such activities with Americans regardless of frequency. The ratings on social interaction were based on the above multiple indices.

Theoretical Framework

A number of studies on foreign students in the United States have shown that environmental conditions may have an important influence on the development of personal relations and social interactions (Sewell and Davidsen 1961; Selltitz et al, 1963). The size of the school and of the city, and the number of students from particular ethnic groups are among the significant variables.

It is argued that personal relations are apt to occur more frequently in proportion to residential proximity. Physical closeness occurs in a small and medium-sized university. Thus Selltitz et al, (1956) postulated that a foreign student in a small or medium-sized university in a small city would find himself more in the company of Americans than on a large campus in a large city. Two explanations are offered. First, since the university is not so large it allows the students to have frequent contact with one another. Second, since the campus is not large and located in a small city, it is usually less known to many potential foreign students. As a result there are only few foreign students, especially from any given cultural background, studying in such a university. Foreign students attending a large university will interact less frequently with Americans, and if interaction occurs it only at impersonal and superficial level. In a large university, it is observable that relationships between students, especially those between American and foreign students, and between students and professors, tend to be impersonal. There are few occasions for intimacy. Also, in a large university there is little chance for American students to interact with foreign students. Finally, it may be postulated that there are usually many foreign students studying in a large university, including large groups from the same countries; in such a situation, students coming from one cultural background will interact frequently among themselves, and less so with students of another cultural background.

Data

The data for this paper were collected during a four-month period of

intensive fieldwork among Malay students in NIU in 1977 The Malay students' community totalled 138 men and women, and was the second largest in the United States. This community included married and unmarried students, graduates and undergraduates, students from urban and rural backgrounds, those who had working experience and no working experience, and those who had experience living or studying overseas as well as those with no such experience prior to coming to NIU

Findings

Theoretically, NIU provides a very high interaction potential in view of the size of the university and of the city NIU is a medium-sized State University with an enrollment (at the time of the study) of approximately 20,000, of which 300 are foreign students. The university is located in a small city with a total population of 30,000. However, the data indicate that a majority of Malay students at NIU, after studying between one and four years in the United States, have not visited a single American home, have never eaten with Americans, have no close American friends, and do not feel that they know any Americans well enough to discuss books or current events with them, or go to the movies with them. They spend all, or almost all, their free time exclusively with people from their own country and students of the same religious background.

The study indicates that Malay students tend to have friendship relations with other Malay students first, with other students of the Islamic faith second, and with Americans last. Measured in terms of where they spend their free time, 86 percent of the students indicate that they spend such free time with other Malay students and only fourteen percent with other nationalities. Of that fourteen percent, most spend their free time with students from other Islamic countries. It appears therefore, that Americans are the least desired friends.

This low rate of interaction holds true for all Malays at NIU irrespective of their backgrounds — rural or urban, married or unmarried, from high or low social positions. Although there is a tendency to show that the urban, the married and those from high status positions tend to have high interaction potential, a fair number of respondents do not really interact. The main explanation for this is that there exists pressure from the Malay group which discourages interaction. A male student (in his senior year), whose father is a high ranking government officer, reported:

“How can you go out with Americans, when everybody (Malay students) keeps an eye on you Before you have the chance of getting to know someone (American) closely, you become the topic of gossip”

Such a feeling is common among Malay students who wish to establish relationships with Americans. Malay students who interact with Americans are accused by other Malay members of losing their self-respect or *malu*. Losing *malu* means losing one's own ethnic identity An

informant (also a 'senior') remarks:

“When I first arrived here in DeKalb, I had several American friends. We went to football, movies and outings together But, rumours went wild that I had neglected my own fellow Malays. They accused me of losing my self-respect. They said that I didn't have feeling of *malu* anymore . . . and that I acted like the “whites”.

Thus for Malay students, NIU has often been likened to a Malay *kampung* (village). My interviews with some key informants indicate that the sense of living in a Malay *kampung* is strongly felt at NIU. As mentioned earlier, Malay students at NIU are numerous and large enough to operate as a community observing their religious, social, political and economic practices and values, with little interdependence on Americans.

In order to explain further the lack of interaction between Malay students and Americans, we have to understand the Malay student's attitude towards American culture.

Malay students openly expressed their dislike for features of American culture such as family life, politics, economics, religion, friendship and morality. In general, their attitudes toward American culture are unfavorable and their relationships with Americans superficial.

The Malay students view American family life as loosely-knit. American wives are more concerned with their husbands than their children. The students were very critical of child-rearing practices and the instability of the American family. They frequently mentioned the high divorce rate as an indication of this problem. They feel that child-rearing practices were too liberal and that children are free to do anything they like. Most parents are very indulgent, and thus children have little respect for them.

Such an observation easily fits into a general pattern in the Malay students' images of American interpersonal relations, that is, easy, free, and spontaneous interaction but exists on the surface and thus lacking depth and strength.

Referring to the political aspect, the Malay students felt that Americans were more concerned with big and wealthy countries than with smaller and underdeveloped countries. Many Americans seemed to have no knowledge of Malaysia, and this usually was reflected in their question: “Is it near Vietnam?” In addition, the Malay students considered Americans in general to be opportunists, in the sense that they show indifference towards those countries in which America will not get anything in return. Referring to the crisis in the Middle East, the Malays felt that the Americans are more in favor of Israel than Arab countries. They felt that all American weapons sold to Arab nations are of lower quality than those given to Israel. Their attachment and support of the Islamic nations caused them to express their dislike towards American policy in the Middle East.

