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# Language Choice among the Punjabi Sikh Community in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

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**Abstract:** When a minority group interacts and comes into contact with individuals from the dominant language, they tend to choose a commonly understood language. Language choice is forced to negotiate their own identity and cultural practices with their dominant culture. This can create a conflict, as in the case of the Punjabi community, who try to adopt new cultural norms and maintain their own identity when living in a dominant cultural group. With the growing number of Punjabis in Sabah, specifically in the capital city of Kota Kinabalu, East Malaysia, this situation presents an excellent case for advancing our knowledge about the challenges that the process of assimilation and enculturation may have on the Punjabi community living in a society which predominantly is of a different culture in Sabah. This study thus addresses the impact of social integration among a small population of the Punjabi Sikhs living in Kota Kinabalu. Data is collected using a questionnaire and interviews with several community members. The study draws implications on how a minority group adapts to the dominant culture and provides possible avenues for future research.

**Keywords:** Punjabi, assimilation, enculturation, minority, social integration.

## I. Introduction

This paper examines the language choice of the Punjabi Sikh community living in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, a state in the East of Malaysia. As a multiracial country, Malaysia is a culturally diverse society with different ethnic groups, linguistic backgrounds, and religious affiliations. The Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020) reports that as of 2019, Malaysia has a population of 32.4 million, with the largest ethnic group being the Bumiputra (69.3%), followed by the Chinese (22.8%), Indians (6.9%), and Others (1%). Historically, migration brought several minority groups to the country for economic and social mobility. Through the harmonious coexistence of different cultures, the groups live together with the dominant groups, undergoing several cultural adaptations and adjustments with the local cultures.

The relationship between minority and dominant group cultures has been explored in sociolinguistics research. Several studies have looked at how the minority groups socialise and assimilate with the dominant groups in Malaysia specifically (Tan, 1993; David, 1998; David & Naji, 2000; David et al., 2003; Teo, 2003; David & Dealwis, 2009; David et al., 2015; Abiddin et al., 2016; Mohd Zahirwan et al., 2016; Yusoff et al., 2019). For example, among the Sikh community in Kuching, although they have shown a high degree of assimilation with the dominant use of English instead of the mother tongue, Punjabi, the community has appeared to maintain their ethnocultural identity. In several aspects, such as food, entertainment, and marriage, they have displayed a move towards acculturation to the local community. Thus, this paper examines the challenges that assimilation and enculturation may have on another Punjabi community living in a society predominantly of a different culture in Sabah, a state in the East of Malaysia, like Kuching consists of indigenous ethnic groups. We start the article by first discussing relevant literature about the study, we then provide background information on the history of the Punjabi Sikhs to Malaysia, and finally, we discuss the findings of the study.

## II. Literature Review

Acculturation is when an individual encounters a new culture, leading to assimilation and acceptance of mainstream cultural values, behaviours, and cognitions. (Lee, Yoon & Liu-Tom, 2006; Yeh, 2003). It is viewed as a two-way or reciprocal process and does not require out-group acceptance (Teske and Nelson, 1974). On the other hand, the process of maintaining the values, behaviours, and cognitions of an individual's native culture is known as enculturation (Kim & Abreu, 2001). According to Bordon and Wang (2018:39), "acculturation and enculturation may serve to infuse into a person's overall conception of her/himself and how she/he relates to the dominant culture." Zhang and Moradi (2013) examine the possible presence of four dimensions of acculturation and enculturation based on a sample of Asian Americans. They conducted an exploratory factor analysis and found three subgroups of items closely related to each other, namely (a) language-related behavior, (b) cultural and sociopolitical knowledge, and (c) pride and cultural group association. The vital variables that underline acculturation and enculturation are behaviour, knowledge, and cultural identity.

Assimilation occurs between two or more cultures with the influence of the dominant culture on the minority group. It is "the process by which minorities gradually adopt dominant culture patterns" (Maconis, 2001: 363-364). Often it includes specific cultural changes such as attitudes and values, religion, language, social networks, and even identity. Arnold Rose (1956, cited in Gordon, 1964) characterises assimilation as "the adoption by a person or group of the culture of another social group to such a complete extent that the person or group no longer has any particular

loyalties to his former culture (p. 99)". According to Gordon (1964: 71), assimilation involves changes in extrinsic cultural patterns in the way of life that includes dress, food, language, and education.

On the other hand, intrinsic cultural patterns take a longer time to assimilate, and these are mainly looked at in terms of religious beliefs, kinship systems, and ethical values. Inherited values are more challenging to change than integrated values arising from the environment that are not passed down from generations. Furthermore, total or complete assimilation would depend on the extent to which the minority group takes on the ethnic identity of the dominant group and loses its own original cultural identity.

