

## **Beyond Arbitrary Labels: Understanding Ethnic Identity Development among Chindians**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Malaysia is home to many different ethnic groups. The historical past of the nation has greatly contributed to its multiethnic status today. The National Constitution and the National Principles of Malaysia has assured every citizen the right to religious and cultural freedom, allowing the nation to flourish as a multiethnic state that propagates unity within diversity. The social fabric of the nation and the widening of contact zones has allowed for the occurrence of miscegenation and the existence of biethnic individuals. Sino-Indians or commonly known as Chindians are biethnic individuals who form part of the social composition of the Malaysian population. Based on the constructionist theory of Ethnic Identity Development by Cornell and Hartmann (1998), this paper advocates that ethnic identity is a result of interfaces between cultural and social factors, making it a dynamic developmental process and therefore, should not be reduced to arbitrary labels attached to a person. However, the Malaysian National Birth Registration Policy dictates that Malaysians should neatly fit into the predefined single ethnic categories that has existed for the past 58 years.

**Keywords:** Sino-Indians, Chindians, biethnic, ethnic identity, culture, social

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Malaysia today is a multiethnic country populated by people who belong to various ethnic and sub-ethnic groups (Abraham, 2008; Rahman, 2009; Cheah, 2009; Department of Statistics, 2008; Economic Planning Unit and United Nations Country Team Malaysia, 2011; Khoo, 2009; Lim and Gomes, 2009). Geographically, Malaysia is made up of East Malaysia and West Malaysia. East Malaysia consists of Sabah and Sarawak and is collectively home to approximately 45 ethnic groups (Department of Statistics, 2011), while the Peninsular is inhabited by 3 most prominent ethnic groups which are the Malays (50%), Chinese (37%) and Indians (11%) and also those who fall into the 'Others' (2%) category (Ishak, 2014). The administrative and social structure

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officially recognises these three main ethnic groups as the groups that make up the majority population of Malaysia especially in the Peninsular. An additional ‘Others’ category was created to fit those who do not belong to the three earlier mentioned main categories (Department of Statistics, 2008).

As a multiethnic country, Malaysia is also home to individuals from mixed marriages. Biethnic individuals are found in many parts of the world as a result of mixed marriages. In Malaysia, the Sino-Indians are a group of biethnic individuals who are the offspring of Chinese and Indian mixed parentage (David, 2008) and they are found mainly in Peninsular Malaysia. Sino-Indians are also widely found in neighbouring Singapore. These biethnic individuals are better known locally as “Chindians” (David, 2008; Gopan, 2011), a term coined from the words “Chinese” and “Indian”. This research uses the terms “Sino-Indian” and “Chindian” interchangeably as the term “Chindian” has been widely accepted in the local Malaysian social context. Their physical appearance and phenotype features vary from one another; some resemble members of the Chinese community and others resemble more closely members of the Indian community, but in most cases, physically, they closely resemble the local Malays (Arumugam, 1990).

This paper offers a micro-level analysis of ethnic identity development of Chindian individuals in Malaysia, from an emic perspective, which is paramount to the discussion and evaluation of the macro-level structures. The Malaysian National Birth Registration Policy acts as one of the main overarching macro structures that influence the process of ethnic identity development among Chindian biethnic individuals in Malaysia. This micro-level analysis is pivotal in understanding social evolution in the nation, as suggested by Stets and Burke (2005:136): “we must go back and forth and understand how social structure is the accomplishment of the actors, but also how actors always act within the social structures they create.”

## **2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethnic groups have been defined by anthropologists as groups that share cultural similarities. These ethnic groups perceive themselves to be distinctive from one another due to cultural similarity within group members and cultural variation between groups (Eriksen, 1997; Kottak, 2008). Members of an ethnic group are bound by shared beliefs, values, habits, customs and norms due to their common background (Kottak, 2008; Koopelman and Goodhart, 2008).

It is commonly assumed in Malaysia that all Malaysians fit perfectly into the pigeonhole ethnic categories that exist and hence automatically adopt the accompanying relevant ethnic identities (Thambiah, 2009). Accompanying these assumptions are policies and stereotypes that have always been a significant element in the discussion of ethnic identity in Malaysia. The emergence of Chindians in the Malaysian society has created a grey and fuzzy area amongst the clearly vertically compartmentalised ethnic categories that have been maintained. The ethnic categories in Malaysia have remained rigid since independence till today (Abraham, 2008; Thambiah, 2009); this raises concerns that the existing monoethnic categories do not capture the actual ethnic composition of the Malaysian population.