In addition, students were less interested in American domestic politics as compared to issues on foreign policy. One persistent comment made about American political life is that, like personal relations, it is free and spontaneous. The American people, for instance, often make “fun” of their President, senators and high ranking officers which would never happen in Malaysian politics. The mass-media is so powerful that it can put some politicians, even the President, for that matter, in trouble.

With regard to American economic life Malay students held a number of stereotyped views. They vaguely categorized America as a capitalistic country, and consequently regarded all Americans as capitalistic and materialistic. They also did not hesitate to express the lack of generosity on the part of the Americans. They learned this through their experience, as was expressed by one informant: “they (Americans) seldom would pay a cup of coffee for their friends”. A female student expressed her dislike by saying, “even if they invite you to their party, they expect you to bring something”. This view is common not only among the freshmen but also among the seniors. During their three to four years’ stay in the United States, they have not changed their stereotyped attitudes. With regard to this, another informant added

“In our society, when we are invited to someone’s house, we are not expected to bring anything, except if it is a wedding in the *kampung*. After all, we are their quests. But in American society, if they invite you to the party, they will tell you to bring something. I feel funny though, because sometimes I’ll end up eating my own cooking. Can you imagine that? If I want to have my own cooking I don’t have to be in their party I guess, that’s what a party is about.”

In essence, such an observation fits into a familiar pattern in the student’s image of American economy life : capitalistic, materialistic and miserly.

With respect to religion, the students are aware that the majority of Americans are Christians. This is symbolized by their churches which are landmarks in every town or city. They felt however, there was a great deal of diversity in the religion. What is more astonishing to them is the high degree of competition among denominations. For instance, one denomination would advertise on television or in newspapers some activities which would attract people to their church. Many students felt that Christianity has been secularized, as was summarized by one informant:

“It is different really how we see religion and how Americans see it. We always view religion as a personal and sacred thing. But here it seems religion has been very much secularized.”

Many Malay students felt that young Americans are less interested in their religion, as compared to older Americans who attend church regularly

In terms of personal relations, Americans are described by Malay students as “friendly, but only superficially ” For instance, a senior student said:

“they (Americans) may say Hello or Hi when they meet you, but those words do not mean anything”.

Malay students seem to feel that American students are not interested in making friends with foreign students, as one junior student explained

“I think the Americans have superiority feeling, and are prejudiced against foreigners I hope (jokingly) they are not Nazi members Maybe they think that their taxes are being spent on us. But they don't realize we all here are on MARA scholarships, that means we are spending our own government money We too are paying higher tuition fees as compared to them”

Thus some Malay students are not kind in describing American students in general. From the interview with the key informants, they describe their American classmates and neighbours as noisy, carefree, superficial, aggressive, inconsiderate and childish.

Another aspect of the American way of life which Malay students always referred to is their standard of morality In general, Malay students view American moral standards as low Generally they perceive Americans as morally decadent. Alcoholism, drug addiction, premarital sex and decreasing attention and respect to the elders are mooted as some symptoms of such moral decadence. In their conversations they view this moral decadence as a product of rapid technological change. The students also view it as the result of the liberal attitude of American parents and educators toward the young.

In NIU, like any other American university, relations between students and professors are very informal. Many students address their professors by their first names. Some of them, even the underclassmen, would argue with or criticize their professors. Such occasions will not occur in Malaysian high schools or universities. Thus, many Malay students feel that many young people in America are “losing their manners”

Conclusion

The above discussion clearly shows how Malay students perceive negatively the American way of life. The reluctance and unwillingness of

Malay students to interact with Americans is because they consider the American way of life a threat to their way of life. American cultural norms and values are direct contrasts to Malay cultural norms and values. In view of this, the Malay students openly express unfavourable attitudes toward American culture which they characterize as matérialistic, irreligious, and as having a low standard of morality. Particularly disliked by them is the life-style of young Americans which is viewed as full of negative features — aggressiveness, alcoholism, drug addiction, and sexual permissiveness. Thus Malay students are afraid that they would be influenced by American students if they associate with them because by associating with the American they will participate in the American way of life. Furthermore, in the course of their interaction, the Malay students feel that they are obliged to eat food that are prohibited by their religion. Also, they may be obliged to drink beer and other alcoholic drinks. As a result they withdraw from the mainstream of American student life on the campus. It is in order to avoid contamination by this culture that cause the Malay students to withdraw from participation in American life.¹

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1 This paper as well as my previous article published in this journal have suggested that, the feeling of ethnicity is stronger in campuses where a large number of Malay students exist like at NIU. Here, they live by themselves, avoiding the contact with the host culture. For this reason the students have not learned about living in multi-ethnic society which is important in their later life. In a smaller (Malay) students group it seems that they communicate and interact better with the Americans. The writer believes in this way they learn more about American multi-ethnic society. In the future, the writer would like to suggest that Malay students should be encouraged to study in campuses where there are less Malay students, and government should avoid sending them to centers which have large concentration of Malay students. Careful distribution of students will help to better their understanding of the people and the culture.

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