

Can Cultural Homogenization be an Open-Ended Process? Reconstructing the Narratives of Brunei's Homogenization Process

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Abstract: This paper examines the cultural homogenization process in Brunei Darussalam. While the success and outcomes of cultural homogenization, in general, have been thoroughly examined and highlighted, recent research trends have also been focusing more on the processes of cultural homogenization on the ground, i.e., the responses and reactions of ordinary people who are, supposedly, at the receiving end of the homogenization process. In the case of Brunei Darussalam (hereinafter Brunei), cultural homogenization strategies were introduced as early as the 1950s, primarily for state-building purposes. Similar to conventional writings, official narratives of Brunei's homogenization also focus more on the outcomes of the process. Thus, focusing on the Dusun ethnic group as its case study, this article questions the ways the Dusuns view and respond to the homogenization process. This study utilizes the interview data gathered from thirty-four Dusun respondents to examine how they perceive, understand, and react toward the process and related policies. The findings of the study suggest that the Dusuns generally accept the homogenization with a sporadic indication of contestation mainly due to the observable decline of ethnic culture and language. Modernization has also been identified as a notable agent, integrating successfully with the homogenizing process, and driving the latter to the desired outcomes.

Keywords: Brunei Darussalam, cultural homogenization, Melayu Islam Beraja, modernization.

Cultural homogenization has always been conceptualized as a top-down process. It is utilized for diverse national goals, including state building, territorial control, economic productivity, and, more recently, the pursuit of modernization. Gellner's (1983) widely recognized and highly controversial definition of nationalism suggests nationalism dictates national congruency and the legitimacy of a political unit depends on the level of national congruency possessed by its society. Hence, it is a requirement for a political regime to implement policies and mobilize campaigns to enable cultural homogenization, suggesting a top-down approach to create a homogenous culture and society. State policies are carefully planned, constantly refined, and adjusted to create favorable grounds for facilitating homogeneity among the population. The policies are usually in the form of standardization practices of a common or national language, culture, and religion (Aydingün & Aydingün, 2004; Fleming, 2012; Tong & Cheung, 2011). The education system has also increasingly become one of the primary vehicles of cultural homogenization due to its unquestionable ability to reach the young and youth population, the primary target of any homogenization efforts (Conversi, 2008).

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As the nature and direction of homogenization policies have to intertwine with the national agenda, political authorities play dominant roles in policy formulation and process aspects of implementing the former. State elites and governmental resources would ensure the policies are operative effectively at all levels to serve the goals of homogenization. This further reinforces the top-down and possibly non-negotiable direction of the homogenization process.

Although cultural homogenization always aims for cultural congruency, it may also seek ethnic homogeneity, again, depending on the needs of the political elites. Such an aim would define the diverse policies of cultural homogenization, which can go from lenient policies, including a universal education system and an endorsement of a national language, to more extreme forms including forced assimilation and ethnic discrimination, and forced ethnic expulsion (Conversi, 2008). Rai (2015), in her study of the cultural homogenization in Bhutan analyzes the top-down attempt to impose socio-cultural changes, which primarily aims at cultural uniformity and to align the people's culture with the distinctive national culture. Specifically, ethnic minorities, such as the Lhotampas of Bhutan, have been adopting national dress and language since 1989, although the adoption was done rather forcefully by the government. Related to this perspective, such adoption of, and adherence to, hegemonic practices through standardized policies of national language and educational curriculum is among the common features of the cultural homogenization implemented in various contexts and conditions (Aydingün & Aydingün, 2004; Hoon, 2006; Kalantari, 2012). Consequently, the wide dissemination and subsequent acceptance of hegemonic practices considerably permeate every aspect of life—be it cultural, social, religious, or economic. In many cases, the domination of mainstream cultural values becomes a ground for contestation and even potential national conflict due to the elimination of minority cultures and subsequent reduction of cultural diversity (Bhawuk, 2008; Rai, 2015; Tai, 2003).