When two communities engage in sharing a common religion, assimilation is accelerated. In David's (2003) study, the Pakistani Muslim men married local Kelantanese Muslim women and showed complete assimilation when they spoke the local Kelantanese dialect. They reported complete integration with the Kelantanese community at large, and they were able to assimilate with the local culture. Similarly, the 'Peranakan Chinese' in Kelantan showed assimilation through a common language, names, costumes, and food (Teo, 2003). However, Teo (2003) asserts that this assimilation does not alienate them from their identity as they will always identify themselves as Chinese. This is also true for the Baba community of Malacca, who identify themselves as indigenous and Chinese (Tan, 1993). As reported, the Baba women don Malay-style dresses, and food is a fusion of Chinese and indigenous cuisines. Their assimilation is just at the degree of social yet not at the identificational level. According to Kawangit (2015), assimilation occurs between the Baba and Nyonya community in Malacca and their Malay counterparts in Malaysia. They have managed to retain their Chinese traditions and religious beliefs. However, they have adopted the Malay customs and social practices and developed their unique dialect, the Baba Malay, over time.

Other factors that integrate minority culture into the dominant one includes government integration policies like Malaysia, which has national systems that could influence cultural and linguistic behaviour (David and Govindasamy, 2003). Other minority groups would also assimilate with the dominant community if certain rights were given to the dominant group to enjoy the benefits (David and Dealwis, 2009). For instance, in the Javanese Muslim community, they have fully assimilated to the larger Malay Muslim society (Muhamad Subakir, 2000). The greater the power of the community to maintain its own unique identity, the less the chances of assimilation. Abramitzky et al. (2020) found that cultural assimilation can be traced by examining shifts in the names given to children by immigrants as they spend time in the United States. Immigrants from countries such as Portugal, Finland, Austria, and Russia, in particular, chose American-sounding names for their children as they spend more time in the United States.

Adopting the culture in terms of language, dressing, and food are noticeable changes in cultural assimilation (Alagappar et al., 2016). A

study on Malaysian Tamils has found a shift from the ethnic language to English and Malay in the domain of friendship (David and Naji, 2000). This phenomenon is also evidenced among first-generation Sindhi women shifting to Malay in their communication with their grandchildren (David, 1998) as they do not speak English. Another community, the Chitty community in Malacca has emerged due to inter-marriages between Hindu traders and local Malays, Chinese, Javanese, and Bataks, and they have been reported to fully assimilate to the language and dressing of the dominant Malay community (Moorthy, 2009). Mohd Salehuddin et al. (2019) found that the acculturation process may affect food commonalities acceptance, forming a unique food identity in the minority community. For example, for the Baba-Nyonya community, their combination of Chinese and Malay cooking remains a significant heritage (Aisyah Tumin et al., 2017).

#### *A. The History of the Early Sikhs in Sabah*

The Punjabi community is one of the minorities in Malaysia. Punjabis are people from Punjab, and they have migrated here since the 19th century. The Punjabis are a society where many religions are practiced, such as Sikhism being the dominant religion, and Hinduism. The Punjabi Sikhs first started immigrating to Malaya in the 1870s mainly to serve in the police and paramilitary forces (Malhi, 2015). Sikhs started immigrating to Sabah with the establishment of the police force in 1881. Capt. A. M. Harrington, formerly of the Rifle Brigade, formed the British North Borneo Armed Constabulary (NBAC), the territory's police force. He brought in the Sikhs from Punjab to join the NBAC. In 1883, the NBAC comprised 153 personnel - 3 Europeans, 50 Indians (Sikhs and Pashtuns), 30 Dayaks, 50 Somalis, and 20 Malays.

According to Gill (2007), in 1911, there were 173 Sikhs in North Borneo, and a majority were located in Jesselton (63), Sandakan (46), and Lahad Datu (40). In 1918, the number of Sikhs working in the NBAC was 130 people. In 1921, an additional 23 new Sikh armed forces, including four native Sikh officers, were recruited. In 1949, the North Borneo Annual Report reported reducing the Sikh armed forces due to the high cost of employing them; hence, the government recruited others from the region. Consequently, Sikhs and Pakistanis remained in the NBAC alongside the predominant local ethnic groups dominated by the Dusuns, Muruts, and Brunei. Some of the Sikhs were transferred from the NBAC to be prison warders in prisons located in other towns like Jesselton, Kudat, and Sandakan, all of which were under the administration of the NBAC Commandant. It was reported that the Sikhs were "simple, manly and upright fellows. They were hardy, brave and intelligent, obedient to discipline, attached to their officers, and careless of caste prohibitions. They were considered thoroughly reliable and useful soldiers" (Nadzan Haron, 1991:68 cited in Gill, 2007).