Over the decades, a gradual yet clear paradigm shift has been observed in the way the ethnic identity of biethnic individuals have been conceptualised and theorised. Cornell and Hartmann (1998) offered a more holistic approach to the phenomenon of ethnic identity development. Built on adaptations of the Circumstantialism concept which argues that ethnic identity is a fluid phenomenon and Primordialism concept which argues that ethnic identity is a fixed phenomenon, the Constructionist approach by Cornell and Hartmann (1998) aids in the understanding of the epistemology of ethnic identity development.

The Constructionist approach proposes that identity is constantly created, amended and sometimes even erased according to the needs and demands of time and situations. According to the Constructionist approach, social and cultural domains in a given circumstance play pivotal roles in ethnic identity development. The cultural domain consists of three main elements which are language, religion and customs while the social domain consists of acceptance by members of the family, friends and the general public. The interface of the elements of these domains leads to an ethnic identity claim which is suggested to be stable especially after adolescence (Erickson, 1968; Yahaya and Latif, 2006). Therefore, ethnic identity is conceptualised as a fluid phenomenon which is dynamic and non-static.

The discussion of ethnic identity development becomes even more challenging when it concerns Chindian individuals who are offsprings of parents from two separate cultural backgrounds. Hence, this paper has problematised the process of ethnic identity development among Chindians based on Cornell and Hartmann's (1998) Constructionist theory of Ethnic Identity Development by questioning "How do social and cultural domains influence the ethnic identity portrayal of the Malaysian Chindians?"

The malleability of ethnic identity and the non-rigid nature of ethnic identity development is aptly captured further in the model of Ethnic Identity Development (Chaudhari and Pizzolato, 2008) that discusses variations of ethnic identity claims among biethnic individuals. Based on this model, it can be summarised that the interface between influential psychological factors, social factors and cultural factors forms a biethnic individual's identity. Biethnic individuals are then suggested to claim belonging to five possible ethnic categories which are monoethnic, multiple monoethnic, multiethnic, situational ethnic and extraethnic.

Monoethnic identity refers to individuals who clearly chose one ethnic identity over the other. Multiple monoethnic identity describes individuals who form their identity by combining various features of the different ethnic groups that they belong to. The ethnic group that they chose to belong to depends on the needs of a particular situation that they find themselves in. Those who possess multiethnic identity create a fusion form of ethnic identity. Situational ethnic identity refers to those whose ethnic identity shifts from one pattern to another every now and then according to situation. This might occur consciously or unconsciously. Those who do not belong to the above-mentioned categories fall into the extraethnic category which refers to a situation where the individual is in total denial or refuses to conform to any form of ethnic identity.

Although conceptually, ethnic identity has been suggested to be a fluid concept especially when it concerns individuals of mixed parentage, biethnic categories have not been officially accepted by the Malaysian National Birth Registration Policy especially in the Peninsular Malaysia. The Malaysian Birth and Death Registration Act requires every Malaysian to belong to an ethnic category upon birth. Legally, biethnic individuals in Malaysia are registered according to Section 13A of the Malaysian Birth and Death Registration Act 299 which only applies to non-Malays. This act stipulates that a child should take after the father's race (*Akta Pendaftaran Kelahiran Dan Kematian*, 2007). Based on this act, a Chindian child with an Indian father would be registered as an Indian while a Chindian child born to a Chinese father would be registered as a Chinese (David, 2008). Therefore, the Chindians in Malaysia are divided into two groups; they either fall into the Indian or Chinese category.

Due to the existence of registration acts that serve as structures within which ethnic identity development takes place in the local Malaysian context, Shamsul (1996) has advocated the existence of two forms of ethnic identity. According to Shamsul (1996), biethnic individuals who find that the emic perspective of their ethnic identity is not represented by the authority develop their own form of ethnic identity, which they relate to better. These divergent forms of ethnic identities are known as authority defined social reality and everyday defined social reality. Everyday lives of biethnic individuals are conducted based on the everyday defined social reality while the authority defined social reality is only used for official matters.