Yet, the implementation of cultural homogenization policies in everyday realities is not straightforward. While the successes and outcomes of cultural homogenization have been thoroughly examined and highlighted, recent research trends have also been focusing more on the processes of cultural homogenization on the ground, i.e., the responses and reactions of ordinary people who are, supposedly, at the receiving end of the homogenization process. Despite the pervasive homogenization processes coupled with inflexible policies, evidence of cultural heterogeneity on the ground can still be observed. In his observation of Japanese society, Tai (2013) notes that,

it cannot be denied that we observe and experience a certain level of “cultural homogeneity” in certain social settings. However, if we simply call that situation “a homogenous culture”, we are being caught by nationalist discourse and dismissing the cultural heterogeneity also present in practice. (p. 17)

The persistent existence of cultural heterogeneity under the image of cultural homogeneity means different ethnic values would inevitably encounter one another. As briefly mentioned earlier, such cross-cultural encounters lead to the questions of compatibility, tolerance, and the readiness of the people subjected to a homogenizing process to accept and interact with the opposing cultures (Smolicz, 1984). Hoon (2006) expects tension, conflict, and contradiction to occur in any form of cross-cultural encounters. Focusing on the social agency itself, that is, the group of people involved in the cross-cultural encounters, Wang (2007, p. 84) contends that these people are not mere objects and “can sift various influences and reject or integrate them”. Cultural homogenization can also be superficial and does not affect people's interaction and connection with their surroundings as much as what has been thought it would be.

Considering these conceptual arguments, the cultural homogenization process can therefore be conceptualized as an open-ended process. Similar to the acculturation process, which can be voluntary or mandatory (Filippidou, 2022), the homogenizing process can also be accepted, contested, or even rejected by the people. There could also be those who do not even consider the culture of political elites as mainstream or dominant; hence, they do not need to resist or accept the so-called homogenizing culture (Liao, 2012; Shrestha & Conway, 2006).

This is the conceptual notion that this study is subscribed to. By considering the cultural homogenization process as an open-ended interaction between the state elites and the population, this study examines the ways the Dusun view and consider Brunei's cultural homogenization. In addition, investigations into ethnic lives are necessary, which is in line with Bhawuk's call for "much thick descriptions of indigenous cultures" to "understand the worldviews of people from traditional cultures as well as to understand the acculturation patterns and issues facing various populations" (Bhawuk, 2008, p. 307). Liao (2012) also calls for further research on how cultural flows, be it globalization or homogenization, "are received and experienced in diverse cultural contexts and geographical locations" (p. 81).

This paper explores the ways the experience of ordinary people unfolded during the cultural homogenization process in Brunei. As will be discussed later, previous studies on Brunei's homogenizing practices focus solely on the endpoint of the practices, and none of them examines the ways the homogenization processes were actually operative on the ground, that is, at the people's level.

This study focuses on the Dusuns, one of the constitutionally recognized ethnic groups in the country. The Dusuns mainly reside in Tutong District, one of the four districts in the country. Traditionally, the Dusuns practice animism with Derato as their main cosmic god. They speak their own ethnic (Dusun) language with multiple varieties according to their geographical localities. In the past, the main economic activity of the Dusuns is rice farming, and they believe the Derato bestows them with bountiful yields at the end of the harvesting season. Hence, they carry out a ritual practice, Temarok, to convey their appreciation and ask for protection and a rich harvest in the next round of rice plantation. Temarok is led by Belian, a group of Dusun women with specialized knowledge about the supernatural world who also acts as the mediator between human being and their cosmic god. The centrality of Temarok as the Dusun's primary ritual practice is not limited to the rice harvest. Derato also acts as a healing deity, and the Dusuns conduct Temarok to seek Derato's intervention to cure illnesses.

Cultural Homogenization in Brunei

Brunei's cultural homogenization is defined by three main policies: the Brunei Constitution, which was promulgated in 1959, the Nationality Act passed in 1961, and Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) or the Malay Islam Monarchy, which was declared as the State Philosophy in 1984, following the country's full independence from Britain in the same year. The discussion on these policies, as provided below, offers the essential backdrop to understanding Brunei's homogenization policies and processes.

Like any other homogenization process, Brunei's cultural homogenization is characterized strongly by a top-down planning flow. The process began with the declaration of Islam and *Bahasa Melayu* (the Malay Language) as the official religion and language of the country in the Brunei Constitution in 1959. With the declaration, more vernacular schools were opened in the 1960s, with the Malay Language becoming the main medium of instruction. This means those whose mother tongue was their native language had to learn and be proficient in the Malay Language to understand and stay on pace with the curriculum. Previous works demonstrate that non-Malay ethnic groups in Brunei immediately saw the need to learn and be proficient in the Malay Language and also in Brunei Malay, a local variant of the Malay

Language which later became the national lingua franca of the country (Haji-Othman, 2005; Martin, 1996; Saxena, 2007). The employment of the Malay Language was extended to the secondary school curriculum in the 1970s. By the 1980s, as Brunei gained full independence from Britain in 1984, there was an equally growing need to incorporate the English Language into the education system. Hence, the Bilingual Education Policy was passed in 1985. This policy gave the Malay Language and the English Language an equal standing in the national curriculum, although by the 1990s, the English Language gradually became the main medium of instruction at schools and tertiary education. The Bilingual Education Policy remained in practice until 2008 when a new education policy, the 21st Century National Education System or *Sukatan Pelajaran Negara Abad Ke-21* (SPN21), was introduced.