The involvement of the Sikhs in the armed forces in North Borneo in several prominent locations such as Jesselton, Sandakan, Lahad Datu, and

Tawau has left social implications to the Sikhs. They have migrated from Punjab and built a Sikh community in Sabah. These include aspects of the Sikh identity, religion, the establishment of gurdwaras, a community of interracial marriages with the local community, family ties with Punjab, and sports involvement. All these are known to have influenced the development of the Sikh identity in Sabah (Gill, 2007). The first Gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) in North Borneo was built at the police barracks in Jesselton in 1906 by the Sikh armed forces from NBAC. The Gurdwara serves as an important institution for the Punjabi Sikhs as they congregate here every week. It is also a place to perform religious rites, including marriages. In those early days in British North Borneo, there were not many Sikh ladies of marriageable age, resulting in inter-racial marriages between Sikh men and women of other races. The nuptials were solemnised at the Gurdwara. These non-Sikh ladies were required to partake Amrit (nectar of baptism), be baptised into the Sikh faith, and adopt a Sikh name before their marriage (Sidhu, 2003).

The Sikh community is a minority community in Sabah. It is difficult to ascertain the actual number of Sikhs because some Sikhs categorise themselves as Indians under ethnicity in the national census while some prefer to be considered 'Others.' In the census of 2010, under total population by ethnic group and religion, the ethnic groups of Sabah were categorised under Bumiputera, Malay, Kadazan/Dusun, Bajau, Murut, Other Bumiputera, Chinese, Indian, and Others. Under religion, the categories were Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism/ Taoism, other traditional Chinese religion/ Tribal/folk religion, other religions, and unknown religion. In the ethnic group category, the Sikhs were either categorised as Indian or Others. Under religion, Sikhs most likely were under the 'other religion' category. In his book, *Sikh Gurdwaras in Malaysia and Singapore*, Saran Singh Sidhu (2003: 283) mentioned that there were about 100 families in Kota Kinabalu and its surrounding areas. These Sikhs mainly go to the Gurdwara to congregate and perform their prayers.

### III. Research Questions

This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Have the Punjabi Sikh community in Kota Kinabalu enculturated themselves, or have they maintained their identities?
2. What cultural and linguistic aspects of the Punjabi Sikh culture have been assimilated into the Malaysian culture in Kota Kinabalu?

### IV. Methodology

The subjects for this study were drawn from the Punjabi Sikh community in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. A total of 43 Punjabi Sikhs participated



in the study. Subjects were selected using a convenience sampling technique. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in the data gathering. The quantitative approach made use of a self-designed questionnaire. The qualitative approach used interviews conducted by the researchers with several respondents who participated in the study.

A self-designed questionnaire was developed for the study. The pilot study of the questionnaire was administered to several members of the Punjabi community. As a result of the responses, some items in the questionnaire were revised, and hard copies of the revised questionnaire were distributed to the community via snowball sampling. The questionnaire is divided into four main sections: firstly, information on the demographic profile of the participants, secondly, language use, and finally, social identity.

All the respondents were interviewed following questions in a semi-structured interview to elicit data at the Kota Kinabalu gurdwara during prayer congregations held at the Gurdwara over three Sundays. The respondents were regular temple goers to the Gurdwara and were willing to be interviewed for the study after the prayer sessions. In addition, participant observation was also conducted at the Gurdwara of the community's activities, language use, and religious, cultural norms.

## **V. Analysis of Data**

The findings of the study were based on the data obtained from the questionnaires disseminated to the participants and from the interview conducted. The results of the study closely analyze the extent of assimilation and enculturation of the Punjabi Sikhs in Kota Kinabalu. Information on the respondents is provided in the following sections.

### *A. Demographic Profile of the Participants*

This section presents the demographic profile of the participants as obtained from the questionnaire. Out of 43 respondents, 18 of them (41.9%) were from the 2nd generation, followed by 15 (34.9%) from the first generation and ten from the third generation (23.2%). Many of the participants were 30-49 years (16), followed by 50-59 years ( $n = 9$ ), 60-69 years ( $n = 8$ ), 18-29 years ( $n = 6$ ) and the least number of participants were aged 70 years and above ( $n = 4$ ). More than half of the participants were working ( $n = 25$ , 58.1%), while 13 (30.2%) were retired, 4 (9.3%) schooling and 1 (2.3%) unemployed. In terms of the medium of instruction in schools, most respondents ( $n=25$ ) reported having English only, followed by ten respondents with Malay only and seven respondents with a combination of English and Malay as a medium of instruction. One (1) respondent reported not having had any schooling.

## B. Language Use

The language used by the Punjabi families in Kota Kinabalu is explicitly studied by looking at language preferences in several domains as follows.