### 3. METHOD

This research is focused on the ethnic identity of individuals of mixed parentage. The emphasis of the inquiry is specifically on biethnic individuals of Chinese and Indian parentage found in Malaysia. The research adopted the qualitative research design because it fulfils the research goals and questions as well as best suits the type of data collected (Morse and Richards, 2002). Multiple data gathering techniques were applied to collect the data necessary in order to avoid limitations caused by constraints posed by singular data collection strategy (Maxwell, 2005). Triangulation of data gathering strategies also increased the credibility of the research findings by heightening the validity and reliability of the research (Merriam, 2002). In-depth semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method used in this study. Besides semi-structured interviews, observations, casual conversations and incidental observations were also carried out. A number of 31 Chindians, 20 Indians and 20 Chinese individuals participated in this research. Out of the 31 Chindian participants, 20 of them had Indian fathers and Chinese mothers while 11 of them had Chinese fathers and Indian mothers. The data collected between January to November 2014 via semi-structured interviews were coded and analysed using the NVivo 10 software which was designed for the management of qualitative data. The data obtained were interpreted based on the conceptual framework of the research which outlines cultural and social factors as factors that contribute towards the ethnic identity development of biethnic individuals. Although not the common norm, numerals were used in this

qualitative study to increase internal generalisability of the data analysed and presented (Maxwell, 2010). Besides, the use of numerical data facilitates better comprehension of the data presented and discussed. Pseudonyms were used in the presentation and discussion of the data analysed to provide anonymity to the research participants.

#### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS ON CULTURAL FACTORS**

##### **4.1 Language**

Language, an element of the cultural domain, plays an integral role in the formation of a person's ethnic identity. Language is constructed by culture. It is a social and racial construction that "comprises structure and symbols that represent reality as it conveys cultural meaning, myths and codes" (Taylor, 2004:91). Analysis of the data obtained suggests that most of the Chindian individuals with Chinese fathers consider neither Chinese nor Tamil as their native language. They instead consider English as their native language. Chinese is used as a general term in this paper to refer to the different dialects of the Chinese community. This similar scenario is witnessed among Chindian participants with Indian fathers. Ten out of the 20 Chindian individuals with Indian fathers (50%) and seven out of 11 individuals with Chinese fathers (64%) consider English as their native language. Karuna Lee (male, 28 years old) whose mother is Indian and father is Chinese, mentioned:

"I consider English as my native language because that's the first language I learned as a child and that's the language we speak at home."

According to Karuna, English was the first language his parents spoke to him when he was a child and therefore, it was only natural for him to consider English as his native language.

Interestingly, none of the Chindian individuals with Indian fathers considered Tamil as their native language, instead two individuals with Chinese fathers (18%) considered Tamil as their native language. Chinese was not considered as their native language by any of the Chindians with Chinese fathers but the language was considered as their native language by seven individuals with Indian fathers (35%). This finding corresponds to the notion proposed by David (2008) that biethnic individuals pick up native languages from their mothers instead of their fathers. One of the participants explained:

"My father is seldom at home so, we spend most of the time with my mother and she speaks in Chinese to us."

A few participants considered dual language as their native language. One participant with a Chinese father (9%) considered Tamil and English as his native language and two of the Chindian participants with Indian fathers (10%) mentioned that they consider both English and Chinese as their native language while one participant with an Indian father (5%) considered English and Tamil to be his native language.

The language regarded as the native language by the Chindian participants plays an integral role in their ethnic identity development because language is not merely

a communicative tool but also plays a pertinent role in shaping a person's worldview (Taylor, 2004). The findings on the language aspect of the Chindian participants demonstrates three key findings. First, the research establishes that heritage languages are relegated to a lower hierarchy of importance by most of the Chindian participants. The second finding is that most participants do not regard their heritage language as native to them, showing instead a strong preference towards English. This is due to the fact that English is used as a common language in the home domain to cater to the communicative needs of their parents from different ethnic backgrounds. This suggests that Chindians who regard English as their native language would have a different worldview and develop an ethnic identity dissimilar to the pure Indian and Chinese individuals who regard heritage languages as their native language.