Islamic practices have also been implemented on many fronts since 1959. The first institutionalization of Islam was through the means of education. The Islamic Religious Knowledge (IRK) subject was introduced in schools in the 1970s. In 1984, with the formation of a ministerial cabinet as the foundation of the newly-independent government, the Ministry of Religious Affairs was formed in 1986. Islamic education was put under the purview of the Ministry, leading to the gradual establishment of Islamic academic institutions and tertiary education. This development is concurrent with the declaration of MIB as the State Philosophy in 1984. In addition, government agencies such as Islamic Da'wah Centre were also established after Brunei's independence, supporting further the propagation of Islam in the country. Such institutionalization efforts led to a growing familiarity with the religion, not just amongst Muslims but also non-Muslims. One of the easily demonstrable familiarities with Islam is the adoption of the Muslim dress code. Since the 1970s, the government has called for Muslim women to observe proper Islamic dress, including headscarf and clothing that is "thick enough to avoid transparency that shows the skin and should be loose and not accentuate one's body curve" (Kamaluddin & Kumpoh, 2022, p. 187). Female Muslim government employees are required to wear headscarves within their work premises. Government schools also implemented the Islamic dressing style as a school uniform policy whereby the Malay traditional costume's baju kurung and headscarf be worn by Muslim female students. Subsequently, school children became so familiar with the Islamic dress code that many non-Muslims would also adopt baju kurung and headscarves not just at school but also outside their school milieu (Alas, 2007). In addition, since the 1990s, there have been a growing number of non-Muslim children attending religious school, demonstrating their parents' recognition of Islamic teaching (Kumpoh, 2011). However, it is worth mentioning that familiarity with the religion does not necessarily lead to conversion to Islam. Instead, constant interaction with Muslim friends and family members could easily instigate a more profound interest and curiosity to learn about Islam and eventually choose it as a new faith (Kumpoh, 2017).

The Brunei Constitution also expanded the scope of Malay ethnicity to include other indigenous ethnic groups. Brunei's Nationality Act passed in 1961, recognizes seven ethnic groups as Malay ethnic groups, namely the Brunei Malays, the Tutongs, the Kedayans, the Dusuns, the Belaits, the Muruts, and the Bisayas. To describe these ethnic groups briefly, the Brunei Malays, the Tutongs, and the Kedayans traditionally observe Islam as their religion, and the groups generally understand and speak the Brunei Malay dialect. Whereas the other four ethnic groups, traditionally, they profess their respective ethnic faith and have their ethnic language or dialect as their mother tongue. Among these ethnic groups, the Brunei Malays are considered as the most dominant ethnic group due to their political and cultural influences (Brown, 1970).

The ethnic reclassification and expansion are part of the nation-building strategy, particularly considering Brunei, in the 1960s, had just gained internal self-government with external affairs remaining to reside with the British. Brunei needed to build the foundation of the impending new nation by forging a sense of solidarity and togetherness by creating what

Anderson (1991) conceptualized as an imagined community. When Brunei gained full independence from the British in 1984, as a newly independent nation, Brunei sought to bind the population together and form a solid foundation upon which development and modernization plans could be established. Hence, a State Philosophy, Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) or Malay Islam Monarchy, was declared. Similar to Indonesia's Pancasila and Malaysia's Rukun Negara, MIB is also strategized to foster collective social and cultural solidarity among the population (Derichs & Heberer, 2006). In addition, with its overarching ideological character, MIB also "serves as a moral and ethical framework for all aspects and levels of domestic governance in the country" (Salbrina & Mabud, 2021, pp. 45-46). Ultimately, MIB became the "homogenization agent of the country" (Kumpoh, Wahsalfelah & Haji-Othman 2016, p. 17), as it not only set a solid foundation for the country's key development and transformation in the later part of the twentieth century onwards but it also became the basis of Brunei's national culture.

Although Brunei's MIB-based national culture initially sounds like an imagined culture ('imagined' in a similar sense to Anderson's imagined community), there has been some proliferation of official narratives that continue to clarify and demonstrate the connection between MIB and Brunei's historical past (Hamid, 1992; Kumpoh, Druce, & Bakar, 2022; Serudin, 1998). Such narratives significantly legitimize the three main cultural components, Monarchy, Islam, and Malay, which over time, have been accepted as the tripartite pillars of the national culture (Ho & Deterding, 2021; Kumpoh et al., 2017).