### 1. Language used at home

Table 1 shows the language used in the home domain as informed by the participants in the questionnaire.

**Table 1:**  
**Language used at home**

Language used at home	Number of participants
Punjabi	3
English	16
Punjabi and English	8
Punjabi and Malay	5
Punjabi, English and Malay	7
English and Malay	4

#### The language used at home

The table indicates that most of the participants (n=16) used English as the primary medium of communication at home, followed by participants who reported using Punjabi and English, and seven participants used three languages, i.e. Punjabi, English, and Malay. Five participants used Punjabi and Malay, while four participants reported using both English and Malay instead. Punjabi was used the least, with only three participants stating they used the language at home.

### 2. Language preference for newspapers

Table 2 shows the language preference of newspapers of the participants, whether print or online.

**Table 2:**  
**Language preference for newspapers**

Language preference of newspaper	Number of participants
Malay language	4
English language	32
Malay and Punjabi language	6
English and Punjabi language	1

#### Language preference for newspapers



As shown in the table, most (n=32) of the respondents read English language newspapers that included print or online, followed by only four who read Malay language newspapers. Some participants stated their preference for both Malay and Punjabi languages newspapers (n=6) and English-Punjabi newspapers (n=1). The data reveals that most of the Punjabi Sikhs in Kota Kinabalu prefer English-language newspapers as English is used in various communication domains. The preference for reading Malay or Punjabi language newspapers is less.

### 3. Language preference of TV shows

Table 3 shows the language preference of TV shows among the respondents in this study.

**Table 3:**  
**Language(s) preference of TV shows**

<b>Language(s) preference of TV shows</b>	<b>No. of participants</b>
English	20
Punjabi	1
Combination of English and Punjabi	10
English, Hindi	3
Malay, Punjabi	1
Malay, English	1
English, Punjabi, Hindi	1
Malay, English, Punjabi	6

### Language(s) preference of TV shows

The participants were told to choose more than one preferred language. The data reveal that 20 participants prefer English, 1 Punjabi, 10 English-Punjabi, 3 English\*-Hindi, 1 Malay- Punjabi, 1 Malay-English, 1 English-Punjabi-Hindi, 6 Malay, English, Punjabi. The data show that the preference for English in TV shows may indicate that most Punjabis in Kota Kinabalu has started to assimilate linguistically in English. It also shows that the choice of Punjabi is no longer popular with the majority of the participants. However, a few people (n=10) prefer mixing English with Punjabi.

### 4. Language used with colleagues/friends of working respondents

Table 4 shows the main language/languages used with colleagues/friends of working respondents.

**Table 4:**  
**Main language used with colleagues/friends of working respondents**

	Malay	English	Mandarin/ Chinese dialect	Punjabi	Sabah Malay
Malay colleagues /friends	7	9	0	0	9
Indian (non- Punjabi) colleagues /friends	4	17	0	3	1
Chinese colleagues /friends	5	18	1	0	1
Punjabi colleagues /friends	3	10	0	10	2
Kadazan Dusun, Murut	1	10	0	0	14

Unemployed – 1, Retired - 13

*The primary language used with colleagues/friends of working respondents*

Table 4 shows the main language/s used with colleagues and friends by the working respondents. The participants of this study chose more than one preferred language. It reveals that when the participants interact with their Malay friends and colleagues, they tend to use Sabah Malay (n=9) and English (n=9) the most, followed by Malay (n=7). The data shows that English (n=17) is spoken the most with Indian colleagues who are non-Punjabis, followed by Punjabi (n=3) and Sabah Malay (n=1). English (n=18) is also spoken the most with their Chinese colleagues and friends, followed by Malay (n=5), Mandarin/Chinese dialect (n=1), and Sabah Malay (n=1). With their Punjabi colleagues/friends, most of the participants reported that both Punjabi (n=10) and English (n=10) are spoken. Malay (n=3) and Sabah Malay (n=2) are also used by a few. With Native Sabah colleagues and friends who are Kadazan Dusun and Murut, many of the respondents (n=14) reported that Sabah Malay was used, followed by English (n=10) and Malay (n=1). The data also show that one participant declared himself as unemployed, and 13 had retired and did not indicate their language preferences.

Based on the findings, it can be generalized that in the work domain, the chance of accommodating and assimilating with the other languages is higher, specifically with the English language and Bahasa Malaysia and Sabah Malay. It shows that most Punjabi respondents in Kota Kinabalu are more comfortable in English than in any other language/s available in their speech community.

### *C. Cultural Assimilation or Accommodation: Food, Music/Songs, Clothing, Festivals, Marriage, Identity*

In this section, cultural practices and values of the respondents in the study are examined in terms of food, music/songs, clothing, festivals they celebrate, marriage, and how they construct their own identity to determine the extent of cultural assimilation and accommodation.

