

Navigating New Waters: Indonesian Muslims Practicing Islam in A Taiwanese University

Donne Jone Panizales Sodusta, Ricky Setiawan

Department of Education and Human Potentials
Development

Hua-Shih College of Education, National Dong Hwa
University, Hualien, Taiwan

810688115@gms.ndhu.edu.tw.com;

setiawanricky.rs@gmail.com

Beni Setiawan

Program of Science Education Department of Education and
Human Potentials Development

Hua-Shih College of Education, National Dong Hwa
University, Hualien, Taiwan

benisetiawan@unesa.ac.id

Abstract— This phenomenological study sought to understand the lived experiences of Indonesian international students studying in Taiwan and their practice of Islam. An open-ended questionnaire was first administered to a group of Indonesian students in a Taiwanese public university then three interviewees were selected based of the richness of their responses. Data from both questionnaires and interview transcripts were used. Using Braun and Clarkes' (2006) thematic analysis procedures, five major recurring themes were identified: (a) the Taiwan appeal; (b) practice of Islam; (c) support systems; (d) difficulties; and (e) their proposed solutions. Practicing Islam away from home gains a new meaning for them as it becomes their identity. Moving from a majority to a minority experience was the underlying structure of their experience. The essence of their experience was likened to that of sailing with an Indonesian watercraft, the sampan, while in new cultural waters. Conclusions, implications, and recommendations were also drawn from their collective experience.

Keywords—Muslim students; International education; International students; Taiwanese universities.

I. INTRODUCTION AND AIM OF THE STUDY

A crucial part of the internationalization strategy of Taiwanese higher education is the offering of additional English as medium of instruction (EMI) courses to attract more international students [1] This effort, aside from the massive campaign from Taiwanese universities have resulted into an influx of international students coming into Taiwan to avail of its quality yet relatively affordable higher education programs. The country has gotten into the wave of regional globalization migration patterns in their side of Asia. With an increased economic, political and cultural activities among and within the countries that comprise the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), this East Asia island-nation made it a policy to engage with these countries. This increase in active engagement has brought along with it international students, a good number of them are Indonesians; from a country of the most number of Muslims in the world. They come, not only bringing their hopes and dreams of social and economic mobility, but also, and quite importantly, their religion, Islam.

An increasing number of international Muslim students in Taiwan come from countries where Islam is the official or the

predominant religion. As foreign students in Taiwan, they find themselves in a society with a different, albeit, open and tolerant religious landscape. Adjustment and experience of Muslim students in a non-Islamic society is an emerging research subject. Muslims could face culturally-insensitive or unfavorable conditions and may even experience discrimination [2]. Muslims could also experience some cultural unease and unfamiliarity especially along gender relations, issues, and socialization [3]. Cross-cultural religious coping practices has been an emergent subject of several theories and studies in psychology and allied fields [4, 5, 6, 7].

Studies have noted the presence and needs of an increasing population of Muslim students in former generally homogenous universities. One such study by [8] explored the religious and cultural experiences of Muslim students in a number of universities in Australia. There appears to be a secular tendency among campuses that allows the practice of the Islamic faith although some incidence of discrimination and the concern over haram activities were reported. Universities step up on their efforts to create inclusive learning environments. [9] study among young post-secondary students in Canada seem to paint a slightly different picture. In an effort to understand how Muslim students perceive treatments of fairness, they noted that the respondents' university was viewed as the place where they get most fairness, while the rest of the world was seen to be unfair to them. They also felt that the country where their university is located, is also fair to them. Apart from the country that they identity with, they felt that other places were more fair to non-Muslim than to them. The result of this study points towards a status quo which is still far from inclusive and equitable for Muslims students. Issues of access and availability of service could also figure into the lived experiences and perceptions of Muslims. This is illustrated in the case of minority communities and their unique educational needs. Learners from minority groups do not always get the benefit of having their educational needs prioritized. [18] observed that there are logistical and other forms of barriers towards having an Islamic education in countries that are pre-dominantly non-Muslim. This means that the educational needs of a minority population, although typically acknowledged, could only be addressed by those who are direct stakeholders of such initiatives—the Muslim community itself. Thus, in order to promote an Islamic

education agenda, the community must explore ways to establish, operate, and sustain such an enterprise. Ultimately, Muslim communities need to fend for themselves.