There is no question that this development offers a fertile ground for further nation-building strategies. Given the pervasive influence of the Malay culture and ethnicity drawn from the earlier policies of the 1959 Constitution and the 1961 Nationality Act, Kumpoh (2011) terms the nation-building strategy as the Malaynization strategy "which over time, had caused the ethnic boundaries of the Malay ethnic group to soften, allowing the integration of the different ethnic groups into the mainstream society" (p. 12).

Putting together the socio-cultural consequences of the promulgation of Islam and Malay Language as the official religion and language and the expanding Malay ethnicity stipulated in the 1961 Nationality Act, Brunei society was gradually seen as experiencing significant socio-cultural and religious transformations (King, 1994; Kumpoh et al., 2017; Alas, 2007). These transformations are unquestionably the evidence of cultural homogenization, as the population, particularly those from non-Malay and non-Muslim ethnic groups, are proficient in the Brunei Malay and the Malay Language, familiar with Islam and, for some, subtly emulate the Malay-Muslim way of life. A review of relevant literature on Brunei's homogenization process is presented below.

Literature Review

The outcomes of Brunei's cultural homogenization policies have been discussed and examined from a range of perspectives, particularly those that studied the impacts of the policies on ethnic dialect or language, cultural values, and lifestyle. Saxena (2007) examined the effects of homogenization on the ethnolinguistic landscape of the Brunei people and demonstrated that Brunei Malay has become the lingua franca of the population. King (1994) also established a similar observation on the cultural landscape of the Brunei population, where cultural differences distinguishing between the Brunei Malays and the other ethnic groups had almost disappeared as the population had "progressively been incorporated into the Muslim-Malay culture" (p. 186).

Not only that, but cultural homogenization has also become a means for upward social mobility for non-Malay and non-Muslim ethnic groups. Specifically, in examining the Kedayans, Hamid (2007) observed that the ethnic group was eager to be part of the dominant

culture of the Brunei Malays as it gave them a stepping stone for upward social mobility. This situation indicated the high acceptance among the Kedayans of the homogenization policy. Hamid also highlighted that the Kedayans' Islamic faith made it easier for the ethnic group to homogenize with the mainstream culture, which was equally laden with Islamic and Malay values. Alas (2007) also argued that the new generation of Bruneians would not hesitate to consider themselves as 'Malay' regardless of their religious orientation. Even those who did not observe Islam, in many ways, led a lifestyle similar to that of the Brunei Malays and adopted the national dialect as their mother tongue. Alas (2007) further indicated that the dominant ethnic status and social prestige of the Brunei Malays was the enabler for the unquestioned acceptance of the Malay culture and values among the new generation.

In the specific case of the Dusuns, the 1950s were a turning-point period that transformed the cultural and ethnic identity of the Dusuns. Bernstein (1997) noted that the 1950s witnessed "the transformation of Dusun culture and society, and its assimilation into modern Brunei society, including conversion to Islam and language shift converging into Malay" (p. 73). Bernstein (1997) also observed the increasing marginalization of the Dusun culture as the members of ethnic group were under pressure to advance themselves and seek identification with the Brunei Malays. Kershaw (1998) even suggested that Brunei was a "coercive nationhood" that denied the right of the non-Muslims to protect their ethnic culture (p. 101).

However, there are also observations that Brunei society remained heterogeneous regardless of what is widely presented and represented in the literature. Despite a broader Malay identity and the evidence demonstrating that the population, particularly those from the non-Muslim ethnic groups, were seemingly in tune with the Islamic way of life, some previous studies also point out the contrasting life experience of the groups during the cultural homogenization process. Trigger and Wahsalfelah (2011) pointed out that the older generation tended to identify with their (traditional) ethnic group more than they would with their cultural 'Malay' identity. Such steadfast identification with their ethnicity could be taken as a means of preserving their ethnic roots and, more significantly, a potential contestation demonstrated by the older population when facing challenges arising from cultural homogenization.

Such contestation can be observed in Hamid's work (2007) which questioned the dominance of the Brunei Malay culture, which he argued nearly obliterated the Kedayans' unique dialect. Hamid (2007) also identified that modernization, including the education system, substantially affected the survivability of local dialects. Martin (1996) similarly considered modernization-related factors such as the oil boom and modern employment led to the dispersal of his respondents, the Belait ethnic group, affecting the patterns of dialect use. Evidently, the Belait learned and became more proficient in the lingua franca from school and their workplace.