The third finding on the language aspect of Chindian participants demonstrates that mothers play a more dominant role in disseminating their heritage language to their children, hence having a stronger influence over their ethnic identity development. Unfortunately, this element is not considered in the official assignment of ethnic categories to biethnic individuals. Although in common cases where both parents belong to the same ethnic group, patriarchal practices of ethnic identity assignment would be easily accepted but in the case of children of mixed parentage, the practise becomes questionable.

#### **4.2 Religion**

Religion is often viewed as the most prominent aspect of their ethnic identity by many individuals (Sorokin, 2009); this is because ethnicity and religious beliefs are reciprocal elements in most ethnic groups. This view is supported by Chaudhari and Pizzolato (2008) who stated that religious practices are a form of external manifestation of internal beliefs that serve as an important ethnic identity marker. It is interesting that most of the Chindian participants in this study have parents of different religious beliefs.

Data on the religious beliefs of the Chindian participants of this research were discussed and compared against the religious beliefs of their fathers because both the Indian and Chinese societies are patriarchal in nature. The research found that the religious obligation of many of the Chindian participants differ in comparison to the religion of their Indian and Chinese fathers.

The data on the religious obligation of Chindians with Indian fathers show that two participants (10%) are religiously Buddhist or Taoist although none of the Indian fathers is religiously solely a Buddhist or Taoist, and eight Chindian participants (40%) are Christians in comparison to six Indian fathers who are Christians. Five Chindian participants (25%) claimed to practice dual religion which is both Hinduism and Buddhism or Taoism which was lesser than the number of Indian fathers who practised dual religion. Nirmala Krsnan (female, 19 years old) who practises dual religion, mentioned:

“I believe in both Hinduism and Buddhism/Taoism because there is no harm done as it only brings more good and understanding.”

Two participants (10%) are staunch Hindus while only one Indian father is a devout Hindu. One of the most interesting findings, especially in the Malaysian context where belief in god is the first national principle, was that four Chindian participants (20%) claimed that they are either an atheist or a freethinker, which was coded as “no religion” because they did not submit to any particular religion. In comparison, none of the Indian fathers are either an atheist or a freethinker.

Six out of the 11 Chindian participants (55%) with Chinese fathers expressed that they practise both Hinduism and Buddhism or Taoism while seven Chinese fathers profess dual religion. One participant (9%) is a Buddhist or a Taoist. This is lesser compared to the number of Chinese fathers who are Buddhist and Taoist. One participant (9%) is a Hindu while none of the Chinese fathers are solely Hindus. None of the Chindian participants with Chinese fathers are Christians which coincides with the finding that none of the Chinese fathers are Christians. Three out of the 11 participants (27%) are freethinkers while, just like the Indian fathers, none of the Chinese fathers are either an atheist or a freethinker.

Adam Rishi Lee’s (male, 25 years old) statement sheds light on the principles of participants who are atheists:

“I don’t believe in religion, I believe in humanitarian qualities, I think it’s more important.”

Almost all of the participants who are atheists and freethinkers shared similar views on their choice to relinquish any form of religious belief. To them what mattered most was being humane instead of being inhumane and racist in the name of god. They did not wish to be part of the racial and religious polarisation between the human race. Furthermore, they are also tired of the racial and religious baiting which often surfaces in the Malaysian political arena.

Overall findings show that 61% of the Chindian participants have religious beliefs that are similar to their fathers, while 39% of them do not share religious beliefs with their fathers. The variation in the religious obligation of the Chindian participants and their fathers proves that the participants do not take after the religion of their fathers by default. It also proves that the Chindian participants are not religiously indoctrinated by their parents. It was indeed interesting to discover that most of the participants practise dual religious beliefs which is not a common phenomenon in the compartmentalised Malaysian society. The Chindian participants display high levels of acceptance, understanding and respect towards the two religions. They perceive religion as a solidarity tool and not as a medium to demarcate between the human race.

### **4.3 Customs**

Customs is a concept closely intertwined with ethnicity (Khanna and Johnson, 2010; Rocha, 2010). Knowing the customs of an ethnic group helps create a sense of belonging towards the group while the opposite, creates detachment (Taylor, 2004). Most of the Chindian participants in this research grew up being exposed to two sets of customs although the extent to which they were exposed to each set

of customs might vary from one Chindian individual to another. Findings show that 80% of the Chindian participants, with Indian fathers, adhere to some elements of the Indian customs and 80% of them adhere to elements of the Chinese customs. 91% of Chindians, with Chinese fathers, adhere to elements of the Chinese customs while 100% of them adhere to elements of the Indian customs. Arissha Wong (female, 31 years old) who adheres to both the Indian and Chinese customs shared:

“Both the Chinese and Indian customs are a part of who I am.”