#### *1. Food*

Table 5 shows the habitually consumed food of the participants in the study.

**Table 5:**  
**Food habitually consumed at home**

Food habitually consumed at home	Number of participants
Punjabi	30
Western	1
Chinese	7
Sabah Native	5

\* dominant

#### *Food habitually consumed at home*

Table 5 indicates that most of the participants (n=30) consumed Punjabi food habitually at home; seven consumed Chinese food, followed by five who consumed Sabahan local food, while one indicated consuming Western diet habitually. The Punjabi participants have retained their food preference for their ethnic food, such as consuming chapatis, lentils, and curries. Other types of foods are also eaten but by only a smaller number of participants. Therefore, there seems to be not so much accommodation and assimilation to the food/culinary habits of the other ethnic groups where food is concerned.

Table 6 shows the food habitually consumed outside the home as reported by the participants.

**Table 6:**  
**Food habitually consumed outside home**

Food habitually consumed outside home	No. of Participants
Punjabi	0
Western	10
Chinese	20
Indian (other than Punjabi)	8
Malay	5

#### *Food habitually consumed outside the home*

From Table 6, it is indicated that when eating out, the participants preferred eating Chinese food (n=20), followed by Western food (n=10), Indian food (other than Punjabi food, referring to South Indian cuisine), and Malay food (including Indian Muslim food which is locally known as Mamak food) (n=5). This reflects that many Punjabis in the study have started to assimilate with Chinese culinary habits.

## 2. Music/Songs

Table 7 presents the preferred music/songs the participants reported they listen to.

**Table 7:**  
**Preferred music/songs to listen**

Preferred music/songs to listen	Number of participants
Punjabi/ Hindi	30
English	10
Local Sabahan	3

### *Preferred music/songs to listen.*

From the table, the participants show a high preference for Punjabi/Hindi music/songs, with almost three-quarters (n=30) of them, reported to like that. This is followed by a preference for English (n=10) and local Sabah music/songs. Generally, the participants' preference in music/songs is mixed with Punjabi/Hindi, English, and local Sabah. It can be generalized through their music preference that perhaps some of them have partially accommodated and assimilated with the other ethnic groups in Malaysia.

## 3. Clothing

Table 8 shows the participants' preference for clothing.

**Table 8:**  
**Participants' preference for clothing**

Clothing preferred	Number of participants
Punjabi / Western/ National costume	15
Punjabi	11
Western	17

### *Participants' preference for clothing*

From Table 8, it is reported that most of the participants (n=17) preferred wearing Western clothes, including t-shirts, shirts, skirts, dresses, shorts, and pants. This is followed by a preference for Punjabi outfits (salwar kameez, kurta, and some elderly men reported wearing

kechara and lungi at home), Western clothes (formal, informal wear), and National costumes (batik, baju kurung, baju kebaya, sari) worn at different occasions as were reported by 15 of the respondents. However, eleven (11) participants expressed their preference to wear mostly Punjabi suits as they felt comfortable doing that, and these were mainly the elderly female participants in the study. Though there is a preference for Punjabi attire, the participants have also accommodated the Western, Chinese, and Malaysian costumes.

#### 4. Festivals

People in multicultural and multilingual societies like Malaysia celebrate several festivals. They celebrate their own and at the same time assimilate with the other groups in the celebration. Table 9 shows the festivals celebrated by the participants.

**Table 9:**  
**Festivals celebrated**

<b>Festivals celebrated</b>	<b>No. of participants</b>
Vaisakhi & Deepavali	26
Vaisakhi & Harvest festival	4
Vaisakhi	10
Vaisakhi & Deepavali & Christmas	2
Vaisakhi & Deepavali & Chinese New Year	1

#### Festivals celebrated

A majority of the participants (n=28) indicated celebrating both Vaisakhi and Deepavali. Ten participants reported that they celebrate only Vaisakhi, while four reported celebrating both Vaisakhi and the Harvest festival. Two participants reported celebrating Christmas with Vaisakhi and Deepavali, while only one participant indicated celebrating Chinese New Year, besides Vaisakhi and Deepavali.

#### 5. Marriage

Most of the participants are married (n=36), while seven are single (divorced/separated/unmarried). Table 10 shows the ethnicity of the respondents' spouses in the study.