In light of these observations of sociolinguistic changes among ethnic groups, the main research objectives of this study focus on three main themes relevant to the examination of the Dusuns' experiences of cultural homogenization: (1) the ways the Dusuns responded to the cultural homogenization process, (2) the occurrences of negotiation or contestation during the process of cultural homogenization, and (3) the nature of Brunei's cultural homogenization, whether the top-down approach dictates it or if it could be more open-ended than what is thought and theorized.

Data and Method

This study employed qualitative in-depth interviews with 34 Dusun respondents recruited via purposive and snowball sampling. The main recruitment criterion for this study is the age of the respondents to ensure the study can capture the varying life experiences of the

Dusun under the homogenization policies. Hence, the respondents, aged between 30 and 80 years old, were carefully chosen from different villages and communities. The research recruited both Muslim and non-Muslim Dusuns. The interviews were conducted in simple, everyday language which eased the communication between the researcher and the respondents. Thus, the national lingua franca, Brunei Malay, was used in all interviews. More importantly, such linguistic proficiency and similarity minimize potential misunderstanding and confusion, which could influence the validity and reliability of the data and their interpretation (Baškarada, 2014).

The interview questions generally explored the quotidian experiences of the respondents in many dimensions, including their childhood experiences, and their engagement in education and employment, with a specific focus on the ways the cultural homogenization process impacted and influenced their lives. The interview also explored the respondents' involvement in communal activities, customs, and ritual practices. By drawing on the respondents' stories, this study has gained useful insights into their experiences in individual and family settings, rural and urban areas, and living with the mainstream as well as ethnic cultures. Such detailed exploration is crucial in consideration of previous studies which demonstrate the implication of communal activities and religious or traditional practices on an individual's inclination to accept or reject cultural homogenization (Rai, 2015; Tai, 2003; Wang, 2007). Specific thematic interview questions were also developed from the findings of past studies, which highlighted the critical role of the national language, education system, and modernization that significantly transformed the present-day outlook of the ethnic groups in the country (Hamid, 2007; Kumpoh, 2016; Martin, 1996). These thematic questions assisted the researcher in keeping the data collection process within the scope of the research. More importantly, such a structured interview approach eases the conceptual analysis and structuring of the research (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

This research utilized Clarke and Braun's (2013) thematic analysis phases to examine the research respondents' narrative accounts. The accounts were repeatedly read and initially coded according to the themes (or codes) identified from the literature review and the conceptual framework of cultural homogenization. Further reading and coding processes examined the accounts more in-depth to identify new themes and patterns within the accounts (Saldaña, 2014). Subsequently, all identified themes were compared and contrasted, extensively interpreted, and made sense of so that the researcher would not only see and find the obvious (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). At this point, the research employed the meaning-making process to "generate more details than had been verbally voiced" by the research respondents (Kumpoh 2011, p. 99). Specifically, the researcher actively sought any indications of the ways the Dusun perceive, understand and react towards cultural homogenization. Hence, two prominent themes have been identified from the interview data that significantly capture the lived experiences of the Dusun. They are the openness and acceptance towards the homogenization policies and some levels of contestation against the homogenizing process, which are discussed separately below. This study also identifies modernization as a notable agent that integrates with Brunei's cultural homogenization process, driving the latter toward its desired outcomes.

Findings and Discussion

Openness and Acceptance Towards Cultural Homogenization

The interview data revealed that the Dusun generally shared a positive understanding of, and an open attitude towards, the changing cultural mores of their community. The most apparent cultural change was the adoption of the Malay-Muslim dress code among the Dusuns. It has been mentioned earlier that female Muslim civil servants at government agencies were

required to wear proper headscarves during working hours. Although there was no official instruction from employers for non-Muslim female staff to adopt a similar dress code, the female respondents of this study shared that they were comfortable wearing a headscarf for work. In fact, some female respondents also wore headscarves beyond working hours, for instance, when attending social functions such as Muslim wedding ceremonies.

There are multiple reasons for such adoption of the Malay-Muslim dress code, and interestingly, many of them were personal and practical reasons. A 47-year-old financial officer shared that a headscarf saved her time when getting ready for work, and she could spend more time preparing her children's breakfast during busy mornings. A 42-year-old education officer shared that she has saved a lot by wearing a headscarf to work and social functions. She candidly shared that she could no longer afford expensive hair care products such as hair shine spray that cost her more than USD\$7 per month. In contrast, a headscarf only costs around USD\$2 per piece, which she could frequently wear for years. Even some male respondents agreed that they own Baju Cara Melayu (Malay traditional costume), which they deliberately chose to be black in color so that they could repeatedly wear for official or national celebrations and other Islamic social functions. A 55-year-old government officer shared that no one could tell the difference whether he wore the same Baju Cara Melayu that he had already wore for an event a week before.