She explained that being a Chindian is about practising elements of both Chinese and Indian customs such as taboos and celebrations. Data collected on the non-adherence to customs presented more interesting and valuable findings. The findings reveal that a smaller number of Chindian participants who participated in this research did not adhere to either the Chinese or Indian customs, and in a few instances, both customs. Four participants, with Indian fathers, said that they did not adhere to the Chinese customs and the Indian customs, respectively. A closer look at the data showed that three out of the four participants who do not adhere to the Chinese customs are Christians by religion and the fourth participant is an atheist. According to them, most of the Indian and Chinese customs are closely intertwined with religious beliefs, therefore they choose to abstain from such customs. Bryan Steve Nathan (male, 24 years old) mentioned:

“My customs are guided by Christianity so I do not adhere much to the Indian or Chinese customs since both my parents converted to be Christians.”

This portrays an erosion of traditional Indian and Chinese customs among Chindians who are Christians and atheists although they are officially registered as Indians or Chinese, which leads to arbitrary categorising of the population. To conclude, findings suggest that the Chindian participants carry out various degrees of adherence to the Indian and Chinese customs but a majority of the participants adhered to both Chinese and Indian customs in their daily life especially in relation to festivals and family occasions. This finding therefore strengthens the argument that it is unrealistic to insist that they should only claim to belong to one ethnic group.

## **5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS ON SOCIAL FACTORS**

### **5.1 *Acceptance by Paternal Family***

Socialisation patterns are another pertinent factor in the development of ethnic identity among biethnic individuals (Steck et al., 2003; Rockquemore and Brunnsma, 2002). Relationships with others will question, challenge and verify the ethnic identity of biethnic individuals and this contributes towards the development and understanding of their identity (Chaudhari and Pizzolato, 2008). Therefore, acceptance by family members is a very important fundamental aspect in the process of ethnic identity development.

Based on the data collected, 18 Chindian participants, with an Indian father and a Chinese mother (90%), stated that they felt accepted by their paternal family members

while two individuals (10%) shared that they did not feel accepted. One male participant (5%) and one female participant (5%) felt that they are not accepted by their paternal Indian family members. According to Bernard Segaran (male, 22 years old):

“I think my fairer skin colour was always an issue.”

Bernard felt that his fairer skin tone caused jealousy among his Indian family members, therefore they treated him as an outsider. Even though Bernard was officially registered as an Indian because his father was Indian, he is not accepted as an in-group member even by his own paternal family. It is a common assumption that being darker-skinned is a popular cause of rejection but the data obtained demonstrates that the opposite scenario is also possible. Bernard's experience suggests that it is important to meet certain basic physical traits to gain acceptance by members of an ethnic group and this applies even among immediate family members.

Nine out of the 11 participants with Chinese fathers (82%) said that they felt accepted by their Chinese paternal family and once again, two participants (18%), one male and one female, said that they feel rejected. Stella Goh Siew Jew (female, 35 years old) shared her deepest painful experience of being rejected by her paternal Chinese family for almost a decade. According to her, they initially even refused to speak to her. Stella said:

“At first, no one talked to me. They only started socialising with me when I was ten or eleven years old. Maybe it was because of the skin colour, they treated me different.”

Stella felt like an outcast among her paternal family members for many years and she said that she was deeply hurt by the way she was treated. Stella's experience demonstrates that her darker skin tone was the cause of rejection among her Chinese paternal family members. Such negative experiences within the family circle serve as push factors that impede the verification of a person's claimed ethnic identity. The rejection experienced by Bernard and Stella proposes that skin colour is an important prerequisite that often causes rejection among family members.

## ***5.2 Acceptance by Maternal Family***

When enquired about the acceptance of their maternal family towards them, 17 Chindian participants with Chinese mothers (85%) felt that they are well accepted while three participants (15%), two males and one female, felt that they are not accepted by their Chinese maternal family. Rakesh Zao (male, 38 years old), who felt rejected by his Chinese maternal family did not wish to delve deeper into the topic but mentioned that:

“For them, us (Rakesh and his siblings) being Chindian, is their first experience of inter-racial marriage but it hasn't changed them. They are still wearing the lens, it hasn't changed them. Sometimes it takes a lot more to change them. Friends are in fact more receptive but of course it varies from one family to another.”