Muslim international students had to make personal and cultural adjustments to their lives in Taiwanese universities because they have unique cultural conditions and needs. A study by [3] revealed that male Muslim graduate students from Indonesia has to make adjustments in issue concerning religion, gender roles, challenges to prayer and dietary needs, and other forms of discrimination off campus. [10] asserted a single factor that could determine healthy adjustment among international students. While a number of studies look at psychological conditions and factors, it is also important to see how these could have some links with the socio-cultural dimensions of an individual living and studying in a foreign land. Muslim students do not just view their religion as a practice or lifestyle, but more importantly as a complex amalgamation and construction of their cultural identities. In a study of Muslim students in a prestigious university in England, [11] noted that cultural identities of Islamic students are not static. They are rather interacting with a whole range of complex factors which appears to be difficult to isolate or distinguish as distinct. Their race, social class, gender, language, culture, and religious affiliations prominently figure into this fluid mix. Likewise, their idea of success was explored and this proved to be a dilemma and struggle for them. They had to balance, negotiate several dimensions and aspects of their identities. Although, they were born in England, some of them felt that they were both “insiders” and “outsiders” in their own land by virtue of their cultural and religious backgrounds. As much as the psychological is validly worthy as an angle of investigation, the socio-cultural dimension, especially the personal narratives, also deserve attention and careful thought. There is a growing scholarship on documenting and understanding the experience of how ethnic newcomers cope with their expectations and the realities they are given in practicing their religion in their host countries [12] Given the increasing number of Muslim students in Taiwan, implications on how schools adjust and assure quality learning experience for Muslims is a given, their unique cultural-religious needs. In response to the need to add to the literature exploring the experience of international students in societies where their cultural backgrounds are stark minorities, this study posed this question: What is the experience of Indonesian Muslims as they practice Islam in a Taiwanese university? Specifically, it sought to build upon the earlier work of [3] who have also studied the adjustments of Muslim Indonesian students in Taiwan, only that their respondents were all males and were all in the hard Science fields.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

A. Perspective and Approach

Before and during the course of this investigation, the researchers involved in this study always sought to consciously locate themselves socially and culturally by acknowledging their reflexivity. The investigators were two empathic, interested and engaged cultural outsiders and one willing, interested, and engaged cultural insider. It was important for

them to always maintain an empathic stance with regards to their participants and to always think of them as being covered by the *postulancy of adequacy* [13]. A contextualist epistemological position was assumed in this paper (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This study also takes up an interpretivist stance in terms of epistemology and ontology [15]. This was done to be “...sensitive to context, that get inside the ways others see the world, and that are more concerned with achieving an empathic understanding than with testing laws such as theories of human behaviour” [13]. This study used phenomenology as the methodological framework since it was “interested in elucidating both that which appears and the manner in which it appears...studies the subjects’ perspectives of their world...[and] attempts to describe in detail the content and structure of the subjects’ consciousness, to grasp the qualitative diversity of their experiences and to explicate their essential meanings” [16]. Essentially, this study was aimed at understanding their lived experience.

B. Participants

This study began with an exploratory scheme by fielding a questionnaire with open-ended questions to 14 Muslim International students enrolled in a comprehensive public university on the east side of Taiwan during the fall semester of academic year 106 (2017-2018). Note that the initial sample included Muslim students enrolled in the university from different countries. The sample for the questionnaire comprised thirteen (13) males and one (1) female. They were also classified based on department and their duration of residence in the university. The researchers made an arbitrary classification for the duration. They were considered as “newbies” if they were registered for less than a semester, an “adjusted” if they were here at least for two semesters, and they were called “veteran” if they were in academic residence for more than two semesters. They were chosen through a combination of purposive, convenience, and snow-ball sampling techniques. Out of the 14 respondents, three were chosen for interview based on the “richness” of their answers. It was during this phase of the study when the focus shifted towards just the Indonesian Muslims. Three “newbie” Indonesian students were selected based on this criterion. Also, it was assumed that the newcomers needed more adjustment than the veterans so the difference from their home and current culture could be more striking. The three interview participants were Joko, Budi, and Intan who were interviewed during their free time and in their language, Bahasa Indonesia:

- 1) Joko, a 27 year-old male is a master’s degree student at the Department of English. He comes from the predominantly Muslim province of Aceh, Indonesia. He studied for his bachelor degree in Medan, the capital city North Sumatra. He used to work as an English teacher in a cram school in that city. He came to Taiwan in September 2017. He chose to study in Taiwan because of the manageable living conditions compared to other countries. He is a recipient of a university scholarship. It is a rare opportunity for him to study in Taiwan. His current university was prompt in responding to his application compared to other foreign and Indonesian universities. He was also attracted to

study in Taiwan because of the good academic reputation of the Taiwanese universities.

- 2) Budi is a 42 year-old male master's degree student at the Department of Management from the same city as Joko. He used to work in a bank for more than ten years before he decided to pursue a graduate degree in Taiwan. Budi is married and has children. He came to Taiwan in September 2017 as part of his career move to eventually become a lecturer when he comes back to Indonesia. He came to Taiwan because his department offers a program related to his major and because he also got a scholarship from his university.
- 3) Intan is a 20-year old female exchange student from Surakarta, Indonesia. While being an international exchange student in Taiwan, she is concurrently enrolled in her home university in Indonesia. She studies at the Department of Management Science and Finance. As an exchange student, she won't stay long in Taiwan. She is expected to graduate from her bachelor's degree soon. She arrived in Taiwan in September 2017. She has initially been offered an exchange student status from two South Korean universities, but she chose to study in Taiwan because of an already existing Muslim organization in the university. So far, she has never eaten in any restaurants, both inside and outside the university because she is afraid that she might eat non-halal food. She opted to cook her own meals. Her hijab makes her a visible personality in campus. Hijab is a generally expected headwear for Muslim women in Indonesia and other Muslim countries. She is particularly fond of changing the colour and the style of her hijab. She finds her many hijab options as a way of her demonstration of her unique fashion statement that makes her stand out.

C. The Sources of Data and Analysis

There were two data sources for this paper: open-ended questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire has three parts: (a) letter explaining the purpose of the questionnaire; (b) open-ended questions on Islamic religious practices and experiences; and (c) personal Information. An interview schedule was constructed roughly based on the questions in the questionnaire. The interview was conducted during the participants' chosen free time and in their language, Bahasa Indonesia. Necessary protocols were followed during the entire data gathering phase. [14] thematic analysis procedure was used to process and analyze the data for this study. In this entire process, the researchers tried to go back and forth (iterative checking and cross-matching) to determine if there were any contradictions or inconsistencies with the data from the questionnaires and from the interviews. The following were the overarching thoughts that was being considered during the data analysis phase: *"Is this what they are saying? Is this what they mean? Are we properly representing their ideas and experiences?"*

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Themes

The results of the thematic analysis of the questionnaire and interview data revealed five themes: (a) The Taiwan Appeal, (b) The Practice of Islam, (c) Support System, (d) Difficulties, and (e) Proposed Solutions.

- 1) The Taiwan Appeal. Taiwan offers international students of a fresh start and a chance for career improvement without the relatively higher hassle and stress associated with living and studying other progressive countries. According to Joko (27), "it's an opportunity that will not come twice". The academic reputation of Taiwanese universities plus the generally open and tolerant culture are very strong invitations for students to come and study. The same condition was observed by an earlier study by [17] in other Taiwanese universities.
- 2) Practice of Islam. Practices such as Sholat, worship, fasting, and praying as an obligation means that had no apparent institutional or policy barriers or prohibitions in a public Taiwanese university. The university even provides spaces for these practices. Given the space and time by the University the basic practices which each Muslim is obliged to do, is practiced. Religious practice is an essential part of a Muslim's identity and life even in a predominantly non-Muslim country [11] and the freedom to practice is important as Budi (42) explained, "because it is our duty as Muslims, anywhere must execute the religious commands".
- 3) Support System. In a country where Muslims find themselves as the minority in a country and university despite the general openness, an existing support systems such a Muslim student organization or groups in the local community beyond the school could make the adjustment and integration less overwhelming. [10] asserted that support groups help in helping international students live productive and healthy lives in the campus. Based on some of my older level friends if here (in the university), there is already a Muslim organization, so at least the support for me to practice my religion is not absent. I could say, because of my low knowledge of religion, I fear that I would eventually lose it (my faith)...It gives us a condition a bit similar to that in Indonesia. But in here I get to study abroad, gain new friends, and new experiences. Intan (20)
- 4) Difficulties. Limited time to pray, lack of washing facilities, fear of eating non-halal food, and difficulty in finding halal food are most common challenges that international Muslim student face. They have to constantly adjust to a new schedule that does not accommodate the same religious schedule as the ones back in Indonesia, often forcing them to combine prayers instead of doing them separately as normally expected. Intan (20) explained that "time is the most difficult because of conflict with the college's schedule so Dhuhur and Ashar prayers must be combined". As