Filippidou (2022) argued that the adoption of mainstream culture could easily take place when ethnic groups identify the usefulness and benefits of adopting such dominant culture. This was the case with the respondents of this study. Without hesitation, they shared the physical and practical benefits they gained from adopting the Malay-Muslim dress code, which became their routine daily experiences. On the other hand, analyzing the interview data further, the respondents made it clear that their Muslim and Malay dress code should not be taken as an intention to be part of the mainstream Brunei Malay society. Only one respondent openly expressed that adopting the Malay-Muslim dress code was partly because the Dusuns were an ethnic minority in the country, and thus the Dusuns needed to be aligned with the mainstream culture and way of life. The others, however, argued that their open attitude towards, and acceptance of the dominant culture, was because they saw the benefit and usefulness of doing so. This should not be taken as full acceptance and subsequent incorporation into the mainstream culture.

Filippidou (2022) also conceptualized that the main target of cultural homogenization is the young population as they are susceptible to influence, and thus, it is much easier to mould them towards national characters, values and identity. Without a doubt, a similar strategy was adopted by Brunei to homogenize the population. The national education system has become one of the critical enablers of Brunei's cultural homogenization and robust support to Brunei's endeavor of nation-building. As explained earlier, the use of Bahasa Melayu as the main medium of instruction in primary schools since the 1960s led to the broader usage of the national language, as well as Brunei Malay as the national dialect.

Interestingly, the narratives of the Dusuns on the ground revealed novel findings. The respondents generally understood that the incorporation of the Malay Language in the national education system was a government policy and a substantial part of the concerted efforts put forward by the government and the Brunei monarch to modernize the country since the 1950s. However, they did not perceive the Malay Language as part of the cultural homogenization framework. The respondents also did not consider their proficiency in Brunei Malay and the adoption of the national dialect as their children's mother tongue facilitates their incorporation into mainstream society. Instead, the respondents emphasized, once again, the practical need and benefit of learning and being fluent in the national language, that is, to make sure their children could do well at school and gain decent employment in the future.

A deeper analysis uncovers that some respondents perceive the Malay Language more as an indicator of modernization rather than part of the homogenization effort. Such statement was always accompanied with the view that the Dusun language was a traditional language. Some respondents shared that, it was common in the 1980s that whoever could converse in the Malay Language and Brunei Malay were perceived as educated and modern. Such a perception inevitably led to a more widespread adoption of the lingua franca among the Dusuns. More than half of the respondents born in the 1970s and the 1980s have Brunei Malay as their first language, even though they also picked up the Dusun language through their interaction with their elders. Similarly, they also let their children learn Brunei Malay and made it as the latter's mother tongue. Given this transition, we can safely argue that, even though the Dusuns deemed their adoption of the national language was solely for practical reasons, the outcome of adopting the national language did resemble what the cultural homogenization desired to achieve eventually.

The Dusuns' open attitude towards cultural homogenization could also be traced from the changes that occurred to the ethnic customs and traditions. The changes were mainly pointed out by the elders who observed and experienced the ways the ethnic customs have changed over time. A 78-year-old Dusun revealed that, traditionally, the Dusuns did not hold ethnic festivities, such as the present-day *Adau Gayoh*, which was the Dusuns' celebration of the completion of the padi harvesting season. Similarly, an 83-year-old former teacher pointed out that, in the past, the Dusun visited cemeteries for burial purposes only. Nowadays, however, it has become a regular practice for the Dusuns to conduct cemetery cleaning campaigns before and during the *Adau Gayoh*. This new practice closely resembled the cemetery visits and cleaning campaigns carried out by the Muslims during the fasting month of Ramadhan and the Eid Fitr celebration.

It is worth mentioning that although cultural homogenization was a state-driven strategy, the respondents agreed that the strategy has not been in any way forceful upon them or other population. The respondents shared that they could speak the ethnic languages of the Dusun, the Bisaya and the Tutong without restriction at school and other places. There were also non-Muslim respondents who attended religious schools of their own will, and some opted out before completing the curriculum without being penalized by school authorities. This was clear evidence of the open-ended process of Brunei's cultural homogenization.