It is obvious that Rakesh is frustrated by the situation that he had to face with his maternal family. Rakesh personally preferred to be identified as a Chinese person but the rejection experienced from his maternal family is a very strong form of invalidation to Rakesh's claimed ethnic identity. Satish experienced similar rejection from his Chinese maternal family. Satish Achutan (male, 22 years old) shares that:

“Some of the elderly aunties, they are fine but they still have a preference towards my pure Chinese cousins till today.”

Satish said that this situation makes him feel uncomfortable and out of place when there are family gatherings with his maternal family. Such rejection from immediate family members impedes natural enculturation processes that one experiences by being around family members and by actively participating in customs and religious activities which are important in ethnic identity development.

All 17 participants with Chinese mothers (85%) who said that they felt accepted by their maternal family said that they are well treated and that they felt comfortable among their Chinese family members. Nithiya Ananda stated her ability to converse in Chinese as the reason for her acceptance by her maternal family. Nithiya Ananda (female, 31 years old) mentioned:

“I don't have any problem with them, since I can communicate in Chinese, so it's not a problem. They don't treat me badly because I'm a Chindian.”

Nithiya Ananda demonstrates that her ability to converse well in Chinese has gained her acceptance among her Chinese maternal family members although she might differ from common physical stereotypes usually associated with the Chinese community.

Data obtained reveals that none of the Chindian participants with Indian mothers felt rejected by their Indian maternal family. This coincides with the overall data that shows a high level of acceptance among Indian family members of the Chindian participants. The inability to speak the native language of the reference group members, skin colour and phenotype features that do not meet commonly accepted stereotypes were quoted by most of the participants as reasons for rejection by paternal and maternal family members.

Most participants who feel rejected by family members found it very difficult to accept the rejection as it made them feel like an outcast. Many of the participants experienced such rejection at a very young age and are not able to comprehend the reason for such rejection. Some of them blamed themselves for not being able to fit in. Rejection by family members caused depression and demotivation among some of the biethnic Chindians, but as they grew older, they began to accept and are able to deal with such rejection. Many of them prefer to focus on the positive aspects of being a Chindian such as being able to have the best of both worlds instead of feeling depressed about the rejection they experienced.

### ***5.3 Acceptance by Indian and Chinese Friends***

Overall analysis shows that 80% of the 20 Chindian participants with Indian fathers felt that they are well accepted by their Indian friends while 20% of them felt that they

are rejected. 73% of the 11 Chindian individuals with Chinese fathers felt that they are well received by their Indian friends while 27% felt that they are not accepted.

In discussing acceptance by Chinese friends, 55% of the Sino-Indian participants, with Indian fathers, said that they are well accepted by their Chinese friends while 45% of them felt that they are not well accepted. As for Chindians with Chinese fathers, 11 participants (64%) felt that they are well accepted by their Chinese friends while 36% of them felt that they are not well accepted.

A cross analysis between the acceptance of Chindian participants by their Indian friends and Chinese friends shows that the Indian friends of the Chindian participants are more receptive towards them compared to their Chinese friends. This was true for both categories, namely Chindians with Indian fathers and Chindians with Chinese fathers. Generally, Indian friends viewed Chindians as an asset towards the community. Most negative experiences with Indian friends were due to the lack or refusal of the Chindians to embrace Indian customs and Hinduism or the inability to speak in Tamil.

Analysis shows that rejection by Chinese friends are usually due to the inability to speak the Chinese language and the absence of Chinese customs. In addition, most of the Chinese friends of the Chindian participants rejected Chindians as in-group members due to the presence of Indian customs or the practise of Hinduism in the daily lives of Chindians. The Chinese friends of the Chindian participants expected them to practise the Chinese culture exclusively in order to accept them as an in-group member. Most Chindian participants felt that this is a difficult prerequisite to meet as they are not accepted for who they truly are.