minorities, Muslims face some resource constraints towards their goals [18].

- 5) Proposed Solutions. International Muslim students expressed their need for certified halal food facilities. Budi (42) conveyed this desire saying, "I hope that halal food including food like meat could also be provided. Beef has to be slaughtered and prepared in the correct Islamic way. Then I hope there could be a vegetarian restaurant that is completely without pork". They also need strategically located and accessible praying space and a visible presence of Islamic spaces and facilities. Joko (27) observed this contrast, "In an Indonesian university, there is a mushollah in every corner of the department. So I did not need to go to a prayer room. Now we usually worship in the dormitory".

B. Majority to a Minority Experience: The Sampan Metaphor

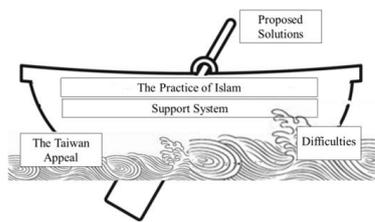


Figure 1: The Themes Organized into a Metaphorical Image

Moving from a majority to a minority experience is a key feature of practicing Islam in a Taiwanese university as an international student. The experience is built around this concept and the apparent support received, and the subsequent adjustments is made. Moving, living, adjusting, and thriving in a society and institution where the access to resources and convenience of practicing one's religion, and by extension, the maintenance of one's cultural identity and agency, are recognized and addressed to some extent but are not the important or urgent concern of resource allocations of the prevailing status quo. Being a minority in a Taiwanese university is not even bad or severely difficult at all. It is just that adjusting to the absence or lack of previously easily accessible resources takes some getting used to. It could be quite bothersome to a Muslim who wants to devote more energy and time into getting the most of the academic experience that their university could offer. The experience for Indonesian students is like navigating across new waters on a *sampan*, a small boat used in Indonesia. The creates the image of venturing into the inviting waters of Taiwan which is bit challenging but not strenuous (The Taiwan Appeal). The waters of Taiwan allow one to wade and paddle the way you did back home (Practice of Islam). There were already early *sampan* travelers who are willing to teach newcomers in navigating to the new waters (Support System). However, the unfamiliar currents, the different weather patterns, the new activities, and the lack of the usual fishes (for food) pose some challenge in navigation; the *sampan* is strong but it is not built for these waters (Difficulties). The need for an upgraded boat whose materials are found along the shores and waters of Taiwan. This will allows one to navigate better and reach the

destination without many barriers and with less anxiety (Proposed Solutions).

IV. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

[19] claimed that the presence of international students enriches university life. However, international students have to face several issues in their course of study [10]. Facing the challenge of maintaining practices and lifestyle activities that form an integral part of their identities could also prove stressful and detrimental to their academic performance and personal well being. Practicing Islam from a majority to a minority experience in a Taiwanese university is a constant navigation and adjustment on the part of the international Muslim student. The academic reputation of Taiwanese universities and its generally tolerant society attracts international Muslim students. The status quo does not prevent them from practicing their faith, but some inconveniences persist because their outward practice of their cultural and religious identities, although respected, is not a priority in resource allocation. University administration therefore need to understand how individual and community prayers and food customs form an essential part of a Muslim student's Islamic identity. This implies a review of current policies and facilities among stakeholders in the campuses. The presence of available spaces, however, does not mean consistent access and convenience. Ultimately, the recurring issues would be about proving all students with an environment that is fair where they feel safe to thrive and learn [9].

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