This study also found that the Dusuns were allowed to observe their traditional customs and rites, even after the declaration of Islam as the state religion in 1959. It is noted that the scale and management of the traditions and rituals might have changed, but ethnic customs such as wedding customs and burial rites can still be practiced by the Dusuns. Given this situation, we can argue that the homogenization policies did not directly impact the Dusun culture and tradition. We can also take the argument further and assert that ethnic culture was only superficially affected by the national culture. Wang (2007) contended that the superficiality of cultural homogenization did not significantly affect how people related to one another and how they found meaning and purpose in life. This appears to be the case with the Dusun.

What worries the Dusun more was the dwindling number of community elders and those who possessed sufficient ethnic knowledge to safeguard and pass down important customs and rites to the next generation. A 59-year-old secondary school teacher believed that preserving the Dusun customs and traditions could only be achieved successfully with the preservation of the ethnic language, which was the sole medium of instruction for all ethnic rituals and ceremonies. However, as discussed above, the preservation effort of the ethnic language is facing a tremendous challenge amid the prevalent use of Brunei Malay particularly among the new generation. Some respondents took their own initiative by encouraging their children to interact with the Dusun elders in the ethnic language, hoping that the young ones would pick up or at least understand the language. To support this initiative, the respondents would do

'balik kampung,' a practice of regular visits to their home village during weekends or long holidays. This was mainly done by those who lived outside their villages due to employment and/or marriage. However, many also admitted that such effort might or might not succeed, considering the much more pervasive use of Brunei Malay among the present-day Dusuns. Evidently, for some respondents, such inevitability breeds the feeling of hopelessness, instigating some actions of rejecting cultural homogenization.

Contesting the Homogenization

In contrast to the number of respondents who reacted positively towards cultural homogenization, the number of those who resented the process was small but not insignificant. The earlier discussion presented in this article presupposes that the older generation would be more likely to contest or reject cultural homogenization, possibly due to their strong identification with their ethnic roots (Trigger & Wahsalfelah, 2011). This study concurs with Trigger and Wahsalfelah's (2011) argument that some older respondents were more aware of the adverse consequences of the homogenization process on the Dusun community. For instance, a 79-year-old housewife expressed her disapproval of the growing practice among the Dusun newlyweds wearing traditional Muslim Malay costumes for their wedding ceremonies. She regarded such action as culturally and ethnically insensitive and a blatant rejection of their Dusun roots. In responding to this criticism, a younger 36-year-old respondent justified that the wearing of the Muslim Malay traditional costumes by the Dusun newlyweds was due to the fact that it was increasingly difficult to find the Dusun traditional wedding costumes with the correct size and proper fitting. Moreover, due to time constraints because of employment and other commitments, it was understandable for the Dusun bride and groom to prefer Muslim Malay wedding costumes which were always readily available. What was more important to them was that their family, especially their parents, did not resent their choice and decision.

Another elder respondent, aged 82 years old, criticized Dusun families for not teaching young family members the Dusun language. He argued that, as the government would not do anything to preserve the ethnic language, family members should work together and work harder at the preservation effort. A 75-year-old male respondent also raised a similar issue of preservation. He believed that the Malay-Muslim culture was too dominant and did not leave enough room for the ethnic culture to persevere and survive. As he termed it, the aggressiveness of the mainstream culture has made any effort to teach young ones the ethnic language or the basic rites and customs futile and unsuccessful. At the same time, he also believed many Dusun parents were not even concerned with the absence of the Dusun language in their familial realm, let alone putting effort for their children to be acquainted with the ethnic customs and rites.

The disappearance of Tamarok has also caused a grave concern among a few elder respondents. A 63-year-old former government officer insisted that Tamarok was the main pillar of the Dusun culture. He understood the need for education for young Dusun, which over time, took them away from learning traditional culture. His resentment was evident when he no longer felt that the ethnic rites could be preserved for future generation. He also commented that if the Dusuns no longer perform Tamarok for its actual, traditional purposes, there was no need to present Tamarok to the public as a performance (as part of the preservation effort) because it was meaningless to do so.

The above indications of contestation were sporadic, and not every respondent shared similar sentiments. However, they were significantly dissentive responses to Brunei's cultural homogenization process. The findings also demonstrated that it was due to the failure and inability of the Dusun community to safeguard the ethnic language and culture, compounded with the indifferent attitude of Dusun parents, which has inevitably led to the observable decline of ethnic language and culture.

It is worthwhile to note here that other respondents, including the younger ones, also observed a similar situation and expressed the need for the government and Dusun community leaders to protect and preserve the ethnic language and culture. At the same time however, they also recognized that the homogenization process was intertwined with the country's modernization drive and the need for Brunei to develop and modernize. Many respondents concurred that modernization imposed more considerable challenges to the preservation efforts of the Dusun customs and rites. One respondent argued Islam or the Malay culture has not changed the Dusun culture, but modernization has. The following discussion demonstrates the ways the Dusuns dealt and negotiated the country's modernization drive and, eventually, the homogenization process.