#### ***5.4 Acceptance by the Public***

The research also collected data on the acceptance of the Chinese and Indian reference group members towards Chindians. 20 Indian individuals and 20 Chinese individuals were interviewed. The data analysed revealed that reference group members fell into two categories. Those who accepted the Chindians without any form of prerequisites and those who set prerequisites for acceptance.

50% of both the Chinese and Indian reference group members accepted Chindians as in-group members without any additional prerequisites. According to them, it will suffice to gain acceptance as an in-group member with just one Chinese or Indian parent. They also cited the fact that there are many pure Chinese and Indian individuals today who could not speak their native language and did not adhere to many of the customs, therefore there was no valid reason to reject the membership of Chindians based on such reasons.

50% of the Chinese and Indian reference group members mentioned language, religion and customs as an important prerequisite for acceptance. According to them, to gain acceptance as an in-group member, it was important for Chindian individuals to be able to speak, or at least understand, their native language and show respect towards their heritage customs by adhering to it. Indian participants who set prerequisites for acceptance also said that it was important for a Chindian to profess Hinduism to gain acceptance.

The findings demonstrate that Chindian individuals face a 50-50 chance of being accepted or rejected by their reference group members. They are often vulnerable to judgements made by members of their reference group members and are usually not wholly accepted. Reference group members are often suspicious towards Chindians due to their biethnic status.

### 5.5 *Ethnic Identity Claim*

The participants were finally asked to conclude their experiences and emotions by stating their ethnic identity claim based on the model of Ethnic Identity Development by Chaudhari and Pizzolato (2008) which was part of the conceptual framework of this research. Upon analysing the data obtained from the Chindian participants with Indian fathers, it was observed that 10 out of the 20 participants (50%) in this category claimed that they had a multiethnic identity. This meant that their ethnic identity is a fusion of the Chinese and Indian ethnic identity. Nithiya Ananda (female, 31 years old) who chose multiethnic as her ethnic identity said:

“I would say Chindian because they force me to choose and I can’t choose just one.”

Nithiya Ananda added that claiming to belong to a single ethnic identity would mean denying her other half and that was not acceptable to her. Five Chindian participants with Indian fathers said that their ethnic identity was situational (25%). At times they felt totally Chinese, at times, they felt totally Indian and at times, they felt like a Chindian. Diviya Ananda (female, 39 years old) who felt that her ethnic identity was situational explained that her ethnic identity was influenced by the people she was with. Diviya said:

“When I’m with my Chinese friends I feel totally Chinese, when I’m with my Indian friends I feel totally Indian and when people think that I’m Malay I feel Chindian.”

Four Chindian participants with Indian fathers (20%) said that they did not identify with any form of ethnic identity, hence they picked extraethnic as their identity. Katherine Adrina Suvarmani (female, 24 years old) said that she chose extraethnic because:

“...my friends become racist and they drag me into it so that’s when I put my foot down and say I don’t want to pick sides.”

Only one Chindian participant with an Indian father (5%) chose monoethnic as his ethnic identity. Aryan Sudan said that he was monoethnic because he saw himself as an Indian. None of the Chindian participants with Indian fathers chose multiple monoethnic, which referred to feeling totally Indian at times and totally Chinese at other times but never seeing themselves as a Chindian at any one time.

As for the 11 Chindian participants with Chinese fathers, a variation is observed as well. Five of them (46%) claimed that their ethnic identity is multiethnic. Lee Tai Soon

(male, 24 years old) said that although his father is Chinese and he carries a Chinese name but he personally felt like a Chindian. Tai Soon said:

“When people ask me I do say I’m Chinese because I carry a Chinese name and also because my identity card says I’m Chinese but I feel that I’m Chindian”

Although Tai Soon was formally registered as a Chinese, has a Chinese name and practises Chinese customs, he identified well with the Chindian ethnic identity. This is mostly due to the invalidation he received from the society. Tai Soon also mentioned that the Chindian ethnic identity suited him most because in reality, he has mixed parentage.

Four Chindian participants with Chinese fathers (36%) said that their ethnic identity was situational. Speaking about her ethnic identity, Amanda Ooi Suet Lai (female, 24 years old) said that her ethnic identity was situational because:

“Sometimes I do feel very Chinese, sometimes I do feel very Indian and sometimes I just feel Chindian. It depends on the people that I’m around with.”