**Table 10:**  
**Ethnicity of spouse**

<b>Ethnicity of spouse</b>	<b>No. of participants</b>
Chinese	1
Punjabi Sikh	28
Sino-Kadazan	1
Dusun	2
Indian (other than Punjabi)	1
Indian/Kadazan	1
Punjabi/Dusun	2

*Ethnicity of spouse*

Most of the respondents (n=28) are married to spouses of the same ethnic group, i.e., Punjabi Sikh. The rest are married to spouses from mixed and other ethnic groups. These include Dusun (n=2), Punjabi/Dusun mixed ethnicity (n=2), Chinese (n=1), Sino-Kadazan (n=1), Indian other than Punjabi (n=1), and mixed Indian/Kadazan (n=1). Generally, Punjabi Sikhs are pretty conservative regarding inter-marriages, especially outside the religion. This is prevalent among the older generation. However, this study seems to depict that the Punjabi Sikh participants reported having some inter- marriages. Of the 36 married participants of this study, 13 have got 20 married children, 22 have unmarried children, and 1 participant has no child.

**Table 11:**  
**Ethnicity of spouse of married children**

<b>Ethnicity of spouse of married children</b>	<b>No. of participants</b>
Punjabi Sikh	29
Dusun/Kadazan	10
English	1
Chinese	1
Malay	1
Tamil	1

*Ethnicity of the spouse of married children*

Table 11 shows the ethnicity of the children's spouses. A majority of the participant's children (n=29) were married to Punjabi Sikhs. Ten participants' children married Dusun/Kadazan, while one participant had children married to an English, a Chinese, a Malay, and a Tamil, respectively. Intermarriages in their children's generation seem to be more common among the Punjabi participants in the study than their generation. Participants who did not have married children were asked a hypothetical question if they would allow exogamous marriage for their children. Table 12 would show the participants' responses on their perception if that were to happen.



**Table 12:**  
Parent's perception of exogamous marriage for their children

Children marrying the outside members	Number of participants
Yes	10
No	12

*Parents' perception of exogamous marriage for their children*

Table 12 shows an almost equal response on whether participants would consider allowing their children to marry outside the community. Interviews with some of these participants whose affirmative responses revealed that they would be agreeable to interracial marriages as long as their child/children do not convert to other religions.

## 6. Identity

Table 13 presents the participants' perception of themselves and the ethnic group they identify themselves with.

**Table 13:**  
Participants' description of themselves

Participants' description of themselves	No. of participants
Punjabi	24
Indian	4
Sabahan Sikh	7
Malaysian Sikh	5
Australian Sikh	1
Child of God	1
Punjabi-Kadazan	1

*Participants' description of themselves*

A majority of the participants (n=24) identify themselves as Punjabi, followed by seven who identify as Sabahan Sikh, five as Malaysian Sikh, four as Indian, one as Australian Sikh, one as Child of God and the other one as Punjabi-Kadazan. The findings reveal that with the majority of the participants identifying themselves as Punjabi, this could indicate that their internal ethnic group solidarity is firm; therefore, their chances of adopting other cultures could meet with some resistance.

## VI. Interviews

This section reports interviews held with the respondents. The data show that most of the participants' first-generation families migrated to Malaysia in the latter part of the 19th century up to the early part of the 20th century. It reveals that the majority of the Punjabis who came to Malaysia worked in the military. The British police hired the majority of

them in Borneo Island. On the question of migration, interviews with the respondents reviewed several interesting patterns of migration of the Sikh respondents and how they had migrated either from within or outside Malaysia to Kota Kinabalu. As a whole, a majority of the respondents were born in Sabah (n=25), followed by ten who were born in Peninsular Malaysia, six born in Punjab (India), one in Delhi (India), and one in Australia.

Fifteen (15) respondents belonged to the first generation. A majority of them (n=8) was born in Malaysia in the different states of Malaysia, namely, Perak, Kuala Lumpur, and Seremban. The rest (n=6) were born in India, mainly in Punjab and one in New Delhi. One participant was born in Australia. Respondents born in Malaysia stated job transfer reasons as having brought them to Kota Kinabalu: two were doctors and had transferred to Kota Kinabalu hospital, another one transferred as an Engineer, another on military posting, and two others indicated their teaching posting brought them to Kota Kinabalu. Those who came from overseas (non- Malaysians) reported several reasons to arrive in Malaysia and eventually to Kota Kinabalu. One respondent said coming to Kota Kinabalu in 1934 following his parents from Punjab. Another respondent reported being in Kota Kinabalu for military posting and police personnel. One respondent reported coming from Australia under Malaysia My Second Home Programme, another respondent came as a policeman from Punjab, another respondent came to Kota Kinabalu from Punjab to get married, and another was recruited as a policeman by the British.