Negotiating Modernization

The modernization drive in the context of the twentieth-century Brunei began with the introduction of vernacular schools in the early years of the 1910s. Education is known to be critical for upward social mobility (Mail, 2006; Phan et al., 2021). There were two main influential consequences of Brunei's modern education system. Firstly, the use of the Malay Language, which is widely spoken by the Dusuns. As discussed above, the Malay Language is an inherent part of the cultural homogenization effort. In addition, as it is also tied together with the introduction of modern education, the Malay Language is also a demonstration of progression and modernity. Due to this, the Dusun Language has increasingly lost its standing as the mother tongue of many Dusuns. Many could not adequately carry out the Dusun customs and rites, which use the ethnic language as the medium of communication with the cosmic god, the Derato. This situation eventually led to a conceptual rejection of the cosmic god by young and modern Dusuns.

Secondly, with educational attainment, the Dusun were no longer confined to traditional rice farming and padi cultivation activities. By the 1990s, as more Dusuns acquired the necessary skills for modern and non-farm employments, they became less involved in rice farming, which loosened their connection with padi, the main element of Temarok. The fact that since the 1980s, Brunei began to import fragrant rice from other Southeast Asian countries, it further reduced the sacral value of padi or rice, particularly in the eyes of those who did not observe Temarok. In addition, due to technological advancement, local padi production now has several planting and harvesting cycles in a year, in contrast to the traditional cycle with no more than two cycles annually. The respondents of this study concurred that, as modern employments took them away from their home villages as they resettled in other parts of the country, there was less manpower in their family to carry out the ritual practices. The Dusuns, particularly the elders, found it increasingly exhausting to conduct Temarok every harvesting season. Reflecting further on this situation, a 61-year-old pensioner differentiated homogenization from modernization as he argued that such unfortunate circumstance was the consequence of modern employment and a modern way of life, and not due to Islamic or Malay component of the homogenization policy.

Hence, the Dusuns could only negotiate the impacts of modernization by simplifying the ways ethnic customs were conducted. The respondents generally agreed that a family gathering during bereavement period following a demise of a family member could no longer be held for fourteen days continuously, as other family members had work and other commitments to attend. They had no choice but to simplify some ethnic rites for the sake of fulfilling the fundamental requirement of the rituals. For instance, in preparing funeral feasts, the Dusuns would utilize food catering services rather than having a traditional communal effort (*bermucang-mucang*) in preparing food to be served during the feasts. In addition, voluntary invitation was passed to extended family members to attend the feasts so that they would not

feel obliged to attend the ceremony. Such simplified tradition would also alleviate the financial and physical burden on the family of the deceased.

At the same time, some respondents were concerned with the simplifying practices of the Dusun customs as it could adversely affect the Dusuns' knowledge, confidence and trust in the customs. It is evident nowadays that the young Dusuns tend to belittle the ethnic rites and taboos as illogical and ridiculous. At the same time, some respondents felt that Dusun's lives had too many taboos, impeding the people from gaining good education and employment. The Dusun elders also felt that the young generation was embarrassed to carry forward the ethnic customs, which the latter considered outdated and often inapposite of a modern way of life.

Conclusion

This study articulates the analysis of cultural homogenization in Brunei and how the Dusuns considered and responded to the cultural homogenization process. Regardless of the official narratives that the Brunei people including the Dusuns have increasingly become homogenized, the above analysis has shown diverse reactions towards the process. The respondents generally found it unproblematic to combine and mix their inherited cultural values with those of the mainstream Malay Muslim society, with only a few rejecting the process as it adversely impacts the practice of ethnic customs and traditions. The freedom given to the Dusuns to observe their ethnic custom significantly indicates the practice of religious tolerance in the country. This study has also found that the changes experienced by the Brunei Dusuns were equally sourced from modernization, which, as demonstrated by the discussion earlier, cause more adverse implications on the community than the homogenization process itself.

This study also demonstrates that ordinary people on the ground perceive the homogenization process differently from what is always theorized and hypothesized by existing literature. This novel finding should be highlighted and taken further by future researchers. A larger sample which may include other ethnic groups, could strengthen the findings of this study further. In addition, cultural homogenization has also been considered as the leading agent that transforms the definition of ethnic identity in Brunei. The complexities, negotiation, acceptance and management of the cultural and ethnic values are closely related to the ways the Dusuns conceive their ethnic identity.

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