Shamini Yong Chee Hing (female, 33 years old) said that she felt that her ethnic identity was situational. She explained:

“Because when someone says bad things about the Chinese then I’ll back them up and when someone says bad things about the Indians, I’ll back them up and other times I feel Chindian.”

One Chindian participant with a Chinese father (9%) said that his identity is extraethnic because he did not wish to conform to any form of ethnic identity due to all the stereotype perceptions and ethnocentrism among members of the society. One participant (9%) said that her ethnic identity is monoethnic because she felt that she is totally Chinese due her socialisation patterns, the language she speaks and the customs she practises in her daily life which are all more inclined towards the Chinese community.

In actual fact, most of the Chindian participants showed no preference towards ethnic-based categories. Almost all of them demonstrated a strong sense of national identity and wanted to be recognised as Malaysians without any additional ethnic-based labels. When probed further on an ethnic category that represented them well, most of the Chindian participants of this study related to a multiethnic identity due to the effects of the elements of the cultural and social domains discussed in this paper. Exposure to both the Chinese and Indian culture as well as negative and positive social encounters with Chinese and Indian reference group members have led to the development of a multiethnic identity.

Although most of the Chindian participants can relate to the ethnic identity categories as suggested by the model of Ethnic Identity Development (Chaudhari and Pizzolato, 2008), this research has discovered a sixth category of ethnic identity claim called “adopted ethnic identity”. Biethnic individuals who fall into this category

may claim belonging to either, both or neither of their parent's ethnic identity and in addition to that, adopt a third form of ethnic identity. In the case of this study, most of the participants have adopted values of the western culture which is found to be practical and current to them. This is evident in the high percentage of Chindian participants who claim English to be their native language and prefer more neutral forms of customs. The existing model discussed in this study does not cater to such evolutions and adaptations in the process of ethnic identity development and therefore, the extra category suggested further enriches the model of Ethnic Identity Development by Chaudhari and Pizzolato (2008).

## 6. CONCLUSION

Evidence obtained from this research suggests that the ethnic identity claim of the Malaysian Sino-Indians or better known as Chindians is greatly influenced by various elements of the cultural and social domains. This research proves that Chindians do not solely take after their father's ethnicity. The majority of the participants embrace a fusion form of ethnic identity known as multiethnic identity, while others take on other forms of ethnic identities such as monoethnic, extraethnic, situational ethnic and as this research has suggested, adopted ethnic identity. The research also discovered that the majority of the participants would prefer to be identified by their national identity as Malaysians without further ethnic tags.

Based on these findings, it is undeniable that ethnic identity is a fluid concept (Ooi, 2009; Cornell and Hartmann, 1998; Thambiah, 2009). As advocated by the Constructionist theory, the findings on the ethnic identity of the Malaysian Chindians clearly prove that ethnic identity is constantly being created; it is neither permanent nor fixed. It further demonstrates the porousness of ethnic-based boundaries that we adamantly choose to hold on steadfastly to. Circumstances and the individual play a central role in ethnic identity development. Therefore, the ethnic identity of biethnic individuals should not be predetermined or reduced to a single ethnic category. The findings of this research also suggests that Section 13A of the Malaysian Birth and Death Registration Act, which is based on patriarchal practices, does not capture the true ethnic composition of the nation as it intends to. Hence, it is only rational to revisit the ethnic categories that have been used and accepted in Malaysia for the past 58 years as they no longer portray the current ethnic categories that exist in Malaysia today.

As Malaysia insists on quota systems based on ethnic categories for the distribution of wealth, aid and opportunities and for the execution of development plans, it is of paramount importance that the categories that exist must represent the social reality. Unrealistic, outdated categories should not be imposed upon the people as it defeats the purpose of having ethnic categories. Evolution in the social landscape of the nation should not be continuously denied by the preservation of outdated policies. It is timely to admit and realise that the task of capturing social evolutions based on fixed, absolute ethnic categories is a complex task which is almost impossible. Therefore, the next most viable option would be to move away from polarising ethnic-based

categories and accept national identity as a more viable and objective option. This would not only be more realistic but will also heighten the sense of nationalism among Malaysians and it definitely augurs well towards efforts of nation-building. Arbitrary ethnic labels disparage the empirical dynamics of ethnic identity development and the insistence to cling on to it denies progressive advancement of the nation.

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