Eighteen (18) respondents belonged to the second generation, and a majority of them (n=15) were born in Sabah. The ones born in Sabah had a Punjabi Sikh father and mother who mainly came from the Sabah community, namely Kadazan or Dusun. Some of the respondents highlighted their roots and where they originated from. One of the participants stated that his father was from India and migrated to Malaysia in 1912. One said his parents came from India and that his father worked for the Sabah government and had migrated to Malaysia. One respondent was born in Kuala Lumpur and came to Sabah with his parents. One respondent stated the migration of his grandparents and parents as follows:

*My grandfather came to Taiping in 1920. He was a businessman in textile. He came from Hoshiarpur. My father came to Malaysia as a government servant to work under RTM. He came to East Malaysia, Sabah.*

Ten participants in the study claimed themselves as belonging to that generation for the third generation. All of them from this generation were born in Sabah. Two respondents reported that their grandfathers arrived in Sabah through the British in 1890, and their grandfathers were recruited by the British to work in the police force. One participant said that his grandfather came from Amritsar in 1914 recruited by the British army, "looking for greener pasture." Another respondent said he was born in Labuan, and his grandfather was in the British Police and brought his father from India. Another respondent shared his origin as follows:

*My grandfather came to Sandakan in 1890 as a police staff. My father was a hospital dresser, and both my grandfather and father married Punjabi women. I was born in Sandakan in 1939. They migrated to Brunei in 1948 and returned to Sabah in 1960.*

Another participant narrated how his grandfather had worked for the British and returned to Punjab, leaving his children behind:

*Myself born in Sabah. My grandfather came to work in British in the police force, then my grandfather returned to Punjab, but the children stayed on. My father worked for the railway, and he married a woman from Punjab, my mother.*

In another situation, the respondent informed how intermarriage with the native Sabah women had taken place in his family. He reported that his grandfather had married a Kadazan woman and that his father married a Punjabi Kadazan. He married a Dusun woman who eventually converted to Sikhism.

When the participants were asked why their ethnic identification as they responded in the questionnaire, the following extracts are some of the responses obtained.

Some responses from those who identified themselves as Punjabi are as follows:

*... because culturally I am a Punjabi (Participant 17)*

*Punjabi is a race (Participant 25)*

*I am born a Punjabi, and I worship the Sikh religion (Participant 40)*

A typical response from participants who identified themselves as Indian is as follows:

*That's our ethnicity. Our origin is Indian. (Participant 9)*

*Had been identified by authorities as Indian. (Participant 13)*

The responses for some of those who identified themselves as Sabahan Sikhs are as follows:

*I am a Sikh first, and secondly a Sabahan. If they want to find out who am I, I would say I am a Sabahan Sikh. (Participant 19)*

*It is not the language that makes you a Punjabi. My grandfather prefers using Urdu to write letters. I am a Sabahan Sikh. (Participant 42)*

A response from one of those who regard herself as a Malaysian Sikh is as follows:

*We live in Malaysia and have to portray ourselves as Malaysian Sikhs. (Participant 40)*

One of the participants would identify himself just as a child of God. He responded as follows:

*We are all from the same source. Yes, I am a Sikh, but I am a child of God and would like to be identified as such. (Participant 33)*

One of the participants identified himself as a Punjabi Kadazan when he said the following:

*I am a mixed blood of Punjabi, Sikh and Kadazan. I cannot speak Punjabi but consider myself a Punjabi Kadazan. (Participant 39)*

Regarding how language relates to assimilation, some respondents expressed their views that language is not linked to culture and is not linked to the person's ethnicity. These are presented as follows:

*Language is not the only cultural link to a person's ethnic identity (Participant 8)*

*It is not the language that makes you a Punjabi. my grandfather prefers using Urdu to write letters (Participant 42)*

*Language doesn't make you a lesser Punjabi but sad that next-generation losing language (Participant 25)*

*It is difficult to maintain Punjabiness, difficult to get spouses. I believe that my children from my Dusun wife wouldn't be married to Punjabis. Ethnicity does not matter; religion is more important. In the Gurdwara, there are very few with turbans and beards, so many have lost their identity. I fear that in 20 years the Punjabi language will die. (Participant 39)*

*Generally i would like to use my language with my community members. It entirely depends on where I am and whom am I talking to. You are born within a race and culture that you cannot run away from. but you may not speak the language, but you are still Punjabi. (Participant 37)*

Interviews with all the respondents revealed some interesting background information about the Sikhs in Kota Kinabalu in terms of their socialisation. One respondent explained his observations about some cultural elements that are changing among the Punjabi Sikh community:

*With our death rites and rituals, women follow to the crematorium, turbans are disappearing where you don't see the young boys having long hair, dressing and food habits are changing. We normally eat at home but it is no longer taboo to eat out, our language has code-mixing with English and Malay even in intracommunity interaction. (Participant 13)*

He added that some ceremonies are still maintained, which are cultural intra-social interactions such as the amrit baptism of a newborn child, the milni ceremony, which is the meeting of the in-laws, and the exchange of gifts during a Sikh wedding.

According to one of the respondents, most of the Sikhs originate from the same village or neighbouring villages in Punjab, recruiting families as they arrived in Kota Kinabalu in the past. They had land and families in Punjab and still maintained their ties with them in Punjab. Inter-marriages with the local community were very common and the spouses assimilated with the Punjabi culture and norms. Most first-generation Punjabis are related through marriage, and many still maintain contact with their kin in Punjab. Many of them have mixed marriages with the local community, and the families have close bonds among the Sikh community. As mentioned by one of the female respondents interviewed on her observation with regards to assimilation with the Sikh community:

*Nowadays arranged marriages are dwindling, and many are marrying outside the community and settling down elsewhere in the Peninsular, Australia, Singapore, Canada... The non-Sikh wives also come to the Gurdwara. They attend the prayer congregations on Sundays in the*

*Gurdwara, and in the langgar eating the food like everybody. They have no problems eating our food and doing sewa. The brides from India also speak English. (Participant 43)*

In terms of language maintenance, Punjabi classes are held in the Sikh gurdwaras located in Kota Kinabalu. One of the respondents expressed his views on the current trend about the Punjabi language:

*The younger generation tends to lose their language. In fact, we ourselves hardly speak in Punjabi nowadays as the younger generation don't understand us. That is the sad trend. (Participant 22)*

He further added on about the situation on the teaching and learning of Punjabi in Kota Kinabalu:

*In the temple, we organised Punjabi classes. These classes tend to concentrate on religion and culture and to read and write Punjabi as the scriptures are in Punjabi. About 60 to 70 children come to the school in temple for their classes once a week for 3 hours. These are the very few, mostly forced by the parents. But at home the children shift to Malay and English.*

## VII. Discussion

This research explores the extent of assimilation and enculturation of the Punjabi Sikh community in Kota Kinabalu. This research shows that most of the Punjabi participants belong to the first and second generations whose age ranges from 30-49 years old and 50-59 years old. Meaning the participants were mostly adults, and many of them were working, particularly those who were in their late 50s had retired from their jobs.

As far as language use is concerned, it is evident that most of them use English as the medium of communication when dealing with other ethnic groups or even among the Punjabi Sikhs. The Sikhs face many challenges when trying to adapt to a receiving culture. Their preference for the English language as the medium can be traced perhaps from their educational background since most of them were exposed to the English educational system. It shows that even the language used at home, the workplace, and even with friends in English. It also shows that their preferences for CDs/DVDs, newspapers, and TV shows are English. It can be said that most of the participants have accommodated the English language most of the time in dealing with people. Therefore, it can be said that they linguistically accommodate the English language more than that of Bahasa Malaysia or other languages in Malaysia. The dominance of English among the Punjabi in KK can be a product of migration where the language of the first migrants was not maintained. The preference for English can perhaps be generalized due to the dominance of the English language and its prestige, since having the ability to speak the English language can be an advantage economically. This could also be due to the education whereby the Punjabi language is not taught in schools, and they would mostly learn from communication with their families.

Although it can be said that most of the Punjabi Sikh participants had linguistically assimilated and enculturated to the English language,



they still retained their culture in some ways. One instance is the food preferences of the Punjabi respondents. Some of them prefer Punjabi food when they are at home. This means that the families still expose the young generations to the Punjabi culture. This practice may benefit all the Punjabi Sikhs that the young generations can continue to learn their ethnic culture. At home, as far as food is concerned, most of the participants prefer Punjabi food.

On the contrary, when they go out, the food preference differs. It shows that most of them prefer Chinese food because most of the stalls were owned by the Chinese. The Punjabi Sikhs accommodate the Chinese as far as their food preference is concerned.

However, most participants display lower assimilation and accommodation to the other ethnic groups when it comes to music and clothing. They still prefer Punjabi music and clothing. This means that the Punjabi culture has been maintained in some families. Moreover, the maintenance of the Punjabi culture can also be influenced by the participants' religion as Sikhs relate their religion to Punjab. It can also be said that most of the Punjabi Sikh participants in Kota Kinabalu have identified themselves as Punjabi, and a few identified themselves as Sabahan and Malaysian. Generally, accommodation and enculturation occur in various domains of communication among the Punjabis in Kota Kinabalu. However, in some domains, particularly at home the maintenance of the Punjabis culture is still present.

## VIII. Conclusion

The objective of this article was to study the extent to the Punjabi Sikh community in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, has assimilated and accommodated with the Malaysian culture in several domains. How these processes have occurred is an important consideration in multicultural contexts like Malaysia. The study has some geographical and sampling limitations that should also be noted. Although the study is limited to a few respondents, the Punjabi community itself provides an opportunity for deeper inquiry for future studies in relation to the broader society.

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